



## BLACK SHEEP'S DAUGHTER

Carola Dunn

### Chapter 1

A raucous flock of scarlet macaws rose screeching from the huge jacaranda, scattering lavender-blue petals beneath the horses' hooves as the riders entered the muddy stable-yard. Sir Andrew looked about at the neat, white-washed adobe buildings, their red tiles aglow in the rosy light.

"Welcome to the Hacienda del Inglés," said his grey-haired companion, his host, then called out, "¡Hola!"

From one of the buildings emerged a young woman dressed in a white shirt and a calf-length skirt of brown homespun cotton over leather riding boots.

Andrew concentrated on dismounting as gracefully as possible from the ornate Spanish saddle. In the months of travel south from Mexico he had learned to appreciate its comfort, but he still found its high back made leaving it awkward.

As his foot touched the ground, a shot rang out, then another.

His mount shied and Andrew sat down in the mud. The echo of the shots was replaced by a trilling laugh.

Outrage warring with embarrassment, he raised his eyes to see the girl standing with pistol in either hand. From its perch on her shoulder, a bright green parrot scolded, "*¡Hijo de puta! ¡Hijo de puta!*"

She hurried forward, hand outstretched. "*¡Perdóneme, señor!*"

"Sir Andrew is an Englishman, Teresa," interrupted the older man, grinning as he dismounted.

Andrew scowled up at the cause of his discomfiture,

who was attempting a curtsy, no mean feat in riding boots. Annoyed as he was, he could not help but notice delicate features, golden complexion, huge dark eyes, and a delectable figure emphasised by a wide leather belt ornamented with silver, from which hung her pistols.

"Hello!" said the parrot, fixing him with a beady eye. It stretched its red- and blue-barred wings, flapping them wildly so that a breeze stirred escaping tendrils of her glossy black braids. "Hello, hello, hello!"

"I beg your pardon, sir!" She spoke English with no trace of an accent. "There was a snake, so close I had no time to warn you."

Moving very fast, Andrew scrambled to his feet and looked down. A four-foot snake, reddish brown with dark bands and bright red sides, lay there twitching, its head a bloody ruin.

"Good God!" he gasped, shaken. "Lord Edward, this is indeed a stimulating welcome."

An enchanting ripple of laughter greeted his feeble witticism, as his host introduced, "My daughter, Teresa. *Querida*, this is Sir Andrew Graylin, an envoy of the British Government."

"Miss Teresa." Andrew bowed his most elegant bow, trying to forget the mud that coated him from the waist down. "Pray permit me to express my eternal gratitude for your rapidity in coming to my assistance."

He looked down into twinkling brown eyes, and her lips twitched at the pompous solemnity of his words, but she said gravely, "*Con mucho gusto*, Sir Andrew. I hope you will forgive me for startling you." Then she giggled. "It sounds so funny to hear you calling Papa 'Lord Edward.' Here he is known as Don Eduardo, you know."

"Enough of your teasing, minx," ordered her father. "Take Sir Andrew to meet your mother and then I expect he will want to—ah—tidy up before he faces the entire family at dinner."

"Dinner!" shrieked the parrot, which still clung to Teresa's shoulder. "Hello, hello, hello, dinner!"

"Gayo wants to be introduced," Teresa explained. "Will you shake hands with him, sir?"

Andrew held out his muddy hand, gingerly, and the parrot inspected it with care. Then it came to a decision, hopped from Teresa's shoulder to a firm

grasp of the Englishman's forefinger, then sidled up his sleeve to grip his collar. It rubbed its yellow-naped neck against his head, nibbling gently on his ear and crooning.

Teresa watched in amazement. "He practically never does that to anyone but me!" she exclaimed. "You are indeed honoured, sir! It seems he has fallen for a handsome stranger."

Andrew flushed. Far from comfortable with the bird clucking to him intimately, he wondered in alarm what on earth this extraordinary young woman was going to say next.

Nothing out of the ordinary. "Come through to the house now, sir. I am sure you will prefer to 'tidy yourself,' as Papa so tactfully put it, before you meet Doña Esperanza. Your servant arrived hours ago, with my brother Oscar."

"Lord Edward—Don Eduardo—sent them ahead from Cartago," he explained. The parrot flapped back to her as Andrew followed her from the stables through an arch into another courtyard, where purple, crimson and orange bougainvillea climbed riotously up the walls. "They were to inform Lady Edward that he had invited me to stay."

"Lady Edward!" Again her infectious laugh rang out as they climbed wooden stairs to the open gallery that ran along the first floor. "I did not believe Papa when he said that that was what Mama would be called in England. Here in Costa Rica she is Doña Esperanza, which is much prettier, you must agree. Here is your room. I hope you will be comfortable. I must go and change for dinner, and then I shall come back to show you the way."

"Thank you, Miss Teresa."

"Oh no," she said with that infuriating gravity belied by the mischief in her eyes, "you must address me as Miss Danville, for though I have ten brothers I am the only girl. You see, Papa has taught me the proper forms. *Hasta luego*."

In the dusk, he watched her walk away along the gallery, her graceful form made lopsided by the animate hump of the parrot on her shoulder. Lord Edward Danville had the strangest notions of bringing up a daughter, he mused. The younger son of an English duke, however long separated from his noble family, might have been supposed to have more

concern for propriety than to let the girl go about in short skirts with pistols at her belt!

The door to his room stood ajar; oil lamps burned within and he heard his servant moving about. The tropical night was falling fast and here in the mountains a pleasant coolness replaced the humid heat of the day. Andrew entered a chamber similar to those he had occupied during most of his mission to Central America—whitewashed walls with woven hangings in brilliant hues, heavy wooden furniture gleaming with beeswax, wood plank floor polished and meticulously swept—until he stepped onto it and the drying mud cracked from his clothes and boots to fall in little heaps about his feet.

Once again he felt the humiliation of his arrival. He was not sure which was worse, to owe his life to a female marksman or to land in the mud in front of her.

Rowson turned at the sound of his master's entry and gaped.

"Lawks, sir, you're a right mess, you are! What ever happened?"

"Never you mind. See if you can get me a bath, will you? And be quick about it, for Miss Danville will return shortly to fetch me."

"Right you are, sir. I'll have a word with Sanchita, the cook. One bath coming up." The manservant left, closing the door behind him.

Andrew checked that the curtains thoroughly covered the barred but unglazed window onto the courtyard, then began to undress. Recalling Miss Danville's reference to him as a 'handsome stranger,' he paused to study his face in the mirror on the wall. It was the same face that had looked back at him any time these dozen years, unexceptionable but less than striking.

His one good point, he had always thought, was his patrician nose, but that was now reddened by an excess of sun. The rest of his face was acceptably tanned; somehow his nose could never come to terms with the climates to which their lordships at the Foreign Office insisted on sending him.

Blond hair, bleached pale by that same sun, and blue eyes completed the inventory. Possibly Miss Danville had never seen such English colouring before, and therefore admired it. More likely she had been quizzing him. Stripping off his mud-coated riding

breeches he turned before the mirror. At twenty-nine he was leaner than he had been at twenty, muscles turned to whipcord by his travels through the wilds.

He frowned. The impertinent chit had him posing like a man-milliner!

Half an hour later, clean and refreshed, he was adjusting his cravat before the same mirror when Miss Danville knocked.

"Are you ready, Sir Andrew?" she called.

Rowson opened the door and bowed. "Perfect timing, miss, if I may make so bold."

"Good. You know where the kitchen is, Rowson. Sanchita will feed you, if your Spanish is good enough to tell her what you want."

"Mootchers grassiers, singyereeter. I find sign langwidge works best, miss. Give a cook a kiss and you'll get a meal anywheres in the world." He winked, and she chuckled.

"That will do, Rowson!" said Andrew sharply. "You forget yourself."

Turning, he realised why his man had been moved to such familiarity. Miss Danville was clad for all the world like any peasant girl in her fiesta clothes. Like her earlier dress, her full skirt of scarlet cotton reached only to mid calf: Since she wore sandals instead of boots, this displayed an unseemly length of slender ankle. Her open-necked shirt was embroidered with crimson and green and blue, flowers and birds and intricate curlicues; her hair, freed from its braids, fell loose to her narrow waist in a rippling ebony tide, adorned only by a scarlet hibiscus tucked behind her ear.

In the light of the oil lamps Andrew saw that she was older than he had supposed; in her early twenties, he guessed. The warm light, together with the vivid hues, made her amber skin glow. She looked colourful, pretty, and thoroughly amused by his scrutiny.

"Yes, Sir Andrew, I do occasionally set aside my pistols," she said drily.

He flushed. "Where is the parrot?" he asked to cover his confusion.

"Doña Esperanza will not allow Gayo in the dining room. Besides, he gets his claws tangled in the embroidery when I dress up. He is in the stables. Do come on, I'm so hungry!"

The dining room occupied most of the ground floor of one wing of the house. The long table was spread with a white cloth embroidered in green, and set with European china and silverware. As Andrew and Teresa entered the room a hush fell on the group standing at one end. The young Englishman found himself confronted by a horde of young men and boys, all different sizes but all with a strong family resemblance and all looking at him with curiosity. One of them stepped forward, boot heels clicking on the red tile floor. To his relief he recognised Oscar, his host's eldest son, who had been present at the talks in Cartago.

"Come and meet Doña Esperanza," he said.

The horde parted to reveal a plump, placid matron, her dark hair touched with grey, dressed in an old-fashioned black gown in the Spanish style, with a lace mantilla. She looked no different from a score of starchy Spanish ladies Andrew had met on his travels, and as he bowed over her hand, he wondered how she had come to have such an unconventional daughter.

After a few minutes of polite conversation, in Spanish since Doña Esperanza spoke little English, he was whisked away by Miss Danville to be made acquainted with her brothers. In spite of his diplomatic training he found it impossible to fit all the names to all the faces. The only other female in the family was the timid wife of the second son, who spoke in a whisper that went unheard amid the clamour of all the male voices. Andrew began to realise why Teresa had grown up with such an outspoken nature. The alternative would have been total self-effacement.

Don Eduardo came in and gave his arm to his wife, who moved with arthritic difficulty to the table. As the rest took their places, Andrew found himself sitting beside Teresa. Apparently she ran the household, for at her signal a pair of maids carried in steaming dishes. Pork with pejibaye and beans, beefsteaks fried with onions and chiles, potatoes and yuca cakes and plantain fritters: the odours made Andrew's mouth water.

For some time conversation was limited to requests to pass the salt, as the hungry, hard-working family concentrated on putting away as much food as possible as fast as possible.

Teresa was the first to raise her eyes, and her

thoughts, from her plate. "Sir Andrew." Her voice was reflective. "Are you a baronet, sir?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, ma'am. I am a mere knight."

Don Eduardo snorted. "Better a knighthood earned than a baronetcy inherited. Graylin started out as the 'mere' second son of a viscount, *querida*, and was knighted for his services to the British Government."

Once more the gaze of the entire family focussed on his embarrassed face.

"What did you do, señor?" demanded one of the younger brothers. "Did you fight Napoleon?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm a diplomat, not a soldier. The Foreign Office sent me to North Africa, on much the same mission I am on here, and they were sufficiently pleased with my reports to recommend a knighthood. I must confess that my father is a member of the Carlton House set and he dropped a word in the Prince Regent's ear on my behalf."

"So when they read your next reports, I daresay you will be made a baronet," said Teresa, looking pleased at the thought.

Her second brother spoke at the same time. "What exactly is your mission in Costa Rica, Sir Andrew?"

The Englishman sent a questioning look towards his host, who nodded.

"Nothing more dramatic than collecting information. I have been consulting with the leaders of the local populations throughout Central America, from Mexico south, to discover how serious is the general insurrection against Spain."

"Our people are changing their minds," broke in Oscar eagerly. "Since Fernando VII repudiated the 1812 constitution, even those who led our soldiers against the uprising in Nicaragua have decided to fight for freedom from Spain."

A lively political discussion ensued, in which Teresa bore her part admirably. She was thoroughly in favour of independence from Spain, and had no qualms about stating her opinions with vigour.

When the talk turned to hacienda business, Teresa asked Andrew to tell her about his adventures in North Africa. He insisted that nothing exciting had happened to him there, but she was fascinated by his descriptions of the ancient walled cities, the fierce, blue-faced Bedouin tribesmen who ranged the deserts

on their camels, the veiled women and whirling dervishes and snake charmers.

A thoughtful look crossed her face when she heard about the snake charmers.

"I beg you will not try anything of the sort!" Andrew said in alarm, easily reading her expression. "No, I take that back. I absolutely forbid you to try, even with a harmless snake!"

She giggled, but said indignantly, "You cannot forbid me to do anything, sir. Still, I cannot imagine a viper, such as the one that nearly attacked you today, being enraptured by the sound of an ocarina."

He would have pressed her, but the maids came in to replace the empty dishes with pots of fragrant coffee and bowls of bananas, mangos, pineapples, papayas and melons. The bowls were beautifully carved out of an extraordinary purple wood; filled with colourful fruit they made an exotic display. When Sir Andrew admired them, Don Eduardo told him that one of his younger sons had made them.

"They're a talented lot, my family," he claimed with patriarchal pride, and proceeded to mete out tomorrow's chores.

Andrew realised that Don Eduardo made full use of all his offspring's talents. Much of the farm work was done by the family, though they did employ a dozen or so peons, both Indian and of Spanish descent.

"Should you like to see the farm tomorrow?" Teresa whispered. "If you can persuade Papa to let me show you around, then I shall be able to escape my own chores in the house."

"It is always a pleasure to come to the aid of a lady," he said with mock gallantry. "But yes, I should enjoy seeing the place. I cannot stay here long, for there will be a Navy vessel waiting for me off Puerto Limón at the beginning of next month, and your father tells me one must allow a week for the journey to the coast."

"How I wish I could travel like you!" she cried. "I have never been even so far as Limón, which is no distance at all. It takes a week to get there, and much longer with ox-carts, only because the road is so bad. And Don Eduardo says there is nothing there when you arrive. I should like to see London, and Paris, and the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara and the Bedouin. And the snake charmers," she added with a twinkle in her eye.



"Come to think of it," he said, "considering the way you have charmed your parrot, I daresay you would not have the least difficulty with a snake! This coffee is delicious," he went on, sipping the aromatic brew. "I do believe it is the best I have ever tasted."

"Papa! Sir Andrew thinks our coffee the best he has had!"

For the third time that evening, the diplomat found himself the cynosure of all eyes.

"Now that," said Don Eduardo, grinning, "is precisely what I wanted to hear. Though coffee growing is a new venture for us, Graylin, I am convinced that we produce the best in the world and that there will be a great future for it if we can but develop an export market. We need to learn more about the proper cultivation, too, for our yield is very low. I am thinking of sending Oscar to Jamaica to learn more about the business."

"I shall be sailing to Jamaica on my way to England," said Andrew, holding out his cup for more coffee. "Perhaps I might persuade the captain to allow Oscar to go with me."

Don Eduardo gazed at him with an arrested look. "That would be most helpful," he said slowly. "I must think about this." He glanced at his wife, then at Teresa, then at one of the boys who had been sitting quietly, rarely joining in the conversation.

"Yes, I must think. We shall speak more of this tomorrow, Graylin."

Shortly after this exchange, the household retired. Most of them would be up before dawn, ready to fit in a long morning of labour before the afternoon siesta.

The young Englishman was not sleepy but he had no wish to disrupt the routine of the house. He went up to the gallery outside his chamber, and leaned on the railing overlooking the courtyard, pondering the completion of his mission. He must start soon to write the report of the Cartago meeting, while the details were fresh in his mind. However, he could spare a day to tour the hacienda with Teresa. Though she would undoubtedly be condemned as "farouche" by London society, she was a pretty and amusing young woman and he had no doubt that he would enjoy his time with her.

It had been raining, and from the courtyard rose the fresh smell of damp earth, mingled with the

overpoweringly sweet fragrance of some unknown jungle flower. Andrew breathed it in and was about to go to bed when he heard footsteps approaching along the gallery. In the near darkness nothing was visible but the pale blur of a white shirt-front.

For a moment he almost hoped it was the unconventional Miss Danville, looking for a romantic tryst beneath the tropic moon. Then he recognised the boy who had been so quiet at dinner. Marco, he thought his name was.

"Sir, would you mind if I asked you something?" the youth blurted out shyly. "Were you ever at a university?"

Andrew confessed to having read history at Oxford. He was hard-pressed to answer the flood of questions that followed. Marco wanted to know everything there was to know about university life.

At last he said passionately, "If only I could go there! The new school in San José is supposed to be an alternative to universities abroad but it teaches only the rudiments of philosophy, and indeed most classes teach basic reading and writing!"

"How much schooling do you have?"

"I expect I should have to have a year or two of tutoring," Marco said in a humble voice. "Don Eduardo has bought me all the books he could lay his hands on, even though it is illegal to import them except from Spain. And I have had some help from the priests in Cartago."

"I fear Catholics are not allowed at Oxford and Cambridge, though many Emancipation bills have been presented in Parliament and perhaps one has passed since I left."

"Oh, I am not a Catholic. Papa would not permit Mama to have us baptised. It is one of the few things they ever argue about. Papa says he is still an Englishman and an Anglican though he has not set foot in England or in church for a quarter of a century, and as far as he is concerned we, as his children, are all honorary Englishmen and Anglicans. No, that is not a problem. The problem is getting to England in the first place."

Andrew looked at him. "If Oscar is to go with me to Jamaica..." he said slowly.

"You don't suppose you could persuade...?"

"I shall see what I can do," promised Andrew

recklessly, then wondered why he felt he was letting himself in for far more than he realised.

## Chapter 2

Teresa woke to a feeling of anticipation.

Why? she wondered sleepily. In all her twenty-three years, only her birthday in October and the August fiesta in Cartago, in honour of Nuestra Señora de los Angeles, had made her feel this way, but this was June. Besides, for the past few years even those great events had lost their attraction. Life was dull.

Then she remembered: the Englishman Papa had brought home with him. She was to spend the day showing him the hacienda.

Tossing the patchwork quilt around her shoulders against the morning chill, she went to the window. The sky had scarcely begun to pale in the east but it was clear, full of stars. The summit of Irazù loomed black against the deep blue, seeming near enough to touch. Her father had been to the top once, when he first settled in the area, and her brothers had often talked of going up to see the crater, but somehow there were always too many other things to be done.

This was her opportunity, she thought in sudden excitement.

It would be much more interesting than looking at crops and livestock. Sir Andrew had not mentioned ever seeing the inside of a volcano on his travels, and if it was clear enough, according to Don Eduardo, they would be able to see both Atlantic and Pacific from the top. Perhaps the sight would wipe that censorious look off his face.

She scrambled into her riding skirt and snatched up a broad brimmed hat, then ran along the gallery to tap softly but insistently on his door.

"Señor!" she hissed at the window. "Wake up, please wake up."

"Miss Danville!" His sleepy face, fair hair tousled, appeared between the curtains. "What is it?"

"I want to take you up the volcano, and we must leave at once if we are to get there before the clouds gather."

"Huh?"

"I'll explain later. Get dressed while I go and make some coffee to wake you up properly. Don't be long!"

He joined her in the kitchen ten minutes later, still tousled. A cup of coffee roused him to the point where he began to think.

"Does your father know about this?" he asked suspiciously.

"I've left a note so they know where we are going," she said, impatient. Picking up a saddlebag full of food, she hurried him towards the stables.

Gayo greeted them vociferously, launching himself from his perch with a shriek of "Hello, hello, hello!" Then he spotted his new friend and flapped across to Sir Andrew. "Dinner," he said in a friendly voice. "Hello, dinner."

"Oh dear," said Teresa, chuckling as she led out a pair of small but frisky horses. "Now he has associated you with that word he will never forget it. I think he had best stay behind today. Will you saddle the horses while I tie him?"

She hooked a tether to the parrot's leg ring, to his noisy disapproval, and made sure he had food and water.

The rest of the household was astir as they trotted round the side of the house, and as soon as they were clear Teresa led the way at a gallop. It was still cool, though the sun was just rising on their right. The muddy track--with the rainy season well under way, everything was muddy--ran between fields of crops among which Andrew recognised potatoes, maize, carrots, onions and bananas. A swell of ground topped by cacao trees hid them from the house, and Teresa slackened her headlong pace to a canter.

"There, that has shaken the fidgets out of them," she said with satisfaction as Sir Andrew reined in beside her.

He looked at her with misgiving.

"Miss Danville, I am sure that this expedition must be frowned upon by your parents. Apart from any other consideration, it is not at all the thing for you to be without a chaperon. It would be highly improper in England, and I know that the Spanish have still stricter rules governing the behaviour of young ladies."

"We are not in England, nor in Spain," she answered, irritated. "Papa lets me ride about the hacienda on my own."

"But you mean to leave the hacienda, do you not, and besides, you are not on your own."

She laughed at him. "Are you warning me to beware of you, Sir Andrew? You must know that I have brought two chaperons."

She drew a pistol, waved it at him and declaimed, "Sirrah, if you do not immediately cease your unwanted attentions, I shall put a bullet through your blackguardly heart!"

Recalling her brilliant shooting of the deadly snake, Sir Andrew suppressed his instinctive nervousness at the sight of the waving gun. Despite his disapproval, he was forced to smile. "A potent argument," he said drily.

"Do you not want to see the volcano?"

"Very much, but I do not care to be subjected to your father's reproaches for leading you astray."

"Papa will know very well that it was I who led you astray. Ah, I have the answer: I shall kidnap you at gunpoint and force you to accompany me. Will that ease your tender conscience?"

"I give way to superior force. You are incorrigible, ma'am!"

Teresa was not at all sure she liked being called incorrigible, but in view of her victory she decided to overlook it. As they cantered along, she pointed out the various crops and answered his questions as best she could.

The way grew steeper and the horses' gait dropped to a walk.

The field crops and fruit trees gave way to cattle pasture, which was in turn supplanted by rows of small coffee trees hung with clusters of green, yellow and red berries.

"Don Eduardo is planting more and more coffee," Teresa informed her companion. "When we win our independence, we shall be able to export our products all over the world instead of just to Spain, and he expects to make a fortune. Did you mean it when you said it is the best coffee you ever drank?"

"The Blue Mountains in Jamaica grow an excellent variety, but yours is as good if not better. I daresay Lord Edward will make his fortune. He seems to me to be doing very well already." Sir Andrew was most impressed by the vast acreage cleared from the inhospitable jungle. "How did an English nobleman come to settle in such an out of the way corner of the world?"

"He did not tell you? It is his favourite story. We were all brought up on it."

"Perhaps he did not want it told to a stranger. When I met him I quickly discovered that he was English, but it took all my diplomacy to elicit the information that he was the fourth son of the late Duke of Stafford."

"It was the Duke who forced him to leave England. Papa says he was a cold and unnatural father, who cared for nothing but appearances. Otherwise he will not talk of him. Papa fought a duel, you see, and killed a very important marquis whose wife was his mistress."

"Miss Danville!"

"Oh dear, have I shocked you again? Papa did warn me not to mention that word in company, but I thought that was just because the Spanish ladies like to pretend their husbands do not have *amantes*, which is quite untrue." She sighed. "In general Papa does not like me to be mealy-mouthed, but I can see that I must watch my tongue when I am with you." She cast him a sidelong glance and was pleased to see that he flushed.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said stiffly. "It is not my place to criticise your speech."

"Nor my behaviour."

"Nor your behaviour."

"Then let us cry friends and I shall tell you the rest of Papa's story. When the duke told him to leave the country, he rode off to Bristol, where he found a ship called the *Jenny Belle*, about to set sail for Jamaica. He decided that this was a good omen, as Jenny was the name of the high-flyer he had been keeping in London."

Sir Andrew bit his lip but held his tongue. Teresa decided to throw in one last provocation to see if she could shake his resolve.

"As the *Jenny Belle* sailed down the Bristol Channel, Papa made the acquaintance of a lightskirt who was travelling as maidservant attending a family on board." She did not dare look at Sir Andrew's face lest she burst out laughing. "His enjoyment of her favours made the voyage pass rapidly, and not until they were a day or two out of Kingston did he begin to wonder what he should do when he arrived."

"Miss Danville, I do believe you are teasing me," said

Sir Andrew in a long-suffering voice.

"It was irresistible," she confessed, with a gurgle of laughter. "But since you have guessed it, there is no point in continuing. I shall omit the rest of Papa's amatory adventures and just tell you how he came to Costa Rica. Look, we have reached the end of the coffee trees. There is not much in the way of a track from here, and the footing is uncertain. We must ride single file. Go carefully."

The native trees had been felled for a hundred feet beyond the edge of the plantation. Rotting stumps were overgrown with vines, ferns, and flowers in a dozen vivid shades of pink and red. Soon the trail was nothing more than a faintly marked line where the plants grew less thickly. Teresa saw tiny three-toed footprints in a patch of mud and decided the track had probably been made by a herd of peccaries, not people, but she had no intention of turning back and admitting that the expedition was a mistake. After all, if they rode always upwards they must reach the summit sooner or later.

They went on, between scattered trees and thorn bushes, up and up, the slope growing ever steeper until they had to cut across it at an angle. The summit was invisible, hidden by a ridge. Soon areas of bare volcanic ash and lava showed through the scrubby grass. This close to its source, it had not yet weathered to the rich black soil to be found farther down the mountainside. The horses began to slip on the rough scree. Irazù had looked so close this morning! The way was much longer than Teresa expected, but no sign of her misgiving was in her voice when she said that they must now dismount and go on on foot. Sir Andrew looked as if he would have liked to turn back but did not dare suggest anything so poor-spirited.

They ate some fruit from Teresa's saddlebag, and she fastened a pair of leather bottles of tamarindo water to her belt, beside the pistols, before they set out again.

At last, hot and sweating, they reached the top of the ridge. Irazù stood clear and rugged against the deep blue sky. Teresa told Sir Andrew that she was relieved to see that there were still no clouds gathered about it to spoil their view when they reached it. Nothing could have made her admit that she would have welcomed the excuse to abandon the climb. The

summit was still so high above them, she wondered if perhaps Don Eduardo had taken more than one day to reach it.

Slipping and sliding down into a shallow ravine, they found a stream among the bushes at the bottom. They washed their faces in the cool water, then sat in the meagre shade of a yellow-flowered shrub and drank some sour, refreshing tamarindo.

Teresa stood up and stoppered the bottles as she eyed the rocky hillside ahead of them.

Sir Andrew groaned. "Miss Danville, have mercy! You will think me a poor creature but remember that I am quite unused to exercise in such heat. Sit down, pray, and tell me the rest of your father's story before we go on."

She squinted up at the sun, which was almost overhead. "It is past midday," she said doubtfully, "and there is still some way to go."

"It is bound to be quicker going back, downhill all the way."

"I suppose so." She sat down with mingled reluctance and relief. "I told you Papa had nearly reached Jamaica? Well, the *Jenny Belle* was taken by a Spanish privateer. He and his men plundered the ship, then let her continue to port unharmed. However, Papa decided to throw in his lot with the privateer."

"Lord Edward sailed with a Spanish privateer? You are gammoning me!"

"Indeed I am not. When Papa was a boy he always wished he could be a pirate sailing the Spanish Main, so when the opportunity came he took it. He said it was mostly prodigious dull and uncomfortable and unprofitable, not at all as he had imagined. And then the ship was wrecked in a hurricane, and all hands were lost, save Papa. He was washed ashore on the coast of Costa Rica and fell ill with jungle fever. Mama's family took him in, and Mama nursed him back to health, then he married her. It is the most romantic story in the world, is it not?"

"Undoubtedly, though I am sure that what came next was a great deal of very hard work. Lord Edward told me that he has never contacted his family in England since he left. He did not even know that his father was dead and his brother succeeded to the dukedom."



"My uncle Gerald was the only one in the family he regretted leaving. Do you know him?"

"Only by sight and by reputation. I have heard him described as an affable gentleman, never too high in the instep."

"High in the instep?"

Sir Andrew laughed. "An odd phrase, now I come to think on it. It means he does not stand upon the dignity of his rank. You speak English so well that I had forgot you can know only what you have heard from Lord Edward."

"I have read a great many English books," said Teresa, offended. Then her irrepressible sense of humour broke through, "And besides, Don Eduardo talks a great deal! Are you rested? Shall we go on?"

At that moment a gust of wind shook the bush under which they sat, showering them with yellow petals. Teresa jumped to her feet.

"For a moment, I thought that was rain," said Sir Andrew, stretching lazily.

"No, but it soon will be. Look at the clouds! I cannot see the top of Irazù at all. How could they have blown in so fast?"

"Perhaps the summit is in the clear above them. Do you want to continue?"

"No, that would be foolish beyond permission. I should have known better than to come up here in the rainy season; indeed it is rarely clear even in the dry season. We shall have to go down."

Teresa's voice was full of disappointment. Andrew put his arm about her shoulders and gave her a sympathetic squeeze.

They scrambled back up the ridge and started down the other side.

Suddenly, silently, the clouds enveloped them in grey dampness. The loose ash beneath their feet was more slippery than ever and they clung to each other laughing as they slithered and slid down the mountainside. A light rain began to fall.

Soon they reached a gentler slope, but now the mist grew thicker, swirling about them and hiding all but the nearest trees. There was no sign of a path, no sign of the horses. Peering about, trying to guess their way, Teresa fell over a tangle of vines and twisted her ankle.

Andrew helped her up. She hobbled on grimly, biting her lip with the pain, but he soon guessed she

had hurt herself.

Without a by-your-leave, he picked her up and carried her to the shelter of a small tree, where fallen leaves made a soft and reasonably dry carpet.

Here he set her down and lowered himself beside her, both of them self-conscious and somewhat breathless.

"No point in soldiering on," he said gently, "when we don't even know where we are going."

"It is all my fault." She was fighting tears. "Papa will say I am a feather-brained widgeon to have brought you up here, and the worst of it is, he will be right."

"Not at all. You may be a muttonheaded wantwit, but I should never describe you as a feather-brained widgeon."

This sally brought a reluctant smile to her lips. "And you must be touched in the upper works to have come with me," she riposted.

"I see your grasp of colloquial English is greater than I had supposed. Lord Edward must have frequent occasion to complain of his children's folly, to have taught you so many alternatives."

"Mooncalf," said Teresa, "nodcock, rattlepate, shatterbrain, knock in the cradle. He does have eleven children, remember."

Sir Andrew laughed. Teresa thought how different, how much younger, he looked when he was amused. When he was not being disapproving, he could be kind and even charming. She found him much more interesting than the local youths who swarmed admiringly about her at fiestas, though she had to admit that her interest was piqued by his disapproval. Ah well, in a few days he would be on his way back to England, and she would never see him again. A drip from the leaf canopy above splashed on her hand, then another. Sitting still, they heard the patter of raindrops falling, then a rustle, then a roar. Beneath the tropical deluge, the tree was no protection. They huddled together in misery, shivering now since they were still high on the mountain and the dank air was chill on their wet skin. A rivulet washed by their feet.

"I never thought to feel cold this close to the Equator," murmured Sir Andrew. He put his arm about Teresa's shoulders and pulled her close against him. A comforting warmth arose where their bodies touched, and with the warmth a peculiar sensation

that made her breathe faster.

The storm seemed to go on for ever. When at last it stopped raining, the mist had cleared but heavy grey clouds still lowered overhead, and Teresa was afraid it was growing dark.

"My ankle feels much better now," she said, pulling away from him with considerable reluctance. "Shall we go?"

"Do you not think your family will come searching for us soon? I believe we shall do better to stay here and wait, rather than wandering farther in what might be the wrong direction."

"Yes, I daresay you are right. Perhaps we should call for help, so that they can find us?"

They took it in turns to shout, feeling more and more foolish when there was no reply. At last they fell silent. It was definitely growing darker. A family of peccaries wandered past, rooting in the undergrowth with their pig-like snouts, and then an armadillo trotted up the hill. Both were nocturnal creatures.

Teresa tried not to think about the jaguars and pumas that might be out hunting soon.

She remembered that she had brought her ocarina, in case she met a snake to charm. Music might keep the animals at bay, or at least keep up their spirits. She drew it from inside her shirt, where it dangled on a leather thong.

"What is that?" asked Sir Andrew.

"My ocarina. It is a native instrument." She passed him the small clay object, fashioned into the shape of a toucan, with several small holes bored in it.

"You can make music with that?" He was sceptical.

She put it to her mouth and played a minor scale, then a mournful, piping tune.

As if in answer, an owl hooted close by and they both jumped.

Teresa wondered whether the ocarina might attract wildlife rather than repelling it. In any case its sound was too melancholy for their present situation. She put it away.

"Do you not think we should go?" she asked. "If we go downhill..."

"We are more likely to break our necks than to find your home, I fear."

She nodded. The owl hooted again...no, it was a human voice!

They stood up and shouted till they were hoarse. In a few minutes they saw a speck of lantern light, bright in the gathering gloom. They started down towards it and in no time Teresa was stumbling into her father's arms.

"Little featherhead," he said, hugging her close.

She winked over her shoulder at Sir Andrew, who grinned and shook his head.

"Peagoose," he murmured.

Lord Edward released his errant daughter, waved his lantern and shouted, "*Están aquí, les he encontrado!* I've found them!"

Answering shouts came from both sides, and they saw lights moving in the distance. They started downhill, walking with care, and gradually the lights converged until they were joined by several brothers, two or three peons, and Sir Andrew's servant, Rowson.

"Thought I'd lost you for good and all, sir," said the latter cheerfully. "Can't say as I'd like to get lost in this here jungle, with the wild beasts wandering about, all ready to eat you."

"I was never in the least danger," responded Sir Andrew. "Miss Danville has her pistols, and I know her to be a crack-shot."

"Yes, bacon-brained but a crack-shot," agreed Oscar.

Teresa was too pleased by Sir Andrew's praise to rise to this bait. Instead she said, "That is one I forgot."

Sir Andrew laughed, but they refused to explain the joke.

Tired as she was, Teresa had a bounce in her step as they went on down the mountain. There was something pleasingly intimate about a shared private joke.

In the morning, as Teresa had expected, she was called to see her father in his study. Don Eduardo was a lenient parent but, in spite of Sir Andrew's expressed faith in her, she had put them both in danger.

To her relief, Don Eduardo was not seated behind his desk, as he would have been in case of a major crime. He patted the sofa seat beside him.

She ran forward and flung herself into his arms. "I'm so sorry, Papa," she cried. "I did not mean to cause so much trouble."

"I know, my darling," he soothed her. "You just wanted to impress our guest."

"How did you know?" She sat back on the well-worn leather and gazed at him in surprise.

He took both her hands in his and looked at her seriously. "I see now that I have been selfish," he said, to her astonishment and distress. "Most young women your age are long since married, with families of their own, but I wanted you to be always my little girl. And we have all grown to depend on you to keep us comfortable, when you ought to be busy with a family of your own."

"But Mama is not well enough to manage the household."

"Nonsense," said Don Eduardo briskly. "She and your sister-in-law could cope between them, and I wager that when Oscar returns from Jamaica he will wed your cousin, the pretty one, what's her name?"

"Rafaela. In any case, I have never met anyone I had the least desire to marry. I had rather stay at home with you always."

"The young men hereabouts are uneducated, provincial boors. When you turned eighteen, I realised that none of them were worthy of you and I seriously considered sending you to England. Somehow the right opportunity never came. So you have never before met a gentleman of breeding and education..."

"Other than you and my brothers!"

"...So it is only natural that you should wish to impress Graylin. I want you to have a choice of husbands fit for a duke's granddaughter. *Querida*, you will always have a loving home here, but I have discussed it with Graylin and he is willing to escort you. When he leaves I want you to travel with him to make your bow to Society in London."

### Chapter 3

"London!" In that one word Teresa expressed all her feelings of shock, distress, excitement and rising anticipation. "I am to go to London? No, surely I need not go so far to seek a husband!"

"That is not my only reason, my love. It pains me to say this, but I have come to realise that I have allowed you too much freedom. Your escapade yesterday was such as could never be condoned in a gently bred

female. The Spanish idea of propriety is so restrictive that I have gone too far the other way and let you grow up with no idea of propriety at all. When I left England I vowed to be a very different sort of father from my own, but I do want my daughter to be a lady. There is no one here to teach you how to go on."

"I do not care to be a lady, and besides, who is there in London to teach me? I know no one there."

"I shall send you to my brother. If his wife cannot undertake to bring you out, he must find someone who will. And you need not fear that you will be a poor relation. I have never taken a groat of my income in twenty-five years and more. Though it was but a pittance, by now it must amount to enough to give you a Season."

"But to travel alone, all that way!"

"Now there you are out." Don Eduardo was triumphant at his own ingenuity. "Oscar goes with you as far as Jamaica, and I have decided to send Marco to complete his education in England."

Teresa was silenced for a moment. What an adventure it would be! She had always wanted to see the world beyond the narrow confines of her jungle home. Then she imagined facing an unknown uncle and aunt, trying to measure up to the standards of the society to which Sir Andrew, censorious Sir Andrew, belonged.

"Papa, I shall never be able to learn all the rules of polite behaviour!" she cried, panic-stricken.

"If there is one thing I had never thought to fault, Teresa, it is your courage. I have every confidence in your ability to adapt to the notions of the Fashionable World, and your birth and beauty must make you an unexceptionable member of the Haut Ton. However, there is another reason I am sending you. Marco is a dreamer, too young and too impractical to do this for me, and I cannot spare any other of your brothers, with Oscar gone. You know my plans for developing a trade in coffee. I must find buyers. I want you to take a sample of our best beans to the coffee merchants of London, and to send me back the best contract you can obtain."

"You trust me to do that?" Teresa was overwhelmed.

"I do, child. You've a sensible head on your shoulders, when you are not being a complete

goosecap. I'll explain just what I am looking for, and the rest will be up to you."

"Oh Papa, I shall bring you back the best coffee contract anyone ever had." Once again, Teresa was enfolded in her father's loving arms.

Having made up her mind to go, Teresa was impatient of delays. Don Eduardo assured her she should have a complete new wardrobe when she reached London, so she packed up a few skirts and shirts, a warm poncho and a couple of pairs of sandals. She was ready to leave.

However, no one else was. Sir Andrew had to write his report. Oscar was busy collecting samples of soil and insect pests from the coffee plantation. Marco changed his mind a dozen times a day about which books he simply could not do without.

With his own hands, Don Eduardo sorted through his precious coffee beans and packed the best in a small chest carved from a glossy chestnut-coloured native wood. These were the samples with which Teresa was to persuade the coffee merchants of London that trade with Costa Rica could be lucrative. He wrapped the chest in several thicknesses of mastate, a cloth made of bark, and tied it with a well-knotted rope.

He also wrote letters to his brother, his lawyer and his bank.

Teresa's patience was tried to the utmost by her mother. Doña Esperanza had long since given up hope of influencing her daughter when her husband was so determined to treat her as another son. About to lose her to the wicked world beyond the hacienda, she kept her by her side and in her soft voice attempted too late to inculcate those precepts upon which she herself had been raised. Teresa heard not more than one word in ten, and ignored that. Papa had said that Spanish rules of conduct were too restrictive for an English lady; she would wait and see what there was to be learned in London.

At last everything was ready. On a grey, humid Monday morning the cavalcade assembled in the stable yard: Oscar, Marco, Teresa, Sir Andrew, and his servant Rowson. With them were a young Spanish maid and her brother, who were to be abigail and manservant to the Danvilles. There were half a dozen pack mules to carry all their belongings, and a couple

of peons to bring all the animals back from Limón to the hacienda.

Teresa embraced her father, her mother, all her brothers who were staying behind, and then her father again. She was too excited to shed any tears, though there was a hollow feeling in her chest at the thought that she might never see them again.

Now everyone was waiting for her. She mounted, put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. Gayo appeared from the jacaranda and took up his usual post on her shoulder.

"Oh no," said Sir Andrew. "I may or may not be able to persuade a captain of the Royal Navy to take on board five unexpected passengers; it's conceivable he won't mind a parrot, as seamen sometimes own one; but I can tell you here and now that there is not the least chance of the Duke of Stafford accepting a foul-mouthed fowl into his household."

Teresa looked at him in shock. "But I cannot leave him behind. I cannot go to England without him."

"I fear you have no choice, Miss Danville."

"Papa?"

"He is right, *querida*. What Gerald would say if you arrived at Stafford House with a parrot doesn't bear thinking of."

"He depends on me!"

"I promise you we will take the greatest care of him, love."

"He will not be happy, and nor shall I." Teresa read sympathy in her father's eyes, but he shook his head. "At least let me take him to Limón! Juan and Jorge can bring him back with the horses."

Relieved to have won his point, Andrew conceded that there could be no harm in taking the bird to the coast with them—though he wasn't so sure about that when Gayo, suddenly noticing his presence, shrieked, "Hello, dinner," and swooped to his shoulder. He sat there muttering "*Hijo de puta, hijo de puta*," and other choice insults, until Andrew was prepared to wager he knew exactly what had happened.

They set out on the well-travelled track between the Hacienda del Inglés and Cartago. A few hundred yards from the house they entered a belt of thick jungle, but they soon emerged into another cleared area where the rich, black, volcanic soil supported rich agriculture on the gently rolling hills.



At midday they reached Cartago and stopped to rest at the house of one of Doña Esperanza's brothers, who had a post in the colonial government. Cartago, capital of the gobernacion of Costa Rica, was a small town of adobe houses hidden behind high walls, with wide, straight dirt streets. The great stone cathedral of Nuestra Señora de los Angeles had more than once been ruined in the earthquakes associated with the eruptions of Irazù.

Teresa had been there many times, visiting their relatives and to the various fiestas. For the first time, she regarded it with a critical eye. She had seen woodcuts of the cities of Europe but they had always been so remote as to seem unreal. Now, she was on her way to London, greatest city of them all. "How does Cartago compare with London?" she asked Sir Andrew.

He roared with laughter, then apologised. "Cartago would fit easily into one of London's parks," he explained. "In English terms, it scarce qualifies as a town, more of an overgrown village."

"Tell me about London."

He shrugged. "You could live a lifetime in the city without knowing the half of it, Miss Danville. I cannot possibly describe it in terms that you will understand. You must wait and see."

Teresa turned away, resentful of the toplofty young Englishman's scorn. It was easy for him to sneer, who had not had to build a nation from nothing in a land of earthquakes and tropical storms and ever-encroaching jungle.

\* \* \* \*

They soon rode on, anxious to reach the farm of another uncle before nightfall. As far as the tiny hamlet of Paraiso, most of the land was cleared and it was easy going. Then the hills grew steeper and the horses slowed to a walk on the slippery, yellow clay track.

Huge trees with buttressed trunks closed in on either side and soon they were enclosed in a gloomy green tunnel. Rope-like lianas hung in festoons like giant spider-webs; tall ferns sprang from every nook and cranny. Here and there, where a splash of sunlight managed to reach through the forest canopy to the ground, shrubs bloomed in violent purples and scarlets.

Frequent rocky streams crossed their path and had

to be forded with care.

They reached the bottom of a valley, where the track wound between stagnant pools. A constant whine of insects kept Sir Andrew slapping at every inch of exposed skin. The mosquitos seemed to recognise him as a thin-skinned foreigner and concentrated their efforts on him.

Teresa thought it a very good revenge on him for his derision of her country. However, she had no desire to see him come down with jungle fever so she kept watch for a certain plant and when she saw it, dismounted to pluck some leaves.

"Put a couple of these in your hatband," she suggested, handing them to Sir Andrew.

He raised his eyebrows.

"Go on," she said impatiently, "they will help to keep the biters away."

He looked sceptical, but when her brothers demanded some for themselves, he followed suit.

Marco took pity and explained. "There's a wandering Talamanca Indian *sukia* comes to the hacienda now and then."

"Sukia?"

"*Curandero*; a witch doctor, or medicine man. Teresa has learned a great deal of plant lore from him. They are clever fellows. Like Hippocrates, they believe in the importance of proper diet, and they know a great deal about the properties of native plants."

Andrew was unconvinced, until he noticed a definite diminution in the number of insects buzzing about his head. They seemed to be concentrating on his hands, instead.

"Miss Danville," he begged sheepishly, "have you any leaves to spare for my hands?"

Feeling distinctly superior, she showed him how to crush them and smear the juice on his skin.

"It stings on your face," she explained, "but let me put some on the back of your neck."

He stiffened at the gentle touch of her fingers on his nape.

She looked at him in surprise, then flushed. "I beg your pardon," she murmured. "I had forgot you are not one of my brothers." Still pink-cheeked, she went back to her horse, mounted, and began a determined argument with Oscar as to whether they were going the right way.

The track wound out of the valley, and soon they entered a clearing. Here the way branched.

"I told you so," said Oscar. "Our uncle's house is just beyond that papaya grove."

