

# Crown of Laurel

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CROWN OF LAUREL

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### PROLOGUE

1809

Laurel held her breath as the acrobat stood upright on his companion's shoulders and held up his arms for a third man to do a handstand. She was trying to watch them and the fire-eater at the same time. The crowd's cries of admiration blended with the sound of a hurdy-gurdy, played by a shabbily dressed man with a monkey on his shoulder. Laurel applauded the acrobats and fed the monkey a piece of her toffee apple, while her eyes flickered round for some new experience. She was at a fair for the first time in her short life and the glory of it overwhelmed her. The quiet existence of a poor relation in the home of the Earl of Averham hadn't prepared her for this noisy, garish scene and she wanted to do everything, see everything and try everything.

She was tall for her eleven years, and the angularity of childhood made her look gawky. But the red-gold hair and deep blue eyes that would one day give her beauty already made a striking effect with her pale face. Her cotton dress, though clean and well-made, was simple and beginning to be too small, and her straw bonnet had a battered appearance from being repeatedly lost and retrieved and rammed carelessly onto her untidy hair. She was like spring, caught at the moment before the bud unfurls and everything is possible.

She'd seized the chance to escape the sedateness of Norley Priory and accompany her mother to Manchester. It had been the purest luck that they'd arrived on the day a fair had set up in St Peter's Field, the open space before St Peter's Church near the city centre. Laurel had pleaded and her mother had smiled and pressed a few precious coins into her hand. She'd spent one of them on a toffee apple, but she had two left and an hour to herself. She was in heaven.

The acrobats had finished, and she wandered on, finding her way by instinct, for her eyes were fixed on the merry-go-round with its gaudy horses, their lips drawn back as though snarling. At last she stopped outside a tent whose hoarding proclaimed, 'Megan can answer your questions about the future', feeling her heart beat faster as she thought of the only question that mattered. Would she ever be Harry's wife?

Harry was Lord Averham's nephew and heir, but to be Lady Averham was nothing to her innocent heart. To be Harry's bride was everything. He was a young god, fair-haired, handsome and glorious in his guards uniform. One brief meeting had been enough to make her adore him with her whole being.

She took a deep breath, and lightly touched a battered coin that hung about her neck beneath her dress. It was her lucky charm, practically a guarantee that Megan would have good news for her.

Then she pushed open the tent flap.

Megan found herself confronting an eager child, seemingly no different from many others, all wanting to hear the same thing: lovers, wealth and rank. Every servant girl hoped to be told she'd wed a lord, and lived on the promise until the day she resigned herself to the butcher's boy. So Megan took Laurel's hand in hers and launched into her regular speech.

'There is great good fortune coming your way. You'll be a fine lady with a title.' A tremble went through Laurel at this prediction that came so close to her hopes. Sensing it, Megan continued in the same vein. 'I see diamonds and a coronet, and people calling you 'Your Ladyship'.'

'Do you see - him?' Laurel breathed. 'Is he dark or - fair?'

'Fair,' said Megan, rightly interpreting the hesitation on the last word. 'And wonderfully handsome. You think perhaps that he hasn't noticed you.' This was a safe guess. It was that very fear that drove girls into her tent. 'But he feels more than he says. You're very young. He's biding his time. He thinks of you this minute, hoping you'll wait for him.'

'Oh yes - yes,' she said blissfully.

She wandered out into the blinding sun and collided with a young man. He made an impatient exclamation, but his irritation faded when he saw her.

'I'm sorry,' he said briefly.

He was gaunt to the point of wastage, with a face young in years but old in experience. He smiled at her with an effort, and bent to retrieve her bonnet which had fallen off in the collision and was now very much the worse for wear.

'Oh dear,' she said guiltily. 'Mama will say I've been acting like a ragamuffin again.'

'Do you often act like a ragamuffin?'

She sighed. 'All the time, according to Mama.'

He was a kind-hearted young man, and guessed that the ruin of a bonnet probably represented a major tragedy to her.

'It's only a small hole,' he said. 'Come with me.'

He took her hand and led her to a coconut shy and pointed to the prizes, among which dangled some garishly coloured ribbons. 'Suppose I get you one of those. You can wind it round the crown.'

'But you have to get three coconuts in a row,' she said sceptically.

'Then that's what I'll do.'

It took him seven attempts but he managed it. The stall keeper held out the ribbons and she chose the cream one.

'Thank you,' she said blissfully as she tied it round the hat. 'It was really my fault we bumped. I was so happy that I was dreaming and not looking where I was going.'

'Why, what did the fortune teller promise you? A chest of gold?'

'Better than that,' she assured him fervently. 'Much better. Why don't you go inside? She might tell you something that would make you happy too.' She added shyly, 'I don't think you're very happy now.'

Her words gave him a strange feeling. He'd tried to smother his melancholy and seem cheerful for her sake, but her wise young eyes had seen through the pretence.

'I don't think a fortune teller has a cure for my ills,' he said.

'Have you had a fever?' she asked, searching his lean face.

'Yes, but I didn't mean that kind of ill.' He stopped himself. He couldn't tell her that he was sick from despair, that disillusion was more virulent than fever. He bought her a vividly coloured cordial from a stall and steered her through the crowd. Like any other young man of twenty-one he didn't normally seek the company of children, but there was a quality of radiant hope in her that he needed at that moment.

'My name's Laurel,' she confided.

'Mine's Daniel.'

'Do you live in Manchester?'

'When I'm at home. My father owns a mill, but I'm a soldier.'

Her eyes shone. 'In the Guards?' she asked hopefully.

'No, the 10th Hussars.' Youthful arrogance made him add, 'We don't think much of the Guards. We call them Hyde Park soldiers because they spend so much time being decorative.'

She glared. 'They're the finest regiment in the army.'

'All right, don't attack me,' he smiled at her fierce expression. 'Have you got a friend in the Guards?'

She nodded. 'And he doesn't stand around in Hyde Park,' she said firmly. 'He fought in Spain.' Child though she was, she knew what all England knew, that the tyrant Napoleon had set his brother on the Spanish throne and the British army was helping the Spanish to resist him.

'Then I apologise if I insulted him.' Daniel gave a wry grimace and a sigh of self-disgust. 'Don't take any notice of me,' he said tiredly. 'Why should I snipe at another fellow? My own regiment was stuck here for an eternity before we were sent to Spain.'

Laurel laid a gentle hand on his arm. 'Tell me what happened to you.'

He told her, modifying the worst to make it fit for her ears. He described himself at seventeen, hot for the army, wildly proud of his first uniform. He'd served three years in England, chafing to get at the enemy. Last year he'd been made a lieutenant and, to his great joy, sent to Spain.

But the campaign had been a disaster. The Spanish had run away or surrendered, leaving the British regiments outnumbered by the French three to one. They'd been forced to retreat to the

port of Corunna through the icy winter mud. Three months after leaving they had arrived home, laid low by typhus or dysentery, and vermin-ridden, since the loss of their baggage had left them with no change of clothes. Daniel had been sick in body but sicker yet in spirit at the cruelly ignominious ending of his first taste of action. But the worst was yet to come.

'I arrived to find my mother had died a week earlier. I'd thought of her all the way home. She was the only person I could have told the state I was in, and she'd have made it right. But she wasn't there.'

For a moment he wasn't a soldier but an unhappy boy, and his voice trembled. He heard it and blushed for shame, but the eyes looking up at him were as sweet and gentle as those he'd never see again, and suddenly he was no longer ashamed. 'I didn't mean to come to a fair,' he said, 'but I couldn't endure the house any longer. I fled anywhere, and found myself here.'

Laurel pulled the old coin out of her dress on its chain, and held it up. 'See, it's my lucky charm. It gave me what I wanted. Now you must wish on it too.'

To humour her he did so, and since the person he wanted most had gone for ever he said,

'My commanding officer was killed at Corunna. I wish that the new commander shall be a genius who'll put the French on the run.' He smiled. 'Do you think that'll work?'

'Of course it will. It did for me. Let's ask Megan what she sees for you.'

Eagerly she took his hand and pulled him back to Megan's tent. The old woman looked up, recognising her. 'I'm honoured by your return, Your Ladyship,' she said promptly.

'Your Ladyship?' queried Daniel in surprise. 'Did you-?'

Without warning a cry of anguish broke from the fortune teller.

'It's too late!' she said violently. 'Too late - too late.' She clutched her head and rocked back and forth in agony. 'There's no escape from the grief you'll bring each other.'

'Oh,' gasped Laurel, 'She thinks-'

'Her visions are a bit confused this time,' Daniel agreed. He gave the old woman a gentle shake. 'We're not really together,' he said loudly. 'Do you understand?'

But Megan was past hearing. As if in a dream she gazed at him, her eyes wide with terror, while her lips still whispered, 'Too late - too late-'

Daniel took Laurel's hand and drew her quickly away. Left alone, Megan continued to shake. Fraud though she was, she sometimes had moments of true insight, and with these two she'd been battered by a feeling of brief joy, followed by bitter anguish. Her eyes closed and she sat there, trembling with misery.

Both Laurel and Daniel felt relieved to be back in the sun, as though her monstrous vision had infected them.

'Did you really wish for a title?' Daniel asked.

'No, of course not. Megan told me I'd have diamonds and a coronet, and people calling me 'Your

Ladyship', but I don't think that would make me happy. I'm sure they don't make Aunt Elizabeth happy.' The mention of a titled relative made him glance quizzically at her shabby clothes. She understood, and burst into a laugh that streamed around him like sunlight.

'I'm a poor relation,' she said cheerfully. 'Aunt Elizabeth isn't really my aunt, but she lets me call her that because Mama is her fifth cousin twice removed - I think. It's hard to remember. Anyway she's terribly sad. I don't think Uncle Josh is very kind to her.'

'Is he unkind to you?'

'Oh no. He hardly knows I'm there. He's ever so old and gloomy, and I don't think it can be nice for Aunt Elizabeth being married to him, even though he did give her a title. So I don't care about that, but you see- ' she stopped and a faint pink colour stole into her cheeks.

'Perhaps your friend in the Guards will have a title?' he asked gently. She nodded and he was illogically glad that this charming child wasn't mercenary after all. 'I hope you have everything you want,' he said, meaning it.

'Oh, but I will. That's certain now. Look,' she pulled the chain over her head and held it out to him. 'You must take my lucky charm, and then you'll have what you want.'

Daniel accepted it gravely. He didn't believe in the charm but it would be a souvenir of the girl whose radiance had eased his heart.

