

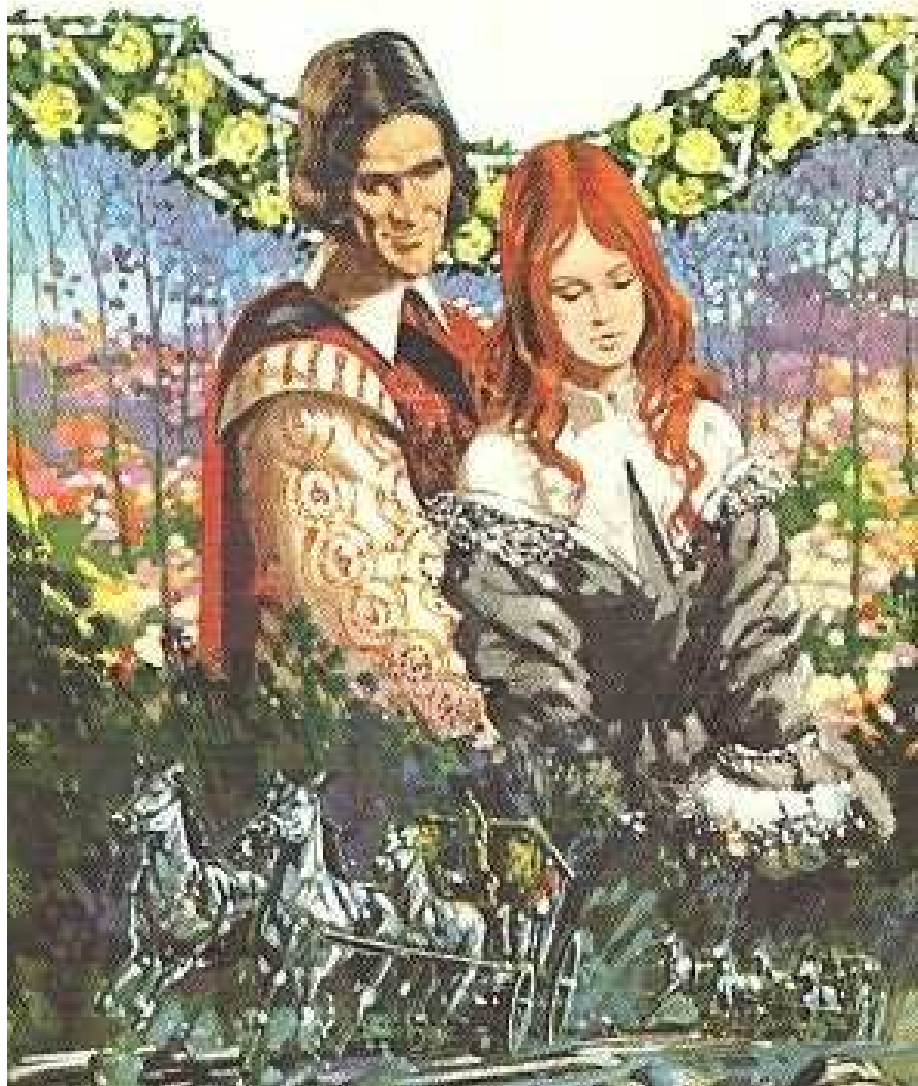


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Puritan Wife

ELIZABETH DE GUISE



PURITAN WIFE

Elizabeth de Guise

"That Stuart monster will never be my king!"

Constance Aiken was no royalist When Cromwell fell she lost her ancestral estate. Then the Earl of Brede arrived in all his royalist splendor to take possession of her beloved home. Where was she to go?

To her amazement the impetuous Earl swept her into a hasty marriage and off to the intrigue-ridden court of Charles II. There she struggled between the dictates of her Puritan conscience and growing love for her handsome husband.

But, with such different backgrounds, could they find true love?

CHAPTER ONE

LORD BREDE did not usually concern himself with the opinions of his servants, and he was not best pleased to have to give his attention to his housekeeper's complaint now. The glint in his eye boded a comfortless half-hour for his steward, who ought by now to have the servants under better control, and for his hapless housekeeper who was plainly too old for the tasks allotted to her and whom he had inherited from his Puritan cousins who had lived in and owned Brede House during the Commonwealth.

"What is the matter with her now?" he demanded, keeping a tight grip on his nearly exhausted patience.

"She's in the Long Gallery," the steward answered in awed tones. "She has a somewhat waspish tongue, my lord. I'm afraid nothing I could say - " He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "This time she insists on seeing your lordship in person. She considers that my experience in running a household of this size is too limited to be of any use - " The steward, a young man, distantly related to the Earl of Brede and with a strong resemblance to his employer, struggled manfully on to the end of his sentence despite his heightened colour. "The Puritan conscience is easily upset, my lord."

The Earl gave his steward a startled glance. "So I understand, Frederick, but surely such an ancient crone can hardly be afraid of receiving unwelcome attentions from anyone - even yourself."

Frederick Aiken was taken aback. "Mrs. Goodman is not exactly old, my lord," he said.

"Nor a young woman either! My mother remembers her well when she and my father were living here, and she served my cousin ever since the Civil War. I can't say I was surprised she didn't feel well

enough to greet me on my arrival here. Weren't we told she had the rheumatics, or some such nonsense?"

"My lord?"

The Earl remembered that his young relative had only joined his household after he had repossessed himself of his old home. It had been an unexpected stroke of luck that his cousin had died so conveniently, making it possible for the King to restore all the family possessions to the rightful branch of the family, though he had to admit that his cousin had administered the estates as well as had been possible during those troubled years when the rightful owners had been in exile with their King. His cousin's Roundhead convictions had served the family well after all. Many an estate had not survived the aftermath of the Civil War and the newly crowned King Charles had had few rewards to offer his most faithful supporters.

"In the Long Gallery, did you say?" the Earl mused aloud. "I think I will see her after all. I am curious about our Mrs. Goodman. But remember, Frederick, the discipline of the staff - even the female staff - is your affair. If they think they can appeal over your head to me every time their consequence is upset, you'll have no peace from them."

Mr. Aiken looked downcast, but he cheered up in a minute. "They are beginning to come round to me, my lord. I have far fewer complaints about the changes we have made now than at first. Your cousin, if I may say so, was well-liked by your people, even if he was a dyed-in-the-wool Puritan."

The Earl nodded distantly. "His wife even more so," he responded, moving quickly towards the stairs, "or so I've heard. I find I know far too little about her, but at least she will provide the redoubtable Mrs. Goodman and myself with an unexceptionable topic of conversation. It should be an interesting encounter!"

The Long Gallery was not a room that appealed to the present Earl of Brede. He considered it a draughty waste of space, the more especially as he had no wife or mistress in the house to make use of it by taking her exercise in it during the wet weather. Perhaps once it had been a pleasant enough room, when it had housed the family portraits and had been used for dancing, or for staging plays, or any of the other entertainments the Lord Protector and his minions had banned throughout the length and breadth of England. His cousin, as Puritan in his ideas as his master, had stripped the gallery of its pictures and ornamentation, leaving two portraits only over the fireplace. The larger one was of himself, his broad-brimmed hat hiding the short haircut that had given the Parliamentarians the nickname of Roundhead, and showed that he too had possessed the heavy-lidded look that was such a feature of the Aiken family. Otherwise the face had been distorted by the constant pain the owner had suffered from the wounds he had sustained in battle and which had ultimately led to his untimely death. The other portrait was of a woman, depicting a face full of untroubled humour that sat oddly under the hooded coif that most Puritan women wore to hide their hair from the eyes of men.

Once there must have been a third picture to balance the portrait of Mrs. Aiken on the other side of the mantelshelf, but it had been recently removed, leaving a dark mark on the wall where it had been. That was something else Mrs. Goodman could tell him about, the Earl vowed under his breath as he gained the top of the stairs. He was beginning to think he had a great deal to say to his housekeeper after ail, and that if either of them were to regret her insistence on seeing him, it was not going to be himself.

He paused in the doorway, looking down the long room with displeasure. Mrs. Goodman had her back to him. She was a small, grey-clad woman, who was either magnificently preserved or much younger than he had been led to suppose. He took a step forward and the floorboard under his foot betrayed his presence to her. She

whirled round to face him, her hands clenched into two fists by her side.

"Mrs. Goodman!" The Earl of Brede joined her where she was standing by one of the windows that looked out across the park that surrounded the house. His eyes rested on the youthful face that was turned towards him and he was hard put to it not to laugh. "Or should it be Mrs. Aiken?"

She made no attempt to answer, giving him ample opportunity to study her appearance more closely. Her dress covered her neck and shoulders, giving her a quaintly demure air that was belied by her tiny waist, the agitation of her breathing, and the lock of copper hair that had escaped the confines of her hand-embroidered coif. She had a mouth more given to smiling than to disapproval, a nose that added character rather than beauty to her face, and a fine pair of deep brown eyes that had widened at the sight of him and were now half-hidden behind long lashes that were as black as her hair was undoubtedly red.

"It's Mrs. Goodman," she said with more decision than he found to be pleasing in a young woman. "You're probably not aware of the fact, but I'm your housekeeper - "

"For the moment," he drawled.

"Really," she replied. "One does not cast off old and valued servants!"

"True," he murmured. "But I have yet to be persuaded that you come under either category." He walked deliberately over to the portrait of Mrs. Aiken and studied it thoughtfully. "Wouldn't it be easier to tell me the truth?" he suggested at last as she made no effort to continue the conversation. He glanced at her over his shoulder and saw that she was in a fine rage and was only controlling herself with difficulty.

Amused, he clasped her lightly round the wrist and dragged her over to stand beneath the portraits. "Well?" he prompted her.

"She's been dead for many years, as anyone could tell you," she said at last. "We had the plague locally and she couldn't be persuaded to stay away from her old nurse who was one of the victims. They both died."

"Then who are you?" he insisted.

She lifted her chin. "My name is Goodman - "

"Nonsense!" He put a hand beneath her chin and turned her face this way and that, his fingers as hard as steel. "Are you her daughter?"

Her eyes sparkled dangerously. "It has sometimes been thought that Mr. Aiken was my father!"

The heavy lids that drooped over her soft, rounded cheeks told him that this was more than possible.

"Where is Mrs. Goodman? You may as well tell me what I want to know, or I shall go and find her for myself, which I fancy neither you nor she will like!"

A glint of amusement came suddenly into her eyes. "I'm not afraid that you'll find her," she declared.

He sighed. "Is she dead also?"

She nodded. "She's buried in the family vault." She caught herself up and hurriedly corrected herself. "She remembered you too. She was looking forward to seeing you again. Do you still like to eat Quaking Pudding?"

"It's a long time since I tasted it. I was certainly fond of it as a small child."

"I could make it for you," she exclaimed. She looked up at him curiously. "You haven't received any complaints about my work, have you? If you have, I consider it a great deal too bad of Frederick to bother you with such trivialities. Anyway, you can't believe a word he says. The tales he tells about what you did in exile couldn't possibly be true! Besides, you would hardly confide in a beardless youth whose idea of a great adventure is to steal up on some hapless girl and kiss her behind the door!"

"Is that what he did to you?"

"Certainly not! But he would have liked to have done!" A certain look in her wide eyes coupled with the relish of her tone made him feel some sympathy for his young steward. It was quite clear to him that, Puritan or not, his "housekeeper" was something of a baggage.

"I expect Frederick was trying to live up to the family reputation. It would seem he has some distance to go."

The girl giggled. "He would need seven league boots to catch up with you!" told him. A guilty hand crept up in front of her mouth. "But of course I know nothing of that. All the King's men are the same, I'm told."

The Earl of Brede scratched his chin. "Were the Puritan Aikens so virtuous?" he asked.

She nodded with a sigh. "They're quite dull by comparison. None of them ever sinned grandly that I can remember."

"And how long is that?"

She was on the point of telling him her exact age, but changed her mind. "A long time," she said instead. "I was brought up by Mrs. Goodman, you know, and she knew every detail there was to be known about all the Aikens."

"That was before you decided to inherit her position?"

"Yes. I don't know what I would have done otherwise," she confessed.

"What happened to the under-housekeeper?"

She cast him a suspicious look. "She's still here," she said at last with great reluctance. "She doesn't approve, if you must know. But I'm a much better housekeeper than she's ever like to be. You would do much better to continue to employ me!"

"But somewhat young?"

"Yes, well, you wouldn't have known about that if Frederick hadn't made me so unspeakably angry this morning. I'd meant to stay out of your way until you took yourself off to London. You're bound to spend most of your time at Court with the pew King and then we can be quite comfortable here again."

"Mr. Aiken said you wished to see me," the Earl remembered drily.

"He said he wouldn't - or, at least, he said you wouldn't see me. But I expect you find him as silly as I do?"

"I shouldn't employ him as my steward if I did. I was relying on Mrs. Goodman to help him settle in - "

The girl made a noise of contempt in the back of her throat. "Mrs. Goodman would have made mincemeat of Frederick, as well you know!"

"It would be more fitting if you referred to him as Mr. Aiken," the Earl reproved her. "He may be young in years, but he has already seen more than a young man should in my service. He is entitled to your respect, young woman."

"Frederick is? What did he do? Is it true he killed a man in France, or was he only boasting as usual?" Her face lit up with a new thought. "Did you really have two mistresses at the same time at the French court without either of their husbands finding out? They must have been incredibly stupid!"

The Earl reflected that he would have to have a word with Mr. Frederick Aiken about keeping a closer guard on his tongue. It was not like Frederick to gossip even with girls as lovely as this one.

"It's not a subject I intend discussing with you," he said sharply. "I'm beginning to think I've been misled in thinking that Puritan young ladies had better things to think about than the *on dit* of the servants' imaginings about their betters! If Frederick thinks fit to tell you any more such tales, I shall rely on you to raise the tone of his mind, as I'm sure you have been taught to do?"

She flushed. "He made it sound very exciting," she tried to explain in a small voice. "Besides, Mrs. Goodman talked about you often enough and all the things you did."

"I cannot somehow imagine Mrs. Goodman discussing my female friends with you," he said crushingly, adding for good measure, "nor would I expect a well brought-up young lady to listen to such things!"

She hung her head. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I didn't think you'd mind being talked about. Frederick says you like being the centre of everyone's attention." She peeped up at him and saw he was still frowning. "A housekeeper is not a lady," she added on a rallying note, "well brought up, or not!"

"I think you'd better tell me why you wished to see me," he advised. "It may present you with a safer topic of conversation, don't you think?"

She was rather less convinced of that. "It's the changes you're making," she said baldly. "I didn't mind the new cane furniture, ugly though it is, because I have to admit it is more comfortable than anything we have had in the house before. But I can't allow you to cut up the Long Gallery - "

"Indeed?"

She could hardly fail to notice the warning in that one word, but she sailed into full battle nevertheless, her eyes fixed firmly on the spoils of victory.

"Whoever heard of a house as old as this one without a Long Gallery? We have more than sufficient rooms without having three more! There has always been a Long Gallery at Brede. Just because modern houses are built without a gallery at all, is that a reason for emulating them?"

"The smaller rooms would be warmer - "

"But my mother - " She stamped her foot to cover her slip. "Where else will the ladies take their exercise in winter?"

"Your mother?" he insisted quietly.

"I don't remember her," she came back quickly. "She died when I was still very young."

"The late Mrs. Aiken?"

Her face reflected clearly the forces that fought within her, one half knowing that she might as well confess the whole to him, the other

less timid side of her determined not to give an inch for fear of total disaster.

The Earl leaned against the mantelpiece and waited for her to decide which way she was going to jump. He had always admired courage and he could detect no lack of it in the small figure in front of him. Whichever course she chose, she would face the consequences squarely, without begging for any favours from him, or any other man. He rather hoped that she would choose to trust him in the end. If she did, it would save a lot of trouble as far as his own plans were concerned.

"Mrs. Aiken was your mother?" he asked her again.

She squared her shoulders, flinging back her head to look him straight in the eyes.

"Yes." She gestured towards the painted portraits on the wall behind him. "Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Aiken. My father and mother. The third portrait was of me, but I had it taken down before you could see it. That was when I decided I'd rather be your housekeeper than your cousin and poor relation. And so I would now!" Angry tears filled her eyes, but she refused to look away. "My name is Constance Aiken, my lord."

Constance Aiken had known more than her fair share of sorrow in her eighteen years. Her mother had died of plague when she was five, leaving her in the sole care of her father, a man who had embraced the Parliamentary cause with all the fervour of someone who has nothing else in his life to interest him. He had consigned his daughter to the care of his housekeeper with the instructions that she was to be brought up to be serious-minded and well educated in the Puritan faith and housewifely duties, and that a stern watchful eye should be

kept on any tendency she might have inherited from her mother to find life one long festival of fun.

To Constance, her father had been a stranger. Their only shared pleasure was Brede Place, which they both loved with a passion made all the stronger because it was only by chance that the estate had fallen to their branch of the family and was not still owned and administered by the exiled Earl of Brede. There was only one thing that could have added to Samuel Aiken's satisfaction in living at Brede and that would have been to hear that the senior branch of his family had finally died out in France. There was no doubt in his mind but that they deserved to do so. They had fought on the wrong side in the Civil War, when every right-minded man knew God was on the side of Cromwell and, worse still, they had even managed to enjoy some aspects of their exile, judging by the rumours that had filtered back to Brede, becoming firm favourites of the Stuart Monster, whom Samuel Aiken suspected of everything he most abhorred, such as popish tendencies in his religion and a vast capacity of attracting and being entertained by some of the most beautiful ladies in Europe.

Constance could just remember the day on which her father had given public thanks in the church on the estate for the death of his cousin the fourth Earl of Brede. Constance had a vivid memory of the tight disapproval of Mrs. Goodman, who had been forced to attend the service.

"It be a disgrace!" she had said warmly when she had Constance to herself. "His Lordship were a fine gentleman. I thank God he has left the young Earl to take his place. Master Henry had very nice ways when he was a little lad."

Constant sometimes felt that she knew more about "Master Henry" than anyone who was now living on the estate. She knew all about the day he had been breeched and how his mother had cried, thinking him far too young to leave the nursery. She knew about his first horse, and

the dogs he had smuggled into his bed at night, and the things he had liked best to eat. She had thanked God every bit as earnestly as had Mrs. Goodman when he had succeeded to the title. "Master Henry" had been an idol to her all through her childhood. He was no enemy of hers, whatever he may have been to her father.

Shortly after her sixteenth birthday, Constance's father had finally succumbed to the wounds he had received in battle and she had found herself in sole possession of Brede Place. For nearly two years she had held things together as best she could, and it had been a good best. Mrs. Goodman's death had left her more lonely than ever and, for the first time, she had neglected the affairs of the estate in order to mourn the woman who had brought her up and who had supplied the only love and affection she had ever known in her short life.

It had come as a great shock when she heard that her claim to the Estate of Brede had been dismissed by the King's Magistrates and that "Master Henry" in the guise of the fifth Earl of Brede had had all his family's estates and incomes restored to him. In some secret recess of her heart she could not help being glad for him, but it had soon been borne in on her that her own situation was unhappy in the extreme.

"I shall take the name of Goodman," she had announced to Mrs. Petters, the woman who had taken up Mrs. Goodman's duties within the household. "I doubt my father spoke to Mrs. Goodman more than twice in his life, so why should the Earl ever wish to see me? If he does want to see his housekeeper, you'll have to take my place and tell him I'm confined to my room with the rheumatics."

Mrs. Petters had been horrified by the suggestion. "Now, now, Mistress Constance, what future would there be in that?"

"All the future I need. Brede is all I have left! I *couldn't* leave here - ever! I'd sooner die! As housekeeper I can pretend to myself that I'm still mistress here. Nothing will be really changed."

"His lordship will be marrying - "

"Not for ages!" Constance had retorted. "He has a mistress at Court, you know, but she's married to someone else. It's said she's of a remarkably jealous disposition, which is a good thing for me!"

Mrs. Petters had gone on issuing dour warnings, but she had none of the influence her predecessor had had with her young mistress and she had not been particularly surprised when Constance had put her plan into action. When nothing awful had happened on the day the fifth Earl of Brede had come to take up residence at Brede Place, the relief of Mrs. Petters had been voluble indeed.

Constance had watched his arrival from the Long Gallery. She was so anxious to catch her first glimpse of him that she had very nearly fallen from the window, but when she had finally seen him she felt more than rewarded for her trouble. She could never have imagined such a magnificent dress on any man - nor, come to think of it, such a magnificent looking man. He had a proud look to him which was reflected in the set of his shoulders and the way he wore his hair, black like the mane of his horse and as thick and glossy as any she had ever seen. He had a long, lean face, darkened by the sun, and a resolute mouth that caused her a momentary doubt about her own position in his household. It was a pity, she thought, that she was unlikely ever to see him close up, but for the moment it had been enough to stare at the astonishing picture he presented, for no Puritan gentleman would have dared to deck himself out in such sartorial splendour.

Never before had she seen anything like his high-heeled, rust-coloured boots, or such a shirt with a lace jabot-drawstring and

the sleeves puffing out in three layers finished with lace cuffs. But it was his coat that gave her the greatest satisfaction for it was *coloured* and intricately embroidered and nothing like the constant black that all the men of her acquaintance wore. This coat was cherry-coloured, and she was almost sure that the buttons glinted pure gold.

It had been a great temptation to go down to the Great Hall with everyone else to greet the Earl, but she had ruthlessly refused herself that pleasure in her new role as housekeeper. What she had not been able to resist was making the acquaintance of young Mr. Frederick Aiken for the pleasure of hearing all that he could tell her of the doings of Lord Brede, a subject that never ceased to fascinate her.

Frederick himself was a mere boy and she teased him unmercifully, just as she would have done the brother she had never had. When he had told her that she was the strangest Puritan he had ever encountered, she had been pleased rather than repentant, though later she had made an earnest attempt to concentrate more on her psalter and less on his descriptions of the various women Lord Brede had known and loved, both in France and in England.

But then had come the fateful day when Frederick had revealed the Earl's plans for modernising Brede Place in line with the ideas he had acquired on his travels. Constance had been indignant when the new cane-seated and cane-backed chairs had taken the place of the severe wood of the box-chair, but in justice she had admitted to herself that the Earl was entitled to sit on whatever kind of chair he liked. But his intention to turn the Long Gallery into three smaller rooms, which would be warmer and considerably less draughty, but which would lose all the splendour of the old Gallery, was more than she could stomach.

She had told Frederick exactly what she thought of the scheme. "I won't allow it!" she had ended fiercely. "You must put an end to it!"

Frederick had looked decidedly uncomfortable. "I'm Brede's steward, not his master. He's a generous enough employer, but I shouldn't like to put his patience to such a test as that. I'd be on my way back to London in the morning."

"You're afraid of him!" Constance had accused him.

"I respect him - " the luckless Frederick had begun.

"Well, I don't shiver in my shoes at the sight of him!" Constance had declared. "I shall speak to him myself!"

"What makes you think he'll discuss his plans with his housekeeper?" Frederick had asked, aghast. "Though you're pretty enough to catch his eye, but that's a different thing. If you ask me, you'd better watch your step where he's concerned."

Constance had laughed at the thought. "He has his mistress in London," she had reassured them both. "It seems to me I'm in far more danger from your attentions, or I would be if you had any ideas beyond stealing a kiss every now and then!" She chuckled at the sight of Frederick's furious face. "I don't believe you even enjoy it much!"

"Not with someone as waspish as yourself," he told her sulkily. "Other girls take me more seriously, let me tell you."

Constance could have hugged herself with glee. "Perhaps they don't know you're afraid to voice an idea if it runs counter to 'Master Henry's'," she taunted him.

"I'm not afraid! I agree with him!"

"Then tell him that I wish to discuss the matter with him. Or don't you dare do that either?"

But he had dared, and the results were likely to be more uncomfortable than Constance liked to admit. However well she felt she knew young "Master Henry", she had no way of telling how much of the boy survived in the man who was the fifth Earl of Brede. Nor had Henry Aiken any reason to tolerate any member of her family gladly. If they had heard rumours of his doings, it was quite likely that he had heard of her father's Service of Thanksgiving on his father's death. It was a thought that made her feel cold inside and, despite herself, the tears trickled down her cheeks and she brushed them away with an angry hand.

"My name is Constance Aiken," she repeated. "My father was some kind of cousin of yours."

"My Puritan cousin," the Earl agreed smoothly. "So, Cousin Constance, rather than discuss the Long Gallery any further, let us discuss what is to be done with you."

"Now?" she sniffed.

He held out a startlingly white wisp of cambric and lace to her and watched lazily as she tried to restore order to her face.

"Shall we say in half-an-hour ? In a warmer room than this ?" His lips twitched as she started defensively. "I think the Little Parlour should suit our purpose," he went on with a smile that made her ready objections die on her lips. "And I should like to see you looking a little more like my cousin and a little less like my housekeeper. Have you no coloured dresses?"

She shook her head. "I share the faith of my father," she informed him proudly. "We don't share your ostentatious ways!"

"Nevertheless - " he began.

"This is my only dress," she burst out, hating him for making known to her her long-standing resentment over that particular fact. Yet how many people had more in these days? She wasn't the only one to have to stay indoors in her shift while her dress was being cleaned from the worst of the fat and candle-grease she was apt to spill down it. "I have no need of a large wardrobe," she went on, hoping to persuade herself even if she couldn't persuade him that her sartorial poverty was a part of her religious beliefs.

"You *had* no need," he corrected her gently. His smile made her heart tremble within her and she had no hesitation in putting her hand in his, damp handkerchief and all. "I can see you are going to be a great expense to me," he continued in the same tone of voice. "But I rather think it may be worth it. I have a fancy to see what fine feathers can do for my little Puritan cousin. It would not surprise me to find I have a raving beauty on my hands! Shall I see you in the Little Parlour?"

She could not have answered him to save her life. All she could do was nod her head and give a little jump for joy. She was beginning to think that "Master Henry" was just as Mrs. Goodman had always led her to believe - the handsomest young gentleman in England!

CHAPTER TWO

UNTIL recently Constance had looked on the Little Parlour as her own sitting-room. After her father's death she had gone to the extravagance of refurnishing the room to suit her own taste and comfort. She had bought at vast expense two of the new upholstered chairs and had herself lovingly embroidered them with patterns of flowers and fruits and with the various heraldic emblems of the Aiken family. She had polished the floors until they had shone even in the darkest corners and had borrowed one of the Persian rugs that had previously graced her father's study to add a little colour and to match the fine tapestries that hung on the walls. She had even thought of taking down the tapestries and panelling the walls in the modern manner, but that had seemed an unjustifiable expense when she was so hard-pressed to find enough money to keep the whole house going. But the room had given her great satisfaction as it was, and it had been with regret that she had vacated it when the Earl had come home to the house that had always been owned by the Earls of Brede.

When she entered the room now, she felt a little glow of pleasure that here, at least, he had changed nothing. On the contrary, he looked very much at home there, standing by the open fireplace, his velvet coat reflecting the light of the orange flames behind him.

Constance had taken the trouble to change her coif for one that she had made herself and which she thought a great deal more elegant than anything else in her possession. She had embroidered it herself, with silk and metal thread on linen, keeping to a pattern she had been told had been worn by Cromwell's mother herself. She thought it suited her very well, and she saw with satisfaction that the Earl had noticed it at once and apparently thought it an improvement also.

Indeed, she had been so busy watching for his slightest reaction, that she failed to notice at first that Mrs. Petters had been summoned also

and was standing awkwardly in the illest-lit corner of the room, her eyes lowered discreetly to the polished boards of the floor.

"My lord," Constance murmured, making her curtsy.

"Cousin Constance," he replied on the edge of laughter. "Mrs. Petters has agreed to be present while we discuss your future. I thought you would be more comfortable with another woman present?"

"Oh yes," she said. "Yes indeed. I didn't know you knew Mrs. Petters," she added unthinkingly. "She used to help Mrs. Goodman, you know."

"So she tells me," the Earl acknowledged. "You will be happy to hear she has agreed to look after you until I can make other arrangements for you. She will be sleeping in your bedroom, for instance."

Constance said nothing. She cast Mrs. Petters a speaking look and the old woman smiled faintly.

"Mistress Constance has had too many responsibilities these last years," she excused her charge. "It's a wonder to me that she is not more self-willed than she is, not having anyone to answer to. It speaks highly for her good sense, as I'm sure your lordship will have noticed for yourself."

The Earl rased his eyebrows in mute mockery. "I am glad to hear it. I was afraid she was bird-brained indeed, judging by her efforts to turn herself into a mere housekeeper - "

"There's nothing wrong in being a housekeeper!" Constance retorted.

"There is everything wrong in Constance Aiken being reduced to such a role. A husband is what you need, and a home of your own."

Constance looked at him in horror. "I will *never* leave Brede Place! It's been my home ever since I was born! If having a husband means I have to live somewhere else, I'd rather stay as I am!"

Mrs. Petters made a shocked sound, shaking her head at the angry girl. "I'm sure his lordship will overlook - " she began in worried tones.

"Why should I leave?" Constance demanded. "I'm as much an Aiken as he is! My mother was as well-born, if not better born than his! He may have the tide, but my right is as strong as his!"

The Earl did not look in the least angry. "I have the right of possession," he reminded her, "and I, too, was born at Brede Place."

"Yes, I know, and it must have been terrible to go away and leave it. If you remember what you felt then, you'll know why I have to stay! I know every inch of the land. I've loved it. I looked after it as well as ever my father did! You can't make me go away!"

It was difficult to tell what the Earl was thinking, or if he were listening at all. He studied her flushed face, taking the opportunity to adjust the lace at his cuffs.

"I should be very remiss if I were to take you at your word," he said at last. "Has there been no one who has sought your hand in marriage?"

Constance tensed, going very pale. "My father wished me to marry Sir Thomas Lucas. He is - was very prominent in the district, and a good Puritan also. Only I could not! He is old!"

"And you were only sixteen when your father died?"

"I sent word to Sir Thomas that my father had changed his mind," she confessed. "He was not very pleased, for he had a great many children by his two previous wives and he had a mind to have someone young

and strong to look after them. I knew his second wife a little. She was afraid of him - and I should have been afraid too."

"I take it he was unkind to her?" the Earl enquired. "Ay, he would be. I have heard tell of your Sir Thomas Lucas and I shouldn't wish anyone of my family to be connected with him."

Constance heaved a sigh of relief. "There is no one else!" she exclaimed in triumph. "There are few men around here in all conscience."

"There is one other," the Earl said slowly. "There is myself. You may think I am rather old also, but at least I wouldn't beat you - often."

It seemed to Constance that the room was whirling about her. " *You* }
But you don't want a wife! What about - "

"I really must insist that you forget all Frederick has told you about my life at Court," the Earl interrupted her drily. "A young girl should know nothing about such things."

"But I do know," Constance objected. "Frederick didn't tell me anything that I didn't know already. Even in Brede we heard all about both you and your father. All Frederick said was that they were as beautiful as they had been rumoured to be, and that your present mis-
friend is the most beautiful of them all!"

The Earl looked amused. "They are not a side of my life of which I am particularly proud, my dear. I would prefer that Frederick had found the time to tell you something which would bring a blush to neither of our cheeks."

Constance chuckled. "Have you ever blushed about anything, cousin?" she demanded. She frowned up at him. "If I had had such a vast success, I think I should be rather pleased that other people should know of it."

"It ill behoves a gentleman to boast of his conquests - or a lady either!"

She was surprised. "Is that why you won't talk about her?" she asked innocently. "But *everyone* knows - "

"*You* should not!"

Her eyes sparkled back at him. "But it sounds such fun to make so many pretty ladies fall in love with one, especially if it makes their husbands angry. Being at Court would be terribly boring otherwise or, at least, my mother found it so." "Those were other times," he said with a touch of weariness. "Nowadays it's hard to tell one's enemies from one's friends, and harder still to tell the enemies of the King. One gathers one's information where one may."

She was entranced by the notion. "But surely you haven't any enemies - not *rpal* ones, who could do you any harm, have you?"

"I have my fair share," he answered.

She found that difficult to believe. Her father had been the Earl's enemy, that she knew, but she couldn't imagine why anyone else should have cause to dislike him. She was her father's daughter, but dislike was not the first emotion that came to mind when she considered her cousin. Far from it, he pleased her eye more than any other individual she could name, and she had found their first encounter in the Long Gallery a strangely exciting interview.

"But they wouldn't want to see you dead!" she protested. "They might be a little jealous - "

"Jealous of my having the King's ear? The Stuart cause is not popular everywhere in England."

"No, indeed!" She suspected that he had wilfully misunderstood her, for he must know that she was far from espousing the King's cause herself. If he had enemies, they were far more likely to be the husbands of his various female friends. She looked up at him, lowering her lids in unconscious coquetry. "The truth is I can't see why you should want to marry," she confessed. "She might not like your paying court to all those other ladies."

Mrs. Petters felt impelled to take a hand in the conversation before her charge should make any more similarly outrageous remarks. "A lady," she scolded in a hoarse whisper, "would not notice, let alone speak of such things!"

"Well, I think I would notice," Constance objected. "Though I must say I much prefer the conversation of gentlemen myself." She turned to the Earl, anxious to get to the bottom of the matter. "Papa said that all ladies of the Court were tools of the devil. He said they were only interested to hear compliments to themselves and never had any opinions on anything that matters. But then, apart from Mama, Papa never spoke to any females at all if he could help it. Are you never bored with so much feminine society?"

Mrs. Petters opened her mouth to utter another rebuke, but the Earl stopped her with a slight movement of one hand. He seemed far more amused by his cousin's remarks than Mrs. Petters considered to be quite proper, relieved as she was that he obviously understood that Constance had little notion what she was talking about.

"I am seldom bored," the Earl drawled, half-smiling. "The rewards of mixing with the opposite sex are different from sharing an hour or so with one's male friends, but I would not be without them."

