

Elizabeth Chater



The Gamester

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*For Kerry,
who loves the gamble*

"**YOU HAD BETTER** tell me the rest of the plan, Miss Zelda," the butler said firmly. "I'm thinking it must be a Chancy one by the way you're skirting around it."

Griselda shrugged resignedly. She told him about Devil Fallon, the gamester who could not resist a wager. "My scheme is to simply offer him a wager he can't possibly win, and make the stakes high enough to ransom back the house and the Farm."

Wiggins was appalled. "And if you lose, Miss Zelda?"

"I shall not," retorted the girl. "I am going to be using a different name and looking like a different person."

Thus began a very dangerous deception...

The Gamester

1

Miss Griselda Grant stood in the center of the small, charming parlor of her home in Thornapple Square, London, carefully scrutinizing the room. It was a handsome room, the epitome of elegance and beauty, traditionally called the Ladies' Parlor. Simon Grant had designed it as a luxurious yet cozy place where his wife and daughter and their special guests might be comfortable on occasions when the more formal elegance of the drawing room did not appeal. Miss Grant's butler waited for her verdict. Finally the girl turned to him with her enchanting smile.

"It's perfect, Wiggins," she said. "Thank Millie and Prue for me. The Ladies' Parlor has never looked better."

Wiggins sighed his relief. Every servant in the house was well aware that Miss Griselda was expecting a most important visitor. Mr. Regis Southerleigh, only son and heir to a minor baronetcy in the counties, was coming to call upon the orphaned heiress of Simon Grant, merchant prince of the city of London. Much as they admired their young mistress, none of the staff had dared to hope for such a match. True, the nobleman was only a baronet's son, and his lands, which ran contiguous to the well-kept country estate of the

Grants, were heavily mortgaged, but he was an honorable, and county, and would elevate Miss Grant into polite society.

"Is my brother at home?" Griselda's question interrupted Wiggins's rosy dreams.

The butler stopped smiling. He knew as well as Griselda did that Sholto Grant was a Drawback. Young, spoiled, impetuous, by turns sulky and obstreperous, he was still the titular head of the house and the man of the family. It was to him that Regis must present his proposal. And so it was essential that Griselda's young brother be on hand to receive the nobleman's offer.

"He is in his room, Miss Zelda. Calver informs me he was rather late getting home last night, and...not himself—"

"Oh, dear!" Griselda exclaimed. "I suppose that means he came home shot in the neck and is badly hung over this morning. Wretched boy! How could he?"

Wiggins hadn't the heart to rebuke his young mistress for her unseemly language. He'd watched her grow into a beautiful young woman, and what was more remarkable, take over the management of the town house and the farm with courage and good sense when her parents were killed. He had observed her patience and tact in dealing with her brother. Five years her junior, Sholto had been his mother's darling and a disappointment to his father. On the death of both parents in an accident, the fourteen-year-old Sholto had confidently expected to take over his father's enormous fortune. When he heard that his sister was to be his guardian until he reached his majority, he was affronted.

Worse was to follow. He was informed that, under a most rigid trust, a substantial amount of money was to be given, quarterly, to Mr. Grant's older child, and that from these funds Griselda was to pay all bills and give Sholto what he characterized as a beggarly pittance. His rage was unbounded. In fact, he behaved so reprehensibly, shouting and stamping his feet, that the lawyer, tight-lipped, packed up his papers, informed Miss Grant he would wait upon her when she was alone, and left Thornapple Square in a huff comparable to Sholto's.

After lawyer Heathrow had finished describing the unpleasant interview to his junior partner, who was also his son, he concluded, "In all fairness to the young cub, I must admit that I had many serious reservations when Simon Grant gave me his instructions. Such an enormous sum outright to his daughter upon her marriage—"

"She'll be the target of every fortune hunter in Europe," said Heathrow Junior, gloomily.

His father nodded agreement. "Even more reprehensible, it seemed to me, was the provision that, in the event of his demise before his son's majority had been reached, the daughter should have control of the entire quarterly

allowance until she marries or the boy becomes twenty-one. At which point *we* are to continue the administration of the estate until the youth reaches the age of thirty."

"It is easy to see what opinion the testator held of his son," suggested Heathrow Junior.

"With justice, as we now observe," added his parent sternly. "Such a childish display of ill-temper I have never, thank God, been forced to put up with until today. I suppose we can only be grateful that the girl is a remarkably sensible female—"

"A contradiction in terms," ventured his son, and was rewarded by quite a hearty chuckle from his parent. Though it ruffled his dignity to have to consult a female on important matters, he had decided that Miss Griselda Grant would be a much more satisfactory client to deal with than her spoiled brat of a brother.

In the next three years Griselda's good sense and patience were tried to their limits. Master Sholto pouted, protested, whined, raged, and borrowed money from her. She held the line firmly yet fairly, and managed her brother better than their mother had ever done. It was a struggle. Cook, who detested Sholto, said darkly that he was a nasty little scrub and would come to no good end, and what a pity it was that Miss Griselda had to waste so much time on him and his scrapes that might better be spent looking out for her own future.

But today it seemed that a glowing future might be possible for their darling. Mr. Regis Southerleigh had requested an appointment with Miss Grant for two o'clock, to be followed by one with the head of the family at precisely two-fifteen.

Griselda's smile was a little wry as she considered the neatness and dispatch of her suitor's timing. He evidently considered a quarter of an hour ample time to make his declaration and receive her reply. Obviously he anticipated a favorable answer, after which he would state his intentions to Mr. Sholto Grant. She frowned. It was to be hoped that Sholto, well primed for the interview, would behave himself. He was in some awe of Regis Southerleigh, and very much aware of the honor the nobleman was doing his family.

The old butler had been watching her with concern. "It'll be all right, Miss Zelda," he said. "Master Sholto won't want to put anything in the way of the match."

Griselda nodded briskly. She had few secrets from this old and faithful servant, and none which concerned Sholto.

"Considering that he will come into a very large sum of money when I marry, I believe you are right, Wiggins," she said with an impish smile. "Giving due regard to Mr. Southerleigh's agenda, I think you should be pre-

pared to serve the best brandy in the library as soon as you show him into the room. It will break the ice."

Wiggins ventured a question. "Miss Zelda—are you sure this is what you want?"

The girl smiled reassuringly. "Yes, Wiggins, I'm sure."

But after he had left the room, she considered the question carefully. Regis resembled his father: narrow shoulders, lean frame, even the slightly protuberant pale blue eyes and the large aquiline nose. Since he had also inherited all the heavy humorlessness of his dear mamma, it was easy to understand Wiggins's concern. But Regis was a good man, Griselda reassured herself. He had no vices—he had told her so himself. He had been educated at Eton; he would be able to talk of other things besides hunting. He would share the security and dignity of his position with her. Best of all, since Regis, a rigidly high-principled young man, did not approve of the frivolity and license of the *Beau Monde*, they would spend eleven-twelfths of the year at his parents' estate, Leigh Hall, whose boundaries ran with those of Grant Farm.

Griselda's heart warmed at the thought. She had always adored living at the farm. Though luxuriously appointed, it had always been a working farm—Simon Grant would have tolerated no other—and it had a well-trained staff of servants and farm laborers. It made a handsome profit every year, and in addition, it furnished a bountiful supply of vegetables, fruit, cheeses, hams, fresh eggs, and well-hung meats to the tables at Thornapple Square. There were fine horses in the stables, and Griselda loved to ride. Best of all, there were the orchards, with a merry little stream running through them and out into a sunny meadow. This was Griselda's favorite part of the property. In the spring she had played or walked under a fragrant cover of blossoms. In late summer she had climbed the trees and munched the apples which jeweled the branches, or made her hands and face sticky with the sweet, sun-warmed flesh of late peaches. In the winter she admired the exquisite patterns of bare black branches against snowy fields, and listened to the tiny song of the stream under ice.

Here also she had met and played with Regis without his parents' knowledge. He had been a stiff, consequential little boy, very lonely as a result of his dear mamma's conviction that nobody in the neighborhood was good enough for him to associate with. Lady Agena Southerleigh prided herself upon the fact that she did not know the names of above six people in the district, and exchanged visits with only three families, but her son slipped away to enjoy the companionship of the pretty little girl on the great estate to the west. Griselda felt sorry for him. She never mocked him. She let him win at many of their games, and she invariably supplied delicious snacks during their play.

Now the plain little boy had grown up and wanted to marry her. If she accepted Regis's proposal, she could leave lonely, dangerous London, and keep Sholto safe from harm in the country.

You know he'll hate it, her conscience shouted. He's bound to refuse to live in Sussex even if Regis's parents are willing to invite him. And he's always loathed the farm—it's the only thing Father left you that he isn't jealous of. Are you ready to abandon Sholto to the lures of London?

"The Heathrows will prevent him from doing anything too disastrous," she tried to placate her conscience.

"Hah!" said her conscience, unplaced.

Hah, indeed. Griselda sighed. She would have to persuade—all right, bribe!—Sholto to make his headquarters at the farm and accompany her husband's family to London for their customary one month at the height of the Season. Perhaps she could get him married to some girl of good family who could settle him down. She sighed again. Even his glittering prospects might not be enough to attract the kind of girl she wanted for Sholto. But that was for the future. The immediate problem was to make sure that Sholto was up, dressed, and clear-headed enough to receive, with proper dignity, Mr. Regis Southerleigh, who, if he followed his schedule, would be presenting himself in Thornapple Square in exactly twenty minutes.

2

At about this time, Regis, carefully attired in the correct apparel for a formal afternoon visit, was entering his parents' heavy, old-fashioned coach, and giving the address of the Grant town house. As he sank back against the familiar dingy squabs of the seat, it was quite apparent that he had a very good opinion of himself, and realized fully the importance of the prize he was about to confer upon Griselda Grant. In fact, he was overwhelmed with gratitude to his noble parents for their indulgence in permitting him to take this step. As the coach, creaking and groaning, pulled away from the house Sir Hulbert leased for one month every year, Regis felt an almost physical reaction which might have been occasioned either by the force of his emotions or by the jolting and swaying of the coach over the uneven cobblestones.

When the young man had first considered the possibility of an alliance with the only daughter of a London merchant, he had known that Sir Hulbert and Lady Southerleigh would have to be convinced. Being a conventional, unimaginative, and pompous young man, as well as a very dutiful son, he had broached the subject first to his father. The latter had heard him out in a not unfriendly silence.

"Your mother recently suggested to me that it was time you allied yourself with a young woman of suitable birth and fortune," he said deliberately. "With that object in view, I have been considering the well-born females of the proper age and endowment. The field is, unfortunately, narrow." He frowned. "Those who are not too old or too young are either beyond our touch or possessed of paltry dowries. I had not considered the family of Simon Grant."

Regis blushed. "Her lands run with ours," he offered, "and she has a great fortune—"

"True. So great that I have heard it mentioned. It is a powerful argument. But there must be much more before we can expect your mother to listen to your request." There was a pause, while the two men considered what would be the almost inevitable reaction of the Lady Agena to the notion of an alliance with a merchant's daughter. Then Sir Southerleigh said kindly, "It is not what I had hoped, and I fear your mother will not be best pleased, but I shall investigate this young person."

Regis was overcome with gratitude.

The facts which Sir Southerleigh was able to discover within the next two weeks were so reassuring that Regis was able to request a formal interview with both his parents in the drawing room of the hired house in Grosvenor Square. As her husband had gloomily prognosticated, Regis's dear mamma had at first utterly rejected the idea of her son throwing himself away on the daughter of a cit, and a cit in trade, at that! But when her husband explained to her the truly remarkable dowry which Simon Grant's child would bring to her husband's family, milady's frosty manner melted a trifle.

"So much as *that*?" She considered the fact. "Are you sure of this, Hulbert?"

"Positive," replied her spouse. "Girl is the greatest heiress in England."

"Why have I not heard of her?"

"She lives very retired," her son hastened to inform her. "She does not try to go into Society, and makes no show of her fortune. Which I believe," he added, glancing at his father, "is tied up until she marries."

"Sensible," commented his dear mamma. Then she frowned. "Well, I suppose I shall have to consider her, if you and your father wish for the connection. Our consequence will be great enough to bring her off, if she is otherwise acceptable to me. She does come of healthy stock?"

"Excellent," her son assured her. "Sound yeoman English—I had the family traced."

"Of whom does her immediate family consist?" was Lady Agena's next question.

"Parents both dead. Drowned when a bridge collapsed under their carriage and dropped them into a swollen river. One brother, aged seventeen."

Lady Southerleigh had nodded grudgingly. "It may do. It is as well both parents are dead—no embarrassing introductions of gauche persons to our

friends. And the boy is young enough to be molded." She pursed her lips, while Sir Southerleigh and Regis awaited her decision. Finally she nodded briskly. "Very well. You may offer for the girl, Regis. I shall school her thoroughly at Leigh Hall before we present her to Society as your bride."

So, conscious of his family's approval, and well-instructed by his dear mamma, Regis had come to offer Griselda the high privilege of wearing his family's name and donating to them her fortune. His coach pulled up in front of the great mansion in Thornapple Square, and the young man got down and trod the steps up to the impressive door.

3

Wiggins threw open the door of the Ladies' Parlor.

"Mr. Regis Southerleigh!" he announced, and stepped aside for Griselda's suitor to enter.

Regis advanced into the room and made his salutations in strict form, if a trifle pompously. He was well aware of his own value, but his pale blue eyes brightened as they rested upon his beautiful young hostess. Since they had played as children, she did not overawe him as most of the modish females of his own order did. She was eminently acceptable in all but birth, and her exquisite beauty and unexceptionable good manners very nearly made up, in Regis's judgment, for her plebian origin. Conscious of the historic nature of the occasion, he stared solemnly at the girl after Wiggins had left them alone. His mouth pressed into a prim line and his eyes, it must be admitted, bulged slightly.

Miss Grant was familiar enough with his normal cast of countenance to entertain no fears that he might be having a seizure. With charming composure she waited for her erstwhile playfellow to speak.

"Oh. Ah. Miss Griselda. I am here as arranged."

"You are very welcome, Mr. Southerleigh," she said. "Will you be seated?"

Regis looked about him as if in search of a chair which would suitably bear the weight of his consequence. He wondered why the small room appeared so much more pleasant than his own dear mamma's sitting room at Leigh Hall; then he banished the thought as unworthy. *His* family, thank God, had no need of style or beauty to enhance their worth! Cheered by this thought, he seated himself and prepared to speak. He was momentarily diverted by admiration of the fine new pair of Inexpressibles he had ordered on first coming up to London. These city tailors knew how to make the most of a man's figure! He stretched out one thin leg and laid it carefully over the other knee.

Griselda, noting his absorption and its object, suppressed a sigh. It is a good thing I am not a romantic miss, she told herself. I shall not be expecting more than Regis has to give, or nourishing impossible dreams. She had always been her father's daughter, and he, when he saw what his son was and was not, had confided to Griselda some of the excitements, hazards, and satisfactions of his business.

"You are my real son," he said once in a rare emotional moment. "You could have been a great trader. There is daring in you, and a core of iron. What a partner you'd have made!" He sighed. "For a woman, you are steady and unusually sensible," he had added generously.

He would have approved of this match, Griselda told herself. His good yeoman stock welded into the minor nobility—his grandson to bear a title! A good bargain, surely! Security, a stable background for Sholto, a noble name, an old estate that marched with his beloved farm! With shame Griselda admitted that it was the latter consideration which had shaped her decision. Steady and sensible, yes. And if there was still a tiny part of her, buried deep, which longed for beauty, shared laughter, love—in short, the unobtainable—it had better be dealt with firmly, and rooted out.

She sat, eyelids lowered modestly to hide her mental turmoil, while Regis looked her over with proprietary pride before launching into his well-rehearsed speech. She was too tall for his taste—nearly overtopping him—but nobly formed, and should bear healthy sons. A beautiful face crowned by shining, fair hair, eyes of an unusual violet-blue, and the prettiest smile in London. Regis felt his rather sluggish blood begin to move more quickly. However, there would be time for all that later. The sight of his hostess affected him like a glass of brandy, and departing from his prepared speech, he became fulsome.

He was not, he thanked God (he said devoutly), in the petticoat line, but Miss Grant's beauty and decorous ways had allayed the natural alarm he had felt at being compelled to enter the state of matrimony. Unhappy at her plebian origins and her father's involvement in trade any man of sensibility must be, he said, but he reassured her, as his dear mamma had assured him,

that money has no smell. Further, he was convinced that Lady Southerleigh could make Miss Grant acceptable to even the nicest taste with a few months of hard and careful drilling in the seclusion of Leigh Hall, which his dear mamma had promised him she would do. Then he expounded at length upon his dear mamma's condescension.

While her noble suitor, carried away by the force of the emotions aroused by his own rhetoric, was enjoying his magnanimity, Griselda's heart was rapidly sinking. Even for the privilege of living in the country, even for the priceless boon of protecting Sholto, could she endure a lifetime of Regis and his dear mamma? She tried to encourage herself with visions of the farm, and the thought of many hours stolen from the dreary pomp of Lady Southerleigh's establishment to be spent in the beloved surroundings. Steady and sensible, she reminded herself, to such good effect that by the time Regis had worked up to his peroration, she was able to meet his bulging eyes with equanimity. She recalled a poem of Andrew Marvell's in which he had dedicated enormous lengths of time to the celebration of various portions of his coy mistress's anatomy. Suppressing a smile at the thought of Regis's reaction to such salty material, Griselda decided that her tedious suitor, celebrating the virtues of his noble heritage, was Marvell's natural heir.

Having dealt with his lineage and his own virtues at length, Regis had now reached the point of enumerating to Griselda the advantages of the match he was proposing. The girl made the appropriate murmurs of admiration and assent. Satisfied that she was suitably impressed, Regis uttered the fateful words.

"In short, Miss Griselda, will you do me the honor to accept my heart and hand?"

It really wasn't a question. There was no doubt in the pale, protuberant eyes which rested on her face. For one treacherous instant her mind gleefully pictured how that face would fall, how the monumental assurance would be shattered, if she gave him a simple no. Then, taking herself sternly to task for such unseemly levity, she answered, "Yes, Regis, I shall be honored to accept your offer."

"Good!" Regis rose, paced over to her chair, and carefully kissed her hand. "That is to say, delighted, ma'am! I'll wait upon your brother now. I take it he is expecting me?"

"In the library." As she rose to ring for Wiggins, Griselda devoutly hoped it was so. Sholto could be very perverse if the mood took him.

After a few more formal gallantries, the well-born suitor followed Wiggins from the room.

Watching them go, the girl found herself smiling. It was hard to decide which of them was more conscious of the dignity of the moment. Wiggins

obviously pictured himself as being in *loco parentis* for the orphaned heiress, as well as being the majordomo of the Grant household, while Regis carried the weight of a dozen titled forebears on his narrow, sloping shoulders. Griselda sat down again, resigned to waiting for the ceremony in the library to be completed so Wiggins or Sholto could come to inform her that the males had observed the tribal rituals and all was well.

This was not to happen, however. Less than five minutes after he had made his dignified exit, Regis reentered the parlor so hastily that Wiggins, puffing in his wake, had not the time to announce him before he spoke.

"Miss Grant!" It was a Cry of outrage.

"Yes, Mr. Southerleigh?" Griselda's calm, low tones seemed to remind him of his duty to his own consequence.

"Your brother, Miss Griselda!" he continued in a milder voice, into which a querulous note had entered.

He is like a small boy running to his nurse to tell tales on another child, thought Griselda dispassionately. She did not make the error of smiling, but nodded repressively. "Sholto, I fear, is...not himself this morning. It seems he indulged a little too freely in the wine last night." She pursed her lips primly. "I can only offer my apologies for his conduct. In extenuation, it may be said that he is just seventeen, and not as accustomed to the ways of the Polite World as you are, Mr. Southerleigh."

This speech had a remarkably soothing effect. Regis's offended manner relaxed. "Ah. Indeed, Miss Griselda? It was that, then! I could not understand the boy's odd behavior!"

"Surely he did not refuse his consent to our marriage?" Griselda thought she had better get to the crux of the problem immediately.

Regis smiled. "On the contrary, your brother seemed both pleased and impressed with the idea of the connection with my family. It was when I began to discuss the—ah—arrangements that his behavior became very peculiar."

"Oh!" Griselda permitted herself a knowing smile. "He is, after all, quite a boy yet. The role of head of the family sits uneasily on a very young man's shoulders, you understand. But more importantly, he knows his own powerlessness to deal with matters of business. My father arranged that all such matters be handled by his lawyers, Heathrow and Heathrow. It is to them that you should now address yourself, I conjecture."

Regis looked relieved. He and his father could deal with the lawyers more comfortably than with a restive boy. He nodded soberly. "That might be better. Still, as the titular head...I had thought...more seemly to address myself..."

"Very properly so," approved Griselda. "Remember, too, Sholto's own allowance will be increased upon my marriage. Which pleases him, of course,

but his accountability thereafter will be to the Heathrows, and not to an indulgent sister. Which perhaps depresses him." She turned the full force of her beguiling smile on her suitor. Violet eyes sparkling roguishly, she challenged, "Do you think I have explained his mixture of elation, chagrin, and natural nervousness, Regis?"

As much charmed by her beauty as struck by the rationality of her explanation, Griselda's suitor answered her smile with one of his own. Now that he did not have to fear returning to his family with an incredible rejection, he was able to accept the disturbing interview he had just gone through as the result of a boy's awkwardness, not a challenge to his own importance. He wished his dear mamma had not been so rigidly insistent that he deal with Sholto Grant, a mere whimsical boy. Regis and his father would know how to conduct an interview with a lawyer who would be fully sensible of the honor being done his client. Feathers smoothed, Regis took a dignified leave of his affianced wife, arranged to meet with her and her brother in a few days' time at the chambers of Heathrow and Heathrow to sign the necessary papers. He was so pleased with himself that he ventured a mild jest.

"May I suggest, ma'am, that you instruct your butler to be niggardly in serving the brandy at dinner the night before our meeting?" he said, as he bent punctiliously over Griselda's hand.

She smiled but did not comment.

Which satisfied her noble suitor, who preferred having the last word in any conversation.

After showing the visitor to the door, Wiggins hurried back to the parlor to find his mistress waiting anxiously for him. "What happened?" she asked quietly.

"Master Sholto was in one of his moods," replied Wiggins heavily. "It was shill-he, shall-he, will-he, nill-he. 'Tis no wonder Mr. Southerleigh was put off."

"But he wasn't," Griselda reminded him gently. "I think it would take more than Sholto to put Lady Southerleigh off the largest dowry in England."

Wiggins's face expressed a mixture of relief and reproof. "Miss Zelda, that is not seemly—"

"It's true," said his mistress briskly. "Now, I had best find out what's to do with Sholto."

She discovered her young brother kicking his heels in the library.

"I knew you'd be here to read me the riot act," he flung at her before she had a chance to speak.

"Did you?" smiled Griselda. There was something more here than a boy's awkwardness in a social situation. Sholto had known about and been impressed by the idea of Southerleigh's intentions. So the trouble must be something else. "I wonder why you should suppose that?"

Her brother flushed angrily.

"Damn it all, Zelda, that's a plaguey, windy fellow you're set on! Regular jaw-me-dead! He kept prosing on for an hour about the honor he was doing us—" he hesitated, looking at once resentful and apprehensive. Griselda felt a chill of alarm.

"You don't like him, Sholto?" This was another problem. Could it be the real one? If so, why the guilt Sholto was so plainly evidencing?

"Oh, I daresay he's well enough," her brother admitted grudgingly. "Thank God I won't have to live in the fellow's pocket after you're shackled. I'll take a neat lodging in town. Maybe travel a bit. I had always a fancy to see Europe, you know."

Since this was the first time she had ever heard him mention it, Griselda was not much impressed. What *could* be bothering him? "Why take a lodging? We won't want to close up this house, Sholto. Shall you find it too lonely, living here alone?"

Poor boy, perhaps she had overrated his maturity. He was, after all, a very youthful seventeen. She was rapidly running over in her mind a list of the cousins, male and female, one of whom Sholto might accept as a house companion, when a groan from her brother drew her eyes to his face. The expression on it alarmed her.

Sholto jumped from his chair and began to pace the floor. Finally he stopped in front of her. "I must tell you! We are ruined, Griselda!" he announced, and loosened his cravat with a theatrical gesture.

"Could you be more explicit?"

Although her tone was sober enough, Sholto flared up. "That's it, make a joke of it! I tell you I'm ruined, and you laugh!"

"I am far from laughter," his sister advised him. "Do give over these histronics and tell me directly what you mean. It may be that I can help."

"No one can help me," said Sholto with gloomy relish. "I've lost this house. Last night. At piquet."

"You were gambling?" Griselda's voice was steady, but her brother reacted defensively.

"My allowance is so miserly that I have to do something to supplement it!"

"Like losing the house? No, don't answer that! It was unworthy. Of course you didn't intend to lose it," conceded Griselda. "Did you lose it to the—the owner of the place?"

"No. I lost it to the Devil."

Griselda showed her first sign of anger. "Really, Sholto! How am I to deal with this if you talk so foolishly? Have the goodness to tell me exactly what happened!"

"Having lost all of my meager allowance," began Sholto doggedly, "I wagered this house to Devil Fallon. He is a notorious gamester, Zelda, and

said to be prodigiously lucky—luck of the Devil, everyone says—that's how he got his nickname. He's made three fortunes in the last six months; he's the darling of the *haut ton*—received everywhere! They say he's even *persona grata* at Watier's!"

"Weren't you a little foolhardy to challenge such a nonpareil?" teased Griselda, while her mind was busily twisting and turning to find a way out of this impasse. Better get all the facts, then go at once to Heathrow and Heathrow and turn the matter over to them. They'd be sufficiently impressed by the delicacy of the situation with the Southerleighs to buy back the house quietly before Regis's parents heard of Sholto's folly. He is only a boy, she reminded herself, and was then able to address him with equanimity.

"I'm sure I can handle it, my dear. I'll commission young Heathrow to get it back for you—"

"And advertise me throughout London as a naughty child! That's famous!"

Since that was exactly how she regarded him, Griselda avoided answering that. Instead she attempted to soothe him. "The lawyers are very discreet. And I venture to predict that your Devil would prefer hard cash in hand to a great cumbersome mansion with a staff of servants to pay. Heathrow will know how much to offer: you needn't even come into the business! If the negotiations are lengthy, we can go down to the farm for a few days. I'd like that! Wouldn't you?"

Sholto had gone over to the window and stood looking out with his back turned to her as she was speaking. "You haven't heard it all. I—I lost the farm, too."

"Indeed?" said Griselda, and this time her voice was neither soothing nor playful. "I think you had better tell me the full extent of—"

"—of the disaster?" supplied Sholto angrily. "I knew you'd be furious! And that mealy-mouthed fellow you're going to marry will never let me forget this...I wish I was *dead*!"

Since this remark had been one of the ways Sholto had managed his mother, Griselda ignored it. "What else did you lose?"

Sholto flung himself into a chair. "Just this house and the farm. And I'm well aware that the farm belongs to you and was not mine to wager. And when your fine Heathrows spread *that* story about," he finished dramatically, "I *am* ruined!"

"Don't sound so pleased about it," snapped Griselda. She knew, if Sholto did not, that he had gone dangerously beyond the limits of what was a gentleman's privilege. Watching his sullen, averted face she continued sternly, "You've done a foolish thing, and I hope you realize it. I shall have to put all to rights before the Southerleighs get wind of the matter, or your credit is gone and mine with it."

"Put all to rights," her brother mocked savagely. "That means telling everyone in London what a fool I've been. By the time you've finished, the Heathrows and their staff will not only have the tale, but they'll stretch it out of reason—" he caught back a sob. "And when they offer to buy it back from Fallon, he'll spread the story all over London that I wagered what I'd no right to...and no one will ever play cards with me again!"

Griselda, ignoring his plaintive wail, had been thinking hard. Suddenly she smiled. "Sholto, we're home! I have the perfect solution! And if it works, no one need know of your mistake who doesn't already!"

Torn between resentment and hope, the boy stared at her. "I can't see what—"

"It's perfect." She smiled at him, ready as always to forgive him as soon as she had found a way out of the predicaments he got himself into. "I shall just go to him—"

"Go to who?" interrupted Sholto suspiciously.

"Whom," corrected Griselda absently, her mind intent on the details of her plan. "Why, to your Mr. Fallon, of course."

Sholto glared at her. "May I ask what you intend to do when you've gone to him?"

"It's very unlikely Mr. Fallon has taken the matter of your wager seriously," Griselda began.

It was the wrong thing to say.

"Just because *you* don't take me seriously!" Sholto shouted at her. "The house should have been mine when my father died, and the farm, too! It's not enough that my father left his only son hanging on a woman's sleeve, like some poor relation! Now my sister has to shame me before all London, running to settle my affairs as though I were still in swaddling clothes!" He caught his breath and continued with a venom all the more startling because of its quietness. "I swear to you, Griselda, if you do this I shall leave the house and never return!"

"But I understood that was what we both would have to do," his sister retorted. "All I am suggesting is that I visit the gentleman and ask him what he would take to sell the house back to us. You may do it, if you please, and I'll get the money from the Heathrows as an advance on my dowry." When he did not reply, but kept his burning gaze fastened on her face, she said gently, "Isn't it a good plan, Sholto? You can handle all the negotiations. I'll not appear in the matter at all, except for my visit to the Heathrows—and I swear to you I will not tell them why I need the money."

In the same strange, hard voice, Sholto replied, "I suppose you cannot be expected to understand anything about a man's honor. If you did, you would know that a gaming debt is the most serious a man can contract. It is play and pay. There is no negotiation." Then his boy's nature took over, and he burst

out, "You think going to Fallon with some whining tale will get me out of this with credit? He'd have his lackeys shut the door in my face. And if *you* went—! How the clubs would buzz to that! Sholto Grant's sister begging at Fallon's door, and getting thrown into the street for her pains!"

Griselda was not to be moved. "I doubt he'd have me thrown into the street," she said reasonably. "Besides, I don't think any of your new friends in the clubs even know you have a sister. I don't go about in Society—" She caught her breath sharply. "*I have it!*"

"What?" demanded Sholto apprehensively.

"You said this Devil person is an ardent gamester?"

"Ardent!'" parroted Sholto angrily. "If you'd been listening to me, you'd know he lives for gaming. By it, too, they say. He hasn't a penny to his name but what he makes with his infernal skill and his even more infernal luck at a wager—"

"Then it's likely he'd accept even an outrageous wager?"

Sholto did not often find himself in a position to instruct his efficient sister. Besides, his nerves were badly jangled by the precarious situation he found himself in, and exacerbated by the heavy potations of the night before. At this moment he felt that Griselda's silly, persistent questions were designed to bait him in his misery.

"Devil Fallon is a gamester," he announced, in a fury of exasperation. "Which means that gaming—the hazard of money or some other valuable consideration on the hope of a favorable turn of Fate—is his occupation, as cooking is a cook's work and turning his master out fashionably is a valet's. Does Cook refuse to prepare our dinners? Does Calver refuse to wait on me? Not if they wish to retain their places. Fallon's place in Society is a deuced precarious one. Damme, the fellow's *got* to accept wagers!"

Catching sight of his sister's raised eyebrows, Sholto took a deep breath and moderated his tone. "Devil Fallon has never been known to refuse a wager, and they say around the clubs that he never loses. Does that answer your question?"

Oblivious to his sarcasm, Griselda persisted, "You mean he will accept any bet, *no matter how ridiculous?*"

Sholto raised his eyes to heaven. "I *told* you—! Let me put it this way: in the last three weeks, I have heard the following wagers offered him and accepted: one, that Lord Puff would not be made a vice-admiral by the end of this month; two, that Beau Ravenhurst would wear his silver coat and diamonds to Carleton House for Prinny's birthday; three, that the Dowager Countess of Haney would still be alive by the first of July—"

"But she's reported on her deathbed!" protested a scandalized Griselda.

Sholto, his poise restored by this exchange, merely shrugged.

Griselda's eyes began to sparkle. "Then if men in general, and Fallon in particular, are such ninnies, I shall have no trouble at all in accomplishing my plan."

"What is it?" demanded Sholto.

"The less you know about it, the less cause you will have to worry," said his sister, incorrectly. "Now tell me. When may we expect to be turned out of the house? I am not familiar with the male etiquette which governs these matters."

Sholto squirmed. Already he had fallen into the familiar comfort of the idea that Griselda would bring him safe out of his trouble. But she could make a man feel like a damned fool when he was most in need of sympathetic understanding. "There's no haste," he said stiffly. "He'll make no move till I send him the keys."

"Generous," commented his sister. "Now, could you live at one of your—clubs for a month?"

"What fool's notion have you got now?" began Sholto. "Why should I—"

"I am going to try," said Griselda, her patience coming to an end, "to save your reputation and pay off Fallon. In order to do so, I'll have to leave the house. Don't object! You know we have no alternative. Haven't you just lost it to Fallon? Neither one of us can remain. Could you, therefore, take lodging in one of the clubs you frequent?"

"Nobody," said Sholto desperately, "lives at the clubs. Or the hells or the coffeehouses. Those are just places where gentlemen congregate—"

"—to lose their fortunes, homes, and respect," summarized his sister, rather unjustly, but she was weary of his arguments. "Can you think of any other haven?"

"I suppose I could go with Dobey Gregg," admitted Sholto grudgingly. "He's been at me for a sennight to accompany him into the country to his parents' place. He's got to go on repairing lease, you know, and wants company to avoid boredom."

Griselda didn't understand all of this, but was so thankful that he had thought of a place to go that she welcomed the idea with a warm smile. "How fortunate that you should know such a convenient person! Can you stretch the—er—repairing lease out for a month?"

"I'll manage," said her brother gloomily. The enormity of what he had done was finally getting through to his not too tender conscience. Even more disturbing was the fear of what folly his sister might be getting herself into. Still, Sholto thought with a ghost of malice, *let her!* She fancied herself such an excellent manager! Let her come to points with Devil Fallon. She might learn she was no smarter than her brother.

4

Sholto, his good humor quite restored by the prospect of a month with boon companions at a lively country estate, hurried up the stairs shouting for Calver to come at once to help him pack. He leaned over the balustrade halfway up the stairs to order Wiggins to have his cur-ricule brought around, and no, he'd take only Calver—how many servants could a man foist onto his host?

Griselda stood very still in the charming parlor, staring blindly at the door. The plan which had come into her mind was a daring one, and she was having second thoughts about the feasibility of it. If anything should go wrong...The more she thought about it, the more pitfalls and hazards she perceived. She might place the Grant family in a very bad light indeed.

She realized, if he did not, how ill-advised Sholto's behavior had been. Ill-advised? It had been criminal folly, she told herself sternly, accepting the blame for not having taught him better. It was clear that Sholto needed a strong, masculine hand to guide him in the way that he should go. She tried to take comfort from the thought of her approaching marriage to Regis, but found herself quite unable to do so. For one thing, Regis was unlikely to command lasting respect from Sholto, who admired the position but not the man.

Worse, it was not impossible that Regis's parents would sever the connection with the Grants if word ever reached them of the disastrous wager, even if Griselda had brought it to a quiet and satisfactory outcome meanwhile. No, it was essential that she proceed as quickly as possible with her audacious plan—and hope no one but Devil Fallon ever learned of it.

Griselda sighed. If only Regis had been different! Had he been a man whose strength was within himself, not derived from family or position, she might have appealed to him for advice, even for help. You have only yourself to depend on, she told herself grimly. You must do this on your own, and the sooner you get the business organized, the better for Sholto and all concerned.

She went to her desk, a pretty toy her father had brought her from France, and began to write down the details of her scheme to recover both town house and farm. After a few minutes she became conscious of another presence in the room. She glanced up. Wiggins, staring worriedly at her, was standing just within the doorway. When he caught her eye he asked, "Miss Zelda, what is wrong?"

Griselda motioned him to enter and shut the door. Then she stared at him speculatively. She needed a confidant—confederate is a better word! she thought wryly—someone in the house who could help her. It had better be Wiggins. She had known him since her childhood; since her parents' death he had served her faithfully, and supported her as well as he was able in her skirmishes with Sholto. Nodding with decision, she beckoned him to stand closer and said quietly, "Sholto has lost this house and the farm in a wager. I have an idea of a way to get them back without notifying the whole of London of his folly."

Horrified, Wiggins whispered, "The Southerleighs! If they should hear of it!"

"Exactly," said Griselda. "We cannot take the chance of Regis or his parents finding out."

"The Heathrows?"

"I thought of them, but I am sure they'd never give me enough money to buy the property back unless I told them why I needed such a large sum immediately."

"But surely lawyers are trained to respect their clients' confidence, Miss Zelda? And they know about the Southerleighs; they'd be as anxious for the connection as we all are."

"Sholto feels that he could not endure to have his folly revealed to the Heathrows," said Griselda, the more firmly because she herself agreed with Wiggins. "He knows he's behaved badly, but he's just a boy—"

"He is seventeen, Miss Zelda, and a man grown," objected the old servant. "He should not be running to you to solve all his problems."

"You are right, of course, but in this instance he is quite unable to come up with a solution, while I believe I may have found a way out of this which will not expose us all to censure or ridicule," Griselda said soberly. "Let me tell you what I plan to do. You will help me, will you not? As you have done so many times since Mother and Father died?"

"Oh, Miss Zelda," Wiggins answered in a voice shaken with emotion, "you know I'll do anything in my power."

"Wait until you hear what I propose," Griselda advised him with a crooked smile.

"Anything!" repeated Wiggins devoutly.

"Very well, old friend, I shall hold you to that. First, I want you to send all the servants to the farm. Tell them I'm having the house redecorated for the wedding. Sholto is going to spend a month with a friend in the country, so he'll be out of the way. Then I want you to hire a skeleton staff of new people for this house, and stay here yourself to run things and act as liaison for me."

"And where will you be, Miss Zelda?" asked the butler nervously.

"I shall be in London," said Griselda evasively. "Wiggins, I do not wish to be mysterious. I am just not sure my plan will succeed, but whether it does or does not, I shall need you here to help me."

"You know I'll do my possible," vowed Wiggins. "But Miss Zelda, take care what you do!"

Griselda nodded. "I am going to write a letter to the Southerleighs immediately, explaining that I have decided to go to Paris with a female companion to select my trousseau. I'll suggest that Lord Southerleigh and Regis go ahead and consult with the Heathrows about the marriage settlements. They'll disapprove of the trip to Paris, but I'm sure they'll decide I've shown proper feeling in not being present during the financial arrangements."

"You really do not like the Southerleighs, do you, Miss Zelda?" asked Wiggins with the freedom of an old retainer. "Do you think you should reconsider—?"

"No, Wiggins, we both know I could never find a better match than Regis. And it is not as though I had fallen in love with anyone else—"

"I should hope not, Miss Zelda," said Wiggins repressively. He sighed. "It's times like this when I wish your father was here."

"I, too, but he is not, and I must do the best I can to put all to rights."

"You had better tell me the rest of the plan, Miss Zelda," the butler said firmly. "I'm thinking it must be a chancy one by the way you're skirting around it."

Griselda shrugged resignedly. She told him about Devil Fallon, the gamester who could not resist a wager. "My scheme is simply to offer him a wager he can't possibly win, and make the stakes high enough to ransom back the house and the farm."

Wiggins was appalled. "And if you lose, Miss Zelda?"

"I shall not," retorted the girl.

"That is most likely what Master Sholto thought," said Wiggins. "What is the subject of this wager?"

"I must not tell you. Don't tease me," pleaded Griselda. "If it works, I may be back here soon, needing your help."

"It's no good, Miss Zelda," said the old man sternly. "I'm that upset already by what you've said, I'll not be able to rest until you tell me the whole of it. I'm afraid for your good name."

"Oh! Then you may be at ease, Wiggins. I am going to be using a different name and looking like a different person. So, whatever may happen, Miss Griselda Grant will never be connected with the business."

Wiggins was stammering with alarm and disapproval. "Any person who'd ever seen your pretty face and hair—" he began.

Griselda gave a crow of delight. "You have just solved a problem," she said. "I'll dye my hair black. Then with a disguise on my face—"

"Disguise!" In his agitation, Wiggins forgot his training. "You must be all about in your head! What your father would say to such a skimble-skamble charade, or to me for letting you enter into it, I dread to think! Let me hear no more of this nonsense!"

Correctly evaluating the anxiety and genuine affection behind the old servant's air of outrage, Griselda said gently, "On the contrary, I have decided to share the whole plan with you. When you have heard, and thought about it, I hope you will agree to help me—because we really are in the basket, Wiggins, if we can't make a recover from Sholto's folly."

Wiggins stared at her with an anguished expression. He was forced to admit she was right. More than the possession of property hung on her quick wits. If word of the boy's act leaked into Society, he would be permanently disgraced. Sighing his defeat, Wiggins asked, "What do you plan to do, Miss Zelda?"

"First, I must be sure I am not recognized. Very few people look closely at servants, especially those of other people. So I am going to present myself at the residence of Mr. Timothy Fallon as a discreet, middle-aged housekeeper, formerly employed by Mr. Sholto Grant. I shall wear a plain black gown and a white mobcap into which I shall tuck all my hair...and I intend to disguise my face."

"How?" asked Wiggins wretchedly. The entire situation was appalling to him, but his loyalty to his young mistress was stronger than his fearful distaste for the whole predicament.

"Remember Sophie, the kitchenmaid? Her face was marked by a heavy scar. Even her fellow servants avoided looking at her. I shall want you to pur-

chase court plaster, gum arabic, ceruse paste, and carmine at an apothecary's. By the time I've finished, I promise even you won't recognize me."

This intelligence failed to reassure the butler, who was stunned by the sudden disastrous turn the affairs of his mistress had taken. Shaking his head, he muttered, "Oh lord, what's to do?"

"Go out at once and get me the materials to counterfeit the scar, Wiggins! I can't trust anyone but you to get the task done correctly and discreetly, and you'll agree I must not be seen making such purchases myself!"

Wiggins agreed it would set tongues wagging. "Well, then, Miss Zelda, I'll go at once." He hurried off.

Griselda sighed. She had recruited Wiggins without telling him just how daring her scheme actually was. She hoped she would not have to tell him. He would be sure to object, and to do his best to stop her. He might even take it into his head to go to the Heathrows.

But the old servant surprised her. She had just finished seeing Sholto off in his curricule, with Calver primly perched beside him, when Wiggins came into the parlor with a parcel sealed with red wax.

"The—things you sent for, Miss Zelda."

"Thank you, Wiggins! That will be all for now."

Wiggins closed the door behind him and advanced purposefully toward her.

"Not quite, Miss Zelda. I'm going along with this dangerous scheme because I can't think of any other way out of Master Sholto's dilemma, but I shall insist that you tell me what it is you are going to do. I owe it to your father, Miss Zelda, and that you know."

"I am going to Mr. Fallon's house disguised as Sholto's housekeeper, give him the keys, and...and offer him a wager he can't resist," she ended lamely.

Wiggins was inexorable. "And what might be the exact nature of this wager?"

Griselda spoke more confidently than she felt. "Something I can do better than he can."

Wiggins shook his head. "I can't let you get yourself involved with this person. What do we know of his breeding—his morals?"

Griselda shrugged. "What choice have we? You know we can not let Sholto be shamed publicly—or carted off to gaol."

"It would never come to that, Miss Zelda!"

"I must act—and I truly believe I have a chance to win. Can't you trust me, Wiggins?"

"What is the wager?" Wiggins persisted firmly.

"I have thought that my own talent—if I have one—is in the skillful management of the household—"

"That's true enough," acknowledged Wiggins with dawning hope. "You're a wonder! And so says Cook and all of us. But how could that serve the case?"

"I shall go to the gentleman and wager that I can manage his household for one month better than it has ever been done before—"

But Wiggins was frowning and shaking his head.

"Nay, Miss Zelda, that'll never wash! You'd have to live in the creature's lodgings...He might presume...I cannot permit it."

Griselda frowned at his stubborn old face. "Wiggins, I shall return here every night."

"What if someone who knows you saw you there? Regis Southerleigh? We should be undone!"

"Regis in the home of a common gamester? Unthinkable! His dear mamma would never permit it! Even if someone I know should chance to visit the man's lodging, which I cannot believe to be at all possible, how should they see me! How many times have our own guests seen Cook?"

Wiggins was struck by the truth of this; still he shook his head. "I cannot like the scheme, Miss Zelda."

Griselda stood up. Her lovely face assumed so much of Simon Grant's determination that Wiggins was startled. "Nevertheless, it must be done. Now get on with sending the servants to the farm. I'll go up and try on my mask."

She picked up the parcel from the apothecary shop and went out of the parlor with a rustle of silken skirts.

5

At Number Six Bishop Street, Denny poked his head cautiously into his master's bedchamber, eyed the long recumbent figure with considerable trepidation mixed with admiration. Himself slept very neat, not all asprawl and snoring like his father, rest his soul. Still, the black Fallon temper was there, smoldering under that calm surface, and Denny was not the man to forget it. He sidled gingerly into the room.

There was a warning growl from the bed. The little valet gulped nervously, and looked with longing toward the door, but moved a foot nearer to his master.

"Sir," he stammered, "beggin' yet pardon—"

"Blast you, Denny," came a soft voice from the bed, "if you've disturbed me without adequate reason, I'll thrash you first and discharge you afterwards. Is the house on fire?"

"There's a—a person, sir," Denny began, eyes fixed on the long shape under the rumpled quilt.

"'A person,' is it?" mocked his master. "You wouldn't mean a woman, by any chance? Well, show her out, you mealy-mouthed fool," the quiet voice became deadly, "and the next time you waken me to announce some slut—"

"Oh, no, sir!" Denny took his courage in his hands. "Sir, she is very determined, and a respectable woman into the bargain."

Devil Fallon lunged up, seized the heavy water pitcher from the table by his bed, and hurled it at Denny, all in one swift movement. The servant dodged with the ease of practice.

"Get your miserable carcass out of here, you peat-eating bog-trotter!" roared his master, swinging his legs out of bed. "if you haven't learned by now that no respectable woman would be caught dead in my rooms, it's time I taught you—"

"That," interrupted a female voice from the doorway, "is where you are mistaken, Mr. Fallon. If it makes any difference, I am generally conceded to be respectable, and I have certainly called upon you. On a matter of business."

At the sound of the woman's voice, the tall Irishman had scrambled with ludicrous haste back under the covers, from which security he stared at the newcomer openmouthed. Denny hurried forward in an agony of embarrassment to drape a modish dressing robe over his master's bare torso, but Fallon pushed him aside absentmindedly, and sat staring at the visitor.

It was undeniably a female figure, somberly clad in a voluminous black gown and cape, and topped by a black poke bonnet and a veil.

"Draw back the draperies, Denny," Fallon requested, and reached for his quizzing glass. That highly fashionable bauble was unable to help him pierce the shrouding veil. After a long look, he snapped his fingers for Denny, and permitted the valet to help him on with the robe and straighten his bedcovers. As the servant stepped back, Fallon addressed his visitor.

"Well, madam, in what way may I serve you?"

"At least," the enigmatic figure announced in a voice whose quality sent Fallon's eyebrows up, "you haven't instructed your lackeys to throw me into the street."