He slipped it over his head. 'Thank you,' he said. 'I'll remember you.'

He bent to kiss her cheek, then turned abruptly and vanished into the crowd.

Three weeks later he was in Spain again. His new commander was Sir Arthur Wellesley who mirrored his wish with uncanny accuracy: a genius who soon had the French on the run. From that moment everything went well for the British army and for Daniel personally. His admiration for Wellesley grew in leaps, and although he told himself it was absurd to be superstitious the commander's brilliance constantly reminded him of the girl at the fair.

In the April of 1814 the French were finally defeated. On the day Wellesley was created Duke of Wellington Daniel took out the lucky charm to gaze at it. In his mind it was Laurel who had brought him good luck. He thought of her tenderly, hoping that she too had got her wish.

## CHAPTER ONE

1815

Laurel pushed the salt across the breakfast table towards her mother and thought savagely, 'I hate them all!'

With one part of her mind she tried to block out the satisfied tones of Lord Averham as he read from the letter in his hand. With another part she hung onto every word, as though hoping to hear him announce that it had all been a dreadful mistake. As well might a condemned man stand with the rope around his neck, listening to the priest read from the bible, hoping that the turning of the page would reveal a reprieve.

'This is very pleasing news,' His Lordship announced with an emphatic drawl. 'Very pleasing indeed.'

Laurel looked at her mother, but Maria Drummond had her attention fully fixed on Lord Averham, and her face wore the look of a poor relation, intent on discovering the feelings of the head of the house and faithfully reflecting them.

'It's so gratifying that dear Harry has made the marriage you urged on him,' she chimed in now.

'I'd hardly say I urged him exactly,' Lord Averham disclaimed. 'I told him to look up the Comte's family while he was stationed in Brussels. I may also have mentioned that I recalled the Comtesse as an uncommonly pretty woman, but that's from thirty years back. I certainly never told him to marry the daughter out of hand without informing me first. Still,' he added, 'I hinted that he had my approval if the idea took his fancy.'

Mrs Drummond allowed herself to grow sentimental. 'A young man so recently returned from the hardship of war - it's hardly surprising if his feelings ran away with him.'

'Don't be a fool, woman!' said Lord Averham, not mincing his words. 'If my nephew suffered more than a very moderate share of hardship I'd be mightily surprised. You've seen him when he's been home on leave. Did he look as if he was suffering?'

Mrs Drummond was forced to concede this point. On his last visit, six months earlier, Captain Harry Wallace had presented the appearance of a sleek, well-fed attractive young animal who'd enjoyed the excitement of a war without being unduly inconvenienced by it.

Neither of the two middle-aged people sitting in the breakfast room at Norley Priory that January morning in 1815 paid the slightest heed to the seventeen-year-old girl who was their only companion. They'd forgotten her in the excitement of the letter that had just arrived, and Laurel Drummond was glad of this. It gave her time to fight down the storm of despair that threatened to engulf her.

She sat silently, her face a mask, her eyes fixed blindly on her plate. Inwardly she felt as though a volcano had erupted. Was there anyone she didn't hate, from Uncle Josh who'd urged his nephew and heir into this 'desirable' match with the daughter of a Belgian Comte, to her own mother who sat there uttering amiable vacuities, ignorant of the fact that her daughter's heart was breaking?

And Harry! Oh, she hated Harry worst of all. For Harry was hers, and he'd betrayed her with this Eugenie creature.

Josh was reminiscing about the Comtesse de Ferrier. 'You never saw a girl so dazzling. At one time I thought I'd bring her back to England as Lady Averham, but then Ferrier appeared on the scene and that was the end of that. He was one of the richest men in Belgium. Annette's parents were determined to secure him and I doubt if she minded getting her hands on his fortune. They were very pretty hands, but always a little too ready to curve into a grasping shape.'

Shocked by this unloverlike realism, Mrs Drummond murmured something about 'true love' and 'broken hearts'.

'Fiddle!' Uncle Josh said bluntly. 'These things have to be thought of in marriage. Why else do you think I gave Harry a nudge in that direction? Eugenie must be an heiress. Thank God he seems to have some sense of family duty after all!'

His voice soured fractionally on the last words. An observer might have thought that Lord Averham's pride in his heir was more formal than affectionate.

'May I leave the table, mother?' Laurel asked in a stifled voice. If she had to listen to any more she'd go mad.

'But you've hardly eaten anything,' Mrs Drummond objected.

'I've a headache this morning, I'd like to go out for a ride.'

'In this weather?' Mrs Drummond cast a scandalised glance at the frost-covered landscape out of the window.

'Let her go,' Uncle Josh said genially. 'She can do me a service.'

He gave Laurel a pleasant smile that softened his harshly lined face, and lifted another, unopened letter that lay beside his plate.

'Harry enclosed this for his mother. She'd better have it as soon as possible and in view of the contents I'd rather not send it by a servant. If you're going in that direction you might take it for me.'

Although it bore the appearance of a request they all knew there was no question of Laurel declining. Joshua Wallace, tenth Earl of Averham, demanded the privilege of an absolute ruler, spoke his mind with often brutal frankness and expected his wishes to be obeyed. Laurel seized the letter and escaped quickly.

Constance Wallace lived in a small lodge on the estate about three miles away. Like the Drummonds she was a poor relation, being dependent on her brother-in-law's support since her husband died. But, unlike them, she found it hard to disguise this condition, since Lord Averham was irritated by her and refused to invite her to live in the great house, even after his own son had died and Harry became his heir. He compounded this snub by treating Laurel, whose needle-witted conversation he enjoyed, as a niece, and having one of his horses reserved for her use.

Laurel took Donny from the stables now and urged him into a gallop. The cold wind stung her cheeks and whipped through her slim body, turning it to ice. Her heart lay like a black, frozen stone within her. She wasn't ready to weep. For the moment anger was stronger than grief, anger that she'd been made a fool of.

The path to the lodge lay through a small wood which stood just ahead of her, bleak and uninviting. As soon as she could, Laurel turned off the path to where the trees crowded thickly together. She dismounted and dropped onto a fallen tree trunk. Before she faced Harry's mother she wanted to be alone to sort out her thoughts and remember how this had all come about.

Harry had always dazzled her, ever since she'd first seen him. Nineteen, six foot tall and solidly

made with gleaming fair hair, he'd been a young Apollo, and the little girl had gazed up at him in awe.

Over the years he'd returned home on leave several times and she'd been able to feast her eyes on his magnificence. Harry's easy good nature was touched by her hero worship. His fresh, boyish face would break into smiles at the sight of her and when he'd come home in the spring of 1813 he'd taught her the waltz, the new dance that was considered 'fast' because the man danced with his arm encircling the girl's waist.

'Like this,' he said, seizing her and whirling her around the drawing-room at Norley. Then, because they were alone, and because she was looking at him with brilliant eyes in a flushed face, he'd yielded easily to the temptation to drop a light kiss on her upturned mouth.

'Now I've compromised you and you'll have to marry me,' he'd said gaily, whirling her away again.

She'd known, even at fifteen, that his words were spoken in jest. She'd guessed too that the kiss meant nothing to him. But no man had ever kissed her on the lips before and the tremor that ran through her left her thunderstruck.

With every fibre of her being she longed for him to kiss her again, to make her body pulse with excitement and then - what? Being totally ignorant, she had no idea what it was she yearned for. She only knew she wanted to feel his arms around her, not carelessly as they'd been before, but pulling her tightly towards him until she gasped for breath.

Harry loved nothing better than to ride over the estate that would one day be his, and on his last day he responded gladly to her suggestion that they ride together.

The Earls of Averham had owned the estate of Norley since the days of Henry VIII, when the break-up of the monasteries had caused many religious houses and their extensive grounds to fall into private hands. Norley had been a Benedictine Priory, handed over to the third Lord Averham by a grateful monarch in return for services rendered. The family fortunes, modest until then, had grown rapidly since, and Norley was now a vast inheritance.

To Harry, the son of an impoverished younger son, the realisation that the death of his cousin Simon had made him the heir came like the herald of a golden dawn.

'I still wake up every morning and pinch myself in case I'm dreaming,' he told Laurel as they meandered through the woods. 'You can't imagine what it's like to be poor, Laurel.'

She stared at him in astonishment, but he'd spoken quite seriously. Her point of view simply hadn't occurred to him. 'I'm a lot poorer than you,' she chided him merrily.

He laughed. 'I suppose you are. I never think of that. Uncle Josh treats you like his niece'

'My mother looks after the house.'

'He never calls her his housekeeper. He calls her 'my wife's cousin Maria, who is good enough to look after me.' You live at the Priory. Mama and I live in a pokey little house and seem to be regarded as servants. You'd never think I was the heir.'

'Mother said Uncle Josh spent over £2,000 on your last commission, and another £4,000 settling your debts,' Laurel said cheekily.

He roared with laughter, a happy, hearty sound that echoed cheerfully through the woods. 'So you've been checking up on me, confound your nerve,' he said amiably.

'Not a bit. He's always grumbling about how much money you spend.'

'Serve him right,' Harry said amiably. 'It was his idea to send me into the army, just because the Averhams always have a soldier serving, and I was the only one available.'

'He said you chose one of the most expensive regiments, and if it wasn't for the scandal he'd refuse to pay your debts. Not that he actually said that to me,' she admitted. 'I was listening at the door.'

Again the woods rang with his laughter. 'Laurel, you're an incorrigible child.'

She'd felt a stab of dismay. Suddenly she became aware of her hair hanging loose like a little girl's, and the way they'd been allowed to ride off alone together, because no one thought her old enough to need a chaperone with Harry.

That night she made a wish that he should wait for her until she grew up. She stifled her disappointment when he departed without kissing her again, and in the year that followed she watched with satisfaction as her young body filled out to maturity. She'd grown taller than was ideal for a young lady, but that wouldn't matter to Harry.

She was sorry that the high-waisted fashions of the day made it impossible for her to show off her tiny waist, and above it the full, perfect breasts that the decorous bosoms of her dresses imperfectly concealed. But the creamy bloom of her complexion was the envy of every girl who saw it. Candlelight brought out the hint of auburn in the dark gold of her hair, and the blue of her eyes was so dark that they sometimes looked almost black. She knew Harry could never again call her a child, and with the blinkered self-confidence of youth she believed that when he returned he'd fall as totally in love with her as she was with him.

