

Elizabeth Chater



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Alfredda

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A Place for Alfreda

Prologue: 1800

London

Alfred, Earl of Dorn, was drunk, angry—and anxious. Not because of the difficult labor his frail wife Penelope was at this very moment enduring, as she struggled to bear the son who would ensure her husband's fortune. Certainly not for the comfort of the mistress whose importunate summons had brought him at this most inconvenient moment to the opulent little maisonette he had given her. Roughly shouldering his way past the sleepy servant who was opening the door for him, the earl strode through the hall and thrust his way into the overdecorated bedroom.

"There had better be a damned good reason for—" he began, and then froze. There were three people in the room. The earl glared at his mistress and the grinning man who was standing at the bedside. Carlotta, beautiful even at this moment, held out a lustily bawling infant for Dorn's inspection.

"A healthy boy!" she crowed. "Has your lady-wife done as well by you, Dorn? Dr. Smith tells me she has been in labor for three days, and will likely die, and the child with her! What a pity you did not choose the mother of your heir with the same skill you use to pick your brood mares!" She motioned to the doctor. "Pour us all a drink, Smith! The earl will wish to offer a toast to his fine son—who is not his heir!"

"Why didn't you tell me it was to be so soon? I hadn't realized—!" stammered the earl, for once at a loss.

"How could I? You haven't been next or nigh me for a month!" screeched Carlotta. "It's widely known that Milord of Dorn isn't interested in pregnant females—even his poor little dab of a wife!"

Under the stimulation of his mistress's venom Lord Dorn regained his wits. "Jealous, my dear?" He smirked. "You know you are always—attractive—" He eyed her buxom body insultingly. "The thing of it is, your—ah—curves are always so voluptuous that one couldn't be sure . . ."

A lusty bawl from the red-faced, black-haired infant caught his attention. He stared down grimly at the child. His son. A healthy male. Whereas Penelope, if she survived, would probably present him with some wretched, puling brat—or, even worse, a girl! Frowning, he accepted the whiskey the doctor offered. As he drank, he considered the woman in the rumpled bed, and the raven-haired child in her arms. Already the germ of an idea was taking root in his mind. If his legitimate child were to die with its dying mother. . . all the Dorn males had red hair, but Penelope had a swarthy uncle. . . .

"Don't you wish to hold your son, milord?" The doctor grinned over his whiskey. "He's a fine lad, strong and lusty. Too bad he was born on the wrong side of the blanket! He would have put paid to your cousin's hopes of inheriting the title!"

Did everyone in London know all his business? "My wife will bear a son!" he snarled at the gossip-monger.

The doctor looked at him, a hint of pity in the bleary gaze. "If you say so, milord," he agreed. With a few words of advice to the mother, he made his adieux.

Carlotta laughed raucously, shifting the baby so it might feed at her swollen breast. It nuzzled greedily.

"So, my toplofty earl, you are forced to concede the victory to your prim-mouthed cousin? How he will enjoy telling his pious friends that it is his seed that will grace the earldom, and not that of the notorious rake, Lord Dorn! Can't you just hear him prosing on that Virtue has triumphed?"

The earl's intent glare moved from the grunting infant to the dark-eyed courtesan. Toast of the London opera season, Carlotta was no more Spanish than he was. But whatever her antecedents, she had borne a healthy child—a male child, who could rescue Alfred's branch of the family from the encroachment of mealy-mouthed Benedict, his cousin and heir.

Alfred, Earl of Dorn, tightened his jaw.

"This is what we are going to do," he said, in a deep, guttural voice that no one had ever heard from his throat before.

1

1818

When the stagecoach, buffeted by the worst storm in ten years, was forced to pull up for the night at a well-lighted, comfortable inn, every miserable passenger who had been cooped up in its freezing, musty interior for too many battering hours breathed a sigh of relief. The Pot O'Gold was a notable hostelry. The disgruntled, hungry, bone-weary travelers were able to hobble into its excellent common room and order a filling dinner with the firm expectation of finishing the meal before being rudely summoned to remount and jostle off again toward London. In fact, the coachman had informed them, he wasn't moving outside into the weather until the storm passed. If any of them was in a hurry to get to Lunnon, they could bloody well walk!

The pretty little redhead in the old-fashioned black cloak and dowdy hat seated herself thankfully at one end of a long table. Ordering a frugal meal, she stared around her with interest. It was her first trip to the Metropolis, and she was eager to miss no detail of the experience. To say nothing of being free at last from the narrow confines of the remote small village to which she had been brought eighteen years before, and placed in the care of a middle-aged recluse named Mrs. Green.

Granny Green, as she was familiarly called behind her stiff back, had served as a governess in several Great Houses in her younger days. Her small cottage was most comfortably furnished, and although she was no spend-thrift, she seemed able to command all the common comforts. Her most annoying fault was that she never discussed her business with anyone in the village. She made no effort to explain the sudden arrival of an infant girl, but the gossips soon discovered that a sum of money was delivered by post to the old woman every month. For the care and nurture of the child, of course, decided the gossips.

The girl's name was Alfreda.

The older villagers disapproved of the whole transaction, and cast scurrilous doubts upon the child's legitimacy. The rest of the inhabitants, warned off by Mrs. Green's chilly aloofness, mostly ignored the coltish little girl as she grew up. The fact that she did not have to work for her living—Granny Green hired a village girl to clean and cook—as well as the even more annoying fact that her manners and speech, thanks-to Mrs. Green's meticulous training, were far superior to those of any other young person in the village, did nothing to endear her to anyone, young or old. Her greatest fault, however, was felt to be that she proved to be a bookworm. Many times a villager returning from hard, honest labor came across the idle girl, seated under a tree or beside a hedge, her nose buried in a book. Alfreda was quite oblivious to dust, rain, the passage of time or the presence of other human beings.

On one such occasion, a trio of village lads was attracted to the girl's mane of bright red hair, and moved in on her by unspoken consent, their faces alight with mischief. The girl's first warning was a small stone dropped onto the pages of her book. She glanced up, to see a tight semicircle of big young males facing her. Before she could speak, one of the louts dropped a muddy clod after the stone. It splattered across the pages, obliterating the text.

Alfreda was up and attacking the vandals with the closed book before they had time to realize her intent. Not for nothing had she the fiery topknot Mrs. Green so disliked. And in spite of that elderly martinet's constant instruction, it was fatally easy for the girl to succumb to the flare of temper that seemed to be a characteristic of her red hair. Shouting quite astonishing epithets as she belabored the hapless louts with her book, the girl even succeeded in getting in a few shrewd kicks on their shins with her heavy boots. She routed them without a struggle.

Of course none of the wretches mentioned their defeat at the hands of the small termagant, but the impression filtered through the small village that the girl had better be left alone. Most of the villagers were only too willing to do so. Alfreda was a mystery—neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring, as the saying went. Since she was surely illegitimate, the older women said, she had

no business acting as though she were Somebody, putting on airs and graces! And the young women made fun of her flaming hair, while the youths were uncomfortable with her book-learning.

Even Mrs. Green, openly challenged as to her charge's origin, merely sniffed and turned away from the impertinent questioner.

"She'll come to no good end, that one," prophesied the gossips, shaking censorious heads.

"I cannot think what Granny Green is about, to let the girl run wild like that," fretted Mrs. Bowen, wife of the local landowner, to her sole crony, the wife of the minister. "It is not as though the old woman doesn't know better! She's served in some decent houses in her time, they say."

Mrs. James offered her placating smile. "The girl is not actually wild, dear Mrs. Bowen," she said with what she thought was Christian charity. "Just bookish."

"Much good that will do her!" sniffed the squire's lady. "No respectable woman would hire her to teach her children!"

Mindful of her position, Mrs. James still ventured an extenuating circumstance. "Surely bookish is better than—ah—"

"Man-hunting?" sneered Mrs. Bowen. "Give her time! With her background, I have no doubt we shall see that next!"

But the young Alfreda continued to bury her straight little nose in any book she could lay her hands on, although her preference was for novels dealing with the romantic adventures of beautiful maidens, so perhaps Mrs. Bowen had a point.

The death of Alfreda's guardian changed the situation.

Less than a week after the sad event, while Alfreda was still grieving for the stiff old woman who had always treated her justly, if coolly, a letter of instruction came by post addressed to Miss Alfreda Green, ordering her to present herself at the Inns of Court in London, to learn what disposition was to be made of her person.

Dreamer and bookworm Alfreda might be, but the lofty, almost contemptuous tone of the missive awoke in her a hot flame of resentment. However, since the letter continued by announcing that the cottage in which Mrs. Green and Alfreda had lived was to be put up for sale immediately, the girl was forced to agree that she would be well-advised to accept the ticket enclosed, which provided passage to London by stagecoach. Once there, the letter continued, Miss Green would go at once to Ruston's Hotel, where a room had been reserved for her on the date noted, and where, in due course, she would receive further instructions.

The letter concluded rather absurdly, "I have the honor to remain, Ma'am, your very obedient servant, Thomas S. North, Barrister."

A wry smile twisted Alfreda's lips. If that pompous man is anybody's "obedient servant" I shall be much surprised, she thought. Still, with the cottage to be sold; and evidently no further monthly pension to arrive, there was little the girl could do but accept the ticket to London and follow the arrogant lawyer's commands.

Thinking it only sensible, however, to consult with some authority before rushing off pell-mell into the Unknown, Alfreda asked for an interview with the squire. When she offered him the letter to read, Mr. Bowen, obviously uncomfortable in her presence, accepted the missive reluctantly and read it through slowly twice. Then he glanced at the girl suspiciously, and said in a harsh voice, "Very properly put! What is your problem? The fellow does enclose a ticket, and his arrangements seem more than generous—in the circumstances."

The girl stared into the squire's heavy countenance with a frown. "The circumstances? I am afraid I do not quite understand, sir. Why should Mrs. Green's lawyer wish me to come to London? Do you think there might be a will? An inheritance? Oh!" Her expressive little face lighted up with a delightful smile. "I was wondering," she confided, "what I might find to do to support myself, but if there is a will—"

"I referred to the . . . circumstances surrounding your birth and your arrival here in Little Weald. You were sent here as an infant, you know, and placed in the care of Mrs. Green. Did she never tell you? . . ."

The glow of delight on the small, eager face made the chit look almost attractive, thought the squire suddenly.

Alfreda was saying excitedly, "Do you think Mr. North intends to tell me about my parents? But that will be wonderful!"

The squire's manner became at once more distant. "I must warn you that it will do you little or no good to know. If your father has not been willing to acknowledge you so far, it is most unlikely he will do so now."

Before Alfreda could demand an explanation of this cryptic remark, the door to the study was flung open with more force than elegance. A frowning Mrs. Bowen swept into the room, her eyes darting suspiciously from her husband to the girl.

"What is this—this girl doing, closeted with you and all the servants aware of it!" she challenged.

"She is asking my advice about a letter she has received from a London lawyer," snapped the squire, none too pleased to have his sharp-tongued wife interfering in man's business.

This intelligence gave Mrs. Bowen pause, but not for long.

"Are you telling me that her father has finally decided to acknowledge her? Who is he?" Mrs. Bowen demanded.

Disgusted at female insensitivity, the squire handed the lawyer's letter back to Alfreda and rose to his feet. "You would be wise to accept Barrister North's instructions," he advised the girl. Then, without a word or a glance at his pushy wife, Squire Bowen stomped out of his study, leaving it to the crass invader.

Ignoring the squire's avidly curious wife, Alfreda hastened to follow his example.

Perhaps it was her own fault, the girl thought, but the fact was she had made no real friends in the village. There was no one to urge her to remain. No one, indeed, who cared whether she stayed or went. So, rather sadly packing her few belongings—most of them books given to her by Mrs. Green on birthdays and at Christmas—into an old-fashioned clothesbag with the best of her own and Granny's garments to fill the spaces, Alfreda was ready to enter the stagecoach for London two days later.

She presented an odd little figure to the curious gaze of her fellow passengers. She was wearing Mrs. Green's best cloak, a garment so hideously practical as to daunt the eye; and crowning her vibrant red hair was Mrs. Green's Sunday bonnet, whose only virtue was that it had protected its owner from all weathers for at least twenty years. If the other passengers in the coach had been of good ton, Alfreda's regalia would have driven them to disgust or to tears of mirth. As it was, she was considered to be a pretty enough little girl, although far too pale for the males' hearty tastes, and as no threat to the other females.

The trip to London was a misery, plagued by bad weather and volubly complaining passengers. Today's storm had come at a good time, however, since the coachman, resentful of the bored, whining travelers, had been springing his horses without regard for anyone's comfort. Now there would be time to eat, refresh one's self, and read, thought Alfreda contentedly.

When her plate was finally set down in front of her with a slam by a harried inn servant, the girl tucked into the savory food with real relish. Not for nothing was the Pot O'Gold Inn known to set the best table on the post road. Alfreda sighed her pleasure and settled in for a pleasant meal. Finishing all too quickly, she wiped lips and fingers with her handkerchief, opened her handbag, and took out the book she was currently reading. While it lacked the delicious emotion of her favorite romances, it offered a surprisingly satisfying challenge to a mind well-trained by the former governess in Great Houses. All around her in the crowded, noisy commons, travelers came and ate and departed. Oblivious to the bustle, the girl remained where she was, elbows propped on the table, head bent over the open volume.

A very large, very wet, and very annoyed young man, whose many-caped coat marked him as a Top-o'-the-Trees Whipster, entered the commons

abruptly, seated himself opposite Alfreda, ordered a meal and a mug of mulled ale, and waited with barely concealed impatience to be served. While he waited, Mark Savage stared broodingly at his fellow diners, not really seeing them. His handsome countenance was marked with both anger and indecision.

Whatever had possessed him to take over Roger Dorn's wager? Of course he did it to force Jeremy out of so unequal a contest, but would it serve? Roger was up to no good, and it was clear that young Jeremy was going to be goaded into accepting one of the bully's challenges sooner or later. Mark set his jaw. It should be their father's responsibility to guide his younger son into manhood, but that was too much to hope for. Sidney Savage, bitter recluse and hater of the whole human race, was no proper parent for his frail little gamecock of a son. Which left only big half brother Mark to prevent Jeremy from being baited into taking risks that would destroy him!

Mark had found himself stepping in time and again to take up the gauntlet. This time there had been unpleasant consequences. Had Jeremy, angry at his older brother's high-handed preemption of his effort to play the man, deliberately loosened the pins holding on the wheel of Mark's curricule? Surely it had been an accident? Could Jeremy actually resent his half brother's protectiveness enough to wish to disable or even kill Mark? Losing a wheel at the speed the curricule had been going, the latter fate would have been a distinct possibility!

Mark sighed. He would catch up with the recalcitrant little Jeremy sooner or later, and demand an accounting. Or perhaps he should demand one from the bully Roger Dorn? That loose wheel might have been his doing, not Jeremy's. It was comforting to believe that the rancor that had planned so ugly a trick came from their neighbor's son rather than his own brother. Still, Roger at eighteen and Jeremy at fifteen were too old for such childish ploys, such stupid adolescent game-playing! As I am, groaned Mark silently, rubbing his bruised and aching arm, luckily the only memento of the accident.

His attention once more focused upon his immediate surroundings, he tried to catch the eye of one of the overburdened inn servants. Where was that ale?

He found himself staring at a dowdy hat, the top of which had been facing him ever since he had seated himself. Whatever could be wrong with the female? He noticed a thick book on the table, over which the woman was poring. A grin twitched at the corners of his well-cut lips. A bluestocking who frequented the Pot O'Gold? Had her vehicle, like his own, suffered a breakdown? Of a surety, she would hardly choose this noisy bustle for a quiet browse? Or had the poor old female fallen asleep? Would it be chivalrous to wake her before her doddering old head fell into her book? This picture so tickled his risibilities that Mark smothered a laugh.

Alfreda, aware of a low rumble of laughter, lifted her wide blue eyes to observe a large, dark, beautiful, grinning male staring across the table at her. All of Granny Green's endless strictures rose in her memory.

Never smile at or in any way acknowledge the presence of a strange man. Never enter into conversation with such a person. In public places, keep your eyes lowered and your mouth closed. It is essential that you, Alfreda, without the protection of a family, be most circumspect.

So had advised Granny Green. But Alfreda, since the beginning of this ill-fated journey, had begun to wonder if the old woman had still been living in a world whose customs had long been abandoned. After all, this was 1818, not 1718! Besides, after Lawyer North, Squire Bowen, and the stagecoach driver, Alfreda was a little tired of arrogant males commanding, sneering, or laughing at her!

She confronted the rude creature with a look of lofty inquiry on her small, attractive countenance. "Are you in pain, sir?" she asked, too sweetly.

There was a sudden, startled expression on the handsome face across the table from her. And then a deep, curiously challenging voice responded, "Pain? No. Why should you think so?"

"The odd noises you were just making," Alfreda explained with exaggerated kindness.

Startled by this gambit, the big man laughed again.

"Yes. Those," Alfreda explained with false compassion.

"Laughter," explained her antagonist, his gray eyes sparkling with interest. "It is admittedly a convulsive sound which one produces when one experiences a feeling of amusement or—ah—derision—" The rogue grinned, waiting for her response to the provocation in that last word.

Amazingly, Alfreda found she, too, was enjoying the exchange. "Laughter? At what?" she riposted. And if he dares to say he is laughing at me, I shall—I shall hit him with my book!

Whether or not the man read the belligerence in Alfreda's eyes, blazing like sapphires, he at least was aware of the vulgar attention a public quarrel would receive from their fellow diners. Regretfully, he curbed his unruly tongue and rendered a civil answer.

"I was recalling a jest I had heard—last night," he temporized smoothly.

Alfreda was still suspicious. "Indeed?" she said with blatant disbelief.

So the little witch was not going to let him get away with it! Pleased with the chance to vent some of his anger at Roger Dorn's treacherous insolence, and Jeremy's predictably stupid reactions to it, Mark settled down for a contest of wits and wills. Who did this dowdy little female imagine she was, challenging a male who was also a stranger to her? What were women coming to? He answered her attack smoothly. "Indeed! Would you care to hear it?"

“Yes,” said the odd female unequivocally.

She doesn’t believe me, Mark mused. Most females of her sort would not have the nous—or the courage—to challenge a male of my order. Little red-headed devil! Halfway between annoyance at her intransigence and amusement at her spirit, the man tried frantically to recall a joke that would be funny enough to explain his laughter, yet respectable enough to relate in mixed society. No matter how deplorable her getup, the girl’s accent was impeccable and her behavior, while unusual for any well-bred young female, was not that of a servant or tradesperson. Yet if gently bred, he thought warily, what the devil was she doing in that deplorable outfit, sitting in the common room of a public inn, reading. . . what the deuce had the chit been reading? To gain time to plan his next move, Mark thrust a long arm across the table, picked up the girl’s book, and uttered a sound of disbelief.

“Aristotle? Nichomachean Ethics? What on earth is a girl of your sort doing with such a treatise?” he demanded with more interest than good manners.

A girl of your sort! It was the last straw. “Just what sort of girl do you think I am?” snapped Alfreda in a fine fury. The louts in the village would have taken apprehensive note of her flashing eyes that seemed almost to be emitting sparks, and the bright red hair curling with a life of its own; taken note and backed off. Mark Savage did not have their special knowledge. As startled as though he had suddenly unveiled a Medusa, Mark still could not resist the challenge. It had been a vile, enraging day.

Alfreda for her part was ready to explode. She glared at the insulting wretch in his fancy greatcoat. Whipster, indeed! What would a “man of his sort” know about Aristotle? Men were arrogant, closed-minded tyrants! First the high-handed lawyer with his false claim to be her obedient servant; then the squire with his ugly, heavy-handed hints and callous dismissal; and now this insufferable dandy with his odious, mocking condescension! It was too much!

“Perhaps if you studied the treatise yourself, you might benefit, sirrah!” she snapped.

Mark’s heavy dark eyebrows drew down; cold gray eyes dueled with flashing blue ones across the table, to the rising interest of everyone else around the long board. It was time, decided the man, and past time, to call the impudent little chit’s bluff! He waved her book tauntingly in front of the girl’s nose.

“And just what, Miss Bluestocking, does the learned Aristotle have to say that might benefit me? If, of course, you have understood even one word in ten of the work—which I take leave to doubt!” He waved the book in view of the other diners.

The ruffle of laughter and comments that this barb brought from the listeners around the table were all that was needed to unleash Alfreda’s fury. She bent forward and snatched the book out of the barbarian’s hands. “It is, sir, a

discussion of Happiness as the goal of life, which is achieved only through contemplating philosophic truth. It is the result, claims Aristotle, of the exercise of—and I quote!—‘man’s peculiar virtue, the rational principle.’ Rational! It is clear that Aristotle did not know you, sir!”

To the horror of both combatants, this thrust was followed by a rough cheer and laughter. Recalled too late to an awareness of the public nature of their argument, Mark tried to lighten the moment by calling for ale all around the table. This great-hearted gesture was received with almost universal approval, and the serving maids went scurrying to fill such a noble request.

Alfreda glared at the hateful, smirking creature. She had been so angry that she had not stopped to consider the impropriety of her behavior, but had acted under the goad of the complacent, self-righteous male. She sat down again, book in her lap, cheeks scarlet, and lifted her mug of milk with trembling fingers.

The brute across the table remained standing, grinning at her as he waited for the fresh ale. When the little servant reached him with the laden tray, he took two mugs from her and indicated the rest of his fellow diners with a lavish gesture. Then he held up one mug, calling to the curious, laughing crowd around the table.

“A toast, milords and ladies!” He mocked the formal invitation to honor a special guest. “To our little bluestocking!” Gesturing toward her dowdy hat, he continued, “We can only hope her knowledge of the Classics is better than her alamodality!” Leaning forward, he offered the furious girl the second mug of ale.

Her tight smile and narrowed eyes should have warned him. Alfreda rose both literally and figuratively to the occasion. Claspings her book in one hand, she accepted the ale and raised the mug in salute to her tormentor, offering a toast of her own.

“To the self-proclaimed Top-o’-the-Trees Whipster,” she said with a telling glance at his plethora of modish, short shoulder capes. “We can only hope that his skill with his horses is even half as great as his alamodality!”

And she flung the contents of her mug into the grinning creature’s face.

Then, while the enraged dandy was wiping his face, she turned and ran from the room to the accompaniment of raucous cheers and laughter. Under cover of the uproar, Alfreda made her way to a group of fellow travelers milling about in the broad entrance hall, who were bargaining with the innkeeper for a place to spend the night.

Her low-voiced question to one elderly female as to the possible time of their departure brought little comfort. Their stagecoach driver had already retired to the loft above the stables, with the announcement that he

would be leaving the Pot O'Gold at six ayem, whether his passengers were ready or not.

Grimly, Alfreda considered her limited resources. There had been no money included with the stagecoach ticket. It seemed obvious to Alfreda that the arrogant lawyer had no concern for the comfort of a nonentity like herself. Or perhaps he dwelt in so lofty a realm that the notion of anyone's being almost penniless had not occurred to him. True, she did have a pound or two, thanks to Mrs. Green's careful husbandry. Was it enough to get a room for the night? Judging from the sounds in the common room, she might expect a rude reckoning with the irate Whipster!

She pushed forward to speak to the innkeeper. It seemed she might have a cot if she was willing to share a room with two other ladies. The fee required was quite within her means. The girl assented gladly, and locating her clothesbag against the wall, she picked it up and hurried after the two elderly ladies who were marching up the shadowy stairs after a servant.

She did not cast another look in the direction of the noisy common room. If that bully could see me scuttling away, eager to avoid another bout, he would chuckle, she told herself, but a naughty smile tugged at her lips as she envisioned his wet face, startled open mouth, and the dripping ale. That, she thought righteously, should teach him! It was Alfreda's devout wish that she might never have to encounter that handsome, sneering and no doubt furious male ever again.

For the following morning, at least, she got her wish. A tired, subdued group of passengers mounted into the coach in the dawn, hardly prepared by an adequate breakfast to endure the rest of the journey to London. Perhaps it was as well for the exhausted Alfreda that she found a comfortable room reserved for her at Ruston's Hotel, and a knowledgeable attendant at the desk who took one look at her pale, weary little face under the hideous bonnet and gave its owner hastily to the kind ministrations of an elderly chambermaid.

2

Alfreda refused the doorman's offer to call her a hackney cab the following morning. Striding proudly down the street, conscious of his disapproving stare, she told herself that she needed the exercise and the time to pull herself together for the meeting with the lawyer. She had asked an equally disapproving desk clerk the shortest way to walk to the Inns of Court, so she had a vague idea of the direction and distance of her goal. She would use the walk to firm up her resolve. . . .

Alfreda sighed and shook her head. Why try to deceive herself? She dreaded the revelation that Lawyer Thomas S. North was about to make to her. It would not be pleasant hearing, for it would destroy forever the hopes she long had nourished, of someday finding a loving parent from whom she had been stolen by gypsies as an infant. A mother, warm and wise and kind! What if the cruel father, uncaring, had made no effort to find his lost child? The girl had comforted herself with this thought during many a lonely night when, anguished by callous treatment from Mrs. Green, she lay crying quietly in her hard, narrow cot. There was still the comforting dream of warm arms, a gentle smile—love. Yet within minutes the dream might be forever shattered, the loneliness final! Little wonder Alfreda's footsteps lagged!

As she walked slowly toward Lincoln's Inn Fields, Alfreda noticed a row of delightful single houses, some charmingly antique in appearance. Pausing as much to enjoy the classic facades as to delay her moment of truth in the lawyer's office, Alfreda observed an elderly lady coming down the front steps of one of the houses at a dangerous speed. In one quick glance the girl was aware of a hat almost as dowdy as her own, a wrinkled black surcoat—and a pair of wildly waving arms as the elderly female missed her footing and slid awkwardly to the street.

Instinctively Alfreda was running forward even as the old woman fell. She was not quick enough to catch her, but she did break the full force of the fall.

"Are you hurt?" she demanded of the winded, angry-looking woman. Alfreda glanced up at the front doorway of the handsome building. "Shall I call someone to help you?"

"No!" snapped the woman sharply. "D'you think I want them to see what a fool I've made of myself?"

Judging by her costume that the old woman was a servant in the elegant house, and by her accent that she was an upper servant, perhaps even the housekeeper, Alfreda forbore to urge an embarrassing exposure. Gently she brushed off the unfashionable garments, while she scanned the wrinkled face for signs of pain.

"What may I do to help you?" she asked softly.

"You can get me away from here before someone sees what's happened." The voice was still ungracious, but there was something in the old face that compelled Alfreda's pity and concern.

"Lean on me, ma'am," she said. "If you can walk, I'll help you to wherever you wish to go. . . ."

The shrewd old eyes scanned the young face bent over her. "Why should you?" challenged the Dowager Duchess of Calthorp. "Why not just call me a hackney?"

Alfreda grinned down at the old-fashioned, almost threadbare garb of her companion. "Are you sure you have the blunt?" she teased, using a term employed by the village lads. "I must advise you that, as your rescuer, I have not!"

A reluctant smile brightened the weary old face. "A jokester, I perceive," she retorted, but the angry bite had gone out of her tone. "Well, I have the blunt, you saucy little miss, so you may help me, quickly, to the corner, where we shall find a hack to take me to my destination."

Alfreda put her strong young arm around the thin waist of the older woman, and firmly assisted her toward the corner.

"Do they know you are out?" she asked gently.

The old woman frowned up at her. Finally she decided to answer. Perhaps something in the girl who was helping her so pleasantly touched a heart long toughened by pain of loss and constant anguish.

"No, no one in the household knows I am going on a special errand today," she admitted. "And it is important that no one should hear of it until. . . until the problem is resolved."

Alfreda's heart was touched by the desolation in the older woman's voice. "Let me go with you," she urged. At the sudden, sharp glance she received, she said quietly, "I promise not to pry! Indeed, ma'am, I know what it is to have a secret one cannot share with another soul!" At the quizzical, faintly mistrustful challenge in the old woman's expression, Alfreda confided quietly, "I am in search of my parentage, ma'am. I am eighteen years old, and do not know—have never met—either of my parents."

The old woman took a deep breath. Her faded blue eyes were hard upon the vulnerable countenance above her.

"You tell a strange tale, girl! Just how do you expect to discover your. . . parentage?"

In for a penny, in for a pound, thought Alfreda. Surely it would not hurt to confide in this poor, elderly female who seemed to have a problem as heavy and painful as her own? The girl recalled another of Mrs. Green's pithy sayings: Misery loves company.

"I have received a letter from a. . . barrister called Thomas North," she began, hesitantly. Then, gathering courage, she continued. "He tells me he is going to explain my situation and tell me—ah—'what disposition is to be made of my person.' And I quote," she ended with a small, gallant smile.

The older woman hissed in a breath. "Thomas North, you say? Are you lying to me, girl?"

Alfreda drew back. They had reached the corner, and by good fortune there was a neat hackney coach waiting for a fare. "I do not lie, ma'am," Alfreda said coolly. "And' there is your hack. I wish you safe journey."

"Wait!" demanded the old woman imperiously.

But the girl was already striding away toward the Inns of Court.

3

Twenty minutes later, confused but not defeated by the intricacies of the Inns of Court, Alfreda presented herself at the offices—called, she was told firmly by the male clerk, the chambers—of Thomas S. North, Barrister, and Son. She was asked to wait.

“There had better be some sort of inheritance,” she told herself darkly. “Otherwise Miss Alfreda Green will find herself in Dun Territory!”

In spite of this foreboding thought, she found herself smiling. Elation began to well up in her breast like a small fountain, bubbling and effervescent. I am in London, that great, exciting Metropolis! I have actually walked through streets that have seen History; triumph and despair; hatred; grief; betrayal; rejoicing! Alfreda’s eyes began to sparkle like jewels. Hands childishly clasped at her breast, she looked out of the grimy windows, afraid to miss a single moment of the experience. And then she stared around at her immediate surroundings. Lawyer North’s chambers were no disappointment. Although a bit musty for her country-trained senses, there was no doubt of their richness: oak and leather furnishings, a neat, clean carpet, several framed documents. The large, book-crowded room reeked of age and respectability, and money! Alfreda chuckled at the concept.