"Had you expected that?" The man's lips curved into a reluctant smile. "I may do so at any moment." He put strong, white fingers to his forehead and winced slightly. "Denny—get coffee! My head—!" He returned his gaze to the woman. "Do you feel that you might, with propriety, remove your veil? I must confess that after a night of drinking, your somber facelessness smacks too strong of the Grim Reaper to set easy on my stomach."

With perfect self-possession the woman lifted her veil, took off her bonnet and cape, and handed them to the dumbfounded Denny. She advanced a step or two closer to the window and stood quietly for Fallon's inspection.

He saw a woman of medium height, whose superb figure could not be disguised even by the plain black gown she wore. Her hair was neatly covered by a mobcap with a tiny ruffle all around. Her eyes, which met his steadily,

were an arresting shade of dark blue, almost violet. But it was difficult to focus on anything on her face except the scar.

"Not very pretty, is it, sir? Would you rather I put on my bonnet and veil again, sir? My face may set harder on your uneasy stomach than the veil."

Fallon focused his eyes on her face. It would have been lovely, he thought, had it not been so hideously marred. The features were delicate, but the observer's eye was inevitably drawn and held by the great red scar which crossed one cheek and pulled at the soft, well-shaped mouth. A disciplined mouth, for all its softness, Fallon decided. He forced his gaze back to her steady eyes, his own gray eyes soft with pity.

"My dear ma'am," he said gently, "whatever it is you're wanting, I'm thinking you've come to the wrong place. You'd best be leaving at once."

The woman shook her head. "I have come on a particular business. With your permission, I intend to stay a considerable time. A month, perhaps. And the first thing I shall do is cure that queasy stomach."

Devil Fallon had had his lips open to blast the presumptuous female, but as the import of her final words sank in, he changed what he had been going to say. "If you were able to perform such a miracle as that, I'm damned if I might not decide to keep you here. But it's beyond even Denny's power."

Griselda favored Denny with a friendly smile.

"Your man Denny is an excellent valet, I make no doubt, sir. Yet a woman's hand is needed, and sorely needed, in this establishment."

Fallon's face hardly changed, but Denny quailed as though dodging a blow, and cast a glance of anguished warning at the doomed female.

"One thing this establishment does not need and will never have," icy contempt framed every word, "is a woman's hand, if by that nauseating phrase you mean some meddling female seeking to direct my household and affairs. Denny, you will show this lady to the door. Madam, good day!" He settled back against his pillows with a mirthless smile.

Griselda took no notice of words or action.

"I said, Mr. Fallon, that I had come upon a matter of business. I intend to make an effort to transact it before I leave this house."

Fallon flung himself up to face her. "Od's body, madam, shall I have you ejected forcibly?"

Griselda set her mouth and stared back at him.

After a moment of mutually hostile glaring, Fallon's eyes narrowed and he shrugged. He extended a deceptively slender hand, to whose iron strength Denny could have testified. "Come here, my dear. Perhaps we should become better acquainted. Pleasure before business, eh?"

Griselda met the challenging mockery in his eyes without affectation. "I am not a wanton, though I admit my presence here might offer grounds for

such a suspicion in a mind of mediocre apprehension." As Fallon's eyebrows shot up, she continued with a flash of insight, "Neither am I a prim Miss to be frightened away by a leer. If I may be permitted to state my business—"

"Od's life, madam," roared the now thoroughly exasperated Fallon, running his hands through his heavy black hair in a gesture of agony, "state your damned business and make an end to it! My head is killing me!"

Griselda smiled with maddening calm. "I shall fix that as soon as we conclude our business. Briefly, then—"

"Thank God for small mercies," interjected Fallon darkly.

"—briefly, Mr. Fallon, do you know one Sholto Grant?"

"Grant?" snarled Fallon. "Yes, if it's any concern of yours, I know the fatuous puppy. What—?"

"Last night," Griselda continued inexorably, "you won the fatuous puppy's London house and his country estate, did you not?"

An ominous frown darkened the gamester's face. "Who gave you license to meddle in the affairs of gentlemen? Be good enough to tell me how you learned of this, and what concern it is of yours?" A sudden thought struck him, and he grinned viciously. "Has the fatuous puppy sent you to get his property back?"

Griselda set her jaw against an inner alarm. No fool, this Fallon. He was dangerously close to the mark. She kept voice and manner calm.

"I have brought you the keys to the town house, sir. Mr. Wiggins, Mr. Grant's butler, and I are very anxious to know if we and the other servants are to be kept on—"

"My good woman," Fallon interrupted her in a milder tone, "why didn't you introduce yourself properly? If you and your husband are worried—"

"You mistake me," Griselda interrupted in her turn. "I am not Mistress Wiggins. I am Mrs. Meek. I have served as Mr. Grant's cook and housekeeper for a number of years. When I learned that Mr. Grant had—transferred ownership of the house to you, I decided it would be best if I came into your service."

"Best for whom?" inquired Fallon silkily. Denny, standing near the door, hardly dared to breathe. Sure an' this poor, foolish woman had no way of knowin' that the one thing Tim Fallon hated more than a woman was a managing woman! The valet waited for the lightning to strike.

"You were saying," purred Fallon, "that you had decided it was best—?"

"For everyone concerned," said the poor, foolish woman briskly. Fallon stared at her for several moments in silence. Griselda waited with composure, as though her proposal were the most natural in the world. At length, with the ominous quiet which marked his most dangerous moods, Fallon spoke.

"Get out, Denny."

With a warning glance at the woman, Denny slipped out the door. Fallon addressed Griselda. "Now, Miss Respectability, what's your game?"

"There is no game," began Griselda in the sweetly reasonable tone which never failed to reduce brother Sholto to sullen obedience.

Tim Fallon was of another metal.

"Give me credit for some intelligence, however mediocre my apprehension," he snapped. "Your speech is that of an educated woman. You are not an ordinary housekeeper seeking a position in the ordinary way—"

"Would I have got it, if I had?" challenged the girl.

"You would not," Fallon conceded grimly. "Nor will you—"

"I did not think so, and I am not stupid enough to waste time on a foredoomed venture." She marched back to the window and stood with the sunlight streaming across her face, an arresting and moving sight, as she very well knew. "I am as you see me," she said, "and I will try to explain my proposal without feminine guile. I happen to be a good cook and housekeeper, and I am desperately in need of money. There are few ways for a female to earn large sums of money honestly—"

"You might try marrying it," sneered Fallon, and then fell silent in embarrassment as he considered her marred face.

Griselda ignored the interjection. "I will not beg, and I cannot borrow the sum I need. I cannot walk into the clubs and win it at piquet; indeed, I should probably lose. Therefore I am forced to secure the money in any way I am able. I have been reliably informed that you cannot resist a wager. That, in fact, your acceptance in the better clubs is in great measure due to the fact that you never refuse to accept such bets. Mr. Fallon, I wish to wager my services against five thousand pounds that I am the best servant you ever had."

"What incredible nonsense is this?" Fallon, smarting from her accurate analysis of his precarious position in high society, was at least startled out of his ill-temper and definitely interested. "You force your way into my bed-chamber at an unhallowed hour. You talk till my head aches. And then you present, as though it were the most reasonable thing in the world, a wager whose terms are so utterly ridiculous—"

"You *are* Devil Fallon, are you not?" asked Griselda, with raised eyebrows. "I have not come to the wrong house?"

The man in the bed gripped at the covers as though to fling them off, caught her mildly inquiring gaze, and thought better of it. With a visible effort, he controlled himself.

"I am often called Devil Fallon," he acknowledged between set teeth. "As to your absurd proposal—"

"Then let us have done with this fencing," retorted Griselda. "Either you accept my wager or you refuse it. I warn you that I am sure of winning." Her

gaze swept the room critically. "I have never seen an establishment which offered so many opportunities for improvement."

Fallon followed her gaze. The merciless sunlight revealed dust and disorder everywhere. Crumpled clothing draped the chairs and lay in heaps on the floor. A tray bearing the remains of a former meal jostled two empty bottles and some sticky glasses on the highboy. On the lowboy was a jumble of bills, coins, jewelry, a snuffbox and several soiled cravats. The man averted his eyes in time to catch Griselda's challenging smile.

"Of course, I'll withdraw at once if you are *afraid* to have a woman in the house, though I assure you you are safe with me. I am not one of your susceptible females."

"Viper," Fallon said with a reluctant grin.

"Just so," Griselda went on equably. "Perhaps you are hesitant to wager because I am so sure to win?"

"That is the second time you have expressed that sentiment," said Fallon. "If you were a man, madam, I should be obliged to call you out. But perhaps you are aware that I cannot call out a female, and that is why you feel safe in making a libelous allegation."

"A neat riposte," commended Griselda, pursuing her momentary advantage. "Surely this is an unconscionable deal of bother either for a wager or the hiring of a cook, is it not?" Her faintly superior smile set the gentleman's teeth on edge. He controlled his emotions and kept his voice soft with an effort.

"You seem strangely unsure of your role in this farce you are playing, my girl. Are you a cook applying for a post, or a gamester offering a wager? You should perhaps have been informed by your—sponsors that a man wagers only with his equals—"

"Fiddle-faddle," said Griselda, matter-of-factly dismissing this lofty flight. "I have no secret sponsors, and I wasn't born yesterday. A wager is a wager—if one has the stomach for it."

Fallon, thus rudely reminded of his unfortunate potations of the previous evening, bellowed with a mixture of exasperation and nausea, "Witchwife! Am I to listen to your ignorant and presumptuous remarks all day? Let me remind you, madam, that you are in my bedroom, at your own invitation, and that I am heartily sick of you and your ridiculous wager!"

"Easy enough to remedy that," retorted Griselda cheerfully. "Accept the wager and I'll go below stairs at once and begin my part in it."

"God forbid!" exclaimed Fallon with a shudder. "Your sex, ma'am, is by natural constitution—proving the wisdom of a kindly deity—quite unable to comprehend the intricacies and requirements of the male pastime of gaming. For example," he continued, raising his voice to forestall her attempt to interrupt, "for instance, what happens when a woman attempts to wager at cards? She loses, inevitably, and then the man is treated to a display of coquetry or

tears—or both!—designed to persuade him that she was unaware of the true nature of the terms of the wager, or *he* was mistaken, or he cheated her, and he's really a monster, the greatest beast in nature, to hold her to it—"

"I shall not enact you any such Cheltenham tragedies," said Griselda crisply, interrupting the flow of his oratory. "For a sex which has been known to bet on whether a certain tulip of the *ton* would or would not wear a silver brocade coat to a ball, and whether an aged peeress Would or would not die before a certain date, you seem to make a great to-do over a simple matter of your creature comfort."

"But that's just it!" shouted the embattled gamester. "Those were *sensible* bets—wagers whose outcome would be clear and indisputable! But a matter of—what were your ridiculous terms?—whether you are the best servant I ever had!... Absurd! How could one possibly measure such a matter? For one thing, servitude is personal! Denny has been my body-servant since we both were boys. He knows my ways. No female, however accomplished, could ever replace him for me!"

"Very commendable," said Griselda in kinder tones. "I had not believed you to have so much sensibility." Then as his dark eyebrows drew down, she continued, "My attitude is surely not to be wondered at, when one considers that you fleece boys young enough to be your sons out of their homes and fortunes, sir, every night at the gaming tables."

He spoke through gritted teeth. "I do not make a habit of playing with boys young enough to be my sons, nor with counter-coxcombs too green to know that one doesn't wager beyond one's ability to pay—" He governed his emotions with an effort. "Enough of this fruitless argument. I am competently served. I have no need of more servants, my household is administered to my complete satisfaction—"

The effect of this toplofty dismissal was somewhat marred by a sudden thunderous knocking upon the street door, directly below the bedroom window. Devil Fallon winced, put one hand to his aching head, then tried to speak above the din. "I advise you to leave this room before I begin to ask questions which might prove embarrassing."

The knocking below had been succeeded by a hubbub of shouting voices, obviously within the building. Denny came hurrying into the room, anxious eyes on his master's face. Through the opened bedroom door came loud voices in challenge and demand.

"For God's sake, Denny, what is that racket? Get downstairs and find out who it is and what they want!"

Denny ran out. Fallon glared at Griselda. "And if you, ma'am, will have the courtesy to leave my bedroom, I shall be able to dress and investigate the trouble for myself."

Griselda considered his furious face, her mind at the stretch. Until this moment it had seemed to her that her desperate ploy had failed. Could it be that the trouble downstairs might afford her an opportunity to retrieve the situation? She bit at her knuckle, trying to estimate how far she could safely go in defying the furious male in the bed.

Denny, pale and worried, slipped back into the room. "Sir—Mr. Fallon..."

"Well, idiot, what's to do?"

"Your creditors, sir," breathed the little valet. "They're in a nasty mood! I'm afraid nothing will satisfy them but to confront you in person." Observing the danger signs in his master's face, he hurried to add, "It seems they've got wind of your good fortune of last evening—" His eyes went to the large, untidy pile of banknotes and gold coins on the lowboy.

"Vultures!" snapped Fallon. "Throw 'em out!"

"There's too many of 'em," said Denny simply.

Griselda smiled. "Is this a regular occurrence in your establishment, sir?" she inquired sweetly. "In such circumstances my services might prevent many an unpleasant moment."

Fallon, at first enraged by her attitude, gradually began to smile. It was not by any means a reassuring grimace, and Denny, wiser in his master's ways than Griselda could be, trembled for her.

"You really think you could manage this?" Fallon asked.

"Yes," said Griselda.

"Then pray do so, at once," invited the gentleman.

Griselda glanced at the untidy pile of money on the lowboy. "Shall I settle the accounts with some of this?"

Fallon grinned maliciously. "Surely you can handle a few wretched tradesmen without paying them off? After all, even Denny could take care of their demands given unlimited funds. No, no, ma'am, that would be no test of your vaunted abilities!"

Griselda narrowed her eyelids. It was to be war, then, with no quarter? So much the better! She was beginning to detest this arrogant gamester, this fleecer of children, this sneering woman-hater. She pulled her wits together in the face of his triumphant smile. The opportunity was too good to be lost because of womanly sensibilities.

"If I deal with this rabble to your complete satisfaction, may I assume that you accept our wager?"

"Indeed you may—if you can deal with it," replied Fallon cordially.

"Very well, then, I shall go down and do so," said Griselda, putting her bonnet back on.

As she left the bedroom, Denny cast a reproachful glance at his master. "There is more than enough on your honor's bureau to satisfy every one of

those yapping spalpeens," he ventured to protest. "Will you not let me take some money down to the lady, sir? 'Tis afraid I am they will do her an injury."

"Good!" said Fallon, smiling at the thought. "Then we shall be rid of her, shall we not? Quick, help me into my dressing robe. It would be a shame to miss the scene of her rout."

6

Griselda stood at the top of the narrow stairway. The contentious voices echoed loud and unpleasant in the confined space. The girl drew in a steadying breath and began firmly to descend the steps. When she was about halfway down, one of the angry tradesmen chanced to espy her and stopped in the middle of a vociferous accusation. Gradually one after another of Mr. Fallon's creditors fell silent, following the direction of the first one's open-eyed stare.

It was perhaps not to be wondered at. Griselda, draped in funereal black, was a daunting figure even to an honest tradesman with an account long overdue. The majority of the men there knew they had really nothing to fear. Devil Fallon had a sound reputation; he paid his bills, if not promptly, at least in full and without argument. But it had been a satisfying thing to behave to a man of Fallon's position as they would never have dared to act toward a gentleman. To express themselves forcefully in a gamester's house assuaged their resentment at the cavalier treatment they usually received in the establishments of his social superiors.

Griselda's sudden appearance cast a damper on the proceedings. Grim and somber as an intimation of mortality, she now moved slowly down to

stand a little above them. The ringleader, a stout, red-faced man, shrewdly judging by Griselda's unfashionable costume that he had only a poor relation or a superior servant to deal with, opened his mouth to assert his claim. But his opponent was wise in the ways of handling persons of his order. She got in first.

"Am I to assume," she inquired in a voice of chilling respectability, "that you ruffians are a drunken and disorderly rabble, or that you have deliberately entered this house to attack a defenseless woman?"

Faced with these unsavory choices, the red-faced man took a step backward. "Now, Missus, ye've got no call to speak to us loike that," he protested, trying for a firm tone. "We only wants our roights—"

Quick to see an advantage, Griselda raised her voice in a ladylike but unmusical screech. "*Riot! Oh, Heavens! Denny! Hang out the window and call the Watch! This villain threatens Riot!*"

Divide and conquer, thought Fallon with reluctant admiration from the shadows at the top of the stairs. It was plain that the tradesmen felt the situation was deteriorating rapidly. A subdued but anxious chorus offered excuses and reassurances to this very formidable female, and a number of resentful looks were cast at the ringleader. This worthy felt it incumbent upon him to regain his position of strength, so with a wary glance up the stairs, where the Denny appealed to might even now be shouting out the window for the guardians of the peace, he said, roughly,

"Now then, Missus, no offense meant, I'm sure, but we're all honest tradesmen—"

"Tradesmen!" screeched the female dragon in a voice so shrill it caused her audience to wince. "This cannot be true! A ruse! Angels and Ministers of Grace, defend me!"

"A nice classic touch," commented Fallon. "Knows her Shakespeare."

There was a hasty babble of assurances corroborating the claim: "But we *are!*...Toby's right!...Believe us, Missus, we're nought but loyal honest English merchants..."

"*Merchants!*" Griselda's earlier screech was a whisper compared to this latest effort. "*MERCHANTS? Lies! Lies! An honest English merchant would present his account decently and in order at the tradesmen's entrance, not force his way into the front hall in a drunken frenzy! Oh, help! Robbery! Murder! Rape! Ye gods, will no one protect a defenseless woman?*"

Fallon, shaking with laughter, had to restrain Denny, who was quite carried away by Mistress Meek's virtuoso performance. The consternation in the ranks of the tradesmen, who knew they had no business where they were, was so great that several of the more timid sort actually slipped out the front door and hastened off down the street, trying to appear unconscious of the piercing wails now echoing from Mr. Fallon's residence.

The more heroic of the remaining creditors labored valiantly to quiet the terrible female, ruthlessly thrusting their erstwhile leader to the rear, and pleading to be directed to the tradesmen's entrance forthwith. Griselda allowed herself to be calmed after a time, and in a shaking voice announced that if they were indeed honest tradesmen, and not drunken rioters and despoilers of helpless English womanhood, she would receive their accounts, and hand out the payment on the following day. She directed the cowed and apologetic men to file past her singly and deliver their statements into her hands.

At once the burly fellows formed a line and obeyed her instructions with touching alacrity, escaping thankfully into the street and dispersing without conversation. Griselda closed the front door upon the last craven back, and turned to find Devil Fallon grinning at her.

"An impressive performance! But I shall have to find myself a new set of tradesmen."

"On the contrary, these will return tomorrow, better behaved but determined to be satisfied. And tomorrow, having checked each item carefully, I shall pay them—with your ill-gotten gains."

Fallon chuckled. "So you shall, Mistress Meek. You have demonstrated superior ability in handling presumptuous tradesmen, but it was wicked, ma'am, wicked!" He looked at her, the vestiges of a smile around his lips. "Why did you not challenge some such provable items as overcharging or short count? I'll be bound the rascals are cheating me."

"Quite possibly," agreed Griselda. "Yet had I attacked them on such an issue, I should have failed. Your London merchant considers it his natural prerogative—his inalienable right—to overcharge and short weight his wealthy customers. Had I leveled accusations in that direction, I should have been regarded as a silly female with no worldly sense. I should also have united them against their common enemy, the customer. When, however, I pretended to believe they had come to murder or rape a defenseless female, I took them by surprise. I flattered their virility and divided their ranks."

Fallon had ceased to smile. "I perceive that you are a very dangerous female indeed," he said. "Pray God I do not rue the day I accepted your wager."

Griselda nodded. "And now, sir, will you instruct Denny to show me to my room—"

"Your room!" bellowed Fallon. "That was not in the bargain! There is no provision in this place for a woman to live!"

"Mr. Fallon," said Griselda patiently, "I have lodgings elsewhere. I merely hoped some small room could be provided for my headquarters during the day, so that I might keep out of the way of yourself and your guests."

Denny, concealing a smile, interjected the information that there was a small room at the end of the hall, next to the service pantry, which would do nicely for Mistress Meek's office. In a failing voice his master urged him to conduct the lady thither without loss of time, and was making his escape up the stairs when his new housekeeper's voice reached him dulcetly.

"The money, sir? For the tradesmen?"

"Yes, yes, Denny shall bring it to you as soon as he has you safely bestowed!"

As Griselda followed Denny down the hall toward the rear of the house, it must be regretfully chronicled that they both were smiling.

7

Although he had accepted Mistress Meek's wager, Mr. Tim Fallon was very much on the alert, during the days which followed the classic Rout of the Creditors, to repel any encroachment on the part of the redoubtable woman. True to her word, however, Mistress Meek seldom intruded herself upon his notice. She accomplished her miracles unobtrusively, but the house itself spoke of her presence. Everything was shining clean, warm, fragrant, comfortable and orderly. Mr. Fallon's linen was immaculately laundered and stacked in fresh-smelling piles in his highboy. His coats were neatly pressed and hung in the armoire with a ball of lavender to scent them unobtrusively. Meals were served on time, and they were of such excellent quality that Mr. Fallon found himself dining at home with increasing frequency.

His bath water, once cold and scanty, was now delivered by a clean, smartly attired boot-boy, and it was abundant, piping hot and set out before a cheerful fire. Regarding it and the heap of snowy towels which warmed on the hearth, Fallon raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Decadent luxury, Denny! We are under the cat's foot and no mistake!"

Denny beamed. "Yes, isn't it fine, sir? Everything goin' so smooth and easylike?"

Fallon sniffed. "All surfaces within this house which are capable of being waxed, washed or polished have received such treatment," he observed with a saturnine smile as Denny helped him into his bath. "I foresee the day not far distant when you and Orrible and Barty will find yourselves similarly served."

"She can polish me till I shine like a doorknob, yet honor," said Orrible with a maudlin smile, arriving at this moment with his master's boots polished to a gleaming luster. "We're 'avin' apple tart wi' cream, an' beefsteak and kidney puddin' tonight."

Cuffing him for impudence, Denny sent him back below stairs. But when the boy was safely out of earshot, Denny said softly, "Mistress Meek is a wonder, sir. And the primest cook I ever ate after."

"She is not so remarkable," objected Mr. Fallon mendaciously.

Denny glanced at him. "She's been here three weeks, sir," he ventured. "Will—will she win her wager?"

Fallon frowned. "I wonder when we shall discover what she is really after? Her sex is treacherous. They are most dangerous when they are coaxing and seductive."

"Mistress Meek ain't all that coaxing," objected Denny. "She keeps us in order below stairs." He grinned. "Even Orrible."

"You mean she nags you? Browbeats? Whines?" asked Fallon.

"No, sir. She's very quiet and pleasant with it all—but we do as she tells us."

Fallon's brow was a thundercloud. "I knew it! Give a woman a foothold and she schemes to control the whole place! She shall leave tomorrow!"

"Oh, no, sir!" protested Denny, aghast. "She's done us no harm, sir—only good!"

"Got you all bamboozled, has she? Fool! Have you forgotten so soon that one of her cozening, sweet-voiced sex nearly had you transported as a thief?"

Denny faced his master's anger bravely.

"I've not forgotten that lady, sir, nor what she did to both of us. I just believe Mistress Meek is a very different sort."

"My poor idiot, they are all alike," Fallon advised him cynically. "Maid or mistress, plain or pretty, they are heartless bitches. I shall tilt a lance with our kitchen paragon this very day." He surveyed his image in the sparkling mirror, then added, absently, "After dinner."

"Yes, sir," said Denny meekly, but his downcast eyes held a hint of laughter.

While he was still determined to force the issue, Devil Fallon found his mood almost benign after the toothsome meal that evening. The beefsteak pie had been only one of a number of tempting dishes; the apple tart with cream being of such superior seductiveness—crisp melting crust, juicy apples, crunchy spice and sugar blended—that he had requested Denny to bring it

back twice. However, his mind was made up, and he told Denny to ask Mistress Meek to wait upon him in the dining room while he drank his port.

Denny expressed regret. "Were you wishful to speak to her, sir? I'm afraid she's left us."

"Left us?" Fallon experienced a sharp sense of shock.

"Gone home, sir. You'll remember you forbade her to stay in the house overnight."

"Oh—yes. But you knew I intended to speak—" he stared suspiciously, into his valet's blandly inquiring countenance. There was nothing there he could seize on. "Well, tell her I wish to see her after breakfast tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," said Denny. "Will your honor be going out tonight?"

"No, I think not. I'll have a glass of brandy in the drawing room, and read a book." He gave a short bark of laughter without humor. "Quite a while since the parson's son sat down for a quiet evening with the classics, eh, Denny?"

Denny's sentimental Irish heart was moved by his master's speech. "Och, an' those were the good days, sir! Your sainted father on one side of the hearth, you on the other, each with his nose in a book, and the sherry between you—"

Fallon interrupted this panegyric harsh-voiced. "And never enough coals to keep the fire going, and the sherry scarce fit to drink! And none of you paid your wages for a twelvemonth! Sing me no sentimental songs, you Irish spalpeen! Get my hat. I'm off to White's."

Regretfully the servant brought the hat and saw his master out the door. Fallon's gaming, though it was now a way of life and a successful one to boot, never ceased to frighten him.

If I'd kept my mouth shut on me, he mourned, maybe his honor would have kept to the house. Will I never learn to manage him? I have failed his sainted father—may he rest in peace!

Denny went sadly down to the kitchen to be warm while he waited up for his young master's return. Sitting in the dark, watching the flickers of light from the grating of the stove for comfort, he thought of Mistress Meek, and then of the great lady who had nearly got him transported to Australia. Fallon's bitter comment, made earlier in the day, had brought the whole scene back into his mind. It had been the mare started it all—the lovely little Irish thoroughbred roan, shining dark red and gold in the sunlight of the country lane.

He had found her straying, recognized her at once as belonging to the Lady Roslyn Maghery, and set out to return her. Boylike, for he was little more than a lad at the time, Denny unwisely mounted the lovely animal to ride her to her home stables. He had not gone one hundred yards before he encountered a great black stallion with Lord Ronyl Maghery up. The nobleman caught at the mare's bridle and pulled her up.

"What's this? What are ye doin' on me sister's horse?"

"I'm returnin' her to the stable, sir," Denny faltered.

"Returnin' her from where, ye thievin' scut?" Lord Ronyl struck the boy a blow that sent him flying out of the saddle.

Denny picked himself up. "From the spinney, sir, on Black-gallows Hill. I was walkin' from Cordover Village with a package for the Reverend Fallon, sir, when I saw her ladyship's mare. I thought it would be best to return her to the Towers before harm came to her—"

It was then that both lord and servant heard the rapid beat of hooves and the sound of laughing voices. Out of the spinney and down the road came a powerful gray horse bearing a man and a girl. When they saw the tableau in the center of the road, the man pulled up sharply.

Lord Ronyl glared black anger at the newcomers.

"What the devil were ye doin' in that spinney, Ros?" he shouted at her.

"Looking for Molly, of course. What else?" her ladyship had said, saucily.

"How came you off her? Ye'll not be tellin' me ye fell off?" sneered her brother. He turned to the man. "Set down me sister, Hardacre. I'll see her home. And I'm servin' ye warnin' ye'll not be welcome at the Towers in the future!"

Lady Roslyn flamed out at that, "What's in your dirty mind, then? I dismounted to check her shoe—"

"Say ye so, indeed?" Maghery was beside himself with suspicion and anger. "Then one thing led to another, I've no doubt?"

"I missed Molly and saw this thief running off with her," Lady Roslyn said composedly. "I shall formally charge him with the theft of my mare."

"That's a transportation offense, Roslyn!" protested Hardacre. "Surely you'd not tell such a story—"

"Perhaps you'd like to give my brother *your* version of how I lost the beast?" invited her ladyship, smiling, and Denny suddenly realized that if these gentry stuck to milady's story, he was as good as dispatched to wild Australia now.

But Hardacre had refused to go along with the falsehood, and Denny was free to run home. He had not mentioned the encounter to Tim Fallon at that time, knowing that his young master was, like half the males in the county, completely bewitched by her ladyship, and would be unwilling to believe a word against her.

Now, in the friendly dark by the stove, waiting for Fallon to return from an English club, Denny wondered what would have happened if he had told the story that very day. It might have prevented the tragedy which came later.

8

Mr. Timothy Fallon descended into the basement kitchen of his bachelor residence at a very unseemly hour indeed on the following morning. To Denny's surprise and relief, he had come home betimes the previous night, complaining fairly good-humoredly of the dullness of the company at White's, and his own weariness, as he permitted himself to be helped into his nightclothes by his thankful servant. An excellent night's repose between lavender-scented sheets had caused him to waken in unusually good spirits. Not a little of the contentment he felt was due to the delicious odors which were rising through the house from the kitchen. So provocative were these scents that Mr. Fallon found himself quite unable to maintain a fashionable languour and remain in his bed until noon.

Therefore, to the surprise and alarm of his servants, he appeared at the foot of the steep stairs and entered the kitchen at a critical moment. Orrible so far forgot himself as to utter a whispered warning.

"Tyke care, Guv'ner! It's the popovers!"

Fallon moved soft-footed into the room. It was, indeed, the popovers. Mistress Meek was in the very act of lifting from the oven a whole panful of

the delicate morsels, beautifully golden and wafting a mouth-watering fragrance into the surrounding air. Breaths were held during the crucial moments while Griselda transferred the succulent puffs from pan to warmed plates. Then there was a general sigh of relief, and with it, a registering of the disturbing fact of Mr. Fallon's untoward appearance.

Griselda spoke first. "Is something the matter, Mr. Fallon? Are you ill?"

"I shall be, if not immediately served with a generous portion of those popovers, suitably accompanied by meats and beverages."

Orrible, still somewhat above himself by reason of the shared vigil, said pertly, "It's homemade sossingers and farm eggs this mornin', Guv'ner," only to be promptly squelched by Denny, who directed him to a seat at the foot of the kitchen table with an awful look. Then Denny turned to his master.

"If you'll go up to the dining room, sir, I'll bring your breakfast before the cat can blink her eye."

But it appeared that Mr. Fallon was not to be got rid of so easily. "What, and abandon these popovers to your heavy handling? I'll eat them here, warm from the oven." He stared around the sparkling kitchen with admiration. The light which entered the high-set windows from the area under the front steps glowed through gay yellow curtains, and warmed the shining copper pans on the wall and stove. The well-sanded floor tiles were clean, and the table, set for the servants' breakfast, had a crisp white cloth.

"I had no idea this room was so pleasant," Fallon said. "I believe I shall join Orrible at the table and take potluck."

That youth and the saturnine Barty appeared to regard this skittish behavior on the part of their employer with less than enthusiasm, but Denny, his soft heart touched by the pleasure on his master's face, hastened to hold his chair for him. Fallon, seated at the head of his own kitchen table, gazed around him. "Four chairs, five persons," he remarked. "Bring another chair for Mistress Meek, Denny."

"Thank you, but no," Griselda smiled. "I've already broken my fast at home. I'll serve you now, if you are ready."

"Please do so at once," invited her employer with a grin.

The meal passed in silence. Barty, footman-groom-handyman, was constitutionally silent, his voice when he did speak sounding rusty from lack of use. Orrible, the Boots, like most normal twelve-year olds, was a compulsive talker, making the meals he attended hideous with his endless chatter, but the presence of his employer at the board restrained him to an unusual and welcome silence. Denny was both pleased and startled by his master's whim to eat with his servants, but was far less disconcerted than a London-bred valet would have been at the unwonted condescension, remembering less formal days in Ireland. The four males at the table were absorbed in the simple, sen-

sual pleasure of eating superb food served hot from the stove. A silent meal, but one deeply enjoyed.

Griselda was bending over Fallon's shoulder to refill his coffee cup for the third time when she glanced aside and caught his gaze fixed on her face. She was leaning so close to him that she caught the scent of clean flesh and hair; she saw his eyes moving from her brow to her mouth—following the line of the ugly red scar. Then his eyes raised to hers. She looked hastily at the coffee cup she was filling, her thoughts in a turmoil. Was something wrong with the cosmetic patch she had affixed to her cheek? She lifted the coffeepot carefully, and hurried back to the stove, where she stood, keeping her back to the table.

Mr. Fallon finished his meal soon after. He thanked Mistress Meek punctiliously, then said to Denny, already standing awaiting orders, "I'm invited to take dinner and play whist at Lord Corman's home this evening. I'll wear the red satin coat."

"Yes, sir, I'll press it at once."

Griselda stared after them as they disappeared up the steep stairs to the main hallway. "*Red satin?*" she asked of no one in particular.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said Orrible. "It's the Guv'ner's favorite coat. 'E looks fine as fivepence in it."

"Tell Denny I wish to see it," said Griselda.

Very shortly thereafter, there was presented to her widening eyes a coat of the brightest scarlet she had ever seen. "Do you mean to tell me Mr. Fallon actually goes out of doors in *that?*" she demanded. "Where people can see him?"

"Calls it his lucky coat," confirmed Denny happily. "He never loses at cards when he wears it."

"His opponents are most likely blinded and unable to read their cards aright," said Griselda. "Dispose of it."

"Dis-*dispose*, did ye say, ma'am?" faltered Denny. "You'll not be wantin' me to *get rid of it?*"

"Exactly," said Griselda inexorably. "Burn it, bury it, throw it in the Thames, pay the rag-and-bone man to take it away—"

"It'd cost me me life to do so, ma'am—and probably me job as well," Denny assured her, face pale at the thought. "It's his favorite coat, ma'am, his lucky charm! You'd never be wantin' me to dispose of his luck, now, would ye?"

Griselda hardened her heart against the blandishment of his soft Irish brogue. "Would you wish the men of fashion with whom he dines tonight—for I infer this to be a party of the highest *ton*, not some casual attendance at a hell—would you have these men laugh at your master? Do you wish him to be an object of scorn?"

Denny was not more surprised than Griselda herself at the heat of her remarks. While the little valet considered the question, Griselda wondered what had got into her. What difference could it possibly make to her if a group of idle, fashionable fribbles amused themselves at the behavior and appearance of an Irish gamester? What possible concern, in fact, was it of Mistress Griselda Grant, heiress of a merchant prince, how or at whom the *haut ton* amused itself? To her dismay, she discovered that it did seem to matter very much, and she heard herself saying, "The Lord Corman and his fashionable guests will mock your master if they see him in this ridiculous coat. Destroy it. I'll take the blame."

Barty the silent made one of his rare comments. "Don't do it, ma'am," he advised.

The other three stared at him in surprise. He felt constrained to explain. "Man's lucky coat...females ain't got the feel for it...askin' yet pardon, ma'am."

Impressed against her will, Griselda bit at one knuckle as she pondered Barty's advice. The men waited apprehensively. Would this respected member of her sex rush boldly on her doom—and, what was worse, bring it down indiscriminately on all of them?

Finally Griselda nodded reluctantly. "Very well, Denny, clean and press it, but hang it in the wardrobe. I'll lay out the new black velvet. *It is unexceptionable.* Then you see if you can persuade—"

"No, ma'am, beggin' yer pardon," interrupted Denny. His tone was firmly courteous but his eyes were abject.

Griselda took pity. "Very well, Denny," she smiled. "I shall do my possible to save your master from humiliation."

After she had gone up to her small office to compute the accounts, Denny and Batty exchanged a look of relief.

"I'm obliged to you, Barty," said the valet. "Himself would have turned me off without a character."

"Committed you to Bedlam, more like," grated Barty. "*Women!*"

"She don't understand." Denny defended the lady whom he had already placed on a pedestal beside his master in his sentimental heart.

Barty sniffed wordlessly and vanished to the small stable in the mews behind the house—his refuge from unreasonable Fate and Women.

When Griselda returned to the kitchen to assign the day's tasks, she found Denny pressing the scarlet coat. For a moment she watched him, noted the careful hands and intent expression.

"You really care for Mr. Failon, do you not, Denny?" she said gently.

The little Irishman looked up at her with a smile. "Indeed, ma'am, that is a true word! He's a remarkable man, is himself. Been to a great college in Dublin and learned to read Greek and Latin and all. And a rare, fine horseman! The

best seat and the gentlest hands of any rider in the county. When we first come to England, he kept us fed and clothed and a roof over our heads by tutoring young louts with ten times his money and no sense at all. And between times he taught the fat sons of London cits to ride around Hyde Park without fallen' off their horses."

Griselda smiled at his enthusiasm. "Did you all come to England together?"

"Och, no, ma'am. It was just himself and me, come to seek our fortune."

It seemed to Griselda that Denny hesitated briefly, and that his manner as he answered this last question was a little reserved. Denny had become very busy with the flatiron. Then he glanced at Griselda, who was making her list of supplies at the table.

"We landed in Liverpool on a very bitter day, ma'am. 'Twas rainin' like the Flood itself was upon us, and we in a foreign land with no notion of where to go. Well, we had brought our luggage from the boat into a pile under a shed roof on the dock, and were lookin' about us for a conveyance, when himself spots a little boy makin' off with a box of his books. Himself was after the lad in a trice, and brought him back into the shelter of the shed. The little lad's face was wet, whether with tears or the rain I cannot say, but he spoke up cool enough.

"'It's a proper cop, Guv'ner,' he said. 'Shall I call the Watch for ye?'

"'I think I can handle this meself,' says his honor with a smile. 'Since you are so anxious to carry my books, I'll let ye do so, and lead us to a decent inn nearby.'

"'Books?' says the urchin. 'I thought it must be gold at least, it's that heavy! Is it a teacher ye are, then?'

"His honor laughed. 'I'll have to be—if I can get the chance,' says he. 'For I've scarce enough money to get us to London, and none to pay the shot when I get there. Now lead on, me lad, and don't take us to the palace, for we couldn't afford the rent!'

"The boy grinned and shouldered his honor's books with a will. When he led us safe and sound to a decent plain inn, and carried the books up to our room, himself thanked the lad kindly and handed him a shillin'. The boy looked at it and then he said, 'It's too much, Guv'ner. If this is 'ow ye mean to go on, ye'll be short o' the dibs sooner than ye think.'

"Mr. Fallon grinned at him. 'Now I know I'm going to do well in me new country,' he says, 'for I've met an honest man in the first five minutes. What's your name, friend?'

"'Orrible, sir,' pipes up the lad.

"'Do ye live with your family?' says his honor.

"'I ain't got no family,' says Orrible, 'an' I lives where I can find a plyce. 'Ave ye got any errands ye want done, Guv'ner?'

"Mr. Fallon studies the boy careful-like. 'What can ye do, Orrible?' says he.

"I can get into or out of any locked room in Liverpool," says he, 'an' find lots of vallybles as people don't know they've lost.'

"We'll 'ave none o' that whilst you're with us, Orrible," says himself, very strict. Orrible says 'No, sir!' an' that was that. The boy's been with us ever since."

"I see," said Griselda.

Denny put the red coat carefully on a hanger. "I'll just put this in his honor's wardrobe," he said. "He calls it his luck, ma'am," and the valet looked pleadingly at Griselda.

"Hang it up," she said firmly, "but I shall still try to persuade him not to wear it. It does not do him justice."

That evening Mr. Fallon, in unusually fine spirits, splashed in his hip bath and sang Irish songs in a resonant baritone before the fire in his bedroom. Denny was moving nervously between the wardrobe and the bed, fussily laying out his master's clothing. Becoming aware of the unaccustomed bustle, Fallon suspended his musical activities and watched his valet for a moment.

"What's the matter, Denny?"

Denny jumped as if goaded. "Nothing, sir. Not a thing. Just gettin' yer duds laid ready for ye, sir." He wiped his wet brow with one of Fallon's immaculate linen handkerchiefs, noted what he'd done, and blushed an unbecoming red. "Get you another, sir," he muttered, hastening to the lowboy.

Fallon frowned and looked at the bed. "You did clean and press my red coat?"

"Oh, yes, sir! That is—"

"That is *what*?"

"I'll put it out right away, sir."

"Do so," said Fallon pleasantly. "And then you may tell me what this is all about."

Denny dragged his gaze up to meet his master's. "It's Mistress Meek, sir...She's...goin' to serve you a bit of a sustainin' snack before ye go—knowin' how late the fine dinners sometimes begins—" He mopped his forehead again.

"Thoughtful—an excellent idea," commented Fallon. "But not, I think, the cause of your unusual behavior. Dammit, Denny," he said softly, "we've known each other too long for these games. What's amiss?"

"Mistress Meek...she's a grand person...you'll have to admit she's done a grand job of managing—that is, the bills all paid, money deposited to your account, the house so orderly and fresh-smelling...the grand food..."

Steady gray eyes regarded him from under raised brows. "Just so," admitted Fallon mildly. "*Grand*."

"Sir!" the little valet protested hotly.

"If you've got that pap out of your craw, suppose you tell me the truth. For the last time: what's amiss?"

Denny nerved himself for desperate measures. "It's the red coat, sir. You mustn't wear it tonight."

Fallon paused in the act of soaping his back brush. "Why riot?"

"Beggin' yer pardon, sir, but it's too...too...ye'll be laughed at!" he ended in a rush.

"Have you gone mad?"

"No, sir," said the unhappy Denny. "Mistress Meek says ye'll be an object of scorn—"

With a roar that shook the windows, Fallon hurled the brush. Denny dodged it almost absentmindedly, more apprehensive of the scathing flow of language he was sure would follow.

"So Mistress Meek, having done such a grand job on my house, my staff, my business affairs and my cuisine, is now about to direct my personal life? She has decided my clothing is vulgarly ostentatious, has she then? Will She next be supervising my person? Washing my back, perhaps?"

"Mr. Fallon!" gasped Denny, between outrage and embarrassment.

"Don't Mr. Fallon me, you Judas! Set out my red coat and then bring me a drink—a strong drink!"

Denny scuttled out of the room. His master fumed and muttered, soaping his thick black hair with unnecessary violence. Unfortunately, anger dulled caution, and he got an agonizing dollop of soap in one eye. Groping frantically for the towels, he almost overset his tub.

"Denny! Help me, you idiot! I'm blinded!" The more he rubbed with wet soapy hands at his eyes, the worse the pain became. Both eyes now streamed with tears.

He heard the door open, and footsteps hastening across the room. A dry towel was put into his groping hands. As he patted at his smarting eyes, Fallon grunted, "Get that pitcher of clean water—the warm one—and pour it over my head...get the damned soap off!"

He tipped his head back, eyes screwed shut. Then he gasped as an icy torrent flooded his scalp and streamed down his chest. "Blast you, Denny, that's the cold water! Hand me my towel. I'm getting out." Dabbing gingerly at his eyes with the dry towel, Fallon stepped out onto the warm hearth rug. A big bath sheet was wrapped around him from behind. Then—

"Mr. Fallon!" came Denny's scandalized voice from the doorway.

Fallon clutched his towel to him and peered through still-watering eyes. Yes, Denny stood in the doorway, bearing a large glass on a tray. Then who—?

Griselda walked past him toward the bed with perfect composure. "I have a young brother," she explained kindly. "He too has occasional temper tantrums." Ignoring Denny's sputtering objections, she lifted the red satin coat and held it up for their inspection.

"I am persuaded you will not be so ill-advised as to wear this coat to milord's home, Mr. Fallon," she said.

"Leave us, Denny," said Fallon icily.

"Sir—!" protested Denny with anguish.

"At once!"

Denny placed the tray on the lowboy and went out.

"It is time," began Fallon menacingly, "that we had an understanding, Mistress Meek!"

"Your towel is slipping," Griselda advised him.

Fallon tightened his grasp convulsively. Then he cast a hasty glance downward. A reluctant grin tugged at the corners of his lips. In quite a different tone he said, "Madam, that is a wicked lie. I begin to see that I have nourished a viper in—uh—my bosom. Slipping indeed! Perhaps it is like that very unbecoming *maquillage* you place on your cheek? Unfortunately for your deception, you have put it on today in a slightly different position than yesterday."

"I was afraid of something like that when you stared at me so hard at breakfast." Griselda made a quick recovery. "I'll return to the kitchen and send Denny to you with a bite of food. I really can't trust Orrible to dish it up."

"Of course you cannot. My fear of the results of that should make a very effective red herring to divert my attention from more important matters." He walked over to the bed, a tall, exotic figure in his wrapped towel, and threw his dressing robe over his shoulders. Griselda, warily awaiting the attack, had to concede that he had presence and self-assurance even when placed in a ridiculous situation. "Before you leave this room, ma'am, I shall have some direct answers from you. There is too much mystery in my house since you came into it."

"Can the questions not wait until you are dressed and finished with your repast, sir?"

Fallon ignored this weak counter-thrust. "What were you and that fool Denny telling me about my coat—my *lucky* red satin coat?"

Griselda felt a little triumph. He had listened! He placed value upon her advice! He stood looking at her in the warm light of the fire and dozens of candles, absentmindedly rubbing at his damp hair with a towel, looking as vulnerable as Sholto, and a good deal more pleasant.

"It is such a *bright* red satin, sir," she began gently.

"The prince wore a salmon pink coat three nights ago. With a gold and apricot waistcoat. And his brother wore cloth of gold with gold lace, rubies and diamonds."

"Hideous," said Griselda solemnly, as though she were agreeing to criticism of such costumes. "Vulgar. Ostentatious. But you are your own man. You need not try to imitate their poor taste."

"Besides which," interjected Fallon smoothly, "I am a mere gamester, whose foibles will be received with rather less complacency than are those of men better bred and circumstanced."

"Perhaps that might be the judgment among persons of limited understanding," agreed Griselda, taking the wind out of his sails deftly. "Of course there's the other thing." She hesitated, one knuckle caught between white teeth.

Fallon rose to the bait. "What other thing?" he demanded suspiciously.

"You are an exceedingly good-looking man, Mr. Fallon. Wearing red satin with your black hair, fine figure, and handsome features, you present an almost theatrical appearance."

"Good God!" erupted Fallon, with a look of such intense revulsion that Griselda had all she could do to keep a straight face. "Send Denny to me at once!"

"Just as you say, sir," responded Griselda with disarming meekness.

Something in her tone caught Fallon's attention. He eyed her sharply. She smiled blandly back at him, eyebrows a little raised in query. His expression changed from suspicion to anger, and then to reluctant amusement. "I shall wear the black velvet—which was what you intended from the outset, Mistress Meek. Meek! If ever there was a misnomer—! You are a very dangerous young woman, ma'am. Just a word of warning to you. Be content to work your magic in my house, even with my servants, but do not try your tricks on me again! You'll catch cold at it!"

"Why Mr. Fallon!" protested Griselda demurely, and slipped out of the room before he could reply. In the hallway she nearly fell over Denny, who was leaning against the wall, his mouth and eyes wide.

"Mr. Fallon wishes you to help him dress, Denny," she said kindly. "He will wear the black coat."

"Yes, ma'am," said Denny with great respect. But after she had gone downstairs, he whispered, "I'm only hopin' it won't change his luck, an' all!"

9

When Griselda arrived at Mr. Fallon's lodgings early the following day, she was met by a very worried valet. "Why, Denny, this is a Friday face!" she rallied him. "Let me but fix you a hot cup of chocolate and some baked eggs, and you'll feel your spirits rise."

