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One

A Lady in Distress

It had begun to rain an hour ago, a fine driving mist with the sky grey above. The gentleman riding beside the chaise surveyed the clouds placidly. 'Faith, it's a wonderful climate,' he remarked of no one in particular.

The grizzled serving man who rode some paces to the rear spurred up to him. 'Best put up for the night, sir,' he grunted. 'There's an inn a mile or two on.'

The window of the chaise was let down with a clatter, and a lady looked out. 'Child, you'll be wet,' she said to her cavalier. 'How far to Norman Cross?'

The serving man rode up close to the chaise. 'Another hour, ma'am. I'm saying we'd best put up for the night.'

'I'd as soon make Norman Cross,' said the gentleman, 'for all it's plaguily damp.'

'There's an inn close by, as I remember,' the servant repeated, addressing himself to the lady.

'*En avant*, then. Produce me the inn,' the lady said. 'Give you joy of your England, Peter my little man.'

The gentleman laughed. 'Oh, it's a comforting spot, Kate.'

The inn came soon into sight, a square white house glimmering through the dusk. There were lights in the windows, and a post-chaise drawn up in the court before it.

The gentleman came lightly down from the saddle. He was of

medium height, and carried himself well. He had a neat leg encased in a fine riding boot, and a slender hand in an embroidered gauntlet.

There was straightway a bustle at the inn. An ostler came running; mine host appeared in the porch with a bow and a scrape and a waiting man sped forth to assist in letting down the steps of the chaise.

‘Two bedchambers, for myself and my sister,’ said the gentleman. ‘Dinner, and a private room.’

Consternation was in the landlord’s face. ‘Bedchambers, sir. Yes – on the instant! Polly, the two best bedchambers, and fires to be lit in them!’ A serving maid went scuttling off. ‘Sir, the private room!’ Mine host bowed, and spread a pair of deprecating hands. ‘But this moment, sir, it was bespoken by a lady and a gentleman travelling north.’ He looked slyly, and cast down his eyes. ‘But they stay only for dinner, sir, and if your honour and the lady would condescend to the coffee-room? There’s never a soul likely to come tonight, and ’twill be private enough.’

There was a rustle of skirts. My lady came down from the chaise with a hand on her servant’s shoulder. ‘The coffee-room or any other so I get out of this wet!’ she cried, and swept into the inn with her cavalier behind her.

They found themselves straight in a comfortable large room. There was a table set, and a wood fire burning in the hearth. A door led out into a passage at the back, where the stairs rose steeply, and another to one side, giving on to the taproom.

A trim girl in a mob cap brought more candles, and dropped a shy curtsy to the lady. ‘If you please, my lady, should I take your ladyship’s cloak? Your ladyship’s abigail . . . ?’

‘Alack, the creature’s not with me!’ mourned Madam Kate. ‘Take the cloak up to my chamber, child. So!’ She put back the hood from her head, and untied the strings round her throat. The cloak was given to the maid; Madam stood up in a taffety gown of blue spread over a wide hoop. She wore her fair ringlets *en demie toilette*, free from powder, with a blue ribbon threaded through, and a couple of curls allowed to fall over her shoulder.

The maid thought her a prodigiously lovely lady and bobbed another curtsy before she went away with the cloak.

My lady's brother gave his three-cornered hat into his servant's keeping, and struggled out of his greatcoat. He was much of his sister's height, a little taller perhaps, and like enough to her in appearance. His hair was of a darker brown, confined demurely at the neck by a black riband; and his eyes showed more grey than blue in the candlelight. Young he seemed, for his cheek was innocent of all but the faintest down; but he had a square shoulder, and a good chin, rounded, but purposeful enough. The landlord, following him into the coffee-room, was profuse in apologies and obeisances, for he recognized a member of the Quality. The lady wore a fine silk gown, and Mr Merriot a modish coat of brown velvet, with gold lacing, and a quantity of Mechlin lace at his throat and wrists. A pretty pair, in all, with the easy ways of the Quality, and a humorous look about the eyes that made them much alike. The landlord began to talk of capons and his best burgundy, and was sent off to produce them.

Miss Merriot sat down by the fire, and stretched one foot in its buckled shoe to the blaze. There was a red heel to her shoe, and marvellous embroidered clocks to her silken stockings. 'So!' said Miss Merriot. 'How do you, my Peter?'

'I don't melt in a shower of rain, I believe,' Peter said, and sat down on the edge of the table, swinging one booted leg.

'No, faith, child, there's too much of you for that.'