"Oh," said Constance. "I find it much more exciting talking with you than even with Mrs. Goodman - but perhaps that isn't quite the same thing?"

His eyes filled with laughter. "Precisely, that is it exactly."

She gave him a shy look. "But then you are the first man I've ever talked with like this, except for Frederick and the minister, and they don't count. And the people on the estate, and they don't bother with me now that you have set up a proper office to deal with them."

"Do you mind very much?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "I'm glad not to have it to do," she said frankly. "But I'd do it again sooner than have to leave Brede. This is my home."

"It is his lordship's home," Mrs. Petters hissed.

"If you marry me it will be your home for the rest of your life," the Earl added. "Isn't that what you desire most of all?"

"Yes, it is," she admitted. "But should I like being married to you? I've never thought about marrying anyone in particular before. I don't know much about it."

The Earl took her hands in his. "I should do my best to see that you liked it. At least there should be little danger of our ever boring each other! Besides, the House of Aiken has been divided against itself for far too long. Don't you think that you and I would do well to unite it?"

That appealed to her more than anything else he had said. "You won't mind having a Puritan wife?" she tested him.

"No more than you will mind having a Royalist husband. Will that be more than your Puritan conscience can stomach?"

Her whole face lit with laughter. "Is it very bad of me, but I much prefer your coats to my father's black ones? You must be every bit as

magnificent as Charles Stuart, even though people do say he is a very handsome man - "

"You will be able to see for yourself when I take you to Court," he interrupted her, not ill-pleased to be compared so favourably with his King.

Constance pursed up her lips, excited despite herself. "I shall try to remember he is your King," she said with dignity, "but he will never be mine! Will he mind much, do you think?"

"I think he may win you to his side despite yourself," the Earl returned, his voice dry. "You may do better to attach yourself to Queen Catherine's ladies. Her need of friends may one day be greater than his."

"But the Queen is a Catholic!" Constance's voice shook a little as she remembered all she had been told about such people. "And it is said she speaks no English at all!"

"She is learning to speak a little. She is a very brave lady - and very far from her home."

That was something with which Constance could sympathise, but she was beginning to think that life at Court was going to be a poor thing compared with her beloved Brede. "I am sorry for her, but I think, my lord, that I should prefer to stay here when you go to Court. I would only be a drag on and a worry to you and I'd rather not have anything to do with the Stuart Monster, even as your wife - "

"I'm sorry I can't oblige you in that," he replied languidly. "It's essential that you should be seen at Court as the new Countess of Brede. You will not be alone there, Constance. Won't you trust me to look after you?"

She was surprised to discover he was still holding her hands and she tried to free herself, but he would not allow it, threading his fingers through hers in a small, intimate gesture that set her heart pounding.

"Won't you trust me, Constance?" he repeated.

She licked her lips with an agitated tongue, trying to read his thoughts but not succeeding very well.

"Yes, I do trust you," she breathed. "But we won't have to go at once, will we? We can stay at Brede until we're used to one another, can't we? I think we shall always be strangers if we have to go straight to Court, and I don't like to think of you as a stranger!"

He kissed her fingers and smiled at her. "I shan't remain a stranger to you for long," he promised. "You shall have your honeymoon at Brede, but then I must return to the King. Is it a bargain, my little cousin?"

Constance's hands trembled in his and her heavy lids hid her eyes from his gaze. "Thank you, my lord," she whispered. "I shall try to be content with that."

Constance had expected that the next few weeks would be much the same as the ones that had passed since the Earl's arrival at Brede Place. Instead, they proved to be some of the busiest she had ever spent - and some of the most delightful also!

Following Mrs. Goodman's good example, she had never trusted anyone else in the household with the care of the tinder-box, with its flint and steel above and its heap of combustible rags below. She was careful to keep a good supply of linen rags, tearing them up herself and charring them in a closed vessel, making sure that they did not actually burst into flames. She had suffered from damp tinder

sufficiently often to want to make sure that it was always possible to light the fires and the candles on the cold winter mornings when they were most necessary, a fact which the heedless maids were apt to forget if the task was left to them.

For the last year or more, she had made her own candles also. She had been shocked by the prices the chandlers charged when they had visited Brede Place, and had begun carefully saving the fats from the kitchen, especially the mutton-fat which set the hardest and therefore made the best candles. If she was feeling more extravagant she would mix a little wax with the fat, but, even so, the resulting yellowish tallow candles were more suited for the servants' use than that of her noble cousin. It was clear that they were going to have to use a great deal more wax in the future.

Frederick was no help to her at all in her self-inflicted economies. He thought fivepence a pound for candles a quite reasonable price, and was even willing to spend a shilling a pound on wax from the bee-keepers.

"What we must have is our own hive!" Constance announced to him. "There is a woman in the village offering one for threepence. I shall go and see her myself!"

Frederick swallowed. "There are no need for such economies now, Cousin Constance," he said faintly. "His lordship won't grudge a few pennies spent on candles for the house."

"His lordship hasn't been brought up to consider economies at all," she retorted. "He will always spend money to save himself a little trouble, like all the Royalists. If he were a Puritan he would soon have to mend his ways - and you also!"

"But who will look after the bees?" Frederick demanded, torn between a strong desire to defend himself and his anxiety not to offend his employer's affianced wife.

"I shall," Constance said in amazement. "It is I who want them, after all!"

Frederick could only stare at her. "Won't you discuss it with his lordship first?" he pleaded with her. "He won't like it if you're stung - "

"Oh, fiddle!" Constance turned her back on him. "I'm not so cowardly as to mind a few stings every now and then. His lordship need never know!"

"I shall have to tell him," Frederick said unhappily. "You might consider me a little, cousin. I am his steward and such decisions should be made by me. If I prefer to buy in our candles - "

"Oh, go ahead and tell him if you must, but I shan't change my mind! And you can tell him that, too!"

She had not thought that the Earl would trouble himself over such a small domestic matter, but in that she was mistaken. He came upon her without warning when she had taken refuge in the dairy from Mrs. Petters' constant attentions. She was busy pressing the latest batch of cheese, tightening the wooden screws in the mould with a fierce concentration that was partly joy in finding herself alone and away from the old woman's constant strictures on her behaviour.

Her whole being filled with unexpected delight at the sight of the Earl in the doorway and she ran a hand across her nose to hide the strange weakness that seized her, leaving a trail of damp curds down the side of her cheek.

"My lord?" she stammered. "What has brought you here?"

He laughed out loud. "Don't look so worried, sweetheart. I haven't come to cast the evil eye on your work. I doubt I could if I tried!"

"Some people would believe you can," she told him.

"And what do you believe?"

Thus appealed to, she didn't know how to answer. She more than half believed that there were evil people who "overlooked" the cattle, or who could cast spells and prevent the cream from "coming" into butter, but common sense made her wonder what the Earl would gain from such activities, particularly in his own dairy.

"I believe you could do anything if you tried," she answered at last, "but as this cheese is for your table you wouldn't want to spoil it." She stole a look at him, striving to curb her excitement at seeing him. "Did you come looking for me?" she asked in the most prosaic tones she could manage.

"I had expected to find Mrs. Petters with you. If she had been here, I was going to suggest we took a turn in the garden and I could tell you about our wedding plans."

"I'm not afraid to go with you alone. Oh, do let us leave Mrs. Petters behind this once. She will never let me say what I want to you!"

He looked amused. "I haven't noticed that you are particularly reticent in her company. You make me wonder what is in store for me when she is not there to curb your tongue?"

She was effectively rendered speechless and she could feel herself blushing under the light rebuke. She sighed heavily.

"The trouble is I'm not used to going into Society," she explained, wishing suddenly that she was as beautiful and as well versed in pleasing him as his mistress in London. "Nor is Mrs. Petters," she

added with greater spirit. "You will have to be my teacher yourself, my lord, if you don't want me to disgrace you."

He brushed the dried curds off her face, smiling down at her. "I'm not afraid that you'll ever do that, my little Puritan. I'm more afraid that I may fail you." He tucked her hand into his arm and led her out of the dairy. "If we stay in sight of the house, perhaps it won't be so very dreadful for us to take a turn together without the vigilant eye of Mrs. Petters." He shut the door behind them. "Tell me, my dear, is it really necessary that you should do so many of the household chores yourself?"

"I always have," she answered him. "Recently there have been few others to do even the most necessary tasks."

"But that is not the case now. I have told Frederick to employ as many servants as it needs to keep the house running in good order. I may have spent most of my years in exile, but I am not short of the pennies you might save me by working your fingers to the bone."

Her eyes kindled. "I am not in favour of unnecessary extravagance, my lord. Frederick can afford to be feckless with someone else's money, but I should think myself a poor housewife if I were to follow his example."

"I see," he murmured, "but, do you know, I have the oddest wish to have my wife put her husband before his household? As it is, I never know where I may find you - today, the dairy; tomorrow, tackling an angry swarm of bees! What is my role to be, my love? Removing the stings before I may come near you?"

She frowned, puzzled as to what he meant. "But I'm always glad to talk to you, and I'm not afraid of a sting or two - whatever Frederick may think. He may be afraid of a few bees, but let me tell you, my lord, that I am not!"

He slid an arm about her waist, drawing her close. "I am not doubting your courage, Cousin Constance. I wouldn't dare, remembering that you are as much an Aiken as I am myself - and a red-headed Aiken at that, which must surely be unique!"

"It's a commonplace in my mother's family," she murmured. She felt quite odd standing so close to him and she only hoped that she was not sickening for something. "My mother was Margaret Tusser before she married."

"And closely related to the Palmers, I believe!" the Earl added. "Did you know you are cousin to my lord Castlemaine?"

"Mrs. Palmer's husband? I have no love or admiration for *her*, my lord!"

"Lady Castlemaine has all the admiration she needs from another source," the Earl said drily. "But the connection may have its uses to us both. Barbara Villiers is an insensitive woman, an ennobled whore who could do great damage to the King."

Constance made a face at the mention of Charles Stuart. "I have heard that he finds delight in her company, and that the Queen was grossly insulted when he first wanted Lady Castlemaine to be one of her Ladies-in-Waiting, and then insisted on introducing her to Catherine. Was it so very bad, my lord? I don't think I should mind very much if you were to introduce to me those ladies whom you like to associate with. Perhaps I might like them also?"

"I hope you would not!" He looked down at her with a mixture of amusement and frustration. "Hasn't it occurred to you yet that as your husband I may wish to do more than talk with you?"

Constance's face turned bright pink. "I had not thought - " she stammered. "I have no knowledge of such things. P-per- haps you would rather not marry me after all?"

"On the contrary," he said gently, "the prospect becomes more pleasing by the moment." He put up a hand to her embroidered coif, pulling it away from her head, and her rich, red hair fell about her shoulders and down her back.

"My lord!" she protested. Her breath caught in the back of her throat and she felt as weak as if she had run a couple of miles trying to keep up with one of the Earl's horses. "It's wicked for a woman to uncover her hair!"

"I'm beginning to understand why," the Earl teased her. "You're a beautiful woman, Constance Aiken."

She giggled irrepressibly. "The only beauty that counts is beauty of spirit," she pointed out. "I'm sadly lacking in the virtues that matter." She giggled again. "It's terrible to want to wear clothes as fine as yours and one should never, *never* concern oneself with one's looks, but I shall enjoy wearing lovely dresses if it pleases you." She peeped up at him with a guilty look. "I'm afraid I'm every bit as sinful as my father thought me!" she sighed.

He wound a lock of her hair round his fingers. "It will please me very much to see you in colours. The autumn shades will suit you best, I think. Shall we order you a dress of gold for your wedding?"

She could hardly believe her ears. "You did say you didn't care greatly for my grey dress," she reminded him, anxious to justify this dream he was holding out to her. "Could I wear gold brocade at Court?"

"Once the wedding-knots were removed, I should think it would do very well," he agreed. "You must consult my mother about it. Did I tell you that I have invited her to come to Brede? She will be here in a few days and will stay until after we are married."

Constance thought he knew perfectly well that he hadn't mentioned his mother's coming at all. It was probably deliberate, for she couldn't help thinking that the present Countess of Brede would think poorly of having such a drab creature as her daughter-in-law.

"Did she wish to leave the Court just now?" Constance asked, sounding more frightened than she knew.

"She is very excited that I am giving her a daughter at last," the Earl said firmly. "Every girl needs a mother when she is about to be wed and, as she is about to be your mother indeed, she will be able to advise you about your new life in a way that Mrs. Petters - or even Mrs. Goodman had she still been alive - might have found a trifle difficult. You have no need to be afraid of her, Constance. She has already taken fright that you will think her frivolous and will look down your Puritan nose at her worldly interests - "

"What have you told her about me?" Constance demanded with a mixture of annoyance and wonder. "Nobody has ever been afraid of me!"

"When she sees you, she will love you very much," he consoled her. "It will be hard for her to return to Brede after all this time. She was mistress here before she went into exile with my father. She may find the changes that have been made by your father not at all to her liking!"

Constance almost smirked at the thought of having such an able ally as the Earl's mother was like to be. "She will agree with me about the Long Gallery!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure she will! She will soon put an end to your schemes to ruin what must always be a feature of the house!"

"You will have to speak to her about it," he said with a smile. "Between the two of you, I can see, I shall have a sad life of it, never

being allowed my own way about anything. A poor, henpecked thing
- "

She stopped him by pulling on his sleeve. "A Puritan wife would never seek to command her husband in anything!" she declared. "Though I do hope to *persuade* you to leave the Long Gallery alone!"

The Earl bent his head and touched his mouth to hers in a kiss so gentle that she wondered why her lips should throb with the wonder of it long after he had released his hold on her.

"Is *that* what you do with your ladies?" she marvelled, her attention completely diverted from his iniquitous intentions as far as the Long Gallery was concerned. "I never thought I'd like to kiss anyone." She wrinkled up her brow. "I think it must be that you do it very well!"

He kissed her again, a more lingering kiss that stirred her blood and made her cling to him for support. "Do you mind?" he asked.

She shook her head, struggling to regain her breath, and mumbled something that was quite unintelligible to them both.

"I hope you may come to like it," he went on calmly, "because I intend to kiss my wife as often as she will allow, as is only proper in a married couple, but not if you are completely reluctant, of course?"

The colour came and went in her cheeks. "I'm not!" she gasped out. "I mean I liked it very well! And I've always wanted to be the Mistress of Brede," she added naively, "so I think I'm going to like being married to you very much!" She would have liked him to kiss her again, but he showed no signs of doing so and so she covered her confusion by sinking into a deep curtsy. "The future Countess of Brede presents her compliments to her lord - " She broke off as a new thought struck her. "Do you think it's very sinful to be enjoying myself so much?" she asked him. "Only, I can't care as much as I

ought because I think I should tell you, Cousin Henry, that I find I'm not reluctant to be kissed by you at all!"

CHAPTER THREE

CONSTANCE read her psalter often and with resolution but, try as she would, she could not regret a single moment of the time she had spent in her future lord's company. Her father would have been shocked beyond belief that his daughter could have displayed such a marked lack of dignified restraint when speaking with any man, even her future husband, and she had to admit that the memory of her exact words gave her a hollow feeling inside herself whenever she thought about it.

His lordship, though, had not been in the least shocked. It was, Constance thought, one of the many things that made him so entrancingly different from any other man she had known. She would remember till the day she died the exact look on his face as he had bowed in response to her curtsy and had said,

"The Earl of Brede is flattered by his future wife's condescension and will do all in his power to live up to her high opinion of him."

Constance had been overcome by his kindness to her. "Will you like being married to me too?" she had asked him humbly.

"Very much! Whatever the gossips may tell you, my dear, you are the only woman I have ever wanted for my wife. Remember that, if I should ever give you reason to believe otherwise, and have no regrets because I have occasionally dallied elsewhere. Not one of them is worth as much as your little finger!"

She thought it was the most gallant speech she had ever heard. As most of the other ladies had been married already, she was sensible enough to take his protestations with a pinch of salt, but she was intensely grateful to him for treating the little, grey-clad, Puritan Aiken as though she were something special in his world.

"I don't care if it is a sin," she had cried out passionately, "I want to be as beautiful as - as anyone else in my dress of gold! I want to look beautiful for you!"

"You already do that," he had told her. "How could it be otherwise when your hair is the colour of the setting sun and your eyes the colour of the horse-chestnuts I played with as a boy? I think I should take you back to Mrs. Petters, my love, before I forget to guard my tongue, as you so often do yours, and say something you are not yet ready to hear from any man!"

Constance had been curious to know what he was keeping from her, but she had made no demur when he had led her back to the house and the redoubtable Mrs. Petters, and she had done her best not to laugh when he had tried to explain her loosened hair, claiming she had caught her coif in a low branch of a tree.

"Whatever would your father have said?" Mrs. Petters had scolded her, making short work of the Earl's lame excuses. "A woman's hair is the snare of the devil! How often have you heard that said, Mistress Constance?"

Constance, who had never really considered the point, was inclined to argue. "I don't see it's any worse than wearing a wig as the Old Queen did! And when she was younger, she probably wore her own hair. Her pictures always show her doing so!"

Mrs. Petters, like many Puritans, had an intense devotion to the memory of Good Queen Bess, and was quite put out of temper at this criticism of her idol. "I won't hear another word!" she had said sharply. "At least nobody could have thought Queen Elizabeth a wanton, as his lordship will shortly be thinking you must be! The sooner you're married the better, I'm thinking!"

The Earl was on the point of shrugging his shoulders at the incident when he had noticed the unshed tears in Constance's eyes and had realised that his betrothed was taking the old woman's strictures far more seriously than he liked. Not for the first time in the last few days, he had wished he had never heard of his Puritan relations with their rigid ideas of right and wrong.

"That's enough, Mrs. Petters," he had said aloud. "Mistress Constance's conscience is in my keeping now, and if I have any complaints I am well able to voice them myself. It was I who loosed her hair - against her wishes. Nor do I believe that anything so beautiful is of the devil's devising, or it would be gracing a very different head!" His eyes were bold and hard and his mouth took on a bitter twist. "But that is very rarely the way of things in this world of ours."

Mrs. Petters had subsided, affronted, but as she had said to Constance afterwards, she would not have been surprised to hear that the Earl frequently consorted with the devil himself. "Your father would have known better than to entrust you to such a monster of iniquity. I grieve for you being wedded to such a one as he!"

Constance had tried to grieve over her fate also, but as a golden gladness burgeoned within her whenever she considered her future life with her husband, she was not very successful, and even the most sincere attempts to recall her past sins rapidly turned into daydreams in which the future Countess of Brede figured in the most romantic roles imaginable, rescuing her husband in the nick of time from the most dreadful circumstances, or contriving in some unspecified way to earn his undying gratitude by her deeds of fortitude and daring.

She set herself penances, of course, for wasting her time in this way, but she soon came to the conclusion that it was well worth learning whole chapters of the Bible by heart if it meant that she could also

indulge her dreams of Henry Aiken, Earl of Brede, with an *almost* clear conscience.

The imminent arrival of the Earl's mother put the whole household in a spin. Constance declared that they would have a grand washday so that everything would be clean and fresh for her, and turned everything upside down in her efforts to make sure that nothing was forgotten. Damp washing hung in piles in every room, as it had rained without ceasing since early morning, thus driving the menfolk out to find more peaceful occupations elsewhere. Frederick had gone rent-collecting amongst the tenant farmers and the Earl had taken himself off to call on some friends of his who lived nearby.

Constance had finished overseeing the wash herself, clucking her tongue over the new soap the maids had made from fats and lye and which she didn't think had turned out as well as it should have done, and was busy making some starch from cuckoo-pint roots, when she heard a fearful noise in the drive outside.

"Whatever can that be?" she asked the only other occupant of the laundry, a young maid who was the daughter of one of the local farmers.

Sobriety, for such was the girl's name, looked up from the mortar in which she was beating together rose-leaves, lavender- flowers, orris, cypress, and Calamus Aromaticus to make a "delicate washing ball" for her mistress.

"The footman will be going to see, I'm thinking, or maybe someone else," she offered hopefully.

Constance swallowed down her irritation and dried her hands on her apron. She knew that Frederick had done the best he could with the staff of servants he had found already in residence in Brede Place, but the two years they had spent without any master to answer to had had

their inevitable results. Constance had tried to keep their liveries in good repair, but a certain sloppiness had crept first into their dress and then into their manners which she had been helpless to curb. The result was that, with Frederick known to be away, it was unlikely that anyone would disturb himself in the servants' hall to go and answer the door.

"There must be plenty who would wish to do an honest day's work in these troubled times!" she grumbled. "Heaven knows, we could do with some of them here!"

"His lordship has ordered new livery, so 'tis said," Sobriety told her in some excitement, "and new dresses for the maids. Even Mrs. Petters is to have one. 'Tis rumoured as we'll be able to wear it outside on the days we go home, if we looks after them. 'Tis a long time since we was envied for working up at Brede Place, but things is going to be different now!"

Constance hid the hurt which the maid's words dealt her, reminding herself that she too was benefiting from the many changes, but it was hard to know that her own efforts to hold Brede together had largely gone for nothing.

As she had suspected there was no sign of any of the servants in the hall. She crossed the polished boards, angry that her beloved home should present such a poor face to the world, and pulled the door open wide, there to be met by the most astonishing sight of her Whole life.

No fewer than five mud-spattered coaches stood in the driveway. Two of them were closely curtained against prying eyes, making Constance's skin crawl as she wondered if the reason was because they contained sickness. It had been years since any cases of plague had been reported anywhere near Brede, but she always remembered that was the cause of her mother's untimely death and she couldn't help the canker of anxiety that filled her at the sight.

Wide-eyed, she turned her attention to the man who was standing immediately without the door. His wide-sleeved coat was drenched from the rain and he was plainly in a very bad temper.

"Look to it, girl! Are we to be kept standing here all day? Her ladyship, the Countess of Brede, is here to see your mistress."

Constance gave him a frightened look. "The Earl of Brede is visiting friends - " she began.

"Are you deaf as well as stupid?" the man thundered at her. "Her ladyship wishes to see Mistress Aiken at once!"

"I see," said Constance, not seeing at all. "We were not expecting her until tomorrow, but please to bid her to come in out of the rain."

"*Her!*" the man exclaimed, beside himself. "*Her ladyship*, if you please!"

"Yes, sir, if you say so," Constance agreed meekly, her sense of humour getting the better of her. "Shall I come out to help her in?"

He didn't deign to answer, sweeping round on his heel, and going himself to help his mistress from her coach. Constance, intrigued to catch a glimpse of her future mother-in-law before that lady could see her, stood as high on her toes as she could get and peered out into the driving rain. Her first thought was that the Countess might as well have been stark naked, so revealing was the cut of her handsome velvet dress, but her ladyship showed no sign of embarrassment at the way her figure was revealed to the public gaze, so Constance could only suppose that it was deliberate on her part. This opinion was confirmed when she caught sight of the way the velvet skirt was looped up to reveal an embroidered petticoat beneath that matched the long, pointed stomacher and the full, elaborately trimmed sleeves.

"Well, well, what have we here?" the Countess laughed to no one in particular as she gained the panelled hall, shaking the drops of water from her elaborately contrived coiffure. "How little it has changed!"

"Oh, my lady, how glad I am to hear you say so," Constance said, making her curtsy. "I'm afraid we are offering you a very poor reception, but we were led to believe from your son that you were arriving tomorrow."

The Countess looked suitably guilty. "So I should have done, but I began to think about the poor girl he is marrying with such indecent haste and I set forth at once. If I had known that the weather was going to be so wretched, I might have thought twice before doing so."

Constance blinked. "We - we are a trifle disorganised - ""But of course you are! Pay no heed at all to me, my dear. . All I require is a warm room where I may dry myself and Mistress Aiken's company as soon as she can be spared from her household tasks."

Constance fiddled with the bib of her apron with nervous fingers. "I think you njoy find the Little Parlour suitable, my lady," she whispered. "And I - I am Constance Aiken, if it pleases you."

The Countess very nearly overbalanced as she strove to hide her astonishment at this piece of news. "But you are just a child!"

"I am close to eighteen years."

The Countess put a hand below Constance's chin and turned her face this way and that, exactly as her son had done, noting the wide, frightened eyes and the stiff, straightened back that defied her to comment unfavourably on her appearance.

"But of course you are Constance Aiken," she said at last. "How like your Mama you are, now I come to look at you."

"I am thought to favour the Aikens," Constance muttered.

"With hair you could warm your hands in front of? No Aiken that I ever heard of had other than the black hair! But that's not the matter I came rushing down to Brede to talk to you about. The truth is, my dear, that it occurred to me that your situation was most unenviable - are you sure you wish to marry Henry? I love him dearly, but he is really very like his father - But there! I don't wish to tell you tales to frighten you! What I am trying to say is that you mustn't think you have no choice in the matter. If you wish to marry Henry, no one will be more pleased than myself, for I have always wanted a daughter, but what must I do, but produce one son after another and all of them as alike as peas in a pod! But I felt I had to assure you that if you wished to come and live with me, if you don't want to marry Henry, I shall take you back to London with me at once. So, you see, there is not the slightest need to force yourself into anything you don't quite like!"

Constance's eyes glimmered with laughter. "How kind of you, ma'am," she said with real feeling. "But the truth is I can think of nothing I shall like better than to be the Countess of Brede!"

The present Countess looked distinctly relieved. "I can't pretend I'm not glad that you feel that way!" she exclaimed. "If it were necessary, I should make a stand against Brede, but I have to admit I am never quite comfortable when I set myself against his wishes."

"I know exactly how you feel," Constance assured her. "With my father, I didn't mind disappointing him every now and again, but with his lordship, I should be devastated to lose his good opinion of me."

The Countess hugged her with real affection. "It was the same with his father," she confessed. "He was always kind and thoughtful for my comfort, and I know how fortunate I was in every way, but females always hope for more than is wise for their happiness - look

at the Queen! - and it is far more comfortable to make the best of what one has." She sighed, evidently recalling some painful moments from the past. "It's no good expecting *constancy* when one has everything else from a man!"

Constance fussed round her guest, settling her into the most comfortable chair in the Little Parlour, seating herself on the Persian rug at her feet. She was thinking hard on what her future mother-in-law had said and, while she suspected that a great deal of good advice was concealed in her prattling speech, she knew that she wanted more than that for herself.

"Ma'am," she said at last, "do you know why his lordship is marrying me?"

The Countess didn't answer immediately.

"Is it because he didn't know what else to do with me?"

The Countess brushed away any such idea with one beautifully tended hand. "There are many things he could have done. He could have let your game of being my dear Mrs. Goodman go on, or he could have lodged you with any one of his married brothers, or brought you to me. That he did none of these things can only mean he meant to marry you from the first moment he set eyes on you. Why he should want to do so, you can answer better than I can. If he is *epri*s with you, his mother is the last person he would tell."

Constance blushed, "I don't believe it is that - though he did kiss me once. He seemed more interested that my grandmother, my mother's mother, had been born a Palmer."

"It may have been that," the Countess agreed, "though I cannot see it is of any particular interest myself." Her eyes twinkled suddenly. "Do you know that you are the very first Puritan I have ever spoken with intimately. I was so frightened of you, I can't tell you! But you are just

exactly what I should have wished my daughter to be! So he kissed you, did he?"

Constance nodded her head. "I had no idea he would do that - it was most improper, and Mrs. Petters was angry all the rest of the day. He says when we are married he will kiss me quite often. Perhaps I should not speak of such things to you, my lady, but Mrs. Petters will not speak about it at all, and I have no wish to make a fool of myself because - because your son doesn't suffer fools very gladly, as you must know yourself."

The Countess accepted this speech with a mixture of surprise and amusement. "If you liked his kisses you have nothing to worry about. If you lack experience, one cannot possibly say the same for Henry, and so it is best to leave everything to him. Don't look so worried, child! He has given pleasure to far too many women not to do the same by you!"

Constance saw at once that the older woman had misunderstood her anxiety and was more than a little shocked by the other's plain speaking. She blushed to the ears and turned away towards the fire.

"His lordship - " she stammered. "It is only that I would not like him to be shamed by me," she managed to say. "I know nothing of Society, or the ways of Charles Stuart's supporters. Since my father died when I was sixteen, I have been here alone at Brede. My manners - my speech - oh, my lady, you can't know how much I want him to be proud of his wife! I am afraid my Puritan ways may be misunderstood at Court and that he will suffer for it. He is ordering new dresses for me, but I shall still be myself underneath, and the Royalist cause is none of mine!"

"Such violence!" the Earl's mother teased her. "Am I to understand that a Puritan gentleman would *not* have kissed you?"

"Certainly not!" said Constance, not having the least idea whether he would or not, given a like opportunity.

"What a dull lot they must be!" the older woman observed.

Constance repressed a giggle with difficulty. "Did you know my father, ma'am?" she asked.

"No. He had already cast off his family ties when I married his cousin. I remember how surprised we all were when your mother married him. She was younger than I, of course, and quite the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. But there, perhaps her father was wise to arrange the match. His own sympathies were Royalist, but he often said the Parliamentarians would be the saving of England and that they would surely win the war. He was right in that, at any rate, though the Commonwealth was very un-English to my way of thinking! Imagine making people work on Christmas Day!"

Constance laughed a little. She couldn't remember that anyone had done anything else. She could dimly remember stories of May Poles and people dancing round them, but her father had been strict in his interpretation of the law and such activities had soon ceased in the face of his displeasure.

"Mrs. Goodman used to say that the Old Queen would never have tried the patience of the people as the Stuarts did. If she had lived, she would have won the leaders of both persuasions to her side. It was a bad day when the Stuart Monster came down from Scotland!"

"Dear Mrs. Goodman! I remember her well. But, alas, even queens are mortal, and how many of us now were alive when she was on the throne? Though I could wish her back with a good will if it meant the end to the incessant politics which is all we ever hear about nowadays!"

"Mrs. Goodman said politics were best left to the men."

"Unfortunately ambition frequently wears skirts," the Countess said drily. "And our sex can be far more ruthless than most men. I sometimes wish that someone would have the courage to tell the King as much!"

"Do you dislike my lady Castlemaine also?" Constance enquired.

"My dear, from the moment she joined the King's Court in exile, she scandalised the whole of Europe. But to present her to the Queen was beyond everything, especially as she was putting it about that that son of hers was fathered by the King and not by her husband, who was equally adamant that the boy was his son and heir and has recognised him as such. Castlemaine had him baptised by a priest of his own religion, and then what must my lady do but have him baptised all over again in the Protestant religion. And this before the King had been married to Her Majesty for more than two months! Poor lady, it's not surprising she would like to pack her bags and run away from us all back to that beloved Portugal of hers!" She rose to her feet, her disgust at the situation written clearly on her face. "But that is of small interest to you, my love. Brede commissioned me to bring a whole wardrobe of clothing for you with my own things. Shall we go and see if there is anything there to suit you?"

Constance could hardly believe her ears. "For me? Oh, ma'am, is it very wicked of me to want to wear colours so much?"

"Not wicked at all! With that hair of yours it would be a sin *not* to wear the finest colours we can find for you. We will soon make Brede's eyes start in his head!"

That was something Constance would like very much indeed! She could scarcely refrain from dancing through the house as she led her future mother-in-law to the bedchamber which she would inhabit during her stay.

"Oh my!" that lady exclaimed when she saw it. "I do declare that it hasn't been changed in twenty years! How long it has been since we were forced to flee for our lives in the War - before they murdered the poor, martyred King. But where is your own chamber? And should not your own maid attend you?"

"I have always slept upstairs with the servants," Constance told her cheerfully. "My father insisted on it. He didn't believe it was good for the young to have too much comfort." She hesitated, biting her lip and feeling something of a freak. "I have never had a maid of my own," she added shyly. "Mrs. Petters has sometimes dressed my hair, but it isn't necessary to have much styling when it is hidden by a coif. I have never worn my hair as you do. I'm afraid the Elders would be deeply shocked to see you, my lady!"

The Countess laughed comfortably. "No doubt, but you must remember that I find their round heads and long faces equally shocking! I had best send for my own maid, I think, and she will advise us how best to transform you into a Royalist bride!"

Constance set her face determinedly against giving way to this delightful suggestion without at least a token struggle. "Charles Stuart may be your King, but he is none of mine!" she declared. "I have another King of my own and, if I dress to please anyone, it will be to please him."

"If you say so, my love," the Countess agreed, a little puzzled as to how to deal with this unaccustomed religious fervour. "But, try as I will, I cannot believe our precious Saviour - " She broke off, astonished by the deep blush that was staining her daughter-to-be's cheeks. She was wise enough to say nothing further, however, content with the knowledge that Constance's Puritan conscience had not prevented her from tumbling into love with her son. If the occasion arrived, she thought to herself, she would drop a word in the Earl's ear, warning him to be gentle with his young bride, for she had

surprised within herself a quite unusual affection for the girl and had not the least ambition to see her hurt by the whim of that careless young man.

There followed the most delightful hour as Constance had her first encounter with the fashions of the Court. The Countess's own maid dressed her hair and was gratifyingly complimentary in the process, and was even more so when she laced the tightly-boned stomacher and found that that painful necessity to the truly fashionable was scarcely needed by Constance at all.

The dress of gold was kept to the last. "You will want to sew on your own bride-favours," the Countess decided, "taking care they can be torn off without spoiling the cloth. I will help you if you like."

Appreciating the honour, Constance thanked her gravely. "Do I look nice, ma'am?" she asked, her voice quivering with barely concealed anxiety.

"See for yourself, child!" The Countess pushed her in front of the tall looking-glass she had brought with her from London and which she never travelled anywhere without. "What do you think?"

Constance saw a stranger before her, her flaming red hair dressed high on her head and falling in the prettiest ringlets about her shoulders. And the dress itself! It shone in the dim light that came through the windows with a magnificence that was reflected in the pearl-encrusted sleeves and bodice. For the first time in her life Constance knew she looked beautiful.