As always in moments of stress, Denny reverted to the soft brogue of his childhood. "Och, Mistress Meek, it's that worried I am! Himself not home till after four this mornin', filthy drunk—beggin' yer pardon—and in the fiend's own temper! I misdoubt he's lost every penny he had in the world!"

Griselda's heart sank. *Had she*, by some weird trick of fate, spoiled his phenomenal luck when she prevented him from wearing that red coat? And then her spirits fell further as she considered the threat that this information offered to her own plan. If Devil Fallon had a streak of bad luck, he might hazard the Grant town house and the farm and lose both before she could redeem them.

She took off her bonnet and cloak and hung them up. Then, having given herself time to regain her poise, she said quietly, "Will you not sit down at the table and tell me exactly what is wrong? Did Mr. Fallon indeed lose all his money? Or was his trouble merely too much to drink, perhaps?"

"No," replied Denny with more composure. "He was angry about something. I took it for granted that he had had heavy losses, but he didn't actually say so." He took a deep breath. "First of all, I am charged to tell you he wishes to speak to you directly after he has had his breakfast. No"—catching her worried glance ceilingward—"he hasn't wakened yet, and won't till noon, if I'm any judge. But he'll be in the devil of a temper, what with the headache from drink taken, and remembering whatever it was made him so angry last night. If you truly know a remedy for too much drink taken, ma'am, now is the time to mix it."

Griselda smiled with more confidence than she felt. "I do. My brother swears by it. He calls it wake-the-dead. I'll get your breakfast, and then prepare the potion while you eat." She heated milk for the cocoa and sliced freshly baked bread. "Have you any idea why he wishes to see me?"

"I think it's about your wager," Denny said.

Griselda, speculating furiously, broke eggs into a pan and set thick slices of farm ham to brown on another griddle. What could Fallon be going to say about the wager? As delectable smells filled the kitchen, Denny began to pluck up heart. He addressed himself to his breakfast, and was just wiping the last of his ham gravy from his plate with a crust of bread when Mr. Fallon's bell rang. Denny promptly lost his newfound courage.

"Oh, ma'am, what'll I do?"

Hastily Griselda completed the mixture she was preparing and decanted it into a tall glass. "You will get him to drink this by whatever stratagems you need. It will clear his head and sweeten his temper."

Denny regarded the frothy mixture doubtfully. Then he hastened upstairs and entered his master's room soft-footed. As he pulled the bed curtains aside, there was a yelp of pain from the figure on the bed. Gently Denny guided Fallon's groping hand to the glass.

"Whuzzis?" came in a strained voice.

"A settler, sir," whispered Denny.

There was a tense silence, broken only by the faint sounds of cautious sipping, then, later, by grateful gulping. There followed a pregnant pause. At last Fallon's voice came more strongly through the shrouded gloom.

"Incredible! Denny, I shall raise your salary as of today."

"Thank you, sir, but the potion was compounded by Mistress Meek."

"Then *her* salary shall be raised as well—on condition she shares the secret formula with you. That's a remarkable brew!"

"She says her brother swears by it, sir," confided Denny happily. "I was after thinkin' she'd probably no need of such restoratives for herself."

Fallon acknowledged this mild joke with a flash of white teeth in the gloom. "Her brother, eh? 'Tis the second time we've heard of this brother of hers."

"Yes, sir." Denny had no wish to recall the previous time. "Will you be able to take a little breakfast, sir?"

A pause. Then, "It may be possible. Perhaps later in the day. I shall ring."

"Yes, sir," said Denny thankfully, and slipped out of the bedchamber. Griselda was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs, eyebrows raised in question.

"A miracle, ma'am! Turned him up sweet as a cooing dove. He even thinks he could fancy breakfast, later."

"He said nothing about me? Or losing his money?"

"Not a word, ma'am. He commended yet potion and charged me to get the secret of it."

"Why did he ring for you?"

"I think it was his headache wakened him."

Griselda pondered her strategy. "When he rings again, Denny, I shall take up the breakfast tray."

"D'ye think that's wise, ma'am? Beggin' yer pardon, but he might not relish seein' ye till he's dressed an' all."

Gently, so as not to disparage his prim consideration for her, Griselda said, "I think it best, Denny. It will be all right." And with that he had to be content.

Griselda was placing a crisp cloth on the tray when there was a sudden heavy knocking on the front door. Denny leaped up. "They'll waken him! Oh, the saints preserve us!"

He ran lightly up the narrow stair from the basement to the front hallway, and got the door open in the middle of a second fusillade. An impatient man on the doorstep handed him a letter. Closing the door gently, Denny went to listen fearfully at the foot of the stairs. Then he came back down to the kitchen. Griselda was alarmed by the expression on his face.

"Was Mr. Fallon wakened?" she whispered.

Wordlessly Denny shook his head. He was staring at the letter he held in his hand.

"Oh! It was the post—" began Griselda, then stopped at the look of despair Denny gave her.

"It's from— *her*," he said in a voice of doom.

"Her?"

"Milady Roslyn. She as caused all our trouble, and made himself what he is."

"Do you mean to tell me that some woman taught Mr. Fallon to be a gamester?"

"Och, no, ma'am! But himself hates all the Fair Sex because of what that same lady did, and now here she is writin' to him and startin' the bad times all over again."

Griselda was more curious than alarmed. "But why, if they have. broken off, as I gather—" she began.

Denny's wail interrupted her. "She must have learned somehow—witch that she is—that he has money and success. That'll bring her. And when she leaves us this time, he'll be ruined entirely. It's not in a man's flesh and blood to win back twice after what she can do! His house'll be sold and all the grand money gone—everything gone!"

Griselda set her lips. "Denny, this is merest vaporings! You must control yourself. Pray tell me as clearly as you can what this is all about." And Heaven forgive me for a prying meddler, she thought, but I must know what it is I have to fight.

Denny got himself under control with an effort. His open Irish face was ravaged with his fear and concern. "Well, ma'am," he began in a lower voice, "at home in Ireland the Magherys are one of the good old families, impoverished, and dwindled down to two—a brother and a sister. The Lady Roslyn Maghery is a heartless, scheming creature, but no one could deny she's the loveliest lady as ever came out of the Emerald Isle."

"And Mr. Fallon fell in love with her, of course," said Griselda.

"As did every man from seven to seventy in the county. She and Lord Ronyl, her bully of a brother, being all that is left of a great family, are proud as Herod. Nobody could be good enough for the Magherys, but every man of family or fortune in three counties offered for her. She led 'em all a dance with her caressin' ways—"

"And Mr. Fallon was one of those who danced." Griselda discovered that this thought was very distasteful to her. She was not sure why, and had no desire to find out.

"He was worse than all the rest," Denny confirmed lugubriously. "A very high-hearted youth was Master Timothy in those days, as full of spirit as a thoroughbred colt. His father, the vicar of the parish, was afraid he'd do something desperate. We servants couldn't understand why she bothered with a green boy when there were older men, richer, titled, mad to wed her. And then she did it—blast her black heart. She turned a fine, clean lad, his father's son, into a byword, a public laughingstock—and then into a gamester hanging on the coattails of society and a terror in his cups, that scarcely touched the stuff before!"

"A boy becomes a man," said Griselda, and hated herself for the prosy sophism. "Did she accept his suit?"

"Her?" sneered Denny. "She was playin' with him the whole time! Gave him to understand she loved him; led him on to declare himself in front of her brother and his friends, and then refused him. They all made mock of him!"

"Oh, no!" breathed Griselda. Then, "He could never have told you about that—"

"Himself told me? Divil a word. 'Twas Lord Ronyl spread it all over the county. Mr. Timothy had to leave Ireland—the talk and the laughin' was more

than flesh and blood could bear. He took off for London, vowin' to win a fortune and come back an' show the Magherys. When first we came, we had a very chancy time of it, as I told ye, ma'am. We nearly starved."

"But he had you with him," said Griselda.

"Where else would I be?" asked Denny.

"I'm glad," said Griselda simply.

"It was little enough help I was," objected Denny gloomily. "Just another raw Irish Paddy—another mouth to feed. An' there was Orrible. An' then, one black day, himself found he had skill with the cards. Like magic it was, ma'am, the runs of luck! It wasn't long before we had money for good clothin' an' for buyin' this fine house, an' then himself began to be accepted in the good clubs. Of late he's even been invited to the houses of the nobs." He shook his head gloomily. "The vast sums of money that change hands—it makes me blood run cold. For what if he loses it all?"

"He would do better to stop gaming and wagering at once, while he has money enough for his needs," said Griselda sternly. Then she thought, what am I saying? If he stops now, I'll lose my chance to retrieve the house and the farm. Her feelings were strangely mixed; unhappiness, guilt, and another feeling she would not analyze. Foremost was guilt. Could she have spoiled his phenomenal luck by insisting on that wretched black coat? Fie! Superstitious nonsense! Obviously there was something more seriously wrong than a reverse at cards. This woman, now, who was thrusting herself into Fallon's life again. Had he met her recently? Last night? Would he be an easy victim a second time? Griselda sighed. She had always thought of herself as a practical woman, her father's daughter, unemotional, poised, sensible. She had neatly contrived, against great odds, a marriage of convenience with a member of the nobility. She was going to elevate her family, her children, into Society in the best possible way. She believed her father would have been proud of her. His legal advisors certainly approved. Gaming and romantic passions and all such theatrical behavior had never been either attractive or even interesting to her until Sholto had so reprehensibly thrust her into this mad charade in her effort to recover the losses and avoid the disgrace his criminal folly had brought into their lives.

Griselda straightened her shoulders. It was the sensible thing to secure her wager, win back the properties, before this Irish witch got her claws back into Fallon. *That was his risk*, and nothing to do with Miss Griselda Grant. Let him deal with the woman as best he could, so long as Griselda and her brother were saved. Be sensible! Time was running out!

At this moment of decision, the bell from Mr. Fallon's bedchamber pealed. "I shall take up the breakfast—and this letter," she announced.

"Better give them to himself in that order," advised Denny grimly. Then, "Don't ye think we might just drop the letter in the fire, ma'am?"

His face brightened. "Mayhap she'd get mad an' leave us alone, if himself ignored her?"

Griselda shook her head, firmly resisting temptation. But as she made her way upstairs, uncomfortably aware of the letter in her apron pocket, she wondered if Denny perhaps might be right. She tapped quietly at the door.

"Come in, Denny, you fool!" said his employer cheerfully. "If you're knocking because you're afraid I'm still shot in the neck, you're glaringly abroad. Mistress Meek's potion has saved the day—and your skin."

Somewhat heartened by this display of good humor, Griselda entered and set the tray by the bed. Then she drew aside the heavy window draperies and the hangings on the tester bed.

"Mistress Meek!" Fallon sat up, regarding her with surprise. "What brings you—? Where's that lazy dog Denny?"

"Denny is engaged upon a commission for me. Now eat your breakfast while it is hot, Mr. Fallon, and then I'll send up Denny to help you dress."

"My good woman," said Fallon in a complacent voice, "you should be informed that I invariably take half an hour of devout meditation after one of your breakfasts. What have we today?" He began lifting covers and peering into dishes with the healthy relish of a man at peace with his world and his stomach. "Ah! muffins, spiced peach preserve, omelette, ham..." Reassured, he lifted the coffeepot and poured a fragrant cupful. "Now, invaluable Hebe, depart and permit me to enjoy these few morsels undisturbed."

Griselda hardened her heart against his charm. "I shall return as soon as you have finished dressing, sir. There are matters of business which we must discuss."

He interrupted pleasantly, a mouthful of food a little distorting his speech. "This ham is delicious!" He swallowed. "I had intended to wind up the business of our absurd wager today, and to suggest that you use your winnings to open a little cook-shop in the city. You'd have all of London at your feet in a six-month, I assure you."

Griselda gasped. "You are admitting that I have won?" She came closer to the bed.

Fallon took a heaping forkful of omelette, masticated, and closed his eyes in bliss. "A six-month, did I say? Six days is more like it." He smiled at her. "You innocent! Had the nature of your wager not revealed it to me, I would have learned it by now from your conduct. Of course you've won! My only regret is in losing your excellent services. Be sure you inform me of the address of your cook-shop." Then, noting her expression, he asked, "Have I said something to offend you? Of course you will do with your winnings as you wish. I shall have the money for you by tomorrow. That will give me the opportunity to enjoy one more breakfast such as this."

Griselda's mind was racing. He had obviously not lost his fortune at the gaming tables. Then what had been the matter? Did being drunk turn him into the "fiend" Denny had described earlier? Or was that an exaggeration on the part of the devoted but emotional servant? No, Denny's white face and shaking hands argued a valid reason for alarm. Still, Denny had probably seen his master inebriated more than once. Griselda knew it was the custom for gentlemen in even the very highest circles of the *ton* to consume inordinate amounts of intoxicants. If his evil temper was not to be attributed to overly generous potations, had it been the result of something which happened at Lord Corman's party? Dared she ask, and risk destroying the friendly accord of this moment?

Well, my girl, thought Griselda, you've got a problem. If you give him the letter from the Irishwoman, you will probably destroy whatever stability he has been able to build since she humiliated him and drove him from his country. And who is to say he'll remember such an unimportant thing as a wager with a servant? She glanced up and caught his eyes on her, alert, concerned. "Is something the matter, ma'am? Can I help in any way?"

Fool, she called herself. You're not the judge of men that Simon Grant was, but you're older than seven, and you can see that this is a man of integrity, whatever wild and chancy way he makes his money. He'd not forget a debt he owed a servant, especially if she were, to the best of his knowledge, a lone female. Still—if Denny was correct—and who should know better than the man who'd stood beside Fallon during the black times?—the return of Lady Roslyn might well precipitate a mad splurge of gambling which would lose him the elegant Grant town house and the farm too, before its rightful owner had a chance to buy it back. Or—hideous thought!—he might give it to his dark lady as a gift! At this particularly unpleasant thought, Griselda's resolution hardened. She managed a somewhat artificial smile.

Fallon set the breakfast tray aside and regarded her steadily. "Something is wrong. I beg you'll honor me with your confidence."

This offer of help, so quietly made, nearly upset Griselda's determination. Should she seize upon his suggestion, ask for the property before she gave him the letter? It would not be so hard to confess her sisterly concern to this big, serious man, whose fine gray eyes were meeting her own so kindly. Not taking time to consider the effect of her words, she plunged into speech.

"Yes, Mr. Fallon, I do have a problem. I have not been—completely honest with you."

Confused as to how she might best relate the involved little story, she glanced at him and noted the sudden frown and the small tightening of the lips. In a rather different voice, a voice wary and controlled, Fallon repeated,

"Not completely honest? Why, how is this, Mistress Meek? I had thought you one woman with a soul of limpid verity."

Griselda took a deep breath. "It means, sir, that I have a great—a desperate—need for two pieces of property which I had hoped to buy from you with my winnings."

The man's frown lifted. "Is this all? What is the property? I might even be tempted to give it to you if tonight's dinner, to which I have invited two old friends"—he smiled oddly—"is especially impressive. Now will you tell me the whole story behind this ridiculous masquerade? I'd be willing to hazard we can come to a gentleman's agreement." He smiled and held out his hand.

Griselda suffered a revulsion of feeling. This kind man, this very sensitive and friendly and charming man, was offering her a gift rare and wonderful: his trust. And what was she doing? Trying to use him, to manipulate him, to get an advantage from him while he was yet ignorant of a new and menacing situation. How could Simon Grant's daughter have sunk to such tricks? Her voice was harsh as she said, "I cannot tell you the whole story, since it involves the stupidity and dishonesty of another person—very dear to me—"

Now the frown was in full evidence, and every sign of the warmth she had responded to was gone from Fallon's face. "Can you not be open with me, ma'am? Can it be that this 'dear person' to whom you refer has placed you within my household for his own reasons?"

Sholto, how can I betray your folly? thought Griselda in despair. "I cannot betray him," She whispered, and had the pain of seeing his face harden into its accustomed gamester's mask.

What Devil Fallon might have replied to this equivocal statement, the lady never learned, for Denny entered the room hurriedly. With one quick, worried glance at Griselda, which Fallon observed, he stammered, "Sir, 'tis Lord Ronyl Maghery and Mr. Delevan to see ye. I've put them in the drawing room."

Griselda took the letter from her apron pocket with a sense of disaster. "There was a letter for you this morning, sir," she said, and gave it into his outstretched hand. Then she turned and would have left the room.

"Stay one moment," commanded Fallon in his coldest voice. "Denny, is the door shut from the drawing room to the front hall?"

"Why no, sir. I don't believe I shut it."

"Go back to the gentlemen and take them the sherry in the Waterford decanter. Tell them I shall be down shortly. Then, when you leave them, be Sure to close the door behind you." He saw the puzzled look on the Valet's face. "You fool, do you not remember the charming habits of Lord Ronyl? I would not submit Mistress Meek to his innuendoes, should he see her descending the stairs from my bedroom."

Griselda followed the soft-footed Denny out of the room and waited on the landing until he had the door to the drawing room safely closed. Then she descended to the kitchen, her heart filled with a gray despair. Somehow, in her confusion and self-doubt, she had thrown away what she now felt was a priceless gift—Fallon's friendship. Suspecting her of treachery, he had still taken pains to prevent her from being embarrassed. But who was to protect him? While Denny had been fetching the sherry, Griselda had overheard a heavy voice saying, "Damned fine and fancy set-out for the preacher's-boy-turned-gamester, Del! D'ye suppose he cogs the cards?"

"I'm sure you'll say he does," another man answered lightly. "I don't dare to speculate on what Roslyn will spread around about the lad."

Both men had laughed. Griselda, hiding on the landing, thought it was the cruelest sound she had ever heard.

As she went drearily about her preparations for the "especially impressive" dinner Fallon had ordered, she thought that there had been a moment during her conversation with Devil Fallon when she might have been honest, might have reached the kind of understanding which would have enabled her to help him as well as herself and Sholto. But she'd lost the chance through her own folly and lack of trust. And now, to her worry over Sholto's reputation there was added a new fear. The men who were waiting in Fallon's drawing room meant him harm; there was no doubt of it. Perhaps they would succeed in ruining his reputation again, this time before all of London and that *haut ton* he had so precariously entered. Her feeling of foreboding, Griselda told herself firmly, had absolutely nothing to do with a seductive Irish beauty named Lady Roslyn Maghery.

10

The visitors had long since left.

Denny, who could not bear to be near the men who had caused his master so much anguish, had sent Orrible up to be doorman, a position of importance the boy relished. In the neat new livery Griselda had had made for him, Orrible felt that he looked a proper servant for a gentleman's house, and discharged his duties with aplomb. Denny meanwhile huddled miserably in the kitchen, his sensitive heart overwhelmed with premonitions of bad luck. From time to time he asked Griselda a querulous question, hardly taking in her reply. When he had repeated for the third time, "Sure an' I cannot figure out why himself should have invited those two to dine with him tonight, can you, ma'am?" Griselda snapped at him,

"No, I cannot indeed, for I heard them mocking at him in his own drawing room. Their manner is not that of friends. But I am sure he is old enough and sensible enough to know how they feel about him, and decide his own course of action."

A moment after the harsh words left her lips, Griselda regretted them, but she herself was suffering an irritation of the nerves as severe as Denny's, and she could not prevent herself. She had spent the last hour reviewing the inept-

ness with which she had handled her employer, and rehearsing in her mind the things she might have said and should have said, and recalling what she actually had said, which was certainly the wrong thing. And now to be venting her exasperation on the hapless valet! Inexcusable!

"Forgive me, Denny! I am a beast! But let us not-fall into the dismal! Soon we must begin to set up the dining room for dinner, if Mr. Fallen is not to be shamed before those men. What wines does he wish to serve? Can you tell me, Denny?"

Wordlessly the valet shook his head.

"Come now, Denny, this will not do! Off with you and find out your master's wishes."

Denny merely stared at her, vacant-eyed.

Griselda felt the beginning of an irrational anger that one man, and a gamester at that, should so thoroughly demoralize a household of normal persons. "Then I shall!" she declared, and went up the stairs before her courage could evaporate.

Mr. Fallon's drawing room presented the air of clean and elegant comfort it had come to wear under her direction and the servants' careful attention. Fresh flowers filled one large bowl, a cozy fire had settled into red embers, the furniture glowed with polish in the sunlight which filtered through draped curtains of sheer silk. There was no sign of disturbance. Three used glasses stood on a tray beside an exquisite Waterford decanter. All this Griselda took in with one lightning glance before she noticed the tall figure of her employer standing in front of the farther window staring into the street.

He did not turn or acknowledge her presence as she hesitated inside the doorway, although he must have heard her opening the door. Griselda discovered that she was reluctant to break the silence. After a few moments Fallon removed his gaze from the street and turned to face her.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, ma'am? Are we again besieged by obstreperous tradesmen?"

Although the words were light, recalling shared laughter, Griselda's heart sank. Fallon's tone was distant, disinterested, and his eyes were wary upon her—the eyes on an antagonist. There was no doubt that his visitors had caused a change for the worse in his attitude. She realized, now that it was gone, that there had been a sense of trust, of comfort, even of good fellowship pervading the house for the past two weeks.

No longer so.

The annoyance at Fallon's behavior which had carried her into the room changed to resentment against the men who had sneered behind their host's back and then accepted his hospitality. And obviously intended to continue

accepting it until they had whatever it was they wanted from him. If a dinner's all they take, he'll be lucky, she thought. Well, Griselda Grant would be out of it tomorrow, in any event, and long gone before they achieved, for the second time, the humiliation of Timothy Fallon.

"Would you choose the wines you wish Denny to serve, sir? That is, if you are still planning to dine at home?"

His gray eyes rested curiously on her face. "Yes. I have invited four guests, Sir Henry Drowne, Lord Corman, and two former friends whom I met again at Corman's dinner last night. Those were the two gentlemen who called upon me just now. They seem very eager to hear more about my—phenomenal success." His steady voice held an edge of something—was it bitterness? Still watching her face, Fallon continued, "Shall we make a bargain, Mistress Meek? The two properties you seek, in exchange for one piece of information?"

Griselda's throat felt tight. "What information?"

"Will you tell me, honestly, whether it was one of those same two gentlemen who put you up to coming to my home?"

The enormity of the accusation as much as the unexpectedness of it so astonished Griselda that she could not find her voice. He thought she might be in league with those two vicious creatures! That Griselda Grant would stoop to enter a man's house in order to betray him! Then the thought came crowding: was that not just what she had done, but for her brother's sake? After too long a pause, the girl stammered, "Of course not! *I have never seen or heard of them before today!*" And then she realized, to her horror, that she was blushing. For she *had* heard of them, and discussed their malice toward Fallon, with Denny.

Fallon's questioning look changed to cold certainty. "Very vehement denial! 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much,' as your poet Shakespeare has it!" said the gentleman. "No, protest no more! I wouldn't believe you. Still, it is better to know who the enemy is, don't you think, ma'am? I suppose you wouldn't wish to give me a hint of what your purpose in this house was to be?" When she was silent for very indignation, he shrugged lightly. "That would be too much to hope for, would it not? A double treachery. Well, you may go now, and tell that fool Denny he knows damn well I wish the best in my cellars on the table tonight. As for you, ma'am, I shall expect you to put forth your best efforts with dinner. You can collect your wager money from Denny tomorrow at noon. I do not wish to see you again, but I suppose I must thank you—for a lesson in the folly of trusting any human being."

Before the girl could collect her wits, Devil Fallon had bowed slightly and walked past her out of the room.

11

By the time she reached the kitchen, Griselda was angrier than she had ever been in her life. At her entrance, Denny lifted a forlorn face, which rapidly acquired an expression of amazement as the normally serene and kindly Mistress Meek proceeded to behave like a termagant. Within five minutes she had Orrible and Barty enlisted to help with the preparation of such a dinner as they had never served before. Barty was given a list of extra supplies to be purchased; Orrible was set to peeling a mountain of vegetables, after which he was to bring more fuel and stoke the ovens. Denny was commanded to stop behaving like a female with the vapors and instead set the dining room table "with the best linen, silver and glass the cupboards provided.

"And then you will kindly take up to the serving pantry the wines and brandies and whatever your master's guests will wish to drink. As Mr. Fallon so charmingly put it, 'Tell that fool Denny he knows damn well what to serve.' It is to be hoped you do! Now I have told you all what your tasks are, I expect you to do them promptly!"

In a shocked silence, the servants hastened to carry out the orders of this redoubtable female. Simon Grant's daughter was on her mettle at last. No

more soft dealing with the Irish gamester or his staff! He didn't wish to see her again? Perhaps Mistress Meek would have something to say about that! As she slammed lids on fragrantly boiling pots, basted furiously at delectable meats roasting in the ovens, and constructed mouth-watering pastries, Griselda resolved that she'd have the town house and the farm back from the stupid man if she had to go to the lawyers for money to do it. Was not the money hers, after all? Then it was more than time she had the free use of it. She was no foolish child, to be sure! Or a feeble female. So far from it was she feeling at this moment that she almost wished for the opportunity of facing down any single male or group of males in London! Let them all beware! She closed the oven door with a crash, and turned to survey Orrible's work with so fierce a frown that he trembled and almost chopped his hand instead of the vegetables he was preparing. And when Barty returned from the errands upon which she had sent him, Griselda thanked him without her customary smile, and advised him to scrub his hands well and put on a clean coat and clean linen before he went up to attend the front door.

The next few hours were the most strenuous any of them, including Griselda, had ever put in. The guests arrived betimes, and were escorted into the dining room by their host. Barty and Orrible trudged up the narrow stairs, carrying to Denny in the serving pantry the succulent dishes prepared and garnished by the fiercely silent Mistress Meek. Hastening back with empty plates and then up again with loaded platters, they dared not comment upon the progress of the dinner party.

The excellence of the fare surprised even Fallon, used as he had become to culinary masterpieces. Simon Grant's daughter, though such a very great heiress might never be expected to set foot below stairs, had been sensibly trained in all details of the management of a large household. She had, in fact, been taught a great deal more than the French and German and Latin and mathematics in which her tutors had been required to instruct her. Since her mother enjoyed semi-invalid status, Griselda had in fact taken over the control of the house, had learned to purchase and cook food well so that she might know if she were being well served by her large staff. She also organized the duties of the staff, and saw that each performed his task properly. This pleased Simon Grant as much as the fact that her governesses taught her to play upon the pianoforte and the harp, that her dancing masters made sure she could take her part gracefully in the dances acceptable to the society in which she might move, and that her riding masters had schooled her so carefully that she had a good seat, light hands, and the ability to control a spirited horse. They reported to her father that Miss Griselda had high courage and a strong will. At this intelligence, Simon

Grant chuckled and said, well-pleased, "Aye, she's as stubborn as I am. Bound to get her way, my lass is, but you'll never know you've been outmaneuvered until she's done the trick."

Now, in her seething fury, she wondered why she had so tamely permitted Fallon to ride roughshod over her. During this last month, beset by fears for Sholto's good name, she had gone about on tiptoe, fearful of every shadow. She had even allowed herself to be guided—and hampered—by the ridiculous male code of behavior. No longer!

Her anger sustained her through the long hours of the dinner. When the final dishes and the heavy coffee urn had been taken up, she looked with extreme disfavor upon the scene of devastation around her. The kitchen was a shambles. Dirty dishes and pots were piled on every flat surface. The sink in the scullery was full of dirty dishes and cutlery. Empty bottles were stacked in one corner of the kitchen. Griselda's lip curled. All this for five men. Men! Pigs was an apter term!

Barty had gone upstairs again to tend the door for the imminent departure of the guests. Orrible stood numbly before her, awaiting further commands. She had seen to it that he and Barty had made a good meal in the intervals between their service. Now she told Orrible, "You've done very well. Thank you. If you have had enough to eat, you may go to bed."

Orrible cast a glance at a rosy jelly clotted with country cream. Griselda nodded, and he helped himself to a bowl of it and vanished with his booty into his room at the rear of the kitchen.

Griselda realized that she was exhausted. But something nagged at her mind. She frowned. Denny! The valet had appeared in the kitchen very seldom during the evening, being fully occupied in serving his master's guests from the pantry above. He had refused to eat anything. It was clear that the reappearance of Fallon's former tormentors had seriously disturbed him. Griselda went to the foot of the stairs, then halfway up, listening. The dinner party had become progressively noisier as the evening advanced. At the moment a heavy voice was singing a rude ballad. Griselda's lips tightened. She wished their racket would bring the Watch down upon them, but had little real hope of so well-deserved a fate. The door from the dining room into the hall was thrown open, bringing a burst of loud laughter and cries of "Good night!"

"Thank Heaven," Griselda muttered. She had felt strangely apprehensive about this dinner party. She was unable to see why Fallon would wish to entertain men who had laughed him out of Ireland. What could they want of him, thus to seek him out now? Money, of course. But what else? Had the stupid creature no suspicions about their purpose? He seemed to have enough about hers!

The front door was opened, letting in a draft of chill night air which even touched Griselda in her stairwell at the far end of the hallway. Fallon's voice sounded, bidding his guests good night. There were voices unfamiliar to her, and more maudlin laughter. And then there was a sudden crash in the dining room, followed after several moments by hasty steps coming along the hall toward the stairs on which she stood. Griselda went quickly back down to the kitchen.

Denny stumbled down and stood near the foot of the stairs. He had his hand over his cheek. For a minute he was not aware of Griselda's presence. Then he saw her and gave a start,

"Mistress Meek! I thought you'd have gone away home long since—"

Griselda's eyes were upon his face, horrified. "Denny! Your cheek is bleeding! Who has done this to you?"

Denny turned away from her pity and anger. "No one, ma'am. I stumbled and fell. You'd best leave now. The guests are going to their homes."

"Go to bed at once yourself, Denny," Griselda said quietly. "We can clean this up tomorrow, when we are less tired. That is an order."

She stood watching as the little valet went silently toward his room in the back of the basement. Neither of them said good night.

12

When Griselda arrived at Devil Fallon's house a little after her usual time the following morning, her scorn and anger at its master had chilled into a cold fury. All three of the men servants were busy in the kitchen when she entered. They looked up at her, smiling tentatively as they offered subdued greetings.

Griselda stared around in surprise. Gone was the confusion and mess of the previous evening. All surfaces were clean and empty. The pots, pans, and dishes were tidily in their places. A good fire crackled in the stove, and the kettle was on the boil. Orrible and Barty beamed with pride at her praise.

"It were Denny's notion we should make all bonny for ye, Mistress," Orrible told her happily.

Griselda was scrutinizing Denny. What she saw reinforced her decision to come to points with Devil Fallon. The little valet's face was badly bruised. One eye was blackened and swollen shut. The cut on his face was covered with a strip of sticking plaster, but the edges were angry red and swollen. He tried to appear cheerful but he seemed in great discomfort.

"Denny, you will please to sit down at the table and have some coffee. If you can eat anything, so much the better. Then, as soon as I've fed Barty, he

shall drive you to a doctor. I know of a very good one, and I shall write you a note to take—"

"Thank ye kindly, Mistress Meek, but there's no need whatever. I'll be glad of the coffee, but no doctor is needed at all, ma'am."

"You will allow me to determine what is needed," said Griselda in a voice which brooked no argument. She was busy at the stove and cupboard, Before their eyes she assembled a tasty breakfast, and very shortly she had them all seated before well-filled plates. She seated herself with a cup of coffee and sipped slowly, watching Denny without appearing to. Although he was obviously trying, he was not managing to eat very much, Whether it was because of his bruised face or for some other reason, physical or emotional, Griselda did not know, but her anger against Devil Fallon grew greater as she watched. Making her decision, she got up and poured a fresh cup of coffee, placed it on a tray, and started for the stairway.

Denny was on his feet at once. "Ma'am! You'll not go up so early? He's not awake, and he'll be sick as a cat after all the brandy!"

"So much the better," said the lady grimly.

"Then for God's sake take him a glass of yer settler, ma'am! I fear for ye—"

"Let him dare to touch me! Let him offer me the slightest excuse and I'll see him in gaol!" snapped the new and terrifying Mistress Meek. She swept up the stairs like a Fury, leaving the three males staring after her openmouthed.

She made no effort to soften her footsteps. She flung open the door of the bedroom; she set down the tray on the lowboy with a thump; she dragged aside the heavy drapes from the windows without mercy. Sunlight flooded the room. From the bed there came a groan of protest, upon hearing which the girl smiled nastily. She went to stand by the bedside.

"You will wake up now, Mr. Fallon," she said in a penetrating voice. "You will drink the coffee I have brought you and then you will listen to a few home truths."

Fallon's gray eyes stared dazedly up into hers. "What's amiss?" He pushed himself to a sitting position and shook his head to clear it. This proceeding brought forth an involuntary groan of anguish. He peered up at the rigid, dark-clad figure confronting him. "Mistress Meek! What's to do?"

Griselda thrust the tray at him so hard that the coffee slopped over into the saucer. When he had taken it, she stood back. "Drink it! And then I have something to say to you."

He put the cup to his lips obediently and sipped. It was hot, but he drank it to recruit his wits. Griselda glared at him meanwhile. He surely didn't seem completely castaway, she thought, and the room was orderly. Of course, she decided scornfully, Denny sneaked back up here and got him safely to bed, and then tidied up the room after I left last night!

Fallon finished the coffee and put down the cup. He eyed her warily. "Where's Denny?"

"He is on his way to a doctor, I hope."

"Doctor? What's wrong with him?"

"It seems he was the victim of a drunken attack last night," said Griselda savagely. "His face is cut and bruised, one eye is blackened—"

"Denny's hurt?" Fallon reached for his dressing gown at the foot of the bed. Then he sat back and stared at her, frowning. "You said, a drunken attack? How is this? I can't remember—"

"Very convenient," sneered the lady. "Perhaps it happens so often that it does not particularly impress itself upon your mind? You're twice his size and three times his weight, and he's devoted to you—God knows why!—so it shouldn't take too much effort for you to knock the poor little fellow about—"

"Have you gone mad?" Fallon was getting angry in his turn. "If Denny says I knocked him down—"

"You know he's so loyal to you he'd never betray you whatever you did!" interrupted Griselda fiercely. "It is despicable to use him so! A decent man could not so far forget himself, even in his cups! But the true nature comes out then, does it not, Mr. Fallon? *In vino veritas!*"

Fallon was glaring at her through narrowed lids. "Latin, i' faith! Perhaps you can construe this one, Mistress Scholar?"

He quoted, in Latin, one of the poet Horace's particularly sneering evaluations of the female role in society.

Griselda could construe, and her color rose. "I did not come here to exchange Latin tags with you! I came to receive the winnings of my wager, and to make you an offer for the property we spoke of yesterday."

Fallon, recovering his aplomb, surveyed her coolly. "That was yesterday."

Griselda drew in her breath in a hiss of outrage. "I might have expected that, also, from a man who brutalizes his valet!"

Fallon refused to be drawn. "To be sure you might," he agreed. "When I offered so rashly to give you the properties, I was not aware that you were a spy, acting for the Magherys."

"*I am not!*" blazed Griselda. "I never heard of the Magherys until Denny—" she interrupted herself, but it was too late. Fallon's countenance twisted with contempt.

"So you have managed to corrupt my servants, also, have you? Smacked your lips over my wretched history, I've no doubt! Well, permit me to tell you this, Mistress Holier-than-Thou! I have never to my knowledge struck Denny in all the years I've known him!"

Griselda went swiftly to the head of the bed and pulled the bell rope. "Let us hear you tell him that to his face," she said.

"If he has really been hurt," began Fallon, "it was not...could not have been I who did it."

"Perhaps then you think it amusing to permit your guests to savage your servants?"

Fallon snatched up his dressing gown and threw it on, getting out of bed to do so. His face was a thundercloud, but before he had a chance to pour out his wrath on this infuriating female, Denny came into the room at a run.

"Yes, sir—ma'am?" he stammered, looking anxiously from one to the other of the people he most admired.

Fallon turned to face him, mouth opened to roar. Then he shut it and stared with dismay at his valet's ravaged countenance. "Good God, Denny, *did I do that?*"

"Of course not, sir!"

"I told you he would deny it!" cried Griselda wrathfully.

"I knew I could not have done so." Fallon ignored her comment. "Who did it, then? Speak up, man!"

"'Twas Lord Ronyl. You had gone to see Lord Corman and Sir Henry to their coaches."

"I was having the devil of a time persuading Sir Henry to enter his own vehicle. He was badly foxed, and both he and Lord Corman were convinced they had come together in Corman's carriage. It took the combined efforts of both their coachmen, as well as Barty and myself, to get my noble guests properly bestowed and safely on their way."

"Yes, sir. You were away for some time, sir. I heard the bustle of departure, an', thinkin' all had left, I came in through the service door from the pantry to clear the table. I discovered Lord Ronyl and Mr. Delevan still at their brandy. I picked up a tray of dishes from the sideboard and would have slipped quietly away, but Lord Ronyl lunged up from his chair and caught my shoulder."

"The devil he did!" snapped Fallon.

"He asked me questions, sir, like how much money you had won, and where you kept it...and if it was true you were received in good houses—" Denny caught his breath in a sob. "I answered not a word, sir, so he—he struck me in the face, twice. It was his signet ring that cut my cheek."

Fallon's jaw was tight with anger. "And then—?"

"Well, then, sir, Mr. Delevan came up and caught his hand. I could see he was annoyed with Lord Ronyl, but he kept his voice down. 'Gently, you ijjit,' says he. 'Will you ruin all with yet folly? There's more we have to know, and if you cause an open break, you'll have Roslyn to answer to.'

"So then Lord Ronyl, laughin' very foolish, pushed me against the sideboard. That's when I dropped the tray, sir. 'Back to yer kennel, ye dirty Irish dog,' he says to me, 'an' if ye tell yet master of this, we'll both swear yet lyin', an' tripped

over yer own clumsy feet.' I went out through the service door as ye were comin' back to the dinin' room from seein' off the other gentlemen. I caught Barty in the hall, an' asked him to tell ye I'd gone to bed with a toothache. He promised me he'd see you safely upstairs, if you'd too much drink taken."

"But I had not," said Fallon quietly. "I was wary of my guests—but not alert enough, it seems! I had thought it would be myself would receive the attack, if attack there was to be." He put a hand on Denny's shoulder. "'Tis sorry I am this should have happened to you, Denny."

"Are you going to send for a constable?" demanded Griselda.

Both men regarded this naivety with surprise. After a moment Fallon said, "Mistress Meek tells me Barty is ready to drive you to a doctor. An excellent idea. When you return, we shall talk. I think it is time I included you in my councils." He patted the little valet gently on the shoulder. "Charge Orrible to keep the door until you return. Go along with you, man."

After the valet had left, Griselda said stiffly, "I beg your pardon for having accused you of striking Denny. I was so angry when I saw his face—! And when he would not answer my questions, I believed he was shielding you."

Fallon said, "I ask your forgiveness for accusing you of spying for those gentlemen. I don't think I really believed it, even when I said it, but you angered me. You must admit you have been something of an enigma, with your education and your gentlewoman's speech and your scar that slips!"

"It has seemed necessary that I keep my own counsel. I was trying to shield someone—and must still do so, I believe. But now that I am leaving this house, I would like to offer you whatever sum you hazarded with Mr. Sholto Grant when he lost his home to you. I want to buy it back."

Fallon struck his forehead lightly. "I should have guessed! You told me you had been his housekeeper the day you arrived. Were you also his governess? Confess, ma'am, it was young Grant sent you to me!" He smiled and waited for her answer, but the girl shook her head silently. "So your mystery is simply solved. Tell that young cub I'll sell his house back to him when he has the courage to come and ask for it himself. And here are your winnings, fair and truly won!"

He extended to her a roll of bills.

As Griselda, nonplussed by the turn events had taken, put out her hand for the money, the door burst open and Orrible stumbled into the room.

"There's a lydyship, Guv'ner—the beautifulest gentry mort I ever seen, an' she's come to visit yet! 'Er nyme and style is—"

"The Lady Roslyn Maghery!" came a laughing, deep voice from the doorway. Then there was a sudden awkward pause as the newcomer saw Fallon in his dressing gown and a lady standing with her back to the door and a large roll of money in her hand.

The Lady Roslyn made a quick recover. With a note of mockery, she continued, "I see I have come at an inopportune moment, Timmy darlin'! But when you didn't answer my note, I decided to come to see you for old times' sake, my dear! Shall I return at a time when you are not—engaged?" The throaty, deep-velvet voice made Griselda's skin tighten with an ancient antagonism.

"Stay," said Fallon. "This lady is my housekeeper, Mistress Meek. I am giving her the money to pay the household accounts."

"Och, Timmy darlin', what a tall one!" gurgled the Lady Roslyn in a voice of honey. "As if I didn't know—"

Whatever she had intended to say caught in her throat, for Griselda turned at that instant and presented the scarred face to the visitor. Roslyn gave a shudder of revulsion, all amusement wiped from her beautiful face. Griselda placed the money in her apron pocket and walked toward the door.

"Where do you think you're going, Mistress Meek? I have not dismissed you," said Fallon silkily, his eyes alight with mischief.

"To settle the 'ousehold accounts as you ordered, sir." Griselda's voice had suddenly taken on a servile whine and a very common accent. "Thinkin' ye'd want to be alone with the fancy leddy—"

Fallon's lips quirked, but he retorted solemnly, "You were going to leave that same fancy lady unchaperoned? I must insist you remain here to prevent scandal!"

"Really, Timmy, that's absurd," said Lady Roslyn sharply. "Such old friends—such *good* friends as we..."

To Griselda's admiration, Fallon suddenly got very Irish. "And phwat would I be after tellin' Lord Ronyl if he should chance to walk in on us in me bedroom, and me in me nightgown, with the Lady Roslyn Maghery beside me?"

He's done it now, thought Griselda. She'll catch on that he's playing her up, making a game of the game she's trying to play on him! But incredibly, the Irishwoman seemed to accept his speech at face value, and to feel herself on firmer ground because of it. She smiled encouragingly.

"Can't you forget the foolish things my brother once said? I promise you he has forgotten that whole foolish misunderstanding. He was delighted to be your guest last night—old neighbors and countrymen together."

"Nay, then, Ros, that's all very well to say, but this is London, and the English are a cold, censorious lot. Me position in Society is not that secure that I could survive a challenge from Lord Ronyl Maghery over his sister's honor. Mistress Meek must remain here as long as you do, to protect me good name." He went to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, grinning in a way that Griselda at least found particularly foolish.

Roslyn's obvious annoyance at his remarks matched Griselda's own. What is he playing at now? thought the girl. He's showing her a weakness she can

exploit! His sudden change of manner—the heavy brogue, the extravagant, foolish speech, must be a role he was acting. But why? Surely the Irishwoman, if she knew him at all, could tell he was playing a game!

But Lady Roslyn accepted his behavior without question. She came closer to the bed, smiling seductively. She is lovely, admitted Griselda. Those green eyes and all that dark red hair! What kind of an idiot is he, not to see what she's really like? Give her half a chance, and she'll enslave him again, for all his silly games.

Lady Roslyn was saying in a soft, coaxing tone, "Be reasonable, Timmy darlin'! Send the woman away. I'll stay only two minutes, but I've a word for your private ear," and she pursed her red lips invitingly.

Griselda had had enough. She walked over to the bed and handed the roll of money to Fallon. "We'll finish our business later," she said. "Sir."

Milady's eyes were drawn to the bundle of money. "So much as that to pay the monthly accounts?"

"Weekly," said Fallon complacently. "'Tis a very expensive life I'm livin', me dear."

"You've a nice little place here, Timmy," Roslyn agreed, patronizingly.

Egging him on to boast, thought Griselda resentfully. And he'll do it, never fear! Men are such fools!

"Oh, these are just my bachelor quarters, close to the clubs," explained the fool. "I've recently acquired a town house, a little out of the fashionable district, I'll admit, but quiet, so I can maintain me privacy. And then I've a country place as well."

Boasting! thought Griselda hotly. She glared at him, and he caught her glance and smiled.

"Take me to tea at your town place today, Timmy," the Lady Roslyn coaxed. "I'm dying to see it! Maybe I can smarten it up for you. I've a certain knack for adornment," and she preened her lovely figure, delectably encased in a velvet redingote.

"Och, me dear, takin' you to tea in me town house would be as bad as this—or worse! We'd not even have Mistress Meek to play propriety." He appeared to relent at the sight of Roslyn's lovely, pouting face. "I'll come to your hotel today and pay me respects. In your brother's presence an' all."

Roslyn considered this. "I had planned to visit the shops today—"

"Better and better! I'll accompany you and mayhap we can find a pretty bauble to mark our reunion." He smiled. "Now, away with you, Ros, me dear! I'll show you me town house another day."

With a charming shrug, the Lady Roslyn conceded defeat.

"We're at the Grand Hotel in Covent Garden. I'll be waiting for you, Timmy darlin'," she said in a voice as sweet as syrup. Then she followed Griselda out of the room.

"The Boots will see you to your carriage, milady," Griselda said stolidly. Roslyn brushed past her without a glance or a word. Griselda waited until the other woman had gone through the front door, which Orrible was holding open slavishly. The door closed.

"Mistress Meek—are you there?" came Fallon's voice, full of laughter.

Griselda went down the stairs to the kitchen, donned her cloak and bonnet, and left the house. She knew that if she stayed she would reveal the whole story of Sholto's disgraceful behavior. More. She was afraid she would also reveal to his mocking gray eyes that Miss Griselda Grant was in love with an Irish rascal.

13

By the following morning Griselda had herself well enough in hand to contemplate facing the treacherous Fallon with some degree of control. Accordingly she arrived at Bishop Street at her usual hour, and found the servants gathered glumly in the kitchen awaiting her. Her sudden departure on the previous day had not escaped their notice. Very shortly she had a tempting breakfast on the table, and Barty and Orrible put on brighter faces.

Denny waited until the others had departed on their various duties. Then, as if unable to contain his alarm and disappointment, he burst out, "Himself is bewitched! I would never have believed the man could have forgotten the way she treated him—making a raree-show of him in front of her brother and Delevan! How could he forget it?"

"What has he done?" Griselda felt compelled to ask, although she really didn't want to know.

"It's That Woman," declared Denny lugubriously. "She's bewitched him! Was he not dancing attendance upon her all of the daylight hours yesterday, an' then off to the theater with herself an' her brother an' that Delevan last evening, an' not home till the wee hours? I do not think I can endure to stay an' watch it happening again."

"But surely this is a sign of truly Christian forbearance, if your master can do good to those who used him so spitefully?"

"Do good?" Denny's voice rose. "I'll tell you how much good he's doing That Woman! He bought her an emerald ring yesterday—and a lovely little mare for her to ride in the park. If you don't believe me, go out into the mews and look in the stable!"

Griselda stood very still, her body frozen with shock. Was it possible she had misread the whole of the incident yesterday? That when she had thought Fallon was sharing a joke with her, he was merely exercising the kind of charm which is the stock in trade of a man who manipulates others to his own advantage? An emerald ring! Surely that was too valuable, too symbolic a gift to be offered lightly? It had to be what she had at first feared. Fallon was besotted again with the woman he had idolized in his youth. The Grant properties would no doubt go along with the rest of what he possessed as offerings at her unworthy shrine. For Roslyn was unworthy of a man's true devotion; Griselda was sure of that, though she had met the woman only once and that, briefly. Those slumberous, slanted green eyes, the wild rose complexion, the vibrant mahogany-red hair, all the seductive wiles of the woman were aimed at one thing—the gratification of her own wishes and will.

