



Heartless

By Mary Balogh

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Ten years later, fate has brought him back home to England as head of the family who rejected him. Unwilling as he is to be involved with them, he must assume responsibility for his younger siblings, the family estate he once loved—and the succession. He faces the prospect of marrying with the greatest reluctance—until he sees beguiling Lady Anna Marlowe across a ballroom one night.

Anna, far from being the bright-eyed innocent Luke takes her for, is no more a stranger to the shadows of a painful past than he is. But for her, marriage cannot so easily solve what is wrong in her life—not when a tormentor stalks her to the very doors of Bowden Abbey, where Luke and Anna must learn to trust in each other or risk any chance they may have for a happy future.

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Heartless By Mary Balogh Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #107835 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-07-07
- Released on: 2015-07-07
- Format: Kindle eBook



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Editorial Review

Review

Everyone loves Mary Balogh!

"One of the best!"—*New York Times* bestselling author Julia Quinn

"Balogh is today's superstar heir to the marvelous legacy of Georgette Heyer, (except a lot steamier!)"—*New York Times* bestselling author Susan Elizabeth Phillips

"With her brilliant, beautiful and emotionally intense writing Mary Balogh sets the gold standard in historical romance."—*New York Times* bestselling author Jayne Ann Krentz

"When it comes to historical romance, Mary Balogh is one of my favorites!"—*New York Times* bestselling author Eloisa James

About the Author

Mary Balogh grew up in Wales and now lives with her husband, Robert, in Saskatchewan, Canada. She has written more than one hundred historical novels and novellas, more than thirty of which have been *New York Times* bestsellers. They include the Bedwyn saga, the Simply quartet, the Huxtable quintet, the seven-part Survivors' Club series, and the Westcott series.

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Dear Reader,

I am very delighted that *Heartless* (with its companion piece, *Silent Melody*, to follow next month) is being republished in this lovely edition. It has one of my all-time favorite heroes. The story is set in eighteenth-century England, an earlier era than my usual Regency setting. I made the change deliberately so that I could dress up my characters in all the splendid plumage of the time. Lucas Kendrick, Duke of Harndon, has just returned from Paris, undisputed center of the fashionable world, having unexpectedly inherited his title and position as head of the family that had spurned and exiled him many years before. Now he has power to wield and old scores to settle, and he looks upon his world with a cold and dangerous cynicism.

I enjoyed creating that very masculine aspect of his character, but I positively reveled in clothing him in all his Parisian splendor. He attends a ball early in the book in a wide-skirted scarlet coat and a gold waistcoat, both sparkling with gold embroidery, while white lace froths at his neck and wrists. He wears satin knee breeches with white stockings and jeweled shoes with high red heels. His long hair is powdered and crisply curled at the sides and bagged at the back, and he wears cosmetics and carries a fan. But he also carries at his side a jewel-hilted sword with which he is said to be more than ordinarily adept, and for all the languid grace of his manner, there is that look in his eyes—a look he soon directs across the ballroom at Lady Anna Marlowe.

And so begins a passion-fraught love story that kept me pounding the keyboard until they had found their happily-ever-after. I hope you enjoy seeing the two sides of Luke as much as I did creating them. And I hope

you consider Anna a worthy heroine for him.

Mary Balogh

1

“FAITH, child,” Lady Sterne said to her goddaughter, “’tis time you gave some thought to yourself. Always it has been your family—first your mama, may God rest her soul, and then your papa, may God rest his, and always your brother and the girls. Well, now, Victor is of age and has come into his inheritance, Charlotte has married, Agnes is as pretty as a spring meadow and is like to marry as soon as we have presented her to some eligible gentlemen, and Emily . . . Well, you just cannot make yourself a martyr to your youngest sister. ’Tis time you looked to your own interests.”

Lady Anna Marlowe smiled and watched her younger sister at the other end of the gallery being fitted out for fashionable clothes suitable to be worn in London. Bolts of fabric, mostly silks and shimmering satins, were piled on tables, some of them partly unrolled. There was some excitement about the scene and about the anticipation of seeing the clothes made and worn, she had to admit.

“Agnes is eighteen, Aunt Marjorie,” she said. “I am five-and-twenty. On the shelf, one might say.”

“And I vow that is where you wish to stay,” Lady Sterne said sharply. “Life slips by fast, child, and increases in pace as one gets older, I swear. And life can become filled with regrets for what one might have done in the past but did not do. ’Tis not too late for you to seek a husband, but in another year or two perhaps it will be. Men do not look for breeders among women who are staring thirty years in the face—and men of course look for breeders when they choose mates. You have a great deal of love to give, Anna. You should now be looking to giving it to a husband and to receiving love in return—and position and security.”

That last point hit home. Victor, Anna’s only brother, had recently celebrated his twenty-first birthday. With university days behind him and his title still new to him—he had been the Earl of Royce since Papa’s death a little more than a year ago—he was soon to return home to take up his responsibilities there. And he was newly betrothed. Where did that leave her? Anna wondered. And Agnes and Emily? Suddenly their home did not seem quite home any longer. Not that Victor would turn them out, or Constance for that matter. But one did not like to intrude on a newly married couple in their own home—especially not in the status of spinster sister.

She was a spinster. Anna clasped her hands rather tightly in her lap. But she could not marry. The thought brought with it the familiar shortness of breath and coldness in her head. She fought off the dizziness.

“I brought Agnes to London at your urging, Aunt,” she said. “’Tis more likely that she will find an eligible husband here than in the neighborhood of Elm Court. If she can be settled, I will be content.”

“Lud, child,” her godmother said, “I urged you to *bring* your sister, not send her. I intended that you both find husbands. But you most of all, Anna. You are my godchild—my only one. Agnes is nothing to me except the daughter of my dear Lucy. For although you are all sweet enough to call me aunt, I am no such thing, you know. I see that Madame Delacroix has all but finished with her measurements.” She got to her feet. “I will have you, too, decked out properly for town, my dear. Excuse my bluntness, but you look quite rustic. Even your hoops— they should be twice the size they are.”

“Large hoops look quite ridiculous,” Anna said. Ridiculous, but wondrously feminine and pretty, she thought

treacherously. And her godmother had just reminded her that there was no real tie between her and Agnes. Could she be expected to take Agnes about to all the social events at which it was to be hoped she would attract a husband? Was not that Anna's responsibility? And would not it be wonderfully exhilarating to dress fashionably and to go about in society just a few times? Just for a short while?

I will return. And of course you will be here when I do so. You will remember, my Anna, that you are mine? Body and soul? The voice was as vivid in her head as if the man who had uttered them stood at her shoulder and spoke the words now. They had been spoken a year ago at Elm Court. A long time ago and a long way away. He would not come back. And even if he did, it would surely do no harm to enjoy herself a little before he did. She was only twenty-five. And really there had been very little enjoyment in her life. Surely just a little. . . . It was not as if she was going to be in search of a husband, after all. She knew very well that she could never marry.

"Well, perhaps," she said, getting to her feet to stand beside Lady Sterne, "I could have a few new clothes made so that I will not shame you if I do venture out with you once or twice."

"Lud, child," her godmother said, "'twould be difficult for you to do that when you have such beauty. Nevertheless, fashion is of importance. Come." She linked her arm through Anna's and moved her forward across the room. "Let us proceed before you change your mind."

Agnes was flushed and bright-eyed and was exclaiming that she could not possibly need all the clothes Madame Delacroix claimed to be the bare essentials for a young lady of quality making her first appearance in society. Anna's heart went out to her sister. She was eighteen years old and had been in mourning for two years—first for Mama and then for Papa. Even before that Mama had been ill with consumption and Papa had been—well, he had been ill too. And there had been the poverty. There had been very little chance for Agnes to enjoy her youth.