"I must show it to *him*!" she exclaimed. "As soon as he comes home, I shall show him how nice I look!"

The Countess and her maid exchanged glances. "His lordship sent for some refreshments to be taken to the Oak Parlour more than half-an-hour ago," the maid told her.

"Then I shall go to him now! Should I carry a fan, do you think? I never have before, you know!"

The Countess chose one for her and pushed it into her excited hands, praying inwardly that the Earl would greet the intrusion with sufficient good humour not to disappoint Constance's pleasure in her new appearance.

The Earl, however, was not alone. He turned his head at Constance's rather boisterous entrance and smiled across the room at her, thus reducing her to a shy, tongued-tied silence. His eyebrows rose as his eyes travelled over her.

"I see my mother has arrived a day early!" he said.

"Yes, my lord." She advanced a few feet into the room. "Are you - are you pleased with what she has brought me?"

He took her hand and drew her close beside him. "Very pleased! And how does the beautiful young lady feel herself about it?"

"I'm pleased if you are, my lord."

It was only then that the second man in the room spoke. "Mistress Constance! Can it really be you? Are you so lost - "

"Not lost, Sir Thomas. Her family have only recently discovered the acquaintance of our little cousin."

Sir Thomas smote one hand against the other. "Samuel Aiken will be turning in his grave to think of his daughter in the Royalist clutches! You would have done better to have obeyed his wishes and married me, my girl!"

The Earl felt the girl beside him shiver with fear and a slight frown appeared in his eyes. "Mistress Aiken is too young to have the management of a household such as yours," he returned pleasantly.

"She has managed well enough here at Brede. Besides she would soon have learned what was needed - to the betterment of her immortal soul, my lord, which is now undoubtedly lost to her! I should have taught her the duties of a wife in accord with her father's conscience. A diet of bread and water and an unsparing use of the rod would make her more amenable both to the requirements of her religion and to myself. It is known that it is ever a hard way for a female to earn forgiveness for her sins, for she is more easily tempted than her brother, as Eve was tempted before Adam. If I had any doubts, my lord, I have the proof of it now! How easily has this Daughter of Eve fallen from grace!"

Constance cast the Earl a stricken look. "My father would have thought so too!" she whispered.

His lordship put a forcible finger beneath her chin and raised her face to meet his quizzical gaze.

"I have never heard it said that our loving Lord raised a hand against a woman," he observed. "Should his followers be less charitable than He?"

For a long moment Constance struggled with the exigencies of her conscience, remembering first the rigid unhappiness in which her father had lived his life, and then turning her attention to the contrast between the two men who were watching the battle that was going on within herself. They could not have been more different. One of them she loved with all her heart, who had brought warmth and colour into her life, and whom she couldn't think of as having sold his soul to the devil. The other was cold, hard, and as miserable in his dealings with

his dependents as ever her father had been. She took a deep breath and looked up at her lord.

"I shall be more than content to follow my husband's religion and to live as he would have me live," she managed at last, "if I have his affection or, at least, a small part of it, for I have often been lonely these - these last few years."

"Have you, sweeting?" The Earl showed not the slightest concern for the apoplectic countenance of his guest. "I think I can safely promise you that married to me you will never be lonely again. My wife will always have her own place in my heart."

Constance smiled happily through her tears. "Thank you, my lord," she said.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was some time since the Countess of Brede had sat down to table anywhere in the English countryside, and though she did her best to school her expression into some semblance of tolerance, she was scandalised by the lack of delicacy that was displayed. She had forgotten that she, too, had found the manners of a former era perfectly acceptable before her sojourn at the Court of Louis XIV in France. She vowed that she would present Constance with a set of the new two-pronged forks for a wedding gift and went to a lot of trouble to instruct her in their use and as to how advantageous they were in transferring morsels of meat from plate to mouth.

"I have just the plates for you also," she enthused, glowing with her own generosity. "They are the most beautiful things you have ever seen! They have the prettiest designs wrought upon them, and you must place them on the table so and only turn them over when you wish to use them, otherwise your guests would miss their rare beauty. In France, it is a long time since everyone ate from a communal dish as you do here!"

"But the food had a lot less to recommend it," her son put in. "The meats come to table smothered in sauces of every kind, half the time to conceal the fact that it has been so long in transport that it is rotten. We must compliment our little cousin on the table she keeps, especially as Frederick tells me that he has not yet found a cook to take control of the kitchens."

Constance threw him a grateful look. "There is a surprise for you which I have made myself to come after the main dish." she told him. "I do hope you may like it!"

Even the Earl's mother cheered up and looked expectant when one of the servants brought in the dessert and placed it on the table, but her face fell again when she saw what it : was. It was more than a quarter

of a century since anyone had expected her to partake of Quaking Pudding. She opened her mouth to say as much, but was silenced by a brief shake of the Earl's head.

"One of my favourite dishes!" he assured her cheerfully. "We have it on the authority of Mrs. Goodman."

"No, really, she took too much on herself to say such a thing!" the Countess exclaimed. "I have no memory of any such thing!"

"But she was quite certain it was Master Henry's favourite," Constance said. "She told me so frequently."

"And so it is!" the Earl insisted gently.

His mother reflected ruefully, as parents do the whole world over, on the number of times she had produced a tried and trusted favourite for her son's delectation only to be told in the brusquest tones imaginable that while it may have been true that he had liked it last week, now the only really toothsome dish was something quite different, as surely even she must have been aware! She changed her mind about the need to warn the Earl to be gentle with his young bride's feelings. Constance, in the matter of a few days, had apparently converted him to that view herself, though how she had done so when, to the Countess' certain knowledge, her son had never seen the slightest need for considering the weaknesses of any female for the last thirty years, was beyond her wistful imaginings. Perhaps even one as confirmed in having his own way to the exclusion of others, as was the Earl of Brede, was reluctant to dim the sparkle of pleasure that shone out of Constance's chestnut eyes.

"I knew you would like it!" his betrothed exclaimed in triumph. "And so you should when I think of the good things that have gone into it." She coloured up a little. "But you did say there was no need to be as economical as we have had to be recently, didn't you? I wouldn't want

you to think I am being less careful now that it is your money we are spending."

The Earl grinned at her. "Still hankering after those beehives?" he teased her.

She smiled back shyly. "It would be a great saving - if Frederick wasn't such a coward as to mind a few bee-stings!"

The Countess' eyebrows rose at this familiar way of addressing her son's steward. "And how is Mr. Aiken settling in to his new appointment?"

The Earl smothered a laugh. "Well, I think. Wouldn't you say so, Constance? For a beardless boy, of course."

He helped himself to more of the Quaking Pudding with apparent gusto. "What is in this concoction, by the way? You were on the point of telling us, I believe."

Constance obliged, counting the ingredients off on her fingers. "A full pint of thick cream, ten yolks of eggs, with three of the whites; rosewater; sugar; and fine flour. It must be boiled very fast for half-an-hour and served with a sauce of rosewater, or as I did this time, sack mixed with butter and sugar." She smiled a little. "I thought the sack would please you better now you are grown up, for the rosewater sauce can be a little sweet."

"The perfect housewife!" he complimented her, lifting his glass to her, an action which pleased her excessively. "My two unmarried brothers will be green with envy that it was I who saw you first. I don't mention my married brothers because they have already lost their chance."

"They will all be here tomorrow," the Countess sighed. "It makes me feel very old when they are all there to tower over me. Imagine, five sons, and all of them full of their own importance!"

"What of your two daughters-in-law?" the Earl reminded her.

The Countess made a face. "Royalist to the backbone, both of them! I could wish they had learned something from our recent history, but nothing will persuade them that there were any faults on the side of their choosing. I thank God the King is more realistic than the half of his advisers, even if he is too lazy to take a stand on his own principles. But there, perhaps he is right to give way as often as he does and to be seen to be doing so." She laughed. "I never thought to have a Puritan daughter, but she has far more sense than the others put together!" She lifted her glass as her son had done. "To my favourite daughter - the most unexpected, and the dearest to grace our family!"

Constance's own cup was full to overflowing. "To Brede!" she said, a picture of the house, with its wooden beams and red brick filling in her mind's eye, a house of Plantagenet beginnings and Tudor additions. It must be, it had to be, the very finest house in the whole of England!

"The house or the man?" the Earl asked her, his lips betraying his amusement at her earnestness.

She averted her face, confused by the gleam that came and went in his eye. "B-both," she stammered.

"But you were thinking of the house," he accused her, an odd note in his voice.

She nodded her head unhappily. "I meant the house," she confessed. "But I would like to drink to your health also - only, I thought you would think it an impertinence in me to do so. It is strange enough to be sitting at the same table as the master of the house. My father never

allowed me to eat with him." She glowered at him suddenly, resenting his laughter. "It's a constant worry to me that I may not behave as I should! Nor do I see anything funny about it!"

The Earl's amusement died away. "Courage is everything," he said softly. "I think I have every reason to be proud of my future wife, my dear!"

During the Commonwealth most of the old marriage customs had been frowned upon and had fallen into decay. Even its religious character had been lost, first by the substitution of the Presbyterian "Directory" for the now illegal Book of Common Prayer in 1645, and then, in 1652, by taking the solemnisation of matrimony out of the hands of the clergy altogether and transferring it to those of the Justices. Constance had been rendered uncomfortable on three Sundays running when she had sat beside her future mother-in-law in the family pew and had listened to her banns being called in such intimate surroundings. To her way of thinking they should more properly have been cried in the market-place on market day, when she could have happily absented herself from the proceedings.

But then the church was no longer as she had known it. The panels bearing the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in fine gold script, had been banished from their central position, and the altar had returned to the sanctuary and on it the candlesticks and other such idolatrous furnishings had taken their place. Constance had made a muted protest to the Earl about these changes, but secretly she rather admired the new Anglican clergyman to whom the Earl had granted the vacant living, and wasn't at all sorry to be overruled in the matter. A pleasant confusion took hold of her and she floated along in a daze of excitement, obeying any suggestion that was made to her and hoping for the best.

It was a busy time. To begin with, the Aiken family arrived in vast numbers, straining the resources of Brede Place to breaking point. Then there were all the wedding preparations to be made, most of which Constance found were ultimately left to her, for, though the Countess revelled in her role as producer and director of the piece, she was woefully inadequate when it came to needlecraft or any of the other more practical arts.

There were not only the bride-favours to be sewn on her wedding-dress, but scarves to be hemmed, and her own gloves to be made, though the Earl had his and those pairs that he traditionally presented to members of his family, friends, and even to the officiating clergyman, made for him in London.

"You have enough to do, my sweet," he had told her kindly.

"Make those idle sisters-in-law of mine do some of the tasks for you!"

"Oh no, I could not!" she had exclaimed. "They scare me half to death, looking down their noses at everything I do." She had presented him with an exasperated face. "Is it true that *everything* in France is so much in advance of what we have here?"

"Many things are, but don't let them fret you, Cousin Constance. Most of their chatter is designed to conceal their jealousy of you. They would willingly give up their forks and fashionable baubles for your looks and your pleasure in being alive. If they patronise you, you may be sorry for them, for they have seen, if you have not, the way my brothers look at you!" His eyes twinkled at some thought of his own — "We don't require those beehives of yours at Brede. Its new mistress is a sweet enough attraction in herself!"

Constance had virtuously discounted the compliment, dousing down the pleasure she found in the Earl's words in case she should begin to believe them or - much worse! - seek to hear more in a similar vein

from him. It was terrible to think that she had so far fallen away from the paths of grace that she was in danger of doing everything with an eye to gaining his praise for herself, instead of more usefully preparing for the life hereafter by doing what was plainly her duty without any thought of such reward.

On her wedding-eve, she made a determined effort to cast her mind in the way it should go and to prepare herself to meet with fortitude the frivolities that were to make up much of the entertainment the following day. Not normally given to imaginative fancies, she struggled to rid herself of the oppressive feeling that her father's disapproval of her marriage was such that he would somehow arrange for some harm to come to the Earl through some action of hers. She could feel his presence brooding over the pallet on which she had slept since she was a small child. His hatred for everything she had come to love would not have been changed by his death. Her fear was that he had the ear of the whole heavenly throng and that there would be no one to speak for the Earl of Brede, or even for herself, and by the time the first grey light of dawn lit up the eastern sky, she was shivering and as far from sleep as she had been throughout the night.

Mrs. Petters brought her a hot posset to her bed as soon as the servants were stirring, an unusual favour that she explained away by telling her young mistress that she was obeying the personal instructions of the Earl or she would have expected Constance to be up and dressing herself as usual.

"I never thought to live to see the day when such a fuss would be made over your going to your husband! You had best remember that it has nothing to do with you, Mistress Constance, but is a penance you must put up with because you have no choice in the matter!"

"But that isn't quite true, Mrs. Petters," Constance replied.

Mrs. Petters bridled angrily. "His lordship stands in the place of your father and he has the right to bestow your hand where he will," she sniffed. "You owe him your obedience, but take care lest you come to think that such attentions are your due, for to him you will always be the poor relation he took pity on, despite your Puritan upbringing and your father's hatred for his. I could wish you a happier fate than to lie in comfort in a Royalist bed with such as he! God is not mocked and will see all that you do, so it behoves you to remember that a woman must do her duty always, but that to take pleasure in fleshly things is a snare and a delusion that has been the undoing of many a poor soul. Turn your mind to higher things when his lordship comes to you and give your heart only into the keeping of your loving Saviour and He will reward you accordingly."

"Amen," said Constance, guiltily aware that she had not been listening to this good advice, but had allowed her mind to wander to her coming toilet and the decoration of her sinful body that Mrs. Petters was so earnestly warning her not to give in to.

"It will be difficult to be a Puritan and the Countess of Brede!" she sighed. "My father - " She shivered and wished that her eyes didn't feel sandy with lack of sleep. "I felt him in the room with me last night! Mrs. Petters, I'm sure he hates me too! He hates me for marrying one of his enemies, but what else was I to do?"

Mrs. Petters' mouth clamped into a straight line of disapproval. "He was a strange man, Mistress Constance. It is unnatural to hate your own child and your own relations, but there, he thought he was doing right and he did his best to further the cause of God in this part of England. It is not for us to judge him. Mrs. Goodman would always have it that he looked on your mother's death as a sign that he should keep himself for God only and that to love his fellow man was a weakness he had to overcome. I only knew that he withheld from you the affection that was your right from your father. I have always been afraid you would seek it elsewhere, but I am glad to see you are too

sensible for that. It is right that you should seek his lordship's protection and that you give him a wifely devotion, but you would be deceiving yourself if you wished to inspire anything more than a husbandly regard in him in return. It must be enough for you that he took you as you are, with no dowry and no prospects. You have much to be grateful for, without seeking nonsensical moonbeams of a romantic nature. Your mother did that, and look where it got her, poor soul!"

As Constance hardly remembered her mother, she didn't know where it had got her, but she could think of few things more chilling than to have been married to her father, especially if one was full of laughter and in love with life, as her mother's portrait had recorded her to be.

She drank her hot posset, torn between a strong desire to bid Mrs. Petters to leave her and the knowledge that the old woman was genuinely concerned for her and that her motives were nothing but kindly.

To her relief, she was shortly rescued by her new female relations who had come to dress the bride with their own hands.

"Oh, my love, how well I remember my own wedding day!" the Countess declared, taking charge of the proceedings with all of her usual flair. "Though I must admit that I didn't begin it in a cheerless attic like this one! I had the most enchanting room when I was a girl, though I did have to share it with my three sisters." Her shrewd eyes met her new daughter's and she silenced herself with a dismissive gesture. "I should have guessed you would spend the night worrying yourself into a limp rag if you had no one with you - and what has that old witch been saying to you? She's more than enough to put us all in a fright!"

Constance gave her a wan smile. "Mrs. Petters means well. She knows I am missing Mrs. Goodman."

"That's as may be, but you would do well not to listen to her too closely," the Countess advised succinctly. "How cold it is in here! Would it upset you if I suggested we went to my bed-chamber and dressed you there? There is a fire lit - and fewer ghosts to haunt your happy day!"

Constance was only too ready to follow this suggestion. She pushed back the bedclothes and stood up in her shift, her bare feet wincing away from the cold draughts on the floor. Her future sisters-in-law giggled audibly and turned their heads away to whisper behind their hands. "My dear, she doesn't even have a nightdress! Whatever will Brede think of *that!*"

"Leave everything!" the Countess commanded her, her voice tight with anger. "The maids will collect anything you need." She flounced out of the small, bare attic, leaving the others to follow at their leisure.

Constance pattered after her, hugging herself to stop herself from shivering, and, at the top of the stairs, the Countess waited for her, grasped her firmly by the hand, and hurried her down to the warmth of the lower floor.

"You shall have one of my own nightdresses!" she declared in ringing tones. "It will be perfect for you! It is the prettiest thing imaginable, made of pure white silk and simply covered with lace, as only the French can make it!"

"Thank you, ma'am," Constance murmured. "I have made one for myself, but it is plain and not to be compared with one of yours. I'm afraid it has a strongly Puritan look, which Mrs. Petters and I may approve, but - " she cast a look over her shoulder - "*they* will find little to recommend in it!"

"They are not being asked to wear it!" the Countess retorted grandly. She led Constance into her own bedroom and began to organise the maids into feverish activity. "Are the other bridesmaids come?" she demanded, and nodded in a satisfied way when told that they had. "Bid them come up! And one of you go and fetch Mistress Constance's gown and accessories. Now, we had best get busy if we are all to be ready in time!"

It took more than an hour for the Countess' maid to dress Constance's hair to her mistress's satisfaction, but when it was done none of the ladies present could find any fault in it. There were a few gasps, not least from the Earl's two sisters-in-law, when the Countess herself threw the dress of gold over Constance's head and fastened it for her, making short work of the fiddling rows of tiny buttons.

The wedding-knots, in white and rose, blue and silver, gold and scarlet, spoilt the pure line of the sleeves, bodice, and skirt, but they would soon be gone, torn off by the guests in the scramble and worn by them to bring them good luck throughout the rest of the festivities. Constance, anxious that nothing should happen to the gown she had fallen in love with on sight, had attached them with a single strand of thread which she had left unknotted so they would come away with a minimum of trouble. She had made her own garters also, embroidering them with tiny seed pearls, but her stockings she had bought from a visiting merchant. She had never before wore silk stockings and she liked the feel of them. All in all, she thought she made a more stylish bride than she would have believed possible, especially as the excitement had brought a warm colour to her cheeks, taking away the wan, dispirited feeling that had afflicted her all through the night.

She plucked at the Countess' sleeve with a timid hand.

"My lady, I shall never cease to thank you for all you have done for me," she said, suddenly close to tears. "I hope you are a little pleased too with your handiwork?"

The Countess smiled. "I would be hard to please if I were not!" She turned to the others. "Have you ever seen a more beautiful bride?"

And there was not one of them there who could say that they had; not the Puritan girls, daughters of neighbours whom Constance had known all her life; nor the Royalist ladies, cudgel their brains as they might. With her flaming red hair and sweet, shy expression, Constance had blossomed into a beauty that was well able to stand comparison with any of the noted lovelies who adorned King Charles' Court in London.

Constance could scarcely hear the musicians playing for the thumping of her own heart. She took her place in the procession, prickling with nerves. She tried to turn her attention to the minute page who came immediately before her and behind the musicians. He was doing his best to carry a gilded branch of rosemary in a silver cup before him, but it proved to be so large that try as he would he could not see where he was going. Constance wondered if he were an Aiken too, and then remembered that the Earl's nephews and nieces had joined the family party at Brede Place the day before, though she herself had not yet had time to make their acquaintance.

Behind her came the bridesmaids, also carrying sprigs of rosemary. They had already fallen into two camps, the Aiken ladies coming first, while the soberly clad Puritan girls had been left far behind. Constance was tempted to tell them to hold their heads up and to catch up with the others, and had almost decided to do so when, to her surprise, her younger sister-in-law turned and beckoned to them, smiling at them affably and saying something to them which made them laugh and feel a little better about entering the parish church

now that it had been restored to the Church of England form of worship.

After that, Constance had eyes only for the Earl. Even when she was not looking at him, she could see only him. And whilst she made her vows in a small, shaky voice that betrayed her inner fright despite her calm exterior, he made his as though it were an everyday affair and very much to his taste. Try as she would, she could not detect even the slightest reluctance in his tone, and she was compelled to the conclusion that he was enjoying himself more than a little - and very largely at her expense.

She was sure of it when the parson took as his text for his sermon from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, "*Ye women submitte yourselves unto your own husbandes as unto the lord: for the husbande is the zoyve's head, even as Christe is the head of the Church*", and he whispered to her, "Did you expect it to be otherwise, my sweet wife, married to a Cavalier?"

Her spirits rose dramatically and she rapped him sharply over the knuckles with her fan. "Behave yourself, husband," she whispered back and was rewarded by one of the amused smiles she had come to look for from him.

The ceremony over, Constance gave her elaborately embroidered gloves to the bridesmen, not without some regret considering the many hours of work she had put into them, after which she and the Earl drank wine together from a bowl in which rosemary had been dipped, and ran the gauntlet of the guests who lavishly poured wheat over Constance's head. -

A little breathless, she held on tightly to the Earl's hand, for she was quite unaccustomed to being at the centre of the stage and found it rather a daunting experience to have so many eyes watching her every movement. It was worse still when eager hands reached out to

snatch the bride-favours as she walked by, with a familiarity that shocked her Puritan soul to the core.

It was quite the most exhausting day she had ever spent. Unused to dancing, or to the high heels of her golden slippers, and especially to the bawdy humour of the greater number of the guests, she felt battered in body and mind alike.

Her mother-in-law watched her with concern, remembering how pale she had looked that morning, and took her some wine with her own hands, determined to give her an encouraging word to the effect that nothing, not even one's wedding day, can possibly last for ever. But when she came up to the girl she became more concerned than ever. The child looked positively exhausted!

"It's a good thing Henry has promised you some time to yourselves at Brede before you go to Court," she said frankly. "You look like a wet week, my love!"

"Oh, surely it isn't as bad as that!" Constance laughed. "I'm a trifle tired, no more than that. No, no more wine, ma'am, I thank you. The room is so stuffy and there is so much colour and noise that I have a slight headache. Tell me," she added, her eyes anxious, "is it often like this at Court? Because I don't think I can ever grow accustomed to such constant excitement. I am used to my own society - too used, perhaps?"

"The Court is certainly gay," the Dowager Countess admitted. "Shall we take a turn in the fresh air to relieve your head? You look so faint, my love!"

Constance was touched by the offer, for she knew as well as anyone that her mother-in-law never set foot outside if she could possibly help it.

"You are far too kind to me, ma'am, but I can just as easily go by myself, and, if you are here, there will be fewer enquiries about my absence for a few minutes."

She went quickly, breathing deeply the cool, clear air that met her as soon as she opened the door. It was calm and peaceful outside and she felt better immediately, even though she was more conscious than ever of how tired she was and how much she would have liked to curl up in a ball and sleep the rest of the day away.

The windows of the Winter Parlour, a room that was seldom used at other times of the year, were open and she glanced inside to see that the Aiken brothers, apart from the Earl, and Frederick were deep in some political discussion. She stopped automatically, not because she wanted to hear what they were saying, but because the path was muddy on the further side of the Windows and she did not wish to spoil her slippers by walking through it. Then, suddenly, the meaning of what they were saying was made clear to her and she ran back inside, intent on speaking to the Earl at once.

To her immense surprise she had no time to say anything at all, but was firmly captured by the bridesmen, who appeared to have every intention of removing her garters, whether she should consent or no. It was a battle she was destined to lose, and her humiliation was the more complete when they handed her over to her bridesmaids for the putting-to-bed ceremony, an ordeal for which she was totally unprepared. She was undressed in a flash and clothed in the nightdress her mother-in-law had presented her with, after it, the bed, and her person had all been searched for any stray pins, it being well known that if one were to be left behind, woe would surely follow.

She was placed in the bed her father and mother had once shared and her husband was brought to join her as the bridal-chamber filled up with people who had come to wish them joy. The bridesmen sat on her side of the bed, and the bridesmaids sat on the Earl's, where they

amused themselves by throwing their wedding stockings over their heads, the men hoping to hit the bride and the girls the groom for, if they were lucky enough to. do so, it was a sign they would soon be married themselves.

Then, at last, everyone was gone, even the most senior of the bridesmaids, whose humour had become quite ribald with all the wine she had drunk, and the curtains were drawn about the bed, leaving the two of them alone.

Constance struggled against the fatigue that made her long for nothing more than sleep. "My lord, I must speak with you," she whispered urgently. "Your brothers were saying the King is about to sell Dunkirk back to the French - "

"So it is rumoured," he acknowledged. He grinned at her. "I never thought to talk politics with you on our wedding night!"

"But he must not!" she exclaimed.

"It's the sensible thing to do, or so the King's advisers would have us believe. Such a small bridgehead would be impossible to defend - "

"But, my lord, large parts of England are still reluctant to acknowledge the rights of your King. Has no one told him that that bridgehead was the pride of Cromwell's redcoats? It will cause a great deal of ill-feeling. Is there no one whom the King trusts who could tell him so?"

He leaned up on his elbow, studying her determined face. "At the moment the King is delighted with the novelty of having his throne," he said. "There are few he will listen to, and fewer still who can convert him from following his own whim. It is the French who pay the greater part of his expenses and they see that their largesse is not easily forgotten."

"But he listens to you?" Constance prompted him.

"Sometimes," he answered. "If the advice is to his taste. Do you think I have not already warned him that every time we grow nearer to the French, the Dutch grow restive? We can't afford to offend either party, but the King is not inclined to listen and he is suspicious of any man who once held Cromwellian sympathies. If he speaks with you, my dear, it will not be on any such subject as this!" He saw her drooping lids and smiled. "Constance, I do believe you are falling asleep?" He leaned over and kissed her on the mouth, but she was already sunk deep in oblivion, her long black lashes that contrasted so oddly with her flaming hair, resting lightly against her pale cheeks.

The Earl made no effort to awaken her, but it was a long time before he slept himself. He tucked the bedding in round his wife's shoulders and drew her close into the circle of his arms, a little amused by the childlike depth of her slumber. Such a thing had never happened to him before, he thought with a touch of self-mockery, but then his dealings with Constance had been consistent only by being unusual. He sighed, settling himself for sleep also. It wasn't the way he had expected to spend his wedding-night, and yet he couldn't bring himself to hold it against her. Indeed, he was surprised to discover a warm affection for her within himself. He had liked few women in his life, though he had loved many, but he was beginning to think he might come to like Constance better than anyone, for she had a sweetness for him the others had always lacked.

"I'll make a Royalist of you yet, my lady," he promised himself, pleased by the concern his little bride had shown for the welfare of the state. "And a shrewd Royalist at that, for you are right, someone must make the King listen!" It was an unexpected disappointment to that that someone would probably have to be himself. "Will you hate me for giving you Brede and immediately taking you away from it?" he wondered aloud.

But the Countess of Brede had no answer for him. Her head fell against the pillow of her husband's shoulder and with a little murmur of content she moved more closely against him.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHE would not cry! She would not, even though she had to hold her breath the whole way to London. It was not as though she was never going to see Brede Place again. The Earl had promised her as much, or at least she thought he had, for she could hardly hear a word he had been saying what with musicians playing just outside their windows and yet more well-wishers coming into their bedchamber to see how they had passed the night.

Not even the arrival of the musicians had woken her from the deep, refreshing sleep of the night. It had been her husband's breath against her cheek that had first roused her, and she had opened her eyes to find him blowing gently in her ear, having despaired of the more orthodox methods of waking his bride.

"Good morning, my lady," he had laughed at her. "I have no need to ask if you slept well?"

She had blushed. It had been strange to see him with his hair undressed, black hair that made him look younger than when he was fully dressed. Privately, she had thought she had never seen anyone more handsome.

"What are we going to do today?" she had asked him shyly. Could there be anything more heavenly than to have the Earl all to herself in the home they were going to share together?

"I see that you don't remember what you had to tell me last night. We must leave for Hampton Court as soon as you are dressed, my love. What we spoke about last night has brought me to the conclusion that the sooner I have a word with my lord Clarendon the better."

Constance had remembered then what she had struggled to stay awake to tell him the night before. A burning disappointment that

they were not to stay at Brede after all had made her angry with herself and, obscurely, with him.

"I hate Lord Clarendon!" she had told him roundly. "I hate everything to do with politics!"

"He is a better First Minister than many who would serve the King," the Earl had told her.

"You may think so, if you like," she had retorted, "yet who was it who restored the Church of England to being the religion of the whole State? We deserved better treatment than that!"

Her husband had lain back and had laughed. "So you don't approve of the Clarendon Code! If you are wise, you will keep such thoughts to yourself when we are at Court, my dear. It was a great achievement to bring the King back to his throne without shedding any blood. We all have our difficulties to contend with, but I am of the opinion that nothing would be worth another war!" He had sat up suddenly and had put his arms round her. "That reminds me, sweeting, there is something I must say to you. It will be no secret at Court that you were brought up a Puritan and that you are still committed to many of their ways. There are some people who may try to persuade you into taking sides with them, even against the life of the King. Listen to everything they have to say, and then come and tell me, but do nothing on your own. Have I your promise to obey me in this, Constance?"

"If he is your King, I have no wish to see the Stuart Monster struck down," she had answered. "I shall tell them so." -

He had smiled a trifle ruefully. "And will you tell me everything you hear, no matter how unlikely the source? I want to know what the Dutch are thinking."

Constance had nodded. "Are there many Puritans at Court?" she had asked.

"Not nearly enough!" he had sighed. "Most of those who surround the King are looking for rewards for their loyalty and hang on his sleeve as if he had the same depth of purse as his father. Would that he had! He would be less inclined to become Louis' pensioner if he didn't have a life of mounting debts to look forward to!"

"He has Catherine's dowry," Constance had pointed out. "Surely that is enough for him?"

"Her portion was a large one - Tangier, Bombay, and the right for the English nation to trade freely with Brazil and the East Indies is a fortune in itself, without the half-a-million pounds sterling she brought in ready monies - but King Charles' expenses are larger still, and Parliament is in no mind to vote him the funds he needs to maintain his estate."

"Nor would I!" Constance had declared, but her indignation at the cost of maintaining Charles Stuart on the throne paled against her curiosity about another piece of gossip she had heard. "Is it true my lord chancellor Clarendon arranged the marriage for the King because Queen Catherine is barren and he wants the succession for his own granddaughters, the children of the Duke of York?"

The Earl of Brede looked at his wife with open amusement. "How the world loves to gossip! That such a juicy morsel should have reached as far as Brede in so short a time! I hope those ears of yours will serve me as well. But Queen Catherine cannot be more than twenty-five years old now and, as she has never been married before, it must be quite as likely that she will produce as large a family as the Duchess of York, or larger. It is no kindness to her to believe otherwise, and this can only be a story her enemies have put about to hurt both her

and the King. I hope not to hear such an incredible slur against the poor lady on your lips again."

It had occurred to Constance that she was younger still and might be expected to do the same. She had wrinkled up her brow and considered her married state with some anxiety. It hadn't seemed very much different from what her single state had been. She had been almost since that the Earl had been about to bring up the subject himself but, before he could do so, the door to their bed-chamber had burst open and the chief bridesmaid had brought them a posset to help them face the day, to the accompaniment of a tremendous racket from the pipes and drums of the musicians down below.

Constance went over the conversation again as she sat stiffly inside the carriage that bore her husband's arms emblazoned on the two doors. She had never been further than a few miles from Brede, and although Hampton Court was not in London, but had been built beside the River Thames, she was afraid that the pall of sound and smell that she had been told hung over the city would only be a little less strong in Cardinal Wolsey's Palace. That prelate had found out the hard way not to put his trust in kings, as had how many others before and since? Yet he must have been an astute man in other ways. Perhaps he had been astute enough to build his house in the kind of surroundings Constance would have chosen herself. She certainly hoped so!

The Earl came close on the huge stallion he was riding and he took off his hat and bowed in the saddle to her with an elegance that made her heart jump within her.

"How goes it, my love?" he asked her.

"We are quite comfortable," Constance lied. She wished she was riding beside him instead of confined inside the lurching carriage

with only Sobriety, newly promoted to being her personal maid, for company.

"I should like to be at Hampton Court tonight if it is at all possible, but I have ordered a meal to be made ready for us a mile or two up the road from here. It is a comfortable inn and we-could stay the night there, if you would prefer it?"

She jerked her head up proudly. "If you can ride the full distance, my lord, in the saddle, I can travel that far in a comfortable coach. I am not one of your soft, painted ladies to upset your plans! I, too, would prefer to spend the night at Hampton Court."

"It's a crowded place," he warned her. "We would have more time to ourselves at the inn."

She wondered at the strange note in his voice, a note that set her in a fine tizzy and her pulses drumming as if she had a high fever. Was it possible that he wanted her undiluted society for the night, instead of that of his friends ? But that was impossible to believe! He had been so eager to rush off to Hampton Court and back to his King, so why should he hesitate now?

She averted her face from his gaze. "I should prefer to go on, my lord."

"Well, if you are sure," he agreed. "I'm afraid you will find it very strange at first, my love, and there is little I can do to help you. I should have left you to follow with my mother and our sisters-in-law, Charlotte and Henrietta. They would have introduced you more gently to the ways of the Court."

She blinked. "I have you, my lord."

His mouth tightened. "And little enough you'll see of me!" He wheeled his horse away from the carriage, leaving her to wonder

what she could have said to anger him. But as, in her experience, gentlemen were frequently angry about nothing at all and invariably vented their tempers on the nearest person to hand, she tried not to mind too much, but to put it out of her thoughts. That she was less than successful in this, bothered her more than somewhat, but she came to the conclusion that whereas her father's ill humours had been obviously irrational the same could not be said of the Earl. It might be better not to ignore his mood but to learn to understand him better. But that was a whole new worry in itself. How did someone, as inexperienced and as unused to masculine society as she was, ever learn to know, let alone become the confidante of someone as magnificent and important as the Earl of Brede?