Denny was muttering, "—says she's like Diana."

"Diana?" Griselda repeated, dully.

"The Huntress."

"Oh." And that's true enough, if the poor foolish man could only realize it, she thought. She'll hunt him down again the way she did the first time, and Fallon thinking all the time he's the one doing the pursuing.

"She'll ruin him proper this time," Denny grizzled.

Griselda was so completely in agreement with this prognostication that she could find nothing to say to comfort the valet.

Denny continued, "And tonight he goes to their hotel to play cards. He'll come home penniless!"

After a moment of dismay, Griselda set her lips. "That he shall not!" she declared stoutly.

Denny looked up at her. "Bound to," he said.

"On the contrary," retorted Griselda, "he will be unable to meet with those men at their hotel tonight—quite unable."

"For why should he be unable, then?" inquired Denny, hopeful but skeptical.

"Because I am going to prevent him."

"How?"

"I'll give him a potion," Griselda improvised desperately.

To her surprise, Denny became immediately interested. Mistress Meek's phenomenal skill with the settler had impressed the whole staff. "Now that's

a clever thought!" he applauded. "I was afraid ye were goin' to suggest we try to talk himself out of it, which I know from past experience is hopeless. Whatever kind of a potion would it be now, Mistress Meek?" This wild Irish peasant thinks I'm going to brew a witch's broth, Griselda thought, between dismay and laughter. And then she had it! "Something to put him to sleep," the girl announced triumphantly. "It stands to reason that if he is asleep, he can't go anywhere! And maybe his failure to keep the engagement with them will give those creatures enough of a disgust of him that they will let him alone."

This latest flight of fancy Denny was not willing to allow. "Starvin' wolves in sight of a tender lamb? 'Twould take a shotgun to drive them away—if even that would work." Then he brightened. "But every day we keep them from himself is a day gained. 'Twas well thought-of, ma'am."

It was obvious Denny would have preferred something more colorful and exotic than a mere sleeping draught, but his judgment overcame his love of the romantic, and he congratulated the girl on her brilliant idea.

I just hope I don't kill him, thought Griselda, but she did not share this moment of self-doubt with her admiring henchman. Instead she said briskly, "Go to an apothecary's and purchase a strong sleeping draught. We'll put it in the wine you serve him at dinner. He is going to dine at home, isn't he?"

"That's right enough. He wants to be very fresh for the gaming," replied Denny. Then he added thoughtfully, "I got the feelin' he was still a little wary of Maghery and Delevan. Maybe he fears they might dope his wine!" and he chuckled gleefully.

While it is we, his friends, who are going to do it. The girl had the grace to feel remorse. However, she soon was able to dismiss the feeling. What they were doing was for Fallon's own good, wasn't it?

That evening, quieting a little natural trepidation, Griselda introduced the contents of two small packets of powder into the decanter which Denny would use to serve his master. Just before summoning Fallon to dinner, she hastily added a third packet. "If some is good, more is better," she advised the worried valet.

"Is it safe, ma'am?"

"I shall take the blame if there should be any comment from Mr. Fallon." Griselda avoided the central question. "I shall be in the service pantry to watch the effect."

The first setback to her plan came when Denny, returning to the pantry for the second course of the delicious but salty meal Griselda had carefully prepared, shook his head at her silently.

"What's gone wrong?" she whispered.

"Himself is refusing the wine," Denny whispered back. "Says he'll have water and coffee only. Wants a clear head for the cards!"

They had not considered this possibility. Griselda set her lips. It was of no use to salt the food to induce thirst, if Fallon was going to slake it with plain water. She took up the doped decanter and went past Denny into the dining room.

Fallon looked up at her entrance, and a smile of welcome touched his lips. "Forgiven me for my teasing, Mistress Meek? I take that very kindly. What's the occasion?"

"I've come to pour you a little wine," said Griselda, feeling like Lucretia Borgia.

"I had planned on abstaining to keep my wits clear for the cards tonight, but if you wish to pour me a small glass, I'll do myself the honor of drinking your health."

Griselda, intent upon her plan, missed the softened look in his fine gray eyes. She poured a full glass.

Again Fallon regarded her quizzically, but he rose, and, standing tall, drank to "The incomparable—and enigmatic—Mistress Meek!" He set the glass down empty. Then he frowned and touched his tongue to his lips. "Which wine is this?"

"It's a special vintage I bought today, in honor of Orrible's birthday," improvised Griselda hastily. "If you would drink a toast to him, he'd be terribly pleased. Do let me pour it for you!" and she lifted the decanter.

"Not in this glass. It's sacred," smiled Fallon, and threw it into the fireplace. Griselda didn't take time to ponder the significance of this action; instead she was hurriedly filling another glass. She held it out to him.

"To Orrible," she urged.

Fallon took the glass from her hand, seemed about to say something, then shrugged and emptied the glass. An involuntary shudder racked him as he set the glass down.

"You say you bought this—beverage—today, ma'am? Better leave wine-buying to Denny or me. And now let's have a cup of your coffee—very black!"

Griselda cast about desperately for some new artifice. She had no idea how much he'd have to drink to put him to sleep, and she wanted to get as much as possible of the powder into him. If she had had any left, she could have put it in his coffee; as it was, her whole ammunition was in the decanter. She steeled her will and ignored her fears. "You forgot the Lady Roslyn," she said, and refilled his glass.

He watched her with surprise and some amusement. His cheeks flushed and his eyes began to blaze. He caught her wrist gently but firmly. "You are trying to get me drunk, my dear. Why?"

Griselda, too conscious of his fingers on her wrist, said a little shakily, "Surely these few sips won't unsettle your head?"

At the words he went pale and released her wrist. "More like to unsettle my stomach! This, with all apologies to you, is a peculiarly vile wine. Can't we at least open another bottle?"

"Your palate is no doubt a little dulled after last night's potations. I found this wine quite good," averred Griselda wildly.

"You found it...?" Fallon shot her a keen glance. "Tippling, Mistress Meek?" He laughed too loudly, and filling a second glass, handed it to her. "Let us tipple together this wine of your considered choice, my dear. To the king!"

Griselda closed her eyes and drank down the queer-tasting brew. Fallon watched her carefully as she gulped and choked.

"To the strangely absent Denny!" commanded her tormentor.

Griselda set her jaw and gulped again.

"And now to your former employer, Mr. Sholto Grant. Did you also select his wines?"

"No," Griselda gritted through clenched teeth. Fallon's face faded and came clear before her smarting eyes. His sardonic smile misted, then sharpened. She clutched at the nearest chair back.

Fallon's face went abruptly white. "I'll kill the wine merchant. He's doped this wine or I'm a Dutchman—" He broke off and struck one hand against the table. "*Doped!* Was it Denny? If he's done this, I'll have his black heart! Mistress Meek, are you all right? I'll send Orrible for a doctor—" He lurched over to the bellpull.

"No!" gasped Griselda. "Please, we'll be all right. Denny had nothing to do with this."

He flung around to face her. "Nothing to do with *what?*"

"The doped wine," confessed Griselda, while the floor seemed to be rising and falling beneath her feet. "I did it."

Grimly clinging to his self-control and his wits, the man staggered over and pushed wide a window. "Fresh air...you doped the wine...but why? Was it because I let Maghery strike Denny without a reprisal? Do you hate me enough to poison me?"

"It ish not poishon," enunciated the wretched Griselda, fighting a rising nausea. "It wash to put you...sleep."

"To sleep? But why?"

"Sho you woul'n' go to play cards wi' Maghery," gasped the girl. Then, hand to mouth, she fled from the room, almost colliding with Denny as he entered. Fallon gave a gasp of laughter, then broke off in mid-breath. "A basin, Denny! I am going to be vilely ill!"

Later, white and shaken, Fallon said to his valet, "I'll do now. No, let be! I'll live! Mistress Meek said you'd nothing to do with this mad start of hers. Is that true?"

"I tried to dissuade her, sir, but not very hard," confessed the valet. "At the latter end of it, I was encouragin' her."

"Would you like to explain what the purpose of this criminal act was?"

"I would rather not," said Denny bravely.

Fallon's smile was sardonic. "Very fine! Protecting the lady's honor is ever the mark of your true gentleman. *She* said it was to keep me from gaming with Maghery and Delevan."

Denny admitted the truth sheepishly.

Fallon sighed. "Well, I'm done for the night. Send Orrible around to Maghery's hotel and inform him that I have eaten something which disagreed with me, and will not be able to leave my bed to attend their soiree." He grinned wryly. "This insanity may not be a total loss. My failure to appear may increase their keenness to have me. It may serve, after all. You had better instruct Barty to drive Mistress Meek to her home."

Denny returned a few minutes later to assist his master into bed.

"Mistress Meek off safely?" grinned Fallon with a trace of malice. "She got almost as much of the stuff as I did!"

"She had already left, sir," replied Denny repressively. "After having been wretchedly unwell in the scullery." He frowned at his master's laughter. Then, hesitantly, he added, "Barty says she has a coach waiting for her outside the mews every evening, sir."

Fallon's expression was suddenly sober. "Has she, now?" was all he said.

14

At eleven the next morning, a loudly jocose pair of gentlemen waited upon Devil Fallon at his house, to twit him for shying off the gaming the previous evening. There may have been a trace of suspicion in their manner at first, but the sight of Fallon, who had had a very rough night and looked it, seemed unaccountably to reassure them.

"I bet Del you'd run shy, afraid to meet us." Lord Ronyl's coarse, heavy voice made Fallon wince. "I see I was mistaken. Ye look as sick as a horse."

"Thank you," said the gamester weakly. "I was in no case to concentrate on the cards last night, that's certain."

"I've felt a bit queazy meself, after some of these fine London meals," admitted Maghery patronizingly. "Better get back to Ireland, boyo, where ye can trust the food!"

Orrible entered with coffee and three cups, and a glass of foaming liquid. "Will you join me?" Fallon offered, sipping at the potion gratefully.

The coffee smelled delicious, and the visitors accepted. Orrible poured with great care and passed the cups. Fallon finished his settler and then sipped at his coffee, glancing at his guests with observant gray eyes. Lord Ronyl, for all his loud laugh and bluster, seemed a little ill-at-ease. Delevan sat quietly,

relaxing in a comfortable armchair. His face, under the sleek fair hair, was smoothly handsome and noncommittal. Of the two, Fallon felt he would rather face the callous brutality of Maghery.

"How are you enjoying the metropolis?" Fallon asked, making conversation.

"It's well enough, I suppose," Lord Ronyl shrugged. "Ros is as happy as a pig at a trough—"

"A singularly unpleasant analogy," interrupted Delevan, with the first hint of emotion Fallon had seen from him.

Oho! Sits the wind from that quarter, thought Fallon. When we were all younger, in Ireland, I thought Delevan was the only one of us not besotted over her!

Delevan seemed to be aware of his self-betrayal. He hurried to change the subject. "She tells us you've given her a mare. She's in alt about the animal."

"Yes, when are we to set eyes on the nonpareil?" challenged Lord Ronyl.

"Ye gods! I had forgotten!" Fallon struck lightly at his forehead. "I am promised to Lady Roslyn! We are to ride in the park today! What is the hour? Eleven! I shall be late! You must excuse me, gentlemen, but I cannot entertain you one minute longer, delightful as it has been! I must rise and dress at once!" He reached a long arm and pulled at the bell rope. "Lady Roslyn expects me at one."

"That's a good two hours. It won't take you that long—" Lord Ronyl began to protest.

"My dear! Only two hours? I hope I can manage..."

Delevan took the affronted Ronyl by the arm and led him toward the door. "These London Tulips!" he said with a laugh. "We'll see you tonight, then?"

Fallon smiled blandly at them. "Let us say, rather, that you permit me to entertain you both at dinner on Saturday in my new town house? I'll be all in a bustle, moving into it, between now and then. And with your permission, Maghery, I'll offer tea to your sister there tomorrow afternoon. She has expressed a desire to redecorate the place for me."

Ronyl's face darkened. "Tea, with you—alone?"

Delevan pinched at his arm. "He includes us, of course."

"I do?" Fallon was all bland inquiry.

Maghery pulled his arm from Delevan's grasp and turned back to face Fallon, who, obviously enjoying the situation, picked up a quizzing glass from the bedside table and raised it to study Lord Ronyl's reddening face. "Me dear Maghery," he warned, "you are positively purple! Better watch the brandy!"

Lord Ronyl growled an obscenity and took a step toward the bed. Delevan said, at his shoulder, "He's roasting you, man! Can't you see when you're being gulled?"

Maghery, head lowered and eyes burning, resembled nothing so much as a baited bull. He glared at Devil Fallon, who mercifully put down the offending glass, but continued to smile with innocent inquiry.

"Is that what you meant, Fallon? Was the invitation for my sister and me?"

"You can bring all your friends if you like," replied Fallon lightly. "But you'd better consult Roslyn first. 'Twas she who told me what she would do."

Lord Ronyl was not satisfied in the least, but the last statement gave him pause. He was reminded that this fop, this gamester, had given his sister an emerald worth a year's rent from his impoverished estates. He wanted to kill the presumptuous upstart, but the memory of Roslyn's instructions kept him on the leash. Delevan made their adieus in form and hustled him out of the room and down the stairs. As they went out into the street, Ronyl thought he heard a man's laughter from the house.

"I'll kill him!" he growled, and would have turned back.

"You'll hide your teeth and wait for the moment," snarled Delevan. "D'ye think I enjoyed that? I'm to marry your sister, in case you've forgotten! But she's right, Ronyl. If you kill the goose that lays the golden eggs before we get our share of them, I'll kill you myself!"

Back in his bedroom, Fallon, who had guessed how their conversation would be going, was smiling as Denny helped him dress in his riding coat and buckskins. The beautifully cut garments suited Fallon's tall figure to perfection. When Denny had finished, he stood back in simple admiration. Fallon grinned at him.

"Will it do to overwhelm the lady?"

Denny primmed his mouth repressively, refusing to pander to vanity. "Mistress Meek has your breakfast ready, sir."

"I am surprised she did not bring it up earlier. She has taken such a personal interest in me of late!"

Denny privately thought it would be difficult for any lady to resist his master in this mood, laughing and devil-may-care and provocative, with his fine eyes alight with challenge and laughter. However, he said in tones designed to depress pretension, "She does not like the gentlemen who visited you, sir."

"And nor do you, eh, my lad?"

Denny refused to answer.

"I do not blame you," Fallon said in a quiet voice. "They are not likable men." He ran down the stairs lightly, leaving a puzzled Denny to follow.

Later, while his master ate breakfast in the dining room, Denny hoped Fallon would enlarge upon his comment, but Fallon ate without conversing, staring broodingly upon vacancy. Fallon went out at five minutes before one

o'clock. Barty had brought around his master's stallion and the dainty mare. Fallon mounted and led the way to the entrance to Hyde Park, with Barty following on his own hack and leading the mare. They had just entered the park when a rented carriage appeared, out of which Lady Roslyn Maghery descended, handsome in an emerald velvet riding dress.

Fallon dismounted and assisted her to mount into the mare's saddle. They rode off, Barty following at a discreet distance. Roslyn patted the mare's glossy neck. "She's a darlin'! What have you named her?"

"I believe she is called Meg," said Fallon. "But you will call her what you like. Does she please you?"

Roslyn flung back her head, touched the mare with her heel, and went flying down the path. Fallon was after her in a trice, and caught up with her so quickly she was startled. The hour was unfashionably early, so the ride was almost empty, and for a few hundred yards the man and the girl raced along side by side. Then Roslyn pulled up and laughed joyously. "She's magic!"

She looked at the man riding along beside her. In the sunlight he made an attractive figure astride the great black stallion. For a disturbing moment Roslyn wondered if she had made the wrong choice. The vicar's son had amassed a fortune; if rumor reported truly, so much that he could buy and sell her brother and Delevan several times over. A town house, a country estate, elegant bachelor lodgings—he was living on a grand scale. And the gifts! An emerald ring, a mare, as casually given as, in the old days, he would have brought her a posy or a book.

He was better looking than she remembered him. The boy's sensitive face had hardened into a firmness which impressed her. His dark shining hair, regular features, and laughing gray eyes made Roslyn look coarse and common, and Delevan a smooth nonentity. She pursed her lips. Should she, perhaps, consider changing her plans, now that she had met Timmy again?

They had had word of him in Ireland. The young Duke of Clonmel, writing home to his mother, had given her the story of Devil Fallon's amazing success, which was the talk of fashionable London. "It appears our vicar's son is much admired, even liked. He seems to have made a number of friends. Even those who have lost considerable sums to him have as much respect for his skill as for his uncanny luck. I don't know what his father would have said about the matter, but there's no denying Tim Fallon is a very successful man among the English!"

The Dowager Duchess, who had always had a soft spot for the Reverend Fallon's son, and who cordially disliked the Magherys, lost no time in conveying the news about the rejected suitor's triumph in London. For all her beauty, Lady Roslyn had not made the brilliant match so confidently expected, and the dowager, who knew about and deplored the cruel game the

girl had played on Tim Fallon, had herself driven over to the Towers to take tea with Lady Roslyn. She read her the duke's letter, and enjoyed twitting her, not too subtly, on her mistake in judgment.

The Lady Roslyn passed it off with a smile, but her anger after the duchess left was a wicked thing to see. She raged and swore in the privacy of her bedroom, and smashed a vase of flowers sent by a bucolic admirer. She was short with Delevan when he came in with Ronyl for dinner. It was later that evening that she had hatched the plan which brought the three to London.

Now that she was here, however, the situation seemed different than she had anticipated. Fallon was even richer than she had been informed. He was also less malleable than he had been, and, strangely, more interesting. Should she, perhaps—?

She became aware that he was watching her with that very attractive smile. "A penny for your thoughts, milady," he offered.

Roslyn had to pull herself together. He was quite too charming. Admit it, unsettling. The dangerous thing was that he was not the naive youth she remembered. This was a man, who might not react as that boy had done. Ronyl was making that mistake: thinking he still had love-smitten Timmy Fallon to deal with. Roslyn summoned up a seductive smile.

"I'm thinkin' of a name for the mare. I'll call her Fallon's Luck," she said softly, with a languishing glance in his direction.

The exasperating man threw back his head in a shout of laughter. "Better name her Fallon's Folly and be done with it," he advised, his gray eyes dancing with mirth. "I'm picturing Ronyl's face when you announce that you're riding Fallon's Luck!"

Roslyn was annoyed. Fallon should have been all eager, awkward gratitude for her favor. And as for Ronyl—!

"Have you seen my brother today?"

"Oh, yes." Fallon was still chuckling. "He and Delevan waited upon me in my bedroom before I was up this morning. They'll really have to learn not to keep country hours here in London," he advised her, grinning. "No one of consequence is seen outside his house before twelve. Perhaps you could drop them a hint?" He chuckled again at her expression. "I think they suspected my indisposition was a ruse to avoid their company. Then, seeing me all frail and pallid upon my couch, they were forced to accept the reality of my illness."

Roslyn bit back the surge of anger that threatened to overcome her judgment. Was this mocking man the foolish boy she had twisted around her finger? He dared to mock her! She would blast him—! And yet... There was the emerald ring upon her finger, casually purchased when she admired it, and this mare, high-bred and dainty. It would be foolish to resent his teasing when there was still so much she might gain from him.

"What? Struck dumb, Ros? Surely it can't be the thought of Fallon, sick and defenseless, which holds you speechless?"

"You are a naughty man. I must try to think of a way to punish you," she said with mock severity.

"I've no doubt you'll try it," said the outrageous man. "Shall we canter?"

As she set the mare after his black, Roslyn felt off balance and apprehensive for the first time in her life. He would set the pace, would he? She resolved to make him pay for his impudence. So when they approached the gates and her hired carriage, she told him she was bored with riding and wished to return to the hotel. At which the exasperating creature assisted her to dismount and handed her into the carriage with smiling courtesy, instead of the regret and dismay he should have shown. Roslyn felt a chill of alarm. She must not lose him now! So she leaned to the carriage window and held out her hand with her most seductive smile.

"Am I to have the privilege of seeing your town house today?"

"I had hoped to give you tea there, and solicit your advice about refurbishing the place, but," he sighed and bent over her hand, "it seems it is not to be."

"Why not?" queried Roslyn in a sharper tone than she intended.

"Ronyl."

"Ronyl? What has be to say to anything?"

"Apparently a good deal," replied Fallon, releasing her hand and stepping back from the carriage.

"But this is absurd! What did he say?" Roslyn's voice took on a shrill note.

"You had best ask him," advised Fallon solemnly. "Shall I tell your coachman to drive on? I fear we are blocking the entrance. *Au revoir!*" and with that, Fallon waved the coachman on.

Seething with fury, Roslyn was left with the memory of a tall, handsome figure, smiling and waving his hand.

"Grinned all the way home, he did," Barty told his fascinated audience. They were seated around the table in the kitchen at Bishop Street. "I was ridin' behind 'im, leadin' the little mare, an' he was chucklin' an' laughin' like Tom o' Bedlam!"

"But what was he laughing at?" demanded Griselda. "He must have said *something* to you!"

"Nary word." Barty grinned reminiscently. "I'd give a lot to have heard what he said to her lydyship. Red as a beet as she druv' off, and master smilin' an' wavin'." Barty shook his head.

"Maybe he's finally got rid of her," ventured Denny.

"Not a chance," Griselda said crossly. "Her kind aren't so easily discouraged."

The event proved her correct. At three o'clock that afternoon, an open carriage stopped before Number Six Bishop Street, and a coachman got

down. In the carriage sat the Lady Roslyn, elegant in amber velvet, with a hat with three amber plumes. Her coachman plied the knocker at Mr. Fallon's residence. While Orrible was hurrying to open the door, Devil Fallon came leisurely down the stairway from his room.

"Tell Mistress Meek I am going to take the Lady Roslyn for a drive into the country, and then I may take her to tea in Thornapple Square. If we come, it should be about four o'clock, Orrible. I shall be back for dinner—alone."

"'E's tykin' 'er to that grand 'ouse 'e won," reported Orrible. "I 'eard 'im tellin' 'er brother this mornin' that's what 'e was goin' to do, but milord cut up rough. I guess the lydy made 'im chynge 'is mind."

"At least," Griselda told the servants, "he has the decency to give me time to warn the servants before he descends upon them with strange females! I suppose I should be thankful for so much!" She stalked over to the hook on which she hung her cloak and bonnet each morning, and put them on. "Batty, you may drive me to Thornapple Square at once!" she snapped.

After she left, Denny and Orrible exchanged worried glances.

"She didn't s'y when she'd be back to myke dinner," said Orrible.

Denny shook his head.

"What's so strynge about that good-lookin' gentry mort?" persisted Orrible.

"I fear that Mistress Meek is—jealous of the Lady Roslyn," said Denny soberly.

Orrible opened his mouth to comment and then closed it, staring owl-eyed at the valet.

15

As the coach rattled over the cobbled streets, Griselda adjusted her veil. She left her home in her own carriage every morning heavily veiled, so the servants would not see their mistress with the scar *maquillage*. Tom Coachman had been with her father, and like Wiggins, would believe no evil of her, but his dour face as he let her out at the entrance to the mews each morning, and picked her up in the evening, was enough, she once told him crisply, to curdle milk.

Her mind was busy with conjectures as she rehearsed the actions she would have to take, but continually the thought of Fallon interrupted. At one moment she was sure he was playing some deep game; in the next instant she felt scorn for his infatuation with the Irish woman. His offer to show her the town house Griselda saw as a slightly childish effort to impress a woman who had once rejected him. Surely he was not going back on his word to sell the house to Sholto?

That thought brought her up sharply. Where was Sholto? And if she could find him, would he have the spirit to face Fallon and offer for the property? Or would he turn sullen and stubborn, ranting about a man's honor, and refuse to do as he ought?

Worst of all, where would the money to bargain with come from? Like the spoiled child she'd condemned in Sholto, she'd returned Fallon his five thousand pounds when he sat there like an idiot coquetting with the Irish woman. What difference could it make to Griselda Grant whom an Irish gamester flirted with? Grimly she brought her mind back to the problem. So she'd returned the five thousand. Fallon would scarcely have let two such valuable properties go for so small a sum, in any event. Was he playing with her as he was with Roslyn?

Griselda shook her head in exasperation. For all her brave talk, she'd made as great a mull of it as Sholto had! It would have to be confession to the Heathrows, and the quiet, legal negotiation of the business by men better fitted to deal with such problems than she was. And as for Sholto's reluctance to have anyone know of his folly, it was time her brother grew up and faced the consequences of his own actions. The lawyers would keep quiet about the wretched business if she asked them to do so. And Sholto would behave properly or she'd send him to the farm to stay until he'd learned to behave as he ought. As for Mistress Meek, she had played her part and would disappear. She would certainly not remain to wait upon an Irish termagant!

Somewhat comforted by these decisions, Griselda looked out the window to discover her whereabouts. She spent the next five minutes planning her immediate course of action. Wiggins would have to be warned of the imminent arrival of the new owner—temporary owner!—and his guest, for Griselda hadn't a hope that Fallon would resist the temptation to lionize himself in front of the Lady Roslyn.

Next, she would have a maid pack her boxes so she could move to a hotel to wait out the negotiations between Sholto, Fallon and the Heathrows. Then advise Wiggins to send Sholto to join her—where? Why not the Grand Hotel? She'd heard the name somewhere lately. It was known to be an excellent house, quiet and conservative, catering to upper-class patrons with a desire for service but none for ostentation. If only Lady Southerleigh had been more approachable! She might have gone to stay with her for a few days. But no! The Southerleighs must be kept from even the slightest hint of Sholto's folly. Griselda sighed. In these last few weeks she had thought scarcely at all of her conventional fiancé, and the thought of him now brought nothing but a sense of impatience.

The carriage drew up in front of the town house in Thornapple Square. Griselda descended, thanked Barty, and ordered him to return to Bishop Street. Then she hastened up the steps to the front door. Wiggins had it open for her before she touched the knocker.

"You're early, Miss Zelda! Is something amiss?"

Griselda hurried past him into the front hall. "We've no time for that now," she said. "Fallon is bringing a guest here shortly, and I must be packed and away to a hotel before they get here. Tell Tom Coachman to bring the carriage around in an hour. Has Sholto returned?"

The old butler appeared dazed at her news. "Not yet, Miss Zelda, but I expect him any day, as I've told you."

"Wretched boy! He promised he'd be back in a month. What was the name of the friend he went to? Never mind—" as Wiggins began to stammer. "I'll think of it as I change. The first thing I'm going to do is to remove this idiotic scar. Fallon knew it was false. He told me so!"

As she spoke, she was hurrying across, the great hall toward the stairway. Wiggins fluttered after her, requesting direction as to how he should behave to the Irish gamester, deploring the whole situation, inquiring how long the interloper would be staying, advising Griselda that her father would not have approved of any of this, and calling Heaven to witness that he had always done his best to protect the Grant orphans. Griselda realized that she would have to take time to reassure the faithful old man and inform him of the exact situation, or he would be incapable of carrying out his part in the events of the next few days. She caught at her self-control, led the way to the drawing room, and patiently explained as much of the situation as might prepare him.

"Mr. Fallon has agreed to sell back both the properties," she concluded, "if Sholto will be man enough to make an offer. So all is well that ends well, is it not?"

Wiggins did not appear to be entirely convinced. "Well, now, Miss Zelda, are you certain you can bring your brother up to snuff? And where, if I may make so bold, is the money to come from? You told me you had rather not bring the lawyers into it—"

"I was wrong," said Griselda. "I intend to take them into my confidence—"

"They'll never agree to it," protested Wiggins. "Master Sholto being a minor and all, and having no right to hazard the property in the first place—"

Her response startled him. "They had better agree to my requests! It is Grant property and Grant money. They will do as I tell them!"

Wiggins blinked at her. "You don't look anything like your father," he quavered, "but when you said that, Miss Zelda, it was Simon Grant speaking!"

"Good!" said Griselda briskly. "Now, do you know how you are to act when Mr. Fallon comes? We must not be remiss in any observance, lest he become angry and refuse to sell. So treat him, if you will, as an honored guest."

"I shall, Miss Zelda. Everything shall be done just as it ought to be. How long do you think he will stay?"

"A day or so, I should guess. Long enough to impress his Irish friends. Actually it will depend on how soon we can find Sholto and get him up to the

sticking point. I'm going to the Grand Hotel. As soon as Sholto gets here, have his valet pack him fresh clothing and send them both to me there."

"What if Mr. Southerleigh comes here while Mr. Fallon is in residence?"

"Good God, Wiggins, is that likely?"

"Mr. Southerleigh called here this morning. He asked me when you were expected back from France, and seemed very discontented with my answer."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said it would be at least one more week, Miss Zelda."

"But that is perfect! I expect to have all our problems neatly solved by then. Now I must go up and select some clothes for the hotel. Send one of the new maids—Mary, I think—to help me. I'll—Oh, bother! Who can that be? You'll deny me, of course. Tell whoever it is I'm still in Paris."

Someone was beating a tattoo on the bronze door knocker. Wiggins, muttering nervously, hastened out into the hall. Griselda stationed herself just inside the nearly closed door of the drawing room. She heard Wiggins say, "Yes, sir? What may I do—?" and then she heard a voice which had become all too familiar.

"I am Timothy Fallon. I believe I own this house."

Griselda gasped. He must not find her! As she prepared to leave the drawing room by way of the door which led into the Ladies' Parlor, her eye lit upon a large portrait of Miss Griselda Grant in white silk and pearls which hung above the marble fireplace. It had been her father's favorite of the several portraits he had had painted of her. Fallon—and the Lady Roslyn Maghery—must not be allowed to see it, lest they guess that Mr. Fallon's housekeeper was in fact the city merchant's heiress.

Griselda ran over to the fireplace, pulled a chair into place beneath the portrait, and climbed up. She tried to lift the picture from the wall, but it was large and heavy and exceedingly awkward to handle. In fact she couldn't even get it off the hooks. She heard the door open behind her, and gasped, "Did you get rid of them, Wiggins? Come at once and help me get this portrait out of sight!"

"Why should you? It's really quite attractive just where it is," came Fallon's voice.

Griselda whirled around precariously on the chair and beheld the tall, immaculately dressed figure of the Irish gamester, looking particularly devilish with the saturnine smile on his handsome face.

"Should you be climbing upon the furniture, Mistress Meek? Let me help you down."

To her confusion, he did so, very firmly, and as he set her upon her feet, he said, "I am afraid Wiggins didn't succeed in getting rid of me. In fact, the shoe was on the other foot."

Griselda hastened to put some distance between her person and that of the gamester. His eyes went from her face to the pictured likeness.

"Now this is interesting," he commented. "I hope you mean to tell me why Mr. Sholto Grant keeps a picture of his housekeeper in the position of honor in his drawing room? You were perhaps his nurse or his governess in—ah—happier days? Before you acquired the movable scar and lost your looks?"

Griselda said icily, "Spare me this heavy-handed raillery, sir! I am Sholto's sister, as I make no doubt you know."

"I had not known the exact relationship until this moment, not considering the families of my gaming acquaintances any of my concern. I am glad to learn, however, that at least one of the Grants has courage."

Griselda did not find this compliment much to her liking. "What do you intend to do?" she asked.

"Why, just what I said I should. I'll use this place for a day or so—'twill assist me in a plan I have—and I'll sell it back to your brother for the amount I wagered against it."

Griselda didn't like the idea of the Grant town house being used as a part of any scheme of Fallon's, and said so.

The Irish gamester smiled at her in a way that she found particularly infuriating. "Then you had better get your fool of a brother to redeem it quickly, for thanks to him, it is, at the moment, the Fallon town house." He stopped smiling and regarded her with an oddly gentle expression. "Better accept the situation with grace, my dear. It won't be long, after all. I'm sure, now that I behold all this very expensive magnificence, that the Grant fortune will be adequate to redeem your brother's debts." He looked at her closely. "Is there any chance that you might be induced to confide in me? You seem to have made a spirited, if absurd, effort to regain possession of your home. Are you actually in some financial difficulties?"

Griselda turned her face up to his, her eyes searching his face. After a moment the gamester frowned and said in quite a different tone, "For mercy's sake, take that ridiculous thing off your face!"

Griselda was minded to give the impudent fellow a sharp set-down when the knocker thundered again at the front door. "Ye gods! Am I never to have a moment's peace?" she groaned. "Can this be your Lady Roslyn?"

"I doubt it. I left her at her hotel. I am to return and pick up both the Magherys and Mr. Delevan and escort them here. The men were absent when we reached the hotel. Lady Roslyn is very much out of charity with them." He grinned reprehensibly.

"Shut the door into the hall," commanded Griselda. "I have no wish to be discovered here by casual visitors."

Fallon, like a sensible man, was already doing so, but he left a tiny crack so she could discover who the latest arrival might be.

Wiggins, moving through the hall to the front door, passed their position. "How did you get away from him?" whispered Griselda.

"Sent him to get me some sherry," Fallon whispered back.

The butler opened the front door, and a high, unpleasantly penetrating female voice was demanding to know exactly when Miss Grant would return from Paris. "—for I must inform you that I am Lady Southerleigh, who is to be Miss Grant's mamma-in-law, and I am not to be put off with servant's evasions."

Griselda went pale and grasped Fallon's arm. "Good God!" she whispered. "She must not find me here like this!"

Fallon patted the hand on his sleeve absentmindedly, as they both strained to hear how Wiggins would handle this formidable challenge.

Wiggins was imperturbable. "I shall send a messenger to you, milady, the very instant I myself receive word of Miss Grant's arrival," he began. "She had intended to return next week—"

"Do not keep me standing upon the doorstep, fool!"

There was a small confusion of sounds as the lady apparently pushed past Wiggins into the hall. "I intend to remain here until you tell me what I wish to know," her voice came louder to the listening ears. "I am convinced you have the exact date, or can get it. Do so!"

"I am not sure I like this, Mamma," said a male voice nervously.

Fallon glanced down at Griselda with raised eyebrows.

"My affianced husband," whispered the girl.

Lady Southerleigh was speaking. "No more do I, my son, but it must be done. Trust Mamma to know what is best. I was afraid of something like this. When you chose to ally yourself with the daughter of a cit, you should have realized that you would encounter disagreeable situations. There is an instability here which I cannot like. Why would the girl rush off to France on the eve of your wedding?"

Her son was heard to murmur something about bridal clothes.

"Nonsense," retorted Lady Southerleigh. "You may accept such an explanation; I do not. It is high time I took control of this skimble-skamble business. Before I can permit you to bring this young woman into the family, I shall have to be sure—very sure—that she will not disgrace us all with her ill-bred starts and unladylike jauntings!"

Wiggins was heard to interject in a colorless voice, "If your ladyship will be pleased to enter the drawing room and be seated? Perhaps milady will consent to partake of a glass of ratafia, while I endeavor to discover from the housekeeper if she knows the date of Miss Grant's return?"

"That is a sensible idea," conceded her ladyship. "But first, since I am here, I believe I shall require you to give me a tour of the premises. I must decide whether I wish to put the place up for sale, or retain it as a *pied-à-terre*. Lord Southerleigh is most particular in his requirements, and finds the mansions offered to lease when we are come to London are sadly inferior to what we are accustomed to in our own Leigh Park. True, this house is in an unfashionable part of the city, but it seems larger than the place we have now, and better furnished."

"Indeed, milady? Please follow me into the dining room. The paneling is thought to be very fine. The gold service, for twenty-four persons, includes plates, goblets, cutlery *and* the epergne, all of which were crafted in Italy. And this set of dishes, service for twenty, was brought by special order from China. There is not another such set in England—" Wiggins's voice was cut off as he closed the door into the dining room.

"How could he puff us off like that?" breathed Griselda.

"You butler is affronted, and rightly so," said Fallon. "He is dealing with her as she deserves—a meddlesome, prying, ill-bred woman."

There was an awkward silence. Then, "I am not marrying *her*!" Griselda whispered fiercely.

"Are you not?" the gamester whispered back. "Let's get out of here before she comes to inspect us."

"I suppose you imply that she is snooping?" asked Griselda.

"Well, isn't she?" He regarded her flushed face soberly. "I can think of few worse fates than to find oneself in the power of that harpy."

"You are hardly likely to be so," snapped Griselda. "But you are right. She mustn't find either of us here."

"Where shall we hide?" he whispered, eyes lighting with amusement. "Under the stairs? Up the chimney? I would give odds that her tour of inspection will leave no door unopened—no drawer, even!"

Griselda felt she must disapprove of such levity toward her future mother-in-law. She said so, but a horrid suspicion had entered her mind. Had Lady Southerleigh come prepared to snoop? She must have known that Griselda was away from home, since Regis had been told so by Wiggins just this morning. More to quiet her own doubts than to answer Fallon's challenge, she whispered stoutly, "She is naturally interested in a house she may be visiting very frequently—"

"So interested that she comes to inspect it in the absence of its owner? Of course if it doesn't suit her, she'll sell it!"

Griselda found herself out of patience with the impudent man, the more so since he was saying only what they both had heard. Still, she discovered herself to be equally annoyed at what must only be regarded as the overbear-

ing encroachment of Lady Southerleigh. Rather crossly she led the way through the Ladies' Parlor to the rear hallway which led to the kitchen. Fallon stopped her just outside the kitchen door.

"Do take off that very gruesome looking patch or whatever it is on your cheek, my dear! Since I've seen what you were used to look like in your youth, I find I can't bear it!" he teased.

Griselda refused to rise to the bait, but she did pull the red sticking plaster from her face before leading the way into the kitchen. The new servants might not even recognize her with it, since she had worn her heavy veil every morning on leaving the house to be driven to the mews behind Fallon's residence. She accepted the rather nervous bobbings of the cook and her helper, and wisely did not try to make any explanation of her presence in the kitchen with a male guest.

Fallon appeared to be enjoying his conducted tour, and smiled so charmingly at the two servants that he was offered a cup of tea on the spot. Griselda was forced to interrupt the exchange of courtesies when they heard the sound of Wiggins's voice as he led Lady Southerleigh and her son across the front hall and into the drawing room. He was pitching it loud enough to be heard by his mistress, wherever she might have taken refuge.

"If you will be seated here, your ladyship, I'll bring you a glass of ratafia—or a cup of tea, if you prefer it?"

"Tea will do nicely for me. You may bring a glass of sherry for my son." Milady's voice was even more penetrating than the butler's.

"Poor devil doesn't even get to choose his own tippie," commiserated Fallon.

The cook and kitchen maid were looking bewildered at the turn of events. Small wonder, thought Griselda fiercely. Their oddly dressed mistress hiding in the kitchen with a veritable *beau* of the *ton*, while some strange female and her son demanded a tour of the premises! Her resentment at the Southerleighs crystallized into a low-voiced rebuke of the outrageous Mr. Fallon.

"Regis treats his mamma with courtesy," she snapped, "but that is something you would hardly understand!" She knew it was unworthy of her before the words left her mouth. Rather than accepting this very daunting set-down, however, Fallon grinned cheerfully.

"Can't call his soul his own, I expect. I haven't set eyes on him, having been forced to skulk in the background since he and his formidable mother descended on this house, but I'll lay you odds he has narrow shoulders, spindleshanks, and an air of overbearing self-confidence—when his mamma is not present to deflate him!"

Since this was painfully accurate, Griselda chose not to dignify it by a reply, but instead advised the cook, "Prepare tea for the guests. I am not at home to them, so if Wiggins should conduct them through the kitchen, you will please not mention my being here."

The women seemed confused by the situation. The cook, bolder being the older of the two, asked, "Conduct them? But ma'am, how is it Wiggins would bring visitors to your kitchen?"

"This visitor is a lady who wishes to be sure she is not buying a pig in a poke," Fallon advised her kindly.

"Buying a pig—?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Fallon, be still! You do not help with the problem with these attempts at humor!" snapped Griselda.

"I thought it might ease the tension," offered Fallon mendaciously. Any rejoinder Miss Grant might have made was cut off by the entrance of a harried Wiggins. Griselda gasped but relaxed when she perceived him unaccompanied.

"She'll be here in a moment If I don't get the tea in!" the butler whispered hoarsely. "I tried to head her off, but she's like iron. Insists on seeing the whole place."

"I shall go to my room," Griselda said with a show of calm. "You will not, of course, take her there. I am sure it is only the public rooms she will wish to inspect."

Wiggins did not appear to be convinced, but he picked up the tea tray with a word of thanks to the cook. "I've given Mr. Regis the wine. I'll try to keep them in the drawing room with this as long as I can, Miss Zelda, but you'd better slip up by way of the servants' stairs at once."

"But this is delightful!" said Fallon, lounging with one hip on the edge of the table. "An arrogant beldam sets the whole household by the ears; its mistress hides in her own kitchen and escapes by the servants' staircase! Ma'am, take my advice. Hire Mistress Meek to handle this contretemps. She reduced my small difficulties to order with resolution and dispatch. I am confident she could handle this problem equally well."

Griselda gazed at him darkly. The women were beaming at him as though he were the answer to prayer. He is probably right, she conceded. I am behaving like a coward. But it is all so awkward! "Will you leave now, sir?" she asked.

"'Twould be a good time, sir," Wiggins seconded the idea. "I can close the drawing-room door when I take in the tea, and you can slip out—"

"Slip out of my-own house?" Fallon asked lazily, his mocking eyes on Griselda. "I had rather show these uninvited guests the door!"

Griselda clasped her hands. "Mr. Fallon, you don't understand!" she said, her voice quivering slightly. "If you please—"

Fallon stared at her, then shrugged. "I suppose it was too much to expect,"

"Too much?" Griselda faltered.

"That you would show pluck. Females," he added gently, "are not usually courageous."

The bell from the drawing room rang sharply.

To no one in particular, Fallon said, "Milady calls!"

Griselda turned and fled up the stairs.

Half an hour later, sitting in her elegant dressing gown by the window in her bedroom, Griselda heard Wiggins's voice outside the door.

"This is Miss Griselda's room, milady."

"You may open the door. The room faces out into the square, I collect? I wish to see the prospect from the windows."

Griselda did not move from her chair. If Lady Southerleigh overran her defenses, burst into the room, she would face and repel the encroachment. If she lost Regis, so be it. She had never really had for him anything but the most civil tolerance. She had learned in the last few days that real involvement with another human being was a very different thing than the civil contract she had been about to enter into.

Wiggins's voice, colorless, respectful, and unexpectedly firm, came to her ears.

"I do not feel it my place, madam, to open my mistress's suite to anyone in her absence. You will understand, I am sure."

"Mamma! We must go!" pleaded Regis, obviously embarrassed. "Have you forgot our engagement with Lord and Lady Tethinton?"

There was a further comment in Lady Southerleigh's harsh tones, then the voices became less distinct as the inspection party passed along the hallway and down the main staircase. Griselda hardly noted their departure.

He was right, she thought. I am a coward. Even Wiggins is braver. And that hateful woman is a beldam, a hag, a...I cannot endure to place myself under her control.

She tried to order her thoughts. Why did the Southerleigh alliance seem insupportable now, when she had accepted it, if not with rapture, at least with a comfortable feeling of well-doing just four weeks earlier? What had brought about this radical change in her attitude? Surely Lady Agena and Regis were not suddenly become monstrous?

You had not then seen them as you did today, prying and spying in your home in your supposed absence, argued a quiet voice in the back of her mind.

Better if I had been absent, she told the voice. Then I would not have learned about a side of the Southerleighs which must disgust any person of sensibility!

Are you working on the theory that what you don't know won't hurt you? You'll catch cold at that, my girl! How can you endure the thought of a life-time spent in their company, under their control? goaded the small voice within her mind. Was it an echo of her father's sound common sense? It had a familiar ring.

But I have accepted Regis! The Heathrows feel I have done very well for the Grants, behaved just as I ought. Simon Grant's grandchildren will be members of the nobility!

They will also be Lady Agena's grandchildren—and Regis will be their father, the voice reminded her.

I cannot bear it, she thought wildly. I—I have changed. But not enough, the familiar voice sounded in her mind. You have not the courage to break off with them, the arrogant, snooping—

Fallon! It Was the echo of his voice she heard in her head, his sneering comments about the family of Simon Grant: "no pluck...no courage...hire Mistress Meek—"

—who can handle everyone's problems but her own, his voice had implied.

A light tapping on her door aroused her from self-recrimination. "Who is it?" the girl called.

"Wiggins, ma'am. Master Sholto is home."

"Has Falion left?"

"No, Miss Zelda. Can you come down? There seems to be a—problem."

Griselda stood up. Really, this was becoming intolerable! Could none of these men conduct their own affairs without appeals to her? "I shall be down in fifteen minutes," she said crisply. Welcome anger was blossoming in her breast. "Be kind enough to ask the gentlemen to await me in the drawing room."

She was amused by the obvious relief in Wiggins's voice as he said, "Yes, Miss Zelda. Thank you!"

In very little more than fifteen minutes Miss Griselda Grant swept down the main stairway of her father's town house. She presented a very different figure from the one which had fled cravenly up the servants' stairs earlier. Her face, washed clean of disguise, was restored to its usual beauty; her shining gold hair was modishly dressed; she wore a gown of blue silk exactly the color of her eyes. Her head was up and her beautiful eyes flashed. The picture she presented was enough to open the eyes of at least one of the men who awaited her.

Wiggins closed the door after her as she swept into the drawing room and confronted Fallon and her brother. Fallon drew a deep breath.

"So this is Miss Grant?" he said, and bowed deeply. "I must admit she is more handsome than Mistress Meek."

"Who is this Mistress Meek?" asked Sholto, scowling. He was nervous of the confrontation with Fallon and his sister. "What difference does it make to my sister and me what some female looks like?"

When Fallon merely raised an eyebrow at this display of querulousness, Sholto went on, sullenly, "I cannot understand what you are doing here,

Fallon. I was informed by my sister that she would make all right—! You did tell me, Griselda, that you would get our house back!" He frowned at her petulantly.

He behaves like a spoiled child, thought Griselda, seething with anger, and in front of Fallon! Has the boy no pride?

Unfortunately for her self-control, Fallon caught and echoed her thought. "You wish to hide behind your sister's skirts, Grant? I have told you already that I have not met Miss Grant, nor, indeed, would I expect a man's sister to intervene in a matter of play and pay." The quiet voice had a cutting edge.

Sholto's face reddened and he clenched his fists.

"I do not expect—that is, I fully, intend—" he began to bluster, then faltered and cast a beseeching glance at Griselda.

"As I informed you," Fallon interjected before Griselda could respond to Sholto's appeal, "I shall consider selling back the house when—and if—you have the courage to seek an interview with me to make me an offer." He held Sholto's eyes with a level gaze, and repeated quietly, "When and if. You have not demonstrated much courage so far, Grant. It would seem that your sister deserves a manlier protector."

Must he lash at the boy so unmercifully? Griselda opened her mouth to make a heated defense of Sholto, then shut it again. For the boy, white-faced, had straightened his shoulders.

"May I wait on you, sir, for the purpose of redeeming my sister's house...which I lost to you?"

Fallon nodded curtly. "This is Tuesday. I shall receive you in Bishop Street on Friday at twelve noon...that is, if three days will give you time to get the money?"

Sholto's face went even paler. He had to clear his throat. "I shall do my best. The amount?"