In the spring of 1814 the tide of the war turned against the French. Napoleon was defeated and banished to the island of Elba. The country rang with victory celebrations, and in the summer Harry came home.

He looked at the sunlight playing on the rich crown of her hair, and smiled at her with an odd, surprised look in his eyes that had never been there before, and her heart turned over. The old feeling had been a ghost compared to this new sensation of aching sweetness that shook her afresh whenever she saw him.

On his first evening home he and Constance came to dinner and she watched him in glowing silence. Often Harry's eyes would be on her, amazed, ardent. Even in her inexperience she understood that look. Later that evening he murmured to her, 'Do you still go riding through the woods, Laurel?'

'Yes. Mostly in the afternoons,' she answered softly.

She was too innocent and undamaged to know doubt or fear. When, next day, she saw Harry cantering through the trees, moving in and out of the slanting sunbeams, she felt no relief for it hadn't occurred to her that he might not come. They dismounted and walked side by side, talking of nothing, like two people in a dream. Sometimes his eyes rested on her with a glowing, unmistakable look, then he seemed to tear his gaze away by main force, and all the while she knew a magic circle was tightening around them.

'It's getting late,' he said at last. 'We ought to be going back.'

'Yes.' But she didn't move. Harry was before her, the sun turning him to gold, and she was struck dumb by his glory.

'Laurel- '

She couldn't speak. She could only smile.

'Laurel,' he repeated, 'Laurel, my lovely girl- '

She was in his arms, crushed by his kiss. Joy flooded her as she felt his body straining against hers. This was nothing like the kiss he'd given her before. Then he hadn't moved his lips over hers with the slow tantalising urgency that he did now, nor had he ground his hand into the small of her back as though he would merge her with himself.

Once she pulled away slightly to catch her breath, and looked up into his eyes. She was startled by the oddly blank look in them, as though he couldn't see her. It gave him the look of a stranger.

He forced her neck back so that his lips could travel downwards to her throat. She closed her eyes and her head swam. The whole world seemed to be swaying and she let herself go with it. When she opened her eyes she was looking directly up into the branches overhead. The ground was soft and warm beneath her and there was a piercing sweetness in her loins. Her body seemed to be surging forward in a convulsion of yearning that exploded abruptly, leaving her drained, shattered by her first experience of a man, but passionately glad.

She realised that his weight was pressing her into the earth. She didn't know how they'd both come to be lying there. She smiled up at him, calm and happy. He smiled back, but in a nervous, almost shame-faced way that puzzled her. She'd expected him to radiate the same joyous fulfilment that possessed her, but he helped her to her feet without looking at her, and turned away abruptly while she rearranged her clothes.

'I'm sorry Laurel,' he said with a sigh that sounded almost despairing.

'Why?' she asked, disappointed.

This seemed to embarrass him more than ever, and he muttered something she couldn't catch, except for the words, 'You didn't know- '

She kissed him gently, thinking only of making him feel better. His awkwardness puzzled but didn't worry her. She was happier than she'd ever been.

Next day she went out to meet him, but he wasn't there. After a miserable two hours she faced the unbelievable fact that he wasn't coming.

She didn't see him for three days. Then he came to dinner with his mother and Laurel learned that Constance had riveted Harry to her side for a round of calls on her friends in nearby Manchester. She knew a twinge of disappointment that he'd let himself be so easily ruled. But then, she reasoned, anxious to excuse him, Harry was kind-hearted and Constance was a determined woman.

After that Constance clung to her son like a limpet, producing schemes that took up every moment of his time. Most evenings mother and son came to dine at the Priory, and Laurel had to content

herself with looking at Harry over the table and stealing a few words with him afterwards.

And then it was the last day before he left to rejoin his regiment as part of the army of occupation in Belgium. She didn't know when she'd see him again and she decided the time had come to fight tactics with tactics. It should by rights have been Harry, the professional soldier, who thought up a way to outflank his mother, but it obviously needed a woman to defeat a woman.

She left the house early in the morning and took Donny from the stables. When they were a short distance from the lodge she dismounted and gave him a slap on the rump. He cantered off and she rubbed some dust into her riding habit and onto her face, then snatched off her hat and slightly disarranged her hair. Now she was ready to take on the enemy. As she marched forward she fancied she could hear trumpets sounding the advance.

Within sight of the lodge she developed a limp and began to rub her cheek. The maid, cleaning the front step, stared at her and vanished into the house. A moment later Harry himself came out and ran to her.

'Laurel, my dear girl-'

'It's all right, Harry,' she gasped bravely. 'I just had a little fall. Donny galloped off.'

Harry swept her up into his arms and hurried to the house. She suddenly found it hard to breathe. Her face was only a few inches from his and the tangy, masculine smell of him assailed her. Her flesh came alive with memory, the touch of his hands, roving intimately over her, the feel of him deep within her, his body joined to hers, as joined as their hearts. Her blood sang with the knowledge of what had been and what would soon be again.

Inside the lodge Harry set her down gently on the sofa and told his mother what had happened. 'We'll send for a doctor,' he said.

'Not for a few bruises,' Laurel said quickly. 'If you could just take me home -'

'Your horse will have arrived home by now,' Constance observed sweetly. 'They'll be out looking for you.'

'I'm afraid Donny took rather a heavy fall too,' Laurel improvised unblushingly. 'He's lame and may not get home for hours.'

'Then I'll take you in the curricle,' Harry declared.

Sensing defeat, Constance began to protest but Harry had the curricle brought round at once. In a few minutes Laurel was seated inside it while Harry took the reins. After a mile they came across Donny, contentedly cropping the grass. Harry jumped down to inspect him.

'He doesn't seem hurt,' he said, baffled. 'I thought you said he fell. Laurel, what are you doing?'

She'd jumped down from the curricle and was looking up at him with a face full of mischief. Suddenly everything was simple. Understanding dawned in Harry's eyes and he grinned.

'Did you really fall?' he demanded.

She shook her head, laughing. 'You didn't want to spend all day drinking tea in Manchester, did you?' she said demurely.

He burst out with his rich chuckle, taking hold of her shoulders and giving her a gentle shake.

'You little witch,' he whispered. 'Of all the unprincipled, scheming - '

She never heard him. The moment he touched her she forgot everything else and slipped her arms round his neck. And then it was like before, only a thousand times sweeter. She lay with him on the ground, the smell of the good earth in her nostrils, its warm, rich pungency at one with the scent of male need and urgency. She gave herself up to him with love and confidence, blindly, worshipfully happy. She wanted nothing but to be his, and the feeling that he belonged to her made her one with the gods.

But afterwards there was that same moment of bewilderment at the half-shamed look on his face. Harry's uneasiness was the one thing that spoiled what was otherwise perfect.

'You really will have to marry me now,' she teased him lovingly, trying to banish the shadows from his face.

She laughed as she spoke for she knew they belonged to each other too deeply to need words. The wedding, when it came, would be the outward sign of an accomplished fact. But Harry only mumbled, 'Of course.'

When they parted he said gruffly, 'I don't know when I can get leave again, but I'll make it as soon as I can. Until then, can we keep this our secret, Laurel?'

She nodded and smiled, unable to speak. At the last minute she took his hand and held it against her heart.

'Yours,' she said softly, looking up at him with glowing eyes. 'Yours. Oh my love, my love.' Her whole trusting heart was in her kiss.

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Now she wanted to weep, sitting here on the log in the frozen wood, her heart returning to painful life, as anger evaporated into desolation.

How could it be only six months since last July, when she'd grown up a thousand years? The child she'd been then seemed a pathetic creature, naively assuming that the world must be hers because she wanted it. She remounted and headed towards the lodge, while her thoughts wandered dazedly around in a small circle, always coming back to the same point. Harry had married someone else.

At the lodge Constance kept her waiting with a deliberate lack of courtesy. She, even more than her son, resented their modest accommodation. The sight of the Drummonds at home in the Priory was a thorn in her flesh.

When she knew Laurel's errand she gushed with delight. 'How kind of you to take the trouble for me. And how is your dear mother? I feel for her so dreadfully. I always say that should I have been unfortunate enough to have to earn my living, the job of housekeeper is, of all things, the one I'd detest the most.'

The sight of the pretty, fluffy, silly woman brought a pang to Laurel's heart. Harry had inherited his mother's face to a startling degree. It had never occurred to her that it was basically a woman's face, so splendid had it always looked surrounded by the trappings of masculinity. But now she

saw that Constance had bequeathed her own soft mouth and widely spaced eyes to her son. The shape of her straight nose and curving jaw had become coarsened in the transition to Harry, but the golden hair that had been her glory as a girl had also passed to him.

'Of course it was very imprudent of dear Harry to contract this marriage so hurriedly,' said Constance when she'd exclaimed over the news, 'but he does seem to be so terribly in love.'

She lifted her head and stared Laurel in the face. The spite and dislike of years sat unmasked in her eyes, and to them was now joined triumph. Laurel grew cold as she saw that this woman knew of her love and was enjoying the satisfaction of making the housekeeper's daughter realise that the heir to Norley was not for her.

From somewhere Laurel dredged up the courage to say, 'Does he write much about Eugene?'

'Small and dark and very lovely,' Constance read. 'He says 'You'll see her soon. I think I can obtain leave in the early part of February, and I'll bring her to Norley.'

Somehow Laurel managed a polite farewell and got herself out of the house. Once she reached the safety of the woods Harry's words struck her like a blow over the heart. He would bring Eugenie to Norley and Laurel would have to be the daily witness of their happiness, knowing that she'd given herself too easily to a man who'd held her gift cheap.

Until this moment it hadn't troubled Laurel that she'd loved Harry fully without the security of marriage. It would have seemed to her a meanness to have made him plead for what her heart had joyed in sharing with him. But now a hundred veiled warnings of her mother's flooded back to her with hideous significance. This was what lay behind those precepts about virtue and decorous behaviour; not morality, but an ancient female understanding that what was offered too soon would be lightly accepted and then as lightly discarded.

As she made her way home through the falling shadows it seemed to her that every woman since the world began must have known by instinct the caution she had learned too late.

As Laurel approached the stables Jacob Price came out to take Donny from her. Jacob was the eldest son of the head groom and had infuriated his father by leaving the Norley stables to join the army as a private soldier. Years of living rough in Spain had toughened him until he looked as if he was made of solid oak.

He'd recently returned, invalided out of the army by a broken leg that had been set awkwardly. Laurel greeted him and expressed a polite pleasure that he'd recovered sufficiently to be active.