"Lud, child," Lady Sterne said to Agnes, "'twould not do at all, you know, for you to be seen in the same dresses time and again. Madame knows her job. Besides, she has had strict instructions from me. And now 'tis Anna's turn."

Lady Sterne had insisted from the start that she would bear all the expenses of the few months to be spent in London. It would be a dream come true for her, she claimed, to have two young ladies to take about and introduce to society. She had never had children of her own. Anna had brought some money with her—Victor had insisted that she take some from the estate though it would be years before he could expect to make it prosper again. And perhaps he never would if . . . But Anna refused to pursue the thought. She was not going to think about any of that for a month or two. She was going to give herself a chance to heal a little. She had told her godmother that she would keep a strict account of all that was spent on her and Agnes, that she would consider it a loan to be repaid when she was able.

And so, after all, she found herself being taken into the capable hands of Madame Delacroix and measured and poked and prodded and pricked and draped. It seemed that she stood still for hours while discussing with the two older ladies fabrics and trimmings and designs for petticoats, stomachers, open gowns, closed gowns, sack dresses—it was all very dizzying. She was laced into stays far tighter than she was accustomed to and looked down in some embarrassment—and some fascination—at the way they pushed up her breasts, making them seem larger and more feminine. And she was tied into whalebone hoops so wide that she wondered how she would pass through doorways.

She enjoyed every moment.

How wonderful it was, she thought, to feel young and free. Not that she was either in reality. Youth had

passed her by. And as for freedom . . . well. She felt slightly nauseated for a moment when she remembered how very much she was not free. If *he* should come back from America as he had sworn he would . . . But she was not trying to break free forever. Merely for a couple of months. Surely he would not begrudge her that much time even if he knew about it.

How wonderful it would be to feel youthful and free for two whole months.

"I vow, child," Lady Sterne said when the fitting was finally over, "the years are falling off you by the minute. You have had a hard time and have remained devoted to your family throughout. Now is the time for yourself. And 'tis not too late. As I live, I am going to find you a very special husband."

Anna laughed. "'Twill be enough to attend a few balls and concerts, Aunt," she said. "I will remember it all for a lifetime. I have no need of a husband."

"Pshaw!" said her godmother briskly.

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"Egad, but you made us all look like bumpkins tonight, lad," Theodore, Lord Quinn said, slapping his thigh with delight as he seated himself in a deep chair in his nephew's library and took a glass of brandy from a valet's hand before the man was dismissed. He laughed heartily. "'Twas the fan that really slayed 'em."

Lucas Kendrick, Duke of Harndon, was neither drinking nor sitting. He stood elegantly propped against the marble mantel. He raised the fan to which his uncle had just referred, a small ivory and gold affair, and opened it to waft it languidly in front of his face. "It serves to cool one's brow in a warm room," he said. "It has a purely practical function, my dear."

His uncle was in a mood to be amused. He laughed afresh. "Pox on it, Luke," he said, "'tis pure affectation as are the powder and rouge and patches."

His nephew raised his eyebrows. "You would have me appear in society half naked, Theo?" he asked.

"Not me, lad," Lord Quinn said. He took a sizable mouthful from his glass, savored it for a few moments on his tongue and then swallowed. "I have spent time in Paris and know how men dress and behave there. Though even there, as I remember, you have a reputation for leading fashion rather than following it. 'Tis perhaps a good thing that you also have a reputation as a deadly shot and swordsman, or it might almost be thought . . ."

"Yes?" The clear gray eyes of his nephew narrowed slightly and the fan stilled in his hands. "What might almost be thought?"

But his uncle merely laughed and looked him over from head to toe with leisurely appreciation. His amused eyes took in the powdered hair neatly set into two rolls on either side of the head, the long hair caught behind into a black silk bag and tied in a large bow at the nape of his neck—it was his own hair, not a wig—the austere handsome face with its dusting of powder and blush of rouge and one black patch; the dark blue silk coat with its full skirts and silver lining and lavish silver embroidery and facings; the silver waistcoat with blue embroidery; the tight gray knee breeches and white silk stockings; the silver-buckled shoes with their high red heels. The Duke of Harndon was the very epitome of Parisian splendor. And then, of course, there was the dress sword at his side with its sapphire-jeweled hilt, a weapon with which his grace was said to be more than ordinarily adept.

"I refuse to answer, lad," Lord Quinn said at last, "on the grounds that I do not fancy having the tip of that sword poking out from my backbone. But it was kind of you to leave White's Club early tonight. You will be the topic of conversation there for the rest of the night, I warrant you." He chuckled once more. "The fan, Luke. Zounds, but I swear Jessop very near swallowed his port, glass and all, when you first drew it out and opened it."

"If you will remember, Theo," Luke said, fanning himself again, not participating in the laughter, "I left Paris with the greatest reluctance. You talked me into it. But I'll be damned before you also talk me into becoming the typical English gentleman, stalking about my land with ill-fitting frock coat and staff in hand and hounds at heel and English ale in my stomach and English oaths on my lips. Don't expect it of me."

"Hark ye, Luke," his uncle said, suddenly serious. "If I had to persuade you to come back home, 'twas only because you would not take the responsibility on your own shoulders and everything is like to go to wrack and ruin at Bowden Abbey in your absence."

"Perhaps," the Duke of Harndon said coldly, "I do not care the snap of two fingers what happens to Bowden Abbey and all who live there, Theo. I have done well enough without them for the past ten years."

"Nay, lad," his uncle said, "I know you better than most. Cold you may appear to be when you are not charming the ladies and coaxing the most lovely of them into your bed, and cold you may have the right to be after the unjust way you were treated. But I know that the Luke of ten years ago is still in large measure the Luke of today. You care, lad. Besides, there is such a thing as responsibility. You are the Duke of Harndon now and have been for two years."

"I never looked for such a position," Luke said, "or expected it, Theo. There was George older than me, and George married ten years ago." There was something resembling a sneer in his voice for a moment. "One might have expected there to be male issue in the eight years before his death."

"Aye," his uncle said. "But there was only the one son, stillborn, Luke. Like it or not, you are the head of the family, and they need you."

"They have a strange way of showing need," Luke said, fanning himself slowly again. "If 'twere not for you, Theo, I would not even know if any of them lived or all were dead. And if they are in need, they may be sorry if I begin to answer it."

"'Tis time for old wounds to be healed," his uncle said, "and the awkwardness of a long and mutual silence to be overcome. Ashley and Doris were too young to be held responsible for anything that happened, and your mother, my sister—well, your mother is as proud as you, lad. And Henrietta . . ." He shrugged expressively, unable to complete the sentence.

"And Henrietta is George's widow," Luke said quietly, his fan still.

"Aye." Lord Quinn sighed. "You have begun badly, lad, leasing this house instead of taking up residence at Harndon House. 'Twill be thought strange that you live here while your mother, brother and sister are there."

"You forget, my dear," Luke said, looking keenly at his uncle from beneath half-lowered eyelids, "that I care not one fig for what people think."

"Aye, 'tis so." Lord Quinn drained his glass. "But you have not even called on them."

Luke sat down at last, crossing one leg elegantly over the other. He set down his fan and withdrew an

enameled, jeweled snuffbox from a pocket. He set a pinch of snuff on the back of one hand and proceeded unhurriedly to sniff it up each nostril before replying.