“Our offices amuse you?” challenged a cool, hard voice. A man reached out an arm to steady her startled movement.

The girl looked up into a classically, handsome male countenance with as much warmth in it as a Grecian statue’s.

“You must be my ‘very obedient servant, Thomas S. North,’” she quoted, with what the young lawyer had to admit was admirable aplomb, considering the situation.

Satisfied that she had regained her equilibrium, he released her and stood back two correct paces. “I am T. Samuel North.” He corrected her in that cool voice which denied any claim she might urge upon him. “It was a letter from my father that summoned you to this conference,” he continued, turning away and walking toward an open doorway. “If you will accompany me to his chambers, ma’am?”

Alfreda followed him past several young men who appeared to be very hard at work at raised desks. No eyes were raised.

Then, in a tone so low and discreet that Alfreda almost missed it, the young lawyer said, “The term ‘your very obedient servant,’ or its alternate ‘your humble servant,’ are not to be taken seriously, Miss Green. They are merely the courtesies of the profession. Like ‘madam.’”

“That puts me in my place,” commented Alfreda, equally sotto voce. And felt well repaid by the slight stiffening of the obnoxious creature’s shoulders.

If the young lawyer wished to retaliate in kind, he was unable to do so, for at that very moment they entered the office of the senior member of the firm. Thomas North rose to his feet to welcome his new client, and a real welcome it was. At first glance the girl decided that she liked this charming little man. His top-lofty son must resemble his mama, thought Alfreda. Thomas had brown, twinkling eyes surrounded by a network of lines which announced that he, for one, was capable of warmth and laughter. Alfreda loved him on sight.

“Pray be seated, my dear,” said the gnome, gesturing to his son to mind his manners and draw up a chair for the client. “I am sure you must be very curious as to our purpose in summoning you to this meeting.”

“I was happy to come,” said Alfreda simply.

Giving her a nod of approval, the senior North went on.

“I suppose I should ask you, first, if Mrs. Green ever discussed your parentage with you?”

Frowning at his parent’s lack of discretion, Samuel North rose from his chair and stalked to the door, making sure it was tightly closed. Then he returned and took up his former position, where he was able to observe the expressions on the faces of both his father and their client. Snoop, thought Alfreda, and kept her gaze fixed on the older man.

"No," she answered Thomas's question, "Granny Green was what the villagers called closemouthed. The minister's wife complained that Mrs. Green didn't even pray out loud! Granny said she was pretty sure the Lord heard her, and it was nobody else's business."

Smothering a delighted smile, the senior partner clasped his hands on the desk. "Has anyone mentioned your parents to you? Given you any hints?"

Alfreda searched her memory. Aside from a few taunting remarks from girls and boys her own age, which she had never bothered to listen to, there had been nothing—no, wait! "Squire Bowen told me that your arrangements for my visit to London were 'more than generous—in the circumstances.'" The first thought that came to my mind was that there might be a will. . . that Granny might have left me something—even some information about my parents. I presume I did have some," she finished, with a minatory glance at the arrogant young lawyer. "Unless you are implying that I sprang, full-armed, from the brow of Jove?"

Alfreda had the satisfaction of observing a dull flush warming Samuel's cheeks, while his father chuckled his appreciation. "I see that Mrs. Green gave you the benefit of her splendid training in the Classics," he commented, and then, more soberly, "It is just as well, my dear. We have a . . . rather difficult problem to face." All traces of laughter faded as he watched his young client steadily. "My son and I have discussed this matter at length. We have considered the rule of confidentiality: that is, our duty to our noble client; as opposed to our obligation to make sure justice is served: that is, our duty to you, a victim of our client. We agreed that we must tell you the true facts of your birth and heritage." Frowning, he regarded the girl. "Frankly, now that I have met you, the truth is irrefutable. Do you not think so, Samuel?"

The younger man ran his eyes over the glory of reddish-gold hair that was, as usual, escaping from beneath Mrs. Green's dowdy black hat. "It's the Dorn hair," he admitted.

"And the . . . eyes?" prodded his father.

Samuel stared into the wide, deep blue eyes that were raised in challenge to his with almost painful intensity.

"Dorn has brown eyes," he said slowly.

His father nodded once, as though satisfied by a moot point of law. "Could it be possible she has her mother's eyes?" It wasn't a challenge, merely a suggestion, but young North's eyebrows lifted sharply. "You don't mean—you can't be saying . . .?"

"I am saying it. But you must not, until we have done further research. And now, I think it is time we told Miss Alfreda what we know about her parentage."

Alfreda took a deep breath and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. She would not beg, or cry, no matter what the next few minutes brought.

There was to be another delay. Young North had turned to his father almost in protest. "I admit I recognize the eyes," he agreed morosely. "But you know the hazards if she tries to—"

Alfreda had had enough of this pompous objector.

"Squire Bowen told me I had been sent to Little Weald as an infant. He hinted that there had been suspicious circumstances related to my birth. It occurred to me that I might have been born"—she searched for the acceptable term—"out of wedlock. Is that what you are trying to tell me?" Her small chin lifted proudly. "If that is so, then I shall—"

Moved by the pain in that small, sweet face, the elder North interrupted. "The truth is that your father, to prevent a hated cousin from inheriting his title and fortune, substituted a male child for you, his legitimate daughter, and sent you off into the care of his own former governess. He told her that you were a—his—by-blow, and that he was most generously providing for you in this manner. The rather lavish allowance was to be made to Mrs. Green as long as she kept you safely out of his way. To avoid a scandal, of course. Mrs. Green had no reason to suspect him of lying."

Alfreda was no fool. "But you did," she said shrewdly.

Lawyer Thomas pursed his lips. "Let me just say that such long-term generosity to an illegitimate daughter was not in accord with what we knew of the client's behavior. And since our firm was paying the allowance, I was of course involved." His lips pursed censoriously. "A few years ago," he continued, "after a particularly nasty incident in which our client lost an incredible sum of money in one night's gaming, and had to come to us for an advance upon the next year's rents, we, that is, I suggested that he end the drain of the monthly payments he was making to his, as we had been told, illegitimate daughter."

Alfreda's accusing glance at young Samuel clearly announced which of them she thought had had that idea.

Thomas North was continuing. "We also advised selling two bijou maisonettes, and returning the latest purchase of diamonds he had just made for his current—ah—friends."

"A sensible retrenchment plan," added Samuel firmly. It was becoming rather important to him that this little red-haired female regard him favorably.

"At first," continued Thomas as though his son had not spoken, "our client resisted our suggestions with a fervor I can only describe as suspicious. And then with a guilty look, he agreed to sell one house and the diamonds, but not to evict the other—ah—tenant, or cut off the payments to Mrs. Green. He made a comment that had us both puzzled. He said something about 'Alfreda's' being well-enough settled in her rustic paradise by now, probably married to some country bumpkin and getting more redheaded brats to enlarge his line. And he laughed." The lawyer cleared his throat, suddenly aware of the

shocked understanding in the girl's face. "You must understand that your father had had more liquor than was safe or sensible for a man endeavoring to conduct a business meeting. Our client was, I am afraid, a little under the influence of alcohol at the time," he said, in an effort to excuse the crudity.

"Your client is always a little under the influence," commented Samuel icily, "except when he is a lot under it."

Thomas ignored his son. "We began to feel considerable concern at this point. True, Lord Dorn was our client, and there are rules of confidentiality. But there is also justice; and his attitude led us to suspect that a fraud was being perpetrated upon the true heir—Lord Dorn's cousin. We had a few disturbing facts." He held up one wrinkled hand to enumerate his points. "There was the name Alfreda; Dorn's name is Alfred. There was his eighteen years of concern over one illegitimate child—truly unusual behavior for our client." Too late the old lawyer caught the look of pain that Alfreda could not hide. He frowned and apologized.

"Forgive me, child! I am as insensitive and cruel as your wretched father," he said remorsefully.

Alfreda set her shoulders and held her head up. "I should like to know all the facts, if you please. Then I shall be able to decide what is best to do," she said quietly.

Both lawyers looked at her with respect. "Our investigation has revealed that you are the child of one Penelope, Lady Dorn, who died at your birth. Your father, Alfred, Lord Dorn, apparently passed off the male child of—of another woman as his lawful son and heir," began the older man.

"Thus insuring the succession," added Samuel gloomily. It was plain that this hugger-mugger was distasteful to his neatly conventional mind.

"Is all this really any more than wild surmise?" demanded the girl beligerently, holding anger like a shield against the tearing grief of so dreadful a rejection.

Thomas North seemed to understand and respect her pain.

"Yes, Lady Alfreda, we, have been quietly but-thoroughly investigating the matter for a couple of years. You may take it for granted that we have adequate documentation to prove your claim to be the legitimate daughter of Alfred, Earl of Dorn."

White of face, blue eyes blazing, Alfreda said proudly, "I would not choose to be known as the daughter of such a man."

"There is more to it than pride, however admirable," commented the hateful Samuel. "There is the small matter of maintaining yourself with reasonable dignity and comfort for the rest of your life—"

"I shall earn my own living," declared Alfreda proudly. "It is not my wish to destroy a father, even though he rejected me! And I refuse to accept charity from a man who refused to acknowledge me until forced to do so."

"You have it incorrectly," said Samuel North heavily. "Your father has not acknowledged you. He does not know we have ferreted out the true state of events. We decided not to release the results of our search, nor will we, until you, the victim, have been apprised of the situation, and made an unemotional, fully informed decision."

Frowning heavily, his father interrupted. "Milady, there are some unpleasant possibilities to consider. How, for instance, will the earl take it when he discovers that his elaborate scheme for doing his cousin Benedict Dorn out of the title and estate is in peril of public disclosure? The scandal will be horrendous, of course. But beyond that. . . have you thought of. . . your own safety?"

The gaze Alfreda turned upon the elderly lawyer was wide with shock. "Are you suggesting that the earl would harm his own child?"

The senior North peered at the girl anxiously. "I believe we must consider the possibility," he admitted. "Dorn has a—colorful reputation."

"He could have had me killed eighteen years ago," she said stolidly. "Or thrown into the streets. Instead he gave me protection of a sort."

"That was eighteen years ago," interjected young North, grimly. "He is old now, and dissolute beyond recovery; to say nothing of the debts that increasingly harass him. If this scandal comes out, he will be utterly ruined in London—he will have to flee to the Continent or the New World to escape his implacable creditors. If he can get away."

Alfreda made her decision. "I order you not to tell him," she said firmly. "I have no wish to be linked in any way with such a villain."

"What will you do?" pressed the older man. "He has ordered the monthly allowance to be stopped."

"I shall make my own way in life!" replied the girl with touching pride.

"There is one other factor we have not yet mentioned," said Thomas North quietly. "Your maternal grandmother. Lady Dorn's mother."

"The dowager duchess is very old," added young Samuel sternly. "It is said she never recovered from the grief of her only daughter's death in childbirth. Perhaps you owe her the courtesy of knowing she has a grandchild."

Alfreda was wary of that sentimental trap. "If I so closely resemble the man who so viciously robbed her of her granddaughter, would I not be more of an agony to her than a comfort?" she challenged.

It was the old lawyer who answered her. "If I were your grandmama, child, I should thank God for the chance to welcome so pretty and spirited a grandchild."

"Her only son, the duke, was killed on the hunting field two years ago," added Samuel. "Your mother died at your birth. Although she could be a leader of London society, the dowager is a lonely recluse. The present duke is the grandson of her husband's brother. He is a cold, rigid man who disapproves of your father's family, and would not welcome a . . ."

"A questionable connection," supplied the girl. "I quite see his point." She stared at the two lawyers. The decision was hers alone to make, and she truly wished no part of a scandalous quarrel with her unfeeling parent. And yet—! To know her grandmother! Someone of her very own. . . family! There had never been family, only the callous ignoring of her peers, the scornful disapproval of the older villagers, the cold, reserved, and unloving relationship with Mrs. Green, who was doing her duty for the monthly remittance.

Drawing a deep, trembling breath, Alfreda nodded firmly.

"I should like to meet my grandmama," she said.

The old lawyer, beaming widely, rose and took her hand. He escorted her into a small anteroom next to his own office.

And presented her to an elderly, rumpled, dowdy woman whose faded blue eyes caught her own glance eagerly; caught and held it—and warmed into incredulous joy.

"I have to thank you for seeing me into my hackney," said the Dowager Duchess of Calthorp, "Granddaughter!" She turned to the grinning Thomas North. "And you for inviting me to this meeting, sir. I shall never cease to be grateful."

Then she fixed her avid gaze upon the vulnerable, hopeful countenance of the young girl.

"Do you. . . do you believe I am your granddaughter?" breathed the girl.

Instead of a direct answer, the dowager asked, "Is your name Penelope, by any chance?"

"No, Your Grace," answered the girl. "It is Alfreda."

"Well, at least that wretched father of yours had the decency to give you one of his names! I shall call you Freddi!"

She held out her arms with the warmest smile anyone had ever seen on her lips.

Alfreda ran to embrace her with a little cry of love and longing. For a moment the two women clung, murmuring words of welcome and promises. Then the dowager lifted her head and noticed the stunned expression on young Samuel's face. She cocked a quizzical eyebrow.

"Aside from that pretty red hair under that deplorable bonnet, Freddi looks exactly like my poor Penelope! The same sweet mouth! The identical saucy little nose! And those deep, lovely blue eyes! It is to be hoped," she added for Alfreda's benefit, "that you have more strength of character than your mama ever exhibited, child! What a ninny she was to let that rakehell bamboozle her!" She wiped a tear from her eye.

"You—you accept Lady Alfreda as your granddaughter?" stammered the young lawyer.

"Who could deny it, with the evidence of both parents flaunting itself so clearly in the child's face and hair?" She hugged the trembling girl close. "I've

been waiting for you, Freddi," she said softly. "I never could accept that hulking brute as Penelope's son, no matter how proudly Dorn flaunted him. Somehow, I think I knew you were out there somewhere. I thank God for you."

Alfreda felt as though she might faint at any moment. She clung almost desperately to the tiny, rumpled figure, and found herself pressing a shy kiss on the wrinkled cheek. "Mrs. Green kept me safe for you," she whispered, so shaken with gratitude and relief and love for this wonderful, little old woman who had waited and hoped to meet her and claim her, that she had to hold the embrace just a moment longer. Then, as much to lighten her own emotions as to ease the older woman's tension, she added provocatively, "But there is one thing. . . ."

"What?" demanded both lawyers and the dowager with one voice.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Green turned me into a bookworm."

"Don't tell me you are a bluestocking as well as a beauty?" exulted the dowager. Her delight in this charming grandchild was obvious. "What a sensation we shall cause in the ton, Freddi!"

"Are you sure you want me, Grandmama?" Alfreda asked. "I won't be too much a reminder of my father, and what he did to you?"

"I shall take great pleasure in sponsoring my darling granddaughter into the beau monde," said the dowager, with a militant light in her fine eyes. "That should give the wretched man and his loutish son something to worry about!"

At this injudicious statement, the elder North, who had been beaming foolishly at the sentimental scene, was compelled to issue a warning. "Such a course of action is fraught with danger, ma'am," he said repressively. "I must admit I am more than a little concerned over the possible results of an announcement that Lady Amelia Calthorp has a granddaughter the same age as Lord Dorn's son—one, moreover, who resembles the Dorns more closely than does the swarthy Roger."

Lady Amelia was no mooncalf. "A granddaughter who also is the image of Penelope Dorn," she said, all amusement gone from her expression. "I see your point, Mr. North. The earl is not a man to accept such a major threat without attempting retaliation." Her wise old eyes met the lawyer's concerned gaze in agreement.

Alfreda was alarmed at the turn the conversation had taken. "If there is any chance that—that creature—would attempt to harm you, Grandmama . . ." she began, and then paused to relish the sound of that title, smiling softly.

Lady Amelia's glance met the lawyer's again, and a silent compact was made between them. Protect the child. She has had enough pain.

"Alfred Dorn wouldn't dare!" the dowager spoke forcefully. "Mr. North, you and your son have my deepest gratitude for your integrity in this matter.

I know that you will do whatever is necessary to establish my granddaughter's legitimacy, and I agree that caution must be our chief concern. Is there a chance that we can make all secure before the earl learns of our purpose?"

Thomas North considered the problem, frowning.

"Not if you flaunt a beautiful, hitherto unknown granddaughter in the beau monde. I doubt that very much can remain secret in that arena of gabble-mongers! Need I remind you, Your Grace, that we are dealing with a desperate—a ruthless man? He has everything to lose—wealth, position, honor—"

"Honor?" scorned the old woman.

"Reputation, then," insisted Thomas. "Believe me, ma'am, Dorn will not accept this situation graciously!"

"Then I shall simply disappear," announced Alfreda quietly.

"No!" Not one voice but three objected loudly to that decision.

Clinging grimly to the small, fine-boned hand clasped in hers, Alfreda held to her resolve. "I can get a room somewhere near you." She smiled at her grandmother. "I can live very quietly, perhaps as a governess in some socially undistinguished family, where I shall present no threat to anyone. . . ." Her explanation faded under the three dissenting stares she encountered.

"Foolish beyond permission," decided the old woman. "My granddaughter living in some wretched attic, under the knaggy dominance of an unfashionable female, and compelled to instruct her stupid brats in subjects they have neither the brains nor the nous to understand!" And then the dowager paused, as though struck by a new idea. Her expression became first thoughtful and then triumphant. "I have it!"

Her audience waited for the revelation, hardly daring to breathe.

A slow, wicked smile softened the outline of Lady Amelia's mouth. "I have been seriously in need of a bright, young companion. You see, I have decided to reenter the beau monde, and I shall require a companion-secretary of intelligence and good humor to assist me."

"But the hair! The eyes!" waited Samuel North. "One look at Lady Alfreda, and the secret will be out!"

But his father was grinning. He hadn't had such an interesting case in years. "An excellent idea, ma'am," he said, bestowing a small bow of commendation in the dowager's direction. "Of course, there will be details to be agreed upon. . . ."

His son could see that the old man was off on one of his quirky starts again. Reluctantly, and with considerable foreboding, he enquired, "What details?"

"The hair, for one. We must arrange to change the color. Oh, only temporarily, to be sure!" he said, as he encountered the forbidding frown on the dowager's face. "For Lady Alfreda's protection."

"You may be right," the dowager agreed, albeit grudgingly. "So pretty," she explained to a bemused Alfreda, "but we must protect you from that monster of a father of yours."

"The Calthorp eyes?" prodded Samuel.

"I could wear spectacles!" Alfreda was getting into the spirit of the game, her grandmother's evident desire to be near her providing ample stimulus.

The dowager hailed the suggestion with satisfaction. "All that is left to do," she told her companions, "is to get Freddi to the best modiste in London, and see the child rigged out in proper style—"

"I am afraid your attendance at such a boutique would set tongues wagging," objected the senior North. "Buying clothes for your new companion?"

His son astonished everyone. "You'd better go to the Soho Bazaar for her clothes, if you're all determined upon this madcap plan," he said grudgingly.

His father regarded him with surprise, while Lady Amelia-nodded slowly. "You are right, young man. That place is the haunt of every clothes-conscious woman among the less affluent—and a good few of our women of fashion. Heavily veiled, of course!" she added mockingly.

"Then that shall be our salvation in this particular case," nodded Thomas North. "Lady Freddi can go veiled, or even tuck that betraying hair under . . ." He looked with distaste at Granny Green's old hat.

Alfreda giggled. "It's a sight, isn't it? But useful as a disguise."

"Then let us proceed!" commanded the dowager. "To the Soho Bazaar!" She smiled warmly at her grandchild. "Considering that I have not dressed to please the ton for more years than I care to count, I find myself curiously eager to embark upon the business of shopping, which to so many of the ton is their only profession!" She stood up, keeping her clasp on Alfreda's hand. She had not been so happy for eighteen years!

The dowager smiled again at the older man. "Since I came in a hackney, you may instruct your coachman to drive us to this bazaar with which your son is familiar." She chuckled at the younger man's expression. "Oh, I'll admit I know the place; I've had my maid buy clothing for me there from time to time. They should be able to provide more appealing garments than these," she admitted, catching the look of disapproval with which young Samuel was regarding her rumpled, out-moded clothing. "I really haven't cared. . . until now."

Alfreda was so moved by this admission of long-held grief that she made no protest against a shopping expedition. Strangely enough, both lawyers insisted upon attending the ladies.

"You may escort us to the bazaar," decreed Lady Amelia firmly, "but you must wait inside your carriage when we go in. Someone is sure to see you—more women of fashion hunt for bargains there than would ever admit it to their couturiers! They mustn't see my two respected men-at-law lending importance to the refur-

bishing of my young companion's wardrobe. Especially if a glimpse of red hair is caught! That news would get back to my horrid son-in-law by tonight at the latest."

Alfreda, in alt at the wonderful developments, was busily tucking her flaming hair into Granny Green's dowdy hat. "No one shall see it, Grandma," she promised, eyes alight with excitement and pleasure.

"Our first purchase must be a dark silk scarf," suggested the dowager. The two women were at once lost in the delights of making a list of absolute necessities.

The lawyers sighed and resigned themselves to a long wait in their carriage.

The wait was even longer than they had anticipated. When the two ladies finally strolled toward their carriage, followed obsequiously by a tradesman-clerk bearing boxes and bags, the Norths did not at first recognize the dowdy duchess and her country-bumpkin grandchild. Somehow the duchess had managed to get Alfreda into newly bought clothing in some changing-room within the bazaar. And the dowager herself sported a new bonnet!

Smiling widely, she held up an imperious hand.

"We are ready to be driven home," she announced. The lawyers were staring. "Rather a transformation, isn't it?" she added in a lower voice, as Samuel leaped out to assist the ladies into the carriage. "And you've seen only the beginning of our—ah—'sea-change'—as Shakespeare has it!"

"Into something rich and strange," added Alfreda, finishing the quotation. "Grandmama has a magic touch! She has made me beautiful!" Eyes wide with wonder and unaccustomed pleasure, she demanded that the silently gaping Samuel share her delight in her charming costume.

The young man pulled himself together and tried to examine this endearing little wench with his usual air of cool professional detachment. Rich and strange was not so far off the mark, he mused. The dowager had chosen to clothe her granddaughter in a black silk dress so soft that a man's hand ached to stroke it. . . and the newly revealed gentle curves beneath it. Although the intriguing garment was a sober, suitable black, it was topped by a saucy little blue bonnet that exactly matched Alfreda's eyes, as well as effectively concealing the flaming hair beneath. Tearing his glance from the slender waist and the delicious soft swell of bosom above it, Samuel North found his eyes sinking—drowning—in the widest, clearest, sweetest blue gaze he had ever beheld. Rallying, he managed to say, ". . . lovely blue eyes, ma'am! You'll have to get spectacles at once!" And then, regaining some composure, he forced a few more reluctant words. "Change, indeed, milady!"

His father had the audacity to laugh.

"That's the barber!" he commented in the cant phrase he knew his son would detest. "Always admit it when you are wrong. It increases your chances of being believed if ever you should be right!"

4

Naturally the servants of Thorp Townhouse were set aflutter by the arrival of an unexpected, young, and rather mysterious companion for Lady Amelia. Snow, the butler, was at first a trifle put out by the event, since, as a good majordomo, he expected to be consulted or at least informed about changes in routine. Rather sternly, he questioned Burton, Lady Amelia's dresser, as to why she had not told him of the imminent arrival.

Burton's manner alerted all the butler's darkest suspicions. The woman's naturally solemn face became guarded, and her eyes would not meet his. This was not strange, since the dowager had decided, within two minutes of entering her house the afternoon before, to confide in her oldest friend among the servants. It was just as well, she thought, since Burton would bear the brunt of the deception they intended to practice.

Lady Amelia knew nothing of hair dyes, for example; yet it was most urgent that the odd-smelling stuff they had bought at the Soho Bazaar be administered with some skill to the flaming length of Freddi's hair. Burton, she knew, had such skills. In fact, the woman had made herself a nuisance, when Lady Amelia's hair began to go gray, urging that she permit her dresser to "put some color back into it.". So she motioned Burton to follow her and her new companion into milady's

boudoir, and to shut the door securely after them. And then, briefly, she introduced her granddaughter, explained the situation, and held out the hair dye.

Speechless, excited, Burton took it. While the ladies were removing their outer wraps and bonnets, she opened the odd-smelling stuff and poured some into a basin.

"It may turn her hair green," she warned her mistress, and then looked at the fiery, flowing mane Alfreda was shaking out.

"Oh!" It was a gasp of pleasure.

"Pretty, isn't it?" asked Lady Amelia complacently. "And I absolutely forbid you to turn it green."

"That's as the Lord wills and the dye acts," snapped Burton, eager to get hands and brush into that lovely mass of color.

The new companion-granddaughter grinned saucily. "At least they won't connect me with Lord Dorn if my hair's green," she offered. Her companions were startled into a laugh.

And so it went, during that long afternoon and evening. The dowager rang for supper to be served in her boudoir, with Alfreda and Burton hiding in Lady Amelia's bedroom while the curious maids served the meal. Then, as they ate it, with the girl's head bound in a towel, the three women found so much to chuckle about, so much to plan and discuss, that Lady Amelia, for one, felt she had never eaten a more stimulating supper.

At length, the moment of truth came. Gingerly Burton unwound the towel, fearful lest the lovely hair be purple or fall out in handfuls. Instead, a rather heavy pelt of ebony stood out harshly around the girl's face, startling against its soft ivory.

The dowager stared with dissatisfaction. Finally she said, "Well, at least it isn't green."

"Or purple," giggled Alfreda.

"Or red," Burton reminded them both.

Lady Amelia smiled. "Now we shall plan our strategy!"

Later that night—her second—in London, Alfreda lay in the most comfortable bed she had ever known, staring up at a delicately coved and painted ceiling faintly revealed by the light of a pretty lamp burning low at her side. She was tired, but her mind would not release the excitements of the past twenty-four hours. Her room was next to the dowager's, and an inside door connected them. Lady Amelia utterly refused to permit her granddaughter to be housed in the servant's quarter, and Burton seconded her.

"For Her Grace's companion is not an ordinary servant," she had explained to a doubting Alfreda. "Indigent members of one's own family often act as companion or secretary."

Alfreda had grinned ruefully. "Well, I'm certainly indigent."

So she had been settled into the dainty, attractive little room, helped into her new nightgown by Burton, and tucked gently into bed by her grandmother.

"If anyone asks why I have placed Miss Freddi next to me," ordered the dowager, "you are to tell them that I feel I may have need of her assistance during the night."

Burton curtseyed and quietly left the room. Lady Amelia bent and kissed Alfreda gently on the forehead. "Welcome home, dearest!" she whispered, and went into her own bedroom to the waiting Burton.

And now she was alone, yet not alone. Never had she known this feeling of belonging, of being part of a family. Cuddling deeper into the soft mattress, Alfreda rehearsed the day that had made such a change in her life.

First there had been the meeting with the cheerful Thomas North and his handsome, critical son. From the very first moment she had had an urge to tease him, to provoke and ruffle his studied complacency. Then there had been the shocking news that her own father had banished her into obscurity in order to secure the succession with his son by a woman other than his wife. The smile disappeared as she tried to deal with that betrayal. Alfreda forced herself to recall the joy of meeting her mother's mother. Why dwell on unhappy events when she had found a real grandmother who loved Alfreda because she so closely resembled the lost Penelope? And who would, vowed the girl, come to love me because I love her!

Smiling again, Alfreda tried to picture her mother. Just before she tucked Alfreda into bed, Lady Amelia had given her a delicately painted miniature of Penelope. The girl pored over the young, wistfully smiling face painted by an unknown artist. Mother. She tried out the word, touching the tiny painted face with a gentle fingertip. Lady Amelia said that Alfreda had Penelope's nose and mouth. Too vulnerable. Firming her chin, the girl vowed that, in her own case, the red hair of the Dorn side of her family would give her the fire and strength she would undoubtedly need in the next few months. Even if it was dyed black!

She pulled her thoughts away from the unhappy young wife and the brutal husband. There was so much to be thankful for: especially Lawyer North, without whose help she would never have been united with her grandmother. In the cause of justice, he had been willing to sacrifice his client's interest—surely a difficult decision for a man of integrity—when he believed that client had committed a crime. Now think about his son, the starched-up Samuel, she urged herself, trying to lighten her mood.

Strangely, however, when she tried to picture the pompous, handsome, disapproving face, she found another male countenance imposing itself over the too-regular features. A dark, virile face which was lighted by a pair of

wickedly teasing gray eyes, and a white, predatory grin. . . . Who—? Oh, yes! That outrageous stranger at the Pot O'Gold Inn!

Of course she would never see the mocking wretch again, Alfreda told herself. But the brief duel of wits had been fun. As she drifted off to sleep, she wondered what the exasperating fellow was doing at this moment, and if he had spared even one thought for the dowdy little bluestocking. . . .

Although she had feared she might spend the long dark hours of the night brooding over the cold-hearted rejection of his daughter by the Earl of Dorn, Alfreda fell asleep with a smile on her face, thinking of a few telling remarks she would make to the presumptuous man in the caped overcoat if she ever saw him again. And what he would say to her about that mug of ale!

5

The Earl of Dorn regarded his illegitimate son and heir through a brandy-induced haze. Roger, who had arrived late for dinner, was methodically eating his way through the heavy courses, paying little or no attention to his father's ill-humor.

"You," sneered Lord Dorn, "remind me of your mother. Loud, greedy, and vulgar."

"At least she saved your bacon," retorted his son through a mouthful of food. "Which is more than your lily-white Lady P. could manage to do."