'It ain't never gonna be as it was,' said Jacob, 'but I do well enough. Mind you, I'd swap it for a nice little billet in Belgium this minute -'

His father appeared from nowhere like the devil rising through a trapdoor and proceeded to adjure his offspring (who was twice his size) to shut his ungrateful mouth before the master heard him talking like that. Despite her unhappiness Laurel couldn't repress a slight twitch of the lips. Old Price's fearsome bullying of his sons was in inverse proportion to his lack of inches and she thought Jacob had probably fled to the wars as to a haven of rest.

'You don't mean you'd actually like to go back to the army?' she said, when Old Price had run out of words and stamped off. 'After what it did to you?'

'It wasn't the army that did this to me, miss. It was a Frenchie hussar who couldn't ride any better

than to bring his horse down on top of me. He ended up sorrier than me, though. I left my bayonet right up his - sorry, miss.' He became absorbed in removing Donny's harness.

Laurel dropped down onto a stool, glad of an excuse not to go into the house. 'But isn't it a hard life?' she said.

'No, it's a grand life, miss. Mr 'Arry's the lucky one, still being there. Does he ever send to say how he's doin'?

'Yes,' said Laurel reluctantly. 'We heard from him this morning. He's married to a Belgian girl.'

Jacob grinned his delight and insisted on dragging the details from her. 'That couldn't be better,' he said at last. 'Might cheer this place up a bit. Been like a morgue since Mr Simon died.'

'I didn't know him,' said Laurel, quickly turning the conversation. 'He was dead before I came to live here. What was he like?'

'Very quiet. Not like Mr 'Arry. Now him, you never knew where he was, except that he'd be somewhere he shouldn't be, doing something he'd no business doing.' Jacob's tone was full of admiration. 'Mr Simon wasn't much of a one for devilment. If Mr 'Arry wanted real mischief he used to run off to the village and play with the lads there. That's how he got the scarlet fever. Then of course Mr Simon caught it from him and died.'

Laurel saw Old Price coming back. She excused herself and slipped away. As she went into the house its heart-stopping beauty struck her afresh and she realised that being Harry's wife and being the mistress of Norley Priory had been the same thing in her mind. This was her home and there was nowhere else in the world that she wanted to live.

She knew there were other great houses but none, surely, where the sun slanted so magically through the stained glass windows, making brilliant coloured patterns on the floors, the self-same patterns that had splayed out like a carpet beneath the feet of black-habited monks, moving in quiet procession through these corridors three hundred years ago.

Not all of the house consisted of the original building. Over the centuries the Averhams had made extensive additions so that there was now an Elizabethan wing, another added during the Restoration, and a small extension dating from as recently as a hundred years. But the heart of the house was the original Benedictine priory of pale yellow stone, a rambling building with narrow passages that led to unexpected little rooms and winding staircases that straightened out without warning into half-landings that vanished into more passages.

The first Lord Averham to take possession had been a renovator, ripping out walls to create the great hall, wide central staircase and imposing living rooms that he considered essential for his abode. But sufficient remained of the original, with its high vaulted ceilings, to preserve an atmosphere that whispered tantalisingly of something other than a country gentleman's robust pleasures. Maria might complain that those ceilings defeated all attempts to keep the house warm, but Laurel treasured the echoing, faintly unearthly atmosphere.

Everything was in good condition because Joshua would have considered it beneath his dignity to allow the family property to suffer neglect, and Maria ran the house in the same spirit of sober efficiency. But Laurel knew that neither of them shared her own passionate love of the place for its own sake. They didn't sit at the window in the early morning and watch the soft white mist blanket the countryside so that the hedges seemed to be floating above it. Nor did they stroll home through the woods in the twilight while the setting sun slid down between the tree trunks and

flooded the path ahead with glory.

To Laurel's eyes Norley yearned for a mistress who would love it and care for its beauty. She'd dreamed of being that mistress, and now the dream had crumbled to dust.

She went into the house and slipped into the library. To her relief it was empty. A fire burned in the grate but otherwise the room was unlit and the advancing winter afternoon had thrown it almost into darkness. The curtains at the big windows still hung open and through them she could see the grey sky, slashed across by the bare branches of trees. She dropped into a chair and stared hopelessly into the fire.

The click of the door being opened made her jump. It was Maria.

'I'm glad you're back, dear,' she said, coming to sit on the other side of the fire, 'It's so cold outside. How did Harry's mother receive the news?'

'She was delighted.'

'Naturally she would be,' Maria said, adding with tart realism, 'Uncle Josh will have to let her live here now. Harry could hardly take the future Lady Averham to live in that pokey lodge.'

Laurel glanced across at her mother, the haggard lines of whose face were emphasised by the flickering shadows thrown by the fire, and suddenly she saw that Maria must once have looked very much like herself. Work and worry had left their mark on her, as had two marriages, one to a man long dead and the second to a reprobate that no one had heard of for years. She was thirty-seven and she looked fifty.

Between them lay a considerable affection, which their frequent battles had never diminished, but interwoven with Laurel's love was a strain of youthful intolerance. She'd always been impatient with her mother's caution and willingness to make the nervous concessions of a poor relation. But now, looking at the face that had once been as young and lovely as her own, it was as though a vision of the future had risen to cackle at her.

Laurel might be thoughtless but she was also generous. Her revelation transmuted misery into understanding, and understanding into pity for her mother rather than herself. She jumped up and crossed to Maria, flung an arm round her thin shoulders and hugged her compulsively. Her mother hugged her back, pleased and surprised by this demonstration of affection.

'I must be about my duties,' she said at last. 'Go and change your clothes, Laurel dear.'

'Yes mother. I'll just stay a little longer to get warm.'

She waited till she was alone before she relaxed. For a moment she'd longed to bury her face in Maria's lap and sob out her wretchedness, but she'd restrained the impulse. Loving mother though she was, Maria couldn't have coped with the truth. In fact the one person who could have heard her tale with understanding and without shock, was George, the man she thought of as her father.

Laurel was the child of Maria's first husband, Michael Drummond, a university professor. But Michael had died when she was six months old, and Maria had sought security in marriage to George Lang, one of his colleagues. The marriage hadn't been a success, except in one respect. George had adored his step-daughter.

He'd taken her education in hand, rejecting the lady-like half-truths thought proper for little girls, and giving her solid learning on which to cut her mental teeth. She was a precocious pupil, happiest in the company of her beloved teacher, and it was as well she seized her chances because when she was ten they were taken away from her.

George was dismissed from his university post because of a scandal involving the wife of another don. Maria had demanded a separation. George's parting gifts to Laurel had been a dictionary and the advice always to look up what she didn't understand. Laurel, who'd overheard the invective her mother had flung at her erring husband, promptly looked up 'reprobate' and 'depravity'. She was unable to check on 'licentious', however, being uncertain of the spelling.

Maria had thrown herself onto the charity of Elizabeth, Lady Averham, a distant cousin, who'd invited her to make her home at Norley.

Maria was determined to wipe George Lang from her life, even to the extent of resuming the name of her first husband. She set about reclaiming her daughter for lady-like occupations, grateful to Elizabeth who undertook, in her loneliness, to instruct the child in music, drawing, water-colours and other feminine accomplishments that George despised.

Neither woman realised that they were fighting a losing battle. What George had given Laurel could never be taken away. She often slipped away into the library at Norley, and although her reading lacked direction it improved her mind to an extent that would have horrified Maria.

Sometimes she didn't read at all, but sat there, thinking of George. The house was gloomy since the Averhams' son, Simon, had died, and there was no one to laugh with her, and no one to help her calm the raging, childish tempers that sometimes swamped her, and which she found so frightening.

Seven years had passed since she'd last seen George, yet still she escaped to the library that he would have found so congenial, and closed her eyes to conjure up his thin, humorous face. There'd never been a trouble that she couldn't take to him and he'd have known what to say to her now. But there was no George, only her own puny, impotent strength to pit against despair and betrayal.

## CHAPTER TWO

Harry arrived in the last week of February, and the members of the household, according to their various dispositions, drew mingled sighs of disappointment and relief. For he was alone.

'I understood you were bringing your bride to us,' Joshua told his heir gruffly. The first awkward greetings had been managed without disaster, and the family were now gathered together in the salon that adjoined the dining room, waiting for dinner to be served.

'That was my intention, sir,' Harry responded. 'But Eugenie has never been away from her home before, and she became so affected that I delayed our departure for a little. However, even that

didn't succeed, and on the day - '

'She became 'affected' again,' Joshua interrupted him wryly. 'Not married a watering pot, have you?'

'Certainly not,' said Harry, colouring uncomfortably. 'Naturally she doesn't wish to leave her family earlier than necessary, and since I'll be returning to Belgium and she dreads a long parting - '

'Yes, yes,' Joshua interrupted him again, testily. 'But surely all this was obvious from the start? Why plan to bring the girl at all until you return here permanently?'

'Her father wished it,' said Harry. 'He thinks the peace won't last, and Eugenie should be got to safety before another war breaks out.'

He shrugged as puzzling memories stirred in his brain. Harry was on amicable terms with his hedonistic father-in-law, but he'd been surprised at this sudden assumption of political sagacity by a man whose interests normally extended no further than drinking fine wines, visiting gaming houses and other personal pleasures of a less openly admissible character.

It was Eugenie herself who had defeated both of them, declaring, with a forcefulness that had astounded him coming from that fragile body, that she would not go to England to live among strangers until her dear Harry could come with her for good. The Comte had been furious at his daughter's stubbornness.

Laurel hadn't given Harry one direct glance since he'd come home, even managing to return his greeting with her attention fixed on his left shoulder. She knew that if she once allowed her eyes to meet his he'd read the suffering and accusation in them, and that would strip her of the last remnants of dignity. Dignity - the determination not to squall like a seduced kitchen maid - was all she had left to cling to.

Over dinner she tried to keep a guard on her eyes while Harry entertained them with a description of life in Brussels which seemed to consist largely of dancing, military revues and the most relaxed of regimental duties. English society, deprived of European travel for years, had swarmed to Belgium, where an army of occupation gave an agreeable sense of safety.

But Harry couldn't be allowed to go for long without describing Eugenie. 'She's like a little kitten,' he said, 'so tiny that she barely comes up to my shoulder.'

'She sounds a squabby female,' Constance said, pleurably dissatisfied. 'They usually run to fat.'

'Not Eugenie,' said Harry at once. 'She's so frail that I'm almost afraid to dance with her in case she comes apart in my hands.'