“No,” he said, “I have not waited upon them yet, my dear. Perhaps I will do so tomorrow or the next day. Perhaps not.”

“And yet you came home,” his uncle reminded him.

“I came to England,” the duke said. “To London. Perhaps I came out of curiosity, Theo, to find how it has changed in ten years. Perhaps I grew restless and bored in Paris. Perhaps I have grown tired of Angélique. Though she has followed me here. Did you know?”

“The Marquise d’Étienne?” Lord Quinn asked. “Sometimes known as the most beautiful woman in France?”

“None other,” Luke said. “And I would have to agree with public opinion. But she has been my mistress for almost six months. I usually make three the upper limit. Mistresses are not easy to shed after three months. They become possessive.”

Lord Quinn chuckled.

“Of course,” his nephew said, “everyone knows that you have kept the same mistress for ten years or more, Theo.”

“Fifteen,” his uncle said. “And she is not possessive, Luke. She still refuses to marry me whenever conscience prompts me to broach the subject of matrimony.”

“A paragon,” Luke said.

“You will return to Bowden?” his uncle asked casually.

“You would make a masterful conspirator, my dear,” his nephew said. “First one small step and then another until your victim has finally done all you set out to persuade him to do. No, not Bowden. I have no wish to return there. I have no love for the place.”

“And yet,” his uncle reminded him, “’tis yours, Luke. Many people there depend upon you, and word has it that ’tis not being run as well as it might. Rents are high and wages are low and cottages are falling into disrepair.”

The Duke of Harndon fanned his face again and looked at Lord Quinn with keen eyes. “I was called a murderer ten years ago,” he said. “By my own family, Theo. I was twenty years old and as naive as—well, complete the simile for yourself. What is as incredibly naive as I was at the age of twenty? I was forced to flee and all my abject, pleading letters were returned to me. I was cut off without a penny. I made my own way in life without help from any of my family, except you. Am I now to go back to make everything right for them?”

His uncle smiled, but it was a gentle smile, without any of the humor he had shown earlier. “In a word, yes, my lad,” he said. “And you know it too. You are here, are you not?”

The duke inclined his head to acknowledge the hit but made no reply.

“What you really ought to do,” Lord Quinn said, “is take a wife, Luke. ’Twould be easier for you to return, perhaps, if you were married, and ’tis time you set about producing heirs.”

His nephew's stare had become icy and haughty. "I have an heir," he said. "Ashley may succeed me when I die as I succeeded George."

"There is frequently dissension between brothers when the one is the other's heir," Lord Quinn said.

"As there was between George and me?" Luke fanned his face slowly. "But it was not because I was his heir, Theo. And until he was four-and-twenty and I twenty, we were the best of friends. I never remember coveting the title despite what must have been said afterward. There was one specific cause of our quarrel. I very near killed him, did I not? One inch lower, the physician said. One inch. I was a poor shot in those days." There was coldness, almost bitterness in his voice.

"This is spring," Lord Quinn said. "The time when almost the whole of the fashionable world is in town, Luke. The perfect time for selecting a bride eligible for a duke's bed."

"This duke is not in search of a life's partner," Luke said. "The very thought is enough to make me shudder." He shuddered rather theatrically to prove his point.

"You may wish to consider it, nevertheless, after I have taken my leave," Lord Quinn said, getting to his feet and stretching. "'Tis time, my lad."

"And yet," Luke said, "you are almost twenty years my senior, Theo, but it has never been time for you? You have retained your bachelorhood into the fifth decade of your life."

His uncle chuckled. "I had the misfortune to fall in love with a married lady," he said. "By the time she was widowed it was too late to get my heirs on her anyway. Or perhaps it was not too late, who knows? No matter. I am a mere baron. And I do not have a passel of unruly relatives breathing down my neck."

"And I do?" Luke said, closing his fan and getting to his feet to see his uncle on his way. "They must be taught, Theo, that 'tis not to be tolerated. No one breathes down my neck unless she is specifically invited to do so."

His uncle laughed heartily once more. "Take a wife, Luke," he said. "Egad, 'twill be the answer for you. Take my word on it. And get sons on her as fast as it may be done. I will keep my eyes open and see who is available this year. I will choose you the prettiest, lad, provided she has the rank and breeding to go along with her looks."

"Thank you, my dear," his nephew said languidly, following Lord Quinn into the hall, "but I make it a habit to choose my own bedfellows. And truly, rarely for more than three months at a time." He grimaced as a footman stepped forward to open the outer door. "Must you ram your hat on your head as if to glue it to your wig? Did you not know that hats are not meant to be worn on the head but to be carried decoratively beneath the arm?"

His uncle threw back his head and guffawed inelegantly. "Pox on your French ways," he said. "You are living in an English climate now, my lad, where a hat is not an ornament but a head warmer."

"Heaven forbid!" the duke said fervently. He turned back to the library as the door closed behind his uncle.

A bride. He had never seriously considered taking one even though he was thirty years old and had unexpectedly been elevated to high rank on the death of his brother two years ago, only three years after the death of their father. At least, he had not considered taking a wife since ten years ago. He did not particularly want to think about that.

Marriage was not for him. Marriage meant commitment. It meant belonging to someone and having someone belong to him. It meant children and the ties they would bring. It meant being bound, body and soul. It meant being vulnerable—again.

He was not vulnerable now. He had spent ten years—well, nine anyway, if he remembered that for that first year he had whined and pleaded and then staggered into a life of wild, self-pitying debauchery—carefully cultivating an invulnerability. He had amassed a fortune entirely by his own efforts, first by gambling and then by careful investments. He had made himself into the complete Parisian gentleman so that he was not only accepted everywhere but even sought after in the very highest circles. He had learned how to attract the most beautiful and fashionable women and how to make love to them and how to get rid of them when he tired of them. He had acquired expert instruction on the art of swordplay and on the skill of pistol shooting and had made himself deadly with both weapons; he had learned how to be charming in manner but steely of heart. He had learned that love was not to be trusted, even when it was the love of one's own family—especially then. He had learned neither to expect nor to give love.

He knew that he had acquired the reputation of being a ruthless and a heartless man. It was a reputation he coveted. It was how he wanted to be seen by the world. It was how he wanted to be.

And was he now to consider taking a wife? Merely because his uncle thought it a good idea? When had he allowed his uncle to make his decisions for him? Actually, he thought, propping himself against the mantel again and staring absently across the room, if he was to answer that question honestly, he must confess that he had frequently taken his uncle's advice. At Theo's suggestion he had gone to France and eventually given up the hope of coming home to resume the life he had known—it seemed rather laughable now that he had been intended for the church and that he had wanted the life of a clergyman for himself. It was at his uncle's suggestion that he had gone to Paris to make a new life for himself. And it was at Theo's suggestion that he had come home—well, partly home, anyway. He had come to England, to London. He was not sure he would be able to go all the way home to Bowden Abbey.

Henrietta was at Bowden. His sister-in-law. George's widow.

If he had a wife, perhaps he would find it more possible to go home. The thought came unbidden.

But he did not want a wife. And he did not want to go to Bowden.

Except that Theo had reminded him of his responsibilities there, of the people who depended on him even apart from the members of his own family. Devil take them all, he thought. What were they to him? They were his father's people. George's people.

And now his own.

He had never wanted to be the Duke of Harndon. He had never envied George his position as eldest son. He had been quite content to be merely Lord Lucas Kendrick. Perhaps the Reverend Lord Lucas Kendrick. He smiled ruefully, though the expression was perhaps more sneer than smile. Poor naive boy. All eager at the age of twenty to enter the church, to marry, and to live happily ever after.