Teresa, her usual sunny spirits quite restored, grinned and said, "I hope my aunt can quickly put a meal on the table. I am quite famished."

Her hopes were fulfilled. Though their farm was much smaller than the Danville hacienda, Doña Esperanza's brother and his family expressed in edible form their delight at seeing their relatives. The table was loaded with fried chicken and yucca cakes, black beans with onions and chiles, guavas, papayas and coconuts.

Their host was thrilled to meet the British envoy, and had to hear all about the Cartago talks. Teresa noticed that Oscar's attention was torn between the political discussion and his pretty cousin, who sat on his right. She wondered whether, on his return from Jamaica, he might take Rafaela back to the hacienda as his wife. She would not be there to see, to dance at their wedding.

Did she really want to go to London? Was she crazy to agree to give up everyone she loved to follow a will-o'-the-wisp? She glanced at Sir Andrew, and suddenly she knew that whatever happened, it would be worth it.

After the meal, Teresa and Oscar and Marco were begged to take out their ocarinas. Rafaela fetched her guitar and sang as they played a plaintive melody.

Sir Andrew sat listening with a far away look on his face.

Teresa was sure he was comparing their crude efforts with the magnificent performances he must have attended in England. Don Eduardo had mentioned that all well bred young ladies played the piano or the harp, and there were operas and orchestras also.

However, when they finished, the Englishman said with great sincerity, "What a haunting tune! It reminds me a little of the music of the Scottish islands. Will you play another?"

With Oscar gazing into Rafaela's dark eyes, and Teresa delighted to be doing something that met with Sir Andrew's approval, it was left to Marco to be practical for once. After their third piece, he reminded

them firmly that they must be up at dawn tomorrow if they hoped to reach Turrialba. Reluctantly they put away their instruments and retired for the night.

\* \* \* \*

They left shortly after dawn the next morning. Torrential rain during the night had turned the path to a yellow hasty pudding that sucked at the horses' hooves and steamed visibly in the hot sun.

When they reached the main track, the jungle closed in again.

A pair of huge blue butterflies danced by and Gayo swooped at them. They fluttered on, paying him no heed, to his annoyance.

He scolded vociferously, making Teresa laugh. Offended, he took refuge with Sir Andrew.

As they rounded a bend, a spectacular view opened before them. They were on the edge of a precipice that fell sheer into a mighty, mist-filled gorge. In the depths, rifts in the swirling mists revealed a glint of sunlight on water.

Oscar, as always in the lead, reined in his horse. They all stopped and sat in silence, staring. The walls of the rift, steep as they were, were green with jungle growth, broken here and there by a yellow-flowering tree or the white of falling water. On the far side, mountain slopes rose towards the volcano Chirripo, its peak now hidden in clouds.

A flock of long-tailed scarlet macaws flew by below them, their raucous cries breaking the stillness.

"Hello, hello, hello," cried Gayo, but his wild cousins paid him no heed. "Hello, dinner," he muttered in Andrew's ear, sounding just like a sulky child.

Regretfully they rode on.

\* \* \* \*

Some time later, they were picking their way down a steep slope when it began to rain. The path was sandy, scattered with pebbles, and many exposed roots crossed it; Oscar at once recognised it as the bed of an occasional stream. As the sudden downpour turned the track into a rushing torrent of yellow water, he shouted for everyone to move to the sides and try to find more solid footing on the tangle of roots and small plants. One of the mules dug in its heels and refused to move, holding back the two others tied to it. Teresa saw the peon leading them raise his whip.

"Juan, no!" she cried, afraid that the terrified animal

would lose its footing and dump all their possessions in the floodwaters. She urged her mount back up the path, grasped the mule's leading rein and leaned down to stroke its long nose and speak soothing words. Gently tugging, she persuaded it to scramble up the side of the stream. The other two followed willy-nilly.

Just as they gained firm ground, a fallen branch as thick as a man's leg swept by them, twisting in the current.

"Don't you dare ever do such a damned fool thing again!" shouted Oscar, furious.

"But it is carrying Don Eduardo's coffee," she explained, bewildered.

"Don't you ever think before you act? Do you think Papa had not rather lose all the coffee in the world than lose you? How do you suppose I could ever go home and tell him you had died in such a stupid accident while in my care?" He saw the glint of tears in his sister's eyes. Dismounting, he pulled her down into his arms and held her tight. "You are the most precious thing in the world to him, to all of us," he went on gently. "We can scarcely bear to let you go to England, Teresa. It would break our hearts to lose all hope of seeing you again. Take better care of yourself for our sakes, if not for your own."

"I did not think anyone cared that I am going," she sniffled into his rain-wet shoulder.

"Papa knows that you will never be satisfied with the limited life at home. It is a hard, dull life for a woman. Perhaps you will come back to us when you have seen the world, if only for a visit. At least we will know you are not wasting away lonely on some isolated farm. Be happy, that is all we want."

She hugged him hard, sniffed again, then leaned back with a brilliant smile. "Darling Oscar, if you are so eloquent when you speak to Rafaela, I have no fears that your courtship will not prosper."

He laughed, let her go, and aimed a slap at her rear end. "Back on your horse, woman, or we shall never reach Turrialba before dark."

"Well done!" Marco mouthed at her as she passed him.

As Teresa mounted, she saw Sir Andrew watching her with a strange look on his face. She realised she had once again managed to thoroughly disgust him with her unladylike conduct. No doubt he would prefer

her to fall into a swoon at the least sign of danger, so that he could play the gallant in coming to the rescue.

Next time, she thought, perhaps she would oblige.

The rainstorm ended and the flood dispersed as suddenly as it had risen. Riding on, they made good time in spite of the rugged terrain, and reached the posada in the little village of Turrialba well before nightfall.

The innkeeper recognised Oscar, who had more than once accompanied his father's trains of ox-wagons to the coast, and welcomed them heartily. A hunter had just brought in a sack of armadillos, so they dined on roast armadillo, except for Sir Andrew who declined even though the alternative was plain beans. Once again, the political news was eagerly discussed, but they retired early and rose as usual with the dawn.

Their goal for the day was Siquirres, which was not very far. However, as Oscar said, it was better to leave early and allow for delays than to find themselves still in the jungle after dark.

The track was in good condition, and as they neared the coastal plain the going was easier though they all felt the heat after the comparative coolness of the Meseta Central. The jungle was more tangled and lush than ever, and occasionally the peons took out their machetes to clear encroaching growth. If everyone who passed did not do their bit, the track would soon disappear altogether.

They crossed several rough log bridges over slow moving, greenish grey rivers. Once they disturbed a caiman sleeping in the sun. It looked like a misplaced log until it opened its jagged-toothed mouth in a wide yawn. The sinister reptile slid off the bridge into the water with a splash then surfaced to watch them with cold, unblinking eyes.

On the banks, where more light reached the lower levels of the forest, orchids bloomed in delicate profusion on every branch.

By Oscar's reckoning, it was not long after noon and they were scarce an hour's ride from Siquirres when they found their way blocked. A hundred-foot tree had fallen recently, directly across the track. In its fall it had dragged down a score of lesser trees, all tied together by an impenetrable tangle of vines.

They would have to blaze a new trail. The men drew

out their machetes from their leather sheathes. Spares were found for Rowson and Sir Andrew, who enquired in a bland voice as to why Miss Danville was exempt from this labour.

"She is skilful with a machete," Marco rushed to her defense, "but not strong enough. Besides, someone must stand guard, and she is the best shot."

So Teresa sat her horse, hands hovering over her pistols, eyes scanning the jungle. The maidservant was left in charge of the other animals. Oscar went ahead, slicing his way through the greenery, to choose a route that was wide enough to allow passage to an ox-cart. The rest of the men followed, blades swinging.

Andrew soon found that he was making little impression on his adversary, the jungle, while expending a great deal more energy than the others appeared to be. He wiped his forehead and went humbly back to Teresa to ask for a lesson. She demonstrated the twist of the wrist that would most successfully direct the force of the blade. He was heading back to work when there was a noise something like barking dogs in the treetops, far above. He looked up.

A very ripe and very smelly fruit hit him in the face.

Attracted by the sound of their work, a troop of monkeys had come to investigate. Soon a shower of missiles descended upon them, mostly harmless if squishy, but including sizeable sticks. Trying not to laugh, Teresa handed Sir Andrew a large handkerchief. She looked up with caution. A dozen or more white-faced monkeys swung through the branches, apparently enjoying themselves no end.

Gayo did not appreciate their antics. He flew up to a treetop above them and shouted in outrage. "*¡Hijo de puta! ¡Hijo de puta! ¡Caramba! ¡Ay de mí! ¡Que lástima*, what a pity, what a pity!"

The shower of missiles grew less as the monkeys lost interest. Teresa moved after the men, along the newly cleared track.

Suddenly she heard a coughing snarl above her, and a rank odour reached her nostrils. She glanced up.

She looked straight into the golden eyes of a jaguar.

## Chapter 4

Teresa's horse smelled the jaguar's distinctive scent. With a frightened neigh it reared, then galloped off leaving its rider prone on the ground.

Startled, breathless, Teresa gaped up at the big cat. It lounged on a branch some fifteen feet above her. In that frozen instant before she began to think, she noted the rounded, white furred ears, the sleek tawny coat stippled with black rosettes. The jaguar gazed at her with impassive eyes. Its black tipped tail twitched and it yawned, its long, sharp teeth gleaming ivory.

Teresa's first impulse was to faint and let Sir Andrew deal with the situation. He was closer to her than the others and she was sure he would appreciate a chance to play the hero. On the other hand, she had no idea how to go about swooning.

She did not dare lose sight of the jaguar, but she needed to know what the men were doing. Very slowly she turned her head a little. Sir Andrew was laughing at her! Behind him, his servant, her brothers and the peons all had broad grins on their faces. For a moment she was furious, then she realised that all they knew was that her horse had thrown her.

Andrew's amusement changed to concern when he saw that Teresa was not moving. He started towards her.

"Stop!" she hissed. "Jaguar!" She tried to roll her eyes upwards to indicate its position without making a movement that might startle it.

He stopped, looking puzzled, doubtful. She moved her hand just enough to point. Raising his gaze, he peered into the tangled mass of growth, then she saw his face pale beneath the tan.

Oscar and Marco came up to him. He pointed and whispered, "A jaguar! Do you see it? In the tree just above her. What can we do?"

Her eyes on the beast, Teresa heard Oscar say in a low voice, "My rifle is with the horses. I must go round through the jungle to get it."

"No." Sir Andrew sounded aghast. "It will take too long, and besides, if you only wounded it it would certainly attack. She is too close. There must be something else we can do!"

"What do you suggest?" Oscar asked helplessly.

The three men looked at each other in despair. Oscar turned and started hacking his way through the jungle towards the horses.



Out of the corner of her eye, Teresa caught sight of a movement in the greenery above the jaguar. A pair of dark eyes peered down through the leaves. One of the troop of monkeys had discovered the jaguar. It screeched, and its companions swung down the dangling lianas to join it.

Fruit and sticks pelted down on their enemy, amidst whoops of fury. The jaguar turned its dispassionate golden gaze on the pests. Its ears twitched and it stirred restlessly. Suddenly Gayo swooped down with a wordless shriek, batting his colourful wings at the big cat's ears.

"No!" Teresa whispered in dismay.

But Gayo darted down again with a wordless shriek. Distracted by the parrot and the monkeys, the jaguar seemed to lose interest in Teresa. Her eyes never leaving it, she sat up and began to inch backwards.

When she had crept some fifteen feet it turned its head and regarded her with calm unconcern. She jumped to her feet and ran, stumbling over roots and vines. Sir Andrew caught her and hugged her to him. She slumped against him, very much aware of his comforting strength. Catching her breath, she turned, his arms still about her, and looked back.

The jaguar snarled as Gayo swooped down once more. Breaking from Sir Andrew's disturbing clasp, Teresa put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. The parrot veered towards her. With majestic composure, the jaguar leaped to the ground and stalked away into the forest without a backward glance.

In moments, its speckled coat merged with the pattern of light and shadow and it vanished.

"Hold still a minute," said Marco, and started brushing leaf mould off Teresa's back with a brotherly disregard of her narrow escape.

"You would almost think he knew what he was doing," exclaimed Sir Andrew as Gayo landed on his shoulder.

"Of course he knew what he was doing!" snapped Teresa, annoyed with herself for her reaction to the Englishman's embrace. "Oh stop it, Marco. Where has Oscar got to?"

There was a crashing in the undergrowth and Oscar appeared, breathless, machete in hand. "What happened? I heard Teresa's whistle."

"The jaguar jumped down and wandered off into the

jungle," said Marco with a grin. "It decided she was not an appetising morsel."

"A beast of no discernment whatever," Sir Andrew muttered to himself. He flushed as Teresa's questioning glance informed him that he had been overheard.

Oscar had an explanation for her escape. "I found a fresh deer carcass under a bush, half eaten. It must have fed recently. What extraordinary good luck."

"What luck!" said Gayo complacently, and emitted a deep, rich chuckle.

Rowson looked at him, startled. "Blimey if that ain't Sanchita's laugh!" He shook his head, a reminiscent look in his eye. "Beg pardon for spoilin' the celebration," he went on, "but was you aware a bunch o' them horses has took off?"

They all looked to where the maidservant, Josefa, was struggling to control their mounts. Several were missing.

"Let us hope they stayed on the track," said Oscar, frowning. "Teresa, will you and Sir Andrew go after them, please, while the rest of us finish cutting a passage?"

Since Teresa's mount had run off with her sidesaddle, she was forced to ride astride one of the remaining horses. She had often done so at home, but with Sir Andrew riding alongside, carefully avoiding looking her way, she was very conscious of her skirts hiked up to her knee, exposing several inches of leg above her high boots. She couldn't forget how he had taken her in his arms when she had run from the jaguar. A tiny smile curved the corners of her mouth and she glanced at him. His eyes were fixed rigidly ahead.

They reached the point where their new track had diverged from the old to circle the fallen tree. Teresa's horse was standing by the barrier. It rolled its eyes nervously but came when she called. Rejecting Sir Andrew's assistance, she slid to the ground and tied the spare horse to a sapling, then used a stump to hoist herself onto the sidesaddle. She rearranged her skirts with great care, then grinned at her companion.

"Better?" she asked.

"Better," he agreed ruefully. "Of course it would be quite impossible to manage with an English ladies' riding habit in the jungle. You could never have

escaped the jaguar without tripping over the train. I find it difficult to rid myself of old prejudices. You must forgive me, Miss Danville."

"Willingly, sir, since you are willing to admit that they might be unwarranted. Now let us see if we can find the rest of the beasts. I hope they have not gone too far."

They found the three missing horses milling uneasily at the near end of the last bridge they had crossed. As they calmed and caught them, they saw the reason for their halted flight. On the bridge lay three caimans, one an impressive six-footer that looked quite capable of drowning a horse if it tried.

"I never thought to be grateful to a crocodile," said Sir Andrew.

"Ugly brutes," shuddered Teresa. "I had rather meet a snake any day."

"You doubt your ability to charm these creatures? Come now, you must have more faith in your powers of enchantment."

Teresa flushed and looked away. Had there been an unexpected warmth behind his teasing smile, or had she imagined it? She was thoroughly confused.

Leading the recaptured animals, they rejoined the others. The new trail had rejoined the old, and they had not gone far when they met a train of ox wagons heading for the Meseta Central.

Loaded with all the household goods of several immigrant families, the two-wheeled carts moved with painful slowness. Men and boys escorted them on horseback, but all the women and girls perched on top of their belongings on the wagons. They stared at Teresa as she rode past.

Oscar spoke to their guide, a local man he knew slightly, explaining about the new detour, then the two groups parted. Teresa reined in until Sir Andrew drew level with her.

"Had I insisted on travelling thus," she pointed out, "you'd not reach the coast for a month."

"I'd not have allowed myself to be persuaded to escort you," he retorted. "A missish female could be nothing but an encumbrance on a journey such as lies ahead of us."

That, she decided uncertainly, could be taken as a compliment of sorts.

\* \* \* \*

They reached Siquirres as the sun set behind the mountains. Leaving horses and mules in the care of Juan and Jorge, they entered the public room of the posada, to find a Spanish family already ensconced there.

Teresa was first into the room. Seeing a black-clad matron sitting in a corner with two girls, she nodded to them. "*Buenas tardes, señora.*"

The woman looked her up and down, then eyed her companions. They were all travel-stained, weary, but only Teresa was liberally coated with mud, as a result of her encounter with the jaguar. Like a mother hen protecting her chicks, the woman gathered her daughters to her and, ignoring Teresa entirely, swept out of the room.

Mortified, Teresa looked down at herself. Her clothes were filthy and uncomfortable. She had accepted it as an unavoidable hazard of travel, not considering her appearance. She brushed futilely at her skirt. "I had not realised what a disgraceful sight I am," she said with an attempted laugh. "How I long for a bath!"

"You must learn not to heed the lack of manners of the ill-bred," drawled Sir Andrew. "A bourgeois, I make no doubt. A true lady must have realised that your condition was due to misfortune, not to willful disregard of the proprieties. I remember being in precisely the same shocking condition myself quite recently."

Teresa recalled his arrival at the hacienda, and this time had no difficulty in laughing. "Shocking indeed," she said gratefully. How noble of him to remind her of a contretemps he must wish to forget!

Meanwhile, Oscar had made the acquaintance of the head of the family and learned that they were stranded in Siquirres by a sick ox, one of those they had hired in Limón to take them to the Meseta Central. "My sister will look at it," he offered. "She is a curandera, and always takes care of our sick animals. Teresa, you will see what you can do for their ox, will you not?"

Teresa was tempted to refuse, in revenge for the snub she had received. She saw Sir Andrew watching her curiously, as if he could read her mind. What would a true lady do in such a situation, she wondered.

Sighing, she nodded. "All right. I had better go before I bathe, but please order a bath for me before dinner." As she turned to go out, she caught a look of approval in Sir Andrew's eyes and raised her eyebrows at him.

He followed her to the stables. "Admirable!" he said, leaning against the wall and watching as she examined the eyes and ears of the huge, placid animal.

"I am delighted to have done something right for once," she retorted tartly. "However, I take leave to doubt that many English ladies are thoroughly acquainted with veterinary medicine. Will you be so good as to tell me what I have done to earn your approval?"

"Resisted the urge for vengeance. Not necessarily a ladylike trait, but admirable nonetheless."

A wave of weariness overwhelmed her. "I am too tired to try to be ladylike. Do go away." She turned to the servant. "Juan! *Tráeme mis hierbas, por favor.*"

Thanks to Teresa's herbs, the ox was clearly on the mend by morning. The Spaniard was duly grateful when they met at breakfast. His wife, however, sat at table with her back to the room, rigidly disapproving. Teresa was inclined to take a pet until Sir Andrew murmured "coals of fire" in her ear.

"Coals of fire? Whatever are you talking about?"

"Another expression you are not familiar with? It's from the Bible, I believe, unless it is Shakespeare. Everything is one or the other. Something about feeding your enemy and thus heaping coals of fire on his head."

"That's all very well," grumbled Teresa, "but *la señora* seems to have a fireproof head." All the same, she felt better.

\* \* \* \*

It was a long day's ride to Limón, but nothing occurred to slow them and once again they reached shelter as dusk was falling. Oscar led them to an inn where he was well-known, a large, two-storied building with extensive stabling for horses, mules and oxen. It was too dark to see much of the town or the harbour, but Teresa looked forward to exploring in the morning.

It rained all night, a ceaseless drumming on the roof tiles that was irritating to begin with but soon became soothing. By the time they gathered for breakfast it had stopped and the sun, already hot, had

chased away the clouds.

Andrew was anxious to establish contact with the Royal Navy frigate that had been sent to meet him. The Danvilles walked with him through the little town down to the harbour to view the situation.

Limón appeared to consist of several inns, a carpenter's shop making ox carts, a number of warehouses and, near the quay, a customs house that was little more than a shed. In this ramshackle building, Oscar explained, were stationed a pair of customs officers whose job was to prevent the Costa Ricans from trading with anyone but Spain.

"If they were more successful," he went on, grinning, "we should have started fighting for our independence long ago. As it is, British and American traders come and go more or less at will."

"I gather the Admiralty does not care to risk offence by sending in a Navy ship," said Andrew. "I was told to signal from that little island, just offshore." He pointed to where, sheltering the harbour, a small island rose from the sparkling blue swells of the Caribbean.

"The Isla Uvita," said Oscar. "We must find a boat to take you there, then. How are you to signal?"

"With a lantern, at night."

As the two young men discussed their plans, Teresa gazed out to sea. Waves lapped gently at the wooden quay and fork-tailed frigate birds wheeled high overhead. Suddenly it was real to her, the fact that she was about to leave her native land, to sail thousands of miles across the ocean to a world she could scarcely imagine. A rising bubble of anticipation made her breathless, and she held tight to Marco's arm, very glad that he was to go with her.

He looked down at her and she saw by his shining eyes that he was feeling the same excitement. "What an adventure!" he breathed.

Sir Andrew and Oscar had settled matters between them and turned back towards the town. Teresa and Marco followed reluctantly, unwilling to leave the inviting shore for the muddy streets.

The day dragged endlessly. By mid-morning it was raining again, and the occasional pauses in the downpour only allowed a swarm of vicious mosquitos to attack. The heat and humidity made every movement an effort. Even Gayo was listless.

Dusk brought a cooling breeze, and the town came

to life. Men gathered at the posadas to drink chicha beer, and among them Oscar found a fisherman willing to take Andrew out to the Isla Uvita without asking too many questions.

The Englishman returned disconsolate at dawn. There had been no response to his lantern waving.

Teresa made good use of the delay. She and Josefa went out to the little market behind the posada and purchased several yards of black cotton cloth. They retired to their chamber, which being upstairs caught the slightest breeze, and sewed on flounces to lengthen all Teresa's skirts. If Sir Andrew was willing to admit that a habit with a train was impractical for riding in the jungle, she was willing to admit that short skirts were inappropriate in public. Besides, the contrasting black was quite striking.

Even upstairs, the heat was hard to bear. When she went down to dinner, everyone was crotchety and no one commented on her improved appearance.

\* \* \* \*

Three miserable days passed. Each evening Andrew was rowed out to the island, each morning he returned more worried. The first week of July was past. If for some reason the ship did not make the rendezvous, it might take months to find other transportation and his reports were urgently awaited in London. It was too hot to sleep properly during the day and at night he dared not close his eyes lest he miss a signal.

On the fourth night, he nearly sent Rowson in his place. His man was just as able to wield a lantern. However, he could not expect the servant to talk the captain, if he arrived, into allowing the Danvilles on board. Not for the first time, Andrew wished heartily that he had not taken on the responsibility for seeing them to their destinations.

For the fourth time he disembarked on the island and climbed wearily up the hillside facing the sea. Setting his lantern on a rock, he checked his watch. Every hour, on the hour, he must swing the light three times, pause, and again three times.

At eleven o'clock, an answering spark showed briefly to seaward. It could have been a firefly, but no, there it was again: a triple flash, pause, and three more flashes.

Half an hour later, he was clambering up a rope ladder to the dimly lit deck of HMS *Destiny*.

"Sir Andrew Graylin?" The officer of the watch saluted. "Captain Fitch requests that you join him below, sir."

Down a steep companionway, between rows of half-seen hammocks, ducking his head beneath guessed-at beams, Andrew followed the cabin boy to the captain's cabin in the stern of the frigate. He had spent enough time afloat to adjust automatically to the uneasy motion of a ship at anchor.

The boy tapped on a door.

"Enter," called a thin, reedy voice.

Captain Fitch was a tall, skinny man with greying hair and the mournful, wrinkled face of an underfed bloodhound. He stood up from his chart table as Andrew entered his cabin, and shook hands with a preoccupied air. "Happy to have you aboard, Graylin. Excuse me while I give orders to weigh anchor."

"You mean to sail into Limón, then?"

"No, no. Mustn't let the Spaniards know what we're about. I need to find a quiet spot to take on fresh water and supplies." The captain sat down again and studied his chart anxiously.

"I fear we cannot leave immediately, sir. My servant and all my belongings are still ashore. And I promised to ask you if you would mind conveying to Jamaica a couple of young gentlemen of English descent..."

"Yes, of course, we shall find a spot for them to sling their hammocks."

"...And their sister."

Captain Fitch looked up in shock. With dropped jaw and raised eyebrows, his long, weatherbeaten face became a maze of furrows in which his horrified eyes nearly disappeared. "Females on my ship? Never, sir, never! Quite out of the question. Now, I don't suppose you know of any deserted cove where we might put in for water, fruit and a bit of fresh meat?"

Andrew felt a rush of relief. He had asked, and had been turned down. His responsibility for Teresa was at an end. With a clear conscience he could leave her disturbing presence behind him and rediscover his usual composure.

He looked down at the chart, but what he saw was Teresa's face, full of hurt disappointment, bravely fighting back tears. "Her uncle, their uncle, is the Duke of Stafford," he heard himself say. "I believe his Grace's brother is a Lord of the Admiralty. Miss



Danville and one of her brothers are travelling to London to stay with the duke."

"Danville?" said the captain absently. "That would be Lord Frederick Danville. D'ye think we could put in here, Graylin, at the mouth of the Rio Colorado?"

"I have no idea, captain. If I were you, I should sail right into Limón harbour and be damned to the Spanish. The local people are about to rise in open revolt against them, and the sum total of the garrison is two ragged customs officials. I'd wager they've not been paid in months." A plan began to form in Andrew's mind. "Put me ashore now, and I will arrange that by midday they shall be incapable of noticing your arrival. My word on it."

\* \* \* \*

A couple of hours later, Andrew crept up to Teresa's chamber door and scratched on it.

"¿*Quien es?*" demanded a sleepy voice he recognised as Josefa's.

He had forgotten that the maid was sharing the room. He was annoyed, but on second thoughts it was most fortunate that Teresa had a chaperon, and the girl would not understand if they spoke English. In a whisper, he explained that he must speak to the señorita.

When he was admitted to the room a few minutes later, Gayo glared at him with silent suspicion. Teresa was sitting up in bed, wrapped in a mantilla, her dark eyes huge in the light of a single tallow candle. Her black hair hung in a glossy plait over her shoulder. Andrew found himself suppressing an alarming urge to loosen it, run his fingers through its silky length, take her face between his hands and press kisses on her lips.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice husky. "Has the ship come?"

"Yes. I apologise for visiting you at this ungodly hour, but I must know, do you have some sort of sleeping potion among your medicines?"

"Yes, of course." Teresa started to push back the bedcover, then changed her mind. "Josefa, *mis hierbas, por favor*. You cannot sleep, sir? When do we go aboard?"

Quickly he explained the situation as she sorted through her herbs. "You see," he finished, "I shall tell Captain Fitch it was your doing that the officials are

incapacitated, and with luck his gratitude will be such that he will take you aboard after all."

"But what am I to do if he will not? I shall never have another chance to go to England."

"Never fear, I shall find a way to persuade him. If gratitude will not do it, then I shall have to convince him that your uncle in the Admiralty will be most displeased to learn of his discourtesy."

"How kind you are to do this for me." She looked up at him with a slight frown, trying to read his reasons, then handed him a small leather pouch. "Here, take this and put three pinches in each man's mug of beer. They should fall asleep almost at once and sleep for at least twelve hours. Have you told Oscar? I expect he will be able to arrange for supplies to be ready to load when the ship arrives."

"Good idea. I'll talk to him first thing in the morning."

"The herbs could not wait till morning?" Teresa teased.

Andrew felt his face redden and hoped it was invisible in the dim light. "If you had had nothing suitable, I should have needed time to make other plans," he said with dignity. "Now I can catch a few hours sleep before I tackle the enemy."

She reached out one slender arm towards him. "You will be careful?" she begged. "They may be pathetic, but they are armed and Spain does still have sympathisers."

"I shall take care," he promised, bowing over her hand and kissing it with more warmth than he had intended.

He departed hurriedly, in something of a fluster, and failed to notice how she pressed the back of her hand to her cheek as she watched him leave.

For his own already shaky peace of mind, it was just as well.

## Chapter 5

Josefa blew out the candle, retired to her pallet, and was soon breathing evenly. Teresa lay down, but she could not sleep. She was annoyed with herself. Sir Andrew was undoubtedly the most interesting and attractive man she had ever met, but she had no intention of throwing her cap over the windmill. The

rare occasions when he looked at her with respect, even with admiration, were more than outweighed by the many times she had read disapproval in his face.

Besides, for all she knew some pretty, well-bred young lady awaited him in England. He might even be married. To be sure, he had never mentioned a wife, but nor had he ever claimed to be a bachelor.

It had been most indiscreet of him to come to her chamber in the middle of the night. He could very well have waited till morning for the herbs. She was glad Josefa had been with her. For the first time, Teresa realised that there was a good reason for society's insistence on a chaperon for young ladies.

She slept at last, but woke early and took Gayo down to the kitchens. In the dawn coolness the parrot was lively and talkative. The cook fed him on fruit and dried corn kernels, and laughed at his antics, especially when he addressed her as Sanchita. Her name was Maria, she said, and she tried to teach it to him.

Rowson came in to fetch hot water for his master to shave, and then Marco appeared, looking for something to eat to keep him alive until breakfast. "Let's take Gayo out for half an hour while it's cool," he suggested, peeling a banana. "It's only a step or two to the edge of the forest and it's not raining for once."

As they went, Teresa told him about the arrival of HMS *Destiny* and Sir Andrew's plan.

"The very thing!" said Marco in triumph. "I have been racking my brains to find a way to take Gayo aboard without anyone knowing. We can drug them and carry them on with the rest of the luggage."

"Papa said it was impossible to take him," his sister reminded him unhappily. "Besides, it is by no means certain that the captain will even allow me to go."

"Fustian! You cannot be so poor spirited. Sir Andrew is a diplomat, after all, and accustomed to persuading people to do what he wants. Of course you will go with us, and without you Gayo will pine and probably die in no time."

"Do you think so?" She watched as Gayo flew off to investigate a bush covered with appetising crimson blossoms.

"Do you want to risk it, Teresa? After he saved you from the jaguar?"

She made up her mind. "You are right, I cannot risk

it. Surely if I keep him in the cabin there can be no objection. No one need even know he is there," she added optimistically. "Anyway, Sir Andrew said the captain might not mind as seamen often have parrots. I'll worry about the duke when we get to England, but Sir Andrew and Oscar must not know we're taking him aboard."

"We must buy a closed basket," Marco proposed.

"There is a sort of market near the posada. Will you go while I work out the right dose for him?"

\* \* \* \*

Oscar and Andrew were too busy with their own projects to notice the furtive activities of the younger members of the party. By the time the *Destiny* sailed into the harbour and dropped anchor, the two customs men were snoring in their official shack. The quay was already piled with barrels of fresh water and sacks of fruit, and hunters were coming in with game slung over their shoulders. A swarm of small boats rowed out to the frigate to bargain with the ship's purser in a peculiar mixture of English and Spanish.

Andrew was first aboard. By dint of crediting Teresa with the entire success of his plan, together with frequent references to Lord Frederick Danville of the Admiralty, he managed to persuade the reluctant captain to allow her to travel with her brothers.

He rushed back to the inn to tell her.

She was pleased but unsurprised. "With your diplomatic training," she explained laughing, "I never doubted for a moment that you could talk him round. I am all packed already, you see."

"Then let us go at once, before the captain changes his mind!" Oscar insisted.

In the bustle of supplies being loaded, no one noticed the basket that Teresa herself carried aboard with particular care. She managed to hold onto it while she climbed down the steep rungs of the companionway, too anxious about the limp little body within to notice her surroundings.

The cabin boy, a freckle-faced lad of ten or twelve, ushered her into the tiniest room she had ever seen. It looked to her more like a storage closet than an inhabitable space.

"'Tis the first mate's cabin, right enough, miss," the boy assured her, noting her uncertainty. "The gentlemen'll be next door, where the other officers

gen'rally sleep. 'Tain't much, I know. If I was cap'n, I'da gived you my cabin for sure." He turned bright red and ducked his head.

"Thank you," said Teresa, smiling at him. "What is your name?"

"Willy, miss. If you wants anything just call out my name. Summun'll tell me ifn I doesn't hear."

Most of Teresa's meagre luggage had already been stacked in the cabin. When Josefa joined her, there was scarcely room to turn round. She checked that Don Eduardo's chest of coffee beans had arrived undamaged, then made sure the door was closed securely and opened her precious basket.

Gayo was muttering very softly to himself, though his eyes were closed. Teresa breathed a sigh of relief.

"*¡Ay, señorita!*" gasped Josefa. "*¡El papagayo!*" She fell silent, looking almost as green as the parrot, as a particularly large swell gently rocked the ship.

"*Ay de mí!*" agreed Gayo, struggling to his feet and trying shakily to climb out of the basket.

The ship rolled again, its timbers creaking. Teresa and Josefa both sat down suddenly on the two narrow bunks which were the only furniture.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew knocked on the door some minutes later. "Miss Danville?" he called. "We are about to sail. Will you come up on deck to watch?"

Teresa opened the door a crack. Her face was alarmingly pale. "You mean we are still at anchor and I already want to die?" She managed to summon up a weak smile.

"You will feel much better for some fresh air, I promise you. Oscar and Marco were both suffering until I made them go up."

"They are sick too? Josefa is much worse than I. If you will wait a moment, I shall try to persuade her to come along."

Josefa only groaned and refused to move.

Sir Andrew helped Teresa up the companionway and they went to join her brothers on the poop deck. She felt better at once, and was fascinated by the busy scene.

Barefooted sailors in striped trousers and short jackets scampered about in apparent confusion, climbing the rigging, coiling ropes, winding the windlass as the huge anchor rose dripping from the

depths. The boatswain bawled orders and the three tall masts blossomed with white canvas. On the quarter deck, Captain Fitch directed orders to the helmsman; the breeze took the sails and the *Destiny* stood out to sea.

They rounded the Isla Uvita and met the full force of the rolling waves. Teresa held tight to the taffrail. After a brief glance down at the frothy white wake cutting the glass-green water, she kept her eyes on the receding shore and tried to ignore her stomach.

She had some success at this until it began to grow dark and she went below. When Andrew came to convey an invitation from Captain Fitch to dine with him and his officers in the wardroom, he was greeted by moans.

Opening the door, he stepped into the cabin. By the light of a swinging oil lamp, he saw Teresa and her maid huddled on their bunks.

"Hello, dinner," a hoarse voice said brightly.

Andrew swung round. The parrot was hanging upside down from a bracket on the bulkhead, regarding him in a friendly manner.

"Miss Danville! I told you—your father told you—that Gayo was to be left behind!"

Teresa sat up, her belligerent expression bringing a flush to her pallid cheeks. "I could not leave him. He might have died without me to take care of him."

"Gammon! Lord Edward promised to look after him." Curiosity overcame his fury. "How on earth did you manage to bring him aboard without anyone noticing?"

"Marco helped me. He is the only male sensitive enough to understand. I gave him a herb to make him sleep, the same one you gave to the customs men."

To her surprise, he laughed though he shook his head. "I must learn not to be taken aback by your enterprise, Miss Danville. But since his wings are not clipped, you must promise me to keep him close in the cabin, always leashed. If he started to fly around disrupting the crew, I daresay Captain Fitch would maroon the lot of us on the first island we pass."

"Like Robinson Crusoe?" Teresa considered. "That might be more agreeable than London society. At least I should not have to worry about obeying every petty rule. However, I shall attempt to keep him hidden."

"I am delighted to hear it. Now, are you well enough

to dine with us?"

Teresa's nausea had disappeared as soon as she ceased to think about it. "Yes, I believe I am," she said in astonishment. "In fact, I am ravenous. Give me a few minutes to tidy myself."

"I shall send Willy to show you the way."

The cabin boy knocked as Teresa finished brushing her hair. "One minute," she called.

He opened the door and stepped in, then turned fiery red as he saw her putting on her slippers. "Beg pardon, miss. I thought you said to come in, honest I did. I ain't never done for ladies afore."

"That's all right, Willy. I am quite ready."

Turning to leave, he came face to face with Gayo. "Cor, miss!" he gasped. "You got a parrot! The carpenter has one, too, but it's not half as pretty."

"Hello," said Gayo politely.

Teresa thought the child's eyes would pop out of his head. "Blimey, it talks! His don't say nuffink, and it bites. Can I touch it, miss?"

"Not now. I shall be late for dinner. Tomorrow. And don't tell anyone about him, will you?"

"Cross me heart and hope to die." His eyes were like stars as he led her to the wardroom.

\* \* \* \*

In the days that followed, as the *Destiny* sped across the sparkling Caribbean, Willy became adept at smuggling food to Gayo. The task of keeping their presence secret was made easier by Josefa. The maid's seasickness continued, and any odd noises the parrot made were put down to her groans of misery.

Willy grew very fond of Gayo. It troubled him that the big bird was always kept tied and he begged Teresa to let him have the run of the tiny cabin. Mindful of her promise to Sir Andrew she refused, so one day he decided to take matters into his own hands.

Miss Danville was talking with her brothers in their cabin. Josefa was asleep. If he let Gayo off his leash just for a few minutes, no one would ever know.

For a few minutes Gayo explored the cabin. He stayed away from Josefa, who was nervous of him. He peered out of the porthole, muttering, then climbed up the chain of the oil lamp and flapped his colourful wings. Then he crossed to the door. Hanging on with one foot and his beak, he went to work on the latch with his powerful claw.

The ship rolled and the door swung open. Appalled, Willy grabbed for the parrot and missed.

Gayo swooped through the doorway and flapped away along the narrow passage. Willy scurried after, until he saw Gayo disappear into the galley. Peering from around a corner, he saw the bird emerge at full speed, followed at a fast waddle by the ship's cook, brandishing a cleaver.

"¡*Hijo de puta!*" screeched Gayo, fleeing up the companionway.

The cook's language was equally colourful as he stood at the bottom of the stairway. The difficulty of hoisting his ample person up the steep rungs dissuaded him from following, but the stream of invective issuing from his lips made every head turn his way.

"Catch it!" bellowed the bosun after a stunned moment of silence when the parrot erupted from below.

With one accord, the sailors joyfully quit holystoning the immaculate deck and took up the chase.

Gayo headed straight for the rigging. Alighting, he started hand over hand up a taut rope. A couple of dozen seamen climbed after him. Unintimidated, he didn't bother to move away until the foremost reached for him. Then he glided down to the quarter deck, perched on a convenient railing, and addressed the gaping first mate. "*Hijo de puta,*" he said in a conversational tone, adding Sanchita's deep, rich chuckle. "Hello, hello, what a pity. Blimey! Cor stone the crows!"

The officer snatched at him. Gayo eluded his grasp with an effortless hop and continued his harangue to an appreciative audience as a circle of sailors closed in on him.

"Misbegotten son of a sea-snake!" he yelled in the cook's voice. "Toss-pot scum! Slimy, slimy, slimy scum. Hello. Gadzooks!" Eyes alert with mischief, he waited until the last moment before flying back up to the topgallant mast. "Misbegotten rum scum!" he let loose one last insult before falling silent and preening his feathers.

Down on the quarter deck, the first mate shook his fist in impotent fury as the rest of the crew took to the rigging again. Teresa, warned by the trembling cabin



boy, arrived on deck moments later with her brothers and Sir Andrew hot on her heels. She ran to the bosun.

"I can fetch him down," she told him hurriedly. "He will come to me, only you must call off your men. He'll just keep evading them."

The bosun glared at her. Before he could open his mouth to let out a blistering reproof, Sir Andrew broke in.

"It's Miss Danville's parrot," he said in his most soothing diplomatic accents, "but she is not responsible for his escape. Let her call him down."

The first mate leaned over the rail to hear them. He scowled at Teresa, but his lips were twitching. "Bring the men down," he ordered.

The bosun's roar brought the sailors down with a rush.

Everyone watched as Teresa put her fingers to her mouth and whistled. Gayo descended like a diving eagle. He landed on Teresa's shoulder and nibbled her ear. Then he saw Sir Andrew and flapped over to him. "Hello, dinner," he said fondly.

The bosun looked at the diplomat and grinned. "Got a mouth on 'im, that bird," he said with sympathy. "Don't know as I 'adn't rather be called slimy toss-pot better'n dinner. Sir." He realised his men were slacking and sent them back to their holystones with a bellow.

Andrew transferred the parrot to Teresa and, a minatory look in his eye, ordered her below. She obeyed meekly while he went to apologise to the mate.

"Funniest thing I've seen in fifteen years in His Majesty's Navy," admitted that worthy officer. "If it was not Miss Danville's fault, whose was it?"

"Well, it was Miss Danville's fault for bringing the bird aboard in the first place," he temporized, thinking of the scared, remorseful cabin boy. "I warned her not to. As for who let them loose, I'd prefer not to say. I'm afraid Captain Fitch is going to be in a high dudgeon over this."

"He has probably slept through it, and I'll do what I can to keep it from him, but I cannot guarantee he will not find out."

Andrew went down to ring a peal over Teresa. He found Oscar doing an excellent job of it, so he changed his mind and consoled her with the news that the first mate was more amused than angry.

\* \* \* \*

Inevitably, the tale reached the captain's ears. He summoned Andrew to his cabin. "I cannot countenance such a Bedlam on my ship," he pointed out. His eyes were inflamed, making him look more than ever like an unhappy bloodhound. "Unless she'll leave the bird behind or clip its wings..."

"She'll never do that," Andrew was certain.

"Then not a league beyond Port Royal shall I carry Miss Danville and her parrot. Pray inform her that she must seek another vessel to carry her to England."

Teresa accepted the verdict without demur. She was unhappily aware that she ought to have left Gayo at home. He had never caused any trouble there and she had not realised how disruptive he could be. It was too late now. She could not abandon him to the doubtful care of strangers and the thought of clipping his wings revolted her.

Indeed, there was no good reason why she and Marco need look to the Royal Navy for transportation. It should not be difficult to take passage on one of the many merchant ships that plied the Atlantic between Jamaica and England.

The only trouble was that once Sir Andrew had sailed off aboard the *Destiny*, she might very well never see him again.

## Chapter 6

Captain Fitch no longer took his meals in the wardroom with his officers and his passengers. Teresa supposed him to be so angry with her that he preferred to dine in solitary splendour in his cabin.

It was Willy, a chastened shadow of his former perky self, who disabused her of this notion. "It's his eyes, miss. Mortal bad, they be. The sawbones can't do nothing for 'em. Says it's some tropical disease and cap'n's like to go blind."

Sorry as she was for the captain, Teresa brightened at this news. She consulted the ship's doctor, who confirmed the cabin boy's report. "There's nae a great deal known o' yon tropical infections," he went on. "I hae me doots there's nae doctor e'en in Kingston can cure it."

Eagerly Teresa offered a herbal eyewash. "If it is as bad as you say it cannot harm him," she pointed out.

"You had best administer it, though, for the poor man is quite out of charity with me. Only if it works, please tell him it was my doing and perhaps he will be grateful enough to let me stay on the *Destiny* to England."

By the time the lookout in the crow's nest sighted Port Royal two days later, Captain Fitch's eyes were definitely on the mend. With considerable reluctance and still more trepidation, he acknowledged his debt to Miss Danville and gave his permission for her to remain on board. As he mentioned to Andrew, she was, after all, Lord Frederick Danville's niece, though he rather doubted that Lord Frederick's brother, the duke, would thank him for adding a blasphemous bird to his domestic arrangements.

Teresa's pleasure at his capitulation was overshadowed by Oscar's imminent departure. She realised that she had relied on her older brother's presence as a sort of deputy for her father. From now on, she was the eldest family member; Marco would depend on her as she had depended on Oscar.

As the *Destiny* sailed into Port Royal harbour, she recollected that Josefa was also to lose a brother now. The maid was sister to the manservant who would stay in Jamaica with Oscar, and though she had seen little of him during the voyage she must certainly wish to take leave of him.

Leaving her brothers and Sir Andrew watching the busy harbour from the forecastle, Teresa went below. She found Josefa packing up her few possessions.

"We do not go ashore," she told the maid. "The *Destiny* will stay only to pick up supplies and despatches and we leave again tomorrow."

"*Lo siento, señorita, pero no voy con usted.*" After nine days confined to her bunk, the girl was shaky but determined. Nothing, she vowed, could make her stay on board and the only thing that would ever make her brave the sea again was the prospect of going home to Costa Rica. Don Oscar and her brother would take care of her, the señorita must not worry. Her mind was made up.

Disheartened, Teresa climbed back up to the forecastle. The world seemed to be conspiring to prevent her travelling with Sir Andrew. She knew that Oscar would refuse to let her go on without any female companion, and indeed she could not feel comfortable

at the prospect. It did not seem likely that she could find a new maid ashore in time to sail with the *Destiny* on the morrow.