His father had early informed Roger of his less-than-legal right to inherit the title. Dorn knew there must be no loose talk; no fatal slips of tongue. He had thought it only sensible to inform the boy of the insecurity of his own position, and the dangers of their situation.

The earl scowled. When the brandy had descended to this level in the bottle, he was not always sure just what he had planned to say or do. Things were enveloped in a sort of warm mist, and his troubles, which were many, seemed less important than he had feared. Still, he reminded himself, there was one very important fact, relayed to him by someone he trusted in London, which he needed to discuss with the hulking Roger. What the devil was it? Something to do with. . . the girl!

"Mrs. Green is dead," he said, remembering the message from the lawyers. Roger wasn't impressed. "Good! I always thought that pension you paid her was a waste of blunt." He belched.

"That means the girl's loose," muttered Lord Dorn.

"Girl?" Roger helped himself to several more slices of roast beef.

His son's lack of attention finally roused the earl's ire. "Your sister—half sister—whatever she is," he snapped. "If she gets to asking questions in London, you may find yourself hanging out somewhere else than here at Dorn Manor! And having to work for your livelihood." He grinned maliciously at the suddenly alert youth.

Roger's jaw began slowly to masticate again.

"Kill her," he advised.

Lord Dorn was surprised. "You don't mean that," he protested.

"Why not? If she's a danger, as you seem to believe, then get rid of her. Unless you're willing to hand over the rents and the succession to Cousin Benedict."

"I am still the earl," snarled Alfred. "The rents are mine as long as I live!"

"Tell that to your beloved and very nosey cousin!" sneered Roger. "The word is around that he is considering a protest against your reckless squandering of the funds that belong to the estate—funds entailed to him—as my heir!"

His brief burst of anger spent, the earl's head was beginning to nod.

"Per—p'raps we'd better t-t-talk about it inna mornin'," he murmured. His head went down with a thud upon the stained tablecloth. He uttered a faint, snoring sound.

The burly youth gave his drunken parent a long, cold stare. Was the old sot going to give the game away? After eighteen years of good living, Roger was not about to lose the comforts and advantages of being heir to the Earl of Dorn! Even an idiot could see that Alfred had become a threat to the whole scheme he himself had contrived so many years ago. Roger picked up his glass and drained it, his eyes never leaving the slumped figure of his father. Perhaps the stupid old man should go, as well as the girl? He nodded sharply. Yes, it might be a good idea to do something about the mess before it was too late.

Grunting, he hoisted himself to his feet and strolled off to bed. The servants would carry his father upstairs when they were ready.

Roger strolled into his father's bedroom early the following morning, carrying a restorative potion. He had no desire to talk—what use were words? You couldn't break any bones with them! After some thought, Roger had hit upon a plan of action that might solve his problem. Going very early to the stables, he had casually removed a small bottle of a drug the horse doctor had

sent last month to deaden pain in an injured horse the earl had wished to save; Some sort of painkiller. Roger had dropped some of it into the settler he had demanded from the butler.

He paid no attention to his father's groans of protest, pulling him into an upright position and forcing the potion into Dorn's mouth.

"Wake up, old man!" he said roughly. "Drink this! We've got to move before that whelp-bitch of yours drags us both down."

Fifteen minutes later, Lord Dorn was morosely downing a mug of ale while Roger outlined his scheme.

"We'll send someone to wherever you planted the girl, and have her taken to Rye and put aboard a smuggler's boat. They can sell her in France for enough to make it worth their while."

Lord Dorn was not in a conforming mood. "And if she has already left for London?" he snarled.

"You think the lawyers have told her? You bloody fool, didn't you have enough sense to swear them to secrecy?"

The earl grinned sourly. "Better than that. I never told them the truth. I said she was a by-blow I wanted to provide for. I told Green the same tale. The girl is most likely married to some rustic clown by now, and sporting a farrow of brats."

Roger stared at him suspiciously. "That's not the tune you were singing last night," he snapped. "In a rare taking, you were!" He glared at his father. "You have more sense drunk than sober."

The earl, whose policy it was to avoid anything that disturbed his peace for as long as possible, searched his dulled mind for a ploy that might divert his belligerent offspring's anger. "I had a letter from our good neighbor, Mark Savage, yesterday," he told Roger. "He wishes you to know that, as of yesterday, you are not welcome at The Oaks. *Persona non grata*. That means he hates your guts. Have you been chousing too much blunt from his dear little brother?"

The diversion was successful. Roger's grin was wolfish. "It's not only the cards. The little cock can't resist a dare. I bet him one hundred pounds he couldn't beat me in a race from here to London, and then I had Felsin loosen one of the wheels of his curricule. Unfortunately, big brother Mark took over the challenge." Roger laughed coarsely. "Unfortunately for him! Big brother never made it to London."

Lord Dorn joined the laughter. "What did he break?"

"Nothing, apparently. He's got the devil's own luck! And of course he's forbidding me the freedom of his house so I won't try to collect the bet. But all that's beside the question. What are you going to do about the girl?"

So the diversion hadn't worked! The earl sighed. "We are going to London. We shall open the house I have there, and I shall visit the lawyers and

find out what is happening—and what they know.” He scrutinized the scowling dark face of his illegitimate son with a malicious grin. “Maybe I’ll arrange for you to marry the girl, and keep it in the family.”

Both men exchanged wicked smiles at this ugly suggestion.

Late that afternoon Roger rode over to The Oaks to collect the hundred pounds due him from Jeremy Savage. Mark Savage had not been able to finish the race with a wheel missing, and greedy young Roger had no intention of leaving for London without getting his money. He was not afraid of breaking the ban—no man could show him the door until the debt of honor had been paid!

In point of fact, it was Jeremy into whose presence the disapproving butler ushered Roger.

The younger man—a boy, really—was in a sulky mood.

“If my half brother had not interfered, I should have beaten you,” he muttered sullenly. “I suppose you’re here to collect your pound of flesh.”

“One hundred pounds,” taunted Roger. “Do you have that much?”

“I can get it.” Jeremy’s face was a sickly shade. He almost ran out of the room.

Grinning, Roger strode around the library. It was a large, comfortable room, very masculine with heavy wood and leather and the scent of tobacco. And brandy, thought Roger gleefully, his eyes searching for the decanter.

His search was interrupted by the coldest voice he had ever heard. “What are you doing here, Dorn? I thought I’d told you you were *persona non grata*—or is that much Latin too difficult for your feeble wits?”

Roger experienced the wary, unwelcome sense of alarm he always felt in Mark Savage’s presence. “I thought you’d be willing to pay your debts before denying me the door,” he blustered.

“No matter how treacherously won?” Mark sneered. He walked over to the desk and pulled out a leather purse. “You are no better than a thug, a hulking, blustering bullyboy, robbing children and old ladies.” With a contemptuous sneer, Mark opened the purse and tossed the coins it contained onto the floor. “Scramble for your dirty money,” he advised, grinning. “Crawl for it!”

For one long, furious moment Roger glared at his tormentor. Greed and rage warred in his heavy countenance. And then the gleam of the golden coins won over his anger, and he stooped to scabble up the guineas.

Mark Savage watched him with scorn.

Jeremy slipped into the room, caught sight of Roger’s kneeling figure and Mark at the same moment, and froze.

Roger lurched to his feet, eyes ablaze.

“You missed one,” offered Mark, kicking the coin toward his antagonist.

Cursing, Roger lunged toward the door. Jeremy, terrified, scooted aside in time to avoid that bull-like rush. A minute later, there was the sound of the massive front door closing. Jeremy met his brother's intent gaze.

"You made him grovel for it," he said faintly.

"He rooted for those guineas like the pig he is," agreed Mark.

"You warned me," admitted Jeremy, the freest smile he'd ever given his half brother trembling on his lips. "You were right." Ever since the fifteen-year-old had learned of the treacherously removed linchpin, he had begun to consider seriously Mark's earnest efforts to caution him against Roger's brutal tricks. "I've been a fool!"

"Congratulations." Mark extended his hand.

"For what?" Jeremy asked warily, accepting the adult ritual and shaking Mark's hand firmly.

"For taking the first step toward being a man," said his older brother quietly. He scanned the youthful, good-looking countenance of his sibling. If only their father had bothered to give the boy even half of the attention he paid his books and his ill-health! And he himself, Mark acknowledged glumly, had never really tried to get beyond that barrier Jeremy erected against everyone—except the brutish Roger Dorn. Setting his jaw grimly, Mark acknowledged further that Roger was the only youth near Jeremy's age in the vicinity. And the Dorn estate abutted upon theirs. Propinquity. Mark regretted that he had not seen earlier the devastating effects a rough character such as the Dorn heir could have on a disgruntled youth.

Well, that would all change now, Mark promised himself. And to set the ball rolling. . . "What do you say we celebrate? We've been rusticated in the depths of the county for too long! Shall we take a toddle up to the City?" Mark imitated the high nasal whine of a London dandy. "Deck ourselves out in full fig?"

His reward was a lighthearted grin from his half brother.

"I'd like that, Mark! I might even purchase a quizzing glass!"

Their shared laughter strengthened the newly forming bond between them. For the first time, young Jeremy looked his overpowering half brother in the eyes without resentment. "Do you think Papa will. . . mind?"

"He'll never miss us," responded Mark cheerfully.

And both of them knew that was true.

6

As the days passed, Burton was convinced that a kindly Providence had combined Christmas and her birthday into one. The dresser was eager to add Thanksgiving to the miraculous event. Lady Amelia had not only acquired a charming, well-educated, conversable companion, but Her Grace had even admitted to her long-time servant and crony that some new clothing was to be purchased for herself, as well as for the girl! Burton's faithful heart swelled, not only because her own task, so long a dreadful frustration as she beheld her dear mistress growing older and dowdier by the year, would in future be more interesting and rewarding. There was also the satisfaction of seeing a light long absent from those faded blue eyes daily rekindled by the newly discovered granddaughter.

The rest of the staff were equally pleased. One elderly maid, carried away by the startling new breaks from the dull, daily routine, had even been heard to mutter, "Er Gryce might break down an' 'ave a few parties!—Jus' small ones," the woman had hastened to add.

Snow, as pleased as the rest of the servants at the obvious happiness of his mistress, still felt it necessary to warn the staff that Her Grace had not

entertained in nigh on twenty years, and might not intend doing so now! But secretly, the butler shared the other servants' hopes. A miracle, indeed.

Lady Amelia was almost bewildered by the delightful possibilities that seemed to be increasing daily. First and most important, of course, was the pleasure of sharing the small, ordinary events of the normal day with her newfound granddaughter. The joy of planning, acting, talking together! The dowager had to remind herself frequently that the girl's safety might well depend upon the concealment of her true identity, but it was fatally easy to admire, and approve, and enjoy the young woman whom Mrs. Green had educated but had been unable to mold in her own stern, humorless image.

What a charmer Freddi was, to be sure! Lady Amelia ached to present her to the ton, to watch her captivate and conquer that closed, self-centered group with her beauty, her sparkling wit, and her provocative personality. For Alfreda had blossomed like a rose under the loving appreciation of her doting grandparent.

But even the besotted Lady Amelia dared not go against Lawyer North's stringent command and enlighten the world—or her servants: the same thing!—as to the true situation at Thorp House, especially after his warning that a disclosure of Freddi's parentage might lead to a threat to the girl's life. The lawyer would have been appalled to learn that his noble client had already taken both Burton and Snow into her confidence. The staff, however, even ignorant of Miss Freddi's true position, had taken the lively girl to their collective hearts. While they rather deplored the black-dyed hair, they had never seen its true red color, so would be unable, the dowager consoled herself, to squeak beef. (This was one of the provocative bits of cant she had borrowed from Freddi's rustic vocabulary.) The servants, pretending shocked disapproval of their mistress's new freedom of speech, were actually so titillated that they could hardly wait to get to the staff dinner table to relate or listen to the latest example of reprehensible jargon. Oddly enough, there was no censure for the source of the naughty language. Alfreda already had won an almost feudal loyalty from the formerly austere staff.

Lady Amelia, ignoring her granddaughter's protests, was spending a great deal of time and money in the elegant premises of London's most exclusive boutiques, choosing pretty dresses for her "companion," and almost incidentally, for herself. She was so pleased by this activity that Freddi hadn't the heart to deny her. But the very best times were when the two women sat in Lady Amelia's boudoir, asking questions, sharing experiences, filling in the lost years. Alfreda never tired of hearing about her mother's girlhood, and the dowager laughed until she cried at some of Freddi's salted rural anecdotes. She showed keen interest in the story of the girl's encounter with the rude rogue at the Pot O'Gold Inn.

"Inexcusable," was her comment when Freddi, pink-cheeked with wrath, had finished the tale. "Such male arrogance! Quite unforgivable, in fact." She peered sharply at the angry, animated little face of her grandchild.

"It was not enough that the wretch should make fun of Mrs. Green's bonnet," elaborated the girl. "The villain had the insolence to claim that a girl of my sort could never understand Aristotle's Ethics!"

"And can you?" probed the fascinated dowager.

"I think so," answered Mrs. Green's prize pupil. "At least enough of it to land that arrogant male a facer—as Squire Bowen's son used to say," she added hastily, qualifying her use of boxing cant.

Lady Amelia was more interested than she permitted Freddi to notice. "Was the wretch a gentleman, do you suppose?"

"He must have been," admitted Alfreda. "He recognized Aristotle. His accent was cultured, he wore a heavy signet ring. His coat was quite modish, I should think. Capes," she added seriously, unaware of the conclusions her grandmother was drawing from this detailed appraisal. "Not at all the kind of coat the squire wears, or any of the Quality in the county. In fact," she added judiciously, "if anyone else had been wearing that coat, I should have laughed! So many small, short capes hanging from his shoulders," she explained, and then added reluctantly, "He carried them off well. He was tall, and his shoulders were very wide."

"You were able to observe a good deal in such a short encounter," the dowager could not resist remarking. She gazed at the girl with encouraging interest. Her ploy was rewarded as Freddi went on dreamily.

"His eyes," she said softly, "were a really remarkable shade of gray. Almost silver in some lights, with very black lashes framing them like a fringe. . . ." Her own wide blue eyes caught the quizzical challenge in the older woman's glance.

Warm color flooded the girl's cheeks. To her grandmother's satisfaction, however, Freddi tried no coy evasions. "It is obvious," she said in a small tense voice, "that the man at the Pot O'Gold made a strong impression on me."

"I think that is a reasonable assumption," agreed her grandmother, releasing with no regret the image of the personable young Samuel North in favor of more interesting possibilities. "I shall hope to meet this arrogant humorist, this Top-o'-the-Trees dandy, some day. Perhaps at one of the social functions Burton is forever urging me to attend. Of course our wardrobes will have to be thoroughly renewed before such a move is possible."

Alfreda had her mouth open to remind her impulsive relative of Lawyer North's warning against springing an unknown young woman upon the ton—and a mere companion, at that!—when the dowager went on happily, "Which reminds me. I have decided to invite my oldest and best friends to

tea in a few days—long enough for the staff to get over their shock at the idea! It won't be as impressive as a bid to Almack's or Carlton House, but I do want my dearest friends to meet you." She sighed with pleasure. "It will be good to see them again."

Observing the new sparkle in her grandmama's eyes, Alfreda choked off her own objections. Surely the Earl of Dorn, in his ancestral estate far from London, would never hear of a black-haired companion to his mother-in-law! Or care, if he should hear. So she said cheerfully, "Your friends will be so happy to see you looking so smart—as fine as fivepence in a new gown, I've no doubt of it! Now what shall you wear?"

Which provocative question was good for a full hour of blissful discussion.

7

The comparative peace of her first week in London had lulled Alfreda into a sense of security that was to be rudely shattered two days before the dowager's tea party. Pursuing her scheme to introduce her new companion to her dearest friends, Lady Amelia dragged Freddi out to purchase a pretty morning dress.

"You have bought me too many new dresses, Grandmama!" the girl protested. "Your friends will be shocked at such alamodality in a mere companion!"

"Never a mere anything," objected the dowager crisply. Then, with a guilty smile, she added, "I must confess that I have decided to tell everyone that you are the daughter of a distant cousin who lives in the wilds of Scotland—northern Scotland! The Shetland Islands, in fact." She went on to explain, eyes twinkling. "No one I know has ever ventured so far north, you see. The perfect cover! The Shetland Islands are halfway to the Pole!"

Alfreda broke into delighted laughter. "Grandmama! The North Pole? I suppose that means I must appear in my bearskin?"

Lady Amelia's eyebrows rose. "Naughty child! Whatever—oh! You mean a bearskin!" She shook her head in playful admonition. "I have even thought of a suitable name for my young cousin. By the way, you must learn to call me Cousin Amelia, if you please!"

"My new name?" demanded Alfreda. "What have you thought of?"

"Frederica Darling," the dowager beamed. "What do you think?"

Alfreda pretended to be giving serious consideration to the name. "If I am to be an inhabitant of northern Scotland, should it not be MacDarling?"

"Whatever you say." The dowager chuckled, much pleased at this reception of her scheme. "As long as you agree to choose a pretty morning gown with me today. I wonder if Célèste has any tartan plaids?"

"Tell me you are not serious," begged the girl, still laughing. "Next you will be mounting me upon a Shetland pony for my debut!"

"Freddi, you are evading the question!" said the dowager firmly.

"If you insist upon purchasing one more gown for me, you will have to buy another clothes press, dear Gr—dear Cousin Amelia! I swear there is not so much as an inch of space left in that huge armoire in my bedroom!"

The old woman waved this poor-spirited objection aside.

"Nonsense, Freddi! You've scarcely enough clothing to last you out the week, once you enter Society." She mimicked anguished distress. "It is the Kiss of Death to be seen in the beau monde twice in the same dress!"

Grinning at her grandmother's absurd mime of disaster, the girl tried to reason with her too-generous relative. "Those sticklers have never met me, so must it not follow, logically, that every dress I have will be new to them?"

"Am I to be treated to Aristotle's dialectics?" demanded the dowager. 'Allow me to know more than any ancient Greek male about the customs of London's Bon Ton!'

Sweeping her granddaughter ruthlessly out to the carriage, Lady Amelia told the long-suffering coachman to get them to Célèste's with all speed, and then wait to pick them up when they should emerge from that elegant boutique.

The ladies spent a delightfully successful hour in those sacred precincts, deciding finally upon a warm rose-colored morning dress for Freddi. The rich shade did much to soften the harsh black of the dyed hair. But when the dowager, in full flood of a newly aroused shopping fever, offered to purchase a rose bonnet to go with the dress, Freddi put her foot down firmly.

"Not another item shall you buy for me, Cousin Amelia, until we have added the necessary touches to your own new costume." She had coaxed her grandmother into choosing a pretty blue dress for herself, one whose soft ruffles did a great deal to enhance the dowager's still too-slender figure. Now, contemplating that garment, Alfreda said, "Shoes, of course! Little silk ones, or soft leather to match this dress."

Célèste, who had been serving these distinguished clients personally, was forced to admit that she did not include shoes in the wealth of treasures she offered. "But next door, madame," she advised, "there is un cordonnier très chic!"

Alfreda, who could hardly wait to see her grandmother and herself attired in their new finery, insisted that the two dresses, tenderly packed into gilt boxes, should be given into her care at once, rather than sent over later in the day. Laughing, the two ladies went out onto the street and hastened over to peer into the window of the recommended shoemaker. Alfreda gasped her appreciation, pointing toward the single pair of shoes displayed on a silk-covered stand.

They were of blue velvet, a few shades darker than Lady Amelia's new dress.

"Those! We must have those!" she cried. "They match the blue dress exactly! Oh, please, ma'am, do buy them! It would make me so happy!"

At that moment a hard, masculine voice grated in their ears. "I see you are doing very well for yourself in the big city, Miss Bluestocking! Feathering your nest very comfortably, in fact!" The man's cold, contemptuous glance took in the dress boxes the girl was holding, slid over the pretty gray redingote she was wearing; then swept back disdainfully to her face. "Your new bonnet is more becoming than that hideous antique you were sporting when last we met, but I can't say I admire your taste in wigs. Even your red mop looked better than that thing!"

The scorn and disgust in his voice struck at Alfreda like a physical blow. Color drained from her face as she turned from the window to confront the man from the Pot O'Gold.

The dowager, shocked by the sudden attack, stared up into that dark, saturnine countenance. "What. . . who—?" she stammered.

The big fellow turned to her. "Let me warn you, ma'am. This little hellcat has claws she has not shown you yet, I would hazard. Wheedling shoes, and from the look of it, dresses from a rich, unwary patron! A word to the wise: Don't let the little cozenor bamboozle you out of anything more! She'll end up throwing something in your face!" Tipping his hat to the older woman, the fellow strode off down the street, causing modish saunterers to scuttle out of the way of his angry advance.

Nobly repressing a smile, the dowager breathed out a long exhalation. Her keen glance raked her granddaughter's stormy face, noting with admiration the fiery color that was already surging into her cheeks. "May I presume that that—gentleman—was your adversary at the inn? If so, then the half was not told me!" And she began to chuckle. "What did you throw at him?"

Blue eyes dark with fury between narrowed lids, Alfreda glared after the vanishing man. "Coward!" she spat. "Hadh't the courage to stay and face me!"

The dowager grinned at this sign of hot temper. "I can hardly wait for your next encounter," she said smugly. "Heaven grant I am present to witness it."

At that moment, rage cooling, Mark Savage turned into the exclusive tailoring establishment where young Jeremy was being fitted for his first adult suit. He had gone out during the seemingly endless time of the fitting, ostensibly to blow a cloud, but actually to secure tickets for the balloon ascension that Jeremy had been hinting about.

Both brothers' were finding their new friendship an unexpected pleasure. With a gap of ten years between them, neither one of them had considered that they had much in common. This visit to London had shown them the error of that belief. Mark found the bright, eager youth a good companion; Jeremy, for his part, had quite abandoned the petty resentments and complaints that it had been his wont to express every time his big half brother had tried to act in loco parentis, and guide his behavior into adult patterns. Both of them were aware, although neither would admit it, that this was the pleasantest experience they had ever shared.

When Mark reached the tailor's, Jeremy was already dressed in his old clothes, trying on hats in front of a large mirror. Even he was grinning at the effect of a large topper which was resting on the bridge of his nose.

"Let's try this one," suggested Mark, and Alfreda would not have recognized his voice.

Jeremy peered at the jaunty cap with a hard brim over the eyes. "Just the thing to wear at a balloon ascension," added Mark.

Jeremy's face lighted with pleasure. "We are to go? You have the tickets?"

"Taken out of your next month's allowance, my friend," Mark announced firmly. "And since that makes you my host, I shall also expect a good restorative tea to recruit our strength, afterward."

Jeremy clapped a hand to the pocket in which he kept the money Mark had solemnly handed over to him in the hotel that morning. "I think I can stretch to that," he said, in his most mature voice—and then he and Mark laughed together.

Even the tailor grinned at the obvious enjoyment on the two faces.

At the very moment that Mark and Jeremy were strolling toward the park from which the balloon was to take off, the Earl of Dorn was entering the chambers of his lawyer. The elder Mr. North greeted him warily. The investigation he and his son were carrying out had not yet cleared all the questions they needed to answer; the lawyer wondered what had brought his unpleasant client in at this moment. He soon found out.

"Where's the girl?" Alfred Dorn demanded, before he had even taken the chair North was indicating.

North played for time. "The girl?"

"My illegitimate daughter," Dorn supplied tersely. "You wrote to me that you had sent her a ticket to London when the old woman died. And asked me what I wished you to do about it, as I recall."

North forbore to ask why it had taken his client several weeks to respond to so personal a problem. Instead he said, smoothly, "When we did not hear from you, we proceeded to use our own judgment. . . ."

"Which was?" snapped Dorn.

"We apprised her of the true nature of her situation, loaned her some money—which we shall expect to receive from the estate—and found her a—a situation with a reputable employer. She is acting as a secretary-companion to an old lady."

All true, and it should hold him, God grant, until the dowager could make up her mind as to the course of action she wished to follow. Would Dorn swallow it without gagging?

For a while it appeared that he might. He was still frowning suspiciously, but his puffy, dissolute face was easing out of its hostile scowl. "Who's the old woman?" he demanded.

"Do you wish me to arrange a meeting?" challenged the lawyer. "I should think you would rather be seen as little as possible in Miss Green's vicinity."

"You should never have found the girl a post in London," growled the earl. "Give her some money and send her back to the village. . . ."

"There is no money," North said decisively. "The cottage you bought for Mrs. Green, eighteen years ago, recently sold for a pittance. Your creditors here in London—an army!—harass me daily. Your cousin Benedict has instructed his lawyers to get a restraining order, and appoint a conservator for the estate. We are contesting that, of course, but if Benedict succeeds, you will have to account for your stewardship." North's expression was grim. "You have already sold every parcel of land that was not entailed to the Dorn estate. You have borrowed against the next two years' rents. You are, I regret to tell you, bankrupt." He sighed. "I've been warning you for years, milord."

Dorn's face was haggard. "What—what can I do?"

The lawyer gave him a sharp glance. He'd been asked for his advice before, and no attention had been paid to it. Still—"You can take back and cash in the jewels you have lavished upon your mistresses. Sell that bijou house in Regis Crescent. Go quietly to Europe—living is cheaper in Spain or Italy—and lie low! We can forward what money trickles in from the rents." He pursed his lips. "One more thing. Take Roger with you."

"Roger!" The earl breathed the name with relief. "Benedict can't inherit anything as long as Roger is alive—"

"Haven't you listened to a word I've said?" demanded the lawyer. "If Benedict succeeds in getting a conservator—and he has every chance of doing

so—neither you nor Roger can say or do anything.” He paused, staring keenly at the fat, dissolute countenance across the desk from him. “You would be wiser not to thrust Roger under Benedict’s nose, milord. If Benedict could prove he was not your heir—”

The earl flung himself up out of the chair. “What kind of damnfoolery is this? Roger is my son and heir—!”

“Can you sustain a rigorous search into his bona fides?” North demanded. “I must warn you there is a great deal of talk about so graceless a son. . . who resembles neither of his parents.”

Dorn fumbled his way back to his chair and glared over the desk at the lawyer. Thomas North found himself almost feeling pity for the jaded, debauched creature in front of him. Then those tentative feelings were wiped away by the final snarl from his noble client.

“Don’t try to destroy me, North! I’ll tell everyone you knew about it all the time. If I go down, I’ll take you with me!”

Half an hour later Alfred Dorn was facing his son in the musty, poorly staffed town house which was his London residence. Briefly Dorn related what had transpired at the Inns of Court. Roger showed less alarm than his father had expected. He said, coolly, “What are you doing to do?”

“I’ll take the fellow’s advice, of course. Sell up everything I can lay hands on and cut to the Continent. He’s promised to send the proceeds of the sale of your dear mama’s little nest to me as soon as I can establish a pied-à-terre. And the rents, as they are paid in—for as long as I live!” He shrugged. “I shan’t mind Spain. They say the women there are fiery—and obliging.”

“Where is my mother?” asked Roger, his unblinking stare fastened on his father’s face.

Alfred Dorn felt a twinge of surprise—and was it alarm?—at the manner in which Roger, always loudly vociferous, was taking this catastrophe, for it must have been almost more of a shock to the selfish young brute than it had been to his father.

“Shall I take you with me when I go to give Carlotta her notice-to-quit?” he mocked, secretly glad that the hulking lout was not putting up a fight. “I’m sure she’ll be overcome with joy and pride to behold what a fine specimen her son has turned out to be!”

“Damn you to hell,” said Roger in that same low tone.

The earl laughed. “Not if you’re there! No, I’ll introduce you, and tell her what’s happened—and then you can both get lost. I never really needed you,” he said cruelly.

"I've kept Benedict from breathing down your neck for eighteen years," Roger struck back. "He and his lawyers would have made mincemeat of you years ago if you hadn't produced a son who could inherit. . . ."

"But now I am going to Spain—and let Benedict do his damndest! He can't seize the rents until I'm dead!"

"And where am I to go?" asked Roger.

"To hell," said his father, grinning, and started out to the carriage.

"If I do, I'll take you with me," muttered Roger, following his father closely.

8

Mark Savage had made a startling discovery. He was actually enjoying the company of his pestilential young half brother. The youth had a wry, gentle wit which bloomed into hilarious good-humor as he accepted the fact that his handsome, secretly admired older brother liked him. On his part, Mark had some bitter thoughts about the selfish, sour old man who had locked himself into his suite when his second wife died, and, served by another old man as dour as himself, refused to have anything more to do with the sons who needed his guidance—even his presence—to orient their lives.

But now things had changed. Mark was grateful for the angry impulse that had brought them both to London. Every day was revealing new facets of the boy's personality, and every day was made enjoyable by Jeremy's unsuspected gift for humor. Today, at Jeremy's urging, the brothers were going to a widely touted balloon ascension. They enjoyed a splendid meal in a famous tavern and then wandered over to the park to get a good seat for the performance, as Jeremy insisted.

"But my dear brother, any seat would be a good one when the balloon flies up into the sky," teased Mark.

"I would rather stand," announced Jeremy, grinning. "I'll secure a comfy seat for you among the dowagers, old man," he told his brother with carefully mimed concern. "Can't be too careful, you know! At your age, that is!"

"Young devil!" Mark grinned appreciatively. "Just for that, I shall lean upon you during the whole flight."

The boy's blissful smile was payment enough.

The world and his wife had apparently accepted the offer of a rare treat—and had brought their children with them. In no time at all, Mark and Jeremy were fighting their way through a pushing, shoving, loud-talking throng of what Mark characterized as sweating Cits. Using the advantage of his extra height to try to spy out a less uncomfortable area, Mark's eye was caught by a roped-off enclosure within which the crowd was less dense. Grabbing Jeremy by the arm, he steered them both over to this space. As he might have expected, an enterprising Cockney had set up the ropes early that morning, and complacently charged an exorbitant fee for admission into the relatively uncrowded area.