"Exactly what I wagered when you asked if you might put up your town house as security for a like amount—ten thousand pounds."

Fascinated, Griselda watched her brother, white to the lips, digest this intelligence. But when he said, in a voice like a croak, "And the farm?" she could have embraced him. Spoiled, sullen, childish, Sholto might be, but he was facing up to this as she had never seen him do before. The room, Sholto, Fallon, blurred before her eyes, and she realized that there were tears of pride of her lashes.

Fallon merely bowed slightly. He could at least have said something in praise of Sholto's courage, thought Griselda angrily. Then she wondered if he might be behaving correctly according to that thing known as a Gentleman's Code.

Sholto was repeating, in a stronger voice, "The amount for the farm?"

Fallon shrugged. "We can settle that between us when you come," he said. "I shall tell you now that it will suit me to take up residence here this evening, and to remain here until Sunday afternoon. During that time I shall entertain several friends at dinner Saturday night, and invite a lady to drink tea here tomorrow afternoon."

Sholto frowned.

Fallon raised his eyebrows.

Sholto said hurriedly, "Wiggins informs me that all the servants are at the farm, and there are just a temporary cook and a couple of hired girls—"

"Then there will be less talk, when your own servants return, if they have not been aware that this house has been temporarily in the possession of another owner."

Sholto looked mutinous. "I do not think the present staff can manage a dinner party—"

"I shall bring my own servants to assist yours," said Fallon smoothly. Griselda's eyes flew to his face, but it was unreadable.

"You have invited a lady to drink tea with you here?" Sholto persisted.

"My housekeeper, Mistress Meek, will be here to satisfy *les convenances*, if that is what is worrying you."

"Oh, no!" Sholto was embarrassed. "I just—wondered what lady...if the lady was one who knew whose house this is—"

"The lady is a newcomer to town, and has never heard of Sholto or Griselda Grant—or of Lady Southerleigh," Fallon added shrewdly.

Sholto's face cleared. "Oh, then there surely can be no objection! Did you know, Griselda, I met the Southerleighs as I came in? I naturally supposed they had been visiting you, but they told me you were still in Paris—*Paris*? Now I come to think of it, that's deuced odd! I'd no idea you'd gone to Paris."

"I had not," said Griselda, who had been in, a panic since Fallon had cast his bomb. *Mistress Meek to be present to satisfy convention?* What madness was this? She pulled herself together. "I asked Wiggins to deny me today because I could not face them—"

"I don't blame you!" said Sholto with a grimace. "That woman! All the same, it's a queer start! Wiggins told me they'd been all over the house. If they thought you were in Paris—"

"Lady Southerleigh came to see the house so she could decide whether or not to sell it," explained Fallon.

"Sell it? The woman must be all about in her head! The place belongs to my sister."

"Still, after I'm married to Regis," Griselda began to explain.

"Oh, *then*!" said Sholto. "Well, I shall take lodging somewhere in the city—a neat, small place with just Calver to look after me—and one or two other

servants. I tell you to your face, Zelda, I couldn't stand living anywhere near that woman!"

"You have more sense than I credited you with," said Fallon kindly. "Will you stay here until Sunday? I should be pleased to have you at dinner Saturday night."

Sholto looked affronted. "I think not," he said stiffly. "I shall stay at a hotel with my sister. She would not wish to stay in a public inn alone."

Fallon turned to Griselda. "Miss Grant?"

He was giving her her chance. Griselda's mind raced with conjectures. Was he asking her to stay or to go? Anger rose again in her breast. It was not fair of him to force her to make the choice! If she stayed, what was to be her role in the play? He was offering her no guarantees, no concessions. *Stay with me, his arrogance stated, stay on my terms.*

"Sholto, you might take rooms for us both at the Grand Hotel. I may be able to join you there sooner than I think."

"Not at once?" Sholto looked puzzled.

"I shall be staying with—friends for the next day or so," Griselda replied. "A prior engagement."

"Oh, very well! I'll just tell Calver to pack fresh linen for me. The Grand Hotel! It will be a famous thing!" His face fell. "I say, Zelda, I'd better talk to you before you go to your friends. If I am to redeem the property," he explained to Fallon, "I shall have to ask my father's lawyers to advance me the money. And that means telling them what a—a fool I've been."

"You wish your sister to go with you to face them?"

Sholto's face darkened. After a moment said sullenly, "I was going to ask that of her."

"Of course I shall go," said his sister, glaring at Fallon.

Sholto shook his head. "He's right, it would be better if I went alone," he admitted.

Fallon held out his hand. After an instant of surprise, Sholto clasped it reluctantly.

"It's only thirteen years till I come into my inheritance. The Heathrows can take some of the loan out of my allowance every quarter until then!" With a sneering smile, Sholto went quickly out of the room.

Griselda was feeling in some charity with Fallon for his handling of Sholto, but the gamester soon managed to rid her of benevolent feelings.

"Your father showed less than the acumen he is reputed to have possessed when he left his fortune in such a way that Sholto will not have control of his share until he is thirty," Fallon said grimly. "Did he intend the boy to be tied to your apron strings for years? 'Twill make a cripple out of him! He would be better to defy you and the lawyers and run off!"

"I hope you will refrain from putting any such idea in his head," retorted Griselda, between anger and alarm.

"He's spoiled, headstrong, ill-disciplined," was Fallon's answer. "You do not handle him well, my girl!"

"You have the effrontery to criticize me!" snapped Griselda, "'My house-keeper, Mistress Meek, will be here!'" she quoted acidly. "You are an unprincipled ruffian! What part had you planned for me to take in your affairs? If you expect me to act as a servant, to wait upon your Irish bullies and that—*woman*—!"

Fallon grinned unforgivably. "I thought that was where the shoe pinched! Not wait upon them, Mistress Meek. Just see to, it that the dinner is as good as you have trained me to expect—"

So that was what he wanted! Not a partner to share his difficulties and his triumphs, to enter into his council as an equal—oh, no! Mr. Fallon didn't want a friend. He needed a cook! Griselda shook with irrational fury. "You would really try to use me as a servant in my own house? Is it not enough that you force Denny to wait upon the bullies who struck him? You are despicable! If my brother were not in your power, I would have you thrown from the house this instant. As it is, you must be content with what servants you can hire. *I despise you!*"

Fallon had stopped smiling. "If you think—!" he began furiously, then changed his mind. His face assumed its inscrutable gamester's mask. "If that is how you feel, Miss Grant, you had better go to the hotel with your brother. I had planned to explain my purpose to you, but I see that my idea of including you in any scheme of such a creature as you think me would be quite ineligible. I shall bid you good-day."

His bow was correct and cold. He closed the drawing-room door quietly behind him. In a few moments Griselda heard the sound of the heavy front door closing.

When Wiggins entered the drawing room, the girl looked up dully. "What now?"

Wiggins held the silver salver on which he normally presented to her the cards of callers and the letters brought by the post. On the tray now was a large roll of bills. Wiggins's face was impassive. "Mr. Fallon instructed me to give you this, Miss Zelda. He says it is the wager you won."

"Throw it in the fire!" commanded Griselda. "No, wait! Give it to Sholto. Tell him that is five thousand pounds he will not have to ask the Heathrows for. And then you may ask Mary to come to my room to help me pack. I am going to the Grand Hotel with my brother."

16

Mr. Sholto Grant and his sister, with valet and maid and a mountain of luggage, were ushered into the most luxurious suite of rooms in the Grand Hotel. There were two airy bedrooms, each opening onto a small private balcony overlooking the hotel's private courtyard, an arrangement shared by the other two suites on the same corridor. Each bedroom had its own dressing room in which a truckle bed could be set up for the servant of a guest. The bedrooms were joined, or separated, by a large sitting room furnished in the first style of elegance. There was even a small fireplace and a luster chandelier.

Young Mr. Grant was very pleased with everything, and inquired as to the hour when dinner would be served in the dining room, and what plays were currently being offered in the city.

"For I have been in the country on a repairing lease," he explained to the landlord, who had himself conducted to their quarters such affluent guests.

While Sholto was arranging for tickets to a play and choosing dinner for himself and his sister, Griselda walked to the door which led out to the balcony. When consulted by Sholto as to her preferences for the meal, she

replied gently that she thought she would have a little chicken and some tea here in their sitting room, and go to bed early.

"Oh, that is the shabbiest thing!" Sholto was at first rallying and then disappointed, but she satisfied him by entering into his plans for his own entertainment with feigned interest. Better to have him fully occupied at a theater than hanging about the hotel lobby or roaming the town.

As their host, satisfied that all was to the taste of his guests, bowed himself out the door, Sholto said, "Well. Griselda, I'll just wander down to the coffee room and spy out the land before dinner."

She smiled at his boyish enthusiasm, but said in a serious tone, "We'll need to talk a little about your interview tomorrow with the Heathrows, don't you think?"

Sholto's ebullience faded. "I suppose so," he said grudgingly. "I'll be back in time to talk before I dress for dinner."

In fact he was back within half an hour, good humor magically restored. "Griselda! There's the most beautiful girl I ever set eyes on, downstairs at this very moment, and she's staying at this hotel with her brother, just like you and me! Brother's a *great go*—huge fellow with shoulders like a bull, dressed very fine! He was most friendly—asked me to their suite for a quiet game of cards after dinner. Their suite is on this floor—quite handy, you can see! It seems they're just over from Ireland and don't know many people here as yet. D'ye think I should turn back my tickets to the theater and accept their invitation? Or perhaps get three more tickets and ask them to be my guests at the play?"

With a feeling of horror, Griselda realized why the name of the Grand Hotel had come quickly to her mind when she had decided to get away from the town house. She had heard it from Lady Roslyn Maghery. This was a disaster! Sholto was looking at her inquiringly. There was no time to think—!

"Have they a friend with them?"

Sholto was startled. "Why, yes, how did you know? Oh, I see! *Three* tickets! Yes, Sir Ronyl introduced me to their friend, Mr. Terence Delevan. Should I offer to host them, Gris?"

Trying not to spoil Sholto's eager anticipation, Griselda replied pleasantly, "Better not to seem too solicitous, my dear. I'm sure they are constantly toad-eaten in Ireland, if they are of the nobility. It would make a stronger impression of your own consequence if you went slowly with the friendship, don't you think?"

"But *they* asked *me* to play cards!" protested Sholto.

"And you told them you were engaged for the theater tonight, and would be pleased to join them another time, I'll be bound. Very self-possessed—quite the man of the town," smiled his sister.

Sholto preened a little. "Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I did. It all happened so quickly, and I blurted out my plans for tonight before I had a chance to think what I'd rather do," confessed Sholto. "You think my hesitation made a good impression?"

"It was bound to," said Griselda earnestly. "Believe me, they'll value you the more for not agreeing too quickly. I'll wager they suggested a later night's entertainment?"

"Well, they did!" said Sholto with satisfaction. "They asked me to join them at dinner tomorrow night, or even to drop in to their suite later, for cards."

"You see?" Griselda smiled. "They think the better of you for not coming to heel at their first whistle."

Sholto frowned at an analogy he could not like. "But I *wish* to further the acquaintance, Gris! They're regular top-of-the-trees, out-and-outers!"

Over my dead body, thought Griselda grimly, but she assumed a complaisant air and said only, "Of course you do! But I've changed my mind, dear. I'm lonely. Have your dinner up here with me before you go to the theater. It will be above anything cozy! We'll have Mary light the fire—see, it's already laid—and Calver shall bring up the dinner as soon as may be. What have you decided to order?" And so, talking and coaxing, she kept him out of the public rooms and away from the Magherys for one night.

She was still awake when Sholto returned from the theater. She overheard him relating all the details of his experience, which had evidently been a delightful one, to Calver. She drifted off to sleep secure in the belief that he hadn't seen the Irish adventurers at the theater—an eventuality she had feared. Probably they had not yet discovered the extent of her brother's fortune!

She had left instructions with Calver to inform her the instant Sholto rose. She ordered breakfast to be served in their sitting room, and was dressed and at table before Sholto emerged from his bedroom. He was not in the least tired from his pleasuring of the night before, and with very little encouragement from his sister, told her all about the play: actors, theater, and audience. This safe topic lasted all through breakfast, and when it and the meal seemed to be coming to an end together, Griselda suggested that they might spend the day seeing some of the more interesting sights of London, which, because of Sholto's youth and their quiet way of life, they had not previously done.

Sholto began by regarding this proposal with considerable suspicion, but when he was reassured that his sister did not mean to drag him through museums or art galleries or any such Gothic starts, his resistance dissolved. He was forced to admit that a variety show offering rope dancers, performing animals, jugglers and fire-eaters promised very good entertainment indeed, and agreed to escort his sister there that very afternoon. He also agreed that a balloon ascension from St. George's Fields about noon would make a very acceptable

aperitif before the main attraction. So brother and sister set off in good spirits before Lord Ronyl's party had emerged from their bedrooms, and Griselda felt she had won a small victory. Surely Sholto, after such exertions and delights as the variety show must provide, would be willing to eat dinner in their sitting room and might even welcome an early bed.

Indeed, it seemed to be so. Dinner tête-à-tête was pleasantly beguiled by Sholto's enthusiastic reliving of the day's excitements, voted beyond anything great. His sister bid him goodnight at ten P.M. in the comfortable belief that he, too, was bound for his Couch. She took the risk of suggesting that since the meeting with Fallon was set for Friday, tomorrow might be a good time to visit the Heathrows.

Sholto muttered something intended to be appeasing, and Griselda thought she had turned his thoughts away from the glamor of his new acquaintances and toward his adult responsibilities.

Alas for her hopes! Sholto, repairing to his own room, began to think nervously of the coming interview with the lawyers, and his imagination conjured up such grim pictures of their scorn and censure that all hope of sleep fled, and he began to cast about in his mind for any possible way of getting money without asking those self-righteous old men.

Of course the offer of his charming new friends to entertain him at cards popped into his mind. It was not long before he was visualizing himself as a very ungrateful dog to have ignored their invitation. After a few minutes of worrying about whether it was proper to win money from such kind, if casual, acquaintances, he slipped quietly out of his bedroom into the hall and sought the Magherys' suite. He was resolved he would win just a little—not enough to be missed by men of such obvious wealth as Lord Ronyl and Mr. Delevan.

He could have spared his scruples. When he staggered back to the ministrations of his valet five hours later, he had a dim and uneasy recollection of drinking a great deal too much brandy and losing a great deal of money.

17

Griselda was made aware of this latest disaster as she sat at breakfast the following morning. The day had promised to be unseasonably warm, and Mary had opened the door onto the small balcony outside the sitting room. Griselda, hungrily regarding the ample breakfast the waiter was laying before her, charged Mary to require Calver to rouse his master at once, if he wished to find a single bite of food left.

Calver came in immediately, sober-faced, and informed Miss Grant that her brother had returned to his bedroom very late—or very early, he said with a titter, if one was to be quite accurate—and more than a trifle above himself. Then seeing the surprise on Miss Grant's face turn to shock and anger, he began to make excuses for himself.

Griselda cut him short. "You are not his keeper, Calver. How could you prevent him if he wished to get out? Do you know where he went?"

"From what he said, ma'am, and how he looked when he came in, he was somewhere within the hotel. No hat—no top coat...Perhaps he has formed a new acquaintance here?"

"I had better see him at once. It is essential that he be in condition to conduct an important business interview this afternoon—"

"If you'll permit me to say so, Miss Grant, I do not think Mr. Sholto will be able," Calver advised her. "He is still sleeping heavily, and will not awake in very plump currant."

"I apprehend you are telling me that he's drunk and will have a vile headache when he wakes," translated Griselda grimly. "You had better go out to an apothecary's and get me the things I shall write down on this paper." She went to the little escritoire and wrote briefly. As she handed the list to Calver, she said, "This is most unfortunate. Had I had any notion Mr. Sholto was planning to go out, I would have warned you to try to dissuade him, or to notify me. However, what's done is done. While you are gone, Mary and I shall get cold water and towels and more coffee. We must do our possible to rouse my brother as soon as you return with the ingredients for the settler." She picked up her reticule. "Here is money for the purchases you will make."

Calver took the money obsequiously from her hands, but he resented having to be funded by a woman. Queer sort of go it was, when a young sprig as rich as grease had to hang on his sister's sleeve for every penny! The valet felt personally abused. Serve the bullocking Miss Grant right if her brother did kick over the traces now and then! Let her manage the meet with the lawyers herself, if she was so concerned about it! Smiling and bowing, he took his leave.

One hideous hour later, Sholto, queasy and shivering, was huddled in an armchair in his bedroom, glaring at his sister through red-rimmed eyes. He was dumbly resentful and sullen. Knowing him, Griselda wasted no time in recriminations.

"You may leave us now, Calver. Mary, bring one more pot of coffee, please, and then you may have an hour to rest."

When they were alone, she turned to her brother. "How bad is it?"

He pretended not to understand.

"How much money did you lose to the Magherys?" she demanded.

He muttered that he hadn't kept count.

"The more fool you, since you'd so little money in your pocket—Oh, *no! Not the five thousand pounds!*"

Sholto looked very sick indeed. He made fumbling gestures toward the pockets of a coat he did not have on. "I can't remember," he whined.

Griselda set her teeth. "Can you remember if that's all you lost? Or did you give them notes of hand, or whatever they're called?"

"Vowels," said Sholto. "IOUs. I don't think so."

"Did you by any chance wager the town house or the farm?"

"How could I, when I have not yet redeemed them from that gamester Fallon?" snarled Sholto weakly.

"I hope you are right! Heathrow may be persuaded to buy back the properties once, but I cannot imagine him doing so twice in the same week!"

She stared down at him. He looked very young and very sick as he huddled in his overly ornate dressing gown, a boy trying very hard to ape the modes and manners of the Polite World, and succeeding only in aping its worst weaknesses and vices. She had to own herself beaten. What could she do to make him a man of whom their father might have been proud? How would he have dealt with this latest folly? She remembered that Simon Grant had left the boy to the too-fond indulgence of a silly mother. The girl shook her head wearily. Fallon might have saved him. There had been a flicker of something—manliness, acceptance of responsibility—when the two met at the town house. Gone now. As Fallon was gone out of her life. Griselda squared her shoulders.

"Well, Sholto, what are we to do? Can you face the interview with the Heathrows?" As she saw the look that came over his face, she answered her own question. "No, you cannot. Shall we cast ourselves upon Mr. Fallon's mercy? Or shall I go to the Heathrows in your place?"

Sholto took a ragged breath. "If you are trying to shame me into going to the lawyers while I feel this way—" he cried; then at her stare of disapproval, he broke and began to sob. "I'm sick, Zelda!"

Griselda set her lips. "Those persons with whom you played—the Magherys—are little better than blacklegs! Luring a green boy into their room, getting him drunk, and then fleecing him! I hope you will learn from this, at least enough not to play against them in future!"

"You're always at me! And this time you're far off the mark. They are members of the peerage, fine important people—as good as your precious Regis and his antidote of a mother!"

"Fine people indeed, to rob a drunken boy!"

"You'll never understand, so I shan't try to explain," he retorted.

His sister lost patience. "You may not need to explain to me, but you'd better get a story ready for the Heathrows."

Sholto refused to meet her eyes. "You'll have to see them. I can't go."

"You must. You gave your word to Fallon. Or doesn't your word mean anything?"

Sholto's face darkened from greenish-white to red. Still he said nothing.

"Oh, go back to bed!" she snapped, finally.

Sholto rose shakily from the chair. "You—you'll go to the lawyers for me?"

Griselda stared at him without expression. "No."

"But you must!"

"Go to bed."

She went into the sitting room and poured herself a cup of coffee. For several minutes she stared at the closed door of Sholto's room. Mary and Calver came back. She addressed Calver.

"You will lock the door from Mr. Sholto's room into the corridor and bring me the key. I am going out shortly. When I leave, you will lock the door of this room and keep the key in your pocket. Mr. Sholto is ill. He is not to leave this apartment. Do I make myself clear?"

Calver looked glum. "Mr. Sholto'll get rid of me."

"Impossible. He has not the power to do so. Your salary is paid by the estate. I shall not permit him to dismiss you." She waited, not sure how much to confide. Then, "Last night my brother played cards and lost money he intended to keep for another purpose. He was made drunk by people I believe are dishonest. My brother has been completely taken in by them. If by any chance they should call on him here, or send a message, you are to say he is out."

"They'll never believe it."

"Nevertheless you will say it." Griselda was startled at Calver's insolence. "You will keep the door closed until I return. That is an order. And *I am able* to dismiss you!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Calver, looking alarmed.

Griselda was not reassured. The valet had taken on the attitudes and the sullen self-will of his young master, evidently very partisan and resentful of Miss Grant's control. It was an unfortunate situation, but she could do little at the moment to correct it.

"Mary will bring food to you, and anything Mr. Sholto may ask for. You will keep the doors for me, and deny my brother to all comers. Get the keys now."

While Calver was quietly locking the doors of Sholto's room, Griselda went into her bedroom to get her cloak. She was deeply troubled. If only there were someone she could consult! Someone who would give her advice without recrimination or argument. It was probably inevitable that she would have to lay the whole matter before the Heathrows, but if there were any other choice, she would prefer to conceal Sholto's weakness from them. Could she, perhaps, appeal to Fallon for more time? Hardly. She recalled the violence of her denunciation of him on Tuesday. Remembering, her face became hot with embarrassment. Although she had flung the charge at him, she had not really thought him contemptible. Why, she asked herself, did she behave with such uncharacteristic anger in her dealings with this man? She hardly knew the woman she had become in these past few weeks. She put up her hands to cool her burning cheeks, then walked over and stood beside the open door leading out onto the small balcony. The breeze refreshed her. She stared with unseeing eyes at the metal railings.

Suddenly she heard her surname spoken in a man's voice, almost at her shoulder.

"...young Grant. Did you arrange to get him here again tonight?"

"I keep tellin' ye he's no longer worth our time," came the unmistakable brogue of Lord Ronyl Maghery. "Didn't I take five thousand pounds off him last night? He's plucked clean! I say, let's get along with our plan against Timmy-boy. Have ye found him yet? Has he left the town?"

They are in the bedroom next to this, Griselda realized. She stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe lest they discover her presence, yet straining to overhear what they might say next.

Delevan was speaking. "Fallon's servant denied him yesterday. Told me his master had been called away on urgent private business. That would explain why he failed to pick us up."

"Business? Him? What business could a gamester have?" objected Maghery.

"Don't underrate the fellow. It's obvious he's done very well for himself amongst the English. You should not show your hate of him so clearly, me bucko."

"Did he not have the audacity to raise his eyes to me sister?"

Delevan laughed softly. "Trust Ros to deal with him," he advised. "Isn't our whole venture a clever stratagem of her own? She's off to his house this very day to discover if he's really there or gone away. I'd put my brass on your sister, Ronyl. She's irresistible. She cozened him once for our sport. She can do it again for our profit."

"I cannot like it," persisted Ronyl, "her trafficking with that presumptuous rascal. I tell ye I cannot wait to get him in me clutches."

"You've no finesse, Ronyl," Delevan said mildly. "You go runnin' after the preacher's son, poor clod, and leave the young Croesus untouched."

"Give me but one chance at Fallon! I'll get him blind drunk and forge his name to enough vowels to ruin him!"

"Clumsy as well as heavy-handed, laddy," chided Delevan softly. "Plenty of time to pluck Fallon. I keep tellin' you we would do better to get that young cit in here tonight. He's half flash and half foolish, but he's a pigeon worthy of our milking."

"A green halfling!" grunted Ronyl. "D'ye think he's got more than five thousand pounds? I'd his whole fortune off him last night."

"On the contrary, dear boy. I have done some research today and I find he's worth a score of Fallons. He's underage, of course, but he's heir to one of the greatest fortunes in England. That five thousand is just pocket money to him."

Maghery whistled. "D'ye say so? How about parents? Guardians?"

"He's an orphan," Delevan advised him. "There's a sister, but she's older, I hear, and lives very quiet. The boy don't get his hands on the dibs till he's thirty, but while we're waitin' for Fallon to come back to town, we can employ

ourselves profitably with the halfling. We'll get enough of his vowels to set us all up for life!"

"Who wants to wait ten or fifteen years to collect?" objected Ronyl.

"Who is it says we'll have to wait? Only get him here, make him drunk again, and flatter him into playing for larger sums, take his IOUs, and when we have a sizable sum, we'll take his debts of honor to his lawyers and press for payment. They'll be glad to settle for part of it."

"Or we take 'em to his sister, and put the screws to her." Ronyl's voice was eager. "What is she like? How old is she?"

"Oho, Ronyl, me lad! You're not so thick-witted as I had supposed! The sister, eh? Do you think to go for the whole shebang instead of just a trifle?"

There was a pregnant silence, followed by their laughter, then Lord Ronyl's voice, "What are we waitin' for? I'll look through the hotel for the wealthy boyo. If he's out sightseein' as he was yesterday, I'll leave a note for him. Where's his room?"

"Somewhere on this floor. Ask at the desk. I'll order brandy and lay out the special cards."

There was more laughter, heavy and predatory. Griselda silently thanked Heaven that she had Sholto safe asleep in his room with the doors locked, but she couldn't keep him there forever. What could be done?

She walked back into the sitting room to make sure Calver had locked Sholto in. As she did, she heard a nervous tapping on the door leading to the corridor. Griselda went past Calver and flung the door open, the light of battle in her eyes. Wiggins stood in the corridor.

When he was inside and the door shut again, the butler delivered his news. "Mr. Fallon has not come to the house, Miss Zelda. There's been no word. I felt I must consult you. Has there been a change of plans?"

Griselda looked at Calver. "You may give the keys to Mr. Sholto's room to Wiggins, then go and find Mary." When he had gone, the girl turned to her butler. "The Magherys are here, Wiggins, next door. It is my fault that we are here as well. I had heard Lady Roslyn mention where they were staying, but I forgot where I heard it, and only remembered the name of the hotel."

"It is a reputable place, Miss Zelda. You are not likely to come to harm here."

"Sholto played cards with Sir Ronyl last night and lost the five thousand pounds Mr. Fallon paid me on Tuesday."

Wiggins was rendered speechless by this disaster.

"They got him drunk and I have no doubt they cheated him. I overheard one of them mentioning the 'special cards.' But since I cannot prevent him from gaming with them, I must lock him up."

"You cannot do that for long, Miss Zelda, in a public inn. He'll raise the roof!"

Griselda bit at her knuckle. "How if we—you and I, perhaps with Calver's help—got him away from here and down to the farm?"

"I doubt he'd stay there, him misliking the place so much," objected Wiggins gloomily. "There's no one can control him."

"Devil Fallon could," Griselda heard herself saying. "He handled him very well at the house on Tuesday."

Wiggins glanced at her speculatively. "Yes, Miss Zelda, I believe he could. He's a very persuasive fellow."

"You like him, Wiggins? That gamester?"

Wiggins pursed his lips. "Your father would have liked him, I think. He's honest—a decent kind of man—and as for his being a gamester, your father was used to say a merchant was no better than a gambler, always taking great risks."

Calver came in quietly, Mary wide-eyed at his heels.

Griselda made up her mind. "Mary, you may pack my belongings. We'll be leaving shortly." The girl hurried away. "This place is too dangerous," she told the men servants. "If I must come to points with Sholto, I don't intend to do it within hearing of half of London." She nodded decisively. "Calver, is my brother asleep?"

"He was when I left him, and will be for some time, I venture to say."

"Good! I wish you to request a private interview with the landlord. You will tell him very quietly that Mr. Sholto Grant is ill, and that his sister and his doctor will remove him to his country estate this afternoon. Our host should be more than eager to get a sick man out of his house without fanfare. He may even permit you to remove him by way of the back door." She studied their puzzled faces. "Don't you see? I want to get my brother out of the clutches of those men. He's only seventeen—too green to deal with their kind..."

Wiggins nodded agreement. "They won't see us leave, and if they inquire, they'll be told he's gone to the country. Very good, Miss Zelda! But where will we be taking him?"

"Home," said Griselda. "There's a lock on the nursery suite at the top of the house, and bars on the windows. We'll just keep him there a day or two, until I can arrange something he'll like better. Go now to the landlord, Calver, and tell him what I instructed you. Wiggins will give you money to settle the account here." When this had been done, and the valet had left, Griselda turned to her butler. "When Calver returns, have him pack Sholto's things. When all is ready, rouse him enough to dress him and get him down the back way. Can you manage?"

"Yes, Miss Zelda." He smiled at the girl. "Don't fret. It's a good plan. I left Tom Coachman in the street, waiting."

"I knew I could depend upon you! I'll go at once to Mr. Fallon's to see what's amiss there. We've got to maintain the connection until he sells us back the property, you know." She looked sternly at Wiggins.

"Oh, yes, Miss Zelda. We need to maintain the connection," The old man smothered a slight smile.

"Well, then," Griselda continued, her glance still suspicious, "I'll send the carriage back to wait for you and Sholto and Calver. At the rear of the hotel, I think. Mary can take the luggage home in a hired chaise—no, wait! Let us leave no trails to Thornapple Square!"

"Surely those creatures would not have the effrontery to seek out Mr. Sholto in his own home!"

"Would they not? The Maghery had the effrontery to consider wedding me for my fortune! They are leeches! Once they have tasted blood, they will cling!" As she talked, Griselda put on her cloak and a veiled bonnet. She said to Wiggins, "When you've got Sholto settled in the nursery, you are to see that he stays there. Have you enough resolution to control him that far? To lock him in for his own good?"

"Yes, Miss Zelda. I love him too, you know."

"Bless you!" Griselda took a deep breath. "Then you may send the carriage back for Mary and the luggage, and when they are home, send the carriage to Fallon's residence for me."

"And if Lady Southerleigh calls again?"

"Tell her—tell her nothing!" said Griselda grimly. "And do not let her inside the door."

"Yes, Miss Zelda," said Wiggins happily.

Griseld' sought out her carriage and reached it without incident.

18

Orrible was alone in the kitchen when Griselda came quietly in. When he saw her, his face lighted up. "Oh, ma'am!" he said. It was like a prayer.

"Is he here?"

"Yes. 'E's been 'ere since Choosdy. Locked 'isself in 'is room, 'e 'as, an' won't let any of us in. Ceptin' Denny to bring 'im a bottle of brandy las' night. 'E must've 'ad bad luck. M'ybe 'e's lost all 'is brass."

"How could that be? You tell me he has kept to his room, so how could he lose his money?"

Orrible was struck by the wisdom of this. His face brightened into a beaming smile. "Now yer 'ere, Mistress Meek, all's bowman. 'E said as you was 'is luck, the day you left. Choosdy. 'E went out all rigged in a new toge and shap, lookin' fine as fivepence. That's when 'e said you was 'is luck. I'm glad yet back!"

Griselda remembered last Tuesday. The excitement of shared hazard, hiding from Lady Southerleigh. Then Fallon's firmness with Sholto, and the boy's reluctant response. Fallon could have made a man of him or at least helped him to stand on his own feet. And how had she rewarded Fallon? By ordering

him out, refusing to listen to his plan calling him contemptible! *Fallon's luck!* She had behaved worse than the Lady Roslyn!

Griselda laid aside her cloak and bonnet and went to the stove. "I suppose you three have not bothered to eat regularly since I left?"

Orrible shrugged. "Denny fixed somethin'. We been in the dumps, I tell ye. Barty's been on the door, tellin' everyone Fallon's in the country. Denny's been sittin' outside the Guv'ner's room, waitin' for a chance to do somethin' for 'im."

"Go up and bring Denny and Barty down here."

"Yes, ma'am!" Orrible was off like a racehorse.

In a minute Denny stood before her, tears on his cheeks. "Oh, Mistress Meek!" was all he said. Barty grinned wordlessly.

Griselda patted Denny's shoulder. "It is going to be all right, Denny. I won't leave till he's on his feet again."

Denny couldn't speak. Griselda made them all sit down at the kitchen table while she hastily prepared sandwiches and waited for the kettle to boil. Then as the three servants ate, Denny tried to tell her what happened since she left.

Mr. Delevan had come Wednesday afternoon and been told Fallon was called away on business. He had been reluctant to accept the message but had finally left.

"Sure an' I don't know what to do for the best, ma'am, an' that's the truth! Himself had a plan. He was goin' to invite those two villains to some grand house he had won, and tempt them to wager large sums with him, and then win it all!"

"But what if he had lost?" protested the girl, recalling the references to special cards and vowels forged against a host too drunk to know what was happening.

"I told him that same thing!" wailed Denny. "All he would say was he'd found his Luck at last!"

"In 'igh gig 'e was," corroborated Orrible.

Griselda forced herself to face the fact that Fallon had, early in the game, discovered her true person—and liked it. He had not appeared at all surprised when he caught her trying to hide her portrait. Could she truly have been the "luck" he boasted of? She set her teeth against the remorse she felt. A little more of this, she thought, and I'll be wailing like Denny! "He won't come down? Then I'll go up and see what I can do."

"He won't open the door to any of us," warned Denny.

"He'll open it for me," the girl said stoutly.

The door to Fallon's bedroom was uncompromisingly locked. Griselda knocked firmly.

"Go away," said Devil Fallon. The weariness in his voice shocked her.

"I must see you," Griselda said. "It is Griselda Grant." There was a silence within the room. Then, "Go away."

"Open the door, Mr. Fallon! There are things you must know—" Silence.

"Tim, I need your help. I am in great trouble," Griselda said humbly.

There was the sound of footsteps toward the door, the scratch and rattle of a key, and then the door swung open. Fallon stood looking at her from his darkened room.

Griselda was not sure what it was she had expected to see. She had ministered, during the few weeks she had been Mistress Meek the housekeeper, to Fallon, drunk, Fallon hung over, and Fallon contented and boyishly light-hearted. This man, looking at her so quietly from the shadows, was a stranger. The lines of the face, covered by a stubble of dark beard, were harder and leaner than she remembered. The thick dark hair hung over his forehead. His expression was unreadable,

"It is you," he said after a moment. "I had thought—" He seemed to reconsider what he had been about to say. "How may I serve you, Miss Grant?"

"May I...come in?"

He considered this a moment. Then he shook his head. "It would not be suitable. If you will give me a few moments, I shall join you in the drawing room."

The girl moved back a little. Fallon shut his door.

Ten minutes later, when Fallon joined her downstairs, she had had time to take in the fact that the room was colder, less alive than when she had been in charge. The flowers in the big bowl were wilted; the faintest haze of dust made a patina on tables and chests. Fallon came in quietly. His hair was neatly clubbed, he wore a fresh shirt and neckcloth and a plain dark suit. He did not smile, nor did he seat himself,

"You must excuse the appearance I presented upstairs, ma'am," he said constrainedly. "Rumpled linen—no coat—I was not expecting company."

"Oh, Fallon, what does all that matter? I've seen you when you had more than a coat missing!" She laughed shakily, but he did not answer in kind.

"You said you were in trouble, Miss Grant. How may I help you?"

So it was to be like that. Could she have been wrong? Was it Roslyn who had brought this pain into his face? In the better light of the drawing room, Griselda could see the dark shadows under the gray eyes, and the wary, guarded lines around the mouth. I must not be discouraged, she told herself. I am in trouble and I believe he can help—perhaps only he.

"My—my fool of a brother, as you so justly named him, has proved it again. He was enticed into a game of piquet with Ronyl Maghery, and lost the five thousand pounds you paid me."

Fallon waited in silence.

Griselda clasped her hands together tightly and kept her voice steady. "I overheard Mr. Delevan and Lord Ronyl discussing you, Sholto, and myself. You are to be made drunk, after which Lord Ronyl will forge your name to enough vowels to ruin you."

Fallon was frowning at her, surprised and doubtful.

"Sholto is to be fleeced of enormous sums through the use of special cards—although why they should need them when he plays so poorly, I cannot guess! It seems like shooting ducks in a barrel."

"Fish," corrected Fallon.

Griselda smiled. Surely that iron reserve was melting a little? "Thank you. Fish in a barrel. Then when the two rascals have won enough of Sholto's IOUs, they plan to force the Heathrows to redeem them. Or alternately, they may decide to collect Sholto's debts from his old maid sister."

"They can't have seen you," Fallon said shortly.

"I have reason to be grateful for that," Griselda advised him, "since your noble friend is also considering marrying me, and getting the whole shebang, to use Delevan's graceful phrase—if I'm halfway presentable, that is."

"Damn him!" said Fallon, roused at last. "I'm glad you told me. You must contrive to stay out of their reach—"

"You underestimate their greed," said Griselda. "They are searching for Sholto at this very moment."

"Where is he?"

"I have him locked in the nursery at the top of our house, but I don't place much dependence on my ability to keep him there above a day or two."

"Your servants—your lawyers—can none of them protect you?"

"We can keep the Maghery out, but how do we keep Sholto in? That is where you can help."

"I?" It seemed she had managed to surprise him again. "How?" Then his face hardened. "I understand you find me contemptible. Set one rogue to catch the others?"

She knew now that it was of utmost importance to her that she heal this hurt she had dealt him. More was at stake than helping Sholto. Only complete honesty would serve. She took a steadying breath.

"Can you forget that foolish word, Tim Fallon? I didn't mean it. I said it because I was afraid. I had never met anyone like you before, and I did not understand my own feelings toward you. I"—her eyes fell before the searching look in his—"I was jealous of the Lady Roslyn, and I was afraid and angry at—the way you made me feel."

She met his eyes fully, squarely, at last. "Please don't think you must be kind just because I have told you this, or that you must do the polite to

Sholto's old maid sister! I won't speak of this again, if you will say you have forgiven me those foolish, childish words. I want you to know that I was suffering an—irritation of the nerves when I spoke to you so rudely." She essayed a smile. "Can you forgive me, and be my friend?" She held out her hand.

Fallon took it, still staring into her face.

"Do you know," he said softly in a voice she had never heard from him before, "you have the most enchanting smile I have ever seen on a human face?" and he bent his dark head and set his lips on her hand.

Because the moment was so charged with emotion, so precious to her, Griselda had the impulse to run away from it, to gloss it over with a social response. But she must not hurt this man again. So she said, gently, "Thank you. From you, that compliment makes me very happy. But Denny tells me you have not eaten for two days. Will you not let him bring you some coffee and a little food?"

"Still managing my household, Mistress Meek?" Fallon's voice shook just a little as he released her hand and smiled down at her. "I'll come to the kitchen, where I have no doubt you've spread a meal for my staff. Then we shall plan our strategy."

It was pleasant to sit together around the clean-scrubbed table again and share food and drink. Fallon introduced the servants formally to Miss Griselda Grant, and found they had been aware of the lady's real identity as soon as he had—such is the excellent intelligence reconnaissance of servants' halls.

"Do not tell me that you knew the scar was false?" he begged. "I thought I had been the only one to notice that!"

Orrible grinned. "Fust time Mistress Meek put it on crooked, we all knew it was gammon," he averred. "No tellin' what the lydies will get it into their heads to put on their faces next!"

Even Griselda had to laugh.

Everyone wanted to talk at once. In his relief, Orrible got a little above himself and had to be given a set-down by Denny, which he took in good part, merely grinning blissfully around the circle of amused faces. When they had eaten, Fallon leaned back in his chair and said, "Now, ma'am, I'm myself again! And since I am sure you have a plan, I am ready to listen and take my part in it."

"Oho, Guv'ner," piped up the irrepressible Orrible, "yer tykin' a charnce, you are!"

Griselda smiled. He said it was enchanting. I must not be self-conscious! "It's my belief that when they discover that Sholto is gone beyond their reach, those creatures will come after you again, Mr. Fallon. You must not receive them here—"

"Why must I not?" challenged Fallon, smiling lazily. "A gamester must accept challenges to play. It is how he makes his living. Besides, I have personal reasons for wishing to meet those gentry. There is much between us, past and present, which must be settled."

"Yes, I can understand that. But here, alone with them in this house, you are too vulnerable to their treachery. You must meet them where there are many other men, so they dare not attempt to cheat you or do you harm. Above all, you must not drink with them. I would not put it past them to dope the wine." Then, recalling an earlier incident, Griselda smiled demurely.

"That's good advice, sir," Denny was saying soberly.

Fallon considered the situation. "I suppose I could get Corman and Drowne here again, and a few more—"

"I have a better idea. It must be more public, more important, than a few men gathering in this house."

Fallon cocked an eyebrow at her. "Do you suggest that I hire a hall?"

Griselda chuckled. "No, I suggest that you use your house in Thornapple Square."

Fallon shook his head. "Impossible! That is your home, and must be known to be so. I was a fool to ever consider using it. I shall not jeopardize your standing in Society, your reputation—"

"Fiddle-faddle!" retorted Griselda. "In the first place, it is not my house until Sholto buys it back, and at the rate he is going, I'd better plan to spend my old age at the farm. I like it better, anyway! Secondly, my reputation in Society will not suffer, since no one in that exalted circle so much as knows my name. I have few acquaintances and fewer friends—the daughters of some distant cousins with whom we occasionally went to the seaside, Worthing or Bath. My parents did not mingle with Father's business associates, and he was too busy to make friends outside his work. My mother was a semi-invalid. Now, if I have answered your objections, why don't you make up a guest list for an exclusive dinner party, to be followed by an evening at cards? And to be sure your guests accept, why not add to your invitation the announcement that this will be their last chance to recoup their losses, since you are leaving London for good a few days after the dinner?"

"That'd bring 'em!" said Denny excitedly. "There must be dozens of 'em has lost money to you, sir, an' would jump at one final chance to win it back."

Fallon smiled at Griselda. "You are ruthless! You would banish me from London? I'd have to leave, you know, if I sent out such a notice."

"Are you so eager to keep on with this life?" asked the girl curiously. "Do you—do you not have enough money saved to retire from gaming and take up some other profession?"

"You mean now, or after I've given all the losers in London their chance to get back their money from me? I may well be penniless."

"But you'd win, of course." Griselda smiled at him. "Devil's Luck!"

But for once Fallon did not return her smile. "I've a queer feeling my luck with the cards may be out," he said slowly.

Denny groaned. "I knew it! I felt it in me bones!"

His master continued, half in earnest, "I perceive in myself a sudden lack of interest in gaming."

Denny's expression of alarm was repeated on the faces of Orrible and Barty. Griselda tried to rally them from their superstitious depression. "Those two men are evil. They have robbed Sholto and plan to rob you. I would like you to fleece them so thoroughly they'll have to *swim* back to Ireland!"

Fallon threw back his head in a shout of laughter.

"Welcome home, Mistress Meek! This is the redoubtable female we all know and love! How have you planned the fleecing? For I am sure you have a plan!"

"First, for all your guests, a memorable dinner. I have noticed that a very heavy meal somewhat dulls-the wits of the diners. Then the finest wines in the cellar. There is a brandy my father used to speak' of with reverence. We'll instruct Wiggins to serve a very great deal of it to Maghery and Delevan—"

Her hearers groaned in unison. "Wicked waste!" protested Fallon, but his eyes sparkled with enjoyment.

"—while you, of course, must drink very lightly, if at all!" She pretended to frown at Fallon's cry of protest, and added sternly, "You must keep a clear head to outwit the Irish contingent!"

"You alarm me," said Fallon with a grin. "The host must stay sober, madam, while he encourages his guests to lose their wits? Or is it that you do not wish your—*champion* to lose his?" When the girl refused to rise to that provocation, he added, mock-serious, "I see that any husband of yours will be under the cat's foot!"

Griselda smiled demurely. "I should hope no husband of mine would feel the need of excessive drink."

Fallon's eyes were warm and admiring. "No husband of yours would have time," he teased. "He'd be too busy following your orders. I must say I envy the fellow."

"You envy Regis?" queried the girl, mischievously.

"That pompous young spindleshanks? I've no fear of him as a rival!"

But this was going too fast for Mistress Grant, and she brought him back to the problem at hand. "Make out your guest list. I'll write the invitations—I am thought to possess a tolerable hand—and Barty and Orrible shall deliver the notes. This is Thursday. Let us arrange the dinner for Saturday night. I warn you I shall expect several noble guests to end an air of dignity to the proceedings—and appreciate my father's brandy."

"Unlikely," Fallon advised her kindly. "Most of the peers I am acquainted with present a pretty poor figure in their cups. But I know one peer who'll come: Lord Ronyl Maghery. We could not keep that dastardly rakehell away with a shotgun, as long as he scents a pigeon to pluck."

The others laughed, but Denny did not join in the fun. The sentimental young Irishman rejoiced in the new happiness which radiated from his master like a glow, but he could not be comfortable with the situation Fallon and Miss Grant were so lightheartedly planning. He had been through the dark times, and he had a superstitious fear of the self-possessed Mr. Delevan and his companion, Lord Ronyl.

"Let it not happen again to himself!" he cried out in the depths of his fearful, loving, Irish heart.

19

At first it appeared that Denny's fears had been baseless. Miss Grant and her staff welcomed Fallon's party with open arms. Early on Friday morning, the gamester pulled up before the great mansion in Thornapple Square in his curricule, with Barty very formal, arms correctly folded, at his side. A few minutes later the carriage containing Denny, Orrible, and Fallon's wardrobe unloaded in the stable behind the house. Wiggins was too happy to see reinforcements to be scandalized by the presence of new, if temporary, owners. He had been having trouble with Calver, who had taken to grumbling about the extra work the new arrangement was causing, and objecting to Wiggins's accompanying him every time he had to enter the locked door of the nursery suite. Wiggins had no joy in dealing with Sholto's evil temper, which was growing worse as the physical effects of his evening with Lord Ronyl wore off.

Griselda was convinced that Sholto had been given drugged wine, since his incapacitation had been lengthier and more severe than might be accounted for by a simple case of overindulgence. When she tried to explain this to him early Friday morning, however, he rejected the idea with scorn, and accused her of making him a prisoner in his own house. Since this was true, Griselda

was in very low spirits. Still, the alternative seemed so much worse that she hardened her heart and turned the key on his whining complaints.

She was still frowning over the problem when Fallon was ushered into the drawing room. He said abruptly, "What has happened to set you into a worry?"

She greeted him with pleasure. "It is Sholto," she answered his question. "He will not accept my warning about the Magherys and Delevan. He demands to be let out of the nursery."

"It is a humiliating situation," said Fallon slowly. "Can you not take him with a party of his friends to your country place, and entertain them there until Sunday night?"

Griselda shook her head. "He would never stay there. He has taken the farm in dislike—says it is beyond everything slow and dull!—and would refuse to stay. The servants would obey him if he demanded a horse or carriage."

"Against your orders?" Fallon was skeptical.

"But I should not be there to enforce them," Griselda explained. "I shall be here."

Fallon's expression became stern. "Impossible! I must absolutely refuse to permit you to remain in Thornapple Square. Someone might see you, and later, when you are Regis Southerleigh's wife—or some other fortunate man's—might remember he had seen you in an unconventional situation. You must see how ineligible it would be for you to be here!"

"But I must!" protested the girl. "I cannot move into a hotel alone—and you must admit I cannot take Sholto to any public place in his present mood! I have no friend into whose home I might invite myself and my brother so abruptly. This is the only place where I can be assured of controlling Sholto until we have routed our enemies. Surely it will not be longer than a day or two?"

Very reluctantly Fallon considered the problem. Every instinct warned him that the situation was fraught with danger. But what other options had they?

"Perhaps if you spoke to him?" suggested Griselda. "He responded to your strength and common sense before."