She poured out her tale of woe. As expected, Oscar was adamant. "Naturally I should be happier if you could travel under Graylin's protection," he said, "but it is quite out of the question to go without your maid, is it not, sir?" He turned to the Englishman.

Sir Andrew's lean, tanned face was unwontedly flushed. "Normally I would agree," he said hesitantly. "However, I must tell you something which will change the situation entirely. Captain Fitch does not know it yet, but there is an order awaiting him from the Governor of Jamaica. His Excellency's sister-in-law, Lady Parr, and her daughter are to sail to England on the *Destiny*."

"Then that is all right!" said Oscar with relief. "It must be altogether unexceptionable for Teresa to travel in such company."

Sir Andrew's embarrassment was patent, and Teresa's happy smile faded as a disagreeable suspicion crossed her mind. "How is it," she asked, "that you already know what the captain as yet does not?"

His flush deepened and he avoided her gaze. "I am betrothed to Miss Muriel Parr," he said.

There was a moment of shocked silence. Then pride came to Teresa's rescue. She could only be glad she had once considered the possibility that he was married. It enabled her to keep her composure, though inwardly she seethed with anger and hurt. After a scarcely noticeable pause, her voice was steady when she said, "I shall be happy to make Miss Parr's acquaintance."

\* \* \* \*

Captain Fitch, when his orders arrived, was equally disgruntled and less unwilling to show it. He had to give up his cabin to the ladies, an imposition beside which the disruption caused by Miss Danville's presence aboard seemed insignificant. His regard for Teresa warmed immeasurably from the moment Lady Parr swept past him with a haughty nod, her majestic air unimpaired by the indignity of being lifted from the boat to the deck in a sling.

Teresa had already moved her belongings, including Gayo, into the captain's cabin. Despite the addition of two cots to the large bed, four chairs and table, it

seemed huge after the first mate's cramped abode.

Here she awaited the new arrivals, with some trepidation. This was to be her first encounter with ladies of that Polite World in which her father expected her to find a place. For the fifth time she peered into the captain's little square of mirror. She had wound her long braid into a knot on the back of her head. She poked at escaping tendrils, tucked her shirt more firmly into the waistband, smoothed her full purple skirt and was glad she had lengthened it with the black cloth purchased in Limón.

There was a knock. Willy opened the door, squeaked "Lady Parr, miss," and ducked out of sight.

Her ladyship, clad all in white crape, reminded Teresa irresistibly of the *Destiny* under full sail, except that she altogether lacked the frigate's beauty.

Teresa curtsied. "I am Teresa Danville, ma'am," she said.

Lady Parr, standing in the doorway, raised her quizzing glass and examined her from head to toe. "You are shockingly brown, Miss Danville," she declared.

"What a pity," commented Gayo. "*Buenos días*, hello, hello."

The full force of the quizzing glass was turned upon him and he quailed a little. "A parrot," said Lady Parr. "I cannot share my cabin with a parrot. The bird must be removed at once. Sir Archibald would insist upon it."

In the fuss attendant upon the removal of Gayo to the cabin shared by Marco and Sir Andrew, Teresa noticed Miss Muriel Parr only as a slight, silent figure in pale pink muslin.

When she returned without Gayo, the ladies' luggage had arrived. Their abigail, Kinsey, was scurrying about attempting to stow everything away in the limited space available. A short, round, rosy-cheeked woman, she smiled in a friendly way and bobbed a curtsy, but did not speak. Lady Parr sat in the captain's chair, a well-thumbed book of sermons open upon the table before her. Her daughter perched on the bed on the far side of the cabin, doing her best not to hinder the abigail's task. Her back was as straight as if she found herself in the drawing room of one of the patronesses of Almack's, her hands folded in her lap.

On seeing her, Teresa drew in her breath sharply. Miss Parr had removed her bonnet, revealing blond ringlets, blue eyes and a complexion pink and white as a china doll. No wonder Sir Andrew had chosen the girl as his bride!

A wave of envy not far from jealousy swept over Teresa. She fought it down and went over to the bed. "How do you do," she said with a smile. "I beg your pardon for not greeting you before, but I thought it best to comply immediately with your mother's wishes."

The answering smile was timid. "I do find it advisable to obey Mama quickly," said Miss Parr. Her voice was soft, apologetic. It grew softer as she added, "I am so sorry she was rude to you. She always says just what she thinks regardless of other people's feelings."

"She was quite right, though," Teresa said ruefully. "When I see your face I must agree that I am 'shockingly brown.' However did you avoid getting sunburned in Jamaica? No, wait, we cannot talk comfortably here. Let us go up on deck."

Miss Parr's blue eyes grew large. "Oh, Miss Danville! But there are sailors everywhere. Such rough men!"

"We shall go to the quarter deck. Only officers go there."

"I must ask Mama."

Her ladyship was extremely doubtful of the propriety of two young ladies promenading on deck without an escort she had no intention of providing.

"I expect Sir Andrew and Marco will be there, ma'am," Teresa assured her. "They will want to watch the preparations for our departure."

"Marco?" The quizzing glass was brought into play.

"My brother, who goes with me to England."

"A foreign name, Miss Danville. Sir Archibald did not approve of foreigners."

"We were born and raised in Costa Rica, ma'am. It is a colony of Spain. Our father, Lord Edward Danville, is an Englishman however."

"Lord Edward Danville," mused Lady Parr, sitting up straighter. "Is Lord Edward by any chance a connexion of his Grace of Stafford?"

"The duke is my uncle. Marco and I are going to live with him." Teresa crossed her fingers behind her

back, remembering that her uncle was as yet unaware of her existence.

"I shall be happy to make Mr Mark Danville's acquaintance," announced Lady Parr. "You may go up, Muriel. I believe Sir Archibald would have permitted it. Put on your bonnet and carry your parasol."

Though unhappily aware that nothing could make her complexion match Miss Parr's, Teresa donned her plain straw hat.

Neither Marco nor Sir Andrew was on deck. Teresa was glad to postpone her first sight of the betrothed couple together, glad also of the opportunity to talk privately with Miss Parr. She had a thousand questions she wanted to ask, about England and society and fashion, and about her engagement to Sir Andrew.

In the crowded cabin, Teresa had not been able to view Miss Parr's gown properly. When they reached the quarter deck and began to stroll up and down, she realised that it was so different from her own dress as to make comparison impossible. The high, round neckline was trimmed with lace, as were the tight cuffs of the long, full sleeves. The skirt fell straight in front from a waist bound with darker pink ribbon just below the bust, while a few gathers at the back gave it just enough fullness to enable its wearer to take small, dainty steps. The delicate colour of the fine mull muslin made her own bright purple positively garish.

"I daresay your gown is in the latest London fashion?" she asked wistfully.

"Heavens no," answered Miss Parr with a refined titter. "I had it made up by a Kingston seamstress and all the pattern books in Jamaica are several months out of date at least."

"Months! Do fashions change so fast?"

"Only in details," conceded her companion. "Except during the London Season, it is not necessary to discard gowns even a year or two old. I expect things change more slowly in Costa Rica?"

"On the whole, we dress for practicality," Teresa admitted. "It would be difficult to work on the hacienda in a skirt as narrow as yours. How elegant you look, and cool!"

"It is impossible to look cool in Jamaica. I do not care for Jamaica. The people are so coarse and common that we never went into Kingston at all, and

Mama did not let me leave the grounds of the King's House without two footmen to guard the carriage. I wonder that your papa permits you to travel without a chaperon or any servants!"

Teresa assured her that she had left home with a maid and her elder brother to take care of her. "I could not have gone farther had not you and your mama come aboard to lend me countenance. But what, pray, is the King's House?"

"That is the Governor's mansion, in Spanish Town. It is by no means the equal of an English mansion. I quite long to be back in England."

"If you dislike Jamaica so, I wonder that you lived there. Were you there long?"

"Nearly a year." Miss Parr explained that on the death of her father, Sir Archibald, some fourteen months since, her aunt had invited them for a visit. Since her marriage must be postponed until after a year's mourning, and by chance Andrew had been able to escort them to Jamaica on his way to Mexico, the invitation had been accepted. "However," she continued, "I wish we had stayed at home. Everything is so strange here. Once we are married, Andrew will not care to travel."

Teresa hoped for her sake that she was right. "How did you meet Sir Andrew?" she asked.

"He was presented to me as a partner at Lady Sefton's ball. Mama did not care for the match—he is a second son, you know—but after all, Papa was only a baronet and my fortune is not large. It was my second Season and I had not had an offer from any gentleman I liked half as well."

Teresa was prevented from delving into the depth of that liking by the arrival of the subject of their conversation.

\* \* \* \*

On their arrival in Jamaica, Andrew had gone to Spanish Town to inform the Governor of the results of his mission to Central America. There he met his Muriel for the first time in close to a year. He was struck anew by her gentle prettiness, the propriety of her manners, her deference to his wishes and opinions. She would make him an attractive, conformable wife, well suited to aid his advancement in his chosen profession. Already her connexion with the Governor of Jamaica had stood him in good stead



in the diplomatic service.

He had escorted his betrothed and her mother back to the naval base at Port Royal, then left them to board the *Destiny* while he completed some other business.

Now, mounting the steps to the quarter deck, he was struck by the contrast between the two young ladies who awaited him. Beside Muriel's quiet elegance, Teresa appeared an awkward peasant. They moved towards him, the one tripping lightly, the other striding like a boy.

"Andrew," cooed Muriel, her face shyly welcoming as he bowed and kissed her hand. "I am glad you are come. I feared you might be left behind."

"They are about to raise the anchor," said Teresa. Her voice was lower, more resonant, and for the first time he caught the faintest hint of an accent. "Where is Marco, I wonder? He will be sorry to miss the excitement."

"I picked up a couple of books for him in Port Royal, Miss Danville. He has had such a limited selection always that he is absurdly grateful for any addition to their number." He spoke lightly, but even to his own ears he sounded condescending.

"Don Eduardo has always bought every volume he could lay his hands on," said Teresa, resentment in her tone. "If you will excuse me, I shall go and see how he does."

He watched her go, sorry to have offended and hoping that she had not read his earlier thoughts in his face. Over the weeks he had known her he had ceased to wonder at her frank, outspoken manner and the idiosyncrasies of her dress. He did not want her to think he ceased to value her friendship just because Muriel had reminded him of the ideal of decorous propriety.

"I hope you and Miss Danville will be friends," he said, turning abruptly to Muriel.

"I hope so, if you wish it. Miss Danville is...an unusual person."

"She has had no one to teach her the niceties of fashion and conduct. I begin to wonder whether her aunt, the duchess, will be willing to sponsor her if she arrives as she is now. Not that I mean to criticise her! But do you suppose that you might try to give her some notion of what is required of a young lady entering society? She cannot do better than to model

her behaviour upon yours."

Muriel blushed with gratification, but said anxiously, "I will do my best to give her a hint, only I should not like to offend her. Oh, I know the very thing! I shall give her some of my dresses. I daresay Kinsey will be able to alter them to fit Miss Danville. That will lead to talk of fashion, and I can always slip in a word or two of advice about how to go on in London."

"How good you are, Muriel!" He took her hand and kissed it warmly, producing another blush. "You see, I cannot but feel somewhat responsible for Miss Danville's acceptance by her relatives, since her father entrusted her to my care."

"Of course, Andrew, I do understand. It will be good to have something to occupy me on the voyage. Jamaica was so very dull and I do dislike travelling above everything. How I long to be back in London, do not you?"

Andrew agreed, though not without a certain hesitancy. Certainly he would enjoy a few months back in civilisation, but so much of the world waited to be seen. Of course, everything would be different once they were married, he assured himself. Different in what way, he failed to ask.

\* \* \* \*

Muriel's trunk was carried up from the hold by a grumbling sailor. Teresa held her breath as Kinsey set aside layer after layer of mourning clothes, grey and black. Underneath, the maid vowed, were several gowns she had packed "just in case." They were now two years old, out of date by London standards, but in the mid-Atlantic, who was to know?

There was a walking dress of pink jaconet, trimmed with white frills, and a rose spencer to go with it. Another, of the palest blue, had a matching blue and white striped pelisse. Two morning gowns of white muslin, sprigged one with green and one with yellow, and a much beruffled white parasol completed the collection.

"Miss Muriel hardly wore these at all," Kinsey explained. "It seemed a right pity to leave 'em behind. After all, you never know."

"I remember, I had them made just before Papa died and we went into mourning. Do you like them, Miss Danville?"

"Oh yes! They are beautiful. Only you will want to wear them, I am sure."

"I had quite forgot them, and I have enough new things from Kingston for now, though of course I shall need a complete new wardrobe before I am married. You are welcome to them, Miss Danville."

"Let's try 'em on you, miss, for I can see I'll have to do a spot of altering. Miss Muriel's a mite taller and p'raps a tad narrower in the bust and hip."

Lady Parr, who had raised no material objection to the expropriation of her daughter's clothes but was watching suspiciously, broke in. "Muriel's figure is excellent. You will find, Miss Danville, that it is fashionable in the Haut Ton to be tall and slender. Sir Archibald could never abide short, squatty females."

"Yes, ma'am," said Teresa, biting her lip in an effort not to laugh aloud. Her ladyship was tall enough, certainly, but it was impossible to imagine that she had ever been slender.

"There is nothing wrong with your figure," Muriel whispered indignantly. "If anything, I am too thin for my height. You look perfect to me."

"How kind you are!" murmured Teresa, squeezing her hand.

Kinsey announced that with a bit taken off the hem and let into the bodice one of the gowns would be ready to wear by next day. That evening, for dinner in the wardroom, Teresa was still clad in one of her cotton skirts. For the first time since she had lengthened it, she was utterly dissatisfied.

Captain Fitch, having resigned himself to losing his cabin to a bevy of females, was in a chatty mood. He held forth at length on the history of the buccaneers in Jamaica. Teresa once more had to bite her lip when she realised that he regarded Henry Morgan, that scourge of the seas, as something of a hero.

Unfortunately she caught Sir Andrew's eye. That gentleman had clearly been struck by the same thought, and the giggle which sprang to her lips was irrepressible.

"You are amused, Miss Danville?" asked the captain, regarding her with his mournful, doggy eyes.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I was just thinking how odd it was that Sir Henry was made lieutenant governor of the island after his undeniably unorthodox career."

"I am amazed, Miss Danville," pronounced Lady

Parr, "that you should find such iniquity amusing. Sir Archibald considered the buccaneers to be barbarians."

Unlikely as it seemed that the late baronet had ever found cause to pronounce such a condemnation, this censure failed to crush Teresa.

Captain Fitch cast a look of profound dislike at her ladyship and changed the subject. "In these modern times," he said, "since we are not at present at war, the most barbarous sailors in these waters are the slave traders."

"The Greek philosophers had no moral objection to slavery," Marco observed. As he rarely spoke, everyone looked at him in surprise. He crimsoned, and hurriedly filled his mouth with food.

Captain Fitch decided to ignore his comment. "The slave trade has been outlawed by the British Government," he continued doggedly. "The Royal Navy is dedicated to stamping it out. While we lay at Port Royal, I was informed that a suspected slave ship, the *Snipe*, is known to be heading for Cuba. I have her description, and if we sight her we are duty bound to engage her," he ended with a triumphant nod at Lady Parr.

"Engage it, captain? Engage it? You will do no such thing whilst I and my daughter are aboard. Sir Archibald would absolutely forbid such a thing. I venture to say, he would most certainly complain to the Admiralty at the very suggestion."

"Sir Archibald is not here, ma'am, and even if he were he could not stop an officer of His Majesty's Navy in the course of his duties. We shall engage the *Snipe*, I say."

"Is it not unlikely that we should sight the ship, captain?" Andrew enquired hurriedly, seeing his future mama-in-law grow purple in the face. "It must be the merest chance that we should cross its path."

"Our course lies through the Windward Passage, between Cuba and Hispaniola, and the *Snipe* must needs pass one end or t'other," said the captain. "She'll be easy to recognise, for she's one o' these new-fangled Baltimore brigs with the raked masts."

The first mate spoke soothingly. "It is not known whether the blackbirder sails north or south of Hispaniola, and in either case Sir Andrew is right. We shall be lucky to catch her."

Captain Fitch scowled at him, and Lady Parr snorted at his choice of words, but no more was said of the slave ship that evening.

\* \* \* \*

Shortly after dawn the next morning came a cry from the lookout: "Sail-ho!"

"What ship?" called up the second mate, the officer of the watch.

"'Tis a brig, sir, with raked masts. I'll go bail she's the *Snipe*!"

## Chapter 7

Shouts and the thud of running feet woke Teresa. She had slept later than usual if it was eight bells already and time to change the watch. She snuggled under the covers for a few minutes, then sat up wide awake and full of energy.

The Parrs and their abigail were still sound asleep, her ladyship with her open mouth issuing a ladylike snore. Teresa grinned, threw back the covers and started to dress. Her eyes went to the green-sprigged muslin, hanging between her cot and Kinsey's. By tonight it should be ready to wear. How surprised Sir Andrew would be to see her in a London-made gown!

She was tying her shoes when a crashing roar shook the air. Lady Parr, Muriel and Kinsey all sat bolt upright, sleepy eyes filled with alarm.

"Lawks, what was that?" cried the abigail.

Teresa shook her head and shrugged. "I've not the slightest notion," she admitted, "but I shall go up at once to find out."

To the amazed horror of the other three, she took her pistols from under her pillow, checked that they were loaded, thrust them into their holsters and buckled the belt about her waist.

"Muriel, I absolutely forbid you to leave the cabin," squawked Lady Parr.

"Yes, Mama," whispered her daughter, looking as if it was the last order she was likely to disobey.

"I shall come back to tell you what is happening," said Teresa, "but I suspect we have caught up with the slavers after all."

When she stepped out of the cabin, she saw at once that the lower deck was cleared for action. All the guns were manned by watchful seamen, and one, right in

the bows, was being reloaded.

She expected to be told to return to the cabin, but everyone was too busy to notice her. After a moment's consideration, she decided it was probably no more dangerous on deck than below. If she found she was in the way she could always go back down.

Marco, Andrew and Rowson were already on the quarter deck, with Captain Fitch and two of the officers. Teresa followed the direction of their gaze and saw a two-masted ship, considerably smaller than the frigate, a couple of hundred yards away. Its sails were being hastily lowered and a white flag waved from amidships.

"Looks like they're surrendering," grunted the captain with satisfaction.

As the *Snipe* lost speed, a boat was lowered over her side. Four men climbed down to it and began rowing towards the *Destiny*. The white flag went with them.

They had covered half the distance when a hollow boom rang out. The *Snipe* shuddered visibly, though no damage was visible.

"What was that?" asked Teresa. "Did we shoot at them?"

The first mate turned to her, his face pale. "They're scuttling the evidence, ma'am. They've blown a hole in their own ship."

Shouts and yells could be heard across the water, and they saw men jumping overboard.

"That'll be the rest of the crew," said Captain Fitch. "The officers—if such scum deserve the name--abandoned them. Lower a boat, we'll go and pick 'em up. Maybe they'll turn King's Evidence."

"But what about the slaves?" demanded Teresa. "Why are they not jumping?"

"They'll have battened down the hatches, Miss Danville," explained Captain Fitch grimly. "No use scuttling the ship if the cargo escapes to tell tales."

"But we must rescue them!" she cried in agony. "Send a boat to release them!"

"I can't order my men onto a sinking ship, ma'am."

"Then I shall go! Will no one go with me?"

Marco moved to her side, followed at once by Andrew and Rowson.

"We can try, captain," said Andrew. "Will you have the other boat lowered and give us a couple of men to

row us over? They can wait for us in the boat."

By the time the four of them climbed down into the captain's gig, held steady by a pair of sailors, the slaver captain and his three cronies were aboard the *Destiny*. Teresa looked up to see them staring down at her with puzzled faces.

The *Snipe* had drifted closer and they reached her side in no time. Teresa looked at the dangling rope ladder and cursed her skirts. With a defiant glance at Andrew, she picked up the hem and tucked it into the waistband, carefully leaving her pistols clear.

Andrew shook his head at her and grinned. "Considering the impropriety of this whole mad venture," he pointed out, "of what significance is a mere display of limbs?"

They clambered up to the deck. The ship was listing slightly though it seemed steady beneath their feet. They heard cries and groans from below, thumps and thuds as the imprisoned wretches tried desperately to break out.

"Marco, you and Rowson open this hatch," ordered Andrew. "Come, Teresa, let us see what we can do aft."

It was the work of a moment to undo the fastening on the aft hatch. Teresa thought her arms would come out of their sockets as she struggled to help Andrew lift it. Marco and Rowson rushed to help as a swarm of dark-skinned, half naked women and children burst up from the forward hold and milled about on the deck.

The aft hatch swung open and another dozen women staggered out. No one else appeared. Teresa peered down into the gloom, hearing shouts in deeper male voices.

Behind her Andrew cried, "Break loose the railings, the spars, any timber you can find. Throw it overboard and make them jump. It's the only hope. Teresa, wait!"

She was already half way down the stairs. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw rows of men lying shackled to the deck. They were packed close together like a hand of bananas, unable to move without knocking against each other. The smell was appalling and she thought she was going to vomit.

She braced herself. The cries ended in a terrified silence as she moved to the nearest slave and drew her pistols. She shot off his shackles. The report was deafening. As it echoed around, the man realised that

he was still alive. He jumped to his feet and headed for the hatchway as Teresa reloaded and moved on.

Andrew was beside her, a pair of pistols in his hands. Eyes stinging from the smoke, she blinked at him and moved to the next, and the next, and the next.

The ship shuddered and listed a little further.

"She's going!" called Marco's scared voice. "Teresa, come up! Teresa!"

She moved to the next, shot, reloaded, moved on into the gloom.

Andrew ran back to her from the depth of the hold. "That's the last. Come on!" he said urgently.

Too dazed to comprehend, she started to reload again. He picked her up, sped to the hatch and pushed her through. Marco and Rowson grabbed her arms and hauled, then turned to help Andrew.

The sailors had pulled several children into the captain's gig, but they had saved space for the rescuers. The boat was half way back to the *Destiny* when Teresa looked back to see the *Snipe* tilt over on her side and slide smoothly beneath the placid blue swells. The sea's gleaming surface was dotted with floating wood and bobbing heads. Among them crawled the boats from the *Snipe* and the *Destiny*.

Numb with shock and exhaustion, Teresa had to be lifted to the deck in a sling. Willing hands helped her aboard. She stood in a daze until Andrew, his face blackened by powder smoke, appeared over the side, picked her up once again, and carried her down to the cabin.

Between Kinsey, the cabin boy and the ship's cook, a hot bath was provided in short order. Teresa never remembered climbing into or out of it, but before she fell asleep in her cot she was aware of Muriel bending over her, tucking her in, her blue eyes wondering.

"You are a heroine!" she breathed.

Teresa slept till mid afternoon and woke ravenous. She sat up and said so. "I'm so hungry I could eat an ox, I vow!"

"A lady ought to have a delicate appetite, and never to mention it," Lady Parr informed her. "I eat like a bird and so, I am happy to say, does Muriel. It is quite otherwise with gentlemen. Sir Archibald had an excellent appetite. I have decided, Miss Danville, to



take you in hand. It will never do for you to present yourself to her Grace of Stafford until you have overcome certain odd notions of behaviour. I flatter myself that I am as able as anyone to teach you how to go on unexceptionably, though I daresay you will never be as pretty-behaved as Muriel. Muriel is exceptional."

"Yes, ma'am, and thank you, but I missed both breakfast and luncheon!"

"Kinsey, fetch some nourishment for Miss Danville. And you may tell Miss Muriel to come down. She has spent quite enough time with young Graylin for this afternoon."

The abigail went off and Teresa dressed. In a few minutes a knock at the door announced Willy, the cabin boy, bearing a tray. "Cap'n's compliments, miss," he said as he set it carefully on the table, "and there's over a hundred Africans been saved. I seen 'em, miss. They's up on deck, wi' a bit o' canvas rigged to keep the sun offn 'em. And I seen them slavers too, in irons in the brig. Summun told 'em it was you as saved them Blacks and they was cussing something awful!"

"That will do!" said Lady Parr severely, and Willy departed in haste.

Muriel came in while Teresa was eating. "Captain Fitch wants to see you on the quarter deck," she said, "if you are quite recovered. Oh, Miss Danville, you were splendid! I cannot imagine how you could be so brave. Why, it frightens me only to see their black faces at a distance."

Teresa looked at her in surprise. "They are people," she said gently. "I could not let them drown without trying to save them. If you will excuse me, ma'am, I shall go up to see the captain."

Captain Fitch wanted to know what she expected him to do with her protégés. Andrew leaned on the rail, grinning at her disconcerted expression.

"I'll impress a score or so of the men," the captain went on. "We've lost that many of the crew to Yellow Fever and such, and there's enough of the Blacks healthy. The rest, there's the women and children, and a lot of them sick."

"Then the first thing is to attempt to cure them," said Teresa. "After seeing the conditions they were kept in, I should say fresh air and decent food will be enough for most of them. However, I shall fetch my herbs and see whether I can help any of them. Perhaps

the doctor could meet me there?"

As Teresa joined the ship's doctor amidships, she looked round at the rescued slaves. Some of the children were sufficiently recovered from their ordeal to run and play, and a number of the men were standing and stretching, or walking about. Others sat huddled or lay sprawling. She imagined they must enjoy simply having space to breathe.

When they saw her, many of them called out in incomprehensible words. A young girl, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, came towards her. She was clad only in a piece of white cloth tied above her breasts and hanging to mid thigh.

"They are blessing you, miss," she said in excellent English. "They know that without you they would be dead. I am Annie, miss, and I too bless you and thank you."

Teresa felt her cheeks grow hot and quickly asked, "How is it that you speak English?"

Annie explained that since she was a small child her mother had lived with a white man, who had treated her as a daughter. Both her mother and her adoptive father had died of some nameless tropical disease, and she had been sold to the slavers by the local chief.

She made herself useful interpreting as Teresa and the doctor moved among the others, cleaning and binding wounds, dosing fevers, washing inflamed eyes with herbs.

When they had seen all the sick, Teresa went to report to Captain Fitch. As she climbed the steps to the quarter deck, she looked up to see Andrew watching her. She gave him a weary smile. "I think they will all survive," she said. "I must tell you how grateful I am that you went with me to the *Snipe*. Without your support I could have done nothing."

"Without your initiative, nothing would have been done, Miss Danville. I was prepared to take the Captain's word that they could not be saved. There are times when a disregard for convention is estimable."

His voice was serious, and when Teresa looked for a teasing light in his eye, she read only admiration. She turned away to hide her flushed face.

Captain Fitch had decided to set his unwanted passengers ashore at Grand Turk, in the Caicos Islands, which they would pass close to in a few days.

He assured Teresa that it had a healthful climate and that the men would certainly find work in the salt industry which flourished there. She had to agree that it would probably suit them better than England, had it been possible to convey them thither.

She went down to the cabin to dress for dinner. After all the adventure of the day, she was ruefully aware of a ridiculous feeling of excitement when she remembered that she was to wear her new gown.

She watched Kinsey help Lady Parr and Muriel into their finery and arrange their hair. The first thing she must do when she arrived in London, she decided, was to find a competent abigail. There was clearly a definite art to it, far beyond the services Josefa had rendered her, which had amounted to little more than mending and laundry. Muriel, whose blond ringlets had been sadly disarranged by the breeze during her visit on deck, emerged from Kinsey's clever hands fit to grace a ballroom.

Then it was Teresa's turn. She held her breath as the sprigged muslin slipped down over her shoulders. It fitted perfectly. Kinsey took the captain's tiny mirror off its hook and held it tilted while Teresa twisted and turned, trying to see herself in her new finery.

At last she gave up, laughing. "I shall have to take it on trust," she said, then added with unwonted shyness, "Do you think you can do anything with my hair?"

Kinsey sat her down at the table. Muriel obligingly sat opposite holding the mirror while the ebony tide was loosed from its bounds and brushed vigorously.

"It's beautiful," Muriel assured her, "but you will have to cut it shorter to be *à la mode*."

"Not a bit of it," Kinsey said. "We'll take the most of it and wind it up on top of your head, miss. Add a bit of height, like. Then this that's left, it'll lie over your shoulder like so. We'll put a curling paper in it tonight and 'twill drape even better tomorrow, but isn't that fine as fivence right now, Miss Muriel?"

"Charming!"

Lady Parr raised her quizzing glass. "Astonishing! I'd not have thought Miss Danville could look half so well. I wore my hair thus in my youth. It was the quite the fashion then, and Sir Archibald admired it exceedingly. Of course, my hair was golden." She studied Teresa's raven locks, sighed, and rose to lead

the way to the wardroom.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew rose and bowed as Lady Parr swept into the wardroom. Even when, as now, dressed in puce rather than white, she bore a startling resemblance to a ship in full sail. His betrothed followed, as usual a figure of quiet elegance in pale blue. Behind her came Teresa. He frankly stared.

Her skin was darkened in contrast to the white muslin. The ruffles and bows that flattered Muriel's slender shape emphasized the wrong portions of her fuller figure and even though the way she wore her hair made her appear taller, she looked plump. Somehow, in that simple gown that would not be out of place in any drawing room in London, she managed to look more foreign than ever.

She glanced at him anxiously. He could not tell her that her own old clothes suited her far better. "You look every inch a lady," he said, with the utmost sincerity.

It was not precisely what she had hoped for, but at least he no longer thought her dressed like a hoyden. She told herself she was satisfied.

"You're complete to a shade!" exclaimed Marco, who had learned any amount of useful slang from Andrew.

Captain Fitch had clearly never noticed anything amiss with Miss Danville's appearance and was at a loss to understand the present interest therein. He had matters of more moment to discuss. To Lady Parr's obvious irritation, since she would have preferred to ignore the subject, he proceeded to congratulate himself upon the successful pursuit and capture of the *Snipe*. He had talked to the slaver captain, Harrison, a very unpleasant sort of fellow who flew into a passion when he learned that his slaves had been rescued. He would certainly be transported for his part in the infamous trade; indeed, he might even be hanged for murder since a number of the unfortunate Africans had drowned.

"He would not tell me who financed the voyage," the captain continued. "Certainly it was not his own ship, or he'd never have scuttled her. There are gentlemen in England still who put up the funds for scoundrels like Harrison, and it is generally impossible to prove their complicity."

"I suppose it is still a profitable trade then,"

observed Andrew.

"Aye, and will be until the Americans and the French agree to cooperate," growled the captain. "The British Navy cannot stop American ships, and the French never punish their citizens when we catch them."

Lady Parr managed to turn the conversation to the infamous behaviour of the French and the Americans in general, both of them given to revolutions that quite cut up everyone's peace. Teresa and Andrew between them managed to silence Marco when he attempted to inform her that Costa Rica, and indeed all of Central America, was on the verge of its own revolution. Teresa did not care to give her ladyship any more ammunition against her. She already had plenty.

Teresa's lessons in deportment began on the morrow. Lady Parr commandeered the wardroom between the hours of nine and one, pointing out to the unfortunate officers that they might very well go to their cabins or on deck.

Here Teresa paraded up and down in front of her ladyship's eagle eye until her carefree stride was reduced to a dainty step. Soon she could walk arm in arm with Muriel without pulling her along. She learned to curtsy gracefully, and to adjust the depth of her curtsy to the rank, called out by Lady Parr, of the person to whom she was supposedly being presented. She had some difficulty in distinguishing between the deference due to the King or Queen and that due the Prince Regent.

"Not that you will meet the King, of course, for he is quite mad by now. Duke!" Her ladyship frowned in thought as Teresa produced a creditable ducal curtsy. "I daresay you will not go so low to the Duke of Stafford as he is your uncle, at least once he has acknowledged you. Viscount! No, no, girl, that is deep enough for an earl, or even a marquis."

Muriel helped her practise conversing in a soft voice upon unexceptionable topics such as the weather. Lady Parr had nothing but praise for her low, musical voice. Her laugh, however, was sadly deprecated and proved impossible to remedy. The only alternative Teresa managed to produce was a horrid titter, which she herself refused to consider acceptable.

"We cannot expect perfection," sighed Lady Parr. "You will have to confine yourself to smiling, Miss

Danville. Sir Archibald did not approve of females laughing, so that will do very well. Your teeth are good, I am glad to see."

Another failure was the art of fluttering fan and eyelashes: Teresa simply could not take it seriously enough to concentrate. In fact, the effort invariably called forth that unfortunate laugh.

The lessons were interrupted twice a day when Teresa made her rounds of the ex-slaves, attending to their ills. Andrew was openly admiring of both her compassion and her medical skills. On the second day Muriel asked permission to help, and though she was ill at ease, continued to join her thereafter. Teresa had to respect the effort she was making to overcome her timidity. In spite of her jealousy, suppressed with difficulty, and Lady Parr's constant comparisons to her detriment, she found herself growing fond of Andrew's future wife.

She also felt a growing attachment to Annie. The girl was always cheerful and ready to help. When the *Destiny* anchored off Grand Turk and the boats started ferrying the Africans ashore, Teresa made up her mind to ask Annie to stay with her as her abigail.

Annie accepted joyfully. Despite Lady Parr's distaste at sharing the cabin with a savage, when it was overfull already, a pallet was made up for her on the floor. Kinsey took the girl under her wing at once, and Muriel donated a couple of her mourning dresses to make her some decent clothes. Clad demurely in grey, Annie was miraculously transformed from savage to maidservant, and under Kinsey's kindly tutelage she began to learn an abigail's skills.

Marco was also taking lessons. His intellectual curiosity unbounded, he had persuaded Captain Fitch to teach him the science of navigation. At all hours of the day and night, he could be seen wielding sextant, astrolabe and chronometer, consulting the Nautical Almanac, or bending over Admiralty charts with dividers in hand.

Teresa's course of instruction continued meanwhile with the rules of behaviour in Polite Society. "A young lady never dances more than twice with any gentleman at the same ball, and must not waltz until given permission by one of the patronesses of Almack's."

"I am not likely to break that rule, ma'am," laughed Teresa, "for I have no notion how to waltz."

Nor, it seemed, did she know how to dance the cotillion, or the quadrille, or any English country dances. Andrew and Muriel were enlisted, and Marco reluctantly joined in the lessons to make up the numbers. With the wardroom table cleared to one side there was just space enough to learn the steps as long as they moved with great care. Since their only music was Lady Parr's tuneless hum, it would in any case have been impossible to infuse any spirit into the exercise.

To supplement the list of possible subjects of polite conversation, there was a list of unmentionables. This included religion, politics, prize fighting and most parts of the body. Certain works of literature, such as poetry and the latest novels, were acceptable in moderation.

"Do you read, Miss Danville?" enquired her ladyship.

"Why yes, ma'am. I have read most of my father's library."

"Do not on any account mention it! Nothing is so fatal to a young lady's chances as being known as a bluestocking. Sir Archibald never permitted Muriel to enter his library. Do you sketch? Play the piano? The harp, perhaps?"

"Only the ocarina, ma'am."

Marco was persuaded to play a duet with her. Muriel thought it charming but Lady Parr was not impressed.

"Impossible," she declared.

Teresa began to feel thoroughly inadequate. "It is a lowering reflection," she confided to Marco later, "that my one talent, shooting straight, is not on the list of ladylike accomplishments."

\* \* \* \*

However, by the time the Scillies were sighted, Lady Parr pronounced herself satisfied. "You are vastly improved, I vow, Miss Danville," she said. "I daresay it is not too much to hope you will not disgrace yourself in your uncle's house. I should be excessively mortified if the duchess were to lay any fault in your conduct at my door."

"Indeed I must thank you for all your efforts in my behalf," Teresa assured her. "I shall endeavour to behave with the utmost decorum." She curtsied the precise curtsy proper to the widow of a baronet.

Her resolve was very soon put to the test, when the *Destiny* sailed into Spithead. "A lady preserves her composure under all conditions," she remembered. "Only yokels gape." She wanted to gape at the spectacle of hundreds of vessels lying at anchor or sailing to and fro in the narrow waterway between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. With great effort she managed to preserve her countenance, though she did say to Andrew, "I never dreamed there were so many ships in the whole world!"

It was dusk when they went ashore in the naval dockyards. Captain Fitch bid them farewell with so obvious an air of relief that, as had become her habit, Teresa sought Andrew's eyes to confirm her amusement.

With a sudden pang, she realised that, even if she saw him in London, they could never again be on such intimate terms. He would soon be married to Muriel and she, she decided, would collect dozens of beaux, among whom she was bound to find someone else who shared her sense of humour.

While they waited for Rowson to bring carriages to take them into Portsmouth, the slavers were marched off the frigate in chains. As they passed their captain, Harrison, looked round and saw Teresa.

"You wait, Miss Marplot Danville," he snarled, his lips twisted in a vicious grin. "I'll get you for this!"

## Chapter 8

A hired carriage pulled into the well-lit courtyard of the Star and Garter. From it descended a tall, fair young gentleman. The landlord, who had just stepped out to take the air on this mild September evening, bustled forward. Yes, he had several excellent rooms available. A private parlour? Of course. Two post chaises and three riding horses to start for London in the morning? Certainly, certainly. He rubbed his hands together and bowed to the imposing lady who now followed the gentleman from the carriage.

A youth and two young ladies emerged next. As mine host ushered the party towards the door, he heard another carriage drive up and glanced backwards.

"That will be our servants," the gentleman informed him.



From the second carriage stepped a respectable-looking manservant--with a parrot on his shoulder! He handed down a perfectly normal lady's maid, and then a Black female, dressed just as if she too was a perfectly normal lady's maid.

"Y-your servants, sir?" stammered the innkeeper, goggling.

The gentleman's lips twitched, but before he could answer the elder of the two young ladies, the dark one, spoke up. "Yes, and please see that the parrot comes in to the parlour. It is by far too cold to leave him in the stables." She threw an indignant look at the gentleman, as if the stables was his suggestion. He shrugged resignedly.

"Hello, hello," said the parrot. "Hello, dinner."

As the heads of several ostlers, an idling tapster, and a passing sailor all turned towards the bird, the landlord swallowed his instinctive protest. "Hungry is 'e?" he asked. "What's 'e like to eat?"

The young lady grinned at the gentleman. "When he says 'dinner' it doesn't necessarily mean he's thinking of food," she said, walking into the inn beside the landlord as she explained. "I expect he is hungry though."

"Messy eaters, parrots," said the landlord judiciously. "I seen 'em afore. Might be better if your man feeds 'im in the taproom, afore 'e takes 'im up."

"That will do very well," agreed the young lady with a sunny smile.

As expected, the news that there was a talking parrot in the taproom of the Star and Garter spread like wildfire. The crowd that gathered to hear Gayo swear at them in English and Spanish drank more ale in an hour than the regulars drank in a week. What was more, lots of them stayed on when Rowson took him upstairs, and in the morning a new crowd waited in hopes of his reappearance. Many of the latter were lucky enough also to catch a glimpse of the African abigail.

"I feel as if I'm in charge of a travelling circus!" Andrew muttered to Rowson as he mounted his hired hack.

Teresa, who had been impressed by the amenities of the coaching inn, was silenced by the bustling streets of Portsmouth when she saw them in daylight. She understood at last why Andrew had referred to

Cartago as a mere village. The coach, in itself a wonder to one used to ox-carts, rolled smoothly along on the paved surface, past row after row of neat brick buildings. There were people everywhere, on horseback, in carriages, walking or running, dressed in finery or rags, talking, shouting, singing, enjoying the rare sunny day.

Since Lady Parr did not admonish Teresa for gaping, she guessed that she had succeeded in schooling her expression to hide her awe.

They reached the end of the town and continued along the open highway. Nothing could have been more different from the jungle trail to Limón. The road was wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other; in fact their chaise frequently overtook slow wagons, and was overtaken by a mail coach and a curricule or two.

Teresa was fascinated by the countryside. The rolling hills were patchworked with other fields, already harvested, and pasture of a brilliant green hue quite unlike that of the tropical forests. Autumn was already tinting the woodlands with russet and gold. In the hedgerows, crimson haws and scarlet hips vied with silky white tangles of old man's beard. Hump-backed stone bridges crossed gentle, gurgling streams that sparkled in the sun, so very different from the rushing mountain torrents and slow, smooth lowland rivers of Costa Rica.

She mentioned this to Andrew when he rode alongside.

"No caimans," he assured her with a grin.

Every few miles they passed through villages where thatched cottages clustered round a stone church. The cottage gardens blazed with tall pink hollyhocks, honey-scented alyssum and blue-mauve Michaelmas daisies. To Teresa, everything looked peaceful and prosperous, and somehow smugly self-satisfied.

"Is it not delightful to be back in England, Mama?" sighed Muriel. "How I have missed it! I shall never go away again."

They stopped in the small town of Petersfield to change horses and drink tea in one of the many coaching inns. The main street was lined with modern houses of red brick, with regular facades of rectangular windows, giving an impression of restrained elegance.

Teresa fetched Gayo from the servants' coach and carried him into the inn's coffee room. It was warm, with a roaring fire in the wide hearth. Gayo was on his best behaviour. Even when the inevitable crowd gathered he confined his swearing to Spanish, incomprehensible to all but one old Peninsula soldier who sat in a corner cackling.

Annie had her own group of admirers. In Portsmouth, where black sailors were not uncommon, a black abigail was a momentary wonder. In rural Petersfield she was a sensation. It was all Rowson could do to stop the yokels feeling her fuzzy hair to see if it was real.

"Travelling circus it is, sir," he said to Andrew as they set off again.

Marco chose to join the ladies in the carriage for a stage. He found riding with an English saddle prodigious tiring. By the time they stopped in Godalming for lunch, his thighs (one of the unmentionable parts of the body) had stiffened so that he staggered into the King's Arms and collapsed into a chair with a groan.

The King's Arms gained as much custom from their presence as had the last two inns. In fact, the innkeeper confided that Gayo and Annie drew a bigger crowd between them than had turned out when Tsar Alexander stopped at his hostelry a few months since.

The triumphal procession continued through Guildford without stopping, and paused for tea and a change of horses in Esher, to the delight of yet another landlord. They crossed sinister Wimbledon Common in the twilight without Teresa having to draw her pistols against a highwayman, then rumbled across the wooden bridge at Putney.

It was dark when they drove through Fulham and Chelsea and Kensington, but Teresa could tell by the twinkling lights of a thousand villas that the open country was behind them. She could not repress a gasp as at last they entered the gas-lit streets of Mayfair.

Lady Parr nodded indulgently and patted her knee. "'Tis amazing bright, is it not?"

"Indeed, ma'am, I can scarce believe it is night. And the houses! There are so many houses, and so tall!"

"London is a monstrous fine city," said Muriel with a happy smile. "Kingston and Spanish Town are

nothing to it, I vow. I am prodigious glad to be back."

A few minutes later the carriage came to a halt and Andrew appeared at the door. "Here we are in Hill Street," he announced, opening it. "The house is all lit up, my lady. I believe your brother is at home. We shall leave you here and go on to Stafford House. May I have your permission to call tomorrow morning to see how you go on?"

One of the postilions had run up the steps and banged on the door, which opened to reveal a glimpse of the elegant interior. A pair of footmen came down and, directed by Kinsey, began unloading the Parrs' luggage from the other coach. Lady Parr and Muriel both kissed Teresa's cheek before descending to the pavement.

"I am grown excessively fond of you, child, I declare," said her ladyship in a surprised voice, then sailed up the steps and into the house.

"You will visit us, will you not?" asked Muriel wistfully, and disappeared in her mother's wake.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew and Marco joined Teresa in the chaise and they set off again. "Not far now," said Andrew reassuringly. "Stafford House is on Park Lane. I hope the duke and duchess are in residence."

"Where else would they be?" asked Marco, surprised. "Is that not their home?"

"I had not thought," said Teresa, "but I recall that Papa spent most of his childhood in the country. I expect the duke has a country house as well?"

"Several."

Teresa was silent, trying to imagine what it would be like to have more than one home. Her father's family clearly lived on a lavish scale she found hard to believe. How could she ever make a place for herself in such a world? She was not merely a yokel, but a barbarian. She reached for Marco's hand.

All too soon the carriage pulled up. Rowson appeared, opened the door and let down the step.

Andrew jumped out and turned to offer Teresa his hand. "Be brave," he whispered.

Wide stone steps between elaborate wrought iron railings led up to a pedimented front door; above, a row of pilasters added to the air of impressive elegance. Teresa looked up, counting rows of windows, but the top of the facade was lost in darkness.

Marco stepped down beside her. "Ionic columns," he said matter-of-factly, pointing to the pilasters. "I've seen them in pictures of the old Greek temples. Narrower and more elaborate than Doric, but less ornate than Corinthian."