Mark was glad to pay, and found himself relaxing in the comparatively civilized group. Until he beheld, seated at the very front of the space, two familiar figures. The older woman he scarcely glanced at. It was the brazen young adventuress in the hideous black wig who caught and held his gaze.

"Not again!" He gritted his teeth. "Must that wretched female pursue me wherever I go?"

Of course Jeremy was on to his brother's annoyance like a flash, and demanded an explanation. Briefly and succinctly Mark gave it to him.

"You think she followed you here?" Jeremy's too-innocent expression alerted Mark to the fact that his young rascal of a sibling was trying to bamboozle him.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," Mark snapped. "The woman is a menace!"

Jeremy sidled around the ropes until he could get a clear view of this woman who had his knowledgeable brother in such high dudgeon. His eyes opened wider as he caught a glimpse of Alfreda's glowing, happy little face—the big blue eyes sparkling like sapphires, the rosy lips smiling. The boy glanced back at his brother with a frown. Surely no man in his right mind could find that little charmer a menace?

And then he grinned. In his memory, he could not recall that Mark had ever squired a female to any social event. Oh, his big brother had accepted invitations to balls and dinners given by the local gentry, but there had been no special girl mentioned. This was something new, different, interesting! Jeremy looked up to see a frowning Mark at his shoulder, but the frown was not directed at himself, Jeremy noted. The glare was focused upon the pretty little charmer in the rosy dress.

"Why don't you just ask her why she's following you?" prodded Jeremy with mock innocence. Ignoring the obvious fact that the girl didn't even know they were alive, he went on, "Perhaps if she knows you are on to her scheme she will leave you alone."

It was the veriest nonsense, and both Savage men knew it. Still, Mark was alarmed that the absurd proposal sounded so attractive. He found he wanted to confront the cozening female and set her to rights! Scowling, he turned away and stared hard at the preparations for the balloon ascension.

With one wicked look at his brother's stubborn stance, Jeremy slipped toward the fascinating little enigma in the rosy bonnet.

He arrived behind the two ladies just in time to hear Alfreda crow with delight, "Oh, look, Grandmama! They are letting it go!"

Jeremy caught the nervous glance with which the older lady sought to discover if anyone had heard the girl's cry. She met Jeremy's eyes; frowned, shrugged, then smiled.

"Come here, young man," she said imperiously.

Jeremy, agog with excitement and a wicked desire to play a trick on his wonderful big brother, lost no time in presenting himself in front of the two ladies and making his best bow.

"My elder brother pointed your. . . granddaughter out, ma'am," he announced boldly. "I wished to—er—offer my compliments!" he finished triumphantly, recalling something he'd overheard Mark say when doing the polite.

Both ladies were now regarding him with considerable interest. "Your elder brother?" quizzed the dowager, glancing behind the boy to see if she recognized one of her friend's grandsons. Alfreda was more direct.

"What is your elder brother's name?" she asked suspiciously. Was this some artful young dodger out to house a wealthy looking woman? How did he know she was the dowager's granddaughter?

"Our name is Savage," answered the wicked boy, "and I am sorry to tell you that that is my brother's nature, also. He is very angry about you, ma'am," he said, bowing to Alfreda, "although I am sure I cannot see why!" And he bestowed his most wheedling, winsome smile upon the pretty girl. "What is your name?" he inquired guilelessly.

Both women seemed taken aback by these revelations. The dowager was extremely interested and curious. Her gaze swept over the persons standing nearby, but all of them seemed entranced by the slowly rising balloon.

All but one.

Bearing down upon the three with a most horrendous frown upon his darkly handsome countenance was the man who had accosted them in front of the shoemaker's. The dowager was delighted.

But not Alfreda, interrupted at the most exciting moment of the first balloon ascension she had ever had a chance to witness by that *bête noir*, that shameless wretch who seemed determined to ruin her pleasure. Sending his innocent little brother to do his nasty work! It was time, and past time, Alfreda decided, to give the villain his comeuppance!

So it was that the furious Mark was met by a raging little virago who was, if anything, angrier than he was. The little termagant did not even give him time to voice his disapproval and scorn.

"If you do not stop annoying my grandmother and myself, I shall have the law on you! I am sure there are statutes that forbid great insensitive bullies from persecuting defenseless females!"

"Defenseless!" snarled Mark. "That will be the day!" And then something about what she said penetrated the battering ram of his anger. "Grandmother?" he asked in a tone of pure shock; and then, contemptuously, "Grandmother? How have you managed to deceive this poor woman so vilely? She is no more your grandmother than I am!"

The dowager and Jeremy exchanged looks of pure delight. It was their mutual hope that nothing might occur to interrupt this fascinating exchange. The dowager wondered, briefly, if she should interject a few words to add fuel to the flame, but quickly decided that the combatants were doing very nicely without her assistance. Mark was speaking.

"I wouldn't be so quick to bandy threats, you little sneak! Perhaps the law might be interested in the means by which you cozened this poor old lady into accepting you as her grandchild?" The word was a sneer.

The comment struck home, although not in the way Mark thought. The hot-tempered Alfreda had suddenly realized that she had let out the secret, done exactly what Lawyer North had warned her against. She cast a hasty glance around to make sure no one could overhear them. Had she brought trouble to Grandmama by her careless talk?

Her sudden caution, the hunted expression on her face, convinced Mark Savage that he had reason for his worst suspicions. He did not stop to ask himself why he should be so angry at this little deceiver—as though she were someone of whom he had expected better behavior. Instead he said coldly, addressing the dowager, "May I see you home, ma'am? I hope this little thief hasn't robbed you of more than a few clothes!"

The dowager could not resist the opportunity. Her life had become so rich, so interesting, so utterly delightful since the arrival of her darling granddaughter, that she had not believed it could get any better. But this—! Like a melodrama on a stage, it was. Dark plots, conniving women, beautiful avenging men! Lady Amelia raised pitiful blue eyes to the hero-villain of this drama.

"Well, yes," she faltered, with convincing concern. "There have been a few other things. . . ." Her glance went to the charming little necklace of pearls that had been Penelope's coming-of-age gift, which she had given to darling Freddi for the tea party.

The man followed her glance, his frown darkening as he noted the delicate luster of the jewels.

"How could you?" he grated, glaring at Alfreda. "Even a girl of your sort should have scruples about robbing such a kindly, gentle old woman!"

There it was again! "A girl of your sort." Alfreda's hands clenched into fists as she faced the infuriating, pompous creature. But he had not finished. Pleased at her obvious reaction to his taunts, Mark went a step too far.

"Lucky for this lady and me that you haven't a mug of ale in your fist," he goaded, then turned to the wide-eyed dowager. "She threw a mug of ale over me at an inn," he explained, grimly.

"How. . . how uncivil of her!" Lady Amelia managed, fighting to suppress her laughter.

Jeremy, an interested observer, felt that the odds against this pretty, spirited little girl were too uneven. He said judicially, "I can't say I find the action unwarranted, especially if Mark was speaking to her the way he is now. I should think a mug of ale was a mild reprisal."

"Would you?" The dowager was determined to defend the most interesting young man she had met in years. Perfect for Freddi! "But to throw it at him? In a public inn? I should imagine quite a number of persons saw what happened. Persons one finds in a common room of an inn are hardly noted for their delicacy of behavior. They probably laughed their heads off at your brother. I am sure the poor fellow has every right to be furious."

Alfreda stared from her grandmother to the young boy with a sense that she was taking part in a nightmare. How had the older woman and the youth gotten into what was surely a private battle? She looked at Mark, and found the same expression of disbelief and annoyance on his face that she felt upon her own countenance.

"While I am naturally grateful for your partisanship," he said stiffly to the dowager, "I must beg your permission to retire, with the final warning against this conniving little wretch." He bowed stiffly and, with a minatory glance at his treacherous little brother, prepared to depart.

The dowager could not bear the encounter to end so tamely.

"I. . . I believe I am. . . going to faint!" she cried, with surprising strength for one in such a state.

Mark turned back quickly, and caught her as she collapsed.

"Where is this lady's carriage?" he demanded of the stunned girl.

Wordlessly, Alfreda led him to the place where Tom Coachman had let them off—with instructions to come back for them after the event was finished! Miserably, worried for the frail little woman lying so quietly in Mark's big arms, she confessed that the carriage would not be waiting yet.

Scowling as though it were all her fault, Mark changed direction and led the small, silent procession toward his own smart curricule.

"Get in," he told the girl sharply. "You will have to hold her while I drive. And direct me to where she lives." He glanced at the grinning Jeremy, who had not had time to smooth out his expression. "I'll see you back at the hotel, my lad."

For the moment wordless, Alfreda hastened to take her position in the curricule and hold out her arms to receive the limp burden of her grandmother. While the man went around to the other side to mount, Alfreda cradled Lady Amelia gently against her shoulder. And then, to her surprise and annoyance, she caught a flash of a naughty smile on the pale lips. The girl set her jaw against any betrayal of the anger that flared up in her breast. How could Grandmama! Such a shabby trick! And above all, WHY?

To get that man to drive us home, she told herself after a moment's thought. Wicked Lady Amelia! But of course it was impossible for her granddaughter to expose her naughty trick to the man's scorn. Grimly Alfreda held her tricky relative against the jolting of the curricule as Mark Savage drove it home as though he could not get rid of them quickly enough.

When they reached Thorp House, Mark did not wait for Alfreda to summon the butler, but carried the dowager into the hall and up the stairs, ignoring the flustered behavior of the servants. Alfreda followed, soothing the staff almost absent-mindedly in her eagerness to reach the dowager's room as quickly as the man who was carrying her. She darted ahead to open the door of the bedroom, and then stood aside to indicate the huge four-poster.

Mark laid his burden down gently. Then he turned to face the girl and the butler and dresser who stood in the doorway anxiously peering at their beloved mistress.

"Since you have feathered your nest so nicely," Mark said in a frigid voice which was heard by every servant in the hallway, "perhaps you'd better do something helpful to pay for the gifts you've choused from this poor old woman!" And he strode out of the room, scattering the clustering staff before him.

He became aware of rapidly moving footsteps behind him, and whirled with a sense of satisfaction. Wanted to quarrel, did she? He'd settle her hash for her! Mark thought crudely.

But when he faced the pursuer, it was to see a mature woman servant in a neat black gown, with a stern expression that boded ill for his own peace of

mind. Almost fatalistically he heard Burton say, "You'd no right whatever to speak so harshly to Lady Freddi. She's the dowager's granddaughter, and she's brought more happiness into this house than's been here for twenty years!"

Mark considered the flashing eyes and wondered whether to ignore the whole scene or face the issue. "Whether I believe you or not is beside the point, ma'am," he said with a gentleness that would have surprised Alfreda. "It is clear that you believe her story, and that your mistress does so. I would only ask that you consider why the girl is wearing that hideous wig. There's a wild red mop under it: I know."

"I dyed Lady Freddi's hair because her father would murder her if he knew she was in London—" began Burton angrily.

Mark held up a restraining hand. "Spare me these Cheltenham dramatics," he begged. "If that wild tale doesn't tip you off to the little minx's unscrupulous intent, nothing will save you. I only wished to protect your mistress from a cozening sharp."

He turned and walked down the great stairway without giving the dresser a chance to reply. Snow, very frozen of demeanor, held the door open. As he trod down the steps to his curricule, watched over by a footman, Mark wondered rather bitterly how many more times he would find himself confronting this maddening little troublemaker. What was she really doing in this elegant mansion? Couldn't the silly old woman see through that tissue of lies? A murderous father, indeed! And then Mark Savage laughed so heartily that his horses' ears pricked, and two passersby on the street stared at him. What a wild and wonderful imagination the little chit had, to be sure! Plus enough nous to fool women old enough to know better!

He wondered briefly if it was his duty to warn the old woman again; then he decided it was not.

When he reached the hotel in which he and Jeremy were staying, he found that the boy had gotten there before him. Jeremy was all agog to know the details of the rescue of the fainting woman, and asked some pretty sharp questions about the little charmer in the pink bonnet. Mark made a quick decision. He told Jeremy the whole story of the virago at the Pot O'Gold Inn, even including the tossed mug of ale. The boy could not hide his amusement.

"Got you rather neatly, didn't she?"

"Neatly?" Mark howled. "She ruined my new coat!"

Jeremy carefully neglected to meet Mark's fuming glance. "But you rather put her down in front of a lot of strangers, didn't you?" he asked.

Mark hissed between his strong white teeth that he knew damned well where he'd like to put that conniving little so-and-so!

Jeremy chortled with laughter he could not throttle. His life had been a great deal more fun since big brother Mark had taken control. He opined

sagely that the girl was most likely a thief, out for what she could get, but then argued that since she seemed to be entertaining her Victim so well, it might be worth whatever trifles she could wrest from the Victim to let her stay on unmolested—especially since Mark had informed them all of the girl's true nature.

Mark found this reasoning distasteful, but wasn't quite sure why. It occurred to him that what he would really like to do would be to get the saucy little wretch in his power and shake the truth out of her!

Rather alarmed by his own vindictiveness—after all, it was only a topcoat that she had mined—Mark decided to scout the neighborhood, discover the name of the Victim, and then make up his mind whether or not to tell the authorities.

Jeremy eagerly agreed to this bit of scouting, on condition that he be allowed to share the adventure.

It took them less than half a day to find a hackney driver, posted near the corner of the block, who could give them all the information they required. The brothers returned to their hotel to discuss further plans over a tasty dinner.

"A dowager duchess!" breathed Jeremy. "You would think she'd have more brains than to be taken in by some grubby thief!"

Although it had been his own opinion, Mark felt some discomfort at hearing it so crudely expressed. The little bluestocking at the inn had not seemed really vicious, just bad-tempered—which would naturally go with hair of that flamboyant color. And thinking of the hair—why would any woman in her right senses disguise that glorious crest under coarse black dye? Could there be any truth in the story? . . .

Tossing off the last of his ale, Mark damned himself for being as gullible a dupe as had ever tried to cash a draft on Aldgate pump.

While he was thus musing over his own fallibility, Jeremy made a comment that brought Mark to full alert.

"Roger Dorn's in town with his old man. I saw them at the balloon ascension today."

"Are you certain?" Mark had hoped to keep young Jeremy away from the vicious influence of that brutal lout. Was it a coincidence that the Dorns had come to London now? Chiding himself for being a nervous biddy, Mark still could not help but feel uncomfortable in the situation. "Did he see you?"

"I don't think so," Jeremy answered slowly, "but I surely saw him. Well, I mean I saw his father's red hair first, of course. Hard to miss that topknot! And then I noticed Roger standing beside him. They were both in a raging temper," he concluded cheerfully.

Mark was sitting as though stunned, with his fork halfway to his mouth. Red hair! Could it be possible that there was some connection between Dorn and the little thief? Surely the earl would not find it necessary to send a spy into the home of a duchess? Slowly his fist tightened, as a resolve hardened in his mind.

“We are going on a hunt, Jerry,” he announced.

The youth was so pleased to receive a nickname from his impressive half brother that he would have agreed to any scheme, however harebrained.

9

The Earl of Dorn and his son were at that moment calling upon Alfred's old mistress, Roger's mamma. The little house that Alfred had bestowed upon Carlotta was surprisingly well-kept, Dorn thought, then sneered at his surprise. Carlotta had always been very conscious of her own comfort, and the gods knew she had had enough blunt out of him to keep her in a style to which she had never been accustomed before she met him! And no doubt many others had contributed during the past eighteen years.

Had it been that long? wondered the earl as he waited for the bell to be answered. Perhaps the bitch had sold the bijou residence, and the lawyers would be unable to recover the money!

The door swung open. A heavy-set female loomed in the doorway, challenging the newcomers to state their business. There were enough remnants of her former dark beauty to tell Alfred that this was indeed the luscious Carlotta, rather the worse for time. A flash of recognition lit the woman's dark eyes, but it was Roger who spoke first.

"You are my mother?" he said, casting a scathing glance over her too-ample proportions. He fell silent, his heavy face sullen.

Carlotta raised her eyebrows. "Just like his papa: no manners," she commented, grinning.

The earl pushed his way past her into the hallway.

"Who is your latest. . . protector?"

"The best I've ever had," Carlotta said crisply. "Myself."

The earl looked more closely at her. Behind her, in the open doorway, Roger lingered, glowering. The woman was not too badly dressed in a purple gown that did its best for her bulging figure, Dorn decided.

"I run a boardinghouse," she explained proudly. "For bachelors."

The earl's rakish grin showed all too clearly his interpretation of that announcement. "Then your—guests—will have to shift for themselves. I'm selling the house."

"You're doing what?" Carlotta's voice rose to a screech.

"I'm selling it," Dorn repeated. "You've had eighteen years free rent, woman. Don't be greedy." He was enjoying this.

"I'll squeak beef!" Carlotta yelled. "I'll tell everybody you switched—"

Before she could finish her threat, the earl had clapped his hand over his mouth and pushed her before him into the living room, snapping an order to Roger to shut the front door.

"Why do you think I'm selling up, you damned idiot?" he snarled. "I've got to get out of England, go to Spain, stay there until I die probably! And believe me, I need the money this place will bring." He scanned the neatly kept room. "I didn't know you had it in you to be such a good housekeeper, lady-bird! When I knew you, you were careless and sloppy." He laughed. "You've hired a maid to do the cleaning," he said, guessing.

"Keep that up and I'll kill you, you—!" Carlotta shrieked. "And don't think I couldn't do it! You've run to fat since last we met, haven't you, you brandy-soaked sot?"

Strangely enough, it was Roger who deflated the drama of the moment.

"Shut up and use your heads," he said roughly. "Yelling at each other isn't going to get us out of this mess."

Both faces turned toward this unexpected critic. Lord Alfred was the first to recover. "I suppose you've got a brilliant plan which will save the day?" he sneered.

Roger's glance at his parents revealed all too clearly what he thought of them. "You've both wallowed in comfort for eighteen years because I kept the snooping, meddlesome Benedict off your backs until now. . . ."

"Not by any exercise of brains or skill," taunted his father. "The top of your bent is fleecing young boys by wrecking their curricles!"

"I made a hundred pounds at it," Roger reminded him. "That's more than you can claim from any of your card-playing. You always lose!"

The earl grimaced at the shrewd hit. "Well, what's your magic solution, then? Let's hear it!"

Roger sucked in a deep breath. He discovered he was relishing the feel of power. "First," he said slowly, "my mother will sell all the jewels she has come by and be ready to set out with us to Spain. Dorn will wait for the lawyers to dispose of this house, and any other valuables he hasn't already put up the spout. As soon as we've got it all—" He stared at his father. "Can you be sure the Norths won't squeak on you?"

"The flight to Spain was Thomas North's idea," said the earl, as much to deflate his overbearing son as to enlighten him.

Roger was not put off. "Then he's got more sense than either of you two. Now why don't you get going?"

"And what will you do, you nincompoop?" The earl was still smarting from the set down his hitherto disregarded son had given him.

Carlotta spoke sharply. "Less of that sort of talk, Dorn!" she advised. "Don't forget it is your stupidity and bad management that has gotten us into this bumblebath!" She eyed her son with more interest than she had yet shown. "What's your part in this, lad?"

"I intend to collect my little half sister and make sure she isn't around to foul up my plans. My dear father swears that no one, not even the lawyers, suspects his trick with the children. If he's right, we'll be sure there's no way to prove I'm not the real heir." He scanned their irresolute expressions intently. "My dear mama will remain safe and comfortable in Spain until the present earl"—he grinned viciously—"hops off. After which I shall return to claim the dibs."

Alfred, Lord Dorn, was shaking with rage. "You rotten little—" he began, striding toward the big hulking figure. "I'll—"

Roger put one hand out and sent him staggering back. "You'll what, cockylorum? Mill me down? I'd like to see you try it, you old windbag!"

Carlotta thrust her ample person between the combatants. "Shut up or I'll scuttle both yer nobs! I mean it!" She waved a heavy brass candlestick in the air. Then, when the threat of a fistfight seemed to be decreasing, she went on softly, "The worst enemy you Dorn men have is yourselves. If you can force yourselves to act like sensible human beings for a few days, we may all come out of this with credit."

"I'd rather have the cash." Roger grinned, suddenly admiring his mother for the first time.

Lord Dorn was reluctant to accept Roger's plan, but eventually agreed. "Just wait until I get safely out of the country before you try anything criminal," he stipulated, pettishly.

Neither of the others bothered to listen to him.

"How are you going to find the girl?" asked Carlotta. "Has Dorn told you the name of the village he had her taken to?"

"She's in London," vouchsafed the earl.

Both his auditors glared at him. "You had her brought here?" screeched Carlotta. "Did you tell her who she is?"

"The woman I had her with died," the earl explained grudgingly. "I told the lawyers to sell the place. They sent for her." It hadn't been quite like that, but it was all these two needed to know, Alfred thought with some resentment. It wasn't his fault that the Green woman had died!

"Go to see the lawyers in the morning," said Roger angrily. "Find out where she is and what they've told her!"

The earl gave him a sour look. "Who was your servant last year?" he snapped.

"You fool!" snarled Carlotta. "Don't you see the girl could ruin everything for us? I think—"

"I couldn't care less what you think," said Alfred Dorn, smiling nastily. "I am secure for my lifetime, if I go to Spain as Thomas advises. He'll see I get my rents and whatever money he can salvage from the properties that aren't entailed—"

"And when you've kicked the bucket?" demanded Roger. "What's left for her and me then?" He nodded toward his mother.

Dorn made the mistake of laughing. "Oh, I'm sure you'll think of something," he uttered mockingly. "Carlotta always did have an eye to the main chance."

"If you won't see the lawyers, I will," vowed Roger.

"You terrify me," taunted his father, but he did indeed look concerned. "With your brains—or lack of 'em!—you'll give away the whole shot before we can squeeze a groat out of 'em!" He gave an elaborate sigh, meanwhile thinking as fast as he could. "Oh, all right! I'll call on the Norths tomorrow, and see what I can discover. Will that satisfy you?"

It didn't, but Carlotta and Roger agreed to wait at least until the next day before trying any plans of their own.

10

Jeremy, vastly proud of his growing expertise as a whipster, was more than happy to accept Mark's generous suggestion that he tool the cur-ricule in the park for an hour every day. But the day after the rescue of the fainting dowager, Jeremy headed in a different direction. It had occurred to him that his big brother was far more angry at the girl in the black wig than was normal for his easygoing temperament. Surely one spoiled coat, when he had so many, was not worth so furious and persistent an anger?

A few would-be casual questions had evoked such a scowl that Jeremy quickly changed the subject. Today, however, he had made a discreet inquiry as to the residence of the elderly victim—with a view, he hastened to add, to making sure she was still alive and recovering from her ghastly experience.

"Were you planning to send flowers?" snapped Mark, but he begrudgingly gave the requested information.

Gratefully accepting this lead, Jeremy spent almost all of his current pocket money upon a lavish bouquet, and then lost no time in driving to the duchess's home. Soon he was pulling up in front of an elegant, small mansion. Securing his horses to a handsome bronze hitching post by the road, he

clasped the bouquet to his chest and went to knock upon the heavy bronze ring on the front door. An elderly butler opened it.

"I have come," explained Jeremy with his most ingenuous smile, "to pay my respects to the duchess and her granddaughter."

"You're a little young for either of 'em, me bucko," said Snow with a genial lack of restraint quite uncharacteristic of him. "Who are ye—and what's up?"

Jeremy began again. "My name is Jeremy Savage, and I am the younger brother of Mark Savage, who rescued the duchess when she fainted at the balloon ascension yesterday. We. . . thought it only civil to inquire. . . ." He waved the bouquet enticingly.

Snow permitted himself a grin at the likable schoolboy.

"Well, since you've spouted for so handsome a bouquet, I suppose I should at least discover whether Her Grace wishes to see you." Snow looked beyond the youth at the hitched curricule. "I'll send someone out to walk your horses. You won't be long," he added in explanation, "but they look a lively pair."

Then he ushered the triumphant Jeremy into a small anteroom, bade him wait, and went off to inform the dowager of her unusual visitor.

Of course Lady Amelia commanded that the boy be brought to her boudoir at once, and sent Burton to make sure Freddi didn't interrupt the meeting until the dowager had found out why the boy had come. "Oh, and send up food, Snow. You will know what a lad of that age would relish."

Concealing a grin, the stately Snow trod the stairs back to Jeremy's position, personally conducted him to the boudoir, and introduced him as formally as to the Regent.

Jeremy's interest and veneration were as great as though he were indeed meeting his prince. He bowed, almost crushing the flowers, tendered them with a hesitant smile, and then bowed again. "Compliments of Mark Savage, Your Grace! With our wishes for your continued good health!"

"Nicely done, sprig," said the dowager kindly. "Now why did you come here today?"

Jeremy stared hard into the wise, faded blue eyes. "I wanted to solve the mystery of the red-haired girl who threw the ale on Mark's new coat," he confessed. "And made him so angry that he can't forget her. He says," he added with a sly grin, "that she's following him!"

Lady Amelia was betrayed into a chuckle, which her visitor joined. "Tell me all about Mark—and yourself, Jeremy."

When an interested Snow himself brought the trayful, of delicious goodies and a large mug of chilled orgeat ten minutes later, he found his mistress and the cocky youth sharing a laugh. Jeremy brightened at the sight of the food, and he hastily cleared a small table for the tray. Eyes sparkling, he

passed a small plate to Lady Amelia, offered snacks, and then filled a plate for himself. Blissfully munching and sipping, he beamed at his hostess. "This is something I like," he pronounced his verdict. "Thank you! I must admit I was getting sharp-set—driving Mark's curricule, you know."

Snow, smiling his own approval of the event, took his quiet leave. Lady Amelia summed up the boy's account. "So your hot-tempered brother is determined to regard my poor grandchild as some sort of thief or criminal, is he? Well, I suppose after the rather odd introduction they had, he might wonder at her new status. But you may assure him, Jeremy, that Lady Fred-di is indeed my granddaughter, child of my daughter, Penelope."

"But why did she dye her hair? Mark says it was strikingly beautiful," objected Jeremy. "And whatever was she doing in what my brother says is the dowdiest hat and coat he's ever seen, sitting alone in an inn?" He saw the instant frown that hardened his hostess's face, and said quickly, "Forgive me, ma'am, I've no right to ask! It's just that Mark can't seem to get your granddaughter out of his mind—and I've never seen him so angry, even at Roger Dorn!"

The old woman's face lost color. "Dorn?" she whispered. "What have you to do with Alfred Dorn and his son?"

"His estate borders ours in the county, ma'am," the youth hurried to explain. "Roger is forever getting me into scrapes! Mark always gets me out, but it makes him very angry that I am so gullible." He sighed. "The last one was when Roger bet me one hundred pounds that he could beat me in a curricule race. Mark found out, and took my place. It seems Roger had had some-one loosen the linchpin."

"Was your brother injured?" gasped the dowager.

"No, only bruised," confessed Jeremy ruefully, "but he was mad as a hornet. He made Roger crawl to pick up the hundred pounds."

"The Dorns are wicked men," said Lady Amelia, slowly. She could not be absolutely sure that this ingenuous boy was not, in fact, a skillful villain in the pay of Alfred Dorn. Staring hard into the youth's eyes, she challenged, "You say you are neighbors. How can I be sure you are not—accomplices?"

"Of the Dorns?" Jeremy's incredulity could not be false, Lady Amelia thought. "Mark despises them, and I . . . fear them."

Studying that open countenance, the old woman made up her mind. "Alfred Dorn was the husband of my daughter, Penelope, and the father of Alfreda," she said quietly, and then told the tale as Lawyer North had ferreted it out.

Jeremy's jaw dropped during the recital. "He traded off his own darling daughter for that—that lout Roger?" he exclaimed, with such heat that the dowager quite fell in love with the charming lad. "What are you doing to get justice for her?" was his next question.

The dowager sighed. That question had been on her own mind ever since her darling Freddi had come into her life, bringing a sense of fun, of joy that it had lacked for too many years. "We are warned to be very careful," she told the boy. "Lawyer North fears that the Dorns may do Freddi an injury if they discover she is here and that we know the truth."

Instead of the laughing rejection that she hoped this statement might have evoked, her companion began to nod solemnly. "Roger is capable of anything," he muttered. He stood up and came closer to his hostess's chair. "What can we do? I am willing to help, ma'am! And I know Mark will be, too, when he learns what you have told me." Jeremy paused, scowling. "I believe you ought to inform the Bow Street Runners, ma'am. Roger will stop at nothing if he thinks his position is in danger!"

At this pregnant moment, Alfreda came into the boudoir, smiling shyly to greet the guest Snow had mentioned the duchess was receiving. When she saw Jeremy, she halted, cocked her head, and peered into the boy's face. "You are That Man's brother!" she said sharply. "Why have you come?" She glanced around the room to see if the obnoxious Mark was also present.

"This charming lad has brought us warning of Roger Dorn's ruthless nature. It appears he tried to maim or kill Jeremy during a race he had challenged the young man to! Mark took over the wager and was badly bruised when the wheel fell off. Roger collected one hundred pounds—for winning the race!"

Alfreda's eyes had widened with shock at this tale of raw brutality. It was no wonder Mr. North had warned them to avoid the notice of so vicious a pair as Roger and the Earl of Dorn! And to think that such people were—her family! Alfreda smothered a sob. Could her own father truly wish to see her dead?

"What—what are we to do?" she asked.

The dowager nodded decisively. "I am going to see Lawyer North this instant!" she announced. "There must be something he can do to protect us. Perhaps once the matter is brought to public notice, those terrible men will be loath to act against us!"

"May I drive you, Your Grace?" offered Jeremy.

"Oh, do let us all go," begged Alfreda. "In numbers there is strength, you know."

"You may follow us in your curricule," agreed the dowager. "I am not sure we can all crowd into it, so we shall perforce use my carriage." And she shared a conspiratorial smile with the delighted Jeremy.