The inn was everything he had said it was. The carriage rattled uncomfortably over the cobbled street and under the arch that led into the yard behind the main building. Sobriety jumped up and down in her excitement and Constance spoke sharply to her, partly because she could have wished to have done the same herself, and partly because the sight of so many strangers to her, their speech subtly different from the accent to which she was accustomed, had brought it home to her how far from home and all things familiar she was.

The Earl dismounted and handed his horse over to a groom before coming himself to help her down from the coach.

"I fear you must be stiff from so much travelling?" he said to her, and he flicked her nose with his fingers as if she were a small child, almost making her miss her step. "Is all this really so strange to you?"

"I have never been inside an inn before," she confessed, annoyed that he could breach her dignified defences with such impertinent ease, "but I am not afraid to enter such a place, though it is said they are much frequented by the kind of travellers one must usually hope to avoid on the open road. If - " and her voice trembled a little - "we

should happen to see such a person, would you mind very much *not* telling me until we are on our way again?"

The Earl threw back his head and laughed. "What worse could he do to you than I have already done? Torn you from the home you love - "

She swallowed hard. "It's your right to say where your wife shall live, my lord," she said stiffly.

"Does that make it any better? Is it also my right to make use of you as bait in a trap to catch some of the big, bad wolves at Court?"

"If - if that is your wish," she stammered, deeply upset that she should have made him angry again. "But, if you could tell me what you want of me," she continued in a strained voice, "it would be much easier for me. When I guess, I always seem to guess wrong!" she added forlornly.

His hand squeezed hers. "I'm a brute, sweeting, but I don't mean to be. The fact is that if I tell you too much you would find it doubly hard to act the part you must if I am to do my duty to the King and to this land of ours. You must be my ears in places where I can't go, for, at Court, it is very true that the female is more deadly than the male. But I have no wish to see you unhappy, or beset by the nagging tongues of a score of ladies, none of them worthy to be in the same room as yourself!"

"But I am happy!" she insisted with a touch of desperation. "And I shall be happy - as long as I am able to please you. The Royalist ladies know all the modern fashions and are well versed in the arts of conversation. You may come to regret your Puritan wife."

"We shall soon be back at Brede," he promised her, "and then I shall show you how few regrets I have! Take courage, sweetheart, for every day that passes will bring us nearer to that time!"

She looked up at him, her eyes clouded with doubts. "Will it be enough for you? You have so many friends at Court!"

He gave her an impudent glance, calculated to raise her spirits. "The father of a large family can never be dull!" he declared with a smile.

Constance was glad that the Earl had rented a private room where they could eat their meal without the prying eyes of half the village to watch them. She noticed that the platters on the table were clean and that the food was more than palatable and substantial enough even for a man who had spent the greater part of the day in the saddle.

"I have heard that the Queen customarily drinks tea," she said by way of conversation as she broached the sweet wine that had been poured into her cup. "Have you ever tasted it, my lord? Shall I like it if ever I have to drink it?"

He leaned back in his chair and considered the matter. "You may well like it." His voice took on a familiar teasing note. "It has many of the Puritan virtues. It seems thin and tasteless at first, but it has a subtle flavour that grows on one the more one drinks it."

Constance blushed. "Do you like it?"

"Yes indeed! I assure you if it were a cheaper beverage, it would sweep the whole country. It would even take the place of ale as the staple drink of the poor as well as the rich. Unfortunately, it is like to remain the drink of Queens at its present price!"

After that, Constance couldn't think of anything to say to him. She ate the larger part of her meal in silence, hoping that Sobriety was being as well fed downstairs and that his lordship's coachman had not made any remark to her that would put her to the blush. "She had little faith in Sobriety's common sense, and even less in the girl's powers of resistance if any flattering suggestion were to be made to her by any man. It was not a problem she could share with the Earl, however, and

so she resolved to speak to her herself before they should arrive at Hampton Court, warning her that the primrose path, no matter how glamorous, was seldom the same as the narrow way that led to the Better Life they had both been brought up to seek above all things.

But these pious intentions were frustrated by his lordship's decision to travel the rest of the way in the coach with his wife. He sent Sobriety back to travel in the second coach with the luggage and took her place beside Constance, putting the rugs about her knees with his own hands and waving his surprised coachman away without even noticing the man's indignant glance at his new mistress.

Constance stared out at the passing scenery, trying to pretend to herself she was alone in the carriage. She couldn't help being conscious of his dominating presence, but she could and did make some attempt to school her emotions into not making too much of the contact. He was tired of riding, she told herself, and would not want to listen to idle, feminine chatter which was all she could offer him. Accordingly, she folded her hands in her lap, twisting her fingers together into a nervous knot, and tried to persuade herself that he wasn't really there at all.

This "illusion was speedily shattered when his voice said crisply, "I trust you're not too sleepy to welcome your husband's presence beside you today?"

She jumped, her hard-won composure falling from her. "Did - did you wish to say something to me?"

He put an arm about her shoulders, turning her face towards him with his other hand. He could scarcely help noticing the violence of her heartbeat, nor the blush that flooded her cheeks in answer to the appreciative gleam she saw in his eyes.

"I hoped, madam wife, that you might have some words of welcome for me?"

Rendered completely tongue-tied by the shyness that had her in its grip, she made a half-hearted effort to escape the firm grasp of his hand on her chin, but he would have none of it. Pulling her closer still, he bent his head to hers and kissed her lightly on the lips.

She put up a hand in protest but somehow it lost its way and grasped the cloth of his velvet sleeve instead, returning the welcome pressure of his arm.

"Well, at least you are not asleep!" he murmured, and kissed her again with a commanding air that put an end to any further objections she might have made. "Have you nothing to say to that?" he teased her, patting her cheek in a satisfied way.

"Of course I am not asleep!" she retorted. "Why should I be?"

"No reason in the world!" he smiled, confirmed in his opinion that his mother had made wretched work of preparing his young bride for the responsibilities and joys of marriage. "No reason in the world!" he said again, hugging her to him. "Is that more comfortable?"

She buried her face in his shoulder. "I always like being with you," she answered simply. "Isn't it nice that the Aikens are united again? Because, whatever my father thought, I should have hated to be your enemy. I never could think of young 'Master Henry' as that and, now I know you, I'd much rather have you for my friend."

"Friends may be lovers too," he said in her ear.

She thought about that in silence for a long moment, then she said, "It's kind of you to pretend, my lord, but I don't expect to come first with you, as you must always do with me. I shall be content with

whatever you wish to give me. At least, I shall try to be content with that!"

He held her the more tightly against him. "My wife must always hold a special place in my heart, little one. The Countess of Brede has nothing to fear from any other woman. Remember that, for it may sometimes look otherwise. The King's courtiers all have to learn to play strange parts at times, but I shall never do anything willingly to hurt you."

"You are always kind," she sighed.

"And you trust me to make you happy in the end?"

She thought of Brede, and his promise that they should return there to live and bring up their family. She would be happy then! "Of course," she said, and put her hand in his to seal the bargain.

Hampton Court Palace was vastly bigger than Constance had imagined it would be. She quite believed the rumour that it contained more than a thousand rooms within its red brick walls, and yet it was more crowded than any other house she had seen. People swarmed everywhere, all intent on their own business and quite incurious as to what anyone else was doing there.

The Earl led his wife through Anne Boleyn's Gateway and was immediately recognised by the half-dozen servants who waited there, day and night, in case they should be needed.

"Is my lord Clarendon here?" the Earl asked one of them.

"He is with the King."

His lordship gave a quick nod of satisfaction. "And Mistress Simpson?" He pulled Constance further into the light. "Take my lady to her and tell her she will earn my everlasting gratitude if she will see her comfortably lodged for the night. It is too late to present her to the Court tonight."

"Ay, my lord. If her ladyship will follow me, I will take her to Mistress Simpson myself."

Constance died a little when she realised she was to be so quickly abandoned by her husband. She cast him a beseeching look, trembling with fright at the prospect to having to face a bevy of strangers on her own, but his mind had already gone away from her and his bow was merely a courteous formality before he disappeared out of her sight into another part of the gloomy building.

"Who - who is Mistress Simpson?" she asked, struggling with a strong desire to burst into tears.

The servant didn't deign to answer. He led her down innumerable corridors and then left her without the door as he knocked and entered himself, conveying his lordship's message to whoever was within. A white-haired lady came running to the door and threw it wide, her smile as warm and affectionate as Constance's curtsy was fearful.

"My lord Brede is ever unexpected!" she crowed in a soft, country-bred voice. "And who might you be, my dear?"

"I am Constance Aiken - "

"Ah, then we are related. I am Brede's aunt. His mother is my sister. How vast our family has grown, has it not? I am forever being surprised that yet another one of us has found our way to Court! We are crowded out, my dear, and that's the truth! But I shall find a bed for you somewhere, never fear! I suppose you must be one of Brede's cousins?"

Constance nodded, determined to make her Puritan origins plain as soon as she could. "My father was Samuel Aiken - "

Mistress Simpson started and then held out friendly hand. "Then we have much in common!" she exclaimed. "I was here at Hampton Court all through the Commonwealth, when Mr. Cromwell was living here. How glad I am to make your acquaintance! Everything is very different now, I should warn you, with so many exiles back from France. But there, it doesn't do to complain about what can't be changed. One can't help feeling for that poor little Portuguese lady, however. The King has told her today that he is expecting her to apologize to my lady Castlemaine for injuring her reputation by a public insult. As if that were possible! What an upset that caused! There has been nothing but tears and disputes all day!"

Mistress Simpson pushed Constance into the nearest chair and took a seat opposite her, staring at her with undisguised curiosity. "How like your mother you are!" she said at last. "Did you know that we were bosom friends before her marriage? I never saw her after that, for all my husband's political sympathies were the same as our Cousin Samuel's. I often hoped that she was happy with him, for there was something - but I mustn't criticise your father to you, must I?"

"He was very strict in his ideas," Constance said uncomfortably. "But I hardly remember my mother. She died of the plague when I was small. My father never married again."

"He was a cold, hard, unfeeling man," Mistress Simpson opined. "My husband used to say he was no great benefit to the Puritan cause, because there wasn't an ounce of love in him for anyone, God or man! Oh dear, now I've said it! You'll have to forgive me, my dear. Neither my sister Brede, nor I, could ever keep a still tongue in our heads!"

She jumped to her feet and pulled on the bell-rope several times with vigour. "I have no right to keep you up here, gossiping with me, when

you must be dead with weariness! I know how Brede travels, my dear! His mother will never accompany him anywhere, I assure you, after the last time he took her on a forced march across the countryside. You should have heard what she had to say about it!"

Constance, who had only the warmest, most loving memories of the last part of her day's journey, managed a faint smile and said, "He could not have been kinder, nor more concerned for my comfort, than he was today. I assure you, ma'am, I should not have minded if we had had to come twice as far."

Mistress Simpson gave her a look that made the family likeness between her and the Dowager Countess quite evident.

"You would do well not to break your heart over Brede, my love," she warned. "It is well known where his attention has rested these last few months. She can't compete with you for looks, 'tis true, but everything else stands in her favour, with her Continental manners and her light conscience!" Constance winced. "Is she well liked at Court, ma'am?" "Well enough. None of the Dutch is very popular at the moment, but her English is so good one is apt to forget that her family supports the Orange cause. Lady Hartley, she is now, but she was born a van der Meer."

"I see," said Constance. She bit her lip, hesitating before she put the question. "Mistress Simpson, would you present me to her? With so many papists here at Court, I should like to know some Protestants like myself."

"It's unlikely that she will wish you well, my dear," Mistress Simpson returned. "But if you wish it, I shall certainly do so. She is not a person whom I see frequently, however. Having to mix with my lady Castlemaine is penance enough for anyone with decided views on the value of the marriage vows, though 'tis my belief she cuckolds the King as often as she does poor Mr. Palmer, or my lord Castlemaine as

we must now remember to call him!" She pulled on the bell-rope again, shrugged her shoulders, and held out her hand to Constance. "Come, I shall find you a bed myself with some girls of your own age for company. The Palace has been upside down all day and I, for one, am not surprised!"

She picked up a candelabrum, sheltering the fluttering candles from the worst of the draughts with her hand, and sallied forth out of the room with Constance keeping close behind her, in a fever of fear lest she should be left behind in the rabbit warren of rooms and passages that seemed to stretch endlessly in every direction.

As they walked through one of the galleries Mistress Simpson came to an abrupt halt, her hand imperiously held out to prevent Constance taking another step.

"There she is now!" she exclaimed in a harsh whisper.

"You will see her clearly as she passes by. If she acknowledges us, I shall present you to her here and now, but she is a moody creature and is just as likely to pretend she hasn't seen us."

The backs of Constance's hands prickled with nervousness as the rather plump, elegantly robed figure came slowly towards her, her uneven gait betraying the fact that she had supped rather too well. She was not beautiful by any of the accepted standards of the day, but she would have been difficult to ignore in any society.

"Mistress Simpson!" she said, followed by a loud laugh. "Have you come to scold the young girls who are not yet in bed? Not their own, nor anyone else's, poor little loves! Ah, I see you have a new addition to the innocents you take it upon yourself to guard like a veritable dragon! Who is she?"

"May I present Mistress Constance Aiken - "

"Aiken? She must be related to my darling lord Brede!"

"A distant cousin," Mistress Simpson said in frozen tones.

"But - " Constance began. "I thought you knew - Ma'am, I think I ought to tell you - "

"Not now!" Lady Hartley cut her off. "I have no time now!" She made a strange grimace that passed for a smile and reeled away, a hand held out before her to prevent her from colliding with the wall.

Constance took a deep breath. "But what can he find to like in her?"

"She has a greater intelligence than many of the women here," Mistress Simpson said grimly. "A sad creature! Thank Sod she is already married and that we'll never see her as the Countess of Brede!"

"But she has such a peculiar smile!"

The Dowager Countess' sister uttered a delighted peal of laughter, "It's been many moons since she dared show her teeth! She fell victim to the fashion for using *aqua fortis* as a whitening lotion for the teeth, and the effects were all too disastrous in her case. It may be all right if used in moderation, I couldn't say, because I have never tried it myself, but far from whitening the teeth, one is like to lose them altogether if it is applied too frequently! However, she more than makes up for any lack of a pearly white smile by all the paint and rouge she puts on her face! I hope you do not mean to follow her example?"

"No, indeed, ma'am!" Constance said hastily. She had been undeniably disappointed in her husband's mistress and, although it was some time since she had thought she would like her because the Earl did so, she was still able to feel disillusioned by the reality of his choice.

Mistress Simpson rapped sharply on a door, breaking into her distressed thoughts, and opened it with a bright smile for the two girls who were in the act of disrobing before going to bed.

"I have brought you a companion," she told them with the assurance of one who is used to being well received. "A young relative of mine. Mistress Constance Aiken." She walked over to the vacant third bed in the room and patted it to make sure it was comfortable. "These two young ladies are Lady Elizabeth Grey and Mistress Catherine Hyde. You may sleep in this bed, my dear, and your maid, when she is sent to you, can sleep on a pallet beside you. Now I'll bid you all goodnight. Lady Elizabeth will bring you to me in the morning."

"Yes, but - " Constance said helplessly.

"But what?" Mistress Simpson retorted sharply.

"I think I should tell you that I am not Constance Aiken. At least, I mean, I am, but I am also the Countess of Brede. We were married yesterday!"

CHAPTER SIX

THREE pairs of rounded eyes goggled at her, their owners completely bewildered. Mistress Simpson sat plump down on the nearest bed.

"I should never have said a word - " she declared. "How could you let me run on about that woman? To think that my nephew Brede should choose a young, innocent girl when he has never so much as looked at one before! Married! And my own sister never breathed a word of it to me! I suppose you were wed at Brede Place?"

"In the parish church," Constance told her.

"And did my sister approve the match?"

"I think so, ma'am. His lordship's mother chose my dress herself and had her own maid arrange my hair. It was not a Puritan wedding - but, oh, everything was as pretty as it could be! With candles everywhere, and everyone dressed in the most splendid colours! My father would not have approved, I know, but my lord said it was not very sinful of me to want to look my best for him, and I have always been taught that one should study to please one's husband - " She came to a dismayed stop, aware that her audience couldn't possibly be interested in such personal anxieties. Indeed, she herself had thought she had put them behind her, but it seemed that that wasn't quite true. She still felt at odds with the new image of herself that had been created for her. She loved every one of her new dresses and would have hated now to have to give them up,' but none of them had the familiar comfort of the useful grey cloth she had worn all her life.

"You discussed such matters with Brede?" Mistress Simpson asked, quite overcome by the thought.

"Oh yes," Constance answered. "I explained to him that to want to wear beautiful things showed a sad lack of virtue in me, but he wasn't at all put out. He is always kind, you know. He said he thought the

autumn shades would suit me best, and so I was married in a golden dress. I have it with me, because I thought I could wear it sometimes at Court - "

"So my lord Brede knows you are a Puritan?" Mistress Simpson sounded as though she could scarcely believe her ears. "Of course he must have known it as you are the daughter of Samuel Aiken, but that he should have *married* you! Whatever will the King have to say about it?"

Lady Elizabeth Grey came suddenly to life. "Judging by what we all suffered today, it will take him several days to notice anything but his own troubles! I think it's highly romantic to have a new bride thrust amongst us, and there are few families more Cavalier than mine! If we are all quite complacent to have a pretty little Puritan amongst us, His Majesty will be panting to meet this new beauty come to adorn his Court. It might be different if you were not of our sex, I admit, but even then I would wager on my lord Brede to persuade the King of anything. No, my dear, the worst you will have to suffer is the jealousy of those whose hopes you have blighted! Brede has the most devastating way with him. Even I have known what it is to be elated by a mere smile thrown in my direction!"

"Lady Elizabeth!" Mistress Simpson reproved her.

"But you have to admit I am right!" that unrepentant young lady retorted.

"Maybe."

"I am! Catherine, you tell her that I am right."

Mistress Catherine Hyde hesitated only for a moment. "Yes, I think you are." She came forward, a sweet smile on her face. "You must know that I am connected to the Duchess of York and her father, my

lord Clarendon, and I shall take the first opportunity to present you to them as a friend of mine."

Constance expressed her gratitude with a shy dignity that appealed to all three ladies. "My mother was cousin to the Palmers. My lord tells me that Lady Castlemaine's husband is a relative of mine, but perhaps his influence is only limited at Court?"

"How stupid of me not to have thought of that!" Mistress Simpson exclaimed. "If my lady Casdemaine can be persuaded to like you - " She broke off, catching sight of Constance's expression. "No, perhaps it wouldn't do!" she sighed. "I'll have to talk to Brede and my sister about their plans for you. Meanwhile, what are we going to do with you, my dear? You'll have to stay the night here as arranged. Brede can make what plans he will for your lodging in the morning. I declare I am too exhausted to go **running** round the Palace waiting on his convenience tonight. We will just have to leave things as they are."

Constance's face fell. She had been pinning her hopes on being restored to the Earl as soon as possible, for without his support she felt completely at sea, and was afraid of drowning in the dangerous currents of the Court before she would be allowed to see him again.

"Yes, ma'am," she whispered.

"Don't look like that, child," Mistress Simpson rallied her. "Brede is more likely to spend the night talking politics than sleeping, but I shall leave a message for him so that he knows where you are should he wish to send for you." She rose to her feet, hiding as well as she could the arthritic stiffening of her joints that had made walking a painful business for her these last few years. "I'll bid you ladies a calm and peaceful night. Pray God the Queen sleeps soundly also or she will weep herself into a decline!" And she walked out, shutting the door behind her.

Constance's eyes flashed with an inherited indignation. "It's not Tier fault, poor lady! The Stuart Monster - "

Lady Elizabeth clapped a hand over her mouth. "My love, you cannot say such things here! Or, if you must, you must at least pretend to see some virtue in our liege lord! Most ladies manage that much, you know, because he is exceedingly charming to anyone with a pretty face." She uttered an irrepressible giggle. "That's the poor Portuguese lady's dilemma at bottom. If she looked less like a pudding, she would soon be able to send the Castlemaine about her business! As it is, what can she do but mumble prayers in the privacy of her room and cry about his treatment of her?"

"He could treat her with the respect to which she is entitled ..."

"But Charles doesn't like to be made to feel guilty," Lady Elizabeth murmured with a light laugh. "He wants to enjoy himself, and for the people around him to do likewise. Queen Catherine's reproaches make him vastly uncomfortable and he would abandon his best friend sooner than face the fact he could be a trifle at fault himself!"

"And you find that admirable?" Constance demanded, scandalised.

"It's very human," Lady Elizabeth pointed out.

Constance sniffed. "He would be better occupied preparing for the day when he shall meet his Maker, instead of romping through life like a spoilt child with too many sweets to choose from. He will not escape the final reckoning by pleading the Divine Right of Kings! It seems to me he has much to learn from his lady wife, instead of abusing her merely because she is more virtuous than he!"

"Ah," said Mistress Catherine Hyde, "a Puritan indeed! But a hair shirt like Mr. Cromwell's would not suit the King at all!" She opened her eyes very wide and added gently, "Or my lord Brede either! Have you thought of that?"

Constance flushed. "I would not presume - " She bit her lip. "No, you are very right. It is no business of mine, and I should not be criticising my husband's King, especially not to you. Perhaps you would be kind enough to forget I did so?"

"No sooner said than done," Mistress Catherine assured her. "You may say what you like to either of us, but there are others at Court who would gladly see every Puritan in the land put to death. It is always well to remember that he who pays the piper calls the tune, and it is France who is paying most of His Majesty's accounts at the moment."

"And what of Holland?" Constance asked.

"France's noble ally? If you ask me there will soon be trouble in that quarter - and they have their allies too! Take my advice, young lady, and listen to everyone, but say nothing yourself. You will be like to burst at times when you hear some of the foolishness that is spoken in all seriousness by those who should know better, but those are the very people who are often the most dangerous of all. And you will not only have your own enemies to contend with, but my lord Brede's as well!"

"But the Puritans have no power left," Constance protested. "Since the Clarendon Code restored the Church of England, we cannot even worship as we please. Our ministers have had to leave their livings and reside no closer than five miles to their former flocks. What more can be taken away from us?"

"Your lives," Lady Elizabeth said practically, "so beware!"

Constance blenched. "Does my lord know what a weapon he has placed in the hands of his enemies by marrying me?" she wondered.

"He must do!" Lady Elizabeth chuckled and exchanged glances with her friend. "He must be *ipris* indeed to have taken the risk! Behold us

mad with jealousy that you should have had the good fortune to make my lord Brede lose his heart to you! We never thought it possible, did we, Kate? Never fear, though, he of all men knows how to protect his own. He will have had some reason for bringing you to Court."

Ay, Constance thought, and she knew what that was. With the Court so Catholic and French-minded, she was no longer surprised that he should want to know what the Protestants and the Dutch were thinking also. Nonconformist opinion was strong in the country, if not among the King's advisers, and to offend too deeply against it was to court disaster.

"I hadn't thought before," she mused aloud, "but my lady Hartley is Dutch, isn't she?"

"The less you know about her the better!" Mistress Catherine exclaimed. "Anyway, you need not mind her, Constance. As the Countess of Brede you have every advantage over such a person."

"But I was wondering why I didn't like her better," Constance explained. "I thought I should be bound to like anyone who had been a close friend of my lord's - "

"Constance, don't you mind at all that she was your husband's mistress?"

Constance sat down on her bed and nodded her head. "Yes - but I wish I didn't! And if it were only because her sympathies were Orange I *think* I could persuade myself that I didn't mind - quite so much."

Lady Elizabeth laughed. "I do declare the little Puritan has fallen in love with her bridegroom! I always thought they never allowed themselves any feelings at all! I daresay if we all got to know each other, Cavaliers and Roundheads, we'd find we were not so very different after all!"

"No, indeed," Constance agreed quickly. "When the Old Queen was on the throne she was proud to be 'mere English' like the rest of us. Mrs. Goodman thought very highly of her for that"

"Lawks, can she remember her?" Lady Elizabeth asked inelegantly. "She must be an old, old lady now?"

"Mrs. Goodman? She's dead. But she lived at Brede Place for more than eighty years. After my mother died, she was the only person I really loved. She used to tell me stories about young 'Master Henry' when he was a boy. When he came back to Brede I felt I already knew him a little. He is just the same now as he was then. He is the kindest man in the world!"

Kate looked impressed, but for quite another reason. "Your Mrs. Goodman must have been at least twenty years old when Queen Elizabeth died. I never knew anyone who was alive in those days. Did she tell you many stories of when she was young? I do wish I could have known her!"

Constance smiled. "I shall always be glad that I did." Her smile deepened into laughter. "But you might not have liked her very much after all - you see, she was a Puritan too!"

Sobriety's face looked green with fright.

"My lady! Wake up, your ladyship, please! Oh, Mistress Constance, I want to serve you as well as his lordship said I should have to, but I don't know where to go!"

Constance felt almost as frightened as her maid when she thought about the miles of corridor she had traversed the night before.

"Don't worry, Sobriety. Lady Elizabeth and Mistress Catherine must have their own personal maids too. They'll tell you everything that will be expected of you."

A light giggle from the other side of the room told her that Lady Elizabeth was also awake and, a minute later, her face appeared through the curtains that had been pulled closely about the bed.

"Is this your maid? We share one between us, Kate and I, and she will soon show your girl what to do. But *what* did you say her name was?"

Constance threw her a warning look. "Puritans believe in calling their children after the various virtues they hope they will have, though quite a few of us have your own name in memory of the Old Queen."

It was the beginning of a strange day for Constance. She was introduced to more people than she could afterwards possibly remember, but of the Earl there was no sign at all. She became increasingly dejected as the day went on, and although her new friends did everything they could think of to cheer her up, her flagging spirits eventually cast a blight over them too.

"We must take you to Mistress Simpson before it is time for dinner," they offered when they had all partaken of a little bread and a cup of hot chocolate, brought to them by their maids, and had dressed themselves with the elaborate care with which everything seemed to be done at Court.

Constance smiled briefly. "He has forgotten I am here," she teased herself, "or surely he would have sent for me by now?"

"Your Aunt Simpson will know the answer to that," Mistress Catherine said kindly. "Come, let's go to her at once."

Constance could only marvel at the way the other two girls knew their way about the palace, and for the moment she forgot her troubles as they showed her some of the rooms she would need to know, such as the Great Hall where the whole Court customarily sat down together for the two main meals of the day.

"Do you wish to see the Chapel also?" Lady Elizabeth demanded blundy. "You will be expected to worship there whether you will or no. Only the Queen and her ladies sometimes absent themselves, for it was part of the marriage agreement that she should be allowed to practise her own faith."

Constance obediently entered and was quite overcome by its magnificent fan-vaulted wooden ceiling, with its many carved and gilded pendants, decorated with crowns and other royal symbols, and the great blue vault across which a dusting of stars had been spread with a liberal hand. Constance shut her eyes to close out the sight, wondering how anyone could manage to say their prayers amidst so much splendour. She was afraid that she, evidently a weaker vessel than the Cavalier or Tudor ladies had been, would be sadly distracted by so much beauty around her and would find it hard indeed to concentrate with proper humility on the edicts of her Maker.

Mistress Catherine, whom Constance had already discovered to be peculiarly sensitive to the feelings of others, said, "Mr. Cromwell worshipped here, you know, when he held Court here during the Commonwealth."

"You have to have a King to have a Court," Constance objected, comforted nonetheless by the thought.

"Do you?" Lady Elizabeth said. "Then why did Mr. Cromwell choose to live in a palace at all?"

Constance had no idea. She supposed it had been more convenient for the men who had run the government to gather together in one place and that Hampton Court had been as convenient a place as any other. "It must have cost less to have a Lord Protector than to support the whole Royal Family. I have always understood that that was so!"

"Then far be it from me to disillusion you," Lady Elizabeth drawled. "But you have my word for it that England cost not a penny less to run during the Commonwealth, as you can find out for yourself by reading the accounts of the Protector's struggles with *his* parliaments."

"How much you know about these things!" Constance exclaimed. "You must think me very ignorant indeed, but I have never been away from Brede before and the management of the estate was the nearest I have ever come to public affairs."

Lady Elizabeth laughed. "My family, and Kate's too, are bred on such things when we are still in the nursery, but neither of us could run even the simplest establishment without an army of servants to do all the work for us. You, I'm sure, are a notable housewife, able to do everything with your own hands?" She laughed again at Constance's self-conscious expression. "No, no, I haven't the second sight, I assure you! The truth is, your maid Sobriety told our maid all about you, and our maid told us. That's how one hears most things at Court when one is female and shut out of the meeting-places of our lords and masters!"

Kate nodded her head and smiled. "Is it true you wanted to keep bees to reduce the cost of wax?" she asked. "How brave you must be!"

Constance perceived that the gap between country and town dwellers was bigger than she had thought. "Many people keep bees in the country," she said.

"But not the Countess of Brede!" Kate teased her.

Constance blushed, thinking of how the Earl had said they had no need of bees at Brede for she was a sweet enough attraction in herself. "My lord forbade it," she told the two girls.

"And you don't hold the decision against him?" Lady Elizabeth said with a droll look.

"No," Constance said, surprised at the suggestion. "He wanted to save me the extra work. No one has ever been kinder to me. He is the finest gentleman imaginable!"

Thinking about the Earl sent her spirits back into the doldrums. It would have been more than enough just to catch sight of him and to be favoured by one of his long, slow smiles. She didn't want to ask too much, and she knew he was expecting her to find her own feet in this strange, new world of the Court, without forever hanging on his sleeve. The trouble was that she pined for his company and nobody else's would do! And, try as she would to put the memory of his kisses out of her mind, they lingered in her thoughts in a way she could only think was wanton and disgraceful though she didn't fully understand why.

When Mistress Simpson remarked that she too had received no message from the Earl, Constance was hard put to it not to burst into tears.

"He could look for me all day in this place and not find me!" she exclaimed.

"Nonsense, my dear! If he couldn't lay hands on *you* he knows quite well where *my* rooms are situated! Nor am I a complete stranger to his apartment, being a close relative of his."

"Then, please ma'am, will you show me the way there?" Constance pleaded with her.

"My love, I doubt he would be there even if I were to take you to him." She saw the despair written large on the new Countess' face. "Oh, very well, I will show you the way, so that you will know where to go when he does send for you. But I beg of you not to go uninvited.

You would not bring his anger down on your head needlessly, would you? He may have a very good reason for not wanting you with him just now."

"You mean *she* may be there?"

That had been exactly what the Earl's aunt had meant, but she was loath to admit as much to his young bride of scarcely two days. "He will refaiember you very soon," she consoled her awkwardly. "Doubtless he thinks you are busy enough finding your way about the Court."

When Constance saw the assembled Court in the Great Hall waiting for the King to give the signal for grace to be said, she was sure that the Earl was bound to be there and could scarcely contain her excitement. At one end of the Hall was a dais on which was placed the High Table where the King himself was seated. But there was no sign of the Earl anywhere at that table, an honoured position that Constance felt was bound to be his by right. Nor could she discover him anywhere else in the huge room. She tried to attend to what Lady Elizabeth was telling her as to how Henry VIII had been so impatient for the building to be finished that the work had been carried out not only in daylight but by candlelight as well. She admired the glories of the hammer-beam roof, and shuddered at the gruesome details of Anne Boleyn's death, for that ill-fated Queen had met her end before the building had been brought to a conclusion, when the great love of Henry's life, Anne's lady-in-waiting Jane Seymour, had taken her place as consort to that much-married monarch, but nothing could really divert Constance from her sense of impending-doom as the meal progressed.

The many and varied dishes had a long way to travel from the kitchens and had already stood for at least an hour in the serving place, later to be known as the Horn Room, and Constant was not impressed to find her food stone cold and the gravy a congealed mess

on her plate. The green-goose sauce was made of sorrel, sugar, and scalded gooseberries, and the fish should have been quite delicious, being served in a mixture of horse-radish, lemon-peel, egg-yolks, butter, white wine, and anchovies, but as the whole point of such a sauce was that it should be served piping hot, the long delays had completely ruined that dish also.

The afternoon that followed was boring in the extreme, for whilst Mistress Simpson had promised to present Constance to the Queen at the first opportunity, that poor lady was still recovering from her fit of hysteria of the day before and was in no state to receive anyone. Constance played a variety of silly games with her new friends, convinced that she was as much in danger of losing her immortal soul as the few pennies they were likely to win from her. Her conscience, already roused, was the more completely upset to discover it was she who had won their money, and not just a few pennies either, but what seemed to her incredulous eyes a quite iniquitous sum to hazard on a game of chance.

Supper, a meal customarily taken between the hours of six and nine in the evening, was as disappointing to Constance as the midday meal had been. By the time she had struggled through part of a half-raw pigeon and had refused a portion of rabbit pie in deference to her protesting digestive system, she was left with nothing more to eat than some bread and cheese. She was glad, though, to be offered some milk to drink, boiled with raisins, which she found a pleasant change from the usual ale or mead. She was no longer surprised, however, that the Earl chose to eat his meals elsewhere, and made up her mind to do likewise as soon as she could find some way of making the necessary arrangements.

It was as she left the Great Hall for the second time that day that she allowed herself one last look across at the men, just in case she should have overlooked the Earl, though she knew quite well that he was not there. But someone else was! She could have sworn that she caught a

glimpse of Sir Thomas Lucas, no longer in Puritan dress, but indistinguishable from all the other gendemen, in a wig and wide-sleeved, embroidered coat. But it could not have been! Sir Thomas would never have come to Court unless he had been dragged there, kicking and screaming. His conscience would never have allowed it!

"What's the matter?" Kate breathed, noting Constance's sudden stillness.