Teresa laughed. If her little brother accepted this enormous mansion with such nonchalance, she could do no less. "Very decorative," she said, and went up the steps.

Rowson had already knocked and the door was swinging open. A wrinkled old man in green livery with crimson piping bowed to Teresa. "What can I do for you, madam?" he enquired in a reedy voice.

"The hall porter," Andrew hissed in Teresa's ear as he stepped forward. "His Grace's niece and nephew, Miss Danville and Mr Marco Danville, to see his Grace," he announced.

The porter looked flustered. He beckoned to a liveried footman who stood motionless against the wall, and whispered to him. The footman departed in haste.

A few moments later a portly butler in black appeared. He was completely bald, and as he advanced with stately tread across the hall, the light of several dozen wax candles reflected from his shiny pate. "Miss Danville?" His voice managed to be at once imperious and suspicious. "His Grace is not at home. I believe his Grace is not expecting you?"

"No, he does not even know of our existence," said Teresa candidly. "We could not advise him of our arrival since we only reached England yesterday."

"Indeed, miss." The butler's nostrils quivered in an inaudible sniff. "I am given to hunderstand that you claim to be his Grace's niece."

Teresa's chin rose. A light rain was beginning to fall and she had no intention of standing on the doorstep getting wet while this haughty man interrogated her. He was, she reminded herself, no more than a servant. "I am the duke's niece, Lord Edward Danville's daughter. We shall wait until he or my aunt returns."

As she spoke she advanced into the hall, followed by Marco, Andrew, Annie and Rowson. In the face of this concerted front, the butler stepped back. Then he saw the parrot on Rowson's shoulder. His spine stiffened. "The bird can wait in the stables," he said coldly, and beckoned the footman, whose eyes were

popping in his still otherwise expressionless face. "James, take the bird round to the mews."

James's jaw dropped and he stepped forward with every indication of alarm. "Me, Mr Boggs?" he faltered.

"*¡Hijo de puta!*" said Gayo indignantly. "Misbegotten sea scum!" With a squawk, he flew to Teresa's shoulder.

She noticed that Andrew's shoulders were shaking and glared at him. "The parrot will stay with me," she told the butler, with all the hauteur of an aristocrat born and bred. "It is far too cold for him outside in this abominable climate. Where do you wish us to await my uncle?"

Mr Boggs, routed, looked around the hall as if he wondered if he dared keep them standing there indefinitely.

For the first time Teresa noticed her surroundings. The circular, domed entrance was floored with pink veined marble, and marble pillars flanked each doorway that opened onto it. At some point Rowson, with quiet efficiency, had carried in their bags and the pathetic, grubby little pile looked hideously out of place. Opposite the front door, a double stair with ornately carved banisters, gleaming from much polishing, curved up to a wide landing.

Marco, oblivious of the altercation behind him, was examining a glossy red vase on a stand in a niche between the staircases. "Samian ware," he announced.

Andrew joined him. "I believe that must be the original Greek pottery, not a Roman imitation," he proposed.

"If you will come this way, miss, gentlemen." Boggs interrupted the discussion of classical pottery. Leaving Annie and Rowson perched on the edge of a pair of straight chairs in the hall, the butler ushered Teresa, Marco and Andrew into a small, chilly, back parlour.

To Teresa's annoyance and Andrew's amusement, he stationed James outside the door. "For all the world as if we were burglars!" she fumed.

\* \* \* \*

By the time they had waited three quarters of an hour, Teresa's annoyance had grown to wrath and Andrew was no longer amused. They had not eaten since luncheon in Godalming, which now seemed part of another life. Not only was the room to which they were confined cold but its furniture was sparse and

uncomfortable.

"I believe this chair was designed to discourage sitting!" said Marco after twisting and turning for some minutes. He was still stiff from his introduction to the English saddle.

"I believe this room was designed to discourage importunate visitors," Andrew snorted. "I am going to send James to discover at what hour the duke is expected to return home." He started towards the door.

"I cannot think why we did not enquire before," agreed Teresa. "Do you think we might with propriety request a pot of coffee at least?"

Andrew grimaced. "I'm afraid not, as you are not yet resident here." He opened the door, conferred with the footman, and returned to announce, "The duke is dining with Lord Liverpool. He is not expected back before eleven, or later."

Teresa glanced at the clock on the mantel above the empty fireplace. It was half past eight.

Gayo, bored, flapped over to the window and began to climb the curtains, muttering imprecations.

"Perhaps we had best go to a posada for the night and return in the morning," suggested Teresa. "Only we already owe you, Sir Andrew, for the inn last night and the carriage, and I cannot pay you until I have seen Don Eduardo's banker."

"I can stand the nonsense, but I think you will do better to wait here, tiresome though it is. By the time we summon a hackney, find an hotel and settle you in it, the duke will have come home, and then the battle is to be fought again tomorrow."

"It was a battle royal, was it not?" She laughed. "I fear it is yet to be won. Surely my uncle cannot be half so formidable as his butler! Perhaps you are right and we ought to stay, but we must not keep you from your own fireside, not to mention your dinner."

An expression of yearning crossed Andrew's face but he said staunchly, "I shall not desert you after these thousands of miles we have crossed together."

At that moment a loud, cheerful voice was heard outside and the door was flung open. A tall, broad-shouldered young man stood there grinning. His face was so much like Don Eduardo's that Teresa gasped as she rose to her feet.

"I'm John Danville," he announced. "That rascal

Boggs tells me you're my cousins. Damned—beg pardon, dashed—if I knew I had any I hadn't met, but welcome to London!"

"Thank you!" said Teresa, curtsying with a joyful smile. "I am Teresa Danville, and this is my brother Marco. How very like Papa you look, Lord Danville."

He strode forward to take both her hands in his and kiss her cheek. "Lord Danville's my elder brother, Tom," he corrected, shaking Marco's hand vigorously. "Starchy sort of fellow, make a good duke. I'm just Lord John; Cousin John to you, of course."

He looked enquiringly at Andrew, but before Teresa could introduce them Gayo took a hand, or claw, in the proceedings. "Hello, hello, hello," he cried, swooping down from the top of the curtains where he had been quietly shredding a fringe. He landed on Lord John's shoulder, flapped wildly till he found his balance, then leaned towards his lordship's ear and said in a confidential tone, "Son of a sea snake. Blimey!"

To Teresa's relief, though her big cousin looked startled he laughed. "Boggs did mutter something disgruntled about a bird," he said. "But he didn't tell me it talks!"

"Gayo appears to have fallen in love with you at first sight."

"Just like all the girls," he boasted, but with such a engaging twinkle in his eyes that it was impossible to be offended. He turned again to Andrew and held out his hand.

Andrew shook hands and introduced himself. "I had the honour of escorting Miss Danville and Marco from Costa Rica," he explained. "Now that they are safely in the hands of a relative, I shall be on my way."

"I was on my way to dine with friends," said Lord John, "but dashed if I don't stay home to improve my acquaintance with my pretty new cousin. Boggs! Boggs, I say! Ha, knew you were listening at the door. We'll have something to eat in the breakfast room in half an hour. Tell Jacques a cold collation will do, but make it substantial. You'll join us, Sir Andrew?"

The diplomat declined, standing firm against their urging. Teresa thought he looked somewhat miffed. She wished she could think that he was the least bit jealous to see her welcomed with such enthusiasm by a handsome young gentleman. But no, he was



affianced to Muriel.

Her cousin's lively volubility prevented any speech with Sir Andrew beyond the brief expression of her deepest gratitude and a promise to repay very soon the blunt he had laid out on their behalf. He departed with a curt nod of acknowledgment.

\* \* \* \*

A few minutes later, Teresa ventured to interrupt Lord John's amiable chatter to ask if it was possible to change her travel-stained gown before eating. The housekeeper was summoned and took her upstairs, scarcely blinking at the parrot that accompanied them.

"You'll be Lord Edward's daughter, miss?" asked Mrs Davies. "A prime favourite he was with the staff. I was still a housemaid when he went off so sudden. There's not many left as knew him. That Boggs, now, only been here ten years, he has."

Warned by the butler that Lord John had taken his alleged cousins under his wing and that they would likely stay the night, Mrs Davies had already ordered a suite prepared. Annie was in the dressing room, unpacking Teresa's minimal wardrobe, while a pair of maids bustled about making up the bed, lighting a fire, fetching hot water.

"This was Lady Pamela's chamber before she married," said the housekeeper.

"It looks very comfortable," said Teresa, trying not to appear impressed by the primrose silk-hung bed, the matching Hepplewhite chairs, the patterned Axminster carpet. The dressing room had two huge armoires with mirrored doors, a dressing table with another mirror, a chest of drawers and a marble-topped washstand. It could be used as a private sitting room also as there were a chaise longue and two comfortable looking armchairs by the fireplace.

"I had best leave Gayo here," she went on hesitantly. "Annie will stay with him until he is settled."

Mrs Davis, who still had a fondness for the dashing Lord Edward, willingly agreed to send up a tray for the abigail and a selection of fruit and nuts for the parrot. Teresa thought she was enjoying herself hugely, and soon found out why.

"My cousin's always boasting about her mistress's black pageboy," she confided in a whisper as she left. "Just wait till I tell her we've a black abigail in the

house, and a parrot to boot!"

Teresa washed and changed quickly, and hurried down to the entrance hall. The footman, James, directed her to the breakfast room and she went in to find her brother and her cousin already seated with Boggs about to serve them an informal supper.

"Thought you wouldn't mind if we didn't stand on ceremony," said Lord John jovially. "All family, after all, and young Marco and I are deuced sharp-set."

"If by that you mean that you are excessively hungry, then I must forgive you for so am I," Teresa said with a smile, taking the chair the butler held for her. Without a second thought she ignored Lady Parr's instructions about delicate appetites and did justice to every one of the duke's French chef's delectable concoctions.

At last even Lord John, a notable trencherman, was satisfied. He pushed his chair back from the table and called for port. Teresa knew that ladies always retired before the gentlemen started on the port, but he persuaded her to stay and take a glass of canary.

"We're all family," he repeated, "and I rely on you, cousin, to tell me about my uncle Edward and your home and your journey, for young Marco's a silent sort of fellow. Told me just enough to whet my appetite."

Marco grinned at his teasing tone, unoffended. He was quite accustomed to such treatment from his brothers, so it made him feel at home. He told his sister later that their cousin was a great gun and had promised to show him around London.

Boggs provided port, canary wine, and bowls of nuts and dried fruit, then took himself off. They sat round the table, sipping the wine and nibbling at raisins and apricots and figs, while Teresa described the Hacienda del Inglés and began the tale of their journey to England.

Lord John was commenting that the jaguar must have been a deuced flat to miss snapping up a tasty morsel like his cousin, when they heard the sound of new arrivals in the hall. "That'll be m'father," he said, jumping up. "Come on, I'll make you known to him. I'd wager a monkey he'll be pleased as Punch. Good sort of chap, m'father."

Despite these encouraging words, Teresa and Marco followed him with some trepidation. They reached the hall just as Boggs took hat, gloves and

cane from the duke and passed them to James, and Mrs Davies helped the short, plump duchess out of her damp pelisse. Both the upper servants were talking at once.

Though Teresa could not distinguish their words she was sure that the butler was telling his master that they were impostors and the housekeeper her mistress that they were not.

Lord John broke into the chatter. "Here's m'cousins come all the way from the Americas, sir," he announced. "Mama, let me present Cousin Teresa, and this is young Marco."

Teresa sank in a ducal curtsy and Marco performed his best bow.

"You've both a look of Edward!" said the duke, and swept them both into his jovial embrace. "I trust you have come to stay for a good long visit?"

"Stafford, you cannot mean it!" wailed the duchess. "I feel quite faint. Davies, my smelling salts!"

## Chapter 9

Teresa lay in bed the next morning, simply enjoying the knowledge that for the first time in months she was not travelling. She had wondered for a time, last night, whether she and Marco were to be allowed to stay. The duchess had collapsed onto the nearest chair, moaning weakly about fraud and deception until her dresser hurried in with a glass of hartshorn and supported her faltering steps up the stairs.

Neither her husband nor her son had taken much notice of this performance.

"There, there," the duke had said soothingly, then turned to ask eagerly for news of his brother.

"M'mother's given to the vapours," Lord John had explained. "No use letting it cast you into the dimals."

Teresa had gathered that her genial uncle was not influenced by his wife's distempers. She and Marco could stay, for the rest of their lives if they chose.

Whether her Grace would agree to sponsor her in Society was another matter. Don Eduardo wanted her to join the Haut Ton, not merely to live as a poor relation in his brother's house. She would follow Lady Parr's directions with the greatest precision, she vowed, and prove to her aunt that she was worthy.

The china clock on the mantelpiece, with its

idealised shepherd and shepherdess, showed a little after eight. Lady Parr had said that a lady never appeared below stairs before ten in the morning. Teresa was wide awake and she wondered how to fill her time until she could go in search of breakfast. Her room was warm—a maid must have slipped in earlier to light the fire without waking her—so she got up and went bare-footed in her cotton nightgown into the dressing room.

"¡Buenos días!" Gayo greeted her. He was perched on the bare towel-horse, to which Annie had leashed him. Excited, he flew to meet Teresa and the wooden towel-horse went over with a crash. "Blimey, what a pity," he mourned as his flight came to an abrupt halt.

"*Estúpido*," she said as she unhooked the tether and smoothed his ruffled plumage. "You know you cannot fly when you are tied."

Annie slipped into the room, bearing a tray. "I brought your chocolate, miss. What was that great crash?" She saw the towel-horse. "Oh, Gayo, you naughty creature!"

"It made an excellent perch, but he had best be tied to something else in future. It is such a help to me that he likes you, Annie, and equally important, that you like him. Tell me, how are the other servants treating you?"

"Fine, miss, though some of them do stare. Mrs Davies and Mr Boggs keep them polite. Did you know an abigail sits above all the other maids? Only her Grace's dresser, Miss Howell, is higher than me, except Mrs Davies, of course. Oh miss, I'm so glad you didn't leave me on that island!"

"So am I," Teresa assured her. In a house full of strangers, the girl was more an old friend than a servant though they had met little more than a month ago.

Teresa went down to the breakfast room at ten. Marco and the duke were there. Lord John, as his father informed her, had gone out last night and would doubtless not be seen before noon. The duchess invariably breakfasted in her room.

The butler poured Teresa a cup of coffee and she chose two rashers of bacon and a toasted muffin from the long list of dishes he offered her. His manner was austere and she thought he had not entirely given up his suspicion of their credentials. The duke seemed to

have not the least doubt that Teresa and Marco were his brother's children, but Teresa was glad to have Don Eduardo's letter to give him. He set aside his newspaper and read it, guffawing now and then.

"Always could make me laugh, the scapegrace," he said. "It sounds as if he's done very well for himself, after all. So it's a tutor you want, Marco. Shouldn't be any problem there. And a London Season for you, missy. That's for your aunt to see to."

Teresa sipped her coffee, suddenly losing her appetite as she reflected on her aunt's reaction to their arrival.

The coffee was good, but not in any way comparable with what she was used to at home. She remembered her father's commission. If she failed at being a lady, at least she would take him back a good coffee contract, she vowed.

\* \* \* \*

"Her Grace requests Miss Danville's presence in her dressing room directly after breakfast," Boggs told her as she left the room a short while later. Judging by the commiserating tone of his voice, Lord Edward's letter had at last convinced him of her authenticity.

She hurried upstairs, going as fast as possible without actually running, which was forbidden by Lady Parr. In her own dressing room she anxiously studied her image in the looking glass while Annie assured her that her hair was neatness itself, her morning dress spotless, her entire appearance unexceptionable.

Teresa suppressed the thought that her maid knew as little as she did, and proceeded at a decorous pace to the duchess's dressing room. Even her encounter with the jaguar had not been near so frightening as the prospect of meeting her aunt.

A liveried footman stood in the hallway, waiting to run any errands for her Grace. When she stopped to ascertain that she had come to the right place, he scratched on the door for her. The dresser, Howell, admitted her. A tall, angular woman with a frosty grey eye, her intimidating expression clearly showed that she had no good opinion of poor, foreign relations come to batten on her mistress.

Teresa, after her contretemps with the butler the night before, had no intention of letting herself be intimidated by a servant, however toplofty. She might

be unused to the luxury of Stafford House but she was no peasant girl. She had dealt with servants all her life.

She looked squarely and coldly into the woman's eyes and said, "My aunt asked for me. Kindly tell her I am here."

Howell pursed her thin lips but dropped her eyes and curtsied. "Yes, miss. Please come this way. Her Grace is expecting you."

Heartened by this minor victory, Teresa followed her into a pink bedchamber. The bed and window draperies were pink silk, the counterpane was pink, the carpet was beige with pink roses, the chairs covered with pink satin, the walls papered with more roses. On the hearth a huge fire blazed, and the room was suffocatingly hot. Teresa repressed a nervous giggle at the notion that she had been swallowed alive.

The duchess, dressed in a pink wrap that matched her face very neatly, lay back against a pile of pillows. Since the pillow slips were also pink, she might have vanished entirely were it not for her white lace nightcap.

Teresa curtsied her ducal curtsy. "Good morning..." Aunt? Ma'am? Your Grace? she wondered desperately. Lady Parr's words floated through her mind: It is always better to be too formal than too familiar. "Good morning, your Grace."

"Come here, miss," commanded the duchess in a fading voice belied by her bright eyes and pink cheeks.

Approaching the bed, Teresa curtsied again, not quite so low this time. The bright eyes looked her up and down, then closed, with an air of acute suffering. "Where did you come by that gown? Howell, my vinaigrette!"

Teresa was wearing the green-sprigged muslin. Admittedly it was somewhat shabby after having been worn constantly on the journey, but it was positively modish compared to the clothes she used to wear at home. "It was given to me by a young lady I met on the voyage, ma'am."

"Cast-offs! I believe I shall have a Spasm. A Danville in cast-offs!" She waved away the glass of hartshorn quickly presented by Howell and sat up straighter, adjusting her cap. "I suppose you are a Danville, miss?"

"My uncle is satisfied," said Teresa with some

indignation. She was growing tired of having her identity doubted. "This morning he read the letter my father wrote him."

"Then you must have some new gowns, Miss Danville. Even a poor relation cannot be seen about the house in rags."

"Papa wishes me to have a Season, ma'am, and I believe my uncle concurs."

"A Season! This is aiming high indeed! You are shockingly brown, Miss Danville, and I daresay it is your natural complexion so that crushed strawberries cannot be expected to help. You are past your first youth, and I have not heard that you have a portion worth mentioning. Besides, you were brought up in the jungle and cannot possibly know how to go on in society. As the Duchess of Stafford I have standards to uphold. Your inevitable failure would be utterly mortifying."

"I do not expect to be presented as a debutante, ma'am. I do not expect to be acclaimed as an Incomparable, nor to make a brilliant match. I am twenty-three years old and have no dowry unless there is something left in Papa's bank account when Marco's and my expenses have been paid. But I have had lessons in correct behaviour from Lady Parr and I am very willing to accept any further instruction you think necessary. Don Eduardo—Lord Edward—says I am to have a Season. I am accustomed to obeying my father, ma'am."

"Hmm, I am glad to hear it, miss! And who is Lady Parr?"

"She is the widow of a baronet, who travelled with us from Jamaica."

"A baronet's relict. Shabby genteel, I make no doubt. I shall have to correct the half of what you have learned."

Teresa smiled, her dark eyes lighting. "Then you will sponsor me, ma'am?"

"Well, I do believe you are quite passably pretty when you smile! You may call me aunt. Howell, send for Miss Carter. This promises to be quite exhausting." Her Grace leaned back against her pillows and closed her eyes.

Teresa was about to tiptoe from the room, but Howell put her finger to her lips and indicated a chair so she sat down. The abigail hurried out.

Teresa studied her newly acknowledged aunt. The duchess did not look in the least as if she suffered from nervous debility. Her round face with its rosy cheeks was the picture of health. Recalling Lord John's words, she decided that her Grace, being of unimposing stature, used the threat of imminent collapse as a weapon to uphold her dignity. Her family had learned to ignore it, but that it intimidated strangers she herself could attest.

Howell returned. The duchess sat up with renewed vigour, swung her legs (limbs, Teresa reminded herself) out of bed and headed for the dressing room. "I shall dress," she announced. "The Little Season is beginning and we shall have a great deal to do to make Miss Danville—Teresa, is it not?—presentable. Is Stafford still in the house? Send to ask him if he will be so good as to spare me a moment. And while you are about it, send for the modiste, that Frenchwoman who is all the crack, I forget her name, and for Monsieur Henri."

"Monsieur Henri went back to France, your Grace."

"Back to France? We shall have to make do with his assistant then, that nasty little man from Birmingham. That hair must come off. Let me see your teeth, girl. Excellent, and your figure is acceptable under those frills, I believe. Now walk about while I dress so that I may see how you move."

Teresa walked with carefully mincing steps towards the window, a false smile pinned to her lips in the hope that it was making her look "passably pretty." For a nostalgic moment she wished she was back on board the *Destiny*, parading before Lady Parr, Muriel and Andrew.

Her aunt's voice brought her abruptly back to the present. "As I feared, shabby genteel. You look as if you were hobbled like a horse. Let me see how you move naturally."

Teresa strode towards her and nearly fell flat on her face as the narrow skirt tangled round her ankles. "I am hobbled, aunt," she said, laughing.

"Far too mannish." The duchess gazed at her speculatively. "But that laugh is superb. I'll tell you what, Teresa, if you stick with gentlemen who consider themselves amusing, you may yet do me credit. Now walk again, something between the fop and the Corinthian, if you please."



Teresa set off for the window again. No disparaging comments halting her, she reached it and looked out. On the other side of a wide, paved street, she saw lawns and trees. "Oh, you are quite in the country," she exclaimed. "I thought Stafford House was in the middle of London."

"That is Hyde Park. The Fashionable World drives or rides or walks there to see and be seen."

"How delightful! I quite long to go."

"You will not leave this house, Teresa, until you have decent clothes on your back! Now walk this way. You are improving already, I am glad to see."

At that moment the door opened and Miss Carter came in. An impoverished cousin who acted as the duchess's companion, she looked amazingly like her patroness: small and round with a pink face. She was placid and agreeable. Teresa thought her Grace might share her temperament as well as her looks if it were not for the necessity of preserving her rank.

"You wanted to see me, Aurelia?" enquired Miss Carter, looking rather like an inquisitive sparrow in her brown silk gown.

"Yes, Amelia. This is Stafford's niece, Teresa Danville. I am to bring her out and I shall need your assistance."

Teresa curtsied, a nicely calculated bob suitable for an older female of unquestioned gentility but no status. Then she wondered whether Lady Parr's carefully graded curtsies were as shabby genteel as some of her other notions were turning out to be. It was a relief not to have to walk as if her ankles were tied together, and a still greater relief not to have to avoid laughing. However, it was best, she decided, to comply with her ladyship's advice until she was told otherwise. It was certainly more appropriate than her natural, unaffected manners.

Before the duchess could reveal Miss Carter's role in the transformation, there was another knock and the duke put his head round the door.

"Come in, Stafford, do," invited his wife. "I gather you mean Teresa to have a Season, and I must know what you mean to do for her."

"Buy the gal whatever she needs, Aurelia. You will know best."

Teresa flushed with embarrassment. "My father said I am to use whatever money is in his account,

sir," she said. "He expected it to be enough for both Marco and me."

"Fustian, missy! If a man cannot buy a few dresses for a pretty niece, what can he spend his blunt on? Use Edward's account for your pin-money, by all means. I'm off to White's, Aurelia. I look to see Edward's girl dressed to the nines, mind."

\* \* \* \*

The "nasty little man from Birmingham" arrived shortly thereafter, delighted to be called to the ducal mansion. He was actually tall and lanky, and when he told Teresa that her hair was beautiful, she could not think him nasty. He did have the most peculiar accent, a combination of Midlands English with a patina of French acquired from his mentor, Monsieur Henri.

Teresa was seated before her Grace's dressing table and the coiffeur unpinned her hair, which Annie had braided and wound into a knot on top of her head. His nimble fingers unplaited it and brushed the dusky cloud. "Merveller," he said in his approximation of French, "and it'll take a curl, I'll be bound, once it's cut. Miss can use the height, though, so I won't take off too much. Just enough so's it's easy to put up and don't overweigh the face. Miss's face is tray delicah."

"Speak English, man!" snapped the duchess.

"Delicate features, your Grace. Don't want to hide 'em under a bushel, do we?" He started snipping away.

Teresa sat with her eyes shut. Her head grew lighter and lighter and the scissors clicked on. He had said he would not take off too much, she told herself.

"Vwahlah," said the hairdresser at last. "I mean, there we are. Now let's see what we can do with it."

Teresa opened her eyes and was relieved to see that there was still plenty left. "Should not my abigail be here?" she asked. "She will need to know how to dress it."

"Howell, send for Miss Teresa's abigail," the duchess ordered.

A few minutes later Annie trotted in. Howell had seen her in the servants' hall and told the duchess, but Miss Carter was taken by surprise. "Ooh," she squealed, "an African!"

"Do try not to be such a ninnyhammer, Amelia," scolded her cousin. "Remember Teresa comes from the Americas, where everyone has black servants."

Teresa did not think it was the moment to explain that there were practically no blacks in Costa Rica and that she had rescued Annie from a sinking slave ship. She had a lowering feeling that the duchess would not approve of that particular exploit.

By the time the man from Birmingham had demonstrated several possible styles, her head was aching and she almost wished he had cut all her hair off. He departed, promising to return in person to dress it before her first ball. She was too exhausted to feel the slightest spark of enthusiasm at the prospect of that great event.

Miss Carter took one look at her drawn face and said, "Aurelia, Miss Teresa needs a cup of tea. I do believe she has the headache, poor child."

"A little," acknowledged Teresa, "but I shall do very well if I lie down for half an hour."

"Howell, tea in my sitting room and something to eat. Something light, for the dressmaker will be here shortly."

Teresa groaned internally at the thought of spending the afternoon being measured and draped and pinned. However, after lying for a few minutes on the sofa in the duchess's sitting room, she consumed several cups of tea and a couple of Jacques's divine chicken vol-au-vents and found her usual energy restored.

\* \* \* \*

Madame Roquier, who had no intention of going back to France while business in London was so good, arrived with an assistant bearing pattern books. They were followed by three of the duke's footmen laden with bolts of cloth. She took one look at Teresa and began picking out all the rolls of white and pastel fabrics.

"Zese you may take back down to *mon équipage*," she said, to Teresa's astonishment. Those were just the colours that, according to Lady Parr, should be worn by an unmarried girl. The modiste turned to the duchess and explained, "Your Grace, I know nozzing of zis young lady I am to dress, so I bring everysing. White she cannot wear. It makes to look sallow zis golden skin. And zese ruffles—pah! Miss must wear ze jewel tones, vibrant, alive. *Regardez-moi ça.*" She seized a length of amethyst silk and draped it around Teresa's shoulders.

There was a murmur of approval.

"I cannot see!" wailed Teresa.

"Put those down," the duchess directed the two footmen who still stood holding the rest of the fabrics, "and fetch the cheval glass from the dressing room."

Teresa looked at her reflection and gasped. Her face was no longer "shockingly brown," but warm amber. The rich sheen of the silk made her complexion glow, and her dark eyes shone with excitement. She turned to her aunt and smiled.

"Not passably pretty," said the duchess. "Not an Incomparable, perhaps, but do you know, my dear Teresa, I'd wager we shall do very well!"

## Chapter 10

Madame Roquier did not mean to risk losing such a lucrative and influential customer as the Duchess of Stafford. Early the very next afternoon her young assistant delivered two gowns. She carried them up to Miss Danville's dressing room so that she could make any necessary adjustments.

"*Buenos días*," said Gayo. The girl screeched and dropped the pile of boxes. "What a pity," he said sadly.

From one of the boxes spilled a promenade dress of bronze gros de Naples, with a cashemire shawl patterned in bronze and cream and a huge muff of cream-coloured fur. Teresa admired it briefly, but she was captivated by the walking dress. It was sapphire blue, a figured silk patterned with tiny rosettes of darker blue. The neckline was trimmed with cream Brussels lace; otherwise the bodice was very plain. The skirt fell straight from the high waist, ornamented just above the hem by a wide band of the same lace, which also finished the long sleeves.

Annie helped Teresa out of Muriel's old morning gown, for the last time, she hoped. Madame Roquier's assistant helped her into the new walking dress, then stood back and clasped her hands.

"Well I never!" she marvelled.

"Oh, Miss Teresa, you look quite beautiful," cried Annie. "I see now that Miss Muriel's gowns were all wrong for you." She darted forward and fiddled with Teresa's hair for a moment. "Now look at yourself in the mirrors."

Teresa raised her eyes and stared. Why, she looked

positively elegant! The simple bodice, high waist, and long straight lines of the skirt flattered her figure. Annie had put up her hair on top, as usual, to add to her height, but now a few ringlets softened the effect.

Surely if Andrew saw her now, he would find something better to say than that she looked "every inch a lady!"

As the dressmaker unwrapped a dark blue pelerine the duchess bustled in, with Miss Carter in tow. Teresa turned before her, hope and anxiety warring in her breast.

"You look very well, child. Now that you are decently clad, Amelia shall take you shopping."

"That will be delightful, aunt. I do thank you, Miss Carter. Only there are one or two people I ought to call on first."

"Nonsense. Before you pay any calls you must have gloves and stockings and slippers and boots, and reticules and handkerchiefs and, oh, a hundred other odds and ends. Not to mention hats and bonnets!"

Teresa would gladly have forgone such fripperies. All she wanted was to see Andrew's expression when she appeared in her new finery. But doubtless he would agree that the finery was incomplete without gloves and a bonnet. She sighed. "Very well, aunt. I have not tried on the promenade dress yet. If it fits as well as this, I shall wear it, if Miss Carter will not mind waiting a few minutes?"

Miss Carter, beaming, pronounced herself perfectly satisfied, so it was half an hour later that the two ladies, accompanied by Annie, set out for the milliner's in the duchess's barouche.

\* \* \* \*

Every day for a week, boxes arrived from Madame Roquier's workshops, until both Teresa's wardrobes were full. Every day Miss Carter took her shopping, until not another embroidered handkerchief could be stuffed into the chest of drawers and Annie begged her not to buy any more hats.

Every day, the duchess took her visiting. She met her uncle Frederick, a very large and finicky bachelor who was one of the Lords of the Admiralty. She met a variety of second and third cousins, and more distant connexions. Bearing Lady Parr's instructions in mind, she managed to behave with perfect propriety. Then the day came when her Grace declared her ready to

meet some of those hostesses upon whose invitations her social success must depend.

That evening, the duke and duchess were dining out. Lord John, for the first time all week, was not. He had not seen his cousin since the fashionmongers of London had transformed her. His eyes widened as she entered the drawing room wearing an evening gown of emerald satin.

"Cousin Teresa?" he said, incredulous. He advanced across the room and lifted her hand to his lips. "My compliments, cousin. You are ravishing."

She blushed a little, smiling. She had learned a great deal from Miss Carter and now, studying his dress, she recognised his style as Corinthian. His dark green coat and fawn pantaloons fitted superbly over his muscular form, but not so tightly that those muscles were unusable. His waistcoat was of green and gold brocade, his shirtpoints of moderate height, his cravat neat yet not so elaborate that it must have taken hours to tie. He looked like a gentleman fond of sport, and she was ready to wager he spent a good many afternoons at fisticuffs in Gentleman Jackson's Saloon or shooting at Manton's Gallery.

She had to admit that he was handsomer than Andrew. On the other hand, his way of life was much less to be admired. Miss Carter had whispered that many Corinthians, after those unexceptionable afternoons, indulged in other sports less acceptable, such as Boxing the Watch and Consorting with Fallen Females.

Dismissing Andrew from her mind, Teresa concentrated with sparkling eyes on Lord John's extravagant compliments.

Marco came into the room. "Teresa, I must talk to you!" he said urgently. "You are always out, or at least I can never find you alone."

"Speak, halfling," said Lord John. "I shall take myself into a far corner and close my ears."

"Oh, I don't mind you hearing...though maybe Teresa would. It is all these curst females, and perhaps it is best if my uncle does not know."

"What is it, Marco? Are you not happy with your tutor? You have had him only three days."

"No, no, I like Mr Netherdale very well. It's something I read in the newspaper. Oh, bother!"

This last exclamation was riven from him by the

arrival of Miss Carter, closely followed by Boggs with the announcement that dinner was served. Teresa was on tenterhooks throughout the meal. She could not imagine what her brother could have read in the paper that was so important, and that her aunt and uncle were not to know.

In spite of her preoccupation, she conversed politely with Miss Carter and exchanged witty repartee with Lord John. He asked after Gayo, to whom he had taken a great liking, and promised to visit the parrot soon.

He was near her own age and she found him easy to talk to, charming even, though she doubted his sense of propriety. It was unlikely that a gentleman ought to tell a young, unmarried lady, even his cousin, that the children of Jane Harley, Countess of Oxford, were known as the Harleian Miscellany because of their variety of fathers!

It rather spoiled the story that she had never heard of the Harleian Manuscripts. Lord John explained with his usual affability that these were a valuable collection made by an earlier Earl, later bought by the government for the British Museum. Since this was the only part of the conversation overheard by Miss Carter, she concluded that their discussion was decorous, if excessively learned.

"Will you ride with me in the park tomorrow, Teresa?" Lord John asked some time later. "I should like to show off my beautiful cousin to my friends."

"I have no riding habit," said Teresa, her voice filled with disappointment and longing. It seemed forever since she had ridden, whereas at home she spent as much time on horseback as off it.

"You do ride, don't you? Order a habit and we shall go when it arrives."

"Uncle Stafford has already bought me so many clothes! I cannot ask for more. And Annie will be quite overset if she has to find room in the wardrobe."

He laughed. "I shall ask for you. I daresay m'mother never thought to suggest it, for she does not ride. And we'll find you a mount in the stables, never fear. Half of them just stand around eating their heads off. One for you too, sprout," he added to Marco, noting his hopeful face.

At last dinner ended. Teresa and Miss Carter retired to the drawing room, whither both gentlemen

soon followed them. Marco had not yet developed a taste for port, and Lord John preferred carousing with his bosom bows to drinking sedately in his parents' dining room.

In no time Miss Carter, as was her custom, was nodding off in her chair by the fire.

"What did you read in the newspaper?" demanded Teresa. "No, wait a minute. Whisper, so that I can tell if I want our cousin to know."

"It was about Harrison, the captain of the *Snipe*," whispered Marco.

"Harrison! I am glad you did not blurt it out before the duke and duchess, for I do not in the least want them to learn that story. I daresay it will not hurt for Cousin John to know, if he promises not to breathe a word to a soul."

"Cross my heart and hope to die," said Lord John, "or if you prefer it, upon my word as a gentleman. I am like to die of curiosity."

"It was in the *Times*. He has been arraigned, and a date set for the trial."

"Whoa! You go too fast, young Marco. Who is Harrison and what is our interest in his misdeeds?"

Teresa and Marco told the tale of the hunting of the *Snipe*, how the slavers had scuttled her with all the slaves aboard, and how they had been saved. Teresa was inclined to belittle her part in the affair, but her brother insisted on the rescue having been her idea in the first place.

"And you who did a great deal of the rescuing too. And you helped the ship's doctor treat them, too, Teresa."

"The devil you did!"

"I was very proud of you, and so was Sir Andrew."

"Who is this Sir Andrew you keep mentioning?" John asked.

Teresa felt herself blushing and was furious. "You met him," she reminded, "when we arrived here."

"Oh, that fella," said his lordship dismissively. "So what is it has you in the boughs, halfling? Not just the notice of Harrison's trial, I'll wager."

It was Marco's turn to redden. "I daresay it is nothing of importance. The paper said he accused a gentleman of high rank of financing his voyage."

"They did not mention his name?" asked Teresa.

"Hah, afraid of a suit for libel," explained Lord



John. "Anything else?"

"He uttered fearsome threats against those who incriminated him."

"Well, I do not like it, but we did hear him before, remember."

"I do wish you will stop interrupting, Teresa! I thought you ought to know that the prosecutor will be calling the passengers as witnesses because the *Destiny* and its crew have already sailed."

"Heavens!" Teresa paled. "The whole story will be published to the world. I dare not think what the duchess will say."

"Half the world will call you a heroine," said Lord John, frowning. "Unfortunately, the half that matters is more like to damn you as a scapegrace hoyden."

"I'll tell you what I think," offered Marco. "You should go and consult Sir Andrew. He will know what's best to do."

Teresa was so pleased with this advice that she flung her arms round her brother and kissed him, much to his embarrassment.

Later, snuggling into the cosy warmth of her feather bed, she was overcome with guilt. It was ten days since her arrival in London and she had called on neither Lady Parr and Muriel nor Sir Andrew. To all of them she owed her gratitude and to the latter money as well. She hoped they did not think her so puffed up with pride in her aristocratic relations that they were beneath her touch.

\* \* \* \*

The next day she begged the duchess to postpone their visits to the hostesses of the Ton. Her Grace was not best pleased to hear that her niece intended to call upon Lady Parr, that shabby-genteel relict of a baronet. However, Teresa managed to persuade her that it would be the height of incivility to fail to acknowledge the lady who had chaperoned her across the Atlantic.

"Very well," sighed her aunt. "But you must not expect me to go with you, and pray do not invite them to Stafford House. Stafford abhors mushrooms."

Teresa was too pleased that the duchess was not to go with her to wonder what her uncle's taste in vegetables had to do with the matter. Somehow she had not mentioned that she intended also to call on Sir Andrew Graylin. If her Grace disapproved of Lady

Parr, the young diplomat, who worked for his living, might well be considered quite beyond the pale.

She knew better than to go alone. She and Annie set out at eleven in the morning, the proper hour for paying visits, in the landaulet the duke had put at her disposal.

Teresa had dressed with unusual care. She had no desire to offend Lady Parr, however shabby-genteel, nor to outshine Muriel. On the other hand, she wanted to stun Andrew. She wore an amethyst walking dress, cut with the exquisite simplicity that did so much for her shape. Her kid gloves and half-boots were of the same shade, her pelisse of darker violet cloth and her bonnet trimmed with a jaunty bunch of violets. She felt every inch a lady of fashion as the carriage rattled down Park Lane.

But if Andrew merely told her again that she looked every inch a lady, she would succumb to the vapours, she vowed. Then she was ashamed of herself. He was affianced to Muriel, her friend, and though she hoped he was her friend too she had no business caring what he thought of her appearance.

The groom drew up the horses outside the Parrs' house in Hill Street. Teresa told him she would send a message if she decided to stay more than half an hour, and she and Annie trod up the steps.

The brass knocker summoned an elderly butler, who said he would see if her ladyship was at home, and then creaked away up the stairs. Teresa gazed curiously around the entrance hall. She remembered her brief glimpse of it from the carriage on her arrival in London. It had impressed her as palatial then; now, used to the magnificence of Stafford House, she found it unremarkable.

The duchess's comment about mushrooms returned to her, and she remembered what Miss Carter had said on the subject. Miss Carter's information was imparted in a stream of gentle chatter that seemed to go in one ear and out the other, but much of it stuck, to reappear unexpectedly at the right moment. "Mushrooms," she had explained, "pop up overnight in fields though there was no sign of them the day before. In society a mushroom, though without known family background, pops up among people of the highest rank."

At the thought of Lady Parr's expression could she

know that the duchess considered her a mushroom, Teresa laughed aloud.

Andrew, running down the stairs to greet her, heard the enchanting laugh he knew so well at the very moment that he caught sight of a modish young lady he scarcely recognised. "Teresa! Miss Danville!" Words failed him.

She read wonder in his face and was satisfied. She held out both hands to him. He took them and pressed a kiss on each, warm enough to be felt through the thin kid, then flushed and released them.

"Andrew, what a happy chance to meet you here." Her own colour was heightened but she smiled with careful composure, wondering how his kiss would feel on her cheek, on her lips. "I was going to call on you next."

"Then thank heaven I am here!" He blanched at this candid avowal. "A young lady never visits a gentleman's lodging."

"I have brought Annie. I know better than to go about alone."

"In this case a maid is insufficient," he said sternly. "No escort less than the duke or duchess could make such a visit respectable. Promise me that you will not call on me."

Teresa was flushed with annoyance now. Nearly two weeks without seeing him, an altogether gratifying greeting, and here they were already come to cuffs.

"I beg your pardon." His smile was rueful. "We agreed long ago that I had no right to guide your conduct, and now you are under the duke's protection I am sure I have no need."

"I did not tell anyone I meant to visit you," she confessed, disarmed. "I had a notion it might be frowned on, though I did not guess it was unforgivable."

"Nothing you do could be unforgivable, Teresa. I am amazed at how quickly you are learning the rules of society, but they are many and your mentors cannot be expected to foresee every eventuality. For your own sake, I hope you will consult the duchess when in doubt. I should not care to see you in the briars."

"How can I resist such an appeal? I shall not call on you, I promise, unless I can persuade my uncle to bring me. I suppose my cousin John is not an eligible escort in such a case?"

He frowned. "No," he said abruptly. "Shall we go up? Muriel and Lady Parr will be wondering what has become of you."

As they went up, Teresa asked him how much she and Marco owed him. "A round sum," she added. "I do not expect a detailed account."

"I can stand the nonsense," he growled. "I am sure you have better things to spend the ready on." He glanced at the stylish violet pelisse.

"Uncle Stafford has been more than generous. I have had no expenses so far. I am certain that Don Eduardo did not expect that you should frank us, sir, and I do not care to be beholden. Pray tell me the amount."

He muttered a figure.

"I shall bring it to your lodging as soon as I have seen Don Eduardo's banker."

"Teresa!" He caught the twinkle in her eye. "Oh, you are roasting me. Dashed if I hadn't forgot what a tease you are!" He ushered her into a small saloon decorated in the Egyptian style. "Ma'am, Muriel, here is Miss Danville."

Muriel rose from an uncomfortable-looking chair with lions' feet and started towards Teresa, her languid movements belied by her expression of eager welcome. Then she took in the apparition of fashionable splendour and her gliding steps faltered.

"Oh Muriel, you cannot be shy of me!" Teresa hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Fine feathers do not make fine birds, you know."

Despite her new elegance, she found she still envied her friend's blond prettiness. After all, that was what Andrew admired. Muriel was wearing a new morning gown of pink mull muslin. Teresa knew now that it would not have suited her in the least, yet it became Muriel's slender fairness very well. If perhaps some of Lady Parr's notions were shabby-genteel, her daughter was perfectly presentable. Teresa resolved not to give up the acquaintance only because her aunt was excessively high in the instep.

She turned to Lady Parr and curtsied a trifle lower than her ladyship's own rules provided for a baronet's widow. "I hope I see you well, ma'am?"

My lady was amazingly subdued by her ex-protégée's blossoming into a lady of fashion. In the conversation that followed, she only once quoted the

late Sir Archibald's opinion and that in a complimentary manner. When Teresa begged her to allow Muriel to drive with her in the park, she agreed with every sign of delight and sent her daughter off to fetch her spencer at once.

Teresa suddenly remembered that she had to consult Andrew about the trial of the slaver captain. She did not want to alarm the ladies, should they not have heard the news, though as they had stayed below during the entire incident they were not witnesses.

"There is something I must discuss with you privately," she told Andrew in a low, worried voice. "Will you call at Stafford House, as soon as may be?"

Puzzled but intrigued, he assented. "Tomorrow afternoon at three?" he asked.

"Thank you, that will do very well."

No sooner were the words uttered than she recalled the duchess's rejection of "mushrooms." Her aunt had not specifically named Andrew. Of course she had not known that her niece meant to call on him, and even invite him to call. Teresa looked at him, trying to judge whether he looked like a mushroom.

He too had purchased new clothes since returning to England. Though his dark coat and knit pantaloons had none of the flair of Lord John's apparel, he was dressed with the utmost propriety. She thought the riding clothes he had worn when they first met suited him better, but at least there was nothing in his present appearance to give the duchess a disgust of him. His father was a viscount, she remembered. Surely the invitation would not land her in a scrape!

## Chapter 11

Next morning, Andrew found himself in a quandary. The Foreign Secretary wanted to see him at half past three, and he was promised to Teresa for three o'clock.

According to his immediate superior, the great man wanted to thank him for the sterling service he had done in Central America. It was not the sort of meeting an ambitious young man could afford to miss. Had his other appointment been with any other person of his acquaintance, he would simply have sent a note postponing it. But this was with Teresa. And what was more, she had sounded worried. The idea of Teresa

worrying caused an inexplicable sinking feeling in his middle.

He decided to present himself at Stafford House at ten in the morning. It was an unconscionable hour to pay a visit, but she was therefore unlikely to have already gone out.