Fallon felt he would be at a considerable disadvantage in attempting to coerce a youth in his own house, but the girl looked so unhappy that he agreed to see what he could do. Accordingly, he allowed himself to be escorted up to the nursery suite by Wiggins, with Sholto's valet trailing along suspiciously behind them. It seemed wiser to permit Calver to go into the suite with them, so that he might see no harm was intended to his master.

The interview was even more awkward than Fallon had feared. Sholto, clad in his ornate dressing gown, was seated at the table, his head in his hands. When the door opened, he looked up eagerly, then his eyes widened as he realized who his visitor was.

"Fallon! How does it happen you are here? Are you come to rescue me?"

Fallon went to stand beside the table. "I am here to turn over to you the ownership of this house if you have the funds to redeem it as we agreed—" he began.

Sholto interrupted angrily, "And so I would have, if that cursed sister of mine had not clapped me up here like some felon! Get me out of here, and I'll give you twice what we wagered!"

"Will you come with me to the lawyer's this morning, if I can arrange for your release?" questioned Fallon uncompromisingly.

Sholto hesitated. It was obvious that such an action was not to his liking. "Well, perhaps in a day or two, when I am feeling recovered from whatever foul stuff my sister has been doping me with—" he temporized.

Such an accusation was more than Fallon could endure. "That is a lie, Grant!" he interrupted sharply. "You talk like a foolish, headstrong child. You must realize that the discomfort you have been feeling has been the result of the drinks you were given by Maghery, the night he won from you the money your sister had given you to offer for this house!"

Sholto sputtered with anger. "You're in it with her, are you? Got your stories to coincide? Both of you are conspiring against me and my friends. Well, you may tell my fine sister that she'll not keep me here forever—and perhaps I shall have something to tell the Heathrows about her scheme to oust me from my inheritance!"

Calver drew in his breath in a gasp of shock, and eyed Fallon with fearful dislike. Wiggins, shaking his white head with dismay at the turn matters had taken, led the visitors from the nursery and locked the door with trembling hands. Calver scuttled down the stairs ahead of the other two, and Wiggins said mournfully, "We'll have trouble with that one! He's as silly as Master Sholto, playacting, and so puffed up with his own consequence he thinks himself a great man!"

"You know how frequently valets identify themselves with their masters, Wiggins," Fallon reminded him. "Calver sees himself the agent and confidential servant of a young man of great fortune. To such as Calver, a sister, even though she be the principal heir, is of little consequence except as she diminishes his own importance and that of his master. I have no doubt he is as resentful of Miss Grant's behavior as young Grant is."

"But it's for Master Sholto's own good!" protested Wiggins bitterly. "The trouble he's caused his sister! If something's not done to stop the silly noddy, he'll lose his fortune to the first rascal who comes along!"

Fallon agreed rather ruefully. "Try to convince him of that—or Calver, either," he said, and went to report failure to Griselda.

The invitations had been sent, and acceptances were already arriving. Preparations for the dinner party were going on apace. Fallon had insisted

that Griselda should leave by the back door the instant the first guest arrived at the front, and Wiggins stoutly backed him up. The girl's boxes were packed and the carriage was ordered to take her down to the farm Saturday night, where she would remain until the following Monday.

"I must return then. I wish you will meet me at the offices of the Heathrows. I do not intend to permit this ridiculous situation to continue. I shall tell the lawyers everything, and request that Sholto's debts be discharged. I am quite out of charity with him! Perhaps Mr. Heathrow can control him."

"I hope you will not betray your brother's weakness on my account," said Fallon quietly. "I could not consider accepting money from you for your home. You may tell Sholto whatever you please, but I assure you the house and the farm are yours. I have never really considered them as belonging to me."

"But the wager—" began Griselda.

"It was a boy's folly. I had thought to let him suffer long enough to ensure he would not repeat the idiocy, and then give the property back to him."

Griselda was not satisfied. "The most hopeful behavior I have observed on Sholto's part was when you so firmly yet calmly rallied him to accept his responsibilities. I was wishing you might continue to guide him toward a more manly attitude."

"I fear it is hopeless," confessed Fallon. "He is as bitter toward me, now, as he is toward you. Perhaps when I am gone, and you can resume your accustomed pattern in this house, he will be more amenable to your good sense and loving guidance."

With her better knowledge of her brother's disposition, Griselda could not believe Fallon was correct in his evaluation of the problem facing her. When Fallon further suggested that they release Sholto and invite him to the dinner as a gesture toward establishing goodwill, she rejected the idea out of hand.

"Surely you have not forgot that two guests at that dinner will be the very rogues who fleeced Sholto of five thousand pounds? And can you be sure he will not cause a scandal, making some of his wild accusations against us both in front of all the company?"

Fallon was compelled to admit the wisdom of her remarks. He had insisted, however, with Wiggins's support, that Griselda's own cook and housekeeper be sent for, to give her what protection such companionship would guarantee in the minds of the censorious. They were to arrive late Friday evening, help their mistress with her preparations during the day Saturday, and accompany her back to the farm on Saturday evening.

"It is fortunate that a full moon is shining," said the girl with asperity. She was not at all pleased at the arrangements Fallon was so autocratically making. "So many desperate journeys by night! I declare it is like a romance!"

But Fallon merely grinned at her and advised her not to be waspish.

In the midst of all the bustle, Denny kept alert. His sense of apprehension increased as the time for the dinner came closer. It was he who discovered, early on Saturday afternoon, that Calver was missing, and communicated that fact to Wiggins. After a careful search, they agreed it was best to inform Miss Griselda, and did so. The girl ran up to the nursery floor, opened the locked door, and saw Sholto seated at the table, fully dressed, enjoying a pleasant, small repast which had been brought him earlier.

"Where is Calver?" demanded Griselda without ceremony.

"Oh, have you lost him?" sneered Sholto. "My clever sister, so busy about my affairs! I make no doubt someone has employed him to run an errand."

"No one would send your servant about other business than your own," protested Griselda. Sholto only smiled.

Carefully relocking the door upon her brother's laughter, Griselda lost no time in seeking out Fallon with the intellience.

He frowned. "Could someone have sent him out?"

"He wouldn't have gone," the girl replied. "He's been insubordinate since we brought Sholto home from the hotel."

"Still, let us ask," said Fallon.

They discovered that the cook, who had grown tired of Calver's demands for special delicacies for his master, had indeed sent the valet out to procure a confection of which Master Sholto was especially fond, "for as I told him to his face, ma'am, have him pestering me in my kitchen with all that's to be done today, I will NOT! Lemon curd tart, says I! As if I'd time to fuss with that!"

Griselda was much relieved at this explanation, for everyone in the household knew of Master Sholto's special fondness for that particular dainty, and thought it very like him to demand it to sweeten his incarceration. Denny, though he said nothing, was not completely reassured, and kept an unobtrusive watch. Sure enough, Calver returned after a time with the pastry carefully wrapped, and accompanied by Wiggins, took it upstairs at once to his master.

Denny waited until the old butler had puffed his way back downstairs and given the nursery key to Miss Griselda. Then the Irish valet went quietly up the stairs to the nursery landing. The door to the room where Sholto was confined was closed. Denny put his ear to the panel. A murmur of voices came to him, followed by a sudden crow of laughter from Sholto. The youth said in a louder tone, easily distinguishable through the panel, "I knew they'd agree to help me! They are great guns, not like this upstart Irish gamester! You see, Calver, my friends are eager to come to my rescue!"

The valet's voice came more softly, so Denny, straining to hear, could not make out a Word be said. Then Sholto again, louder, "Oh, bother, Calver,

who's to hear? They're all busy with their plans for this stupid dinner—in MY house, without MY leave! Tell me again what part I am to play, and what my friends are going to do! What a surprise for our upstart Irish gamester and my dear sister!"

Denny, leaning his ear against the door, was just beginning to think that the laughter was going on for a very long time, when the door flew open. He staggered into the room, off-balance. Something hit him over the head and he lost consciousness.

20

Late that afternoon Fallon went up to the luxuriously comfortable room which had been assigned to him and prepared to dress for dinner. Unaccountably, Denny was not waiting to assist him. Fallon glanced around the room and into the powder closet. Then he walked over and pulled at the bell rope. In a minute Wiggins came to the door.

"Have you seen Denny, Wiggins?"

"No, sir. I've been so busy with the arrangements for dinner, the wines—"

"Can you send Orrible up to me?"

"Of course, sir. At once." The old man hastened back down the hallway.

Very shortly Orrible was facing his master. "Ole Wigs tole me what was eatin' yer, Guv'ner, an' I took a look round afore I come up 'ere. Denny's opped it. 'E ain't nowhere in the 'ouse."

"No one could have got him away from me at this time," said Fallon. "Keep looking. If you see him, send him to me."

Fallon went down to the drawing room and found Griselda there, superintending the placement of great bowls of fragrant flowers. "Have you seen Denny?" he asked abruptly.

Griselda looked about her vaguely. "Shall I check with Wiggins?"

Fallon shook his head. "Can you let me have the key to Sholto's rooms? I have a feeling—"

Griselda handed him the heavy key from her pocket. She stared after him as he took the stairs two at a time. She smiled. She had never seen anyone leap up the grand staircase in all the years she'd lived in the house.

Fallon opened the nursery door and found Calver in attendance upon his master. Sholto was clad in an extreme fashion which did not accord well with his adolescent figure. The extravagant waist and padded shoulders, the enormous silver buttons, the tightness of the breeches, above all, the bright, discordant mix of colors made the boy resemble a scrawny peacock. Fallon said courteously, "You're monstrous fine this evening, Grant! A la modality!"

The boy peered at him suspiciously, then smiled as he detected no hint of mockery in the man's face. "Thank you," he said, and then recollecting his grievances, continued, "If I'm to be stuck in this hole, I can at least dress with some style."

"That's my problem," confided Fallon humorously. "I can't dress at all—my man Denny seems to have disappeared. Can either of you shed any light on the mystery?"

Sholto hurried to deny any knowledge of Denny's whereabouts. Fallon, flashing a glance at Calver, thought he caught just a hint of malice in the valet's smirking denial. Sholto hastened to offer Calver's services.

"Get down at once to Fallon's room, Calver! I'll be bound you can turn him out as fine as fivepence!"

Calver slipped quietly away.

Fallon stared at Sholto. "That's very kind." The situation had awkward overtones. For one thing, he was sure Sholto had Denny locked up somewhere, but whether it was a boy's prank or something more deadly was impossible to discover. Conveniently forgetting the facts, Sholto had convinced himself that this was his home and that his sister and Fallon were keeping him a prisoner in it for their own nefarious ends. No doubt he would see any treachery on his own part as perfectly justified in his position. Still, Fallon reflected, I am a man and he is a boy. It behooves me to try to set the matter straight.

"I must advise you, Grant, that I am preparing to return your properties to you tomorrow. I'm sure your lawyers can make an equitable arrangement."

Sholto merely looked at him with a glittering stare Fallon found disturbing.

"I regret that we could not reach a better understanding—" Fallon went on, when Sholto broke in with an artificial laugh,

"Oh, I don't blame you for making me a prisoner in my own home. I know who I have to thank for that!"

Fallon's patience was wearing thin. Couldn't the silly gudgeon see that he'd had generous treatment? No adult who had gamed and lost his possessions expected the new owner to return them, or to care what hardships faced the

loser. Any man who gambled was expected to pay without whining. Still, Fallon's own sense of compassion restrained the blighting answers he could have made: the boy was in above his depth, with no older man in his family to guide and instruct him, or even serve as a model. It must be galling to be locked in a nursery like a naughty child. Griselda was correct in assuming that her brother needed to be protected from unscrupulous persons, but her methods were not such as would endear themselves to a green youth, half flash and half foolish. Fallon made one more effort to reach Sholto.

"Your sister is trying to keep you from making a mistake which could ruin you, Grant. Surely you know that it is not accepted practice among gentlemen to hazard something they do not own."

The pale face turned away from him. Then after a moment Sholto said, "Oh, well, I'm going to buy it back, so I'm all secure there."

"Not everyone you wager with will be so forbearing," Fallon reminded him. "Lord Ronyl, for instance, will hardly feel it incumbent upon him to return your five thousand pounds, nor any other sums you may chance to lose to him."

Sholto shot him a glance. His hands clasped and picked at each other on the table. "Surely it would depend—" he began, then hesitated. He was trying to get up courage to say something, but Fallon's stern expression seemed to prevent him.

There was no time to argue or reason with the boy. There was one last gesture he could make, in spite of what Griselda had advised. Surely Maghery and Delevan would not dare to cheat the halfling with the roomful of members of the *ton*! "Grant, would you care to join me and my guests at dinner? There will be cards after, which might amuse you."

"A guest at my own table? I think not, gamester!"

At the expression of pure hatred visible on the boy's face, Fallon gave up. He locked the door after him and went down to dress, feeling apprehensive. What had Sholto started to say? "It would depends—" On what? What could nullify a wager? Nothing—if it *had been fairly won*! Was the fool boy comforting his wounded pride by pretending he'd been cheated by Fallon? The Irish gamester hadn't been born yesterday, and he knew charges of foul play were a standard defense of poor losers. He shrugged as he entered his room, but the unpleasantness of the interview with Sholto lingered like a bad taste in his mouth.

Calver had laid out the black velvet coat.

"I understand you have a red satin coat which is famous as your good-luck charm, sir," he smirked, "but I don't see it here."

"I shall wear that black velvet, a white linen shirt and white satin breeches," said Fallon briefly.

In silence the valet brought out the rest of the clothing and fussily assisted Fallon into it. The gamester felt a reluctance to accept his help... a sense of discomfort. He glanced at Calver. There was a small, secret smile, little more

than a pursing of the lips, on Calver's face. There was no doubt in Fallon's mind that master and servant had some scheme afoot. Whatever it was, it had begun while Calver was missing during the afternoon. Had, Calver done something else besides purchasing pastry for Sholto? Probably. But what?

Had the valet purchased a master key to let Sholto out of the nursery? But Fallon had already offered to have Sholto freed and had been refused. Perhaps the boy wanted to prove he could win his own freedom? That could be the answer, Fallon supposed—but it did not satisfy him. Finally he dismissed Calver with a word of thanks. When the fellow had gone, Fallon went out himself in search of Orrible.

He found the boy at the front door with Barty.

"I'm directin' carriages, Guv'ner!" he said proudly. "When they start comin', that is."

"I need you for an urgent errand," Fallon told him, low-voiced, and led him into the empty drawing room with a great air of secrecy. There he wasted no time. "When did you last see Denny?"

"'E was 'angin' round the kitchen 'safternoon, Guv'ner."

"Did he say anything to you about leaving?"

"'E looked glum—real Friday-faced. 'E was watchin' Calver an' mutterin'."

Fallon considered this. "I'll tell you what I wish you to do," he said.

At that moment, in her bedroom, Griselda was putting on her traveling cape and adjusting a very fetching bonnet. Her boxes had already been taken out and stowed in the carriage, where Tom Coachman waited her summons. She frowned at her flowerlike face in the mirror.

"This is ridiculous," she grumbled. "Who would see me if I stayed here in my room, resting, and finally going to sleep in my own comfortable bed? Instead I am to be jolted over wretched roads at night, arriving at the farm at some ungodly hour, disturbing all the servants there!"

"Oh, Miss Grant! It is exciting, ain't it?" sighed Mary, who was to accompany her mistress.

"Where is Fallon?" Griselda fretted. "Has he not the courtesy to bid me good-by? I shall go down!"

"Oh, Miss, should you? You might be seen!" breathed Mary, quite caught up in the spirit of intrigue.

"Fiddle-faddle!" Griselda went to the door, then hesitated. "Well, I'll wait a little longer and then I shall go down and find him." She did not bother to understand why it was so necessary that she see Mr. Timothy Fallon before she left for the farm.

And at this moment, Fallon was speaking to Orrible in the brilliantly lit drawing room. "You boasted once, when first we met on the docks at

Liverpool, that you could get into, or out of, any room ever built. Was that true?"

"Yes, Guv'ner, as 'Eaven's me witness."

"Good. I wish you to search this house from attics to cellars. I believe Denny has been hidden away by Calver, and I wish him found and set free. When you find him, get him to my room and hide him there. One thing: don't let Calver catch you at it."

Orrible was not a child of the slums for nothing. As he himself would be the first to admit, he was as shrewd as he could stare. He proved it now.

"What if Denny's in Master Sholto's room, Guv'ner? I mean the nursery."

"He's not in the central room; I was just there. Is there another way into the bedrooms than through that room?"

"I'll look."

"If you can't find him, wait till Sholto comes out of the nursery and slip in then."

"'E's comin' out, is 'e?"

Fallon smiled grimly. "He's dressed for it. And he's wound as tight as a spring. I'd say he can hardly wait, but he's planning to make some kind of an entrance when all the guests are here. Yes, I'd say Master Sholto has planned a surprise. I don't know whether it is for his sister or for me."

"'E's a twiddlepoop," said Orrible. "You can 'andle 'im, Guv'ner."

Fallon grinned. "I hope you're right. He's got confederates, I'm convinced. Be off with you, then. I'll speak to Wiggins on my way out, and tell him you're detached to my service."

"Wigs is a good ole gager," said Orrible, and slipped away on his errand.

Wiggins beamed as Fallon approached the door. True, the butler admitted, the Irishman was a gamester, but he came of gentlefolk, it was clear, and was well-bred. And he was, if Wiggins was any judge, a true man. Miss Zelda needed someone like this big, fine-looking fellow. "You're looking very well, sir," he ventured.

"Thank you! Barty, call Tom Coachman."

"He's out front now, sir, waiting for Miss Grant."

"Good! Wiggins, if I am not back before the first guests arrive, please show them into the drawing room and offer them sherry."

"You—you're not *leaving*, sir?" Wiggins was appalled.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Urgent business." Fallon strode swiftly out into the dusk of Thornapple Square, leaving Wiggins to stare after him, mouth drooping. The disastrous situation was not improved by the sight of Mr. Fallon beginning to remove his black velvet coat as the carriage pulled away. Was he going to don some sort of disguise? And if so, why?

When Miss Griselda, very much on her high ropes, came into the hall a few minutes later to give Mr. Fallon a sharp set-down before she left for the farm, she had difficulty in understanding Wiggins's halting explanation.

"You mean to tell me he has left the house on some mysterious business of his own, with guests due to arrive within the hour? How can this be? And taken *my carriage* to do it? Preposterous!"

"But he *assured* me he would return as soon as he could, Miss Zelda!" protested the butler.

"Did he, indeed?" said the irate girl. "Monstrous obliging of him?"

"The guests will be arriving shortly, Miss Zelda, and they must not find you here," fussed Wiggins. "You must leave now. I shall instruct the grooms to prepare your mother's old traveling coach—"

"Pray do not bother to do so!" Griselda had the light of battle in her eye. "I shall leave in my own carriage or not at all! I am now going to return to my room. Pray see that I am informed when—and if!—Mr. Fallon deigns to return!"

The dignity of her withdrawal was somewhat marred by a sudden knocking at the front door.

"If that is Fallon, I shall have something to say to him!"

"It cannot be, Miss Zelda. He has just left. It must be an early guest!" Wiggins made restraining gestures with his hand. "Miss Zelda—*please!*"

The knocker thundered.

"Miss Griselda!" pleaded Wiggins, in an agony. "No one must see you!"

Rebelliously the girl turned and walked to the stairway. The butler advanced toward the door, whose knocker was still being plied most heartily. Wiggins, affronted at such ill-mannered importunity, flung the portal wide.

Mr. Regis Southerleigh stood on the porch, his protuberant eyes glaring with disapproval and suspicion.

"What is this? A party in Miss Grant's absence? Or am I to suppose that she has returned? I was assured I should be informed the instant *that* occurred!"

"Miss Grant is not in residence," said Wiggins frostily. "If you will forgive me, sir—" and the butler made to shut the door.

Regis pushed past him, looking like nothing so much as a bantam rooster, decided Griselda, viewing his forcible entry from the vantage point of the first landing. Her angry suitor did not at first perceive her, having his attention fixed upon the affronted butler.

"You shall not shut the door upon me, sirrah!" cried Regis shrilly. "If Miss Grant is in truth absent, what is going on here?" He peered around frowning. "It is as Lady Southerleigh warned me! The servants in this house are lax and impertinent! No doubt you entertain yourselves while your mistress is away! I demand to know what is the occasion for this unforgivable license!"

Griselda could endure no more. Her sensibilities had been exacerbated by Fallon's outrageous behavior, and now this fatuous lordling had the impudence to force himself into her house. She swept down the stairs.

"Where is your dear mamma, Regis? Has she sent you back a second time to spy on my home and my servants? I am surprised she has not accompanied you this time."

"Griselda!" gasped Regis, forgetting formality in his surprise. "What are you doing here? When did you return from Paris?"

"I have never been in Paris," snapped Griselda. With her color heightened and her fine eyes sparkling, she made a beautiful sight, but Regis was in no mood to admire his childhood playmate.

"Never been—? Then why did you lie to my dear mamm—"

"If you mention your dear mamma to me once more, Regis Southerleigh, I shall scream! Prying and poking in my house, quizzing and bullocking my servants—"

"Griselda!" warned Regis in a voice of doom, "I cannot permit—"

"You wanted to know what was happening here tonight? I'll tell you! I've decided to turn the place into a gaming hell, and I'm having the opening tonight. It will be *very* exclusive—by invitation only—but if Lord Southerleigh wishes to come, he may. There are no ladies invited, so your dear mamma must contain her curiosity this time!"

"I withdraw my offer for your hand!" pronounced Regis with awful calm. Then he spoiled it by adding, "A gaming hell? Either you have run mad or you are shameless indeed! I thank God my eyes were opened in time!"

"Yes, it *was* fortunate you came snooping again tonight, wasn't it?" agreed Griselda, her spirits much refreshed by this brisk passage-at-arms with her old playmate. "Pray close the door after Mr. Southerleigh, Wiggins."

When he had done so, the old man told his mistress sternly, "That was very rude, Miss Zelda! I'm sure I don't know what your father would have said to such behavior."

"Do you not?" smiled the girl naughtily.

"Hoydenish!" said Wiggins.

"Yes, wasn't it?" Griselda agreed. "I found it most satisfying, and what is more, I have a suspicion my father would have enjoyed it, too."

And she went triumphantly up the stairs. Behind her retreating back, Wiggins smiled broadly.

21

Fortunately for Wiggins's sanity, Mr. Fallon, properly clothed in his elegant black velvet coat, returned to the house in Thornapple Square at five minutes before the hour. He had no more than entered the great oak door when the wheels of another carriage sounded on the gravel of the drive. Wiggins held the front door wide, and moved his head to indicate the drawing room. Grinning, Fallon obeyed the gesture and strolled into the brilliantly lit room to await his guests.

He was finding himself keenly enjoying the adventure, especially after the excitements of the past hour. It was pleasant to stand in this luxuriously appointed room and welcome his guests. He had a moment of regret that this was not, in fact, his own home—but it might well have been! Had he been a different man, the Grants would be long gone from this house. He had never heard of an occasion when a man, winning such a bet, had not taken ownership at once. Deep play, as it was called, was one of the major pleasures of the English. Had not Walpole written in his *Letters* of Miss Fanny Braddock, the sister of General Braddock, who had "gamed away her little fortune" and hanged herself thereafter? "Poor Fanny," her brother had said, "I always knew she would play until she was forced to tuck herself up." And had not Sir John

Bland lost the whole of his vast estates, which included the entire city of Manchester and environs, at the gaming tables, and shot himself as a result, in 1755? Any other gamester in London would consider himself the rightful owner of the Grant house—and would be so considered!

Fallon found this unthinkable. He had been, he reflected wryly, too long the son of the Reverend Fallon. He would return the properties to the boy and his sister on the morrow. But he would not remain in Bishop Street either. That place would be too full of reminders of a blue-eyed woman—a managing female who had first infuriated him and then won his admiration. And his heart? Yes. But of course he could not tell her that! For a while...but that had been a foolish dream. When he had seen what manner of home she lived in, had learned that his adorable, managing Mistress Meek was a very great heiress, he had realized how very ineligible was the Irish cleric's son turned gamester. Griselda must marry someone who could protect her, give her a secure and honorable position in Society; above all, someone strong and well-established, who could keep her brother from disgracing himself and their name. Fallon tried to visualize a suitable man. Regis Southerleigh? Impossible! Lady Southerleigh would be enough in herself to cut up Griselda's peace and ruin the match...

He was recalled to his duties by the sound of men's voices in the hall, and collected his wits. Wiggins announced the first guests with a flourish.

"His Grace the Duke of Clonmel; Lord Ronyl Maghery! Mr. Terence Delevan!"

Fallon had often seen the duke, a redheaded Irishman, in his father's church in the old days. He went to greet them, hand outstretched. "Your Grace! What a pleasure! I trust your mother is well?"

Young Clonmel grasped his hand warmly. "I had a note from her just last week. She's very well, thank you, and desired me to convey her congratulations on your success in London." The dowager had gleefully recounted the details of her meeting with Lady Roslyn Maghery, and ended her letter with strict injunction to her son to call upon Fallon and see how he went on. When, therefore, he received the invitation for this evening, Clonmel was very happy to accept—for old time's sake.

"Let me get you some sherry," offered Fallon. Beckoning to a footman, he saw his noble guest seated and turned to welcome the next arrivals. He had only time to greet Maghery and Delevan before another group was ushered in. He excused himself to greet the new guests.

"Pretty good for the parson's boy!" sneered Lord Ronyl, staring around the elegant room with envy. The duke grinned at his obvious discomfiture.

"Our Timothy has done well for himself among the English, hasn't he?"

"He won this place from a green boy who was no match for a seasoned gamester," said Delevan smoothly. "I wonder a little at our Timothy—with his upbringing."

The duke shrugged and turned to address some of the other guests.

Lord Ronyl was staring up at the portrait of Griselda above the fireplace. He caught Delevan's arm. "D'ye suppose that's the sister? I'd marry her like a shot, cit or no! I'd no idea, from the way Sholto spoke, she was such a toothsome bit!"

"Control yourself!" hissed Delevan in his ear. "You're not in an alehouse! You'll be overheard!"

"Who's to care? Have you turned Puritan?" Ronyl grunted, but he turned away from the portrait and accepted a glass of the excellent sherry a footman was offering him.

The great room filled rapidly. As Fallon moved among his guests, he became aware that Maghery and Delevan were also making a circuit, dropping low-voiced remarks which caused their hearers to look at Fallon with surprise and occasional disapproval.

So that's their game, he thought. They are painting me as a despoiler of innocent youth. Well, whatever it is they plan, they'll have to do it tonight. Griselda's scheme has forced their hand. I hope I can deal with whatever little surprises they have arranged for me, he thought. No one knew better than Timothy Fallon how easily the tide of public opinion could be turned, and how savagely it could overwhelm an erstwhile favorite. A gamester was always fair game—there were so many who had lost to him!

The dinner was lavish and delicious. Fallon had the duke on his right, Lord Corman on his left. Maghery and Delevan were sitting apart, farther down the great table. Fallon observed with amusement how assiduously Wiggins and the two hired footmen kept the guests' glasses filled with choice wines from Simon Grant's apparently inexhaustible cellar, and how seldom his own glass was refilled. Clonmel noticed it also, and raised his own glass in an ironic salute.

"I can't fault you for wishing to keep a clear head, Fallon," he said quietly, "but must your servants ply the rest of us so tirelessly? You'll have us all befuddled before the gaming begins!"

"A man should know his own capacity," objected Corman, who had overheard the remark.

Sir Henry Drowne chimed in from Clonmel's right, "M'father was a notable drinker. Boasted he could drink any man whoever set lip to glass under the table. I pride m'self on the fact that I can more than equal his record and still get m'self home to the right house."

That got a general laugh, which was repeated when Corman said plaintively, "But you usually end up at *my* house, old fellow!"

When Fallon finally led the way to the drawing room, tables had been set up with cards, dice, and all the appurtenances of play. Groups formed, chal-

lenges were given and accepted in an atmosphere of great good humor. Wiggins and his aides moved unobtrusively around the room serving brandy as the gentlemen took their places. As the evening progressed, it was generally agreed that Devil Fallon's farewell party was a success. The company knew itself to be select; the play was high and fast; and even the losers reflected the general spirit of gaiety. Fallon made an excellent host, circulating through the room to make sure all his guests were enjoying themselves. This exercise of his hostly duties made it difficult for those who wished to try their luck against him to be satisfied. Finally, Lord Ronyl was heard to comment loudly that Fallon seemed to be running shy.

A little pool of silence surrounded him and slowly began to spread. The Irish peer stood beside a table where he had been discontentedly tossing dice with Delevan. They had kept together during the evening, avoiding the tables where play was keen and high lest they lose their money before they had a chance to challenge Fallon. Now Maghery, his coarse features reddened by the drinking he had done, issued his challenge.

"If this is our last chance to recoup our losses, Fallon," he said loudly, "than come and play! Damme, ye've been flutterin' about like a blasted butterfly all evenin'."

There was some laughter. Fallon advanced, smiling.

"If all the losers are to have their fair chance at me, Maghery, I'm afraid the line will have to form out in the hall!"

This was greeted with general amusement. Clonmel came up quietly and stood at Fallon's shoulder. Maghery indicated a table set for six near the center of the room, directly beneath a great chandelier. "The line will begin here, me boyo, and I'm at the head of it!"

There was some murmur of comment at Maghery's obvious belligerence, and some players even laid down their hands and came closer to observe the fun.

Fallon shrugged, smiling. "If you wish, milord," he said disinterestedly. "What will you play?"

"Macao—and cut for banker."

Clonmel and Delevan took seats at the table. Sir Henry Drowne and a consequential gray-haired gentleman joined them. Fallon, waiting for them to seat themselves, beckoned to a passing footman for fresh cards and brandy. The duke and the gray-haired gentleman refused; the other three permitted the servant to supply them with glasses. Clonmel won the bank.

Play was fairly even as the antagonists tested their luck. Then the began to win, and after about ten minutes Clonmel offered it for sale.

Maghery objected. "Let it be by lot!" he protested loudly. "There's some of us can't ever hope to bid high enough to get it!"

Clonmel raised his brows, and the gray-haired gentleman, whose name was Malriss, glared at the Irish milord. They drew cards, however, and Fallon won the bank.

Oddly enough, this did not seem to disconcert Lord Ronyl. He began to bet higher and accept his occasional losses with equanimity. This uncharacteristic behavior struck a warning signal in Fallon's mind, and he watched the play even more carefully than he had been doing. The bank began to win steadily again, and Devil Fallon's phenomenal good luck rose to new heights. Gradually the players at other tables left their games and came to watch the excitement at Fallon's table.

Fallon was playing coolly, a small smile just touching the comers of his lips. Maghery punted more and more recklessly. It seemed to Fallon that he was determined to lose, so poorly did he gauge his play. Delevan played a more cautious game, as did Clonmel and Malriss, but Drowne plunged almost as deeply as Maghery. Then Terence Delevan began to lose heavily. His goodhumored bewilderment and chagrin set the company off into gales of laughter which served to relax the tensions Maghery's conduct had been generating.

"The object of the game is to make nine," Sir Henry advised him owlshly.

"How is it, then," Delevan queried, frowning, "that it is always eight or ten with me?"

There was renewed laughter and much advice, a good deal of it ribald. Delevan joined the laughter sheepishly.

The pile of notes in front of Fallon was increasing. He played imperturbably; the only sign of tension was in the increasing pallor of his face. Disaster struck abruptly, and from an unexpected source. Delevan pushed back his chair and rose from the table.

"You may think me a poor loser," he said quietly, "but I refuse to play longer with—a cheat!" and he flung his cards directly into Devil Fallon's face.

Those around the table were shocked into silence. Gradually, like a widening ripple in a pool, the silence spread out to every comer of the room, with only the sibilant whisper of "cheat...cheat" hissed low-voiced, as each man told his neighbor of the monstrous accusation, and startled faces turned toward the tableau under the great chandelier.

Devil Fallon lounged at his ease in his chair. The light of a hundred candles beat down upon his sleek, dark hair. His face was the same enigmatic mask he always presented while gaming. He still held his own cards in strong white fingers, but some of the cards Mr. Delevan had flung into his face clung to the black velvet coat into which Calver had so carefully eased him before dinner.

"Fallon cheated, ye say?" Lord Ronyl picked up the accusation loud-voiced. "That's a serious charge—"

"And a ridiculous one," snapped Sir Henry.

"You will have to explain your statement, Mr. Delevan," said Clonmel, who, as the senior in rank of those present, as well as a countryman of the accused, felt it his duty to assume control of the scene.

"It's for this gamester to explain himself and his trickery. I've suspected him for quite a while—lost a fortune to him, in fact. But tonight I caught him at it. I suggest that he be searched."

"Mr. Delevan!" protested the duke. "We are both guests here! I suggest you have imbibed too freely of our host's excellent brandy—"

"Mr. Fallon is not our host!" snapped Delevan. "He won this house from a boy young enough to be his son—a boy whom he has since kept locked up in the attics to prevent him from seeking justice and redress!"

There was a stir of shock, horror and avid interest; many of the guests drew back from the circle, looking very sober indeed.

Fallon rose from his chair and said coolly, "Why, here's a wealth of rhetoric! Cardsharp, cheat, abductor! Shall we address ourselves to Mr. Delevan's charges *singulatum et seriatim*? Firstly, then, I demand that I be searched, here and now! Your Grace, will you appoint a committee to do it? But I beg of you, handle this coat gently! I shall not dare to face my valet if there's so much as a crease in it!"

There was a murmur of relieved laughter. Clonmel regarded his host with respect. Fallon was certainly displaying presence under accusations so terrible. Delevan sensed the duke's admiration of his opponent and ground his teeth. "I suggest that this coat be carefully searched—pockets and sleeve linings—" he began harshly.

"Mr. Delevan would seem to be plaguey familiar with the possible hiding places of marked cards." Fallon didn't once look at Delevan, but addressed his speech to the duke. "Do you think we should examine his own coat, after Mr. Malriss has given me a clean bill?"

At the word, he slid neatly out of his coat and handed it to the gray-haired gentlemen. "Mind you look under the buttons, and pierce the collar and lining with a long needle!" he advised. There was a titter of nervous laughter from the onlookers.

Mr. Malriss, who disapproved of levity in such a serious affair, made a very solemn business of searching the coat. Fallon watched him judicially. The rest of the gentlemen watched Fallon. He was well worth looking at, Clonmel thought, as he stood there perfectly self-possessed, his powerful shoulders broad under the fine linen of his shirt, his body tapering to narrow hips and strong, well-turned legs in the court breeches and fine silk hose. Maghery's eyes were burning as they rested on the tall figure, the duke noted.

Mr. Malriss looked up with a smile of relief. "Your Grace, there's nothing here—" he began.

Delevan started forward, his face working with anger and chagrin. "Let me look!" he demanded harshly.

"Wait!" Malriss's smile faded suddenly as he turned back the flap of one pocket to reveal a card neatly fitted into a slit in the lining.

The guests crowded closer to stare and murmur. Wiggins, wide-eyed with horror in the doorway, disappeared into the hall. Fallon appeared faintly surprised. "May I see that?" he requested politely.

Delevan pushed past him, snatched the card from Malriss's hand and thrust it into Clonmel's. "The nine of spades! I believe Your Grace will find markings on it—" he said triumphantly, then stopped speaking as Clonmel began to laugh.

"Markings indeed! Damme, Fallon, you must be the Devil himself!" Clonmel raised his voice slightly, so all in the room might hear. "Your attention, gentlemen! On the card found inside Mr. Fallon's coat—which Mr. Delevan with rather remarkable prescience has just informed us is the nine of spades—is pasted a portion of a note dunning Mr. Delevan for a tailor's bill a year old!"

And now the laughter rang out as the gentlemen relaxed from the tense excitement of the last few minutes. The duke called for silence. "I think Mr. Delevan has an apology to make before he leaves," he suggested sternly.

Delevan glared black hate at Fallon, who was now being assisted into his coat by a dozen eager hands.

"I was mistaken," he ground out.

"Rather more than that, I should say. It seems that there has been an ugly plot here, neatly circumvented by our Devil. What say you, Fallon?"

Fallon was prevented from saying anything by the dramatic entrance of Sholto Grant. He ran into the drawing room in all his unsuitable finery, and made his own hasty interpretation of the scene before him.

"I am glad this cheat has been unmasked, gentlemen," he cried out in a boy's shrill tones. "He has had me locked up in my own attics for days—"

"Yet you are apparently not locked up now," commented Clonmel. He found that he was enjoying this card party of Fallon's more than any one he had ever attended. "Tell us—how did you escape?"

Sholto was disconcerted by this interruption, and by the unexpected reaction from the assembled men.

"Who is this young jackanapes?" asked Mr. Malriss irritably.

"I'm Sholto Grant sir, and this is my house—" he paused, struck by the look of warning on Fallon's face. As though he, Sholto Grant, were entering a trap, rather than the gamester. As he hesitated, Delevan and Maghery strode past him into the hall without a word.

"Maghery! Delevan! Where are you going? Now the Cheat is exposed, you're my guests!"

Delevan ignored him, but Lord Ronyl, raging at the failure of his plans, was glad of a scapegoat. "Get out of me way, ye damned little ijjit! Yer blunder with the card has spoilt all!"

"But Calver put it in his coat just as you instructed—I swear he did!" protested Sholto, further damning the conspirators.

"Be quiet, boy! You expose yourself before these gentlemen!" Fallon snapped, coming to stand beside him.

Sholto turned on him with a face of sullen anger. "I've no mind to be schooled by a damned cheating gamester," he snarled. "I'll join my friends." As he strode out of the room, the fascinated guests heard a scuffling in the hallway, and to their further amusement, Calver and Denny came lurching into the room, close grappled. As the struggling bodies sorted themselves out, it was seen that Denny was trying to enter, while Calver was trying to prevent him from doing so.

Denny cried out, "Gentlemen, it was all a trick! A plot against Mr. Fallon! This spalpeen hid a card in my master's coat. You must not believe himself's a cheat! You are being deceived!"

Clonmel, a grin spreading across his face, said provocatively, "No, my man, we are quite satisfied as to the culprit. There has been no deceit."

Denny wrung his hands, while Calver, straightening his garments, looked smug.

Then the duke added, chuckling, "Lord, what's this? Another one?"

For Griselda Grant, summoned by the horrified Wiggins, had come into the room, and, pale but determined, was advancing toward Fallon.

"Gentlemen," she said, clear-voiced, "a dastardly injustice has been perpetrated upon an innocent man!"

"Indeed? I think not," Clonmel said, surveying her with appreciation. "Do tell us more!"

"Clonmel, for pity's sake!" protested Fallon. "This becomes absurd!" And in truth some of the gentlemen were quite overcome with mirth, and everyone was smiling.

"It is true, sir," Griselda persisted. "This man is not a cheat, although the machinations of a scoundrel have made him seem to be one!"

"Pure farce!" sighed Clonmel blissfully.

Griselda looked bewildered. She had on a plain, dark traveling dress, no jewels, and, crowning dishevelment, her hair had escaped its pins and was curling about her shoulders in a mass of golden curls. She was adorably pretty. Tim Fallon went to her side and took her hand in his.

"Griselda, this is not necessary," he said gently.

"Not necessary?" Griselda silenced him with a look. "When your honor is at stake? Gentlemen, Mr. Fallon has been the victim of scheming rogues, I can discover the whole plot to your satisfaction. I have witnesses to substantiate my words."

"By all means, let us hear the witnesses," agreed the duke enthusiastically. "But first, may we not know the identity of Mr. Fallon's rescuer?"

"I think Your Grace and gentlemen can dispense with the witnesses," Fallon silenced the chorus of masculine encouragement. "This lady is Miss Grant. She is here to drive her brother home."

Griselda turned to him with a gesture of appeal which he answered gently, "You've sufficiently vouched for me, ma'am. I'll warrant these gentlemen will accept your word as ample guarantee of my character."

Griselda stared around the circle of interested, smiling faces. Her lovely, answering smile lighted her own face. She took a step nearer Fallon and raised her eyes to his.

"Of course! They know you for what you are! How—how *foolish* of me to have thought you might need my protestations!"

Fallon answered with unusual humility. "Mistress Grant, any man would be a fool not to value your faith and loyalty..."

"And he might have been very glad of both, as well as of your witnesses, ma'am, had he not been more adroit than his adversaries," the young duke added. "I insist you enlighten us, Tim! Tell us how you managed it! I swear it was the neatest turning of the tables I've ever seen!"

The other guests drew closer, agog to hear the explanation of the mystery.

Fallon shrugged. "I had been warned by Sholto Grant that something of the sort was being planned. He was entering into it with a love of playacting which many of us can recall from our own younger days." Fallon smiled around at the assembled men. There were raised eyebrows—some of the guests had heard Sholto's self-betrayal—but the consensus seemed to be a willingness to permit Fallon to keep the boy out of trouble for his sister's sake.

"Well, an hour before you were to arrive, I went to the hotel of the two gentlemen who have just left us. I told the servant at the desk that Mr. Fallon had sent a carriage to bring them to his house. I had already instructed my coachman to drive them the long way around—a very long way!—thus giving me time to put my plan into effect. I chose a vantage point out of their sight, and when I saw our two fine rogues go out to my carriage, I slipped upstairs to their rooms and...collected a souvenir!"

"The dun!" chuckled Clonmel. "Now why would any man have kept such a thing by him?"

"I believe it must have been delivered just today. I found it crumpled in the wastebasket. Since he had thrown it away," continued Fallon with an innocent

air which quite convulsed his audience, "I felt sure the gentleman would not mind my taking it. I believed it would serve my purpose," he concluded modestly.

"How did you suspect there was to be a marked card?" inquired Malriss, who had a need to know every detail.

"I had been warned by Sholto Grant, so I took off my coat on the way to the hotel, and searched it till I discovered the marked card. Then, when I had the paper I wanted, I affixed it to the card and took a hired cab back here. Thanks to Tom Coachman's delay, I arrived just ahead of my guests."

The duke shook his head. "You're incredible, Tim! I vow I have not enjoyed myself as much in a year. This evening has been better than a play at the theater!"

"All's Well that Ends Well?" grinned Fallon. "I wish you will partake of some refreshment, then you may care to go on with the cards."

"No, no, my boy! Anything after this would be anticlimax," said Malriss genially. "We'll say good night, and offer our thanks for a most—ah—unusual entertainment!"

The other guests, laughing, agreed. Fallon accompanied them to the hall and saw them on their way, assisted by Wiggins and the hired footmen. Griselda had disappeared.

When all the guests had departed, Fallon turned to Wiggins. "Where is Miss Grant?"

"I believe she retired to the Ladies' Parlor, sir, while you were explaining about the marked card."

"Bring Denny and Calver to us there. We have matters to clear up."

Fallon made his way through the drawing room. It was empty now, but still ablaze with the light of hundreds of candles, since the card party, while charged with drama, had been of relatively short duration. It reminded Fallon of an empty stage, curiously forlorn in spite of its luxury and beauty.

He found Griselda in front of a cozy fire in the Ladies' Parlor. Fallon's expression softened as he observed the look of strain and unhappiness on the girl's lovely face.

"May I get you a glass of sherry?" the man offered gently. "This has been a trying experience for you."

Griselda shook her head. Without taking her eyes from the leaping flames, she asked, "What you told your guests, that Sholto helped you to unmask Maghery and Delevan, was not true, was it? He was working with them—against you."

Wary-eyed, Fallon was unable to deny the charge.

Clenching her small fists, Griselda did not wait for an answer. "How *could* he? When you'd given him back the properties, tried to help him—!"

Fallon interposed quietly. "He's just a lad."

"Other boys of his age know enough to behave decently! I've spoiled him—failed him!"

Before Fallon could reply, Wiggins came into the room, followed by a belligerent Denny and an apprehensive Calver. Fallon took up a position behind Griselda's chair.

"Your mistress wishes to hear what you know of tonight's unfortunate events, Calver."

Calver muttered something about only doing as he was ordered.

"You did your young master an ill turn, aiding him with his absurd scheme," Fallon told the valet. "And now he has apparently gone off after two discredited rogues, who, not content with cheating him out of five thousand pounds, have involved him in a distasteful affair which may become a public scandal."

"The Heathrows will have to be informed of what has occurred," said Griselda. "I must tell them of Lord Ronyl's plan to cheat my brother at cards and then use his IOUs to blackmail our lawyers into a heavy settlement. Heathrow may send him a warning." She was looking at Fallon, almost pleading for reassurance. But the gamester was watching Calver.

"I am still waiting to hear how you became embroiled in these shady doings, Calver," he said sharply. "It may be you have laid yourself open to criminal prosecution."

Calver, definitely alarmed at last, answered that he had gone to the Irishmen's hotel at Master Sholto's orders, and had received from them a marked card to secrete in Mr. Fallon's coat. "And a master key to let Mr. Sholto out of his prison. Miss Grant had no right to keep him locked up in the nursery," he finished resentfully.

When Fallon would have rebuked him for his insolence, Griselda intervened. "It is as well that you feel loyalty to my brother, Calver. I cannot have you here in my home after tonight, of course, but Master Sholto may have need of you. It seems he has followed his new friends to their hotel. Pack fresh clothing for him and take it there."

"What'll he do for money?" asked Calver, insolent even in dismissal.

Griselda stared coldly at him. "That is his problem. I shall no longer be responsible for his debts. He will have to consult the lawyers."

Calver seemed about to argue, but hesitated as Fallon moved purposefully toward him. The valet's bravado evaporated before that implacable advance. He turned and scuttled out of the room.

"Go after him, Wiggins," ordered Fallon. "See that he takes only Mr. Sholto's belongings."

He motioned to Denny to wait for him in the hall. When he was alone with Griselda, Fallon came to stand beside her chair, looking intently down at her troubled face.

"My poor girl, this has been a bitter experience for you, but the Heathrows will know how to handle such rascals as Maghery and Delevan. I should have advised you to consult them as soon as I had an inkling of your problem. You must go to them tomorrow and tell them all. They must be brought to realize the insupportable nature of your position."

Griselda tried to summon up a smile. "You are right, of course. I should not have allowed Sholto's pleas for secrecy to sway me. If I had acted with firmness earlier, I might have prevented this latest shameful action. Now all fashionable London will know of his behavior. I am sure no one tonight was deceived for a moment as to his complicity in the plan to ruin you." She rubbed her forehead wearily. "I have indeed failed him."

Fallon frowned. "What is this? No woman could handle such a spoiled, willful youth. He requires a man's strong hand."

"If it is not too late," Griselda sighed. "Perhaps the Heathrows can suggest something. I am at my wit's end."

She studied his handsome features, now set sternly as he considered the problem. Oh, if only you would offer to help me, the girl thought, but after the scurvy trick her brother had tried to play on Fallon, she could not ask him to help Sholto. In fact, Griselda decided, stealing another look at his formidable black eyebrows, Fallon must be eager to remove himself from the vicinity of anyone with the name of Grant! Putting on her composure with a social smile, she said, too brightly:

"Well, Mr. Fallon, we have had quite an adventure, have we not? 'Excursions and alarums', as the poet Shakespeare would say! I daresay you are thoroughly bored by...by..." for a brief moment the girl's composure broke, but before Fallon could respond to the pain in her eyes, she rose and moved toward the door. "I'll bid you good night now—and thank you more than I can say for your forbearance, as well as for the gift of this house and the farm. Try to forget us, Mr. Fallon. Good-bye."