11

Half an hour later an odd trio of clients was ushered into the inner chamber of the law offices of Thomas S. North and Son. Both men were present to deal with whatever problem had brought the Dowager Duchess of Calthorp, her granddaughter, and Jeremy Savage for an urgent consultation.

The matter was soon explained. Father and son exchanged sober glances in which alarm was tempered by caution.

"My first thought is to tell you to do nothing, Your Grace. Go down into the country where the duke's family and servants can protect both of you until something can be officially proved. However," he continued slowly, "I know that you and the present holder of the title have very little in common. Perhaps you would not care to ask for asylum from the present duke?"

"You are correct," said Lady Amelia grimly. "He and his wife would not shed a tear if I died tomorrow—nor would they lift a hand to find me if I disappeared!"

"Which seems to settle that," said Mr. North dryly.

"I should like to acknowledge Alfreda publicly—at the tea this afternoon, and at a Grand Ball as soon as we can get that awful black dye out of her hair!"

The lawyer cast a glance at the harsh black mop under the rosy bonnet but refrained from comment. "We may decide to make a public announce-

ment," he said thoughtfully. "I have collected enough material to prove our case, I believe. But I must warn you that if Dorn decides to contest the suit, Lady Alfreda will be subjected to a flood of most disagreeable publicity. You would both have to go into retirement in that case, I should think."

"Then what is to be done?" asked Alfreda. "Grandmama knows I don't wish for or need public recognition. It will be enough just to know that I am her daughter's child, and that she loves me!"

The dowager leaned toward her and clasped her hand. Lawyer North cleared his throat. "There must be a way to secure your rights without exposing you to the sneers of the haut ton," he said quietly. "I have persuaded the earl to go to Spain and take up residence there. If he agrees, and he seems to be ready to do so, his true heir, Benedict Dorn, will not press charges. When Lord Dorn leaves for Spain, Roger will surely go with him. And then we can introduce Lady Alfreda into society with no special fuss or fanfare."

"Oh, yes! I should like that," agreed the girl eagerly.

Jeremy, following the discussion earnestly, felt compelled to interject a comment. "That course of action would not protect Lady Alfreda from Roger Dorn, Your Grace! I tell you, he is the most evil, brutal fellow—!"

Both the Norths drew unobtrusive sighs of relief. It appeared that the ladies were willing to be guided by wiser heads than their own. If all went as planned, there would be no scandal, no threats to life or limb.

The conference ended with satisfaction all around, and the young Savage boy escorted the ladies out to their carriage and helped them into it. He stood for a moment exchanging good-byes before the coachman set off along the street. Then, with a sigh of relief, Jeremy turned to retrace his way to Mark's curricule and drive himself back to the hotel to share the news of this most exciting day.

What none of the three observed was the heavy, dandified figure of the Earl of Dor, who had also come to speak to his man-at-law, and had witnessed the departure of his mother-in-law, a girl who looked something like his former wife, and a young sprig whom he identified as the Savage boy.

The earl lingered in the arcade outside the offices until he could get his emotions under control. He knew, if Roger did not, how vital it was to make no false step at this crucial moment. What had the old hag been doing at the Norths' chambers? Was it possible someone had talked? Carlotta? No, she was hinting that she wanted to go to Spain with him, and she'd keep sweet—and quiet!—until she was sure of him. And the girl! Could that be his daughter? He hadn't noticed the red hair Mrs. Green had mentioned. Perhaps the girl was an abigail or a companion? And what was one of the Savage men doing with the dowager?

Warily the earl made his way up to the lawyers' chambers. He had his story clearly in mind. He would not ask revealing questions, but perhaps he could pick up something. . . .

He was received with the usual correct courtesy by both the father and son. Dorn sensed a little hostility in the younger man's attitude, but then young T. Samuel had always been a prickly pedant.

The earl lost no time in getting to business. "I am prepared to leave for Madrid as soon as passage can be arranged, and a suitable sum of money and credit provided for my comfort while I am there. You will see to the sale of the bijou residence in Regis Crescent, and any other properties not entailed to Benedict Dorn."

"And Roger? Your son is to go with you?" queried the lawyer. He would not put it past the earl to abandon the illegitimate son without qualms; still, it was within the role of ignorance, which he hoped to play out for the earl's benefit, to treat Roger as the heir.

Dorn's swollen, dissolute countenance did not reveal anything to the careful scrutiny of the Norths. "My son hasn't decided yet what he wishes to do. He may come with me, to see that I am comfortably settled in Madrid; then he may return here to keep the family seat open and the servants on their toes."

"I had hoped we might substantially reduce the number of servants at Dorn," commented the senior North. "That way we might eke out a little more cash for your use."

The earl nodded slowly. "Yes, that is satisfactory. You must do the best you can with rents and the sale of properties. And now there is one more very important matter you have not yet reported on: my illegitimate daughter. Where is she at this moment?"

"I advised her to return to her village of Little Weald and find work among people who know her," said the senior North blandly. "We may even be able to provide her with a small monthly stipend—just to keep her down there and—happy."

The earl felt an enormous surge of relief. Apparently the girl hadn't found out the truth about her parentage. A sudden thought struck him. Roger had been more sullen than usual today, muttering darkly about making sure the slut didn't squeak. . . . Better tell the fellow all's bowmon, Dorn decided. Knowing Roger's ungovernable temper and nasty ways, he didn't put it past him to do something unpleasant to the chit. And while that might have to be the ultimate solution, it hardly seemed worthwhile taking the risk when matters were so well in hand. Musing pleasantly upon a future in which he might return safely to England, Lord Dorn made his way to the nearest tavern for a brandy.

Jeremy arrived back at the hotel to find an irate big brother waiting in their rooms.

"Let me have it," instructed Mark grimly. "Have you wrecked my curricule?"

Jeremy presented an innocent face. "No, sir! It's safe in the hotel stableyard."

"Then what have you been doing for three hours?" roared Mark. He was unwilling to admit to the dark surmises that had made the last two hours wretched: visions of Jeremy broken and bloodied in a gutter, the horses lost or stolen, the curricule wrecked. . . and now this little villain grinning as though nothing had happened—Mark caught himself up. Nothing had happened! He heaved a deep, relaxing sigh. What it was to be in loco parentis! He managed a grin. "Well, spill it! Where have you been for three hours, while your aged sibling went slowly insane worrying about you?"

Jeremy grinned his delight. "I've been visiting with your. . . friend, Lady Alfreda Dorn," he said smugly.

At once the storm clouds returned to Mark's brow. "You have what?" he shouted.

Jeremy chuckled. "I took your advice and got a large bouquet of flowers for the dear old lady who fainted in your arms," he said loftily.

Mark was more interested than he dared to admit. Assuming a casual air that utterly failed to deceive the wicked Jeremy, he drawled, "How were they—that is, was she?"

"They," repeated Jeremy, "were well. In fact, I persuaded the dowager duchess to tell me the whole story."

"It is a pack of lies," said Mark with a show of indifference that fooled nobody.

"You would impugn the word of a Peeress of the Realm?" teased his wicked half brother.

Mark failed to repress a wide grin. "Open the budget, youngling!" he commanded. "It seems you have important news to impart!"

Jeremy lost no time in explaining the whole situation. Mark, at first openly skeptical, soon became absorbed in the devious tale, and was frowning heavily by the time Jeremy had finished his account of the morning's activities.

"They actually let you go to the lawyers' office with them?" he demanded.

"I think the duchess likes me," admitted the boy modestly.

Mark hardly listened to the comment. "The Dorns!" he murmured. "Can we never get away from their filthy manipulations? And now that they are aware that—that she is in London, who knows what vile schemes they'll concoct!"

"I promised the duchess we would protect them," Jeremy lied, his gaze fixed on his big brother's scowling countenance.

The response was all he could have hoped for.

Mark clapped one big fist into the other palm decisively. "You were right!" he agreed. "When are we to call upon them—to discuss strategy," he

explained, having caught Jeremy unprepared for so prompt an acceptance of his ruse.

"Why, I should think the sooner the better," faltered the boy.

Since this agreed perfectly with Mark's own wishes, the two brothers went down to the dining room for a quick nuncheon—"just to give us strength," Jeremy explained. Within half an hour they were driving to the residence of the dowager duchess.

They were a little alarmed by the sight of several carriages being driven slowly up and down the street, but the real shock awaited them when Snow ushered them into a huge living room which was literally filled with beautifully dressed, shrilly conversing females! Even more devastating, all conversation ceased abruptly at Snow's announcement; all eyes turned toward the solitary males who were too far into the room to escape unnoticed. To cap it all, the treacherous Snow closed the great double doors behind him as he left.

A pretty girl with a crown of harshly black hair came swiftly toward them, a smile pinned on her rosy face. Mark Savage forced himself to meet Alfreda's challenging gaze. Rather tensely he squared his shoulders.

"You do well to quail," Alfreda gritted between set teeth, the smile still fixed in place.

"At least you are not carrying a mug of ale this time," Mark retorted wickedly.

Jeremy chuckled.

"Do let me give you a cup of tea, Mr. Savage," said Alfreda too sweetly. "Hot tea!"

Mark had taken enough from this little virago. "I should like that," he dared her, his eyes threatening reprisals.

Turning with a smile to young Jeremy, Alfreda took his arm and led him to greet the dowager. Mark perforce followed, promising himself that he'd speak to young Jerry for bamboozling him into this tea party.

The dowager made a great deal of fuss over the two solitary male guests. She insisted on introducing them to all her elderly bosom-bows, who professed themselves pleased to meet such charming young men. Then Alfreda, compounding the crime, brought up all the smartest of the younger women to meet Mark. This strategy, if she intended it to result in Mark's embarrassment, failed lamentably. The wretched man caught on at once to her ploy, and refused to show either discomfiture or mortification. Instead he played the gallant to the top of his bent, quite enchanting the younger women, and setting a predatory gleam in the eyes of the older, more experienced ones.

After fifteen minutes of this elegant wordplay, with Mark's compliments flying and being met with complacent or pleased smiles, Alfreda had had enough. Breaking firmly into the latest in a series of flirtatious exchanges, she

took Mark by the arm and with the merest of unconvincing excuses, led him away to a quiet corner near the rear windows.

"Not a convincing show of *savoir faire*," Mark said with a smirk. "Getting jealous, Redhead? And what happened to those carrotty curls, anyway?"

"I should like to—to strangle you," hissed Alfreda. "What are you doing here, you wretch?"

"Jeremy told me you and your grandmother needed our protection," Mark explained, as to one lacking perceptivity. "Your grandmama wished us to come."

That stopped Alfreda, but only for a minute. Peering suspiciously up into his dark, smiling face, she muttered, "I am afraid I don't believe you! Why would she do such a thing. . . and not warn me?"

"She thought you might cut up rough and spoil her tea party?" hazarded the enraging creature. His grin was a flash of white teeth against his sun-darkened skin, and the sight of it set an odd trembling going in Alfreda's stomach.

"You have a wicked smile," she said—and then could have cut out her tongue at the betrayal.

Mark was watching her with eyes that sparkled with laughter. "Go on! Tell me more!" he urged.

"I will strangle you!" Alfreda announced.

"Moderate your voice while uttering threats," the wicked man advised her. "You are attracting the attention of that very pretty little debutante who has been eyeing us for the last five minutes."

"Eyeing you, you mean," snapped Alfreda. "She and I cannot bear each other!"

"You are longtime enemies?" teased the man.

"I met her for the first time this afternoon," admitted the girl. "It was hate at first sight."

Mark's burst of full-throated laughter attracted the very attention Alfreda had dreaded. It seemed to the girl that every eye in the room had fastened on the big, dashing handsome male, and some of the ladies were managing to drift a little closer, eager to hear what was making the big man laugh. Observing her darling Freddy's embarrassment, the dowager brought two of her best friends across the room to meet Mark and rescue the girl from the situation she had placed herself in.

After a few moments of pleasant small talk, Lady Amelia said cheerfully to Mark, "I am sure you have had quite enough of this feminine chitter-chat, Mr. Savage. We shall expect you and young Jeremy to dine with us tonight, at which time you can tell us what brought you here this afternoon. For I am sure you didn't really expect to attend a tea party!"

Amid the soft titter of feminine laughter, Alfreda's shocked "No!" sounded as loud as a pistol shot. Surely this arrogant, cruel male would not be

intending to push himself further upon their privacy? Why had he come in the first place? Why, to embarrass her, for sure! Quite ignoring the fact that Mr. Savage had behaved with exemplary courtesy, made himself agreeable to all and sundry, and in every way acted the perfect guest, Alfreda was convinced that the villain had some hidden purpose, most likely a desire to ruin her and her dear grandmother in front of all her friends!

In the awkward little silence that fell after Alfreda's loud rejection, Lady Amelia collected her wits and endeavored to save the situation. "No," she agreed in a firm, carrying voice, "we cannot accept a refusal, Mr. Savage! You must humor us, and take your supper with us this evening." Her commanding glance left no chance of discussion or refusal. Mark bowed gracefully.

"As ever, ma'am, your wish is my command!" His bright, challenging glance took in Alfreda's stormy expression. "Anything to please you—both!" And then he took a smiling and graceful leave of the charmed group of ladies, who were agog over the little contretemps, and would eagerly discuss the details later—as Alfreda well knew!

What was he up to? Making fun of her in front of all the fashionables in London! No thanks to wily Mr. Savage if Frederica MacDarling did not become the jest of London! She determined grimly that she would starve to death before coming down to any dinner Mark Savage attended.

Alfred, Lord Dorn, arrived at his town house rather the worse for his libations. Roger, who had been anxiously awaiting his father's return from the lawyers' office for some hours, was enraged to behold the earl's unsteady step and smell the reek of cheap brandy. Pulling the older man over to a chair, he thrust him roughly into it and went for a glass of ale. Forcing it upon the reluctant Lord Dorn, he awaited impatiently until his father had drunk half of it and then demanded, "Well? How did it go? What did you find out?"

Lord Dorn hiccupped. Then, fixing his recalcitrant son with a wary eye, he managed to say that all was bowmon; the noddleheads suspected nothing; the girl was back in Little Weald. The earl realized that that was not exactly what North had said, but it was close enough. He had no wish to quarrel with the belligerent Roger at the moment.

Roger was mollified but not completely convinced. He stood glaring down moodily upon his drunken father, his huge hands clenching and unclenching with frustration and suspicion. Finally, well aware that he would get no more sense out of the old sot that night, he caught up his hat, took the money that was left in his now-snoring father's purse, and slammed out of the room. He had decided to forget the old fool's cautious warnings and do some investigating of his own. And if the facts were not as Lord Dorn had said, then Roger Dorn was the man to handle the situation!

12

As he and a delighted Jeremy were ushered into Lady Amelia's house that evening, Mark had resolved to be on his best behavior, whatever provocation the little minx offered him. He would first discover the truth—all of it—from the dowager, and then he would most magnanimously offer to help, even though he disapproved of her so-called granddaughter and wouldn't trust the little witch as far as he could throw her. Imagining the logistics of this special exercise brought such a devilish grin to his face that the dowager, greeting him in the drawing room, was captivated all over again.

Not so Alfreda. Dragooned by her insensitive relative to attend the dinner, she managed to look both scornful, disapproving, and polite at the same time, a masterly performance.

Lady Amelia kept the conversation on innocuous subjects until dinner was announced by Snow, who was as delighted as Jeremy at the festivities. The meal was superb, every servant in the kitchen from the chef down bending every effort to make the first male guest in donkey's years glad he had come. Speculation was rife that the young man—really very handsome and obviously not short of a penny or two!—might be preparing to offer for Lady Freddi.

Snow, superintending the footmen as they served the meal, kept a weathery eye upon the faces of the diners; and as the evening advanced, his hopes were shaken. While the dowager and young Jeremy were enjoying themselves enormously, and the big gentleman was everything that could be expected, Lady Freddi was behaving like a skittish mare. Snow, who really admired the girl who had brought so much light and happiness to the gloomy house and life of his mistress, was compelled to give her a warning glance or two as she sat, stubbornly silent and frowning.

Rather unexpectedly, Mark rose to the challenge.

"Lady Alfreda," he began, "I think for Lady Amelia's sake we should clear the air. It cannot be pleasant for her to watch you behaving so badly to her guests."

Alfreda's head came up with a jerk of outrage. "How dare you—" she began angrily.

"I dare because I care for Lady Amelia. . . and I believe that you do, too."

This frank speech halted the angry girl. She closed her mouth on the quarrelsome reply she was about to make, and then, more quietly, she said, "Yes, I do care deeply for my grandmother, and I am sorry if I have caused her discomfort. It is just that you always make me so angry—!"

The wretch had the audacity to grin. He knows what that white, flashing smile does to me—to any woman, hastily amended the girl. But catching the avidly interested glances of the dowager and Jeremy, to say nothing of the almost catatonic stillness of Snow and the two footmen, Alfreda was forced to acknowledge that this was hardly the time to indulge past spite or rake up old hurts. Forcing her warmest smile onto her lips, Alfreda said graciously, "We are most interested to learn what it was that brought you and Jeremy to visit us this afternoon."

The dowager, Jeremy, and the servants breathed freely once more. Mark, however, was still to be placated.

"Since my brother had the pleasure of escorting Lady Amelia to the chambers of her men-at-law, we have been deeply concerned at one aspect of this—situation."

"Only one?" prodded Alfreda, too sweetly.

Mark ignored this unworthy effort. "We happen to know a good deal about the Dorns, and none of it to their credit," he began soberly. "Their estate runs with ours in Essex, and we have found them, over the years, to be undesirable neighbors, to say the least."

"Roger Dorn is like an animal," Jeremy offered.

"He has no sense of fitting behavior," agreed Mark slowly, not wishing to frighten the ladies too badly, yet aware that he must warn them of their great risk.

Snow, well knowing that such private and personal matters should not be overheard by servants, gestured the two footmen out of the room. When they had gone, he glanced at his mistress.

"You may stay, Snow," she said quietly. "It is well that my majordomo should be warned of our dangers."

"The better to protect my lady," vowed the old butler, with deep feeling.

Mark took up the tale. "The Dorns will stop at nothing to gain an advantage. Roger had my curricule tampered with so that he could win one hundred pounds on a race against Jeremy. And if I read this situation correctly, what you are doing, Lady Amelia, will affect the Dorns a great deal more drastically than the loss of a few pounds."

He waited, knowing that he could not pry further. If they were going to confide in him, let him help them, the next move must come from them. It did not occur to him to wonder why he should be so anxious to help a fiery little bluestocking who was also more than likely an impostor.

Lady Amelia was regarding the Savage men with admiration and some considerable affection. "We appreciate your concern," she said. "What should we do, do you think?"

Mark's tense muscles relaxed for the first time that evening. "If you would care to confide in me," he offered, "I could perhaps advise you as to how to deal with the Dorns, who, I assure you, are truly dangerous men."

The dowager nodded decisively. "Yes, I believe we could use your help, so kindly offered. Let us finish here, and then hold a council of war in the library. We shall have our coffee there, Snow, if you please."

When they were at length seated in a circle, and the coffee cups had been laid aside, the dowager told her guests the whole wretched tale as the Norths had ferreted it out. Mark and Jeremy had already had clues and inklings, but the full story appalled them. "To do such a thing to his own little baby daughter!" Jeremy fumed. "The man isn't human!"

"He is greedy and self-indulgent," began Mark, striving for a less dramatic presentation.

"And utterly without scruple," added the dowager. "My husband should never have agreed to the match! All that brute wanted was Penelope's dowry and an heir." She stifled a sob. "My poor Penelope—given to that monster! And now Freddi must acknowledge him as her father, or be scorned as illegitimate!"

Alfreda tried to soothe her grandmother. "But dearest Grandmama, I have you, and your love! I promise you that is the greatest joy I can conceive!" She came over to kneel at her grandmother's side and hold her hand.

Mark brought a sobering note to this affectionate scene. "If those two were the only alternatives, I would admit you have a hard problem to solve. . . but I am afraid there is more."

He had everyone's full attention now. Three worried faces turned to his, eyes demanding that he go on.

"It is my belief that the Dorns will try to—to destroy your granddaughter if they believe their trick has failed," he told them.

"You mean—kill her?" breathed Lady Amelia, eyes wide with horror. "But not even Roger Dorn could be so criminally vicious! His own sister!"

"Who will prevent him from inheriting the estates," added Mark. "As I understand it, Lord Dorn has wasted his whole inheritance, and must make indentures upon the entailed portions of the estate. But his cousin Benedict, the heir in truth, has become very suspicious and is threatening Lord Dorn's peace. Any hint that Roger is not the true heir would result in an instant freezing of cash and credit—and the possibility of a criminal prosecution would destroy both Dorns. Do you really think two such brutes will stand idly by and let something like that happen?"

After a grim silence, Lady Amelia ventured a question.

"What should we do?"

"Do you have a place of real safety, such as the main home of the present Duke of Calthorp?" Mark asked.

"Mr. North suggested that," admitted the duchess. "I was forced to tell him that the present holder of the title has no time for me, or anyone connected with me. He and my husband enjoyed a mutual dislike that amounted to hatred in the latter years."

"There is no friend. . .?" began Mark, and then corrected himself. "But of course we cannot have you imposing upon your friends in such a personal—dangerous!—affair. I do have an idea, but I am not sure of its value," he ended, hesitantly.

"Anything that would help us," urged the dowager.

"You could both come down, with your most trusted servants, to my home. We could keep your presence secret," he went on, warming to the idea. "I in turn could hire a few extra stout fellows to act as guards. Meanwhile, we would have told your lawyers what we were doing. Also, we should call in at Bow Street—"

"And thus inform all London of what is going on," snapped Alfreda, who had been growing more and more nervous and annoyed during this conversation. "There is one very simple solution that seems to have escaped your razor-sharp mind, Mr. Savage. I shall find a comfortable position with some large, county family, perhaps as governess to their children, for Mrs. Green taught me well in all the conventional disciplines. There I shall live as Miss Green, a threat to no one, not even my grandmother." She waited for their comments. They were not long in coming. In fact, it was a race to see who should be-first to file objections. Mark beat the others.

"How stupid can a young female get?" he stormed, with quite inappropriate heat. "How long do you think it would take a determined murderer to find you? After all, I found you several times—and I am no murderer," he added, catching the look of horror on each woman's face.

Alfreda was so angry that she hardly waited for him to finish. "But of course we know why that happened!" she sneered. "You are convinced that I was following you! I would certainly not be following the Dorns!"

Mark's glance at his mouthy young brother boded ill for a future reckoning. With a visible effort, he controlled the sense of panic that threatened to overwhelm even his anger at this maddening little wretch. He appealed to Lady Amelia.

"Can we adults not settle this matter without any further vaporings from the children?" he demanded unforgivably. "Will you accept my hospitality, Your Grace? I assure you, you will be safe and comfortable."

"But the Dorns are right next door!" wailed Jeremy, all the old fears of his burly brute of a neighbor rising.

The dowager seemed to be made of sterner stuff. She began to nod. "That might do very well," she admitted, with the little half smile Alfreda had come to dread. What was darling, naughty Grandmama planning? thought Alfreda in despair. If she establishes us in That Man's very house, I shall never be able to be free of him! And then, wondering why it should be so important to keep a safe distance between herself and the provocative Mr. Savage, she stared very hard at the face of her tormentor.

With a quickly drawn breath she acknowledged that he was the most beautiful, the most splendid, the most. . . his gray eyes were shining silver in the light, made the more remarkable by the fringe of thick dark lashes and the heavy black eyebrows. And his mouth—! Hastily Alfreda removed her gaze from that fascinating structure to a safe area. His shoulders? Magnificent in another of those modish coats he favored. Before her wayward glance could lead her into more embarrassment, Alfreda fixed her attention on her grandmother's face. And as she met that loving, gentle glance, she understood the cause of her unease.

She was falling in love with That Man! And Grandmama knew it!

The same did not apply to Mark Savage, that was clear. He was glaring at her with extreme distaste. Ignoring Jeremy's objections and her grandmother's tentative agreement with the plan, Alfreda tried once more to avert the tragedy.

"There must be something else we can do!" she protested. "This is like—like burning down the house to dislodge a rat!"

"Roger Dorn is more dangerous than any rat you are ever likely to meet, Lady Alfreda," Mark snapped. He was beginning to wonder how he had got himself trapped in this melodramatic imbroglio. If he didn't know how dangerous Roger was he would fling himself out of the house and away from the idiotish female who was about to plunge herself and her dear old grandmother into disaster.

Feeling happily superior to the addlepatented Alfreda, Mark turned graciously to the older woman. "Do you accept my invitation, then, Your Grace?" he asked smoothly.

The dowager, carefully concealing her satisfaction at this desirable development, smiled graciously and said, to Alfreda's dismay, "Thank you, yes. I think that might be our safest course, at least until the Dorns are firmly established in Spain. Which is where Mr. North tells us they are going."

Mark said all that was hospitable and supportive in response.

Alfreda and Jeremy, for very different reasons, gazed at one another with total consternation.

Having secured the dowager's consent, Mark proceeded without delay to carry out his plan. First warning the other three not to breathe a word—not a syllable!—about their decision, he asked Lady Amelia what acceptable pleasure jaunt might be mentioned to friends and the servants to cloak their real destination.

"For there will be no use in taking these measures to protect you, if one of you blabs to the servants some wild tale—" And his minatory glance rested on the fuming Alfreda.

"We shall all be mum as oysters," agreed Lady Amelia happily.

Grandmama is enjoying this, Alfreda thought. She really isn't taking it seriously. It was evident that the dowager had not had as much fun in a long time; she was fairly blooming under the stimulus of this cloak-and-dagger scheme of Mark Savage's. Still, the girl dared not disagree with the plan. There might be truth in the man's fears for their safety. He did know the Dorns; it appeared he had ample reason to distrust them.

That is my father—my half brother—we are accepting as two ruthless, dangerous men! she told herself, but she could find no self-condemnation in the bitter judgment.

Lady Amelia decided that she would announce that she and her cousin, Lady Freddi MacDarling, would be called to the bedside of the latter's dangerously ill father in the Shetland Isles. This would accord with the introduction Lady Amelia had given Alfreda at the tea party, and would be a valid reason for a long journey and a lengthy stay.

The dowager did not discuss the possibility that some of the servants might know better. She knew she could trust Snow to keep a still tongue in his head, and Burton would of course come with them.

With the date of departure set for the following morning, Mark and Jeremy took their leave. They were so anxious to get the project in train that neither of them noticed a hulking figure standing among the trees in the small park that centered the square.

13

Lady Amelia dispatched a note to the Norths after Mark and Jeremy left. She felt it only sensible to let her lawyers know what measures were being taken to insure Alfreda's safety, in view of the fact that the ladies' sudden departure might cause the Norths some alarm.

Not unexpectedly, both father and son arrived at Thorp townhouse within the hour. Young Samuel obviously disapproved of a jaunt to the wilds at this crucial time. His father thought it a sound protective measure. When, however, the real destination was disclosed, both Norths were dubious. Shetland was one thing; very few persons would think to check on the ladies at that distance. An estate which directly adjoined the Dorns' was something else again.

"You are placing yourselves within the tiger's mouth!" fretted Samuel. His minatory glance at Alfreda showed clearly who he thought was the originator of that dangerous plan.

"Perhaps the tiger will not be looking for his prey so close to his own lair," suggested the dowager. "Did you not tell me the Dorns are presently residing in London? And that they plan to go to Spain very shortly?"

"That is so, Your Grace," admitted Thomas North. "At least Lord Dorn is going. The plan for his son is not so clear-cut."

Alfreda frowned. "Are we not allowing the possibility of danger from my—from the Dorns to assume too important a place in our thinking? I find it hard to believe that any man would deliberately plan to—to murder his own child! Would he not rather pay her to stay out of his way?"

Three pairs of eyes focused on the author of this naiveté.

"Mr. Savage has promised to take excellent care of us," the dowager explained. "He knows the character of the Dorns," she added. "Having had a very unpleasant experience with them himself lately."

"I am sure Mr. Savage will do all in his power to protect you both," Thomas North said. "And perhaps that would be, in the long run, better than bringing in the Runners and making a public spectacle of all of you." But he did not look entirely convinced.

"I told him Lady Alfreda had agreed to return to Little Weald and find work. I even suggested that I could eke out a few pounds occasionally to keep you settled there," added the senior North. "It seemed to satisfy Lord Dorn."

Thanking Lady Amelia for sharing her true destination with him, Thomas promised to keep them informed of any developments. Then the lawyers took polite leave of the ladies, with young Samuel casting a final, dissatisfied look at the remarkably pretty little Alfreda. He wished that it might be himself who was taking care of her safety, but when he confided this thought to his father, the latter told him to leave heroics to those who thrived upon such exotic fare.

"You are much too level-headed to engage in such havey-cavey activities," he said firmly.

Samuel, who thought it was a compliment, agreed with a solemn nod.

Alfreda hardly said good-bye. When the Norths had gone, Lady Amelia turned a perceptive glance at her granddaughter.

"Something is bothering you," she said gently. "Is it young North?"

Alfreda could never wish to deceive her darling grandmama. "It suddenly came over me that my—my father didn't even try to meet me. . . see what I have grown to be—" Her throat tightened so that no further words emerged.

With a little cry of sympathy, Lady Amelia took the girl into her arms. "Oh, my dearest, darling Freddi!" She rocked the slight, trembling figure comfortingly in her arms. "Alfred Dorn isn't worthy to be your father. He didn't deserve my Penelope, either! The only thing that compensates me for having let that brute marry her, is you, dear heart! I must forgive his terrible flaws because he gave me my darling granddaughter!"

After a comforting cry together, both women felt much refreshed, their tensions relieved. The dowager was the first to recover.

"We must put Burton into the picture at once," she announced, drying her eyes. "There is so much to be done if we are to take off into the wilds

of Essex, and we have fewer than twenty-four hours to accomplish everything! I have notes to write—Ye gods! Cissie Denbey's reception is tomorrow! We intended introducing you to some of the more acceptable young men of the ton!"