Well, he decided, he would force himself to see his mother since she was in town, and Doris and Ashley too. There were apparently problems with his sister and brother, if Theo was to be believed, problems that his mother seemed unable to deal with, problems that he would have to handle. And he would handle them too, by God. But the problems at Bowden would be solved at long distance. He would appoint a new steward, perhaps, and get rid of Colby. Better still, he would summon Colby to London and allow him to speak for himself.

He would not marry. He would tell Theo so in no uncertain terms the next time he saw him. One had to be very positive with Theo or else one found oneself willy-nilly doing what the man wanted one to do. Theo really had missed his calling in life. He should have been a diplomat.

Luke had returned to England in order to make an appearance there as duke and in order to wait upon his mother and brother and sister while they were in London. He had come in order to assert his authority where it needed to be asserted—and only where there was need. He had come out of a grudging sense of duty—and, yes, perhaps out of some curiosity. But he did not intend to stay. As soon as he was decently able, he would return to Paris where he belonged, where he was happy—as far as a man without a heart could be happy, that was. Actually he did not look for happiness. If one was happy, one could also be unhappy and would be sooner or later. It was altogether more desirable to steer clear of either extreme.

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Lady Sterne looked down at herself dispassionately. She was naked to just below the waist, where a sheet covered her. She had, she supposed, reached an age at which she should start covering herself up when there were other eyes in addition to her own to look at her. She was no longer a youthful beauty. But she turned her head on her lover's arm and noticed the signs of aging in his own sleeping face and torso. It did not matter, she decided. They were long familiar with each other. If she were to see him now for the first time, perhaps—undoubtedly—she would see him as a man of middle age. He would look even older if she saw him—as she was seeing him now—without his wig, with his thinning hair cut very short. But her eyes saw only the man she had known and loved for years.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Old age creeping up or galloping up, Marj,” he said, echoing her thoughts. “Have I slept away our afternoon together?”

“No, Theo,” she said. “You did not sleep away the first part of it. Ah.” She sighed with contentment and stretched luxuriously, feeling one of his legs firm against her own. “I do believe this gets better with age.”

He chuckled. “But we used not to sleep at all,” he said. He changed the subject suddenly to resume the topic of conversation that had engrossed them before they made love. “You think the older gel, then? She is not a little too old, Marj?”

“To bear him a few sons and some daughters too?” she asked scornfully. “Lud, Theo, she is five-and-twenty. Hardly decrepit. And a great beauty. She has a pleasing maturity too. She has suffered, you know.”

“Maturity,” he said dryly, “is not like to make Harndon foam at the mouth, my love. He might find the other gel more appetizing.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “I do not know his tastes. But Agnes is only eighteen. Pretty enough and good-natured but she would be a mere toy to a man of Harndon's age and experience. Anna could be a companion to him.”

“Some men, Marj,” he said, “want toys for wives. And breeders, of course. Eighteen sounds a good age to me.”

“For my sake”—she turned her head to kiss his cheek—“let us make it Anna, Theo. She is very precious to me. I would dearly love to marry her to a duke. And to your nephew into the bargain.”

He turned his head so that their lips met. “Why not?” he said. “The boy is not easily led, anyway. It has taken me two years of wheedling just to get him back to England. It may take another two to get him down to Bowden. And he insists he is not in the market for a wife. We will try to interest him in the mature beauty.”

“And Anna too declares quite emphatically that she is not in search of a husband,” Lady Sterne said. “It took all my ingenuity just to persuade her to have some fashionable clothes made so that she may go about in town. She looked quite rustic.”

Lord Quinn grimaced. “Harndon would not like that,” he said. “So, granted that we are probably embarking on an impossibility, when shall we bring them together? Lady Diddering’s ball?”

“The night after tomorrow?” she said. “Yes, ’twill do nicely, Theo. Oh, if only it works. My dear Anna a duchess. And a lady of fortune. I am as anxious for her happiness as if she were my own daughter.”

He stroked her hair. “Has it been a sadness in your life, not having children of your own, Marj?” he asked. “Should we have tried, perhaps . . . ?”

“No,” she said. “Regrets are pointless, Theo. I have had a good life. And ’tis not over yet. Perhaps not nearly over. I am still only in my forties. In fact, ’tis not yet quite impossible . . .” She did not complete the thought.

“But this afternoon is nearly over,” he said. “I am to dine with the Potters and they always begin a meal promptly. Shall we make use of what time we have left?”

“Yes.” She turned to him with another sigh of contentment. “Yes, let us do that, Theo.”

2

HIS mother and his sister and brother would be at the Diddering ball, which his uncle was urging him to attend. Luke had guessed it even before he knew it as a fact. It would be altogether too awkward to encounter them for the first time in ten years in such a public setting. Besides, the meeting was not to be avoided. It was to see them that he had come to England, after all. And he could not expect them to call on him, even though they must know he was in London; Theo would have seen to that. If he delayed beyond a few days of his arrival from Paris, it might be thought that he was afraid of meeting them.

He was not afraid. It was just something that he did not want to do and that he wished he need not do—ever. If George had lived, or if he had had a son to succeed him, everything would have been different. He himself could have stayed in Paris for the rest of his life and forgotten that he had been born an Englishman. He could have forgotten the fact that he still had family there. He would not have been needed by them, and he certainly would not have needed them. He had long outgrown such a need.

But George had not lived and George—and Henrietta—had had no son. And so there was the tie forever binding him to England and to Bowden Abbey, where he had been born, and to the family still living there.

It was fact and unavoidable, and so the day before the Diddering ball he made his appearance at Harndon House, his own town house even though he had rented another for a month—a foolish move, perhaps, and suggestive of a certain cowardice. The simple fact was that he did not want to live under the same roof as his mother. And he had not been invited to live there, though of course he needed no invitation. Perhaps his mother had not even known he was coming to England.

The butler who received him in the hall of Harndon House was a stranger to him. But he was a master at the art of passivity, cultivated by all the best of his breed. There was scarcely a flicker in his eyes when Luke identified himself, though the man’s bow deepened and his manner became perceptibly more deferential. But clearly the man faced a dilemma. Was he to present his master as a visitor or . . .

Luke helped him out. "You will ask the Dowager Duchess of Harndon if she is receiving this morning," he said and strolled across the tiled hall to examine a rather well-executed landscape painting in a gilded frame.

His mother received him alone in the morning room since he had not announced his intention of calling. She rose to her feet as he entered the room, having been given only a minute or two in which to compose herself to receive the son she had not seen in ten years.

"Madam?" Luke made her a bow from just inside the door. "I trust I find you well?"

"Lucas." She spoke his name after looking at him for several silent seconds. "I had heard that you had changed. I would not have recognized you."

She was as he remembered her: unsmiling, straight-backed, composed. Her dark hair, unpowdered, was dusted with gray. It was the only sign that she had aged by ten years. But then his mother had never been young—or old. And she had never been smiling or warm or maternal. Duty had been the guiding principle of his mother's life. Any love she might have felt for her children had been smothered by a devotion to preparing them for the positions they must expect to hold in life. While never harsh and never neglectful, she had been humorless and unaffectionate.

"I was a mere boy, madam," he said, "when I was judged no longer fit to be your son. Ten years have passed since then."

She made no comment on his words. "You have come home to your responsibilities at last," she said, "though 'tis wrong that you have chosen to take up residence in another house when this is your own."