Against her will Laurel's head jerked up. She'd heard something in Harry's voice that filled her heart with pain. It was a note of authentic tenderness, and in a moment her frantically seeking eyes had caught it reflected in his face. It was as though he'd slammed yet one more door in her face.

She took in everything about him that had changed. He'd been too thin when she'd last seen him, but the easy life in Brussels had added flesh to his tall frame, and the slight extra heaviness suited him. He radiated confidence and a healthy animal vitality that seemed to reach across the table and touch her. She drew a soft, shuddering breath. It had been a mistake to look up. The sight of

his face had set the blood dancing in her veins in a way that would once have been a delight but was now a humiliation. It was the final blow to her pride that the man who'd rejected her could still call forth this violent response in her heart and body. She felt the hot colour surge over her face, and swiftly dropped her head.

At last it was time for the ladies to retire, leaving Harry and Joshua to drink port together and try to cover their mutual unease with a seemly garb of family affection.

Harry became aware that his uncle was looking at him expectantly. The candlelight threw into relief every aspect of that lined, harsh face, emphasising the craggy chin, the uncompromising jut of the jaw. He knew Lord Averham was in the mid-fifties but he seemed much older. Grief had aged him, turning his thick hair to snowy white. His eye sockets were black holes into which it was hard to see. Something about those eyes made Harry uneasy. It was almost as if his uncle disliked him, but that was ridiculous.

'You've volunteered precious little about anything that matters,' Joshua said with a shrewdness that dismayed his nephew, 'and nothing at all about your mother-in-law. How is Annette now? What's she like?'

This at least was safe ground. 'I doubt you'd recognise her, sir,' Harry said. 'Whatever she may have been in her youth the word that describes her now is raddled. Thin as a rail with a neck like a chicken. Thank heavens Eugenie's not like her.'

'She will be. They all get like their mothers.'

'God forbid!' Harry exclaimed fervently.

Joshua cackled and pushed the port across the table. 'What were you thinking of to marry without my consent?' he demanded abruptly. 'I'm still the head of the family. You're not Lord Averham yet, and who's to say you ever will be? I'm young enough to marry again and beget a son that'll put your nose out of joint.'

He derived a good deal of pleasure from the sick look that washed over Harry's face before he could prevent it. It was gone in a moment and the young man was again in command of himself, saying everything that was proper about his uncle's right to please himself, and a great deal more of which Joshua didn't believe one word.

'Yes, yes, all right,' he said impatiently, when the pleasure of seeing Harry tie himself in knots of dissimulation began to pall. 'Just as long as you don't forget I'm still above ground.'

'And will be for a long time, I hope,' said Harry politely. 'I don't forget my duty to you, sir. That's why I hastened to pay you my respects immediately following my marriage. But you may remember that you as good as gave me your consent in advance. The post between England and the continent is still extremely uncertain, and Eugenie and I - that is, once we'd decided - ' inspiration came to his aid, 'the fact is, sir, that after your advising me that the Comte was one of the richest men in Belgium, I felt it best not to delay.'

Joshua grunted. 'I trust you negotiated a good dowry?'

'The Comte and I agreed on 200,000 francs,' said Harry.

A light gleamed in the depths of those sockets. 'And how much of that money is in your hands at the moment?' Joshua demanded.

'About 10,000 francs,' said Harry. 'Most of Eugenie's fortune is tied up in land and securities. I agreed to accept the Comte's note of hand while the formalities went through.'

The two men lingered a while longer over their port, talking with great diligence until a decent time should have passed, when they could join the ladies and endure each other's company in diluted form. Even then Joshua contrived to bring the evening to an early close, declaring that he was an old man and ready for bed.

When he was in his own imposing chamber and had sent away his man for the night Joshua sat staring at the dying embers of the fire, a glass of brandy in his hand. The evening had upset him more than he'd cared to admit, even to himself, and it had been many years since he'd confided in another human being. The only warm place in his heart had belonged to Simon, who would have been Harry's age, had he lived. But now there was no Simon, and no warmth left.

His grief and hatred rushed over him, as fresh as though it had all happened yesterday. If he curved his arms now he could feel in them the weight of his boy as he lay there in his last moments, his face flushed, his eyes blind with fear and the approach of the end. Joshua had thrust everyone away from him, including the child's mother, who'd stood by the bed, sobbing while Joshua held his dying son. He'd clutched Simon to him in terrible silence, while his eyes pleaded.

And when it was over, and the thin, fever-wracked form was laid back on the bed, Joshua had got to his feet and known that all the love and tenderness of which his soul was capable, had gone out of him forever. In its place was only hatred of Harry, the nephew who'd killed Simon; Harry, who couldn't resist showing off to the village urchins who should have been beneath his notice, and who'd contracted the fever in some labourer's cottage and brought it home to Norley, and Simon.

He'd ensured that Harry's education befitted the future earl, purchased him a commission in a good regiment and paid his debts of honour without a murmur. To behave otherwise to his heir would have been a stain on the dignity of his house. But he'd done it all with hate.

At one time he'd had two younger brothers, but one, Andrew, had followed the family tradition of going into the army, and had died sixteen years ago, fighting Bonaparte's troops in Holland. Paul, the youngest, had been a good-looking, easy-mannered wastrel who'd fallen in love with Constance, sister-in-law of a small Manchester mill owner. He'd married her, despite the taint of trade that clung to her, dissipated her small fortune and died of drink and disappointment, leaving her and their son destitute. Joshua, with strict attention to the proprieties, had offered Constance and Harry a home on his estate.

He'd disapproved of Harry from the start. The boy had inherited his mother's face and his father's character, easy-going, charming, relying on his personal attraction to smooth his path in life. And now there was only Harry to inherit because Joshua had no other child, his wife having been barren after Simon.

It had taken him a long time to accept the truth. In the first year after his son's death he'd made repeated attempts to beget another son on his poor lady, despite her frantic pleas that her time for child-bearing was past. She'd been saved in the end by her husband's flagging energy which, sapped by grief and bitterness, eventually gave out. If she was useless as a wife, he was forced to the unpalatable conclusion that he was useless as a husband.

His one hope was that his wife would die in time for him to achieve new vigour with a younger, more attractive female. Year by year he'd watched her drag out her weary existence, resenting

every day she lived. It was his last great grudge against her, that she didn't release him until it was too late.

Soon after burying Lady Averham he had the third chambermaid in his eye, a buxom wench with a bosom that pressed luxuriously against her dress. She must provide him with the proof that the spark hadn't died forever before he dared venture on a second marriage.

But the ashes were cold and lifeless, and not even the most magnificent milky-white breasts that Joshua had ever seen could fan them into life. For three weeks he took her to his bed and night after night his humiliation deepened.

At last he dispensed with the girl's services, not only in his bed but in his house. He gave her a handsome present which she understood, without a word being said, was for keeping her mouth shut, and saw her departure with relief. He didn't try a second time. He wanted no more young wenches rushing about the country with the knowledge that Lord Averham was useless in bed.

After that he'd abandoned his attempt to ensure that one whom he regarded as his son's murderer didn't come into his son's inheritance. If it ever occurred to him that Harry might die in Spain, he pushed the idea back to a place where he couldn't examine it. The closest he'd allow himself to come was the thought that but for the existence of cousin Cecil Wallace, the next in line, Harry couldn't have been sent into the army.

But the war was over. Harry had survived, returned home, and was now married to beget sons who would eventually take from him the inheritance he'd stolen from another. Joshua had behaved properly as always. A welcome had been prepared for Eugenie and from henceforth Harry's home would be the Priory.

But as he sat staring into his dying fire Joshua's bitterness rose up in a flood that threatened to engulf him. He downed his brandy in one gulp and went wearily to bed.

Harry was also preparing for bed. He thought of his wife and smiled. He'd lied when he declared she wasn't a 'watering-pot' but it would have been impossible to explain to his uncle that her tears were part of her elfin charm, even if they did flow needlessly often. That dried-up old man could never understand the way Eugenie's eyelashes glinted entrancingly until she brushed the tears away with a childishly brave gesture that made Harry's heart beat with pleasure. And then he had to comfort her and make her laugh until her dark curls danced round her little heart-shaped face.

She'd cried, he remembered, the first time he'd kissed her, and somehow, in reassuring, her, it had been necessary to kiss her again. Then she'd run away and he'd followed eagerly, enchanted by the chase.

She'd driven him mad by her elusiveness until the day he'd waltzed her out of a ballroom into a small, private salon. He hadn't seen her alone for more than a week, and in the euphoria of success he'd lost his head and behaved, according to Eugene's mother, in a 'scandalous, disgraceful manner.' He was never quite certain where her parents had appeared from, but within seconds an avalanche had descended on his head. Eugenie sobbed that he'd compromised her, the Comte de Ferrier muttered vehemently about 'dishonour' and somehow it was simpler to declare that he'd been on the verge of proposing. After that it was all smiles.

Harry hadn't regretted the business. He was Eugenie's willing slave and he supposed a proposal would have come eventually. He'd asked for a short delay while he wrote to England for his uncle's approval but it seemed the recovery of Eugenie's honour demanded an immediate marriage. He

shrugged helplessly and agreed. Anything was better than having the Comtesse go storming to his Colonel.

So Eugenie had become his wife, and Harry divided his time between his billet with his regiment and the Ferrier home in the fashionable quarter of Brussels, where it had been agreed she should remain until he took her to England.

At first her modest acceptance of his love-making had entranced him, and he'd looked forward to overcoming her shyness and teaching her to love him passionately in return. But he'd made little progress. Eugenie still wept and made him feel like a seducer, and he doubted that this would change while she was under her parent's roof.

He began to count the nights till he'd be with her again, and groaned with deprivation. His charm and looks had always filled his bed with a succession of willing girls, starting with the cook's daughter when he was fifteen. But in his blind infatuation for Eugenie he'd embraced the idea that fidelity on his part was not merely desirable but possible. He hadn't, of course, lived like a monk while enduring the frustrations of courtship, but he'd been sure that once in possession of his beloved he would become a faithful married man. That was before their parting.

A forbidden memory slid into his mind, ignoring his frantic efforts to bar its way. Laurel's glowing face danced before his eyes, whispering, 'Yours. Oh my love, my love!' just as she'd done last summer, when she'd thrown herself into his arms and given herself to him generously and with joy. And there beside it, maddening in its contrast, was Eugenie's face as he'd seen it on their wedding night, eyes wide with horrified disbelief. He finally succeeded in shutting out both faces.