He dressed with his usual plain neatness, then, just as Rowson was about to help him don his dark brown cut-away coat, he was overcome with dissatisfaction. Before his eyes rose a vision of Lord John's careless elegance. "Wait," he said, "I believe I shall try something more elaborate with my neckcloth. Do you know how to tie a Waterfall?"

"Nay, sir," said Rowson, shaking his head mournfully. "I've tended ye through desert and jungle without ever learning to tie a fancy knot. If that's what you want, 'tis a proper gentleman's gentleman you'll need."

Andrew frowned at the offending cravat. He had been happy with the same simple tie for years; now it seemed inadequate. "Let me try. Is there another cloth ready?"

He struggled for several minutes. First the knot was off centre, then the creases were all crooked, then it was so tight he could not breathe. "The devil with it!" he said at last, ripping it off and retying a fresh one the usual way. "It will have to do. Is this the best waistcoat I possess?" He regarded the amber satin with distaste.

"'Tis your favourite, sir!" said Rowson, his voice reproachful.

"I shall buy some more waistcoats." Andrew put on his coat, took up his gloves and top hat and turned before the mirror, peering at himself. "Damned if I haven't done this before," he muttered. "Posing like a man-milliner." Then he remembered that last time he had been naked, and he grinned. "Find me a hackney, Rowson, I'm running late."

At this hour there were more pedestrians in the streets than carriages. However, the hackney was pulled by an aged and infirm nag and moved at scarcely more than a walking pace. Andrew had all too much time to think. He was overcome by a wave of guilt. It was all very well to decide to refurbish his staid image, but he ought to be doing it for Muriel, not for Teresa.

What a beauty she had turned out to be with a little town bronze to give her polish! She was not at all his style, though. He had always admired blondes with fair complexions, and had won the hand of the prettiest of them all. And Teresa was far too lively for comfort. A man wanted a quiet, conformable wife who would make him a peaceful home and not contradict him at every turn.

He could not deny that his heart beat faster at the thought of seeing Teresa again. It was worry, of course, at what sort of scrape she had fallen into this time. For all her new town bronze she was not yet up to snuff, and he had an obligation to Lord Edward to keep an eye on her.

His guilt rationalised away, he reached Stafford House at half past ten and bounded up the steps. Boggs, being an excellent butler, recognised him and admitted him at once.

"Miss Danville?"

"Miss Danville is not at home, sir."

"She asked me to call on a matter of business. If you tell her I am come, I expect she will see me."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I did not hintend to convey that Miss Danville is not receiving. She is gone out. If you would care to see young Mr Marco, sir, I believe he is yet at breakfast."

Andrew frowned. "Yes, I had best see Marco. Perhaps he can explain the matter. Tell him I am here, if you please."

Boggs returned a moment later. "His Grace requests the pleasure of your company in the breakfast room, sir. Mr Marco is with him."

Ushered into a room redolent of grilled ham, kippers and toasted muffins, Andrew made his bow to the duke. He nodded to Marco, who looked anxious, and a gentleman of about his own age whom he vaguely recognised.

His Grace of Stafford stood up and shook his hand, then waved him to a seat. "Coffee?" he offered, "or something more substantial? So you are the young man who brought me my niece and my nephew. My thanks to you, sir. A most welcome addition to my family, and of course I was more than happy to have news of my brother after all these years. You know my son, Danville?"

"How do you do, Graylin," said Viscount Danville, a

solidly built gentleman as good-looking as his younger brother but for his haughty expression. "We have met, I believe."

"Yes, indeed, some years since." After a few minutes of conversation, the duke affable, his heir stiff, Andrew said, "If you will excuse us, your Grace, I should like a few words in private with Marco."

Marco breathed a sigh of relief, bowed to his uncle and cousin, and led his visitor to the library. "This is where I have my lessons," he explained as they sat down. "No one else uses it at this hour. Have you come about the trial? Teresa said she had no chance to consult you yesterday, but I thought you were coming this afternoon."

"The trial?"

"Did you not read about it? The *Times* reported that the *Destiny's* passengers are to be called as witnesses in the trial of the crew of the *Snipe*. You know my sister, she is pluck to the backbone, but the thought of all London knowing of her exploit has her in a quake."

"Do the duke and duchess know?"

"No, only Cousin John. He thinks it a famous adventure and calls her a heroine, but even he says it will ruin her if it becomes generally known. He is up to every rig and row in town, you know, and Teresa was quite upset when he said that."

"I daresay it will not do to tell the duchess, but it may be necessary to open our budget to the duke. He has the influence to quash a subpoena, and he is fond of you both already. I doubt he will turn you out into the street. Where is Teresa, by the way? I thought I was early enough to catch her."

"She went to see Don Eduardo's banker. We both need a spot of the ready in our pockets, besides what we owe you."

"She went to the City? Alone?"

"Of course not, she took Annie." Marco was indignant. "She is not stupid, you know."

Andrew groaned. "No, but she is green! Ladies of quality do not go to the City without a male escort. Indeed, it is not *comme il faut* for a young lady to visit a man of business at all."

"Then I had best go after her at once," the lad said stiffly. "Pray excuse me, sir, I must make my excuses to my tutor. Thank you for warning me. I shall pass on your advice to my sister, regarding the trial."



"Don't be a gudgeon, you young firebrand. I shall go with you. But I cannot help wondering what will be her next start."

By this time the streets were bustling with traffic. The barouches, phaetons and chaises of Mayfair gave way to the stagecoaches and carters' wagons of less exalted quarters. Then their hackney threaded its way through the narrow streets of the City, past St Paul's, and turned into Lombard Street.

Fortunately Marco remembered the name of the bank. The carriage drew up before it and they climbed out. Andrew paid the driver.

"It's a good thing you did come with me," admitted Marco, flushing, "for I haven't even sixpence for the hackney. You can see how necessary it was for Teresa to come here."

"I am surprised that your uncle has not offered you an allowance."

"Teresa would not accept it," said the youth proudly as they were ushered into the bank. "Uncle Stafford insists on paying all our expenses." He turned to a bowing, black-clad clerk. "We are looking for my sister, Miss Danville. Is she still here?"

The clerk led them through a counting house full of more black-clad clerks, and up some stairs to a small office at the back. As he opened the door they saw a plump, middle-aged man sitting behind a desk, his face wreathed in smiles, then Annie, in the corner, and Teresa, seated with her back to them.

"Sir Andrew Graylin and Mr Danville," announced the clerk.

Teresa jumped up, ran to Marco and flung her arms around him. "We're rich!" she crowed.

Andrew watched with amusement as Marco disentangled himself from his sister's embrace. In this place, in her sapphire outfit, she looked like a peacock among crows.

She turned her laughing eyes to him and curtsied, half mocking. "I beg your pardon, sir, but it is monstrous exciting when you think you are a poor relation to discover suddenly that you are rich. Papa thought there would be enough for Marco's education and my come-out. It seems his little pittance has multiplied with such vigour that we have enough for that even if the money is divided equally with all my brothers!"

"Which I cannot advise," put in the banker. "To split up such a fortune among so many is as bad as squandering it."

"I must consult Don Eduardo, of course. But even if he agrees that it must be shared, I shall have a proper dowry."

"You are already considering marriage?" asked Andrew, scowling. His thoughts flew to Lord John, then he wondered whether Lord Danville, heir to the dukedom, might be a greater attraction. Could first cousins marry? He had never before had cause to wonder.

Teresa laughed. "Is not marriage the first business of young ladies?" she teased, though there was an edge to her voice. "No, not yet. However, I expect to meet a great many charming young men shortly, for my aunt is planning a party to introduce me to the Ton." She turned back to the banker. "But we are wasting your time, sir. For the present, I should like one hundred pounds each for myself and my brother, in notes and coins, and the draft you prepared is for this gentleman. You will notify me when you have arranged the meeting?"

"Certainly, Miss Danville." The stout banker rang a bell then bowed and shook her hand. "It has been a pleasure doing business with you, ma'am, though I hope you will reconsider splitting such an admirable fortune. Sirs, your servant."

The clerk arrived to show them out.

"Just how rich are we?" demanded Marco as they went down the stairs. He whistled as she named the figure. "Each? I shall be able to devote my life to my studies, and with that for a marriage portion, you can look to the highest in the land for a husband!"

Andrew objected strongly to all this talk of marriage. He could not voice his objection as he had no justification for such a dog-in-the-mangerish attitude, so he said severely, "We came after you, Teresa, to provide a respectable escort. Ladies do not visit the City unaccompanied by a gentleman."

Teresa sighed heavily as he helped her into the landaulet. "I made sure it was all right! I mentioned to my uncle last night that I must see Papa's banker and he said not a word."

"Nonetheless, it is so. In fact, young ladies are supposed to know nothing of business."

"You know very well that Don Eduardo entrusted me with his business. Indeed, I have arranged to meet with a number of coffee brokers to discuss a contract. I suppose Marco will have to go with me."

"It cannot be necessary for you to meet them in person!"

"I intend to. I must prepare the coffee for them to sample, so that I know it is properly done."

"Marco is too young to be an adequate escort." Andrew ignored Marco's insulted snort. "If you insist on doing this, then I shall go with you."

"That will be delightful." Teresa beamed. "I could ask Cousin John, if it is inconvenient for you, though."

"Certainly not! I mean, Lord John knows nothing of Costa Rican coffee, whereas I may perhaps be of assistance."

"It is most kind of you, Sir Andrew. Now tell me, has Marco explained about the trial?"

As the groom drove them back through the crowded streets, Sir Andrew tried to persuade her that her only recourse was to confess all to the duke. At last he convinced her.

"I daresay he will be proud of you," he reassured her when they dropped him off in Whitehall, convenient to the Foreign Office. "I am, you know."

She flushed with pleasure. "And Cousin John said some would think me a heroine," she said hopefully.

Damn Cousin John! thought Andrew as he waved farewell.

\* \* \* \*

When Teresa reached Stafford House, she found that her riding habit had been delivered. Since she had ordered it so as to be able to ride with Lord John, she went to look for him. Boggs directed her to the back of the house, where he was playing billiards with his brother. He declared himself happy to squire her to Hyde Park at the hour of the fashionable promenade. To her surprise Lord Danville requested permission to join them, and even begged her to call him "Cousin Tom."

The duke's heir had been in the country, supervising some business at one of the family estates. He had only returned to London the previous night, so she was not well acquainted with him. She remembered John describing him as "starchy," and his manner was certainly stiff compared with both brother

and father. Yet he had not looked askance at the unexpected presence of herself and Marco. He had greeted them with kindly aloofness and she was prepared to like him if given a chance to get to know him.

After changing into her new habit, she met Lord John on the landing. She had never worn a dress with a train before and it felt strange to have all that extra fabric dragging behind her. She was about to start down the stairs when he put his hand on her arm and held her back. She looked up at him enquiringly. He was laughing at her.

"You must drape the train over your arm," he explained, "or you will go down head first. You claimed to be an accomplished horsewoman, Cousin!"

"So I am," she assured him, "only I have never had a proper habit before."

He grinned down at her. "I should have liked to see you ride without a train to cover your...limbs," he said with regret. "Ah, Tom, there you are. Let us be on our way."

"Ought I to take my maid with me?" asked Teresa uncertainly as they descended. "She does not ride. Oh no, I expect a groom should accompany me."

"Fustian," Lord John scoffed. "You will come to no harm with us."

Teresa had definite reservations about his sense of propriety after his last remark. She looked at the viscount, whose opinion must surely be trusted.

"I think in this case, since we are your cousins, a servant may be dispensed with. You are residing in the same household, after all. If ever you ride with only one of us, you had best take a groom."

"Thank you, cousin. I will abide by your advice." She dimpled at him and he smiled. He was really excessively handsome when he smiled, she decided.

Their mounts awaited them in the street. Teresa, used to the rough working horses of the hacienda, fell in love at first sight with the thoroughbred bay mare the duke had provided for her. She longed to try her paces, but Lady Parr had forbidden galloping in the park. She wondered if that prohibition was one of the shabby-genteel notions she might ignore. When Andrew scolded her for offending the proprieties, he did not realise how difficult it was to steer a course between conflicting codes.

They had only to cross Park Lane to enter Hyde Park by the Grosvenor Gate, and she knew at once that this time Lady Parr's rule was commonsense. As far as she could see, lines of elegant phaetons and barouches moved at a walking pace, their still more elegant occupants bowing, waving or stopping to talk to each other and the strollers and riders.

"Half the population of London must be here!" she exclaimed.

"This is only the Little Season," Lord John reminded her. "You should see it on a fine day in May. Drove my curricule once and dashed if I didn't get stuck in the crush for half an hour. Since then, I always ride."

As they merged into the stream, a plump, dowdy lady waved an imperious summons from a carriage coming towards them.

"Come, Cousin," said Lord Danville, "I shall introduce you to Lady Castlereagh." He led the way.

Lord John leaned towards Teresa and whispered, "One of Almack's patronesses. If they approve you, you'll get vouchers next Season. Deuced flat place, but it's all the rage among the females and you won't want to be excluded. Of course, they won't care to offend m'mother, unless you do something truly outrageous, and Lord Castlereagh is one of m'father's bosom bows."

Lady Parr had stressed the importance of being seen at Almack's. No female banned from those august premises could be considered a social success. Thanking providence that her aunt was a duchess, Teresa followed her cousins.

The viscount introduced Teresa as Lord Edward's daughter. Lady Castlereagh asked kindly after her father, whom she had met in his rakish youth. As they parted, she promised to invite Teresa to a small soirée she was holding in a few days.

Teresa breathed a sigh of relief. That was one patroness, at least, who seemed to approve of her. Making sure her ladyship was out of earshot, she said, "I know I am newly acquainted with London fashions, but is not Lady Castlereagh dressed oddly?"

"She is noted for it," laughed Lord John. "It is said that at the Congress of Vienna she attended a party with his lordship's Order of the Garter decorating her hair."

The viscount frowned. "Do not make fun of her,

John. She is a respectable and benevolent lady, and her husband was instrumental in Bonaparte's defeat."

His brother hastily disclaimed any intended disparagement, but began to mutter that riding in the park was deuced flat entertainment.

Teresa had noticed a pair of riders cantering in the distance, and she suggested leaving the crowd and stretching their mounts legs. "Limbs, I mean," she corrected hastily.

Lord Danville shook his head. "You will note that both riders are gentlemen," he pointed out. "It will not do for a young lady at this hour. If you wish to rise early, a canter--a gallop even--is unexceptionable before nine or so." He smiled at the idea of a female rising early for such a reason.

"A capital notion, Tom!" Lord John was enthusiastic. "Eight o'clock tomorrow, coz?"

Teresa accepted with alacrity.

As they rode on at a snail's pace, her cousins introduced her to so many people that she was sure she would never remember them all. It amused her to note that the viscount's acquaintance consisted of sober gentlemen of middle years and respectable matrons with marriageable daughters, while his brother's friends were all bucks of the first stare. She was equally grateful to both. When she began to go about in society it would be comfortable to know both young ladies with whom to chat and young gentlemen with whom to dance.

One middle-aged gentleman on horseback caught her eye. His horse was a magnificent black stallion. He was richly dressed, with a large ruby in his neckcloth and several gold fobs, but his face had a cynical, dissipated look. Her cousins both nodded to him as they passed, but did not offer to introduce him.

"I see Carruthers is in funds at present," said Lord John.

"Who is he?" Teresa asked.

"Loose fish," said her cousin briefly.

Lord Danville elaborated. "Baron Carruthers is a gamester who lives by his wits. He is rumoured to be involved in various unsavory dealings. Unfortunately he lives near us in Sussex so we are bound to acknowledge him, but I should not dream of making him acquainted with you."

"In Sussex? Is that Five Oaks, where my father

grew up? I hope I shall see it one day."

"We generally spend Christmas there," Lord John told her. "Now there's the place for a good gallop!"

At that moment, Teresa saw Lady Parr and Muriel driving towards them, with Andrew riding beside their carriage.

For a moment Teresa despaired. The duchess did not want Lady Parr to visit. Did that mean it would be wrong to introduce the Parrs to her cousins? Yet she could not cut them; they had done nothing to deserve such an insult. Was it possible to talk to them while pretending her cousins were not there? That seemed even less possible. Nothing she had been taught covered this situation. How she wished she had been brought up knowing the correct way to deal with every circumstance!

Lord John took the decision out of her hands. "Isn't that Graylin?" he asked. "And who's the charmer in the carriage with the dragon? I must ask him for an introduction."

## Chapter 12

Muriel was dressed in a pale blue gown which enhanced the celestial colour of her eyes. Beneath a chipstraw hat decorated with blue bows, her golden ringlets shone in the autumnal sunlight. Teresa was not in the least surprised that her cousin John was eager to meet her.

It pleased her to be, for once, the one performing the introductions. Lady Parr was clearly delighted to make the acquaintance of her noble relatives, though Teresa noted with relief that neither her ladyship's character nor her sense of decorum led her to toady them. Muriel blushed and smiled with a pretty shyness that Teresa wished she could emulate.

Andrew greeted their lordships with what she could only view as suspicion. She realised that no mention had been made of his engagement to Muriel, so she hastened to remedy the omission.

For some reason, this made Andrew look still more resentful, while her cousins redoubled their attentions to the enchanting Miss Parr.

Teresa found herself riding behind the carriage with Sir Andrew. "I'm sorry," she said, "should I not have revealed that you and Muriel are affianced?"

"It was perfectly proper to tell them," he said noncommittally.

"I thought you were annoyed that they admired her, but when they learned that she is betrothed it only seemed to increase their admiration. I do not understand it; I expected the reverse."

He laughed. "That is because you are a very straightforward person, without a devious notion in your head. Gentlemen of rank and fortune like your cousins are the natural prey of the matchmaking mamas with marriageable daughters. When they are also young and handsome, like your cousins, even the most milk-and-water misses grow predatory. Since Muriel is already spoken for, they are safe in making her the object of their attentions."

Heads turned as Teresa's peal of laughter rang out. "You are not roasting me?" she said, still grinning. "No, it does make a twisted sort of sense. Oh dear, everyone is staring! Lady Parr warned me that my laugh is not sufficiently restrained."

"Fustian! If you raise your eyes, you will see that you have brought smiles to a dozen sour faces. Your laugh is a tonic and you must not subdue it. I fear my next question will do just that, however. Have you yet spoken to the duke about the trial?"

"No, he was from home this afternoon. I expect I shall have an opportunity this evening to speak with him. Was your appointment with the Foreign Secretary satisfactory?"

"Lord Castlereagh was most complimentary."

"Lord Castlereagh? I had not realised that he is the Foreign Secretary! I met his wife just now. It seems that she is just as important in her way, for she is one of those who controls access to Almack's. I will not say that she was complimentary, but she did promise me an invitation. Andrew, Castlereagh is one of my uncle's particular friends! I must make quite certain that he understands how indebted we are to you, and that you are a diplomat. With his patronage, I daresay you will be made ambassador in no time."

"Perhaps." He smiled at her enthusiasm. "In the meantime, I have been offered a mission to China."

"To China! What an adventure!" Teresa fell silent for a moment, remembering how his betrothed dreaded travelling abroad. "What does Muriel think of it?" she asked cautiously.



"I have not told her yet. I escaped from the Foreign Office only just in time to accompany her hither." He tried to sound unconcerned, but Teresa knew him well enough to detect apprehension in his voice. He must expect that his future wife would not be best pleased at the news.

In an effort to cheer him up, she told him, "My aunt is giving a party next week to introduce me to the Ton. I hope you will come? I shall need a few friendly faces to lend me countenance."

Before he could answer, Lord Danville rode up beside them. "Lady Parr has agreed to bring Miss Parr to my mother's party next week. I hope we may count on your acceptance also, Graylin?"

As Andrew pronounced himself happy to attend, Teresa burst into laughter again. She refused to explain the source of her amusement. She could hardly tell either gentleman that the duchess had explicitly warned her against inviting the Parrs to Stafford House.

She dropped back to ride beside the carriage, chatting with Muriel. Before parting, they arranged to meet the following afternoon for a walk.

\* \* \* \*

Teresa's cousins escorted her home through the twilight streets and she went above stairs to change. In her dressing room, the duchess was reclining on the sofa while Annie and Howell displayed Teresa's evening gowns before her. She jumped up and swept her niece into a scented embrace.

"My dear, your first dinner party! I happened to mention to Lady Kaye that you are residing with us and she immediately extended the invitation to include you. The *écru crêpe*, I believe, Howell, the one with the *coquelicot* ribbons. Yes, that will do very well. We shall leave at half past seven, Teresa, so I shall send Howell to you at a quarter past the hour to make sure all is in order."

The duchess and her abigail left, and Teresa hugged her maid. "Oh, Annie, my first London party! I hope I shall know how to go on. Of course, it may be my last London party if I have to appear as witness at that dreadful man's trial. I must arrange to see my uncle in the morning."

She was glad to find, when she went downstairs, that Lord Danville was to accompany them. She did

not expect Lord John. He had once told her that his parents' friends were a bunch of slow-tops and it was his habit to plead a previous engagement when included in their invitations. She knew John better than his brother, and liked him very well, but on this occasion she felt Cousin Tom's staid demeanour might be of more support.

He complimented her gravely on her looks, and handed her into the carriage after the duchess, placing a rug around her knees to guard against the late September chill.

It was but a few minutes drive to Lord and Lady Kaye's townhouse. On her cousin's arm, Teresa followed her uncle and aunt up the steps.

"You will do very well," he reassured, patting her hand as the door opened. She smiled up at him gratefully, surprised at his understanding. "I remember how nervous my sister Pamela was at her first formal dinner," he added in explanation.

He stayed close beside her as they entered the drawing room, and presented her to their host and hostess. Lady Kaye professed herself delighted, while studying Teresa with undisguised curiosity.

As more guests came up, they moved away and were accosted by a dark-haired young beauty Teresa thought she recognised. "Danville! I did not expect to see you here. Now it will not be such a horrid bore after all." Her voice was somewhat shrill, but her appearance could not be faulted. She had green eyes with long, dark lashes which fluttered provocatively. Her gown of primrose sarcenet set off her milk-white skin to perfection, though Teresa suspected that the delicate pink of her cheeks owed more to rouge than nature.

Lord Danville bowed. "Cousin Teresa, you remember Lady Mary Hargreave. We met in the park this afternoon."

The two young ladies nodded to each other, then Lady Mary leaned closer to his lordship. "So dull for you, having to escort your country cousin," she whispered, quite loud enough for Teresa to hear. Then she began to chat about people Teresa could not possibly know.

For two or three minutes Teresa felt more and more uncomfortable as Lady Mary, with practised skill, edged Lord Danville away from her. Cousin Tom,

however, was equally adept at avoiding such manoeuvres. Bowing, he took Teresa's arm and said, "Pray excuse us, Lady Mary. I must make my cousin known to Miss Kaye."

The daughter of the house was a pert blonde, short and a trifle plump but nonetheless pretty. She had a deplorable tendency to giggle at all remarks addressed to her, all very well if they happened to be amusing, otherwise somewhat disconcerting. Though she fluttered her blackened eyelashes at the viscount with as much abandon as had Lady Mary, she was friendly towards Teresa. "We shall have a comfortable coze after dinner," she promised, giggling, "while the gentlemen are at their port."

Dinner was announced. The duke, as highest in rank, led their hostess into the dining room, while Lord Kaye took the duchess. The rest of the guests were left to sort themselves out. Lady Mary materialised beside Lord Danville with an expectant look.

His lordship offered Teresa his arm. Lady Mary shot her a venomous glance, and even amicable Miss Kaye pouted a little. Teresa began to understand why her cousin was attracted to Muriel Parr, who was already betrothed.

Yet another hopeful debutante sat on the viscount's other side at dinner. He conversed with her politely, but when the courses changed he turned to Teresa with such obvious relief that she nearly laughed aloud.

She had noticed, sitting at the far end of the table, the man her cousins had declined to introduce to her in Hyde Park. "I am surprised to see Lord Carruthers here," she said in a low voice.

"He has entrée everywhere, I fear, for his manners are impeccable—in company--and his family long established. Nothing definite is known to his discredit, save his excessive gambling, and who does not gamble? I hope you will heed my advice though, cousin, and avoid him when possible."

"I do not like his face," said Teresa decisively.

"I daresay he will be at Mama's ball next week."

"Ball! I had thought it was to be a small soirée!"

Cousin Tom grinned, and once again she thought him quite the most handsome man she had ever met. "Her Grace is quite incapable of giving a small soirée," he explained. "Her guest list starts with forty names,

and then she keeps adding those to whom she owes an invitation, those who will be bitterly offended not to receive one, those who happen to cross her mind. I can guarantee you a full scale ball, and I doubt there will be fewer than four hundred in attendance."

"I shall never remember all their names!"

"No, but they will remember you, cousin, and not only because the ball is in your honour."

Though aware that he intended a compliment, she said with a laugh, "Yes, for I shall probably commit some dreadful *faux pas* before half the Ton. I should have preferred a small party for my *début*."

When the ladies withdrew, the duchess summoned Teresa to be introduced to two or three matrons. All seemed disposed to be amiable, and Teresa pondered again the benefits attached to her relationship with a peer of the highest rank. She could not deny that it was excessively pleasant, yet she thought the situation she had been brought up with more equitable. In Costa Rica a man's worth was judged by what he had managed to create out of raw jungle.

A wave of homesickness swept over her as she glanced, a lost look on her face, around the elegant drawing room with its beautifully dressed, mannered ladies making polite, meaningless conversation.

Miss Kaye trotted up to her. "Teresa... May I call you Teresa? And you must call me Jenny for I vow we are going to be friends... Pray come and meet Daphne Pringle, she is the sweetest creature and quite longs to know you." Chattering away she bore Teresa off willy nilly to join in a discussion of the best place to buy French lace.

Lady Mary Hargreave was not a member of this cozy group. She sat at the pianoforte, idly turning over the music with an uninterested air, picking out a tune here and there. She brightened as soon as the gentlemen arrived. Somehow, without appearing to hurry, she reached Teresa's side before Lord Danville, who came straight towards them. He brought with him a couple of young gentlemen who, he claimed, had begged to be introduced to his cousin.

After a few minutes of general conversation, Lady Mary turned to Teresa. "Will you favour us with a tune upon the pianoforte, Miss Danville?" she enquired.

"You must excuse me, I do not play," Teresa said warily.

"Ah, the harp is your instrument! I will beg Lady Kaye to have the harp brought out. No? Then you sing! I shall be happy to accompany you."

"My voice is nothing out of the ordinary, Lady Mary, and I know only Spanish songs, but if you will support me with an accompaniment upon the guitar, I shall do my poor best."

Lady Mary flushed, but made a quick recover. "The guitar is a peasant instrument," she declared. "I am certain Lady Kaye has no such thing in her house."

"Oh but she does," Jenny broke in with a giggle. "My brother was in Spain with Wellington, Teresa, and he brought back a guitar. He plays it, too. What a pity he is not here tonight."

"Nor is it a peasant instrument," added one of Lord Danville's friends indignantly. "I, too, was in Spain, and the gentlemen serenade their ladies with guitar music. Quite delightful, though it does grow a little tiresome around two in the morning."

"Rolled up, horse, foot and artillery," the other gentleman murmured in Teresa's ear as Lady Mary flounced off. "I'll tell you, Miss Danville, she only wanted to be asked to play herself. Her performance upon the pianoforte is generally judged superior, but I believe you have spared us that tedium for this evening."

"Thank you, Sir Toby," Teresa said laughing, "and thank you, Jenny, Mr Wishart, for coming to my defence. But I hope one of you will ask Lady Mary to play, for I quite long to hear it. I do not know of a single pianoforte in Costa Rica. Indeed, the transportation would be impossible and I daresay the climate would ruin it."

Instead of asking Lady Mary to play, they all besieged her with questions about her native land.

When the party broke up, Teresa realised happily that she had several new friends. In the carriage she asked her aunt whether any of them had been invited to their soirée.

"The Kayes will be coming of course," said her Grace. "As for the others, I cannot possibly remember who is on the list, but I shall show it to you tomorrow and you may add whom you will."

"Thank you, aunt," said Teresa, exchanging a glance of amusement with her cousin.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning she rose early to go riding in the park with Lord John. Well aware of his usual habits, she took the precaution of sending a message via Annie and his valet before she dressed. Leaning out of the window to check the air, she felt the nip of frost and put on a pelerine over her habit.

Her cousin stumbled downstairs, rubbing his eyes, a mere five minutes late. "I did remember to send a message to the stables yesterday," he said sheepishly. "Devil of a night, last night, begging your pardon, cousin."

"You can go back to bed when we return," she suggested, smiling. "It is by far too beautiful a day for me to excuse you. It may rain tomorrow."

"The horses are waiting, miss, my lord," announced Boggs. He shook his head in wonder as they went down the front steps. It was years since Lord John had risen at such an hour, except in direct response to a command from his father.

He closed the door and went back to his preparations for the ball, for he knew, as well as did Lord Danville, that her Grace's small *soirée* was to be the great event of the Little Season. Miss Teresa's arrival was turning the household upside down, he thought indulgently, and he was thoroughly enjoying it.

Teresa and Lord John warmed their horses with a short trot, then galloped wildly along the edge of the Serpentine, sending ducks and swans flapping for the safety of the water.

At last Teresa drew rein, laughing with exhilaration. "It has been too long since I had a good ride," she exclaimed. "And poor Gayo has been cooped up inside as well. Do you think I could safely bring them to the park, if we came early when there is no one about?"

"I cannot see the harm in it." Lord John had taken to visiting the parrot in Teresa's dressing room, bringing him tidbits. "Dashed if I'm getting up early again just to exercise your bird, though."

"Of course not. I shall bring Annie. Oh look, is that not Sir Andrew?"

Her cousin waved and hallooed. "Graylin! Well met. Don't tell me you make a habit of rising at this ungodly hour."

Andrew rode up on a superb chestnut gelding.

"Good morning, Miss Danville, Lord John. Yes, I usually ride at this hour."

"There you are then, Teresa. No need to spoil my beauty sleep, Graylin will be delighted to escort you in future. Better bring a groom though."

"You brought no groom?" Andrew looked around with a frown. "John is my cousin," pointed out Teresa, feeling slightly guilty as she recalled that Lord Danville had said she ought to take a groom. "And besides, I have my protectors under my cape." She touched her hip.

"In Hyde Park! Teresa, if anyone saw them..."

"Your protectors?" interrupted Lord John. "Some fierce jungle creature I have not yet met?"

"My pistols," Teresa explained, laughing. "Just in case we are set upon by footpads."

"Females don't shoot."

"This one does," said Andrew, "and better than most men. However, I beg you will not demonstrate in Hyde Park, Teresa," he added hastily. "It really will not do."

"I'm accounted something of a crack-shot," Lord John announced, a glint in his eye. "We'll have a match some time, cousin." He caught Andrew's minatory glance. "Not in Hyde Park, of course. Somewhere private."

Andrew decided it was time to change the subject. "Do you care to ride with me tomorrow morning, Miss Danville?" he asked.

"Oh yes!" she accepted with a joyful smile. "That will be delightful. And I promise to bring a groom."

On the way home, Teresa remembered that she had intended to take Gayo to the park the next day. She mentioned it to Lord John, and he suggested that instead she should take him to the small garden behind Stafford House. As it was private, he could go at any time of day.

"And it has high walls, so he's not likely to fly the coop. Deuced if that isn't the place to have our shooting contest too!"

"But not at the same time, John!"

\* \* \* \*

Teresa ate a hearty breakfast, then collected Marco from the library and went with him to her uncle's study, where she had arranged to see him at eleven. Sitting behind his huge oak desk, he dismissed his

secretary, waved them to seats, and enquired as to how he might help them.

Teresa told him the whole story of the capture of the *Snipe* and the rescue of the slaves.

"And my sister is a heroine, sir," said Marco when she finished, "whatever the tattlemongers may make of it."

"She is indeed, lad," agreed the duke, "but you are right to fear the rumour mill. Is there any reason why it should become the latest on-dit? Are the—ah, the Parrs likely to spread the tale, or your abigail?"

"Annie will not say a word, uncle, nor, I believe, will the Parrs. The only problem is the trial."

Marco explained what he had read in the newspaper.

"I shall not permit my niece to be called as witness," the duke said, a hint of steel visible beneath his usual affability. "You need have no fear of that. I shall have to consider whether it will be wise to allow your maid to testify, or even Marco. I should prefer to keep the family name out of it altogether."

"But I wish to testify!" cried Marco. "Harrison deserves hanging, or at least transportation. Besides, if he goes free we may be in danger for he made the most dreadful threats."

"Graylin's testimony may well be enough," his Grace reassured him, "and the captain of your ship probably left a deposition when he sailed."

"There's Rowson too," Teresa reminded her brother. "Sir Andrew's servant," she explained to her uncle.

The duke sat back, satisfied. "Very well. I shall consult Graylin and, I believe, the prosecutor, but I doubt it will be necessary for any of my household to appear. I am gratified, my dear, that you came to me with this problem."

"Thank you, uncle, I am very glad we told you." Teresa curtsied, then gave way to impulse and rounded the desk to drop a kiss on his cheek. "Papa always said you were the best of brothers."

Marco bowed, and said hopefully, "If you please, sir, may I at least attend the trial, if I am not to be a witness?"

"Certainly, my boy. Ought to be a part of any gentleman's education. Take your tutor, what's his name? Netherdale, with you."

As soon as the study door closed behind them,



Teresa said, "Since you have escaped from Mr Netherdale for the nonce, will you come out with me and Gayo? Cousin John says there is a garden behind the house where he can go free for a while, and I have a couple of hours before I meet Muriel."

Marco agreed with alacrity. A footman showed them the way to the garden, through the ballroom, and they inspected it to make sure it was really suitable. It was surrounded by the house on two sides and a twelve-foot brick wall on the other two. Though Gayo could easily fly out, Teresa thought he was unlikely to go far from her in a strange place.

There was a stone terrace off the ballroom, with steps down to a lawn crossed by brick paths. In the centre grew a spreading chestnut, now losing its golden leaves, with benches about its base. Chrysanthemums and a few late roses bloomed in the flowerbeds round the edge of the lawn.

"Perfect!" said Teresa. "There's plenty here to keep him interested." They went to fetch Gayo.

\* \* \* \*

Gayo flew from Teresa's arms into the boughs of the tree, then settled down to find out whether there was anything edible within the prickly green covering of the chestnuts.

The parrot flew wildly up and down the garden, shouting "Hello!" at the top of his voice. Then he perched in the tree and attacked one of the prickly fruits. It fell to the ground, splitting open to reveal a glossy horse-chestnut.

Gayo swooped down to investigate further. Marco joined him, interested by the curious nut and wondering whether it was edible.

While they were busy, Teresa buried her nose in a fragrant pink rose. Gayo lost interest in the hard chestnut, flew to the next rosebush, and started methodically shredding a beautiful yellow bloom. "Sea scum!" he cried joyfully.

Teresa and Marco looked round and both grabbed for him, getting in each other's way. Marco caught a single green tail-feather, and Gayo disappeared into the house through an open window with a mournful "*¡Ay de mí!*"

"Oh no," groaned Teresa. "I should have made sure all the windows were closed."

"Listen!" said Marco.

Through the window came a series of crashes accompanied by a stream of multi-lingual vituperation.

"*Sacré nom d'un chien!*"

"*¡Hijo de puta!*"

"*Canaille! Cochon!*"

"Slimy son of a sea snake!"

"I catch, I cook *cet oiseau du diable!*"

"I think Gayo found the kitchens," said Marco.

## Chapter 13

Jacques was packing to return to France, where good cooks were properly appreciated. Her Grace the Duchess of Stafford was laid down upon a sofa, calling for *sal volatile* and burnt feathers, while Amelia Carter fluttered about her helplessly. Gayo was back on his perch in the dressing room, scolding himself in a sad, soft voice.

Marco went up to the cook's chamber in the attic. He humbly apologised, blaming the whole fracas on himself. He should not have snatched at the parrot, frightening it.

Better a whole gardenful of roses be destroyed for what was a mere gardener's anger compared to the righteous wrath of a French chef? Such an insult must never happen again. It was difficult adjusting oneself to the customs of a foreign land, did not Jacques agree? Everything was so different. The parrot was homesick, he, Marco, was homesick, was it possible that Jacques was also homesick? One heard that France was a beautiful country.

Jacques broke down and wept. Of course he was homesick, all exiles must be homesick. *Le pauvre petit perroquet*, in a cold country far from his jungle, must also be homesick. Did Monsieur Marco suppose the unhappy bird would enjoy an apricot tart?

Monsieur Marco did, and went off congratulating himself heartily on having listened to Andrew's discourses on diplomacy.

He found Teresa on her knees in the drawing room. She was bathing her aunt's temples with one of her herbal concoctions, and swearing that tonight's guests would be served a good dinner if she had to cook it herself. Miss Carter clucked with dismay, scandalised at the idea of the duchess's niece in the kitchen.

"No need," said Marco. "Jacques is on his way back

to the scene of the crime. I am very sorry, ma'am, it was all my fault. I was supposed to be watching Gayo."

"So was I. I ought to have known it was not safe to let him fly free," Teresa said.

"If we are all beating our breasts," said Lord John, coming in with an ill-concealed grin on his face, "I am to blame for suggesting the garden in the first place."

"Burnt feathers," murmured his mother weakly, unwilling to give up her vapours.

Lord John's grin broadened. "No, no, Mama, you cannot expect to make a burned sacrifice of the poor parrot. Doing it much too brown!" Overcome with helpless laughter at this double pun, he sank into a chair.

"Perhaps this will be sufficient?" enquired Marco with mock anxiety, drawing a single green tail-feather from his pocket before he too collapsed.

"Oh do go away both of you and leave my aunt in peace!" said Teresa, shooing them out, careful to keep her back to the duchess until she had mastered her own mirth.

"I only hope this has not given John ideas," sighed her Grace. "He was always a mischievous little boy and I do not for a moment believe he has grown out of it. Perhaps the conservatory next time, my dear, with all the doors and windows shut?"

Teresa hugged her. "You and my uncle could not be kinder if you were my own parents," she said with a catch in her voice. "Now if you are feeling more the thing, I must go and change. I am going walking with Muriel Parr at two."

The duchess sat up and straightened her cap. "Thomas asked me to add Miss Parr to my guest list. I should be sorry to think he had conceived a tendre for such an unsuitable female. He is, after all, heir to a dukedom."

"Muriel is betrothed already, aunt. I am sure Cousin Tom was only being kind to me by inviting my friend."

This reassurance must have borne less weight had the duchess known that, not twenty minutes later, her eldest son was offering to escort the two young ladies on their walk. Teresa had hoped to talk to Muriel privately about Andrew's China mission, but in the face of her friend's obvious pleasure she had not the heart to fob him off. Trailed by Annie and Kinsey, they

crossed the road and entered the park.

Though Lord Danville took pains to include her, Teresa was soon unutterably bored. Her companions covered every topic of conversation approved by Lady Parr, from the weather to the preferred shade of upholstery for his lordship's new curricule. She was relieved when he asked anxiously whether Miss Parr was not growing tired, and turned their steps homeward.

As they parted, Muriel whispered to her, "How lucky you are to have so charming a cousin. And so very considerate!"

The viscount gazed after her carriage as it drove off. "As pretty-behaved as she is beautiful," he said. "I shall tell Mama that she need not doubt the wisdom of your friendship with Miss Parr. Indeed, from what I hear of a certain parrot's exploits, a certain young lady might even benefit from her acquaintance with such an admirably well-bred female."

He smiled at her, but for once she did not notice how very handsome he was. Furious, she escaped upstairs before she said something she might later regret. It was too bad, when she had been doing so well, that her own cousin should join Andrew in preferring Muriel's manners to hers.

\* \* \* \*

Despite Gayo's depredations, the duchess's dinner party went well. Teresa was brought to the attention of yet more prospective hostesses, and received promises of several invitations. She was in good spirits when Andrew called for her to ride in the park next morning, though it was a grey, mizzling day.

He complimented her on the delightful picture she presented on her bay mare. "In a proper riding habit too," he added with a teasing grin. "Though I admit there was a great deal to be said for your Costa Rican costume, and for those hardworking little horses too."

"These beauties would have a hard time of it in the jungle," she agreed as they crossed Park Lane, followed by the duke's groom. "Your chestnut is magnificent."

"Not mine," he shook his head regretfully. "I spend too much time abroad to set up my stables. He is my father's, but I have the use of him whenever I am at home."

"Tell me about your father, and the rest of your family. You have met all my multitudinous relatives

and I know nothing of yours."

He complied. As they rode on through the grey morning she learned all about his widowed father, his older brother, whose tyrannical wife had much to do with his liking for travel, his three married sisters. They were all in the country at present, though they would come up to town in the spring. He spoke of his home in Warwickshire, to which he hoped to retire one day.

"But not until I have seen the rest of the world," he said, laughing. "It's days like this that make me long for North Africa," he added as it began to rain. "We must go back before you are soaked."

"I am not afraid of this sprinkling. Have you forgot the downpours we call rain at home? I have not yet had my gallop."

"Then I shall race you to the gate, for this may be no more than drizzle but you must admit the temperature is quite different from your tropical storms."

They were damp, if not soaked, when they reached the house. Teresa invited him in to dry off and have some breakfast.

"I am glad you asked," he said, "or I might have gone so far as to invite myself. I have an appointment with the duke later this morning to discuss the trial."

"My uncle has everything well in hand, I believe. Boggs, have Sir Andrew's coat dried, if you please, and show him into the breakfast room. I shall be down shortly."

She returned to find Andrew already busy with a dish of ham and eggs and muffins. Boggs seated her, and then presented her with a silver salver.

"Your post, miss."

"Mine? All those? Who can possibly be writing to me?"

"Hinvitations, I'd venture to guess, miss." He poured her coffee. "Bacon, miss?"

"Food! How can I think of food! Look, Andrew: soirées, routs, musicales, dinners!" The table was littered with papers.

"It seems you are well on the way to social success already, just as Lord Edward wished."

"What is this?" She picked up the last of the pile and broke open the seal. "From my banker. He has arranged for me to meet with half a dozen coffee brokers at the Gloster Coffee House in Piccadilly."

Andrew frowned. "A respectable coaching house, I believe, but I shall make enquiries. I shall go with you, of course, and you will take Annie. Marco had best go too. When is it to be?"

"Next week, Friday morning. I am sure I shall be safe with Marco and Annie." Why did he have to spoil such a delightful morning with his disapproving assumption of authority? "If Don Eduardo ever expected you to take responsibility for me, it ended when my uncle took me under his protection."

"Then you will request your uncle's escort, or your aunt's perhaps? No, I shall support you in this because Don Eduardo expected it of you, but the duke and duchess will be the happier for knowing nothing of your foray into the world of commerce."

A sound at the door alerted Andrew and he noticed that an expression of uneasy fascination had spread over the butler's usually impassive face. "Not a word of this to anyone, Boggs!" he hissed as Lord Danville came in.

Blank-faced again, Boggs bowed, murmured, "Certainly, sir," and went to seat the viscount.

With Andrew avoiding all mention of coffee and the law courts, and Lord Danville determined not to speak of either Gayo's misdeeds or Andrew's betrothed, conversation faltered. Neither seemed able to think of anything else. With some idea of what was on their minds, Teresa took pity on them and introduced the subject of horseflesh. To her surprise, for she thought they had little in common, they had soon arranged to visit Tattersall's together in search of a pair for his lordship's new curricula.

The duke came in, the talk turned to politics, and she left them to it.

\* \* \* \*

The next few days sped by, full of morning callers, afternoon callers, shopping, drives in the park when it was fine, and parties of one sort or another in the evenings. When the duchess was not available to chaperon her, Teresa was often squired by Lord Danville or Lord John. Since her cousins were both much sought after, she soon knew enough people to be able to rely on meeting friends wherever she went.

She even collected her own circle of chattering young ladies and admiring young men, among them Jenny Kaye, Daphne Pringle, Sir Toby and Mr Wishart.

Andrew was often among the company, but Teresa soon realised that Lady Parr and Muriel moved on the fringes of society. She met them only once, at a rout accurately described by Lord John as "a devilish crush." Muriel seemed quieter and shyer than ever among Teresa's lively friends.

Lord Danville was not at the rout, and his brother stigmatised Muriel, in an undertone, as dull as ditchwater. "Not that she's not pretty enough," he added fairly. "Needs a bit of animation." He turned to flirt with Miss Pringle.

Teresa thought Muriel looked unhappy, and guessed the reason. She invited her to drive in the park the next afternoon.

In the morning, riding with Andrew, she discovered as she expected that he had told his betrothed about his mission to China.