He inclined his head to her but offered no explanation of his decision to live elsewhere. He found himself wondering for no apparent reason if his mother had ever hugged him. He could not remember such a time. This welcome—if welcome it were—was exactly what he might have expected of her. Had he expected open arms and eager eyes and tears and fond words? He would not have welcomed them even if they had been offered. They would have come ten years too late. She had made no attempt to shield him from his father's harsh sentence. She had not kissed him good-bye or assured him that she loved him despite everything. She had been dutiful to the end.

"I trust that my sister and brother are well too?" he asked.

"Doris is nineteen, Ashley two-and-twenty," she said. "They have been without the guidance of a father for five years and without that of the head of the family for two."

Was it her way of asking for his help? Or was it a reproach that he had hitherto neglected the duties of his position? Probably the latter, he decided.

Had she grieved, he wondered, when his father died? When her eldest son died? George had been taken by the cholera, a disease that had killed only him from the family, though apparently several people from the village had been struck down by it too.

"There is a problem?" he asked. They were still standing at almost opposite ends of the room. She had not invited him to sit down, though the thought struck him again that he did not need an invitation to be seated in his own home. Nevertheless, he remained where he was.

"Doris is determined to make an ineligible match," she said, "despite the fact that I brought her to town to meet a husband worthy of her rank and she has met any number of eligible gentlemen. Ashley is—well, he

has become wild and unmanageable and totally forgets his position.”

“It is called sowing one’s wild oats, I believe, madam,” he said.

“The worst of it is,” she said, “that they have heard about their elder brother’s exploits in Paris and expect you to support their indiscretions or at least to ignore them. They believe that with their father gone and George gone they can do whatever they please.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “Indeed?” he said quietly.

“You have come,” the dowager said. “Whether you have come to indulge or ignore them or whether you have come to assume the responsibility of your position remains to be seen. As does the question of whether you will continue to allow *the duchess*”—she put emphasis on the words—“to rule at Bowden as if she were still married to the head of the family.”

Ah. So there was conflict between the two women, was there? Between his mother and Henrietta. Both duchesses but neither one of them quite *the duchess*. Neither one of them his duchess. It was another argument in favor of his taking a wife, perhaps. The thought came unbidden and unwillingly. Why should he care if they were feuding? He did *not* care.

And then, before their conversation could continue, the door behind his back was flung open. A very pretty young lady wearing a fashionable sack dress over hoops, her hair vividly dark without powder, rushed into the room and stopped short a mere foot away from him.

Doris! She had been a thin gangly child of nine when he left home. She had been the only member of his family to show regret at his leaving—Ashley had been away at school at the time. She had hidden among the trees near the gates at the end of the driveway and had hurtled out into his path as he rode down it on his way from the house. He had jumped from his horse and caught her up in his arms and held her there for perhaps a whole minute before telling her that she must be a good girl and go back home and grow into a beautiful and accomplished young lady. She had been sobbing too helplessly to say anything beyond his name, repeated over and over again.

She looked into his face now with wide, dark eyes and bit her lower lip. He had the feeling that she had been about to throw herself into his arms but had checked the impulse. He made no move himself. He had been too long out of the habit of hugging—at least of hugging from simple affection.

“Luke?” She looked doubtful. “You *are* Luke?” She laughed breathlessly. “They said you had come. You look . . . so very different.”

There had been no one more unfashionable than he when he was a boy. He had been interested in nothing but books and his future career in the church and his family and home . . . and the woman he had planned to marry.

“And so do you, Doris,” he said. “You have grown up. And you are as lovely as I knew you would be.”

She flushed and smiled with pleasure. But the moment for spontaneity had passed. He knew—perhaps with a small pang of regret—that she would not now rush into his arms. He was a stranger to her although he was her brother. At first glance she had even doubted that it was he.

“Why are you standing here?” She glanced uncertainly at her mother and looked back at him. “Come and sit down, Luke. Are you going to come and live here? It seems strange that you do not. Was it hard leaving

Paris? You must tell me about the latest styles there. I fear we are far behind the newest fashions here. Tell me about the ladies' fashions. I can see what gentlemen must be wearing. Oh, Luke, you are very splendid. Is he not, Mama?"

The dowager did not reply. She busied herself ringing the bell for tea.

It was a strange homecoming. Even though Doris chattered, apparently at her ease after the first moments of shock, there was a certain awkwardness and a consequent air of stiff formality in the drawing room. He felt, Luke decided, like a stranger who was paying a difficult courtesy call.

Which was exactly what he was, in a way.

Except that he was head of this family.

As he was about to take his leave, the door opened again and a tall, slender, dark and handsome young man hurried inside. For one moment Luke's breath caught in his throat. George? But George was long dead. He got to his feet and exchanged bows with his younger brother, who gazed at him with mingled eagerness and awe.

"Luke?" He stepped closer. "Zounds, but I would not have known you. Uncle Theo said I would not. Zounds!"

"Ashley." Luke inclined his head slightly. His brother had a pleasing, open countenance. It was easy to imagine that he was indeed sowing his wild oats—an admirable activity for a man of his age, provided the wildness was not of a nature to destroy him.

"I hear you are more skilled with it than any other man in France," Ashley blurted as he took a seat, indicating the sword that Luke carried always at his side. "And with a pistol too. Is it true that you have killed your man in two duels?"

Perfectly true. But it was not a topic of conversation suitable for female ears. Under the circumstances it was in particularly bad taste. It was in a duel that he had narrowly escaped killing their elder brother.

"If it is true," he said coldly, "'tis not something of which I boast. And 'tis not something that our mother and our sister need have discussed in their presence."

Ashley flushed and Luke felt instantly sorry for the harsh rebuke. Somewhere far back in memory he could remember what it was like to be young and impulsive and rather gauche.

"I-I am sorry, Mama," Ashley said.

And conversation died.

Luke was on his way back to his rented house a few minutes later, glad to be alone again, glad that the initial visit was over, stiff and awkward as it had been. He felt nothing for any of them, he decided. They were strangers to him. Even Doris—it was hard to see in her now the child he had cared for. He was relieved.

And yet something in him ached. The tingle of long-ago memories, perhaps. The long-suppressed, long-forgotten memories of what it felt like to be rejected by everyone who had given meaning and stability to his life. The frightening emptiness of facing life alone when he knew nothing about life, when he had no defenses against it.

It was not the ache to go home. He did not want to go home. More than anything else he wanted to go back to Paris. If he had a home now, that was it. He was comfortable there. It was a familiar world, a world that had shaped him into the man he had become, a world over which he felt he had some control.

But he had come to England again and had seen his family again—or what was left of it. And he had felt again the old mingling of hurt and anger at his mother's rejection of him and the old determination to break on his side the bonds that had held him to her, son to mother. He had seen no welcome in her during his visit and had felt nothing that would make him want to see her again.

Yet he had seen Doris again, too, and Ashley. And his mother had suggested that they needed guidance. His guidance as head of the family. And he had loved them—in that time of innocence when he had been capable of love.

Was guidance something he could give? Something he could give promptly and then return to Paris?

Henrietta was ruling at Bowden as if she were still the mistress there. But why not? She had been George's wife. She had suffered for her position. Perhaps she had suffered more than he, even though she had had a comfortable home and high rank.

As far as he was concerned she could continue to rule there and his mother could continue to fret about the fact. But if he had a wife, there would be no argument about who was mistress there.

There it was again! Damn Theo and his suggestions, which always somehow acquired the quality of a needle, pricking away at him night and day until he acted on them.

But this was one suggestion he would not act upon. Not even for the sake of family order and peace would he sacrifice his freedom and take a wife.