His meeting with Laurel today had been attended by some nervousness, which had given way to relief at her dignified manner and the fact that her eyes had thrown no silent accusations at him. He had nothing to fear. And after all, he argued, easing his conscience into a more comfortable position, he hadn't been to blame. Was it his fault that she had a body that might have been designed to lead a man astray?

And hadn't Laurel herself as good as admitted that she was the housekeeper's daughter? She couldn't seriously have expected marriage. No reasonable person would say he'd been to blame. He repeated that to himself several times.

But as he sat there, the memory of her joyful, eager giving came back to twist a little knife in his heart.

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Laurel was dressing for dinner when her mother delivered her bombshell. She had some cousins who lived just outside London and she'd written to ask them to have Laurel for a long stay. Maria watched her daughter closely as she added that Laurel would be gone before Eugenie arrived.

So the pretence had been useless. Maria knew she loved Harry. But how? In the three days he'd been home she'd never been alone with him, never met his eyes when she could look elsewhere. Perhaps it was the sudden withdrawal from her childhood playmate that had given her away.

As she went down to dinner Laurel gave silent thanks that Harry was visiting friends in Manchester that evening so she could relax her usual vigilance over herself. She was already frighteningly near breaking point and the next ten days seemed to stretch ahead like an eternity. But beyond that there was another eternity, where she would never see Harry again.

She got through dinner like an automaton, smiling at Joshua and making meaningless remarks. He replied pleasantly because he was fond of Laurel as a man might be fond of a kitten. He thought her pretty and enjoyed her company when he wanted to relax. He liked indulging her and would have done a great deal for her if it didn't inconvenience him.

At last the dreadful evening was over, and she lay in her cold bed as the house grew silent about her. But she couldn't sleep, and after lying awake for two hours she got up and whisked a wrap over her shoulders. Candle in hand she made her way down the oak staircase to the library. She slipped inside and closed the door silently behind her. The dying embers of the fire still spread a soft pool of light on the carpet. She went nearer to warm herself, and it was only then that she saw Harry.

He was sprawled on the huge leather sofa, his head thrown back against the arm. His eyes were closed and he bore the dishevelled appearance of a man who'd returned home the worse for wear. The brandy decanter and the glass dangling from one hand told the rest of the story.

Laurel knew she should slip away before he woke, but she was rooted to the spot. She'd known Harry confident and laughing but she'd never before seen the odd look of helplessness he wore now, and it wrung her heart.

She moved forward to rescue the glass that was about to slip out of his hand. But as she began to ease it away his fingers moved over hers and tightened with a sudden jerk that pulled her down beside him. She had no will to resist and her arms seemed to find their own place round his neck. After the agony of the last few days it was a sweet relief not to fight her feelings, and as long as Harry's eyes remained closed she could tell herself he knew nothing. When she felt his arms tighten round her she yielded willingly and kissed him. There would be time for regrets later.

Then he murmured a name and her dreams shattered to fragments.

'Eugenie!' she gasped. 'How dare you?'

Driven by blind instinct, she wrenched herself out of his arms and slapped him stingingly across the face. His eyes flew open and he stared up at her with a look of amazed recognition that added the final, searing touch to her shame. For a red-hot instant all other emotion was swamped by rage at the way she'd betrayed herself. Her fingers groped on the floor for the brandy glass. She scarcely knew she'd hurled it into the fire until she heard the smashing crystal and saw the spurt of flame as the spirit hit the coals.

Harry blinked, appalled. He'd woken out of a happy dream in which Eugenie had at last thrown herself lovingly into his arms, to find himself with a smarting face. Laurel had leapt to her feet and was now glaring stormily into the flames. She turned glittering eyes on him as he approached.

'Don't dare come anywhere near me,' she warned.

'Laurel, for pity's sake, speak quietly,' he pleaded. 'You'll raise the house.'

'I don't care if I raise the dead.'

She flung off the hand he put out, and moved away. She was in the grip of an emotion that she found shocking and exhilarating. All the anger and misery she'd repressed was exploding in primitive fury.

'I'm sorry about what happened just now,' Harry said, 'but it really wasn't my fault -'

'Is anything ever your fault?' she cried, goaded by his feeble tone. She wanted Harry to fight her back, not melt away before her attack.

Harry gave her a little shake. 'Laurel,' he hissed frantically, 'remember where we are. If Uncle Josh -'

'Still looking over your shoulder for him every five minutes?' she demanded scathingly. 'Tell me, Harry, after you went back to Brussels, didn't you ever worry about what I might tell him?' With angry pleasure she noticed the sick look on his face. 'Or did you just assume I'd hold my tongue because it suited you.'

'Laurel - you didn't - ?'

'No,' she cried in rage and anguish, 'I didn't. I was fool enough to do what you wanted. "Can we keep this our secret?" you said, and I kept it. I didn't know I was giving you time to court an heiress. How you must have laughed at me, Harry!'

'Of course I didn't,' he said awkwardly. 'Darling, please -'

'Don't call me darling,' she choked. 'You just called me Eugenie.'

Harry stared at her in alarm. He'd seen this mood in men caught in long-delayed battle. It was an hysterical belligerence that fed on itself, driving the least heroic soldiers to feats of reckless bravery, making them blind and deaf to danger. Laurel was beyond reason, and if he couldn't silence her she'd bring calamity on him.

'It was an accident,' he said in an awkward, placating tone. 'I can't help what happens when I'm asleep.'

He finished with a helpless shrug that he knew females found endearing, but it was wasted.

'Were you asleep when you married Eugene?' she flung at him, 'and then left me to discover it from someone else?'

'It wasn't my fault,' he said again. 'I was trapped.' He hurried into an account of the Ferriers, their insistence that he'd compromised Eugenie, the way he'd been hustled into marriage. He made no single statement that wasn't true but he didn't clutter his explanation with details of his feelings for Eugenie or his willingness to marry her.

'Her mother threatened to go to my Colonel. What could I do? Oh, Laurel, I wish I'd married you when I had the chance.'

For a moment he meant it, for he always preferred to believe what he was saying, if possible. He could still feel the passionate warmth of her kiss while he'd been half awake, and the sensation of her body, naked beneath the thin material of her night-dress, seemed to cling to his hands.

'It's too late to say that now,' she cried, shaken with grief at his words. 'You married her.'

'I didn't have any choice,' he insisted sulkily. 'I didn't even want to call on the Ferriers in the first place, but how could I have explained that to Uncle Josh?'

'Uncle Josh,' she said scornfully. 'Always Uncle Josh! Have you no will of your own?'

'I can't afford one. I've always had to do what he wanted,' Harry complained. His whole easy-going soul cringed at the thought of this scene growing any bigger. He'd have liked to rush up to bed and pull the covers over his head as he'd done at school when caught out in some misdeed for which the punishment was a flogging.

Despite her anguish Laurel's heart was finding excuses for him. He wasn't a weakling, not really. His uncle, the circumstances, everything was against him. Laurel was seventeen and would gladly have believed anything except that her fierce young love had been given to a man who wasn't worth it. Her anger still raged, but now it was turned on a world where men had to marry girls with wealth and rank instead of the ones they loved. It wasn't Harry's fault. She was overtaken by despair. She'd tried to fight the world with her puny weapons and been defeated. Without warning she lost the battle for self-control. Sobs wrenched her apart. She turned blindly, seeking the door, but unable to find it.

'Laurel, please,' Harry stammered, horrified at her misery and at himself for causing it. 'Please darling, I didn't mean to - ' he broke off, for he had no idea what he meant, but he was too soft-hearted to bear the wretchedness of anyone he was fond of, and at that moment he'd have said anything to comfort her. He put his arms round her and held her tightly to him.

Through the haze of her wretchedness Laurel barely realised what was happening. Then she felt his hand pressing her head against his shoulder, the fingers running through her hair in an awkward caress, and she became aware that he was kissing the top of her head while he muttered meaningless words in a clumsy attempt at comfort. Lifting her face, she felt his lips lock onto hers. She threw an arm round his neck, pulling his head down hard, kissing him back hungrily until his arms tightened so that she could scarcely breathe. She knew what she was doing this time, knew what she wanted, and desired it with all the recklessness of a woman's body governed by a child's emotions.

She had one last clear-headed instant when her mind shouted that she mustn't do this, before the pounding of her heart blotted out all thought, and right and wrong were lost in the fact that she wanted him overwhelmingly. It was her he loved, not Eugenie. He belonged to her. When she looked up into Harry's eyes she saw the same blind look in them that she'd seen before, and she couldn't have stopped him then even if she'd wanted to.

He wasn't gentle with her but she barely noticed. The hands that pushed her down onto the sofa were stronger, less tentative than she remembered, and when he took her it was with a kind of angry desperation. The moment she felt him inside her she gave a great shuddering gasp and her heart seemed to stop. The darkness swam before her eyes as she held onto him, half-loving, half-fighting him. When it was over she was exhausted but her eyes were shining, and she locked her hands behind his head in a clasp in which tenderness and possession were equally mixed. He was hers again.

After a moment Harry sat up and ran shaking hands through his hair.

'Oh lord,' he said, 'I didn't mean that to happen.'

Disappointment stirred within her. That wasn't what he should have said. But she pushed the thought aside. It was natural that he should be concerned for her.

'Are you sorry it did?' she whispered.

He looked at her lying there, her night-dress still drawn up about her waist, for it wouldn't have occurred to her to cover herself from Harry's gaze. He shook his head dumbly and pushed the

material further back till her breasts gleamed softly in the semi-darkness, touching them with reverent hands. He kissed them with lips that were as gentle as they'd been rough before. Now that the first violence of his need was spent he loved her with tenderness, waiting for her to be ready for him, and finally taking her again with a slow sweetness that made her grasp him fiercely with her legs and bury her face against his neck, sobbing with the intensity of her delight.

When he'd brushed her tears away he held her to him, stroking her gently.

'It should have been you,' he whispered. 'Laurel, what are we going to do?'

'Love each other - and think of something,' she said. She was blind to everything but the dizzying fact that she'd won Harry back.

If he loved her he'd find a way for them to be together. Her heart was content with that.

\*

There were times when Fate took your hand and invited you to show the way, and Laurel knew this was such a time with her. Everything conspired in her favour, even Uncle Josh, who suddenly wanted to talk about the old days, and occupied Constance and Maria with relentless reminiscences. He dismissed the two young people from these sessions, declaring that they gave him the fidgets, so Maria's plan to keep a close watch on her daughter was thwarted, and Harry and Laurel were free to be together. They discovered an unoccupied labourer's cottage that made the perfect trysting place.