"I saw someone I know, I'm sure I did. Sir Thomas Lucas!"

"What if you did?"; Kate asked. "It would be odd if you did not. The Aiken family must be acquainted with half England."

"Sir Thomas knew my father," Constance said in a voice that quivered. "He has been on the look-out for a third wife these last two years and more. But he would never come here! He is no lover of the Stuart cause!"

"Then you must have been mistaken," Lady Elizabeth said comfortably. "Will you come back to our room with us, Constance?"

But Constance declined. She slipped away from the other two, leaving them gossiping together in the Clock Court, amused because she knew they were only staying there to display themselves to the young men of the Court as they, too, made their way out of the Great Hall. Knowing how easily she could lose herself, Constance retraced her steps through the Hall and through the Serving Room, making her way around the Round Kitchen Court and into the Gallery that she was almost sure she recognised as being on the way to the Earl's apartment.

Standing in the far corner of the Gallery was Sir Thomas Lucas, talking, of all things, to a lady whose dress was remarkably similar to the one Lady Hartley had been wearing the evening" before.

Constance could recognise her erstwhile suitor's voice, a trifle loud and more than a little unctuous, as he flirted with the lady he had with him. She was shocked to notice he had his hand about her waist and that the lady was openly encouraging when he bent to kiss her neck and bared breasts.

Constance hurried on at a run, more afraid than ever that he would notice her, but, just as she was about to leave the Gallery, the lady shrieked and shrieked again, half crazed with fear. Constance ran on as fast as her legs would carry her, finding her way more by instinct than judgement to the Earl's door. She wedged herself against it, shivering with fright and covering her ears against the screams that still rang in her ears. Nor could she bring herself to rap on the door and announce herself. She had, she knew, every right to be there, but Aunt Simpson's words came back to mock her and she felt the more guilty for being there unasked. Supposing she had been wrong about seeing Lady Hartley in the Gallery and she was here before her with her husband? What should she do then?

But before she could frighten herself still further the door was flung open and there was the Earl himself standing there. She uttered a whimper of surprise and found herself enclosed within his strong arms and half-carried into the room.

"So there you are, sweetness. I had expected you last night! Were you so afraid to be with your husband?"

"I didn't know where you were, and when you didn't send for me - "

"No, you are right!" he admitted. "I've neglected you shamefully. But I had to see Clarendon at once. When you weren't here on my return, I presumed you had asked to be lodged elsewhere."

Constance could restrain her tears no longer. "I looked for you all day!" she confessed. She buried her damp face in his neck, beginning

to shiver all over again. "Sir Thomas Lucas is here - and I'm afraid of him!" She peeped over his shoulder, assuring herself that no one else was in the room with the Earl. "He was standing talking to - to a lady in the Gallery, and she screamed. I think he may have hurt her terribly, but I was in too much of a fright to stop and see!"

The Earl caressed her shaking form, kissing her cheeks, her eyes, her lips, with increasing urgency. "I missed my little Puritan wife far too much last night!" he whispered in her ear. "But tonight you shall not escape me, now I have you safe in my arms."

"What of the lady in the Gallery?" she objected.

"She need not concern you," he said very gently. "That Gallery has often been called haunted because poor Catherine Howard, before she was sent to the Tower, was confined within her own chambers here. She escaped and ran along there, hoping to plead for her life with King Henry, who was at his devotions in the Royal Closet. Just as she reached the door that led to the King, she was seized and dragged, screaming all the way, back to her own chamber. The King must have heard her, but he went on with his prayers as if nothing had happened. People have heard poor Catherine's screams ever since, and that must have been what you heard tonight!"

"But Sir Thomas - he would like to hear a woman scream! His last wife - "

"I know, sweeting, but he has no wife now and I have! Won't you please forget Sir Thomas and all his kind for tonight at least and concentrate on my claims to your attention instead?"

She found he had already more than half undressed her and that her outer clothing was in danger of falling to the floor. She allowed him to take it from her as if in a dream, standing in nothing but her shift and looking up at him with loving eyes.

"My lord - " she began and stopped. "Do you believe the spirits of the dead can haunt a place?"

"I know not," he answered, "neither do I care!"

He snatched her shift from her also and picked her up bodily, carrying her over to the large, four-poster bed. He didn't bother with the steps by which most people climbed into the high beds of the time, but vaulted in beside her, closing the curtains about them. Constance hid herself beneath the bedclothes, her eyes dark and a little frightened.

"I trust you are not too tired to do your duty this evening, my beautiful wife," the Earl smiled down at her. He pulled the bedclothes away, taking her firmly into his arms, his hands warm and loving against her skin. "You'll get little sleep tonight, even if you are!" he added, kissing her full on the lips.

"I'm not tired at all," she answered, her breath catching in her throat. She put her arms around him and hugged him closer still, wondering that his heart should be thundering every bit as loudly as her own. "Oh, Henry," she whispered, "please kiss me some more!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE Earl watched his wife sipping her morning chocolate with a well-satisfied air.

"Happy?" he asked her.

He was a little amused to notice that she was as shy as ever now that it was day again. In the night he had evoked a passionate response from his little Puritan that had startled quite as much as it had delighted him. He had thought it would take a long time to break down her reserve and teach her to take pleasure in his lovemaking, but her own nature had made her an apt pupil, seeking to follow his every lead and finding her joy in pleasing him.

She nodded, her face suffused with colour. "I thought I was happy the first time I saw you, when you came riding up the drive at Brede. I had never seen anyone as handsome as you."

"Were you such a stranger to happiness before?" The thought was a painful one to him, and a little disturbing too, now that he had made himself responsible for her future felicity with him.

"Yes," she said simply. "But now there is you." She blew on her chocolate to give herself an excuse not to meet his eyes. "I always thought one was either happy or one was not, but now I know that isn't so. I was happy when I first saw you, but I'm much, much happier now!"

"Even at the Court of the Stuart Monster?" he teased her, touched by her naive satisfaction in her new life.

"Yes, because I know Brede is there, waiting for us." She wrinkled up her brow thoughtfully. "He isn't really a monster, is he? I wonder why so many people think he is. I saw him yesterday, sitting at the High Table. He's just an ordinary man - "

The Earl laughed. "Though more charming and handsome than most, you must agree!" he interposed.

Constance's eyes travelled over her husband's strong, intelligent face. "He isn't as handsome as you are," she said definitely.

"You are too partisan in my favour to be a good judge," he said, almost savagely. "Many far more beautiful women than you have fallen victim to his appeal. My lady Castlemaine is not the first to catch his eye, nor is she likely to be the last!"

"They make a fine pair!" Constance agreed drily.

He gave her a quick, interested glance. "Indeed? It didn't take you long to catch up with the gossip of the Court! Have you thought of your own chances of advancing yourself in the royal favour?"

"Me ? With the King?" A little gasp of laughter escaped her, though she immediately sobered again. "I'm sorry, my lord, but you cannot be serious! Charles Stuart had no appeal for me! His eye must rove elsewhere, for I could never be satisfied with his brief attentions, no matter what rewards his patronage might bring me! Did you imagine I could be, after knowing you? A selfish libertine in the place of the man who - "

He lifted an eyebrow, his impatience gone. "Who - ?" he prompted, plainly meaning to have an answer.

Constance averted her face. "Who is enthroned in my heart," she said, on a low note. "But I think you already know that, my lord."

"It was Henry last night," he reminded her.

"But I could not!"

"When we are alone, my love, it is quite proper for you to call me by my Christian name - unless you dislike it?"

"Oh no!"

"It is not as apt as your own perhaps," he went on, enjoying the struggle that was reflected on her face between her pleasure in the added intimacy of her use of his name and her fear of presuming on his good nature, "but it has been favoured by the English for many centuries past."

"I-I-like it very much!" she stammered.

"Good. I like yours too. Constancy has had as little part in my life as happiness has had in yours, but I think I may have found it in my little Puritan wife who would scorn to be loved by a king?"

She sat quite still for an instant, wondering if she had imagined the note of appeal she thought she had detected in his words. She accepted that he didn't love her as she would have liked to have been loved by him, though she would have been a fool not to know that he had been pleasantly surprised by the satisfaction he had found in his possession of her. Perhaps, in time -

"It is easy to be constant to the source of one's happiness," she answered hastily, catching up her thoughts lest she should begin to hope for the impossible. "But I shall try to understand and not - not criticise if others don't always find it so easy."

He reached across the table and took her hand in his, raising it to his lips. "I make you my compliments, my lady wife. Do you never stoop to subterfuge? It makes a refreshing change from most of my acquaintance." He smiled right into her eyes, warming her through and through. "I think I may have maligned you last night, my little love. What was all that about Sir Thomas Lucas being at Court?"

"I saw him - I saw him twice!" She looked up at him, looking as confused as she felt. "Why didn't you believe me last night?"

His lips curved into a faint smile. "I thought you might have needed an excuse to come to me. I know you better now."

She knew herself better too. The day before she had been a girl, but now she was a woman with a new knowledge of life.

"I have always been afraid of Sir Thomas," she confessed. "It was an instinctive fear, but now I can understand why his wife used to cringe in his presence. A woman is very much at the mercy of her husband."

The Earl's mouth tightened. "Are you afraid of me, Constance?"

She was shocked by the thought. "How could I be?" she burst out. "You're the kindest person I've ever known! You have always been kind to me - right from the beginning!"

"I have an ambition to be more than a kindly husband to you," he told her in self-mocking tones. "I find you very beautiful, madam wife!"

She was absurdly pleased by the compliment. She could have wished it was night time again, with herself held close in his arms, but she had to remember that he would not always want her with him, and that was a thought that brought a burning pain to her heart and a cry to her lips.

He watched the changing emotions flicker across her face and thought how very young she was, yet he could not remember another woman who had made herself so frequently the centre of his thoughts and concern, and some of them had been far more beautiful than she.

"You have no cause to fear Sir Thomas now," he said with a gentleness that would have astonished his mother had she heard him. "As the Countess of Brede you are beyond his reach. If he approaches

you, you may refer him to me and I will see that he doesn't dare to come near you again. I fancy he would think twice before he did anything to harm my wife!"

She shivered, remembering the screams she had heard the night before. Perhaps the Earl would wish to protect his mistress also from Sir Thomas' attentions. It was an uncomfortable thought and she was strongly tempted to hold her tongue and leave Lady Hartley to her own devices. Yet, if the Earl had a fondness for her, would he easily forgive her?

"My lord, he was speaking with my lady Hartley in the Gallery," she said in a rush. "It wasn't Catherine Howard I heard screaming there. I am sure it was she."

"My lady Hartley was conversing with Sir Thomas?"

Constance flushed, convinced that he didn't believe her. "Yes. my lord." she whispered unhappily.

"And what would there be in that to make her scream?"

"They were making love," she blurted out. "I didn't wish to tell you, for I knew you must be hurt to think of my lady Hartley with him, but I daresay it was no desire of hers."

The Earl seated himself on the edge of the table, crossing his arms in front of him. "Did you know what they were doing last night?" he drawled in a voice that made her realise why many considered the Earl of Brede to be a dangerous man to cross.

"You know I did not!" she responded passionately. "I had never imagined that one could do such things. I had never even been kissed - except by you - before I came here. But I could see that she was naked to the waist and that he had his arms about her. And then - and then she screamed!"

"My lady Hartley?"

She nodded. "I am almost sure it was she, though I could not see her face. Her dress is somewhat distinctive though," she added apologetically.

"I have frequently thought so myself," he agreed with a dryness that made her wonder if he were quite as upset as he should be at the thought that his mistress had been unfaithful to him. "And may I ask who it was who introduced you to a lady whose doubtful morals are a by-word throughout society?"

Constance sought to avoid the question by exclaiming that she would never be ready that day if she didn't send for Sobriety undress her. "The poor girl doesn't even know where I am! The vastness of Hampton Court scares her half to death!"

"She is not alone in that!" the Earl retorted. "You had best tell me what I want to know, little one, before I abandon you to finding your own way back to your new friends. Did *they* take it upon themselves to present Anne Hartley to you?"

Constance shook her head. "I asked to meet her," she said in a small voice.

"And they obliged? I shall have something to say to their parents if that is the case!"

"No, no, not they! They are both great admirers of yours and, whilst they might talk about her - a little, they only spoke of presenting me to the Duchess of York and my lord Clarendon. They wouldn't even countenance my claiming a connection to my lady Castlemaine. Mistress Simpson said you might not like it."

"Ah, Aunt Simpson. I had forgotten her! How did you persuade her to make Anne Hartley known to you?"

"She hadn't realised I was your wife - "

"No? And what made her think such a person would be a suitable acquaintance for a young, innocent girl? A girl, moreover, of the same family as herself?"

"But Mistress Simpson is not an Aiken," Constance pointed out with exactitude. "To tell the truth, she didn't like it much, but I told her that with so many papists and churchmen at Court, I wished to know her as a fellow Protestant, and she - understood that I felt a little lost. I believe she does herself!"

"Very likely! But she does not normally consort with the Castlemaines and the Hartleys of this world, nor would she wish to do so." The Earl rounded on his young bride, grasping her by the shoulders and forcing her round to face him. "Nor are you so innocent as to imagine my lady Hartley is cast in the same Puritan mould as yourself! So why, Constance? Who told you about her?"

"I thought if you liked her, I would like her too, but I didn't! I thought her horrible! I can't understand why she should be a close friend of yours. I had always heard she was beautiful, but I didn't find her so!"

The Earl received these comments with commendable calm. Indeed, he looked as if he were hard put to it not to laugh.

"Serves you right! You're no match for my lady Hartley!"

"No," she agreed on a sigh. "I fear you will be very disappointed in me, for I don't see that anyone is like to confide in me, and I did so want to repay you a little for stooping to marry me. It would have been different if I had brought you a dowry - "

"I am well content, my love."

She turned searching eyes on him, a smile breaking through her anxiety. "Did I not say you are always kind? If you are disappointed, I doubt if I shall ever know it! But truly, my lord, I am yours to command. I am not the Queen to be put about by - by your other - "

"Then you had best learn from the Queen that as my wife you have your own dignity to maintain," he cut her off. "I do not wish that you should learn *anything* from my lady Hartley, or from anyone like her! Do you understand me?"

"But, my lord - " She gave him a timid glance. "Have you - have you changed your mind about using me as bait?"

"I should never have suggested it in the first place!" He ran a hand across his brow. "I must have been mad to think of such a thing! As a plan, it was bound to come adrift, as you haven't the faintest idea what you are about. You are far more likely to fall from one scrape into another unless I keep a close eye on you!"

"I don't intend to be a burden to your lordship," she retorted with some indignation. "Lady Elizabeth Grey and Mistress Catherine Hyde have already offered to be my patrons at Court, and they are not likely to allow me to fall into any scrapes, as you put it. They are, both of them, the most charming young ladies, even if they do come from Cavalier families. You may safely leave me in their care!"

He polled her to her feet and close against his chest. "They are, as you say, quite charming, but the Countess of Brede must have a matron to sponsor her into society, not two young girls who are as green in the ways of the world as she is herself !".He pushed her hair back from her brow and kissed her lightly on the nose. "Perhaps not quite as green," he murmured, catching sight of her rebellious expression, "but unmarried nevertheless!" He kissed her more thoroughly, wanning to his task and, with a little sound at the back of her throat,

she threw her arms up round his neck and kissed him back with an ardour that made him smile.

"I may be green, but I am not silly or stupid," she told him with some asperity. "I *did* see Sir Thomas Lucas and I can think of no reason why he should be here. Surely that is of interest to you? Henry, please allow me to be of some use to you. You've given me so much and I would not be completely your pensioner. Is that wrong of me?"

He put a hand on the small of her back in a possessive gesture. "Do you want me to think my Puritan wife has as much pride to conquer as any Cavalier lady?" he teased her.

"Ay, and much more besides," she answered him gravely. "My pride is all in being the Countess of Brede."

"The mistress of Brede Place?"

She hung her head. "Brede Place is only a house," she said at last. "It is not as important to me as I once thought - though I must always think it the most beautiful house in England."

He forced back her head and kissed her again, gratified by the quick passion that flared between them. The little Puritan went to his head all too easily, but he thought she would be like a good wine, maturing well, and he was not afraid she would ever leave a bad taste in his mouth as others, like Anne Hartley, had all too often done in the past.

"Then if it is not the house - ?" he went on in the same jesting vein.

"It must be the man," she finished for him, laughing also. "How could it be otherwise? I have been brought up to believe that a wife owes her husband all her obedience and duty, and the virtuous are often arrogant in their own cause, don't you think? I am in mine! I want to be everything you would have in a wife!"

She was closer to achieving her ambition than she knew, he thought, enjoying the look of piquant expectation in her wide, chestnut eyes. Somehow her very innocence added to the impish challenge she presented to him, for he suspected she was quite unaware of her own attractions, or of the strong desire she had evoked in him to keep her loving heart ruthlessly in his own possession.

He bent his head, meaning to kiss her again, but then she surprised him once more. She looked very earnest and determined. "My lord, if Sir Thomas would harm my lady Hartley, you must prevent him. I won't pretend to any admiration for her - " Her colour rose despite her efforts to look cool and sophisticated - "but I have to admit her claim on you, and I wouldn't want any particular hurt to come to her."

"Then you are more generous than she would ever be!" He hugged her to him and she could feel his laughter reverberating in her own body, so close was the contact between them. But when he spoke, there was no trace of mockery in his voice. "Anne has her own husband to protect her, my dear. She has no need of any care of mine. I only regret that she should ever have crossed your path - and still more that you should know her for what she was to me. Forget her, sweeting! Let her go to perdition in her own way!"

But Constance shook her head, her conscience roused. "It would not be well done in you to abandon her to Sir Thomas," she insisted. "You must not consider my feelings in this, my lord. I would rather know that you will not desert your old friends!" Her voice shook badly, betraying the cost to her of her final remark. "If it were anyone else but Sir Thomas - "

"Are you still afraid of him, my little love?"

"He is- a bad man!" she told him.

"Ay, so I am beginning to think," he answered. For a moment he looked like an avenging angel, then his expression changed and his eyes grew warm and glinted in a way that was calculated to put all thought of Sir Thomas and his evil deeds out of her mind. "Sobriety will have to wait a little longer to dress her mistress! Come, madam wife, it is far too early for you to commence your toilet and I have other plans for your entertainment!"

"Henry!" Her eyes opened wide in shock. "We can't! It's *morning!*"

"And you are my wife," he reminded her, "and in this, at least, I must insist on your obedience - "

"Oh Henry, yes please!" she said.

The Dowager Countess of Brede, looking ridiculously young to be anyone's mother-in-law, stepped down from the coach with all the grace of a young girl. She cast an enquiring look in Constance's direction and was well pleased with what she saw. Her new daughter was evidently beside herself with excitement, and not even her best efforts to maintain her usual calm dignity could prevent her from running forward to fling herself into her mother-in-law's arms.

"I hope you're not fatigued from the journey, ma'am? Henry - my lord said you would be sure to spend the night on the road in order to be here in good time today. How glad I am to see you! Is all well at Brede?"

"Softly, my dear," the older lady protested, returning the embrace with a warmth and affection that quite surprised herself. "Life at Court seems to agree with you," she added maliciously. "I thought you might be pining for your home, but I've never seen you in better looks!" She patted Constance's cheek with her closed fan. "And where is Brede? Closeted with my lord Clarendon, I suppose?"

Constance blushed. "No. He - he was rather late in rising this morning." She lowered her voice to a mere whisper. "My lord Clarendon has been ordered by the King to have an audience with the Queen. Aunt Simpson is in a state of collapse and, indeed, my lady, the whole Court is quite exhausted with the drama. If you had been here - but Aunt Simpson was called to take your place beside the Queen and she *cannot* but disapprove of the whole affair!"

"I do myself," the Dowager Countess said in grim tones.

Constance nodded. "Aunt Simpson is to dine with us at midday and she will tell us all the latest then."

"Did Brede invite her?" the Dowager Countess asked. "Don't you eat in the Great Hall?"

Constance wriggled with embarrassment, but held her ground with the courage that was so much a part of her. "I dined in the Great Hall yesterday; today, I persuaded my lord we would be more private if we ate in his apartment. Many married couples do! There are fewer delays and we can supply our own food." Her eyes flashed as she remembered the meal she had been expected to consume in the Great Hall the day before. "One cannot condone the wastage and the bad management in the royal kitchens! And the dishes we were offered yesterday were inedible for the most part! I would soon make some changes, I can tell you!"

"Hush! Don't tell me any more," the Dowager Countess pleaded. "My credit with the King would never survive an attack on any of his acknowledged favourites by a member of my family."

Discomfited, Constance blinked at her. "I have not said anything to anyone else," she said finally, "but, truly, if he values his digestion he would employ someone with some notions of proper housewifery!"

The Dowager's eyes sparkled with delight at Constance's indignant tones. "The High Table is served in advance of the others," she said in a quick aside, turning her attention to the arrival of her two other daughters-in-law. "Ah, here are the others! I beg of you not to say a word to them, but I could not put up with their dullness an instant longer and made them travel in' a separate conveyance by themselves. It was too bad of me, for they are always on edge not to offend me in any way, and they succeed in doing so on almost every occasion!"

Charlotte and Henrietta both looked a trifle glum as they descended the few steps to the ground.

"I could wish, Mama, that you would occasionally have a thought for other people," Charlotte chided the Dowager in disagreeable tones. "We have been travelling in the wake of the mud thrown up by your carriage for more miles than I care to remember! I had to ask our own coachman to hold back until you were quite out of sight! So if we are late now, you have only yourself to blame!"

The Dowager gave her an impatient look and Constance nearly laughed out loud to see how little she liked being put in the wrong in this way. In that moment she looked very like her eldest son!

"And what have you to say, Henrietta?" she asked sulkily.

The younger daughter-in-law started nervously. "Charlotte's condition makes her anxious. The delay was of no great moment to me." She had a sweet smile, Constance thought, and remembered that it had been she who had taken the trouble to put the Puritan bridesmaids more at their ease during the procession into the church.

"Do you know," she said out loud, "I have missed having my family about me, which is strange seeing I never had one before my lord came to Brede. Hampton Court is so vast, I go into a decline every time I have to find my way from one place to another. Also I am

relying on you to increase my social life, as the only two young ladies I am acquainted with are not yet wed and my lord says that only a married lady will do to sponsor me in society."

Henrietta's kind heart was touched. "He is quite right. Oh, Constance, it will be such fun to make you known to my own particular circle, and I don't care what anyone says - " this with a baleful look at Charlotte - "I'm sure no one will care that your father supported the Commonwealth! If *zve* do not, nor will they!"

The Dowager Countess, restored to her usual good humour, smiled benignly on them both. "Henrietta has a lot of good sense about these things, unlike some others! Besides, there are few people who would wish to offend me, my love, and once it is known that I am your patron at Court they will all fall over themselves to be presented to you. Naturally, you must be presented to the Queen as soon as possible - but not, I think, today. We shall see what can be arranged for tomorrow."

Constance, much pleased by this prospect, gave a little skip of joy. "And Mistress Catherine Hyde has promised to present me to the Duchess of York - with your consent, ma'am - and Lady Elizabeth Grey - "

"That baggage? I see you haven't wasted your time since coming to Court!"

"Aunt Simpson made me known to them," Constance told them, not liking to reveal that she had also spent her first night at Hampton Court sharing their bedchamber rather than her lord's. "They are the kindest people imaginable!"

"You see!" Henrietta castigated poor Charlotte. "If the Hydes can recognise the little Puritan, so too surely can her own family!"

Charlotte tightened her mouth into a knot of disapproval. "The Hydes can afford a few eccentricities all the time my lord Clarendon is Chancellor and while his daughter Anne is Duchess of York and wife to the heir of the throne, but the Aikens are not so happily placed. Samuel Aiken was not the only Roundhead amongst them and there will be many who will be glad to remember it. Our brother Brede is not without enemies, since everyone knows he feels the King depends far too much on France."

Constance lifted her chin. "If they are my lord's enemies, I do not wish to know them!"

Her mother-in-law laughed out loud. "They seldom declare themselves in public," she said drily. "One's best friend is often the most deadly of them all - as many of us discovered back in '48. Fortunately, most of my own family were safely with Queen Henrietta Maria in France, not that it seemed an ideal situation at the time, for they were having a Parliamentary war of their own in Paris in the first days of that year and it was weeks-before we could get any reliable news from England - and then only when my husband came to join us!"

Constance went white. She had never thought before what the death of the first King Charles had meant to those who had been close to him.

"I was not quite four years old," she defended herself, "but I would never have been your enemy, ma'am!"

"Of course you would not. You are too like your dear mother to hate anyone. It was different with your father, but there, he is dead now too and it is best to let his enmity die with him." She hurried them all through Anne Boleyn's Gate and paused on the threshold of the Palace. "Is Brede expecting the entire family to dine with him?"

"I believe so," Constance answered. Her poise deserted her and she blushed despite herself. "I forgot to ask him," she confessed. "I thought I'd never be ready in time to greet you when he told me you were coming today, and every other thought went out of my mind. Poor Sobriety was in despair that I should not leave her enough time to dress my hair properly, lest you should think she hadn't been attending when your own maid did it for me."

Her mother-in-law looked amused. "I expect he meant us all to come or he would have warned you not to mention it in front of your sisters. His invitations always put them in a flutter of anticipation." She cast a bland look at her other daughters-in-law, who were still arguing together. "Not much love lost there," she observed. "Henrietta is dull, but seldom malicious; Charlotte is motivated entirely by spite, and so I warn you, my love. She will do no more than her duty by you and she sees that as being very little."

Constance nodded. "I like Henrietta," she confided shyly.

"There's not an ounce of harm in her," the Dowager Countess opined. "If she would only sometimes have an opinion of her own!"

Constance slanted a swift smile and laughed. "She wouldn't dare voice it to you if she had! You frighten her half to death!"

"I do? Why ever should she be scared of me? Do I frighten you?"

Constance shook her head. "You might have done," she answered seriously, "for you are very much the *grande dame* at times, and I have never known anyone like you. But I loved you dearly from the first moment I saw you. You see, you said you had come a day early because you were concerned that my lord should be forcing me into an unwelcome marriage. How could I possibly fear you after that? Even my own mother might not have done as much for me, especially as I had no dowry to attract other offers for my hand. You might well

have forbidden the match because I am not good enough for your son, my lady, and I know it, yet your thoughts were all for me, lest I should be frightened by the sudden changes in my life. If I had not wanted to wed my lord Brede, I should still have wished to be your daughter."

"Then you had best call me Mama as the others do," the Dowager Countess said carelessly. She turned to go, changed her mind and kissed Constance impulsively on the cheek. "You see, I was married to his father," she explained obscurely, "and I had to know if Henry would break your heart. I was never so glad in my life as when I realised that you were much more likely to break his!"

And she darted off, her skirts billowing out around her, leaving Constance to follow more slowly in the company of her still quarrelling sisters-in-law.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONSTANCE looked down the table with a satisfied air. The roasted meats had been bought only that morning, and even the fish had been taken from the Thames only the night before. It was quite a triumph, she thought, to have arranged such a repast at such short notice. His lordship would be very hard to please if he didn't notice the high standards she had set for his table.

It was not the Earl, however, but his mother who exclaimed over how the white damask cloth set off the family pewter and the few pieces of silver that graced the table. Best of all, as far as the Dowager Countess was concerned, were the forks that had been placed beside the spoon and knife at every place. Constance learned fast, it seemed, and with that touch of fashionable comfort added to as much delicious food as she could find room for, the Dowager was loud in her praise.

"I had never believed it possible to eat so well at Court!" she remarked to the party at large.

"Thank God for it," Aunt Simpson said with feeling. "I would have given anything for you to be here this morning, sister. My lord Clarendon had audience with the Queen - against his better feelings in the matter, as you may imagine - and the poor lady is more cast down than ever! I declare she would be on her way back to Portugal this very minute had he not told her that she no longer had the disposal of her own person in her own hands, that she could not even go out of the house, unless it was with the King's approval."

"My lord Clarendon said that?"

"And a great deal more besides. The King was beside himself with rage at the suggestion that Clarendon had made to him earlier that he should be more indulgent with his Queen. I expect he knows how

well known it is that my lady Castlemaine makes him go down on his knees to ask her pardon whenever he offends *her*, and won't have it thought that he will suffer any such demands from any other female, and the poor Portuguese lady has to submit to his whims accordingly."

Constance made a face and, catching her husband's eye, favoured him with a dazzling smile. "So the monster has a tamer," she said under her breath.

"What else did my lord Clarendon have to say?" the Earl asked Aunt Simpson, putting a warning hand on his wife's knee.

"He was reasonable, thank God, but he offered the Queen very little sympathy. He may have been afraid he would be treated to another emotional scene if he did. She refused to see him yesterday, did you know that? He had to come back again today, and I doubt but that he thought he had wasted enough time on the business already. If you ask me, he could have knocked both their heads together with the greatest good will!"

Charlotte stirred restively,[^] keeping an uneasy eye on her new sister-in-law. "Would it not be better to speak of other things than the King's business in the present company?" she suggested. Her own husband smiled apologetically at the Earl and shook his head at her.

"It is a family party," he said. "We may all say what we please to each other, surely?"

"Until now there has been no question as to where our loyalties lie!"

Constance raised her head, a flash of temper in her eyes. "I am not and never shall be a Royalist, but my lord knows he has my whole loyalty. I should never, never betray any interest of his - not even the more stupid of his relations!"

Only the Dowager Countess seemed unmoved by this outburst. She cast an ironic eye in her eldest son's direction, a faint smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. "I can vouch that that is the truth," she said. "Whilst we all claim Charles Stuart to be our King, Constance has a liege lord of her own. To please him, she was prepared to violate her conscience and wear bright colours, and, no doubt, she will be prepared to violate her conscience once again and espouse the Stuart cause - at least in public?"

Constance, at once furious and overcome with embarrassment, relapsed into an angry silence. How could her mother-in-law reveal her most closely guarded secret to the whole family and enjoy doing so? She hadn't known that she had guessed to whom she was referring when she had claimed to have a King of her own. It had been a childish fantasy, but one that was still precious to her, and to have it laid bare before her brothers-in-law, none of whom she knew at all well, or Aunt Simpson, who had little sympathy for such frivolous nonsense, or worst of all the superior Charlotte, was more than she could bear. Her eyes misted with tears and she bit her lip, her fingers pulling restlessly at the corners of her napkin.

It was the Earl who came to her rescue. "The breach between Cavalier and Roundhead will have to be healed if England is to prosper. It was to unite the Aiken family that Constance agreed to be my wife, and so I told the King. He is as anxious as I that our example should be followed by many others in the near future. It is the best way for him to secure his throne, and he knows it."

"My lord Clarendon doesn't share your tolerance," one of his brothers spoke up. "He is intent on bringing in further measures against those who refuse to conform to the rites of the Church of England."

"He does the best he can," the Earl responded. "His advice is better than much which is offered to the King." His hand sought his wife's,

squeezing her fingers between his in a caress that was happily hidden from the others by the table.

"Dunkirk is to be sold back to the French, despite my advice and that of others as to the upset it will cause among Cromwell's redcoats, not that we would have had any hope of holding it against their will. What is more troubling is the reaction of the Dutch. Wherever we turn in the world, they are our greatest rivals in trade and commerce, and although we are both the allies of the French at the moment, they have no love for King Louis' policies, nor for ours." He sighed, looking suddenly weary. "We are fortunate to have Charles to deal with and not the Duke of York. They share the same purposes, but the King has the incomparable advantage of knowing when to give way!"

"Does he though?" another of the Aiken brothers put in. "I suspect he is too lazy to care as deeply as his brother. If his comfort is affected, the one can be as stubborn as the other!"

"I'll bear witness to that!" Aunt Simpson said with deep feeling. "If I never live through another day like today, I shall die a contented woman!"

"Is the Queen still very much upset?" the Dowager Countess asked her.

"My love, I trust I never have to be present at such an interview ever again! Oh, my lord Clarendon was clever, I'll grant you that! He had her tied in knots in a trice and she, poor lady, had been so sure that her own virtue must triumph with him. Instead, he asked her if she was such an innocent she imagined the King would have preserved his heart for a consort he had never seen before a few weeks ago? And that if an English Princess should be sent to Portugal, would she find that court to be as full of virtuous affections as Catherine would wish to find in England? Of course she couldn't claim anything of the sort, and was honest enough to admit it. I swear I thought he had

reconciled her to accept things as they are and to make the best of whatever Charles offered her in the future - why, she even apologised if she should have seemed unduly tiresome and peevish! - when what must the Chancellor do but bring up the subject of my lady Castlemaine once again. All the good he had done was ruined in a trice. She would not consent to have the Castlemaine amongst her ladies. That was when she said she would return to Portugal sooner than obey such a command. My lord Clarendon left her in no doubt that she was as much a subject of the King as anyone else at Court, but she could not be brought to stomach having my lady Castlemaine constantly about her person. Whereupon, my lord Clarendon advised her not to say as much to the King, but to evade the issue sooner than to refuse outright, or His Majesty would be provoked into a fine passion also and she would very likely get the worst of it!

"Heaven knows what may become of it, but the King is already reproaching her for her stubbornness and want of duty, and she is once again shut up in her chamber in tears, refusing to be disturbed by anyone! And, to make matters worse, what should be a matter between the two of them only, has already reached too many ears to be kept quiet. The whole Court is reverberating with the quarrel! God knows how it will end!"

"Never mind how it will end," the Dowager Countess growled, "it couldn't have happened at a worse time! I had quite set my heart on presenting Constance to the Queen as soon as possible and now there are bound to be delays. Why couldn't they have waited a few days to have their quarrel?"

The Earl looked amused. "Doubtless you will find the Queen more composed by tomorrow, and Constance is in no hurry to take part in the amusements of the Court. The King is to hold yet another masque this evening - "

"A masque?" Constance exclaimed, bursting with excitement. "Does he really take part in such an entertainment himself?"