And so the worst was over, he supposed as he walked on. He had seen them all again, except for Henrietta, whom he had no intention of seeing at all. He would find out more of what was happening in Doris's life and in Ashley's, sort out any problems, if he was able, send for the books from Bowden and perhaps for Colby himself and find out if there were any grounds for dismissing the man and appointing another steward, and then take himself back to Paris. By the summer it should be possible for him to leave again.

In the meantime he would enjoy himself. It would be a novelty to go about in English society for a change and see new faces and hear new gossip. Theo had urged him to attend Lady Diddering's ball tomorrow evening. It was always one of the more glittering balls of the spring, his uncle had said, the place where one was likely to meet everyone who was someone.

What his uncle did not say, of course, was that it was also the place to meet eligible young ladies. But Luke understood that that was what he had meant.

He would go regardless. His mother and Doris were to be there. Doris had said so during tea. He would see how Doris behaved toward prospective suitors and whether there was any sign of the ineligible attachment his mother had mentioned. And it never hurt to look at and dance with young ladies of quality even if they were not mistress material. He enjoyed charming them and watching them smile and blush. He even enjoyed escorting the prettiest of them about once in a while.

Yes, he would go. He might have forgotten how to feel deep emotion, but he had never forgotten how to enjoy himself.

• • •

They were going to their first ball, Lady Diddering's, which would be a grand and magnificent affair, according to Lady Sterne. All the fashionable world was sure to be there.

Anna was dressed in her new finery—an apple green silk mantua with robings from neck to hem heavy with gold embroidery and a stomacher so covered with the same embroidery that it seemed to shimmer all of gold. The mantua opened at the front to reveal a petticoat of paler green, huge and swaying over her new hoops. She had balked at having her hair cut short and curled tight to her head in the latest style, but it was curled at the sides and back and powdered white—she had never worn powder before. The small round cap she wore far back on her head was all of fine lace to match the three deep frills of her shift that extended below the sleeves of her mantua at the elbows. And the same lace trailed from the back of her cap in two long lappets. Her shoes, pale green with gold embroidery, had heels a few inches in height, another new venture for her. She had been wearing them in private for two days in order to be sure of her balance. She wore no cosmetics or patches despite her godmother's warning that she would be more the exception than the rule.

And yet it was not of herself that she thought in the last few minutes before the carriage arrived, and it was not her own appearance or expectations that had brought a flush to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes. She was watching Agnes as her sister came into the salon where Anna waited with Lady Sterne, and was filled with wonder that this could be the same girl who had been a child but yesterday—or so it seemed.

“Agnes,” she said, her hands clasped to her bosom. “Oh, Agnes, you look . . . beautiful.” How could she fail to attract suitors? Surely there would be enough of them even after just tonight that Agnes would have a choice.

“Yes,” Lady Sterne agreed. “I vow you will do, child. And we were quite right to choose that particular shade of blue with your fair coloring.”

But Agnes, modest as she always was about her own appearance, had eyes for no one but her sister. “Anna,” she said, stretching out her hands and taking her sister's. “You have always been lovely—oh, more lovely than anyone else I know. But now you look—ah, I cannot find the words. Does she not, Aunt Marjorie?”

“Faith, child,” Lady Sterne said, “I believe I should carry a stout stick with me to the ball in order to beat back all the young gentlemen who will crowd about the two of you. But I hear someone at the door. It will be Theodore with the carriage. Perhaps he has brought his cane. He will certainly be wearing his sword. I vow he will need it.”

Both sisters laughed and each eyed the other admiringly. And both felt suddenly breathless. It was true that they were the daughters of the late Earl of Royce and as such had entertained and been entertained by persons of quality and had danced at local balls and assemblies. But London seemed like a different world to them. Even after Lord Quinn had bowed over the hand of each and declared that he had not seen two such lovely gels in a month of Sundays—whatever that meant—and had ushered them into his carriage with Lady Sterne; even after he vowed that he would be challenged to a dozen duels before the night was out for greedily surrounding himself with the three most fascinating ladies at the ball—even after that there was still uncertainty. What if their manners were just too rustic for town tastes? What if their conversation was too dull? What if the dance steps with which they were familiar were different from the way the same dances were performed in town?

And what if no one wanted to dance with Agnes?

It seemed impossible to Anna, looking at her sister, to imagine that such a thing could possibly happen,

especially when she was sure that Lady Sterne would see to it that she had partners, but even so it was an anxious time. Her stomach felt somewhat queasy as the carriage slowed and a glance out the window revealed a large mansion with all its windows ablaze with light. Its front doors were thrown back so that light spilled forth and splendidly clad ladies and gentlemen could be seen in the hall. A carpet had been laid down over the steps and across the pavement so that those alighting from carriages would not have to set their feet on hard ground.

Agnes's eyes were rather like saucers.

"Egad," Lord Quinn said as he handed down the ladies from his carriage, "but 'tis many a long day since I was like to be so much the focus of attention and envy. 'Tis to be wished that I had three arms, but I have been blessed with no more than two. Will you walk unescorted, Marj?"

Anna had met Lord Quinn the day before and had been introduced to him as an old friend of her godmother's. She liked him. He was of average height and inclined to stoutness. He was pleasant-looking and had kindly eyes. He must be about the same age as—as *him*, but very different in every other way. And he had a way of setting one at one's ease. At the moment, as she took one of his arms and Agnes took the other, she could think of no one with whom she would rather make her entrance to her first London ball.

"Nervous, my dear?" he was asking Agnes.

"A little, my lord," Agnes admitted.

"Some young man will dance the first minuet with you," he said, "and after five minutes, if you remember at all that you were nervous, you will wonder at yourself and settle to enjoying the rest of the evening. And you, my dear?" He turned to Anna.

"No, my lord," she lied. "I have come to observe and to enjoy the sights and sounds of a society ball. I have nothing to be nervous about."

He chuckled, and then Lady Sterne whisked the sisters away to the withdrawing room to straighten their skirts and check their hair and caps in the looking glass though there had been no wind outside to effect any damage.

And so the moment came when they stepped for the first time inside a London ballroom. It was decked out with flowers and greenery so that it smelled like a summer garden in full bloom on a hot day. But the flowers were superfluous, Anna thought, gazing about her, robbed of breath for a moment. All the most sumptuous satins and silks and laces and jewels must be assembled in this one room, decking out the persons of the guests gathered there. It was hard to say whether the gentlemen or the ladies were the more colorful and gorgeous. The ladies perhaps had the advantage in the sheer size of their skirts and the amount of fabric and decoration that could be displayed. But the gentlemen had the advantage in the elegant cut of full-skirted coats and in the long waistcoats beneath, on which all of an embroiderer's art could be displayed to full advantage.

Anna thought of the rather sober, staid styles worn at home, and looked about her at London fashions.

"Well?" Lady Sterne was asking her, a smile on her face.

"'Tis a new world," Anna said. "One of whose existence I thought I was aware but was not."

"The wonder you feel is in your face, child," her godmother said. "You are not sorry now that I persuaded

you to come?”

“Oh, no,” Anna said.

When she thought back over the last two years, her mind thought in color—or rather in the absence of color. Black and gray, all of it. Of course, those were the colors they had worn for two years. Only in the last two months had they put off their mourning. And there had been the grief, first over the lingering illness and death of Mama and then over the sudden death of Papa. But it was not just the mourning that had sapped life of its color. There had been everything else too. The fight to keep the family together despite adversity, the struggle to avoid ruin and to keep Papa from debtors’ prison and her brother and sisters from destitution, the futile, futile efforts to pay off or redeem all the debts. And the greatest blackness of all—the web that had been woven inexorably about herself, drawing her ever inward, trapping her in a forever after of enslavement. Except that he had gone away after Papa’s death. He had gone to America, promising to come back, promising to come to claim her. But he had been gone for longer than a year, and perhaps—oh, she prayed for it—he would not come back after all.