Spring came early that year. The daffodils were open in the woods, and to Laurel the golden carpet spread before them was an omen of their life to come.

When March was nearly two weeks old they arrived back at the stables one afternoon to find a noisy altercation going on between Jacob Price and his father.

'Dang me if you ain't the ungratefulest whelp I ever did know,' Old Price was howling. 'And don't keep oppin' about like that.'

'I gotta get me things ready if I'm to be off,' came Jacob's sullen voice.

'You ain't goin' nowhere, you 'ear? Will you keep still and listen to me?'

'Ain't no point in keepin' still and listenin' if I ain't gonna take no notice,' retorted Jacob with invincible logic.

Laurel and Harry had dismounted and were watching the little scene. Jacob was limping back and forth while his father trotted after him, yapping like a small, furious terrier.

'I'm goin' and that's flat,' Jacob declared.

'You, a man with one good leg,' Old Price jeered.

'They'll need every man they can get to fight Boney now,' Jacob said solidly.

'Boney?' Harry exclaimed. The two combatants looked round.

'Boney's got away,' Jacob said, his eyes gleaming. 'Flitted off Elba sharp as you like. There'll be a

helluva battle now and no mistake. Beg pardon, miss,' he added hastily, seeing Laurel.

But she didn't hear him. A battle, when she'd thought Harry was finally safe. He was staring at Jacob. 'It isn't possible,' he said.

'It's a fact,' insisted Jacob, outraged at this reluctance to believe good news. 'It's in the newspaper.'

'Oh, you've been reading the newspaper?' said Old Price with deep scorn. He'd reared his sons to be as illiterate as himself and proud of it.

'It is, I tell you,' Jacob insisted. 'I went to get 'is Lordship's Times in Manchester, and they was all makin' a big fuss about summat, so I made'em tell me, and someone showed me where it was writ in the paper. 'Is lordship will 'ave it by now.'

'Never mind what 'is lordship 'as or 'asn't got,' said Old Price belligerently. 'Even if you got 'old of the right end o' this - and I don't s'pose you 'ave, 'cos you never did 'ave more sense than you needed to get to the Woodpecker's Arms and back without drownin' in a ditch on the way - ' he paused for breath and sought vainly for the thread of his argument, 'what for you gotta go rushin' off like a duck in a thunderstorm?'

'I reckon you're the lucky one, Mr 'Arry,' said Jacob, casting a glance of loathing at his parent. 'Ain't no naggin' old scroat trying to keep you 'ere when you wanna be 'avin' a go at Boney.'

Harry grinned. 'I'm sorry to spoil your fun, Jacob, but we didn't just exile Boney, we deposed him. He hasn't got an army now. There won't be any battle.'

As they walked away Laurel said anxiously, 'Do you really believe that?'

'Of course. Think how long it would take for this news to get to London, and then how long it takes for The Times to reach here. Bonaparte must have escaped ten days ago. Lord knows what's happened in that time.'

Harry's estimate turned out to have erred on the side of caution. The Times gave the date of the escape as February 27th. Since it was now March 14th it was obvious that no one knew the real situation.

'I see no reason for you to cut short your leave and worry your mother,' Joshua declared.

Laurel breathed again. But as the days passed and no news reached them of Napoleon's recapture the danger began to loom once more in her mind, giving every moment alone with Harry a piercing quality. To her relief he showed no anxiety to be off.

'Mind you, a lively battle would be preferable to the boredom that awaits us tomorrow,' he groaned one afternoon as they lay in each other's arms.

She chuckled. 'That's no way to speak of Cousin Cecil.'

'I don't mind him so much. At least he talks like a rational man, even if he is dry as dust and makes his disapproval of me insultingly obvious. It's that appalling, overdressed wife of his and their dreadful son. Why Uncle Josh invited them to dinner I can't imagine.'

'To do you honour,' said Laurel solemnly.

'If it's supposed to be an honour to have Sylvester giving me that horse-laugh of his and asking if I've shot any peasants lately -'

'You made that up,' she said, beginning to laugh.

'Word of honour, that's what he said to me last time I was home. There'd been a riot in Manchester. The handloom weavers were smashing the machines in a factory, or some such thing. The military had been called in and one or two of the weavers were killed.'

'But that didn't involve you, surely?'

'Lord no, it happened while I was away. But that's not the point. It's a nasty business turning dragoons on civilians. It reflects on the whole army, and Sylvester would have been wiser to hold his tongue.'

Laurel sighed and snuggled closer to him, too happy and fulfilled to pursue the subject.

'Perhaps Uncle Josh is looking Cecil over in case anything happens to me,' Harry mused. 'After all, he's the next heir.'

'But you said there isn't going to be a battle,' she said frantically.

'No more there is. I was funning.'

'You mustn't. Not about a subject like that.'

She tried to shake off his words but they stayed with her and she woke next morning to a greyness of spirit that nothing would ease. After lunch her mother showed her a letter she'd received that morning. Her manner was triumphant.

'It's as I thought,' she said. 'my cousins write that they'll be delighted to have you.'

Laurel tried to make the right replies but her thoughts were on the plans she and Harry must make for their escape.

She dressed for dinner with care. Uncle Josh might dislike Cecil but family pride made him treat him with outward respect. Cecil had been born a poor relation of an aristocratic family. Instead of presuming on his noble relatives he'd turned to law and had the shrewdness to marry his wealthy employer's daughter. He was now a private banker as well as lawyer. In both capacities he'd made a large fortune, which won Lord Averham's respect without mitigating his dislike. They now lived in Manchester, in fashionable King Street, with their four children.

Their eldest, nineteen-year-old Sylvester, accompanied them to dinner at the Priory. To her distaste, Laurel found herself sitting next to him and had to endure his neighing laugh and constant attempts to ogle her bosom. Eventually she fixed her wrap firmly in place and glared at him until he was covered in confusion and looked away. Now she was free to listen to Cecil who had recently been to Paris on business.

'I hadn't intended to return to England quite so soon,' he said in his thin, dry voice, which so perfectly matched his looks, 'but when the news of Bonaparte's escape reached the city there was a rush to be gone. Having no wish to be involved in an undignified scramble, I brought my wife home at once.'

'Don't tell me anyone takes all this seriously,' Joshua growled. 'Bonaparte will be seized any day.'

'I fancy not,' Cecil said. 'He still commands much support in France.'

Lizzie, his wife, leaned forward so that her huge bosom rested slightly on the table. Two hours with the most expensive maid she could acquire, and her own taste, had turned her out looking like a gaudy parrot. The purple ostrich feathers in her hair quivered with every gesture and she spoke in an habitual titter.

'I bought the sweetest little bust of Napoleon from a street market,' she said, 'but my lord and master insisted on smashing it out of fear for my safety if anyone saw.'

Laurel, every nerve at screaming pitch, thought that if there was one thing that grated on her more than Lizzie's titters it was her habit of referring to a husband half her size as her lord and master. Lizzie, who'd been unwed and unsought till an ambitious, cold-eyed young lawyer had joined her father's firm, still spoke as if she'd been swept off her feet by her suitor's masterful passion.

'On our return to England we stayed in London for a few days,' Cecil continued with a repressive glance at his wife. 'I took the opportunity to dine with Nathan Rothschild and hear his news.' He paused to allow his listeners to appreciate his familiarity with the great financier. He didn't feel it necessary to add that he'd been one of many at that dinner.

'Rothschild has his own sources of information that are considerably ahead of the official channels,' he continued, 'which is why I can tell you more than you'll learn from the newspapers.'

Joshua gave an exaggerated sigh. 'We take the point, Cecil, that you are the man of the moment. Now for the love of heaven will you have the decency to tell us what you know and waste no more time boasting about how you know it?'

Sylvester neighed and received his father's most quelling look before Cecil continued, 'France is welcoming Bonaparte with cries of Vive l'Empereur! The army is going over to him in droves.'

Constance gave a little scream and seemed about to faint. Lizzie and Maria fluttered round her in a consoling manner but Laurel stared, white-faced, at Cecil. It wasn't true. It couldn't be true.

Maria supported the weeping Constance into the tea-room where they remained for an interminable hour until they were joined by the men. Constance immediately claimed Harry on the grounds that he was about to depart for unknown dangers. Cecil's lip curled contemptuously at this vapouring over a young man of whom he held small opinion. Harry, seeing this, gained revenge by slapping Sylvester on the back and offering to introduce him to a recruiting sergeant, provoking a commotion in which Sylvester and his mother were equally involved. Joshua watched the whole scene with glee and even went so far as to give his nephew a word of approval. Laurel ground her nails into her palms as she realised that everyone was taking it for granted that Harry would leave at once.

She saw that his cup was empty and moved quickly to the tea-table. He came over, smiling,

'I've been waiting to speak to you,' he said softly. 'I wanted to ask you -'

Joshua called his name and Harry turned for a moment to answer a question. Laurel poured tea

with an unsteady hand. Her heart was beating with excitement.

'Yes,' she said as he turned back to her. 'Ask me what?'

'What was the matter with you earlier today? You came out of your mother's room with a face like a thundercloud. Why were you upset?'

He gave her his sweet smile which at any other time would have turned her heart over. But now she felt only disappointment that he wasted their time speaking of trivialities.

'That was nothing,' she said impatiently. 'Mother wants me to go and live with some cousins near London.'

'But that means you'll be gone when I come back,' he said, dismayed. 'We won't see each other anymore.'

For a moment she didn't take in the significance of his words. Then a sick feeling invaded her. She breathed hard against it and fixed her eyes on Harry's face.

'Are you ill?' he asked anxiously.

'No, it's just that - that's not quite what I thought you'd say.'

'Did you think I wouldn't care that it's over, after what we've been to each other?'

Anger came to her rescue, clearing her head and supporting her courage.

'After what we've been to each other,' she repeated, giving the words a biting emphasis, 'I hadn't expected you to say that it was over.'

He frowned and glanced nervously over his shoulder. 'But my dearest girl, what else can it be? You know I'm married.'

'You don't have to stay married,' she whispered frantically. 'If Eugenie knew, she'd divorce you - '

'What?'

As she heard his horrified exclamation she realised that the idea of divorce had never entered his head. The sickness was there again, threatening to engulf her.

'That first night, in the library, you said, "What are we going to do?"' she reminded him, fighting for calm.