Alfreda was able to chuckle. "They should be thankful they were spared the ordeal!" she said wryly. "I am not much of a bargain, am I?"

Her grandmother eyed her sternly. "No more of this missish behavior, my dear! If you don't know by now what a darling you are, you're more of a ninnyhammer than I thought!"

Which confusing remark set Alfreda to laughing, as her doting grandparent had hoped it would.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of packing, unpacking, and getting in Burton's way until she roundly accused them of interference and told them to go and bother someone else for a change. This unexpected freedom of speech so delighted the dowager that she explained the whole situation to the enthralled dresser, and concluded with the information that Burton was to accompany them to the Savage estate in Essex, but that no one else on the staff was to have even an inkling of their true destination.

"Not even Snow?" breathed Burton, predictably.

"Of course he must know what is happening, so that he can fob off the curious," said Lady Amelia. "We can trust his discretion, do you not agree?"

When summoned to the dowager's boudoir and made conversant of the facts, Snow rose to the occasion as his mistress had predicted. "Most sensible of you, m'lady," the old man said, a wistful light in his eyes. "I wish I were not needed here to stave off the rascals," he added. "I should be proud to attend you."

"You will know how to protect us," affirmed the dowager. "Have you the story straight?"

"Lady Freddi's father dangerously ill in the Shetlands," Snow recapitulated. "Devoted daughter rushing off to render assistance." They could see he relished the drama of the situation.

"You'll do the thing," Lady Amelia smiled. "Oh, Snow, isn't it—exciting?"

On that note of rather youthful exuberance, the party returned to its several duties.

They made what they hoped was an unobtrusive departure very early the following morning. By some arrangement that Alfreda had not heard, Jeremy Savage arrived to accompany the ladies in the dowager's comfortable carriage.

"I wanted to be your outrider," he explained, as they began to roll away from Thorp House. "But Mark said I might be too noticeable on a prancing white charger!"

Even Burton was compelled to laugh at his playful high spirits.

In point of fact, their clandestine exit was noted by the heavy-built, hulking figure who had spent most of the last two days lurking among the bushes in the small enclosed park that centered the square. Since none of the owners of the fine old houses had young children who might wish to play in the park, there had been no one to observe Roger Dorn during his vigil. As for that young man, he had no patience for his father's casual attitude toward the threat the girl posed. Why should the old fool worry, Roger thought. He's safe enough! I am the one who stands to lose everything if this little bitch can prove herself!

It pleased him very much that the escort chosen for this furtive flight should be young Jeremy. Roger grinned viciously. He'd enjoy roughing up that little sprout! Easier work than tackling the insolent Mark! Roger hurried to the bushes where he had tied his horse, and began to follow the dowager's very distinctive coach out of London.

14

When they stopped for a neat little nuncheon later that morning, everyone's spirits were high. Lady Amelia insisted that Burton eat with the others. "I am not going to risk your being pumped by the innkeeper's wife," she said frivolously.

Burton, who knew her own worth and discretion, was willing to join the laugh.

Only Alfreda felt an odd sense of discomfort. Could it be because she feared spending time in the company of the aggressive Mark Savage? Just how long would they be expected to stay hidden away in his mansion in Essex, she wondered. It was not long before her grandmother caught a hint of her distress.

Lowering her voice, the old woman asked, "What is it, Freddi? What has disturbed you?"

Flashing a loving glance at her perceptive relative, Alfreda shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "Nothing, really. Just a foolish sense of worry. . . . It all went so smoothly this morning. Too smoothly?"

"Perhaps we had worked ourselves up into a rather dramatic state over the matter," began the dowager, frowning.

But Jeremy, face wiped clear of laughter, stared at Alfreda with alarm. "Did you notice anything? Are we being followed?"

Not for the first time, Alfreda wished that the arrogant Mark had chosen to accompany them, instead of sending his young brother. She hastened to reassure the other members of the party.

"It's nothing, really! Perhaps the idea that we must hide away from someone who wishes to do me harm—I expect I am just a little nervous."

"Goose walked over your grave?" teased Jeremy with an amazing lack of tact. Then he turned a painful red, and stammered his apologies.

Alfreda spared him. Smiling, she told him he'd better learn to accept the vaporings of females if he planned on being a knight on a white charger. This gave the rest of the party an opportunity to change the subject into a discussion of whether there actually had been knights on white chargers, and if so, what exactly they had been expected to do.

The feeling of unease did not leave Alfreda, however, and as they were climbing into the dowager's comfortable carriage again, the girl cast a searching look along the road they had come. There was nothing in the least suspicious: a couple of farmer's carts, a few curricles being tooled along by drivers who looked nothing like the hulking brute who had been described to her by Jeremy. Sighing with relief, she allowed the youth to help her into the carriage.

She might have felt more alarm had she known that Roger, wily as an animal, had figured out that Jeremy was taking the women to his own home. Why this should be the case, he had no idea. The only thought in his mind, as he went ahead of the dowager's party toward his own home, was that this way it would be easier for him to accomplish his purpose.

Which was to kidnap the girl who stood between him and a life of comfort, pleasure—and security. Roger's heavy features were set in grim determination as he contemplated the results if he failed to get rid of the girl. He had already decided when to make his move. The party, dawdling along under the control of the old woman's ancient coachman, would never try for the Savage estate that night. So, they would be forced to put up at an inn. Since the route was familiar to Roger, he had a pretty good idea which hostelry Lady Amelia's coachman would choose. It was an elegant place, whose prices were too steep for the average traveler. The thing was to get his hands on the girl before they reached the comparative safety of the public inn. Darkness would cover his action. Roger nodded his satisfaction with his own planning, and put his horse to the gallop.

Dusk came early in the south of England at this time of year, Alfreda was thinking. She gazed idly out of the window, enjoying the country freshness of the scenery.

"I hope this is not too tiring for you, Grandmama," she said, smiling at the older woman's pink cheeks and alert look.

Lady Amelia laughed. "You know I am enjoying every minute of it," she chided. "Naughty child! I have had more excitement, more pleasure, in the short time I have known you, than in all the dreary years since Penelope left us." She shook her head with a feeling of incredulity. "Do you know, Freddy, I believe my dear daughter is happy at last. For she must know we have found one another!"

Alfreda could only agree with this comforting idea. Burton was openly moved, and young Jeremy wore the half-comprehending, half-embarrassed look of a male confronted with three maudlin females.

At this moment there was the sound of a pistol being fired, and a loud voice crying, "Stand! Or I will fire!"

The carriage swayed and jolted as it was pulled up too abruptly.

"My God! That's Roger's voice!" gasped Jeremy, lunging toward the door of the carriage. Alfreda had no doubt he was correct in identifying the voice.

He will try to protect us from that animal—and he will be killed, was her first thought. Then an image of Mark Savage's dark, handsome countenance filled her mind, and she knew she must not permit his young brother to be sacrificed for her unworthy sake. Without hesitation she raised her reticule, heavy with the book she always carried on journeys, and struck down at Jeremy's head.

The blow was not heavy enough to render him unconscious, although she gave it all the strength she could summon. It did, however, succeed in stunning him momentarily, long enough to hold him back from his futile attempt at bravery, and land him on the floor of the carriage. Lady Amelia was as quick-witted as her grandchild. She threw the fur carriage robe, which Burton had carefully tucked about her, over the struggling youth and then looked at Alfreda.

"What now?" she asked.

Alfreda thought furiously. If she went with Roger without a fuss, it was possible that he would not harm her grandmother or Burton. Between them, those doughty females could control Jeremy for a few moments, she thought. It was unlikely that Roger planned to murder her out of hand. An agreement of some kind could surely be worked out. If she promised never to contest his right to inherit the title and estates of the Dorns, would he let her go?

While these ideas were running through her mind, she had worked her way across the struggling, heaving-mass of Jeremy, who was still under the robe, and had managed to get the door open.

In this she was inadvertently assisted by Roger, who had forced his nervous horse close to the carriage and was at that moment endeavoring to force open the door. Alfreda almost fell out into his arms. Roger lost no time in making the most of this piece of luck. Without waiting for any discussion, he

pulled the girl across the saddle in front of him and, whirling his horse, galloped madly off in the direction from which they had come.

His destination was a ruined and rotting old cottage that had once been lived in by one of his father's tenants, long deceased. Careless Lord Dorn had never bothered trying to find a replacement; the nurture of his estates had been of no interest whatever to him. Roger, discovering the place a few years ago, had taken it for his own, and had conducted several pleasurable experiments there, including the forced seduction of a local ne'er-do-well's daughter, and the torment of young Jeremy any time he could catch him away from his brother or the servants. The boy had never mentioned the cruel harassment, Roger knew, for otherwise he would have had to face the one man he feared as greatly as he hated him.

Within a very few minutes Roger and his captive were far beyond sound or sight of the dowager's carriage, and Roger drew up long enough to pull the girl to an upright position in front of him on the saddle. He was a little surprised that she had neither swooned nor started screaming, but he did not relax his iron grip on her for all of that. She further surprised him by the calm tone in which she spoke to him as soon as he had set the horse to cantering again.

"I am glad to have this chance to speak with you, Mr. Dorn," she shocked him by announcing.

Holding her in a grip that he knew must be painful, Roger tried to decide how to take this amazing calmness of behavior. After a moment he said harshly, "Whining will get you nothing."

"Have I whined?" the girl asked reasonably. "I am happy for this chance to clear the air between us. I believe I am speaking to my brother, Roger Dorn am I not?"

"And if you are?" blustered Roger.

"Why, then we may settle our differences, and go our ways without further . . . racket or ruction. You see, brother, I am no more anxious to be known as Alfred Dorn's daughter than you are to have me do so—"

"Gammon! Don't try to flimflam me, you little bitch! I know you greedy females—!"

"But I'm not greedy," Alfred insisted in as calm a tone as she could muster, considering the fierce ache in her ribs from Roger's cruel grip. "I have no desire to stay anywhere near Lord Dorn. Who would, if they could keep away from him! Don't tell me you admire or like that old—sculpin?"

Roger was startled into a coarse laugh. "So you've heard about the old sot, have you? Don't tell me you wouldn't snatch all you could get of his money, sister dear, for I won't believe you! No, I've got a better plan."

"Before you do anything that might land you in the worst mess of your life, you'd better listen to what I propose," said Alfreda, between teeth set against the pain of his iron grip.

The calmness of her voice, even more than the threat of trouble, finally got through Roger's single-minded attitude. He thought about her words for a minute, and then, slightly loosening his grasp, turned the horse into a path that led away from the main highroad and into the woods.

"You're trying to tell me you've got a scheme that won't rob me of my rights?" he asked, caution and curiosity warring in his voice.

Alfreda breathed a little easier. "Yes, Roger, I have. As soon as your father goes to Spain, Lady Amelia is going to take me up to the north of Scotland with her. She's got rich relatives there, and she plans to marry me off to one of the younger brothers who'll be glad of the dowry she plans to settle on me. So you see, I won't be any block to your plans, whatever they are."

There was a lengthy silence while Roger digested her remarks. It was plain that he didn't trust her. On the other hand, if she really meant what she was saying, it would solve his problem without the risk of exposing him to criminal charges. Finally he said, rather grudgingly, "What guarantee do I have that this isn't some kind of flummery you've cooked up to save your bacon? Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'll swear that I don't want anything to do with a man who would abandon his daughter and let the world think she was—" Too late, Alfreda recalled that she was speaking to a man who was illegitimate. She need not have worried. Roger was not a sensitive man. His attention had been caught by the first part of her speech. "You'll swear you don't want his money or the title of lady?" he challenged. "How about writing that out and signing it in the presence of witnesses?"

Alfreda had enough sense to show just a little reluctance, but not too much. "If that's what you want, Roger," she said grudgingly, but her spirits lifted at the prospect of a happy ending, not only to the kidnapping, but to the whole sordid squabble over the Dorn inheritance. "I'll even swear that the man who abducted me was a blond Viking or a Chinese brigand."

Roger tightened his grip painfully. "You are making fun of me, you little—! I'll make you pay for that!"

"Truly, Roger, I only meant to say I would not betray your action—which makes sense since we both wish for the same thing."

"And what's that?" Roger asked suspiciously.

"To make sure you are acknowledged as the son and heir of Alfred Dorn. Believe me, brother, I would not wish to claim acquaintance with so cold and unloving a man."

Roger still held her eyes with his suspicious glare. He was a slow thinker; it seemed impossible to him that anyone would lightly dismiss the wealth and prestige that belonged to the heir of Dorn. Still, he considered, if the wench

has the chance of marrying some Scottish laird who is willing to ignore her background. . . . Because of course he must force her to agree to accept the stigma of illegitimacy, in order to protect his own interests.

Still frowning, he set his horse in motion again, and followed the devious path through the woods toward the deserted cottage.

15

Just after midnight, Mark Savage was drawn out into the lofty, lamp-lit front hallway of The Oaks by an incredible racket on the bronze knocker. He recognized his young half brother's voice crying out in panic, and had the door open before Ryan, the butler, appeared from the back of the hall. One glance sufficed to tell Mark that his plan had gone terribly wrong. Instead of Lady Amelia's carriage, a single horse, heavily lathered, stood head down and panting in the light of the single flambeau. Jeremy, wild-eyed, pushed past Mark and Ryan and then turned and caught Mark by the shoulders.

"He's got her!" the boy sobbed, shaking Mark's shoulders in his excess of self-blame.

"Who has?" demanded Mark, although he had already guessed the answer.

Jeremy gulped and tried to pull himself together. In a lower voice he explained what had taken place. "Roger Dorn. He held up the carriage just beyond Lidell. Fired off a shot. I tried to get to him, got a crack on the head, and something fell over me—a heavy cloth of some kind. . . ."

There was only the sound of his sobbing breath as the two men waited for the rest of the story. Jeremy dragged in a deep breath and went on, "When I worked free of the cloth, it was all over. Freddi was gone!"

"Was the dowager hurt? Or Burton?"

"No. They've put up for the night at Lidell. They understood that I had to get to you quickly." He peered guiltily up at his frowning brother. "I failed to keep her safe, Mark! Roger has her! And what he'll do to her—"

Mark interrupted this frantic babble. "How do you know it was Roger? With your head under some cloth—"

"Don't you think I know that voice?" demanded Jeremy bitterly. "'Stand or I'll fire!' he said—and he'd already done it!"

"Was anyone hurt?"

"He winged the groom. Coachman told me it wasn't too bad, and they'd get him patched up back at the inn. I took one of their horses and came straight to you."

"You did well," said Mark quietly. "Very well! Thanks to your quick action, we can get out in search of them before that rat has a chance to harm her—"

"But I didn't see where he went," Jeremy confessed. He was feeling a little better after Mark's commendation of his action.

"We'll try Dorn's home first," decided Mark. "Ryan, rouse four of the grooms and tell them to saddle six horses. I want them to ride with my brother and myself when we attack."

Ryan nodded and raced back toward the kitchens. Mark put one arm around Jeremy's shoulders. The boy was shaking with exhaustion and anxiety.

"Get yourself a drink, Jerry," he said. "You deserve it, after your lightning dash to gather up the reserves!"

The boy flashed him a grateful grin and went into the library. Mark took the stairs two at a time to get his coat and a brace of pistols. Hastily he added a pocketful of bullets, snatched up his purse, and raced back down the stairs. Jeremy was waiting for him in the hall, pale of face but determined. As they opened the front door, a groom was leading away the dowager's weary coach horse, while sounds of activity from the stables at the rear of The Oaks informed Mark that his men were busy with their assigned task.

Within a few minutes the small cavalcade was mounted and waiting for Mark's word. He regarded their eager expressions with a grim smile.

"I see you are ready for anything," he said quietly. "I wish you to keep as quiet as possible. We do not wish to warn Roger Dorn that we are hunting him. He will have a captive—a lady—who must not be hurt no matter what happens. I shall try to surprise him. If that fails, I'll bargain for her release. If that fails—"

"We'll kill him!" burst out Jeremy, caught up in the drama of the event.

Mark noted the hastily smothered grins with relief. However challenging the event, he trusted his hand-picked servants to support him to their best ability.

"Let's go," he said, and led the small party down the winding driveway to the highroad.

Half an hour later, they stood in front of the stables at Dorn Place. Roger's groom, Felsin, was stolidly refusing to answer any of Mark's questions. Since time was so precious, Mark abandoned the civil approach.

"Tie him up," he ordered his men. "We'll deliver him to the magistrate tonight."

"On what charges?" blustered Felsin. "I ain't done nothin'!"

"Kidnapping a lady of quality," snapped Mark. "You'll be lucky to get away with transportation."

"I ain't done it!" cried Felsin, mentally cursing that thrice-demmed fool Roger. "Whotever 'e's been up to, I ain't 'ad no part in it!"

"That's not what he says," announced Mark.

The lie was enough to undermine whatever loyalty Felsin had for his master. "E come into the stables arf an hour ago, arskin' for some paper and pens, an' tellin' me to throw some clean clothes into a bag for 'im. Then 'e rode out on a fresh 'orse. 'E didn' say where 'e was goin'—an' that's the demmed truth!"

After a long moment, Mark said, "One of you take him back to The Oaks and keep him tied up until we return. I may decide to give him to the magistrate later." When one groom had departed with his cursing burden over his saddle, Mark faced the rest of his party.

"Do any of you have any ideas where our man might be hiding? Remember, he may be stupid, but he knows he's committed a criminal act in kidnapping a lady."

A few disreputable inns were considered, and hasty strategy for scouting them was being discussed, when Jeremy caught at Mark's sleeve.

"There is one place," he ventured. "A tumbledown farmer's cottage near the boundary between our land and the Dorns'. Roger used to go there often, when he had something to do that he didn't want anyone to know about—"

There were nods of agreement from two of the grooms. One of them said, "That's where he took his trollops to be private-like. . . ." He paused at the low growl that erupted from his master's throat. Mark seized Jeremy's shoulder.

"Can you lead us to the place? Right now!" He turned to his men. "Quietly! We don't want to warn him we are coming. I'll give tie signal to dismount and proceed on foot when we're some distance from the place. Lead on, Jerry!"

Roger was finding the situation very much to his liking. He had a girl, alone, in a place that had never been discovered by anyone. The chit was putting up a good show of being calm, but Roger was not fooled. She was scared, which was exactly what he wanted. He had already lighted the old lantern he kept hidden under the rubbish for just such an occasion, and was clearing away a flat surface for her to write on, Handing her the paper, pens, and covered inkwell, he gestured to the cleared spot.

"Write what you said about not wishing any part of the Earl of Dorn's estate," he commanded.

He watched, hawk-eyed, until the girl had finished her task. Then he grabbed the paper and scrutinized the clear flowing script. Even with his limited skills at deciphering handwriting, he knew she had said exactly what he told her to. But there was something else, wasn't there? Oh, yes! His own part in this matter.

"Now you'll say that the man who kidnapped you from the old woman's coach was Mark Savage!" He grinned maliciously.

"That horse won't run." Alfreda adopted the cant of the village louts at Little Weald.

Roger strode forward and caught her throat in one huge paw. "What're you trying to do?" he growled.

Alfreda kept her eyes firmly fixed on his piggy stare. "I'm just warning you that Mark Savage is waiting for Lady Amelia and me at The Oaks, and he's got a house full of servants who can swear he wasn't out on the road tonight. That cock won't fight." Which was the proper term? she wondered anxiously. And could she pierce his iron wall of ignorance and jealousy of Mark Savage? Even with facts?

Roger took his time considering the information; he kept a tight grip on the girl's throat meanwhile. Alfreda was afraid that she might faint if he didn't let her get a breath soon; already her head was spinning and a reddish glare screened her vision. And then he released his grip, and she gasped and sobbed breath into her starving lungs.

Roger laughed. "That will show you not to try to bamboozle me," he taunted. "I'd be a lot safer with you six feet underground, and don't forget it!" He kept his eyes on her pale, pretty face. "If you wasn't my sister—" he mocked her. "Hey?"

Alfreda couldn't control her shudder of distaste, but the reaction seemed to please Roger. He took satisfaction in causing others to fear him. Now if he could just get her to agree to naming some other kidnapper—

"Why can't I swear it was a tall, slender, blond highwayman?" she suggested. When Roger's face took on a set grimace of dissent, the girl said persuasively, "I'm going to be married in Scotland, anyway. Do you think I want to proclaim the fact that I'm illegitimate, and was kidnapped? Don't you see that might ruin my chances at a good match!"

This was talk Roger could understand. He kept silent for several minutes longer, but his mind was already made up. Accept the girl's suggestion; let her write about a blond highwayman who had carried her off. . . and then keep her here for a few days until he'd decided what was safest for himself.

When he told her his decision, the girl turned awkward.

She was full of excuses and reasons why he should let her go at once, so she could get away to Scotland before a scandal could be raised. Roger got a little tired of her nonsense. Did the little trollop think she could manage him? It might be a good idea to rough her up a little, just to show her who was master here! And then, if he felt like it, he'd let her go to find her own way out of the woods.

At first he thought he'd gag her, but the idea of hearing her cry and plead, or even scream, was too enticing to be denied. So it was that Mark, Jeremy and their grooms were led to the cottage by a piercing scream and then a low-voiced pleading from Alfreda.

The sound of her scream galvanized the rescue party into action. They burst into the poorly lit, ramshackle cottage before Roger, deep in the enjoyment of his cruelty, could rouse himself to do battle.

Mark had him floored with a single, punishing blow to the head, and then proceeded to secure his enemy's submission by means that impressed Jeremy and the grooms greatly.

"Shall we tie him up, too?" asked Jeremy eagerly. He had a number of memories of his experiences in this place, and wished to wipe them out with a satisfying disposal of their perpetrator.

Mark nodded. He was just getting control of the surprising fury that had seized him when he heard Alfreda scream. He busied himself untying her hands and feet, and inspecting her sternly.

"Where did he hurt you?" he demanded. "Tell me!"

Alfreda caught her breath. This dominating male was, in his way, almost as frightening as the sadistic Roger. She raised her tingling hands to her throat and found it difficult to speak.

Mark caught the meaning of her gesture. Removing her hands gently from her neck, he bent to inspect the braising. His lips tightened. "Anything else?" he asked, as though fearing the worst.

Alfreda put her palm against a rapidly darkening cheek. "... slapped me. . ." she managed to say. And then, understanding the light of rage in the silver eyes, she tried to smile. "... just getting started," she managed.

Mark turned and stared down at the bound, recumbent bully. He gestured for two of the grooms to lift the hulking figure up. Then he raised his hand and struck Roger twice, three times, across the face. "I don't dare let myself pay back your action in choking this lady," he muttered. "I would be tempted to kill you!"

"Let me, guv'," pleaded one of the grooms.

But Mark was not to be cheated of his satisfaction. "Untie the bully," he said quietly.

A gleam of hope sparked in Roger's eyes. Just let him free me and I'll batter 'em all down! he thought gleefully. . . .

Two bruising minutes later, Roger was flat on his back again, this time with blood flowing from a broken nose.

"If you bother this lady again, I'll kill you," Mark said so softly that Roger could hardly hear him. And the look in the victor's eyes—ice over silver—promised that the threat was no idle boast.

Leaving the bully on his back, the Savages, Alfreda, and the grooms left the crumbling cottage and walked over to the horses. Alfreda was grateful for the presence of the grooms, since she had sensed the icy rage that Mark was holding in tight control—sensed it and realized that it was directed at her.

Stumbling along in the darkness, Alfreda sighed. Why did it always happen that her meetings with this handsome, virile man were charged with antagonism? Was it her fault? Nothing Mrs. Green had taught her prepared her to deal with an arrogant, fascinating buck! In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case—her training, especially in the Classics, appeared to annoy Mark Savage. Or perhaps it was just she herself who annoyed him.

Musing thus disconsolately, she found herself suddenly seized around the waist and flung up onto the back of a horse. With a most undignified thrashing of her limbs she managed to get one on either side of the horse's neck. Almost at once, a heavy body landed behind her, and a hard arm pulled her against a rock-firm body.

It was too much! Alfreda might have been willing to accept part or even all of the blame for the unpleasantness of their former encounters, but this time the aggressive man had gone too far! Throwing her up onto his horse with no regard for her dignity or her comfort! Snarling at her in that hovel, when she was more than willing to praise him and thank him for his timely rescue! Well, he could just whistle for his thanks! Alfreda flounced angrily against the confining grasp.

Her reward for that was a painful tightening of Mark's grip.

"Be still, you little wretch!" he muttered into her ear. "Maybe by the time I get you home, I'll have calmed down enough not to beat you! Have you no sense? Thrusting yourself into danger without thought for the people who love you! I can't let you out of my sight for ten minutes before you're up to your neck in trouble!"

Alfreda opened her mouth to make a fiery rebuttal—and then shut it again. What had he said?—"the people who love you." Did he mean. . . could he be referring to himself? And then the impossibility of that interpretation struck her. Love her? He had all he could do to keep from strangling her! So it must be Lady Amelia he meant, when he said those who loved her. And now the total injustice of his comment struck her dumb. He was talking as though she had had any choice in the carriage when Roger was threatening them all with his pistol! Was she to have let him murder them all without

resistance? Her ever-volatile anger flared and she wrenched around in his hard grasp.

The grip grew painfully tight. "I wouldn't try it," the dark voice warned. And then, coldly, "Be quiet or I'll settle your hash right now!"

Hash? Alfreda went into a simmering fury at the crudity of the man's behavior. She knew very well she could do little or nothing at the moment, in front of the grooms and Jeremy, to punish the brute, but there would come a time. . .!

The rest of the ride back to The Oaks was accomplished in silence, grim on the part of Mark and Alfreda, cautious on the part of Jeremy and the grooms. The whole mood seemed to change, however, as they approached the well-lighted, handsome buildings that made up the Savage holding. Even Mark seemed surprised at the appearance of his ancestral home.

"It's probably the dowager's doing," suggested Jeremy with a poorly concealed laugh. "She's up to every rig and row in the book! I should have known she wouldn't stay at the inn!"

"Let us hope she has not roused our father," commented Mark. "We know his temper when he's disturbed!"

Jeremy fell silent as they dismounted before the oddly welcoming mansion. With a quiet word of thanks to the weary, pleased grooms, Mark turned and took Alfreda's arm. Though she would have died rather than admit it, the girl found his firm support both necessary and comfortable. Without further talk they entered the open portals.

"My God!" breathed Mark.

Apparently the whole staff of the household was waiting for them in the hallway. Led by the indomitable dowager, a cheer sounded as they entered.

"Hip, hip, hooray!" she called, and then repeated it twice.

Mark grinned involuntarily at the hearty accolade.

"You've done the thing!" She came forward smiling. "Dear Mr. Savage, you have saved my darling Freddi's life! I could kiss you! And Jeremy, too!" she added, beaming at the youth.

Mark rose to the occasion gallantly. Leading the stunned Alfreda to her grandmother, he bent and offered his cheek.

"Please do so," he invited, with the devilish smile Alfreda had first glimpsed at the Pot O'Gold.

And when the dowager had smilingly complied, Mark added, in a tone audible to every person in the vast hallway, "Your granddaughter has not yet thanked me, ma'am. Do you think—?"

Whatever Lady Amelia or Alfreda might have answered to this outrageous ploy was never known, since a sour, cold voice sounded from the stairway.

"What is going on down there? Have you all lost your senses?"

Every eye turned to the gaunt figure in a much-worn dressing gown. Alfreda heard a soft, "Oh, no!" from Jeremy. It was enough to warn her that all was not well at The Oaks.

Mark, no longer smiling, sketched a slight bow toward the dowager. "Lady Amelia, may I present my father, Sidney Savage. Father, we are honored to have Lady Amelia Calthorp and her granddaughter, Lady Alfreda Dorn, as our guests."

A thunderous scowl settled over the pallid features as Mr. Savage stared down upon the hushed group in the hallway. "Dorn? You have had the insolence to bring a Dorn into my house?"

Almost without thinking, Alfreda stepped in to divert the old man's anger from Mark—who had only been trying to help a victim of the nefarious Alfred. "Oh, he doesn't acknowledge me as Lady Dorn's daughter, sir," she called out, brightly, "He substituted Roger as his heir when I was born."

Sidney Savage glared from one face to another. "Is this the truth?" he demanded.

Noting Mark's sudden rigidity at his father's open disbelief, Alfreda stepped in impulsively again. "Imagine having Roger Dorn for a son!" She gave the crusty old man her sweetest, most mischievous smile. "Or Alfred for a father! Served them both right, don't you think?"

Jeremy and Mark, staring up at their father, were shocked to see an appreciative grin tugging at the sour corners of the old man's mouth.

Just at this moment, a dour-looking manservant appeared behind Sidney and peered over the old man's shoulder at the crowd in the hallway below.

"And who might these folk be?" he demanded.

"My sons, whom I am sure you must remember," snapped the old man, impatient at the interruption.

"Are they wearing ladies' clothes now, then?" the elderly servant snapped back at his master.

The tentative smile widened into a nearly toothless grin. "No, ye dolt, the ones in women's clothing are our guests, the Duchess of Calthorp and her—granddaughter. Have ye got rooms prepared for 'em? They've decided to visit us. For an indeterminate stay."

Alfreda felt a rush of rage at the nasty old fellow who was saying such cruel things about dear Grandmama. But the dowager was made of sterner stuff. She advanced two paces and swept a truly regal curtsy. "Your welcome overwhelms me, sir," she said clearly. "Of course, if our presence disturbs important matters, we shall leave at once for the nearest inn. Victims of Alfred Dorn cannot expect to find refuge in a house that fears the Dorns."

"I have hated Alfred Dorn for fifteen years," Sidney came down the stairway as he spoke. "If you are truly victims of that wicked man, I shall be proud to welcome you to my home." Mark and Jeremy were as startled as old Campbell at this amazing development. The old servant hurried down the stairs after his master, muttering something about "... finally gone daft. . ."