And now she was in a different world.

Anna smiled suddenly as Lord Quinn caught her eye and winked. And the smile held and spread. She felt an unexpected welling of excitement and happiness. She was in a new world, a world of splendor, a fairy-tale world that she had only ever dreamed of a long, long time ago, when there still seemed to be some point in dreaming. It was true that it was for only a brief time. It was true that he might, after all, come back to claim her and bring back the darkness. But now, at this moment, she was in a London ballroom at the start of a ball. And she was going to enjoy herself.

Oh, yes, she was. She was going to enjoy herself as she had never enjoyed anything else in her life before. She lifted the fan that hung from her wrist by a ribbon, opened it, and cooled her face with it. And she gazed about her with a wondering smile and sparkling eyes.

3

LUKE arrived as the opening minuet was ending. It was unusually early for him, but latecomers at a ball in London were frowned upon, it seemed. Or so his uncle had warned him. Actually his uncle was up to something, and it did not take a genius to guess what.

“Marjorie has her goddaughter up from the country for the spring,” Lord Quinn had remarked casually the evening before. “The Earl of Royce’s daughter. And her younger sister too. A pair of lovely gels, I warrant you, lad.”

Which one, Luke had wondered, did his uncle intend as his bride?

“Indeed?” he had commented. “A little rustic, are they, Theo?”

“Egad, no,” his uncle had replied. “Not with Marjorie to look to outfitting them. They are lovely enough and well-bred enough to make one forgive some rusticity anyway. Pox on it, lad, if I were twenty years younger—”

“If you were twenty years younger, my dear,” Luke had said, “you would still be attached to Lady Sterne but somewhat embarrassed at the age gap.”

His uncle had thrown back his head and laughed heartily. "And so I would, lad," he had said. "And so I would. Now in your case . . ."

"I suppose," Luke had said, "Lady Sterne is to be at the Diddering ball tomorrow evening? With her charges?"

"What?" His uncle had looked startled. "Tomorrow evening already is that, lad? Zounds, and so it is. Marjorie will be there with the gels? It is altogether possible, I suppose. Yes, they may well be there. I hope someone asks them to dance, Luke. Apart from me, that is. They are strangers and all that."

"But lovely strangers," Luke had said. His uncle was overdoing the carelessness.

"Lovely? Zounds, yes," Lord Quinn had said. "I daresay they will not lack for partners, will they?"

Luke had not replied. He had changed the subject. But it was as clear to him as a bright summer day what his uncle was up to.

He had come alone to the ball, though Angélique, Marquise d'Étienne, had hinted that she would be pleased with his escort. She had declared her own intention of spending a month or two in London soon after he had decided to come home. Life was too, too tedious in Paris at times, she had said with a sigh. And she had heard that London could sometimes be amusing. They had not traveled together and had taken only one walk together in public, though he had paid her two lengthy visits at her hotel. He had no intention of their names being linked as an established couple.

The minuet had ended. The floor was clearing. Young ladies were being returned to their chaperones. His eyes picked out the elegant figure of Lady Sterne, whom he would have recognized even if his uncle had not been standing beside her. From across the ballroom she appeared not to have aged since he saw her last, in Paris, at least eight years ago. There was one young lady with them—actually, young girl would be a better description. She looked shy and sweet and very, very young. Luke undressed her with practiced eyes and felt that he was committing some obscenity. She was a child. Theo must have taken leave of his senses.

And then another couple joined them. The gentleman bowed and strolled away, leaving behind his partner. Doubtless she was the other of Royce's daughters. Luke looked at her critically. Although he could see her only in profile, she was clearly the elder sister. She was fashionably dressed in a shade of green that made her look fresh and inviting. She was fanning her face and talking to Lady Sterne. He drew his own fan from a pocket, opened it, and plied it absently.

She turned, having finished what she had to say. Her face was smiling and animated. Ah, yes, definitely rustic. A few months in Paris—or even perhaps in London—would soon wipe that expression from her face and replace it with a look of languid ennui. She was gazing all about her with an eagerness that was almost palpable. Her foot was tapping even though there was no music playing. It set her skirt to swaying invitingly.

Her eyes passed over him and smiled impersonally. And then a few moments later they returned and held on him. Had her expression not been so bright and so open, he would have sworn that she was doing the same to him as he had just done to her younger sister. She seemed to realize suddenly that he was looking directly back at her. She smiled dazzlingly, raised her fan to cover her mouth, and continued to smile with her eyes over the top of it.

He raised his eyebrows and inclined his head a little. By God. She was a flirt.

But Angélique had found him.

“Luc,” she said in heavily accented English, setting one delicate white hand against the wide cuff of his sleeve, “you ’ave come, *cheri*. This is all very quaint, *non?*”

Quaint? Was it? He looked about him. English fashions did not appear to be lagging so very far behind those of Paris, though the French were in the habit of scorning the backward English or at least of treating them with condescension. Of course, there were subtle differences—a little more hair, a little less powder and paint, for example, than he was accustomed to seeing at a fashionable gathering. And he intercepted a look of mingled shock and contempt on the face of an elderly lady whose eyes were fixed on his waving fan.

“It is all very English, Angélique,” he said. “But we are in England now. A quadrille is to be next? You will do me the honor?”

Although he was to all effects a stranger to English society, there were people he had met in Paris and people who remembered his father or his brother and gentlemen he had met at White’s. And of course there were his mother and Doris and Ashley, to whom he paid his respects when the quadrille came to an end. He charmed the ladies and conversed with the gentlemen and felt quite at home within an hour of his arrival. He always enjoyed balls. He liked to dance.

For longer than an hour he avoided Lady Sterne and her goddaughters—though apparently only the elder sister was that. His uncle made no move to draw him into their circle—the old devil was too cunning for that, or thought he was. He probably did not even know that Luke realized what he was up to.

But Luke kept an eye on the older sister. She continued to smile and sparkle and enjoy herself quite openly, and she did not lack for partners, though the younger girl, who might have been considered prettier by many, missed one set. And the older sister was not unaware of him, either. Her eyes seemed to alight on his person altogether too often for it to be accidental, and her smile always deepened when their eyes met.

Interesting. He would meet her without reluctance when Theo considered the time right. He would discover whether her manner was as flirtatious at close quarters as it was at a distance. He wondered with some amusement if she realized that Theo had picked him out as her future husband. And then he sobered. If Theo had set out to promote the match, it was altogether likely that Lady Sterne was a coconspirator. And it was possible that the goddaughter knew about it—if she was the one, of course. Perhaps they had chosen the younger girl for him.

He must be careful. He had no intention whatsoever of being trapped into marrying a rustic, bright-eyed young innocent. Or into marrying anyone for that matter.

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Lady Sterne and Lord Quinn between them had made very sure that she and Agnes had partners for the opening minuet. That was very clear to Anna. And she was grateful to them. Although she had come to the ball merely to observe and to give Agnes a chance to meet eligible gentlemen, once she was there she wanted to be a part of it all too. She wanted to enjoy herself. She wanted to dance. And dance she did, with a friend of Lord Quinn’s. Her feet moved gracefully through the steps; her ears appreciated the rich sounds of a whole orchestra playing the music; her nostrils breathed in the myriad scents of flowers and expensive perfumes; and her eyes were dazzled by the color and movement of silks and satins and jewels. It was surely one of the happiest half hours of her life. She thought it even though her partner was not a handsome man or a young man or one with a great deal of conversation. But he danced well.