"He does, and the Duke of York also, though with rather less grace and wit than his brother displays." The Earl's eyes twinkled as he observed his bride's guilty face. "I thought you might find such recreations beneath contempt," he observed, as though he were about to dismiss all further thought of such things from his mind. "You would not wish to take part in a play or a charade yourself, would you?"

Constance struggled briefly with her conscience, peeping shyly up at her lord through her lashes. "Do you - do you favour such entertainment yourself?" she asked him.

"I have never been a Puritan - "

"Because," Constance interrupted him, so anxious was she to make her point, "because if you think it unexceptionable for me to do so, I should quite like to play in a charade with you."

"I see," he said gravely. "You are making me the keeper of your conscience with a vengeance! Well, I make no complaint on that score, sweeting, as you well know. I only hope you will find it all as enjoyable as you think it will be!"

She smiled prettily up at him. "If you are there, I shall enjoy it excessively," she assured him. "I have often wondered what such things are like. Once, at Brede, some of the villagers had a May Pole, but Mrs. Goodman wouldn't allow me to watch them dancing round it. I was never precisely sure whether she thought it wicked herself, or whether it was because she knew my father would dislike it, because she never said a word when I fell out of the tree I had climbed to see what they were doing. It was very pretty! With many coloured ribbons as well as the pole itself. And there were some jugglers as

well who did all sorts of clever tricks, but they were put in jail for their pains and we never saw them again."

Even Charlotte seemed surprised by this artless account of Constance's past life. She unbent sufficiently to smile hesitantly across the table and to ask,

"Whatever did you do with yourself all the time?"

"I sewed samplers," Constance smiled back. "Mrs. Goodman taught me all the crafts I should need to know to run a house. I was glad she had, too, after my father died, for we had few servants to help us and it would have been terrible if Brede Place had grown neglected and shabby. As it was, I could do most things myself, and, although the management of the estate suffered a little in my care, the house did not!"

Henrietta uttered a little laugh. "But that couldn't have taken up all your time?"

"I expect I, am slow," Constance acknowledged. "There never seemed enough hours in a day to do all that had to be done: the dairy; the laundry; the kitchens and the still room; even keeping the rooms clean! Mrs. Goodman and I would fast on Fridays, and other such penances would take up some hours every day. Then on Sunday we would go to hear the minister preach his sermon - " She went suddenly white and winced away from her thoughts, but she had lost the thread of what she had been saying and her voice died away into silence.

"What is it, my love?" the Earl asked her urgently.

"Sir Thomas would be there on Sundays, and sometimes his wife. His children too. They would often confess their sins in public and he would promise them a good beating for the good of their souls. My father - "

"Did he beat you?" the Dowager Countess demanded with mounting indignation.

"No. I seldom saw him," Constance answered. "And when I did, he never said a word to me, but he - he admired Sir Thomas very much, and I was always afraid that Sir Thomas would persuade him that he was neglecting his duty by never heeding what I did. I much preferred it when he didn't notice me, you see, because I reminded him of my mother and he was still very bitter about her death." She looked round the table, licking her lips to give her courage. "She died of the plague. He had forbidden her to visit the sick families on the estate, but she defied him. And then she died. He never forgave her for leaving him on his own."

"She could scarcely help dying of plague," Henrietta said reasonably.

"No," Constance admitted, frowning. "I sometimes wondered if even Mrs. Goodman knew the whole story, but I expect it was because she disobeyed him by taking food to the sick. It was about the time that the King was executed at Whitehall and the countryside was in turmoil. Mrs. Goodman said one could not go anywhere without hearing rumours of disaster, or being knocked over the head by marauding Royalists - even at Brede."

The Earl smiled kindly. "So your mother was a very brave lady to go out, whatever her reasons," he said quickly, before anyone else could put in a word. "That is how you should think of her, little one. Never mind what anyone thought about her, especially your father. You have every reason to be proud of her!"

She wondered briefly what he could possibly know about her mother, but then he was always kind and no doubt he wished her only to have pride in her parent, the more especially as he had found so little to admire in her father.

She was quite sure of this when they were alone that night and she mentioned her mother again, asking if he knew what had become of the other members of her family. The Earl was a long time in answering. He pulled her closer into his arms and caressed her flesh, arousing her passion to fever heights.

"Margaret Tusser was a renowned beauty before her marriage, as her daughter is like to be after hers! Her family disowned her when she became an Aiken - for several reasons. There is no need for you to bother your head about them now, is there?"

"I know so little about her!" Constance exclaimed.

His lordship had been remarkably unsympathetic. "At the moment, my little love, you would do far better to turn your attention to my pleasure - the Tusser claims on you cannot compare to mine!"

And all thought of her mother's family had slipped from her mind in her eagerness to follow this very good advice. She was young and very much in love, and her mother had been dead for a long, long time.

The Royal row grew daily to greater proportions. Catherine's refusal to accommodate the King over my lady Castlemaine was bolstered up by her conviction that if she were to do so she would be placing the King in grave danger of sinning further with that lady. The King became more and more furious with her obduracy. He taunted her with the nonpayment of her whole portion, which had been delayed, and had already caused her some mortification. Then, not content with this, he insulted her kinsman the Portuguese Ambassador by referring to his consort in the most slighting terms, and then outdid himself by throwing the Jew, Duarte Silva, into prison, because as the go-between in making the arrangements for the Queen's dowry he

had not yet paid the sum for which he was answerable into the exchequer, although the date for these arrangements to be finalised had not yet been reached. It seemed there was nothing he would not stoop to in order to humiliate her and make her accept his mistress as her lady-in- waiting.

The Dowager Countess of Brede watched these events with increasing ire and dismay. She herself had no difficulty in approaching the Queen, but that beset lady refused to allow anyone whom she did not already know to be presented to her.

"As if Constance would do other than sympathise with her!" the Dowager said angrily to her son. "She has had to put up with the sneers of my lady Hartley, after all, and has never said a single word against her in my hearing."

The Earl had looked less than pleased by this information. "What has Anne been saying to her?" he demanded.

The Dowager raised an impatient shoulder. "She has difficulty in saying anything very much these days. I would say it was because her teeth were paining her, but she has the strangest bruises on her face and neck." She allowed her shrewd gaze to fall on her son's startled face. "Haven't you been seeing her lately?" she asked frankly.

"I have been otherwise engaged," her son replied, raising an eyebrow. "The responsibilities of marriage are greater than I had imagined."

"Beware, you may fall in love with that chit before you know it!" his mother warned, relishing the thought.

Her son gave her a sardonic look. "With Margaret Tusser's daughter?"

"Oh, that old story!" the Dowager muttered disdainfully. "Well, I'll have you know that Margaret was one of the few really beautiful

ladies at Court with whom your father did not fall in love! It was all on her side and a great deal of misery it caused her. I assure you, I was as sorry for her as were all her friends, for she had been very strictly brought up and was as shocked as any of us that she should have conceived such a passion for a man already married to another. She thought, poor soul, that Samuel was sufficiently like your father to make her happy - though any fool could have seen it was quite otherwise!" Her face softened dramatically. "I have reason to be grateful to Margaret Tusser, Henry, and if I can repay her by showing kindness to her daughter, then so I will."

"You have my blessing in that," the Earl told her. "Is she very like her mother?"

The Dowager chuckled. "Very! She, too, only has eyes for the Earl of Brede, and would as willingly die in his service!"

"And has a sweetness that would tempt the very saints in heaven," he added, enjoying his mother's delighted astonishment. "And I am no saint, as you have reason to know."

"No, nor was your father before you," the Dowager sighed. "He often made me very unhappy, yet there was never anyone else for me and he always said I had a special place in his heart."

"I have no doubt of that," the Earl responded. "He was devoted to you in his own way."

"I know, but I would wish for more for Constance!" his mother burst out. "Don't hurt her, Henry. Life has hurt her enough. We must do all we can to make her feel loved in her new family."

The Earl's smile held a gentleness she had never seen on his face before.

"I intend to," he said.

The Dowager Countess of Brede was not a woman to be easily defeated once she had set her mind on something. The Queen could closet herself in her chamber with her good will, she would find some other way of approaching her on her daughter-in-law's behalf, but somehow, willy-nilly, the Portuguese lady would be made to receive the new Countess and to be as gracious as her lack of English would permit.

Queen Catherine was, therefore, astounded to be approached by a lady whose elegance put to shame her own feeble attempts to achieve a fashionable appearance in an English dress that held little attraction for her. Greeted in impeccable Spanish, she found herself being cajoled irresistibly into a better mood.

"I have a favour to ask of you," the Dowager Countess murmured after a lengthy exchange of compliments. "My son's bride, my lady Brede, has never set foot outside England and so she has never had the opportunity of seeing your famous Portuguese dress. Having heard so much about your Majesty's beauty in your own national costume, naturally she has a burning ambition to see you in it for herself. Would you - could you indulge her wish, for my sake?"

The Queen showed every sign of bursting into tears once more. "If she wishes to gain her sovereign's favour, she would do better to join the Court of my lady Castlemaine!" she said bitterly.

The Dowager Countess looked shocked. "I should tell you, ma'am, that my lady's sympathies are entirely with you. Her conscience would be outraged by such a suggestion, for she is as virtuous as any lady you are like to meet in England, and asks only the opportunity to tell you in person how willing she is to serve you with the deference and respect your position amongst us must deserve."

The Queen gave her a hopeful stare. "She is a Papist like myself? I have my own chaplain with me who confesses me -"

The Dowager Countess almost ground her teeth with annoyance. "She is a Puritan," she said reluctantly, "so she cannot look for much sympathy from those who are closest to the King."

"She is a Puritan and yet you will sponsor her at Court?"

"She is dear to me, your Majesty. She is unversed in the ways of Society and little given to the arts of compromise - which, as you know, ma'am, is how most of us succeed at Court. Yet my ambitions for her are high - "

The Queen's eyes rounded in surprise, all thought of tears forgotten. "You wish *me* to be her patron?" she accused. Her lips twitched with a mocking amusement "I should have thought I would have been the last person you would have looked to for that!"

The Dowager Countess shook her head. "The first, ma'am. I discovered in my own marriage that whilst there may be others, the wife must always rank first. I do beg of you to believe me that it will always be so in the end."

Queen Catherine considered this, translating the words laboriously into her native Portuguese, for, whilst she understood and spoke Spanish, she was not truly at home in any language save her own. Then she smiled and held out her hand.

"You may present your daughter to me, my lady. I confess myself curious to see your little Puritan for myself!"

Masking her triumph from the gaze of the assembled ladies, the Dowager Countess summoned Constance at once from the ante-room where she had been waiting, before the Queen could change her mind.

Constance, her colour high, made her curtsy and stammered out a few words in Portuguese, which she had made the Earl teach her in

the privacy of their room for this very occasion. The Queen could not have been more pleased. She lifted her to her feet with her own hands and embraced her warmly, introducing her personally to each and every one of the ladies present. The Portuguese among them, touched by hearing a few words of their own language, exclaimed over her and tried out their own broken English until Constance forgot her shyness and made the Queen laugh out loud by asserting roundly that whilst the Republican cause had always had her support, she would be very proud to serve her new Queen, as was fitting in the Countess of Brede.

"My lord told me when we first spoke of you that you were brave. He counts courage to be the best of virtues and so I must needs admire you, ma'am, and so I do!"

"Because my lord Brede tells you to?" the Queen retorted, and laughed again when Constance nodded even before the remark had been translated to her.

"My lord is always right," she said.

The Queen brought the audience to an end when she was told that the servants were waiting to serve her with her usual cup of tea. "You may visit me again," she said to Constance, "whenever your husband and your new mother can spare you to me, and on some suitable feast-day you shall see our Portuguese dresses."

"Thank you, ma'am," Constance said prettily. She made her curtsy once again and escaped from the chamber on the heels of her mother-in-law, her mind awl with the injustice of life and a consciousness of the real loneliness of the Portuguese lady, a loneliness she could not help but recognise - it had so often been present in her own life.

"If she were soon with child - " she began as soon as they were alone.

"If this ridiculous quarrel were to be brought to an end!" the Dowager Countess said with asperity. "Still, you behaved very well, child. I'm pleased with you!"

Constance thought her mother-in-law looked tired, and guessing at the trouble the older woman had gone to on her behalf, she escorted her to her own chamber and left her in the company of her sister so that the two of them could enjoy a good gossip about the day's events, whilst she herself went in search of Lady Elizabeth and Mistress Catherine, hoping to persuade them to accompany her on a turn in the gardens.

The two girls were much excited when they heard that she had at last been presented to the Queen.

"Was she as formidable as you feared?" Lady Elizabeth asked with a mocking, sidelong glance.

"No, but she is sad. I wish we could do something to help her. I couldn't understand her very well, but I liked her. She may be a Queen, but she is not much older than ourselves and she must feel herself a stranger in a foreign land, even if she is married to the King."

"Or perhaps because of it," Kate drawled. "They have no language in common, though both of them understand a little Spanish. Did she like you though, Constance? That's the important thing."

"I think so. She asked me to visit her again."

Her two friends drew great sighs of relief. "You are a success!" Lady Elizabeth informed her. She laughed, clapping her hands together. "How glad I am I presumed to make your acquaintance before you reached such lofty heights. You can hardly look the other way now when I claim to be your friend and bask in your reflected glory!"

Constance hid her crimson cheeks behind her hands, torn between her gratitude at their generous reception of her news and her amusement at the idea of herself as a leading light in the Cavalier society of the Court.

"Let's go down to the Tiltyard," Kate suggested. "I wonder if any tournaments will ever be held there again."

"It's wasted as it is," Lady Elizabeth agreed. "Seven wasted acres without a single knight in sight. When I think of how beautifully I would present my choice with my favour before he went off to joust some villain in my name, I can only think that some gentleman has been done out of the great moment of his life!"

Kate looked wise, smiling a little. "I prefer a closer contact with the* gentleman of my choice. What do you say, Constance?"

Constance averted her face, feeling very matronly and experienced. "It is best of all to be married to him," she answered.

Lady Elizabeth gave her a droll look, while Kate laughed out loud.

"Our little Puritan obviously likes being a Cavalier wife," Lady Elizabeth teased her affectionately. "And my lord Brede looks mighty pleased with himself also, didn't you think so, Kate, when we saw him with my lord Clarendon this morning?"

Kate giggled. "The Aikens are all so handsome!"

Constance stirred herself to make the most unlikely offer of her life. "He has two unmarried brothers," she said humbly, "and they are almost as handsome as my lord!"

Her two friends smiled at her with glee. "So they are! We depend on you to make us known to them - and soon, before the Court visits Greenwich for the visit of the Queen Mother."

"Does Queen Henrietta Maria come to England?" Constance asked, astounded at how the two girls managed to hear everything that was going on at Court long before anyone else could know of it.

Lady Elizabeth put an innocent look on her face and nodded. "I happened to hear my lord Clarendon mention it this very morning," she said.

"To my lord Brede!" Kate added, for good measure. "She will be here by July 28th!"

CHAPTER NINE

CONSTANCE looked at the pouting Sobriety and wished that she herself was both older and wiser.

"You had best go back to Brede," she said.

"You wouldn't send me away," Sobriety retorted. "You need me here, to dress your hair and do all the other things a lady's maid does for you. If I weren't here, you'd be lost to do those things for yourself."

"But if the man is married - "

"Oh, he's married right enough. He was married in France to a Frenchwoman. They couldn't rightly talk to one another, but they was married right enough."

"Then you must see that I can't allow - "

"I said as how he was married to her, but she's in France and he's here. Now he wants to marry with me!"

Constance righteously quelled the thought that if that was what the man wanted he would have done a great deal better to have kept quiet about his French wife. If Sobriety had been ignorant of his spouse there would have been nothing sinful in her living with him as his wife, but now that she did know, how could Constance allow her to do any such thing?

"You must think of his wife and children," she said in determined tones. "It is your duty, Sobriety, and quite right too!"

"His children be as Frenchified as his wife," Sobriety returned sulkily. "They none of them will come to England! She ain't a wife at all! He can't so much as tell the children nothing, for they don't understand a word he's saying. Besides, I already told him he could

share my bed and so he does - ever since we came to Hampton Court." She tossed her head in the air defiantly. "I had nowhere else to go, not after that first night! His lordship wasn't wanting me in *his* lodgings, now was he?"

Constance realised with sinking spirits that it was she who had failed in her duty to the girl. It was no excuse that she had been lost and afraid herself, Sobriety had been her responsibility! Why, good heavens, she had meant to speak to her during the journey to Hampton Court, but his lordship had sent the matter clean out of her head. The sin was clearly on her own soul and the penance would have to be hers also. Was it enough to have to manage without a maid for the next few days? Constance didn't know, but she feared not. Her mouth felt dry, and she would have given anything to take the problem straight to the Earl to deal with, but she knew she could not. He would expect her to be mistress of her own household and so she should be! She was not a baby, but a married woman, and she must behave as such!

"Sobriety, you *must* return to Brede. You imperil your immortal soul with this adulterous liaison. As your mistress, I cannot allow it! Indeed, I beg your pardon that I did not prevent it before it was ever begun. I am very much at fault also and, if I find it hard to manage without you, it is no more than I deserve. Go to Brede you will!"

"And who will take me there?" Sobriety asked her pertly.

"*Not* my lord's coachman!" Constance told her sharply.

Sobriety's face fell. "But, Mistress Constance - my lady, what am I to do if I am already with child?"

Constance's consternation was equally apparent. She had given no thought to such a possibility, and now that it had been brought to her notice, she found it hard not to consider her own case, inwardly

rejoicing at the very idea that she might herself soon be growing heavy with his lordship's seed ripening within her. If she were to have a son -

"My lady?"

Constance started and pushed the pleasant daydream of herself giving suck to the heir of Brede away from her. "That will be your punishment," she said sternly.

"There's no one at Brede as knows he's married, my lady. I want to be with him, my lady. There'll never be no other man for me!"

To Constance's inordinate relief the door of her chamber opened to admit her husband. He threw her a look of enquiry and crossed the room to her, taking her hand in his.

"Now what could possibly be causing that solemn expression, madam?" he teased her. "Just now, when the whole Court is talking about your success with the Queen!"

"It's Sobriety, my lord."

Sobriety dropped him a pained curtsy and sniffed, thus infuriating Constance more than ever. It was one thing to know herself as guilty as her maid, but quite another to be alone in her willingness to do penance for the sin.

"Ah, yes," the Earl murmured. "I expect she has come to tell you she wishes to marry Alfred. Surely you do not object, my love?"

"I hope you do too!" Constance retorted, stung by his casual attitude. "Alfred, if that is the name of your coachman, is married already to some woman in France. He has children by her! If you are ready to condone adultery, I am not!"

The Earl looked amused. "He lived with a woman in France for a while, as did many of his betters when all is said and done. I doubt if they were ever married according to law. The French use the same word for wife and woman, which is not so strange. There are many such matches made in this country too."

Constance thought that that was very little better. "You must find out from Alfred if that was the way of it," she flung out at Sobriety.

"You had best accept that that was how it was," the Earl advised her. "The woman is unlikely to interfere with him here in England."

"If she was married to him, he cannot take another woman to wife!" Constance decided, deeply shocked.

The Earl grinned at her. "We'd best send the two of them to Brede and let them settle the how and why of it between them."

"Certainly not!" Constance decided. "If they go to Brede I shall send a note with them for Mrs. Petters to ensure that this time the knot is securely tied. I never heard of such a thing! What about those poor children in France?"

"Hard at work for their stepfather by now! Write to Mrs. Petters if you must, love, but Alfred is a good man. Sobriety won't do badly with him, I'll vouch for that, though I fancy she will do better if no one at Brede should suspect anything of Alfred's past." He caressed her cheek, rearranging the curls that framed her face. "Leave them to work out their own salvation, sweeting. Of much greater moment will be to find you another maid to replace Sobriety. We must ask my mother what is best to be done."

Constance stirred uncomfortably. "No, my lord. I cannot forever be running to her for advice about this and that. I must learn to manage my own household. It is clear to me that I have been neglecting my duties and I must take the consequences. I shall find my own maid!"

"And Sobriety shall go to Brede with Alfred?"

"I suppose so," she agreed, aware of the quick flash of triumph in her maid's eyes. Did the girl have *no* sense of shame? And that, too, had to be her fault. She should have paid more attention to the spiritual welfare of all those in her employ, instead of leaving it first to Mrs. Goodman and then to Mrs. Petters. When her father had been alive he had insisted that everyone in the house should attend the daily prayers he read aloud, often in the Long Gallery, where the draughts had plagued Constance all through her childhood, playing with her skirts and freezing her feet until she could scarcely concentrate at all on the long dissertations and even longer prayers that her father had thought proper. After his death, she had insisted on grace before and after every meal, but she had soon been tempted to take her psalter into the Little Parlour where, as often as not, she had fallen asleep in front of the fire long before she had come to the end of the allotted portion for the day.

"But I shall write to Mrs. Petters!" she insisted. "*She* will soon make you see the error of your ways for - " She remembered belatedly her husband's presence and that it would be most improper to refer to what had already taken place between Sobriety and his coachman in the free terms that had at first occurred to her - "for the sins you have committed here at Hampton Court! It wouldn't surprise me if she made you fast for a week or more, as well as forbidding you to see Alfred until you are properly wed!"

"Yes, my lady," said Sobriety.

Constance clenched her fists. "I am ashamed that a maid of mine should fear the fires of Hell so little - "

But the Earl would not let her finish. He pulled on one of her ringlets and smiled down at her. "So little and so fierce! Leave Sobriety to Alfred and Mrs. Petters. By the time we return to Brede she will be a

sober, married woman with only good things to say of her mistress. Isn't that so, Sobriety?"

"Ay, 'tis, my lord." The girl ventured a pert smile. "Mistress Constance don't mean no harm, sir. We've done the work that has to be done side by side too often for me not know as how she feels. But there be some sins that be worth the risk of falling into the Devil's hands. It isn't at all as we were told by the minister and by Squire Aiken. I won't come to no harm with Alfred. He'll keep the Devil away - he told me so! Takes a long spoon when he sups with the Devil, he does, and I'm right glad he does, so long as he doesn't use it when he sups with me. It be natural for me to be with Alfred - and I don't see no sin in that!"

Constance opened her mouth to make a sharp retort, but the pressure of the Earl's fingers on her shoulders prevented her. Besides, she wasn't as convinced as she should have been that the girl wasn't right in her way. She blushed a little, reflecting that as God had created nature, it was hard to see why so much of it was sinful and deserving of His censure.

She nodded her dismissal of Sobriety, her mouth pursed up with the strain of worrying about her. She turned impulsively to the Earl, her eyes dark with anxiety.

"I have been dreadfully remiss! I saw exactly how it would be when I saw them together the day we drove here from Brede, and I allowed it to be put out of my mind. I cannot forgive myself - "

"How serious you look, my sweet!"

"But I wanted to be such a good wife to you - not some stupid creature who can't even manage her own household!" She blinked away her tears. "You are not to be kind to me about this, my lord! I deserve the very worst that you can say to me!"

"Do you?" His lips twitched irresistibly. "But as it was I who put the matter out of your mind, I must take my share of the blame, don't you think?" His mouth fell into a lop-sided smile. "It was I who made you forget all about that graceless pair, I presume?"

She nodded. "You know it was," she said warmly, her spirits rising dramatically as he bent his head and kissed her on the lips. Her fingers clutched the folds of his coat. "It isn't only Sobriety who should be doing penance, for it was quite as much my fault as hers. It would be no more than my deserts if you - if you were to have nothing more to do with me for some days."

"That might suit your Puritan conscience, but it says nothing to mine!" His lips slid along the line of her jaw to where her shoulder joined the neck. "Alfred would have had Sobriety sooner or later, with or without your consent, whatever advice you had given the girl. He has been a man this last decade, whereas you are still a child and before you shared my bed had little inkling of what he intended by her. Forget all about it, sweetheart, and rest content that no one at Brede will know of their commerce together before they settled down as man and wife."

Her eyes filled with laughter and she giggled against his neck. "You should know that I am not a child 1 If I am old enough to be your wife," I am old enough to shoulder the responsibilities of your household - but I will not say another word on the subject, lest you begin to agree with me that I am a sad wife to you, for I like it much better when you pay me pretty compliments and are kind to me!"

"You relieve my mind," he teased her, his fingers exploring the buttons of her bodice and undoing them one by one. "If you wish to play the penitent, my pretty one, you'll get no encouragement from me. I am well content with my wife as she is!"

She covered his hands with her own, peeking up at him with a roguish look, as innocent as it was arousing. "You will make me conceited, my lord," she warned him.

His hands spread across her breasts. "You have much to be conceited about!"

Her pulses throbbed beneath his touch and she blushed as she made another feeble attempt to restore some semblance of order to her dress. Recently, she thought, it had become harder and harder to remember that he only said such things in order to be kind, as he had always been kind to her, and not because he was in the least danger of losing his heart to anyone as inadequate as his young wife, no matter how securely he might have taken her own into his keeping. And it was the most perverse folly on her part to wish that it could ever be otherwise!

Constance sat beside her mother-in-law, feasting her eyes on the scene before her. She had never imagined that anything could be so graceful as the ladies and gentlemen before her, swaying and dipping as they danced in time to the music. She longed to join them and attempt the steps for herself, but the dictates of her conscience had forced her to refuse the Earl's offer to teach her the basic movements.

"I find it most improper!" she had declared with her nose in the air.

"I'll wager you five gold pieces that you'll be on the floor before the end of the evening!" he had retorted.

"I have no gold to give you!" She had bitten her lip, remembering she had no business to be encouraging him in such activities.

"I'll take your kisses in exchange," he had said in her ear. "Five kisses against my gold. Is it a bargain?"

She had wrung her hands together, sorely tempted to give way there and then. "But I stand to win both ways, my lord," she had felt obliged to point out. "My kisses are yours to command - "

"Ah, but these you would give me of your own accord, sweetheart!" he had exclaimed.

She had sat up very straight, looking as dignified as possible. "Then we - we have a bargain, my lord," she had whispered.

The look he had given her was with her still, but all he had said was, "Good girl! I salute your courage - as always!"

But, if she had refused to dance herself, she had taken care to fulfil her promise to her two friends by persuading her brothers-in-law to lead them out onto the floor almost as soon as the dance had begun and she had been amused to notice that both girls had made the most of their opportunities, flirting outrageously with their partners for the rest of the evening. She soon found herself longing to join in the dance with the others, however, and she eagerly memorised the steps they made - just in case she should come to lose the bargain she had just made with her husband.

The worst moment for her was when the Earl paused beside Lady Hartley, offering her his arm. She could hardly bear to watch them dancing together, and the Dowager Countess, following her tragic gaze, made a feverish effort to distract her attention by calling to her side a series of old flames to whom she wished to present her new daughter. The last of these was a merry-looking individual, as untidy as he was fashionable, with his wig constandy slipping from side to side of his head. "Does my lady Brede dance?" he asked. Constance shook her head shyly, wondering who he was. The Dowager Countess muttered a name in her ear, laughingly refused a request that she should dance with him in Constance's place, and fluttered her fan to hide her longing to take advantage of his kind offer.

"Please, Mama, do go with him," Constance begged her. "I shall be quite all right here until you get back,"

The Dowager's face lit up, but she held back for a moment longer. "Charlotte will sit with you - "

"No, please don't disturb her!" Constance countered urgently. "I am very well alone!"

"Well, it will only be for a minute or so," the Dowager agreed, "and Henrietta is only just over there if you should need her." And she went merrily on her way, her feet already tapping in time to the music.

Alone, Constance tried not to feel awkward and abandoned. Her eyes sought and found her husband, his head thrown back as he laughed at something his partner had said to him. Constance's dislike of Anne Hardey increased until it was a physical pain within her. She forced herself to look at her as though she were a stranger, meaning nothing to her, but she could still find little to admire in the other woman. She had a blowsy, unwholesome air about her that was accentuated now by a barely disguised black eye and some scratches on her neck that might well have been made by a man's hand. Perhaps it was her wit and her experience that had attracted the Earl to her in the beginning, but what had made him stay? Was it possible that she, too, went weak at the knees with love for him whenever he went near her? Constance doubted it. My lady Hartley was only in love with herself, as her smug expression declared. She was the pivot of her own existence.

"It is my lady Brede, isn't it?"

Constance turned her head and was surprised to see another lady seated on her mother-in-law's chair. Dressed from head to foot in sober black, she looked as out of place as a crow amongst a flock of birds of Paradise.

"Yes, yes it is," Constance admitted.

"I hope you will forgive my presumption in speaking to you, my dear, but when I saw you were alone I couldn't resist coming up to you. We are related, despite the silly quarrel between your mother and the rest of her family. My name is Tusser - your uncle's widow!"

Constance's eyes widened in pleasurable astonishment. "My mother's brother? I didn't know she had one!"

"Oh, yes, the Tussers were quite a large family. Your mother was held to be the most beautiful of them all, so my husband used to tell me. She was as great a success at Court as I hear you are like to be!"

"People are kind to me for my lord's sake," Constance said at once. "I doubt they would forget that the sympathies of my parents were never for the King if I weren't married to him." She looked at the other woman curiously. "Was my uncle a Parliamentary also?"

"All the Tussers were," the woman answered. "All save your mother, Margaret. But there, you will have heard all about that without my telling you all over again."

"My mother was a *Royalist*?"

"Until her marriage," the woman nodded, smiling. "I do believe that you know nothing about what happened after all! I should have thought - My dear, I do apologise for raising the subject. Of course, your father would have wished all your memories of her to be as pure as the driven snow!"

"Tell me about her," Constance commanded blundy. "I would rather know what has been said about her all these years. Nothing can be so bad that it will change my opinion of her!"

"Oh dear me, I wish now I had never come up to you! It's not my place to revive old injuries! I wish you would not question me further!"

"Who else is there I can ask?" Constance demanded.

"No, they would not tell you the truth," the woman admitted. "It isn't very bad, after all. Your mother was a little unwise, perhaps, but if one will not admit the proper restrictions on one's conduct that religion provides, it is not surprising if one is willing to step outside convention in the most brazen way! Your uncle always retained an affection for her, but there was little he could do in the face of your grandfather's decision that her name would never be spoken in the family again. Not even when she married your father would he relent!"

"But whatever did she do?"

"She became the mistress of the Earl of Brede. *The fourth* Earl. I suppose if he were alive now he would be your father- in-law, if he didn't claim a closer relationship still."

Constance's heart went cold within her. "What are you implying, Mistress Tusser ?" she asked with commendable calm.

"Oh, I don't mean anything, but one can't help remembering the gossip of the time. Margaret - your mother - was head over ears in love with the Earl. It was the talk of the day, I assure you! Her family cast her off for it. But she wouldn't even try for more discretion in her behaviour. In the end, the Earl himself was embarrassed by her and, so it was said, arranged himself for her to marry his cousin Samuel. He packed them off to Brede, some said because Margaret was with child, while he himself stood beside the King until the end. General Cromwell was quick to confirm Samuel in his possession of the estate as he was there already, but that was after you had been born and

everyone had accepted that your mother -had found her happiness with her Puritan Samuel after all."

Constance sat, frozen to her seat, her whole life crumbling about her. "I don't wish to hear any more, Mistress Tusser," she said. "I think you'd better go now."

"Ay, so I will, niece, as soon as this dance is over. But there my dear, you mustn't take on so, it was all a long time ago! I wanted you to know that I have only your best interests at heart. There are several of us who have chosen not to conform to the established Church in England and we would be very happy to have you amongst us. Shall we see you tomorrow? As your aunt, I shall make you known to all the others and we can praise God in our own way. It is what your parents would have liked you to do, I am sure of that, my lady."

Constance shuddered with distaste at the thought. "Where do you meet?" she asked.

"In the heart of London, where else? I shall meet you down by the river at ten o'clock in the forenoon, and we'll go together in my own barge. It will be an immense pleasure to me to know that we are friends at last. Your grandfather had no right to deprive you of your family, and so I think also! We shall deal famously together, as I knew the first moment I set eyes upon you! So like your mother, but so much more *restrained*, as is becoming in a well-brought-up girl!"

"Thank you, ma'am," Constance murmured.

"And you will be there in the morning?"

Constance nodded her head, making a great effort to hold back the tears that threatened to undo her carefully maintained dignity.

"That's right, my love. It would never do to forget you were brought up a Puritan and to worship God accordingly!" And with that she was

gone, clutching her black skirts to her as she vanished amongst the other spectators who were still watching the dancing.

The Dowager Countess returned to her self-imposed duty of chaperoning her young daughter-in-law with an anxious frown on her face.

"Who was that extraordinary woman talking to you?" she asked at once.

Constance made a helpless movement, willing herself into being an impassive statue without any feelings at all.

"She claimed an acquaintance with my mother," she replied.

"And you believed her?" The Dowager sounded decidedly put out. "My dear, you should never believe that type of person. They live to make trouble and are best ignored for that very reason!" A glance at her daughter-in-law revealed how close to tears the girl was and she pressed her fan into her hand so that she could make a better job of disguising her misery from the world. "If it's because Henry chose to dance with that - *creature*, you must put it out of your mind, child. He told me himself he had no further interest in her."

Constance shook her head. "It's not that, ma'am. I cannot expect my lord to be permanently at my side - " She sniffed, waving the fan vigorously in front of her face. "That lady was my aunt, Mistress Tusser," she explained in broken tones. "My mother's sister-in-law. She was telling me about my mother. I had no idea you had so much cause to dislike her."

"On the contrary, I have only the most loving memories of your mother," the Dowager contradicted her flatly. "Though I can't say the same for most of her family! I must admit I don't remember any brother, but her father, your grandfather, was a bigoted, stupid old man!"

Constance wondered bleakly if she would ever be as generous, as *noble* about Lady Hartley as her mother-in-law was being about her mother.