Sidney Savage paused at the foot of the stairway and scrutinized his guests carefully. Alfreda thought he was pitiful. He obviously was not eating properly: he was gaunt and pale, and clearly had had no exercise and very little grooming for quite some time. She went forward and curtsied politely, as Mrs. Green had taught her.

"Your older son saved my life tonight," she said in a clear voice. "Roger Dorn had taken me from my grandmother's coach at pistol point, and after making me sign a paper refusing any claim upon the Dorn estates, wished me to add that it was Mark Savage who had kidnapped me."

"But you would have been able to refute that lie as soon as you were found—" began the old man testily.

"If I had been found," agreed the girl. "And if I had been able to speak." She raised one hand and touched her slender neck, already dark with bruises.

There was a grim little silence. Then Sidney Savage glared at his wide-eyed servants. "Well? Where is our hospitality? Ryan, see that rooms are prepared for our guests, and a suitable collation set out. I shall join you downstairs in twenty minutes."

Slowly the old man turned and remounted the stairs, his plainly shocked servant hovering close behind him. Mark and Jeremy exchanged stunned glances. Then Mark turned to their guests with the widest, most carefree smile anyone had ever seen upon his face. As the servants hastened about their business, Mark spoke to the two women.

"It is a miracle," he said softly. "My father has not come out of his apartments for nearly twenty years!" He looked at Alfreda. "I don't know how you did it, little witch, but tonight makes up for all your faults and foibles!"

As an apology for his former intransigent attitude, the speech was less than successful. As praise, it was a disaster. The dowager, who was trying to repress a gust of laughter, merely succeeded in making sputtering sounds. Jeremy was frankly appalled. Was this the older brother whose nous and gallantry had made him the favorite of the young ladies of the county? This foot-in-mouth, infuriating bumbler? Jeremy hastened to the side of the fuming, narrow-eyed Lady Freddi and placed a gentle hand upon her arm.

"Our deepest thanks, milady," he said with a strained smile. "May I escort you and your grandmama to your rooms? I am sure Ryan will have all in train for your comfort. It has been a—rather challenging night!"

Lady Amelia took charge smoothly. There was still a wicked twinkle in her eyes, but she was all suave diplomacy as she shepherded the silent Alfreda and the still murmuring Jeremy up the stairs after a maidservant.

Mark stood where they had left him, a completely unreadable look upon his dark, handsome countenance.

What sort of hornet's nest have I pulled down upon my hapless family? he was thinking. And: Why did I say that to her?

16

When the worried Jeremy finally left them to the careful ministrations of the maidservant, Alfreda turned to her Grandmother. Lady Amelia spoke first. "I do not know when I have had such an interesting, delightful time as I have enjoyed since you came to me, dearest Freddi! I feel—rejuvenated!"

Indeed, her whole countenance was alight with laughter and eagerness; the faded blue eyes had acquired a deep sparkle. She bustled over to where the fascinated maid was unpacking the first of the portmanteaux. "Just open that handbag, child, and get out our brushes and soaps. We would not wish to keep your master waiting, would we? For the collation," she explained, to the girl's uncomprehending stare.

"He can't be coming down to eat with you, ma'am, surely? Why, nobody's been able to budge him outa them rooms for nigh on twenty years—so they tell me!" said the maidservant.

"Then it's lucky we happened by," said the dowager, with a charming disregard for the actual facts of their arrival. "From the look of your master," she said, smiling naughtily, "it is past time that someone did something to bring him back to the living."

The maid, much impressed by this undeniable truth, nodded and found their hairbrushes, special soap, and lotions. Within a remarkably short time, the two ladies trod their way down the massive stairway into the great hall. Mark and Jeremy were already waiting, the signs of their hasty ablutions plain in their still-damp hair. Of the master of the house there was no sign, and Alfreda, for one, was beginning to fear that the night's excursions and alarms had been too much for the old recluse when, preceded by a kilted Campbell, Sidney Savage came slowly down to meet them.

His sons stared, open-mouthed. Gone was the worn dressing gown that had been his sole garment for years. In its place there was a neat black evening suit, obviously long out of style, but particularly effective on that tall, lean figure. There was little color in the pallid cheeks, but the eyes shone with new luster.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting, ladies." His creaky tones indicated little use of the vocal cords. He offered his arm to the dowager, and led the way into the dining room.

Jeremy beat Mark to Alfreda's side, and escorted her to the table, which was nicely set and already bore wine in some of the numerous glasses. Mark, still looking thunderstruck, followed and seated himself across from Alfreda. To keep an eye on the little witch, he told himself. Who knows what she'll be up to next? Throwing her wine at him? She had looked angry enough for that in the hallway earlier!

But Alfreda was ahead of him. She had recruited her equanimity while she repaired her appearance; she was all gentle, girlish smiles, and obviously captivating both Sidney and Jeremy. Mark glanced at the dowager, and met a look of glinting amusement.

He met her grin with one of his own, a wide white slash of male challenge. It was clear that the old noblewoman liked him; he found surprising pleasure in the thought. His gaze traveled to her granddaughter, who was at this moment saying something playful to a delighted Jeremy. Jeremy! Mark felt an unfamiliar tightening of his nerves. Surely the chit was not casting out lures for that—boy? He stared rather belligerently at the laughing duo.

Then he felt eyes upon him, and turned to find his father scanning his countenance. Sidney Savage sat at the head of his table for the first time in many years. To his right he had placed Lady Amelia; to his left, Alfreda. On her left, Jeremy babbled happily. Mark himself occupied the chair next to the dowager's right. This position gave him a clear view of every face except the dowager's, and she faced him often enough so that he felt he could monitor her most of the time.

Why he felt so strong a need to watch the expressions on his table companions' faces Mark was not sure. But there was a very strong compulsion to do so. What was happening? Jeremy seemed to be taking it in stride; the servants were blissful at the promise of interesting company to speculate and gossip about. As

well as more interesting meals to prepare—and share—Mark decided critically. Still, he was forced to admit that anything that got his recluse parent out of his quarters and down to the table was worth celebrating. And judging by the amazed, open expression on Campbell's face, the old manservant agreed with him.

It was a pleasant meal, the most-cheerful Mark ever recalled in that place. As the time passed, however, Mark caught unmistakable evidence that his father was tiring. He glanced up at Campbell. The man nodded agreement. But it was the dowager who instituted the move.

Addressing her host, she said pleasantly, "Mr. Savage, this has been a most restorative meal! I feel quite relaxed and safe, thanks to your gracious hospitality. My granddaughter and I shall retire now, and leave you gentlemen to your wines!"

All three men rose with her, and Jeremy looked as though he would like to escort the ladies elsewhere, but Mark's slight shake of the head held him back.

"You were courteous to think of accompanying them, Jerry," he told the boy, "but they will wish to retire now. It has been an exhausting day, after all!" The smile he gave his sibling was enough to soften the denial of the youth's gallantry.

"Just what happened today?" The rusty voice of their father, weaker for his own exertions, came demandingly to their ears. Mark thought fast. Not for any treasure would he do anything to destroy the urge which had led his recluse father to come out of hiding. "May we adjourn to your rooms, Father? And perhaps Campbell will provide us all with a glass of your finest Scots whiskey? I feel we'll all benefit from a wee doch-an-dorrach while I tell you of our experiences. I hope your wisdom will show us where we went wrong, and even what we should do from this point on."

Then he waited, and Jeremy and Campbell waited, hardly breathing, for the response from the recluse.

"Bring four glasses, Campbell," instructed Sidney Savage, availing himself of his servant's arm to move from the room.

When they had settled with their liquor in the rather musty sitting room of the master suite, Sidney said, "I rather liked that girl. Doesn't look anything like Dorn. Must resemble her mother."

"Her hair is exactly like Alfred Dorn's—flaming red, to match' her temper!" snapped Mark.

The minute the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. Jeremy's reproachful glance further castigated his blundering tongue.

Sidney was staring at him. "Are you blind? The girl's hair is black!"

"She dyed it so she wouldn't look like him—" began Mark awkwardly.

"Sensible little filly," Sidney said approvingly. "Brains as well as charm."

Jeremy was grinning openly. "I think I should warn you, Father," he said, perhaps carried away by the unaccustomed whiskey and the strange feeling of meeting his father for the first time, "that Lady Freddi and Mark

strike sparks from each other every time they meet. Even when he saved her life from that brute Roger, they could hardly exchange a civil word."

And how do you like that, brother dear? said his naughty grin. That would pay him for his rudeness to their pretty young guest earlier in the evening!

Their father glanced from one red-faced brother to his grinning sibling. An unaccustomed smile touched the corners of his lips briefly. Oh, yes, life had suddenly taken on surprising interest.

In their pleasant bedroom, which they were more than happy to share, Lady Amelia and her darling Freddi made ready for bed. They could not discourage the little servant, who was obviously delighted to be assigned to the care of the first female visitors any of the staff could remember. When finally she had been persuaded that there was absolutely nothing more she could do for their comfort, she took a reluctant leave, stopping at the door to tell them that she would be bringing up their breakfast in the morning, and would they prefer coffee or cocoa?

With this weighty matter settled, the dowager finally relaxed against her pillows, and regarded her granddaughter.

"You like him, don't you?"

Alfreda made no pretence of misunderstanding the reference. "Sometimes I think I hate him!" she snapped. "He makes me so furious! You heard him in the hallway, in front of everyone! 'All my faults and foibles!' How could he?"

"He had just saved your life," the dowager reminded her.

"Reluctantly, I am sure," sneered the girl.

The dowager laughed. "You love the creature!" she said, exultant. "I had high hopes that you might. He will be perfect for you, Freddi! Rude, arrogant, outside; as soft as a goose-down pillow inside!"

"You must be jesting, Grandmama," said the girl repressively. "Love that—that creature? I'd as soon love—" she was going to say "Roger!" but the lie stuck in her throat.

Alfreda sighed ostentatiously. "Dearest Grandmama, shall we try to rest now? After all, it has been a rather tiring day!" She touched the bandages that a concerned servant had placed around her throat over the soothing lotion.

The dowager was not taken in. With a wicked chuckle she said, "Oh, let us rest by all means! That is, if you can stop fuming about that villain Mark long enough to fall asleep!"

A disdainful sniff was all the reply she got for that thrust, but Lady Amelia put out the bedside candle with a chuckle.

It could not have turned out better if she had planned it herself, she thought smugly. Darling Freddi! She'd met her match at last!

17

When the Savages' head groom woke up the following morning, and strolled into the stables to inspect their prisoners, he was greeted by a sleeping stableboy and no captives. Three minutes later he had given the alarm, but no one could locate Roger and Felsin anywhere on the estate. Feeling very guilty, although it had not been himself who had fallen asleep on watch, the head groom brought the bad news to Mark.

Inspecting the empty stall, the latter found the ropes with which the prisoners had been bound. "One of them had a knife in his boot," he said. "Or somebody gave them one."

This thought so horrified the head groom, whose name was Tedley, that he offered to discharge every groom and stableboy on the estate.

"Wouldn't do any good now," Mark admonished him. "The birds have flown. It's fortunate we've got reserves coming in today to guard the place. Work out a sensible roster, Tedley. It wasn't your fault, man," he added more kindly. "And no real harm's been done. This bungle will put all the servants on their toes."

In spite of his optimistic attitude, he hurried into the house to make sure his guests were safe. Upon inquiry, Ryan was able to inform him that the ladies had breakfasted in their room and should be down shortly. Mark

heaved a sigh of relief. No midnight snatching, then. "And my father?" He asked the question rather awkwardly.

Ryan smiled. "Mr. Savage has eaten a better breakfast than usual, sir, and will be down shortly, I believe."

Mark's shoulders relaxed their tense posture, and he strolled into the kitchen, thrilling and disrupting the servants there with his demands for food and drink to save a starving man.

He had just finished a sustaining meal, and was strolling into the front hall, when the sound of a light footstep coming down the uncarpeted stairway caught his attention. He raised his eyes to behold Alfreda—with her hair—that black, harsh-looking mass—cut very short and neatly trimmed. And tied up with a blue ribbon that matched her eyes.

"Good morning, Alfreda." Mark was very much on his best behavior. "The new hairstyle becomes you!"

"Thank you, Mark," said Alfreda warily. "The less of this black dye I can see, the better I like it."

"Will it take long to grow back—your own pretty hair, I mean?"

The girl's eyes widened involuntarily. What had gotten into her antagonist? Compliments? So early in the morning? Perhaps his papa had given him instructions last night. She really could not handle so much gushing benevolence so early in the morning. "I thought you hated the color," she said rather snappishly.

Mark grinned. It was so delightfully easy to bait the little female—even when he wasn't trying to! "I thought it matched you—ah—personality," he said slyly.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" demanded the girl suspiciously.

Mark smiled. "That you're bright, and—er—colorful, and—"

"Don't strain yourself," advised Alfreda grimly. "You hate my red hair!" She sniffed haughtily. "Do you think I have forgotten your rude gibes in front of the patrons of the Pot O'Gold?"

"As I recall, I made fun of your hat, not your hair," Mark had the poor taste to remind her.

"An omission that you have more than made up for since," the chit reminded him.

They were glaring at one another when the dowager came down the stairs to greet them. "Fighting as usual, I see," she said.

Mark put on an innocent-little-boy expression. "I was trying to pay your grandchild a compliment, but she makes it hard."

"You were teasing me again, and you know it, Mark Savage," protested the girl.

Any further discussion was interrupted when Sidney Savage came slowly down the stairs, attended by the faithful Campbell. Sidney led the way into

his study-cum-library. While they were seating themselves, he stared around him with some pleasure.

"It is quite a while since I entered this room," he said.

Mark spoke up warmly. "It is good to see you here, Father."

The old man gave his son a tentative, placating glance. "I have a great deal to answer for, son. After the shaking up I had last night. . ." He paused, glancing from one to another of his guests. "There are things I must tell you, but I think Jeremy should be with us to hear them. I have sent Campbell after the lad. He seems to have slept late."

Mark experienced an odd chill of fear, but before he could do anything about it, Jeremy appeared in the doorway, looking for them.

"Here you are!" he said, unnecessarily, and gave them a wide, boyish grin. "Father! It is good to see you downstairs."

Sidney Savage waved the boy to a chair, and then faced them all. He seemed, even now, reluctant to begin. Lady Amelia tried to ease the situation. She smiled warmly at her host.

"It is more than kind of you to house and feed two strange women during what is a difficult time for them," she began. "The Norths—my lawyers—insisted that I get my poor Freddi away from London, and from the possibility that her father might attempt to—remove her as a threat to his income." She took a breath. "I speak thus freely to you since I understand that the Dorns have behaved badly to your family, also."

"Alfred Dorn behaved badly indeed—without honor. I understand from Campbell that Roger, the son, was responsible for at least one accident to Mark that might have proved fatal. To say nothing of a great deal of harassment and mischief directed at Jeremy. Last night's performance by Roger Dorn was the last straw. It encourages me now to finally explain to my sons why their father practically abandoned them for so many years. You may know," he turned to Lady Amelia, "that my first wife, Mark's mother, died in childbirth. Five years later, I married a young and beautiful girl whom I met on a visit to London. I thought that the days of my unhappiness were finally ended. She gave me Jeremy—two sons I then had! It seemed to me that no man could ask for more. And then she met Alfred Dorn at a charity ball given by the local magistrate. I was not particularly interested in dancing and making small talk, and would have been willing to send a contribution to the charity and stay home. But nothing would do my young wife but that we should attend. I felt remorse, naturally. I had swept her from her busy social life in London and rusticated her in this dull spot. So I agreed to attend. It was there that Lord Dorn set his lecherous eyes on her." He paused, a distant, painful expression on his lined, pallid face.

"I learned later, from helpful friends, that he had made what they called a dead set upon my young wife. One evening I was handed a note just before dinner. It was from my wife. She said she could not stand the loneliness and boredom of country life, and was going back to London 'with a friend.' I was preparing to follow her and bring her back—having a suspicion who the 'friend' was, when news was brought to me that her horse had thrown her when she was on her way in the darkness to Dorn's home. She was dead." A tear slid slowly down his face. "After they brought back her body, and I had made proper arrangements, I rode over to Lord Dorn's home with the intention of killing the coward. He had not even made the effort to come and pick her up in his own carriage! If he had done that, she would still be alive. . . even if I had never seen her again. I went prepared to kill Dorn, as I say. He had his grooms set upon me and beat me into insensibility. By the time I had recovered, he was in London."

No one spoke. After a long moment, Sidney turned to his younger son. "I am sorry I did not tell you this sooner, boy. I had hoped to keep the sordid story from you, let you believe in the love and sweetness of your mother. I retired to my own quarters, accepting the fact that I would never be able to protect my young wife's name if I remained in society."

Jeremy got up and went to his father's side. Quietly he put his arm around the narrow, thin shoulders and hugged hard. "I understand. Thank you for your wish to spare me grief," he whispered.

Sidney raised his head and faced them all. "I know now it was a mistake. If I had faced my grief at the time, I would have been a better father to my sons. And you, madam, and your charming granddaughter, would not have been placed in such jeopardy as you have known recently. But that is over now, I think. Do we not have the brutal Roger and his groom in custody? Let us call the constable and have them delivered to the magistrate."

"They have escaped," said Mark shortly. "I've sent for a dozen men to act as guards to the house and estate. We should be able to protect ourselves and our guests until the constable locates the criminals."

"You think they will try to attack these ladies again? Surely Alfred Dorn must know we are warned—ready for them!"

"I do not think the earl is in any way involved with this action," Mark said slowly. "From what Lady Amelia tells me, he has accepted his lawyers' advice to go to Spain and live quietly on the diminished returns from his property. I believe this whole mad scheme is Roger Dorn's—it has the stupid cruelty of his character."

The big, darkly handsome young man rose and faced the group. He looked first at the dowager. "Will it distress you or Alfreda if I go at once to inform our magistrate of our problem? I would not wish to cause you—embarrassment."

Lady Amelia spoke decisively. "Better a little embarrassment than injury or death!" she said crisply. "After all, I have suffered for years at the thought of my Penelope married to that creature! And Roger is no kin of mine—or Penelope's!"

Mark nodded. "Very well, then. I'll swear out a complaint against Roger, and if the magistrate advises, calling the Bow Street Runners to help find the fellow and put him somewhere where he can no longer threaten innocent persons." His silver-gray eyes rested warmly upon Alfreda's small, upturned face. Her admiring glance brought a smile to his lips. Oddly enough, it was pleasant to be the object of the chit's admiration. Sternly, he brought himself back to business. His father was nodding agreement.

"Jeremy and I will remain here to protect our guests, while you, Mark, ride out to do battle with the dragon!" The first real smile anyone had seen on his lips for many years was softening the harshness of his countenance.

Mark had a word with Tedley before he rode to the home of Magistrate Sellers. The head groom assured him that the extra menservants, enlisted from among the farming families and the local group of ex-soldiers who were not only glad of the work but had some training in warfare, were already deployed about the grounds and very much aware of the seriousness of the situation.

"They've all heard of Roger Dorn," Tedley went on. "Many of 'em have had run-ins with him. He's got a bad reputation hereabouts—as I guess you know, sir," Tedley ended.

As Mark rode out of the gates of The Oaks, and turned his horse toward the small village of Oaklea, he was already alert to the dangers they would have to face. Roger was like a madman—or perhaps like a simpleton with only one idea: hurt, destroy! . . . Perhaps it was that subconscious wariness that saved his life. He was never able to pinpoint the moment when he became aware of deadly danger. He pulled up his horse abruptly, scanning the brush on either side of the road. As he did so, a shot fired from the trees at the verge whistled past his face.

Putting his spurs to his mount, Mark raced out of range of the attacker's pistol. Or so he devoutly hoped!

18

As the day dragged on, Alfreda became increasingly nervous. Why had Mark not returned from the home of Magistrate Sellers? Had there been trouble? It seemed to the girl barely normal that she should be so concerned over a man who did not even like her—hastily she revised that to: a man she didn't even like. She could not get the memory of the way he had looked that morning, standing by the table, smiling, out of her mind. How tall he was! And those broad shoulders, just right to rest one's head against—that is, she amended quickly, if one wanted to rest one's head. . . . And that smile! Her own lips curved in unconscious sympathy with that wicked, dashing, provocative. . . enticement!

Alfreda continued to prowls restlessly around the drawing room where her grandmother sat enjoying a quiet coze with their host. Momentarily deflected from her own worried thoughts, she paused to relish the feeling of pleasant companionship that was developing between the recluse and her sprightly grandmama.

At that minute, Lady Amelia looked up and beamed at the girl. Then a little frown settled on her face. "What's to do, Freddi? You are very restless. Would you like to walk out in the park? I am sure Jeremy would escort you."

Sidney frowned. "I don't think that is wise," he objected. "Mark would wish us to remain in the house until we have positive assurance that Roger Dorn is in custody."

This statement naturally threw a gloom over the party, broken only when Jeremy strode eagerly in to confront them with the news that one of the mares had foaled, and inviting them to come out to the stables to admire the new arrival. This project pleased everyone. Within a few minutes the grooms and stableboys were treated to a visit from the recluse, whom many had never set eyes on before, and his noble guests.

The ladies' delight in the adorable, clumsy little creature was rewarding to the assembled servants, who took it as a personal compliment upon their skill. When the ladies had seen enough of the charming little newcomer, they were escorted back toward the house by Sidney and his son.

Jeremy vocalized the anxiety they were all feeling.

"Mark's been gone a long time," he grumbled. "Maybe he went on to London to talk to the magistrate at Bow Street."

"He wouldn't have done that without consulting us," Sidney objected.

Alfreda privately considered that the arrogant young man was quite capable of doing just that. Her irrational fears were increasing with the passing minutes. Why didn't he come home. . . or let them know what he was doing? Selfish man! She set her mouth in what Mrs. Green would have recognized as her stubborn look. If he's not back within half an hour, I'm going to look for him, she vowed silently. How can he disturb everyone this way?

She debated whether to confide her plan to Lady Amelia. She was pretty sure her grandmother was just as apprehensive as she was herself. Perhaps she might sanction the search if Jeremy agreed to accompany Alfreda. But Mr. Savage had already advised against any excursions until Roger was safe in custody. The girl bit at her lower lip with small white teeth. It was difficult to know what was best to do.

She had a moment when she wondered why she was spending this much energy worrying about a man who mocked and teased her. She immediately dismissed this sign of unusual weakness; keeping it dismissed turned out to be another thing entirely. Grimly, the girl forced her mind into other channels. What was really the most important need in her life? she asked herself.

To find a place where she belonged.

The answer had come so swiftly, with such force of feeling, that Alfreda was shocked at herself. Wondering, she tested out the idea. Yes. It occurred to her in this moment of understanding that she had always been driven by a compelling need—to be at home somewhere—to belong in some place that was truly her own. She had never felt at home in Little Weald; Mrs. Green's coldly successful schooling had never made her feel wanted or important.

Alfreda drew a deep, quieting breath. But when she had finally met her grandmother—? Had that not been the moment she had longed for, unconsciously but desperately? She felt a rush of love for the indomitable old lady, so eager to give love and material things, so delighted to have a daughter of her dear Penelope returned to brighten her life! Surely that mutual love and trust created a place for Alfreda?

Shaking her head in denial of the reservations that still remained, the girl went through the glass doors out into the garden. Without realizing her intention, she turned away from the smooth carpets of grass, the colorful beds of flowers, and headed toward the driveway—and the gatehouse. When that well-kept lodge came into sight, Alfreda paused, surprised but not displeased at her unconscious wish to be close to the first place that would receive word of Mark's whereabouts. She walked toward it a little faster.

As though she had known it would happen, a rider was approaching the outside of the gates as she reached the lodge. The custodian, an ancient crusty fellow called Garrett, frowned fiercely at the girl while he swung wide the gates for Mark Savage.

Muttering a brief Godbewi ye to Mark's friendly greeting, he prepared to close the iron gates and lock them.

Mark was glaring down at his welcoming committee of one.

Alfreda, whose own mood had led her to expect a similarly relieved and grateful attitude on Mark's part, was truly disconcerted when the man, looking wickedly beautiful and arrogant astride his splendid black stallion, gave her a fearful scowl, set his horse in motion, and charged directly at her.

Before she could even catch her breath, the aggressive man had bent down as his horse approached her, seized her in a grip of iron, and pulled her up in front of him.

This was getting to be too much! If one more doltish, arrogant male dragged her over his saddle, Alfreda was going to. . . going to—do something that would teach them—or him—a lesson! What century did the creatures think they were living in? Knights and mercenaries, soldiers and highwaymen! Did all males secretly cherish the wish to be daring brigands? Twisting about in Mark's grasp—not an easy chore—Alfreda hit him as hard as she could. At the last moment, compassion intervened, spoiling her aim, which had been directed at his arrogant nose. Her fist landed high on his cheek, where it made a satisfying thud.

Mark looked down at her with interest. "That'll give me a black eye," he said, almost jovially. "I shall inform everyone that was your thanks for my exhausting efforts in your behalf. Witch!"

"I thought you were going to run me down," Alfreda explained reasonably enough. "I was frightened."

“Not you!” scoffed the villain. “You’ve been aching to do that ever since the Pot O’Gold.”

The girl was stubbornly determined to make her point. “I was extremely worried when you were so long in returning. We all were! It would have been considerate of you to let us know—”

“How could I? I didn’t know myself. And when I did, I knew I could get back here before any messenger. But if you prefer the latter, I can go back to Dorn House and send a messenger to tell you—”

“Dorn House?”

“Yes. The magistrate insisted that we take two constables and go there to be sure neither Roger nor his father were hiding out. The place is in a shambles. Apparently Lord Dorn has fired his whole staff, with the exception of his head groom and a caretaker for the house. The servants are naturally upset—unemployment being so high with all the soldiers home from the wars. There was even talk of burning down the buildings.”

Alfreda lifted an appalled face to his. “They were hostile to you?” she faltered.

“Don’t tell me you’d care?” He grinned provocatively. Then, “No. Possibly the presence of the magistrate and the constables deterred them. Between us, we offered to find places for as many of them as we could—Oh, don’t bother thanking me,” he ended crisply. “All of us in this county are accustomed to picking up after the Dorns!”

Of which, thought Alfreda miserably, he considers me to be one! Well, I am, am I not? I can’t help it, but my father is Alfred, Lord Dorn. And I wish to heaven it had been some unknown, even! For in that case I might always have had the liberty of dreaming!

Mark regarded her solemn, unhappy little countenance with a concern he was reluctant to admit. What was wrong with her now? Where was his fiery little redheaded challenger, who made his rather pedestrian life interesting? Almost unaware of his action, he shook her slightly. At once, huge blue eyes were raised to meet his searching glance:

“What is it?” growled the little female. “What have I done wrong now? Is it your eye paining you?”

So pleased to have his little battlemaid back that he was hard-pressed to maintain a neutral tone, Mark replied repressively, “Of course it hurts, witch! And it will be a black-blue-and-orange sign of your cruelty by the time we get back to the house. What will you give me to conceal the fact that it was you who gave it to me?”

Alfreda’s mouth opened and then closed slowly. “You looked just like a fish when you did that,” Mark noted unforgivably. “Funny, but rather endearing.”

“I am glad I amuse you,” said Alfreda between her teeth. “And what I will give you—is another facer!”

“Ah! Boxing cant! I wonder where you learned that?” he taunted, highly pleased at the return of his prickly little adversary.

“The same place I learned how to tap your claret—which I intend doing if you don’t behave yourself!”

Mark’s throat erupted with a shout of laughter. Holding her closer, he grinned down into her angry little face. “Tap my claret, will you? And what will I be doing, while you are attempting the feat? Can you guess, little gamecock?”

Bright blue eyes dared the grinning man to proceed with this verbal attack. And then, suddenly, Alfreda saw beyond the teasing glitter and through to the deep satisfaction her sparring partner was experiencing. He’s enjoying it! she told herself. It’s as though he has never really played in his life! And a small, secret smile tugged at the girl’s lips. So he wants to play, does he?

Almost languidly she raised one small hand and stroked his cheek. It felt pleasant to stroke, she decided, happy that her new strategy should be so satisfying. She peered up into his countenance through her long lashes, gratified to observe the stunned expression on his face. Thus encouraged, she stroked and patted once more, and then leaned upward in an obvious effort to reach his face with her lips. Just to enhance the illusion, she pouted those rosy members temptingly.

A tide of dark red was surging up into the man’s dark visage. “What—” He hesitated, clearing his throat fiercely. “What do you think you’re playing at?” he demanded roughly.

Alfreda rolled her eyes at him soulfully. “Showing my deep gratitude for your many kindnesses, dear Mr. Savage,” she breathed softly, still leaning up against his large hard chest. “Your care of my grandmother and myself! Your offer of hospitality and protection! Oh, there is so much to be grateful for, dear Mr. Savage! Or should I—may I?—call you. . . Mark?” The little tease breathed the last word as though it were a caress, and pouted her rosy lips provocatively at the astounded fellow.

Mark surprised her by the swiftness of his recovery. Before she could even bat her eyelashes, she felt a hard blow on her lips. Eyes flashing open, she found herself gazing so closely into a pair of blazing, silver orbs that her own were crossed in an effort to see clearly. And the blow against her mouth had been administered by the man’s lips! He was—kissing her!

Alfreda was so startled by this lightning-fast response to her teasing ploy that for a few minutes she could neither think nor move away from the compromising clasp in which the man held her. A sort of pleasant bemusement rendered her senses languid; she found herself almost luxuriating in the delicious scent and feel and taste of clean male flesh.

Alfreda had never been kissed by a man before. Relishing the unfamiliar sensations, she decided that she liked it very much. And then, striking

through her euphoria, came the realization that the cause of her pleasure was the same man who had constantly humiliated, mocked, derided her from the first moment he saw her. What was he doing, kissing her so sweetly? And what was she doing, to let him?