'Yes, but I didn't mean - oh Lord, I don't know what I did mean. Just that it was an unholy mess, I suppose.'

And there it was, his view of everything that had been between them: an unholy mess. She clutched the edge of the table, feeling as if she were drowning.

Harry saw her suppressed violence trembling on the edge of breaking out, and dread took hold of him. He must find some way to silence her before she lost control and brought calamity on him.

'Laurel, can't we just be grateful for what we've been to each other, for a while. I'm sorry if you thought it was more but -' Sweat stood out on his brow and fear drove him to a weak man's brutality. 'Dammit, a gentleman doesn't marry the housekeeper's daughter.'

The sickness had risen in a tide, turning her vision black. She felt her cheek hit the table and heard the sound of smashing china as she fell. The last thing she saw was Harry's face, full of shame.

It was dark when she awoke and it took her a while to realise she was in her own room. She'd been undressed and put to bed. Her mother appeared and tenderly stroked her forehead. Laurel turned her face to the wall and lay there, stony-eyed, as the night passed away and the cracks between the curtains became lighter. She rejected an offer of breakfast with loathing.

By mid-day she knew the worst. Harry had left at first light to rejoin his regiment. He was twenty miles away by now.

### CHAPTER THREE

Major Daniel Royce felt as if his aching body would soon break apart, but there was no chance of easing his position in the saddle where he seemed to have been sitting, motionless, for hours. The sun was unseasonably hot for the first week in April, as if it had reserved its fiercest energy for today, of all days, when cool weather would have been appreciated by the two thousand cavalry troops drawn up in ranks while their commander reviewed them.

Most of the men in those ranks had spent the previous evening dining, dancing or simply drinking in Brussels until the small hours, before riding back to their billets. The glittering social life of the city was a distraction from military discipline, but that only put an extra stiffness into the backs held in perfect rigidity under Lord Uxbridge's gimlet eye. At last he grunted his satisfaction and the review was over.

As the ranks relaxed and began to break up there was a wave of movement from the crowd that had gathered in carriages to watch the parade from a nearby incline. Bonnets turned, small gloved hands were waved in greeting, and a number of hussars began to make their way across. Major Royce sat for a moment staring at the carriages, his brow puckered as he tried to make out a particular one.

'She hasn't come,' said a cheerfully ribald voice at his side. 'She's tired of you m'boy.'

Major Royce turned and regarded the plump, amiable figure of Lt. Colonel Sir Frederick Yarnley.

'No,' he said with a grin. 'How to lose a lady's interest after only four weeks is an art you never managed to teach me, Yarnley. She'll be here.'

He cantered off before his friend could decide whether to give amusement or indignation the upper hand. Yarnley was joined by a slim, elegant young officer who wore his uniform with a

dandified air that implied it had been designed for him personally.

'What's his game?' Yarnley demanded, his eyes on Major Royce, who seemed to have spotted his quarry.

Lord Pelham followed his gaze. 'I suppose the fair Eugenie has arrived,' he observed laconically.

'She's an odd choice for one of Royce's flirts.'

'Too virtuous?' Pelham hazarded from the depths of his knowledge of the Major's character.

'Well if she ain't, she ought to be. The girl's only been married two months -'

'And flirts as if she wasn't married at all,' Pelham finished. 'Or as if she'd been married for years and had a complaisant husband. Is her husband complaisant, by the way?'

'No, but he ain't here,' said Yarnley. 'He'll be back soon, though. Royce ought to think of that.'

'Him?' Pelham demanded sceptically. 'Did you ever know him think further ahead than the next dance, the next race or the next bottle?'

'That's true,' said Yarnley, much struck.

They moved off in search of their own ladies. It was a rare officer who couldn't boast at least one sweetheart, especially since the news of Bonaparte's escape had spiced a thousand romances with the promising ingredient of danger, and invested the military with the glamour of saviours.

As they neared the incline Pelham and Yarnley could see the Major beside a phaeton driven by a sleek, well-fed young man with black hair and an uncanny resemblance to a neutered cat. Beside him sat a dainty young girl with the same black hair framing a pale, heart-shaped face out of which peered huge dark eyes, fringed by lashes almost too long to be natural. Dressed in blue, which made her perfect complexion look almost transparent, she was as delicious as a kitten, and Major Royce seemed to be happily under her spell. As his two friends watched he lifted one of her little hands and pressed it gallantly to his lips before wheeling his horse away.

'Who was the man?' Pelham asked as the three of them rode back to their billet.

'That was her brother François,' Major Royce informed them.

'And doesn't he mind about his sister's reputation?' Pelham enquired.

'François doesn't mind about anything except where his next bottle of Chambertin is coming from. Since he usually does know, he leads a happy life.'

'Yes, the Ferriers are as rich as Croesus,' Yarnley mused. 'Harry Wallace nearly got run through from several directions when he carried Eugenie off. Lucky dog! You should have made your mark sooner, Royce. It's no use having the lady languishing for you if the money's in her husband's pocket.'

'But is it?' the Major asked enigmatically.

'Don't tell me Harry Wallace didn't collect a dowry worth a king's ransom,' Yarnley spluttered.

'He may have been promised it, but whether he collects it is another matter,' Royce pointed out.

'You mean it's all a take-in?' Yarnley exclaimed, scandalised. 'Ferrier ain't a rich man?'

'Not nearly as rich as he's reputed,' Royce confirmed. 'At least, so François says. After the second bottle he becomes confiding. I'm going into town with him this evening. He's promised to show me a place in the suburbs where -'

'Not tonight!' said his friends with one voice.

'To the devil with you both!' the Major adjured them impatiently.

'Not tonight,' Pelham repeated. 'You've got to be at your best tomorrow, honour of the regiment and all that.'

The following day would see a picnic, hosted by the 7th, 10th and 15th regiments of hussars, followed by fiercely contested races. The officers of the tenth, to which Royce, Pelham and Yarnley belonged, were expected to do well in the events, and some of those expectations were pinned on Major Royce. Hence his friends' concern.

The Major was inclined to take umbrage at the suggestion that a further night's carousing could affect his performance, and a heated argument ensued. It ended in what they all chose to regard as a compromise. Pelham and Yarnley joined the expedition, which in theory gave them the chance to keep an eye on their friend, and which in practice ensured that the occasion was three times as rowdy as it might otherwise have been.

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It was strange, Eugenie thought, that François had never been known to express an interest in any lady, because his ability to notice details of feminine finery made him the perfect escort, even for his own sister. On the journey from Brussels he'd commented approvingly on her new blue velvet pelisse and matching bonnet, and when she stretched forth a dainty foot encased the softest black, Spanish leather he'd whistled and made what she thought a very vulgar enquiry about the price. Naturally she had no knowledge of such a detail. The shop had been instructed to send the bill to her husband.

Brother and sister were not friends, but wary allies. Eugenie knew what she was expected to do in return for his escort and on the journey home she said,

'I'll speak to Papa tonight. He'll complain and swear that never, never again will he pay your debts. But he will yield in the end.'

'He will if you ask him,' François said comfortably.

'Papa will do anything for me,' Eugenie agreed.

As always François was diverted by the way his sister's manner altered when she slipped back into her native tongue; her air, which had been tremulous and helpless while she conversed with Major Royce, now became brisk and assertive. In fact, thought François with a shudder, it became exactly like their mother's.

'I can't imagine why you needed me this afternoon,' he mused as they bowled along in the

phaeton. 'I can think of half a dozen English officers who would gladly have escorted you.'

'Papa would have made a fuss,' Eugenie declared with a resigned shrug. 'He's become so straight-laced since I married Henri, and lectures me about how I must be discreet, so that my husband doesn't return to find scandal dishonouring his name. Papa to talk of scandal!' Her sceptical tone revealed the extent of the Comte's failure to conceal his peccadillos from his children.

'Perhaps Papa fears that Henri will repudiate you, and leave you on his hands,' François suggested.

Vague memories of her father's strenuous efforts to send her to England with her husband stirred in Eugenie's brain, but she dismissed them. 'That's absurd,' she said. 'Why should Henri repudiate me?'

From this François deduced that whatever Eugenie might guess about her father's light o' loves, certain other, even more disquieting rumours, hadn't yet reached her. He merely said, 'If Henri returns to find himself in competition with half the officers in the British army he might feel that marrying you had been a waste of time.' \*

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## **Lucky in love is lucky enough**

Bright-eyed housekeeper's daughter, Laurel, has her eyes and, more importantly, her heart set on marrying her childhood friend, and soon-to-be Earl, Harry.

After having her fortune read at the local fete, she discovers that her fate is to be wealthy and of high rank someday, and, most of all, to marry a fair boy.

Her heart full of her wonderful future, she meets a young disenchanted soldier, Daniel, who is blighted by the woes of war.

Little does she know that, in handing him her lucky penny, his star will rise as hers falls, and their fates will be irrevocably and tragically intertwined forever.

Sure enough, soon after leaving Daniel, Laurel finds her sweetheart is sent to war, and, not only that, but has met a young Belgian notable, fallen in love and eloped, leaving Laurel stricken.

Meanwhile, Daniel is rising fast through the military ranks, moving through battles from strength to strength.

Jilted, Laurel waits in anguish for Harry's return to Norley to see how things will have changed, but to her surprise she finds they haven't, he is even more passionate than before.

All is well for a while, until Napoleon strikes again and Harry is called away to battle once more.

Now Laurel finds herself alone and pregnant in a world that spawns such a thing.

When Harry's uncle, Joshua, steps in and offers to raise the child as his own, Laurel is in no position to refuse and soon she finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage and questioning her husband's motives.

Why had Harry's Uncle been so keen to marry a ruined, young woman?

Will Laurel and Harry ever find their happily ever after?

And are Daniel and Laurel's path's destined to cross forever more?

Set in 19th Century England, *Crown of Laurel* is a passionate novel of star-crossed lovers in a time that did not believe in true love over social ascent.

Praise for Lucy Gordon

'A charming historical romance'; - **Holly Kinsella**, best-selling author of *Uptown Girl*

**Lucy Gordon** began working life on a British women's magazine, where she interviewed famous men like Sir Roger Moore, Sir Alec Guinness, Warren Beatty, Richard Chamberlain and Charlton Heston. But since 1984, she has been publishing her romance novels; twice winning the Romance Writers of America RITA Award for the Best Traditional Romance. She is now married to a Venetian artist and together, they have lived in different parts of Italy, though currently reside in her native England.

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