"I don't know how you can be so kind to me when she wronged you -"

"Margaret Tusser? The only person she wronged was herself. Her family made no effort to find out the truth of the matter, preferring to believe idle gossip before their own daughter. I went to her father myself on her behalf, but he refused to see me, saying he was too ashamed to do so! I may say I disliked him quite as much as I disliked Samuel! Your father was employed as my husband's steward in those days, just as Henry makes use of Frederick's services today -"

"Is that why he married my mother to him?"

"No. He was against the match from the first. Oh, we all knew that Margaret had lost her heart to Brede - when you are married to a man like *my* lord, you soon learn to recognise the signs, and to guard against them as best you may - but Richard was quite untouched by her. He was sorry for her, but no more than that. He was aghast when she announced she was to marry your father. He was afraid it was because Samuel bore some superficial resemblance to himself. But she would do it, and she went to Brede to live with her husband there. We stayed away for her sake as much as for the King's in those first years. I never saw Margaret again, and Richard, to my own knowledge, saw her but once more, but we both of us always had the kindest memories of her. You may believe me about that, child, because there were many other ladies for whom I never have a kind remembrance ever!"

Constance managed a feeble smile. "Was I - was I born soon after my mother went to Brede?" she enquired with a studied indifference that

would not have deceived anyone with only half the nous of her mother-in-law.

"Not for close on eighteen months. We were told immediately, because Brede Place was still ours in those days, but I'm ashamed to say that the events of the succeeding years put your existence out of my mind until Henry found you again. You have no cause to be ashamed of your mother, or of your birth. Really, Constance, you must think me the most unnatural creature alive if you think I would have stood by and allowed Henry to marry you if there were any truth in that female's evil innuendoes!"

Constance was saved from having to make any reply by finding her husband standing before her, a faint smile on his lips. "Can you resist putting my lady Hartley in the shade?" He wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye with a gentle finger. He raised his eyebrows in open mockery. "Dear heart,

what else can I do if my own wife will not dance with me?"

"Yes, go on, Constance, before I box your ears for you!" her mother-in-law commanded her. "Really, I had forgotten how *stupid* young people can be! It makes me quite glad to have left my youth behind me!"

Constance dropped a more apologetic curtsey. "I'm sorry, ma'am," she said.

"So I should hope!" the Dowager retorted and turned her face away.

Dancing with her husband was a memorable experience. Constance took her place in the line, her hand joined with his, curtseying to him and moving this way and that in time to the music, as she had observed her friends doing such a short time before, only to feel his arm about her waist as he lifted her bodily and swung her round to his other side.

His eyes were brilliant as he looked down at her. "Five kisses, madam, you owe me, and I'll have them from you before you sleep tonight!"

Her breath caught in a little laugh, her lashes veiling her chestnut eyes from his glance. "The pleasure will be mine!" she whispered back, and moved quickly away, to turn and curtsy to him once again.

CHAPTER TEN

"DID you have a pleasant time, my lady?"

Constance stared at the neat figure who was standing in the shadows of her bed-chamber, her hands neatly folded in front of her.

"Where's Sobriety?" she asked at once.

"You sent her to the country, my lady. Perhaps your ladyship has forgotten?"

Constance sat down on the nearest chair, easing her aching feet surreptitiously under her skirts. "But she can't have gone already," she objected. "I meant to write to Mrs. Petters and send the letter with her." She frowned at the silent woman, a little dismayed to discover that for some reason she couldn't put her finger on she didn't care for her. "Besides, who are you?"

"Your aunt send me to attend you, my lady. If your ladyship pleases, my name is Carter."

"I see," Constance murmured. She supposed that Aunt Simpson had sent the girl to her, which made it all the more awkward because she had no intention of retaining her in her service. She wanted to choose her own personal maid, for the last thing she wanted was to have someone whom she disliked constantly fingering her things and her person. "Do you work for my aunt?"

"I have done so, my lady?"

"But you don't work for her now?"

"Not at the moment, my lady. That's why she sent me to you."

Constance sighed. "I appreciate the trouble she went to on my behalf," she said slowly, "however, I prefer that all my servants should come from my husband's estate. I'm sure you'll understand that I can only employ you in a temporary capacity."

"Of course, my lady."

The girl was efficient and quick, Constance had to admit that, but there was none of the laughter that she had shared with Sobriety. Carter stripped her to her shift with a few skilful movements, throwing a voluminous nightdress over her head. "Shall I draw the curtains round the bed, my lady?"

Constance nodded. She did not like to wear her shift at night in the summer, a decision her husband had warmly endorsed, but neither did she like to make an issue of it with this thin-faced young woman who reminded her strongly of someone else she had once known, but whom she couldn't quite remember.

She climbed the three steps up into the bed and sat in the middle of the embroidered silk coverlet, wrestling with the ties of her shift with nervous fingers, which was ridiculous. What did it matter if her maid did catch her at it?

"My lady, have I your permission to accompany you to the prayer meeting on the morrow?" Carter's voice came through the curtains. "It was Sobriety who told me you might be going - being a Puritan like myself."

Constance's warning instincts flared into life. "Sobriety told you?"

"Yes, my lady. She had heard that some people of our persuasion went to London regularly for the meeting and she was sure you would be going yourself. It is so hard to pray as one ought in the Palace!"

Constance thought of the ornate Chapel and mentally agreed with her. The services there were more like magnificent performances to her way of thinking. She liked them very well, but they outraged the simple notions she had been brought up to observe.

"We have to leave very early," she said aloud. "I'm not sure I shall be ready in time. The dance went on so long tonight, and my lord is not yet come to bed. Perhaps another time, Carter?"

"The Lord doesn't wait on our convenience, my lady," the girl said primly. "I shall wake you in good time, have no fear."

"But my lord - "

"His lordship must take second place to your duty to your Maker, my lady," Carter retorted piously. "Forgive me for speaking plainly, but I think you must agree with me that it is so?"

Constance tugged angrily at a recalcitrant string and it came away with a ripping sound that she was sure would bring Carter's head poking round the curtains. When it did not, she heaved a sigh of relief, deciding to overlook the maid's impertinence in addressing her more like an equal than her temporary mistress. That was her conscience speaking, Constance told herself wryly. It judged Carter to be in the right and her own excuses to be lame indeed, and so they were, but so blunted had her sense of duty become these last few days that she was appalled to discover that a few moments in Lord Brede's company seemed an excellent reason for neglecting everything else that ought to concern her. Was it so wrong to accompany him to Church and not to brave the river - a mode of travel which was quite new to her - in order to listen to a lengthy sermon from someone whom she didn't even know? Yes, it was, her conscience replied unequivocally. She would have to go, no matter how she hated it, and, worse still, she would have to keep her intentions from her lord lest he

should prevent her, as he was bound to do, being a firm supporter of my lord Clarendon and the obnoxious Clarendon Code.

But that Carter should be perfectly right did nothing to endear the maid to her. She wriggled out of her shift at last and got thankfully into bed to find that, despite its being summer, Carter had gone to the trouble of warming it for her, a kindness that should have made her like her better, but somehow did not.

"Very well, you may come with us," she said, "if Mistress Tusser says you may. She is the only person I know in the party."

For an instant Constance wondered if the girl was laughing, but she sounded completely grave when she said, "You know my lady Hartley, madam. I am grateful to your ladyship for your condescension. I shall waken you in good time in the morning."

Constance eased her tired limbs into the warm patch in the bed and hoped that Lord Brede would not be long in coming to bed. She relived the moments of their dance together and wished that it could have gone on for ever. How strong he was, to be able to lift her so easily! Next time, she would dance with him sooner and then he might stay away from Lady Hartley and she would not be bothered with persons like her aunt, Mistress Tusser, who had been at the bottom of her mother-in-law's displeasure with her, which had hurt her very much, even though the Dowager Countess had relented when she had gone to her to say goodnight and had kissed her as warmly as ever.

It had been a strange evening, she thought, just before falling asleep, and she had yet to pay her debt to Henry. She smiled to herself, glad that she had not wagered anything more valuable, for she might not have been quite so willing to lose to him, and that would have been a pity, for she was looking forward to the payment of her debt. Nor had she any idea that dancing" could be such excellent and exciting

entertainment, but then so was everything else she did in the company of my lord Brede. He had turned her life upside down, from a grey existence into glorious adventure, and so was it so surprising that he should have won her everlasting gratitude as well as her love? If only he would come -

But when he did come she was fast asleep. He bent and kissed her tenderly on the cheek, moving her over onto her own side of the bed and slipping under the coverlets beside her. She turned into his arms with a confidence she never would have shown had she been awake, and he grinned to himself in the darkness. One day, he vowed, she would come to him as openly in the flail light of day, losing her shy caution of him. It was a pleasant prospect and one that he dwelt on increasingly, enjoying meanwhile his self-imposed task of coaxing her daily to trust him a little more. It had been a notable step forward that evening when she had not only danced with him, but had given as pretty a display of coquetry as he ever hoped to see, without a single thought that he might retaliate with the harshness she had once expected from him. A few more days and the last barrier would be overcome and his possession of her would be complete. It was a sweet thought, and he was still smiling as he held her more closely to him and, in his own turn, drifted off to sleep.

Constance's reluctance to go to London had not grown less during the night. She slipped out of bed, a tight knot of despair clutching at her stomach, and searched in vain for a clean shift she could wear in place of the one she had ruined the night before. In the end she could wait no longer and tied the torn string as best she could, irritated by the added discomfort it caused her.

Carter had been true to her word and was waiting in the ante-chamber to help her into the plainest dress she had in her wardrobe and to dress her hair.

"Have you no coif to hide your hair, my lady?" the girl asked her. "It would be more seemly at a Puritan prayer meeting."

"The Dowager Lady Brede burned the only two I had," Constance confided with a light laugh. "She said it was more of a sin to hide my hair and I must admit it does look well when it is dressed in the way she taught me."

"She and her kind will lead you into all manner of vanities, if you allow her to," Carter reproved her. "It would sadden your friends to see the changes that had already been wrought in you, my lady."

"I had no friends before I married my husband."

"No friends? But, my lady, your father must have had a vast acquaintance! Good folks, Puritans like yourself, people who would wish you to live according to his ideals and would help you to do so!"

Constance felt as though she were being torn in two. "I prefer the company of my husband's family," she insisted, thinking of Sir Thomas Lucas.

"Their ways are offensive to God!" Carter burst out with surprising passion. "They would turn our land into another Sodom and Gomorrah! You should have nothing to do with them!"

"That is hardly for you to say!" Constance said quiedy. "Be thankful that we may may still practise our faith - though for how much longer with people like my lord Clarendon advising the King none can say!" She ought to be grateful for that herself, she thought, and wondered why she wasn't. The truth was that she didn't like deceiving Lord Brede by slipping away to a prayer meeting without his knowledge or consent. Her flesh was weak indeed, she chided herself to stiffen her flagging resolve, if she wanted his approval more than to do right.

Carter took no joy in dressing her hair, but she made an efficient job of it, bringing the tears to Constance's eyes as she pulled on the knots as if she relished the pain she was inflicting.

"If your father were alive, he would make you a Puritan again!" she spat out in a voice full of righteous wrath. "He would have seen you dead, sooner than have you the Countess of Brede. Have you no shame?"

Constance turned to look at her, amazed that any maid should make such an attack on her. "What do you know about my father?" she demanded.

"Only good."

"You'd best keep your opinions to yourself if you want to serve me - even temporarily." Constance was suddenly angrier than she had ever been in her life. Her eyes met Carter's and it was the maid who looked away, a faint flush staining her thin, pale cheeks. "In fact, after today I don't wish to see you again!" Constance added for good measure. "Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, my lady." A smile played over the girl's lips. "It was only today that I wished to serve your ladyship. I knew you would take me to the prayer meeting, you see. You could hardly refuse me that, could you?"

No, Constance thought wearily, but she would have liked to have done. She disliked the whole idea of a semi-secret meeting, as though they were no better than conspirators, and if she had had the courage she would have changed her mind about going. As it was, she could only hope that Lord Brede would not be too angry with her. Hadn't he called himself the keeper of her conscience? And he would not like her to travel the countryside to take part in the rites that the King had

clearly condemned. But she had to go. She was a Puritan by birth and upbringing and she could not turn her back on that.

"Let us go," she said. "My aunt will be waiting."

Although it was summer, it was chilly outside. A light drizzle was falling and, judging by the depths of the clouds, would go on falling for the greater part of the day. Constance held her skirts up as high as she could but, even so, they were drenched by the time she reached the river and flapped uncomfortably about her ankles as she walked up and down awaiting her aunt.

Mistress Tusser had told her they would travel down the river by barge, but when she finally arrived she was seated in nothing better than a leaky boat that, had one man to pull on the oars and another whose task it was to empty the water back into the Thames as fast as it rushed in through the shrunk boards.

"Come aboard, my love," Mistress Tusser cooed across the water to her. "Sit opposite me, where you will be more comfortable. Your maid may sit beside me."

Constance sat down as quickly as she could, not liking the rocking sensation of the boat beneath her feet. Carter got in behind her and seated herself beside the black-clad, smiling woman.

"Do we go?" the boatman asked.

"Nay, we wait for another," Carter answered sharply, for all the world as if the party were of her own organising. "You promised my lady Hartley, ma'am," she added to Mistress Tusser and the two women exchanged a strange smile, as though they were intimate to one another's thoughts in a way that surely had to be impossible. Funnily enough, they looked alike too, but it was probably no more than that they were both in unrelieved black, and both had the same restrained

expression that declared their complete confidence that God's favour rested on them, and them alone.

My lady Hartley was rather less sanguine about the appearance of the boat than any of the other ladies had been.

"We will never reach London alive!" she exclaimed. "Could you not have found anything better?"

"Hush, my lady," Carter remonstrated with her. "We have left you the seat beside my lady Brede. You have a great deal in common, I believe."

"A dislike of leaky boats for one thing!" Constance put in, holding up a hand to help her husband's mistress into the boat.

"Indeed!" Lady Hartley set a reluctant foot over the gunwale and subsided onto the cushioned seat beside Constance. "I wish I'd stayed in my bed!"

Constance smiled at her with real sympathy. "I was thinking exactly that myself," she agreed.

Close to, her rival looked older and more raddled than she had on the dance floor last night. She still had yesterday's paint on her cheeks and mouth and it had caked hard in the little lines round her lips and eyes, giving her an unwashed look and accentuating in some peculiar way the fact that her head was several times too large for her body, like one of the Court dwarfs. Her body smelt also in the most unpleasant way, not as everybody did of perspiration, but of stale ale and another odour that was suspiciously like to that of mice. Her black eye and the scratches on her neck and lower face rounded off this distasteful picture. Whatever could Brede see in her? Constance wondered.

"I thought you might cry off," Lady Hartley addressed her, determined to be pleasant. "My lord Brede is unlikely to tolerate your joining our circle, child."

Constance bit her lip. "Does your husband know you're here?"

"La, no! It is years since he shared my bed, or anything else. We agreed to ignore one another's peculiarities long since." Her eyes filled with malicious amusement. "I share more pleasures with you than I ever did with him!"

Constance flushed and turned away, watching the rain falling on the dismal waters of the Thames. "My lord Brede has a kind heart," she murmured.

Lady Hartley bridled. "He may be no more than kind to you as you are his wife, but I have known a warmer emotion from him in the past."

"In the past I am sure you have!" Constance smiled.

Lady Hartley gave her a furious glance. "Don't be too proud, my lady, or you will fall the further! I may have shared my lover with you for a week or so, but he will be mine again when you are a long time gone!"

Constance's heart missed a beat. "I'm not going anywhere!"

Carter leaned forward, putting an urgent hand on Lady Hartley's knee. "You promised not to say a word until we had arrived. This boat is no place to quarrel! I should have seen to it myself had I the sense I was born with, for what use either you or my mother has been to this enterprise is beyond me!"

Constance stared at all three ladies. There was no mistaking the family likeness between Mistress Tusser and Carter! She had been a

fool not to see it at once! She licked dry lips, knowing whom they had both reminded her of the night before. With a lick of fear running through her veins, she said his name out loud. "Sir Thomas Lucas."

Carter nodded her head. "Your father's friend, my dear. He has only your best interests at heart, you may be sure of that!"

"Then Mistress Tusser is not my mother's sister-in-law?"

The lady in black laughed until her face took on a blue tinge and she was gasping for breath. "I took you in nicely, didn't I? I never thought you'd swallow such a simple tale, but Lettice - my daughter, you know - said you were the kind to be hankering after your mother's family. Lettice is usually right. Didn't you find that, my dear, when you knew her as Carter?"

"Why Carter?" Constance asked, not wanting to know.

"My husband's name was Carter. Lettice doesn't believe in untruths!"

Constance's jaw sagged. "Her conscience seems to trouble her hardly at all in other ways," she said drily.

"You're a wicked girl if you think that! Lettice is a good woman, I'll have you know! Not many of us would have gone to so much trouble to save a stranger from the fires of hell. You should be down on your knees, thanking her, madam, for going to such lengths on your behalf!"

"I'd thank her more heartily if she were to restore me to my husband!" Constance shot back at her.

"But that is what I was trying to tell you," my lady Hartley said sweetly. "Brede is not for you. The marriage would never have received your father's consent, as you know full well. He had quite another groom in mind for you."

"Sir Thomas Lucas? But he changed his mind! I told Sir Thomas as much myself!"

"If anyone is a stranger to the truth, I think it must be you," Mistress "Tusser" put in. "That was an invention of your own, was it not? Mrs. Goodman would never have supported you in that fiction had she not been senile, and made the more so by your father's death!"

"I won't listen to you!" Constance said with as much dignity as she could manage. "You did me no service last night when you told me those stories about my mother and you will certainly pay for what you are doing now. My lord Brede will not thank you for depriving him of his wife!"

"You flatter yourself," Lettice Carter retorted. "There was nothing else to do with you and so he married you, but if you think he wants to be tied to a chit from the same family as your mother you must be wanting in your wits! He will be glad to find you gone at so little cost to himself. My lady Hartley will soon console him as she has every right to do, being the true love of his life."

"Does marriage count for so little in Puritan circles nowadays ?" Constance wondered aloud.

"In your particular circle it does! Your mother saw to that! Whoring after Brede's father like a bitch in heat! What price did she put on her vows to Samuel Aiken?"

"She was true to him always! The Dowager Lady Brede would know if it were otherwise, and she herself told me so!"

"Your father could have told you a different story. She may have been Samuel's wife in name, but her heart and loyalty were always Brede's! She would cry out for him in her sleep until Samuel could bear it no longer and left her chamber for one of his own. Her body was his, but her thoughts were constantly with her lover, until poor Samuel's love

for her withered and died and was replaced by a hatred for them both that lasted until his own death! But you will be the instrument of his revenge, my lady Brede. Your father had to know that your mother committed adultery in her thoughts with the fourth Earl every waking moment of her existence. The fifth Earl will know his wife to be in the care of another man and his pride will forbid him to do a thing about it. Will he take Sir Thomas Lucas' housekeeper back to his bosom as his wife and the mother of his children? Not even you, my dear, can have the vanity to think that!"

Constance leaned forward in her agitation, trying to shut out Lettice Carter's vicious words. "What is it to you?" she asked the older women.

"Your father should have married me! It was all arranged that it should be so, but he preferred a lady from the Court to his neighbour's niece. No doubt, he thought Margaret Tusser would further his career and bring him a fortune for her dowry. But she did neither!"

"He could have married you after my mother died," Constance pointed out. "You can't blame her for that."

"I was married to Carter by that time - the younger son of a younger son. There was no going to Court for me, or any of the treats that have been yours for the last few days! But they won't be yours again, *my lady Brede!* It will be a pleasure to watch you serving your peers - as your father always intended you to do! Not much love lost between the two of you, was there? You are far too like your mother for that!"

Constance stood up and the boat rocked dangerously, making Lady Hartiey scream out loud.

"Sit down, you fool! Will you have us all in the water?"

"Willingly!"

Lettice Carter pushed her back into her seat with rough hands. "You won't escape us, my lady, and the sooner you learn to do as you're told, the better 'twill be for you." Her pale eyes stared deep into the depths of Constance's chestnut ones with a cold, mocking triumph that made the young Countess shiver. "No one can help you now! My lord Brede won't even want'to!"

Constance closed her eyes, shutting out the hatred of the other woman. Was it true that Brede would abandon her to her fate? Would he have any choice? He was expected to accompany the King to Greenwich in a few days' time for the visit of the Queen Mother. Would he defy the royal displeasure just because the poor relation he had married such a short time before was missing? His kindness to her had been unfailing, ever since she had first known him, but could even his kindness be expected to stretch as far as that?

No, she would have to escape on her own. If she could manage to get away from this terrible trio, she could make her way to Brede and send a message to the Earl from there. He could come for her then, or not, as he chose.

When she opened her eyes, Lady Hartley was leaning over her. "You don't like the truth when you hear it, do you?" Her laughter held a note of lunacy that made Constance's blood run cold.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, feeling beaten in mind and body.

"To my uncle," Lettice Carter told her.

"Your uncle?"

"Sir Thomas Lucas. Whom else did you expect? Sir Thomas has always wanted to have you in his house."

Ever since childhood Constance had been afraid of Sir Thomas, but she had never known anything like the fear that had her in its grip at that moment. Death itself would be preferable to having to live in the same house with such a man! She would not submit to such a fate. She would not!

She pitched her body forward with her whole strength, loosening the hold Lettice Carter and Lady Hartley had on her wrists, and plunged over the edge of the boat into the waters of the Thames. She had no idea of how to swim, but her skirts billowed up around her, keeping her afloat for the first, devastating moments when the cold water struck her flesh and paralysed her brain.

Male hands, calloused by constant work on the river, grasped her beneath her arms and hauled her back into the boat. "There, now, my lady, you don't want to drown yourself, do you?"

"Yes, yes, I do! Anything rather than Sir Thomas - "

"It be a mortal sin - "

" - *He* will know how to punish you!"

Constance had never had any doubt about that. She remembered vividly the pinched, white face of his second wife, and the Sundays she had stayed at home sooner than show her broken body to the world. She remembered, too, Lady Hartley's screams in the Gallery at Hampton Court and the black eye that was still plainly visible, as well as the finger-nail scratches on her neck and face.

"Why was Sir Thomas speaking with you at the Palace?" she gasped out. "Do you know him too?"

Lady Hartley looked amused. She moved her feet daintily away from Constance's sodden skirts. "He brings me news from Holland every now and then. This time, he told me of his plans for you."

Constance sat up, feeling sick from the water she had swallowed. "And what is the news from Holland?"

"They grow impatient, as some of us do in England, of the hold France has over the King. They dislike the fact that wherever they go in the world as honest traders, there are the English too, stealing the best bargains and running down their allies. There will be war between us soon - and that will put an end to our pretty King's pretensions!"

Constance began to wring out her dress, earning a sharp rebuke from the man whose job it was to bail out the boat as they went along. Her teeth had begun to chatter and she knew the bitter taste of hatred for the first time in her life.

"I don't know how you can meet a gentleman like that, especially if your heart is already given to Brede!"

Lady Hartley laughed. "You have never appreciated Sir Thomas' attentions, have you? What a pity! You'll find he has a spice your husband lacks, my dear. I'd not dare to cuckold *him*, I assure you, whereas Brede is too dull to notice what I do."

"Perhaps he doesn't care."

"I hardly think it is that," Lady Hartley said drily. "Let us say that he is too well bred to expect constancy from anyone! He learned that lesson at his father's knee!"

Yet he had said he thought he had found it in her, Constance remembered, and he had seemed proud of her for that - and grateful, too, as she was for the happiness he had given her. The memory of that happiness rendered her silent until the boat put in for the bank and she saw that a coach was waiting for them. She covered her face with her hands, silently praying for the strength she would need to

stand against Sir Thomas Lucas. How very much she hated him, and these beastly relations of his as well!

When they handed her ashore, a small, bedraggled figure in her soaking dress, he came out of the carriage and stood there, looking at her, his eyes alight with his evil triumph.

"My lord Brede would think himself well rid of you if he could see you now!" he commented. "A drab like you can hope for nothing from him!"

Constance stood up very straight, throwing back her head in a proud gesture that was borrowed from her mother-in-law.

"If you think that, you have overreached yourself indeed, Sir Thomas. My lord will come for me, I am sure of that!"

"Oh? And what makes you so sure?" he roared at her..

"He knows I am afraid of you," Constance said simply, "and knowing that, he will not allow me to remain in your company for long."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE weather was as dreary as her mood. Sir Thomas Lucas' coach floundered along the muddy roads with none of the comfort that the Earl of Brede expected from the least of his carriages. Constance had not appreciated how cosseted she had been on the journey from Brede to Hampton Court until she had been bumped up and down for miles in something that would have been better named a farm cart than a gende- man's conveyance.

Before she had set foot inside the coach she had made a last attempt to reach Lady Hartley's stony heart. "You will tell Brede where I am?" she had pleaded with her.

"I will tell him you went of your own free will!" Anne Hartley had retorted.

Constance had not doubted her for a moment. To think that she had been gulled into thinking they were going to a prayer meeting! She doubted if one of them ever gave a thought to the true state of his or her soul, or they would be more careful in their behaviour! A prayer meeting forsooth! They would be more at home in a witches' coven!

She sat further back in her corner, trying to control the fit of shivering that had seized her. Her dress was like a cold compress about her and, as the coach was the draughtiest she had ever come across, she thought she would be lucky to escape pneumonia after such a journey.

"Feelirfg less sure of yourself, my lady?" Sir Thomas' hated voice broke the silence between them. "Content yourself with the knowledge that you are doing your father's will - at last. He always meant for us to be together in the end."

"My father is dead," Constance answered in commendably steady tones. "My husband is my legal guardian now."

"A Royalist? A Cavalier? Any rights he ever had were long ago abdicated to me in the eyes of God. I was your father's friend!"

"My father had no friends."

"Not many, it is true, but I always counted myself to be one. I understood him better than any other man. It was to me he confided the disloyalty of his wife, your mother. When he saw you shared her flaming hair and the Tusser arrogance, I was the one he told that he couldn't bear to look at you and know you were his daughter! The parents' sins are inherited by the children and he was always determined that you should pay for your mother's lust by marrying a man who would beat any similar tendency out of you. I waited many years for you to grow old enough to be my wife, but you thought to fool us both, didn't you, my lady, with your marriage to Lord Brede? Did you think I was too old to know how to control a wench as stubborn as yourself? True, I am older than his lordship by some twenty years, but that has allowed me to gain in experience of your sex, my dear. To have seen two wives into the grave, and both of them many years younger than myself, proves how strong I am. You will find me amply man enough for you!"

Constance pretended not to have heard him. She wondered that any man would speak thus in the presence of his sister and niece, but then Sir Thomas was a law unto himself. She was more than half convinced he was touched in the head.

"Still as arrogant as ever?" he went on. "No matter, I know well how to bring a spirit such as yours down into the dust!"

Constance shivered again, not entirely with cold, remembering his treatment of his second wife.

"My lord Brede will never allow you to touch me!"

"He is not here to prevent me, my dear."

Constance sat back, pretending to sleep. She tried to convince herself that Lord Brede would find some way to save her, but she could not for the life of her see how he was going to bring her capture to a happy conclusion. Because of his talent for speaking languages he would be needed at Court more than ever in the next few days. Queen Henrietta Maria, the King's mother, spoke no word of Spanish or Portuguese, and Queen Catherine, her daughter-in-law, spoke no English or French, thus unless they had someone to interpret between them they would not understand even the most commonplace remarks of the other. And the interpreter must be someone whom the King could trust to take his part in the dispute between himself and the poor lady who was his queen. He well knew his mother's reasons for coming to visit him at this particular time and that neither she nor Catherine would be able to understand one word of the other's remarks. It seemed that only the Duke of York was to be entrusted with the task, apart from the King himself, unless anyone cared to brave his displeasure - and not many would do that. Indeed, Constance thought soberly, amongst all the people she had met at Court the Earl of Brede was the only one who possessed that kind of courage. It was well known the King had a violent temper.

Constance had not precisely disliked the King on the rare occasions when she had seen him, though she had privately considered that he couldn't hold a candle to her own lord. But his refusal to allow even the affairs of state to be put before his passion for my lady Castlemaine was something for which she did condemn him, mostly because she knew what anxiety it caused to those who held his cause dear to their hearts. She had heard him herself decry the Queen in public and when chided for fanning the flames of disrespect in which so many of his Court held her he had claimed to be only following the example of his revered grandfather, Henry IV of France, who must surely have managed things very much better than his reprehensible grandson.

Perhaps she really did fall asleep for a while for, the next thing she knew, the carriage had stuck fast in the mud and the coachman was inviting them all to step down into the road to lighten the load for the horses. Standing ankle-deep in the mud, Constance laughed aloud to see the wheels buried up to the axles.

"The weather is like to prove to be my ally rather than yours!" she jeered when Sir Thomas swore loudly as the mud trickled over the tops of his boots.

Sir Thomas muttered something about ham-fisted coachmen and went to hold the horses' heads, his face flushed scarlet with frustrated rage.

"My lord's coachman would not allow a little mud to prevent him from getting through!" she called after him. "At this rate Alfred will soon overtake us!"

Unless he was already at Brede, and Sobriety with him, she added disconsolately to herself. But perhaps Lettice Carter had lied about that as she had lied about so much else. Constance shuddered again and beat her arms against her sides to warm herself against the wind.

"Thomas! Are we to be left here to freeze to death?" Sir Thomas' sister demanded in a piercing tone. "My lady Brede should have a change of dress at least! Call this a summer day! 'Tis more like to winter with this constant rain and the chilly feel to the air!"

"I can't help the weather, sister," Sir Thomas answered her. "If you wish us to move on, put your shoulder to the coach and push!"

"Me?" She could not have sounded more astonished had she been asked to fly to the moon. "I have never heard of such a thing!"

"Come on, Mother, do!" her daughter bade her. "And make that slut do her share too! She may be right about Brede's coachman and then where will we be?"

Lettice Carter was a strong woman and she heaved at the rear of the coach with all her might, while her mother and Constance stood and watched her.

"Mind that you do not break the leather," Constance advised her kindly. "It looks decidedly thin as it is, and I should hate to see the coach fall apart, leaving us stranded!"

Lettice let go her hold and the carriage dropped backwards, sending a spray of muddy water up into her face.

"Poor thing!" said Constance, beginning to enjoy herself. "You really should leave such exertions to the men. You will surely do yourself an injury if you go on like that."

"Devil take you - " Lettice began.

"He seems to have his hands rather full at the moment to bother with anyone as insignificant as myself," Constance murmured, her eyes dancing at the sight of Lettice's furious, muddy face.

Lettice lost her temper completely and came round from the back of the coach, tears of rage leaving a trail down her muddy cheeks.

"Mother! If you can't do anything else, at least you could make her keep a civil tongue in her head!" she wailed. "Everything is always left for me to do! It isn't fair!"

"Quite right," Constance approved.

"Mother! Make her be quiet!"

Her mother looked helplessly about her. "I should warn you, my lady, that you will regret antagonising my little girl. Her temper is as uncertain as her uncle's."

"And you, ma'am? How is your disposition? What a family you make, to be sure! I wonder that you remain friends with one another. I cannot believe that there can be much genuine affection between you, but perhaps I am wrong?"

The woman turned a mottled red. "It is true I set out to deceive you last night, but I am persuaded that my brother knows what is best for you. I was never more shocked in my life than to see what went on at Court! Every feeling was outraged to see a decent Puritan girl like yourself being led in the line like that by any man! But that it should be your father's avowed enemy, the Earl of Brede, who should do so made me feel more than justified for any small deceit on my part! My brother only wishes to save you from yourself! You should be grateful to him for his interest in you! Who will rescue those other trollops of the Court?"

"You must forgive me, ma'am, if I fail to see your brother as a knight in shining armour, or myself cast in the role of maiden in distress. I am no virgin, but a married woman, and I owe all my duty to the Earl my husband. If your brother must go about rescuing damsels in distress, I am sure there must be many who would be glad to oblige him - as my lady Hartley, for example."

"My lady Hartley?" An uncertain note entered the older woman's voice. "What are you implying?"

Constance raised an eyebrow, looking consciously superior. "Don't you know? Well, far be it from me to soil my lips with the story of their relationship. Why don't you ask him to tell you about it?" She suppressed a giggle at the thought of Lord Brede's reaction if he could have heard her taking such a matronly line - but perhaps it was as well

he couldn't. She could not expect him to relish the knowledge that his mistress had played him false.

"You speak thus because you are jealous of her!" Lettice accused her. "My uncle is known for his virtuous life!"

"Is he?" Constance countered with an ironic smile.

Both ladies looked at her in some dismay, their confidence undermined by her quiet certainty.

"It makes no difference!" Lettice said at last. "We have still to get out of this confounded rut!"

"Lettice! Must you sound like a coachman yourself?" her mother reproved her, sniffing.

"Why not? My father was little better than a coachman, thanks to you having been deprived of your rightful husband!"

Her mother looked pained. "My lady Hartley has often graced our prayer meetings," she babbled to herself. "Her politics are beyond reproach! It was a hard day for her when she was forced into marriage with a Royalist who despises her own land. Like the King, he was in France too long to be a true Englishman!"

"Lady Hartley speaks English so well one is apt to forget she is a foreigner," Constance agreed. "She is Dutch, isn't she?"

"I cannot believe any evil of her!" Sir Thomas' sister concluded, her face contorted with the strain of her inward consternation. "I could wish we'd never embarked on this adventure. It is all the fault of the Stuart Monster, twisting the truth to his own ends so that simple folk no longer know what to believe and are made strangers in their own land. Lady Hartley could not feel more a foreigner than I did last night! Such ostentation! Such extravagance! And the next moment

we are told there is not enough money to sustain our gracious Sovereign in the way that is proper for an English monarch! A little simplicity would be a good example to us all, with everything costing more and more every day!"