The gentleman's rich chuckle sounded. 'I'm sufficiently substantial, in truth,' he remarked. He drew out his gold and enamelled snuff-box from one of his huge coat pockets, and took a pinch with an air, delicately shaking the ruffles of lace back from his wrists. A ruby ring glowed on one of his long fingers, while on the other hand he wore a big gold seal ring. A smile crept up into his eyes, and lurked at the corners of his mouth. 'I'd give something to know where the old gentleman is,' he said.

'Safe enough, I'll be bound,' Madam answered, and laughed. 'It's the devil himself, I believe, and will appear in London to snap his fingers under the noses of all King George's men.'

‘Fie, Kate: my poor, respected papa!’ Mr Merriot was not shocked. He fobbed his snuff-box and put it away. A faint crease showed between his brows. ‘For all he named London – egad, ’tis like his impudence! – it’s odds he’s gone to France.’

‘I don’t permit myself to hope too much,’ said Miss Merriot, with a smile at once dreamy and a little impish. ‘He’ll be there to lead us another of his mad dances. If not . . . I’ve a mind to try our own fortunes.’

‘In truth, I’ve a kindness for the old gentleman,’ said Mr Merriot pensively. ‘His dances lead somewhere.’

‘To lost causes.’ There was a hint of bitterness in the tone.

Mr Merriot looked up. ‘Ay, you’ve taken it to heart.’

‘Not I.’ Kate jerked a shoulder as though to shake something off. ‘We went into it – egad, why did we go into it?’

‘Ask the old gentleman,’ said Mr Merriot, the slow smile creeping up again. ‘He had a loyal fervour, belike.’

Kate drew down the corners of her mouth. ‘It’s a pleasing image. He meant it for a *beau geste*, I dare swear. And we? Well, I suppose we went willy nilly into the net.’

‘I don’t regret it. The old gentleman meddled in Saxe’s affairs, but we came out of that net.’

‘That was in the nature of adventuring. This –’ Kate paused. ‘Bah, I hate lost causes! It was different.’

‘For you?’ Mr Merriot lifted an eyebrow. ‘Did you want the Prince, child?’

‘We fought for him while it lasted. He had the right. But now it’s over, and the Butcher’s made a shambles of the North, and there are those who have died on Tower Hill, while we – we try our fortunes, and the old gentleman weaves us a fresh net. I believe I’ll turn respectable.’

‘Alack, we were made for sobriety!’ said Mr Merriot.

Came the landlord, and a serving maid with dinner. Covers were laid, and a cork drawn. Miss Merriot and her brother sat down to fat capons and a generous pasty. They were left presently toying with sweetmeats and their wine. The maid bore off all that remained of the capons through the door that led into

the passage. The door was left ajar and allowed a glimpse of another door, across the passageway. From behind it came the sound of a lady's voice raised in protest.

'I won't, I tell you!' it said. 'I won't!'

There came the sound of a deeper voice, half coaxing, half bullying; then the lady cried out again, on a hysterical note of panic. 'I won't go with you! You sh-shan't elope with me against my will! Take me home! Oh please, Mr Markham, take me home!'

Miss Merriot looked at her brother. He got up, and went unhurriedly to the door, and stood listening.

The man's voice was raised now in anger. 'By God, Letty, you shan't fool me like that!'

Following on a crash from behind the closed door as of a fist banged on the table, came a choked, imploring murmur.

'No!' barked the man's voice. 'If I have to gag you, to Gretna you'll go, Letty! D'you think I'm fool enough to let you slip through my fingers now?'

Mr Merriot turned his head. 'My dear, I believe I don't like the noisy gentleman,' he said calmly.

Madam Kate listened to a cry of: 'My papa will come! I won't marry you, oh, I won't!' and a faint frown was between her eyes.

There came the sound of a coarse laugh. Evidently the gentleman had been drinking. 'I think you will,' he said significantly.

Miss Merriot bit one finger nail. 'It seems we must interfere, my Peter.'

Peter looked rueful, and drew his sword a little way out of the scabbard.

'No, no, child, put up!' said Madam, laughing. 'We know a trick worth two of that. We must have the fox out of his earth, though.'

'Stay you there,' said her brother, and went out into the courtyard, and called to John, his servant.

John came.

‘Who’s the owner of the post-chaise, John?’ inquired Mr Merriot.

The answer was severe. ‘It’s a Mr Markham, sir, running off to Gretna with a rich heiress, so they say. And the lady not out of her teens. There’s wickedness!’

‘John’s propriety is offended,’ murmured Miss Merriot. ‘We will dispose, John, since God seems unwilling. I want a stir made.’

‘Best not meddle,’ said John phlegmatically. ‘We’ve meddled enough.’

‘A cry of fire,’ mused Mr Merriot. ‘Fire or footpads. Where do I lie hid?’

‘Oh, are you with me already?’ admired Kate. ‘Let me have a fire, John, or a parcel of daring footpads, and raise the ostlers.’

John fetched a sigh. ‘We’ve played that trick once before. Will you never be still?’

Mr Merriot laughed. ‘It’s a beauty in distress, John, and Kate must be up and doing.’

A grunt only was vouchsafed, and the glimmering of a grim smile. John went out. Arose presently in the courtyard a shout, and a glow, and quickly uproar.

‘Now I wonder how he made that fire?’ said Miss Merriot, amused.

‘There’s a shed and some straw. Enough for John. Well, it’s a fine stir.’ Mr Merriot went to the window. ‘Mine host leads the household out in force. The wood’s so damp ’twill be out in a moment. Do your part, sister.’ Mr Merriot vanished into the deserted taproom.

Miss Merriot added then to the stir by a scream, close followed by another, and a cry of: — ‘Fire, fire! Help, oh help!’

The door across the passage was burst open, and a dark gentleman strode out. ‘What in hell’s name?’ he began. His face was handsome in the swarthy style, but flushed now with wine. His eye lighted on Miss Merriot, and a smell of burning assailed his nostrils. ‘What’s the noise? Gad, is the place on fire?’ He came quickly into the coffee-room, and received Miss Merriot in

his unwilling arms. Miss Merriot neatly tripped up her chair, and with a moan of 'Save me!' collapsed onto Mr Markham's chest.

He grasped the limp form perforce, and found it a dead weight on his arm. His companion, a slim child of no more than eighteen, ran to the window. 'Oh, 'tis only an old shed caught fire away to the right!' she said.

Mr Markham strove to restore the fainting Miss Merriot. 'Compose yourself, madam! For God's sake, no vapours! There's no danger. Damnation, Letty, pick the chair up!'

Miss Letty came away from the window towards Miss Merriot's fallen chair. Mr Markham was tightly clasping that unconscious lady, wrath at his own helpless predicament adding to the already rich colour in his face.

'The devil take the woman, she weighs a ton!' swore Mr Markham. 'Pick the chair up, I say!'

Miss Letty bent to take hold of it. She heard a door open behind her, and turning saw Mr Merriot.

Of a sudden Miss Merriot came to life. In round-eyed astonishment Miss Letty saw that lady no longer inanimate, but seemingly struggling to be free.

Mr Merriot was across the floor in a moment.

'Unhand my sister, sir!' cried he in a wonderful fury.

Miss Merriot was thrust off. 'God's Life, 'twas herself—' began Mr Markham, but got no further. His chin came into sudden contact with Mr Merriot's sword hilt, nicely delivered, and Mr Markham fell heavily all amongst the table legs.

'Oh, neatly done, i'faith!' vowed Miss Merriot. 'Down like an ox, as I live! Set the coach forward, Peter, and you, child, upstairs with you to my chamber.'

Miss Letty's hand was caught in a firm clasp. Quite bewildered she was swirled away by the competent Miss Merriot.

Miss Merriot's brother put up his sword, and went out into the court. John seemed to rise up out of the gloom to meet him. 'All well, sir?'

Mr Merriot nodded. 'Where's the dear gentleman's chaise, John?'

John jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

‘Horses put to?’ inquired Mr Merriot.

‘Ay, they’re ready to be off. The men are in the taproom – it’s dry they are after the great fire. There’s an ostler to the horses’ heads.’

‘I don’t want that ostler there,’ said Mr Merriot. ‘Drive the chaise past Stilton, John, and hide it somewhere where the gentleman won’t find it too soon.’

‘Hide a chaise and horses, is it?’ John growled.

‘It is, John,’ said Mr Merriot serenely. ‘Tell that ostler that I want a horse saddled on the instant. One of our own, if need be. I shall set the dear gentleman after you, John. God speed you.’

‘Ah, it’s a mad couple you are!’ said John, but he moved away to where the lights of the chaise shone. Mr Merriot heard him give the order to the ostler, and offer to hold the horses’ heads. He heard the ostler run off towards the stables and himself turned back into the coffee-room smiling placidly.

Miss Merriot had come downstairs again and was standing by the fallen Mr Markham calmly surveying him. ‘Well, child, is it done?’ she asked.

The clatter of horses and the rumble of wheels on the cobbles answered her. John was off; they heard the chaise roll away down the road to London. Miss Merriot laughed and dropped her brother a mock curtsy. ‘My compliments, child. It’s you have the head, indeed. Now what to do for the poor gentleman? Water, my Peter, and a napkin. Observe me all solicitude.’ She sank down on to the floor, and lifted Mr Markham’s head into her lap. Mr Merriot was chuckling again as he handed her the water, and a napkin.

The landlord came hurrying in, and stared in horror at what he saw. ‘Sir – madam! The gentleman’s coach is off! Oh law, madam! The gentleman!’

‘Off is it?’ Mr Merriot was interested. ‘Tut, tut! And the lady in it, belike?’

The landlord’s jaw dropped. ‘Ay, that would be it! But what’s come to the gentleman, sir? Good lord, sir, never say –’

‘The poor gentleman!’ said Miss Merriot, holding a wet napkin to Mr Markham’s brow. ‘Twas the drink turned the head on his shoulders, I dare swear. An accident, host. I believe he won’t die of it.’

‘A warning to all abductors,’ said Mr Merriot piously.

A gleam of understanding shot into the landlord’s eyes. ‘Sir, he’ll be raving mad when he comes to.’

‘A warning to you, good fellow, not to be by,’ said Mr Merriot.

There was significance in Mr Merriot’s voice. It occurred to mine host that the less he knew of the matter the better it might be for himself, on all sides. He went out discreetly at what time Mr Markham gave vent to a faint groan.

Mr Markham came slowly back to consciousness, and opened heavy eyes. He did not at once remember much, but he was aware of a swollen jaw-bone which hurt him. A cool hand was placed on his brow, and something wet was laid on his sore chin. He rolled his eyes upwards, groaning, and saw a fair face bent over him, framed in golden ringlets. He stared up at it, trying to collect his bemused wits, and vaguely it seemed to him that he had seen that face before, with its fine, rather ironical blue eyes, and its curiously square chin. He blinked, and frowned in the effort to pull himself together, and saw the delicate mouth smile.

‘Thank God you are better!’ came a cooing voice. ‘I have been in an agony! Dear sir, pray lie still; ’twas a cruel blow, and oh the misunderstanding! Peter, a glass of wine for the gentleman! There, sir, let me but raise your head.’

Mr Markham allowed it, perforce, and sipped at the wine held to his lips. Some of the mists were clearing from his brain. He raised himself on his elbow, and looked round.

‘Oh, you are much better!’ cooed the voice. ‘But gently, sir. Don’t, I implore you, overtax your strength.’

Mr Markham’s gaze came to rest on a flowered waistcoat. He put a hand to his head, and his eyes travelled slowly up the waistcoat to Mr Merriot’s grave face. Mr Merriot was on one knee, glass of wine in hand; Mr Merriot looked all concern.

Recollection came. ‘Burn it, you’re the fellow —’ Mr

Markham's hand went to his jaw; he glared at Peter Merriot. 'Did you – By God, sir, did you – ?'

'Let me help you to a chair, sir,' said Mr Merriot gently. 'In truth you are shaken, and no wonder. Sir, I cannot sufficiently beg your pardon.'

Mr Markham was on his feet now, dizzy and bewildered. 'Was it you knocked me down, sir? Answer me that!' he panted.

'Alas, sir, I did!' said Mr Merriot. 'I came in to find my sister struggling, as I thought, in your arms. Can you blame me, sir? My action was the impulse of the moment.'

Mr Markham was put into a chair. He fought for words, a hand still held to his jaw. 'Struggling? she flung herself at me in a swoon!' he burst out.

Miss Merriot was kneeling at his feet, napkin in hand. Mr Markham thrust it aside with an impotent snarl. 'You have the right to be angry, sir,' sighed Miss Merriot. "'Twas all my folly, but oh sir, when the bustle started, and they were crying fire without I scarce knew what I did!' Her fair head was bent in modest confusion. Mr Markham did not heed her.

'Blame you? blame you? Yes, sir, I can!' he said wrathfully. 'A damnable little puppy to – to –' Words failed him; he sat nursing his jaw and fuming.

Mr Merriot said haughtily: – 'You're heated sir, and I believe excusably. I don't heed what you say therefore. I have asked your pardon for a mistake – understandable, I contend – that I made.'

'Puppy!' snapped Mr Markham, and drank off the rest of the wine in the glass. It seemed to restore him. He got up unsteadily and his hot gaze swept round again. 'Letty!' he shot out. 'Where is the girl?'

'Dear sir, indeed you are not yourself yet!' Miss Merriot laid a soothing hand on his arm. 'There is no girl here save myself.'

She was shaken off. 'No girl, you say?' roared Mr Markham, and went blundering towards the room across the passage. 'Letty!' he shouted. 'Letty, I say! Hell and damnation, her cloak's gone!' He came back, his face dark with rage and suspicion, and caught at Mr Merriot's straight shoulder. 'Out

with it! Where is she? Where have you hidden her? You don't trick me, my fine sir!

Miss Merriot, hovering watchfully, cast herself between them, and clung to her brother. 'No, no!' she cried. 'No swords, I do beseech you. Sir, you are raving! There is no girl here that I have seen.'

Mr Merriot put his sister aside. 'But wait!' he said slowly. 'As I remember there was a lady in the room as I came in. A child with black hair. My sister was overwrought, sir, and maybe forgets. Yes, there was a lady.' He looked round as though he expected to see her lurking in some corner.

'Damme, it won't serve!' cried out the infuriated Mr Markham, and went striding off to the door that led into the taproom, calling loudly for the landlord.

Mine host came quickly, with an uneasy look in his face. In answer to Mr Markham's furious query he said nervously that in the scare of the fire someone had driven off with his worship's chaise, and he doubted but that the lady was in it.

Mr Markham swung round to face Peter Merriot again, and there came a red light into his eyes, while his hand fumbled at his sword hilt. 'Ah, you're in this!' he snarled.

Mr Merriot paused in the act of taking snuff. 'Your pardon, sir?' he asked in some surprise. 'A lady gone off in your post-chaise, and myself in it? I don't understand you, sir. Who is the lady, and why should she go off so? Why, it's churlish of her, I protest.'

Mr Markham seemed undecided. 'It's no business of yours,' he said savagely. 'But if I find 'twas you did it. — Which way did the chaise go?'

'To — towards London, sir,' nervously answered mine host. 'But 'tis only what Tom says. I didn't see myself, and indeed, sir —'

Mr Markham said something between his teeth at which mine host cast a horrified glance at Miss Merriot. The lady appeared to be unmoved. 'Saddle me a horse at once! Where's my hat?'

Light dawned on Mr Merriot. 'Egad, it's a runaway, Kate.

Faith, sir, it seems my – er – impetuosity was indeed ill-timed. A horse, of course! You should be up with the chaise soon enough. A horse for the gentleman!’ Mr Merriot swept out into the court, bearing mine host before him.

‘It’s ready saddled, sir, but Tom says the gentleman ordered it half an hour since,’ said the puzzled landlord.

‘Saddled and ready, eh? Then see it brought round to the door, for the gentleman’s in a hurry.’

‘Yes, sir, but how came it that the horse was bespoke when the gentleman was a-laying like one dead?’

‘Bespoke? A ruse, man, a ruse, and your man in madam’s pay very like. Best keep your mouth shut. Ah, behold the bereft gentleman!’

Mr Markham came stamping out with his hat rammed over his nose, and managed to hoist himself into the saddle with the assistance of two scared ostlers. He gathered the bridle up, and turned to glare down upon Mr Merriot. ‘I’ll settle with you later,’ he promised ferociously, and setting spurs to his horse dashed off into the darkness.

Miss Merriot came out to lay a hand on her brother’s shoulder. ‘The dear gentleman!’ she remarked. ‘Very well, child, but what next?’

TWO

Arrival of a Large Gentleman

Brother and sister went back into the coffee-room. As they entered by one door a little figure tiptoed in at the other, and stood poised on one toe as if for flight. ‘Has he gone?’ breathed Miss Letitia.

It was Peter Merriot who went forward and took the lady’s hand. ‘Why, yes, child, gone for the moment,’ he said, and led her to the fire.

She raised a pair of big pansy-brown eyes. ‘Oh, thank you, sir!’ she said. ‘And you too, dear madam.’

Miss Merriot flushed slightly, whereat the humorous look came into Peter’s eye again. He looked down at Miss Letty gravely enough, and pulled a chair forward. ‘Sit down, madam, and let us have the story, if you please. I should desire to know how we may serve you.’

‘You have served me,’ vowed the lady, clasping her hands in her lap. ‘My story is all folly, sir – wicked folly rising out of the most dreadful persecution.’

‘You shock me, madam.’

Miss Merriot came to the fire, and sat down beside the little lady, who promptly caught her hand and kissed it. ‘I don’t know what I should have done without you!’ she said fervently. ‘For I had quite made up my mind I didn’t want to go to Gretna Green at all. You see, I had never seen him in his cups before. It was a

terrible awakening. He became altered altogether once we were out of London, and – and I was afraid – a little.’ She looked up blushing. ‘At home when I saw him he was so different, you see.’

‘Do I understand, my dear, that you consented to elope with the gentleman?’ inquired Miss Merriot.

The black curls were nodded vigorously. ‘I thought it would be so romantic,’ sighed Letty. She brightened. ‘And so it was, when you hit him,’ she added, turning to Peter. ‘It was positively marvellous!’

‘Did you elope with him for the romance of it?’ asked Mr Merriot, amused.

‘That, and because of my papa,’ said Letty. ‘And because of being bored. Oh, have you never known, ma’am, what it is to be cooped up, and kept so close that you are ready to die of boredom?’

‘In truth, I’ve led something of a rover’s life,’ said Miss Merriot. ‘But continue, child.’

‘I am an heiress,’ announced Letty in tones the most lugubrious.

‘My felicitations, ma’am,’ bowed Mr Merriot.

‘Felicitations! I wish I were a pauper, sir! If a man comes to the house my papa must needs imagine he is after my money. He said that of Gregory Markham. And indeed I think he was right,’ she said reflectively. ‘Ma’am, I think fathers are – are the veriest plague.’

‘We have suffered, child,’ said Miss Merriot.

‘Then, ma’am, you will feel for me. My papa puts a hateful disagreeable woman to be my duenna, and I am so guarded and sheltered that there is nothing amusing ever happens to me, in spite of having been brought to town. Add to all that, ma’am, Sir Anthony Fanshawe, and you will see why I had come to the pitch of doing anything only to get away!’

‘I feel we are to deplore Sir Anthony, Kate,’ said Mr Merriot.

‘It is not that I am not fond of him,’ Letty explained. ‘I have always been fond of him, but conceive, ma’am, being required to marry a man whom you have known all your life! A man, too, of his years and disposition!’

‘I perceive in you a victim of parental tyranny, child,’ said Miss Merriot. ‘We consign Sir Anthony to perdition.’

Letty giggled at that. ‘Oh, never, ma’am! ’Tis a model of prudence and the virtues! And thirty-five years old at the very least!’

Mr Merriot flicked a speck of snuff from his sleeve.

‘And to escape this greybeard, hence the young Adonis yonder, I suppose?’

Miss Letty hung her head. ‘He – he was not very young either, I suppose,’ she confessed. ‘And I have been very silly, and wicked, I know. But indeed I thought him vastly more entertaining than Tony. You could not for your life imagine Tony excited, or in a scrape, or even hurried. And Gregory said such pretty things, and it was all so romantic I was misled.’

‘The matter’s plain to the meanest intelligence, madam,’ Mr Merriot assured her, ‘I discover in myself a growing desire to meet the phlegmatic Sir Anthony.’

His sister laughed. ‘Ay, that’s to your taste. But what’s the next step?’

‘Oh, she goes with us along to London. Pray, ma’am, may we know your name?’

‘’Tis Letitia Grayson, sir. My papa is Sir Humphrey Grayson of Grayson Court, in Gloucestershire. He is afflicted with the gout. I expect you may see him by and by, for I left a note for him, and he would be bound to find it.’

‘We await his coming, then,’ said Miss Merriot. ‘It solves the matter. My Peter, bespeak a bedchamber for Miss Grayson.’

A confiding hand was slipped into Kate’s as Mr Merriot strolled away to the door. ‘Please will you call me Letty?’ said Miss Grayson shyly.

Mr Merriot made an odd grimace at the panel of the door, and went through into the taproom.

Mine host had barely recovered from his very natural bewilderment at finding that the supposed fugitive was still in his house when there came the sound of a chaise bowling at a rare speed along the road. It drew up at the inn, and in the light of the

lamps Mr Merriot saw his servant jump down. He pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. 'This should be papa,' he said pensively. 'Your fourth room will be wanted, host.' He went back into the coffee-room to find that Miss Letty was at the window already, peering out.

'Your papa, as I believe,' announced Mr Merriot.

'I am afraid it is,' agreed Miss Letty. 'Yet with the gout plaguing him so much – oh lud! As I live, 'tis Anthony!'

Miss Merriot threw her brother a comical look. 'And so your desires are fulfilled, child. We are all impatience, Letty.'

Mr Merriot stood by her chair, and took snuff. The door opened to admit a large gentleman, who came in very leisurely.

'Lud, it's a mammoth!' said Miss Merriot, for her brother's private ear.

'Oh, are you jealous?' he retorted.

The large gentleman paused on the threshold and put up his quizzing-glass, through which he blandly surveyed the room. He was a very large gentleman indeed, with magnificent shoulders and a fine leg. He seemed rather to fill the room; he had certainly a presence, and a personality. He wore a tie wig of plain brown, and carried his hat under his arm. The hilt of his sword peeped out from between the folds of his greatcoat, but in his hand he held a cane.

'The gentleman would appear to be annoyed,' murmured Mr Merriot, looking at the lines about the newcomer's mouth and square jowl.

'La, my dear, how can you say so?' marvelled Miss Merriot, seeing the large gentleman's grey eyes calm and bored. She rose with an air, and swept a curtsy. The gentleman must not be allowed to dominate the room thus. It seemed he had the way of it. 'Make your leg, child,' she threw over her shoulder at Peter. 'We are under observation.'

The sternness about Sir Anthony's mouth vanished. He smiled and showed a row of very even white teeth. He bowed with easy grace. 'Madam, your most obedient! Sir, yours!'

Mr Merriot took Miss Letty by the hand. 'Permit me to

restore to you Miss Grayson, sir,' he said, ignoring an indignant protest from the lady.

Sir Anthony showed no desire to receive Miss Grayson, who looked him defiantly between the eyes. He smiled still, but he did not offer to take her hand. 'You should be whipped, Letty,' he said pleasantly.

Miss Grayson flushed. 'Deed, sir, and did you bring your cane for that purpose?' she demanded.

'No, my dear, but I should be happy to benefit you that far.'

Peter Merriot was amused, and permitted his chuckle to be heard. 'Faith, it's a stern suitor.'

'You are – very rude – and – and – and hateful!' declared Miss Grayson, outraged.

Sir Anthony laid down his cane and his hat, and began to take off his greatcoat. As one who had no further interest in Miss Grayson he took out his snuff-box, unfobbed it, and held it out to Mr Merriot. His hand was very white and finely shaped, but it looked to have some strength. 'Sir,' said he, smiling sleepily for all his grey eyes were alert beneath their rather heavy lids, 'you will permit me to thank you on behalf of my friend, Sir Humphrey Grayson, for your services to his daughter.'

Mr Merriot helped himself to a pinch of snuff. Grey eyes met grey; the humorous look played around Mr Merriot's mouth. 'Lud, here's a solemnity!' he said. 'I am Miss Grayson's servant to command.'

Miss Grayson forgot her dignity. 'Tony, 'twas wonderful! His sword was out in a trice, and I thought he was about to run that odious Markham right through the body, but just as it was too monstrously exciting for words the point seemed to flash upwards and the hilt caught Markham on the chin.' She demonstrated with a small fist to her own pretty chin. 'He went down like a stone,' she ended dramatically. Her glance fell on Miss Merriot by the fire. 'And Miss Merriot too was splendid, Tony, for she pretended to swoon in Markham's arms.'

Mr Merriot looked down at his sister something quizzically. 'My dear, I eclipse you,' he murmured. He turned again to Sir

Anthony. 'Thus we mourn our departed suitor. Now where did you find my man John?' He began to pour wine, and handed one glass to the large gentleman.

'At Stilton,' Sir Anthony replied. 'Just before I saw my friend Mr Markham. He was endeavouring to hide a chaise and horses which – er – aroused my suspicions. He was induced to confide in me.'

Mr Merriot looked meditatively at that square handsome face. 'I wonder why?' he said, for he knew his John.

A singularly attractive smile crossed Sir Anthony's face. 'My charm of manner, sir, I believe,' he said.

There came a laugh from Miss Merriot. 'I begin to have a kindness for the large gentleman,' she remarked to the room at large. 'And you met the so dear Mr Markham, sir?'

'Hardly, madam. I had rather say I saw the so dear Mr Markham pass me in a cloud of – mud, I believe.'

'I wonder, did he see you?' Miss Merriot's eyes were bright with laughter.

'I am almost persuaded that he did,' said Sir Anthony.

'Then I take it we are not to expect his return?' Miss Merriot cocked a knowing eyebrow.

'I hardly think so, madam,' said Sir Anthony placidly.

Miss Merriot looked at Miss Grayson. 'Why, child, I like the large gentleman, I protest,' she said. 'Pray, sir, have you dined?'

'So far I have not had the time, madam, but I have reason to hope the landlord is preparing dinner for me at this moment.'

Mine host himself came in most opportunely then, with the serving maid behind him, carrying a loaded tray. A fresh cover was laid, a roasted chicken placed before Sir Anthony, and a fresh bottle uncorked.

'You permit, madam?' Sir Anthony bowed towards Miss Merriot.

'Pray, sir, be seated. You will be ravenous.'

'I confess I hate to miss my dinner,' said Sir Anthony, and began to carve the chicken. 'There is something of me to

maintain, you see,' he added, with a twinkle, and a glance cast down his noble bulk.

Miss Grayson cut in on Miss Merriot's laugh. 'Food!' she ejaculated scornfully, and tapped an impatient foot. Sir Anthony paid no heed. 'Well, Tony, you are come nigh on a hundred miles to rescue me, as I suppose, and now have you nothing at all to say but that you have missed your dinner?'

'That thought has been absorbing me for the last twenty miles,' said Sir Anthony imperturbably.

'And me in peril!' cried the affronted Miss Grayson.

Sir Anthony raised his eyes from the chicken and looked coolly across at her. 'Oh, were you in peril?' he inquired. 'I came merely to put an end to an indiscretion, as I thought.'

'Peril! At the hands of such a Monster!' Miss Grayson was indignant. 'I wonder, sir, that you need ask.'

Sir Anthony poured wine for himself and Mr Merriot. 'My dear Letty,' said he, 'you have so frequently assured us that Mr Markham is a model of all the virtues that I did you the honour to respect your judgment.'

Miss Grayson turned scarlet, and looked as though she were about to cry. 'You didn't, Tony! You are just being – disagreeable. And he's not a model of virtue! He is an odious brute, and – and so are you!'

'Tut, child, the gentleman's hungry, and will be the better for his chicken,' said Mr Merriot.

'I am not a child!' flashed Miss Grayson, and was off in a swirl of skirts to Miss Merriot's side. From the shelter of Miss Merriot's arm she hurled a tearful defiance. 'And I would sooner go to Gretna with that Monster than marry you, Sir Tony!'

Sir Anthony remained unmoved. 'My dear Letty, if this piece of absurdity was to escape my attentions, believe me it was not in the least necessary. So far as I am aware I have never asked you to marry me. Nor have I the smallest intention of so doing.'

This pronouncement brought Miss Grayson's head up from Kate's shoulder. In round-eyed astonishment she gazed at Sir Anthony, busily engaged with the wing of a chicken.

‘I have to suppose,’ said Miss Merriot sharply, ‘that the gentleman is an original.’

Mr Merriot turned away to hide a laughing face. ‘These family arrangements – !’ he said.

‘But – but Papa says –’ began Miss Grayson. ‘Why, Tony, don’t you *want* to marry me?’

‘I do not,’ said Sir Anthony.

Miss Grayson blinked, but she did not seem to be offended. ‘Why don’t you?’ she asked with naive curiosity.

At that Sir Anthony looked up, and there was a twinkle in his eyes. ‘I suppose, Letty, because my taste is at fault.’

‘Well!’ Miss Grayson digested this in silence. She disengaged herself from Kate’s arm, and went slowly to the table. Sir Anthony rose at her approach, and received one little hand in his large one. ‘Tony, will you tell Papa?’ she asked.

‘I have told him, my dear.’

‘How did he take it?’ asked Miss Grayson anxiously.

‘Philosophically, child.’

‘I am so glad!’ said Miss Grayson, with a relieved sigh. ‘If you don’t want to marry me, Tony, I can go home with a quiet mind. And I can even forgive you for being so disagreeable.’

‘And I,’ said Sir Anthony, ‘can finish my dinner.’

Three

My Lady Lowestoft

Miss Merriot called ‘Come in!’ to a scratching on the door. Came Mr Merriot into the big bedroom, and walked across to the fireplace where Kate stood. Mr Merriot cocked an eyebrow at Kate, and said: – ‘Well, my dear, and did you kiss her good-night?’

Miss Merriot kicked off her shoes, and replied in kind. ‘What, are you parted from the large gentleman already?’

Mr Merriot looked into the fire, and a slow smile came, and the suspicion of a blush.

‘Lord, child!’ said Miss Merriot. ‘Are you for the mammoth? It’s a most respectable gentleman, my dear.’

Mr Merriot raised his eyes. ‘I believe I would not choose to cross him,’ he remarked inconsequently. ‘But I would trust him.’

Miss Merriot began to laugh. ‘Be a man, my Peter, I implore you.’

‘Alack!’ sighed Mr Merriot, ‘I feel all a woman.’

‘Oh Prue, my Prue, it’s a Whig with a sober mind! Will you take it to husband?’

‘I suppose you will be merry, Robin. Do you imagine me in love on two hours’ acquaintance? Ah, you’re jealous of the gentleman’s inches. Said I not so?’

‘My inches, child, stand me in good stead. I believe it’s the small men have the wits. My compliments on the sword-play.’