"She dislikes the idea excessively," he said in a gloomy voice. "Of course I do not insist that she go with me. I shall not leave until February, so we might be married at once and have several months together. Then she can reside with my father, or with her mother if she prefers it, until my return. That is not unreasonable, is it? I know it is far from ideal, but many diplomats' wives must live with long separations. And think of Navy wives!"

"Poor Muriel!" Teresa murmured, disturbed by his lack of sympathy for his beloved. She found herself unable to summon up any words of consolation and they cut short their ride, out of charity with each other.

In the afternoon, disobeying her mother's every precept, Muriel burst into tears in the middle of Hyde Park. Teresa shielded her from curious eyes as best she could with her parasol, and they hurried homeward through the side streets.

"Why cannot he be satisfied with a position in the Foreign Office?" wailed Muriel.

"If you love him," said Teresa with exasperated sternness, "you should be glad that he has been offered a job so in tune with his tastes. He will not be gone forever, but if you cannot bear his absence, you must needs go with him."

She returned home in a stormy mood, unable to understand how two people in love with each other could make each other so miserable. Summoned to the

drawing room to take tea with her aunt and several visitors, she sent a message that she had the headache.

\* \* \* \*

In her distress, Teresa had forgotten that this was the night of the ball. The duchess appeared in her chamber, calling for hartshorn and followed by Miss Carter, Howell and Annie all offering conflicting advice. Somehow the news spread. Mrs Davies, the housekeeper, arrived with her sovereign remedy; Chef Jacques sent up a French tisane; Boggs enquired whether a footman should be sent for the doctor.

At the height of the clamour, guaranteed to produce a headache where none existed, Marco stalked in with a brotherly disregard for propriety. "Stop fussing, Teresa, everyone is busy with preparations for your blasted ball and you're setting them at sixes and sevens," he said callously. "Take some of your own herbs. You've been treating other people for years, have you no faith in yourself?"

"I'm not fussing," she said, with justifiable indignation since she had not been able to get a word in edgewise for some time. "My head is much better already. It was no great thing and I believe has been cured by everyone's good wishes. Thank you, dear aunt, all of you, for your solicitude."

"A nervous megrim, I daresay," the duchess diagnosed, being an expert on the subject. "Lie down for an hour on your bed before you dress, child, and do not worry. You are certain to cast all the insipid misses in the shade tonight."

Marco lingered after all the others but Annie had left. "Nervous megrim, is it?" he said with a grin. "Now that's cutting a wheedle for I don't believe you know the meaning of the word."

"Go away, you horrid boy." His sister pulled a face at him. "Of course it was no such thing, but I am tired and I intend to follow Aunt Stafford's advice."

"She's right, you know, you will be the prettiest girl there, so cheer up and do not worry." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Papa would be proud of you."

"And of you," she said softly as he left. "You are growing up, little brother."

Annie drew the curtains and helped Teresa undress, and to her surprise she fell asleep.

When she woke, the maid was lighting candles. "It's



time to dress, Miss Teresa. Just come and see what's waiting for you!"

"Waiting for me?" Feeling refreshed, Teresa stretched and slid out of bed. Annie draped her robe about her and she went into the dressing room. "Flowers! How pretty! Did you look at the cards? Who sent the crimson rosebuds?"

"They're from Lord Danville. He had an unfair advantage, knowing what you're wearing. Shall you carry them?"

"Mmm, they smell sweet. Do you think you can pin one or two in my hair?" She looked at the other four posies, all from various gentlemen she had met in the past week. There was nothing from Andrew; she told herself firmly that of course he could not send flowers to anyone but his affianced wife. "How kind everyone is. What is this?" She picked up a small box of carved ivory.

"I didn't open it, miss. It's from his Grace."

"Oh, look, Annie! A ruby necklace, and eardrops. Oh, Annie, I think I am going to cry."

"You mustn't do that," said her abigail bracingly. "Don't want your eyes to match your gown too, do you?"

Teresa's first ball gown was of ruby satin with an overskirt of ivory lace, open down the front, and more lace trimming the low-cut bodice and puffed sleeves. By the time she had washed and put it on, the coiffeur from Birmingham had arrived to help with her hair, and Howell to supervise the rest of her toilette. The glossy black mass was piled high on her head, with a few loose ringlets framing her face. With instructions from Howell, Annie's nimble fingers wove a wreath of the red rosebuds, and they fixed it in a coronet about her dark head.

Annie knelt to help her put on her ivory satin dancing slippers.

"Her Grace sent this," said Howell, producing a fan of pierced ivory and slipping its ribbon over her wrist. She stepped back. "Well, I have to say, miss, as how her Grace is right. You'll take the shine right out of all those pink and white misses. Looks almost royal, don't she, Annie?"

Annie nodded, eyes shining. "You'll dance every dance, Miss Teresa," she prophesied, "and they'll be fighting to take you in to supper."

\* \* \* \*

There was admiration on the faces of her cousins when she descended to the drawing room. As she curtsied to the duke and duchess, Lord John stepped forward and swept a bow that would have done credit to a Cavalier.

"Cousin, may I have the honour of the first dance?" he requested. "I wager half the fellows in the room will be ready to call me out for forestalling them."

"I hope you will not call out your papa, then," she said, twinkling up at him. "He asked me yesterday."

John turned to the duke. "Sir, name your seconds!" he cried melodramatically.

His Grace shook his head reprovably and murmured, "I daresay you will grow up one day. You look magnificent, Teresa."

"Thanks to your gift, Uncle." She touched the ruby pendant, her face glowing. "How very kind you are, sir. And Cousin Tom, thank you for the roses. You see I am wearing them."

"Thus greatly enhancing their beauty," said Lord Danville gracefully, if a trifle ponderously.

"Dash it all, Tom, you've stolen a march on me, too," his brother accused. "I ain't in the petticoat line in general," he apologised to Teresa. "Should have thought of flowers. The muslin company don't expect such graces," he added wickedly in a whispered aside.

"How lucky you did not send any," she teased, pretending she had not heard his last remark. "I could never have chosen between my cousins' offerings and must have declined to wear either."

Marco stepped forward, proud and handsome in his first evening breeches and black velvet coat. With a bow as graceful as John's, if less elaborate, he handed his sister a small package.

"I hope it is right," he said anxiously. "I asked Aunt Stafford what would be suitable."

It was an ivory bracelet, intricately carved, that matched Teresa's fan to perfection. She put it on at once, over her glove, and turned to Marco. He hurriedly backed away.

"No hugs! You will crease my coat."

"Never say my little brother is become a dandy." She laughed. "Thank you. The bracelet is perfect."

"It is from China. Cousin John took me to Limehouse, down by the docks. There are hundreds of

Chinamen there.”

From China. Teresa studied the entwined dragons with interest, trying to suppress a wish that it was she, not Muriel, who had the opportunity of going to the mysterious land with Andrew.

The guests arrived, forty for dinner followed by another two or three hundred for the ball. The duchess excused Teresa early from the receiving line so that she should not be too tired to dance. She went into the ballroom, dazzling with mirrors, the diamonds of the ladies, the gold chandeliers with their hundreds of beeswax candles. Her dance card was filled, all but the waltzes, long before the duke came to lead her onto the floor to open the ball.

The first dance was a quadrille. Concentrating on the complicated figures, Teresa forgot to be nervous and laughed with delight. The duke beamed at her.

“I wish Edward were here to see you,” he said. “And your mama, of course. You quite take the shine out of all the young ladies.”

Teresa agreed wistfully that it would be beyond anything great to have her parents present, but she could not really imagine them mingling with the haut ton. The hacienda on the volcano’s slope was in another world.

Lord Danville was waiting to claim her for the next dance. As she stood with him at the side of the room, Baron Carruthers approached them. She had seen him several times since her original glimpse in the park, but had never been formally introduced.

He bowed to her partner, his cold eyes appraising her. They reminded her of the jaguar. “Servant, Danville. I am come to beg a favour. Pray present me to your beautiful cousin.”

Lord Danville looked uneasy but found it impossible to refuse a direct request. Though Teresa curtsied politely to the baron, she did not hold out her hand. He bowed low and asked permission to sign her card.

“I am sorry, all the dances are taken,” she said in relief. There was something about him that repelled her, quite apart from her cousins; warnings and the rumours she had since heard about his dissipated way of life. He bowed again, his words of regret accompanied by an expression close to a sneer. He did not press her, and headed for the card room as Cousin Tom took her arm to escort her onto the floor.

When it was time for the first waltz, Teresa went to sit beside the duchess. Most of her friends had already made their débuts the previous spring, so the patronesses of Almack's had long since granted them permission to waltz. Teresa watched a little sadly as the floor began to fill. She was enjoying her first ball more than she had dreamed possible, and it was a shocking waste of time to have to be a wallflower, however briefly.

Then she saw Andrew making his way towards her. In the crush she had missed his arrival. Sitting out a waltz with Andrew would be better than dancing it with anyone else, she thought joyfully.

He bowed to the duchess. "I have Lady Castlereagh's permission to ask Miss Danville for the dance," he said. "May I deprive you her company, ma'am?"

Her hand on his arm felt the muscles move as he clasped her waist and swung her into the dance. His blue eyes gazing down into hers drove all thought from her mind and she moved in a daze, conscious only of his closeness. Her lips parted in a half smile. His grip on her hand tightened and he drew in his breath sharply, pulling her a little closer.

"Teresa," he murmured.

She did not answer. Words were unnecessary.

The next set was one of the simpler country dances, fortunately, since Teresa's head was still in the clouds. She was not expected to hold a proper conversation with her partner, Mr Wishart, because the figures separated them often. Somehow she managed not to make any obvious mistakes.

After that came the supper dance, which John had reserved, and his lighthearted friendliness brought her back to earth. They chatted merrily as they danced, then went into the supper room with Jenny Kaye and her partner.

At a nearby table, Andrew bent solicitously over Muriel, asking her what she wanted from the buffet.

Teresa fell silent, then embarked upon a lively flirtation with her cousin. If he noticed a quality of desperation in her mood, he did not mention it. He responded in kind, and more than one dowager nodded wisely and muttered dire warnings about marriages between cousins.

## Chapter 14

The day after her coming-out ball, Teresa slept till past noon. She awoke with a slight headache, real this time, which she put down to overindulgence in champagne.

She remembered watching Andrew leave with Muriel, placing her cloak solicitously about her slender white shoulders.

She remembered laughing with Cousin John and drinking more champagne and dancing, dancing, dancing till dawn lightened the sky.

She remembered waltzing with Andrew—but on that memory she did not dare let herself dwell.

Today she had missed her morning ride with him, but the next day was the one set for her conference with the coffee merchants. Though she had been indignant when Andrew insisted on going with her, now she felt she would be glad to have his support, as well as being simply glad of his presence.

\* \* \* \*

On the morrow, they drove with Marco and Annie to the Gloster Coffee House in Piccadilly. It was indeed respectable as coaching inns went. Founded a century and more ago the coffee house had, like many another, become a gathering place for merchants and other men of business. Though it was now the London headquarters of the Portsmouth stage line, it was still frequented by dealers in coffee and tea.

Lord Edward's banker had invited seven of the most prominent importers of coffee to meet there that morning. He had not, however, warned them that a female hoped to do business with them. Enticed by his promise of something out of the ordinary, they were all waiting in a private parlour, set aside for their use, when Teresa arrived at the inn.

The landlord ushered her into the parlour, followed by Annie, Andrew, then Marco carrying the little wooden chest of coffee beans they had brought from Costa Rica.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Teresa said. "I am Miss Danville. I hope to persuade you to buy coffee produced on my father's hacienda in Costa Rica."

A small, skinny man in an old-fashioned long coat and tie wig snorted and marched out with a scowl on his face, muttering something about modern females not knowing their place. The other six

remained, their expressions varying from astonishment through scepticism to admiration.

"Delighted, I'm sure," said a corpulent merchant, ogling her. "Out of the ordinary indeed! Always a pleasure to do business with a pretty young woman." He winked.

"I warned you," Andrew whispered, then proceeded to demonstrate his estimable abilities as a diplomat. Without offending anyone, he put the stout cit in his place and convinced the sceptics that it would be worth their while to stay and try Teresa's wares.

She hurried to open the chest and soon they were all sniffing at handfuls of the roasted beans. She set Marco to grinding them in a mill provided by the innkeeper, who had also set out one of the new Biggin coffeepots with a built-in filter. Teresa sent Annie to the kitchens to fetch boiling water and soon the delicious aroma of brewing coffee filled the room.

The merchants sipped her brew, compared it to the best varieties served in the coffee house, tasted again, scribbled notes.

"'Tis as rich as Jamaica Blue Mountain," observed one, impressed.

"Better," said another.

They besieged Teresa with questions about quantities, shipping routes, agents, and political complications. Oscar had prepared her well during the voyage from Limón to Port Royal and she managed to answer all queries to their satisfaction. She shot a glance of triumph at Andrew, who nodded encouragement, grinning.

Finally, all six merchants promised to send draft contracts for her perusal. She gave them her direction at Stafford House, thanked them, and took her leave. They all bowed low as she swept out, followed by her retinue.

Andrew immediately took her to task. "You ought not to have given your uncle's direction," he said. "Your banker could have dealt with the matter without involving your relations."

Teresa was too pleased with herself to take offence at his reprimand. "I daresay you are right, but never mind," she said gaily. "Boggs already knows I am shockingly involved in trade, so I shall ask him to pass the contracts to me privately. Now, I am too excited to

sit tamely in the carriage. Pray let us walk a little."

Marco shook her hand and congratulated her, while Andrew told the groom to meet them in Berkeley Square. They strolled down Piccadilly. The street was full of stagecoaches leaving the Bull and Mouth for Shropshire, the Spread Eagle for Liverpool, half a dozen other inns for destinations all over the country. Teresa and Annie studied the shop windows. They were particularly fascinated by the signs at the money-changer's: "Napoleons sold and bought. Light guineas taken at full value. Old silver taken with rapture. French silver taken with alacrity, quite novel. Napoleons, louis d'or and gold of every sort and denomination taken with peculiar adroitness."

"They even bought the coins I brought back from North Africa," Andrew told them. "I must bring in my Mexican silver one of these days. Now, how about an ice at Gunter's to celebrate the success of your business?"

At the Sign of the Pot and Pineapple, in Berkeley Square, Andrew insisted on treating Annie, too. The maid's dark face shone with delight as she tasted her cream fruit concoction, made with ice shipped all the way from Greenland. Teresa thanked Andrew with a grateful look for the pleasure he had given her abigail. She herself could not choose between Cedrati and Bergamot Chips, and Naples Divolini, so she had some of each, followed by an ice.

"Engaging in commerce is good for the appetite," she observed. "Now that I have justified my journey to England, I shall not feel guilty about spending Don Eduardo's money on frivolities. Next stop, Mrs Bell's on Charlotte Street for a bonnet from Paris."

"I shall walk," chorused Marco and Andrew with identical shudders.

\* \* \* \*

The Parisian bonnet, Teresa's first venture into choosing her own apparel without advice, was deemed charming by the duchess and Miss Carter. More important, it was approved by the duchess's dresser, Howell. With renewed self-confidence, Teresa dashed from rout to ball to Venetian breakfast. Every day she had a choice of entertainments and had to refuse many invitations for lack of time. It was hard to believe that this was merely the Little Season, with half the Ton absent in the country.

Teresa did make time to visit the sights of London. After she had travelled thousands of miles to the greatest city in the world, it would have been a pity to see nothing of it but the streets and squares and shops of the fashionable quarter.

Lord Danville, a mine of historical information, escorted her to the Monument, Mansion House, Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral. Lord John took both her and Marco to Astley's Amphitheatre to see the circus, to Mrs Salmon's Waxwork and Barker's Panorama and a balloon ascension. On a trip to the Tower, John took Marco to the Armoury, while Tom paid out some shillings so that Teresa might peek at the Crown Jewels, scarcely visible by lamplight behind bars. Then they all went to the menagerie.

Teresa found the scruffy lions a sad contrast to the magnificent, if terrifying, jaguar of the Costa Rican jungle. As for the rest, she had to admit to Andrew that he was right, it would take a lifetime to know London well. Cartago was indeed a village in comparison.

Marco was as busy as his sister. His tutor, Mr Netherdale, had a scientific bent, so that as well as the classics he was studying mathematics, chemistry, and astronomy. In his free time, Cousin John introduced him to the city's masculine haunts and pastimes.

"Better keep quiet about all this, young 'un," he advised. "Females don't appreciate cockpits and prizefights and boozing kens."

Marco, who approached these activities with the same intellectual curiosity he applied to his studies, kept quiet about "all that." However, he went straight to his sister when he returned, shaken, from attending the slavers' trial with his tutor.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked, urging him towards a chair by the fire in her dressing room. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"I wish Captain Harrison were a ghost. He is a dreadful man, Teresa, truly evil. They had to drag him out, shouting vicious threats. I cannot repeat his words, but he vowed revenge on those who had wrecked his business and brought him to gaol."

"I am sure it must have been frightening, my dear, but after all, he can do nothing as long as he is in prison. What happened during the trial?"



"He named the man who financed his voyage, the owner of the *Snipe*. Do you remember Captain Fitch was sure the ship was not his own, or he would have made more effort to avoid scuttling her? The owner is called Carruthers," Marco told his sister. "Sir Andrew says the law will never touch him because he is a peer, and the papers will not even mention his name for fear of libel suits. There is no proof beyond Harrison's word and he is a convicted criminal."

"Lord Carruthers!" Teresa gasped. "I have met him. Both John and Tom said he was a bad lot, though he is received in Society. I suppose he must know that I was instrumental in bringing his enterprise to naught. How shall I ever face him again!"

"Perhaps he does not know. I am sure he cannot have visited Harrison in Newgate for fear of being taken up, and he was not at the trial, Sir Andrew said. Besides, you were not actually mentioned by name. Harrison referred to you as 'that hoity-toity female!'"

"Did he, indeed!"

"Sir Andrew says it is best not to tell anyone about Lord Carruthers lest he come to hear of it. He was a great gun in the witness box, Teresa. It was mostly on his evidence that Harrison and two others were sentenced to transportation. They could not nab them on the murder charge because there was no proof that they deliberately sank the *Snipe*," he added with regret. "Mr Netherdale says they will be held in a hulk on the Thames until a convict ship sails for Australia."

"Then I am sure we have no cause for worry. And Andrew is certainly correct that it would be foolish to broadcast our knowledge of Carruthers' misdeeds. Pray tell no one, not even Cousin John, and warn Mr Netherdale to hold his tongue."

"Mum's the word," Marco agreed, looking much more cheerful than on his arrival.

\* \* \* \*

Teresa rode with Andrew in the park the next morning, and he confirmed Marco's report. "It troubles me that Harrison considers you the chief author of his downfall," he added, frowning. "Of course, even if he should communicate with Lord Carruthers, you are safe under the protection of one of the premier peers of the realm. Still, though you can hardly wear your pistols in the ballroom, I hope you still carry them when you are out riding or walking in the park."

"I never thought to hear you say that," she commented with a laugh. "But yes, I have them in my pockets at this moment."

"I am glad to hear it. Though I do not wish to alarm you. I cannot think it likely you will have the slightest use for them."

Touched by his concern, she remembered these words when she sat next to Lord John at dinner that night. Her graceless cousin had not forgotten that he had challenged her to a shooting match.

"I have had a capital notion," he whispered in her ear, a wicked sparkle in his eye. "I shall smuggle you into Manton's Shooting Gallery disguised as a boy."

"You shall do no such thing," she replied indignantly. "I hope you are bamming me. I may be an ignorant foreigner, but I know an outrageous suggestion when I hear one!"

He sighed mournfully and shook his head. "How tame-spirited, cousin. I had thought better of you. I shall have to borrow a target from Manton's and set it up in the garden. I can hang it from the tree. Will the day after tomorrow suit you?"

She murmured acquiescence, preferring not to enquire whether he intended to ask Manton's permission for the loan.

The next evening he informed her that all was arranged for the following morning. She felt a sudden qualm about the propriety of the contest, even in a private garden, but surely even Lord John would not lead her into anything truly outrageous. After all, his suggestion of smuggling her into Manton's had been in jest.

She was shocked when she went down to the garden next morning to find seven or eight of Lord John's fellow Corinthians. Most of them were occupied in wagering on the outcome of the contest, singularly foolish, she thought, since they had no idea of her ability. Two of them were arguing over a candelabrum. They moved it here and there, lighting the candles only to have them blown out by the slight breeze. Since it was mid-morning, broad daylight, Teresa could not imagine what they were about.

Lord John hurried up to her. "You will not mind that I brought along a few of the fellows," he said, meeting her frown with an ingenuous smile.

"This was to be a private affair," she answered

indignantly. "I cannot think it proper..."

"But it is private! Private garden, wall all round, in my own home, too. Can't possibly be any objection. Now you stand here, I'll give you five feet."

"No you will not. I shall stand beside you." Challenged, Teresa forgot her concern.

She put two bullets into the bull's eye, to resounding cheers, and quickly reloaded while her cousin took his turn. He equalled her, so they moved farther away. Again she hit the centre, as did he.

"Equally matched, by Jove!" called one of the spectators.

"Here, we've got these devilish candles lit at last," another announced. "They're burning pretty steady. Try for 'em, ma'am."

"You have to shoot out the flame," John explained when Teresa turned to him in puzzlement.

Her hand steady, enjoying herself now, she took aim, fired. A candle went out. It was Lord John's turn. He shot and another flame died. Teresa extinguished her second—and Lord John missed.

The cheers she expected did not come. Her audience was gazing towards the house, faces aghast, and backing away.

"Good God, Cousin, what are you about?" Lord Danville's horrified voice came from behind her.

She turned. The viscount stood on the terrace, Andrew at his side. Boggs, two footmen and three maids peered from the ballroom. A noise from above made her raise her eyes. At one window of the drawing room she saw the gaping faces of Lady Castlereagh, Lady Kaye and Miss Carter, at the other Jenny Kaye, Daphne Pringle and Mr Wishart.

Somehow Teresa knew that behind them on the sofa the duchess was having a spasm. She wondered why, knowing Cousin John as she did, she had not thought to enquire as to whether he had mentioned the match to his parents and warned the household.

Andrew had come to take Teresa for a drive in the park with Muriel. At Lord Danville's grim suggestion, he whisked her away immediately.

The viscount then used every ounce of his authority as heir to a dukedom, called in several favours, and issued a couple of threats to exact promises from all his brother's friends that not a word of this morning's doings should pass their lips. Rejecting John's

shamefaced assistance, he then went up to the drawing room to face the ladies.

Only Lord Danville's reputation as a serious gentleman of sober tastes enabled him to persuade the Ladies Castlereagh and Kaye that their eyes had deceived them. It was unthinkable, he pointed out, that a young lady of good family should deliberately engage in a shooting contest. His cousin Teresa had heard the shots and gone to investigate. His reprobate brother had then thrust a pistol into her hand and urged her to fire it, which, being an obliging girl, she had done, fortunately without loss of life. She had been very much shocked at the resulting explosion and he had sent her off with her friend, Miss Parr, to recover.

The ladies expressed their hope that Miss Danville's nerves had not suffered irreparable damage from Lord John's thoughtlessness.

Miss Kaye and Miss Pringle, who had been near the window from the first, exchanged a glance and assured his lordship that they were much too fond of Miss Danville to breathe a word. Mr Wishart cast him a cynical look, but he was a good friend and Lord Danville had no fear of his discretion.

The visitors left, and the viscount turned his attention to his prostrate mama. Fortunately, she was more than willing to cast all the blame on her errant younger son.

Meanwhile, below stairs, Boggs had threatened with instant dismissal all servants who so far forgot themselves as to gossip about their betters. By the time Teresa, chastened by Sir Andrew's tongue-lashing and Muriel's manifest horror, returned to Stafford House, the incident had been thoroughly hushed up.

## **Chapter 15**

Andrew did not call for several days thereafter, a much greater punishment for Teresa than her cousin's scold or her aunt's vapours. When he did come to Stafford house, it was with a grave face that had nothing to do with her behaviour. He asked to see Marco, and was closeted with him in the library for some time before he sent a footman to ask Teresa to join them.

Entering the room, she was glad to see him looking

quite cheerful. He greeted her with pleasure and a hint of amusement that intrigued her.

Marco looked puzzled. "Andrew wants me to explain to you about the gaming hell," he said. "I..."

"Gaming hell?" Teresa repeated weakly. She sank into the nearest chair, feeling pale. "Is that where Cousin John has been taking you? Oh Marco, I hope you are not wasting Don Eduardo's money on gambling."

Andrew sat down beside her and took her hand, patting it soothingly. He was openly grinning now. "Before you castigate your brother, wait until you know the whole story," he suggested. "I had very much the same idea when I heard rumours that he had been seen playing faro with Lord Carruthers at Seventy-seven, St James's Street. The place is a notorious hell."

"With Lord Carruthers!"

"A notable gull-groper, among his other faults." Seeing her look of blank incomprehension, he explained, "A Captain Sharp. One who fleeces the unwary at games of chance. I have persuaded Marco to confess to you lest you should hear rumours and worry about it."

"I really went to watch them playing hazard." Marco patiently ignored the interruptions. "Mr Netherdale has been illustrating the laws of probability with the use of dice, you know. However, it was very dull, so I went to see some of the other games. Cousin John stayed behind at the hazard table. He was losing, I think."

"I'll have a word to say to John about this," remarked Teresa, her voice grim. She was less and less able to understand Andrew's amusement.

"Roulette is too dependent on chance," Marco went on, "and piquet involves too much skill to be able to predict the outcome. Faro is perfect. I was just watching, honestly, Teresa, until Lord Carruthers invited me to join in. He was sneering so, it was unbearable, so I did. It looked very easy. All you have to do is remember which cards have gone already and work out the odds of the rest appearing at any given moment. Fascinating."

"So you played."

"Yes." Marco's tone was matter-of-fact. "I won five hundred guineas."

Andrew laughed aloud at Teresa's expression. She snatched her hand away from him with a glare. "You

won five hundred guineas?" she said incredulously. "I hope this has not given you a taste for gaming."

"It was an interesting mathematical puzzle, but it is more amusing to do more complicated calculations, for which one needs a pencil and paper. The atmosphere of a hell is not conducive to serious thought."

"I am glad to hear it! Andrew, how could you let me think he was in deep water?"

To her surprise, Andrew frowned. "To tell the truth," he said slowly, "I am concerned that it was Carruthers who lured Marco into betting. To be sure, it is nothing new to him, but suppose it was an attempt at revenge for the *Snipe*? My informant was very clear that his lordship knew who Marco was and exerted all his wits to involve him in what he must have expected would be heavy losses."

"You think Carruthers has spoken to Harrison, then?"

"Or received a message. It is most fortunate that he was foiled by Marco's intelligence and common sense."

"And luck," said Marco unexpectedly. "Where probabilities are concerned there is no certainty."

Teresa and Andrew laughed. Andrew took his leave, and Marco made Teresa promise not to rake John over the coals for taking him to a gambling establishment.

"I'm sure Papa would consider it part of my education as a gentleman," he pointed out. "And I have no intention of going again."

"Very well," Teresa conceded with a sigh. "But promise me that if you meet Lord Carruthers on any other clandestine outing, you will not allow him to goad you into behaving foolishly."

"I shan't," Marco promised.

\* \* \* \*

The next time Teresa saw Andrew was at a musical evening when her discretion was finally overcome by Lady Mary Hargreave's incessant taunts.

Jenny Kaye had long since introduced her brother, Stewart, to Teresa. One afternoon they met in the Kaye's music room to play and sing together. Stewart had considerable skill on the guitar, and Teresa soon discovered that Jenny's voice was far better than her own. She taught her friend a Spanish song, then took out her ocarina and accompanied them.

The next time they played together, Marco joined them with his ocarina. The Kayes were delighted with

the plaintive sound, and soon the quartet had a repertoire of four or five songs. Teresa had no thought of performing before an audience. It was Jenny who grew impatient with Lady Mary's insinuations against her friend and persuaded her mother to hold a musical evening.

Lady Kaye invited some forty guests, mostly matrons with daughters anxious to perform, and such male family members as they could force to come along. Among them were Lady Parr and Muriel, who had been practising on the harp since her return from Jamaica, and who looked angelic playing it. Lady Parr's brother proving adamant, Andrew was cajoled into squiring them.

The invitation sent to Stafford House specifically requested the presence of Teresa and Marco, though it was open to all the family. Lord Danville decided to go with them. He had kept a close eye on Teresa since the shooting match. Though he could not imagine how she could fall into a scrape at a musicale, he did not consider her brother an adequate escort. After two harpists, three pianists (including Lady Mary's superior performance) and three sopranos (all singing Italian arias), the audience was ready for a change. There was a murmur of interest as the members of Miss Kaye's quartet took their places by the piano.

Stewart struck a chord on the guitar, Teresa and Marco raised their tiny instruments to their mouths, and Jenny's mellow contralto joined them in a song of unhappy love.

As the sweet, sorrowful sound of the ocarinas died away, there was a moment's silence before the listeners applauded. Andrew judged the silence half tribute and half disapproval, the former chiefly from the genuine music-lovers, the latter from jealous mamas.

The applause ended in an expectant hush, and he clearly heard Lady Parr, at his side, mutter, "I warned her that ridiculous instrument was not socially acceptable. Sir Archibald would be shocked."

One or two nearby heads turned, nodding assent.

"My dear ma'am," Andrew said with unnecessary loudness, "so very like a Scottish lament, do you not agree? Instead of the Celtic harp, a guitar and ocarinas. It brings back memories of many a pleasant evening on my travels."

Since Muriel was about to perform a Scottish ballad, Lady Parr murmured feebly, "So original."

Muriel, overcoming her timidity in her friend's defence, stood up and went to Teresa, saying, "I thought it quite delightful. Do let me see your instrument. Can you play 'Flow Gently, Sweet Afton?'" She hummed the tune and Marco picked it out.

As Daphne Pringle and several others joined the group, Lord Danville decided his intervention on his cousins' behalf was unnecessary. Fortunately Lady Castlereagh was not present, and Lady Kaye was stymied by her offsprings' complicity in Teresa's latest start. Danville saw Lady Mary approaching him and quickly made his way over to Sir Andrew.

"Thank you," he said, shaking his hand. "I am glad of an ally in my struggle to keep my cousin within the bounds of respectability."

"She means no harm," said Andrew with a frown. "It's her wretched upbringing."

"I know. Your Miss Parr behaved with estimable loyalty."

They nodded to each other in mutual admiration of Miss Parr, and both clapped loudly when at last she performed her piece.

Muriel had her reward. The very next day Teresa received a note from her: Andrew had agreed to turn down the mission to China in favour of a desk job at the Foreign Office. They were to be married soon after the New Year.

\* \* \* \*

Teresa grew increasingly discontented with the life of a society butterfly. The charm of novelty had turned to the tedium of oft-repeated scenes and faces and conversation. Her new friends had few interests beyond the latest on dits and the newest quirks of fashion. The high point of her days had been the early ride with Andrew, often cancelled by blustery autumn storms. Now he cancelled their outings altogether, saying that approaching winter made the mornings too dark and cold for comfort.

Riding tamely within the confines of Hyde Park had in any case become irksome, Teresa consoled herself, and the leafless skeletons of elms and oaks depressed her spirits.

On fine afternoons she still often drove in the park with Muriel, frequently accompanied by Andrew or



Lord Danville, or both of them, on horseback. The hour of the fashionable promenade retreated before the encroaching dusk of autumn evenings, so they often found themselves surrounded by carriages and riders, though few pedestrians dared the muddy walks.

One crisp, sunny afternoon in late November, both gentlemen had joined the ladies' outing. Muriel was engrossed in plans for her wedding and chattered on, apparently unaware that all her companions were exhibiting signs of restless dissatisfaction. They reached the Serpentine, and Teresa ordered the groom to turn and drive back to the Grosvenor Gate.

Coming towards them, still a hundred yards and several carriages away, was a high-perch phaeton. Teresa recognised Lord John sitting in it, with Marco at the reins. He had been teaching his young cousin to drive, and now it seemed the novice was ready to appear in public.

Marco appeared to be doing quite well. As his sister watched proudly, she saw John lean down to fiddle with something at his feet.

A moment later, Gayo was perched on his shoulder.

Startled, Marco glanced round, and lost control of his team. John grabbed for the reins. Gayo flew up, screaming imprecations, and swooped towards the driver of a nearby curricule.

Horses plunged and reared, the phaeton capsized, shrieks and wails drowned the parrot's scolding.

"How dare he!" Teresa was white-faced with anger and worry. "Oh, I must go to them! Quickly!"

She stood up as the groom driving their landaulet shrugged. "No way through, miss."

Andrew pulled his chestnut close to the landaulet, leaned down, and swept her up onto the horse in front of him. "Hold on," he ordered grimly.

As they galloped towards the tangled mass of carriages, Teresa whistled. Gayo heard the whistle above the commotion and flew to meet them.

He landed on Sir Andrew's shoulder and gently pulled on his earlobe. "Hello, dinner," he said lovingly.

Andrew somehow controlled his startled mount. He reined in beside the wrecked phaeton. John was standing there holding his head, while Marco sat on the ground looking dazed.

"Are you all right?" Teresa demanded urgently of her

brother.

"Just a scratch," John answered, lowering his hand and glancing at it. His glove was bloodstained.

"Not you. Marco!"

"I'll do," said the youth, blinking. He took John's proffered hand and pulled himself to his feet. "Truly! Don't fuss, Teresa."

"Game as a pebble," said John approvingly.

"The sooner I get you out of here the better," said Andrew through gritted teeth, and turned the chestnut towards the park gate. As they cantered on, Teresa glanced back to see what appeared to be a good five thousand of the Upper Ten Thousand watching them, gaping and pointing and whispering to each other. Among them she caught a glimpse of Lord Danville, leaning consolingly over Muriel, her hand in his, her agitated face turned up to him.

Teresa wound her hand in the chestnut's mane and fought the impulse to lean back against Andrew's chest. Muriel's conduct with Cousin Tom did not allow her to relax hers with Muriel's betrothed.

Moments later they reached Stafford House. Teresa slid down onto the mounting block, stepped to the pavement, and turned to look up at him. He was scowling.

"Thank you," she said uncertainly, offering her hand. "I cannot say..."

He ignored her hand. "Why the devil I let your father persuade me to bring you to London, I cannot think," he snapped. "You are no more fit for society than is your Indian witch doctor."

Stunned, she let her hand drop as he rode off. With an indignant squawk Gayo rejoined her. She smoothed his ruffled feathers but her mind was on the bitter injustice of Sir Andrew's blaming her for Lord John's escapade. Shoulders drooping, she went into the house.

Boggs met her in the hall and handed her three thick letters. "These were delivered by messengers," he told her with a conspiratorial wink. "Something to do with *coffee*, I believe, miss, if you take my meaning. I made sure no one else saw them."

She took the packets without interest and thanked him mechanically. He looked offended. She was sorry and hoped her unintended rebuff would not cause the butler to disclose her secret, but she was too blue-

devilled to soothe his ruffled feelings.

Reaching the haven of her dressing room, Teresa leashed Gayo, slumped into a chair, and opened one of her letters. As Boggs had hinted, it was a coffee contract. She skimmed through it, then a second. Both bettered the terms Don Eduardo had told her to hold out for. She tossed them all aside, the third unopened, and sat staring blankly at the window until Annie arrived to draw the curtains and build up the fire.

"I came early," the abigail announced, "because his Grace wants to see you in his study before dinner, and the duchess is calling for you to her chamber right now. In the vapours again, Miss Howell said."

"Then I must change very quickly," Teresa said, smiling with an effort.

As she dressed, she wondered whether her aunt would continue to sponsor her after this latest scandal. Half the Ton had witnessed it, and the other half would soon hear about it. Somehow she could not bring herself to care.

Howell admitted her to the duchess's apartments with a grim face. "Her Grace is that upset, miss," she reported in a whisper. "Mr Boggs just happened to mention to Miss Carter as you'd received papers from some City merchants or other, and Miss Carter let it slip to her Grace, not meaning any harm, but you know how she does rattle on, miss. Her Grace's nerves is quite overset, thinking you might be engaged in trade."

"Thank you, Howell. I shall go in to my aunt at once."

The pink chamber seemed to Teresa particularly oppressive today. The duchess was reclining on her bed, a vinaigrette clutched in her hand, but she sat bolt upright when she saw the culprit.

"Can this be true?" she demanded in a vigorous voice, then remembered her role, sank back against her pillows, and added faintly, "I cannot believe it of you, Teresa. Engaging in trade!"

Teresa had no thought of dissembling. "I'm afraid it is true, aunt," she admitted listlessly. "Papa desired me to arrange for the export of the coffee he grows on the hacienda."

"I understood that Lord Edward sent you to catch a husband. That may well prove excessively difficult if you are seen consorting with Cits."

"He sought to kill two birds with one stone, ma'am. Since I doubt I shall ever marry, perhaps it is just as well that my other purpose is successfully accomplished."

The duchess's buoyant spirits rebounded from her horror. "Well, if you must engage in trade, I daresay it is as well to be successful. I am glad to hear it. But what is this about doubting you shall marry? Do not talk such nonsense. You are already much admired, girl, and the Season is yet some months hence."

Teresa felt a momentary urge to fling herself into her aunt's arms and tell her that the gentleman she loved not only was betrothed to another but held her, Teresa, in aversion. She doubted the duchess would sympathise, when there were any number of more eligible young men available.

"You are right, aunt," she said, hoping she sounded convinced, but realising that the duchess was not yet aware of the latest débâcle. "I am not yet at my last prayers. I am feeling a little mopish this evening, but it will pass. Pray excuse me, now, for my uncle wishes to see me."

"Stafford knows about this shocking business?"

"I believe not, ma'am. It is about some other matter, I make no doubt."

"Then do not tell him, if you please. I have spoken sharply to Amelia and to Boggs already, and if you will hold your tongue there is not reason it should become the latest on-dit. However, perhaps it will be as well to leave early for Sussex, just in case word spreads. It is not worth more than a nine days' wonder, especially if you are not here to remind people by your presence. By the time we return in March, I do not doubt it will be quite forgot. I shall tell Stafford I wish to go to Five Oaks at once, though I shall be excessively sorry to miss Lady Jersey's rout."

"If you think it wise, ma'am." Teresa curtsied and left, wondering whether she ought to have warned the duchess that any on-dit about her business activities was sure to be lost in the hullabaloo over her mad gallop across Hyde Park. So many secrets! She was beginning to grow confused about who knew what.

She started downstairs just as Marco dashed out of his room, looking none the worse for wear. She ought to scold him about taking Gayo out, but it was more important first to be sure he was not injured.

"Marco, are you really all right?"

"Of course, it was nothing. Teresa, you'll never guess what has happened. Harrison has escaped from the prison hulk!"

"Harrison?"

"The slaver. Don't tell me you have forgotten his existence. Honestly, if that isn't like a female, only interested in balls and gowns. Do you think he will come looking for revenge? Ought we to warn Uncle Stafford, in case he has not read about it? And Andrew?"

"Do as you please," said his sister indifferently.

Marco sighed. "Well, if you think it so unimportant I shall not bother my uncle. All the same, it would be famous if he came after us. Keep your pistols about you!"

She went on down to the study, prepared for her uncle to rake her over the coals, with no intention of trying to defend herself. It was her cousin's fault that it had happened but, as Andrew had implied, no proper young lady would have owned a parrot to tempt him to mischief.

Lord John was in the study with the duke. He looked still more dashing than usual with a court plaster on his forehead. He came towards her with both hands held out, a humble apology on his lips. "Cousin, I beg your forgiveness. I had no conceivable right to take Gayo without your knowledge. It never crossed my mind that he would cause such chaos! Marco did not know I had him, I promise you."

She could not resist the rueful twinkle in his eyes, that belied his penitent face and tone. "It was very wrong of you," she said with what severity she could muster. "It is no thanks to you that neither Marco nor Gayo came to harm."

"It is the harm to your reputation that concerns me," said the duke heavily. "You may go, John. Teresa, my dear, I do not mean to ring a peal over you. Once the damage was done, you did what you thought best, though it is unfortunate that that involved galloping through Hyde Park across a gentleman's saddle-bow. However, Danville assures me that you had no choice if you were to catch your parrot before he wreaked any further havoc, not to mention your very proper concern for your brother's possible injuries. At least Graylin had the wit to remove you rapidly from the

scene."

"I am so sorry, uncle! I never meant to disgrace your name."

"It is not so bad as that. It is bound to be the talk of the moment, however. I think it best that we go down to Five Oaks tomorrow, while talk dies down. I had intended to go next week in any case, and we have no important engagements."

"It is not necessary for everyone to put themselves out for me, sir. I can very well go alone."

"That will never do. For one thing, I have no desire to allow the gabblemongers to believe that you are being punished. For another, your aunt knows nothing of what occurred. If we leave early tomorrow, she need not find out, and by the time we return to town in February the business will be long forgotten."

"Aunt Stafford mentioned to me just now that she desires to go to Five Oaks without delay."

"Excellent. I was going to tell her that you have been burning the candle at both ends and are beginning to look sadly pulled." His Grace grinned at his indignant niece. "However, if she wishes to go anyway, we shall let her believe we are merely falling in with her own notion. Now, we generally get up quite a party for Christmas. I want you to be comfortable, my dear, so I shall invite a number of your particular friends to join us in a week or so. Danville has suggested Miss Parr and Miss Kaye, Mr Wishart, Graylin, and one or two others."

"Oh uncle, you are a great deal too good to me! I do try to deserve your kindness, indeed I do."

He patted her cheek. "Off with you then, child. And keep that bird of yours safely tied until we can get it down to the country."

Teresa went slowly up to the drawing room. Others might come, ignoring her disgrace for the prestige of a stay in a ducal mansion. She could not bring herself to tell her kind uncle that Sir Andrew Graylin was not at all likely to accept his invitation.

## **Chapter 16**

Five Oaks was scarce half a day's carriage ride south of London. At first Teresa felt her spirits rise as they left the smoky, bustling city behind them.

Her cheerfulness did not last. The duchess, annoyed

at having to miss Lady Jersey's rout, claimed a megrim and lay back against the brown velvet squabs with an expression of suffering, eyes closed. The countryside, so pretty on her arrival in England, was now painted grey and dun, and the leafless trees looked depressingly dead to one used to the ever-lush tropical forest.

Teresa remembered that, though her aunt was unaware of it, she was in disgrace. Andrew blamed her for the turn-up in the park, and if she ever saw him again he would doubtless be already married. At least, now she was a subject of scandal, he and Muriel would probably not invite her to the wedding. She did not think she could bear to watch them plight their troth.

The duke, sitting opposite, leaned forward and patted her hand. "Pray do not look so miserable, child," he whispered, glancing at his wife. "I have assured you that I do not hold you to blame."

She smiled at him tremulously. "I believe you were right, uncle. I have been drawing the bustle with a vengeance, and am now reaping the effects." Determined not to let a single tear escape, she closed her eyes tight and leaned back in the corner.

\* \* \* \*

If Teresa had been impressed by Stafford House, her first sight of Five Oaks overwhelmed her. A Palladian mansion, set on a gentle slope overlooking the meandering River Arun, it could have held her jungle home in one wing and scarcely noticed its presence. Small, fawn Jersey cows wandered about the park, while larger, dusky-red Sussex cattle browsed the meadows by the river. The flowerbeds in the formal gardens were bare, but there was an evergreen shrubbery close to the house which promised shelter for winter walks. Better still, Teresa anticipated long rides across the rolling hills.

Inside, the mansion was less elegant, less formal than the London house. Not that anything was shabby, rather it exuded an air of homely comfort. This was the duke's favourite seat, within easy reach of London, where generations of ducal children had grown up and congenial house-parties often filled the rooms with lively activity. Teresa stood in the huge entrance hall and tried to imagine her father as a small boy sliding down the well-polished bannisters.

Her bedchamber had a window seat with a view, framed by a vast cedar, down to the rippling brown waters of the Arun, fringed with bare willows. She saw deer mingling with the cows in the park, and a pair of dogs lolloped across the lawn and disappeared into the shrubbery. The setting sun escaped from the layer of clouds, pale but willing, and turned the grey hills to green.

Teresa decided to take Gayo outside before it grew dark. Here, surely, he could not land her in the briars.

Gayo flew wide, joyful circles shouting "Hello, hello," with never a curse escaping his beak. Calmed by his pleasure and her peaceful surroundings, Teresa blessed her uncle for bringing her to this haven.

The next few days she had little leisure for brooding. She rode with Marco and their cousins, helped the duchess plan entertainments for the coming party, explored the house, and met several neighbours. Every day she took Gayo out, and they soon had a regular audience of fascinated gardeners, dairy maids, and any other servants who could sneak away from their duties for a few minutes.