Constance nodded wisely. "I am surprised your brother maintains his own coach when I think of the expense it must be to him. My father never would have one, saying it would cost him all of three hundred pounds a year to do so!"

"Three hundred pounds!" Lettice gasped. "And all to be jolted round the countryside in acute discomfort! I would sooner ride my own mount than submit to such a fate, however rich I might be!"

"We may be riding yet," her mother said with a disparaging glance at the despised, shabby coach. Her eyes swivelled round to her daughter's face. "You're not still feeling ill in your stomach with the travelling, are you?"

Lettice denied that she was. "We are not dressed for travelling except by coach," she objected. "It is ridiculous that we can't get the coach to move!"

She hurried away to consult with her uncle and his coachman, reflecting audibly that they were now all quite as wet as was Constance, and that she for one was in no mood to linger on the side of the road any longer.

Faced with his two mutinous relations, Sir Thomas began to bluster the louder. Constance put in an idle word every now and then, fanning the flames of their quarrel until all three of them were beside themselves with rage. She found their spite towards each other rather shocking, but her father had been cast in the same mould, after all, and she was quite used to hearing herself abused in terms which Mrs. Goodman had always deplored. Dear Mrs. Goodman! How often had

she intervened on her charge's behalf, and how Constance wished she were there to do her the same service now! Yet Mrs. Goodman had been a Puritan too, and more devout than any of this monstrous band. It seemed to Constance that each side of the religious divide had produced its failures and had had its notable successes, and if that were so she would be more than content to follow her husband's lead in the future and leave all other prayer meetings for others to attend.

Sir Thomas' loud-mouthed imprecations had a sudden, unexpected success and the carriage moved forward several feet and came to a halt on firmer land.

"Get the wench inside and we'll be on our way!" he shouted to the woeful band of women still standing on the bank.

Their good humour only partially restored, the three female members of the party climbed back into the coach, two of them loudly praying that there would be no further delays or they were all like to die of the ague and not, as they had previously hoped, of old age in their beds.

Sir Thomas looked wretched himself. He sat deep in his corner, his face an unnatural shade of green, as they jolted on their way, being thrown this way and that by the uneven surface of the track that served as the only road leading in their direction. Constance began to feel more than a little queasy herself, a condition which was not helped by the damp and cold. She thought longingly of the Earl's coach in which she had travelled in the opposite direction. It had had a solid wood foot-platform for the driver instead of expecting him to sit on the cross-bar between the two forward standards, resting his feet on the carriage-pole. And the fittings had been marvellously made to increase the comfort of the interior.

Instead of leather flaps covering the windows, they had actually had glass just like in a house, an idea which must have come from abroad, for Constance hadn't seen a single one like it, not even at Hampton

Court. It had been painted black, trigged out with silver, and the coat-of-arms had shone brightly on the door. How different from this poor vehicle! But then how different were the two men who owned the carriages!

The countryside became more familiar and Constance leaned forward in her seat hoping to catch a glimpse of the gates of Brede Place, but it was too dark to see anything by the time they must have passed her old home and rumbled on the last couple of miles to the house of Sir Thomas Lucas.

"Get yourselves inside," he croaked at them. "And you, sister, see that the girl is given a decent dress and a coif to cover her hair before the children see her. The boy is old enough to be stirred by such a wanton display. After that, she can set about preparing a meal for us all. We may as well start as we mean to go on!"

Constance was too weary to do anything else but obey. She allowed herself to be undressed by Lettice, not even objecting when her shift was taken from her with an exclamation over the torn tie.

"You had best have one of mine," she said with marked reluctance. "It will be too long for you, but you can tuck it up round your waist. I'll not have it marked by your stepping on it all the time, and so I warn you! Sir Thomas kept his wife's dresses and you may wear one of those. It'll fit you better than any of mine!"

Constance accepted the gown from her hands, feeling as she donned it that she was taking on all the cares of the dead woman also. The bodice bore the tell-tale marks of the ill-treatment that had been meted out to her by her husband and Constance shuddered as she imagined the blows falling on her own body. And fall they shortly would, she thought wryly, unless her lord should rescue her, and quickly too!

When she was dressed, she was still far from warm, and she went downstairs to the kitchen without having to be told a second time, hoping to find a fire burning in the hearth. Carrying a tallow candle in her hand, she hurried through the bare rooms of the house, the state of which revolted Constance's housewifely instincts. There were few carpets, those that there were being reserved for Sir Thomas' own parlour. In the other rooms rushes had been strewn on the floor and had been left to moulder, attracting goodness knew what vermin into the house.

The kitchen, too, was far from clean. The huge log at the back of the hearth had been allowed to go out many days before and was now damp and cold, making the fire virtually impossible to light. Constance rearranged the fire dogs to give better ventilation to the centre of the fire, and placed a number of billets, twigs, and the best tinder she could find to catch the flame. It was all in vain. The tinder-box was as neglected as the rest of the house and she couldn't get a spark out of it.

Two of Sir Thomas' adolescent children came into the kitchen to stare at her. Their tousled, beggarly appearance was as unattractive to Constance as was everything else in Sir Thomas' care. She smiled at them and encouraged them forward.

"Who has been taking care of you?" she asked them. "How was it that the fire was allowed to go out?"

The girl, her dress almost up to her knees, bobbed a curtsey. "There's no one here but us," she said.

"No," the boy agreed, wiggling his bare toes to make patterns on the greasy floor. "There's only us."

Sir Thomas' sister, coming into the kitchen at that moment, was just in time to catch the full brunt of Constance's outrage. "You and that

daughter of yours call yourselves good, religious women and yet you permit these children to live in a pigsty without anyone to care for them! Mrs. Goodman would have a deal to say to you, I can tell you, and none of it good!"

"They're no responsibility of mine!"

"You are their aunt!" Constance pointed out unanswerably.

"Sir Thomas will never permit me to interfere with his domestic arrangements," the woman bridled, wringing her hands. "Besides he has you here now - and a great relief it is to me to see you setting about the task with such good will."

"Good will! I have none for any of you!" The children cowered away from her, making Constance feel sorry for them. "I was not speaking to you," she assured them. "You cannot help having such a father. I know, because I couldn't help having my father either."

"Are you here to stay?" they asked her timidly.

"Certainly not! I'll be gone as soon as my lord Brede comes for me." She turned back to the children's aunt, a healthy glow of temper bringing the warmth back to her chilled body. "And, ma'am, when he sees the state these children are in, he'll make that brother of yours wish he'd never been born! And you too, I daresay!" she added, taking satisfaction in the thought. "I don't envy any of you!"

The older woman bowed her head as if in prayer. "Perhaps we would have greater success if we lit the clay oven in the wall. There are plenty of faggots in the grate to fuel it - "

"Except that the tinder-box is wet," Constance sighed. "I suppose I shall have to sacrifice my candle so that we may have something hot to eat, though there are few enough lights in the house to be found

either! When we have cooked the food, we shall have to eat it in the dark. How does that appeal to you, jnadam?"

To her surprise the woman burst into loud, noisy tears and flung herself out of the kitchen, probably to seek her daughter's sympathy. Much good it would do her! Constance doubted if Lettice had ever known a gentle thought in her life!

She bent her back to the task of lighting the fire in the hearth, aware of the four eyes of the Lucas children watching her every movement.

"Are you hungry?" she asked them.

They nodded their heads in unison. "We're starved!" they told her.

She thought that was probably all too true. "Is there any food in the larder? I suppose not. What do you suggest that we eat?"

The girl looked doubtful, but the boy took a step forward. "Yesterday I caught a rabbit in one of the traps," he volunteered. "It's not a very big rabbit - "

"It's a lot better than nothing!" Constance encouraged him. "Do you know how to skin and joint it? Good, then you do that while I get this fire fit."

It was indeed a very small rabbit. At the bottom of the huge iron pot it looked meagre indeed. However, with a variety of vegetables dropped in on top of it as they could be found, Constance began to feel that the children at least would have something hot in their stomachs that night. The adults would have to go hungry - and she was determined that that would include Sir Thomas himself!

The children, all five of them, sat round the table in the glow from the fire that had finally struggled into life. Their faces were far from clean and their hair was a tousled, matted mess that hung down over their

shoulders, boys and girls alike. It was a good thing it was summer, Constance thought, noticing their torn and patched shirts and dresses which bore the same tell-tale signs as the one she herself had on. It was iniquitous that children should live in such neglect, and she thought how easily it might have been her own fate had it not been for her beloved Mrs. Goodman. At least she had been kept clean and tidy and out of the way of her father's strong right arm.

That the children were afraid of their father was obvious and came as no surprise to her, but she was shocked all the same when she saw them cower back from him when he came into the kitchen. She saw at once that he had been drinking and turned her back on him to hide her revulsion. That was a mistake. His temper, ever uncertain, flared up and he seized her by the shoulders, forcing her back against the table.

"Think you're too good to work in my kitchen, *my lady Brede*? We'll soon have you singing another tune! What are you giving your new master to eat, wench?"

All her old fear of him washed over her and she had to clench her teeth together to prevent a cry escaping her lips. Coward! she castigated herself. He was a bully and a beast, and if he smelt her fear she knew he would be more violent than he would be otherwise, but she was paralysed with fright and her command over herself was frail indeed as she stared up into his shadowed face.

"Nothing," she said at last.

"*Nothing*? When you have something cooking on the hob? You'll have to learn better, my dear. In this house the master's needs come first. If anyone goes hungry this night, it will not be me! Bread and water is all you'll get until your body is chastised into submission, but a man has need of stronger sustenance!"

"So have your children!" she burst out. "What food there is, and there is little enough, is for them!"

"Is it for you to say so?" He shook her until her coif fell off her head and her hair came loose, its weight falling down her back and over his hands. "You mistake your position here, Constance Aiken - but then you were ever too arrogant for your own good. I've often heard your father say as much!"

The children huddled together in a corner of the kitchen, their whimpers making it clear that they had been witnesses to far too many scenes like this and that their fear of the coming climax was as great as her own.

"You're mad!" she spat at him. "Why don't you go back to your drinking, for that's the only food you, your sister and your niece, will get this night?"

Constance barely heard the commotion as doors were flung open and shut throughout the house, but she could scarcely avoid being conscious of the sudden draught that fluttered round her feet and skirts as the kitchen door was wrenched open and a number of people burst into the room. In the distance she heard the whinny of a horse and the frightened scream of a woman. She struggled against the hands which held her, resenting more than ever the way he had her bent over backwards across the table.

"Let me go!" she cried out.

"Never!" One hand left her shoulder and smote her across the face. "Never, do you hear me! You were given to me by your father, and mine you'll always be!"

Constance shut her eyes, her whole being in revolt at being in such close proximity with this man she had always hated. Then, to her bewilderment, she was free. Her bodice tore and came away from her

as Sir Thomas' hands were forced to relinquish their grip on her shoulders. She lifted her head in a gasp of horror, wondering what was to come next, and was surprised to see Sobriety, her eyes as wide as saucers, staring back at her.

"Sobriety!" she whispered.

She eased herself up from the table and looked down at Sir Thomas lying unconscious at her feet. Behind him stood her husband, his chest heaving a little with his exertions, but otherwise as cool as ever. Her eyes met his and she wished it was light enough for her to see his expression.

"My lord!"

He stood very straight, giving Sir Thomas a distasteful prod with his foot.

"Didn't you expect me, my lady?"

She nodded, quite unable to find the words to tell him how glad she was to see him. In her mind, she could see herself rushing into the shelter of his arms and them closing about her as though they never meant to let her go. In reality, she was frozen to the spot, clutching her dress to her, more bitterly ashamed that he should see her in such a state than she had ever been, and quite unsure of her welcome.

"Alfred, bring that light in here," the Earl commanded, scarcely lifting his voice at all. The coachman did so, putting a lantern down on the table and going to stand beside Sobriety, placing a comforting arm about her shoulders.

Constance averted her face from her husband's gaze. "I'm sorry," she said. "Oh Henry, I'm sorry!"

He was silent for a long moment, not moving a muscle, then he said, "That dress is vastly unbecoming, madam. Sobriety has some gowns of yours outside in the coach. She will help you to tidy yourself and will accompany you to Brede Place in Alfred's care while I finish my business here."

She made a small gesture of consent. "What will you do with him?" she asked.

"I think it better that you do not know," he returned, tight-lipped and withdrawn. "Go with Sobriety, my love. I'll see you at Brede Place."

She stepped carefully over Sir Thomas, the tears rushing into her eyes. There was pride in every line of her body, though, as she walked away from him towards the door. Only when she was there did she falter and turn back.

"I never doubted you would come!" she blurted out "He - he tried to tell me you wouldn't, but I knew you'd come!"

The mask that was his face softened for an instant. "You were right," he said. "I'd have come to you if it had taken the rest of my life!"

"Because you knew I was afraid of him?"

"That," he agreed, "and because you happen to be my wife!" He smiled at her, a smile that lit up the whole room for her. "My beloved wife!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

CONSTANCE returned the pressure of Sobriety's fingers on her own.

"I thought you had already left Hampton Court," she said in broken tones. "Why did you allow that dreadful creature near me? You must have known that I had never seen her before."

"She said your aunt had sent her, my lady. I thought you were angry with me over marrying Alfred and didn't want to see me again."

"Oh, Sobriety, I was only sending you back to Brede because I thought I ought! Surely you knew that?"

"That's what I thought in the morning, Mistress Constance, but later - well, I didn't know, did I? *They* said you'd gone to prayer meeting in the City, but Mistress Simpson knew nothing of it, so I told Alfred and he told my lord. You've never seen such a carry on as there was then! My, but I never thought the loss of my mistress would make such a stir! Even the Queen herself was enquiring for you! Even the King, so Alfred said."

"But - but did they know?"

"Know, my lady? They knew all right! The Dowager Lady Brede was running round the Palace like a witless hen, wanting to call the Guard out to search for you. And those friends of yours - the young ladies - were in a terrible way! Mistress Hyde it was who thought to question my lady Hartley about you, and she was with my lord Brede when he made her tell him that Sir Thomas had taken you to Brede. Lady Elizabeth - but she will tell you about it herself. She came in the coach with me in case you had need of her!"

"Lady Elizabeth is here!"

"She is, my lady. She'd be up here, talking to you now, but she was overcome by travel sickness almost as soon as we left the Palace, though, she wouldn't hear of us turning round to go back."

"And my lord?"

"He rode all the way on that great stallion of his. He went before us, arranging for a change of horses at every stage. The cost! It must have cost every penny of seven pounds, but he never even blinked. He was worried, Alfred said, because there was no word of you along the road. But then he saw where a coach had fallen into a deep rut and he cheered up something wonderful. Even Lady Elizabeth was more composed when he told her he was sure you were not too far ahead. It was the darkness that held us up in the end. It be mortal hard to find one's way when there be no moon to light the path!"

Sobriety pulled her mistress after her out to the coach. "Lady Elizabeth will be ever so glad to see you!"

Constance hung back, looking wildly about her. "Where are Sir Thomas' sister and Lettice Carter?" she demanded.

Sobriety chuckled, her scorn only too apparent. "They ran away when they heard his lordship ride up to the door. 'Tis only to be expected of such as they. His lordship will never rest until he has them all on their knees before you. He was cold all through with anger, my lady. Not like your father in one of his rages, or violent like Sir Thomas and most other men. He was cold and deadly. I'd have been so scared to cross him, I can tell you, only he never said a cross word to me, just that I was to go with him at once. He should have looked after you better, he said, and you would need me too."

Constance came to a halting stop. "I'll never go to a prayer meeting again!" she exclaimed in muffled tones. "Oh, I wish I hadn't! I might have known how it would end!"

But Sobriety had no time for any such regrets. She drummed her fingers on the side of the lordship's coach before pulling open the door to reveal Lady Elizabeth's pale, worried face.

"We have her safe, my lady!" she announced. "His lordship says she is to change her clothes and - "

Lady Elizabeth tumbled out of the coach, flinging her arms around Constance's slight form. "My love, you have no idea what a time we've had of it! Kate sends her warmest love, and so does the Dowager Countess. Indeed, I wouldn't be here had it not been for her - but I'll tell you about that later. Are you truly all right, Constance?" She released her friend and pushed her under the light that hung on the side of the coach, noting her torn bodice and dishevelled appearance. "You are all right, aren't you? That dreadful man didn't - "

Not for the first time, Constance wondered that her friends knew so much more than she about the ways of men although neither of them was wed.

"No," she said flatly. "I don't think that was ever his intention. He wanted revenge - my father's revenge on the House of Brede."

"Did you tell his lordship that?" her friend asked bluntly. "You look very much the worse for wear, if you won't mind my saying so."

The hot tears coursed down Constance's cheeks. "How could I tell him anything? And I wanted to so badly! But how can he ever forgive me - "

"Forgive you? He's beside himself in case you can't forgive him for letting Sir Thomas get his hands on you! My dear, I never saw a man so near to despair as was your husband when we came away from Hampton Court. All he would say was that the sight of Sir Thomas

had been enough to put you in a quake of fear and how would you be feeling now all alone in his company?"

Constance caught her breath in an audible sound at the back of her throat. "He is the *kindest* person I know! I told Sir Thomas so! I told him he'd never permit me - "

"Kind? Constance, I wish I had some small part of Kate's wisdom so that I would know what to say to you, but I never , had the least bit of tact, and I'm here and she isn't, and if you didn't look so dreadful already I swear I'd shake you myself until your teeth rattled! Don't you know that his lordship is head over heels in love, with you?"

Constance' mouth dropped open. "He is kind to me - "

"He's silly about you, you little fool! Sobriety, take your mistress out of my sight before I box her ears! I vow that you don't deserve him at all. I'd be dancing with joy, let me tell you, if his brother ever looked at *me* the way he looks at you!"

"His brother?" Constance repeated faintly.

"There now, I didn't mean to say a single word about it until we had you safely at home at Brede Place! I was with his brother John when his mother came across us, and she promptly sent me off with his lordship to find you. She said that if I meant to be one of the family, I had best start as I mean to go on and learn to be the kind of sister to you you've always lacked. Not a word about her son's feelings, you notice, let alone mine!"

Constance hugged her with joy. "You mean to marry John? Oh, you can't know how glad I am! I did so hope you or Kate - or both of you - "

Lady Elizabeth giggled. "Kate is less impulsive than I," she warned. "We can't expect too much."

Fortified by the turn their thoughts had taken, both ladies allowed Sobriety to hurry them back into the house and, in a matter of moments, Constance was once more clad in her own garments and was looking very much more the thing.

"Please hurry, my lady," Sobriety begged her. "Alfred will be waiting to take us to Brede Place and he is set against leaving his lordship here on his own for too long."

How pleasant it was to step into the Earl's modern coach instead of that contraption of Sir Thomas'. Constance sank back in her seat with a small sigh of content. To be back home at Brede Place was like a dream come true, especially as his lordship would soon be there also, and they would be friends again. Her lids drooped against her cheeks and, falling against Lady Elizabeth's ready shoulder, she fell fast asleep.

The sun was already high in the sky when Constance awoke. She stretched luxuriously, wondering for a moment where she was. She had only slept in that particular bed at Brede once before and that had been the night of her wedding. Had she fallen asleep again on her husband? She turned impulsively to see if he was beside her, but there was no sign that he had slept there at all. Disappointed, she drew the curtains back round the bed and climbed down to the floor, taking a look at the day out of the window. The steady rain of the day before had cleared away to be replaced by an almost cloudless day and the warm feel of an English summer.

Sobriety came running in answer to her summons on the bell-pull, bringing her a cup of chocolate and some delicious, still warm bread.

"You look ever so much better, my lady! Will you get dressed now?"

Constance nodded. "Where's his lordship? Did he come last night?"

"Oh yes, my lady, but he's been out and round the estate with Mr. Aiken while you were still asleep." Sobriety's eyes shone with excitement. "Alfred and I are to have our own cottage - one that Mrs. Goodman had many years ago. His lordship said as much! He instructed Mr. Aiken that it was to be made ready for us as soon as possible. He said I could come in by the day to act as your personal maid, my lady - for the time being, till the children start to come, and maybe even then. I said as how you would prefer to have me than another stranger!"

"And so I would!" Constance agreed fervently. "I remember the cottage well. You'll be very comfortable there."

"Yes, my lady."

It took Constance a long time to dress that morning. A little shocked that she should have slept so late, and even more so that she should have been carried to her bed and put into her nightgown without waking, she was determined that she would look her very best before the Earl next saw her. Accordingly, she tried on and discarded practically every dress Sobriety had brought with her, until both her maid and Lady Elizabeth were ready to tear out their hair in despair.

"My love, we shall never sit down to dinner if you don't stir yourself!" her ladyship said warmly. "You've tried that one at least twice before and the only difference now is that it is more creased than it was before!"

"But I want to look - perfect," Constance said, chewing her lip. "You don't understand! He *saw* me in that dreadful garment last night. It was worse than anything! You see, it used to bother him when I wore my old grey dress and he only really saw me as a person at all when his mother brought me something to wear from London. I don't want him to remember me like that!"

"No, of course you don't, dear, but you must wear *something*. May I suggest you wear the pink and have Sobriety rearrange your hair into the new style, flat on top with lots of ringlets?"

"Pink," Constance worried. "With my hair?"

"Certainly with your hair. It will look marvellous on you! His lordship will be bowled over at the sight of you - if he waits on you to finally make your appearance after all this time!"

That turned Constance into a whirlwind of activity. She meekly submitted to being triggered out in the dress of palest pink and never made a murmur when Sobriety exclaimed over the state of her hair and brushed the tangles out of it with a heavy hand. Indeed, when Lady Elizabeth suggested that she should pause to admire her appearance in the heavy glass on the wall, she was satisfied with a swift pat to make her skirt sit better and was halfway out of the door before they could think of anything else to do to her.

She met Frederick Aiken coming up the stairs as she was going down.

"Oh, Frederick, how grand the house is looking!" she congratulated him breathlessly. "You must have been busy to have done so much in such a short time. Where is his lordship, do you know?"

Frederick grinned at her. "Not all the changes have been here at Brede!" he exclaimed. "You're looking mighty prettily, Mistress Constance!"

She stuck her tongue out at him with an impertinent look through her lashes. "My lady to you," she rebuked him.

"You look one when you behave like that!" he chuckled. His smile grew broader. "You'll find his lordship in what used to be the Long Gallery, *my lady I*"

Her face fell. "Oh, Frederick, no! He hasn't made changes there too, has he?"

"You'd best go and see," he advised her.

She turned and mounted the stairs again, her head held high with the indignation that burned within her. Frederick came up behind her and, bowing low, threw the door open for her to enter, closing it behind her.

Constance looked suspiciously about her, but there was nothing changed that she could see. She paused in the threshold, waiting for the Earl to turn and see her. He was wearing a coat of bottle green and her heart melted within her at the sight of him.

"Henry," she said tentatively.

He turned and smiled, walking over to the fireplace in the centre of the Long Gallery. The only change that she could see was that her father's portrait had been removed and her mother's placed in the central position.

"Come over here," he bade her. "I have a gift for you and I want to tell you the story that lies behind it." He nodded his head towards the portrait. "It has to do with your mother."

"But you couldn't have known her!" she protested. "What can you tell me about her?"

"Come here, Constance, and you'll find out."

She did as she was bidden, as shy of him as she had ever been. When she came up beside him, she lowered her eyes to the floor, and waited for him to speak in a tongue-tied silence. Only when he placed a necklace of diamonds about her neck and began to clasp a matching

bracelet about her wrist did she look up at him, surprised by his teasing touch against her skin.

"But why now?" she asked him.

"They were your mother's," he said. "I think she would have wanted you to have them. They were one of the few possessions she had after she married your father."

"Diamonds?"

"The Tussers were a wealthy family in their day. She was wearing these diamonds when that portrait was painted."

Constance forced herself to look up at the painted face of her mother. "She was more beautiful than I," she sighed.

He looked amused. "I have to admit a strong partiality for the daughter, but then you know all about that, don't you?" He touched her cheek as she shook her head. "Did that brute hurt you, sweeting?"

"No! No, I think he would have beaten me, but no more than that." Her chin set in a stubborn mould. "I would have killed myself before allowing him to use what must always be yours, my lord!"

"I'm glad it didn't come to that," he said gently. "I would find it very hard to do without my little Puritan wife now that I know her quality."

"A Puritan no longer!" she declared. "I shall never go to another prayer meeting in my life. I shall much prefer to go to Church with you!"

His mouth relaxed into a smile. "I don't suppose your Puritan conscience will ever change," he teased her, "no matter how many scrapes it gets you into."

She smiled too, her shyness falling away from her. "You forget, I made you the keeper of my conscience! In future, I shall remember to consult you *before* I trust myself to anyone -especially those who claim to be my mother's relations, no matter how convincing they are!"

"Your mother was the last of the Tussers, sweetheart. The last and the bravest of them all!"

"Your mother liked her - a little, I think," Constance put in.

"That is all part of what I want to tell you about. Supposing you sit down, my love - "

"Yes, but not if you're going to ruin the Gallery after all," she murmured, remembering her previous anxieties on that score. "Frederick - "

" - has been instructed that the Gallery is to stay exactly as it is now!"

"Truly?" She executed a little dance of joy and perched herself on the edge of the nearest chair. "You must have your portrait painted too, Henry, and we can hang it here. You would look extremely handsome in oils!"

"A family portrait?" he suggested.

She blushed. "I'd like that," she said demurely. "I was thinking how nice it would be - " She broke off, embarrassed. "Tell me about my mother," she commanded.

The Earl sat down beside her, taking her hands in his. "I think you already know that your mother was very much in love with my father?"

She nodded gravely. "But Mama said she never resented her as she did some others. She said it was why my mother married my father."

"Very likely. There was a certain family resemblance between them, as there is between all the Aikens. Even you have that certain look about the eyes that we all have. Be that as it may, Samuel Aiken was my father's steward and agent and she came to live at Brede with him. From all that I've heard, he did not treat her particularly well from the very beginning. At any rate, she never fell out of love with my father and she followed as best she could from a distance all his doings in the service of the King.

"When King Charles was martyred, my father escaped and came to Brede as being the place he knew best. Besides, it was near enough to the coastal towns for him to take boat from there for France - or so he thought. Unfortunately, he fell ill on the way and, by the time he arrived here, he was in no state to maintain his disguise and your mother was afraid that Samuel would get to hear where he was. She took him to Mrs. Goodman's cottage and together the two women nursed him back to health.

"As soon as he was well enough, Margaret drove him herself across the Marshes to Hyfhe and bribed a fishing vessel to take him to France. She gave him her diamonds in case he had need to buy his way out of trouble before he was reunited with his family. That was the last time any of us saw her. What we didn't know was that my father had brought the plague with him from London. Mrs. Goodman had survived the illness when she was no more than a child and was immune, but your mother was soon to die of it, leaving you motherless and for all intents and purposes alone.

"Your father soon found out what your mother had done. She was not yet sick - though I fancy it would have made little difference if she had been. He sold her into bound service to Sir Thomas Lucas and threw her out of the house. Mrs. Goodman heard what had happened

and took her in, keeping her in her own bed until she died a few days later. Then, despite her age, she moved into Brede Place determined to bring you up as your mother would have wished. Your father was afraid of the old lady, because she had somehow survived, and never spoke to her if he could help it until the day he died."

"No, that was true enough!" Constance exclaimed. "He never said anything to me either."

"Nor did he return Sir Thomas' money to him," the Earl went on, holding her hands the tighter. "He said it wasn't his fault if Sir Thomas had come off with a bad bargain! But then Sir Thomas began to threaten that he would tell about the deal they had made and your father was afraid. There are many people who will frown upon a man who will sell his own wife for profit. In the lower classes such things are tolerated, but with Samuel's pretensions to be the Master of Brede Place there would be many who would point the finger at him.

"So he struck a bargain with Sir Thomas. He would keep the money, which by this time he couldn't return to him anyway, and Sir Thomas would wait for you to grow old enough to take your mother's place. That is the claim he thought he had on you - and why he is still alive today!"

Constance bit her lip. "My father was - was not like most men," she said finally. "I think he was mad - and Sir Thomas too!" She fingered the diamonds at her throat. "What is to become of him?"

"Yesterday, I brought with me the King's instrument banishing him from the realm for the remainder of his life. He is to escort my lady Hartley to Holland. She too has thought it wiser to leave the country." His voice was hard and she had no means of discovering whether his mistress' departure had hurt him or not.

"Lady Hartley said we would be at war with Holland in three years," she told him, her eyes anxiously searching his face.

"She was always a good source of information," he said drily. "Her talents in other directions left a lot to be desired!"

Her face cleared as if by magic. "You - you don't mind her leaving England? I don't mean to criticise, my lord, but I've always felt you would do much better with someone more- more - "

His laughter brought the colour storming up into her cheeks. "It isn't kind of you to tease me!"

"Then you'd best not mention my lady Hartley to me again," he warned. "She never did compare to you - in any way."

She gave him a look at once shrewd and shy. "You meant me to collect information for you too in the beginning, did you not?" she accused him. "You practically said as much, that that was why you were marrying me!"

"I'm ashamed to say the thought did cross my mind, but twenty-four hours in your company and I was convinced that I could not put you to such a risk - "

She stiffened. "You thought less of my courage than my mother's! Did you not think that I, too, would willingly risk my life for the Earl of Brede?"

He raised her hands to his lips. "It was I who could not take the risk, little one. I quickly saw how bereft I should be without you!"

"You mean - " she began, determined to get to the bottom of things because she was beginning to think that Lady Elizabeth might have been right about the state of her lord's emotions towards her after all. "You mean you have a fondness for me?"

He laughed, catching her up against him and kissing her on the lips. "Has that aspect of the matter only just occurred to you, my little love?"

"I had thought you might like me a little," she murmured, her head on one side as she looked up at him. "I thought it a very good idea, if you must know. How much more convenient it must be to have the advantages of both wife and mistress centred in one person! If - if you could see me as that person, my lord, it would be a great - happiness to me."

"You have been that person for some days now," he returned, equally grave. "I was only waiting to burden you with that knowledge until you could bring yourself to trust me as someone you can depend on always, who will always be there to protect your interests as best he may. Someone, moreover, to whom you can say anything that occurs to you, or make use of in any way you wish, in return for the love you bear him. Could you see me in such a role?"

"I always have!" she claimed.

"I think, you were a little afraid of me too, though that was as much my fault as yours. I didn't take your fears of Sir Thomas seriously enough to watch him as closely as I should." His lips twitched into a wry smile. "Anne may have screamed, sweeting, as you say she did, but her reactions to Sir Thomas' attentions were far from the fright you credited her with. I should have trusted your instincts more, and hers less. Will you forgive me for that?"

"You were not to know that I have always been afraid of him. He was always there, watching me. Even Mrs. Goodman disliked him - but perhaps she knew more about the arrangement he had made with my father than I did. My lord, how can you ask my forgiveness when you have taken me from such a fate and given me the great happiness of being your wife? When I first heard Mrs. Goodman's stories of young

'Master Henry' I used to conform all my actions to what I believed would be pleasing to you." She smiled, a swift slanting smile that delighted him. "I have not changed with the years, nor shah I now!"

"My dear, I wish I could have given you the happy childhood you deserved, but, I promise you, it will be my first concern to make you happy in the years to come!"

"As I shall be constant to you - you have my promise of that also." She giggled, looking thoroughly pleased with herself. "It's the same bargain we made once before, but it's nicer this time. Henry, I love you so much more than I ever thought I could!" She veiled her eyes from him, her cheeks rosy beneath his gaze. "It was too bad of me to fall asleep last night *again* - "

"Wasn't it?" he retorted. "But you forget, madam, you have yet to pay your debt to me for leading you out in the dance!"

She stood up, pulling her hands free of his, her eyes alight with mirth. "And what if I've decided not to pay?" she challenged him. "You will have to catch me first!"

She sped across the Gallery and down the stairs, paying no heed to the astonished cries of Lady Elizabeth and the servants as she slipped out of the front door and sought a hiding place from the Earl.

"Really, Constance!" Lady Elizabeth's voice came to her clearly. "We are about to sit down at table, and some of us are hungry even if you are not! My lord, I protest - "

"You had best begin," the Earl advised calmly. "My lady Brede and I have some unfinished business to transact."

"Indeed?" Lady Elizabeth sounded more amused than angry.

His lordship dallied no longer but came unerringly in the direction Constance had taken. He pulled her Out from behind the tree she had chosen to hide behind and enclosed her in his arms, smiling down at her. "Well, my lady?"

"I shall pay - truly, I shall! But, Henry, we have to decide first what is to be done with the Lucas children. I was never more shocked than when I saw how little they had to eat last night! And their clothes!"

"Their aunt and cousin are to look after them," he told her. "It was all arranged while you were *sleeping* last night!"

"But have they enough money?" she objected, ignoring the jibe.

"Probably not. I have told them to make some arrangement with Frederick for their keep."

She searched her mind for another topic of conversation to delay him further, and triumphantly found it. "How did you persuade the King to let you come to Brede with all the arrangements to be made for Queen Henrietta Maria's visit?"

"I have a new task, my love. One which will suit my little wife much better than life at Court!"

She opened her eyes wide. "We are to stay at Brede?"

"We are. I'm to be the King's personal representative in the county. At last, I think I have persuaded him that his Court is far from being the whole country. We must unite Englishmen into one nation again, and that is what I mean to do in this county at least."

"I'm surprised they let you go," she said. "I thought my lord Clarendon would keep you at his side for ever!"

He chuckled. "Only you can do that, my love. Are you ready now to pay your debt?"

The laughter left her eyes to be replaced by something of the passion she had previously only shown in the privacy of their bed. She slipped her hands up behind his neck and lowered his head to hers. "Willingly, my lord," she whispered. "Oh, Henry, very willingly!"