In his fear that she might be gone before he could convince her of the folly of her attitude, Fallon spoke more sharply than he intended. "What nonsense is this? Forbearance? Good-bye? There can be no such talk between the Gamester and Mistress Meek—"

"Your housekeeper, thankfully for both of us, has gone for good," said Griselda with a stubborn set to her beautiful mouth. Whatever she had hoped he would say, it was not to remind her of her indiscreet behavior. She caught his sudden frown and went on, grimly determined for his own sake not to involve the disturbing man further in her life. How could she plead with him, beg him to help her brother, when he had already done so much and received so shameful a return? She had her pride, too! Hoping desperately to be over-ridden, she said coldly:

"There is—there can be—nothing further between the sister of Sholto Grant and the man he would have dishonored. There are too many painful memories for us both."

She did not face him as she waited by the door for his reply. If only he would overrule her as he had so often done when she was his housekeeper!

Fallon's expression hardened. Was the girl telling him she'd had enough of him—found the association painful, or worse, degrading? True, he was a man who lived by his wits, a hanger-on barely tolerated on the fringe of London Society, as Lady Roslyn had taken pains to tell him. He was accepted by most of the gentlemen of the haut ton, but he knew he was definitely not the sort of man they would introduce to their ladies. His lips tightened into the old bitter line.

"Of course, if it is your wish, Miss Grant, I'll take myself off at once. Your servant, ma'am," and he bent his head in a low bow, affording the dismayed young woman a close view of his shining, thick dark hair. He stepped past her and was gone.

Too late Griselda realized that she was dealing with a man unlike Sholto or Wiggins or even the Heathrows—a man who would never plead or argue or importune—or linger after he had been dismissed.

There was a murmur of his deep voice in the hall, then the sound of the front door closing. Griselda, white of face, was staring, in that direction as Wiggins entered.

"Mr. Fallon has gone, Miss Zelda," he said reproachfully.

Gone. Strange how hollow was the echo of the word in Griselda's breast. "Did he—what did he say to you as he left?" the girl faltered.

Wiggins's face expressed his disapproval of her behavior. He was an old man and it had been an exhausting evening. He had known the young woman standing before him, her face now cold and unreadable, since she had been a sunny child.

"Mr. Fallon informed me you had dismissed him. That the house and farm had never really belonged to anyone but you. That I was to look after you and help you—"

The icy look melted into tearful petulance as his young mistress brushed past him. "Words! Why couldn't he have told *me*... Oh, *men*! You are all so pompous and noble—and stupid! I am sure I want no more to do with any of you!"

"Temper, Miss Zelda!" chided the bewildered old servant.

But Griselda had fled up the great stairway to her own rooms, of two minds whether to send Wiggins packing for not telling Fallon she didn't hate him, or to cry her heart out on his aged shoulder.

22

While Miss Griselda Grant was suffering a crisis of nerves quite unlike her usual calm good sense, Devil Fallon was also prey to unaccustomed emotions. He strode angrily to the fine stables in the mews behind Miss Grant's elegant town house, and was most unjustly critical of his servants for their inability to read his mind and have his carriage waiting at the front door. They should, he implied, have realized that he would wish to leave the Grant environs immediately if not sooner.

Barty, bowing his head beneath the storm of abuse, said nothing. He mounted the box of the carriage in which his master's luggage was already bestowed, taking up the reins and jerking his head to give Orrible the office to mount beside him. While the Boots clambered nimbly up, Denny unwisely ventured a protest.

"I had thought we might be staying to assist Miss Grant," he began.

"I do not pay you to think! If I did, your salary would be a farthing a year," snapped his master, "and generous at that price! It happens that Miss Grant has no further need of such riffraff as us now she is safely restored to her own home."

Surprisingly, Denny refused to be squelched. "I am thinking she will never be safe as long as those men are at large," he persisted. "Her silly dupe of a brother's no help, nor is old Wiggins. Miss Griselda needs us," he ended in a gulp.

Fallon mounted into his curricule and accepted the reins. Frowning, he gestured Denny to sit beside him.

"Follow me with the luggage," he ordered Barty.

"Where to?" asked his dour henchman. "Home?"

"To the Grand Hotel," decided Devil Fallon reluctantly. "Bring my boxes in unobtrusively from the rear. I'll register as—as Mr. K. Errant of Nowhere in Particular." He gave Denny a sneering smile. "That is how you see us, Denny, is it not? Two *déclassé* Knights Errant, bound to rescue a damsel in distress? Yes, Batty, I'll register at the hotel as K. Errant—"

"How do ye spell that, sir?" asked Barty doubtfully.

Devil Fallon shouted a laugh so harsh and mirthless that Denny winced. "So we are still acting nursemaid to that fool of a brother of hers," he muttered.

As he drove to the hotel, Fallon's anger began to abate. Whatever the lady's feelings toward himself, it was true she was no match for the Irish contingent. If those worthies had plans involving Sholto Grant, it was not Griselda who could defeat them. That silly girl couldn't even control her own brother! Devil's lips curled at the folly of her behavior in summarily dismissing a man who could, if he had been asked, have made a good try at saving the wretched boy. It was unlikely the stodgy lawyers would be able to help, either, even if they came out of their dusty, hidebound chambers long enough to try. Serve her right if the lad did run off with those black-hearted friends of his!

As the night air cooled his temper, however, Fallon accepted his fate. Glancing at Denny's downcast face, he relented sufficiently to inform him of his change of attitude.

"I shall wait upon Miss Grant tomorrow. If her fool of a brother hasn't come home, I'll accompany her to the lawyers."

Denny lifted a joyful face to his master. "Oh, sir, it's bettin' my life I was you'd not be leavin' the lady to those rascals! You're going to help her!"

"That is, of course," Fallon informed him grimly, "if she doesn't order Wiggins to show me the door again, as she did tonight." His bitter smile made Denny's sentimental heart ache. "Quite like the old days, isn't it?" Fallon went on. "I don't seem to have much luck with the ladies, Denny. Ah, well, I'm lucky at cards, and I suppose a man can't have everything."

23

While Mr. K. Errant and servants, of Erewhon, Ireland, were signing in at the Grand and being conducted to a pleasant suite of rooms, a stormy scene was being enacted in the sitting room of Lord Ronyl Maghery's suite in the same hotel. Milord's sister had been awaiting the return of the conspirators, admiring her new emerald ring and wondering if she should have sent a groom to Fallon's stable for the mare. Perhaps Delevan could do it early in the morning, before the gamester had time to sell the beast. Surely he'd leave London—run away as he had done the other time, in Ireland, when she had made a fool of him. A mocking smile pulled at the corners of Roslyn's full mouth as she imagined the look on Tim Fallon's face when the cogged card was discovered in his coat. If she could only have been there to watch the parson's boy get his comeuppance a second time! Pity that social custom ruled out a woman's presence at such an entertainment as Fallon was hosting tonight!

She rose and paced the comfortable sitting room. It was to be hoped that Ronyl or Terence had sense enough to win some money from these London gentlemen before they staged the great scene. Not much chance that her brother had, but Delevan's skill had kept their heads above water for several years.

The woman knew disaster had struck the moment she saw their faces. Delevan's was pale and rigid. Ronyl, in one of his rages, was cursing loudly. Roslyn glanced at Delevan. He shrugged.

"Your boyo was too smooth for us, my dear. He turned the tables on us. 'Twas like witchcraft."

"I'll kill the blaggard!" Ronyl shouted at the top of his voice.

His sister turned on him in a fury. "You'll shut your mouth or I'll do it for you! Have you lost what little sense you were born with? Do you want to have us thrown out of this hotel? Sit down and be quiet while Delevan tells me what went wrong."

Red-faced and muttering, Ronyl poured himself a drink of whiskey and took it and the bottle to a chair. Delevan took Roslyn's hand in his and kissed her fingers.

"'Tis sorry I am, me darlin', for the wreck of the grand plan! The parson's boy was too smart for us—or someone tipped him off."

"But what *happened*?" Roslyn shrieked.

"By some Devil's trick he spotted the card before the game, and fixed it—"

"Stuck one of Delevan's duns on the thing," Ronyl interrupted with a coarse laugh. "By the Lord Harry, if it wasn't such a leveler for the lot of us, I'd have to laugh at the fool he made of your precious Terry! There was Delevan acting affronted, callin' Fallon a dirty cardsharp, and the parson's boy cool as a cucumber, givin' him the lie! How they all laughed as that old spindleshanks read off the dun!"

"We left under a cloud," admitted Delevan. "There's no doubt the word will spread, and we're done in London forever. Have to get out tomorrow, before we're asked to leave."

Lord Ronyl drained his glass and refilled it. "You would come to London, sniffin' after Fallon," he turned on his sister savagely. "With your precious schemes to make us a fortune! You and your darling Terry shuttin' my mouth on me and puttin' on airs and graces! By God, the only one of us that's made a farthing in this filthy hole is meself, fleecin' the young jackanapes! Maybe now ye'll listen to me!"

"We'd be glad to if ye'd anything worthwhile to say," snapped Roslyn in a fury.

Into the momentary silence that followed her words, came the sound of a tapping on the door to the hallway. At a nod from Roslyn, Delevan went to open it. A hotel servant stood outside.

"Mr. Sholto Grant is downstairs wishing to see Lord Ronyl Maghery. On urgent business, he says. Are you in, sir?"

"Yes, Lord Ronyl will see him. Let him come up." Delevan closed the door and faced his companions. "Ros, I'm thinking our luck may have

turned. Flatter the young fool while I try to see how I can wring a profit out of this visit."

"The cards, man!" Ronyl was grinning wolfishly. "We'll get another five thousand pounds from the scut before we turn him loose."

"No!" The woman took command. "First we'll hear why he's come to us at this hour. Then it might be we'll have more from him than a paltry five thousand. Did ye not say he's got a fortune?"

Delevan was taking the bottle from Maghery's fist and straightening his neckcloth. "Leave this to your sister, man! I've a hunch we'll come out of it with our pockets lined."

So it was into a smiling group of elegantly dressed worldlings that the excited Sholto was received a few minutes later. Lady Roslyn he found particularly impressive. He stammered and postured in his endeavor to prove to her that he was a man of the *ton*. She had his measure very shortly, and proceeded to handle him so skillfully that Ronyl and Delevan exchanged a smile of grim satisfaction.

"I saw that the upstart Fallon had tricked us all, so I stayed only long enough to have one of the maids pack me a portmanteau—my valet was missing, damn him!—and came to my friends at once to offer my apologies. I'll see my lawyers tomorrow, and demand a new agreement. This situation with my sister is intolerable!"

Half flash and half foolish, decided Roslyn, elated. She led him on to boast of his enormous fortune. Terence Delevan gave her the nod behind the boy's back. So, it was true. The pigeon was fat and ready for the plucking. She raised her sleek eyebrows at Delevan, who interrupted Sholto's consequential recital.

"Didn't I hear you say your sister had some voice in your affairs, me dear fellow?"

Sholto, interrupted in mid-flight, said a touch sullenly, "Oh, she's my guardian, but I intend to change all that!"

"I would hope you could do so, dear sir! I declare it is a shame to see a grown man so hobbled," Roslyn purred.

Sholto took fire at her obvious sympathy. "She's endlessly on at me, niggle-nagging and forbidding me the simplest pleasure! It's more than flesh and blood can endure, and—and I'll not endure it! After all, Miss Griselda's been seeing a great deal of that gamester fellow, hand in glove with him, gone all day and half the night! When I tell old Heathrow about her behavior, she may just find herself declared unfit to be my guardian!"

Disregarding Roslyn's frown at this news of one she had regarded as besotted over herself, Delevan snapped his fingers, smiling broadly.

"Grant, I think I've got it! A way for you to get the use of your money in days rather than months—and without dragging your sister through a distasteful court case."

Sholto turned toward him eagerly. He'd been drawing a long bow in front of these dazzling new friends, but he was well aware he'd never convince old Heathrow Griselda was unfit. If Delevan had a plan—"What is it? I'll do anything!"

Delevan grinned. "If Miss Grant is your guardian, that means she is required to guard you, to protect you, yes?"

Sholto pouted. "Yes, but I'm tired of her interference."

"Hear me out," coaxed Delevan, with a conspiratorial smile. "What if she lost you? Would she feel responsible, worried? Distracted, even?"

"I suppose she might," admitted Sholto reluctantly. "She's worse than a—broody hen for fussing."

"Then perhaps she might be willing to disgorge a nice round sum to. have her ward returned safely to her—ah—broody care?"

Sholto looked blank, but Roslyn clapped her hands with delight, and advanced on Sholto, kissing him on the mouth. Thunderstruck, the callow youth found himself grinning and shaking hands with the three conspirators. He was ashamed to admit that he didn't understand the reason for their satisfaction. So when Delevan clapped him on the shoulder, saying, "Are you game for the jest, Grant?" he replied:

"Yes, of course! If you think it can be arranged?"

"Nothing easier, me dear fellow! Don't I recall your mentioning that you own a large country estate, rather quiet and out of the way?"

Conveniently neglecting to mention that it was his sister who owned the farm, Sholto assented.

"Then the thing is done! We'll all go to the country place of yours early tomorrow before your sister can send for you. We'll take up residence quietly there, telling no one where we're headed. You can command the servants there to silence, can you not?"

"Of course. I'll threaten to dismiss any one of 'em who breathes a word of us. But I don't quite see—?"

"When we're comfortably bestowed, we'll send off a note to your fine sister, telling her ye've been seized by a gang of desperadoes"—Delevan pulled a fierce face that made them all laugh—"and she'll have to send a fine fat ransom."

Sholto frowned. "She'll never believe a group of desperadoes would hold me at the farm," he objected. "There are thirty servants and farm workers. One of them would be sure to get away and summon help—"

"But that is just it, me bucko! We'll stay at the farm, but we'll tell your sister to send the money somewhere else, never mentioning the farm,"

"And we'll tell her your life is forfeit if she refuses to pay," said Roslyn with a gurgle of laughter.

"Or if she tells the lawyers or anyone else—like the Bow Street Runners," added Lord Ronyl heavily.

Sholto began to grin maliciously. "She'll go into a tizzy—fly up into the boughs! For all she thinks she's so self-possessed, this'll shake her. Let's ask for a tidy sum, enough so I can have a little freedom for a change."

"Oh, we'll ask for plenty for such a valuable commodity," Delevan agreed, and they all laughed again. "How much should we say?" he asked Sholto.

The youth's eyes were sparkling as he sipped at his brandy. This was a game to his liking! "One hundred thousand pounds," he announced loudly, and was pleased to note the astonishment on their faces.

"As much as that?" Delevan's comment was almost a whisper.

"Why not?" Sholto boasted. "My father was a merchant, the merest cit, but by God, he cut up rich! Over two million pounds. Griselda gets half, damn her, but not till she marries, and I get the rest when I'm thirty." He laughed shrilly. "Except that I'm going to get some of it right away, thanks to you, Terence! Be very sure I won't forget my friends."

"Why, Sholto, me dear lad, 'tis very kind of you." Delevan motioned to Roslyn to pour brandy for them all. "Now we must put on our thinking caps and decide how best to play our cards."

24

When Calver arrived at the hotel an hour later (his concern for his rich young master not being great enough for him to consider abandoning all his own belongings in a house he might never return to), he was consternated to learn that Mr. Sholto Grant had already left the premises.

"How can this be? He was planning to stay here! I have his clothing with me. I am Calver, his personal servant, and I demand to be told where he is!"

Calver's pretensions were speedily depressed by the affronted clerk. "I do not inquire of casual visitors where they are going when they leave this hotel. Mr. Grant was not registered here, he was merely calling upon friends. He came. He left. I did not speak to him on his way out, other than to bid him a civil good night."

"Then if I could speak to the friends he was calling upon?" pleaded Calver. Find Master Sholto he must, or he would have neither position nor salary.

The night clerk's face expressed horror, and his genteel manner dropped from him like an ill-fitting mask. "Wot d'yer take me for—a dimwit? Fine fool I'd look, wakin' the nobs up so some silly clunch of a valley oo's lost 'is master can quiz 'em! Get out before I 'ave the porter throw ye!"

Calver hurried out of the hotel, lugging Sholto's portmanteau and his own. Now what to do? His thin figure trembled with anger and fatigue. The coachman was long gone. Where would Sholto have gone at this hour? Back home, probably—the silly noddie! The valet decided he'd better find a link boy or a porter to carry the luggage, and get on back to Thornapple Square. Old Wiggins could settle the shot when they arrived.

Wiggins did so, but informed Calver angrily that he'd never have done so had it not been for his anxiety over Master Sholto. "Get up to your room, Calver; wait for him there. I'll just stay here a little longer—"

"He's probably gone to a boozer to drown his sorrows," suggested Calver. "He'd left the hotel alone. Maybe the fine friends didn't want any part of him. Would his sister take him back? Why don't you ask her?" It did not seem to Calver that enough disturbance was being experienced at the loss of the head of the house.

"I don't intend to wake Miss Zelda with a story like yours! Boozing ken, indeed! She's had enough to bear from that young ingrate this night."

Still, as the butler kept his lonely vigil, he admitted to real alarm. Where was that naughty boy? What could Miss Zelda do, if he didn't come home by morning? If only she hadn't sent Mr. Fallon off so cavalierly! Any man would resent it. Gamester he might be, but Wiggins believed Devil Fallon could help Miss Zelda control her unruly brother.

Morning came, but no Sholto. Reluctantly Wiggins sent a message up with Miss Grant's morning chocolate. Bidden to attend her at once, he hurried up the stairs and entered her room. The girl scrutinized him Solicitously.

"You have not slept a wink," she accused.

"Nor have you, Miss Zelda," he replied in kind, noting the deep shadows beneath her lovely eyes, and cursing the young wastrel in his mind.

Griselda essayed a smile. "What new trouble are we in?"

"Master Sholto hasn't come home."

"He's at the Grand, with those—with his Irish friends." Griselda accepted her cup from the new little maidservant.

"No he isn't, Miss Zelda. Calver came here last night with Master Sholto's portmanteau. He said his master had already left the hotel—alone—before Calver arrived."

Griselda sipped and then put the cup aside. "Well, that should be a relief to us. I suppose his new friends turned him away. Perhaps that will teach him not to bestow his trust upon rascals."

"But where is he, Miss Zelda?"

"Gone to another hotel, I suppose," the girl said wearily. "We'll have him home fast enough when he needs money. I'm going to get up now, Wiggins. If we haven't heard from Sholto in a day or two, I'll make some inquiries."

"In a day or two'—! Miss Zelda, he's just a child—!"

"Not any longer," the girl said sternly. "He chose to leave his home and go after those creatures. He's made his choice, let him abide by it!"

But in the event, it was merely hours until they heard of the erring brother. Griselda, pale but determined to carry out her plan, was coming down the main staircase, elegantly dressed to drive to the Heathrows' chambers, when an urchin left a sealed envelope in Wiggins's hand.

It's for you, Miss Zelda." He held out the grimy missive dubiously.

"From Sholto, I suppose. Have my carriage brought round at once, if you please."

She glanced at the envelope. Unless Sholto had written it while under the influence, it was not from her brother. She opened the note, scanned the first few lines and froze.

Mistress Grant (it began):

I have your brother where no one will ever find him. If you wish to get him back alive, you will have to pay me for my trouble. Get one hundred thousand pounds and he ready to bring it to a place I will tell you of. If you inform ANYONE of what has happened or why you need the money, your brother will die.

You are being WATCHED. Stay away from Bow Street. The young fool owes me something and I plan to have my revenge. If you are late coming with the money when I notify you, I'll send you one of Sholto's fingers for every day you make me wait. If you tell ANYONE, even Wiggins, I'll kill your brother.

The Gamester

The signature was printed. Griselda read it through quickly once again. Instead of throwing her into a panic, the challenge rallied her resources of mind and spirit. She went into the library, and, closing the door, sat down to consider the situation as calmly as possible. It was plain to her that someone wanted her to think Devil Fallon had kidnapped her brother. The mention of revenge might be supposed to refer to Sholto's attempt at disgracing Fallon—everyone at the card party would have known about it, but none of them would have known of Fallon's concern for her dismay, his gallant efforts to comfort her, after the other guests had left. Nor would any of them know of Mistress Meek and her relationship to the gamester. One of Fallon's guests, then, had penned the note.

She frowned. Surely none of the men present last evening would be capable of such cruelty...such villainy...*Lord Ronyl!* His hatred of Fallon had

been more than apparent. The girl recalled his look of rage and chagrin as he left the scene of his humiliation after failing to discredit the gamester. But even he would not be stupid enough to imagine he could get away with this outrageous attempt—

Her racing thoughts came to an abrupt halt. Whatever she suspected, could Sholto's sister take the risk of endangering his life? When she remembered Maghery's furious, hate-filled face, she could accept the idea of his guilt. The man was vicious and utterly without scruple. Had she not overheard him twice, planning his ugly schemes?

The Bow Street Runners could catch him, but would they find Sholto in time? Lord Ronyl had impressed her as an evil, unscrupulous man, governed by his passions. Even consideration for his own safety might not be sufficient to control his anger if he were to be crossed. If he had Sholto hidden away somewhere, could anyone find the boy in time? Common sense told Griselda *she* could not. And if she were indeed being watched—With a shudder of fear, Griselda acknowledged that Lord Ronyl—if in truth the kidnapper were he—had the upper hand. She would have to get the money and be ready to hand it over on demand. And pray, she told herself, that the abductors would release Sholto unharmed!

Oh, if she could only enlist the help of Tim Fallon! But he had left her in anger; no, rather in disappointment, and would be unlikely to return uninvited to a house from which he had been as good as dismissed. She'd go to him in a moment, pride gladly set aside, if only there had not been that warning in the note: "You are being watched." If she sought out Fallon now, the kidnapper would know she had not been fooled by his insinuation, and might punish her disobedience by injuring Sholto. Very clear in her memory loomed Lord Ronyl's face with its cruel, bold black eyes and sensual mouth. He would enjoy hurting someone weaker than himself. But surely not even he would perpetrate such irreversible harm as the severing of... Griselda shuddered and put her hands, over her eyes. Take no chances! Get the money at once!

One hundred thousand pounds! Griselda clasped her shaking hands together in a curious wringing gesture and considered what she must do. Simon Grant would have been able to defend himself, and she was her father's daughter. It would, of course, be impossible to borrow such a sum without explaining what it was needed for. Curiously naive of Lord Ronyl not to consider that. Her jewels might realize part of the amount...then there was the farm...but how long would it take to turn all the assets into cash? It seemed there was nothing to do but go to the Heathrows.

She shook her head in exasperation. They'd never hand over so enormous a sum without demanding an explanation. If she told them the truth, they'd advise her to go to the magistrate at Bow Street to secure help. She might

accuse Lord Ronyl. They might even believe her, although it was much more likely they'd interrogate Fallon. Then what? Where could the Runners go to find Lord Ronyl? Worse, what *evidence* had she that he was the abductor? While all the legal wheels were turning, slower than the mills of the gods, what of the victim? If the abductor, whoever he was, had truly set a spy to watch Griselda, the worst thing she could do would be to go to Bow Street.

So, what story could she tell that would persuade the Heathrows to give her this enormous sum of money? If she failed to convince them of her need, would Lord Ronyl be satisfied with part of it, and her jewels? Could she try to arrange a meeting—appeal to him for time? It struck Griselda that he would enjoy nothing more than to have her at his mercy, pleading for her brother's freedom. Her flesh chilled at the idea. She recalled what she had overheard him saying that morning at the Grand Hotel. Marrying the heiress was a legal way to secure not part but all of her fortune. Hadn't Regis Southerleigh planned to do the very same thing? If she could persuade Lord Ronyl to marry her, surely he would agree not to harm her brother? Could she endure marriage with such a man? Oh, no! And unbidden, unwelcome, the image of another man rose in her mind—tall, broad-shouldered, with clear gray eyes that could become devastatingly tender or provocatively impudent. And his mouth—shaped for tenderness as well as passion. Fallon! If she could only confide in him! She clasped her hands tightly and pressed them against her treacherous lips.

"Miss Zelda?" Wiggins was opening the door of the library. Quickly she thrust the ransom note into the reticule which dangled from her wrist. Calmly she rose and walked toward the door, forcing a smile to her lips.

The butler looked anxiously at her pale, strained face. "The carriage is ready. Master Sholto hasn't returned yet. Shall I send for Mr. Fallon?"

In her fear and desperation—and perhaps because sending for Mr. Fallon was what her own heart urged—Griselda spoke more sharply to the old servant than she had ever done.

"Don't be a fool, Wiggins! Master Sholto has gone back to visit his friend Dobey Gregg. You are like a broody hen over the boy! And the last thing Mr. Fallon would wish to do would be to have any further traffic with a family that has treated him so scurvily!" She controlled her voice. "I am going to the lawyers' chambers now. Then I have an errand in the city. I'm not sure when I shall return home." Refusing to meet his troubled eyes, she went past him out to the carriage and was driven off, leaving the old man shaking his head and muttering.

"Sholto's gone to visit Dobey Gregg—I *don't* think! Told me he'd quarreled with the fellow when he was there before. What silly jugglery is the boy up to? 'Don't send for Mr. Fallon!' If Miss Zelda's the last person he wants to see, I don't know young men!"

25

Wiggins was still muttering and grumbling half an hour later, when the young man in question, hard of eye and grim of expression, plied the shining brass knocker on the front door of the Grant mansion. He was a little startled at the warmth of his welcome. Wiggins almost pulled him into the hall, talking nervously.

"Gone off in a pelter she has. And young spriggins not home yet. Some street boy brought a letter and now she's off to the lawyers and won't be home to lunch. Fair bit my head off when I mentioned your name."

Tim Fallon was able to sort out the various bits of information in the speech, but lost his slight smile on hearing the peroration. "Yet you feel she needs my help?" he suggested.

"I'm positive she does, sir. A fine young woman, but too stubborn and self-willed by half!" He shook his head, his thin, heavy-veined hand trembling a little on Fallon's sleeve. "*Just* like her father!"

"You think there is trouble," Fallon persisted.

Wiggins nodded anxiously.

Fallon continued to recapitulate. "Sholto fails to return. An urchin delivers a letter. Miss Grant leaves the house—ah—in a pelter. Yes, I should definitely say we have a problem."

Wiggins was so relieved to hear that supportive "we" that he beamed up at the tall, dark man before him.

Fallon's air was abstracted. Several possibilities, all unpleasant, presented themselves. The wretched youth could have tried to drown his sorrows and overspent his money, causing the landlord of the boozing den to hold him till the shot was paid. No, that situation could have been handled by dispatching a footman with a purse.

Had the boy boxed the Watch, or otherwise landed afoul of the tipstiffs? No; again a matter to be settled fairly easily by the lawyers. Had the graceless youth got himself in over his head at a gaming hell? In that case he'd have run to the security of his home and let Griselda worry about paying his debts, as he had done before. Fallon sighed. Nothing for it but that he would have to pursue his recalcitrant darling and force her to share her troubles with him.

The night had brought good counsel to Timothy Fallon, Knight Errant. In the dark, sleepless hours he had discovered that he loved the stubborn, foolish, managing female who had dismissed him so summarily. Loved her enough to ignore her wealth and her reservations about his occupation and her rejection of himself, and her unpredictable behavior. He saw not the pale, young woman who had sent him away with a shallow, social smile, but the spirited, lovely woman who had defended him so fiercely before all the fine English gentlemen. She hadn't cared what they thought of her, the darling, but she cared very much that they should not misjudge Devil Fallon!

When dawn came, he had decided to marry her out of hand, and instruct her lawyers to tie up her fortune so he would never get a penny of it. Hadn't he a tidy sum of his own? Far more than the wench knew of, enough to keep a wife in comfort for the rest of her days. Her fortune could go to their children. The thought of Griselda as a mother of his children brought such a glow of delight to Fallon that he dressed at once and set out for Thornapple Square.

Not soon enough, apparently. His valiant love had gone off to battle her own dragons, leaving her knight errant to follow and find her if he could. Fallon suppressed a grin. The whole situation delighted his Celtic sentimentality and roused his crusading zeal. Wiggins caught the look in his eyes and was vastly comforted.

"I believe I must require you to give me the direction of these men of law whom Miss Grant is calling upon," Fallon requested, trying to subdue his love of the chase with a punctilious formality.

Wiggins was almost tearfully happy to oblige. Now that we have a man at the helm, his expression seemed to say, we shall have clear sailing!

This was not, however, immediately found to be the case. When Fallon presented himself at the Heathrows' chambers in the Inns of Court a half an hour later, he was reluctantly received by the junior partner, and when he gave his name and informed this individual that he had come to escort Miss Grant to her home, he found himself being regarded with suspicion.

"Hmmm, Mr.—ah—Fallon," the rather pallid young man was scrutinizing him. "You say that Miss Grant—if she were here, which I am not at liberty to comment upon—arranged with you to meet her here?"

It would have been obvious to a meaner intelligence than Fallon's that something of a disturbing nature had taken place this morning in these hushed, rather dusty offices. He smiled gently at the junior Heathrow. "Miss Grant was not, I believe, aware that I should be calling for her today. I am a friend of the family, and I must confess that I am so old-fashioned as not to appreciate the idea of a young lady's traveling about in the city without proper escort."

The quiet confidence of the smile and voice, together with the fact that the sentiments expressed completely coincided with his own, caused the young man-of-law to relax his suspicions just a little. "You are a friend of the family, then, Mr. Fallon?"

"A close one." Suddenly Fallon recalled the incident in his bedroom when, blinded by soap and rage, he had roared for a towel. And received one. He smiled. "I am like a brother."

Whether it was the quality of that smile, or the reference to Sholto, Junior Heathrow stiffened up immediately. "Miss Grant has already left." He seemed about to say more, then shut his lips discreetly. "May I bid you good-day, Mr. Fallon?"

Realizing that he was unlikely to get anything more from the legal gentleman, Fallon sauntered out of the office. Mounting up into his curricule, he took the reins from Denny.

"She's gone. And she's in serious trouble of some kind. The young barrister was suspicious of me and wouldn't squeak beef, but something's happened this morning which threw him off his nice legal balance."

"Maybe Miss Grant told him she'd not be after marryin' that Southerleigh?" ventured Denny hopefully.

Fallon shrugged. "That intelligence would indeed have set the dovecote in a flutter, but I think it's something else." His face set in the old, hard, bitter lines. "Why didn't the fool of a girl let me help her?"

Seeing that look on his master's face, Denny had the wisdom to keep quiet.

26

At this moment Griselda was returning to Thornapple Square in a fighting mood. The Senior Heathrow had been very obstructive, at first utterly refusing to consider her outrageous request for one hundred thousand pounds in bills, and, on being reminded that it was, after all, her money, had attempted to catechize her on the purpose for which she required such an unheard of amount of cash. Her succinct statement that the money was required to pay a ransom to save Mr. Sholto Grant's life so shocked the man that Griselda's further statement, "If you allow any hint of this to become public, I am assured that the abductors will murder him out of hand, to ensure their anonymity," was obviously quite unnecessary.

Mr. Heathrow's quiet chambers had never before been profaned by such news, since, as he hastened to inform her, his practice of the law was confined to civil, not criminal matters. Although Mr. Heathrow, reeling under the shock, no longer tried to reason with his unfortunate client, he informed her that she would of course have to wait several days while he assembled the needed funds, for which she would have to sign a number of papers. Her response to this legal maneuvering was so clearly reminiscent of Simon Grant's that the lawyer almost suffered a spasm. In the end he agreed to give

her a note to the bank which held the majority of the Grant funds, only rousing himself to warn her, in a feeble voice, that even so there might be an unwillingness to disgorge such a sum.

"Oh, I don't intend to ask for it all. I've had a better idea," announced this incredible female.

"Do not feel yourself obligated to explain it to me," begged the old lawyer.

"I had not intended doing so," declared Miss Grant. "The fewer who know what I am about, the fewer tongues to wag."

Still too shocked at the event to take umbrage at this very unladylike comment, Heathrow made a final effort to deal responsibly with the young woman.

"Have you informed your fiance of your plan? His lawyers and his father, I may add, have waited upon me to discuss the settlements, which only await your signature to transfer all your interest in the estate to the Southerleighs—which I had understood was your express wish."

"That is all ended," the lady informed him, and not before time, he felt, with justifiable annoyance. "Mr. Southerleigh has as little wish to marry me as I have to ally myself to his family," his client snapped.

Upon receiving the note to the banker, which Mr. Heathrow composed with his own hand while She waited, the client flounced out of the office.

"Just like her father," murmured the lawyer, recruiting his nerves with strong tea a little later. Junior Heathrow only shook his head.

Riding back to her home after a short, unpleasant, but productive meeting with her father's bankers, Griselda tried resolutely to quell all emotion. "Men," she sneered to herself in what she felt was a quite reasonable annoyance. "If there is a difficult, time-consuming way to proceed, one may be sure that is the way a man will choose. It is a great pity women have not taken over the management of affairs!" This heretical thought gave her so much satisfaction that her good humor was partially restored, and after she had sipped a cup of restorative tea in the Ladies' Parlor, she began to think constructively about the details of the plan she was hatching.

Being Simon Grant's daughter, she knew that neither romantic notions nor feminine wiles would serve her against Lord Ronyl and his friends. The thought did cross her mind that her antagonists might not be the Irish contingent, but she dismissed it. There was a startling familiarity with intimate details of the Grant family life which seemed to her to rule out a strange criminal. In any event, whoever the abductors were, she must fight them, for she had a feeling the savagery so obvious in the note was not an idle threat. Very well then, what was her next step to be?

As it happened, the next step was taken for her Wiggins came into the parlor to hand her another of the grimy notes. She stared at the old man with a dismay she found it hard to conceal. "When did this...?"

"Just this moment, Miss Zelda. Is—is there anything I can do?"

Griselda rallied her courage. "No, thank you, Wiggins. I'll take care of it."

She hurried up to her room, dismissed the little maid who was waiting there, and, when she was finally alone, opened the missive.

You visited the lawyer this morning, then your father's bank. I am pleased that you are following instructions. A hired carriage will come for you this evening at six. Tell your servants you are going to spend a few days with friends. Bring a handbag containing the money you got from the bank and all your jewels. Bring a change of clothing. Speak to no one about this if you wish to see your brother alive.

The Gamester

Griselda moved slowly over to her dressing table and sat down. She reread the note carefully. The new demand, that she bring her jewels, she understood. The abductors were getting greedy. But why the change of clothing? Was it to give credence to the idea that she planned to visit friends? Was it for the servants' sake? Or was it—she shivered—so no one would think to look for her for several days, if she did not return? She realized with a cold sense of finality that the abductors could never let her come back to her home after she had seen their faces.

She got up and went down the hallway to her parents' bedroom. It was kept meticulously clean and exactly as they had left it. In the back of a lower drawer of her father's bureau she found the small handgun he had carried concealed on his person when he left London on business trips. The bullets, small but sufficiently deadly at close range, were still in their box. She took both pistol and bullets back to her room. Simon Grant had had her taught to shoot by the same ex-soldier who had taught him. Griselda loaded the pistol, placed it, wrapped in a handkerchief, within her reticule, and rang for her maid. She ordered a fire built in her bedroom, a hot bath prepared. After that, she chose carefully the richest yet most subdued garments in her wardrobe. She knew she would need every weapon at her command to give her confidence enough to defy the abductors. She got a sturdy portmanteau from the top shelf of her wardrobe, packed a complete change of clothing, her brush and comb and large bar of scented French soap. Then she scattered the money she had obtained at the bank over the top of the clothing. Unlocking her wall safe, she took three large jewel cases and dropped certain less valuable pieces into

the portmanteau. A little regretfully she also dropped in her finest piece, a slim, exquisite diamond necklace. The jewels flashed multicolored fire. Her father had bought sparingly but well for his wife and daughter. It was a dazzling display to bait the trap.

Closing but not locking the portmanteau, Griselda summoned the maid to help her dress. When she was ready, she smiled at the girl who had served her so enthusiastically. Emboldened by the enchanting smile, the girl clasped her hands. "OOO, Miss, you does look prime! You'll bowl him over, I'll be bound!"

It was obvious she thought her mistress was on the way to meet a sweetheart. Griselda thanked her, and hoped that her prophecy would hold true. For she had decided to overwhelm the abductor in a way not dreamed of by the little maid.

As she approached the head of the stairway, the unaccustomed weight of the pistol set her reticule to swinging. Casting a stealthy glance around to make sure she was unobserved, she slipped the weapon into a deep pocket in her elegant, fur-lined traveling cloak.

She was destined to meet another well-wisher on her way out of the house. Wiggins was waiting in the hall, his old face heavy with anxiety. Griselda adopted a sprightly manner.

"I am going down to the farm for a few days, Wiggins. All this furor has tired me out, and I'm in need of what Sholto's friends call a repairing lease."

Wiggins was not permitting her to escape so easily.

"You're leaving us at this time, Miss Zelda? With Master Sholto not yet returned—and who knows what a coil he'll be in when he does get back!" His ancient loyalty rebuked her.

Suddenly the girl had an impulse to confess the whole thing to him, but she restrained the treacherous weakness. What could he do? If there was a watcher—and the contents of the second note proved that her movements were known—the old man's reactions would warn the abductor that his demand for silence had been disobeyed. So Griselda continued to smile and patted his arm gently. Surely it was better for him to think her unfeeling than to involve him, and herself, in open defiance of those who held Sholto.

Wiggins glanced beyond her. "You're not taking your maid?"

"Why should I? Most of the regular staff are at the farm. All of you cosset me ridiculously." She smiled at him again. "Now open the door, unless you wish me to perform that office for myself?"

Frowning crossly, the old man hurried to the door. Holding the knob, he made one final appeal. "If Mr. Fallon should call again—?"

"You will tell him I have gone to the farm." Her eyebrows lifted. "He has really no right to know."

"He thinks he has," snapped Wiggins. "And so do I," his expression said.

"Good night."

Defeated, Wiggins opened the door. As he swung it wide, he became aware of a strange, closed carriage standing at the foot of the steps. "Now what is this?" he began, in a querulous voice, but Griselda swept past him and down the steps without answering. She was carrying her portmanteau. As she approached the carriage, a burly form appeared from the shadows and swung the door open. A hand under her elbow thrust her up into the shadowed interior, threw her portmanteau after her, climbed in and slammed the door. Before she had time to speak, or even think, the heavy vehicle was lumbering on its way.

"Well," said Griselda, to keep up her spirits.

It was the last thing she said for quite a while. A hand caught her shoulder and a foul-smelling cloth was drawn across her mouth and tied painfully tight behind her head. A moment later a cloth bag of some sort was pulled over her head. Now she could neither shout nor see. I hope I can continue to breathe, she thought doubtfully. Her reticule was jerked from her wrist. She knew a moment's thankfulness that she had transferred the gun to the pocket of her traveling cloak.

The coach swayed and jolted over the London streets. At length, just when she was sure she would either faint or be sick, it rolled onto the relatively softer dirt road outside the city. The coachman whipped up his horses, and the lumbering vehicle gathered speed. Half-conscious, Griselda relaxed the rigid stance she had been maintaining, and sank back against the padded seat.

A nightmare time later the vehicle drew up. There was a subdued bustle of dismounting and talk. Then a voice came clearly to her ears. Griselda's nerves tightened. It sounded like—but could it be? Yes, unmistakably, Sholto. Then the coach door was yanked open, and the man beside her thrust her body up and out into waiting arms. Even through the bag, her nostrils had been assailed by the reek of whiskey and tobacco smoke. It was a blessed relief to breathe cooler, fresher air. She was lifted and carried a distance, then thrown down onto some sort of cot or bed. A door closed. Rough hands jerked the bag free and she discovered herself to be in a smallish, windowless room. A single large oil lamp hung from the ceiling, providing light which dazzled her eyes. There was a familiar smell which dominated even the reek of whiskey and tobacco. Horses! She was in or near a large stable. Then there was movement and she focused upon two figures coming toward her.

Sholto! Anxiously her eyes searched his face and person for signs of injury. He looked intact and unhurt—and he was smiling! That rather nasty little grin he was wont to adopt when he was perpetrating some particularly devious prank. *Sholto!*

"Oh, no!" she groaned in agonized rejection of the situation. Strangely it was not so much because he had loaned himself to such a betrayal, but because he had forced her to accept, at last, that he was completely indifferent to her pain and sisterly concern. "To use me so!" she said, furiously. "Of Lord Ronyl I might have expected such dastardly behavior, but of my own brother—!"

For the huge man looming behind Sholto's meager figure was indeed the Irish peer. He thrust the boy aside and grinned down into her face. "Was it not the wily start yer dear brother conceived of, to lure you to us all complete with a nice little fortune? Ah, but we've still further plans for ye, me dear. You're to be honored, Miss Grant! No little petty honorable for the sister of Sholto Grant. No, yet brother intends to make a much better connection for ye, me pretty one. How does the Lord Ronyl Maghery sound to ye?"

"Disgusting!" Griselda, shaking with anger and reaction from the nauseating gag and hood, tried to stand upright the better to defy her tormentor. To her shocked surprise, Lord Ronyl casually lifted one huge hand and struck her across the face, knocking her back to the couch. The girl's eyes flew to her brother's face, surprising on it a sneaking smile. Something in her breast shriveled at that look, though he quickly enough erased it as his eyes met hers.

"Where is the master criminal, she said wearily. "I am not to suppose that Lord Ronyl or—Mr. Sholto Grant had the brains to plan and carry out this charming prank."

The Irish peer's face assumed a black frown. "I see I shall have to school ye, me dear bride-to-be. Such ugly talk from such a pretty mouth!" He loomed over her, hand raised to strike again.

Almost on cue the door opened and Terence Delevan came swiftly into the room, carrying Griselda's portmanteau. Without looking at the girl, he addressed himself to Ronyl in a voice whose calmness denied the ugly little scene.

"So, your plan has succeeded! We have our guest safely secured, and her dowry as well!"

Lord Ronyl's anger faded into sharp interest, but Sholto frowned petulantly. "*Her dowry?* What's this? The hundred thousand pounds is mine, to do with as I please. We can make arrangements for the marriage settlement when my dear sister is safely wed and in Ireland."

Lord Ronyl grinned but said nothing. Terence Delevan turned to the angry boy with a smooth smile. "Of course, Sholto. 'Twas just a manner of speaking. Let us get the lady and the guineas snug at Maghery Towers, and we'll all live happily ever after."

Sholto was still suspicious. "I've no intention of spending the rest of my life in some drafty barn in the bogs," he said crudely. "It's London for me tomorrow, with enough of the dibs in my pockets to live a little, at last!"

"And so you shall, dear boy, as soon as we're safe." Delevan's voice was soothing. "But should there be too much delay now, perhaps some misguided friend of your sister's—or one of the servants here—might become suspicious, and try to effect a rescue. And it's not many of the dubs you'd have to spend, standing in Old Bailey with a criminal charge on you. That's why we agreed to keep the lady here in the stables, snug and quiet, until we are ready to move her to Ireland. Once Ronyl has wed her, then we're home free and the world's your plaything!"

"I'll wed her tomorrow," said Lord Ronyl. "Until that's done, we're all in jeopardy."

Delevan agreed quickly, and even Sholto nodded a reluctant acquiescence.

Griselda, recovering from the shock of discovering her brother's duplicity, found her brain beginning to function again. She had until tomorrow, then, to get herself out of this coil. It was clearly apparent to her that the alliance of Sholto and the Irish contingent was an uneasy one. At best, Sholto was sullen, suspicious and greedy. Perhaps her wild plan, conceived in the theory of divide and conquer, might be brought to bear fruit. She straightened her shoulders and sat upright on the cot.

"I am hungry and tired," she announced calmly. "Am I to be given food and comfort?"

Delevan turned to her with an ironically admiring smile. "This is a very worthy lady you have chosen, me dear Ronyl. Not a hint of the vapors; no whining or complaining! You are to be congratulated."

Ronyl's smile was broadly-sensual. "I had almost rather she defied me. It will pleasure me to bring her to heel."

"Even so, we should be grateful that we are not compelled to place restraints upon your wife-to-be—or to drug her into acquiescence," Delevan's glance carried its own warning to the girl. "As a reward for such praiseworthy behavior, I think we might find it possible to provide a measure of comfort."

"Not inside the Manor," objected Sholto. "She'll have the servants rising against us at a word from her. It was always thus," he concluded spitefully. "They run to do her slightest command, but it's, 'I'll just ask Miss Zelda, sir,' if ever I give an order. In my own place, too!"

Ronyl gave a contemptuous snort of laughter, but Delevan looked thoughtful..."We'd best not let them know she's here, then," he decided. "I'll see she gets something to eat and drink, then we'll leave her to her slumbers—with a watch outside the locked door, of course."

"Perhaps I'll spend the evening entertaining her," Ronyl suggested, grinning widely. He had obviously been drinking steadily throughout the trip.

Griselda controlled a shudder of revulsion. It was time, and more than time, to put her plan into effect. Oh, Simon, help me now, she thought, and summoned up a smile.

"May I have my clothing and dressing aids from my portmanteau before you leave me? I'm badly disheveled by my ride in your charming coach."

"Lucky you weren't more than disheveled," sneered Sholto. "Since your attendant squire was Lord Ronyl."

"Then it was he who relieved me of my luggage, and my reticule," Griselda remarked. "Where is—oh, there is my portmanteau. May I have it, please?"

"I'm thinking I'd better open it first, considering the contents," replied Delevan jovially, and bent to pick up the leather bag.

"Not so fast, me bucko." Ronyl went to stand beside him. "Better let Roslyn be here for the grand opening. It was her quick wits that thought of demanding the jewels."

Griselda observed the hostility, scarcely veiled, on their faces. These were uneasy allies, distrustful, jealous. So much the better! But Delevan, ever the master of compromise and the quiet approach, had risen from his kneeling position beside the portmanteau and turned with a smile to the door.

"Well thought of, Ronyl. I'll get Roslyn out here as soon as possible—but ye've got to remember we must keep from the servants the fact that we've a distinguished guest in the storage shed." At the door he turned. "Best leave everything locked until we're all here to open it," he advised softly, and went out.

"A little too smooth for my taste," fussed Sholto. "He was suspecting you of doing him out of my sister's jewels," he smirked at Ronyl.

The Irish peer scowled darkly. "He presumes on old acquaintance," he grunted. "Let him remember he's greatly privileged to marry into my family. Roslyn's too good for him, but he's a useful creature."

Griselda tried to think of a way to throw dissension and alarm into the situation, but before she could come up with any good ideas, the door opened softly and the Lady Roslyn Maghery preceded Delevan into the room.

To Griselda's admittedly highly critical eyes, she seemed less beautiful than she had been when Griselda had last seen her. There were lines of anger drawn deeply between the dark, winglike brows, and lines of frustration around the full, sensual mouth. "Lady Roslyn! Welcome to my farm!" Griselda said, sweetly. "I am sorry to see you looking so poorly. Have you been ill?"

Anger flamed for a moment in the magnificent eyes, then Roslyn laughed. "Ronyl, you've a task before you, schooling this one!"

"'Tis a task I expect to enjoy." Ronyl's grin was wolfish.