Her eyes feasted on the sight of so much splendor as she stood with Agnes, her godmother, and Lord Quinn after the minuet was over, and she tapped her foot, almost as if she could still hear the music. She

hoped—oh, she hoped someone else would ask her to dance. She wanted to dance all night without stopping. She wanted to dance until her toes were all blisters and her legs would no longer hold her up. She smiled gaily at her foolish thoughts.

She felt young and pretty, and filled to the brim and beyond with youthful energy. She had never been young, she realized suddenly. She had never had a chance to be young. At the age of five-and-twenty, it might have been thought that youth had forever passed her by. But it had not. There was tonight, this magical night in which she was young and free and pretty and . . . and happy. She was so happy that she could scarcely contain her exuberance.

And then her mind registered what her eyes had seen a few moments before. She looked back to the man standing alone in the doorway. She had thought herself surrounded by the epitome of splendor, but he was—was there a more powerful word than splendid? He was gorgeous. It seemed not quite the word to use for a man.

He was not very tall and he was quite slender. He was graceful—another word that seemed not quite suitable for a man. He wore a coat of crimson satin and a waistcoat of gold, both so bedecked with embroidery and jewels that they shimmered. His shoes had jeweled buckles and high red heels, encrusted with more jewels. The hilt of his dress sword was embossed with rubies. His hair—she was sure it was his own even though it was heavily powdered—was dressed neatly in side rolls and bagged in black silk behind. Even across the distance she could see in some shock that he wore cosmetics—powder and rouge—unlike most of the men in the ballroom.

But the feature that had caught her attention more than any other and had caused her to look back at him was the small ivory fan that he was waving before his face.

He should look effeminate, Anna thought as her eyes wandered over him. Why did he not? There was something about him that was almost suffocatingly masculine. Something about his eyes, perhaps? They looked very steadily and very directly at her from beneath rather heavy lids.

And then she realized that she had been staring and that he had observed her doing so. But if he had done so, then it was because he was staring at her too. He had been as ill-mannered as she. She felt a flutter of physical attraction to the man. And because this was a new world and not quite the real world, and because she was feeling young and pretty and free, she ignored her first impulse, which was to look away in some confusion, and instead continued to look back at him and smiled in acknowledgment of the fact that they had caught each other doing the same thing. Sizing each other up.

She went further. Some instinct—some long-suppressed, quite unsuspected instinct of femininity—made her deliberately raise her fan to her nose so that she could laugh at him with her eyes over the top of it. He did not smile back. But he raised his eyebrows and made her a slight bow with his head and held her eyes until a woman as startlingly gorgeous as he took his attention by laying a hand on his sleeve.

Anna had partners for every set and proceeded to live this magic night to the fullest, consciously enjoying every single moment of it. And yet she was constantly aware of the gentleman in scarlet and gold as he danced and conversed and moved about with an elegance and a grace that had been obvious from the start. Would he effect an introduction? she wondered. Would he ask her to dance?

She hoped so. Shamelessly she sought him out with her eyes as she danced with other partners. And shamelessly she smiled at him whenever she caught his eye. Shamelessly she flirted with him from afar.

It felt wonderful to flirt, she thought. And even the use of that particular word in her mind could not make

her feel ashamed. Her moment of youth and freedom would be complete if he but asked her to dance.

• • •

Luke had watched his sister dance and behave quite properly toward her partners and toward other young men who obviously had an acquaintance with her and came to converse with her between sets. He had observed Ashley dance once and then disappear, presumably in the direction of the card room. And of course he had danced himself and conversed and kept an eye on Lady Sterne's goddaughter.

Instead of dancing one set he wandered into the card room and observed that the stakes were not high and that Ashley was winning—and drinking. It was not a good combination. He had discovered that for himself early in his career. He would not have made his fortune if he had not played with all his wits about him, unbefuddled by alcohol. He would keep his eye on his brother over the next few weeks, he decided. But his attention was distracted now by two gentlemen who began a conversation with him.

It was in the card room that Lord Quinn found him. He joined the group for a few minutes and then took Luke's arm and strolled away with him, leading him casually in the direction of the ballroom.

"Enjoying yourself, are ye, lad?" he asked. "Egad, but you have turned some heads tonight. 'Tis the fan that has done it—again." He chuckled.

"I thought," Luke said, taking the offensive, "that I might get you to present me to Lady Sterne's goddaughter, Theo. She is the older one? The one wearing green?"

The look of suppressed triumph on his uncle's face was almost comical. "Aye, lad," he said. "And all my fears were for naught. The gel has not missed one set. You have noticed her, then?"

"Only because you mentioned her," Luke lied. "I will dance with her if I may, Theo—as a courtesy to Lady Sterne."

The dancing was between sets in the ballroom. Luke followed Lord Quinn across the room to where Lady Sterne was standing with her two charges. The elder of the two stopped fanning herself when she saw him approaching and then began again at an almost furious speed. She lowered her eyes for a moment and then raised them again boldly. They were large green eyes, he saw as he drew closer, made more green by the color of her mantua.

"Well, Marjorie, m'dear," Lord Quinn said in a loud and hearty voice, "look here at whom I ran into in the card room. And I was saying to you not half an hour since that in all the crush it seemed I was not going to have a chance to exchange a word with my own nephy."

"Harndon," Lady Sterne said, smiling graciously, "I am pleased to see you again. And lud, what a happy chance it was that took Theodore past the card room."

Ah yes, indeed, Luke thought, a co-conspirator without a doubt. "Madam?" He made his bow to her.

"May I present my goddaughter to you?" Lady Sterne asked. "Lady Anna Marlowe, daughter of my dear late friend, the Countess of Royce. And Lady Agnes, her younger sister. His grace, the Duke of Harndon, Anna."

He bowed deeply while both young ladies dipped into curtsies. He included both in his bow, but it was on the elder that his whole attention was focused. "Charmed," he murmured.

A Parisienne would have considered herself half naked without cosmetics quite heavily applied and without

patches artfully placed. Lady Anna Marlowe wore none. Her complexion was delicate and clear and healthy, he noted. Her lips were curved in a smile and her eyes sparkled. There was no pretense of indifference now that he was close. A flirt she might be; a coquette she was not.

“His grace has recently returned to England after spending a number of years in Paris,” Lady Sterne was explaining.

“Lady Anna has recently arrived from the country after a lengthy term of mourning for her parents,” Lord Quinn was explaining almost simultaneously.

Lady Anna, looking as if she had never mourned or entertained one sad thought in her life, smiled at him.

“My condolences,” he said, including both sisters again in his bow.

“How fascinating that must have been,” Lady Anna said at the same moment. Her voice was light and as eager as her expression.

She smiled. He inclined his head.

His dealings for years past had been almost exclusively with sophistication. The woman’s open appraisal of him and her very obvious delight in her surroundings made him feel slightly dizzy. Slightly dazzled. Lines were forming for the next dance, a set of country measures.

“Madam.” He bowed once more, but directly to Lady Anna this time. “May I hope that you have not promised this set? May I have the honor of leading you out?”

“Thank you.” Her answer was made almost before his question had been completed and she was reaching out a hand to set in his. “Yes, thank you, your grace.” The whole of the sun seemed to be behind the smile with which she favored him.

“How fortunate,” Luke heard his uncle say. “’Tis the supper dance.”

Ah, yes, of course. His uncle, the consummate schemer. Luke led his partner to the end of the line of ladies and took his place opposite her in the line of gentlemen. The music was beginning.

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