\* \* \* \*

One afternoon, she was descending the main stair with the parrot on her shoulder when she saw a gentleman in a greatcoat standing with his back to her in the hall. He was studying a full length portrait of the First Duke in all his be-wigged glory.

Teresa was going to retreat, not wanting to risk Gayo embarrassing a guest, but there was something familiar about the set of his blond head. She paused, and he turned.

"Andrew!" She ran down the stairs, her face alight with joy; then she remembered the terms on which they had parted.

"Teresa!" He took a step towards her, both hands held out, then stopped.

Gayo bridged the gap: "Hello, dinner!"

"I did not think you would come."

"I had to, if only to apologise. If you cannot forgive me, I shall not stay."

"Forgive you?"

"It was all my fault—well, Lord John was not precisely blameless! But had I not swept you onto my horse and galloped off with you like Young Lochinvar in Scott's poem, no one need have connected you with



the incident."

"I was afraid Marco might be badly hurt, and I had to retrieve Gayo before he caused further disaster. Given the choice of picking up my skirts and running through the mud, or playing the Bride of Young Lochinvar..." Teresa flushed. "Well, you know what I mean." How she would have liked to play bride to this "braw gallant"!

"You know the poem?"

Somehow they were friends again.

"Papa once bought a whole chest of books from an English captain, without any idea what was in it. One was *Marmion*, and that was one of my favourite bits. Are you just now arrived?"

"Yes, the butler has gone to announce me to the duke. I am very glad to have seen you first, for I had no notion how to tell him that my staying depended upon you."

She laughed. "But you will stay. I am taking Gayo outside. When you have seen my uncle, if you are not too tired, will you come out?"

"Happily."

He joined her some ten minutes later, and together they strolled about, chatting comfortably, while Gayo enjoyed his freedom.

"It is growing chilly," said Teresa at last, pulling her cloak closer about her. She whistled, and Gayo flew to her. As they turned towards the house, she told Andrew, "The rest of the guests are arriving tomorrow. My aunt has a hundred entertainments planned to keep us all busy."

"Then I am pleased to have arrived early, to enjoy a quiet coze with you." He smiled at her.

"How is it that you did not travel with Muriel?" Teresa asked, her heart aching. She had no desire to talk of his betrothed, but the words escaped her. She fought to keep her voice even.

"I came via my home, to see my family." He seemed no happier at the choice of subject.

"I am surprised she did not go with you, since she will so soon be your wife."

"Muriel and my sister-in-law are...I cannot say at daggers drawn for Muriel is by far too gentle for such a phrase. They do not deal together."

"You mean, I collect, that your sister-in-law bullies her. I remember that you told me she is an

intimidating female. Something like your future mama-in-law, I daresay! Poor Muriel is such a meek creature, you do well to keep them apart, though you cannot separate her from her mother."

"I cannot, but the duchess can. The invitation did not include Lady Parr."

They exchanged grins and went into the house in perfect agreement for once.

That night, in spite of her active day, Teresa lay awake for some time after Annie snuffed out her candle. If only Andrew were not engaged to Muriel. If only Muriel were not her friend. If only Don Eduardo had never invited him to the Hacienda del Inglés. She realised now that the damage to her heart had been done before ever they left Costa Rica.

She had believed Papa that she was attracted to Andrew only because he was a sophisticated stranger. Now she had met half the eligible gentlemen in England, many of them more elegant, handsomer, richer and of higher rank; now she knew for certain that she loved him.

And somehow, she must keep both him and Muriel from guessing it.

\* \* \* \*

The next afternoon the rest of the house party arrived. As well as Teresa's particular friends, there were people of the duke and duchess's generation, and their elder daughter.

Lady Pamela Jordan, a little younger than her brother Tom, was accompanied by her husband, Lord Jordan, and four children under the age of ten. She largely ignored the former in favour of the latter. In fact she spent so much time in the nursery that Teresa, after a friendly greeting that made her hope for a closer relationship, seldom saw her cousin.

Jenny Kaye and Daphne Pringle, in raptures to be invited to Five Oaks, immediately set about the siege of Lord Danville. Teresa found it impossible to blame him for turning increasingly to the non-threatening, safely betrothed Muriel. Whenever the younger set split up, for instance when they went by carriage to see Arundel Castle, he manoeuvred so that he, Teresa, Muriel and Sir Andrew were together.

This did not please his brother. "The devil of it is," he explained to Teresa, "that as soon as Tom's out of view they start after me, though I ain't half such a

good catch."

Teresa had mixed feelings on the subject, which she confided to no one. It was a painful joy to be so often with Andrew. The presence of his betrothed increased the pain. Though in some ways Cousin Tom's company helped her bear the situation, he also presented a source of confusion: he and Muriel seemed often to have more to say to each other than to Andrew or herself. She knew Andrew noticed it and was hurt.

In spite of these circumstances, she enjoyed the trip to Arundel. She had never seen anything remotely like the ancient medieval castle, rebuilt time and time again over the centuries, and she listened fascinated to Cousin Tom's tales of its history. It belonged to the Duke of Norfolk, and though he was not in residence his housekeeper made them welcome and provided a magnificent luncheon.

The December days were short, so they left early for the two hour drive back to Five Oaks. Though the sun was shining it was bitterly cold, and the housekeeper provided hot bricks for their feet. Andrew and Lord Danville carefully tucked fur rugs about Teresa and Muriel in the smaller of the two carriages, then took their seats opposite and tucked themselves in. They set off, followed by the larger coach with the rest of the group.

Some three miles from Five Oaks, they passed through the village of Billingshurst. They were in the middle of the village when their carriage stopped abruptly, with much whoa-ing from the coachman.

"What is it?" called Lord Danville.

The answer was drowned by a confusion of snarling growls and screams. Teresa leaned out of the window, but all she could see was a village girl carrying two pails of water on a yoke, her hand raised to her mouth, an expression of horror on her face.

"Lord, what's to do?" asked Andrew, peering over Teresa's shoulder.

"I cannot make out."

"Here, let me by and I'll go and see." He swung open the door and jumped out of the carriage, followed by Teresa.

The horses were shying and tossing their heads, held with difficulty by the coachman. Behind them the second coach had stopped and several of its occupants descended, calling out questions. John ran to join

Teresa and Andrew as they hurried forward to where they could see past the restless team.

A mastiff and a bull terrier were locked in combat in the middle of the street, blood-curdling sounds issuing from their throats. It was a terrifying sight, but it did not explain the horror on the girl's face.

Then they saw the child. Perhaps two years old, he was toddling towards the dogs with every evidence of fascinated delight, his hand held out as if to pet them.

Somewhere a woman screamed, "Jemmy!"

With one accord, Andrew and Lord John leaped at the dogs. They seized them by the scruffs of their necks and hung on with all their strength.

Teresa dodged round them, picked up the little boy and set him down at the side of the road, well out of the way. He pouted at her.

"See doggies," he said indignantly.

A woman in a white apron hurried up, tears pouring down her pale, plump face. "Oh, Jemmy! Oh, miss!"

Teresa had no time for her. A backward glance showed her Sir Andrew and Lord John backing away with bloodied hands. The mastiff and the bull terrier, their quarrel forgotten, had both turned on the spoilsports and were advancing with teeth bared. Teresa had not seen so many teeth, so close, since she lay on the ground with the jaguar poised above her.

She dashed to the girl with the yoke, praying that she had already been to the pump. The buckets were full. She seized one of them and threw the icy water at the menacing dogs.

They shook themselves and looked back at her, annoyed at this new interruption to their sport. As she picked up the second bucket and sloshed its contents at them they fled, yelping.

So did Lord John and Andrew.

"Here, I say, cousin!" said Lord John indignantly. "That water is damnably cold."

"Your skill with a bucket does not match your skill with a pistol," added Andrew, looking down with annoyance at his soaked unmentionables.

"I should have let them go after you!" Hurt by their ingratitude, Teresa turned her back on them.

The rest of the party from the second carriage hurried up, laughing at the sodden gentlemen, congratulating Teresa on the rescue.

"Dashed if I've ever seen anything so neat!"

exclaimed Mr Wishart.

"Well done, Teresa," cried Marco.

"How brave you are," shuddered Daphne. "I should never have known what to do."

Then the child's mother approached, shyly pushing through the gentlefolk to thank her baby's saviour. Several other villagers arrived to hear the tale and marvel. Teresa was the centre of attention, and basking in it, until a reproachful voice from the first carriage interrupted.

"We must be on our way!" called Lord Danville. "Miss Parr is sadly shocked and must be taken home."

"And we are frozen half to death," grumbled Lord John, with a shiver, "not to mention bleeding."

Teresa took his hand and examined it. "It is not deep, but it must be thoroughly cleansed, and soon," she said. "Cousin Tom is right, we must go."

She turned to Andrew, but he had already bound his wound with a handkerchief. "It is nothing," he said gruffly. "For pity's sake let us be on our way before dark, if you are done with your admirers."

He and Lord John climbed into the first carriage with Muriel and Tom, so as not to soak both vehicles, and Teresa perforce joined the others.

Mr Wishart took her hand and patted it. "If they are ungracious," he whispered, "it is because they are mortified at being rescued by a beautiful young lady when they hoped to be heroes themselves. Do not heed their sulks. You were magnificent, Miss Danville."

Unconsoled, Teresa removed her hand from his clasp.

\* \* \* \*

It was dark when they reached Five Oaks at last. Andrew abandoned Muriel, still trembling with shock, to Miss Carter's anxious care and hurried up to his chamber. He was shivering violently, frozen to the bone.

Rowson arrived on his heels. He took one look at his master and sent for a hot bath. "And step lively!" he called after the footman. Then he turned back to Andrew. "Nice weather for swimming," he said conversationally, and set about pulling off his sodden boots.

"It was that d-devilish Miss D-Danville," said Andrew, his teeth chattering.

"Shoved you in the river, did she? Daresay she had

her reasons. Game as a pebble, our Miss Teresa. Let's get them pantaloons off then."

"She is n-not our Miss T-Teresa and she did not shove me in the river! She threw a bucket of water over a pair of fighting dogs and drenched both Lord John and me."

"What did I say, a right Trojan, she is."

"Dammit, Rowson, will you take her side? She is a perfectly devilish female! Where's my bath?"

"I'll go hurry 'em up." Rowson was certain that the whole story would by now have passed from coachman to cook and thence to the rest of the staff. Whatever had got his master on his high ropes, it was no mere soaking.

Andrew sat by the fire, wrapped in his dressing gown, gradually thawing. As his shivers ceased, he found himself able to admire Teresa's courage, and still more, her efficiency in an emergency. While he and her cousin had acted like the veriest rattlepates, going for the dogs, she had coolly snatched the child to safety and then turned and rescued them from their folly.

It was all of a piece with everything he knew of her. Before they had exchanged a word, she had saved him from a deadly snake. She had saved the mules in the flood, herself from the jaguar, several score slaves from the depths of the ocean. She was not only fearless but practical.

In the same situation, Muriel was more likely to swoon. That was how a delicately bred female ought to behave. After all, a man wanted the chance to rescue his beloved from deadly peril. It was just his luck to have fallen in love with an Amazon who stood in no need of a heroic deliverer.

Horried, Andrew forced a halt to that train of thought. What poppycock! He loved and was engaged to be married to a young lady of irreproachable timidity.

Fortunately, Rowson came back just then, with a footman bearing a copper hip-bath followed by half a dozen others with hot water. In no time, Sir Andrew was lounging in a steaming bath and beginning to feel much more the thing.

"Our Miss Teresa gave me a wash for your hand, sir," said Rowson, setting out evening clothes.

"It is a mere scratch."

"Said as it's a dog bite it might get infected. I'll do it when you get out. There's a letter too, came in the morning's post after you left."

"Who's it from, can you tell?"

"The Foreign Office, I reckon. Been forwarded a couple o' times."

"Let me see it. No, I'd best dry off first." Andrew stepped from the bath and Rowson enveloped him in a huge towel that had warmed by the fire.

Feeling at last thoroughly comfortable, he sat in a chair and opened the letter. "Damnation! It's back to London for us first thing tomorrow," he said gloomily. "Though perhaps it's just as well."

"For good, sir?"

"No, just a few days. We'll be back well before Christmas." More's the pity, he added silently.

He was, he thought, in a devil of a coil. Here he was engaged to Muriel, the prettiest, best behaved and most docile young lady he had ever known. Yet marriage to her seemed less and less attractive.

On top of that, she was spending all her time in Lord Danville's pocket. He knew, from something Lord John had let drop, that both brothers regarded her as a safe object of their admiration, because of her betrothal. The duke's heir had no serious intentions. Since Andrew, as an honorable gentleman, could not cry off, they would be wed in a month's time willy nilly.

And meanwhile, Teresa was mortifying his pride and otherwise cutting up his peace. He had certainly not known a dull moment since first they met. But by the end of the Season she would be married to one of her many admirers, he would be stuck in his desk job at the Foreign Office, their paths would seldom cross.

China began to look more and more inviting.

## **Chapter 17**

It was still bitterly cold when Andrew left Five Oaks, promising to return in a few days. A thin, high haze hid the sun. Teresa, watching from her dressing room as he rode down the drive, thought she had never in her life seen such a dreary scene.

She had no desire whatever for the usual morning ride. For once she would stay behind with Muriel, who did not ride and was usually left with the older guests. She must make a special effort to be kind to Muriel, to

assuage her guilt for having fallen in love with her friend's future husband.

As it turned out, only Lord Danville and his brother-in-law ventured out. No one else evinced the slightest wish to risk frostbite for the sake of exercise.

There was no lack of entertainment indoors. Small groups gathered in the billiard room and the music room. Several ladies repaired to the drawing room to sew and gossip; one or two more intellectual souls settled in the library to read. Teresa had always loved books and had had little opportunity since her arrival in England to make use of the duke's magnificent collection. She went to the library and browsed along the shelves.

History, philosophy, the classics in the original and in translation, books of travel, poetry, biography—they all looked immeasurably dull. She chose a novel and sat down with it. It failed to hold her attention, as did a second choice.

A series of muttered grunts and black looks told her she was disturbing the other readers. She put the books away and went to the music room.

"Teresa!" cried Jenny Kaye. "Marco has brought his ocarina and we are trying to find tunes that fit its range. Do fetch yours."

She was seated at the pianoforte, with Muriel, Daphne, Marco and Mr Wishart gathered round. They seemed to be having a hilarious time, even her quiet brother who was producing extraordinary noises from his ocarina for their amusement.

Teresa smiled and shook her head. "I was looking for Cousin John," she said mendaciously. She had thought music might soothe her; laughter and merriment were not what she wanted.

"John's playing billiards," Mr Wishart told her. "I'll come down with you."

"No, no, I should not dream of interrupting your concert."

She wandered listlessly down to the billiard room, for want of anything better to do. Lord John was just finishing a game with one of his father's political colleagues.

He greeted her with unabashed relief. "Cousin Teresa! I'll challenge you to a game."

"Remember the outcome last time you challenged me! Besides, I do not know how to play."



"Nothing could be more innocuous than billiards. I shall teach you. I'd wager with your eye you'll soon be a worthy opponent."

Teresa found that learning the rules and techniques occupied just sufficient of her attention, neither requiring intense concentration nor leaving her time to think. Her cousin's casual cheerfulness and good-natured teasing chased her blue devils away for a time. They played until the gong rang for luncheon. By then, though her score improved each time, he had beaten her hollow in three games.

This he announced at table, to his sister's immediate scorn. "Indeed you are no gentleman, John. You ought to have let Teresa win."

"Short of playing with my back turned to the table, that would have been impossible, Pam. Besides, last time I challenged Teresa, she won."

"Oh, famous! You beat our top-o'-the-trees Corinthian, cousin? What was that at?"

Teresa flushed. Lord Danville, Mr Wishart, Jenny and Daphne eyed her knowingly but held their tongues.

"Shoo..." began Lord John.

"Bless you!" said Jenny and Daphne in chorus.

"I hope you are not coming down with a cold," said Lord Danville, frowning at his brother.

"Sneezed myself, this morning," said Mr Wishart. "It's this dashed weather."

"Spillikins!" said Teresa gratefully. It seemed a pity that she could not boast of her prowess at target shooting, but she knew the others were right to forestall John's imminent revelation.

"You must come up to the nursery and play with the children," Lady Pamela invited. "Little Tom adores spillikins."

In the event, all the young people decided the nursery was as good a place as any to be on such a day. Even Lord Danville (Uncle Tom) and Lord Jordan (Papa) forgot their dignity and joined in games of spillikins and lotto and hunt the slipper.

Teresa had never seen Muriel so animated. She and Lord Danville took the lead in romping with the children. When they paused for breath, Teresa heard them expatiating on the joys of family life. Both, it seemed, wanted numerous offspring. She wondered whether Andrew knew that he was expected to father a

large family. It made her quite cross to see the two of them so in charity with each other. It was not at all fair to Andrew, the way demure Muriel turned into a flirt as soon as he absented himself.

The afternoon seemed endless, the evening worse.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning was even colder, but at least the sun was shining. Teresa could not bear the thought of another day confined to the house. She was the only lady who chose to ride with the gentlemen, and they were surprised at her joining them.

"Are you sure it is wise, cousin?" asked Lord Danville solicitously. "After growing up in a tropical climate, you can have no notion how cold England in December can be."

"I mean to find out, or I shall never know. Annie has bundled me up in innumerable layers of clothing, and your housekeeper thrust this muffler upon me as I came down the stair. How should I wear it, do you think?"

Lord John offered his assistance. He pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, then wound the muffler round and round the lower half of her face, tucking the end in securely. Then he stood back to study the result. He laughed.

"Dashed if you don't look like one of those devilish Egyptian mummies in the British Museum."

"When were you ever in the British Museum?" enquired his elder brother sceptically.

"Went for a lark once. Most sobering occasion, I can tell you, seeing all those fellows that died four thousand years ago still standing around."

"I only hope my horse doesn't run a mile when she sees me coming," said Teresa.

Bundled up as she was, the cold startled her at first. Until she mounted, the ground seemed to suck the warmth from her feet through the soles of her boots. A vigorous gallop brought tears to her eyes from the rush of frigid air, but it warmed the rest of her and she was enjoying herself when Lord Jordan suggested turning back.

"Not yet," she pleaded. "Let's go a little farther."

"Let's go round by the lake," said Lord John. "Another day of this and it may freeze over hard enough for skating."

Teresa had seen a reference to skating in a book,

but had not the least idea of what was involved. As they rode towards the lake, the gentlemen described the mechanics of the sport and told numerous anecdotes about the disastrous efforts of their friends.

"Naturally," said Mr. Wishart with a wink, "none of those present has ever been so clumsy as to fall on the ice."

She had ridden and walked by the lake before, and had thought that it must be delightful in the summer. A tributary of the Arun had been dammed to form a sizable pool with paved walks around it. White-painted bridges crossed the stream, and the whole was protected from wind on the north and east by woodland. A pretty summerhouse stood at the edge of the woods, forlorn at this season.

Already the lake's surface was iced over except where the stream entered and left. Teresa found it an astonishing sight. As they drew near, an unwary mallard flew down to land and went sliding across, quacking indignantly.

Lord John dismounted and went to test the ice with a stick. It held, so he took a cautious step, hurriedly retreating when it creaked under his weight.

"Let me!" cried Teresa.

Lord John helped her down and, despite Lord Danville's objection and Marco's anxious "Be careful, Teresa!", she approached the ice. With some trepidation she stepped onto it with one foot, holding her cousin's hand tightly. The other foot followed, and she stood very still, not wishing to follow the duck's humiliating example.

Suddenly she giggled. "How my other brothers would stare, to see me standing on the water," she said. "I hope it will freeze hard enough for skating. John, I will come back now."

She turned, with the greatest care, and gave him her other hand. As she stepped towards him her foot slipped and she fell forward to land in his arms. For a moment he held her close, gazing down at her with an arrested look. She flushed at the disturbing light in his eyes.

"You are a cozy armful, cousin," he murmured, setting her steady on her feet. "I believe I'd have stolen a kiss were it not for that muffler."

"Not in the presence of half a dozen other gentlemen, I trust!" Teresa attempted a rallying tone.

"Is that an invitation for the next time we find ourselves alone together?" he enquired with a wicked grin.

"Certainly not! Help me mount, if you please."

They rode back to the house. Teresa was abstracted, wondering whether she had misread her cousin's meaningful gaze. Suppose he did develop a tendre for her, suppose he went so far as to offer for her, did she want to be his wife?

Lord John was handsome, plump in the pocket, and of impeccable birth, factors that weighed heavily with all her female acquaintance. It would certainly count as an eligible connexion, though as second son he did not quite measure up to a splendid match. More important to Teresa, she thoroughly enjoyed his company, and it would be an added tie to her father's family, for whom she had developed a great affection. Best of all, he was never shocked by her lapses from the highest standards of propriety.

On the other hand, he had been responsible for several of those lapses. He had not a serious bone in his body and was more like to lead her into mischief than to steer her away. Much as she liked him, she did not hold him in esteem. Nor did she love him.

A wave of desolation swept over her. Andrew had her heart and she would never love another. It would not be fair to wed her cousin when all she could offer was affection.

At that point in her musing she managed to laugh at herself. It was not at all likely that John would come up to scratch. For all she knew, first cousins were not permitted to marry in England. Anyway, he was only twenty-four, enjoying his freedom, and with no need to provide an heir. Undoubtedly all he wanted was a light flirtation, and she would oblige, while making very sure not to find herself alone with him!

\* \* \* \*

When the duke heard that the lake was in a fair way to being frozen over, he proposed a skating party. If the weather stayed cold, the ice should be solid enough in a couple of days. If not, they must devise some other entertainment for the invited guests.

Teresa spent the afternoon helping her aunt write invitations to all the neighbours with offspring of an age to enjoy so vigorous a pastime. Recalling the gentlemen's stories, she hoped the ice would set soon

enough for her to practise a little, as she did not wish to make a complete cake of herself in public.

By the next afternoon, Jenny, Daphne and Muriel were sufficiently tired of being confined to the house to agree to walk with Teresa to the lake.

"Do pray wrap up warmly," instructed the duchess anxiously. "You will not wish to spend Christmas with a putrid sore throat."

Teresa was soon ready and went to Jenny's chamber. Jenny, wrapped in layer upon layer of wool, was gazing at herself in the mirror.

"I shall die of mortification if any gentleman sees me bundled up like an Esquimau," she announced with a melodramatic air, followed by a giggle.

"I did not invite any gentlemen to accompany us. I am sure it is perfectly proper to go without. The lake is not far from the house, though it is out of sight, and I shall take my pistols, though I beg you will not mention it to the others. No one will see them under my cloak."

"I scarcely think they will prove necessary! This is England, not Costa Rica."

"I promised my father to carry them when possible. Judging by his stories, there must have been more highwaymen and footpads about in his time."

"In any case, gentlemen are unnecessary for once," Jenny decided. "We must sneak out down the backstairs."

"Thus providing amusement to the servants instead," agreed Teresa, laughing.

They had a merry outing, all but Muriel venturing onto the edge of the ice, clutching each other and giggling. Jenny proclaimed herself an accomplished skater and slid several feet to demonstrate.

When she turned and picked her way carefully back to them, she was frowning. "There's a man watching us," she said. "In the wood, over there."

They all looked, but saw no one.

"Either you imagined it, or it was one of my uncle's gamekeepers," Teresa said.

"I did not imagine it, and he looked by far too shabby to be one of his Grace's servants. I have noticed they are all particularly well clad."

"Then it must have been a poacher," Daphne suggested. "Chasing rabbits or pheasants, not young ladies."

They all laughed, and the conversation turned to the more usual subject of the pursuit of beaux.

Walking homeward, Teresa noticed that yellowish clouds were gathering. As she was unfamiliar with the climate she thought only that it was a pity the sun no longer shone. However, when she went up to her chamber Annie told her that the talk was all of snow.

"It don't make sense to me, miss, but they all say the clouds'll make it warmer and it'll likely start snowing tonight."

"Warmer! I hope the ice will not melt before the party!"

\* \* \* \*

That evening Teresa asked Lord Danville about the possibility of a thaw.

"Quite likely," he said. "A chance to skate comes but rarely. I hope you will not be excessively disappointed, Miss Parr," he added, turning to Muriel.

"Oh no, I never meant to skate," she assured him. "I fear Mama would not approve."

"It is a hurly-burly business," he conceded. "Your delicacy of principle is admirable." He smiled at her warmly.

Teresa immediately decided she must speak to Muriel about her encouragement of his lordship before Andrew returned to observe it. The next morning, she dragged her out to walk down to the lake, ostensibly to test the ice.

No snow had fallen, but the clouds still lowered overhead. It was much warmer and the thaw had turned the paths to mud. There was no difficulty persuading Jenny and Daphne not to go with them; only Teresa's determination prevailed upon Muriel.

They walked in silence for some distance, Muriel attempting to avoid the worst of the mud, Teresa casting about for a way of broaching so delicate a matter. She realised now that she had no real right to intervene. None of those concerned were in any way accountable to her and Muriel would have every right to resent her interference.

As they reached the lake, in which Teresa had lost interest, Muriel spoke first. "I cannot think why we had to come out here, but I am glad of the chance to speak to you privately. I do not know what to do!"

"What to do?"

"It is all such a dreadful muddle. Everyone will

think it is creampot love, but indeed it is not, and they will say I am a horrid jilt. I cannot bear it!"

"What can you not bear? Muriel, pray do not weep, it makes it prodigious difficult to understand you. Here, take my handkerchief. Now explain this muddle, if you please, if you want my advice."

"Oh, Teresa, I am in love with your cousin! He is such a perfect gentleman and would not dream of going off to America or China, and I promise you I do not care that he will be duke."

"Does Tom know this?"

"I have said nothing. It would be most improper even were I not betrothed to Andrew. A lady simply does not declare her feelings until she is certain that the gentleman's interest is fixed. And I shall wait forever for him to speak to me, because he is by far too gentlemanly to pay his addresses while I am not free. What am I to do?"

"You are afraid to cry off in case Tom does not come up to scratch," said Teresa scornfully.

"No, it is not like that. Only I am afraid it will hurt Andrew dreadfully and all for nothing if I do not marry Lord Danville after all."

"I am glad you have some thought for Andrew's feelings! How can you treat him so? It is the outside of enough, when he has loved you all these years and you have at last set the date for your wedding. And he is prepared to give up China for your sake, though travel is the joy of his life. I had not thought you so hard-hearted."

Muriel was silent, abashed, and in the quiet Teresa heard a twig break. She glanced round.

Three scruffy men were bearing down upon them.

She could not see their faces, wrapped in mufflers, but the middle one, the one with the horse pistol, looked vaguely familiar. The other two, one brawny, the second slight, waved cudgels.

"Run, Muriel!" Teresa cried, struggling to draw her own pistols from the entangling folds of her cloak.

Terrified, Muriel froze.

Teresa grasped the gunstock. It was too late to draw. The ruffians were upon them; better that they should not know she was armed. She turned to flee, knowing the attempt to be in vain.

The big man wrapped his arms about her. She kicked backwards at his shin, missing as he swung

her round. Muriel was squirming in the scrawny man's grasp, her face so white she looked about to swoon.

They both faced the third man now.

"What do you want with us?" cried Teresa. "The Duke of Stafford is my uncle, you will never get away with this."

"Oh, I know who you are, right enough, Miss Danville. I have been waiting a long time for this moment." He pulled down his muffler. "Captain Harrison, late of the good ship *Snipe*, at your service, ma'am."

## Chapter 18

Teresa lay face down in mouldy straw in the bottom of a rickety farm cart. Her wrists were tied behind her, her ankles roped together, her cloak wound stiflingly about her head. In spite of the cloak, she could smell the manure the cart must once have carried. The empty sacks strewn on top of her did little to shield her from the glacial draughts that penetrated every chink in the ancient vehicle.

She could not stop shivering. Though she tried to persuade herself it was just the cold, Captain Harrison's mocking sneer kept appearing before her mind's eye. He blamed her for his imprisonment, he had sworn vengeance, and yet when she learned of his escape she had done nothing. Every aching bruise told her she had been a fool.

Muriel moaned.

"Are you all right?" Teresa whispered. There was no answer. She risked a louder voice. "Muriel, are you all right?"

"Stow yer whid," growled Brawny incomprehensibly, "or I'll bash yer 'ead in."

"I don't 'old wiv bashing gentry coves," whined Scrawny. "We'll 'ave the Robin Redbreasts arter us, mark my words. If I'da knowed wot you wuz..."

"That will do!" commanded Harrison. "The Bow Street Runners have been after me since I escaped that damnable hulk, and they've not caught a whiff of my traces yet. After this we'll be off to America, free and clear, and live like lords the rest of our lives. Hush now, someone's coming. Bert, climb over in the back and keep our little birds quiet."

To judge by the way the cart swayed and creaked,



Bert was the man Teresa thought of as Brawny. She felt his huge hand press down on the back of her head. It was impossible to breathe. Blackness closed in.

When she regained her senses nothing had changed except that, if possible, she was colder. Though she still wore gloves and half-boots, her hands and feet were numb, both from cold and from the ropes cutting off the circulation.

The painful journey seemed to have been going on forever, but she had caught a glimpse of the wretched nag pulling the cart and suspected that they were moving very slowly. The closer they were to Five Oaks, the better the chance of rescue. Yet that chance seemed slim, and what might not their vengeful captors do to them in the meantime? It was up to her to save herself and Muriel.

With a jerk that rattled her bones, the cart stopped.

"Bring 'em in, boys," Harrison ordered.

Again the cart shook as the men climbed from the front bench into the back. Teresa was swung up onto Brawny's massive shoulder, her head hanging down his back, his arm about her thighs. Helpless she dangled there, feeling dizzy and sick, as he jumped down to the ground.

The cloak slipped a little and she saw Scrawny pulling Muriel's limp form by the feet across the bed of the cart to the tailgate. "She's too 'eavy," the little man complained. "No way I can carry 'er."

"I'll come back for 'er," offered Brawny. "You leave 'er there, Sid, and go put the prancer in the shed."

"Prancer? You lost yer marbles? This nag's fit fer the knacker. Still, yer always wuz bright as a rusty nail." He went off muttering disapprovingly.

Teresa stifled a hysterical giggle. Brawny Bert and Scrawny Sid made a charming pair.

Despite her whirling head, she noted that they were in a clearing in a wood. The mud that squelched beneath Brawny's scuffed boots smelled of leaf mould. That and his torn coat were all she could see until they entered a ramshackle building. The floorboards were split and warped. The lower part of the whitewashed walls was grimy, and heaps of blown leaves lay in the corners. The rickety stairs protested loudly as Brawny thudded up them.

Teresa's head hit the wall and she fainted again.

She woke to find herself lying on a straw-filled

palliasse in a tiny room. Her cloak had been unwrapped from her head and pulled roughly around her, so she could examine her surroundings. The room was open to the rafters, in fact open to the sky in one corner, but at least the floorboards seemed solid. The tiny window, high under the eaves, had no glass.

On the floor nearby lay a battered valise with a ragged shirt cuff hanging out. A dented pewter mug lay beside it. Probably this was where Harrison slept, with his henchmen sharing another room. It could hardly be described as a bedchamber, but Teresa quailed at the realisation that she was lying helpless on her abductor's bed. Though she knew it would make no difference if he chose to ravish her, she rolled off the thin mattress, becoming thoroughly entangled in her cloak.

Wriggling in an effort to find a more comfortable position, an impossible task with her hands and feet bound, she felt the hardness of her pistols jabbing her ribs. At least they had not found them, though she could not reach them.

Then she heard the stairs protesting again. She hoped it was Brawny bringing Muriel to join her.

On the other hand, it might be Harrison. She swallowed convulsively as a spark of terror shot through her. Forcing her tense body to lie limp, she closed her eyes. Surely he would leave her alone if he thought her in a swoon.

Heavy footsteps entered the room, followed by a thump and a grunt. She opened her eyes the merest slit. Brawny had dumped Muriel on the floor and was standing hands on hips looking down at her.

Muriel lay motionless, insensible. Her face was white, with a bruise on her chin and a trickle of blood running down from the corner of her mouth.

"What have you done to her?" cried Teresa, trying to sit up.

Brawny turned to look at her and grinned nastily. "The guv'nor don't care tuppence if this 'un sticks 'er spoon in the wall. It's you 'e's int'risted in. The guv'nor don't take too kindly to them as queers 'is pitch." He nudged her with his foot. "Us is gonna 'ave a bit o' fun wi' you once we gets our fambles on the rhino."

"Rhino?" Teresa did her best to ignore the rest of his speech, insofar as she'd understood it.

"Is lordship reckons the dook'll come down

'andsome if 'e thinks 'e's gonna get 'is pretty niece back in one piece."

"Lord Carruthers? Is he behind this?"

"Guv'nor never told us 'is name," said the villain indifferently. "Reckon it don't matter if you guessed, for you'll not be squeaking beef when we'm done wi' yer. Sid's off wi' the ransom note already. This time termorrer, us'll be swimming in mint-sauce, and you ain't gonna be worrying about it." Grinning again, he bent down and squeezed her breast with his huge, filthy paw. "There, just to keep yer going," he added with a wink.

Teresa felt her gorge rising and prayed she would not vomit. Her only defence was to pretend to faint.

She heard his footsteps going towards the door. "Feeble creeturs, them gentry morts," he muttered. "Ain't gonna be much fun if she keeps passing out."

Thud of wood on wood as he barred the door, again the stairs creaked, then there was silence but for the distant rumble of voices.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew found the falling snow soothing. It drifted gently down, too slow and light to impede his progress. The miles between London and Five Oaks disappeared beneath his chestnut's hooves, and Rowson kept pace a few strides behind him.

The calming influence was welcome. He was feeling distinctly unsettled. In London he had reached a decision which was bound to change his life, but how and to what degree depended on others.

They rode through Dorking, then took the right-hand branch in the road at Kingsfold. Ten miles to go. It stopped snowing and Andrew gazed round in wonder at the white landscape. He had spent the last two winters in hot climates and had forgotten the beauty of snow-clad hills and trees. Teresa would be astonished and, with her usual enjoyment of new experiences, delighted.

Reaching Five Oaks, they rode directly to the stables. The groom who took his horse seemed to be in the throes of strong excitement. "Aye, sir, I'll see un rubbed down proper an' all. 'Tis a terrible business, sir!"

"What is? What has happened? I have been away for several days."

"Why, the young ladies, sir! Miss Danville and

Miss...the one wi' golden curls. Disappeared, clean as a whistle. They say his Grace is in a fair pucker, not rightly knowing what to do, and young Lord John ready to ride out in all directions. I'm just off now meself, searching."

He spoke to Andrew's rapidly departing back, but Rowson paused to demand further details before following his master into the house.

A dreadful hollow filled Andrew's chest as he strode towards the front hall. If this was more of Teresa's mischief, he would strangle her, he swore. And this time she had managed to tangle Muriel in her coils. He had a feeling it was Muriel though Miss Kaye also had golden curls.

But no, though she was sometimes heedless Teresa would never deliberately set out to worry her relations, nor to involve her gently nurtured friend in her escapades. If they were missing, they were in trouble. Perhaps even in danger.

Several servants were gathered in the hall. The butler stepped from the agitated group as Andrew appeared. "His Grace is in the library," he said, without a word of greeting. His usual poker face was creased with concern. "It's a shocking business, sir."

Andrew nodded his thanks and hurried to the library. He found there all the gentlemen and several ladies of the party. The duke was standing by the fireplace, studying a torn scrap of paper with an air of desperation.

"There is no clue here," he said, his voice weary. "Ah, Graylin, I am glad to see you. Perhaps you can see something we have missed."

"Tell me what has happened. Just a minute, Marco, let me hear the whole thing."

Marco had bounded to his side and was twitching at his sleeve. "I must talk to you," he hissed.

"In a minute. Hush."

Lord Danville took it upon himself to explain the situation in his long-winded way. "It seems Teresa and Mur...Miss Parr went walking this morning. They mentioned that they were going to the lake to test the ice. When they did not appear at luncheon we sent out a couple of men, who found no sign of them."

"The ice!"

"Unbroken. Our first thought, naturally, was that they might have fallen through. We then sent out

gardener, footmen and grooms, all the menservants, in all directions, in case they had lost their way. It had started snowing by that time, and there was little hope of seeing them, but what else could we do? Then, just ten minutes ago, this demand for ransom arrived. They have been abducted, and the villains want ten thousand pounds for their return."

"I shall pay, of course," said the duke heavily.

"Who brought the note?"

"An ostler from the Six Bells in Billingshurst. He did not know who sent it. We shall send the search in that direction, of course."

"Likely they expect that and used that inn to draw us off the trail," said Lord John. "Remember the note says to take the ransom in the opposite direction."

Marco plucked at Andrew's sleeve again. "I must talk to you!" he insisted, his eyes pleading.

Andrew looked at him. The boy was frantic, his face dead white. "Excuse us for a moment."

"Use my study," the duke offered. "I hope you have something useful to say, young man, for otherwise we are at a standstill."

\* \* \* \*

"Muriel!" The blue eyes opened. "Thank God you are alive!" Teresa said on a sob.

"I did not want him to know I was conscious. What a dreadful man! What are we going to do?"

"Do?"

"You always know what to do, and then do it. Andrew told me he had rather be in a tight place with you than with any gentleman of his acquaintance."

Teresa flushed. "He said that? Well, your faith in me is touching, but I have never before been abducted by three villains and tied hand and foot in a ruined cottage in the wilds of Sussex."

Muriel looked frightened but said bravely, "I know you will think of something."

"As a matter of fact I do have an idea, only it depends so much on chance I cannot like it. At least I still have my pistols."

"Your pistols! What an Amazon you are, Teresa! Not that I am not profoundly thankful, since I am in this fix, that you are with me."

"I am astonished that you are not in hysterics," said Teresa frankly. "Your nerves were upset when I stopped that dogfight, and you did not even see it."

"Mama taught me that gentlemen prefer delicate sensibilities in a young lady. There are no gentlemen here."

"Unfortunately."

"Do you think they will search for us?"

"Of course, but I cannot think they will find us except by the merest luck. Listen, let me tell you my plan, if it can be called a plan, just in case we have a chance to try it." She explained what Muriel would need to do if the opportunity arose.

"I will try. It does seem unlikely that everything will work out right. I hope you will try to think up an alternative."

"Believe me, I do not intend to wait like a lamb for the slaughter!" Teresa assured her grimly.

They fell silent, recalling the big man's words. Teresa tried to put her mind to devising another plan of escape, but it kept returning to his face as he bent over her, the feel of his hand on her.

"It's snowing," said Muriel. "Look, a few flakes are coming in through the hole in the roof. I am so cold. I have not been able to feel my hands and feet this age."

"Perhaps we can roll over next to each other." A flash of memory brought Teresa the comforting warmth of Andrew's closeness that day on Mount Irazù. She had thought she was cold then! If only he were here, she would be perfectly happy to let him rescue her to his heart's content. But he was in London and did not even know she was in danger. It was all up to her. "At least the exercise will warm us," she said, beginning to squirm towards Muriel.

"You look like a caterpillar."

If their giggles were subdued, it was still better than weeping. They managed to reach each other, but their tied hands made it impossible to get close enough to be useful. In the end they lay back to back, their shoulders pressed together, trying to pretend that the minimal warmth of that contact was spreading throughout their bodies.

"I'm terrified," confessed Muriel suddenly in a shaking voice. "I shall never again pretend to be frightened when there is nothing to be frightened of. I do not know how you can be so brave."

Teresa was terrified too, but admitting it could only distress her friend further. "Taking into consideration the atrocious situation in which we find ourselves,

your composure is admirable," she said with deliberate pomposity. "Andrew would be prodigious proud of you."

"And...Tom?"

"And Tom." She sighed. "You really love him?"

Her only answer was an unhappy sniff. The silence that followed was broken by the complaint of the dilapidated stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Marco started talking as soon as the connecting door between library and study closed behind them. "Andrew, I'm certain it is Harrison. I read in a newspaper an age ago that he escaped, but Teresa told me not to bother you with the news."

"Why have you not told your uncle? At least here is a clue of sorts." Hope mixed with dread as Andrew remembered the slaver's threats.

"He would not listen to me privately, and you know how determined Teresa was to keep that business secret. If you had not come, I must have blurted it out before everyone."

"The duke knows about the *Snipe* already. Anyone else? What of your cousins?"

"John knows. I think Cousin Tom does not."

"Well, he is not like to spread the news, and the more heads put together the better." Andrew opened the library door. "Your Grace, Danville, Lord John, a word with you, if you please."

The duke and his sons hurried to join them.

"Uncle, I'm sure it's Harrison, the slave captain. He escaped before he was transported."

Lord Danville looked at Marco blankly, then turned to his father. "What is this, sir?" he asked, frowning.

Lord John, Marco and Andrew all started talking at once. Andrew won. He told a brief version of the rescue of the slaves from the *Snipe*, and then Marco went on to describe the trial, and explain how he had read about Harrison's escape in the *Times*.

"I was going to tell you, uncle, but Teresa thought it unimportant. I wish I had! So you see, it must be Harrison, and I daresay Lord Carruthers has a hand in it too."

"Carruthers! What has he to do with this?" asked Lord John, surprised. "I know he's a dirty dish, but kidnapping is going a bit far!"

"Harrison named him as the owner of the *Snipe*,"

said Sir Andrew. "You know him?"

"He is a neighbour, unfortunately," Lord John told him.

"He cannot blame Teresa for the loss of his investment," Andrew said, frowning. "The naval pursuit of his vessel caused Harrison to scuttle her. But without Teresa's intervention the Africans would have drowned without Captain Fitch having proof of their existence. However, he might hope to recoup something from the ransom, and then leave Harrison to wreak vengeance."

"Vengeance?" The duke paled.

"Yes," Andrew said grimly. "Whether you pay the ransom or not, sir, I doubt Teresa will be released unharmed."

The horrified silence was ended by Lord Danville, who had been looking thoughtful since Marco named Carruthers. "I'll wager I know where they are," he said. "Let me see the ransom note, sir." He took it from his father. "Yes, the meeting place named to hand over the money is behind Clock Cottage, by the Blue Ship Inn at The Haven."

"The Haven?" asked Marco.

"A tiny hamlet scarce three miles from here," Lord John answered him. "In the opposite direction from Billingshurst. How does that help us, Tom?"

Lord Danville had all their attention. "Carruthers' place is near Loxwood. I saw a map once that showed the estate. It is an odd shape, long and narrow, and one end reaches nearly to The Haven. There's a wood there, used to be good pheasant shooting. You know how Carruthers has let the place go to rack and ruin—the house is in fair shape but he has no interest in farming or sport. He has not kept up the coverts and he dismissed the gamekeeper long since."

"What of it?" demanded Andrew impatiently. He cared not a groat for the baron's coverts.

"The gamekeeper's cottage was in that wood near The Haven. No one has lived there for years."

"Let's go!" cried Andrew, striding from the room.

His heart leaped within him. Here at last was his chance for a heroic rescue. He was determined to be first through the door of the abandoned cottage. He imagined Teresa looking up as he entered, the dark eyes widening, the glow of gratitude and admiration.

Somehow her face, her eyes, were all that he could



picture. Had she been tied up? A pang of terror shot through him as he realised she might even be unconscious, then fury rose. If Harrison had harmed her, he should not live to see his next trial!

Ten minutes later he rode out of the stable-yard, followed by Marco, Lord Danville, Lord John, Mr Wishart and Lord Jordan, all armed to the teeth.

## Chapter 19

Desperately Teresa inched away from Muriel. In her need for warmth she had forgotten Brawny must not know that they were strong enough to move. Her plan depended on his belief that they were weak, feeble creatures, but it was too late to put more than a couple of feet between them.

He came in, a dirty bottle in his hand. If he noticed anything amiss he did not comment, and Teresa was encouraged to hope that he was as stupid as Scrawny Sid thought him.

Taking no notice of Muriel, who had again pretended to swoon, he pulled the cork from the bottle with his teeth and ordered Teresa to open her mouth. "Guv'nor says to give yer a drop o' gin so's yer don't freeze to death afore he's ready. Bloody waste, if yer ast me." He kicked her. "Open up!"

She gave in and parted her lips, but she closed her throat, determined not to swallow. The vile stuff set her mouth on fire. She managed not to gasp in shock, and it ran out again, down her cheek to the floor.

"I cannot swallow lying down," she protested in a tremulous voice.

He put the bottle down and hauled her to a sitting position. As soon as he let go of her to reach for the gin, she slumped over. Again he raised her up, and again she fell.

"Untie me so that I can sit up," she moaned. "It is impossible to balance without the use of my hands and feet."