"This has got to stop!" said the little warrior. Unfortunately, the words did not emerge as clearly as she hoped, since the provocative man had his mouth firmly pressed to her own. Her attempt to speak, however, seemed to remind him of the position in which his mouth was placed. He raised his head, a dazed expression on his handsome face.

"What was that?" he murmured, and then, before the girl had a chance to repeat her reproof, he said, "This must stop! At least, while we are in sight of the whole population of the county."

Alfreda lifted horrified eyes to behold her grandmother, Mr. Savage, Jeremy, Ryan, and two footmen standing on the spacious porch of The Oaks staring at the pair on Mark's stallion. Too embarrassed to sustain the inspection, Alfreda shut her eyes tightly in the hope that the watchers would disappear.

Not so Mark. "I have never had so sweet a welcome home," he said gaily. "Lady Alfreda has just asked me to marry her."

Congratulations, laughter, eager questions railed down around Alfreda's head like a storm of hail. Stunned, unbelieving, she peered into Mark's laughing countenance. What was the devil up to now? She was sure she should repudiate his audacious claim, but the absence of criticism or disapproval on all sides stopped her. The girl's amazed glance went from her grandmother's smiling countenance to the eagerly happy face of young Jeremy, to meet at last the one gaze she dreaded to encounter. Sidney Savage was staring at her like a man struck by lightning, but as their eyes met, he began to smile!

Alfreda shook her head. It was impossible—a nightmare from which she would wake too soon, Sidney Savage, the man who had been so cruelly betrayed by Lord Dorn, to be presented with that villain's child as a daughter-in-law! Every feeling must be outraged! Pride challenged; principles flaunted! What on earth had Mark Savage been thinking of?

Lady Amelia was regarding her darling Freddi with an indulgent glance. "Perhaps you had better bring her inside, young man," she told the beaming Mark. "The situation seems to be overpowering her."

Mark looked down at the girl he was still holding in his arms. He met her stupefied stare with his most devilish grin. "It must have taken a great deal of courage for her to make her declaration," he said smugly.

This final whopper pushed Alfreda past the point of decorum. She began to struggle to get out of Mark's arms. He set her down quickly, and she stood, arms akimbo, glaring up at him. The look in her eyes must have sobered him for a moment, for Mark cravenly turned the stallion's head toward the stables.

"I'll just see to Corsair," he said, with his widest smile. "Lady Amelia, you and my father can see that Lady Freddi gets safely into the house." And he rode off, chuckling.

"How much of what he said is true?" asked the dowager. "As though I need to ask!"

Alfreda was very much aware of how much her darling grandmama was enjoying all this. Jeremy and his father were attempting to smother their smiles. Alfreda set her small jaw. Fiends take the fellow! He had everyone laughing at her again! Was there no way she could handle Mark Savage's wicked sense of humor?

And then it hit her. A broad smile made her pretty face enchanting. Fascinated, the observers watched as that smile gentled into a shy, innocently pleading expression. Alfreda lowered her long eyelashes in a gesture of maidenly modesty.

"All of it," she said simply. "I do hope you will all forgive me, but I was. . . carried away. By Mark's manly strength and beauty, that is!"

There sounded a trio of gasps. Three pairs of eyes fastened upon that sweetly pleading countenance. The dowager was the first to find breath to speak.

"All of it?" she demanded. "You are telling me that you actually—actually asked—?" She couldn't frame the rest of the sentence.

I wonder if I can make myself blush? the girl was thinking. Perhaps if I held my breath? She peered under her eyelashes at Mark's father. The expression on his face rivalled the dowager's for surprise—shock, even. But there was another emotion that startled the girl. The frail old man seemed pleased at her brazen announcement!

And Jeremy, when she finally looked at him, was grinning broadly. He came toward her, rested his hands lightly on her shoulders, and kissed her cheek gently.

"Welcome to the Savage family, Freddi," he whispered. And then, even more softly, "Minx!"

So Jeremy at least knows it was a hoax—which apparently misfired! Alfreda looked back at her grandmother. The dowager had the oddest little smile on her face. She held out loving arms.

Thoroughly confused by this unexpected reaction to her naughty game, Alfreda hugged Lady Amelia tenderly. The dowager got one glimpse of her darling Freddi's bewilderment, and forced herself not to laugh. A marriage to the dashing and handsome Mark Savage would be such a good thing, she thought. I shall try my best not to let the little scamp back out!

She released the girl and, taking one of her hands, led her toward the bemused but evidently not angry Sidney Savage.

"Have we your approval of the match?" challenged the dowager.

"I approve heartily," was the astounding reply. "I second Jeremy's welcome."

So they had heard it, and accepted it as fact. Alfreda groaned inwardly. What had gone wrong? She had been so sure that each of the three would have found some reason to object. . . and there were plenty! Oh, why could they not see that the whole ploy was a scheme to disconcert the unbearably smug Mark Savage?

Sighing, the girl allowed herself to be escorted into the house by an effervescent Jeremy. Sidney had offered his arm to the dowager with old-fashioned courtesy enhanced by an air of interested expectancy. The dowager, accepting his assistance, decided that even in the short time she had known this frail, elderly man, he had come out of his sour isolation with a rush. Fred-di's loving heart had given them all new life!

Alfreda's thoughts as she entered The Oaks were in a turmoil. Should she face the wretched Mark and force him to deny his sensational announcement? She had expected that he would reject her playful seductiveness with fear or revulsion. Instead he had neatly turned the tables on her, with his outrageous claim that she had asked him to marry her! Well, he would not be allowed to get away with it! As soon as he reentered the house, she would force him to take a stand! She had gleefully anticipated his embarrassment, and the arrogant creature had neatly tossed the challenge back into her lap! What was worse, the people most immediately concerned, his family and her grandmother, seemed to be accepting the whole miserable fiasco with approval!

But when Mark came into the drawing room a few minutes later, he was wearing a serious expression. He had a letter in his hand.

"This just arrived by courier from London," he explained. "It is addressed to you, Lady Amelia, and marked 'Urgent.'"

The dowager waved it away. "You open it, dear boy. I think I have had all the—surprises I can handle today." She smiled at the blushing Alfreda.

Mark opened the missive and scanned it quickly. "It is from your man of law, Thomas North," he said. "It seems that Lord Dorn has agreed to leave for the Continent in three days, and is taking Roger with him."

There was a palpable wave of relief among the listeners, and an exchange of smiles.

"That takes care of our worst fear," exclaimed Jeremy. "Only three days more to keep up our guard, and then, presto! We are free of concern for our guests!"

"I shall never feel free of concern until I have a guarantee that Roger Dorn has sailed," said Sidney slowly. "Could it be a trick?"

"I doubt that Roger would be able to persuade the Norths to write such a letter unless they were assured of its truth," said Mark slowly. "In fact, I would

not be surprised if one of them did not see the Dorns off on the ship.” As I should like to do, his attitude conveyed.

At dinner that evening, a deep current of happiness kept the party laughing and teasing. By common consent, nothing more had been said about the startling announcement Mark had made. It was as if, thought Alfreda, the two Savages and her grandmother were waiting—as though at a fascinating drama—for the dénouement.

I’m dashed if I’ll give them anything more to laugh about, the girl decided, watching the amused expectation on her companions’ faces with increasing ill-humor. She tried for a surface sweetness, and succeeded well enough to fool everybody but Mark. That rascal knew exactly how angry she was becoming, and his smugly triumphant expression revealed how much he was enjoying her plight. Handle this, little bluestocking termagant, his wicked smile was saying.

Alfreda vowed she would have revenge upon the ruthless manipulator. Let him beware! It would have helped her bruised sensitivities if she could have thought of some way to pay the rascal back. Her mind continued to work frantically for a satisfactory resolution to the problem.

Everyone else seemed to be enjoying the meal very much. When the last course had been brought in, Mark signaled to Ryan to fill everyone’s glass. Alfreda caught the gesture, and understood his ploy. She treated the smiling fellow to her most terrifying glare. If you dare to propose a toast to me or to our supposed engagement, I shall drown you! she threatened silently.

Mark, eyes on her stormy little countenance, hesitated. And then, raising his glass, said, “To our delightful guests, Lady Amelia-and Lady Freddi!” All three men rose and honored the toast.

19

The next three days passed in a state of armed truce: Alfreda was armed for battle, and the rest of the party sought only to maintain the truce. Mark was on his best behavior. Alfreda gritted her teeth as she watched him charm her grandmother, draw out his father, and tease his young brother. And all the while his behavior toward herself was faultless: eager to please, courteous. . . an act! The girl could not believe that only she could see the sparkle of wicked mockery in her tormentor's eyes.

His audience seemed to be enjoying every minute of Mark's performance. They were in no hurry to see it cut short by any awkward questions or confrontations. As the days passed, the girl finally realized that her companions were well aware of the game Mark was playing. Where, Alfreda cried out silently, was decorum? Where was decent behavior? She became more and more angry at the seductive, outrageous sweetness of her opponent's manner; As though he really were wooing her! All false, of course!

As she had done on earlier occasions, she asked herself what the villain could be trying to accomplish with this ploy. Was he really interested in her?

The very idea that he might be brought a strange, unfamiliar warmth to the region below her ribs—as though a hot, moist pool was whirling inside her, and she was sinking, drowning. . . .

Taking herself firmly in hand, Alfreda stamped on such unworthy emotions. Whatever the wretched Mark was trying to do, he would not succeed in bamboozling Alfreda Green!

Another message came from the Norths on the fourth day, announcing that Roger Dorn had picked up the two tickets the lawyers had secured for the Dorns' passage to Spain. It seemed that the Dorns were now safely on their way, bag and baggage. Thomas North added that, in his opinion, the family would stay there, "for there is nothing left for them here in England but ruin or disgrace."

There was a general jubilation as Mark read out the contents of the letter. Oddly enough, Alfreda could not join in. She had reason to know how coldly selfish, insensitive, and ruthless was the mind of Alfred Dorn, and how brutally vicious his illegitimate son Roger could be. The message said nothing about seeing the Dorns off at quayside, only that Roger had picked up the tickets.

Alfreda hesitated to cast a damper on the rejoicing. Both the dowager and Sidney Savage had suffered great wrong at Lord Dorn's hands, and Roger's attempt to hurt Alfreda had not endeared him to any of the company. Mark still seethed at the memory of the loosened linchpin that might easily have resulted in crippling injury or death to Jeremy or himself. It was understandable that they would all be happy to see the last of the vicious Dorns. Why, then, Alfreda asked herself, could she not share in their joy?

Because I cannot believe they have given up so easily, she decided. Remembering a father who coolly rejected his infant daughter to insure his own comfort; recalling vividly the hard cruelty of Roger's choking grip on her throat, and the things he had done, smiling, to make her scream. . . her very flesh cringed at the memory.

At last Alfreda admitted that there was another reason why she was unable to join in the lighthearted celebration. The disturbing thought had come to her as she watched Mark's dark, smiling countenance, caught the flash of his white-toothed smile. . . . If Lord Dorn and Roger were truly out of England forever, there was no further reason for the dowager and Alfreda to remain at The Oaks. No need to stay near the maddening, attractive male whose melting silver glances did queer things to a woman's composure.

Feeling foolishly devastated, Alfreda lifted her eyes—and beheld the seductive male's challenging smile directed at her, teasing, mocking, demanding. . . . Demanding what?

Because she did not understand her own feelings, and was aware that she was trembling in response to that penetrating glance, Alfreda flew into a tem-

per. But this time, she was able to control her anger under a tight rein of civility. She returned his challenging smile with one of honeyed sweetness.

"Yes, Mark? What is it?"

Let him start the battle, if he dared.

Mark seemed to sense her attitude. "What shall we do to celebrate our pleasure at the enemy's rout?" he asked softly.

"Well, my grandmother and I will start packing for our return to the city," Alfreda said firmly. "Our gratitude for your father's hospitality can never be adequate! He has literally saved our lives, and we shall be eternally grateful! So much so, that we cannot impose longer upon his privacy!" She turned the sweet smile upon a disconcerted Sidney, a dumbfounded Lady Amelia, and a devastated Jeremy. It was the latter who recovered first.

"You don't mean it, Freddi! Say you don't! We are all so happy here together! Why must you go?"

The dowager pursed her lips, and regarded her difficult, headstrong grandchild with narrowed gaze. What was the little witch up to now? Surely she did not wish to leave The Oaks? They had never been happier! Was it Mark's subtle teasing, his undercover battle of wits, that had disturbed the chit? And what, Lady Amelia thought despairingly, could a mere grandmother do to bring the child to her senses?

She glanced at Mark Savage, and felt her doubts and fears fading away. That splendid, virile male would have the answer, she was confident. If he really wanted the girl, he would never allow her to slip away from him without a struggle. Reassured, she sat back to enjoy the coming conflict.

Mark surprised her. Slowly his smile faded, and his handsome face seemed to become a mask. After a long—and for the suddenly nervous Alfreda—embarrassing pause, he said coldly, "Of course you must be eager to return to the lights and delights of the metropolis! How could we have been so selfish as to hope that you might relish our rustic hospitality!"

This was battle à outrance, thought the shocked Alfreda. Why had her gently taunting, slyly humorous adversary turned into this stiff-rumped, damn-your-eyes antagonist? Had her too quickly formed plan of action unwittingly wounded his male pride at a vulnerable level? Alfreda figuratively wrung her hands in fresh anxiety. Would she never be able to deal with this man on a sensible basis? Must she always be throwing mulled ale over his new coat? She glanced at her grandmother, but that wise old woman was letting her handle her blunder by herself. Then the girl looked at the old man; whose pallid face had taken on new life and interest in the last few days. He was staring at her now, bewildered by the decision which he must feel was unfriendly, if not a total rejection of his hospitality.

There was only one course to pursue. Alfreda squared her shoulders.

"I was trying to get back at Mark because he has been teasing-me for days," she said in a firm little voice. "I have never been happier, more at home, than since my grandmama and I have shared your wonderful hospitality. I am not good at social graces—as I am sure you must all realize," she added, with a rueful grimace. "I have"—she swallowed a lump in her throat—"I have not known how to deal with the. . . the powerful attraction I feel for your son, Mr. Savage." She attempted a smile. Her lips trembled in a way which Mark Savage, cursing himself for his heavy-handed reprisal, found particularly unnerving. Had he ruined everything?

The room was painfully still as the four listeners waited for the girl to continue.

Glancing from her grandmother to Sidney Savage, Alfreda went on. "I don't know whether or not he told you, but I poured a mug of mulled ale over Mark's new driving coat the first time we met. . . ."

Mark could no longer bear to witness his little love debasing herself for his sake. He interrupted the forlorn confession with the warmest, most possessive smile anyone had ever seen upon his face.

"You see why I trapped this irresistible small siren into a declaration of marriage?" he challenged them all. "I always knew she must love me, because I loved her the first moment I set eyes on her dowdy black hat, and the beautiful red-gold hair under it! I was sure that a feeling so special and powerful could not be one-sided. The very Fates themselves had decreed it. And then"—he paused, grinning at the thunderstricken looks on every face, including Alfreda's—"and then my little tormentor spurned me! My whole time since that first night, at the Pot O'Gold has been spent in planning and executing a campaign to win my lady. And when the golden opportunity finally came—when you witnessed our kiss while we were seated on Corsair—I knew I had won my prize. Only my damned sense of humor got in the way—and I told you she had asked me to marry her!"

There was a murmur of laughter—a pleased, approving sound—before Mark went on, holding the dazed but hopeful girl's gaze with his own. "Of course, the little witch had punched me in the eye, and then driven me crazy with a teasing seduction"—he caught a spark of temper in Alfreda's glance and hastened to add—"in which I cooperated wholeheartedly! I admit it! So my cursed sense of humor took over again, and I made my announcement." He took a deep breath. "What I should have said was, 'I am going to ask Lady Alfreda to marry me!'"

Beaming, he glanced around the circle of smiling faces, looking last at his beloved girl.

She was smiling, but not speaking.

"Well?" the man prodded. Wasn't she going to answer? Had he been wrong—?

"Of course I'll marry you, Mark Savage! How could a mere woman defy

the dictates of the Fates? If even Zeus is said to be subject to their decisions, who am I to cavil at them?"

"My adorable bluestocking," murmured the man, his relief and joy obvious to everyone.

"There are, however, a few small matters which must be dealt with before we can. . ." Even her impish sense of humor faltered before the troubled expressions that came over her grandmother's and Sidney Savage's faces. "Oh, Mark, you idiot! Why don't you kiss me and stop this wayward tongue of mine from making any more blunders? Where is the arrogant, self-willed, irresistible wretch I fell in love with?"

Mark showed his lady where her arrogant lover was, to the obvious delight of Lady Amelia, Sidney, and Jeremy. In fact, he enjoyed the exercise so much that he quite forgot his audience, and had finally to be recalled to proper decorum by a series of coughs from all three watchers.

"It is not that we disapprove of your behavior, son," his grinning parent advised him. "It is only that we all feel, if a wedding is to be arranged, the principal actor should begin to set about it!"

This statement was universally applauded.

Dinner that evening was a festive affair, with more toasts with rare old vintages than were advisable for anyone who wished to keep a level head on her shoulders, Alfreda thought, unable to keep her eyes off the triumphant expression on Mark's handsome face. Was he really so delighted with the cage he had allowed himself to be pushed into? A little wrathfully, the girl glanced around at the circle of pleased, smiling faces. Why did they all look so smug? Lady Amelia exactly resembled the cat who had just trapped and swallowed the canary; Sidney Savage, beaming at his guests, his pale face for once flushed with good color; Jeremy, acting as though the whole thing had been brought about by his personal foresight and contrivance! As also were the servants, especially Campbell, tall and gaunt in his kilts, whose habitual dour, suspicious glare had softened into something which faintly resembled approval.

Trembling, the girl considered her own inadequacies, and knew a quiver of quite chilling fear that this magic moment was all too beautiful to last.

20

Lady Amelia summoned the butler, Ryan, to her in the ladies' parlor the following morning. She knew that Mark and Jeremy had ridden off to Magistrate Seller's home early that day to put the wedding plans into motion. With her major concern so delightfully settled, the dowager now turned her attention to the equally provocative situation of her host. She knew, from things which had been said, that the old man had been almost a total recluse for many years, and would probably have remained so until he died had not her little gadfly of a granddaughter set the whole family into delightful chaos. Amelia's mouth curved into a smile. What a treasure her Freddi had turned out to be! How Penelope would have loved the girl! And how it would have delighted her gentle, retiring daughter to watch the sparkling little creature who was her daughter!

Ryan presented himself and asked how he might serve milady. The dowager met him eye to eye. "It seems to me—and you must correct me if I am mistaken," she said quietly, "that your master has enjoyed this—ah—explosion into his privacy Lady Freddi and I have caused."

Ryan bowed, not bothering to suppress a smile. "Nothing in the last twenty years has done him so much good," he said sincerely. "The staff join me in expressing our thanks for your visit, milady."

"Then perhaps you will advise me," she said, making a charming gesture of mock alarm, "since I am terrified to ask Mr. Savage's Scottish retainer!—whether an invitation to join me in a leisurely drive around the neighborhood might be prejudicial to your master's health. . . or a wretched bore for him?"

Ryan's smile broke into a wide grin. "I'll tell Tom Coachman to have our open barouche outside the door in half an hour! If that will suit milady?"

"And who is to inform Campbell?" murmured the dowager.

"That task shall also be mine, Lady Amelia," promised the efficient Ryan.

Thus it was that half an hour later the elegant, small barouche, old-fashioned but supremely comfortable, rolled away from the imposing front entrance of The Oaks, blessed by bright sunshine and a pleasant, flower-scented breeze. The dowager had an errant thought that this charming situation should more properly have been enjoyed by the newly affianced couple, but set that idea aside in the interests of revitalizing her gentle host.

Sidney Savage actually looked very well this morning. The good color that had livened his cheeks the night before was still present in a measure, and his eyes held a light of interest and speculation.

"This is—a rare privilege, Lady Amelia," he began a trifle hesitantly. "I feel as though I should be asking, 'To what do I owe this honor?' "

The dowager grinned impishly. "You'd be terrified if I told you," she confessed.

His glance sharpened; for the first time in years a wicked twinkle entered his eyes. "I'm too young for you, ma'am," he teased. "Besides being out of practice."

The dowager giggled. "Naughty man!" she said, highly pleased. "You know I didn't mean. . .!"

"I'm disappointed," said the grinning man.

"Be sensible," Lady Amelia begged. "I asked you to accompany me on this delightful drive so that I might discuss with you the possibility that you spend at least a little time as my guest in London, after the children are married. Oh, I promise you I would not force you to attend a series of boring functions! I believe—"

The gleam of amusement faded from Sidney's eyes and he reached out to touch the dowager's hand gently. "Please don't apologize," he said softly. "Of course I'll accept your invitation! Those children will need a chaperone when they toddle up to the city for the season." He sighed. "And I must admit, Lady Amelia, that I'd like to see what London looks like. It's been a long time."

"You'd better call me Amelia," said the dowager, her eyes sparkling. It was going to be an interesting season!

Mark and Jeremy were hastening back to The Oaks to impart their good news to Sidney, Lady Amelia, and, most importantly, Alfreda. The all-important ceremony had been arranged for the following week, and Mark was hard put to keep his joyous exuberance from showing. Jeremy was not deceived.

"Better mind your p's and q's, laddie!" he warned loftily. "If you get any more corky, you'll explode!"

"Wretched boy!" said Mark happily. One week! And it could have been three if he hadn't made this special effort today! His full-throated laugh echoed Jeremy's.

They were bowling up the long driveway that led to The Oaks when they spotted Sidney's barouche pulling up at the front door. Good! He's taken the ladies for a drive, was Mark's first thought. And the second: He's changed since they've been here—bless them! He said as much to Jeremy.

Failing to get a reply, Mark glanced at his young brother. Jeremy was frowning. Two figures were mounting the broad front steps, and the barouche was drawing away along the circling drive.

"Where's Freddi?" asked the younger man.

Mark lashed his horses. Then, pulling the alarmed and angry beasts up short at the steps, he flung the reins at Jeremy. "Take 'em to the stables!" he commanded, "and roust out the grooms!" Then he ran up the wide steps and entered the great hall minutes after the older couple.

"Where is Freddi?" he demanded, almost rudely.

Two startled faces turned to meet his glare.

"Why. . . somewhere about," faltered the dowager. "I suppose—"

A carefully tight-voiced Ryan came toward them.

"Roger Dorn wishes to see you in the library, sir," he said, his eyes tortured with regret and shame. "He slipped past us and found Lady Freddi in the library. He's drunk and he has a knife!"

21

It was a wild-eyed brute who met them in the shadowy book room, but all three who entered could see only the small, girlish figure held so tightly against Roger's massive frame. One huge arm caught her just below her breasts; the other hand held a knife against her slender throat.

Mark looked finally into Roger Dorn's swollen, gloating countenance. "What do you want to let her go, Dorn?" he said quietly. "How much?"

Roger laughed—an eerie, chilling sound.

"Ready to beg, Savage? Grovel for her? I'm going to see you on your knees!"

Mark came forward slowly, hands held loosely at his sides, offering no single hostile gesture that might bring harm to Freddi.

"Stop right there!" commanded her captor. "I'll tell you when to move—when I'm ready!" He was breathing very heavily, and his eyes were blazing with the flame of madness.

"How much?" repeated Mark. "A thousand pounds? Two thousand?"

Roger ignored that for the moment. Nothing was going to deprive him of one moment of his revenge. In his drink-inflamed mind, this was his moment of triumph—rich repayment for all the slights and injuries this man had ever offered him. The memory of his last visit to this room was

etched into his brain with acid: the unbearably lofty sneer in Savage's voice, the golden coins rolling across the carpet toward him, the moment when he sank to his knees to scrabble for them. . . .

"On your knees, Savage!" he gritted triumphantly, "or I throw her to you—piece by piece!"

Just as you threw me those coins. . . .

He's mad, Mark realized with agony. Insane! How can I, reach him? It was impossible to take his gaze from the knife against that soft throat.

Time. That was his only hope. Buy some time to. . . to do what?

Slowly he sank to one knee. A wide grin spread across Roger's face.

At almost the same instant, Alfreda, who had been understandably silent thus far, said clearly, "Roger, your name means 'famous with the spear.' Did you know that?"

Before Roger, suddenly frowning, could reply to that interesting bit of trivia, the dowager spoke firmly, "Roger, I am your grandmother-in-law. We are all family here, and I order you to let your sister go before you do something we'll all regret!"

And Sidney asked, with an irrelevance that amounted, in Mark's view, to madness, "What does my name stand for, Alfreda?"

"The bruised or troubled one," Alfreda answered promptly. Then, smiling naughtily, she added, "Amelia means energetic healing!"

"Apt," Sidney agreed. "And Alfreda?"

"Good counselor," replied the girl, smugly.

"Where did you learn about names?" Sidney asked, as calmly as though they were all seated around a tea table.

Roger's bulging eyes were moving from one to another of these fools who didn't seem to recognize their extreme danger. Echoes of their conversation began to move back and forth in his mind, catching his attention, drawing it away from his purpose. . . . All family here. . . bruised. . . healing. . . famous with the spear. . . all family here! He found himself waiting to hear whatever else this—his sister would have to say.

"Oh," Alfreda's small voice came from close to his chest, "Mrs. Green was interested in the meaning of names. She brought me up, you know. I didn't know I had a brother. I'm glad I have you to protect me, Roger, now I've signed the paper for you."

Mark's head swam dizzily. My God! he thought, what are they all up to? They're as crazy as he is! They'll drive him over the edge! He tried to catch Roger's wavering, uncertain stare. Those rolling eyes were downcast now, toward the frail girl he held so fiercely.

And then his voice came, dragging heavily, revealing to them all the depths of his dark despair.

"They left me, you know," he said. "My mother and—that man. He told me we were going together. Told me to pick up the tickets. And then, when the carriage came, she was in it and he told me to. . . he said he didn't need me any longer, he'd made better arrangements—"

Alfreda couldn't endure the pain in that harsh voice. Raising one hand, she moved the knife from her throat and turned gently to place her arms around Roger's shoulders. "I need you, Roger," she said. "Our father threw me away, too. We need each other."

The knife fell from Roger's fingers and landed with a soft thud on the carpet. Mark rose slowly to his feet. Everyone else was afraid to move, but Mark walked carefully toward the two figures near the desk.

The man was crying. Tears coursed down the blank face, but no sound emerged from between the parted lips. Gently, Mark put, his own arm around the bowed shoulders, his other hand coming up slowly to pull the girl away.

"We're all family," he murmured. It was all he could think to say. He led Roger to a chair and helped him into it. Then he turned and gave the rest of the group a warning glance.

Sidney came forward to stand at the other side of the chair. "Let me help you up to your room, Roger," he said quietly. "You must be very tired."

With Mark's support, the hulking fellow rose to his feet and permitted himself to be led from the room by Sidney and Mark.

When they were gone, and the door closed after them by a white-faced Ryan, the dowager turned to Alfreda, opened her arms, and said, "Freddie!" with such love that the girl flew into her embrace, crying softly.

At which moment Jeremy burst through the French doors, brandishing a rock in one fist, a light of battle in his eyes.

The two women regarded his aroused expression judicially.

"What does Jeremy mean?" asked Lady Amelia, calmly.

"Exalted," replied Alfreda, equally calmly.

The dowager pursed her lips. "Well, he does look in alt," she opined.

The youth stared at them as though they were insane.

"Where's Roger?" he demanded. "The grooms told me—"

"I imagine he's resting," said the dowager. "Your father and Mark are—tucking him in."

Jeremy's face fell. "I always miss all the fun," he said crossly.

The two women looked at one another and then tried to smile.

"Fun," said Lady Amelia.

An hour later, when the doctor had come and administered a sleep-inducing drug, Mark sought out the waiting Alfreda. His first words were a reassurance.

"My father and I have decided to help him," he said quietly. "He's resting now, and he'll be dazed for quite a while, Dr. Andrews thinks."

"He won't change—" began the girl doubtfully.

"Oh, we know that," Mark assured her. "He's still Roger Dorn, and he wouldn't want to stay here with us any more than we'd be comfortable having him. But he's had a bad shock, and he's hurt—"

"So you and Sidney are going to help him back on his feet," concluded Alfreda, with a warm, loving smile.

"We'll try to get him work somewhere," admitted the man. "Preferably somewhere far away," he concluded wryly.

He walked over to a chair and sat down. The events of the last two hours had taken more out of him than he wished to admit. To his surprise, he found that his hands were shaking and he felt smothered.

Dear God, I'm not going to faint in front of her, am I? He put his head in his hands.

Alfreda knew exactly how he was feeling, because she was feeling the same way herself. She walked over to her big, beautiful man and stood in front of his bowed figure. Raising her hands, she placed them gently on either side of his head and lifted it to her breast. She cradled him there lovingly.

With a deep sigh, Mark relaxed against her softness.

They remained in that position for long moments, drinking in the wonderful sweetness and reassurance of each other's presence.

She smells like flowers, Mark thought, and like love; and I'll never be able to get enough of her.

And the girl thought, cradling the man's head close to her, I've come home! This, oh, this is my place!

And then Mark's beloved deep voice, with that gleam of amusement, came to her ears.

"What does Mark mean?" he asked softly.

Everything! the girl thought. And he knows it, the wretch! So she said, equally softly, pressing his head against her breast, "It means you've made an impression, of course."

Her lover lifted his face to hers, smiling triumphantly.

About the Author

ELIZABETH CHATER was born in Canada in 1910, the only daughter of parents who wanted sons. She read many books from her father's collection and the public library, leading to a lifetime love of literature.

She married Mel Chater and had two daughters and a son, also pursuing an M.A. and writing and publishing numerous science-fiction, fantasy and mystery novels. Following the loss of her beloved husband in 1978 and her retirement from teaching, Elizabeth embarked upon a highly successful career as a romance novelist, penning twenty-two novels in eight years.