"I hope you'll have better luck than your sister did, trying to manipulate Tim Fallon," Griselda remarked with her enchanting smile. Then she was afraid she had gone too far, for the Irishwoman swept toward her with obvious intent to punish the insolence. But again Delevan's voice, quiet, soothing, prevented an explosion of violence.

Little as the brother and sister might regard him, Griselda realized that this man held the Irish contingent together, gave them quiet, unobtrusive leadership, saved them from the errors their own rapacity and ignorance would lead them into. This, then, was her Chief opponent, since he was the Magherys' chief support. He was addressing Roslyn now.

"We wanted you to be here when we opened the little colleen's portman-teau, me dear," he said, and went to lift it up onto the rough table which stood under the hanging lamp.

At once the conspirators gathered closely around the table, eager to count the money and handle the jewels. Griselda rose quietly and went to stand at her brother's shoulder, ready to play out her part in the little drama which was all she had been able to conceive in the limited time she had had. Thus she was prepared when the portmanteau was opened wide and its contents displayed under the light.

"But it's all mussed up!" she said, childishly. "I'm sure I packed it neater than that!"

Three pairs of eyes were glued to the dazzling shimmer of jewelry scattered loose among the clothing.

Lord Ronyl sucked in his breath noisily. "It seems that someone has been rummaging about among the contents of your case, me dear wife-to-be," he said harshly. He thrust one arm into the bag and pulled out a loose handful of the bills which were scattered casually through the contents. "Shall we count the money, Delevan? Would you say we shall find it all here?"

White-faced, Delevan glared back at him. "It might be as well to make a count, Maghery. If you'll remember, 'twas yourself accompanied the lady within the coach during the rather lengthy drive down here, while I sat cold on the box, driving as slow a pair of slugs as ever it's been my bad fortune to have under rein."

Sholto pushed forward and began to take money from the case. As he pulled it out, he handed it to Delevan to count. The tally was made in a silence complete save for Delevan's voice naming the sum. "Twenty-seven thousand five hundred," he said, too quietly. His eyes went to Lord Ronyl's face.

"But it was supposed to be one hundred thousand!" squawked Sholto.

"It was when I put it in my bag," answered Griselda, all incredulity and alarm. "One hundred thousand pounds and all my jewelry—the price of the ransom for a beloved brother." She looked at Sholto.

"By God—" began Ronyl, red-faced with fury.

"Do not say it, Maghery, or I'll run you through," Delevan uttered between clenched teeth. "Again I remind you, I was on the box. You were in the coach. I had supposed you insisted upon that position in order to further your—

courtship," with a sneer, "but there could have been a more important objective, could there not?"

Lord Ronyl lunged at him across the table. Sholto hurriedly backed away, to stand dithering by the wall. Griselda also prudently removed herself from the immediate arena, but Roslyn moved forward. She slammed her hand down on the table.

"You'll hold your tongues, both of you! Let me see what's in this bag. Then perhaps the little commoner can tell us what we want to know." With a ruthless gesture she dumped the entire contents of the portmantau onto the table. This proved to be ill-advised, since Griselda's jewels went flying in a bright cascade all over the rough floor, some rolling under the cot.

On the instant the men were down on the floor, scrambling. Sholto came up with a flashing necklace of rarely matched, flawless stones. When Roslyn saw it, her breath caught in her throat and she moved forward, snatching it from his hand. He slapped at her. She ignored him, holding the beautiful thing up to catch the light of the lamp.

The men were crawling around on the floor retrieving emeralds that shone with a cool and lovely green fire, rubies burning with sullen beauty, and a dazzle of sapphire, amethyst and topaz. Under cover of the excitement, Griselda slipped her hand into the pocket of her cloak. Beneath her fingers she felt the small, comforting shape of the little pistol. She turned slightly from the absorbed treasure seekers and concealed the weapon under the soft froth of lace at her breast. She had a brief impulse to turn and fire at them all, the greedy thieves, and then she realized with dismay that she could not bring herself to fire upon even these creatures in cold blood. Disgusted by her own weakness, she looked at Sholto. Even in anger, she asked herself, even with the knowledge that he had concurred in this dastardly scheme, could she fire upon her brother?

And then the chance of surprise was gone. Delevan glanced up and caught her stern look. He rose lightly to his feet.

"We must present a singularly unattractive picture to Miss Grant," he said quietly. "Scrambling about on the floor like children after bright baubles."

"Children?" echoed Griselda, her contempt marked on her lovely delicate features.

"I think we have them all," announced Ronyl. "Can you tell us, Grant—is this the sum of your sister's ornaments?"

"Yes, tell these fine thieving friends of yours, Sholto. Are these indeed all the gems our father bought to honor your mother and your sister?"

Sholto, flushing at her tone, was quite unable to meet her accusing gaze. He glanced briefly over the flashing heap of gems that the others reluctantly

deposited on the table, where they shimmered and glowed with a hundred lights. "I believe that is all," he muttered.

"And would ye swear to t'hat now?" challenged Lord Ronyl, "since ye've scarcely looked at them. Or perhaps ye've tucked away a sparkler or two for your own delectation?"

"Why not?" Sholto, goaded beyond his limited control, flamed out at his tormentor. "They're all mine, actually, as the heir and the head of the family!"

"But I'm thinking you'll want to bestow them upon your dear sister as a dowry, when I honor yet family by giving her me name," prodded Ronyl. His eyes burned with greed and the sadistic enjoyment of baiting the boy. "Wouldn't want to let her marry above her without paying for the privilege, would ye now?"

"Shut up, Ronyl," advised his sister. She held out the diamond necklace to Delevan. "Put this on me, Terry. It can be your betrothal gift to me. What do you say to a double wedding?"

Griselda thought it quite time she stirred up the pot again. "But I can't understand about the money! The Heathrows, were very incensed at my demanding so much, and Papa's bankers were absolutely livid! Sholto, you can ask them if you wish how much they gave me. In fact, you'd better do so. You will be coming into a great deal of money after I am married, but not so much that we can afford to lose seventy thousand pounds. The Heathrows are sure to take it out of my inheritance," she pouted at Lord Ronyl.

Delevan's eyes were steely as he regarded Lord Ronyl. Then he framed an ironic smile. "So, me bucko, ye got yer fingers in the till to no advantage, since the missing guineas will be taken from your marriage settlements. Ah, well, ye've earned it, I suppose. Ros and I will just take this," and he scooped up the bills on the table, "for our expenses, like."

There was a double roar at this piece of impertinence. Lord Ronyl was heard to shout that he hadn't laid finger on the missing money, but he thought he knew who had. Sholto, in a falsetto wail, was understood to object to the idea of anyone but himself touching a penny of the money. "After all, it's MY ransom! I'm not too sure I want my sister to marry you anyway, Maghery. You're a demmed uncouth fellow. Are you never sober?"

Eyes and mouth wide with rage at this unpalatable plain-speaking, Lord Ronyl rounded on the boy. "Give thanks I'm willin' to marry the jade," he shouted. "I've no longer any need of you—"

Reading aright the murderous glare in the man's eyes, Griselda interrupted. "But that's the only way you'll get your hands on my fortune, isn't it? By marrying me? If you can't produce me and Sholto, alive and willing, to sign the settlements at the Heathrows', there'll be no money at all."

Delevan turned on the Lady Roslyn. "Can ye not control this savage brute of a brother of yours? He'll do us out of all our profit with his rages. He's no better than a Bedlamite!"

Lord Ronyl lunged forward and caught Delevan around the throat. His fingers squeezed and the dark blood began to congest the slighter man's face. Lady Roslyn's voice came like the crack of a pistol.

"Have done, damn you! I'll kill the both of you if you bungle this! You fools, it's the best chance we've ever had of securing ourselves. By God, I won't permit you to throw all away because of your lack of discipline!"

Lord Ronyl slowly took his hands from Delevan's neck. "Let your pretty man hold his mouth, then," he muttered.

Delevan tried twice to speak and could not. Finally he said in a croak, "Let your fool of a brother mind his temper. I am the only one of us who has the wits to plan and carry out a stratagem." The very lack of emotion in his voice caught and held the Magherys' attention. "I grow weary of this, Roslyn. If ye permit this oaf to spoil the play once more, I shall take me leave of ye both. Reluctantly," he finished with a slight, intimate smile at the woman, "but I shall do it."

Lady Roslyn caught her full lower lip in her teeth and held up a hand to silence her brother. "Hold, Ronyl. Terence means it, every word, and it's not Roslyn Maghery who would lose him at the latter end of this. Let be, brother. Follow his advice. He'll bring us off with the plunder."

"Well, actually, it's Lord Ronyl who will be master of a million pounds after he's married to me," objected Griselda girlishly, casting a speculative glance at the dark, lowering face. *Let me continue to foster dissension*, she thought, devoutly. "Why not give my brother his twenty-five thousand pounds and let him be off to London as soon as may be? Surely the rest of what's left"—she looked provocatively at the conspirators—"which I'm sure some naughty person is hiding at this very moment, will be ample to see the rest of us to Ireland!"

Delevan was regarding her closely. "Now why should you be so eager to see the last of dear Sholto, I wonder?"

Griselda put down her mask to let him see the full force of her disillusionment in her sensitive face. It was convincing, because honest, even if not by any means all of the truth.

"Do you ask me that, Mr. Delevan?" she said quietly. Then, turning to the Magherys, she continued with her pretty air of confiding, "Lady Roslyn will provide an acceptable duenna, I must believe! And I promise you, you'll find Sholto a very dragon as a traveling companion. Nothing ever suits him at the inns, and he gets nervous stomach and headaches from the jolting. Also he becomes vilely unwell at sea. One of you would have to hold his head."

Completely convinced by this revolting possibility, Lord Ronyl handed the majority of the ransom money to a gratified Sholto. "Mind ye say nothing but what we've instructed ye," he growled. "Yer sister's off with dear friends on a romantic journey to Maghery Towers, and ye wouldn't be a bit surprised to hear of a flattering outcome."

"Yes, yes, I have it all in mind," Sholto stammered, reaching greedily for the money.

Delevan, a wary look still on his face, finally said, "I suggest we return at once to the Manor house, lest Grant's servants become suspicious of our unusual interest in the night sky, or whatever excuse we made them for coming out in a group. Let the young woman rest." He picked up her cloak and casually felt in both pockets before he threw it onto the cot. "She'll be snug enough here for the night. No food or drink, and no light. There's a little too much spirit in the girl, Ros. Perhaps when we pick her up on our way out of here tomorrow, she'll be truly biddable, and we may permit her to break her fast with us on the road to Liverpool. If she is not amenable," his voice became very cold, "I suppose we shall have to drug her into insensibility."

"I'll do it with pleasure," said Roslyn, still smarting from Griselda's reference to a duenna.

"I shall be amenable," promised Griselda. "Am I not to be Lady Maghery?" She was determined to escape before the party left England, or turn her pistol upon herself.

Watching her carefully, Delevan finally nodded. He didn't know the girl, but he knew Sholto, and he thought he understood her kind. She was divinely pretty, but as a cit she'd have no chance with the English nobility had she twice the fortune she possessed. "Very well, then. I am delighted you have decided to be sensible. Let me bid you good night."

"You'll search the coach for the missing money, will you not?" Griselda asked ingenuously, her eyes on Delevan. If she could only fan the flame of suspicion among them again! But for the moment, the Irish contingent had closed ranks.

"I am sure we shall find the money, Miss Grant. Perhaps upon your person?"

As they turned to leave the storage room, Lord Ronyl hung back. "I want a word with me future wife before she goes to bed," he explained to his sister's inquiring look. She merely smiled a little maliciously, murmuring, "Rest well, Miss Grant," before she left, drawing Delevan after her. Sholto had been the first to go, avoiding his sister's eyes.

Griselda put her small hands to her breast in a gesture of maidenly modesty. It also brought her right hand close to the pistol under the fine froth of lace. She knew that no appeal she could make would divert Lord Ronyl from his intent, whatever that was, but at least she had now only one

enemy to face—and she would have no scruples in firing on Maghery if he attacked her.

But it seemed that amorous dalliance was not his immediate purpose. His dark, heavy-featured face revealed, for once, neither anger, crude humor, nor lust. Instead his sharp, black eyes studied her face. Griselda realized that this man was the most dangerous of the three conspirators. Lord Ronyl would not be swayed by pity; he would force his will without compunction upon any weaker creature. Then, the girl thought desperately, I must be strong!

"In the absence of a worthy male representing your family," Lord Ronyl began cruelly, "may I give ye a piece of advice? Ye're a handsome woman, although of common birth. Ye are also extremely wealthy. When ye marry, yer husband will have control of yer person and yer fortune. I intend to be that husband. Ye seem to be a sensible creature. Ye haven't treated us to the vapors, and ye've a better control of yet temper than my witch of a sister. I'll enjoy breakin' ye to me will." A glow began to come into the black eyes.

Griselda said quickly, "You were going to give me some advice, my lord?"

He showed her his wolfish grin, but seemed content to keep the discussion on serious matters. "All females are full of tricks and lies. But ye're a cut above the tuck, and seem sensible of the honor I'm after doin' ye. Are ye truly planning to be a conformable female? My advice is that ye do so, and spare yerself both pain and humiliation." And me, trouble, his expression said.

"I shall be sensible, Lord Ronyl," offered Griselda. "I've already given my word to Mr. Delevan." For sure, they none of them need know what she implied by 'sensible.'

But Ronyl was frowning in sudden anger. "There's no need for ye to give yet word or anything at all to Terry Delevan! He's been honored enough to find himself acceptable to me sister, for his family is good but not great, and he has no money but when he can filch from silly gulls and coneyes like yer brother. We none of us have one shilling to rub against another, but it seems it's meself who's to restore the family fortunes by way of a marriage with a little nobody whose father was in trade." He noted her rising color with pleasure. "Does that sting, me darlin'? Toughen yerself. There'll be plenty more of the same when we're married. It's up to yerself to keep me sweet. I'm civil only when I'm sober, and I'm drunk all the time." He gave her his wolfish smile.

"What I stayed behind to tell you, little wife-to-be, is merely this. Ye'll not be responsible to Terry Delevan, nor even to my beautiful bitch of a sister. 'Tis I who am to be yet lord and master. 'Tis my word ye'll carry out—and be damned to the rest of them! Is that clear?"

"Yes, Lord Ronyl," said Griselda meekly, and the fear in her voice was only partly assumed.

Lord Ronyl's laugh was satisfied. "Then I'll bid ye good night, me dear." He sketched her a bow which was in itself an insult, and went out closing and bolting the door after him. Griselda gave a sigh of relief. Cold and hunger and darkness were preferable to a night spent with Lord Ronyl. She took the pistol from her bodice and stared at it. Could she bring herself safely Out of this coil, or would it be better to...

27

Mr. Fallon had returned to Thornapple Square for the third time that day, barely minutes after Griselda had been borne away in the heavy coach. He found Wiggins beside himself with worry. The old man hardly waited to usher him inside the hallway before breaking into an account of the latest development.

"The second of those notes came, sir, and Miss Zelda took it to her room. Very secretive she was, sir. Before I knew what was happening, she was down again, dressed very fine with a long, fur-lined cloak and a portmanteau. She told me she was going to the farm to rest, but she hadn't ordered her carriage. Then I opened the door and there was a very antique-looking coach waiting outside, heavily shuttered. She went off in that, with never a word of what we were to do if Master Sholto came home in more trouble. It is not like her, sir, to be so callous. Oh, I know the boy has given her a disgust of him by his actions, but she has always forgiven him before...helped him..."

"If he is not here, how can she be expected to do either? No, Wiggins, I am more concerned about your mistress than about that reprehensible young man. I feel she is in some great trouble—perhaps danger—and it may be his doing."

Wiggins's face crumpled. "That is what I fear, too, Mr. Fallon. I've felt all day that she was battling some threat of danger, but I kept hoping she could handle it as she has always done. She's that brave and resourceful, sir..." A sob broke from the old man's throat.

Fallon rallied him gently. "Then we are agreed your mistress is in trouble. Let us see what can be done about it, shall we? What do we know? Item: we have two missives, each one sending Miss Grant out of the house."

"But this morning it was to the lawyers she went, as she had planned, to ask them to terminate her guardianship of Master Sholto," interjected the butler.

"Yet when I called upon them, soon after she had left them, the younger Heathrow had an air of alarm which was greater, surely, than such a request would have caused him. So, item: there was more she had to discuss with the lawyers than her guardianship of Sholto. And Sholto himself hasn't been seen since. Is this item three?" He pondered the idea. "Yes. Item: Sholto has not been seen, either by his sister or by the hotel people or by his valet, since last night."

"But he did leave the hotel alone, sir, and walking," suggested the butler. "I thought at first the Irish gentlemen might have been angry with him at the failure of their scheme, and perhaps done him an injury."

Fallon shook his head. "There'd be no profit for those two in giving Sholto a thrashing. He played his part adequately in their little scheme... Wait a minute! No profit in a thrashing, I said. But two letters came to his sister—who is the wealthiest woman in London. The first letter causing her to go to her lawyers with highly disturbing news; the second sending her out into the night in a strange coach with a portmanteau! What does that suggest to you, Wiggins?"

"Oh, God, sir, do you think it is extortion?"

Fallon didn't bother to answer that. "What did she say to you, Wiggins? The exact words, man!"

The old fellow trembled and muttered, then shook his head helplessly. "She only said that about going to the farm, sir. It's plain she was trying to put me off the track."

"Prevent you from worrying, more like," suggested Fallon. "Well, it's obvious that the farm's the last place to look for her, if it is indeed the Irish contingent who sent her the letters." He stood a moment in deep thought, his dark brows drawn together. The old man stared at him in a trembling silence. "Liverpool! They'll make for the port and back to Ireland, whatever shady scheme they've hatched. I'll ride for the port at once."

Perched high on the curricule, Denny looked down at his master with anxious eyes. "She's not home, sir?"

"Wiggins and I are inclined to think she's been the victim of an extortion plot. I believe the Magherys, foiled in their charming attempt to ruin me, have taken young Grant and are holding him for ransom. His sister has gone off in a strange coach to pay it."

Denny's face hardened. "Then let's after them without loss of time," he urged.

Fallon grinned at him wryly. "And where to?"

Denny looked crestfallen. "There is that, isn't there?"

"In truth, there is that. If we make a choice and are mistaken, we may have lost the trail forever... Still, I do have one idea. And I hope to God it is the right one, for without us to aid her, I fear for Miss Grant with those—!" And he used a very bad word in the Gaelic.

"What is your idea, sir?" prodded Denny.

"I am thinking they'll rush her off to Ireland, where it would be impossible for her to betray them to the English authorities, or for those same authorities to find her. I do not believe they will dare to murder her, yet you see, Denny, they cannot permit her to return to her home once she can identify them as the abductors." There was a fine sheen of sweat upon the man's forehead, and it was clear he was desperately afraid for the life of Griselda. "I propose we intercept them at the docks at Liverpool. I only pray we'll be ahead of them there!"

"Amen to that," whispered Denny as Fallon set the curricule in motion.

It seemed to the impatient rescuers that Fate was against them on their wild dash to the Mersey River. First they had to stop at Fallon's house to pick up funds for the trip and a greatcoat each against the chill of night. Then Fallon had to dissuade Barty and Orrible from accompanying the party; he did so by instructing them to have all ready for his return with Mistress Meek. Then Denny got some maggots into his brain about Fallon's consequence when he met the Magherys again. Fallon cursed him roundly, but the little man insisted upon packing his master's best black velvet suit and suitable jewelry and accessories. "For I will not have you looking anything but the great gentleman you are, sir, in front of those creatures! And I've never a doubt that Mistress Meek would second the motion, sir. You'll mind how she refused to let you wear the red coat, lest the hobs laugh at ye?"

"Pack the clothing," Fallon submitted with good grace, "but do not take all night over it. I suppose you'll insist on putting in my quizzing glass?" Then, observing Denny's thoughtful look, he shouted in quite the old way, "I was joking, you fool! If you're not ready in five minutes, I'll leave you!"

Much refreshed and heartened by his burst of ill-temper, the servants accomplished miracles and waved their master and his valet off within very little longer than the designated time. Still, it was nearly ten o'clock at night

when Fallon gave his horses the office, and his elegant curricule, with his best pair stepping out smartly, flashed down Bishop Street. Quite carried away by the drama of it all, Denny cried "Tally ho!" and was severely reprimanded for making a fool of himself.

As Fallon negotiated the twisting streets of London with reckless skill, Denny's mood darkened. "Too bad we're so late. They'll be far ahead of us, for sure."

"Not necessarily, if I know the Magherys. They'll be lying snug in some pleasant inn, now they've plenty of money."

This reflection depressed both master and man, and they kept silence for a space, wondering how the abductors would bestow Griselda Grant. Determined to be optimistic, Denny voiced the problem for both of them.

"They'll take extra care of Miss Grant, sir; after all, she's a fortune to them alive and in good health."

"True," agreed Fallon, also determinedly looking on the bright side.

He felt sure he knew, at least in general, the lay of the roads north and west from London to the Mersey. But a heavy fog crept down on them just after midnight, slowing their progress unbearably. Then sometime during the night, Fallon took a wrong turn and lost several precious hours, since he did not discover his mistake until dawn. All the next day they pressed on, begrudging the time they took to rest the horses and feed themselves.

Toward nightfall, disaster struck. Negotiating a sharp corner, they found themselves confronted by a vehicle unforgivably far over on their side. Fallon handled his own cattle well enough to avoid a serious accident, but the careless whipster's heavier vehicle ripped off and broke their near wheel.

Fallon and Denny were down in a moment, Denny to the horses' heads, to soothe the high-bred animals, Fallon to assess the damage to his curricule. He confronted the tipsy culprit with a white rage, which faded as he observed the young man's appalled regret. Accepting his apologies with scant courtesy, Fallon requested the youth to inform him where a wheelwright could be found.

Their ill-fortune seemed to have changed with the intelligence that a thriving village was just around the turn, less than a mile off. Whether or not the blacksmith could be persuaded to begin work upon their wheel or replace it after dark was a moot point.

"Jolly's a good man. He'll oblige you first thing in the morning, and I'll do myself the honor of paying him for the wheel, since the accident was my fault. I'd had a few too many at the inn," he concluded sheepishly. "In any event, you would not wish to continue your journey tonight." He motioned toward the woods, from which, and from a boggy marsh, a heavy mist was beginning to roll.

Fallon bit back an exclamation of disgust, but Denny said softly at his shoulder, "Them we're after will have to rest as well, sir. You said it yourself. We'll lose little time and feel better for rest and food."

"You remind me of a nanny I once had," said Fallon bitterly. But the valet was correct, he decided an hour later. The horses were fed and resting comfortably in a clean, well-kept stable; he and Denny had eaten well; the room in which they were to spend the night was also clean and well-kept.

"Off to sleep at once, Denny. I've left a call for dawn tomorrow."

Denny yawned and slid between the blankets of the cot he was using. Fallon put out the candle, fearing it might be some time before he could get to sleep, but surprisingly he knew no more until a thunderous knocking on the door of his room aroused him the following morning.

There were complications about making and fitting the new wheel, however, and to their dismay, Fallon and Denny did not get back on the road until the next day. Fallon's lips were set in a white line, and Denny's face was shadowed as they resumed their journey.

"We cannot be too far behind them, sir. I defy them to drive as well or as fast as your honor," muttered Denny at dusk that day.

Fallon's tense shoulders relaxed. He admitted to himself that if he ran into the abductors at this moment, he would be hard put to mill them down in his present condition. Then the thought struck him: how would he get Griselda away from them? Worse. What if she were not with them? Blind fool! He'd run off like an idiot, following his hunch that the conspirators would make for home ground. He sighed. Devil Fallon would just have to trust his luck, and play his cards as they were dealt.

"We'll stop at the next inn," he told the valet. "I think both of us are ready for food and rest."

Within the hour they drove into a small town. They passed a tiny hostelry on the outskirts, the Duck and Drake, which Denny thought had a nice, domestic sound, but Fallon overruled him. "Sheets are probably damp," he decided, and drove on toward the center of town, where Fallon chose a much more pretentious building. It was well-lighted and had a heartening bustle in the inn yard.

"We'll do well here," commented Fallon. "It's the sort of place Ros would insist on stopping at. We may get news of them." He drove neatly past a couple of heavy coaches and pulled in front of the busy stables. An ostler ran out to take charge of the curricule.

"Put her up for the night," ordered Fallon. "See to the horses first. Extra corn, I think. They've done a noble run today." He flipped a coin, which the ostler caught expertly.

"Yes, sir!" the boy was admiring the sleek, high-bred pair.

As they proceeded from the stables toward the back of the inn, Denny carrying the luggage, Fallon halted abruptly in the shadows and threw out an arm to stop the valet. From an open window above their heads came a voice well-known to them both.

"I will admit you're a bruising rider to hounds, but you in turn must agree that you make damned heavy going over rough ground," said the Lady Roslyn Maghery. "All we ask, Ronyl, is that you leave the chit alone until we're safe in Ireland, or that you let me give her a potion that'll keep her quiet."

"He's fallen love with the wench like any callow stripling," Delevan's voice came from almost over their heads. The two listeners faded back into the shadows instinctively, but it seemed to be unnecessary; the three inside the inn were too absorbed in their quarrel to bother coming to the window.

Fallon heard Lord Ronyl growl, "I gave the girl my word I'd let her keep her wits about her, so we'll have none of your dosing and drugging, Ros! And what I say and do to her is my own affair. Have you forgotten I'm to marry her?"

There was an undistinguishable comment from Delevan, then Ronyl's voice loud and angry, "Of course I'll control her money when she's my wife! You weren't thinking of wedding the lass yourself, Terry? What a comeuppance for poor Ros!"

There wad the sudden scrape of a chair on the floor, then the voice of Lady Roslyn, low but clear.

"Shut up! The bitch has you at each other's throats! As for you giving her your word, Ronyl, we all know how much that's worth, if your inclination should ever be to break it! Now go and get comfortably drunk, dear brother, and forget the little English witch. I swear you haven't touched a dram these two days!"

"And I, for one, prefer you drunk," snapped Delevan. "Your temper's chancy, then, but at least you spare us this fustian."

There was no reply from Ronyl, but a door stammed thunderously within. Then Roslyn's voice came low and furious. "He's gone back to the woman! What has she done to him? Perhaps you had better marry her out of hand, and we'll get him drunk and keep him that way until he forgets this folly."

"Would you trust me to wed the charmer, *mo croidhe*, my own dear love?" teased Delevan.

"I would that, little man," laughed Roslyn harshly. "I know well the kind of games you like to play, and it's sure I am the prim little English miss would never play them with you."

The voices lowered, and Fallon and Denny crept back toward the stables. Denny was startled to behold a huge grin upon his master's face. Fallon broke into a low laugh.

"The wit of her! The courage and the bright mind! She's doing it again, Denny, bless her!"

Denny blessed her heartily, and then queried, "What is it Miss Grant is doin', then, if I may ask?"

Fallon chuckled. "Setting the villains against one another, of course. Divide and conquer. Don't tell me ye've forgotten Mistress Meek and the Rout of the Tradesmen?"

Denny grinned at the memory, as Fallon continued in a sober tone, "These are more deadly opponents. We must help her, Denny."

"Ye'll never go into the inn alone? With all of them, and most likely a crew of servants, together there? The odds are against us," objected Denny.

Fallon considered the situation. "They are well entrenched. It's clear to me that I cannot face them down in this guise." He indicated his wrinkled and travel-stained clothing. "This is far from the immaculate and fashionable Devil Fallon I have trained them to expect."

Denny glanced at the warm light spilling from the kitchen of the inn. "It's too hungry and tired we are to think clear, sir. Perhaps we could bed down in the stables, near the horses?"

"No, I've a better idea. We'll go back to that little inn we decided against earlier, and eat a good meal. Then we'll rest a little and clean up, and come back in style."

As they sat together over a meal in the dingy taproom of the Duck and Drake, Denny confided, "I had thought we might waylay them and snatch away Miss Grant, but it's chancy work, ambushing a coach on a busy highway like this one."

Fallon raised amused eyebrows. "I see I have not fully appreciated your talents all these years! So now it's highway robbery, is it?"

Denny chuckled. "Sure an' I'd be no threat at all to anybody, for it's just dawned on me that such a large and fancy party as them we speak of would more than likely have two or even three coaches to carry them and their servants and the baggage. Fine fools we'd look, holdin' up the first coach, and havin' the other two sweep around the bend on us at the vital moment!"

Fallon entered into the game with relish. "What about this? What if the servants' coach came first—to prepare the rooms and all at the next stopping place. We'd ambush the servants, drive them off and set their coach across the road. Then when the Magherys' coach arrived, they'd stop to find out what had happened to their servants, and we'd leap out upon them, yelling and flourishing our weapons—"

"What weapons?" asked Denny in a disapproving voice. "Your honor well knows you refuse to carry any. While we two were battlin' Lord

Ronyl, Mr. Delevan and a round dozen of servants, *with* our bare hands, Lady Roslyn would probably put a pistol to Miss Grant's head and force us to surrender."

"True, Denny, but it was amusing to play a game of make-believe derring-do. I have, in fact, a simpler plan which I hope may work, since it's clear neither of us is a hero. We must face them at the inn, where at least they'll be reluctant to murder us before witnesses. I asked myself what weapon I could employ? What was their greatest weakness?"

"Malice, dishonesty, lust, greed—" began Denny, with the air of one who has much information to impart.

"Stop there," interrupted Fallon. "*Greed*. It is the source and wellspring of their action. So I intend to play upon their greed." He rose and called for the bill. "First, we shall require mine host to give us a room to wash up and change into garments not so travel-worn. Then you shall walk back to the stables, harness up the team, and come back here for me. We'll arrive in a style suited to my consequence! You must go into the inn ahead of me, puff me off to the landlord, demand the best rooms and a hot meal which I shall refuse when I arrive. Best of all, throw down a couple of golden guineas and demand service for Mr. Fallon of London."

"I'd like nothing better," avowed his henchman, "had I the guineas and some idea of what mad scheme yet honor is hatching!"

His master enlightened him.

So it was, half an hour later, that an obsequious host bowed the elegant Mr. Fallon into the best parlor the establishment boasted. That it already contained a glowering Lord Ronyl and a quietly smiling Mr. Delevan did not seem to discompose the new arrival. He raised his quizzing glass and surveyed them calmly.

"Ah! The Irish contingent!" he said sweetly. "Going home? I fear our London fogs—or something—did not quite appeal to you."

"Or something," agreed Delevan equably.

"Now I am going home too," Fallon went on, snapping his fingers at Mine Host, who was waiting to serve the fine gentleman. "Best whiskey, Host, for myself and friends."

Lord Ronyl moved as restlessly as a caged beast. Then he tipped his head and poured the contents of his glass into his mouth. Fallon observed the maneuver blandly.

"I am going home," he repeated, "to buy a castle. Do you know of one for sale?"

Both Delevan and Maghery were now staring at him intently. "What madness is this? Gettin' a bit above yerself, are ye not, Parson's boy?" sneered Lord Ronyl.

"I am, in truth, if two million pounds is above myself. I've had a lucky season, what with your late friend Sholto Grant and a few other pigeons." Fallon sighed affectedly. "Clonmel said he'd help me find a place suitable to me new fortune, but he can't get away from London just yet, and I'm eager to be at it."

"What's this about Grant?" began Lord Ronyl harshly. "He told us ye'd got his house and his allowance off him."

"I had a little more than that," smirked the gamester, looking mysterious. Lord Ronyl thrust back his chair.

Delevan stood up unhurriedly. "Why do we not adjourn to our suite upstairs, and then we can talk in comfort?" He gave his friend a warning glance that indicated the several other guests whose attention had been caught by Lord Ronyl's abrupt movements and loud voice.

But the gamester was playing hard-to-get.

"I think I'll stay down awhile. I'm not ready to retire yet."

"Who said anything about retiring? A pleasant game, perhaps, to while away the evening?"

Fallon laughed so loudly that every eye in the room was attracted to the party. "Oh, my dears, haven't you learned your lesson yet? You've nothing left to wager! I had all of it. Also all of Sholto Grant's. By the way, have you seen that unfortunate youth? His friends fear he'll do himself injury, having beggared himself and his sister in one night's play."

"By God, I'll not listen to yer lies!" began Ronyl, fiercely.

Fallon smiled gently. "Oh, had you hoped to pluck the pigeon at your leisure? If you know where he is, tell him his lawyers are mighty anxious to see him."

"And what do ye know of his lawyers?" snapped Maghery.

"I saw them several days ago—in fact, the day after my card party—not a painful memory, I hope?" he smirked at Lord Ronyl.

"You talked to his lawyers?" persisted Delevan.

"Naturally. I was at their chambers to present young Grant's notes-of-hand. The boy is casual about play and pay. Deludes himself he hasn't really lost much. I had moved into his house, but he kept making excuses about handing over the money. I grew tired of waiting for him to accept his losses and honor his obligations. I faced his lawyers with the IOUs. The senior Heathrow was beside himself. It seems the silly youth hazarded not only his own fortune but his sister's as well. Mr. Heathrow appealed so strongly to my chivalry that I relented a little. 'Tis the Irish sentimentality in me, I am afraid." The gamester sighed affectedly and accepted the whisky from the bowing host. "Gentlemen, your health!"

Delevan refused; Maghery seized the offered glass and drained it in a gulp. Delevan repeated, "You relented a little. How much?"

The gamester shrugged. "I'd heard she was middle-aged and rather plain. I instructed them to give her a few thousand pounds—enough to keep her until she can find something to do for a living, or some fool of a man willing to marry her for her face and fortune." He laughed. Ronyl rose to his feet, glaring.

Delevan was not to be diverted. "Twenty-seven thousand pounds, belike?"

Fallon raised his eyebrows. "Me dear boy! Are ye a warlock? 'Twas thirty thousand I had them give the poor woman. Mr. Heathrow said it was very generous of me. Odd, is it not, to think of Tim Fallon, the parson's boy, able to give away thirty thousand pounds!"

Lord Ronyl gave a bark of laughter and turned on Delevan. "Thirty thousand! And you gave that pup of a boy back twenty-five of it, to get rid of him and keep him sweet for the wedding! It's finely they've diddled ye, ye scut! And ye so willin' to believe I'd had me fingers in the money before ye got to it!"

"But it's you was so anxious to marry the girl," reminded Delevan, white around the nostrils, his voice quieter by the minute. "Do ye think her couple of thousand pounds will last ye through the honeymoon?"

"Oh, are ye to marry the woman, Maghery?" asked Fallon innocently. "Rather beneath your class, the daughter of a tradesman, I should have thought."

"I'll kill her!" raged Lord Ronyl. Several of the guests rose to their feet, staring nervously. The landlord came hurrying over to their table, accompanied by two stout serving men.

"Better send for Ros," Fallon advised Delevan, *sotto voce*. "Our wild Irishman looks to be getting out of hand. This is a fairly public place for him to be making threats of murder, don't you think?"

Delevan slipped past the landlord, a sickly smile on his face. Fallon stepped into the breach. "Landlord, coffee for his lordship, please—quickly." He turned to Maghery. "Please sit down, Lord Ronyl. Our good host will bring you a settler in a moment."

Lord Ronyl sank back into his chair, his burning gaze fastened to the gamester's face. "Is it true you've won all his money? I wondered why he refused to come with us to Ireland, the little weasel. He insisted on returning to London, but it was that damned fool of a Delevan who gave him the money! Still, Grant left his sister to trick me into marriage." He struck the table with his fist. "I thought she..." his voice trailed off and he sat staring at the tabletop in a brown study. Fallon forebore to disturb him.

Very shortly Lady Roslyn appeared in the doorway, escorted by Mr. Delevan. She had one arm linked through that of Griselda Grant. There was a dazed look on the girl's face, and her step was hesitant. Mr. Fallon, after one lightning glance, kept his eyes away from her. He rose to his feet.

"My Lady Roslyn! What a pleasure to see you!"

Roslyn had apparently been informed of the situation by Delevan. Sweeping toward the group, she pulled Griselda along with her toward the table. She smiled at the landlord. "Could you serve us all with some of your excellent coffee, Host? Before we retire to our suite for the night," she added. It was a suggestion the landlord was eager to accept. He bustled off, giving an order to a hovering waiter.

"Terry tells me you've won all Grant's money," she addressed Fallon hard-eyed, but keeping her voice low enough so that no one beyond their table could hear.

"And his sister's," added Fallon. "He was so very eager to play!"

The Lady Roslyn smiled grimly. "Och, you're the clever one, parson's boy," she said. "And you, me dear Terry. You were so quick to give the boy the twenty-five thousand pounds. So what have we at the latter end of it for all our pains?"

"You have the jewels," Delevan reminded her.

"Speak not of them, lest this clever fop wheedles them out of you." Roslyn's smile was icy. She gave Fallon a glance of purest hatred. "I hope we never have to set eyes on you again," she told him softly. "Come near us at Maghery Towers, and I'll kill ye if Ronyl doesn't."

"Thank you for the warning, my lady," said Fallon. "May I bid you good night—and good-by?"

"Wait, Ros," interrupted Delevan. "Get him to take the Grant woman with him. I am truly afraid of what Ronyl will do when he sobers up."

Fallon frowned. "Take her—? What is this? Is this Sholto's sister? She's pretty enough to tempt a bishop!"

"Yes, yes, me boyo, this is Mistress Grant. Wouldn't she make a pleasant traveling companion for you?"

The gamester raised his quizzing glass, stared through it, and shook his head. "Sorry, me boyo, but I'm planning to go on to Liverpool in the morning, and thence to Ireland. What would I do with this young woman?"

"Have ye no pity for the girl ye've robbed of her fortune? Would ye leave her to Ronyl's tender mercies? He'll surely try to kill her when he remembers what she did to us. Come, come, Fallon"—when the gamester still seemed reluctant—"your father would be sadly disappointed in ye!"

Fallon permitted himself to look pained, stupid and irresolute. Delevan pursued his advantage. "We know ye've too kind a heart to desert the girl, when she's the victim of her brother's folly and your—er—skill," he coaxed.

Fallon sighed. "Well... if you feel she's in danger," he said finally. "But you'll have to help me," he continued. "Have your maid bring her cloak and whatever belongings she has to me here."

Glad to escape from the avid interest of the other guests, Roslyn got up and guided the girl out to the hall and upstairs.

"What's wrong with her?" Fallon inquired testily. "She acts like a sleepwalker."

"Just a little quieter Ros gave her. She was feeling a trifle under the weather," Delevan reassured him. "She'll sleep through the night and never remember what's happened."

"Well, this all means I shall have to leave the inn at once. All these staring fools! I can't suddenly acquire a woman and remain here to furnish fuel for their conjectures. Really, Delevan, are you sure this is necessary?"

"Ronyl will do her an injury," Delevan assured him.

Both of them knew that was true.

"Will you really take her back to London?" Delevan asked.

"Of course." Fallon imitated a leer. "Perhaps not by the most direct route. She's not a bad-looking filly."

Delevan threw him a warning look. "Better get out of Ronyl's sight, Failon. I don't know how long he'll remain in that comatose state, but when he comes out of it, he'll be wanting your blood as well as the girl's. He's always hated you, you know."

"Well, I've given him reason," Fallon admitted. And to himself he added: if you only knew how much!

He rose a minute later, and saying good night quietly, went out into the main room of the inn. Denny was there, looking nervous, carrying his own and his master's greatcoats. While Fallon discharged his debt to the landlord, Lady Roslyn's maid came down the stairs escorting Griselda. The girl seemed half asleep. Fallon came forward anxiously to receive her. Her fur-lined cape was draped over her shoulders, and her reticule had been hung from her wrist. The maid handed Denny a small bag without comment, and went back upstairs.

"Let's get out. I won't push my luck," whispered Fallon. He put his arm around Griselda and led her out the front door. The night fog had lifted, and a half moon gave uncertain light to the road. Denny stowed Griselda's bag under the seat, then waited until his master had mounted into the curricule. He boosted the girl up to him. When he made to pull himself up behind, Fallon shook his head.

"I'll need you here to wedge her between us. They've given her something. She'll be sound asleep in a minute,"

Denny swore under his breath, and Fallon nodded agreement.

"They're despicable, of course, but then we always knew that, did we not?"

As Fallon gave his horses the signal, Denny glanced past the girl at his master's stern young face. By the good Lord, the valet thought exultantly, he's really free of that harpy at last! And looking himself for the first time in years!

He put a respectful hand very gently across Miss Grant's shoulders to steady her. His master noticed and approved.

"That's it, lad. We mustn't let her fall, brave lovely girl that she is."

So the three rode through the night, two of them so happy they forgot to be tired, the third fast asleep between them, safe in their care.

28

When Griselda awoke, she found herself in bed in a very pretty little rustic room she had never seen before. She lay still for a few moments, trying to remember how she had got here and what had happened to her. Suddenly she recalled the Lady Roslyn holding a cup to her lips, and she sat up quickly, peering around the sunlit bedroom with alarm. Stretched out in a large armchair near her bed was Devil Fallon, looking very relaxed and serene in his sleep.

She smiled naughtily, remembering how appalled this same gentleman had been the morning Mistress Meek invaded his bedroom, and the anguished leap of his fine, handsome body back under the bedcovers. She looked around for a mirror, saw a tiny one hanging awkwardly high above an antique bureau, and resigned herself to patting her hair into place. If he was here, at least she had nothing to fear from the Irish contingent. She tried to remember how he had gotten her away from the Magherys, but could not. After a minute she did recall something, and got stealthily out of bed to secure her reticule. She found it on the bureau.

Opening it quickly, she gave a sigh of relief. Under a fine lawn handkerchief lay the large bar of scented French soap she had brought from Thornapple Square. She took it out and stood smiling at it.

"So English, this desire to be forever washing," came a lazy, beloved voice from the large chair.

Griselda whirled to face her Devil.

She had already discovered that her outer garments had been removed, and that while her attire covered her adequately, it was certainly not that in which an unmarried lady was wont to receive visitors. Still she stood quietly watching him, adorably flushed and smiling her enchanting smile.

Fallon rose and came slowly toward her. "You must stop looking at me like that, or I shall not answer for the consequences." He took her hand and bowed over it. "Madam, good morning. We are free of the abductors, and I love you."

Griselda sighed with satisfaction. "That is the nicest good morning I have ever had. Would you like to enjoy my soap?"

Fallo quirked an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting that Mistress Meek assist me in my ablutions—again?"

Griselda chuckled and held the bar of soap out for his inspection. "They had me locked in Lady Roslyn's bedroom, where she or her maid might keep me under surveillance. I had pretended to a meekness of deportment"—she smiled at his reaction to this—"and the maid sometimes slipped away while her mistress was at dinner or the like. I had given Lord Ronyl my word that I would not try to runaway if they did not drug me—"

"Which Lady Roslyn had just done when I found you last night," Fallon interjected.

"I'm glad. It releases me from my parole. In any event, I knew that Delevan and Ronyl's sister would prevail very soon, so I tried to be alert for any opportunity. When Roslyn came to get me last night, she sent the girl out of the room on a trumped-up errand. Then she took a small bottle from her case and began to prepare a drink, telling me that she was taking me down to the parlor to meet an old friend and for goodness' sake to smarten myself up so I wouldn't disgrace my hostess."

"That has the Lady Roslyn's authentic touch," commented Fallon grimly.

"I was delighted. I walked over to her dressing table, upon which she had scattered whichever of my jewels she did not desire to wear that evening. I picked up the most important piece and slipped it into my reticule. Its absence was not noticeable in the confusion of the dressing table. Then I tidied my hair and went over to the commode to wash my face. I had this soap in my reticule, and used it—well, don't you think?" With a little effort she separated the bar into two halves. Nestling in the hollow space she had made in

Thornapple Square was a diamond necklace. "It was my mother's, and I didn't want that woman to have it."

"Bravo!" applauded the gamester. "We'll alert the London police when we return. They can advise us as to how to get back the rest of your jewels."

"Do not bother," advised the girl. "They'll never venture back to England as long as they know we could have them arrested if ever they did. It's cheap at the price, to be rid of them."

Fallon came and stood before her. "I want to hold you in my arms," he said softly, and waited. Looking into his face, the girl understood that the male pride of him, so cruelly mocked by a bad woman was holding him, binding him against a full, free offering of his love to any other woman.

"I wish above all things that you would do so," she said gently, and drew his face down to her lips.

An ecstatic time later, the gamester looked down at his lady love. "It's not a very valiant knight errant you've chosen, my darling," he said softly, his voice deep and warm, but a smile of self-mockery set wryly on his lips. "Instead of killing the dragons, or even putting them to rout, I merely tricked them."

When, at her demand, he told her his stratagem, she clapped her hands with pleasure. "How clever you were! To use their own weaknesses against them! My father would have loved it," Griselda said admiringly. "He always valued brain over brawn."

Fallon's smile became amused and tender. "You're determined to admire me, are you, then? No word of censure for the falsehoods I told?"

"I told worse ones myself," the girl said firmly. "As long as we do not tell them to each other—"

"You think we should agree to complete honesty, always?" the man challenged.

Griselda met his eyes, her expression adoring.

"I do."

"Very well, then, Miss Griselda Grant. Do you love me?"

Delicious color rose in her cheeks, but she held his eyes with hers. Instinctively she knew that this healing was essential.

"I do,"

"How much?" Devil Fallon demanded.

"All I can—in every way—for always."

The dark, laughing face became sober, and in the man's eyes a light began to glow. He took her in his arms gently, and bent his shining dark head over hers.

"Do you want me to kiss you?" he whispered.

The beautiful eyes wavered at last, and long-lashed eyelids lowered to conceal them.

The man waited, hardly daring to breathe.

"More than anything in the world," said Simon Grant's daughter in a small, clear voice,

Tim Fallon took her at her word, and for a little while a tiny rustic bedroom in an English inn became the center of the universe.

When Fallon came reluctantly back to earth, he released Griselda and walked rather unsteadily to where his greatcoat was thrown over a chair. Bringing it to the girl he draped it carefully over her shoulders. Griselda was not cold, but she would gladly have worn the man's coat in the center of a furnace.

"I had so sharp a fear they might hurt you," he murmured, when he had her safely back into his arms again, greatcoat and all. The lines on his face testified to the strain his too active imagination had put upon him.

Again the girl's impulse was to heal. She said quickly, "You did not know of it, but I had overheard Lord Ronyl saying he'd be willing to marry me to control my fortune. I believed I was safe. Why murder anyone when a marriage is so much easier and more rewarding—financially, I mean," she hurried to add as she realized how the man would take what she had said.

Fallon threw back his head and shouted with laughter. "Oh, Mistress Meek, I do love you! Let us hasten to discover if indeed marriage is more rewarding!" His gray eyes, cool and reserved no longer, dwelled with open adoration on her rosy face, so close to his own. "Much as I am enjoying this bucolic interlude," he teased her, "I must in all honor get you safe back to your own home at once."

"I am in my own home in your arms. I want no other," Griselda said steadily. It was true. She had never felt so secure, so beloved in the luxury of Thornapple Square.

Timothy Fallon, ex-gamester, placed his lips against the palm of her small hand. And his voice was not steady as he said, softly, "It's prudent I am to be marrying a wealthy woman, for surely a man as lucky in love as I am could never again have any luck at all with the cards!"

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.