Incredibly, it did not dawn on him to prop her in a corner. He looked at her in doubt.

"You cannot be afraid of two such feeble creatures!" she said with scorn, careful to make her voice quaver, despite rising hope. "If we expire from the cold, how much 'fun' will you have?"

He glanced suspiciously at Muriel, who looked half

dead already. Reaching out, he wound one fair ringlet about a finger like a sausage. The girl did not stir. "Always did like 'em wiv golden 'air," murmured the big man. "I'll untie you so's you can get 'er moving. Never did fancy cold meat."

He fumbled at the knots without success, then drew a knife with a rust-spotted blade and sawed at the ropes around Teresa's wrists. Fibre by fibre they parted, and he turned to her ankles while she flexed her numb hands. Feeling returned fast and painfully.

"Now sit up and swaller some o' this gin."

She pushed herself half way up and then collapsed. "I cannot. Let me warm my hands a little while you untie my friend."

Muriel's bonds parted with still more difficulty. If the knife had ever had an edge it was long gone. By the time Brawny had finished the job, Teresa felt her hands would obey her. When he turned back to her, he found himself gaping down the barrels of a pair of pistols.

"Drop the knife."

Blinking in confusion, he dropped it. Muriel, miraculously recovered from her swoon, grabbed it and backed away from him, holding it in front of her with nervous awkwardness.

He shook his head stupidly, then brightened. "If yer shoots me, the guv'nor'll 'ear it and come running."

"I have a bullet for each of you," Teresa pointed out coldly, "and you may ask any of a dozen London bucks whether I am a crack-shot. I was brought up in the jungle, you know, surrounded by fearsome beasts. I have never shot a person before, but you are more like a poisonous snake and I shall not hesitate." The guns pointed unwavering at his heart. "Lie down on the floor, on your front."

Grunting sullenly, he sank to his knees, his beefy face unhappy. "Yer won't get past the guv'nor," he said. "He's in the room at the bottom of the apples."

"Apples?" asked Muriel, bewildered.

"Stairs," Teresa explained with a grin. "Apples and pears—stairs. It's Cockney rhyming slang. Cousin John was talking about it one day and fortunately that is one of the words he mentioned." Her eyes never left her target. "Go on, get down."

Brawny stretched full length.

"Teresa, he cut the ropes instead of untying them,"

wailed Muriel. "How am I to tie him up?"

A moment of panic was sternly suppressed and Teresa glanced quickly around the room. "That bag, see what is in it. The shirt will do to tie his legs, and perhaps there is something else that you can use for his hands. Hurry."

Muriel pulled the shirt from the shabby valise, followed by a pair of trousers which made her blush. The garments were ragged but most of the cloth was still good. She wound the shirt round the man's legs and knotted the sleeves as tight as she could. "I hope that will do," she said doubtfully.

"It will have to. You, put your hands behind your back. Can you tear those...inexpressibles, Muriel? They are too bulky to make a good knot."

A few moments of effort proved the task beyond Muriel's strength. She rummaged in the valise and triumphantly withdrew a grubby neckcloth. Soon Brawny lay trussed like a turkey-cock and at last Teresa dared put aside her pistols.

She tested the bonds. "Oh dear, I hope they will hold! If he wins free we shall be in trouble."

The man had lain passive and silent all this time. She guessed that having surrendered he had not the wit to resist. However, if they left him here for any considerable period he would inevitably attempt escape, and she doubted the cloth, with Muriel's inexpert knots, would hold him.

She could not bring herself to shoot him in cold blood, though, even just to disable him.

Her eye fell on the gin bottle. Enough of that poured down his throat would immobilise him. Picking it up she found it nearly full. The trouble was that they must turn him over to administer it, and when they tried to move him he would likely rouse from his lethargy and struggle.

She felt Muriel's worried gaze upon her as she sought desperately for an answer. There was nothing else in the little room that might help them—or was there? The thought sickened her but a well-placed blow with a pewter pint pot ought to knock out even the undoubtedly thick-skulled Bert.

"Don't look," she ordered Muriel, and brought it down on the back of his head as hard as she could.

Since he did not voice any objection, she assumed the blow had worked. Gingerly she felt for his pulse,

with a prayer that she had not killed him. Failing to find it, she bit her lip, then stripped off her glove and tried again. It disgusted her to touch him with her bare skin, but this time she found the pulse and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Help me turn him over."

Lying on his back, he was an unlovely sight. His mouth hung slackly open. She did not want to drown him so they rolled up the straw pallet and managed to stuff it beneath his head and shoulders. Then she cautiously poured a little gin between his yellowish teeth.

He swallowed automatically. Judging by his breath, he had already been imbibing that day. Little by little Tersa emptied the bottle into him.

He emitted an enormous belch and started to snore. Teresa and Muriel looked at each other and giggled.

Teresa sat back wearily on her heels. "Well, that is all we can do. We had best go down at once before Harrison grows suspicious."

Muriel helped her to stand. They went out onto the tiny landing. The door had been recently fitted with a simple bar lock, they found, presumably to keep them in. They lowered the bar into its sockets with as little noise as they could manage. Teresa eyed the dark, rickety stair with foreboding.

"If we march down together perhaps he will think it is his henchman," whispered Muriel.

"A nice idea, but the two of us together must weigh less than he, and I doubt we could stay in step. We must creep down the side as close to the wall as possible and hope that it is quieter there. At least there is a wall between the stair and the room. I shall go first. When I reach the bottom step, come after me."

Muriel nodded and Teresa started down the stairs.

Step by cautious step, holding her breath, she made her way down. Under her slight weight the cracking boards scarcely moved, their token protest no louder than the scurry of mice within the walls.

On the bottom step she paused. It would be best, she decided, if she found out the situation before Muriel joined her. Her friend might alert Harrison by making too much noise, and she would very likely get in the way if sudden action had to be taken.

Teresa twisted round and made shooing gestures,

mouthling a silent "Wait!"

Muriel nodded understanding. She looked pale and fearful, and Teresa was filled with gratitude for her steadfast help. Their situation was a far cry from the drawing rooms and ballrooms Muriel had been bred up to grace with her decorous presence.

Now Teresa must count on the darkness of the stair enclosure to protect her. Moving by inches, she peered one-eyed round the end of the wall.

Harrison faced her at an angle, sitting on a broken backed chair at a sloping table with his horse pistol in his hand. On the table lay the remains of a meal and, right beside him, an oily rag, a ramrod, a small vial and two leather pouches.

Teresa guessed that the vial contained oil, the little bags powder and ball. He had been cleaning and reloading his gun. At any moment he might decide to go upstairs to see what Bert was doing.

She moved back behind the shelter of the wall. He was holding his pistol: she could not hold him up as she had Brawny. She had to disable him before he could shoot her. She closed her eyes and bit her lip. Pretend he's a snake, she told herself fiercely, a deadly snake.

In one swift, fluid motion she stepped out into the room, raised her pistol in both hands and squeezed the trigger.

Harrison's gun clattered to the floor. He gaped at her then stared down in horror at the river of blood flowing from his wrist. "My God, I shall bleed to death!" he moaned.

"Grasp it tight with your other hand and raise it above your head," ordered Teresa crisply. "Muriel, come on down. We must make a tourniquet."

With the victim's grubby neckcloth wound round his upper arm, and the long barrel of his pistol to twist it tight, they managed to staunch the bleeding. The bullet had barely nicked his vein and they used their own handkerchiefs and strips of petticoat to bind the wound.

By the time they were done with their ministrations their patient had fainted from loss of blood. It was an easy matter to tie his ankles together with the bloodstained neckcloth.

"It does not seem quite right to tie his wrists together," said Muriel, frowning. "I know he is a

dastardly villain and he intended to kill us, but I cannot like it."

"I know what you mean," Teresa agreed. "His hand ought to be kept in the air, too. I have it! Help me pull him over here by the end of the table. Suppose I tie the injured arm up against this table leg, like this. You stretch his other arm over there and tie his wrist to the other leg of the table."

"The very thing. The table is somewhat wobbly, but he is in no case to exert his strength upon it."

"And if he did, the top would fall on his face."

"I should like to see his face when he wakes," said Muriel, "but I daresay we shall be far away by then."

"I'm afraid not. Have you any idea where we are?" Teresa tied a last knot then went to the window and looked out. "Muriel, come and see!"

Muriel joined her and peered through the small, smeary panes. "It has stopped snowing. Quite a lot has fallen already, but at least it is not drifting."

"That is snow? It is beautiful! I never imagined anything like that."

"Wait till you see it on a sunny day. You will think yourself translated to another world. Walking in it is a different matter, though, even if we knew which direction to take. Oh Teresa, what shall we do? We are as much captive here as ever."

"But now we have the upper hand." Teresa moved back to the table, where she sat down and began to clean and reload the pistol she had fired. "Just in case Brawny Bert wakes up and breaks out," she explained. "At least we will hear him coming! I think we must wait till Scrawny Sid returns with the horse."

"Scrawny Sid?"

"The third man. Did you not hear? He went with a ransom note to my uncle."

"Then they will follow him back and find us!"

"I fear not. Bert may be a knock-in-the-cradle but Harrison has his wits about him. I imagine Sid found someone else to send with the message. Anyway, fit for the knacker or no, that unfortunate animal he's riding will have to carry us away from here."

Muriel looked dubious but she said, "Luckily this is a well-populated part of the country. Whichever direction we go, we are sure soon to cross a road which will lead us to a village."

"And in the meantime, until Sid arrives, all we can

do is wait."

\* \* \* \*

Andrew realised abruptly that, much as he desired to lead the rescue party, he had no idea which way to go. "Danville," he called reluctantly, looking back, "you had best go first to show us the road."

"I know where it is," said Lord John, riding up beside him. "Follow me."

Andrew stayed with him neck and neck. The viscount was not the sort to try to seize the glory of rushing first into the cottage, but his dashing brother was another kettle of fish.

They started down a hedged lane, then Lord John led them through a gate to ride cross country. All six gentlemen were mounted on the duke's hunters, which took hedge and ditch and stream in their stride. Marco gasped when he faced the first jump, but though he had never hunted he had spent most of his life on horseback. He let his mount carry him over after the others, and thereafter enjoyed the exhilarating sensation of flying through the air.

Andrew glanced back at his grinning face and envied the resilience of youth. The lad seemed to have forgotten his sister's peril.

And Muriel's, Andrew reminded himself.

They soon reached the wood. Neither undergrowth nor fallen trees had been cleared for years, so their way was barred by a tangled mass of brambles and fallen trees. They rode along the edge looking for a way in, till at last they came to a narrow track.

"Hoofprints in the snow!" cried Lord John triumphantly, drawing rein. "A single file leading inwards. I'll wager it's the man who took the note to Billingshurst."

Mr Wishart leaned down in the saddle and studied the prints. "On a sorry nag, or an excessively tired one," he commented. "See how short its stride is."

Marco had stopped beside Andrew. His face was white and pinched, the thrill gone.

Andrew leaned over and squeezed his shoulder. "We'll find her," he reassured, trying to ignore the tight knot in his own chest. "Come on!" he urged impatiently and started forward.

There was only one way to go now, so he led the group. The track curved to the right. Then it straightened and a hundred feet ahead he saw a

clearing with a tumble-down shack in the centre. There was no light in the windows, no smoke rising from the chimney, but the hoofprints led directly towards the hovel.

He held up his hand and the others stopped. "Back around the bend," he mouthed silently, gesturing.

Out of sight of the cottage they dismounted and tied their horses to nearby trees, then gathered to discuss the next move. They had left Five Oaks without pausing to plan.

Quickly they decided to move through the edge of the wood to surround the clearing, then one of them would creep up to the window and try to see what was going on. Unless he saw good reason against it, he would signal and they would all converge on the shack and break in with pistols drawn.

"I shall go to the window," said Marco. "I am smallest and fastest and it is my sister."

"It's my..." chorused Andrew and Lord Danville, then stopped, glanced at each other and flushed. The rest looked at them with interest, somehow divining that the missing words were not "betrothed" and "cousin."

Marco was already slipping through the trees towards the clearing, so the others hurried to take their places. Andrew moved to a position opposite the door with such a determined air that no one disputed his right to it.

Darting from tree to bush to rotting fence to ancient farm cart, Marco reached the window and crouched below it. Cautiously, he raised himself to peer in at one corner, shading his eyes against the reflected glare of the snow. Andrew saw his mouth open, then stretch in a broad grin.

The poor boy had lost his wits with horror, Andrew thought, aghast.

Marco, still grinning, stood up and waved. Andrew burst through the rickety door bare seconds before Lord Danville.

Teresa stood there with her pistol trained on a small man who lay prone on the floor. Over him bent Muriel, tying his hands with a filthy cloth. Behind them Harrison sprawled on his back, unconscious and bloodstained, a pistol lying nearby on the floor.

Teresa and Muriel looked up as the door crashed back against the wall, shaking the wretched hut. Then



Muriel rose with a wordless cry and flung herself into Lord Danville's arms.

Teresa smiled a wavering smile. "Thank heaven you are come in time," she said. "Now we shall not have to force that unfortunate horse to carry us."

Once again she had saved herself—and this time Muriel, too. Her face was sallow with exhaustion, bruised, dirty. Her hair was tangled, her clothes torn and filthy. Yet to Andrew she was beautiful. He saw only a gallant woman strained to the breaking point, beautiful simply because she was alive.

Their eyes met and held for a long moment.

He could not resent that once again his heroic intentions had been foiled. If Teresa had waited to be rescued, he might have arrived too late, to find only her and Muriel's dead bodies.

Muriel—she had run to Thomas Danville!

Andrew was turning to make sure his eyes had not deceived him when he caught sight of a movement on the floor. The scrawny villain had escaped his half-tied bonds and seized the horse-pistol. The barrel that pointed at Teresa wavered, but she was too close to escape even the most uncertain shot.

The man's dirty finger tightened on the trigger, and Andrew threw himself across the room. A red-hot flash exploded in his side.

The flood of darkness that overwhelmed him was suffused with joy. He had saved Teresa—and Muriel had run to Lord Danville!

Through dimming eyes Andrew saw Teresa kneeling beside him. He must explain to her that all was well.

"Muriel..." he murmured, and passed out.

## Chapter 20

Teresa gazed down blankly at Andrew's limp form. Her mind refused to work. The look they had exchanged had warmed and supported her weary spirits. Then a single whispered word shattered her hopes. She had rushed to succour him and he had called for Muriel.

Blood was seeping through his torn, charred coat. With clumsy fingers she tugged at his neckcloth. How convenient that the essential article of male apparel made a perfect bandage, she thought with a giggle that was half a sob.

John lifted her to her feet. "We'll take care of that," he said gently. "Sit down, Teresa. You are burnt to the socket."

She glanced around. Mr. Wishart was efficiently binding Scrawny Sid's wrists. Muriel was still in Cousin Tom's arms, her wide, horrified eyes fixed upon her wounded betrothed. Lord Jordan had taken off his own cravat and was staunching the flow of blood from Andrew's side.

Suddenly Teresa could bear no more. "Marco, take me home," she said.

Her brother put his arm round her shoulders and they went out into the snow.

John followed them out of the cottage. "The sooner you get on home and into bed the better," he said sympathetically, walking with them to the horses. "You were deuced brave and deuced clever, cousin, but we shall take care of things now. I'll set you on your way, then I'll get back to lend a hand with the villains."

Marco mounted his horse and Lord John lifted Teresa up behind him. She clung to him, her cheek pressed against the rough cloth of his greatcoat. She had not said a word since asking him to take her home.

Lord John led the horse back to the clearing and pointed out another track going off to one side. "You'll come to a lane," he said. "Turn left, then take the right fork and you'll be in Bucks Green in no time. You know the way from there? We've ridden it often enough. You'd better send a carriage for Miss Parr and another for Graylin, Marco. Right, then, off you go and don't worry your head about a thing, Teresa."

The pampered thoroughbred hunter bore both of them with ease, and in spite of the snow the hedged lanes were easy to follow. They made good speed, but even so dusk was falling when they reached Five Oaks.

Only one ancient groom remained in the stables, the rest being out still scouring the countryside. He took their mounts with the incuriosity of the aged and merely nodded when Teresa asked him to saddle her mare and have her ready in half an hour.

Marco gaped at her, stupefied. "What maggot's got into your head now?" he demanded. "You're in no fit state to go out again."

She bit her lip, fighting back tears. "I cannot bear it, Marco. If he dies...if he dies, I do not want to know it. I

am going to pack up a few things and fetch Gayo, and I'm going home."

"Home! You mean to the hacienda? Home?"

"Yes. I have completed Papa's business and I have an excellent contract to take him. There is nothing to keep me here now."

"Then I shall come with you," her brother assured her stoutly. "Shall we go to Portsmouth?"

"Yes...No... I mean, yes I go to Portsmouth, but you must stay and complete your education. That is what Papa sent you for, it is your duty."

"He sent you to find a husband."

"I never shall," she said wearily. "The gentlemen of the Haut Ton are different indeed from our Costa Ricans, but I find them no more interesting. You must stay at least until you have spent a term at the university, or you cannot know whether it is to your taste."

Unconvinced, Marco protested, "You cannot go without an escort. You cannot ride to Portsmouth tonight."

"No, I mean to spend the night at an inn. I shall be long gone before anyone asks to see me in the morning. Then you may tell my uncle where I am gone; I shall write a letter at the inn and send it to him."

"And one to Andrew."

"Yes. I must thank him for saving my life." Even though it was still Muriel he loved. "Now, I cannot stand here brangling any longer. It is growing dark already. You must go and tell everyone that Muriel and I are safe, and send help for Andrew. Say that I have retired to bed and Annie will do what is needful for me. I am by far too tired to see anyone tonight. Oh Marco, I shall miss you. You have been the greatest comfort to me."

"I shall go with you at least to Portsmouth. Do not argue, Teresa. I'll do as you say and tell everyone you have retired, then I'll come and join you. We can decide later whether I shall return here or go home with you."

They hugged each other hard, then slipped quietly into the house.

"Wait till morning," begged Marco in a whisper as she started trudging up the back stairs. "You are too tired to think straight."

With a look of despair, she shook her head, and

went on. The only thing she knew for certain was that never again could she face Andrew.

She found Annie in her dressing room, huddled in a chair weeping. The maid raised a tearstained black face as she entered and leaped to her feet.

Gayo flapped his wings with a bright "Hello."

"Miss Teresa! I made sure you was dead. Gracious heavens, you're worn to the bone. Let me undress you and it's straight into your bed you go."

Teresa shook her head. "No, I'm leaving, Annie. Please pack a few of my simplest dresses and some linen in a couple of small portmanteaux. Hurry, I must go at once."

"You're never going out at this time of night!"

"It is not five yet, it grows dark early these days. Please Annie, I am by far too tired to argue."

The abigail pulled a couple of bags out of a cupboard and began to pack, but she said firmly, "You're not going anywhere without me, miss, that I can tell you."

"I am going home to Costa Rica." Teresa took two small leather sacks of sovereigns from a drawer. "And I shall ride the first few miles so you cannot come."

"I'll hold on behind, miss, but you shan't leave without me."

Too exhausted to argue, Teresa emptied the guineas onto the bed, and sat down to count them.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew recovered consciousness to find himself the target of four pairs of worried eyes. Every breath felt like a dagger in his side.

"Where is Teresa?" he demanded, ignoring the pain.

"She is on her way back to Five Oaks," said Lord Danville soothingly. "She is quite exhausted."

The look of hurt reproach in Andrew's eyes was meant for the woman he loved, who had deserted him in his hour of need, but Muriel intercepted it.

"I...I must explain," she stammered.

Lord Danville realised he still had his arms about the injured hero's betrothed. Hurriedly he let her go.

Lord Jordan and Mr Wishart, not knowing what was going on but sensing deep waters, glanced at each other, shrugged and went to check the captives' bonds.

Muriel knelt beside Andrew. "I'm sorry, Andrew. I ought not to have run to Tom—Lord Danville—like that."

Andrew shook his head, wordless, then moaned as the unconsidered action lit a fire beneath his ribs. Mr. Wishart caught Lord Jordan's eye and they hurried upstairs to explore the rest of the cottage.

"It is difficult to explain," Muriel went on bravely, dismayed at Andrew's silence. "I have behaved very wickedly, I know. Somehow I could not help myself."

Painfully he reached for her hand. "Little goose," he said affectionately, "I believe some of Teresa's courage has rubbed off on you. I must tell you that I have accepted that assignment in China. I know you cannot like it and I shall quite understand if you feel you do not wish to marry me after all."

Lord Danville moved forward to stand with his hands on Muriel's shoulders. "I, too, must apologise, Graylin, and thank you for releasing Miss Parr so graciously. Believe me, it was never my intention to fall in love with another man's wife."

"If you love each other, what more can I have to say?"

The way they smiled at each other assured him of their mutual regard. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight as a spasm of envy shot through him. "Why did Teresa leave?"

"She was exhausted," repeated Lord Danville. "You saved her life, Graylin, and I know she will express her gratitude when she is a little recovered from her ordeal. He went on to express his own gratitude in somewhat flowery periods.

"It's not her gratitude I want," Andrew muttered fretfully under cover of the viscount's words.

"How are you doing, Graylin?" asked Lord John, coming in. "I must say I've lost my faith in the Diplomatic Corps, seeing you resort to physical measures like that. Dashed heroic thing to do, all the same."

Unwisely, Andrew shook his head. He groaned.

"Don't move, man!" said John in alarm. "Just how badly did you come off?"

"Wishart thinks the bullet glanced off his ribs," his brother told him. "Probably broke one or two, but it is not serious. Deuced painful, though, and he has lost considerable blood. He certainly can't ride home."

"I told Marco to send a couple of carriages."

"Good man."

Meanwhile Muriel had been pondering Andrew's

muttered words and had come to a conclusion as welcome as it was unflattering. With newfound self-confidence, she said to Andrew, "Does she know you love her? You are so often at odds that I never guessed till now, and I know you are too much a gentleman to have spoken to her while you were engaged to me. You do love her, do you not, Andrew?"

"Who?" asked Lord Danville, bewildered.

"Teresa," said his brother and his beloved together. The former went on, "Never say, Tom, that you had not noticed the pair of them smelling of April and May. Too busy doing the same yourself, I daresay."

"I love her to distraction," groaned Andrew.

"A deuced appropriate word," said Lord John with a grin. "What the devil is going on up there?"

The stairs were shrieking a protest as Lord Jordan and Mr Wishart descended with a heavy burden. They dumped the third kidnapper on the floor, where he continued to snore stertorously.

Muriel, back in Lord Danville's arms, looked down at him in distaste. "That's Brawny Bert," she announced.

"Brawny Bert?"

"His name is Bert, and the little man is Sid. Teresa called them Brawny Bert and Scrawny Sid."

"If that ain't like my cousin!" said Lord John with a crack of laughter. "Joking in the midst of deadly peril. How the devil—begging your pardon, Miss Parr—did the two of you overcome this great oaf?"

Muriel told the story, her listeners all agog. Lord Jordan was the only one startled to hear that Teresa had been wearing pistols and had used them to such good effect. The others were admiring but unsurprised by her ingenuity, bravery and capability.

"Poured a bottle of gin down his throat!" said Lord John, grinning. "Dashed if she ain't just what you need with you in China, Graylin. Better tell her you love her soon as may be, if you ask me."

"I am so happy," said Muriel with a long, quavering sigh.

John looked at her happy but worn face. "And fagged half to death. Tom, why don't you take her up on your horse instead of waiting for a carriage? We'll manage here between us."

"Not at all the thing," Danville protested.

John, Wishart, Jordan, Andrew and, after a

moment, Muriel all laughed. "My dear brother-in-law," Lord Jordan observed, "can you imagine anything less proper than the current situation?"

"I will go with you, Tom," said Muriel, then glanced anxiously at the wounded hero. "But Andrew..."

"Go on," he said wryly. "I'll do. I daresay these fellows will not let me bleed to death."

"Teresa would know what to do to make you more comfortable, but I confess, I do not," she responded. "I shall make sure there are plenty of cushions and rugs and hot bricks in the carriage that comes for you."

"I'll send for the sawbones," promised Lord Danville. "Again, my thanks, Graylin."

Andrew smiled ruefully as he watched the duke's heir pick up his quondam beloved and carry her out. It was good to have matters settled between them, but the long conversation had tired him and the ache in his side spread throughout his body. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe shallowly.

As the pain eased a little, he tormented himself with wondering why Teresa had left him so abruptly when he had risked his life to save her. Had she really not guessed that he adored her? Even if not, it was most unlike her not to have stayed to nurse him, however tired she was.

So perhaps she had guessed his love but did not return it. Seeing him freed by Muriel, she had fled for fear that he would demand more than she was able to give.

In either case, it seemed she did not return his love. Yet John spoke of the two of them as "smelling of April and May." Try as he might, Andrew could not quite crush a tiny seed of hope.

Despite his agony, despite her exhaustion, he would talk to her this very evening and discover his fate.

## **Chapter 21**

The carriage ride back to Five Oaks severely tested Andrew's endurance and made him doubt Wishart's diagnosis of his injury as not serious. However, the doctor from Billingshurst concurred. So cheerful was his report that the duchess recovered from her hysterics and the duke ventured to repair to Andrew's chamber. Marco followed his uncle.

"My dear fellow!" cried his Grace, approaching the

invalid's bed. "I shall never be able to thank you enough for saving my niece's life."

"It was nothing," mumbled Andrew, embarrassed. "I beg you will not refine upon it." He sent a beseeching look at Marco, hovering by the door.

Always considerate, the duke stayed only a few minutes. When he left, Marco remained at Andrew's bedside, his face troubled.

"I must see your sister. Has she retired already?"

"She don't want to see you. Or anyone else," Marco added fairly.

"I *must* see her. I shall go to her chamber." Andrew winced as he tried to throw off the bedcovers. "Ouch!"

Marco gripped his shoulder and held him down. When he had followed his sister to her room, prepared to escort her to Portsmouth, he had found Annie philosophically unpacking again and Teresa fast asleep on top of her bed.

He had grinned and said to the maid, "Good! I daresay she will have more sense in the morning."

But though he could see that his friend's anguish was as much mental as physical, he did not understand what was going on between Teresa and Andrew. He didn't want to make things worse by saying the wrong thing.

"She's fast asleep," he said gruffly. "I cannot let you wake her. Besides, the doctor said you are not to move for at least three days, lest your ribs pierce your lungs."

Andrew subsided. The laudanum the doctor had given him had not yet taken effect, but he said, "To the devil with my ribs! I cannot wait so long. Marco, tell her in the morning that I must see her. I love her."

"Love her? Then why is she carrying on as if the world is coming to an end? No, it's all right, don't try to explain." He grinned. "I ain't likely to join the petticoat line for a few years yet. You really love her? What about Miss Parr?"

"I'm happy to be able to inform you that Miss Parr is going to be the next Duchess of Stafford. Will you ask Teresa to come and see me?"

"Yes, but I ought to warn you that she is planning on going home to Costa Rica."

"To Costa Rica! Does your uncle know?"

"No, not yet. She was going to leave tonight, and to stay at an inn on the way to Portsmouth. She was



going to write to Uncle Stafford from the inn, and to you."

"To me?"

"To thank you for..."

"Damnation, am I never to be allowed to forget that I saved her life? You say 'she was going to.' She has not left?"

"She fell asleep, and I was not about to wake her, I promise you." Marco eyed Andrew thoughtfully. "You really love her?" he asked again.

"I adore her. I want to marry her, but if she cannot bear the sight of me I shall leave in the morning—or as soon as I am allowed to travel—and she need never set eyes on me again. I will not let her flee the country because of me."

"Good. Then I will not let her flee the country before you have spoken to her."

Andrew relaxed with a sigh of relief. Suddenly drowsy, he smiled sleepily at the thought of Teresa dashing off to Portsmouth, a navel dockyard, when what she really wanted was Bristol. The courageous woman was also a green girl, in need of someone to guide and protect her. Who better than himself?

Marco tiptoed out of the room.

\* \* \* \*

Teresa dreamt she was back at home on the hacienda. It was one of those nights when, even up in the mountains, the air was still and hot and oppressive. She threw back the covers. The sudden chill on her skin awoke her.

She was lying fully dressed on top of her bed. Someone had draped a couple of blankets over her. She sat up and looked around, dazed by the sudden transition from the dream of her simple whitewashed room to the reality of the luxurious furnishings of an English mansion. It was winter, she remembered, yet still she was unbearably hot.

A fire glowed on the hearth and a strange white light outlined the window. It was morning, then. She slipped down from the bed and went to draw back the curtains. That cold light would cool her. Feathers of frost on the glass melted at her breath; she looked out and gasped.

The strange light was sun reflecting on snow. The world sparkled and gleamed. Every branch of the great cedar was outlined in white. Entranced, Teresa leant

her burning forehead against the windowpane.

Two dogs gambolled across the lawn, oblivious of cold feet. Teresa realised that her own feet were icy. She began to shiver uncontrollably, though she was perspiring and her cheeks felt on fire. It dawned on her that she was feverish. As if the knowledge had somehow intensified the symptoms, her head began to ache and her limbs grew leaden. Overcome by lethargy, she forced herself to stumble into her dressing room to find her medicine chest.

"Hello, hello, hello!" Gayo greeted her. When he received no response, he grumbled irritably, "Misbegotten son of a sea snake."

Teresa was not amused. The catch on the chest was inexplicably recalcitrant to her fumbling fingers. She had just decided to give up and go back to bed when Annie came in.

"You're never up already, miss!" she exclaimed in surprise. "After all those goings-on yesterday, I made sure you'd sleep late."

Teresa's memory flooded back. Yesterday she had been kidnapped. She had shot Harrison. Muriel had thrown herself into Cousin Tom's arms.

Yesterday Andrew had been shot, and in his agony he had called for Muriel.

Teresa astonished herself and her abigail by bursting into tears.

Annie ran to her and hugged her. "Heavens above, miss, you're frozen to the bone," she scolded, dismayed. "Back to bed with you this instant. And your forehead's hot as coals of fire. Lawks, you've taken a chill, and no wonder. Come now, miss, just slip out of your dress and into your nightgown—that's it—and let me tuck you in and I'll bring you your herbs. You just tell me what you need and I'll see it's made proper. You'll be right as rain in no time at all. There, let me fluff up your pillows. Here's the medicines now. This one, is it? Cinchona? Made into tea, isn't that right? I'll take it down to Cook right away."

Soothed by the little maid's comforting chatter, Teresa reached out to her. "Annie, Sir Andrew...how is he?"

"He'll be up and about in a day or two, I hear. He's a real hero, Sir Andrew. Everyone says he risked his life to save yours."

"He did," said Teresa, her voice nearly inaudible.

"But perhaps when Muriel deserted him, he thought his life not worth living."

\* \* \* \*

With the cinchona tea—a horribly bitter concoction which Teresa choked down—Annie brought enquiries and best wishes galore. Teresa refused to see anyone, even her brother, but her maid was unequal to keeping out the duchess. Aunt Stafford swept in just before noon, her round face distressed.

"My dear child, what a horrid business. I am not in the least surprised that you are fallen ill. Your girl says you do not care to see the doctor, but I shall send him to you when he comes to see Graylin, and I shall be excessively displeased if you do not let him examine you. He is an excellent man. I fear you must be thinking that England is quite as dangerous as your wild jungles."

"Oh no, ma'am. I am sure there are villains and rogues everywhere."

"Well, do not bother your head about them, my dear. Stafford and John are going to speak with that dreadful Carruthers and you may be sure he will not try anything again. I daresay he will not dare show his nose in public for years." She kissed Teresa's forehead. "I will leave you to rest now, for I wager that is what you need most, and you must be sure your abigail asks for anything you fancy."

"Thank you, aunt." Teresa blinked away tears. She was turning into a regular watering-pot, she who prided herself on her self-control.

The infusion of cinchona bark had cooled her fever, leaving her weak, depressed, and aching all over. It would be days, at least, before she could put into action her plan to depart for Costa Rica. Confined to her bed, she would be spared seeing Andrew, but there was nothing to distract her from her unhappy thoughts.

She had been a fool to hope that he might come to care for her as more than a friend. Now she knew that hope was what had buoyed her throughout yesterday's ordeal. Muriel's confession that she loved Tom had opened the door; Andrew's final word had slammed it shut.

Teresa knew she had been a fool, too, to think of running off at night without a word to her relatives. As soon as she was well enough, she would discuss her

departure calmly with her uncle, ask him to find her an escort. She prayed it would not take him long.

Don Eduardo would be sorry that she had not found a husband she could love and respect, but if she could not have Andrew, she had just as soon dwindle into an old maid.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew, though still feeling somewhat battered about the middle, was by then fretting and fuming at his enforced idleness. Lying flat on his back was a poor perspective from which to view the world. Besides, it made eating very difficult and he had missed his dinner the night before.

Along with his breakfast, Rowson had brought the news of Miss Danville's indisposition. While his manservant ineptly spoon-fed him, with frequent pauses to wipe egg yolk off his chin, Andrew silently cursed Harrison and his plots. With both Teresa and himself confined to their respective beds, how was he to persuade her of his love?

He had just irritably ordered Rowson to take away the rest of the ham and muffins when there was a knock at his door. Rowson admitted Lord Danville. Andrew was glad to see that his lordship looked distinctly sheepish. After an exchange of the usual amenities, the duke's heir enquired after his guest's health.

On being assured that Andrew was much improved, "I am happy to hear it," said Lord Danville. "We are all deeply in your debt for your prompt and brave action in saving my cousin's life." He hesitated, and when Andrew looked at him expectantly, he flushed. "I fear it is a poor recompense that I should...er, appropriate your betrothed."

"Think nothing of it," said Andrew cordially. "I am fond of Muriel, but you are more than fond, I think?"

"I love her. She is everything I most admire in a woman." Tom's voice was fervent. "We are going up to Town today to obtain her mother's blessing on our union. I can only hope the lady will not be quite upset by this sudden change of *dramatis personae*."

"I can think of few things capable of upsetting Lady Parr. Nor can I suppose that the exchange of a impecunious second son of a viscount for the wealthy heir to a dukedom will be unwelcome."

Tom frowned. "You are cynical, Graylin."

"I do not mean to imply that any such consideration influenced Muriel. But a word of warning, Danville. You may find it expedient to keep her mother at arms' length once you are wed. I take it you have his Grace's permission?"

"My father has been most tolerant. I believe he feared I should never find a woman I wished to wed, though of course I must have married eventually to secure the succession. Muriel's lack of fortune is unimportant. Her family is not impressive but her breeding is irreproachable. His Grace concurs with me that she will be an excellent duchess. I had wondered whether her timidity might be a drawback, but she has admitted to me that she has not always been quite as shocked and frightened as she appeared. It seems her mother taught her to behave so."

"Indeed! If she has made such a confession she must truly love you. As I said yesterday, some of Teresa's courage has rubbed off on her."

"And you truly love Teresa?"

"I do."

"Well, she's a taking little thing, my cousin, if a trifle unconventional." He shook his head indulgently. "But then, you are unconventional too, are you not? I daresay you will suit. I must be off now."

Andrew stared after Lord Danville with a bemused look. Unconventional? Him? He had always thought of himself as the most staid and proper of men. After all, a diplomat must above all be courteous, composed, and sober.

On the other hand, how many gentlemen of his acquaintance had the least desire to travel to the less civilised portions of the globe? How many would have gone aboard the *Snipe* to rescue a shipload of slaves? He could not imagine Thomas Danville involved in that expedition. Lord John would have joined in, had he been present. Yet only the most unlikely circumstances could have led to John's presence on board the *Destiny*, whereas he, Andrew, sought out and enjoyed the unexpected exigencies of foreign travel.

Like Teresa he flung himself into new experiences with zest. What had ever made him suppose he wanted a conformable wife? Not only did he love Teresa, she was precisely the kind of wife he needed.

How long had he loved her? Since the day they

met? No, it was the next day, when they were lost on the volcano's side, though he had not recognised it then. He had felt so protective towards her in her disappointment and contrition. Wrong! He had not wanted to protect her but to comfort her in their shared danger.

Sharing, that was what it was all about. Since their arrival in London, he had had no right to a place in her life, if she would only marry him they could share the mission to China, share a lifetime together.

Marco, dashing into Andrew's chamber, found him grinning with pleasure at the thought of travelling with Teresa again.

"You look happy," he observed. "Just as well, because I came to tell you that Teresa won't receive anyone, not even me, so I can't ask her to come and see you."

"I understand she is ill."

"Oh yes," said her brother without sympathy, "but she's not at death's door, it's only a chill. It's my belief she's sulking."

"Teresa does not sulk!" Andrew was outraged. "Something happened yesterday that distressed her."

"Well, she was kidnapped and tied up and shot at. Enough to distress even my sister, I should think."

Andrew groped for something to throw at Marco. "I mean, you young mooncalf, that something made her miffed at me. It's the only reason I can think of that she should have run off leaving me bleeding on the floor."

"Perhaps, but I cannot imagine what," said Marco dubiously. "She can hardly have wished to be shot by Scrawny Sid. Anyway, the other thing I came to tell you was that Uncle Stafford and Cousin John and I are going to Loxwood to deal with Lord Carruthers. Pity you can't come. I must run or they will leave without me."

\* \* \* \*

Whether or not Teresa was indulging in a fit of the sulks, Andrew's frame of mind for the next half hour might certainly have been described thus. A luncheon as unsatisfactory as his breakfast had come and gone before Marco returned to his chamber, accompanied by the duke and Lord John.

"We've put paid to all this nonsense," announced his Grace with a satisfied air. "How are you doing my

boy?"

"Very well, sir. May I hope you refer to Lord Carruthers?"

"You may, and I do. We have just returned from a visit to Loxwood."

"Cousin John wanted to shoot him or run him through with a sword," Marco said, "but Uncle Stafford said that the signed confession from Harrison was an equally potent weapon."

"Pity," said John, "but I daresay it was more satisfying to draw his cork and blacken his daylight."

"And send him to grass," added Marco with enthusiasm. "You never saw such a neat bit of work, Andrew."

"Bloodthirsty cawker," Andrew teased him. "I wish I had seen it."

"I fancy the bad baron is not well acquainted with the noble science of fisticuffs," said the duke dryly. "It seemed fairer, however, than taking a horsewhip to him, the alternative proposed by my impetuous son. After all, the man is a gentleman by birth, if not by nature."

"It seems insufficient punishment, though, sir," Andrew said with a frown, "and an inadequate deterrent."

"Ah, there the confession came in handy. When I pointed out to Carruthers that his choice lay between a voluntary exile in the Americas or an involuntary sojourn in Australia, he wisely opted for the former. I have left two of my larger grooms to escort him to Bristol and ensure his embarkation."

"Bravo!" An incautious movement made Andrew draw in his breath sharply, then he continued, "What of Harrison and his henchmen?"

"Harrison will hang," said the duke with unwonted harshness, "and the other two men will be transported. My influence is sufficient to guarantee it. I admit that I find it difficult to credit that such a man should dare raise his hand to the granddaughter of a duke. He shall learn that it is not an act without consequence."

Andrew shivered at his haughty tone. He wondered whether that unexpected arrogance of rank might cause the duke to deny him Teresa's hand. It would take forever to obtain permission from Lord Edward in Costa Rica.

"Might I have a word with you in private, sir?" he requested diffidently.

Guessing his purpose, Marco and John departed with grins and nods of encouragement.

"Well, Graylin?" queried his Grace of Stafford. The habitual affability had returned to his manner.

Andrew found it was a great deal easier to approach the subject of marriage with the duke than it had been with Lady Parr. "I want to wed Miss Danville," he said baldly. "Since her father is too far distant to consult, I believe I must approach you for permission to pay my addresses."

"So that's what is in the wind. When Thomas told me he hoped to make your betrothed his bride, he hummed and hawed so that I knew something was afoot. Never seen him at a loss for words before. I take it you are not turning to my niece out of pique at losing Miss Parr to my son."

"I love her, sir. I cannot imagine life without her."

"That sounds adequate. I am somewhat acquainted with your father, and my friend Castlereagh speaks highly of you. I may say that I myself have put in a word for you in that quarter, since you escorted Teresa and Marco from Costa Rica. I know your prospects in the Foreign Office are excellent. However, I understand you are leaving shortly for China."

"I have no doubt that Teresa will be eager to go with me, sir. If she will have me."

"Then I can see no objection, my boy. You have my blessing and Edward's also, I make no doubt, since he saw fit to entrust her to your care. If she will have you, of course."

\* \* \* \*

Three days went by before Andrew was allowed to leave his bed—three days which he spent alternately buoyed by hope and cast into the dimms. Marco reported that Teresa was much improved, though still, in Annie's words, very languid and low. She refused to see anyone other than her maid.

"At least," he pointed out, "she has not yet discussed with my uncle her wish to return home."

Andrew passed yet another impatient day recovering his strength, strolling about his chamber, and sitting by the fire, playing chess and backgammon with his constant stream of visitors.

They had, thank heaven, stopped congratulating



him on his gallant saving of Teresa's life.

On the fifth day he could wait no longer. Marco, suborned into spying for him, reported that Annie had been sent to fetch tea. Andrew lay in wait for the maid in the corridor outside Teresa's rooms, and she gave up the tray with a minimal protest and a saucy wink.

"It'll do her good," she opined, opening the dressing room door for him. Andrew wondered whether she meant the tea or his visit.

He stepped into the room. Teresa was reclining on a chaise longue by the window, her back to him, well wrapped in an azure velvet peignoir. Her unbound hair was a dark cloud about her head. "Annie, have you brought the tea?" she asked, her gaze still on the snowy landscape beyond the window.

"Hello, hello, hello, dinner, hello, hello!" cried Gayo in a paroxysm of joy.

"Andrew!" Teresa turned to look at him, jumping to her feet.

"Your tea, madam," he said. He carried the tray over and set it on a small table by the chaise.

She moved away from him and stood looking out of the window again. He went to stand behind her.

"I knew you would appreciate the beauty of the snow," he murmured.

She started and began to turn, then realised how close he was, and changed her mind. "Why are you here?" she said in an expressionless voice.

"I brought your tea. I am glad, by the way, that you have developed a taste for it. I collect coffee is near unobtainable in China."

"Why have you come?" she repeated crossly.

"Because I love you, Teresa."

Now she did turn, a questioning look on her worn face. "Love me? But you are betrothed to Muriel."

"Muriel is betrothed to your cousin."

"Oh!" She paused. "So that is what Annie tried to tell me. It is very noble of you to give her up to him."

"It is not in the least noble. I have been wishing myself free of that entanglement this age. You are the only one I love."

"Then why," she cried, "oh, why did you call out to Muriel when Scrawny Sid shot you?"

"I did?" he asked, startled. He thought back to that moment. "What exactly did I say?"

"Just 'Muriel.'"

A grin of delight and relief spread across his face. "Is that why you ran away? Of course, it must be. You could not guess that I was just trying to tell you that Muriel and your cousin Tom were obviously in love and I was free at last."

Teresa's resistance was at an end. She threw herself into his welcoming arms.

Manfully ignoring the pain in his ribs, he pulled her to him and buried his face in the black waves of her hair. "I do love you, Teresa. Do you think you can ever come to care for me?"

She looked up at him, and the warmth in her dark eyes made him tighten his clasp. "I have loved you a long time, Andrew. Even when I thought it was quite hopeless."

Despite his joy, the ache in his side warned him to sit down. Fortunately the chaise was just behind them. He pulled Teresa down at his side, his arm about her shoulders, her hands in his. She snuggled against him.

"My darling, will you come adventuring to China with me?"

A glimmer of a smile turned up her lips. "As your *chère amie*?"

"You promised six months since not to talk to me of lightskirts, my incorrigible sweetheart. No, as my wife."

"May Annie and Gayo go with us?"

"Of course, if you swear not to teach Gayo to swear in Chinese."

"I swear. I will go anywhere with you, Andrew."

He bent his head to kiss her.

Gayo took exception to this. "*Cochon!*" he shouted. "*Canaille! Sacré nom d'un chien!*"

Distracted from his purpose, Andrew glanced at the parrot reproachfully. "Chef Jacques, I suppose," he murmured. He looked down at his beloved to share his amusement.

At last their lips met.

"What a pity," sighed Gayo.

Copyright © 1989 by Carola Dunn  
Originally published by Walker  
Electronically published in 2003 by Belgrave House

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No portion of this book may be reprinted in whole or in part, by printing, faxing, E-mail, copying electronically or by any other means without permission of the publisher. For more information, contact Belgrave House, 190 Belgrave Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94117-4228

<http://www.belgravehouse.com>  
Electronic sales: [neff@belgravehouse.com](mailto:neff@belgravehouse.com)

This is a work of fiction. All names in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental.