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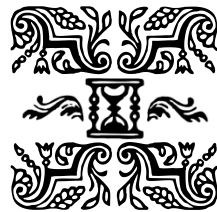
University of Southampton

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

School of English

A Chequered Scene

**Female Agency and Queer Choices in
the Late Eighteenth Century**



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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

School of English

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A Chequered Scene

by Cliona O'Sullivan

This is a creative writing thesis comprising of novel and critical commentary. The overall aim of both parts is to engage with the dual topics of female agency and queer choices in the late eighteenth century. The novel, *A Chequered Scene*, transplants a sixteen-year-old girl from the twenty-first century to 1790 Hampshire, thereby highlighting the contrasts and similarities experienced by women and queer people in the two time periods. The novel aims to deliver an authentic portrait of eighteenth-century life through its style and language, as well as capture the sense of the eighteenth-century novel through its split-narrative, epistolary structure. *A Chequered Scene* explores and illuminates the liminal spaces within which women and queer people exercised their agency. This is done through the narrative itself and in the creation of specific characters whose lives are representative of the potential opportunities or strictures their historical equivalents may have faced: the young heiress with a mercenary suitor; the rich widow who relishes her liberty; the 'fallen woman' with an implacable devotion to the one she loves; one born to the wrong sex who dons the clothes of their chosen identity.

Part two, the critical commentary, offers a series of demarcations on the core aspects of female strictures in the late eighteenth century, including marital prospects and potential careers. Claims for originality lie in the production of an original novel and in employing the extended metaphor of life as 'a chequered scene' in the commentary. Queer and female lives navigate the board of society, either staying within the light of patriarchal strictures, or straying onto the dark of impermissible proclivities. Research into the collection at Chawton House, particularly educational works, conduct literature, memoirs, and diaries, as well as building on recent criticism, has informed the creative aspect in an original way.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

I, Cliona O’Sullivan declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

‘A Chequered Scene’: Female Agency and Queer Choices in the Late Eighteenth Century

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature:

Date: 30 June 2022

Acknowledgements

Completing this work has been no mean feat, as seven years of labour must surely attest! There are several people to whom I owe the sincerest debt of gratitude – I here now give fair warning for my oncoming ebullience!

First, my supervisors, Rebecca Smith and Gillian Dow. Your patience, solidarity, sound advice and unwavering support have kept me on a path I considered impossible to continue treading. This work would not exist without your critical insight, calm cajoling, and invaluable advice.

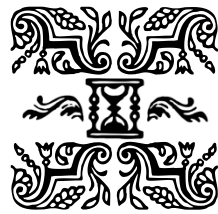
I wish also to thank my colleagues at Chawton House, namely, Katie Childs and Kim Simpson, whose consideration and understanding allowed my studies to flourish alongside my professional work.

I am fortunate to know many brilliant academic minds, whose research has helped shape my own studies. Thanks particularly to Alison Daniell for her advice on coverture, Cheryl Butler for her knowledge on Georgian Southampton, and Mary South for enlightening me on Lock Hospitals.

My friends and family have always been the best of me, and I particularly thank Miss Becca O'Mara (Bee) to whom I owe so much of my writerly confidence. Indeed, the beginning of our friendship delineates the time in which I can truly bestow upon myself the appellation of 'writer'. It is a debt I can never repay. To my best friend, Natty, my earliest reader: now the novel is finished (at last!) let's work on getting it translated into Spanish for your abuela! Thank you to Louisa for expanding my love of all things Georgian and introducing me to *Harlots*. Dearest Shawsy, from the younger sister you never wanted, having lived six years together in Southampton, all I can do is apologise for my ceaselessly annoying habits and wish you good fortune in your own doctoral thesis!

Thank you to my uncle Richard, who opened his doors and allowed me to live and write in his house. It was there I had the space to finish the novel, and it was during that time I came to know and love my Tasha. In loving you, I have learnt that time can stand still in a kiss. Finally, to my wonderful parents, Paddy and Mary, who have been with me throughout the entirety of this mad endeavour. Without your love and support, I could never have written a single word. I dedicate this to you.

A Chequered Scene



Cliona O'Sullivan

Prologue

This is the strange and remarkable narrative of one, Darcy de Courcy, who by returning to the past thereafter changed my future. To the best of my abilities, I have faithfully recorded the tale for you, the reader, with every intention of maintaining the truth. Depend upon it, friend, I do not wish to beguile you with stories of the fantastic, yet how impossible a task to form order out of chaos. There are circumstances, which, despite being present at the time, I cannot explain, and gaps others have had to fill in my absence. I merely hope you find this account faithful, and will forgive any partialities that might colour certain depictions. At its heart, Darcy's history relates to a chequered past, present and future – in short, a Chequered Scene. I leave it to her to begin the history.

S. Woodforde

Chapter 1. Beyond the Boundary

I was sixteen when I left home. Not on purpose.

Me and Mum were visiting an old friend of Dad's when it happened. This friend, Jethro (weird name, I know) lived in a small stable yard about three miles outside Alton, East Hampshire.

I'd stayed the previous summer, exploring woods, and learning to ride horses. It was a change from Southampton, and I loved the shabby little cottage as much as the crotchety old Jethro who lived there.

One morning I came in for a late breakfast after mucking out the stables. Mum and Jethro were whispering, heads bent together. They stopped as I sat down.

"What's going on?" I said, swiping a slice of toast.

"Well, Darcy," said Mum, shifting in her chair, hazel eyes avoiding mine. "There's something I need to tell you. Something difficult about your father. About what happened to him."

"It's hard to believe it's been five years since he died," I sighed. "I'd give anything to hear him call me Deedle again."

"Darcy-Dear," she started. Clearing her throat she added, "That's what we wanted to tell you. He might be – well there's a chance he..."

"It's like this, gehl," said Jethro in his broad Hampshire accent, never one for tact. "Yer Pa might not be dead."

I dropped my toast, appetite forgotten.

"What do you mean?" I said, throat dry. "Of course, he's dead. We went to his funeral, I remember it."

The pair exchanged glances. Silence stretched.

"Say something," I said, slamming my fist down, mugs rattling as tea slopped over their edges.

"He was gone without a trace," said Jethro, tugging nervously at his beard. "No sight nor sound – nary a whisper."

"So you *faked* a funeral?" I said, appalled.

"We felt closure was better," said Mum, putting a tentative hand over my fist. "The burden of uncertainty was too much for an eleven-year-old."

"But lying to me for five years is fine, is it?" I scoffed.

“There was always a chance he couldn’t stay,” said Mum, looking anguished. “He didn’t really belong here.”

“It’s time you knew where he came from,” said Jethro, stubbornly unapologetic. “Back to before.”

“Before what?” I said, frustration barely in check. All these half answers and riddles.

“Before now,” he said simply.

I stood, kicking back my chair.

“Where are you going?” said Mum, panicked, clutching at my sleeve.

“Riding,” I said, marching out the door. “Give it to me straight or not at all. When I’m back I want a proper explanation. Not this rubbish.”

They both clamoured after me, but I ignored them, breaking into a run across the yard. Snatching up a riding hat, I swung up onto a saddled horse. If a voice called my name, I didn’t hear, the rush of wind distorting all sound as I trotted out the paddock.

Once in the open fields the trot became a gallop. It was cold for summer, overcast and grim. Air whipped my face as we gathered speed. Nearing a field edged with a wooden fence I stopped.

Something wanted to claw its way out of me. A recklessness. There was no going back, only going beyond the boundary.

I’d jumped fences but only ever in the paddock, Jethro’s reassuring presence allaying my fears. I snorted. Even Jethro couldn’t be trusted. Making the decision, I charged, not knowing the life altering course I was heading towards.

As we approached, I squeezed my legs tighter, standing up in the stirrups. I felt a shift in myself. A charge of energy pulsing through my body.

Concentration slipped, thoughts on my now-not-dead Dad.

The fence was high, higher than I thought. The change in my position and impossible obstacle spooked the mare. She planted her hooves in the ground, skidding to an abrupt halt. Launched from the saddle, my body flew over the fence like a rag doll. Turning in a forward somersault, I closed my eyes, waiting for the fall’s impact. A burst of light pierced through my closed lids. Searing flashes of reds and whites swam in my vision before fading to complete darkness.

I opened my eyes before shutting them immediately, groaning in pain. Lying on my back, the bright sun beat down, blinding me. The murky day had cleared in a literal flash. Eyes still closed, I carefully took stock, wiggling toes, fingers and gently bending joints. All seemed in order. Slowly, I raised myself to a sitting position, wincing at the pain in my head. Using my hands as a visor, I took in my surroundings. To my surprise, the field I'd landed in was well-kept, a large clump of trees in the distance dominating the view.

Looking behind, I gasped. The fence I'd hurtled over was gone. Although no, not gone - *sunk* into some sort of trench. Even weirder, the field I'd jumped from was now full of noisy, bleating sheep.

Jethro's mare was gone. Shakily getting to my feet, I called out, startling the sheep. I even gave a few low roars, trying to sound like Jethro. All to no avail.

I edged towards the trench. No horse, and no suggestion she'd been there at all. There should have been deep hoof marks from her sudden halt, yet the turf was undisturbed. Had I dizzily wandered off after she threw me? Surely not. Temporary amnesia seemed unlikely.

What then? How had a field of sheep replaced the horse? Maybe the bugger had run off and left me. Walking back seemed the only option. Muttering curses, I stepped back a few paces ready to jump the ditch when –

"Good morning." I whirled, nearly falling over. A girl approached, dressed like nothing I'd ever seen. It was a white dress, with cascades of fabric artfully falling around her neckline. Billowing sleeves cut off at the elbows, a blue sash tied about her waist, under which ballooned a dome of rustling material. Completing the look was a wide brimmed straw hat perched on her head. She seemed like a puffy cloud, floating serenely towards me. Or maybe a shepherdess from an ancient harvest scene. She stopped a few feet away, looking nervous. Maybe my gaping expression freaked her out.

The newcomer broke the silence. "Forgive my intrusion, sir, but are you in any way hurt? Might I offer some assistance?"

I blinked, too surprised to respond. *Had this weirdo just called me sir?*

"Do you need assistance, sir?" the girl repeated, this time in a loud, slow voice, clearly thinking me dim.

"I'm fine," I said shortly. "Did you call me sir? I'm not a guy you know."

She jumped at my response, clearly expecting a more masculine sound.

“My sincerest apologies,” she stammered, “your smock and breeches informed my hasty conclusion. Please forgive my impertinence. But –” she hesitated, glancing at my leggings and boots, “you are indeed a lady?”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” I scoffed. “But yeah, something like that.” To emphasise the point, I took off my riding hat and let my hair tumble out. Unfortunately, it got caught in the clip and I spent a few undignified moments trying to untangle myself.

The girl coughed awkwardly, then said, “Are you quite sure you are well?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” I replied, “it’s not the first time I’ve fallen off a horse, although I’ve never done a proper flip before. Did you see it happen?”

She didn’t answer, blinking at my response. Maybe *she* was a bit slow. It’s not like the question was complicated.

“’Twas most peculiar,” she said, “I was taking a turn in the shrubbery when a great ray illuminated the sky. From this coruscation, a form fell. As I advanced, I heard a great bellowing and quickened my pace. Advancing to the spot, I happened upon you.”

“I wasn’t *bellowing*,” I said, embarrassed. There *had* been a flash of light. That much I could remember. “I was looking for a horse, did you see her? She might’ve run off after she threw me.”

“I saw the events only as I have described them to you.”

This girl had a weird, formal way of talking. How had she seen me fall into the field but missed a horse running around? “I guess she ran back to the stables.”

Scanning my surroundings, birds chirruped and the sheep continued to bleat, unfussed by their new arrival. I looked back at the girl who quickly glanced down when our eyes met.

“So, what’s with the get up?” I asked. She looked blank. “Why you dressed like that, is there a thing on?”

The girl’s expression somewhat cleared. “Forgive my informal dress. As I believed myself to be alone this morning, I chose to relax my usual attire for a more loose-fitting sack. Mama made no objections.”

I squinted at the outfit that was neither a sack, nor informal by any sane judge.

“Pray, forgive my impertinence,” she continued, “but I cannot recall seeing you before. Are your people nearby, perhaps travelling through the region?”

“My people? Yeah, I guess they are nearby,” I said, my mind drifting back to Mum, probably worried. Jethro would be furious once he found out I’d tried to jump an

unknown barrier. Rash, even for me. I scowled at the sunken fence, unable to reconcile the difference.

"I had heard a party of trampers set up camp a few miles away, is it to them you belong?"

"What?" Distracted, it took a moment to realise what she meant. "*Tramper?* Are you calling me a tramp?" True, I hadn't showered that morning and probably smelt of horse... and manure, but I didn't think I looked *that* scruffy.

The girl coloured, sensing she'd caused offence.

"Well, I –" she stammered. "You speak of travelling by horse and your complexion favours the Romani, so I thought –"

"That's a bit of a leap to make don't you think?" I interrupted. Suddenly it felt very hot. I started to take my jumper off before realising I only had a bra underneath. A slow and heavy thud pounded my head, making it hard to focus. I wanted to tell this girl off. The nerve to call me a tramp wearing that stupid outfit! I was fully prepared to insult her insane hat when the world tipped.

Dazed, I spat out grass, unsure how it got there.

Words drifted over me, frantic. "You are not well."

"I'm fine," I said, pushing myself into a sitting position. It was difficult to stop swaying. She bent down. A cool hand touched my cheek, brown eyes meeting mine.

"You have suffered a mishap and need help. I shall fetch it. Wait here."

I grabbed her arm, stopping her from leaving. "Help me up."

"You are not in full possession of your strength, please heed my advice and stay here."

"No." With an effort I stood, still holding onto her.

"Very well, if you are able to walk, I urge you to recover at my father's house, Thropden Hall. We must circumvent the wilderness, as I fear the uneven path would be too difficult to negotiate. If we follow the ha-ha it should only be a five-minute journey."

"What's a ha-ha?" I said, staggering along with her.

"The boundary before you," she said pointing to the long trench.

"Yeah, but what's it for?" I said, trying to stay present.

"It separates the lawn from the parkland without disrupting the view."

"Sneaky. Easy to fall in." I giggled, feeling delirious.

“I have known errant sheep slip into it,” she said with a smile. We struggled on, my vision swimming.

“Hey, what’s your name?” I said, breaking the silence. “I should probably know if I’m coming to your house.”

“Miss Sophia Woodforde, pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Soph-eye-ah?” I repeated. “Like Mariah?” Even this girl’s name was off. “I’m Darcy. Darcy de Courcy.” She’d given her surname, so I gave mine.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss de Courcy. Though I might prefer more auspicious circumstances,” she added, as I staggered again.

“You may stay as long as your health demands it,” she continued, panting a little as I leant on her.

“Thanks,” I said. “But really, I’m fine. Just need some water and maybe a sit down. Is your house far?”

“Now we are beyond the ha-ha, we will soon reach the Winchester road. From there, it is near.”

We stumbled on, eventually moving from grass to compact earth until the house came into sight.

Maybe it was concussion, but the sun seemed to illuminate the house, dazzling my senses. It stood at the end of a long drive, high on the hill, large and impressive but irregularly shaped. An imposing stone edifice jutted forward, with steps leading up to a great door. The main bulk of the building spilled off to the left, with green vines creeping round its corner. Sunlight glittered off the cobbled, slate walls, gleaming silver and bronze. A red roof supported numerous chimneys billowing smoke.

Things get a little hazy after this. I must have fallen again, because I remember feeling the hard ground beneath my knees. A clattering filled my head, rising in an overpowering crescendo. Sophia put her face close to mine, lips moving, but I couldn’t make sense of what she said. The clattering became a roar – a percussion reverberating around everything. I coughed, dust filling my throat. A stampede of horses charged through the haze, ready to crush and trample. They loomed large, filling my vision before the world swam away. It was a long time before I came to myself again.

Chapter 2. “The concourse of foreigners of every denomination that pour each day into London, exceed almost belief. In a short time the town will be half French.” – *The World*, MONDAY, July 19, 1790

It now falls to me to take up the pen, though I claim to be no more than a poor scribbler. For many years I have faithfully kept a private journal, began simply as a means of keeping an account of daily occurrences. My juvenile writings were certainly mundane, keeping note of the quotidian for the sake of routine, rather than interest. Yet as I grew older I gained sufficient courage to confide my private thoughts to paper and open my heart. These pages were intended for none but myself to read. Indeed, the thought of yielding up my secrets to another soul mortifies me still. Yet events now necessitate their release. My account begins on a bright July morning in the year one thousand seven hundred and ninety. I pray you indulge me with tolerance and read on with patience in your heart.

S.Woodforde

Saturday, July 24, in the morning. Thropden Hall

Breakfast concluded, I find myself at leisure for a few hours before the gentlemen arrive. Though I might read or write further, the fine weather tempts me outside, being warm rather than sultry. From my window I see the sun glinting off the trees in the most charming manner. I am in need of some herbs from the walled garden and may direct my feet towards the fields thereafter. I shall ask Mama if her stock of lavender wants replenishing.

Afternoon.

The business of the day has been strange beyond measure, I hardly know how to continue! As a rule, there is scarce another soul seen on my morning rambles, yet our new arrival has disrupted all that is habitual. I had struck through a favourite path of mine when a great phosphoric ray split the sky. Shouts drew me to the scene – I thought some terrible accident must have befallen some innocent. There, I was astonished to find a young lady equipped in men’s clothes, sallying forth by the ha-ha, claiming to have lost her horse. Desirous to know her history and how she came to my father’s property, I made an attempt at civilities. She had a great wildness in her manner and took offence when I presumed she belonged to a nearby group of gypsians. Her nerves, no doubt strained by her adventures,

were stretched beyond support and she fell in a faint. She came to without the aid of smelling salts but would not wait for aid.

My new acquaintance's name is Miss de Courcy, and I am pleased to say she did not expire, though her second collapse left her in danger of being crushed by Mr. Richards' curricule. With a strength I hardly knew I possessed, I pulled her away from the oncoming steeds.

What followed was all confusion. There were shouts, questions, unheeded answers and half-given explanations. Mr. Richards, unruffled as ever, with decisive action swept myself and the lifeless Miss de Courcy into his immaculate equipage, neatly depositing his companion onto the grass. Glancing down, I saw the unfortunate attendant dispossessed of his seat was Mr. Pinhorne, face puce with the affront. Urging the horses on, we sped up the drive, and with many "halloos", gained the attention of the house. As Mr. Richards had been the one to carry in Miss de Courcy, everyone took her for his acquaintance.

Cutting through the chaos, my mother instructed the gawping servants to take the collapsed stranger up to our finest guest room and send for Mr. Kebleworth immediately.

Addressing Mr. Richards she said with a sympathetic air, "Did your companion take ill on the journey, sir? I thought the party was to be you, Pinhorne and James. Now I find you are without my son."

At this moment, Mr. Pinhorne puffed across the threshold, barging his way through the assembled crowd of servants, looking rather cross.

"Confound it, Richards," he stormed, leaning his bulk against the wall to catch his breath. "What d'ye mean slinging me out the carriage like a stuffed frog. All for a queer wench you find on the road limp as a saddlebag, hair blowsy and wild! God's teeth, sir, you do me monstrous wrong."

Mr. Richards, unperturbed by this uncouth address, turned to his friend. "The wrong, Pinhorne, would be mine if I should leave Miss Woodforde and her companion by the roadside without assistance. There was nothing for it but to offer the carriage to the ladies, and we four should have been cheek by jowl had you stayed." He then gave Mr. Pinhorne a quelling look that put an end to any further protestations, though plainly there was more to be said on the matter.

"Miss Woodforde's companion?" said Mama, not missing a trick. "She isn't, that is to say, the young lady is not an acquaintance of yours?"

"Indeed not, madam," he said, courteously. "I can give none of her history."

“The devil she a lady,” interjected Mr. Pinhorne, regaining some of his bluster. “I ne’er saw a lady breeched in all my days, ‘cept on Drury Lane. The trollop was hanging off Miss. Woodforde when we came upon ‘em.”

The babble ceased immediately at this declaration, as the company, struck all-a-mort, turned their gaze upon me.

“Indeed,” said , eyes gleaming at this new intelligence. “And pray, Sophia, from whence did this wandering vagrant come?”

I felt my cheeks overspread with the deepest blush. “I do not know, Mama. She was in a state of confusion when I discovered her by the ha-ha. Though, she did say her name was Miss de Courcy.”

A hum of speculation recommenced as the remaining servants whispered about the origins of our mysterious visitor. Over the hubbub, I heard my mother give *sotto voce* instructions to Mrs. Jenkins to have Miss de Courcy moved to the maid’s old sitting room “until some other arrangement could be made”.

“De Courcy you say?” boomed Mr. Pinhorne. “A French spy on a frolic no doubt. I read in the *Chronicle* only yesterday there was more of this tumult, and they mean to start mischief here too. Mister Marquis or other tried to quickly settle the damnable thing, and had his head cut off for his trouble. I wouldn’t take a Frenchie into my house in days such as these, no ma’am. A confounded fox’s paw if ever there was one.”

Faux pas or fox’s paw, I took little heed of Mr. Pinhorne’s words. The same could not be said for the servants. Perhaps being used to passing their days in uninterrupted quiet, they are more susceptible to errant gossip.

Oh! Call me unjust to think so, Journal. Perhaps I ought to be more charitable in my assumptions. Yet still I caught dark looks exchanged back and forth. I wished to defend our newcomer, but knew not what to say. I was certain she was no French spy, but could give little more intelligence than that.

“Since you so greatly fear a lone woman, Pinhorne,” said Mr. Richards, “perhaps I shall set my man to stand guard outside her room. I’m sure a brace of pistols can be got.”

How glad I am Mr. Richards is here. Never before was raillery of his friend given in such a timely manner. The tension broke in an instant, with some making signs of derision at each other. Mr. Pinhorne meanwhile made attempts at complacency – adjusting the pleated frill on his shirt, wiping his brow or sweeping his hat to and fro.

“The fact remains, sir,” continued Mr. Richards, “there is a person upstairs suffering from a fit of illness who must be attended to. How soon before the apothecary arrives, Mrs Woodforde?”

“He is usually swift footed when summoned, Mr. Richards,” replied my mother. “Little can be done for her until then, I fear. In the meantime, won’t you and Mr. Pinhorne refresh yourselves with a dish of tea?”

The offer was taken up with enthusiasm by Mr. Pinhorne, never one to deny himself an opportunity to eat or drink. It was received with some reluctance on Mr. Richard’s part. No doubt his generous nature governed a desire to see Miss de Courcy set to rights.

“I recollect your daughter is rather clever with herbs, Mrs. Woodforde,” said he, glancing my way. When last I was here, she instructed a tea be brewed that cured me of a monstrous headache.”

My faded blush returned, firing my face. I should have thought such attentions beneath his notice. But nothing escapes the clever and considerate Mr. Richards. In all the hubbub, I had quite forgot my state of undress, and though my head was at least covered, tresses tumbled indecently over my shoulders.

“Yes,” said my mother, uncertainty in her voice. “Yes, she is a good girl to be sure.” She nodded, having apparently made up her mind on something. Perhaps her sense of propriety was at war with itself. “Sophia, watch over the girl until Mr. Kebleworth appears. Then you must change and join our guests. I am certain they will be charmed to hear you play.”

“Indeed, we shall,” said Mr. Richards, giving me a genteel bow.

I ought to have made a polite return, but my lips held fast. It was impossible to even raise my gaze to his face, instead fixing my eyes on his fine boots. The sharp clatter of hoofs thundering up the drive saved me further embarrassment.

The boisterous shouts from without heralded the arrival of my brother.

“Where is my father?” he called, striding into the hall, dust still covering his boots from the journey. “I must show him my new hunter. A marvellous mount – I have named him Hotspur.”

“Oh, James,” said Mama, accepting his kiss with a shake of her head. “Is that wise? You already have a horse. And think of the expense.”

“Nay, Mama,” said he in his easy, feckless manner. “Hotspur is the perfect match for Hector. You know how hard it is to find a pair so well suited.”

“Very well,” said she, once again won over by his charm. “Come and take some tea. Return to your duties,” Mama called to the servants. “See that Anne helps Miss Woodforde with all that she needs. You there, Jack, take the gentlemen’s things to their rooms. Make haste!”

Amidst the bustle, I escaped the hall into the drawing room. It was only once I had gained the upper floor I felt at liberty to breathe again. The warm, still air was stifling in the tapestry gallery and no wonder! A fire blazed in the grate by the staircase. I threw open a sash window and felt a pleasant breeze play across my face. From my vantage I distantly saw my father emerging from the grove. No doubt visiting a tenant. The mystery of Miss de Courcy would soon be explained to him, and I feared Mr. Pinhorne might give a prejudiced view. At least Papa is familiar with Mr. Pinhorne's exaggerations.

Sighing, I turned away, crossing to the door of the servant's passage. As ever, the heavy oak stuck fast on the small and poorly lit landing. My heartbeat quickened. On those rare times I walk this way, I take the door to the right that leads to the great gallery. Miss de Courcy, I knew, lay to the left, down four steps is the maid's old sitting room. How strange we still call it so. When first we came to this great house – many years since – and occupied it as our home, it was the room's chief function. Now it is a comfortably furnished bedroom, the servants' quarters having relocated some time ago. My parents, fond as they are of entertaining, had fitted the defunct apartments with the necessary furniture to accommodate less honoured guests for their, not infrequent, parties. The passing of years is not enough to eradicate habit, however, for the name, 'the maid's old sitting room', has fixed upon us all.

I could hear the homely clattering and carousing shouts from below, no doubt the servants exchanging the news. Lingered for a moment, I tried to catch the substance of their speech. But the babble from the kitchen, scullery and servants' hall combined into unintelligible noise.

Unable to delay further, I entered the room. The curtains were drawn across both sets of windows – the left facing across the fields and t'other overlooking the inner courtyard. Unlike the tapestry gallery, the room was cool, there being no fire lit. The invalid was hardly visible in the gloom, and I carefully pulled back the curtains, letting light pour in. She lay face down above the coverlets, her unbound hair spilling out in all directions. It looked a dark gold colour when set against the pale bedding, falling like a wave over the pillow. Some person had taken off her boots and placed them with her hat under a chair, on top of which was a folded shift. Her attire was surely uncomfortable and I considered the best action to take.

Her breeches were tight, not cut off at the knees as one would expect, but at the ankles. She wore a kind of smock-frock – yet of a sturdier fabric – loose fitting, dark blue. Had her stays been removed? Her breathing wasn't laboured, but nevertheless I feared for her safety. Taking up the shift, I softly moved towards her and took a hold of her smock.

Lifting it a few inches, I was surprised to find her back bare, excepting a small band of black material. She stirred, nearly frightening me out of my wits, but it was merely to roll over. Pausing, I took a moment to examine her face, sun browned, with a smattering of freckles about her cheeks.

The door opened behind me and I received a second shock in as many moments. It was Anne, carrying a pitcher, ewer and cloth.

Containing my cry, I hissed, "Good heavens, Anne! How many times must you be told to knock?"

"Beggin' yer pardon, Miss Woodforde," said she, neither discomposed nor troubling to keep her voice low. "I was only doing as the mistress instructed and seeing you right the Memsel."

"Must you be so loud, Anne?" I sighed. "What is 'the Memsel'?"

"Yon French baggage," she replied, gesturing to the sleeping form.

"Don't call her baggage, her name is Miss de Courcy," said I. "And what makes you think she's French? – do you mean *mademoiselle*?"

"That's so, miss. The house is full of talk she be a Frenchie on some secret business and have taken to call her Memsel on account of it."

"For heaven's sake," I sighed, exasperated at the speed of gossip. "Well as you're here, you can help. We ought to put her in nightwear."

Anne set about the task as instructed, frequently pausing to wonder over the strange articles.

"Did you ever see such a thing, miss?" she said, lifting the smock over the invalid's head. "No petticoats or shift, and stays what are hardly worth the bother. Why, I'd be bent double if all I had was this keeping me up. Most inconvenient." She hooked a finger under the shoulder strap and gave it a twang.

"Cease your trifling," said I with some warmth. "You leave her exposed to the cold air."

"Begging your pardon, miss," said she, casting her eyes down in an act of deference that didn't fool me. "Why, look!" she exclaimed on a sudden. "See this, miss? She's scarce of hair!"

I bent forward. Anne had lifted Miss de Courcy's wrist high over her head, and indeed, the skin was entirely smooth under her arm.

She reached forward, perhaps intending to feel but I commanded her to stop. Scowling, Anne took up the shift. Giving me a sly look she said, "Tis my daily duty to

dress and undress yourself, Miss Woodforde. You needn't stay, I can put her in a shift on my own well enough."

The flush that never seemed far from my countenance crept back. In truth, I was curious to know more about Miss de Courcy and was reluctant to leave, even whilst she slept.

"You are too familiar, Anne. You know how Mrs Woodforde disapproves of such pert talk."

"Meaning no disrespect, Miss," replied she, unabashed, now reaching for the breeches. She let out a laugh of surprise. "Did you ever see such *small* clothes, miss? Is this what all men wear under their breeches? Or only the French ones?"

"She isn't a man, Anne. Nor is she French if I'm any judge. Come, remove them quickly and put the shift over her."

"What of her black stays, miss? Do I leave them?"

"No, take them as well. They might be compressing the upper part of her body."

The act of dressing done, we laid her under the covers. Footsteps on the stairs heralded the arrival of Mr Kebleworth. He greeted me with great courtesy and asked I recount the stranger's sudden appearance. After making some examinations he pronounced that she must be allowed to recover in peace for a week at least, with as much rest as possible.

"I will write up a receipt, with my recommended directions once she wakes." He moved his hand over the crown of Miss de Courcy's head. "There is a chance of pain when she does, a monstrous head-ache at the least if this contusion has anything to say on the matter. It is paramount she stays a bed. I must away, it is mere chance I called to see Mrs. Woodforde this day instead of the next. Close the curtains and bed hangings. The room must be cool and dark. I believe nothing more can be done for her at present."

Bowing to me, he took his leave.

I wished then to escape to my closet and recount the day's proceedings to you, faithful Journal, but was forced to put off such satisfaction. Mrs Jenkins interrupted my vigil to remind me of our guests and the *attendant duties incumbent on me* -- my mother's turn of phrase. With the assistance of the pert Anne, I undressed, taking off the plain chemise and sash, and donning my striped silk caraco and matching petticoat.

When I joined Mama, Papa and the two gentlemen, James busy seeing to the stabling of his new horse, they were all politeness, complimenting me on my dress and later, playing. Papa especially wished to hear the news of the invalid, though the story of her arrival had been recounted to him several times.

“I wish to hear my dear Sophy tell it,” he declared. “I cannot account for the lack of sense the servants have, and wish to know how far the tale has fled from the truth.”

By this time, Mr. Pinhorne was well into his cups, and began booming his belief loudly again and again.

“Whilst I like your story, Pinhorne,” said my father, smiling, “I cannot credit it. I am sorry to contradict a guest, but there you are.”

“A game of whist!” clapped Mama, no doubt tired of discussing our strange visitor. “Sophia, as the fifth you must play at the piano for our amusement.”

And so, the afternoon passed in a series of busy nothings. Before our party dines this evening, I will check to see how Miss de Courcy goes.

Chapter 3. Anno domini, 1790

Something was wrong.

I jolted awake, lurching as if I'd missed the last step on a staircase in the dark. I knew I wasn't at home: the mattress was too soft, the bed different, a four poster? Heavy curtains encased me in, the darkness thick, suffocating. Kicking off the bedding, I saw my clothes were gone, replaced with a random night shirt.

Ripping back the hangings, I found myself in a small, dark room. A feeble crack of light slipped through half closed curtains, illuminating wood panelled walls and a fireplace with its ashy remains. Someone had tucked my boots tucked under a carved wooden chair in the corner, my riding hat placed on top.

Memory came back slowly, settling like soft rain. There had been a girl, Soph-eye-ah, wearing a puffy dress, some sheep, and then? A house. An old house, big and beautiful.

A thunder of knocks assaulted the door. A girl, balancing a large basin against her hip, erupted in, calling over her shoulder, "Ye see, Mistress, I *can* knock."

That Sophia girl followed, flustered and panting. "The point of knocking is to await invitation, Anne, not merely to herald your inevitable entry."

"Ah well," replied Anne, clearly unfazed. "The Memsel is awake so no harm, no foul." She set down the basin, slopping its steaming contents before throwing open the curtains. Turning, she peered at me like I was an animal in a zoo. I stared back. Like Sophia, she was wearing a full-length dress, but plainer. Her coarse apron couldn't hide the faded green material. Red hair poked out from a piece of fabric perched on her head.

The silence stretched, eventually broken by Sophia. "How are you feeling, Miss de Courcy?"

"Um..." Anne leaned forward, apparently eager to catch every word. "Confused. Where am I?"

"She don't sound French," said Anne, ignoring my question and turning to Sophia. "Ent she supposed to be French."

"No," sighed Sophia. "As I have tried to explain to all within my hearing, Miss de Courcy is not French."

"Sorry to disappoint," I said, keen to shift the subject along. "But yeah, where am I? Also, where are my clothes?"

“You are at Thropden Hall,” answered Sophia. “After you fell you were carried here to recover and have been a bed some hours. Your articles were taken to be laundered –”

“Even though it ent wash-day for another week!” interrupted Anne.

“Yes, thank you, Anne,” said Sophia before continuing. “We dressed you in a shift for your comfort as we feared your small, peculiar bodice might constrict your chest.”

Mortified, I glanced under my shift, checking if –

“We took yer undernethers as well,” said Anne cheerfully.

“What the hell.”

“Please do not feel ill at ease,” said Sophia, sensing my aggravation. “The act was kindly meant and most assuredly done for the benefit of your health.”

“How very,” I teetered on the edge of rudeness before settling on “*nice* of you,” dripping sarcasm. “Can I have my stuff back? It must be done.”

Anne and Sophia exchanged confused looks.

“They will not be ready this day, I think?” said Sophia, looking at Anne for confirmation.

“No mistress. They’ve hardly been at the boil this last hour. They’ll need to lie in the copper with a bag o’ pearl ashes tonight then hung out to dry. And that’s with it all being well wrung.”

From this I gathered they were hand washing my stuff. “Why don’t you just stick them in the dryer? Is there a power cut or something?”

“They will be dried, Memsel, but it take time don’ it?” said Anne in a maddeningly superior way, as though she was talking to an imbecile.

“I never asked you to nick my clothes, weirdo!”

“Please, no offence was meant,” said Sophia, stepping forward with raised hands to placate us. “Your articles will be returned as soon as they are ready. In the meantime, you may wear one of Mama’s old gowns. I do not believe any of mine would fit you.”

This much was true given Sophia looked about four inches shorter than me. I was probably thinner too, but hard to tell under her mountain of fabric.

“Ungrateful wench, us washing what’s hers,” muttered Anne darkly. “Wearing the Mistress’ fine clothes too, the pert-face.”

“You got a problem with me? Come on, say it again.” I stumbled out of bed, before falling back under intense dizziness.

Sophia rushed forward, guiding me back onto the pillows. “Tea, Anne. Willowbark,” she said over her shoulder before turning back to me. “Mr. Kebleworth said you must rest. You have received a blow to the head, but with sufficient rest you will recover in time.”

Anne stomped out of the room, her footsteps mirroring the dull throb inside my skull.

“How long have I been like this?” I said, massaging my forehead.

“It was late in the morning when I met you,” replied Sophia. “The clock in the gallery struck five the very moment I came to your chamber.”

“Oh. Well, I better be heading off then, Mum will be wondering where I am,” I made to swing my legs out of bed but the movement sent a stab of pain through my head.

“You must rest,” said Sophia, a firm hand pressing my shoulder. “Mr. Kebleworth has given strict instructions for your care, including avoiding unnecessary exertions. I have spoken with my father, and he says you may stay as long as you need. If you would like, we could send word to your family informing them of your situation.”

“Yeah, I need to call my mum,” I said, clutching my pounding head. “Could I use your phone?”

“Situated where we are, I think your mother would not hear us,” she said, puzzled, before adding, “What is a phone?”

I groaned. The pain was getting worse, not helped by Sophia’s annoying question.

“Do you have any pain killers? This headache it’s –”

“The willow bark tea will help. I know of no better remedy for a headache.”

“Can’t you just give me some paracetamol or something?” I said, frowning up at her. “What are you, like anti-technology or something? Only, the way you talk – all formal and stuff – I don’t get it.”

She looked blank, then shook her head. “I do not take your meaning.”

“That!” I said, exasperated. “Why don’t you just say, ‘I dunno’ like a normal person? And you’ve changed,” I added, gesturing to her dress. “How many of these crazy costumes do you have? What are you, a reenactor?”

“I fear my clothes displease you,” she said with an attempt at bravado. “Your agitation increases whenever you make note of them.”

“Stop talking like that. This is the twenty-first century for God’s sake!”

Her smile slipped. “That is a strange jest, Miss de Courcy. But perhaps I am merely unused to your wit. For naturally – and I feel foolish even suggesting otherwise – you know this is the eighteenth century?”

I gaped. What could I say to that? It was too ridiculous.

She frowned but continued. “You know we are in Hampshire?”

Mouth still open, I nodded. Sophia looked relieved.

“You know it is the month of July?”

I nodded again; aware she spoke like I was a toddler.

“That this is the thirtieth year of our sovereign, King George the Third?”

“Who? We don’t have a *King* George, just a prince.”

Ignoring this, she continued tentatively, “but you do know this is July, Anno domini, 1790, do not you?”

“Anno ... seventeen what?”

“Miss de Courcy,” she said with forced calm. “You know this is the year of our Lord seventeen-hundred and ninety? Would you do me the civility of repeating it back?”

“Oh hah-hah. Ugh, what a rubbish joke.”

“Forgive me, but I think you are unwell. I dare say the blow to your head has affected your reason.”

I glanced around the room, wanting proof to shut her up. No sockets, switches or any signs of electricity. Just candlesticks and lamps. This family seemed well-off, but everything was old school. Maybe there were environmentalists or hated technology or thought the government was spying on them.

I looked again at the sooty fireplace. That didn’t mean anything, did it? Nothing made sense. Unless...

I shivered, hairs rising across my skin. Sophia must have seen something in my face because she looked frightened.

I grabbed her wrist, gripping it tightly as though trying to keep a grip on reality itself.

“What’s happening?” I whispered.

“I don’t –”

I felt possessed with a manic energy. Jumping out of bed, I paced around, pushing through the dizziness and headache, trying to catch hold of my swirling thoughts.

This girl is a really good method actor. And the other one. Yeah. Really into their craft. And this... some kind of elaborate staging. This wall, probably foam. Looks solid, better check.

"You must rest," said Sophia. "You are in danger of overexerting yourself,"

"– Seems legit – what's that?" I said, pressing my ear to the oak-panelling.

"Miss de Courcy, you do not seem well."

"Well? *Well?*" I repeated, now on all fours peering at the join between the wall and floor. "What do you mean by that?"

"You have been muttering to yourself, chiefly nonsense."

"– There has to be wiring *somewhere*. What - no I haven't!"

Before she could respond, Anne burst through the door, carrying a tray.

"Tea for the Memsel," she called, before stopping dead, taking in my ludicrous position on the floor.

Sophia moved forward, and as she took the tea from Anne, seemed to give her whispered instructions. Anne glanced my way, nodded and left.

Ignoring Sophia I stood, throwing open the window. Smooth lawns and distant farmland. Not especially different countryside, and yet it was. Subtle absences. No airplanes leaving white streaks. No roar of car engines, no power pylons, no proof of the modern world at all.

Acceptance came on slow, like clinging onto the final moments of sleep before waking.

Then, a thought convinced me. Jethro's shocking revelation. Realisation spinning new meaning into the day's events. If my Dad wasn't dead and buried in the twenty first century, then where was he?

"What if he's here?" I whispered, voice trembling, hardly daring to believe it.

"Who's here?" Sophia said, sounding worried.

"My dad!" I yelled, spinning round, and making her jump. "What if he came back here too? To the past! That's what Jethro meant. About being "from before". Dad didn't leave us, he got stuck and *I'm* supposed to find him. Maybe that's why I'm here!" I beamed at Sophia, surprised she looked scared.

Her fear dimmed my triumphant realisation. Reality hit: who would believe me? I had to find my dad but needed help. An ally to help me blend in and navigate this strange world.

"I'm going to tell you something," I said, taking a deep breath. "You might want to sit down." She did, back straight, hands folded in her lap. It looked uncomfortable.

"Five years ago, my dad died. Except he didn't! They lied to me, *she* --" I stopped. Her bizarre betrayal still raw. "Mum took me to his funeral, I guess to explain away his disappearance. Maybe she thought I might not believe the truth. But of course, I would! There's no way he would have left us willingly. We were happy." The last word caught in my throat. I cleared it. Then the anger returned. "She kept it from all those years. I was so angry it was like it flung me from that saddle to here. To him. From the twenty-first century to 1790!"

Silence. Sophia looked at her hands, frowning. "You mean to say," she said, keeping her head down. "You believe you are from a century outside of this one?"

I tried again. "Think about it. Do I look like anyone you know? I'm pretty sure girls don't wear trousers and boots around here. You even thought I was a boy!"

Sophia shook her head, still not looking at me. "You may have acquired your masculine articles from a relative or neighbour. It is not empirical proof you are from a different age."

She had me there. I had nothing to prove I was from 'the future'. Except...

"How about this," I said jumping up. "Look at my riding hat; have you ever seen anything like it?" I dashed to the corner, holding it out. Rubbing a hand over the dome, she turned it over.

"See the straps?" I clipped them together with a snap. "The ends are made of plastic, know what that is?" She prodded the inside padding, still frowning.

"Never mind plastic, there's loads of cool stuff from my time! Like phones. I don't have mine with me, but you can talk to anyone on the planet, take pictures, look stuff up..." She looked blank so I tried to simplify things.

"Okay so we have cars. We drive them place to place."

"But you are merely describing a carriage," she said, with the air of explaining two plus two equals four.

"No these are like, *horseless* carriages, powered by engines. People don't really use horses to get around anymore."

"But you claim a horse flung you from a saddle into this century. Why were you riding when you have an alternative means of conveyance? You contradict your own argument."

“Because I’m too young to drive,” I said, exasperated. “Anyway, I like riding. But that’s not all. We have airplanes to fly people across the world. Way quicker than travelling by boat. You can be in France in an hour and Australia in twenty-four! We’ve covered the globe and started exploring the stars. Actual human beings have walked on the moon and orbited the earth. Satellites in the atmosphere ping signals to completely different continents, projecting our voices and even our images all over the world. You could be in America, I’d be in England, but I’d hear you like you were right next to me.”

Silence. “Were I to credit your story,” said Sophia, at last. “Tell me, how great a distance can scents travel in your supposed age?”

I laughed, taken aback. “There aren’t any smell transporters: that would be ridiculous!”

“But why is it so wonderful to imagine?” she said reasonably. “You tell me devices exist, enabling one to hear a voice a world away, and traveling vast distances through the air is habitual. The rules of sight and sound seem untethered in your philosophy, yet you scoff at the very notion smell resides in a single plain.”

I had no comeback.

“*Look stuff up...*” she said, my words sounding strange in her accent. “A directory of sorts? An encyclopaedia perhaps.”

Taking her interest as a good sign, I fumbled for an answer. “It’s the internet. You ask a question, anything really, and get a list of answers, pictures, videos, whatever.”

“An omniscient being,” whispered Sophia. “Infinite knowledge within one’s asking. Surely, the individual who wields this ‘internet’ has unimaginable influence. If one has the means to know anything they choose, one can effect great change instantaneously. Find the means to cure ailments or end needless suffering.”

“Well,” I faltered, remembering I usually watched dog videos. “There are *some* limits. One internet search won’t tackle the big issues. Maybe easy access makes us forget its potential.”

Sophia still looked unsure, and I started to feel frantic.

“Listen to the way I talk! Do I sound like I’m from around here? I bet I’ve said loads of stuff that’s gone right over your head. I’m not lying or crazy, I’m just...”

The re-entry of Anne saved me finishing the sentence. She looked stressed; fists clenched tightly by her sides. Sophia sprang forwards, taking hold of her hands. Something passed between them, I couldn’t say what.

With a distinct air of forced calm, Sophia moved to the tray where the tea lay half-forgotten. “Does your head still pain you, Miss de Courcy?” she asked, her back towards me.

“Oh,” I said taken aback. “Yes, it does.”

“Here,” she said, turning around. “This will ease it.”

“Thanks.” I took the proffered cup from its saucer, wrapping both hands round. The contents were pale, giving off an earthy scent. Raising the cup to my lips, I paused before taking a sip. “You do believe me, don’t you?”

She looked uncomfortable. “You should drink,” she said, not meeting my eye.

Sighing, I took a sip of the lukewarm liquid. It had a bitter aftertaste. Seeing my face, Sophia said, “We will sweeten your tea next time.”

“Thanks.” Deciding I wanted to get it over with, I finished it in three large gulps. A strange feeling washed over me. The pain in my head immediately receded, replaced with a sense of giddiness. I stared down at the cup, the dregs swimming in and out of focus.

“What...” The cup rolled out of my hands, falling into a void, miles below.

“I think,” I swallowed, aware of my tongue. “I think you’ve poisoned me.” Sophia shifted in and out of focus. I tried to reach her but couldn’t raise my arms.

Shushing sounds enveloped me, wrapping across my body and holding me down like slithering snakes.

Chapter 4. “Thou child of Night and Silence, balmy Sleep / Shed thy soft poppies on my aching brow!” – Anna Seward, ‘Sonnet XIII’, July 1773

Evening.

I am not proud of the night’s work, Journal.

Unable to look at Miss de Courcy longer than necessary, I waited only until her feeble attempts to resist the concoction’s effects ceased. Satisfied she would stir no more, I turned to face Anne.

“Did anyone see you?” The girl looked horror-struck, as though she had witnessed a scene Mrs Siddons in her most tragic role.

“Anne!” The strength in my tone surprised us both.

“Ere,” said she, her eyes wide with fright. “She ent dead is she? That weren’t poison we gave her?”

“Of course not,” I said with some warmth. “The dose was merely enough to bring on sleep for a few hours. Now tell me true, were you seen by ought?”

“No, Miss Woodforde, not a soul,” she answered. “Mrs Jenkins was in Mrs Woodforde’s closet nigh on forever – bustling to and fro – why I was gone such a time.”

“Good. Hand me the key, I shall return the tincture. It will arouse less suspicion.” She did so, turning to leave.

“A moment, Anne.” She hesitated by the door, anxious to be on her way.

“It is of the utmost importance that what occurred is known to none but ourselves.” She made no response, her eyes downcast. I have never felt easy giving strict commands to the servants – not like Mama. She says it is why the maids who fall under my sphere of influence are so slovenly.

Adopting a stern visage, I continued, “You will speak of this to no one, you understand? Not your fellow servants, not Mrs Jenkins, *no one*. Should anyone make enquiries about ‘the Memsel’, you are to inform them she is recovering from her fall and is now resting. That is all you know.”

“Yes, Miss Woodforde,” she said, making me a curtsy. “But – the Memsel – what is to be done? She ent right.”

My stern mask slipped a moment as I took in the lifeless form. “She has undergone a trial – I cannot say what – and suffered a loss. We are going to help her, you

and I, as much as we can.” I said no more and continued to gaze down at Miss de Courcy until Anne took her leave.

Soon, I followed, shutting the door with care. Pausing on the threshold, I felt for the vial hidden in the pocket tied about my waist. It was an act of deception, lacking honour. Yet, surely, sleep is the greatest reserve for an immediate recovery – Mr. Kebleworth as good as said so! It is clear Miss de Courcy has lively, animal spirits, which no doubt will aid a swift recovery. Nevertheless, this same energy, if left unchecked during her present disorder, might bring about a fever.

Returning to the party and affecting a calm I did not feel was impossible. Instead, I took a different path through the baize door, towards the gallery. Oft have I paced this floor in inclement weather: observing the heraldic stained-glass windows on one side and the portraits on the other. The remaining fragments of kin come before, captured in their glory for posterity to remember. In times past, I gazed up at them and wondered whether I would be thus preserved.

This day, I contemplated our strange new visitor.

A girl from a different time. Such nonsense! Yet Miss de Courcy herself is not so easy to dismiss. Her tone had been so earnest, and her conduct, though wild at first, belied any true symptoms of madness. Besides which, there is something in her features – I cannot say what – that prejudices her in my favour. Odd as it seems, I do credit her tale.

Ordinarily, the rhythmic swish of my skirts rustling down the hall act as a thresher, separating rational wheat from foolish chaff. Yet today my thoughts would not settle. Thinking the monotony of a familiar task would serve the purpose, I stepped into the withdrawing room – mercifully empty – and sank into the alcove seat, taking up my work. The Dresden pattern was a challenge, which frustrated, rather than distracted, the needle refusing to obey. Soon abandoned, I gazed out the window down the length of the drive.

As well you know, Journal, it is a favourite spot of mine, for the view gives the best vantage of the road, carrying all and sundry to and from London. Travellers of every variety take this route: from the gentry returning to their countryseats, to ragged labourers seeking better fortune elsewhere. It was on that very road Mr. Richards had caught sight of myself and Miss de Courcy.

The door flew open, wrenching me from my contemplations.

“There you are, my dear,” said my mother, sweeping into the room with her usual stately purpose. “I see you are at your leisure,” said she, casting an eye over the abandoned embroidery. “That is as well, but this is no time to be idle.”

“It was not idleness, Mama. I was thinking.”

“Thinking, forbye,” she answered, settling herself on the sofa. “The men would have us believe it is a dangerous predilection for a young woman.” She laughed, adjusting her skirts before asking, “How goes the invalid? Did she stir herself to wakefulness during your vigil?”

How great a fool I am! Miss de Courcy had so thoroughly occupied my mind; I quite forgot to return the vial. It lay in my pocket: unassuming, hidden, yet decidedly *not* where it ought to be.

“No, that is to say, yes,” I replied, affecting composure. “She awoke for a short time only. Her head pained her, so I instructed Anne to brew a little willow bark tea.”

“You gathered no more about her? What of her family? Her connections? What brings her so close to our door? How came she to be here?”

I wonder if all mothers are so adept at cross-examination, or if it is only mine whose true calling was the bar. Under the torrent of inquiry hurled my way, there was no recourse remaining, but to give some answer.

“The little she said was confused,” I began, carefully. “Given the nature of her injury, it cannot be held to much.”

“Yes, but what did she *say*,” Mama interrupted with some impatience. “You are remarkably reserved, Sophia. I would venture more so than is customary.”

“She is searching for her father,” said I, feeling this was the only part of Miss de Courcy’s feverish communication I could safely relate. “She believes he may have travelled through these parts.”

“And she searches alone – quite alone?” exclaimed Mama, aghast.

“As to that, I could not say. Mr. Kebleworth prescribed rest and I did not wish to press her – not whilst she was still unwell.”

My mother made a noise of derision, making plain her disapprobation. “Did she at least say when her father made his journey through the country? Making inquiries about a ‘Mr. de Courcy’ at the coach houses and inns should be of no matter.”

“It was a time ago, I think. Some years, in fact.”

“All seems a banbury story of a cock and bull,” said Mama, tutting. “Really, Sophia, you shouldn’t be so easily taken in. And now I hear we are to be saddled with her a week whilst she is on bedrest. Pinhorne will doubtless suggest the parish take her in as a vagrant. Come, it is near supper time.”

The thought wearied me in the extreme. I could not bear to be teased by Mr. Pinhorne, and found I had no appetite besides. Furthermore, were I to venture down to the

dining room with Mama, there would be no opportunity to return the vial to its proper place.

“I find I do not have the power to be amusing this evening, Mama. Would you make my excuses to the gentlemen and Papa? I am greatly fatigued and wish to retire early.”

After several attempts to dissuade me, she relented, wishing me a good night. After all, she had her beloved boy home from Oxford and wished for only good-humoured company. Waiting some moments after her departure, I crept to her closet, certain to remain undiscovered with the servants busy attending the party. Stowing the laudanum back in its casement, the little bottle seemed to wink at me, successful in its purpose.

Thus, I returned to my sanctuary with time to think on the day’s events. Yet still, I know not what to make of it. My faint hope is Miss de Courcy’s story will become less eccentric as she recovers from her contusion.

Perhaps tomorrow, she will wake, and the mystery of Miss de Courcy will begin to unravel.

Chapter 5. How the other half live

Chaos reigned. The broiling sea raged as a storm broke above. Waves as tall as buildings lurched above, the dark sky thundering with menace. Yet, I felt calm. I floated on a piece of driftwood, untouched by the gale that circled around, enclosing but not harming me. The water twisted and thrashed, white spray forming sharp blades ready to slice. Still, I was unfazed, removed from it all.

The storm fell away, a new vision forming. Sophia. She was saying something, but I couldn't understand. Frustrated, she pointed first at herself, and then at me, and handed me a mirror. Her reflection stared back. When I lowered the mirror, she was gone.

Puzzled, I turned and saw a man walking towards me. He was dressed strangely, and it took a moment to recognise him. Dad. I ran to him, stretching out my arms, but when I reached him, he burst into a flock of black birds. They screamed in my face, beating the wings at me, scraping my skin with their sharp claws. Their caws grew louder and louder until the sound reverberated inside my head –

– I woke, the early dawn's faint light seeping into the room.

Getting out of bed, I wandered towards the window, finding the view the same as before: irritatingly un-modern. Heavy mist hovered over the hills, waiting for the sun to burn it away. Resting my forehead against the glass, I closed my eyes, listening to the sounds of the quiet countryside.

CLANG.

Dashing to the other window, I squinted into a courtyard. Clatters, but no one visible. A clunk, a splash, and a figure emerged through an archway, bearing a huge bucket of water. Too heavy, judging by their agonisingly slow progress. A few steps, plop, rest, pick it up, water slopping all the time. As the figure approached the house, they gave an almighty tug. Catching their toe on a loose cobble, the bucket crashed to the ground, spilling its contents everywhere.

I winced in sympathy, expecting to hear a shout of annoyance. Instead, the figure – a girl, I realised – silently stared down in apparent defeat. The slumped shoulders and downcast head said it all. Then, without warning, she swung the bucket up and flung it against the wall. Deathly silence followed the impact.

Then, a bellow reverberated underneath my window before a huge figure stormed into the courtyard. Seeing the obvious threat, the water carrier tried to run but too late. They dragged her back towards the house, leaving only squeals of pain behind.

I sprinted to the door, bursting onto a dark and narrow landing. Stairs to my left. Down the twisted, blocky spiral, head swimming.

At the bottom, bare feet slamming onto cold stone floor, gloomy light leaked from small, high windows. Left, down the long corridor towards bangs and angry shouts. Flickering light spilled from an open door.

Two boys had each other by the collars, shouting and pulling. A younger girl hurried past, slamming pots on a counter, before retrieving more. In the corner slumped a bleary-eyed old man swigging from a dirty bottle. A great wooden table, set between two upright beams dominated the room. Dark, sticky liquid soaked into the wood, dripping onto the floor. A bloody joint of meat revolved over a blazing fire in a huge hearth, overseen by a red-faced woman.

At the centre of it all was Anne, face twisted in pain as a man in livery tugged her ear.

“What the hell is going on!” I roared. Everyone stopped dead.

“Ent that the Memsel?” said one of the fighting boys, now holding his fellow in a headlock.

“Ent never seen a *lady's* hair full loose,” answered the boy in the headlock.

“She’s the loose one, I’ll wager,” the other replied. The pair sniggered, openly staring.

“Begging your pardon, *mem-sell*,” sneered the man holding Anne, “I’ve no wish to put your back up, but you oughtn’t be down ‘ere.”

His words weren’t exactly threatening, but the way his eyes swept over me gave me the creeps. I suddenly felt conscious of how thin my nightshirt was; every eye on me.

Crossing my arms, I glared at him. “Let go of Anne.”

He tilted his head, considering. Still holding onto her ear, he said, “The cur ‘ere,” he gave Anne’s ear a yank, “did make a fearful noise outside, so I thought to fan her sweetly.”

“Ah, leave her ‘Arry,” said the old man in the corner, clearly very drunk.

“Pay no heed to that fuddle cap, Memsel,” said the liveried man comfortably. “He’s been at the diddle this night.”

“Let go, you bell swagger,” Anne spat, trying, and failing to wrench herself free.

“Shut yer bone-box,” he snarled. “You deserve a proper hiding for the riot you’ve caused. You was sent to fill a pail, not shout a squall.”

“It ent me what’s supposed to fetch the water,” she fired back, still struggling. “I ent no scullery maid, nor no maid-of-all work. I’m a house-maid. I stay in the *house*.”

“And do ye smash the member mug ‘gainst the wall when in the *house*, eh maid? Do ee’?” He gave her ear another tug and she cried out.

“Oi!” I yelled, stepping towards them. “She only dropped the bucket because of me. I opened the window, and it made her jump. If someone should be in trouble, it’s me.”

The man’s eyes narrowed suspiciously; Anne’s widened in surprise.

“Is that so, Memsel,” he said, silkily. “An’ I spose you told her to break the bucket an’ all?”

“That was an accident,” I answered, unsure what else to say. “I saw the whole thing. Now let go of Anne before you pull her ear off. I’m sure you don’t want the family to hear about how you treat the girls here.”

The whole room seemed to be holding its breath. Staring each other down, I played what I hoped was a trump card.

“In case you’ve forgotten, I’m a guest in this house. Right now, I need a house maid, so I say it again: let her go.”

He eyed me for a long moment, before finally releasing Anne. “On yer way, maid,” he said, as she scurried over to me.

“You do indeed be a guest, Memsel,” he called after me, as Anne and I turned to leave. “For now,” he added in a soft undertone.

Anne rubbed her ear as she stalked out of the kitchen. I followed, lifting my chin, and squaring my shoulders, trying to look impressive and commanding. Instead, I felt unnerved. So much for blending in.

We hurried back down the corridor, Anne leading the way up the stairs until we reached the safety of the landing.

“Marry! What mean you by that show?” she hissed, wheeling round to face me. “Abroad at night, storming the servants place bare headed in naught but yer shift. There’ll be talk. Mark me, there’ll be talk.”

“Uh, you’re welcome,” I said, a little annoyed at her lack of gratitude. “How about next time I just let that guy twist your ear clean off?”

“Harry blusters and bullies but he’s naught to bother over. It’s the rest who are long-tongued and bound to blab. And blab they will.”

“Well, so what if they do? It’s not a crime what I did. What’s the big deal?”

She looked at me like I had two heads. Then, apparently remembering we were still in the corridor opened my bedroom door, beckoning me inside.

“T’aint proper,” Anne said, snapping shut the door. “Folks don’ know you, save what Mr. Pinhorne’s been saying, and none of that good. They don’t know who ye are – if yer quality with clout or low enough to cross without trouble.”

“I guess that explains why he was so rude.” A thought struck. “Why is everyone calling me ‘mem-sell’?”

“He was calling ye mademoiselle,” she said, drawing each syllable out. “I reckon it’s his accent you don’ understand,” she added haughtily. “He ent had the proper lettering and can’t speak the *parlez-vous*. An’ like I say, none of us know where ye stand or what to call ye.”

“I see,” I said slowly. Why not just Darcy? Sophia probably wouldn’t approve. I’d stand out. Plus, Anne’s words had more than a hint of warning. Some people in this house were looking to give me trouble.

“Mademoiselle is fine,” I said, mimicking her haughtiness. “But I still don’t get what’s so bad about me coming into the kitchen.”

“It’s like I said, folks’ll talk. ‘Spose they say you’ve been out *visiting* this night,” she said meaningfully. I must have looked blank because she rolled her eyes and continued. “Out visiting gentleman in the house. You ent the only guest staying ‘ere.”

“Well,” I said, thinking quickly. “You can just repeat what I said. That I woke up needing a maid and came down to get you.”

“But they’ll ask what you was needing me for,” said Anne, looking uncomfortable. “What do I say to that?”

“Since you bring it up, I do need your help. Where’s the loo?”

“Loo?” she said, confused. “Far gone for cards, ent it? Oh!” Her expression cleared. “Yer wanting to use the privy? Right you are, though you’d best use the chamber pot.”

Walking to the bed, she bent down and pulled out something that looked like it belonged on a dining table

Handing it to me, she gave a small bob. "If that be all, Memsel, I best be away. There's fires need lighting."

"Wait a second," I said in disgust, holding the bowl at arm's length. "You don't seriously expect me to wee in this. It looks like a gravy boat!"

Anne scowled. "La! If it's good enough for the gentleman and mistress, 'twill serve your fine self! Do ye think I have time to take ye to the privy? The scullery maid's down with fever and me picking up her labour. I've scarce time to draw breath and the days not yet begun! I'm no maid-of-all work I tell ye. I –"

"– Alright!" I cut in, recognising the beginnings of a full-blown rant. "But what am I supposed to do with it after? Chuck it out the window?"

"Out the –" she looked appalled. "Leave it under yer bed, ye baggage!"

"Alright, don't get your pantaloons in a twist. Thanks for your help, I'll let you get on."

She gave another begrudging curtsy and stomped out, muttering to herself.

Sighing, I put the bowl on the floor. Stuck in the past with nothing but the clothes on my back and now a pot to piss in. I squatted, unable to hold it any longer. Halfway through, I realised I didn't have any loo roll. Swearing, I looked around for a box of tissues.

There were none.

Careful not to slosh any of the contents, I slipped it under the bed and waited until the rest of the house woke.

A soft tapping at the door revealed Sophia, looking sheepish.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Poison Ivy herself."

Sophia snapped the door shut behind her. "You mustn't say anything," she said to my surprise. I assumed she'd deny it.

"I haven't decided what I'll do yet," I said, jumping out of bed and swaggering over to her. "It all depends on you, and whether you help me."

"I *am* trying to help you," she said, a note of pleading in her voice.

Before I could make my demands, a few short knocks sounded, freezing us like musical statues. The large red-faced woman from the kitchen bustled in, holding a tray.

“Good morning, Mrs Jenkins,” said Sophia with a forced air of nonchalance. “Are those Miss de Courcy’s victuals?”

“A dish of tea, mistress” she said, giving no indication she recognised me. “And the thin gruel and egg boiled soft as Mr. Kebleworth instructed.”

“Very good. Thank you, Mrs Jenkins.”

She put the tray down, bobbed and left. Sophia hovered awkwardly. I wasn’t quite ready to forgive her but in fairness, she did seem keen to help. Even if her attempts were dubious.

“You look nice,” I said, trying to make conversation. It was true. She wore a pleated white dress embroidered with delicate flowers that came in tightly at her waist. Over her shoulders draped a triangular shawl, stitched with the same pattern. Brown hair was curled and pinned high, an errant strand falling over her face that she tucked self-consciously behind her ear. Paired against her pale skin, her dark features were striking.

Sophia blushed and looked down. Then, defiantly lifting her chin said, “There is no need for falsehoods, Miss de Courcy. My gowns might not be to your taste, but they are to mine. Now, what is it you want of me?”

“No, I wasn’t being sarcastic,” I said taken aback. “You genuinely look nice, with the hair and the dress.” Even if true, it was a feeble compliment against previous insults. “Let’s not argue. I got a little personal, and you tried to poison me. Call it even?”

I took a sip of the newly brought tea in a show of good faith. There was sugar in it at least, but no milk.

“It wasn’t poison,” said Sophia, shifting uncomfortably. “Merely an opiate to calm your nerves.”

I nearly spat out my drink. “Opiate?! That’s much worse than I thought! You spiked me with a Class A! I could get addicted, or lose my hair. What if my teeth fall out...”

“It was a necessary measure. What I did, I did for the sake of your health; you were frantic beyond comprehension. I truly wish to aid you in any way I can. Please, tell me how.”

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I studied her face. What could I see in those dark brown eyes that seemed to glow bright in the dim room? A willingness to take my part, maybe. Hope flared.

“The fact is, Sophia, I’m in a world I don’t understand and I need help. You’re my only hope of finding my dad.”

“I understand and wish to help. But how are we to find a man lost for five years? Who are his people, from whence does he hail?”

“He grew up in Ireland, but I don’t think he’d go back there. He said he didn’t recognise the place of his birth. Southampton became his true home and I just have this feeling he’d be there. When I was a kid, if I ever lost him, I’d go to God’s House Tower. He’d always say, ‘If you need to find me, that’s where I’ll be.’ Southampton... it must be so different now...” I trailed off, the enormity of my situation sinking in. “Help me blend in. Teach me how to act normal so I don’t draw attention to myself whilst I look.”

“Your arrival has not passed unnoticed.”

“Storming the kitchen last night probably didn’t help.”

“I had hoped Anne exaggerated that tale.” She looked thoughtful for a moment before her expression cleared. “It might be possible to excuse the act as a symptom of your injury, dismissing it accordingly. Now as to your history: I first believed you a foreigner; your strange manners spoke as one not native to this country.”

“Well actually you thought I was gypsy, but I see your point. Go on.”

“Most already believe you are French,” she said, pacing the room. “We can concoct a history, based on the spirit of truth: the volatile situation in France and the search for your missing father. Remaining scant on details, we might say the corrupt regime drove your father from his native land five years ago. In that time, you have been under house arrest in the French countryside with foreign keepers, hence your lack of accent and unusual manners.” Her eyes gleamed as the yarn became more elaborate. “The fall of the monarchy afforded you a chance at escape, as your gaolers had lost their paymaster. In the chaos at the ports, you smuggled yourself onto a ship disguised in your strange apparel. Your arrival in England disorientated you, hence your confused arrival. However, you must play the part more convincingly.”

“What part? You said it yourself, I’ve had an isolated upbringing and don’t have any social skills, or whatever.”

“The part in this tale we have concocted –”

“You’ve concocted. I’m not complaining or anything,” I added, seeing her lips purse. “But the way you’ve set it up, it seems I can act as weird as I like, and people will put it down to my crazy prison childhood in the French countryside.”

“You were far too bold sallying forth into the kitchens last night. Ladies do not behave as you just did.”

“Well sorry for overreacting when some bloke tries to pull a girl’s ear off! Where I’m from, that sort of thing is not okay.”

“This may prove more difficult than I first conceived,” said Sophia, worried. “Your manners must be moderated. I can procure some conduct literature, which will help. You are able to read I trust?”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I nodded; appreciating this was a genuine query and not an insult to my intelligence. My stomach however, did not stay silent and grumbled on my behalf.

“You are in need of nourishment I believe,” said Sophia. “One cannot live solely upon exasperating decent members of society. It is most insubstantial.”

“That almost sounded like a joke,” I smirked. “I think you’re enjoying this. Just a little bit.” Catching the serious look on Sophia’s face, I said, “Or not.”

My stomach rumbled loudly again. “About this ‘thin gruel’,” I said, eyeing the porridge left by Mrs Jenkins.

“– Rest easy, I shall instruct cook to bring up a little plum sauce.”

“Oh, great...”

Sophia left to give the orders, promising her swift return. Anne was with her when she came back, carrying a small pot that she thumped on the food tray. The eggs rattled in their silver eggcup stand.

“This morning was crazy right,” I said cheerily, reaching for the tray. “The knock to the head made me go off on one.”

“Aye, memsel,” she said, still not on friendly terms yet. “If that t’were all mistress, church begins soon, and I must away.” She bobbed to Sophia and left.

Eyeing the gruel dubiously, I took a spoonful. Cold and salty. I mixed in the plum sauce to make it sweeter.

“Anne is right to hurry, I too must make haste,” said Sophia, plucking at her gown. “Papa is to give the sermon today, so no doubt the whole village will be present, as well as the entire household.”

“Why would your dad be giving a church sermon?” I said, now starting on the eggs.

“He is the rector of this parish. Though estate business often means he must delegate the task to his curate. I believe he enjoys it, as he undertakes it when he can.”

I frowned, mentally flicking through my limited knowledge of how the wealthy operated in this era. Surely the lord of the manor didn't double up as local vicar. And this mansion certainly wasn't a vicarage.

"I thought you said this was your dad's house. How can he be the rector as well?"

"We weren't always destined for this life, though God granted it be so." With that enigmatic answer, she left.

"What does that mean?" I said to the empty air.

Chapter 6. “You must form and govern your temper and manners, according to the laws of benevolence and justice; and qualify yourself, by all means in your power, for an useful and agreeable member of society.” – Hester Chapone, *Letters on the improvement of the mind: addressed to a young lady*, 1787

Sunday, July 26. Thropden Hall

I am glad to say that today I have left Miss de Courcy in a better condition than yesterday, though tarried a little long in her company. Mama scolded me for my tardiness, but I blamed the circumstance on the need to return to my closet and retrieve my hat.

“The de Courcy girl seems to cause a great deal of trouble,” said she, when I reached her again. “The servants are quite full of her unruliness. Pinhome seemed delighted with such a sure account of her bad character. James thinks us mad to house her at all. See them now exchanging reports,” she gestured with an elegant hand down the drive, where I could just make out the bowed heads of the two men in close conference nearing the church gate. We began our own progress down to St. Nicholas’s, happy to make the short journey on foot, the weather being fine.

“Have you uncovered more of the girl’s history?”

In as brief sentences as possible, I described the fictional events that had brought Miss de Courcy to our door.

“How *unlikely*,” replied Mama, as she swept through the church porch, not clarifying whether the circumstances themselves were unlikely, or whether she doubted their veracity. As we walked up the aisle, parishioners moved aside to let us pass, respectfully bowing their heads or murmuring “Ma’am.”

Papa’s sermons are always amusing, never resorting to other amateur clergymen’s fondness for reading out published sermons in rotation. Often, he addresses the problems of the congregation, most of these being his tenants. Today included the parable of the good Samaritan, no doubt a reference to Miss de Courcy’s staying at the house. I thought of her much as I pressed my heel into the secret slab beneath our pew – the one that rises under pressure and once served as a place to hide my treasures from James when he used to tease me so. Long might I have continued to use the nook, had Anne not spied me placing my papers under it last summer. Though not all the servants can read, she is able, and I could not bear the idea of my private thoughts being circulated below stairs.

As was our custom, Mama and I stood with Papa outside the church after the service, receiving the thanks and well wishes of the village. As ever, Papa was jovial with

all, a genial word here and an affable slap on the back there. The villagers kept their usual distant deference to Mama.

I was impatient to see how Miss de Courcy did but was delayed by the tiresome task of tea with Mr. Pinhorne. The conversation was tedious, fortunately interrupted by Papa, who had not been attending, busy reading a letter

“I’ve a mind to go to Southampton,” said my Papa. “Sir Toby is there taking the waters and says it does wonders for his gouty disposition.”

“Southampton?” boomed Pinhorne, now stuffing his face full of sweetmeats. “Aye, capital idea! I was there last summer having a try at the latest new treatment - Earth Bathing, it was. A fine fellow of a Doctor invented it, though a Sawny. Went to his Temple of Health in London some years back. Had a fine beauty with him extolling the virtues of healthful living.” He sat back, eyes glazed with the memory, behaving - for all the world - as if in rational conversation and not a soliloquy of nonsense.

Why anyone would venture to try Earth Bathing whilst staying in a seaside town I could not fathom. However, I held my tongue and sipped the tea Mr. Richards had kindly gifted us. Removing to Southampton for the summer would be a most convenient arrangement. Whether it aid Miss de Courcy in restoring her health, or better still, restoring her to her father, I was for the scheme.

“I should like to go to Southampton for the summer,” mused James. “Richards, is not your new abode there?”

“Aye, in Gloucester Square,” replied he. “It wants a certain charm of character just now. But with time and attention it will improve. A woman’s touch might be the thing.” Here, Mr. Richards gave me a look I could not be insensible of. I felt the heat rise in my cheeks and, not for the first time, cursed a complexion that so readily answered. What were my feelings at such attention, dear journal? I hardly know, beyond embarrassment. Yet a certain something, even now, creeps in my belly. It prickles and snags, like a stitch come undone. Why am I so uneasy?

My mother, keen to carry on this vein of conversation added, “A fashionable part of town, to be sure,” nodding with approval. “With views across the water, I dare say.”

“Cost a pretty penny too, I should think,” interjected Pinhorne, with his usual lack of propriety.

The conversation moved onto arrangements about our journey – when we would set off and where we would stay. It was agreed that James, Mr. Richards and Pinhorne would leave the next day, Sunday-travelling naturally being out of the question, with the rest of us following the week after. This would provide ample time for Papa to settle affairs

with his curate and see to the business of the estate. Likewise, Mama needed to run over the household accounts and such preparations that arise when removing to the seaside for the summer.

“It will also give sufficient time for Miss de Courcy to recover her strength,” said I without thought. A pause ensued, causing me to falter. “She will be ready to travel by then and taking the waters will be most advantageous.” I tried another tack. “It would be a relief for me to have a companion when facing the social whirl of the town. You know how it tries my nerves making calls or attending dances. Really, Mama,” I directed my pleas towards her, knowing full well where the power of decision lay. “I am not long out and believe the addition of an amiable new acquaintance would enliven my spirits.”

My mother pursed her lips, a small frown creasing her brow. Arguments against such a proposition were evidently forming in her mind. “From the little I have seen of Miss de Courcy, she seems neither genteel in person, nor well bred. I fear she would not be a fit companion for you, Sophia.” This seemed a touch unfair, given all Mama had seen of Darcy was an unconscious form, and I said so in as gentle terms as possible. I did not add that this picture was not far from the truth.

“Her manners might be a little unpolished,” I ventured. “But this is merely because she has been unused to company, so secluded was her upbringing.”

“Pray, what was her upbringing? Who are her people?” asked Mr. Richards. In all the hubbub of the pew dispute, I had quite forgot the gentleman did not yet know the fabricated history. I gave it, embellishing where necessary.

Even my father had abandoned his newspaper to listen. When I had done, he said, “And she believes her father might be in Southampton?” cocking his head in sympathy.

“She is unsure. It has been many years since she has laid eyes upon him.” I knew not how to continue – my sparse ‘facts’ were all spent. Fortunately – and I doubt I shall ever write such a sentence again – I was saved by Mr. Pinhorne, who, with jubilant exultation cried “I KNEW IT!”

“Calm yourself, Pinhorne,” said Mr. Richards, irritably, sweeping fair hair from his brow.

“Didn’t I say she was a Frenchie?” carried on Pinhorne, jumping to his feet and upsetting the sweetmeats dish. “Am I ever wrong in such matters? And tell me, Miss Woodforde, is she a spy, as I predicted?”

“A poor spy to admit such a thing,” interjected James.

“No, sir,” said I, directing my gaze firmly on Mr. Pinhorne. “She is not a spy, and she means no mischief. Miss de Courcy is just a girl who needs our help. Surely you would

not have her thrown upon the mercy of the street?" I had never before spoken so directly, hands clasped in my lap to hide their trembling. Despite this, I could feel a change within. All this incessant censure laid at Darcy's door was galling. Though our acquaintance is brief, I *am* of a mind to take her part.

"I see you are in earnest, my dear," said my father gently. "If your mother consents, then I make no objections." We all turned to her, she tapping her fan against the arm of her chair, considering.

"This is not one of your novels, Sophia. Boundless hospitality to chance-met strangers might be an established convention in romances, but not polite society. However," she added with a sigh. "I see no harm in this scheme, particularly if having a companion brings you out into society more. Besides, there is a certain glamour to hosting an emigree."

It was settled. James and his friends would set off the next day and find accommodation for us in Castle Square, Mr. Richards' house not yet ready to receive visitors beyond Pinhorne.

"The pleasantest spot in the whole town!" cried my father with delight.

"What does your friend know of dancing," asked Mama, leaving the men to carry on with their planning. Has she been to any balls? I can hardly suppose she is out."

"I do not know, I think not."

"As you are to have a companion with you, I expect your dance card to be filled at every assembly. Your footwork was a little off when we dined with the Talbots at Langrish last winter: you must improve."

Wincing at the recollection of the flat-footed Harry Musgrave stepping on my toes, I attempted to keep my face bland.

"I suppose Miss de Courcy ought to be instructed as well. I will send for Signor Piozzi. He is certainly the nearest, if not the best, and can be here within the sennight. That ought to be sufficient time to teach her the rudiments."

And I must likewise do the same for her manners. I have compiled a list of materials in my pocketbook that will serve as a moral guide. For now, I leave off writing, and begin my tutelage of the truculent Darcy de Courcy.

Chapter 7. *I drink, therefore I am*

“Well met, Darcy,” said Sophia, her face flushed with pleasure as she entered my room carrying a stack of books. I noticed the change in her address. Miss de Courcy no longer.

“I have some favourable news. We are to go to Southampton tomorrow sennight.”

“Tomorrow what?” I asked, perplexed.

“Tomorrow week,” she said. “We are to travel to Southampton and Mama has agreed to your accompanying us!”

Southampton. The city I’d lived all my life. How much could a space change over two hundred years? Surely beyond recognition. A lot of the medieval bits were bombed during World War II. Some survived but even they were crumbling edifices, scraps from a disappeared past. A reminder that nothing lasts.

“Darcy?”

“Sorry,” I said, shaking myself, not offering an explanation.

“I thought you would be pleased,” she said uncertainly. “It is what you wanted, is it not? A chance to find your father?”

“Yes,” I said vaguely. Then, with more certainty, “Yes. This is good news. You’re right. It’s my best hope. If he’s anywhere, it’ll be there.”

Sophia seemed to relax. “That is well. I am glad we may go together. But,” she paused, fingering the spines of the books she held. “There is a stipulation in your coming. You must be my companion in society.”

“What does that involve?” Being a ‘companion’ didn’t sound so bad. Judging from her reaction it was more than hanging out as pals.

“It will mean being introduced into company, dining out, attending balls and paying social calls. You might have to curtail certain habits.” She looked awkward, making a face I was now recognised as, *I’m about to offend you*.

I rolled my eyes. “Well, we knew you were going to have to teach me how to blend in. This just seals the deal. Anyway, it can’t be that hard to learn the proper way to hold a teacup with no handles.”

She still looked awkward.

“What?” I said, exasperated.

“You will have to learn how to dance.” This was said with such seriousness I couldn’t help but snigger. She frowned and I tried to mollify her.

“Come on, it can’t be that difficult. I learnt the Macarena in like, five minutes. I’m sure you’ll have me up to scratch in no time.”

“It will not be me teaching you,” she said, and I had a feeling she resisted adding ‘fortunately’. “Signor Piozzi, my dancing master, will take us through the steps within the next few days. In the meantime, I will endeavour to direct your conduct in the correct manner.” Here, she carefully placed the books onto the side table.

“These volumes are some of the conduct literature I mentioned to you. There will serve as a guide on how to stand well in the world.” Picking one up, she opened it and said, “John Gregory has some sound advice on dancing. We will begin there: ‘In dancing, the principal points you are to attend to are ease and grace. I would have you to dance with spirit: but never allow yourself to be so far transported with mirth as to forget the delicacy of your sex.’” She paused giving me a sharp look. I think my eyes had glazed over. Recovering, I said, “Okay I’ll tone down any excitement. Go on.”

She flicked over a few pages before continuing. “What he says here rings true of us. ‘If you have the good fortune to meet with any who deserve the name of friends, unbosom yourself to them with the most unsuspecting confidence.”

I sniggered. *Bosom*.

“Sometimes,” she said loudly, still reading from the book. “‘A girl laughs with all the simplicity of unsuspecting innocence, for no other reason but being infected with other people’s laughing: she is then believed to know more than she should do.’”

“Hmm,” I said, arranging my face into something more serious. “Very true.”

“I think,” she said, laying down the book and swapping it for another. “John Gregory suits you not. We will try Mrs Chapone’s *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*. Clearly you are in need of it.”

“Watch it. I bet insulting people doesn’t display the proper delicacy of sex, or whatever.”

“I am quite sure I don’t know what you mean,” she said loftily before continuing. “‘In your father’s house’ – that is to say, *my father’s house* – ‘it is certainly proper for you to pay civility to the guests, and to talk to them in your turn - with modesty and respect - if they encourage you to it’. You and I will carry out these small civilities together. Perhaps it would be best if the share of conversation falls largely to me.”

“Speak when spoken to. Got it.” We spent the rest of the afternoon like this, Sophia alternating between scolding and teasing me. I tried not to goad her too much. She clearly thought it was important.

“So, Doctor Dolittle,” I said after we had finished with Hannah More’s *Strictures* on the something something of something something. “When are you going to teach me about dinner etiquette and whatnot? The correct way to hold a spoon or cut with a knife.”

“I should hope you already know how to use cutlery. The little I have seen of you leads me to conclude you are not a complete savage.”

“That’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me all day,” I said with a grin. “Actually, I was hinting about dinner.”

“Oh! I have no sense of the time. But Mama has not yet sent anyone along to help me dress for the evening. However,” she said, rising to her feet. “I will ask Anne to bring up a tray. The evening draws in,” she added, glancing at the window. “It is to be a farewell meal of sorts. James, Mr. Richards and Pinhorne are to leave for Southampton tomorrow. No doubt you will meet them then.”

“Who are they?” I asked flopping onto my back, glad the lessons were over for now.

She hesitated for a moment before answering. Sitting back down on the bed she said carefully, “James is my older brother and Mr. Richards is his friend from Oxford. A sensible and well-mannered man. Mr. Pinhorne is a long-term resident of this neighbourhood, though his family weren’t always so prominent. It has been the work of many generations to give him such wealth and consequence. Yet, I fear it would only take one to lose it and he is such a man. He is rather foppish, you see. Silly, and extravagant. Yet, were he not respectable I do not suppose James or my parents would engage with him socially.”

“Well, they’re friends with a silly fop so maybe not.”

She threw me annoyed look, but I shrugged. “It’s what you said.”

“Village life does not offer a broad variety of families to mingle with,” she replied shrtily. “Though there are other reasons for keeping up the connection.” She stood up and walked over to the window, tapping the pane unconsciously.

“Like what?” Tact was never my strong point.

She turned back to face me, chin jutting out in defiance. "I love every brick and board in this house. The prospect is as familiar to me as my own mind."

"Okay," I said, wondering why she was getting so defensive.

"Do you recall my saying this was not the life intended for us?"

"Vaguely. Before you headed off for church."

"My father never thought of inheriting Thropden, he was intended for the church, with hopes of one day getting a good living; with many friends he was confident this would be so. It was whilst visiting some useful connections in Hertfordshire that he met my mother and they fell in love. Both families were against it, as neither had any money. I never met my Kingsborough grandparents, but I understand they lived in genteel poverty. There were some years of difficulties, though I do not remember much, being so young. James was sent to the Royal Naval Academy as a lad and –" she swallowed. "I believe he had a hard time of it. I think it is why he is so determined to enjoy himself now we have wealth and consequence. We lived in Portsmouth for a time to be near him. A letter arrived at our lodgings that changed our lives." She gazed out onto the fields, perhaps considering all the land her family now owned.

"A distant cousin of Papa's had died without an heir and as the only living male relative, he received it all. Naturally, we immediately removed from Portsmouth to establish ourselves here. Much has been done on my parents' part to ingratiate ourselves with the neighbourhood. Including giving notice to silly fops with influence." She said this last part with a slight shade of bitterness. Not a fan of being pals with Mr. Pinhorne then.

"Well, it sounds to me like the neighbourhood was lucky to get a family like yours."

"Perhaps. I think Papa is good to his tenants. He is a popular man and Mama manages the accounts for the glebe and tithe well."

A knock interrupted her. Before either of us could answer, the red-faced Mrs. Jenkins tramped in and bobbed to Sophia.

"The mistress bid me tell 'ee it's time to change."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins." Sophia replied. "I must away for the night," she said, addressing me. "I will see that some sustenance is sent up presently. Good evening, Darcy." Giving me a graceful curtsy, she left. Mrs. Jenkins squinted narrowly at me before quickly following Sophia. I noticed she didn't give me a curtsy, more of a reluctant jerk of the head.

Anne soon came up with a tray carrying food and a candlestick. Dusk was closing in. A honeyed fragrance came off the candle and I sniffed it appreciatively.

Noticing, Anne said, "Aye, beeswax. Better than tallow. Miss Woodforde insisted."

I guessed Sophia had committed another little act of kindness for me.

At first, I thought the food was more of the same; it had a similar looking consistency as the morning's gruel. On closer inspection, I found it was some sort of pale stew.

"White soup," interjected Anne, seeing me spoon it dubiously. "Same as what the Woodfordes and gentlemen are getting." She didn't seem to think much of my getting the same treatment as the family and guests, so I didn't complain about its lukewarm temperature. Bar this, it was delicious: hearty and full of flavour. Anne stayed to watch me eat it all, probably on Sophia's orders. There was no need to worry on that score; there's not a meal I can't finish. Scraping up the remains, I let the spoon fall with a clatter and sighed with contentment.

"My compliments to the chef," I said smiling at Anne. "What's this?" I said, pointing to the earthenware mug containing golden liquid.

"Spruce beer," she grunted. "Made on this estate. Finest in Hampshire."

"Beer?" I said, amazed. It's not like I didn't like beer, just surprised they'd served it in such a grand house with an evening meal. Especially to someone supposedly on bed rest. Taking a tentative sip, I swilled it round my mouth, getting citrus hints and something leafy. Or maybe that was my imagination spurred on by the name 'spruce'. It made me think of Christmas trees.

"It's 'ealthful," said Anne with superiority.

"Cheers to that," I said taking another swig. I offered her the cup and after a moment of surprise she took it and drank. Drawing deep, she let out a satisfied sigh, handing it back empty. We smiled at each other, the previous tension broken. We didn't understand each other but felt a camaraderie. Both of us meant well in our way, even if we didn't always get it right.

"I spose I ought to be heading back down to the kitchens," she said, a little reluctantly.

"Do you have to? I'll die of boredom by myself."

“We-ell,” she said, stretching out the word thoughtfully. “I spose I could say Miss Woodforde asked me to stay up with ye for a time. She did, in a way.”

“Great! Know any games? Any chance of getting more spruce beer? It’s quite nice.”

She brightened at this; I guess teenagers are the same no matter the century.

“Reckon I could pinch a jug without Mrs. Jenkins knowing.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” I said cheerfully. Off she went, bringing back more beer and a stack of battered old cards.

“Here ye go,” she said, heaving a huge leather jug onto the table, slopping some of the contents onto the floor.

“Nice one. Did anyone give you any trouble?” I asked, jumping out of the bed to pour some beer into the cup.

“Naw,” she said, sitting on the foot of the bed and accepting the proffered drink I held out to her. It was one cup between the two of us; I guess she didn’t get another to avoid suspicion. “‘Arry might’ve if he’d seen me. But he’s busy with the other boys in the dining room with the likes of the gents.”

“Yeah, what do you think of them?” I said, taking back the cup. “These gentleman, I mean.”

“Master James is a good sort, I spose. Though runs through money like water I hear. And drink like... water.” She giggled. “And everyone knows Mr. Pinhorne be a poodle-headed ninny. If he was to tell ye the sky was blue you’d be taking a peek outside just to make sure. Best stay out of his reach if ye can.” She gave me a knowing look, making a pinching motion with thumb and forefinger.

“Gross,” I said, passing the cup back to her. “And the other one? Mr. Richards.”

“I know no harm of him,” she said with a shrug. “He’s considered a fine, handsome gentleman. Whenever Mr. Pinhorne gets too loud, he tends to quiet him. ‘Specially when he was shouting ‘bout you being a French spy. He ‘ent even met ye and he’s already taken against ye.”

“Taken against the ‘Memsel’, who would do that?” I said, posing wide-eyed innocence. Anne had the grace to look sheepish.

“Well,” she said, not meeting my eye. “Times are strange, and you coming here all of a sudden, stranger still. It’s like I said last night, people talk. Ye seem decent really.”

“So do you once you get past the scowling. No hard feelings,” I drained the cup and poured myself another. The tips of my fingers had a pleasant warmth, my head floating on air. I picked up the stack of cards to examine them. There were no numbers, just the suits, the backs plain white without the usual red pattern. I picked one up.

“Is that because people can’t read?” I said, flipping it back and forth.

“I’ve my letters,” said Anne huffily.

“Come on; teach me one of your card games.”

“Know loo?”

“Nope.”

The evening sun poured the last of its burnt copper rays through the window before the sky darkened to an inky purple. We drew closer together, playing by the candle’s halo, the room’s only light. As the jug depleted, my card playing grew more haphazard. Anne seemed in better control, if gigglier.

“La,” she said, reshuffling the stack I’d knocked off the bed for the third time.

“How you talk so. Can’t hardly make out half the meaning from the jibber jabber.”

“I dunno what you’re talking about,” I slurred. “I’m so good at making the words go.”

Anne tittered. “Such strangeness! Not just the way you talk neither. Summat right odd about ye. Like y’ent got a thought for the rules. Strolling into the kitchen and yelling at ‘Arry. Ent seen a lady do that, specially not one as young as you an’ me.”

I shrugged, picking up my dealt cards. “That guy is such a tool, needs a good kick up the arse.”

Anne burst out laughing just as the door flew open.

Chapter 8. “The behaviour of girls to servants is generally in extremes: too familiar or haughty.” Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 1787

Night.

Treachery! The basest kind of treachery. Journal, I can hardly marshal my thoughts. Even now, the pen shakes, ink falls in spatters, the page rips, so eager am I to relate the evening events. I must vent my spleen. Perhaps in recounting, I will untangle my furious disorder.

After a hasty visit to my toilette, I dressed for the evening meal without assistance, having instructed Anne to sit with Darcy for the night. Thus, my hair was in a sorry state, a lace cap doing a poor job of disguising multitudinous errors. Time was short enough, the party already assembled in the drawing. Upon entering, I stumbled over the hem of my polonaise gown.

Mama made a show brushing over my undignified arrival. “Dearest Sophia, always eager to make a grand entrance.”

Papa strode forward and offered his arm, allowing me time to recover.

“These old floors do list so,” said he with customary kindness, leading me to a chair. “’Tis a wonder Smith does not drop the partridge pie bringing it from the kitchens.”

“Are you hurt, Miss Woodforde,” said Mr. Richards, also stepping forward, eyes round with concern. This evening he wore a fine green waistcoat, embroidered with silver threaded flowers that shimmered in the firelight. Silhouetted against the window frame, the sun setting behind, he seemed to glow with an irresistible vibrancy.

“No, sir,” I replied, attempting to hide my confusion. “Only a little embarrassed.”

“Please,” he said proffering me a slight bow. “Would you do me the honour of allowing me to accompany you to the dining room?”

“Of course,” I replied, flattered at his gallant behaviour.

After the usual talk, we went through to dine, Papa leading the way with Mama, Mr. Richards and I following behind.

Here begins the source of my fury, journal. All the long evening, I had to endure Mr. Pinhorne’s triumphant declarations that he had the right of Miss de Courcy, “the French interloper not to be trusted”. Would that he die of barrel fever! Though killing himself with drink would be too good an end for such a beau-nasty. Stop me, journal! This talk is irredeemable. Yet, I must ask myself, am I vexed with Mr. Pinhorne for his bottle-headed ways, or that he may have been right about Miss de Courcy’s character?

Drinking my father's cellars dry, a bumper of Pinhorne's wine glass drained as often as he laid insults at Miss de Courcy's door. Enduring it all, I witnessed the footman exchange knowing glances with one another, Mr. Pinhorne's words confirming their misguided suspicions.

"You are mistaken, sir," said I, unable to bear further slander. "All the afternoon, I have sat with Miss de Courcy, and she seems a genteel person, who, though unpolished, has a deep refinement, often lost when women seek to gain societal accomplishments."

Mr. Pinhorne, though barely deserving the appellation, is a gentleman and could not contradict the daughter of his host with any direct openness. Instead, he used such base means as were to hand. Rising unsteadily to his feet, he made a gesture towards the sideboard.

"Member mug," he called. Harry the footman stepped to at once, knowing his duty. Taking up the item, Mr. Pinhorne staggered to the partition and – well... Fortunately, the partition served its function to *hide* what occurred. Unfortunately, it could not mask the sound of his water hitting the bowl – a loud and vulgar spray.

It is not out of the ordinary for gentleman to relieve themselves thus, but never has it occurred whilst speaking to ladies *mere moments* before. They might wait until we withdraw, or, if the need is so great, when attention is directed in another direction.

"God's teeth, man," cried James, repulsed.

"Good heavens, the man is in his altitudes," whispered my mother, aghast.

"Come, Pinhorne, let us have no more of your gum about Miss de Courcy," Mr. Richards called to his friend once returned to the table. "If she is to join us in Southampton, then I will not have you be uncivil. What's more, Miss Woodforde vouches for her character and that is commendation enough for me."

Oh! How these words gall me now.

Dinner over, and with – what I thought – great fortune, Mama excused my waiting for the gentleman to finish their port after we left the table. Perhaps she was uncertain of the reception I might give. Saluting her for the night, I hurried upstairs to see how Miss de Courcy did, taking the route through the Long Gallery to avoid the smoking room. All was quiet upstairs until I passed through the green baize door. Such a carousing and caterwauling I am sure I never heard. Opening the door to the maid's old sitting room, what do you think I found? The most unsuitable tête-à-tête between Miss de Courcy and Anne, in their cups and playing cards! Anne jumped up at once and fled the room, knowing herself in the wrong. Miss de Courcy, however, was not in the least embarrassed at my discovery, only a little surprised at my sudden appearance. Giddiness was apparent in her

behavior, no doubt owing to the empty jug of spruce beer. There was no picture of regret on her part, as evidenced by her grin and raised cup.

I hardly know what words of fury I uttered; reprimands flying fast from my tongue. My carefully stored indignation, unable to flow freely against Mr. Pinhorne's vulgarity, was here let loose.

That such a man be right! To stake my word and reputation on a person who has proved so unworthy! It is intolerable. It is –

My torrent of passion has subsided; I am inclined to think less poorly of Darcy once more. Hearing a noise from beyond my chamber I ceased my scribblings. It was the vagrant in question, wandering the house in an ill-advised attempt to discover my whereabouts after my abrupt departure. Her state of undress in the main body of the house was cause enough to reignite my temper. However, fearful of someone discovering her in such a situation, reprimand was driven from my mind. Upon opening the door and seeing her creep, none too softly, along the Long Gallery, I flew to her at once, pulling her within my chamber, hastily fastening the door.

"Hey, you seem mad," said she, unperturbed by my indelicate handling of her person.

"You are the mad one," I hissed back. "What foolishness is this? Such indecorous behaviour from a guest supposedly confined to her room! My parents or the gentleman might have witnessed your wanton appearance."

"Jeez, calm down," spoken through eyes fogged, swaying in my grip. "You sound like Anne did last night after I went into the kitchens." Hearing my own conduct placed alongside Anne's was too much to bear.

"You are an unfit companion for me," said I, with an icy decisiveness. "It was a mistake to suppose you could accompany my family to Southampton and enter polite society. Decorum is beyond your low means of understanding."

My words seemed to stir her into sobriety. At such close proximity, I could see the minutest movements in her face, dark blue eyes sharpening, lips forming a hard line. Her anger now matched my own. Throwing off my grip, she jabbed a finger at my chest.

"You're the one who doesn't understand. You think you're so clever, concocting this little plan like we're a daring duo in some stupid spy thriller. And okay, yeah, I do like to have a bit of fun and can get carried away. But I don't see what's wrong with having a laugh. You'd rather I sit in a room by myself all night, in a strange house, strange time, alone with my thoughts... I'm alone here! I don't know how to make my way in this world

and there's every chance I'll screw up and not even find him! This will be for nothing. I'll be lost in seventeen-whatever and no one will know where I am or what happened. Mum will think I left her--" Unable to continue, she shivered, goose pimples rising on her neck.

"You're cold," I stated, trying, and failing, to maintain a sense of formality. "Here, take this." Moving to my armoire, I picked up my green banyan. Ostensibly, this retreat was to retrieve the garment for Darcy, but in truth, I needed a moment to gather myself. Her words had struck a deep chord of sympathy within, and though she did not directly berate me with the charge, she blamed me for leaving her so long throughout the evening. Who knows what fears and anxieties had settled on her mind during her isolation? There seemed no indication of distress during our time looking over conduct literature, but perhaps she herself did not realise how affected she was. Perhaps, it was only now when the prospect of losing her one champion and – along with it – her chance to reach Southampton, she felt the precariousness of her situation.

Gently placing the garment about her shoulders, I tried to meet her gaze, but she avoided my eye.

"Darcy," I began. "My words were over hasty. I shall not be the means to keep you from Southampton. Having pledged my word to aid you, I will not rescind that promise." This declaration acted as a soothing balm; her shoulders relaxed and she pulled the banyan close.

"Nevertheless," I continued, maintaining a gentle yet stern tone. "You must heed my words: there are certain spheres you cannot enter – not if you wish to avoid arousing suspicion. Consorting with the servants for one –"

At this, she expelled a most unladylike snort. "Do you have any idea how much of a snob you sound right now?" I must pause here, journal, in relating her diction. Strange though it is, I assure you, I copy it down verbatim.

"Well," replied I, attempting to muster a coherent argument. "Whilst it is always important to practice benevolence in the home, the wide difference in education must surely make any familiarity, or even equality, impossible."

"Pfft. By that reasoning *we* shouldn't be..." Again, she snorted before trailing off. Taking a deep breath, she said. "Look, I like Anne and I think we can trust her. Surely, it makes sense to gather as many allies as possible. She can be our ear on the ground downstairs. Plus, she's already seen how weird I am so it wouldn't take much to convince her I'm from the twenty-first century."

"You wish to tell her of your true origins?"

Am I prejudiced for mistrusting the servants, journal? From what I have witnessed, they are good, Christian people, though sometimes misguided. Yet, I was always taught to maintain a distance. Even when we were comparatively poor and living in Portsmouth, with only some assistance from a local charwoman, she was never a part of our household, though Mama was kind of course.

Yet, Darcy has a certain way of undoing my long-held notions. Conversely, I might be able to do the same to her and encourage caution in her deeds.

“We must tread carefully,” said I, at last. “There is no need to take any rash course of action. Before we engage in any further discussion, I will return you safely to your room and then to bed, perchance to dream.” There seemed a moment she would argue. After a slight hesitation, she relented, consenting to follow me back to the maid’s old sitting room. The candle was nearly spent, sputtering its flickering beam. By its light, I noted the absence of the tray and spruce beer jug. Though Anne fled in those initial moments of crisis, she had apparently returned, perhaps with a desire to make amends. It gave me pause. Anne has more mettle than I give her credit. Seeing Darcy safely to her bed, I made my farewells for the night, with faithful reassurances that tomorrow would see more attention from myself.

So, here I sit relating the evening’s events. Repentant of my former vehemence but conscious it must remain uncensored in my small velum notebook. It will serve as a reminder to do better on the morrow. Where there is a prospect of a sunrise, there is a chance for improvement.

Chapter 9. It's called 'hangxiety'

Would not recommend waking up in the eighteenth century with a massive hangover. Throb-throb in the skull, every pulse like a drum. Moss growing on tongue. No chance of a lucozade. And the worst part? The slow seepage of memory from last night. Beer, shouting, tension. Cringe.

Fortunately, I wasn't left to dwell for long. A gentle knocking interrupted my swirling anxieties, followed by Anne softly opening the door. Looking as sheepish as I felt, she hovered awkwardly on the threshold.

"Hey," I said, untangling myself from the bedsheets. "How are you feeling today?" She didn't answer, edging closer into the room before setting down a tray. Not meeting my eye, she said "I ent seen the mistress yet. Jus' wanted to see how the land lay first. She seemed right cross last night."

"Yeah, it wasn't great. I think it's fine now. We chatted after you skipped off. Just embarrassed how much of a lightweight I am. How come you don't seem hungover?"

"Beg pardon, Memsell?" Back to Memsell, it seemed.

"I mean, you don't seem worse for the drink." She let out a snort of derision.

"Spruce beer ent hard stuff. Why, we have it every day. It's like what I was saying, it's 'ealthful."

Clearly needed to build up a tolerance.

"You must be main hungry," she said nudging the tray. In truth, I felt thirsty, the inside of my mouth like fur. What I really wanted was to brush my teeth. There was a basin filled with water on the dresser, there a while judging by the greasy film on the surface. Giving it a stir with my finger, I splashed my face, letting the tepid water refresh my tired skin.

Anne handed me a cloth and eyed the tray. Same breakfast as yesterday: eggs, porridge and black tea but with the addition of an apple.

"Do you want to share?" I said, carrying it to the bed and gesturing she join. Like a wary cat, she sidled over, sitting at the foot of the bed.

"Will you be coming to Southampton with us?" I said, taking a huge gulp of tea. She was just reaching for the apple but drew her hand back like it had been burned.

“The mistress and yourself must be dressed somehow,” she said with a hint of sarcasm. That gave me pause. I hadn’t considered I’d dress like Sophia. Stupid not to think of it, really. If we were going to balls – why else take lessons from a dancing master – I had to look the part.

“That’ll be all, Memsell?” snapped Anne, now off the bed, a slight bite in her voice.

“Wha- oh yeah. Thanks, Anne.” It seemed my question about Southampton had reestablished some sort of line. She stomped out, back to her old ways.

I’d barely finished eating before the door opened again, Mrs. Jenkins barging in.

“The gents are gone,” she called over her shoulder, bustling about the room straightening my curtains and adjusting the bed hangings.

I nodded, not sure why she was telling me this. I didn’t know them. I could only assume she was one of those people who like telling everyone news as soon as they know it.

“Finished are ye, Memsell?” she said, surveying my clean bowl. “I’ll take it down.” Picking up the tray, she turned to leave. Just as she reached the door I said, “I need to clean my teeth.” Turning back, she gave me a suspicious squint, or maybe that was just her face – she always seemed to look at me like that.

“Why, you’ve got a fine set of ivories. Give us a flash.”

“Yeah there’s a reason for that,” I said, baring my teeth.

“Since the young miss seems a mite taken with yer, nay doubt she’ll lend her own powder. I’ll mind to tell her, now the gentlemen have left.”

“Thanks,” I called after her as she trudged out. Powder to clean teeth? Like that mad, charcoal stuff some people used in my time. Judging by the number of crooked, yellow teeth I’d noticed, oral hygiene wasn’t high on the list of concerns in the eighteenth century. Mrs. Jenkins’ teeth, for instance, were terrible, the few remaining, black and broken.

A soft tapping at the door, far more polite than Mrs. Jenkins’ bombastic entrance, revealed Sophia, straw hat in hand, wearing a white gown with soft red stripes.

“Well met, Darcy,” she said, carefully. “You are not indisposed I hope?”

“Fine, thanks.” Breakfast had seen off the worst of my hangover. “Listen,” I began but Sophia cut me off.

"I hope you are still eager to continue with our lessons," she said, fiddling with a ribbon on her hat. "Southampton would be a dull place without you. I should infinitely prefer if you were with me."

I smiled, understanding this was her way of saying we were alright.

"If you'll still have me, then yes," I said. "Though I imagine you'd like it if I was more boring. Less of a liability?"

"There seems little possibility in your adhering to such a request, were I to even make it," she said with a laugh. "We shall make do and improve where we can. Oh, Mrs. Jenkins said you were in want of tooth powder."

From a small bag tied around her waist, she drew out a jar and some leaves, handing them over.

"Um," I said, not wanting to cause offence "What—"

"You take the sage leaf," she said encouragingly. "Apply some of the powder and rub it over your teeth to cleanse them."

"Okay," I said, doing as instructed. "God, why is it so salty," I wheezed.

"It might be the sal amoniak," said Sophia, concerned at my discomfort. "If you are unused to the sensation, try to avoid placing it on your tongue."

Bit late for that now. Even though the paste left a funny texture in my mouth, the surface of my teeth felt pretty clean, in a slippery sort of way. Better than nothing.

Jumping off the bed, I strode past Sophia to the dresser and scooped a handful of water into my mouth. Gargling, I considered spitting into the basin, but thought that might be bad manners. Instead, I opened a window and spat it out.

Sophia looked revolted but made no comment.

"Thanks," I said, handing the jar back to her.

"I will return with some more reading materials," she answered. "Do excuse me."

Poor Sophia. If she was my teacher writing my report, she'd say "Must try harder." Maybe I should.

Returning with another huge stack of books, I caught an evil glint in her eye when she placed the pile on the table.

"We are going to go over the proper etiquette for entering society. In short, how best to navigate the social customs of the 'bon ton'. Not that we will move in the grandest circles in Southampton: it is hardly Bath or even Weymouth, where the King is currently summering. Still," she paused, looking embarrassed. "There will be —"

“Witnesses?” I interjected.

“People,” she said with some asperity.

“Understood,” I said, picking up one of the books and flicking through the pages.

“Listen to this: ‘no lady will be permitted to dance in an apron, black mittens or black gloves.’ Why would anyone wear mittens to a ball?”

“They wouldn’t,” she snapped, snatching back the book. “Not unless they were unfamiliar with the rules of a ball, which I am determined will not be the case for you. Be mindful, also, not to dance with a gentleman who is without white gloves at a formal dance.”

“Because you’ll catch lurgies?”

“I do not know what that is, but it is clear you are making another jape. I hope you will disguise any such nonsense from the Master of Ceremonies.”

“Who’s the Master of Ceremony? Why does it matter if I’m silly in front of them?”

“You ought not to be silly in front of anyone! But I will lower my expectations in that regard.” She looked stern but I detected a hint of a smile. “The Master of Ceremonies has total authority at Balls and Assemblies. His name is Mr. Haynes, and it is he who determines who is admitted into society and who is barred. Were we newcomers, once settled in Southampton, he would pay us a call and decide whether we are respectable enough. As we visited Southampton last summer, we already acquainted and a formal visit is thus unnecessary. However, he does not know you, meaning you will have to be presented to him. He ensures no improper company is permitted in the assembly rooms. It is who draws up the Rules, which we all follow.”

“Yeah, but he hasn’t got any power, right? Like, once we’re in, we’re in. He wouldn’t chuck us out, right?”

“I wouldn’t be so certain,” she said, looking concerned. “I heard a tale where two –” she paused, apparently unable to form the word. Swallowing, she continued with emphasis. “Women of the town,” giving me a significant look. I nodded, understanding. “Were handed out the room upon discovery of their profession.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad,” I said, shrugging. “They tried to hustle and got shown the door.”

“My understanding,” said Sophia delicately. “Is that they were not so much ‘shown the door’, as kicked down the stairs.”

I gaped at her. “Not actually kicked down the stairs though. That’s one of your mad eighteenth-century euphemisms, right?”

“So, the story goes,” she said, sighing impressively.

So much for polite society. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt if I listened to a few more ballroom rules.”

“Rules of the Assemblies.”

“Right.”

For the next few of hours, Sophia went over the regulations, I tried to pay attention. A lot of them seemed reasonable, like not sitting down in the middle of a dance. However, one really got on my nerves.

“Should you turn down one request for a dance, you must turn down all others.”

“What, not dance for the whole night, just to spare the feelings of some random? What if I don’t like them but still wanted to dance?”

“Then you will be considered a terrible rustic,” replied Sophia, unconcerned.

“I take it I can’t ask anyone to dance with me?” I said, patience wearing thin.

“Who would you ask?” said Sophia, looking blank.

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t it be my choice though?” Seeing Sophia’s lack of comprehension, I sighed. “Forget it. Actually, no it’s going to annoy me if I don’t explain why you’re wrong. You see, in my time there’s this little thing called consent and just because you’re a woman doesn’t mean you don’t have choices. So, if some guy asks you to do something you don’t want to do, you literally don’t have to do it.”

She surveyed me thoughtfully. “Are you familiar with Hobbes’ argument in his *Leviathan*?”

I glared at her. “I think you know I’m not.”

“I will summarise. Thomas Hobbes argues that one’s natural disposition is inclined towards anarchy, and if not checked by some sort of governing power, society will fall into a state of chaos. Though I subscribe more to Locke’s *tabula rasa* school of thought – that we are a blank slate on which improvement is always possible – I do believe one cannot act without any kind of social contract to man’s law.”

“I’m not saying we don’t have any laws,” I said exasperated. “I’m just pointing out that it’s okay to say no to a guy if you don’t fancy him. Or any guy!”

Sophia was saved answering my call for social justice by the abrupt entrance of Mrs. Jenkins.

“The Mistress wishes to know if you’ll be joining herself and the master to dine,” she called, bobbing a curtsy at Sophia.

“Is it so late as two o’clock? My goodness. If not wholly inconvenient, I will take a simple repast here with Miss de Courcy.”

Pleased Sophia would rather eat with me than her own parents, I didn’t tease her for calling lunch ‘dinner’, like a northerner. Mrs. Jenkins hovered, as though waiting for a better answer.

“You may tell them that Miss de Courcy is improving apace and her health benefits from company.” Flashing another suspicious glance my way, Mrs. Jenkins bobbed to Sophia before leaving our haven.

Once her footsteps faded, I dramatically flopped across the bed. “Leave me now, for I am too weak for company.”

“What a pert jester you should make,” replied Sophia unfazed, flicking through another volume. “You would do well treading the boards.”

“Or walking the plank.” Standing up, I gave a huge stretch, feeling the bones in my spine pop. “How much longer do I have to stay in here? I need to be outside; I’m getting cabin fever.”

Sophia surveyed me, as though making a diagnosis. “Perhaps, tomorrow after a family breakfast, we shall take a little air in the grounds. The exercise might release some of your nervous energy.”

“You make me sound like a golden retriever needing a walk.”

“What is a golden retriever?” said Sophia, looking blank.

I gasped. “You don’t have golden retrievers? That’s so sad. Way worse than no phones, cars, consent, or indoor plumbing.”

Anne slipped into the room, carrying a tray. The atmosphere instantly became awkward. Avoiding my eye, she placed the tray down, about to leave when I said, “I’m glad you’ll be in Southampton with us, Anne. It’ll be nice to have another friend in a new place.”

Giving me a swift smile, she left.

“You cannot be friends,” said Sophia.

“Why not? I like her and we’re all about the same age. What’s the big deal?”

“We occupy different spheres – it wouldn’t be right. Distance must be maintained, even within these walls. More so once in Southampton. Certain places are

open to us but barred to her. She will be prevented admittance from the very stairs at the Assembly Rooms." She sounded so defeated; I didn't have the heart to exclaim on the unfair ridiculousness. Sophia wasn't the cause of this disparity.

"Sophia," I said carefully. "Do you have many friends?"

She gave a sad smile. "There are some acquaintances about the country who Mama and I sometimes call upon. I like to visit some of Papa's tenants in the cottages hereabouts. However, this is more to give aid than a social engagement. My greatest pleasure lies in discovering the medicinal quality of plants and sharing the benefits with those who need it –" she broke off, plucking at a loose thread in her gown. "This will need mending," she said, embarrassed.

"That's brilliant," I said, hoping to encourage her further. "It's sound like a calling, more than an interest. Couldn't you pursue it?"

"It would not be proper," she said. "Perhaps if I marry well and have an indulgent husband, I might use his wealth and influence to effect good to those in need."

"Couldn't you just use your money?" I said, gesturing to the grand setting.

"This will all be James' one day," she said without any resentment. "Any money for my dowry will belong to my husband as soon as we wed. I hope he is a good, generous man, eager to help the poor. A man in orders like Papa or better still, a doctor who would allow me to accompany him on his visits. He would have to be wealthy for Mama to even countenance such a match."

"You could be a doctor. In my time," I added, already knowing that was impossible here. "You could be so much more, do so much more."

Her smile remained sad. "Personal desires are to be guided by reason. I will do what I can in the here and now."

The next morning, heavy footsteps heralded the arrival of Mrs. Jenkins. She didn't so much knock, as kick the door down. She was carrying a huge pile of clothes, none mine to my dismay.

"Excuse you," I said, folding my arms. "Do you mind just waiting one second before you barge in? I could have been naked or using the chamber pot."

Mrs. Jenkins looked genuinely confused, like this couldn't possibly be a legitimate concern. "I've seen worse n' your hide, Memsell," she said, laying the clothes on the dresser. "Yer to join the family for breakfast today, the mistress herself has leant you these weeds for wearing."

"Can't I wear my own clothes?" I said, eyeing the mountain of fabric.

"In breeches!" she exclaimed. "You'll not be fit to be seen, much less break bread with yer betters. Ungrateful gilflurt," she muttered.

"Fine, fine," I said, certain "gilflurt" meant nothing flattering. "I'll wear them – I mean," I added, seeing Mrs. Jenkins' eyes flash. "I'm very pleased to wear them. Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins."

Still muttering under her breath, she carried on laying out the garments in order. There were a lot of them.

The process of getting dressed began, ensuing a battle of wills where Mrs. Jenkins came out on top.

Without thought for potential embarrassment, Mrs. Jenkins whipped off the shift I'd slept in, leaving me totally starkers. Too stunned to protest, she threw another clean shift over my head before I knew it and handed me a pair of long white socks. I meekly pulled them past my thighs. Around the ankles were pretty, delicate patterns.

Seeing me take note, Mrs. Jenkins said, "Miss Woodforde stitched them clocks herself. Take these." She threw two ribbons at me that floated onto my lap. Assuming they were for my raggedy hair, I started to tie a ponytail before Mrs. Jenkins stopped me.

"No, no," she said, exasperated. "Them's to keep up yer stockings. Arms up," she ordered barely giving me any time before she threw a thin white skirt over my head. "A dickey petticoat for yer modesty".

Once done, she turned to pick up a stiff bodice.

At the sight of this, I found my voice. "No way! I'm not wearing a bloody corset!"

"None of ye parlez-vous wi' me, Memsell. This ent une corset, these are stays," she brandished them menacingly. "The young missus says you're to be dressed like a lady. And you need stays to keep you in proper, like."

True, without a bra I had no support. I reluctantly allowed her to lace me up in the so-called 'stays'.

The higher she laced the cord, the more upright my posture became. Weirdly enough, it wasn't as bad as I thought. Surprisingly comfortable.

“Here,” she said, handing me what looked like a wooden shoehorn.

“What do I do with it,” I said, perplexed.

“Ent the French sposed to be fashionable,” said Mrs. Jenkins, rolling her eyes. “It’s a busk – helps keep you straight.” Taking the “busk” back from me, she slid it down a sleeve in the front of my stays.

Next came what Mrs. Jenkins called a “bustle”, a small cushion tied round the waist.

“Easier than doing squats,” I said, jerking my hips so the bustle flapped up and down.

“The things you say,” said Mrs. Jenkins, shaking her head in despair. “I’ve no notion what ye mean, even though it be English. Arms up,” she ordered, lifting yet another linen skirt, thicker than the last and dark cream.

“Hold on, I’ve already got a petticoat on, why do I need another?”

She snorted. “Flash the household with yer ankles? You’ll be cast out as a hussy. Deserved,” she added in an undertone. Glaring at her, I put it on. Whilst I pulled out the rumples, Mrs. Jenkins folded a large square piece of silk fabric into a triangle. Draping this over my shoulders like a shawl, she tucked the ends into the waistband of my outer petticoat.

“How does that work,” I said, taking in the next part of the production. It was a rigid, satin triangle, blue with white lace running in horizontal strips across the front. Ignoring me, she pressed it against my chest, taking in the effect.

“Ye see these tabs on the side of the stomacher? Get pinned onto yer stays.” She pointed out three sets of folded ribbon on each side. “Reckon the blue will bring out yer eyes nicely.” I think she was enjoying herself. I smiled, despite myself.

The gown came last, more like a coat than dress. It was beautiful, made of the same blue satin material as the stomacher. I slipped my arms through the elbow length sleeves, trimmed with white lace, and pulled it over my shoulders. The cut naturally flowed inwards at my waist, pleated fabric billowing down to the floor.

“I’m none too great shakes at hair,” she said fretfully, lifting a tendril and letting it fall. “We’ll just have to make do and hope the day cap hides the worst.” Sitting me down, she spent a few minutes doing what she could, pinning and back brushing, before sticking a white cap on the back of my head.

“Just these now,” she said holding out a pair of slippers. I slid my feet in, sure they wouldn’t last two minutes outside. If it came to that, I’d wear my boots.

“There,” she said, satisfied. “You’d hardly know yerself.” Standing up, I gave a slow twirl, admiring how the light danced off the material.

“I don’t know how you managed it, Mrs. Jenkins,” I said, turning and giving her a sweeping curtsy. “You’ve made me a lady.”

Would you believe it, she blushed!

Leaving my room, I followed her up the stairs onto the long corridor. It was necessary to go slow, mindful of tripping over acres of fabric. Reaching Sophia’s door, I noticed Mrs. Jenkins refrained from barging in. She gave me a bashful smile, like we shared a secret. Tapping lightly, she waited a moment before opening it.

“The Memsell is ready, Miss Woodforde,” she announced. I made a slow and stately progress, enjoying the parade of it all. Sophia was sitting at her dresser, Anne pinning up her hair. Seeing me, they both stopped mid action, Anne holding a brush vaguely in the air, Sophia’s arms up over her head. Anne’s mouth fell open, eyes raking over me. Sophia’s reaction was more subtle, a faint blush spreading over her cheeks. When our eyes met, she dropped her gaze, clearing her throat. Then, smoothing down her own pleated gown, she stood. “Well met, Miss de Courcy. There is hope for you yet.”

I dropped a deep curtsy, enjoying how the skirt swirled around me. “Even a polished turd can shine,” I said, rising with a grin.

There was a moment of stunned silence, the air hanging with my gross turn of phrase. To my surprise, Sophia broke it, letting out a shriek of unladylike laughter. Clapping her hands to her mouth, she looked appalled.

Clearing her throat, she said, “As long as you check what you say, I think we will do well enough. Though I confess, I am glad your new apparel has not entirely erased your nature.”

“It’ll take more than that,” I said, bobbing again for good measure. “Breakfast?”

Anne and Mrs. Jenkins melted away, back towards the door leading to my room. Sophia and I headed the other way, towards the part of the house I hadn’t seen. We arrived at a grand, carved staircase, a huge hanging light dangling from the ceiling above.

Placing a delicate hand on the banister, Sophia made a slow and careful progress down the stairs. I followed, leaving enough space so I wouldn't tread on the hem of her gown.

We stepped onto a black-and-white chequered floor, pausing until our next move.

It was a dimly lit entrance hall, with great antlers and pewter platters adorning the walls. To our right was a closed wooden door, stretching from floor to ceiling, almost blending in with the oak panelling.

"What's down there?" I asked, taking in its imposing grandeur.

"That is the door leading to the servants' passage," said Sophia, offering it a cursory glance before carrying on her progress through an archway ahead of us. "It is kept close to mitigate the noise. This is the drawing room," she said, pausing outside an open door on the right, revealing a large oak-panelled room. "It is our main reception room, where we entertain visitors before and after dinner. On occasion, we have held impromptu dances. It has the best space when one clears the furniture."

"Where does that go?" I asked, pointing to a huge, arched door with a burnished lock underneath its handle.

"To the grounds. It is the way you entered this house, as it happens. Though at the time, you were present in body and not in mind."

"You could have just said it was the front door," I grumbled. "So where are we having breakfast?"

"Here, in the morning room. It offers a pleasant prospect at this time of day, being light and airy." She raised her hand to knock, but paused, turning to me with a serious expression.

"Mama is likely to be within already. Upon entering, you must step forward and make a formal curtsy, waiting to speak only once she has addressed you."

"What is she, the Queen?" I said, bravado hiding nerves.

"She is mistress of this house, and is owed common politeness, if not gratitude. It is her choice whether you might be allowed to continue here as my companion. If she deems you suitable, then all is well."

"Suitable?" I hissed, now feeling panicked. "I thought coming to Southampton was a done deal. Why have you sprung this interview on me now?"

“I am merely trying to impress upon you the necessity for decorum in certain situations,” she whispered back. “Thus far, allowances have been made for your eccentricities, but – “

The great front door swung open, warm air sweeping Sophia’s cap clear off. Framed in the doorway, sunlight pouring in behind, stood a man who could only be Sophia’s father.

“Hullo,” he boomed across the hearth, smiling broadly. “Having a tête-à-tête, Sophy? Strange place for it, and on an empty stomach too! Good morning,” he called, sweeping off his three-pointed hat and giving me a bouncing bow. “You must be Miss de Courcy, splendid to meet you. Though really, I ought to say *enchante*, but let’s not go on with all that until we’re fed and watered. It’s hungry work being abroad.”

With that, he strode forward and threw open the breakfast room door. He was nothing like any vicar I imagined. Far from being a stuffy, buttoned-up type. His curly dark hair, rapidly receding, was tousled and unbrushed, with mud on his knee length boots.

Sophia and I followed him into a small, bright room, the striped green and white wallpaper a contrast with the rest of the house’s wood paneling. There was a table laid out with delicate china cups, crockery and a silver urn next to a small wooden box. Laden on the plates was an assortment of rolls, bread, butter and preserves, making my mouth water.

In one corner of the room ticked a loud grandfather clock, in the other a bottle green chair. There, sat Mrs. Woodforde, taking me in. Whilst I gawped round like an idiot, she had watched, taking in my open mouth and poor posture. Seeing her look, I quickly glanced down, trying my best to look modest. I couldn’t manage for long; I had to see my judge and jury. She surveyed me, head cocked with curiosity, as though waiting for something. Remembering – too late – I gave a deep curtsy, rising to my full height with a straight back.

“Mama, this is Miss Darcy de Courcy. Miss de Courcy, this is my mother, Mrs. Woodforde. You have, of course, already met my father, the Reverend Mr. Woodforde.”

“Bless me!” Mr. Woodforde said, thumping his hat on his thigh. “I never introduced meself! Well, now you know. Sophy did such a capital job. I won’t fail in my duty as host again, mark me.” With that, he jumped forward and pulled out one of the four chairs placed round the table, waving me in.

As everyone settled in, I examined the formidable Mrs. Woodforde in turn. Even to my ignorant eye, this woman was a born duchess, despite growing up in what Sophia called “genteel poverty”. She had an elegant presence, immaculately dressed in clothes cut to flatter her figure and decry wealth. Elaborate blonde curls, streaked with silver, were piled on the top of her head and although beautiful, a slight frown marred her lovely features. Green eyes met mine and narrowed.

“Miss de Courcy,” she said nodding. “You look well in my old gown, far better than breeches and smock, at any rate. What possessed you to wear such attire?”

“She finds it more comfortable for travelling, Mama,” interjected Sophia.

“Are you not to let your new companion speak for herself, Sophia?” said Mrs. Woodforde with icy politeness. Sophia blushed, looking away.

From within the many folds of her gown, Mrs. Woodforde drew a small key, unlocking the wooden box on the table. Inside was a compact block resembling a flaky brick. As she scraped parts into a pot I realised what it was.

“You lock your tea?” I said, surprise making me forget to be meek and quiet.

Mrs. Woodforde did not deign to answer, pouring hot water from the urn at the end of the table into three cups. Mr. Woodforde cheerily filled the silence.

“At three shillings and thrupence for half a pound, who wouldn’t?” He said, taking a cup from his wife. “I daresay Mrs. Woodforde ensures ours comes in its purest form, but one hears tales of unscrupulous smugglers cutting their bricks with, at best, licorice or willow, at worst, ash, or even the vilest of bodily produce.”

“As these are the best leaves money can buy,” said Mrs. Woodforde, giving me my tea last. “It would not do to offer so great a temptation to an idle domestic.”

For herself, she poured steaming, velvety brown liquid from a silver jug into another cup.

Seeing my curious look, she remarked, “I always take chocolate in the mornings.”

Restraining the impulse to ask for some of Mrs. Woodforde’s drink, I took a slurp of my tea, trying not to make a face at the bitterness. The chat about mixing “bodily produce” had put me off.

“So, Miss de Courcy,” said Mr. Woodforde, reaching for a roll and buttering it with gusto. “You and Sophy are to enter the *bon ton* together; no doubt the young men will be hard pressed to withstand your combined charms. I’m sure my lady wife will want you out in society as much as possible. But,” he added with a laugh, seeing Sophia

panicked face, “we’ll also sample the delights of Southampton itself. Do you know the town, Miss de Courcy?”

“Yeah, pretty well,” I said without thinking, the question catching me off guard.

“That is strange,” said Mrs. Woodforde, cutting across her husband. “Sophia gave us the impression this was your first time in England.”

Quickly backtracking, I added, “I mean, I know *of* Southampton, parts of it.” Getting flustered under her scrutiny, I elaborated. “I’ve not been there properly but I’ve heard about the medieval walls, sailing on the Solent.”

“Your French gaolers took pains to educate you on English spa towns?” There was no mercy in Mrs. Woodforde’s hard gaze, her pitiless eyes almost daring me to lie to her face again. Glancing at Sophia, I saw her face had deepened to a dark flush.

“Now now, my dear,” interrupted Mr. Woodforde with a good-humoured chuckle. “There’s no need to be nice on the details. This trip is to be a *tabula rasa* for us all, as Locke would say. A chance for Sophia to enter society with a companion by her side.”

Sophia seemed totally mortified into silence. I wanted to say something but worried about giving myself away by asking stupid questions. Instead, I ate all on offer, feeling the lacing on my stays strain against my full stomach.

“It looks like a nice day,” I said, unable to bear the awkward silence any longer.

“Aye, so it is,” said Mr. Woodforde, seizing on my opener. “The prospect is particularly fine from the south lawn at this time of day. Sophia, you might like to take your friend for a stroll about the grounds, if your strength permits it, Miss de Courcy,” he added.

“Yeah, I’d be up for that,” I said. “I never like to be inside for too long.”

“Evidenced by your complexion,” said Mrs. Woodforde, giving my tanned skin a disdainful look. “Sophia, be sure to bring a parasol when you go.”

“Yes Mama,” replied Sophia quietly.

“And do not forget your pattens. I cannot have you ruining another pair of slippers.”

“Yes Mama,” repeated Sophia.

Picking up a dainty silver bell, Mrs. Woodforde gave a tinkle, summoning the footman Harry to take away our plates. His face was completely blank, giving no indication he’d ever seen me. However, whilst bending over a side table behind Mrs.

Woodforde, he caught my eye and bared his teeth in a malicious grin. I wanted to stick my tongue out, but Mrs. Woodforde was facing my way. Instead, I gave him my fakest smile.

“Quick about it, there’s a good lad,” said Mr. Woodforde cheerfully, glancing over at Harry’s suspended form. Without turning around, Mrs. Woodforde slowly and deliberately locked the tea caddy. “You may go,” she said to Sophia, who rose to her feet, eyes on the floor. I followed suit, trying – with difficulty – to avoid catching the various layers of fabric under my chair.

Stopping just short of the door, I turned back, wanting to say something, wanting somehow to defend Sophia. Mrs. Woodforde had been cold to *me*, yes, but I didn’t care. Who was I to her anyway? Just some girl forced into her company. It was the way she’d acted to Sophia that bothered me.

Looking up, she said, “There is much to be done before Southampton. See that it is done, Sophia.”

Interview apparently ongoing; Sophia dragged me away.

Chapter 10. “I would have you to dance with spirit: but never allow yourself to be so far transported with mirth as to forget the delicacy of your sex.” John Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters*, 1774

Saturday, July 31. Thropden Hall

Darcy’s troublesome ways occupy much of my time - I hardly have a moment to commit pen to these pages. What a plague the girl is! Truly, it seems she came into my life simply to vex and trouble me. Never mind that she seems to cause offence at every turn – bad enough, journal – but it is the total lack of any sense of wrongdoing. Whenever I exclaim against her insolent manner, her surprise is almost comical. Therein lies the problem with *my* instruction. You see, I find Darcy’s ways are an excessive source of amusement. It is impossible to carry my ire from one moment to the next. More than likely, she has sensed this weakness, unscrupulously using it to her advantage.

Take, for instance, our dance lessons from Signor Piozzi, a once venerated, if somewhat pompous, master of his art. Now I cannot help but see him as Darcy does – “a git with a fake accent and tiny violin”. Again, journal, I write her words verbatim; though I do not know the meaning of “git”, it is surely not complimentary.

He arrived at Thropden – with great haste – two days ago, eager to carry out the commission sent by my mother. Unsure of how Darcy might receive his tutelage – her reception of *my* instruction was not a promising example – I outlined some of the steps required for a country-dance, whilst simultaneously begging she moderate her willful behaviour.

“Lighten up, would you,” said she, arms outstretched like a bird, whirling on the spot so that her robe à l’anglaise flowed around her person. We were standing in the drawing room, a section cleared of furniture for our upcoming lesson. We expected Signor Piozzi at any moment, and in the brief space of time before his arrival, I again endeavoured to check her exuberance.

“Darcy,” said I, attempting to affect a collected appearance. “As we are both aware, this sham of ours, which I do not believe you take in all seriousness, depends on a certain degree of effort. We are attempting to fool everyone into the belief that you are not only a member of society, but that you rightfully belong in it, *not* a madhouse.”

“I know that,” she replied unconcerned, now increasing the speed with which she spun. “But learning how to dance is hardly a matter of life or death.”

“It is!” I cried, darting forward to seize her wrist, my carefully controlled exterior giving way to the wrath always bubbling beneath the surface. “You walk on a tightrope! One false step and Mama will send you away and that would be death for...” Words failing, I trailed off, lost in the beat of her pulse beneath my fingers, the dark blue of her eyes fixed upon me. Releasing her, I stepped away, drifting towards the mullioned windows. “Without my family’s protection, you won’t have the means to go on,” I continued, attempting to regain my composure. “Who knows where you will be, thrown on the mercy of the street. We must prove you are a worthy companion to prevent this happening. You see,” said I, tracing a finger along the fog in the pane. “I have grown fond of your acquaintance and do not wish to lose it.”

My mind wandered back to a particularly agreeable walk spent in the grounds the previous day. It was a sweet summer’s morning, the breeze holding a touch of warmth, as well as pleasure, in nature’s abundant delights. We took a turn in the wilderness, observing the swallows dart and twitter about their merry business, much like ourselves. The dappled sunlight glinted off the leaves as we talked, interrupted only by the distant bleat of sheep in a far-off field. Wandering the woods of my ancestors, meeting wildflowers in our path, I thought to myself, how pleasant it is to share these beauties with someone else! Inhaling the balmy air, I smiled, happy in my company, ready to enquire after some other future phenomenon, commonplace to Darcy, but which she was pleased to describe. Journal, did you know one may hear music even when not in the presence of a musician through *speakers*?

“I don’t blame you,” said Darcy, snapping me out of my recollection. “I am a lot of fun.”

“Undoubtedly you find *fun* in your various frolics,” said I, adopting a stern tone of voice. “But your thoughtlessness may yet cause of deal of trouble; in the main, to me. Perhaps I shouldn’t miss you, if you were sent away.” I added, affecting unconcern.

“Too late,” said Darcy, with a triumphant air. “You’ve already admitted you like me.”

Just at that moment, Signor Piozzi entered the drawing room, throwing open the doors with great aplomb. Glad for the distraction, I curtsyed, using the time to marshall my sensibilities.

Eccentric in his appearance as ever, the Dancing Master bent a courtly knee in return, his hands twirling an elaborate arc as he bowed.

“Ah, Signorina Woodforde,” cried he, in his thick Italian intonation, seizing my hand and applying liberal kisses to it. “De *angels* above are surely missing their *brightest* star from their *midst*.”

Ignoring this muddled metaphor, I directed a hasty glance towards Darcy, hoping, rather naively, that she would find the self-control to restrain her mirth. Sadly, I was mistaken. She laughed quite openly at Signor Piozzi’s display, making no attempts to hide her mockery. He whirled at the sound, still clutching my hand, almost removing me from my feet.

“And *who*,” asked he, drawing himself up. “Is dis? Who can laugh with *disdain* at the *great* Piozzi? The man who has *danced* in de *finest* courts and most *dazzling* palazzos on the continent?” Signor Piozzi has an unfortunate habit of laying emphasis on several of his words. In this instance, it rather undermined his determination to appear serious.

Accordingly, Darcy reacted in her usual manner. “Who’s this clown?”

Suppressing feelings of mortification, I breathed deep, a bland smile painting my visage.

“This is Miss de Courcy, Signor,” said I, in my most conciliatory tone. “She is to be my companion whilst my family summer in Southampton, but for today she is your latest pupil. A more attentive and considerate student you will never find, I am certain.”

Both the Signor and Darcy made similar sounds of derision. They share one commonality, at least. After many compliments on my part and much harrumphing on the Signor’s, he relented, agreeing to begin our lesson. The steps he taught were familiar, as was his style of teaching. For Darcy, however, I fear she struggled with the intricacies of the movement and fleetness of foot required. The Minuet and Gavotte seemed to spark little interest, but the livelier folk dances suited her high spirits. The risk in these informal dances was the increased wildness of her motions. On more than one occasion, she tripped on the hem of Mama’s gown, nearly losing her footing entirely. In that instance, she practically fell into my arms, and only by catching her, did she not dash her head upon the floor. Helping to steady her, Darcy gave an embarrassed laugh and muttered word of thanks.

“Very good, *molto buona*,” cried the negligent Dancing Master, clapping his hands for attention. “*Now*, you are ready for some music I think,” and with a great flourish, he removed from within the folds of his great coat, his kit violin.

Having danced to this instrument many times, I found its appearance unremarkable and accordingly stood in place ready to begin. The same could not be said for Darcy, who upon glancing at the kit, fell into uproarious laughter.

“Ow *dare* you!” cried the enraged Dancing Master, eyes flashing with menace.
“Ow *dare* you *again* mock the Signor Piozzi?”

“It’s just so stupid,” said she, through tears of mirth. “Why is it so small?”

Looking as though he wished to break the instrument over her head, Signor Piozzi did not answer at first, waiting until her laughs had subsided.

Adopting a grave air, he said, “It is most *rude* for a lady to *ridicule* the size of a man’s *instrument*.”

Now, Journal, even I could not maintain control at such a declaration. It was several minutes before calm was restored and in that time the Dancing Master had beat an indignant retreat. Upon realising this, I swiftly pursued before he could report his tale to my mother. With much coaxing, I persuaded him back into the Drawing Room.

From this point forward Darcy behaved herself and seemed truly to enjoy the dances with the addition of the music. A broad smile caressed her lips as she hopped from foot to foot, and when our hands met in an allemande there was a certain sparkle in her eyes that sent a thrill of joy through me. I flatter myself that Darcy and I were making admirable progress; she is rather more graceful on her feet than I imagined, though still a little slapdash when her concentration slips.

One such incident brought our lesson to a swift and unfortunate conclusion.

We were facing one another in a country dance, the Signor playing his violin with increased rapidity. Darcy, I noticed, was attending more to the sky outside, than the Signor’s instructions. Losing her balance once again, she fell, not onto me, but Signor Piozzi, landing heavily on his foot and causing him to drop his instrument, which broke in twain.

“Damn ye for a hoddy-doddy wench,” cried he, in an accent unlike his habitual style. As though coming to the same realisation himself, he clapped his hands to his mouth and burst into loud sobs.

So shocked were we at this turn of events that neither Darcy nor I spoke, merely exchanging amazed glances.

Darcy was the first to move. “Hey, I’m sorry about your violin,” said she, reaching forward and placing a hand on his shoulder. Alarmed at this familiar display, I gave a tiny admonitory cough. Scowling at me over the openly weeping Piozzi, she patted his back in a somewhat awkward manner, gently shushing his howls.

At last, he gathered himself, wiping his face like a child. Producing a silk handkerchief from my pocket, I passed it to him, which he gratefully accepted, blowing his nose in a most undignified manner. Part of me wished he might have kept it, but the bonds

of decorum made this impossible, particularly as I had embroidered it with my own initials. Being witness to his vulnerable moment did not excuse gifting such an intimate item.

“I’m right sorry,” said he at last, in what I thought was an accent from the north of England. “Ye shouldn’t have seen me like this. Only, when me kit broke and ye heard ‘ow I really sound, I thought to meself - it’s over for ye now, Jack. They’re wise to yer game.” At this, his tears broke out afresh. Darcy continued patting him throughout until he mastered himself once more.

Wanting to know more, or rather, have him cease his weeping, I asked, “Would you care to explain what you mean by ‘game’, Signor Piozzi?”

“Piozzi!” cried he, giving a humourless laugh. “I read the name Piozzi somewhere and thought it were a good one. Proper, like. Continental. I said to meself, none of ye great houses will hire the likes of Jack Nobody from the north of nowhere to teach their ilk how to dance. But the great Signor Piozzi? An Italian of musical renown? Well, now, happen they will. Happen they will.” With these last words murmured to himself, he buried his face in his hands, heaving great sobs.

“Listen Jack,” said Darcy, with more kindness than the Charlatan deserved. “Everyone lies on their CV, it’s not a big deal. I promise we won’t spill the beans.”

“Darcy,” said I in a warning undertone. “Though sympathetic to his plight, this man has lied to my family and entire circle of acquaintance. It cannot go unanswered.”

Over the raised volume of the pretender’s tears, Darcy said, *sotto voce*, “What he’s doing isn’t any different to us. Come on, Sophia, help him out. We’re all just trying to get by.”

I confess, I was not wholly unmoved by his distress. Besides which, honour demanded that I meet the expense of the kit violin’s destruction, since Darcy had broken it. Darcy is my responsibility and thus, in a manner of speaking, is an extension of myself.

Inwardly sighing, I called through the lamentations, “Peace, Signor. We shall not expose you. Peace.” I called again, more as a command this time, for the man still hiccupped loudly. “I will pass off the breakage as a fault of mine and have Mama to reimburse you when she settles your fee.”

“Thank you, Mistress,” said he, and I was pleased to see he did not overstep the bonds of decorum further with any overt protestations of gratitude.

“Just one thing,” said Darcy, a devious glint in her eye, no doubt formed once order was restored. “Since we’re doing you a favour, maybe you could do one for us too.”

He looked nervous and I could hardly blame him. She was mischief incarnate. “Just drop a few hints to Mrs Woodforde that I’m ready for society, okay? Don’t go

overboard or anything,” she added, correctly interpreting his dubious looks. “Or else, she’ll be suspicious. Just reassure her that I’m alright, basically.”

“That her acquaintance would not disgrace the family,” I put in.

“Thanks,” said Darcy, flashing me a swift smile.

He seemed to consider the proposition, tilting his head this way and that. At last, he swept another great bow, and, holding his fist to his chest, said with a solemnity hitherto unseen said, “Upon my honour, such that it is. I will vouchsafe your suitability.”

“Great!” said Darcy, delighted. “It’s a deal.” With these words she stuck out her hand to shake, for all the world like a man.

Smiling wryly, he slowly accepted her proffered hand. “We ‘ave an accord, Mistress.”

Whether his words had the desired effect on Mama’s opinion of Darcy, remains to be seen.

With each passing day, Darcy’s strength and vigour only grows, both in body and mind. She becomes more serious about her instruction – though her embroidery is still woeful – and will be ready for Southampton society when we arrive two days hence. She has intimated an eagerness to ride before we depart and I hope that can be arranged, although she scoffed at the idea of a side-saddle. I shall insist she at least try, perhaps later this afternoon. Should she persist in this desire to canter astride, then it will have to be an early morning venture. Only then can we hope to avoid the servants’ suspicious glances. They stare and whisper too much as it is.

Already, Darcy’s tale has spread to wild proportions. Callers have been eager to see her, though I fend them off.

Her first real test is church tomorrow, when the eager village will be alert to any strange behaviour...

Chapter 11. The first test

Dressed to impress, I swaggered down the main staircase in Sophia's wake, ready for my first proper Anglican Church service. Dad was raised Catholic (lapsed) so we'd occasionally gone to mass. My memories of those times are hazy – a vague sense of trying to drink the wine and being told off. After he disappeared, I never bothered going back. No one to go with.

Mrs. Woodforde waited in the hall, wearing a hat so large, it almost covered her entire face. Mr. Woodforde, still not at church, was clearly loving it, pretending not to know who was beneath.

"Away with you," she snapped, lifting the brim from her face.

"Why my dear!" he exclaimed, jumping back in fake surprise. "How glad I am to see you. This great thing you wear over your face quite prevented my knowing you!"

"Be off, I say," she said, now trying to swat him with her parasol. "The church bells are tolling their summons and their minister is not to be seen."

"Calling all sinners," he said. Giving his wife a cheeky grin, patted her on the bum and ran out the front door. Definitely not your usual church minister.

"Come, Sophia," called Mrs. Woodforde, not even looking back, striding after her husband with a dignified air.

The three of us made a grand procession walking down the drive to church. There was a crowd gathered near the entrance. As we approached, I became aware of the curious glances and open stares. I recognised the odd face amongst the sea of strangers: Harry with a group of vicious looking lads; Mrs. Jenkins holding court over her fellow crones; Anne, talking to a bunch of redheads – her family maybe. I hadn't even asked if she had any.

As we passed, the villagers bobbed and bowed to Mrs. Woodforde, murmuring, "Ma'am," respectfully. I noticed the hum of chatter seemed to intensify as I walked through, and I did my best to avoid tripping. One cold look from Mrs. Woodforde, however, silenced them all.

Mr. Woodforde entered, bounding up the pulpit and grinning down at his congregation.

Overall, I thought it was a good service. Never too preachy but still on message. He ended with words that have stayed with me:

“Life is a chequered scene. As soon as our frail bark is committed to the mighty deep, the waves and billows of disquietude roll over our heads.” He paused at this point, allowing his words to be absorbed.

“If religion be the pilot, we are safe in the storm. I desire to lay the foundation of my happiness upon that Rock, against which the afflictive uncertainties of this life must dash in vain: on this foundation the peace of my soul shall rest secure.”

Religion would never be that rock for me but that didn't mean I'd never find it.

After the service, I stood with the Woodfordes outside the church, bobbing as the villagers paid their respects. Sophia had already prepped me, advising I keep quiet, eyes down. This was difficult given how bizarre the assortment of people looked. I stared as much as them.

A voice trilled behind us, “Why my dear, sweet, Sophia!” Turning, a girl about our age – hard to tell under all the mountains of frills and ruffles – came tripping along towards us, a simpering smile plastered on her face. Making a curtsy that Sophia returned, she carried on, “How I have longed to see you. It was my dearest wish to find you after your father's service. I was just this very moment thinking to call upon you at Thropden Hall. We have only last week received a new pianoforte and it is so dull to sit for hours on end with just Miss Elton for company, who cannot play a fig of course!” She finished this breathy speech with a stupid little laugh. I'd like to point out the obvious here and mention that nothing she'd said was remotely funny.

“But what can your maid be about, Sophia?” scolded the girl who touched a tendril of Sophia's hair. “Your appearance is so untidy, so blowzy!” This observation was followed by another laugh.

Sophia had barely opened her mouth to answer before the girl relentlessly carried on.

“My dear, you know I have an excessive regard for you, but really you ought not to be scampering about the country in such a manner.”

“Well *you* are,” I interrupted, totally done with this chat.

“Darcy,” interjected Sophia quickly. “May I introduce you to my friend and neighbour, Miss Arabella Norris. Arabella, this is a new acquaintance of mine, Miss De Courcy, lately arrived from... France.”

The girl sunk into what I guess you *might* call an “elegant” curtsy. I nodded my head in return, but at a sharp look from Sophia, begrudgingly gave my usual bob.

“So, this is she, *the emigree*,” declared the girl, giving me the up and down. “I expected Lillith returned. But, Sophia, perhaps you have tamed the creature. Quite the picture.”

See, this is why I couldn’t survive the eighteenth century without Sophia. This girl was being so maddeningly, discreetly rude; I could barely restrain from calling her all the worst names under the sun.

Instead, I had to play by her rules.

“It’s been *great* chatting to you, Ariana, but we’ve things to do. Bye.” With that, I marched off, pleased to use the wrong name for good measure. Tramping along the path back to the house, I could hear the final murmurings of excuses and goodbyes from Sophia, who caught up to me, out of breath.

Here we go.

“I cannot... your behaviour is unaccountable. You - you have an utter indifference to decorum. I hardly knew how to make my apologies to Miss Norris.”

“Why should you apologise. She’s a cow.”

Sophia stopped, face white. “I need some herbs,” she declared, before turning on her heel and marching back towards the walled garden. Completely caught off guard, I nearly had to run after her, barely able to keep up with her furious pace.

“Sophia,” I gasped, clutching at her arm to stop. “Are you alright? You seem a little...” I thought the word “crazed” wouldn’t go down well so settled on “off”.

“How...” the word came out as a whisper. “How can you continue to be so ill bred? After all the promises you have made to improve, to *try*. All cast to the winds. I am ashamed. Ashamed.”

“Well,” I said, feeling a little uncomfortable. “She just really annoyed me. You have to admit, she is the worst.”

“Arabella may have her shortcomings, but she is an acquaintance of mine, and I would ask for *my* sake you at least try and demonstrate some delicacy in manner. Never mind that you do not seem to care for your own reputation.”

“Look, I’m not a big enough person to pretend to like some passive aggressive fake. I’m not sorry for what I said, I’m sure she’ll live. What’s more she deserved it.”

Sophia didn't say anything but carried on her determined march, pushing past the wrought iron gates.

"I'm not sorry for offending her," I repeated. "She was smarmy and irritating as hell." I cut myself short before saying anything that crossed a line. I took Sophia's hand in mine, pulling her to a stop. "But I *am* sorry I've upset you, Sophia. I'll try harder to tone it down, for your sake, I will."

"You have said so before. How do I know you are truly in earnest this time?" We held each other's gazes, the moment so intense, we might have been the only two people in the world.

"Off picking flowers are ye, Miss Woodforde." A coarse voice broke the tension and we jumped apart.

It was the drunk man from my adventures in the kitchens. Now, he looked respectable enough in his Sunday best, if a little rough around the edges.

"Oh... yes, Mr. Hulbert," said Sophia, flustered. "That is to say, no. There are a few herbs I wish to bring on our journey. We may not get them in Southampton."

"Right y'are," said Mr. Hulbert doffing his cap respectfully. "You always have the best cures. Good day to ye, Mistress. Memsell." He strolled off, whistling a tune through his teeth.

"Come," said Sophia, not meeting my eye. "It shall be the work of a moment."

Returning to the house, Sophia "wished to consult Mrs Blackwell", whoever that was. Settling ourselves in the library, she took down a huge tome from the booklined wall. It nearly took up the entirety of the small desk.

"What's that?" I said, moving to stand behind her.

She flicked the pages back to the beginning, and then leaned back, resuming her usual, straight posture. In elegant cursive handwriting was the following:

A
Curious Herbal
Containing Five Hundred Cuts
Of the most useful Plants
Which are now used in the Practice of
PHYSICK

*Engraved on folio Copper Plates
After Drawings, taken from
The LIFE*

*By
Elizabeth Blackwell*

*To which is added
A short Description of the Plants
And
Their common Uses in PHYSICK*

"A Curious Herbal," I murmured, taking it in. "What's curious about it?"

Sophia laughed. "Why, I cannot say," she said, shaking her head in surprise. "The question had never occurred to me before. Perhaps the circumstances in which the herbal was created makes it curious. Mrs Blackwell sought a way to secure her husband's release from debtor's prison. The product was this," she tapped the book. "Each day she would walk from her lodgings to the Chelsea Physick Garden and draw the specimens before engraving the copper plates for printing. It took two years to complete and here is the result of her labours." She carefully turned the pages over, revealing double spreads of brightly coloured illustrations.

"This is my favourite entry," she said, reaching a page marked with a small slip of paper.

"Rosemary," I said, taking in the sprigged plants illustration, tiny blue flowers adorning the common leaves.

"Here," she said, reaching into the pocket tied at her waist and producing a sprig. "I always carry a posy of rosemary. The scent is wonderfully fresh, and according to Mrs Blackwell, is said to strengthen the memory."

I inhaled its sweet scent, comforted by its reassuring familiarity.

"If I'm ever in danger of forgetting something important," I said handing the rosemary back to her, "be sure to give me a sprig of this."

"Gladly," she smiled, placing it back in her pocket.

“Is this normal reading material?” I asked, turning over the pages myself, skipping the chunks of text. “For a girl like you?”

“It is not common,” said Sophia, looking a little sheepish. “I confess, I know of no other person in possession of a copy. It is only by chance we have such a one: it was in the library collection my father inherited along with the Thropden estate. When I first came upon it, I was very young and drawn to the pretty illustrations. As I grew older, and discovered the medicinal powers found in ordinary plants, I was entranced. That the right tincture of flowers could improve the balance of health and humours, or herbs one finds within reach might relieve malignant distempers? It is a gratifying thought.” Her eyes shone with enthusiasm. “My interest in botany is perhaps due to Mrs Blackwell. I owe her a great debt.”

“Botany,” I said, giving her a meaningful look. “Sounds a lot like studying medicine to me.”

“You know that field is not open to me,” she said, staring at the book sadly. “At least botany is considered an appropriate pursuit for ladies of the quality.”

“It’s just so unfair,” I burst out. “You’d make a brilliant doctor!”

“It does not do to rail against one’s circumstances. It is as Papa said, ‘life is a chequered scene’. Light succeeds dark and calm precedes storms. All we can do is make the best of the square on which we land.”

We didn’t stay in the library long. There was still plenty to before we set off to Southampton the next day. Sophia, however, had one more surprise left in store.

Chapter 12. “Few places can vie with Southampton in situation, either as a residence for amusements, or for the recovery of health. Every attraction within the compass of a provincial town is afforded, with water excursions, promenades, scenery unrivalled for its beauty.” *The visitor's guide to the watering places.* 1781

Monday, August 2. Castle Square, Southampton

It was dark when I woke this morn – some internal workings reviving me from slumber. Finding myself perfectly recovered from any feelings of fatigue, I threw off the bedding and softly moved to the window. A pale blue tinge, far off in the horizon, heralded dawn's approach.

Struck with a sudden fancy to ride out and witness the sunrise, I reached for the taper to light my movements.

Now illuminated, I threw on my plainest petticoats, skirts and riding habit, hardly sparing a moment to correctly fasten my kerchief. Without Anne's aid, the intricate fastenings of my fine blue coat would have been impossible to manage. My hair, I am sure, was a fright, though up and removed from my face. It must do. With every passing moment, another sunbeam brightened the sky.

Lamp in hand, I stole past my parent's chamber, down the long gallery, through the green baize door and onto the small landing outside Darcy's room. Gently knocking, I paused, listening to the noises of the house. Some servants were already abroad, carrying out the final preparations for our Southampton departure. From within the chamber, I detected sounds of a deep slumber.

Entering, all qualms at *my* inelegant appearance soon vanished. Twisted in a tangle of bedsheets, Darcy's prone figure snored away, arms thrown carelessly above. Stifling a giggle, I crept forward, not wishing to alarm, yet nevertheless determined to interrupt her repose. Clearing my throat did naught to achieve this purpose. I firmly shook her shoulder, clamping a hand over her mouth before she cried out.

The alarm passed; her displeasure began. This soon abated once I relayed my plan.

“I'm not riding side-saddle though,” she whispered, throwing off her chemise and pulling on her old smock and breeches.

“I thought you enjoyed the experience,” said I, recalling our pleasant afternoon ride two days past.

“Yeah,” said she, now pulling on her boots. “But honestly, I just prefer it my way. Plus I haven’t nailed my seat so it’ll be risky in the dark.”

“Your point is fair,” I replied, glancing out of the window, the sky lightening every moment. “Come, make haste, else we shall miss it.”

Clattering onto the black-and-white stone floor of the entrance hall, we made our escape outdoors, the cool air a welcome contrast to the house’s cloistered interior. We met none on our progress to the stables, not even the lad who kept it. Doubtless he slept fast in the annex above – his services not needed until we set off. Unused to saddling my own horse, Darcy had to do it for me, smirking at the commission. She had used Mama’s saddle before, but naturally, this would not do riding astride. Papa’s saddle would also not serve, being too broad for Mama’s grey mare, Clowance. Fortunately, there was a spare fit for purpose -- James’ old saddle when first we came to Thropden. I confess, I was impressed at the speed with which Darcy completely the task, and the affection she showed the animals, rubbing her nose against Clowance’s.

“Milady,” said she, in a mock show of gallantry, bending a knee and offering me a hand.

Stifling a giggle, I affected a grand air, gravely allowing her hand me up upon Cecelia’s back.

Rearranging my skirts, I stole a glance under my lashes at Darcy as she mounted. I am sorry to relate, Journal, that she has an excellent seat and even sorrier to say that she is perfectly aware of this fact.

Clicking her tongue, she gave a roguish smile before trotting into the dark. I followed into the fresh morning, eager to witness the first approach of light streaking the east. Quickening Cecelia’s pace with urgent encouragement, we soon levelled with Darcy and Clowance. The clattering of hooves doubtless carried up the drive and woke the entire household. In that moment, dear Journal, I cared not to be wise, so exhilarated was I with our wayward excursion.

On we rode, out beyond the parklands and wheat fields, steadily ascending and surpassing false horizons until gaining the point where the greatest view is afforded.

Stopping our progress, Darcy swung her leg, leaping from the saddle with joyful swiftness. In two short strides, she was beneath me, hands round my waist lifting me down. The speed with which she did this left me breathless – I know not how else to account for my flustered words of thanks. She nodded, eyes close to mine, before releasing me and tying Clowance and Cecelia’s reins to a nearby tree.

Returning to my side, she sighed, gazing over the prospect. I closed my eyes, savouring the last few moments before morning's true arrival. It must have rained sometime in the night, so fresh was this new day. Breathing in the earth's fertile fragrance, I sighed in turn, enjoying the charm of the early birds' songs. Feeling a nudge to my side, I opened my eyes. The sun emerged and spread its orient beams over the land glistening with dew. As it rose, the heat began to chase away morning mists, dancing like petals on the wind before melting away. By degrees the light spread, illuminating the rolling hills beneath, and with it every herb, flower and leaf – or so it seemed to me. Standing on our vantage, high above nature's beauty, I felt as though the very sun had risen at my command. We might have stood there for one hundred years for all I cared, so absolute was my sense of peace. Yet all good things must end, even glorious mornings.

“Thank you,” said Darcy, touching my arm. “For bringing me here. I wouldn't have missed this for the world.”

“Come,” said I, returning her smile. “It is long since time we returned.”

With each passing step my elation dimmed, certain a witness would descry Darcy's unsuitable position.

Sure enough, as we rounded the stable block, there seemed every male servant gathered in retinue.

“Ah, Harry my good man,” called Darcy to the assembled crowd in superior tones. “How splendid to see you here. Pip-pip, toodle-oo, there you go,” throwing the baffled Harry her reins and leaping from the saddle. “Must dash, lots to do.”

Journal, I can but assume this was Darcy's attempt to brazen out the unfortunate situation.

We did not dally long, returning to our rooms with all haste to make those last-minute preparations. Anne was not in my chamber, having preceded us to Southampton in a coach with some of the other servants. For the second time that day, I missed her assistance in dressing. I made shift as best I could, my present *déshabillé*, choosing a dark travelling dress. I do not understand the current fashion for *white* carriage dresses. Most impractical. The dirt it must attract!

Under my instructions, Anne left out the simplest dress for Darcy to robe herself. Nevertheless, I steeled myself for some new disaster when I tripped over to her room.

To my great surprise, she was dressed with a modicum of refinement, though her hair left much to be desired.

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “You have managed to dress unassisted.”

“Where I’m from we don’t have lady’s maids doing the basics for us. Besides,” she added, peering at herself in the glass. “The front lacing on these stays is easy once you get the hang of it. I’ll never get used to not wearing underwear though. Too breezy” She shifted uncomfortably and once again I marvelled at her openness.

“Yes, well,” I coughed, unsure how to comment on such a remark. “I cannot assist you with that, however, would you like a cap?”

“Go on then,” said she, resigned. Tugging a loose lock, a cascade of long, wavy hair unfurled like a stack of cards collapsing.

After failing to thrust her mane into the garment, I stepped forward to remedy her appearance.

“There now,” said I, quite satisfied with my work. “You shall make a passable travelling companion, even for the likes of Mrs Woodforde of Thropden Hall.”

“Surely not,” she laughed, pushing me away. “Way too much expectation for a scrap of fabric.” She flicked the cap with energy.

“Stop!” I cried, catching hold of her wrist. “You endanger my good offices. Come, it is time to depart. You might be a little nervous. I certainly was, the first time I embarked on a lengthy journey.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call going from here to Southampton lengthy,” said she, following. “Going to a different continent is what I’d call *lengthy*.”

“You have travelled to other continents?” said I all amazement. “Which ones?”

“A few,” said she with casual unconcern – I collect such places to her were within easy reach. “Let’s see,” she continued, beginning to count on one hand. “North America. Been to Egypt, so Africa as well. Technically Asia if you count Turkey. So, with Europe, that makes four.”

“I have not left England,” I sighed, feeling my own inadequacy.

“Hey now,” said she, detecting my gloom. “It’s completely different. For one thing, it’s safer and quicker to travel. Plus, the entire globe has been plotted.”

“Oh, how I should like to visit the Ottoman Empire. I have such a strong inclination to go and live amongst the Turks, as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu did. Her letters on the subject are a marvel. You know, it is because of her I am immune to the pox.”

“Chicken pox?”

“How amusing you are. No, the smallpox. After reading Lady Mary’s *Letters*, Mama arranged for myself and James to receive an *ingrafting*. We were very small, I

cannot remember it all, but I believe they cut our arm and applied a small matter of smallpox.”

“Sounds like a vaccine,” said Darcy thoughtfully. “But I didn’t think it was invented yet. It’s the same principle though, you get a bit of the disease injected as a kid and it gives you immunity.”

“A vaccine you say, and you received it too? You are the first person I know who has not only had it, but not reacted with fear upon learning of the process. Mama insisted all the servants had it and it caused such a row. Is it a common practice in your time?”

“Yeah, well – mainly, yes. It used to be.” Looking a little awkward, she clarified. “For some reason, there are a few people who, um, don’t like it anymore?”

“It is much the same here. People fear that which they don’t understand. To the common man, who cannot read and has never left his village, it must sound extraordinary. I do not blame them for rejecting it.”

“People in my time have no excuse though! All the information is out there and easy to access. But –” she stopped herself, taking a deep breath. “Let’s change the subject. How long does it take to get to Southampton?”

“Not more than six hours, I should hazard.”

“*SIX* hours!” she cried, halted to a standstill.

“Yes,” I replied, gently urging her onwards. “Assuming the roads are good, which in summer they generally are. With the distance of thirty miles, it will be necessary to change horses twice and stop for a repast at a coaching inn. What is your customary journey length?”

“Like, an hour? Maybe an hour and a half at most.”

“You jest, Darcy,” I snorted, decorum lost in the madness of such a notion. “You are suggesting speeds of well above sixty miles an hour. But enough of this,” I said, seeing her wish to protest. “We risk being overheard.” Reaching the bottom of the staircase, the servants remaining in Thropden bustled hither and thither, carrying out their final duties before our departure.

We joined my parents on the front steps, Mama muttering curses at “that drunken sot Hulbert and his poor time keeping.”

“Now, now, my dear,” said Papa jovially, bouncing on his heels. “‘Twas you who wished we take our own carriage. I was quite content to hire a post chaise and bear the expense of one-shilling sixpence a mile. Sophy was all for the stage but, said I, ‘You know how your mother likes to cut a dash when travelling. A stagecoach will not do.’ And there,

you see, I saved you the trouble of facing a cramped and overcrowded stage. You see Sophy, you are thwarted in your attempts to deprive us of comfort.”

Of course, I had made no such suggestion, not privy to our travel arrangements. Papa delighted in Mama’s vehement declarations that she would *never* travel by coach.

“Really, Sophia, what were you thinking of?” asked Mama, turning to me. “You know how deeply unfashionable they are to travel in, not to mention the *smell*.”

I was saved the necessity of a response by the arrival of our carriage, splendidly equipped and drawn by four chestnut horses. Mr. Hulbert, sitting on top, tipped his hat respectfully to Mama with a steady hand, not in his cups for a change.

“This is so cool!” exclaimed Darcy. “Can I ride up top? How fast does it go? How do you steer? Whoa it’s got suspension!” She jumped forward, testing the long leather braces attached to springs. Mama ignored her, sweeping into the carriage with the help of a materialising footman. Papa, however, was equally delighted by her enthusiasm, soon pontificating on the mechanics of his fine new chaise and four.

“Miss de Courcy, I promise, you *shall* ride outside the box this day. However, the dust of the countryside might besmirch your fine appearance. Rest assured that on our approach to Southampton we will place you outside, that you may see the glories of Hampshire. It will be your task to shout when first catching sight of the sea.”

“Deal!” cried Darcy, joy dancing in her eyes. Overcome with exuberance she heartily shook my father’s hand. Though a little surprised, he joined in her laughter and handed her into the carriage himself. I soon followed.

“How lucky we are in the weather today!” cried Papa, jumping into the carriage and ordering Hulbert to rattle on. “No sight of rain, certainly none of any consequence. I am already looking forward to a long and hearty meal at the first inn and coaching house we stop at.”

“How can you talk of eating?” interrupted Mama, a mixture of amusement and exasperation playing across her features. “You have only just broken your fast!”

“Ah, my dear,” said he, affecting a serious air. “You know I must always have a meal in hand. If I have not meticulously considered and imagined my next feast then disaster will surely befall.”

“The nonsense you speak,” sighed Mama with a shake of her head.

Darcy’s joy was infectious, absorbing all that passed before her with childlike wonder. She bounced with every bump and lurch of the carriage. The little annoyances of a long and confined journey, usually vexing, seemed all delight. The vista took on a new beauty when seen through fresh eyes.

Hampshire is truly a beautiful county! Perhaps I am biased, dear Journal, yet I know this sentiment to be true. Even those happy labourers we passed on our progress seemed joyous in their toil. The fine Hampshire flint, of which many a cottage is built, sets off the picturesque vision of this lovely land.

Our journey passed pleasantly in making plans for our Southampton holiday. Darcy assured us she has been sea bathing many times and is stout about the prospect of plunging into the Solent's cold water. Doubtless, she has her own version of sea bathing. I will apprise her of the actualities.

We did not even alight from the carriage during our first stop, excepting Papa, who oversaw the horses being changed. When we changed horses in Winchester, we stayed above an hour at the Clarence Tavern, enjoying the good landlady's offering of cold meats and cheeses. The break was overdue and much needed -- Darcy fidgeted a full twenty minutes before Humbert finally eased us to a halt. Taking a pleasant turn of about twenty minutes in the countryside, Darcy and I returned to the carriage much refreshed and ready to face the penultimate leg of the journey.

"So, Miss de Courcy," cried my father, thumping the roof for Hulbert to drive on. "We are next to change horses in South Stoneham and from thence it will only be five miles until we reach Southampton. Do you still wish to sit outside the box for the journey's close?"

"Yes!" shouted Darcy, punching the air.

Mama flicked out her fan and wafted her face. The rising heat of the day had created a stuffy air within the carriage, and I did not wonder at Darcy wish to be out in the refreshing air. Still, she ought to check her exuberance, particularly in the presence of Mama. I will tell her so later. The list of these little reminders grows ever longer.

The great heat of the day had passed when we reached South Stoneham. I was glad of it, not just for myself, overbaked as I was within the carriage, but for Darcy. The novelty of sitting outside the box would surely wear thin under the sun's glaring rays. Five miles is no mere trifle under such circumstances. Whatever Darcy's virtues, I find patience is not one of them.

We were a little longer than expected at the Masons Arms owing to the axles being greased. We ate, though we did not need the repast and loitered without seeing much. Such is the way with long journeys.

With great excitement, Darcy ascended onto the box. "Wait, Sophia! Aren't you coming up here too?"

"I did not think to," said I, withdrawing my foot from the carriage.

“Come on! There’s room if I scooch. Please please *please*. It’ll be way more fun if you do.” Relenting, I allowed Papa to hand me up, avoiding Mama’s glare.

Though initially hesitant, there is no better way to view the glory of motion than outside the box. On we passed through rolling hills and sun dappled meadows, admiring the flashes of scenic vistas. Darcy was delighted by all, gasping at every new phenomenon. Being on top of the carriage rather than within also gave us the ample opportunity to witness travellers besides ourselves. The glorious mailcoach, painted red and drawn by steaming stallions flashed passed making its progress to London. Its guard blew his horn, making his presence known to us and the turnpike ahead.

At one point, we overtook a stage laboriously climbing a steep incline. The passengers were out, walking alongside.

“Why are they doing that?” asked Darcy, glancing back at the party once we passed.

It was Hulbert who answered. “Too many passengers, not enough horses,” clicking his tongue at our own steeds.

“’Tis a common enough occurrence,” said I. “Almost an expected part of the journey. I dare say we would have to do the same, were the hill any steeper.”

“The sea!” shouted Darcy. We had rounded a high pass and emerged onto a plateaued summit, a clear view for miles around. There was the Solent, the sun dancing and playing on the water.

“Oh ho, Miss de Courcy!” called my father from below. He stuck his head through the carriage window, waving his tricorn hat to gain our attention. “So, you made good on your task? Capital! We shall have a bumper of wine in Castle Square to celebrate your success.”

“Cool!” shouted back Darcy, making a strange gesture with her thumb.

Farmhouses and fields soon gave way to the trappings of Southampton town, the dirt roads becoming smooth and broadening out.

“I consider this point the beginning of Southampton proper,” I called to Darcy over the sound of our conveyance. “See here,” I drew my hand over the vista, taking in the avenue of trees neatly lining the road. “The entrance to the town is known as The Avenue —”

“The Avenue?!” interrupting once more. “*The Avenue?* On the Common? Where Park Run happens?”

“I have no notion,” said I. “Now, as I was saying, the idea of an avenue as a connecting thread between town and country —”

“This is so crazy,” she laughed, paying my words no heed. “To think we still call it that. Brilliant.”

As we drove onwards, the broad avenue turned into cobbled streets. It was necessary to somewhat slow our progress as the traffic became more pronounced. This suited Darcy who twisted about, desperate to take in every new sight. There were carts carrying their wares, laden with goods received at the port; a bathing machine trundled on, dragged by a mule on its way to the bay. A laughing young man in his curricule swiftly overtook a sedan chair, carried by two exhausted men. A dazzlingly fine chaise and four passed, its postilions handsomely liveried and rising regularly in their stirrups. The hoi polloi and *bon ton* were equal in one point at least: eager to join Southampton society.

By the time we came onto Above Bar Street, we had slowed to a walking pace, the carriage’s wheels rattling loudly on the cobblestones. Here, the most superior shops are to be found, and I was particularly pleased to be out of the box and recall each favourite haunt and take note of any new additions. Though I have not been to London, I collect many of these shops rival those of the metropolis, both in elegance and superiority of appearance. We passed the Tea Warehouse and I fancy I could detect the faint tang of tannin.

“Oh my god the Bargate!” shouted Darcy, jumping to her feet and practically leaping off the carriage in her excitement.

“Calm yourself,” I urged, aware we were passing the fashionable Dolphin Hotel. Onlookers paused in their business, amazed at the sight of a young lady leaping about on top of a carriage. How typical Darcy should act the savage the very moment we were outside Southampton’s busiest coaching inn.

Dragging her down, I resisted the urge to give her a sharp pinch.

“You make yourself the sport of the town!” I hissed through tight lips. I nodded and smiled to an elegant pair walking close by our carriage. The lady, shading her face under her parasol, smirked and whispered something to the gentleman on her arm. He tittered, turning his bold gaze upon us and our equipage.

Sinking lower in my seat, I wished Hulbert had been at the diddle and cared naught for driving the carriage at a safe speed.

“This is amazing, Sophia,” said Darcy, unaware of my embarrassment. “The Bargate’s still there in my day. I walk under it all the time.”

“Hold your tongue!” I snapped, pulled out of my silent shame. “Have a care lest half the town witness your display of madness.”

Darcy certainly ceased her loud exclamations, but still turned a delighted eye on all.

Slowly, we ascended the hill, moving nearer to the city walls. At the sight of the sweeping bay, so close to our viewpoint, Darcy could repress her elation no longer.

“No way!” she shouted, nearly vaulting over me in her eagerness to see all. “I know where we are,” said she, excitedly pointing beneath us. “This is where West Quay is – will be.” She gestured to the water.” And then there’s a road.” She waved a hand vaguely in the distance. “And then a car park. And *then* the sea. Now it’s right up to the medieval walls. I gotta say, this is way prettier.”

Journal, I earnestly tried to suppress Darcy’s soliloquy, now in full flow. Never mind that Hulbert was party to every word, or ramblers passing within feet of us could have caught the content of our discourse. I hoped the clatter of carriage wheels were enough to mask her words.

My agonies ended soon. We gained the summit of the hill and arrived at our rented abode on Castle Square. I was quite as wild as Darcy to explore our new home, set in the heart of the medieval town. The house is a fine one, tall (three stories) with a Palladian appearance. However, it is not the building that captures my enthusiasm but its situation. Such a magnificent spot I am sure never existed! The garden runs from the back of the house right down to the ancient walls. Water laps directly beneath us and when the tide is out, I imagine huts litter the bay with eager bathers. From our vantage, the New Forest is visible in all its picturesque loveliness - a fact that particularly delights Darcy.

But, Journal, as ever I run on. I have been scratching my nonsense for above an hour. Yet, when it comes to business of sleep, I find I am not tired. Perhaps being in a new place energises me. Perhaps it is fear that Darcy will expose herself.

Yet, whenever I think of her, I feel a flutter within me.

Chapter 13. Taking the flounce

There was no chance of sleep that night – I was way too buzzing to be back in my home city! Watching for dawn’s slow approach, pitch black eventually gave way to pale fingers of light reaching through my bedroom window. A sliver of moon was visible – a silver crescent against the early morning sky.

Looking out the window I tried to wrap my head around the unfamiliar bay lapping against the medieval walls - walls I’d grown up with. Wooden sailboats glided across the calm water, fishermen hauling in their early catches. The clip-clop of hooves and clattering carriage wheels floated up from the cobbled street, people already starting their day.

Thuds from below signalled the house waking up.

Cleaning my face and underarms in the basin of water, not for the first time I longed for a hot shower. I still wasn’t fully on board doing my business in the chamber pot but was getting used to it. Stays laced and skirts thrown on, I went down the hallway towards Sophia’s room.

The air was heavy with the presence of a sleeping body. I crept over to the mound of blankets gently rising and falling.

“Sophia,” I whispered. Taking hold of one of her shoulders, I gave it a shake, repeating her name a little louder. Still asleep, she turned over, dark hair tumbled over her face, sticking to a slide of drool on her cheek. Stifling a laugh, I wiped it off with the bedsheet.

“Darcy,” she murmured. I snatched back my hand, but she rolled onto her side. Heart hammering, I waited a few moments to calm down before trying again.

“Sophia,” I called, not touching her.

“Darcy?” she slurred, coming to. “What’s the matter? Is the hour so late?”

“No, it’s still early. Not sure of the time exactly but...” I trailed off, embarrassed. Seeing her like this, unlike her usual poised self in just a thin nightshirt, I became aware of how intimate it was coming into her room.

“Sorry to wake you,” I muttered, scuffing my feet on the edge of a rug.

“Think nothing of it,” she yawned. “I have dragged you from sleep enough times, it is only fair you do the same on occasion.”

We laughed.

“What’s on the agenda today?” I said, feeling comfortable enough to settle at the foot of her bed.

“Shopping, I dare say,” said Sophia, her face lighting up. “We are to buy the material for our ball gowns.”

We entered the breakfast room together, finding Mr. Woodforde sat with a rumpled young man. They stood, helping us to our seats.

“Welcome, ladies,” said Mr Woodforde, shuffling his newspaper as he sat back down. “Miss de Courcy, may I introduce you to my son, James Woodforde.”

Eyes red-rimmed and face clammy, he bowed his curly dark head with painful concentration. “Miss de Courcy,” he rasped.

“Your mother, Sophia, is out seeing to her garden, as you will observe,” said Mr Woodforde, oblivious to his son’s raging hangover. He gestured to the large window, through which Mrs Woodforde was visible directing a servant to cut flowers. Seeing us, she swept into the room, peeling off her gloves and carelessly holding them out in mid-air for some waiting attendant to take them.

“How fare the roses, my love?” said Mr. Woodforde, standing again to helping her take a seat.

“Ill, I fear,” she said, gracefully descending into her seat. “They were not pruned early enough. July is too late. You see, Miss de Courcy,” she said, taking me by surprise. “A flower can only bloom when parasitical buds are shorn away.”

“I would’ve thought a flower needs the proper care and nurturing,” I replied coolly. “Warmth and kindness over tough love.”

“Mama, we must see the dressmaker,” said Sophia, changing the subject, eyes alight with excitement.

“I quite agree, my dear,” said Mrs Woodforde, who seemed to enjoy shopping as much as her daughter. “We cannot have you out in society in last season’s drab ensemble. I suppose, Miss de Courcy,” she said, her tone changing back to one of dislike. “You will need to be outfitted in something suitable.”

Her parasite metaphor landed home.

“If it’s too much trouble, I can stay in,” I said with sincerity.

“Oh no, please, Mama,” said Sophia, distressed. “I cannot bear the thought of facing the assemblies alone. Do please get a dress for Miss de Courcy. Perhaps it can be altered for next season.”

“If it pleases you, my dear,” said Mrs Woodforde, her cold, green eyes resting on me a fraction longer before turning to her daughter and softening. “Besides, it would be a waste of the good Signor’s talents if you did not put his instructions to use.”

Sophia met my eye and winked.

Mr. Woodforde had some business to attend, so after breakfast, we set off down the cobbled street towards the town with Mrs Woodforde, Harry the footman a few paces behind. Holding on tight to our straw hats and woollen shawls, the high winds flew up Castle Square trying to drag them away.

Now I had a proper chance to take in the Southampton of the past. The houses were much more elegant, with honey-coloured stone fronts and neat little gardens dotted with Grecian vases and oriental statues.

Entering the hustle and bustle of Above Bar Street, we were almost taken out by a pair of small carriages. The driver in the carriage nearest us was a young man with bronzed skin and long blonde hair flying around his handsome face. As he passed, he flashed a dazzling smile before urging his horse onwards.

“Young men and their gigs,” said Mrs Woodforde with an angry toss of her magnificent head. “A desperate display. I am glad, Sophia, that your father never had any interest in such sports. Let him hunt and fish to his heart’s content, but why risk life and limb for such a feeble show of manliness.”

“I quite agree, Madam. James and I are never so foolhardy,” came a deep voice from behind. Turning round, a huge man stood before us - I had to crane my neck just to look up into his face. He was sharply dressed, from his beautifully cut striped coat of blue and green, down to shiny buckled shoes. He swept off his hat and bowed, the three of us returning our own curtsies (me a little slow on the uptake).

“Mr Richards, such a delight to see you,” said Mrs Woodforde, offering him her hand.

“Dear lady, the pleasure is all mine,” he said, taking it to kiss. “James told me you arrived yesterday evening and I felt emboldened to pay you a call before your hallway is filled with cards and you are too busy for old friends.”

“How could you think so!” said Mrs Woodforde with mock outrage. “Particularly as you are engaged to dine with us this evening. Once your fine house is finished, we should count ourselves fortunate to see you once a sennight.”

“Surely not, when the company is so charming,” he said, resting his eyes on Sophia, who blushed and looked away.

“Hello,” I blurted. Three pairs of eyes turned on me.

The gentleman was the quickest to recover, inclining his head and saying, “Mademoiselle de Courcy, how charming it is to see you recovered from your mishap. I should hardly know you.”

“Mr. Richards rendered you a great service, Darcy,” said Sophia breathlessly. “‘Twas he who carried you to our door when you took ill.”

“Most gallant,” said Mrs Woodforde, nodding her approval.

“And so, you are to join our party and be Miss Woodforde’s companion?” he said to me, smoothly offering his arm to Mrs Woodforde and leading us towards the high street.

“That’s right,” I said, trying to stay engaged in the conversation. A theatre troupe were failing miserably at entertaining a rapidly gathering crowd. Shouts of abuse and heckles drowned out our conversation. Then, a column of red coated soldiers marched by, their bayonets gleaming in the sun.

“War is coming,” said Mr Richards, seeing me eye the passing regiment. “Officers quartered here increase by the day. Decent fellows to toast a bumper with. Somewhat reckless with their pay. All agree war with France is inevitable.”

“How so, Sir?” said Sophia. Her mother gave her a sharp look and the inevitable blush washed over her cheeks. “Not that I mean to contradict you,” she added. “But as a nation that values liberty, why would we object to the French seeking it for themselves?”

“If the means are as noble as the ends, then there would be no objection,” said Mr Richards with a smile. “But there are always those who would seek to exploit a volatile situation. Chaos offers a chance for those to climb, rather than stay where they were born. Ah, Mrs Woodforde, would this shade of coquelicot not suit your daughter perfectly?” He stopped at a shop window, pointing at a ream of red fabric.

“Alas, ladies I cannot accompany you into this fine establishment,” he said, waving to the shop. “I have business that demands my immediate attention. Good day to you all. Until this evening, Mrs Woodforde, Miss Woodforde, Miss de Courcy.” He touched his hat and strode off, powerful frame moving easily through the crowd.

“I do enjoy the company of a man who appreciates the latest fashions,” said Mrs Woodforde as she swept into the shop, Sophia and I scurrying in after her. She moved

over to a swathe of beautiful blue fabric. "Your father cares naught for how he looks or what he wears. I often despair." She smiled affectionately despite herself. "Lamp," she called over her shoulder. A girl popped up from behind us, wielding a light.

"Hold it here," instructed Mrs Woodforde, running the light blue fabric between her fingers before sauntering towards a pillar draped with fabrics of assorted colours.

"Come, Sophia," she said holding out one red and one gold. Sophia obliged, standing dutifully in front of a tall mirror.

"This is indeed your colour," she said draping the red over Sophia's shoulder. "Yet the gold is much grander. You are owed a silk gown I think." The glossy coloured silk shimmered next to her cheeks and Sophia's eyes glowed bright.

Glancing surreptitiously at me, Sophia said, "I think muslin is best for all, Mama. Silk is so difficult to clean. It becomes an extravagance one can ill afford once before ruined. Muslin is far superior and can be turned to some account or other. It is never wasted."

"Very true, my dear, I am glad you think so. Out of this coquelicot can be got a handkerchief, or a cap, or a cloak."

"Dark blue would suit you I think, Darcy," said Sophia, crossing to a new pillar. "What about this?" The colour was like the ocean on a bright day, light from a nearby candle dancing on the surface like flecks of sea spray.

"It's lovely," I said, taking it between my fingers. "But are you sure? I don't want to put you out."

"Of course," said Mrs Woodforde striding between us. "I can't have my daughter's companion ill dressed. I'll take this as well as the red," she said to the girl holding the lamp. "If we send it to the dressmakers today, perhaps we can see them tomorrow for a first fitting."

"*First fitting?*" I said, horrified.

"You'll need three at least," said Mrs Woodforde scowling at me. "Otherwise, where is the use spending good money on material, only to throw it away on an ill-fitting gown."

Purchases made, we left the shop and carried on with our exploration of the town. Walking down the street, my eye caught something that stopped me dead. In a shop window filled with pictures, one turned my blood cold. Under the legend HIGHWAYMAN was a black and white sketch of a face with sharply carved features

framed and shoulder length hair. The eyes were shaded under a low-slung hat, but the curve of the mouth wore an unmistakable smirk.

My breath caught. It was familiar, uncannily so. I stepped forward to take a closer look. Mrs Woodforde walked on, but Sophia noticed and covered for my hesitation.

“Mama,” she said, stopping as well. “I’ve a fancy to see how the town is depicted with an artist’s eye. Might we go into this print shop?”

“Very well,” sighed Mrs Woodforde, leading the way.

Keeping my eyes on the print for as long as possible, I trailed inside after them. Recognising a woman of quality, the owner jumped to Mrs Woodforde asking if there was anything she needed. Gesturing vaguely to her daughter she fell into reluctant conversation with him.

“What is it,” Sophia whispered, quiet enough so her mother and the shopkeeper wouldn’t hear. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, still in a daze. “The picture I saw, I thought it looked like...” it seemed silly now, saying it out loud.

“Let’s see if we can take a closer look,” she said, moving as carefully as her bulky gown allowed within the cluttered shop.

We edged past piles of prints stacked precariously, stepping towards the display window. The owner, who seemed to have an eye everywhere, jumped from Mrs Woodforde, shouting, “Can I help you, ladies?”

“No thanks,” I started, before Sophia cut me off.

“We saw something of interest from without,” she said, eyeing me apologetically before continuing. “If you might be so good as to retrieve it for us?”

“Right you are, young Miss,” he said, leaping forward enthusiastically. “My print shop offers all sorts of engravings for sale, whether it be portraits of actresses ye want,” he handed Sophia a picture of a forlorn looking woman holding a candle with the legend, ‘Mrs Siddons in Lady Macbeth: Out Damned Spot!’. “Noble beauties,” he gestured to a picture of a beautiful young woman with gleaming skin and rosy cheeks. “Or even,” he said picking up a frame from the display front and holding it to his chest for dramatic effect. “Notorious villains.” He spun the picture round to the three of us.

“A most interesting case,” he said, pleased with his rapt audience - even Mrs Woodforde had drifted over to listen. “Worthy of an entry into *Blackguardinia*. This wretch has committed the most heinous crimes and malefactions, eluding every attempt

from the law to bring him to justice. He leads a band of rogues known only as the Sons of Chronos.”

“The Sons of Chronos?” said Mrs Woodforde, leaning over to take a closer look.

“Indeed, madam,” said the owner, seriously. “After the god of time. Their party carves a sickle shape wherever they strike.”

A chill settled in the base of my spine, spreading to every nerve, immobilising each cell. Dread.

“Well, we must be off,” said Mrs Woodforde, with her usual decisiveness.

“Sophia, you may return another time to make your purchases. Good day, sir,” she said to the disappointed shopkeeper. Dragging my feet, I followed in Mrs Woodforde’s wake into the hustle and bustle of Southampton.

I hardly took in the mixture of strange and familiar, the image of the smirking highwayman floating in my mind. Sophia, sensing my distraction, dragged me over to the city walls, pretending to point out the “bathing machines” along the shoreline. The timing was lucky, Mrs Woodforde bumping into to an old friend. Sophia’s efforts at a one-on-one were thwarted however, by the arrival of a rotund man who - I don’t know how else to describe it - gave off a sticky vibe.

“Ah Miss Woodforde,” he sauntered over, swinging his stick in a haphazard fashion, nearly whacking a woman pushing a cart. “How delightful.” He swept off his hat, revealing thinning hair slicked over a greasy forehead. His rounded stomach stuck out beneath an embroidered waistcoat, face glistening with a sheen of sweat.

“Mr Pinhorne,” said Sophia, sinking into an elegant curtsy. “We have seen your friend Mr. Richards not ten minutes ago.”

Placing his hat back on his gleaming head, a small boy, filthy and covered in rags, approached, tugging at Mr Pinhorne’s shining tailcoat. The boy didn’t speak but held up his hands in supplication.

“Away, boy, before I hoop your barrel,” Pinhorne shrieked, raising the back of his hand to strike.

“Mr Pinhorne,” said Sophia, aghast. The boy scarpered, dust flying over his bare feet. I caught the sound of clinking metal and the flash of a grin before he vanished with the kicked-up dust.

Unaware of his loss, Pinhorne continued. “What was I saying? Oh yes, Richards. Well, you know the man, always off on some business or other. Never more than half

seas over when taking a drink. Not like James and me, what! We were in the gun last, by Jupiter. Monstrous fun. Soundly beaten. Couldn't stomach a day of business after so hearty a go." He guffawed, as though the very idea of work was laughable. "But, by Jupiter!" he shouted, jumping back theatrically. "This cannot be she? The mademoiselle of ooh la la fame?" He tittered.

Sophia placed a restraining hand on my wrist. "This is indeed Miss de Courcy, a guest of my father's house. You will recall briefly seeing her, when taken ill upon her arrival. We have been out shopping this day."

"Eh, oh yes?" Taking out a gleaming tin from the inner folds of his coat, he flicked it open, revealing brown powder. He tapped some onto the back of his hand before snorting it up his nose. A good portion clung around his nostrils.

"Ew, gross," I said, unable to stop myself.

He didn't seem to hear, too engrossed in his disgusting habit.

"Good day to you, Mrs Woodforde," he bellowed over the passing stream of people between dividing us from Sophia's mother. She looked up, taken aback at the loud interruption. With a quick bow to us, he left, shoving his way through the crowd.

"And *he's* considered a gentleman," I said, staring after him in amazement.

"Mr Pinhorne is boorish and tiresome, even when in the best of humours," sighed Sophia. "I have yet to see any amiable good qualities, but wealth and consequence count for much when making a man a gentleman. Now, tell me —"

"Girls," said Mrs Woodforde, leaving her companion and marching over. "Was that Pinhorne I saw leaving? Where was he off to with such haste?" Not waiting for an answer, she carried on. "Oh, I do love the hurry, rush, and bustle of the city. Such a change from our sedate life in the country."

We carried on down the clustered street, Mrs Woodforde pointing out people of note with whispered asides about so-and-so's "prominent house on Bugle Street" or the benefits of a "fashionable aquatic excursion". Ahead, the Bar Gate vomited streams of people and carriages through its sand-coloured arch. We turned onto a square surrounded by a cluster of houses on one side and a church on the other. The ground was stained with blood.

"Beware the stinking fish of Southampton," Sophia laughed as I gagged. "The market has finished for the day, but the smell lingers."

"Come along, girls, there is still many an establishment we must patronise."

“Mama,” said Sophia, trotting alongside her mother, the brisk air whipping across her face and snatching her voice away. “Mama,” she repeated, a little out of breath. “As the hour is not so late and the day so fine, perhaps Darcy and I might venture into the water?”

“Do you mean to say, Sophia,” said Mrs Woodforde, huffing with annoyance as a man led a gaggle of geese across her way. “That you wish to take the flounce so soon? Surely there is nothing that ails you so pressingly?”

“No, Mama,” said Sophia, hitching up her skirts and darting after her mother. “But is prevention not the best cure? And once we have doubtless formed our many new acquaintances, we might not be so at our leisure as we are now.”

“You speak sense, my dear,” replied Mrs Woodforde, now leading the way down a stone-arched lane, lined with cramped, overhanging buildings. “But I do not have the time to go with you. I am busy overseeing preparations for this evening’s supper.”

Sophia gave me a swift smile. We split up at Westgate, walking along the medieval walls back to Castle Square.

“Now, tell me,” she said, when no one was near enough to overhear. “What affected you so? ‘Twas like you saw a ghost.”

I winced, her turn of phrase so close to the mark. “Nothing,” I said at last, dismissing my earlier fears and theories with a wave of my hand. “I thought I recognised... but it’s stupid. Forget about it.”

She still looked worried, so I said, “Honestly, Sophia, I’m fine. Just had a moment.”

We walked on.

“That view,” I said, looking out over the bay as the sun sparkled on the distant water.

“There is nowhere else that offers such a fine prospect over the water,” said Sophia, smiling with pleasure before leading me down the steps towards home. “Though one must battle the elements betimes.”

We clutched our shawls tight as the breeze picked up through the narrowing streets.

“I’ve never swum in the Southampton waters before,” I said as we hurried inside, taking off our hats and cloaks. “The water’s too grim in my time. Do you have a costume I can borrow? I’m guessing bikinis are a no.”

“Unintelligible as ever,” said Sophia with a twinkle in her eye. “If I take your meaning correctly, then rest assured the bathing machines will furnish us with the right articles.”

“If you say so,” I said, amused at what these bathing machines might “furnish us” with.

Sophia ordered the carriage and Hulbert lead the horses round from the stable block. Anne stomped around carrying a basket full of extra layers, handing it to Harry who lifted it inside the carriage. He helped Sophia inside before begrudgingly offering his hand to me. Nose in the air, I hopped in unassisted. He slammed the door and the carriage rocked as bodies climbed on top. With the thwack of Hulbert’s whip, the carriage moved off.

“Hold on,” I said, pulling back the curtains and peering out of the carriage windows. “Wasn’t Anne supposed to be coming with us? We’ve forgotten her.”

“Are you certain,” said Sophia, moving next to me to look out the window herself.

“Well yeah,” I scoffed, theatrically looking round the empty carriage. “Do you see her anywh-”

“There!” said Sophia. “Mark her cloak dangling near the back wheel?”

Sure enough, the frayed edge of Anne’s dark green travelling cloak was just visible.

“Why isn’t she sitting in here?” I asked, perplexed.

“Why should she?” said Sophia, equally confused. “The weather is fine, the journey is of a short duration. You would not expect her to be in here with us? She is content to be out on the box, her place is there.”

I sat mute, letting it sink in.

Anne, a girl close in age to us, ranked lower than a basket full of cloaks and blankets. Not given the privilege to ride inside the carriage but made to sit on top. I tried to reason the situation, make it seem less awful. I’d chosen to sit “outside the box” as a treat.

But this was different. I had ridden outside with Sophia for fun and to enjoy the scenery. I was a guest of the household, on a near equal footing, even if at their generous discretion. Anne’s place was quite literally outside that equality.

The carriage lurched to a halt with Hulbert shouting down, “Ere we are, misses. The Spa by the Marshes, finest spot to bathe.”

The sea stretched out before us, the sun glittering off the gentle, undulating water.

All along the shoreline were roofed and walled wooden huts with great big, spoked wheels, pulled to sea out at various distances by heavy horses.

“Thank you, Hulbert,” called Sophia, emerging from the carriage. “Harry, please could you carry our basket to the Machines? I recall Martin’s Baths are the best. There is one at high tide that is especially good.”

“Good day, mistresses,” said a wide-set, ruddy faced woman, grinning broadly at our approach. “Will ye be drinking the water today or bathing?”

“Drink sea water?” I asked, appalled.

The woman roared with laughter. “You must be new to Southampton, Mistress, else you’d know the Spa water offers the most wondrous cures for all manner of ills. Best if yer bowels are evacuated though on account of the –”

“If you say so,” I said, keen to end this topic of conversation. “We’re just swimming, thanks.”

“Right ye are,” she said, unperturbed. “You’ll be needing dresses? Only two shillings if ye have it for yer own. One shilling each to bathe. I’ll call for ye Guide. Mrs Tring?” she squawked. “Will ye fetch these young ladies flannel gowns and take ‘em up the Cradle? Deeper the water the best, I always say.” She flashed a smile, showing off a surprisingly good set of teeth. Maybe drinking seawater worked.

A tall, thin woman appeared, carrying a bundle of clothing. She wore a huge, dark blue smock with a drawstring bag around her waist, a hat like a squashed bowler and a handkerchief tied under her chin.

We tramped along in Mrs Tring’s wake to a bathing machine on the shoreline, emblazoned with the words, *The Cradle*. Mrs Tring led us up inside the red painted hut, Sophia and I sitting opposite each other on facing benches. A curtain hung over the door facing the sea.

“Ready to take the flounce?” said Mrs Tring passing up the clothes. “The gowns are long enough to cover your arms and reach down past yer knees. Socks for yer hocks,” she laughed at the rhyme. “And ye can put yer hair in these leather bags.” She pulled out

two leather shower caps from her apron. "I'll be out with the driver and tap on the door when he's taken the horses back to shore."

"Thank you, Mrs Tring," said Sophia as she closed the door.

"Now what," I said but before Sophia could answer, the hut moved off with a lurch, nearly knocking us to the floor. I peered out the curtain. The horse was pulling our bathing machine further out to sea, wheels sinking deeper and deeper into the water.

"Now, we prepare for our first plunge," said Sophia, untying the strings under her hat, taking off her shoes.

We helped each other take off our skirts and dresses, giggling as we staggered with the hut's motion. When down to our shifts, we slipped the flannel gowns over our heads before tucking our hair inside the leather bags.

The bathing machine came to a stop. Through the curtain, we heard the driver make his farewells to Mrs Tring and the sloshing sounds of the horse trotting back to the shore.

"Ready, mistresses," called Mrs Tring, tapping the front of the machine.

"Bring it on," I said, grinning at Sophia.

Mrs Tring pulled back the curtain, revealing the wide expanse of water. I stuck my head out, taking in the view. Two hundred metres from the shore, the clear water rippled beneath the lip of the bathing machine.

"The deeper the water, the better, I always say," said Mrs Tring, following my gaze downwards.

"I dare say you shall not want courage," said Sophia breathlessly, leaning out next to me. The corners of her mouth tightened.

Mrs Tring jumped down into the sea, the water coming up to her shoulders. "Take both my hands, mistress," she said reaching up to Sophia. "You seem a mite nervous."

"I will take Darcy's hand," said Sophia resolutely, slipping her fingers between mine and gripping tight. Our eyes met.

"Are you ready?" she said, her gaze determined.

"Ready," I said, squeezing her hand back. "On three: one-two-three JUMP!"

We leapt off the edge together, splashing into the waves, heads engulfed under water. It was deeper than I thought – too deep to stand up. As we'd jumped, I'd yelled in triumph, mouth still open as I went under. The heavy flannel gown weighed me down,

dragging me deeper under water. Still gripping Sophia's hand, I frantically kicked up, trying not to panic as my lungs burned. Then a force pulled me upwards, head breaking the surface. Choking and spluttering, an annoyed looking Mrs Tring dragged Sophia and I back towards the bathing machine by the scruff of our gowns, muttering under her breath.

When we could all stand, she said, "Now there's me thinking you could swim!"

"I can," I gasped, still heaving in breaths of air. "I'm just not used to doing it fully clothed." Still holding Sophia's hand, I turned to check on her. Though pale, she looked thrilled.

"That was," she said, eyes alive with excitement, "The most wonderful sensation!"

"There now," said Mrs Tring, fully at her ease. "Wasn't I saying the deeper water's the better?"

Back in the bathing machine, we stripped off our sodden gowns, Sophia removing the leather shower cap. It hadn't been very effective at preserving her curls and as she shook out her long dark hair, droplets of water went flying everywhere.

"Beach hair suits you," I said, without thinking.

"I beg your pardon," she said, squeezing out some of the excess moisture.

"Nothing," I mumbled. "It's nice to be able to fully submerge yourself in water, isn't it?" I said, changing the subject. "I feel like I haven't been able to properly wash the whole time I've been here."

Sophia stared, swaying with the motion of the bathing machine sloshing back towards the shore.

"I mean, you must admit," I said defensively. "Using that piddly little washstand once a day doesn't really count though, does it? If it's not full-body immersion, then is it really washing?"

"I would consider bathing and washing entirely different," said Sophia thoughtfully. "Though an enjoyable past time, sea bathing alone is too infrequent a habit to keep clean. Do not you make regular use of your washstand? At every article change surely."

Fortunately, I was saved answering by the bump and lurch of the bathing machine reaching dry land.

I was quickly reassessing my view of the past. I'd always assumed that without proper deodorant, hot running water and monthly laundry sessions, that made people less hygienic. If anything, they washed *more* often.

Back at the house, Mrs Woodforde was all in a flurry about the evening's dinner party. She flew round the house like a whirlwind, ordering this cushion be straightened or that candlestick be polished. There wasn't a speck of dust to be seen and yet you'd think the place was a dump.

"There are eight people coming tonight, and I'll not have the house a disgrace," she barked at no one in particular, dashing room to room.

"Eight?" I echoed, swapping my boots for house slippers.

"Yes, eight," she snapped, not breaking her stride as she passed us in the hallway. "Jenkins? Where is Jenkins? Oh, yes not here. Anne," she said, catching sight of Anne who was trying to slip past her downstairs. "See that there is rose water for the ladies. And go check that the syllabub has set. Never mind, I shall do it." She marched downstairs towards the kitchen, Anne meekly following in her wake.

"Go and help Miss Woodforde get dressed," we heard Mrs Woodforde's exasperated voice drift up from below, followed by Anne stumping back up to meet us.

"Twelve dishes for the first course and twelve again for the next," said Mrs Woodforde, emerging from below, a lackey in tow nodding at her various instructions. "Be mindful of the – girls! What are you still dallying here jaws agape? Be off with you." We hurried upstairs to get ready.

"I will not tolerate such laxness. Not in appearances nor behaviour. This evening is to go without incident." Mrs Woodforde's voice faded as she moved through the house, with the odd shrieked phrase making its way up through the timbered floorboards. The last of this was an outraged, "Who ordered a hogshead of ale?" It was only when Anne firmly shut the door of my room that we couldn't hear Mrs Woodforde's orders.

Turning my attention to the night ahead, I tried not to think about the highwayman's poster and who he resembled.

Chapter 14. “Don’t you laugh to hear a girl of fifteen complain of the fatigue of dancing?” *The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1768-1778.*

Tuesday, 10 August. Castle Square, Southampton

Tonight, Darcy and I attend an assembly at The Long Rooms. ‘Tis her society debut, indeed, her coming out ball. I attended her as she dressed, the event taking longer than usual, even with Anne’s careful attention. There was an air of reverent caution as we touched the rich, dark blue material of her new gown, the fine flowing fabric soft in our hands.

Slowly turning on the spot, the folds rustled as the train billowed out.

The effect was mesmerising, blue eyes set within a face bronzed from the sun’s rays.

Anne stepped back, appraising.

“Hmm,” said she, adjusting a fold. “We ought to lighten yer complexion.” She took up a tin of whitening powder from the dresser.

“Hold on,” said Darcy, a fox caught in a gin trap. “What’s that stuff made of? If it’s lead then no thanks. You know that stuff’s poisonous.”

“Lord, save us,” Anne said in exasperation. “It’s rice powder. Besides, d’ye want folk thinking yer some common field-labouring, doxy wench? I’ll hold no truck with yer complaining.”

Reluctantly, she allowed Anne to apply the powder to her face and décolletage. “Not too much,” she said sternly. “Don’t want to sweat it off in the heat.”

“Then a touch o’ rouge for the cheeks,” Anne said, more to herself, applying a small circle of either side of her face. Finally, she coloured her eyebrows with a stick of kohl.

Papa insisted we take a glass of port before we departed – “lend you courage for your first outing” – before we climbed into the carriage to take us to the Long Rooms. James and his friends were to meet us there.

As we made our clattering progress from Castle Square, the fluttering of nerves stirred within. Darcy and I had practiced dancing a hundred times over, but never in our fine, voluminous gowns. Should a disastrous faux pas befall us, Mama could decide Darcy was no fit companion and throw her onto the street. I shuddered at the thought and pulled my wrapper tight about me.

The evening was mild with several people taking the night air. Some were respectably dressed, perhaps attending the ball themselves. A small crowd of well-dressed attendees gathered outside the Long Rooms' when our carriage drew up.

'Tis a scenic locale, the Rooms standing as they do across the old city's medieval walls, water lapping below. We entered the wooden, two-storey structure, its large brick chimney protruding out the front besides a high, vaulted door. This was ornately decorated, through which other elegant guests likewise made their grand entrance. The usher announced our party as we crossed the threshold into the ballroom. Inside, five glass chandeliers lit with blazing candles illuminated the room, their light reflected in the mirrors lining the walls. In a gallery above, music floated down over the excitable hubbub – violins and flutes playing a lively tune. Vines wound their way round colonnades, festooned with white flowers releasing a heady scent.

The glittering effect made me think of a fairy grotto. Darcy's smile was equally as dazzling, white teeth gleaming in the light of thousands of candles.

Mr. Haynes, Master of Ceremonies, whose call at Castle Square two days prior had been dutifully paid, bustled over, all self-importance.

"Mrs Woodforde," said he, bending a courtly knee. "I have been entreated to make an introduction to your party. Would you be so kind as to oblige?"

Pleased with this marked show of attention, Mama gave her assent with an elegant nod. Mr Haynes retreated, returning with a young man whom, affected as it may seem, one could only describe as beautiful. Eyes of liquid bronze shone in the candlelight. He wore no wig, nor had he powdered his fair hair, instead tying it back with a fine black ribbon. Though not tall, perhaps of a height with Darcy, he walked with a marked assurance and fine carriage, the flickering light dancing off his magnificent gilt uniform. The tilt of his head, squared shoulders and straight back lent him half a foot. I took him for a military man, although the coat was dark green with black velvet cuffs and collar instead of the usual army red or navy blue. As he walked, his chin jutted forward confidently, showing off his high cheekbones and well-defined jawline.

"May I present Dr Hamilton, of the Society of Archers," intoned Mr Haynes.

"Your servant, Ma'am," said he, bowing to Mama, giving due defence to the lady of the house. "And you, sir," bowing to Papa in turn.

"Splendid to meet you, Dr Hamilton," said he, bouncing on his heels. "You are well-shod tonight. I daresay as well turned out as my son and his friends, and that is saying something. A fine coat you have, part of the Archers, I take it?"

“Yes sir,” replied Dr Hamilton politely. “It is my honour to be physician to the company.”

“And are you a good shot?” said Mr Woodforde, leaning forward conspiratorially.

“Quite deadly, sir,” replied he in the same tone. “Though I cannot say the same for some of my fellows. Fortunately, I am as effective with needle and thread as bow and arrow.”

“Hah! Very good,” Papa laughed. “A useful fellow to know, eh, m’dear?”

Smiling, Dr Hamilton said, “You are too kind, sir. I hope my skill shall not be needed in the present company.” The doctor led the conversation with the readiness and ease of a well-bred man, talking agreeably of Hampshire, of sporting pursuits in the country and society in the town. Mama spoke of her wish for an aquatic excursion.

“If you do not find me too forward, might I suggest you turn your yachting excursion into a visit to the beautiful ruins at Netley Abbey. There is to be a grand rural fete held within its walls some days hence. The most fashionable of the *ton* are to be there. I intend to go by water and return by carriage. We could make a party of it.”

Everyone was thrilled with the prospect. Another acquaintance laid claim to Dr Hamilton’s attention and with much regret he took his leave.

Mr. Richards and Pinhorne appeared, the former attired very handsomely in a blue brocade waistcoat threaded with gold. On the latter, a fine sheen of sweat was already visible on his pink forehead.

“Miss Woodforde,” said Mr. Richards, taking my hand to kiss. “And Miss de Courcy,” he added, not saluting her but still making a courteous address. “How well you both look.”

“Like a fine brace of pheasants,” said Pinhorne, thinking this some sort of pretty compliment.

“Might I claim you, Miss Woodforde, for the first two dances, as well as the third?” said Mr Richards, smoothing over his friend’s blunder.

“And I for the second?” said Pinhorne, nothing daunted. “And, Miss de Courcy,” he added, with the air of one conferring a great prize. “Might you grant me the third set?”

“Oh,” said Darcy looking horrified at the prospect. “Well, I –”

“We should be delighted,” said I swiftly, foiling any opportunity of refusal.

“Where is James?” asked Mama, hearing little of this discourse.

“In the card room, ma’am,” replied Mr Richards with a slight bow. “We left him at Faro on a winning streak. Shall I attend him?”

“Aye, do, sir,” said Mama warmly. “You are always a good influence on him. I feel the better for knowing you are by.”

Once the gentlemen were gone, Darcy turned a furious glare upon me. “What did you do that for,” she hissed.

“You may recall,” said I, maintaining a placid smile, edging her away from my conversing parents. “Should a lady refuse the offer of a dance when she is free for a set, she is obliged to sit out the rest of the evening? You should not like to find yourself unable to dance at your first ball.”

“Humph,” replied she, ungraciously. “Seems like the better option from where I’m standing.”

“Oh, come come,” said I, undaunted. “I declare you enjoy dancing. I marked your countenance during our lessons.”

“I was probably just laughing at that fake Italian,” said she, a reluctant smile reaching her eyes.

Though enjoying our exchange, it was necessary to leave Darcy when Mr. Richards returned some minutes later to claim me for the first set. He was an elegant dancer and conversation was pleasant, though my enjoyment was somewhat marred, knowing Mr. Pinhorne’s turn followed. Alas, he does not have a light step, to which my feet can attest.

Worse than my discomfort was the knowledge Darcy must dance with him next. The event was unavoidable, yet I hoped she would hold her tongue. If the set was a lively reel, it might necessitate Pinhorne saving his breath for movement rather than speech. However, this was not to be, and with a sinking heart heard the chords of a Minuet begin.

An exceptionally difficult dance even with a competent partner, I would have wished better for Darcy, and winced in sympathy for her feet.

Whenever I had leave to look, my anxious gaze sought Darcy and Mr. Pinhorne all along the line, with no success. At last, I spotted the blue of my friend’s dress dart briefly between a pair and return to the line. To my utter amazement, her face was alight with joy. Surely, Mr. Pinhorne had not elicited such a response? The kindest way I could describe my own dance with him is *challenging*.

Confirming my suspicions, upon the next turn, I observed Mr Pinhorne storming towards the card room in a towering rage.

“Damned doxie,” I distinctly heard him mutter as he passed, not noticing me dancing with Mr. Richards.

“I say, Pinhorne,” called Mr. Richards, but his friend was too far gone to hear.

“What means he by this unaccountable behaviour,” mused Mr. Richards.

“A misunderstanding, I am sure, sir,” said I, with some effort at keeping my countenance.

I leave off for now, journal. I cannot write of what occurred next.

Chapter 15. Winning friends and alienating people

Sophia left to dance with Mr Richards. I didn't think much of her partner -- good looking if that's your sort of thing, but she can do better. Not that I knew what counted in the eighteenth-century marriage market. My own "prospects" weren't exactly sparkling. No parentage to speak of, no country estate, clothes begged and borrowed from friends, somewhat lacking in societal refinements. Good thing I didn't want to get married.

I stopped looking at Sophia dancing with Mr. Richards. It led to ugly thoughts. Instead, I took in the spectacular surroundings.

It really was incredible – far beyond what I could have dreamed. The dancers glided about their partners in perfect unison, all impeccably dressed. Women swished about in fine ball gowns, men sporting well-cut suits or blazing red army regimentals.

Smells assaulted me on sides: from the burning of thousands of candles, to sweating dancers and heavily perfumed ladies.

A hand took mine and kissed it.

"I solicit this hand for the next dance," said the man in a low voice. Dr Hamilton raised his golden eyes to mine, the light catching the hazel rim around his iris.

"Oh," I stammered, trying to remember the etiquette Sophia had drilled into me. "I think I'm already taken."

Smirking, he straightened, eyes level with mine. "I had not thought you one to observe the niceties."

"Is that right?" I said, unable to resist the bait. "Well maybe if you'd gone about things the conventional way, you'd actually know what I might do." I half-heartedly tried to walk past, knowing he'd stop me.

"And should you?" he said, stepping alongside. "Like to know me?"

"I haven't decided yet," I said, smirking right back. To my dismay, the sweaty form of Mr. Pinhorne was making a beeline towards us, come to claim me for my promised dance.

Following my gaze, we watched as Mr. Pinhorne negotiated his way around a small table laid with half-filled glasses, knocking several over.

"Who is this hulking boob?" said Dr Hamilton, eyeing Pinhorne's efforts with amusement.

Stifling a laugh, I said, "Mr. Pinhorne, a friend of the Woodfordes."

“Miss de Courcy,” he gasped, breathing a waft of alcoholic fumes over us. “The time has come.” He held out a damp hand, swaying slightly.

Resigned, I was about to take it when –

“You are mistaken, sir,” said Dr Hamilton, pleasantly. “Miss de Courcy has promised this dance to me.”

I looked at him in surprise, too stunned to contradict him.

“Eh,” said Pinhorne, turning his bleary gaze away from me. “What, man?”

“And you appear to be without your left glove, sir,” the newcomer added, giving Mr. Pinhorne an appraising look. “By all appearances you are in no fit state to dance.”

“Eh,” repeated Pinhorne, now properly taking in his rival and sizing him up. Finding he had the advantage in height and girth, he puffed himself up further. “Impudent pup, what business have you hampering a man’s progress to the floor. Even if it is with a rustic. I’ll have you flogged, by Jupiter.”

The slight Dr Hamilton seemed undaunted by Pinhorne’s ranting. Catching my eye, he winked before taking a step closer to Pinhorne, hardening his gaze. Pinhorne faltered under this steely glare but didn’t give up the fight yet.

“Were you not so young,” he blustered feebly. “I should demand satisfaction.”

“I am older than I look,” replied Dr Hamilton, pleasantly. “The Archers would not permit a youth into their society, much less occupy the role of physician.”

“The Archers?” said Pinhorne uncertainly, squinting in concentration.

“The Society of Archers, yes,” said Dr Hamilton, straightening the cuffs of his coat. “I presume you have heard of us, sir? Though perhaps a *rustic* such as yourself may not?”

“Of course – everyone knows – that is – I mean to say,”

“You did not recognise our uniform. It is quite distinct. Though perhaps the burgundy might have washed away your powers of recollection.”

The master of ceremonies called for the dancers to begin.

“Come, Miss de Courcy,” said my new partner, leading me past the tongue-tied, purpled Pinhorne to the floor. I didn’t dare look back, barely containing my laughter.

Slotting in amongst the cream of Southampton town, I focused on the steps of the complicated dance. It took a few minutes of deep concentration but soon moved naturally with the music and fellow dancers. Looking up from my feet, I caught Dr Hamilton’s amused glance.

“You approach the pursuit with a grave countenance,” he said when we came together.

“Oh,” I said with a laugh. “Just new to it, I guess. Don’t want to mess up and make a fool of myself.”

“I think,” he said conspiratorially, as we revolved around each other. “You acquit yourself quite admirably, Miss de Courcy.”

“Maybe it’s my partner,” I said, meeting his gaze.

“An improvement on your alternative I hope?” he said, eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I’m not sure whether or not to thank you for that,” I said, scanning the room in vain for Mr. Pinhorne. He had vanished into the throng of glittering partygoers. “You’ve probably led me into some huge gaffe. And all for someone I’ve just met.”

“Have not we met before? Perhaps it was in a dream,” he said, giving me a wry smile before moving down the line. So, chat up lines have always been cheesy.

He turned, tossing his head as he did so, triggering a memory. A handsome young man flying past us in the street.

“I think we *have* met, actually,” I said as we came back together. “You nearly ran us over in a... ‘gig’ I think it was.”

“A thousand apologies,” he said, grinning irresistibly. “I hope my good deed seeing off the behemoth outweighed any near collision.”

The dance had ended. People were moving off around us, replaced by new couples joining the floor.

“Until our next,” murmured Dr Hamilton in my ear, closing the gap between us before disappearing into the crowd.

I stood rooted to the spot, unaccountably flustered at the brief yet sudden proximity of a stranger. The eighteenth century was turning me into such a prude.

“Darcy,” I felt a hand take mine. It was Sophia, flushed from the recent dance. A cross Mr. Richards stood behind her.

“Huh?” I said, still in a daze.

“They are beginning the next dance,” said Mr. Richards irritably. “You are prohibiting their progress.”

Couples had formed up around us, tutting or shaking their heads. Sophia pulled me out the way towards her parents.

"You must try the canary, Richards." said Mr. Woodforde jovially, drinking a small glass filled with golden liquid.

"Where is Mr. Pinhorne?" said Mrs Woodforde, her eyes flicking from us before scanning the crowded room. "Was not he engaged to dance the last with Miss de Courcy?"

"He has joined James in the card room," interjected Sophia, flashing me a warning look.

"Poor form to neglect you so, Miss de Courcy," said Mr Woodforde with frank sympathy. "I shall rebuke his unmannerly behaviour."

"No need," I said. "My other partner saw to that already."

"Two beaus so soon?" cried Mr. Woodforde with delight. "A sparkling debut, Miss de Courcy, I commend you."

"Who was this man," said Mrs Woodforde, nose sharp to any whiff of scandal.

"Dr Hamilton," I said casually. "Pinhorne was indisposed so he stepped in."

"Did you catch sight of him, Richards?" said Mr. Woodforde, conjuring up two more glasses of wine and handing him one. "Splendid rig."

"From a distance. His coat was of the correct cut and colour," said Mr Richards reluctantly, swallowing the contents. "If you'll excuse me, I shall join James and Pinhorne in the card room before dinner. Your servant, ma'am." He bowed to Mrs Woodforde, before losing himself in the crowd.

"I hope you did not offend Mr Richards, Sophia," said Mrs Woodforde, turning instantly on her daughter. "He seemed most put out."

"How can you say so, my dear," said Mr Woodforde heartily. "He seemed as lively as ever."

"You notice nothing," snapped Mrs Woodforde. "Anything of consequence escapes your eye."

"Quite true, my dear," said Mr Woodforde, unfazed. "'Tis a wonder I find my way to washbasin each morning. And now, ladies, I think it is time for some sustenance. Let us see what fare Mr. Martin's Rooms can offer."

"You cannot be hungry," said Mrs Woodforde, exasperated.

"Alas, I am cursed with an incurably insatiable appetite. Come, one and all, I insist you join me on this quest for nourishment. Besides, my dear, have not we paid our

subscription? We are owed tea and cake! Even you would not say no to a dish of chocolate?”

Mrs Woodforde was reluctantly led away by her husband, Sophia and I trailing a few paces behind.

“What happened,” said Sophia, as soon as her parents were out of earshot, linking her arm in mine. “Why did Mr. Pinhorne jilt you in such an abominable way?”

Bless Sophia’s loyalty, blaming Pinhorne instead of me. I didn’t answer straight away, enjoying the last moment of her good opinion.

“Darcy?” Sophia prompted, looking concerned. “You can tell me. His slight shall not go unpunished.”

“Well actually,” I sighed. “It wasn’t his fault. Unless you consider losing your glove and getting drunk a crime.” I quickly explained what happened.

By now, we had reached the other side of the room. Small tables were laden with cakes and tea things, servants moving amongst guests offering glasses of wine.

“Port to the left,” said Mr Woodforde jovially, handing us each a small glass.

I took a tentative sip of the ruby coloured liquid. It was sweet and syrupy and tasted very strong, warming me from the inside out.

More people were starting to fill the small space around the refreshments, each new body bringing its own heat and raising the temperature.

“So, is this where we’ll eat dinner?” I asked Sophia.

“No, that will take place in the dining salon,” she replied.

“The dining salon!” said Mr Woodforde, overhearing us. “A capital idea, Sophy. Who can be content with tea and cakes when supper awaits?”

“It is too early, my love,” chided Mrs Woodforde. “You must wait.”

“Aha!” he said, hearing the shouts of the next dance being announced. “Surely there can be no better way to pass the time than on the floor. Come, my dear, allow me.” Ignoring his wife’s protestations, he led her away.

“Oh my god ice cream!”

A group of elderly ladies moved, revealing a table laden with pewter dishes, filled with a cream-coloured desert.

“I don’t believe it,” I said, clutching Sophia’s arm in excitement. “No way you guys have that now!”

“Shall sample some?” asked Sophia, smiling indulgently.

“Seriously though,” I said, steering our way past the crowds towards the table.

“How do you keep it cold enough without freezers?”

“I dare say there is a serviceable icehouse nearby,” she said casually, handing me a dish. Seeing my look of confusion, she added, “Where one houses ice.”

“Yes, I’d worked that out, thanks,” I said, half offended, half amused. “But where do they get the ice from in the first place?”

“Oh, I do not know,” she said, taking a dish herself and moving away from the table. “It varies of course, I could not say where precisely the ice for these –” she toasted our dishes – “came from. But I dare say some nearby lake, given the trouble to transport great quantities of the stuff. Then it is not so difficult to make – salt is key, I understand. But come, the ices will melt before you have yet tasted them!”

I scrutinised the desert in my hand, enjoying the feel of cool metal under warm hands. Decorated with two cut strawberries, the texture was lumpy, the colour closer to yellow than cream. Scooping a small amount onto the delicately carved spoon, I tentatively took a bite.

The citrus tang of lemon zest hit my tongue, overwhelming my pallet. Then as the ice melted, cooling my mouth, I crunched down on crystals, salty and sweet -- a strange but pleasant contrast. After the heat of the ballroom, it was heaven.

Something of my enjoyment must have shown, making Sophia laugh.

“Refreshing, is it not?” she said, her eyes dancing. “Is it to your liking?”

I gave a thumbs up, making an *mmmhmmm* sound.

“What now?” I said thickly, through a mouthful of strawberry and lemon ice.

“I should like to dance again,” said Sophia with a sigh, staring wistfully over the floor. “I am fond of the minuet. But there is no gentleman of my acquaintance near at hand.”

“I wish we could dance together,” I said, scraping the remnants of the ice from the dish. “It was so much fun when we practiced before.”

Just then, I felt a presence at my elbow. Turning I swallowed the whole thing, a surge of pain throbbing my skull.

“Ahhh,” I said, clutching my head.

“Darcy,” said Sophia, moving in close. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Allow me,” came the assured voice of Dr Hamilton. Stepping around Sophia, he took my hand off my forehead and replaced it with his own, gazing intently into my eyes.

"It's nothing," I mumbled, avoiding his intent stare. "Brain freeze."

"A severe ailment, surely," he said, not taking his eyes off me. "But unlikely in this heat. I think you shall live to dance another dance."

"Perhaps you ought to take a seat, Darcy?" said Sophia, still concerned.

"Darcy?" said Dr Hamilton.

"Yes," I said vaguely, unsure whether he was asking my name or agreeing with Sophia. "Yes," I said with more certainty. They guided me into a chair at the edge of the room. Seeing them both hovering awkwardly, I said, "Dr Hamilton, why don't you dance with Sophia – I mean, Miss Woodforde."

"It would be my pleasure, Miss *Sophia* Woodforde," said Dr Hamilton with a rakish grin. "Did I hear you were fond of the minuet?"

"That would depend, sir, on whether or not you were eavesdropping," said Sophia coolly.

I sniggered, unused to seeing a sassy Sophia. "I'll be fine here, Sophia. You should go dance."

"I have no wish to, nor have I been engaged –"

"Allow me the pleasure, Miss Woodforde," said Dr Hamilton, offering his arm.

She hesitated, about to refuse, when I cut in. "I'm sure we spoke about this sort of situation earlier, Sophia. Something about how you can't dance with anyone else once you say no?"

Throwing me an annoyed look, she had no choice but to allow Dr Hamilton lead her away. He did so with a grin, giving me a wink as they passed.

Not long after, Mr and Mrs Woodforde returned, flushed from their efforts on the dancefloor.

"What-ho, Miss de Courcy! All alone? I am agog. 'Twas certain sure you'd have several beaus hanging about your sleeves." He handed me another glass of port.

"Where is Sophia?" said Mrs Woodforde, always sharp to her daughter's unusual movements.

I took a sip before answering. "Dancing," I said, giving her a fake smile. "With Dr Hamilton."

"Oh," she said, unsure what to make of it.

"Ha!" cried Mr Woodforde. "He must be quite the swell, to impress himself so well with you two ladies."

Mrs Woodforde scowled but said nothing. "I think we ought to find James," she said. "You will be well enough remaining here until Sophia returns, I trust." Not waiting for an answer, she dragged her husband away.

I crossed my legs, liking the feel of the silk stockings against my skin. Then, remembering this was considered "unladylike", uncrossed them, resisting the urge to kick my skirts out and create a breeze.

My fidgeting had caught the attention of a couple of ladies sitting nearby. They were beautifully dressed in shimmering gowns, one canary yellow, the other a deep crimson. Both had powdered faces and wigs towering above their heads, decorated with a variety of foliage. The one in yellow elbowed her friend in the ribs and pointed at me. Seeing them look, I toasted them, port making me bold. They bent their heads together, sniggering, and then to my surprise, rose in unison and sauntered over, gliding as though on wheels.

"Port m'dear?" said Crimson in a husky voice, handing me another glass. Her accent had a slight twang of West Country. "Your red fustian was near finished."

"Much obliged M'mm, just what I needed," I said, realising with a kind of faraway amusement I slurred my words.

Canary, who had a beauty spot near the corner of her mouth, smiled her red-painted lips. "All alone, young miss?"

"I know people dotted about. Won't you sit down?" I said, gesturing to the chairs nearby.

They sat, enclosing me within their perfumed finery.

"We thought you was perhaps a friend of Madam Ran," purred Crimson.

"Can't say I know her," I said cheerfully, taking a deep swig of the port. "Friend of yours?"

"Oh certainly," said Canary, the pair chuckling. Not getting the joke, I nevertheless joined in and soon all three of us were laughing heartily. People were edging away. I wasn't bothered, enjoying this new, energetic company.

"I must ask you ladies to leave," interrupted a stern voice, cutting through our laughter.

I looked up, surprised to see three men looming over us. The two outer men looked a little sheepish but the man in the middle had no sympathy.

"We've naught but round dealings here," said Crimson, outraged.

“There’s been some complaints made,” said the middle-man. “If you do not come willingly, I shall use force.”

“Hang about,” I said, brain very slowly clicking into gear. “You can’t chuck us out.”

“I assure you, madam,” he said, turning his cold gaze on me. “I will do so if necessary. So, what is it to be?”

The two ladies rose with stately dignity. I didn’t move. “Well, I’m not going anywhere,” I said, crossing my arms stubbornly.

“Very well,” said the middle-man. He moved faster than I could have imagined, snatching my arm in a vice-like grip and yanking me to my feet. I felt his horrible, tobacco filled breath on my neck as he dragged me across the floor, Crimson and Canary trailing alongside, the two other men a step behind.

“Oi! Get off, let go of me – what do you think you’re doing?”

He ignored my protests, hauling me away, my smooth soled slippers offering no grip on the polished floor. I looked around, desperate to see someone who might vouch for me. Unfortunately, he wasn’t taking me out the main entrance, but towards a back door. It led down a dingy staircase and I had a horrible feeling he was going to throw me down. Again, I tried to shove him off, but he only tightened his grip. I stumbled, the pain in my arm almost making me lose my footing. Pressing his advantage, he pushed me further along.

Reaching the door, I made one last bid for freedom, throwing my weight to the side. With his other arm, he caught me mid-air, taking me completely off my feet. Grabbing the doorframe, I held on for dear life.

“Hold, man!” came a low, furious voice from behind. I couldn’t turn my head so tilted it up, the world turned upside down.

It was Dr Hamilton and Sophia, white with shock.

“Unhand the lady at once,” he said, staring down the man, despite the height distance. Middle-man assessed the situation. As he dithered, I cracked my right elbow into his head. It didn’t do any real damage, but he did drop me. I plopped down, almost toppling down the stairs. Panting, I straightened, adrenaline pumping.

Let me throw *him* down the stairs, see how he likes it.

Dr Hamilton must have seen the rage in my face. Stepping forward, he placed himself between us.

“What are you about, treating Miss de Courcy in such an impudent manner?

Answer at once.”

The middle-man shook his head like a dog ridding itself of water. He blinked, taking in the beautifully dressed, slight young man before him.

“Well, sir,” he blustered, puffing out his chest. “There are certain rules at assemblies. And though a gentleman may be quite at his liberty to keep *certain* company, not so in respectable places amongst people of quality.”

“What do you mean, *certain* company?” I said, flaring up.

Sophia, who apparently had a much better grasp of the situation than me, shot a warning glance. I stared, trying to catch her meaning. She nodded her head pointedly at Crimson, and then Canary.

I shrugged, nonplussed.

“Mr Haynes has decreed no women of ill repute enter a ball where he is Master,” said middle-man, gaining his earlier assurance. “We are on the strictest orders to be on the lookout for such women.” He jabbed the air rudely towards Crimson and Canary, who for their part were looking down demurely, holds folded in front.

“An’ we do know the sort these two are,” piped up the youngest of the three men in a squeaky voice.

“I wonder how you should know that,” said Dr Hamilton coolly.

The youth turned red to the roots of his hair, highlighting his acne scars.

“We’ve seen them plying their tricks before,” growled the middle-man, saving his young colleague further embarrassment. “Our instructions are to turn them out by any means necessary.”

“Was it necessary to impose such violent ill-usage?” interjected Sophia. She blushed furiously when everyone turned to her, darting her eyes down.

“Though it was put to the lady in the most reasonable terms, she would not bestir herself. For my part, I would have had her submit and be led from the Assembly peaceably. Nevertheless, she persisted in her obstinacy.”

“You are mistaken in thinking Miss de Courcy is any such kind of a woman,” said Dr Hamilton. “I cannot speak for these ladies,” he bowed his head respectfully to Crimson and Canary. “But Miss de Courcy is of the highest quality, I assure you.”

The penny finally dropped. “I am *not* a prostitute, you – you absolute turd brain of a fermented omelette –” Shock and fury made me incoherent.

“As I said,” interrupted Dr Hamilton. “She is of the highest quality, and you have paid her great insult. Apologise now and we take this no further.”

The three men shifted uncomfortably. At last, they mumbled something that passed for an apology.

“Be off with you all,” commanded Dr Hamilton, dismissing them with an elegant gesture. “This next country dance is promised to me by Miss de Courcy. Come, ladies, let me escort you back to your place.” He turned his back on them and held out an arm, which I gladly took.

“By your leave, sir,” said middle-man, not quite done. “We cannot allow these ladies to re-join the ball.”

“Your judgement has already proven fallacious with regards to Miss de Courcy,” said Dr Hamilton, hardly deigning to turn his beautiful head. “I would not trust your word for a sixpence.”

The middle-man’s calculating eyes narrowed furiously. Clearly, he intended to make some trouble for us yet.

“Your friend does you credit, Miss de Courcy,” said Canary, stepping forward and taking my free hand in hers. “But we are not worth causing such a row. I commend your fortitude and I thank you, sir, for your gallantry,” she curtseyed to Dr Hamilton. “We will go,” she called to the three men, and with the stateliness of a queen, proceeded out of sight down the stairs alongside her companion.

“Come,” murmured Dr Hamilton, and without a backward glance, led Sophia and me back towards the hubbub of the ball. A few people looked up at our re-entrance but returned to their conversations straightaway. No covert glances or whispered comments. My unceremonious removal had mostly gone unnoticed.

We found the Woodfordes again, the doctor falling into easy conversation with them.

Sophia drew me to one side. “How do you fare, Darcy,” she said, resting her hand lightly on my wrist. “Your spirits must be greatly shaken by what occurred.”

I examined her face, looking for any sign of reproach. There was none, only genuine concern.

“You’re not mad?” I said uncertainly. “Because, you know, I made a scene.”

“Mad?” she said, shocked. “With you, certainly not. On your behalf, quite mad. You were treated most barbarously. When I saw how those bullies pulled you about, I wished most ardently I were a man, that I might challenge the rogues.”

I laughed, touched by her righteous anger. “No need. But now I’m curious, gun or sword?”

She frowned, considering my joke question.

“Pistol, I think,” she said at last. “The pistol is sure to misfire. I am likely to walk away entirely unharmed.”

“Well reasoned,” I said nudging her in the ribs. “I’m sure my honour would be satisfied with that outcome.”

“Miss Woodforde, Miss de Courcy,” said Dr Hamilton, joining our conversation. “You’ll pardon my interruption, but other acquaintances now demand my company. Pray, you will honour me with the next country dance? Our excursion to the ruins is all arranged: it is to be on the morrow after next, tides and weather permitting. There is to be dancing at the fete and I hope you will both honour me as partner.”

“Absolutely,” I said warmly. “It’s the least I can do, given you successfully saw off several annoying men tonight.”

He laughed, pleased at the idea. “I must confess I enjoyed playing the role of valiant champion. There is a distinct air of mischief about you, Miss de Courcy. I think there is never yield dull moment in your company.” He bowed, kissing mine and Sophia’s hand before striding off through the crowd.

“What a fine figure that young man cuts,” said Mrs Woodforde approvingly, watching groups of people part for Dr Hamilton. “He has promised to accompany us to the circulating library tomorrow.”

“I did not know we planned to go, Mama,” said Sophia in surprise. “Are we in need of more books?”

“It is an exercise in being *seen*, Sophia,” replied Mrs Woodforde in an exasperated tone, adjusting the feather in her hair. “Besides, I am surprised at your having any compunction, given how fond you are of reading. We ought to find James,” she added, looking over the heads of people nearby.

“And then we may sup,” said Mr Woodforde eagerly. “Though I daresay he is somewhere in the card room under the table by now.”

It never failed to amaze Mr Woodforde was a vicar. He was so casual about drinking and gambling - activities his son clearly enjoyed.

The music stopped and the casual mill of people around us slowly took form into a mass, converging in a fast stream towards the other side of the room.

“Aha!” said Mr Woodforde, watching their progress. “The party is of my mind. Come ladies, let us follow and be fed.”

We entered another room, smaller than the ballroom but better lit, with sconces around the walls and candelabras on the loaded tables. The shimmering light danced off the polished dishes, creating a magical setting.

It met the approval of those around us, commenting: “A handsomely-lit supper indeed”, “such elegance and profusion” and the over the top, “This is meeting quite in fairy-land!”

Dinner came in a mixture of at least twenty hot and cold dishes. I recognised a few, like, roasted duck, peas, asparagus and beans. But others, I needed Sophia to tell me, muttering behind her fan so Mrs Woodforde wouldn’t notice. Like “green geese” and “land-rails”, de-boned and standing in the centre of transparent jellies, all supported on thin-pillared pedestals.

“Why aren’t you eating much?” I said, noticing Sophia delicately nibble tiny morsels. “Aren’t you hungry?” In contrast, I had tried everything, my stays creaking under the strain.

“There is to be more dancing after supper,” she replied, taking a sip from her glass. “Also, being from home, I do not wish to make use of the Rooms’ pots – I hardly suppose they have a chaise parcee installed hereabouts.”

My fork clattered to the plate.

“More dancing?” I said, horrified. “I thought we’d finished! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you knew,” said Sophia, genuinely surprised. “Why would not there be more dancing after dining?”

“Why *would* there be?” I retorted, unable to give a more reasoned argument. “Couldn’t you have stopped me from eating so much?”

She gave me one of her looks, as if to say, *Like I could*. “It is always your custom to indulge so. I thought nothing out of the ordinary and saw no reason to lesson your enjoyment of the evening.”

“You mean you felt bad I nearly got chucked out,” I said grumpily, unconsciously taking another bite of crayfish pie.

She winced in sympathy, but undaunted said, “Come come. At least there is not to be a Gavotte. The dances will be less formal now – more of your preferred, lively turns.”

I swallowed another huge mouthful. The thought of jumping around with a full stomach didn’t appealing.

“And Dr Hamilton did promise you the next country dance,” she said, methodically placing her cutlery before her. “You seemed to enjoy his company. Nay, I do not go far enough – I would say you are much taken with him.”

I looked at her sharply, unable to read the composed expression on her face.

“He seems cool, yeah,” I said carefully. “Didn’t you like him?”

“Very much so,” she said. “He was most indulgent when questioned about his medicinal practices and has also read Mrs Blackwell’s *Herbal*. I felt we could have talked all night...” She paused, embarrassed to have said so much. “And yet,” she continued thoughtfully, “I feel he is not all he seems. I cannot yet say why, but I feel he is hiding something of import.”

I threw up my hands, exasperated. “You were only talking to him for five minutes, Sophia! You’re hardly going to find out every little thing about someone after dancing with them once.”

“I am merely sharing my early meditations,” she said, offended. “Forgive my presumption in taking you for a confidante.”

A booming voice cut through the awkwardness. Sophia’s brother and his friends had joined us, Mr Woodforde loudly greeting them.

They ranged themselves around us, Mr. Richards sitting down with reserved stateliness, Pinhorne doing so in his usual red-faced, sloppy manner and James carelessly settling next to his father, stretching out his rangy limbs. Mr Woodforde poured more wine, which they all enthusiastically drank. James did so with single-minded determination.

“So, my lad,” said Mr Woodforde jovially, refilling James’ glass. “Have you made a pauper of me yet?”

“Debts are considered fashionable,” replied his son, idly swilling the amber liquid in his glass before swallowing it. “What is this?”

“Orgeat,” replied Mrs Woodforde, looking concerned. “Do not you like it?”

“It is gone bad,” he drawled, turning the glass upside down and letting the last drops spill to the floor.

“I thought as much,” said Mrs Woodforde nodding sanctimoniously. “Did not I say so, Mr Woodforde?”

“You there,” James called. A passing servant stopped, precariously carrying a tray full of empty glasses. “Bring some good claret at once. None of this balderdashed rot.” He picked up the half-empty bottle of orgeat and shoved it into the servant’s overladen arms.

“Poor form, by Jupiter,” called Pinhorne half slumped over the table. “Damn me if I wasn’t drinking that swill.”

“Ever the discerning dilettante,” laughed Mr Woodforde, clapping a large hand on his son’s shoulder. “With a suit such as that, I don’t wonder your taste be so refined.”

“If you are not engaged for the next, Miss Woodforde, I should be honoured if you filled my card,” said Mr Richards, serene in his composed sobriety next to his rowdy friends.

“Oh,” said Sophia taken aback. “It is you who does me the honour, sir. But I should not like to leave my companion unattended; given it is her first ball.”

“Damn me, if the doxy doesn’t find herself a cull at the last,” muttered Pinhorne, in a voice that carried across the table.

Breaking my previous inward pledge not to drink anymore, I took a swig of the orgeat wine. For my part, I thought it tasted quite nice – like orange liqueur.

With an exaggerated effort, rolling his eyes and straightening out of his lounging seat, James looked at his sister, saying, “I will accompany Miss de Courcy to the floor, if it pleases you.”

I was tempted to shove the rest of my jelly into his face but held back, knowing it would upset Sophia.

When it came to the dance, it was hard to judge who was the more reluctant. Throughout, we barely made eye contact, let alone conversation. He was clearly bored. When not looking round the room, he glanced at the gold watch dangling at his hip. Luckily, the active nature of the dance covered any potential awkwardness; most couples were too out of breath to speak, particularly after feasting on such a big meal. Busy

watching my footing, I stamped hard on James' silver buckled shoe. He glared but made no comment.

The next dance was much more fun, being with Dr Hamilton. No sooner had James disappeared than the good doctor appeared at my side.

"How fine a thing it is to see a lady enjoy herself so on the dance floor," he said, smiling. "Notwithstanding her former partner whose brow, at best, can only be described as quizzical."

"Well, I like his sister, so I guess I'll put up with him," I said falling into line opposite Dr Hamilton to complete our square set.

Overall, I think the evening went quite well. Yes, I almost got kicked out, but the important thing to remember is that *I didn't*.

Little did I know, ballroom etiquette would be the least of my worries. The night at Netley changed everything.

Chapter 16.

**“Still Twilight now its Shade advancing throws,
Faint in the West the Day’s last Blush is seen;
On Night’s dim Front the Star of Ev’ning glows,
And gilds with distant Beams the solemn Scenes.”**
‘Netley Abbey: An Elegy’ By George Keate, 1764

Friday 13, August. Castle Square.

Oh, Journal! It is true what the poets say of Netley’s beautiful ruins. Our visit must surely dwell in memory with ever freshening vividness. Not merely due to the remains’ majesty. Such a tale, have I to relate.

Having kept our appointment with Dr Hamilton at the circulating library the day after the ball, Mama invited him to tea. We met on the High Street outside Skelton’s Library and on Dr Hamilton’s annual subscription borrowed our choice volumes. He was kind enough to carry home our parcels: *The Gentleman’s Magazine* for James; *The Hampshire Chronicle* for Papa; Mrs Robinson’s *Celadon and Lydia* for Mama; a guide on Southampton for Darcy. For himself, the latest Medical Periodical from London, which he has promised to lend me as soon as he may. Once home, the final details for our outing were put in place.

It was fortunate James was elsewhere, as he is often peevish when not in charge of our directives. His friends are to make up the party, of course.

The day of the excursion being fine, we hired an open-top carriage to convey us to the quay, rather than taking our own chaise-and-four. I dressed in a stone-coloured cloth, lined with rose colour, and frogs on the same. Darcy wore a pale blue habit borrowed from Mama, most becoming to her colouring, and suitable to our day of varied activity.

Though she has a stout disposition, Darcy seemed uncomfortable when embarking upon the schooner. Indeed, her normally ruddy complexion quite paled as she stepped across the gang board, handed on deck by Dr Hamilton.

“Is something amiss,” said I, springing aboard. Being on the water is as natural to me as being off it, having spent many years in proximity to Portsmouth’s harbour.

Sotto voce Darcy replied, “How safe is this boat?”

I looked mysurprise, unable to answer.

“It’s just, um,” she tugged at the rigging, momentarily holding herself up before landing hard on her feet. “It’s very wooden, isn’t it?”

I laughed, unable to contain my mirth. “Well, should you prefer a pewter vessel that sunk as soon as it berths?”

“No” said she, affecting a sort of nonchalance. “But it suddenly seems a bit more real. I mean, in my time, worst comes to worst and the boat sinks, there are backups to make sure you don’t go down with it. Like lifejackets, but also GPS and a black box to track you. Now, if something happens, you’re screwed.”

I looked about, taking in the smooth, glassy water within the quay, our folded sails rippled by naught but the slightest breeze. “You surprise me, Darcy; I never thought you wanted pluck. We stand on a sturdy vessel scarce troubled by the gentlest of tides, yet you fear the direst outcome.”

“I’m not scared,” said she, piqued. “There’s just less of a general safety net in the eighteenth century. Seems a much higher risk of dying than in my time.”

“Then we must ensure every opportunity is taken to appreciate the world’s beauty around us,” replied I, taking her arm and directing her gaze towards the rapidly receding shoreline. “Mark how the trees dip and dangle their leaves into the water on yonder bank. And see how the curling waves creep with silver as they kiss the shore? The estuary is quite beautiful from this vantage.”

“You know,” she said, giving me one of her sly smiles. “You can be quite the poet when trying to distract me.”

“Is the method proving efficacious?” said I, matching her evasive tone but failing to maintain a grave countenance.

“So far, so good,” said she, returning her gaze to the far-distant shore. “It’s nice seeing so much greenery. No factories or refineries spewing smoke. Now, when I look across the River Itchen, I can see,” she raised a gloved hand, shielding her face from the sun’s glare. “A forest dominating the shore, leading out onto a marshy bank. There are,” she counted, “four men wading out, trying to launch a large rowing boat. Behind them is a farmer leading some pigs along a track.”

“It gives me great pleasure,” said I with a laugh, “Seeing you find wonder in the ordinary and everyday components of life.” We continued to gaze over the water, the varying hues of the sea dancing its glee. The bay was shrouded almost on all sides with verdant fields, hanging woods and pleasure boats like our own. Whenever we passed one such, we all of us waved, the gentlemen throwing up their hats and the ladies their kerchiefs. There was such a pleasant atmosphere of exuberance about, it was hard not to be infected by its joy. James and his friends were larking about dangling over the bowsprit, dipping their hands into the water, or toasting the King’s good health.

“Pray, what house is that yonder,” said Mama, gesturing to a fine Palladian manor set in a richly wooded vale. “Most pleasantly situated.”

“We are almost level with the late Sir Nathaniel Holland’s property,” said Dr Hamilton, joining us. “I once treated his wife, Lady Harriet, and think this is the very prospect of his seat. The prettiest spot, to those who like a water scene.”

“You are fortunate in your patronage,” replied Mama, to which Dr Hamilton acknowledged with a modest bow. He looked remarkably fine, wearing a fashionable blue suit with a white edged, black jappanned hat under which his fair hair was tied in a queue.

“And where are your lodgings, sir,” said Mama, always interested in her newly formed acquaintances. No doubt she would soon enquire into every detail of his background, politeness permitting. I am certain she has already learnt *who his people are*.

“Oh humble, I do assure you, madam. I have taken some rooms on the High Street, over a glover’s shop. However, it has a neat dining room that commands a view of the whole street.”

“I am given to understand you are often from home,” came the expansive voice of Mr Richards, his large shadow looming over us. He had left off his sporting trivialities and stood behind we four overlooking the deck.

“The nature of my profession means I am frequently abroad at all hours,” replied Dr Hamilton, unperturbed by the loaded tone of his interrupter. “Ailments and infirmities make little observance of time.”

“Indeed. And yet I gather you are a great favourite with ladies of fashion -- never missed from an intimate party or ruelle. To have Dr Hamilton amongst one’s guests is quite *au dernier gout*.”

“The heart of man naturally loves variety,” replied Dr Hamilton with marked coolness, refusing to be drawn out.

A shout from Papa drew our attention. By now, we were approaching the docks and after a comfortable landing just below the Fort, we disembarked. Thence, split between two carriages, we travelled up the green lane to the Abbey.

Chattering merrily along the carriage road, the party fell silent upon first sight of the beautiful ruins. Their sublimity struck me dumb, and I admired how the ivy crept over its broken, yet no less grand, arches. From this, the wild spread of foliage descended the Abbey walls and through the gaping, glassless windows shone shafts of glimmering light.

Soon, the carousing shouts and choruses of the fete broke upon us.

Amongst the venerable ruins were military bands of several regiments playing their lively tunes for the amusement of upwards three hundred people, all fashionably

dressed and most taking a cold collation upon the turf. Dr Hamilton leapt down from the carriage with alacrity and handed the ladies out, before leading us to our own picnic. There we feasted comfortably on our noonshine, sharing the happy atmosphere found in all parties where one is in expectation of an enjoyable day.

Seeing some old acquaintances, my parents left the young people to continue the repast of cold shrimp.

Though Dr Hamilton was recognised by many and much in demand, he stayed with our party, merely raising his hat in acknowledgement with a smile whenever his name was called. He had stationed himself near myself and Darcy, devoting himself to our amusement.

“Did you always know you wanted to be a doctor?” Darcy asked Dr Hamilton.

“Yes,” he said simply. “I was not born” – he paused, finding the words. “I would no longer extinguish what was inside of me.”

“For some people, it’s a calling.” Darcy met my eyes with a smile.

“Yes,” said he, a smile likewise playing across his fine features. He gestured to our surroundings. “What think you of the ruins? Do they meet the acclaim and accolades of the poets’ panegyrics?”

“Oh come, by Jupiter,” intruded Pinhorne, his loutish voice piercing our contented group. “Asking for an opinion of a woman? You cannot expect to find a rational answer in that quarter. Come, come, Doctor, I should doubt your manhood if you do.” He chortled, seeking support from his friends. James merely raised a quizzical brow and Mr Richards looked away, embarrassed. Yet, neither spoke their contradiction.

“No one can think more highly of the understanding of women than I do,” said Dr Hamilton, eyes flashing. “It is my experience that nature has endowed them with minds as active and shrewd as any man. Withholding opportunities of education prevents true cultivation of what you term *rational*. I have met many a man who benefitted from the finest education money can render, yet still exhibited foolish absurdities. Indeed, those kinds of layabout fops can hardly expect to hold a dancing partner, much less intelligent conversation.” Pinhorne flushed, furious eyes darting to Darcy before meeting Dr Hamilton’s. His mouth worked, yet he seemed incapable of making any retort.

“Ladies,” said Dr Hamilton. “Would you care to join me for a turn about the turf? I wish to know more of your opinion on this fine monument.” We both consented, rising.

Dr Hamilton did not seem quite ready to speak in his usual amiable tone, instead fixing a stern countenance ahead. We continued several paces, a solemn procession, none making any attempt to break the silence.

Darcy, never one to withhold a desire to vent her feelings, made a typically blunt observation. “What a prick.”

A sound escaped me, one which Mama would certainly call *unladylike*. In an instant, the spell of mutinous ill humour broke, and we all laughed heartily.

“Truly abhorrent,” agreed Dr Hamilton, his whole frame shaking with mirth. “I mean no disrespect, Miss Woodforde, to your family’s choice of acquaintance. Perhaps Mr. Pinhome has many fine qualities hitherto concealed from my mean observations.”

“Your generosity does you credit, Dr Hamilton,” I allowed, propriety preventing me from saying more. I chanced a look Darcy’s way, who smirked, instantly conceiving my true thoughts.

By now, we had moved within the ruin itself, in a space of relative, undisturbed quiet. Before us, stood a great chestnut, dominating the very limits of the sky. It was framed by the weather beaten, yet solid masonry of the ruins.

Disengaging herself from the doctor’s arm, Darcy moved forward and placed a hand on the trunk.

“This won’t be here, one day,” she said in a soft undertone, staring up into its lofty branches.

“I wonder if the monks said the same of their great abbey,” said Dr Hamilton, tracing his fingers along the crumbling stone. “It must have been beyond credit in days of prosperity to picture such a magnificent structure mouldering into fragments; yet, who better than those religious men to consider the transience of tinsel trappings?”

Our philosophical discourse was interrupted by a loud commotion coming from the western end of the old chapel. Dancers and singers, dressed in rustic character, performed a kind of pastoral scene, to the amusement of several onlookers. A band of fire jugglers attempted their own entertainment in the favourable spot. Whether by accident or design, the pretend haymakers’ prop was soon alight, causing chaos.

The two troupes were soon at war, setting to tooth and nail, holding no quarter. No longer amused, the terrified crowd retreated, amid the shouts of the battling players. Not all ran in fear, however. Over the heads of the rushing masses, I spied my brother unmistakably hazarding bets on the outcome of the conflict. Meanwhile, the fire blazed unchecked. The scene was sure to end in catastrophe, were it not for the quick action of Dr Hamilton.

He sprang forward and in one swift motion, took up two abandoned blankets, one in each hand, thrusting them over the flames. Never for a moment did he consider his own safety, working until the blaze was utterly extinguished.

The roar of the crowd turned into applause. The doctor turned, a little baffled at his newly indebted audience. His face broke into a dazzling smile and sweeping off his hat, made an elaborate bow, much to his onlookers' delight.

"Is it too early to begin the dancing?" he called merrily, to which the audience cheered their agreement. The musicians struck up a country air and lines began to form with Dr Hamilton at its head. He glanced over at us and gave a half shrug, before being swept off into the tumult.

"Damn me, if he isn't a trifling nuisance," said Pinhorne, emerging from who knows where and swaggering towards us. "James and I were set to make a fortune on the sorrel-pated maid plumping the fat fire thrower, when all the sport ceased."

"The fun's only just beginning," said Darcy, and, seizing my hand, pulled me into the throng of revellers. The informal beginning made for informal proceedings with Darcy and I finding ourselves partnered with strangers. They seemed a merry pair, more interested in enjoying themselves than making our acquaintance. Consequently, Darcy and I danced together unmolested.

Too soon, perhaps an hour had past, the gaities died down and Darcy and I exited the North Aisle hand in hand. Aware of the prolonged contact, I glanced about, fearing my brother or mother's inevitable censure. To my relief, they were nowhere to be seen and making a show of adjusting my hat, reluctantly released my hand from Darcy's.

"What a row was nearly had," panted Dr Hamilton, striding towards us as we proceeded back to our picnic spot.

"Prevented by your good offices," said I. "With a far more enjoyable outcome. I only wish the dancing had not ended so soon."

"Fear not, Miss Woodforde, there is to be more later as dusk arrives. What a tableau that shall make! I understand the ruins are at their most beautiful by moonlight."

"We'll need some more of those fire throwers," said Darcy idly, plucking a leaf from an ivy bower and shredding it.

"Just so, Miss de Courcy. Though preferably without setting the entire ruins ablaze," answered Dr Hamilton with a smile. "And may I count on you both to partner me at some time or other this evening?"

We both happily assented. Re-joining our party, we found the gentlemen in the middle of making elaborate toasts.

"To the finest enamel snuff-box!" cried James, drawing it out from his pocket and opening it with a practiced flick of his thumb.

“To the hero of the hour,” called Papa, catching sight of us. “We have all heard of your daring deed; you truly are a marvel, Dr Hamilton. I commend your ability in turning disaster into dancing.” Papa drained his glass, my brother and his companions making begrudging nods to the doctor before following suit.

Glad for feminine company once more, and no doubt fatigued by the boisterous activity of the men, Mama soon regaled us with a rambling narrative on the various acquaintances she and Papa had met. I confess, my attention wandered. I wished for the sun to hurry its progress and sink from view. Slowly, very slowly, the shadows lengthened, and the light took on a brilliant, golden hue.

Gasps from onlookers drew our attention to the nave arches, situated to our right. As the sun dipped its last over the ruins, a great beam shone across the revellers. It dazzled in a sudden coruscation before disappearing entirely beneath the stone.

“Wow,” whispered Darcy.

With the sun now set, lanterns lit up all around us, some staked in the earth, others winched on cords up the ruins, trailing down towards the ground. As the sky turned darker, stars appeared, first in isolation and then in eruptions, glittering the heavens above. This was as nothing to the appearance of the moon, however. It rose, casting its silvery beams below, pale at first and then bright.

The ruins, though striking during the day, are merely grey when gilded by the sun. In the moonlight, these seemed to fluctuate between shades of ebony and ivory. The sky was black, framing the tower upon which moonbeams shone white.

With the moon up and the dancing soon to recommence, Dr Hamilton begged leave to claim his right. Darcy jumped up at once, not as I thought, to accept his offer, but to urge me to take the first.

“I want to stretch my legs before getting back into it,” said she, by way of explanation. “I’ll walk over with you then jump in after you’re done.”

Though surprised, I assented and the three of us walked off together.

Dr Hamilton and I took our place in the line and Darcy situated herself within my sight near the outer wall of the Abbey. We held each other’s gaze, until she tilted her head in a gesture that urged me to attend my occupation.

When next I looked up, she was gone.

Chapter 17. Dancing in the moonlight.

Is there anything more annoying than needing a wee in public? I'd been having so much fun day-tripping to Netley, I barely thought about going to the loo until nearly too late. Nearly.

The sun had almost set when I realised how badly I needed to go. Fat chance of finding a port-a-loo. My only choice was for a nature wee in the nearby woods. Assuming Sophia wouldn't approve of such unladylike behaviour – except, didn't she need a wee? Surely, she needed a wee too... No one can hold it in for that long, you'd need a bladder of steel – I gave her the slip whilst she was dancing with Dr H.

There was definitely a bit of canoodling going on in the shadows. Not wanting to interrupt, I scuttled away from sounds of human movement until I found a quiet spot to relieve myself.

Hitching up my millions of skirts, the relief of release washed over me. For the first time I actually felt glad the Georgians didn't bother with underwear. All very well pulling them down -- total nightmare hitching them back up!

Feeling like a different person, I made my way back towards the ruins. Disorientated, I popped out in a different place. The dancing was on the other side of the congested green.

"There you are, Miss de Courcy," said Dr Hamilton with relief, climbing through a crumbling window in the ruins. "I appear to have lost my partner." To his credit, he didn't look offended by the snub, more anxious at this unexplained behaviour.

"You lost Sophia?" I said sharply. "Did you see why she left, what triggered it?"

"I am at a loss," admitted Dr Hamilton, peering over the crowd. "All was amicable, I rounded the set and upon returning to our place found her vanished. What is it?"

Something near the dark recesses of the woods had caught my attention. A group of men huddled together, just outside the glow of the outer lanterns. Had I not been looking so hard for Sophia; I wouldn't have seen them. This was a group that did not want to be noticed.

One of them looked up and a jolt of familiarity surged through me.

I cried out and his gaze lingered for a moment then slid away, almost casually, back to his comrades. They turned with menace. As one, they moved, flowing around the man like a river round a rock, until he disappeared from my sight.

"Come, Miss de Courcy," hissed Dr Hamilton urgently, tugging me away. I remained routed to the spot, refusing to take my eyes off the man's back, even as the others slowly advanced.

"Darcy," he said, this time with more force, practically dragging me towards the light. I craned my neck; the men were fanning out, blending into the crowd. Dr Hamilton pulled me round a huge bonfire and walked briskly on, keeping a firm grip on my arm.

"Have a care," he said, slowing his pace after some distance. "A treacherous crowd by all accounts."

"Do you know them?" I said, no longer resisting the direction he was carrying us.

"Only by reputation," he replied curtly, the lines of his face hardening in the flickering light. "The Sons of Chronos."

"But –" I said, making to turn back.

"Darcy," he said, stopping at last, his face hard. "Hear me. These are dangerous men circulating amongst a crowd in which we cannot find your friend. Has the matter sufficient urgency for your attention?"

"I – yes," I said, ashamed. I had almost forgotten about Sophia. "Come on," I said, now taking him by the arm.

He rolled his eyes but allowed me to lead him, the two of us becoming more frantic as time wore on. We were back to where we had started, seeing nothing more of the ominous men.

Unsure how I was going to explain this to the Woodfordes, I turned around, coming nose to nose with Sophia.

"Darcy!" she exclaimed, gripping my forearms. "Where have you been?"

Relief was overtaken by annoyance. "Where have *I* been? Where have *you* been?"

"It is time we were going," said Dr Hamilton, scanning the crowd. "Miss Woodforde, I am glad you are returned but perhaps it would be prudent not to mention this little adventure to your parents?"

Though taken aback, Sophia agreed and we followed him in silence.

My thoughts felt as loud as the festivity around us, which seemed to increase in both volume and rowdiness.

I know what I saw, but not what it meant.

That man, half hidden under the trees, was familiar to me.

I had wondered if I still remembered his face, or if it was just an image from a film I'd half forgotten.

And yet.

In the dim shadows, I was sure.

It was my dad.

Chapter 18. “In a young lady’s behaviour towards gentlemen, great delicacy is certainly required...” Hester Chapone, *Letters on the improvement of the mind: addressed to a young lady*, 1787

Saturday, 14 August. Castle Square.

“News, my dear, of the most abhorrent kind,” announced my mother, sweeping into the morning room, sunlight spilling on the scene.

We were taking a late breakfast, the previous night ending in a long journey home in a hired chaise. Darcy had descended to find the men already at table, James huddled over his coffee, Papa heartily partaking in a stout meal of buttered eggs and kippers. She grimaced at the fish’s strong odour but managed to make no comment.

“Oh, yes?” replied Papa, only half attending, his attention absorbed in yesterday’s newspaper.

“As you know, I have already been abroad this day, seeing to the necessary affairs of the household. If one wants an adequate supper, one cannot leave such matters to the servants. And though one might have a decent housekeeper, I should not leave it to them to buy the meat or fish –”

“Mother,” interrupted James, removing a hand from his brow. “You had news?”

“Indeed, I do,” she agreed, still in no hurry to impart her information. “I will spare you the unnecessary details and instead cut a long story short.”

I highly respect my mother as a woman of good sense, but this is an undertaking she has never managed to achieve.

“We were fortunate to leave yesterday eve’s festivities when we did, for I chanced to meet Mrs Stibbert of Portswood House who, like me, keeps a close eye on her household affairs and does not idle away the morning.” Here, she paused, throwing a pointed glance at myself and Darcy, though not James, himself only just risen. “She was not at the Abbey last night, but heard the news from her farrier, whose brother is a constable, and a very respectable man by all accounts –”

“Mother,” interrupted James once more, his patience all but spent. “I beg you, finish your tale before my brain turns to pudding.”

“Well,” continued Mama, unperturbed, settling down next to Papa, enjoying her captive audience, for we were all invested now, inclination notwithstanding. “What do you think of this? We left the Abbey at just the right moment, though the hour was late enough. A band of rapparees set upon various carriages returning to the town and stripped them of

all their worldly goods. One man was forcibly removed from his carriage and the ruffians made a football of him. But for a timely rescue, he probably would have been kicked to death.”

“The devil they did!” cried my father, sufficiently moved into laying down the *Hampshire Chronicle*. “And what became of the rascals who attacked him?”

“Little to naught,” replied my mother, making a show of distress, though I noticed her eyes lit up, delighted to have finally engaged her audience. “What is this world coming to?”

“I am going to order a brace of pistols,” declared my brother loudly, taking up Papa’s fallen newspaper and flicking to the advertisements. “There is always something to be got at short notice. Otherwise, I will ride over to Thropden and take back the family blunderbuss.”

“It is above thirty miles!” exclaimed my mother. “And that is only one way.”

“The distance is little if one’s mount is good,” replied James, unconcerned. “And Hotspur is. I could stay the night and see the remaining servants are keeping good order. Though I daresay I’d have poor fare if cook has nothing passable ordered in.”

“You would do better to take the mail coach,” said my father, the corners of his mouth hinting a smile as he took back the paper. “There at least you will have armed guards present ensuring you do not meet the same fate as the poor unfortunate football.”

“Well might they try,” replied James, his chin raised in defiance. “I’d see ‘em off, pistols or no.”

The conversation carried on in the same vein for several minutes, with Mama frantically attempting to convince James to avoid needless danger and Papa encouraging it with ever-increasing elaboration.

Darcy had been in some agitation all morning and come the afternoon I suggested we take a bracing walk on the old city walls.

I attempted to draw her out but found her uncharacteristically silent. She glared at the other ramblers and clicked her tongue irritably as the wind snatched our voices away. The talk of the town seemed all on the villains who had mercilessly robbed the revellers on their way home.

We turned into the more secluded streets of the town, she steering me onto the calm Simnel Street and thence Butcher’s Row.

Said she: “There’s something I need to tell you, someone I thought I saw last night.”

My interest was at once piqued, thinking of the poor people robbed by highwaymen.

“Has it to do with the rapparees? The attack of last night?”

She elaborated no further, merely saying, “Not here.”

By now, we had turned onto the busy High Street where I felt there was little chance of sharing confidences.

“Let us return to Castle Square, Darcy,” said I, avoiding a colourfully dressed couple out for a stroll. “It is too crowded.” She was not attending, eyes darting wildly across up and down the street.

“What are you looking for,” said I, now feeling myself irritated as we were simultaneously forced to avoid a knife grinder loudly declaiming his skills.

“This,” she replied triumphantly stopping in front of a glover’s. I glanced at the shop, then her hands, enclosed in a fine pair of kidskins.

“Are you not satisfied with what we have leant you?” I said, unable to hide my sarcasm. “Surely the need for new articles is none so urgent.”

“Huh?” she said, perplexed. Then, following my gaze to the shop, her mouth formed an O-shape, comprehension dawning.

“We’re not here to shop.”

Before I could question her, a friendly voice hailed us. It was the smiling countenance of Dr Hamilton striding towards us through the crowd.

I raised my own gloved hand before turning sharply to Darcy. “Did you contrive this?” said I in an undertone, not allowing fury to mar my features. Meanwhile, I was keeping one eye on the advancing form of Dr Hamilton, who was himself now navigating a drover and his livestock. “Surely even you must be aware of the impropriety of this? We have left no card, given no warning for our arrival, and are visiting a gentleman of new acquaintance unchaperoned.”

“Just a sudden idea I had,” she said, the old gleam of mischief back. I could say no more, for Dr Hamilton was before us.

“This is a happy coincidence,” said he, reaching us at last and sweeping off his hat and bowing. “I am just returned from my rounds. Have you come to sample Mrs Orlebar’s wares? I have it on good authority they are the best the town has to offer.”

The glover’s shop did indeed look handsome, a fine green awning overhanging its windows, behind which both decorative and practical gloves were visible. Unable to provide a satisfactory answer, I busied myself with my reticule – the coward’s way out.

“We’re here to see you actually,” said Darcy, brightly. “Can we come up?”

For just a moment, the doctor seemed at a loss. His mouth opened in surprise, chin titled, an answer hesitating on his lips. Recovering himself, he shook his head with a laugh.

“How delightfully unorthodox,” said he, returning his hat to his head. “Paying a call with no warning and catching me upon the threshold. You have removed all possibility of claiming I am ‘not at home’. Now, I cannot snub you. If we were not friends, I might accuse you of monstrous rudeness, since politeness dictates the caller must leave the choice to the host. However, I am not sorry to welcome you in.” He smiled his brilliant smile, golden eyes twinkling in the summer light.

Endeavouring to make all the correct responses, I followed him within, Darcy close behind. We entered through a door to the left of the glover’s gilt entrance into a narrow hallway.

“I warn you, my apartments are humble,” said Dr Hamilton, leading us up a dimly lit staircase. He unlocked the door and led us into a passage where he hung up his hat and black greatcoat.

“Do not you keep a servant,” I asked, surprised no one received us.

“I value my privacy,” said he, taking mine and Darcy’s cloak. “Won’t you come through to the dining room? Since we are breaking all conventions, we may as well enjoy the superior view.”

We followed him out of the passage and as we did so, I chanced a look at Darcy. Needless to say, she was not in the least embarrassed at our presence. Despite Dr Hamilton’s good grace, our presence was surely an imposition. Hadn’t he pointedly remarked his desire for privacy?

We entered his apartments proper, and though not humble, I would describe them as *moderate*. The décor was not fashionable and there was no ornate frippery in the furnishings – all was functional, if a little plain. This was surprising given how well-turned-out Dr Hamilton was in his appearance. Even out visiting his patients, he was dressed in a tailored, shiny buttoned, high collared coat, cut away to show tight breeches. The short, double-breasted waistcoat was of crimson silk with brass buttons. I was sure James, ever the dandy, would have admitted his attire “cut a dash”.

“I’m afraid I have nothing to offer you by way of sweet-cakes or the like,” said he, directing us to a settle overlooking the street. “I tend to take my meals out and do not like to run the risk of overindulgence at home. A man alone, you know, cannot be too careful when he has nothing but self-restraint to oppose him. Temptation is always so much harder to resist when the object is before us.”

Darcy cheerfully expounded one of her nonsensical expressions – “no worries” on this occasion.

A ripple of amusement danced across his face, but he made no comment, sweeping into the room’s largest chair.

I noticed with painful appreciation that he did not offer us *any* refreshments – not even a libation. Surely his stock was not so bare? It was clear he intended this to be a short visit, and could I blame him? Arriving at his home in such a manner sent my flesh to crawl in mortification. To distract myself, I peered out through the sash window. The view was indeed fine, commanding a prospect the extended from the Dolphin Inn to the just-visible Bargate. A flag atop the structure fluttered violently in the strong winds.

“So, ladies,” said Dr Hamilton, breaking the silence. “To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure? I intended on calling on your honoured parents at Castle Square tomorrow when time was less pressing, but here you are.”

“Dr Hamilton,” blurted out Darcy, apparently unable to contain herself. “Can we talk about those men we saw last night?”

He narrowed his gaze, fixing deep, liquid eyes on her in a penetrating stare. Viewed thus, his face seemed not handsome, but mesmerising: sharply boned, symmetrical and startlingly expressive.

Darcy returned his look without flinching, an unspoken and earnest plea pressed on every line.

“Put them from your mind, Miss de Courcy,” he answered at last. “I believe we left the ruins at precisely the right moment.”

“Do you mean to say,” said I, glancing from one to the other. “You saw the men who committed last night’s violence?”

“We can’t know it was them,” cried Darcy, standing in her passion.

Dr Hamilton, eyeing her coolly, rose with a measured grace and moved to a sideboard in the room’s corner. “I did not wish to alarm you,” said he, unstopping the decanter and pouring a generous measure of the golden-brown contents into three mismatched glasses. “But I see you are already *au fait* with last night’s events.” I accepted the proffered drink, more out of habit than a wish to partake in any liquor. Its heady scent wafted upwards, overpowering my senses.

Darcy scowled; fists clenched. She did not take the glass from Dr Hamilton, instead staring hard into his face, brows contracted. They were almost of a height.

He sighed, placing her glass on a nearby stand, before returning to his chair. Raising a tentative hand, I touched Darcy's arm and she sank back onto the settle beside me, still gazing earnestly at Dr Hamilton.

"Miss Woodforde's circumspection is correct, I think. That ominous group we saw disperse amongst the crowd are the same who committed robbery and assault on last night's revellers."

"How do you know?"

"I treated one of their victims this morning," answered he in a measured tone. "Severe cranium contusion. Yet he could still recall his assailants with perfectly clarity and it matched my own recollections." He paused, taking a sip. "A nasty business. In any case, what are these men to you?"

Darcy took a deep breath, steeling herself for some kind of resistance. In that moment, I knew the truth. It was the same look she had given me when first she confessed her origin.

"Truly, Darcy?" said I. She met my gaze and perfect understanding passed between us.

"I think so," said she quietly. We sat, staring at each other, the significance of our conjectures weighing heavy. We might have been the only two people in the world.

"Pardon me," said Dr Hamilton, now in a tone of annoyance. "Of what, are you talking?"

I took Darcy's hand, squeezing it lightly. It was time to take Dr Hamilton into our confidence. The truth spilled from her lips as rapid and loquacious as a bubbling brook. Dr Hamilton, all the while incredulous, asked several questions, doubtless making his diagnosis.

When she was done, he fell back into the seat of his chair, gazing blankly at the bottom of his glass. Rising, he filled a bumper and drained it.

"I can't decide whether the port isn't doing its work, or I need something stronger," said he, eyeing the stem at close quarters. "Opiates perhaps."

"Don't give Sophia any ideas," said Darcy, suppressing a grin.

He threw back his head and laughed. Laughed and laughed and laughed. "I knew all was not what it seemed," said he, wiping away tears of mirth. "We three are fellow spirits, I fear."

"So, you believe me?" said Darcy, hopeful. How often life runs in circles.

"Well," said he, unconcerned, refilling his glass. "That is of little consequence. We are none of us what we seem."

“Good enough for me,” said Darcy triumphantly, and taking up her glass, swallowed the entirety of her drink. Choking somewhat, her smile was nevertheless exultant. I took a reluctant sip. It was some very fine port. Medicinal really.

“To business, Miss de Courcy,” said Dr Hamilton, after he had refilled our glasses with the fine amber liquid and sat back down. “You believe your father is of this party of ne’er-do-wells. What do you want of me? I admit, you have my sympathy and a great deal of my interest. However, that is all. I am an indolent man and will not act, unless the outcome has some direct interest towards myself.”

“Nay, sir,” said I, the port making me bolder than my usual wont. “I contest the truth of that. You are a physician. You have taken an oath to do no harm.”

“Quite true,” said he, inclining his head. “But Miss de Courcy is not a patient. And one might argue, intervening in this scheme would cause a great deal of harm.”

“Look, are you going to help us or not,” said Darcy, the port also making free of her tongue.

“I do not know,” said Dr Hamilton, smiling benignly upon us both. “You have not yet asked what you want. Interest is certainly in your favour, however.”

“You said you’d seen those men before,” said Darcy, leaning forward and spilling the final contents of her glass onto the rug in her excitement.

“I did,” conceded the Doctor, taking another sip.

“Can you bring them to me?”

“Absurd.”

“Well, then take me to them,” said Darcy eagerly.

“Impossible,” laughed Dr Hamilton, getting up to refill his glass. The decanter was near empty.

“Why not?” she asked, affronted.

“Ladies cannot enter such places,” said he with a shrug, filling Darcy’s empty glass and topping up mine. “Not that either of you seem to have much compunction on the niceties.”

“What sort of places,” said Darcy, beating me to the question. My head filled with debauched dwellings and society’s lowest inhabitants.

“Coffee houses at best,” said he, smirking at Darcy’s apparent lack of qualms. “The lower rank of pot-house or tavern. At worst, well, I need not say.”

“Will you take us?” said Darcy not in the least perturbed by Dr Hamilton’s ominous emphasis.

“Us,” I said faintly, less eager than my friend.

“Come on, Soph,” said Darcy, shifting to face me. “I can’t do this without you.”

At this proximity, I could distinguish every lash framing her dark blue eyes, now fixed on me with the same earnest plea. Drat her, I can deny nothing she asks of me. Closing my eyes in defeat, I nodded, feeling I had crossed the Rubicon long ago. There was no returning to my life before, regardless of what happened now.

“By your leave,” exclaimed Dr Hamilton, once again finding himself outside our interior communication. “I have agreed to no such excursion, nor have I any intention of doing so.”

“Oh, come on,” said Darcy, a broad grin spreading over her face. “You’re part of this now. You can’t back out.” It was clear she was sure of victory. To me, the desired outcome seemed far less certain.

“I tell you, it cannot be done,” said Dr Hamilton, smiling despite himself. To those who regard her well, Darcy’s gaiety is difficult to resist. “Women are not permitted to even cross the thresholds. You could not take two paces within before finding yourselves swiftly escorted out. Something you are familiar with, as I recall, Miss de Courcy.”

“Surely that particular incident at the Long Rooms merely serves to demonstrate Darcy’s tenacious nature,” said I, unable to help the interjection. “After all, they were *unsuccessful* in escorting her out.”

Dr Hamilton laughed and soon we were all falling about the place in our mirth.

Darcy was the first to recover. “Okay, well fine, we can’t go as ourselves. Why can’t we just dress up as men?”

Dr Hamilton laughter died in an instant. He rose at once, emptied the last of the port into his glass and drained the bumper in one swift motion.

“Was it something I said?” murmured Darcy. Though spoken in an undertone, it nevertheless travelled the room’s length. Dr Hamilton laughed, though it held none of the previous moment’s gaiety. This was all cynicism, all bitterness.

“How flippant you are,” said he, his back to us. “You speak as if such things were of little consequence.”

“I am sure Darcy meant no offence –” I began, but she cut me short, rising to stand beside Dr Hamilton.

She placed a hand on his shoulder, which, to my surprise, he did not throw off. A scorching sensation coursed through me. A painful surge of fire from chest to visage. With trembling hands, I removed my gloves and touched my cheek. It was aflame.

Neither of my companions noticed my sudden alteration, so absolute was their attention to each other.

“Of course, it isn’t easy,” said Darcy, in a tone of such tenderness, it bordered on indecency. “And I’m not saying I get it. At all. I think it must be like being a stranger in your own skin. That’s the closest I can imagine it, anyway. For me, it would only be playing a part for a little while, and I’m doing that all the time anyway.” She gave a hollow laugh before continuing. “But we can’t do it without you. Not a chance. So, will you help us? Please.”

For an age, neither spoke, merely gazing upon one another.

“Damn you,” muttered Dr Hamilton, but with a rueful smile.

“Is that a yes?” asked Darcy.

“I fear so,” said he, rolling his eyes theatrically.

She shrieked and threw herself into his arms. This was too much. I jumped to my feet, putting an immediate stop to the proceedings.

“I’m sorry, I’m just excited,” said Darcy, flushed with her success, allowing herself to be pulled back onto the settle.

Dr Hamilton chuckled, shaking his head. Then, clearing his throat he straightened his stock and affected a stern air.

“As I said, it will not be easy. Aside from the innumerable perils of entering such a society, it is of paramount importance the truth of your appearance is not discovered. I will not deny that as your accomplice in the deception, I too will be at risk should things go awry,” he paused, perhaps already having second thoughts about the whole scheme.

Sensing this, Darcy said at once, “We won’t slip up, Doc. There’s too much riding on this.”

Somewhat taken aback by this new, informal appellation, Dr Hamilton’s serious demeanour cracked. Again, he shook his head and chuckled. With a pang, I thought of how often I had similarly tried to admonish Darcy before falling prey to her strange charm. Darcy’s high spirits are nigh impossible to quash, particularly when one is already disinclined.

“We will need at least two days and two nights to accomplish your goal,” continued Dr Hamilton, now pacing up and down the room. “Even then, it may not be sufficient. How to condense a lifetime into a few short hours? No matter, we shall try. I will instruct you in the manner of dress, behaviour and conversation. Do you have a servant you can trust?”

“Yes - Anne,” said Darcy at once.

“Good,” replied Dr Hamilton. Both had apparently chosen to interpret my snort as a cough. “She will need to come here to help you dress.”

“And how,” said I, withdrawing from my sulky retreat to speak. “Are we to achieve all this subterfuge without my family noticing our absence? Not to mention a missing housemaid to boot. One night would be a push, two impossible.”

“Your parents are sociable beings,” said Dr Hamilton with a shrug. “Surely, they have plans to stay with friends over the coming weeks. If not, we must put the idea in their minds.”

“Sounds like a plan, Doc,” said Darcy, throwing me a disapproving look before turning her brilliant smile to him.

“Since we are to be co-conspirators in this devilish scheme,” said Doctor Hamilton, returning her smile with a genuine warmth that sent my insides roiling. “When in present company, we might follow your lead and forego the formalities. Might I address you as Darcy? And you, Miss Woodforde,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “Is Sophia acceptable? Please do call me George in return. Though if you prefer Doc, I will accept that.”

“I’ll mix it up – keep you guessing,” laughed Darcy.

Yes, how entertaining it all was – quite a lark, indeed. I kept a stony silence. George seemed one informality too far.

With jovial handshaking and promises to develop the plans further when next we met, Dr Hamilton waved us onto the high street.

Darcy bounced alongside me, bestowing smiles on all who passed.

“People are staring,” I hissed, as a group of plain-dressed aldermen did a double take. Darcy waved merrily, striding along undaunted.

“Oh, that’s right,” said she, giving me a sly look. “The conduct lit says girls shouldn’t smile. It’s unladylike.”

“They say no such thing,” I snapped, nerves stretched thin. “They do, however denounce those undistinguished females who can smile alike upon all. You would know that, had you paid even the slightest mind to the content.”

“No no,” said Darcy, maddeningly jolly despite my clear irritation. “There’s a line I remember because it was so hilariously awful. From the Fordyce guy. He said smiling makes you a *‘prostitute to every vagrant eye’*.” She laughed, catching my stunned expression.

“What? I did take some of it in, you know,” she said, winking. Much to my annoyance, I felt the corners of my mouth twitch. I mastered the impulse, steering us up Castle Lane and thence Castle Square.

Fortunately, our extended absence passed off unremarked. Naturally enough, I suppose, Darcy wished only to discuss our future undertaking, striding about the rooms with a wide gait and wondering aloud whether it was convincing. Fearing the sharp ears of the servants, I removed us to my chamber, where Darcy might give vent to her high spirits without risk of anyone overhearing.

“What was the understanding which passed between you and Dr Hamilton.” said I, a little coldly. I was still not quite able to call him by his Christian name.

At once, her air became serious. “It’s not for me to say,” she said simply. “It’s his truth. If he wants to share it, he will, and if not, that’s okay too.”

“But you are within his confidence,” said I, that nameless feeling rising in me once more, scorching my blood. “You know this *truth* of his.”

“Possibly,” she conceded, more evasive than I had ever known her. “Just a vibe I picked up.”

This surprised me. Though Darcy has several commendable qualities, perspicacity is not one I would credit her. She would say no more, no matter how hard I pressed.

The bell rang announcing dinner. We descended and joined my parents, James partaking in Mr Richard’s hospitality that night. I made a passing remark about our happenchance meeting with Dr Hamilton that afternoon. The eyes of one’s acquaintances penetrate far and wide and a rendezvous on so public a place as the High Street would never go unnoticed.

Darcy and I retired early, bidding each other goodnight in the upstairs hallway. There was little of the easy warmth that had grown between us over the past few weeks. It was all chill, more reserved even than our initial meeting. Unable to sleep, I have passed the night’s hours committing these proceedings to paper. Dawn is breaking, illuminating the bay with its pale light.

Chapter 19. Nothing more annoying than the worst person you know being right.

Over the next few days, I scrutinised men; watching how they moved, how they talked, *what* they talked about. Most gave very loud opinions on the state of France.

Views varied from the outraged:

“Tis madness and folly! But that has always marked the conduct of that beggarly set who call themselves the National Assembly!”

“Aye, these low wretches, this collection of dirty fellows, they will crush themselves ere long.”

To the easy-going, hopeful medium:

“The French have undergone their Revolution in a rational and expeditious manner. I wish them all success on the long road.”

And even the downright positive:

“Oppression is destroyed! The *noblesse* are without the power to impoverish and depress peasant or farmer! No generous mind can lament the annihilations of these powers.”

I couldn't decide what to make of it. Obviously, I knew how it all went down – the overall gist being ‘not great’. But the type of people who unknowingly predicted the correct outcome tended to be ignorant morons. Pinhorne, for instance, criticised the Revolution loudest, frequently saying he'd like to “shoot the impudent rascals”. He usually finished with the statement, “it will all go to the Devil, mark me.” Nothing more annoying than the worst person you know being right.

He was round for dinner, along with Mr Richards. Fortunately, the Doc was there so the whole thing was just about bearable.

“My concern in the business,” said Mr Richards in his deep, measured voice. “Is how it will affect commerce. If there is a war, what of the East India ships making the perilous crossing home? Trade depends on smooth sailing, and I fear the navy is not equipped to fight the French *and* defend our interests.”

“Your imagination is very rapid, Richards,” said Mr Woodforde good-humouredly. “We are speaking of Revolution, not war.”

“I fear it is a likely outcome,” replied Mr Richards gravely. “Tis a very terrible thing when the corrupt mass gets the upper hand, in any country. It spreads from even *les*

gens comme il faut, to the meanest brutes, consuming all in its path. To my mind, this is an affected, ridiculous patriotism, justified by those calling themselves the friends of the people.”

“Rot the people,” shouted Pinhorne, who had arrived tipsy and was now drunk. “I wish they were all hanged out of the way, both in France and here too. What business have a set of blackguards to have an opinion about liberty, anyhow?”

Richards said nothing, sipping his wine.

“Damn me if the days don’t pass off tedious dull,” said James, lounging in his seat. “We are in need of some entertainment.

“I may have a remedy to that particular ill,” said Mr Richards, placing his glass with deliberate care on the side table. “I have been given the liberty of inviting you all to a grand party at Townhill Park House Friday sennight, with hospitality extending until the following Monday.”

“Where is this Townhill Park House?” asked Mrs Woodforde, breathless with excitement.

“The estate lies some way out into the countryside,” answered Richards, describing some spot downstream of the River Itchen. “And the finest pile I never saw. It is a grand mansion, built of white malmstock bricks. More magnificent is the Pleasure Ground. I am sure the gaieties will spill outside -- I hear fireworks were ordered for the occasion.”

It all sounded very impressive. However, I knew I wasn’t going. As the group chatted about the party, Dr Hamilton caught my eye and given a very slight nod. This was our chance. I followed his lead and said nothing, nodding and smiling where appropriate.

“I hope you will join us, Dr Hamilton?” said Mr Richards, a little stiffly. None of James’ friends had taken to the Doc, tolerating him when in company. “All the cream of Southampton society will be there.”

“Alas, much as it would give me great pleasure, I cannot. The dictates of my profession have engaged me to stay in town that night. Rest assured I have already passed on my apologies to the host. He is a fellow member of the Archers and well known to me.”

Mr Richards’ right hand ever so slightly tensed on his glass. His face, however, remained blandly passive. “A pity,” was all he said, before turning to speak to Sophia, sitting next to him.

“Well, Darcy?” whispered Dr Hamilton, an hour later as we stood in the hallway, waiting for Harry to fetch his hat and coat. “This is our best chance. I fear will not get such an opportunity again.”

I glanced over my shoulder to check there was no one within earshot. “Definitely a goer,” I said, turning back to face him. “But, Doc, how are Sophia and I supposed to get out of the party? Should I have said right away I didn’t want to go?”

“Nay, you were right to keep your silence,” he said, glancing to the parlour door, where James’ friends were slow to leave. “You and Sophia must make all the appearance of attending. And then, the night before the party, one of you will be struck down with a severe toothache. I will prescribe, amongst other quack treatments, bed rest for two nights with a constant companion, thus excluding you both from the frivolities.”

“I shall be glad of some amusement at last,” called James over his shoulder as he led his friends into the hallway.

I quickly stepped away from Dr Hamilton, widening the gap between our bodies, fading into the wall behind.

“By Jupiter, you’re right,” boomed Pinhorne just behind him. “A nice bit of sport should be on the cards as well, eh Richards?” he elbowed his friend in the ribs, who grimaced but made no comment.

“Good day, Miss de Courcy,” said Dr Hamilton, touching his now returned hat. “Gentleman,” he added, bowing to the three men before escaping onto the street.

“Queer fellow, ent he?” said Pinhorne, in what I supposed was his version of a whisper. “Can’t make him out at all. Dresses like a swell but lives like a pauper, so they say.”

“That’s not all they say about him,” said Richards, calmly impassive. My heart raced. Was it possible more people had guessed George’s secret?

“Oh yes,” said James, giving a malicious chuckle. “Wives are never so secure after he has treated them. His reputation as a medical man is not so great it can quash those particular rumours.”

Pinhorne chortled. “Have a care when lingering in doorways with that one, ma’am. It may just sully your good, well, not *name* anyway.” Laughing spitefully, he swaggered out the door, clacking his cane loudly on the cobblestones.

“Miss de Courcy,” sneered Richards, following him out.

“I care not what you do or who you meet,” said James, staring down at me from his gangling height. “You are at liberty to involve yourself with whomsoever you please. But hear me well,” he took half a step towards me, his presence seeming to fill my entire vision. “*Do not* drag my sister into any scheme of yours that might lead to her ruin. Father is too soft to tell you this, so it is beholden on me to intercede. If I hear one word that discredits Sophia, I will hold you responsible and personally see to it that you are thrown from this house, never to darken its door again.”

He turned on his heel and stalked back into the parlour, slamming the door behind him.

Despite my best effort to laugh off the encounter, his words sent a chill through my body. Was he right? Was I dragging Sophia into a life-ruining situation? Perceptions were so different here; it was hard to get my head around. All anyone cared about was how things looked, instead of how they felt.

And how did Sophia feel? She was definitely avoiding being alone with me. She had been distant and aloof since our visit to Dr Hamilton’s rooms. Was she having second thoughts about the plan? If so, we had to have it out. This wasn’t something you could half-arse.

I marched upstairs to her room, flinging the door open in my wake. Writing at her desk, she shoved the contents under a pile of papers.

Looking like a rabbit in headlights, she blinked, eyes wide.

“Darcy! You startled me,” she said, standing up and brushing down her skirts in attempt to regain her composure. “How may I help you?”

I laughed, but there was no joy in it. “*How may I help you?*” I mimicked, closing the door and standing square on, hands on hips. “You can stop being weird for a start. Why all this cold formality? I’m surprised you haven’t gone back to calling me ‘Miss de Courcy’.”

A flush crept over her skin and she turned away, facing the window. Speaking with her back to me, she said, “Excuse me, if my conduct has appeared indifferent of late. Be rest assured I meant no offence.”

I threw my hands in the air out of sheer exasperation. “What does that even mean? If you’ve got a problem with me, then out with it.”

She turned back round, looking hurt. Taking a tentative step forward, she said, “Darcy, I – it is not so simple, I hardly know myself...”

“So, there is something?” I said, striding up to her. She flinched and drew back. “I knew it,” I said, more quietly, watching her retreat with bitterness. “Ever since we got back from the Doc’s place you’ve been different - pulling away.”

“Oh Dr Hamilton,” she said with disdain, so unlike her normal self. “Such an honourable man! So willing to help us. And yet, what do we truly know of him? His character, his conduct? What has he done that demonstrates merit?”

“Where’s all this coming from?” I said, taken aback. “You liked him fine last week.”

“The situation has changed,” she said carefully, fiddling with the lace on her sleeve. “New intelligence has come to light from a well-meaning friend that—”

“Ugh,” I said, too disgusted to offer any more nuanced argument.

“Consider, Darcy!” she said, moving within touching distance. “We are putting ourselves within his power with nothing to aid us but blind trust! Are you so sure of your own judgment? For my part, I am not.”

I felt as though she’d slapped me. Fury boiled through me, which I damped down. “I trust him,” I said through tight lips, jaw clenched. “It just comes down to whether you trust me. Since you clearly don’t, then fine. You’re off the hook. I’ll do this without you.” I made to go, one hand already on the doorknob. Sophia stopped me, taking hold of my wrist.

“Stay,” she said, her voice hoarse. I turned round, our faces inches apart. Our eyes met for the briefest of moments but, again, she retreated. “Forgive me, Darcy, I did not mean – Only that your judgement might be impaired... However,” she added quickly, seeing me about to flare up. “I cannot let you embark on this scheme alone: it is too important to you. I want to help you find answers and I will.” She lifted her chin defiantly, giving me her most determined look.

Though still angry, I couldn’t help but appreciate her loyalty. She was willing to put herself out there, risk everything that mattered, and all for my sake.

Somewhat mollified, I nodded, moving past her to sit on the bed. She slowly followed, careful to keep her distance.

“He has a plan,” I said, not looking at her. “George, I mean. Do you want to hear it?”

Her smile was pained but she made no further objections. “Please.”

“It’s going down next week. We’re skipping that party.”

She looked alarmed but said nothing, waiting for me to finish.

“We act like we’re going but then the day before, one of us will come down with a toothache. Shouldn’t be too hard to fake, I can do it, if you like. The Doc will get called in to take a look, but what he’ll actually be doing is bringing us clothes to wear and talk us through what we have to do. Then, he’ll order two days bedrest, meaning we’ll miss the party. When everyone else has gone, that’s when we’ll sneak out, dressed as men.”

I finished, looking up at her in triumph. “Good, eh?”

“I see,” she said slowly, twisting her fingers in her lap. “All in all, I think it a passable stratagem; however, I think it should be I who has the toothache, not you.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging “Why?”

“Well, I fear if it were you who suffered an indisposition, Mama would still insist on my going to Townhill Park House. Such a fine opportunity to be on the catch is rare and she would never allow me to miss it for your sake alone. In fact, I think she would be overjoyed at the prospect. One less, comely young lady distracting potential suitors can only be for the good, I dare say.”

I scoffed, not at all offended. “Yeah, I can imagine. If only she knew what a liability I actually am. Although she needn’t worry about me stealing the limelight from you. I’m not exactly anyone’s type around here.”

I expected Sophia to laugh but she didn’t, the pained expression returning to her face.

“Let us retire,” she said at last, standing. “The days has been trying on my nerves. Sleep will help”

“Alright,” I said, getting to my feet. The atmosphere between us was better but still chilly. Reaching the door, I paused, turning back to face her. “And you’re sure you’re okay about all this? You can still back out if you want.”

She gave me a long, steady look. “I have given you my word, Darcy. We will tread this path together, no matter the outcome.”

**Chapter 20. ‘Little trefoil leaves, primose leaves and yarrow
pounded, made into a little pellet and put to the tooth or tied up, in
muslin and held between the teeth.’ A remedy for tooth-ache, found
in a letter from Mary Delany, 8 Aug. 1758**

Thursday, 27 August. Castle Square.

Mama’s excitement over our forthcoming engagement is painful to witness. The week passed in busy preparation, with endless discussions of who we might meet, what our style of address ought to be, whether there was sufficient time to alter our gowns, the manner of our arrival and how to ensure it be in a suitably fashionable style. Meanwhile I sat like patience on a monument, all false smiles.

Last Sunday’s service at All Saint’s Church was particularly difficult to endure. Being married to a clergyman, regularly attending church is a duty never shirked by my mother. However, on the Sunday following Mr. Richards invitation, she considered our attendance an absolute necessity.

Services at All Saint’s Church are as much an exercise in socialising as worship, being the most fashionable church in the town. One goes to be *seen* and share the news, the most significant topic being the extravagant party at Townhill Park House.

“What is it all in aid of,” asked my father to an assembled crowd of acquaintances, gathered in the square outside the church. “Does anyone know?”

“I hear it is to celebrate the recovered health of Farmer George,” said one man, a General by his scarlet coat and gleaming brocade. “Though the time has somewhat passed, given his restoration to health occurred April last.” He guffawed, gold braid glinting in the morning’s light.

“Ah, well, one can never be too punctilious when celebrating the health of our monarch,” replied Papa, laughing as well.

“Quite so,” the General agreed. “I am glad for any continuance of stability in the land. Why, only yesterday I received the most shocking intelligence from France...”

The talk naturally turned to the Revolution. I should have liked to hear more but my attention was called away by Mama wanting to introduce me to a Mrs Wallop and her daughter, both of whom had also been invited to Townhill Park House.

“Of course, there will be dancing,” agreed Mama, green eyes flashing in the sun. “Alas, Sophia’s figure is none too graceful,” she added with a sad shake of her head. “But what she lacks in deportment she will surely make up in dress. We have a fine gown made.”

I blushed, feeling the shame of it.

What a contrast the pair of us must make to the casual observer's eye. Mama, elegant, graceful and tall, beautifully dressed, though not extravagant. The new pierrot she wore fit her form perfectly, the jacket of green and yellow striped silk with short tails drawing attention to her slim figure.

For myself – short and swarthy by comparison – I felt out of place merely standing beside her.

“Look at that bird, Sophia,” said Darcy, in a transparent attempt to cheer me. We watched the kite's progress as it soared above the church's Grecian temple frontage, settling upon the dome.

I smiled at Darcy, hoping my looks conveyed gratitude.

As the party drew nearer, Mama was often from the house, making the necessary arrangements for an overnight stay abroad. This absence from Castle Square made meetings with Dr Hamilton easy to contrive.

Too often, I had to quash my natural inclination towards him. I have not forgotten what Mr Richards said of his character and worry over Darcy's apparent preference to him. Such a man is not the marrying kind.

Yet, Dr Hamilton is generous with his knowledge and speaks as though we were equals. It is a rare phenomenon finding a medical man willing to share his insights with a young lady. Having learnt of my own interest in the cures found in nature's botanicals, he was eager to know my thoughts on a case he had recently encountered.

“I have it!” cried he, one afternoon as the three of us were walking along the city walls, discussing the identities we were to assume. “You, Sophia, are to be a medical acquaintance of mine! I fear your looks are too young for anyone to credit your already possessing an MD... perhaps an apprentice or trainee? Your knowledge is such that I believe the ploy would be convincing.”

To my consternation, his warm praise sent a flush of heat across my complexion. I even allowed myself a small smile.

“Great idea, Doc,” said Darcy, smiling at him, her ungloved hand squeezing his arm in appreciation. This served to banish my pleasure quicker than any rebuke and I maintained a stony silence as the pair prattled on with their plans.

“What about names?” said Darcy, unlinking her arm from Doctor Hamilton to better gaze over the city walls. “We'll need proper fake identities, won't we?”

“Quite so,” said Dr Hamilton, pausing in his ramble to likewise peer across the bay. “It would not do to go by de Courcy or Woodforde. Not when the names are known by so many in the town. “What are your suggestions?”

“Well,” said Darcy taking a seat on the walls and kicking up her legs so her gown flapped, displaying an uncommon amount of calf in the motion. Though fearful for my gown, I swiftly sat down beside her, the folds of her skirts pinned under me.

“I thought something suitably eighteenth-century-y,” continued Darcy, blithely unaware of my intervention. “Something frilly, like Peregrine Talbot-Ponsonby the third, or Lord Horatio Chamberpottingham. But that’s probably a bit much. So, I’ll go for John Smith. What about you, Soph?” said she, an uncouth elbow finding its way into my ribs. “What do you want your fake name to be?”

“Your *nom de guerre*,” agreed Dr Hamilton.

“I prefer *nom de plume*, sir, since we are not going to war,” I answered coolly.

“A pen name, is it?” said he, eyes sparkling with amusement. “Do you intend to write an account of our adventures when all is done?”

“Oh, Sophia’s *always* writing something,” said Darcy with her characteristic exaggeration. “Never lets me look though.”

“Nor shall I,” said I with some heat. “My thoughts are my own, not to be spilled across the drawing room for another’s amusement.”

Dearest journal, my mortification would be to the highest degree if any, but my own eyes perused your pages.

“Still, you need a name,” said Darcy, leaving off her raillery and returning to the topic in hand. “To go with your backstory.”

“I am a great admirer of Dr Cullen’s work,” said I, thinking on the book recently borrowed from the circulating library. “As I am to ape the profession for a night, perhaps I might assume his Christian name. I do not wish for people to suppose we are related so a different surname might be necessary.”

“What about Blackwell?” said Darcy, tapping her chin meditatively. “You’re always reading her book.”

“Capital!” cried Dr Hamilton, offering his hand to Darcy, who took it with alacrity. “In the meantime, I shall procure and alter the garments needed for such a venture. The time is nearly upon us! Are you ready to play your part, Miss Sophia?” His latest mode of address was not lost on me. Being a man in possession of deep penetration, he had perceived my inability to call him ‘George’.

“I think I can manage to affect a mere toothache,” said I, not taking his free arm but walking alongside the pair. “Can you affect concern for the patient, however?”

He gave me a quizzical look, perhaps wondering whether to take my words for a slight.

Most of the conversation occurred between Darcy and Dr Hamilton as we returned to Castle Square, relating her recent conversation with Anne, now within the bond of trust that knew Darcy’s future origins.

“On the whole, she took it pretty well,” finished Darcy. “Initially thought I was a witch, but Soph helped convince her otherwise.”

“And you are certain she is capable of secreting you out of the house without the other servants becoming wise?” asked Dr Hamilton.

“Oh sure,” said Darcy, pausing under the house’s portico. “She can handle it.”

Touching his hat, Dr Hamilton bid us adieu, pleading his need to attend patients that afternoon.

“But of course,” said he with a wry eyebrow raised. “I shall be back again soon, called upon the unhappy business of your tooth, Miss Sophia. Do I perceive it already giving you trouble? I fear even tonight’s supper will be too painful a pursuit.” With a quirk of his lips, he departed.

Supper that night was indeed an ordeal. Mr Richards and Pinhorne were both present, so naturally talk centred on the upcoming gaiety. True to Dr Hamilton’s hint, I hardly touched my food; certain nothing short of such a drastic variation could convince Mama anything was amiss.

Her sharp eyes caught all, tutting and shaking her head. At her pointed looks, I obliged by taking small morsels of food, accompanying these with pained intakes of breath.

During the second course, I felt it necessary to enlarge the pantomime, varying between leaning my cheek on my hand or rubbing my jaw.

“Good heavens, Sophia,” cried Mama exasperated, placing down her knife with force. “Whatever is the matter? I cannot hear myself think over the sound of your sighing, let alone Mr Richards’ anecdote on the nabobs.”

“Forgive me, Mama,” said I, placing my hands on my lap, lest the party see them tremble. “I feel a little indisposed this evening. My tooth gives me great pain.”

“Indeed,” replied Mama, eyes flashing but unable to vent her spleen. “Then I suggest you retire early. It may yet pass with rest.”

With many wishes of good health from the assembled company, I departed. The following morning, Mama herself entered my chamber to inquire after the state of my

health. I gave a very good account of the wretched night I had passed – that the pain I suffered prevented even closing my eyes.

“I must say, Sophia, you do not look well at all well,” said she, and though the substance of her words was rather offensive, given my good health, she said it in softened tones of concern. Summoning her own maid and with the assistance of the housekeeper, concocted a remedy from one of the household receipt books.

I would not let any of them near me, claiming the pain was too absolute.

In my pretended state, no cure could be found, no remedy able to alleviate the pain. Mama’s concern mingled with vexation.

“To be sure, there was never anything so shocking,” said she, finding no change for the better the following day. “To come at such a time too! I declare, it is impossible for you to miss such an engagement as we have at Townhill Park House; and yet, poor Sophia, I declare it is quite shocking to look at you. But I won’t allow you to have it out, there is nothing I dread so much. Your teeth are too good, I would not have one of yours drawn for anything. Not even if you suffered under pain of the greatest tortures in the world!”

This offered little enough comfort and I silently thanked heaven my pain was a mere falsehood. There being no dentists in the town with a reputation that satisfied, Mama summoned Dr Hamilton. His countenance was grave as he entered my chamber, performing his part remarkably well. Mama strode in behind him, followed by Darcy.

“Well, Doctor Hamilton?” said she, rising from the chair after he had finished his quack examination.

“I must own, Mrs Woodforde, it is bad, very bad. The inflammation has reached the bone and I fear extraction is inevitable.”

Mama let out a plaintive wail, sinking back into the chair.

“Unless,” said he, raising a quelling forefinger. “You follow these instructions to the letter. First, Miss Woodforde is not to leave this bedchamber for several days, four at least. I am afraid,” said he in a raised voice, anticipating my mother’s objection. “The Ball on Saturday is quite out of the question. Although disappointing, this must come as no surprise, Mrs Woodforde.”

“Indeed, sir,” said she peevishly. “Though I wish there were no such things as teeth in the world; they are nothing but plagues to one.”

“Particularly the one suffering with the toothache, ma’am,” said he, closing his medical bag with a decisive snap. “I will write up my receipt and take it to the apothecary myself,” he waved away my mother’s thanks with an airy hand. “Think nothing of it, there is little I would not do for my friends. Let me also say, it is essential Miss Woodforde only

eat foods that are neither too warm nor too cold. Soups and broths are best, giving the least amount of trouble to the gums. Such a trial may have a long-lasting affect if we do not exercise caution; therefore, I say in the strongest terms possible, she must have nothing to agitate her mind during this period. No visitors whatsoever, barring the maid delivering necessary victuals. However, she ought to have a companion at all times soothing her unquietened mind and amusing the spirits when low.”

Now came the moment of dread. Would Mama suggest herself as companion and ruin the scheme before it begun?

“Aye to be sure,” said Mama, heaving a great sigh. “’Tis most vexing. I assure you, sir, my sorrow is quite violent. And though of course Sophia would naturally wish for me to stay and nurse her, I fear I cannot slight Mr Richards in such a way, generous as he was in inviting me to this great party. No, it will not do. If not I, then...”

Her voice trailed off, her glance flicking to Darcy before guiltily looking away. Though Mama has never warmed to Darcy, even she saw the injustice in depriving a young lady of a night of gaiety, merely to nurse her own daughter.

“I don’t mind, Mrs Woodforde,” said Darcy at once. “It’s the least I can do. I wouldn’t have any fun without Sophia anyway.

“Oh, Miss de Courcy, you are too good,” said she, in the warmest tones hitherto addressed to her. “How glad I am, *now*, that you came upon us.”

Dr Hamilton cleared his throat and I hoped with sincerity Darcy had not caught the implication held in the word “now”.

He was prevailed upon to take a glass of canary, and bowing to me, followed Mama out.

And thus, it follows – *ita sequitur*. Events are in motion; the thing cannot be stopped. I only wish there were more certainties in the case. The risks are so high and chance of reward so small. I can little conceive the dire consequences if we are discovered.

Chapter 21. Seeing the seedy side of Southampton

So, everyone bought the story. Smug Mr. Richards looked disappointed but what can you do? He'd have to find some other luckless girl to dance with.

Dr Hamilton had been round twice to 'see his patient'. Each time he snuck in clothes for our disguises. Summoning Anne up to Sophia's bedroom, he took each item out, telling her how to properly dress a gentleman.

"Though," he said, carefully unfolding a linen shirt. "I have not fitted you in the true style of a gentleman. You see, nothing so fine as silk ruffles," he held up the shirt for us to inspect. "I thought it prudent not to equip you in fine articles, lest you become the prey of those we seek. We are hoping to catch a hunter, after all."

"Oi," I said, half-annoyed. "That's my dad you're maybe talking about. We don't know for sure he's a highwayman."

"Well, with luck we shall soon have some answers," said Sophia, looking up from her diary. "And with greater luck the attempt shall be successful on our first night of subterfuge. I do not think it likely our absence will go unnoticed two nights in a row."

"Ave no fear on that score, Miss," said Anne, placing Dr Hamilton's shirt in a trunk under the bed. "With the master and mistress away, downstairs will be well into their cups by sundown."

Sophia pursed her lips but said nothing. I busied myself with the breeches, hiding my grin.

"In seven bells, ladies," said the Doc, collecting his things. "Go before they have lit the lamps and keep to the back streets if you can."

"And we're meeting at your place?" I said, seeing him to the door. Sophia had returned her attention to her diary.

"Indeed," he said. "For the final touches." He gave my hand a quick, reassuring squeeze and left.

Anne and I ate heartily that night, but Sophia hardly touched her soup. Her hands feverishly flicked through her diary or fidgeted with the bedding. I don't know why *she* was nervous; it wasn't her long-lost Dad she was potentially about to find.

"It's time," I said, glancing at the clock on the mantle. Sophia and I quickly stripped down to our chemises, shyly facing away from each other as Anne yanked them off. Dr Hamilton's shirts drowned us but apparently were supposed to be that big. Their

full, voluminous sleeves made us appear broader than we were. Since this was apparently an age without underwear, we tied the shirrtails underneath instead.

Next, we pulled on white, linen stockings reaching halfway up our thighs. Over these went knee breeches, coming up past our belly buttons, Sophia wearing dark brown, me in tan. Anne tightened the lacing at the back and helped us with the fastening at the front, both of us struggling with the flaps that served as the fly equivalent. Popping our collars, Anne wound white bands around our necks with gathered linen. George had called this a stock, again apologising for not giving us silk versions.

Whilst Anne adjusted Sophia's stock, I pulled on a bottle-green waistcoat with a high collar and half a dozen brass buttons. I couldn't help but draw comparisons with the first time I'd put on the Georgian gown and wondered what Mrs Jenkins would say if she could see me now. Smiling to myself, it took a moment to realise the problem.

"'Tis far too large," muttered Anne, shaking her head.

"What is?" said Sophia, crossing her arms self-consciously. "What's the matter?"

"Yer bosom!" exclaimed Anne before adding sheepishly, "Miss."

Unfortunately, the wine-coloured waistcoat fitted her form too well. Every curve was visible, clearly marking her out as a girl.

"They – you look good though," I said, clearing my throat. The back of my neck felt very warm.

"We'll 'ave ter bind 'em," said Anne decisively, feverishly rifling through drawers. "I'll warrant there's some bandages we can use."

"Wait," I said, wrenching my eyes from Sophia. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. Unsafe binding can be really dangerous." They both looked at me blankly. "Do it too tightly and you can compress your lungs or even break your ribs!"

"Then we won't bind too tightly," said Sophia matter-of-factly, unfastening the buttons on her waistcoat and shrugging it off.

"Hold on," I said, alarmed at the ragged length of material Anne was unwinding. "Why don't you just wear your stays higher up? It'll do vaguely the same job of flattening you down but at least it'll spread out the pressure." They paused, considering.

"There is a rumour the Prince of Wales wears form-fitting stays," said Sophia thoughtfully.

“Plus,” I said, thinking about all the men I had met in the eighteenth century. “Guys look quite girly now, anyway! With broad chests, cinched waists and long hair. Clothes are so gendered, the fact you’re wearing breeches should be enough.”

Sophia quickly redressed, allowing Anne to tie her stays tighter than usual. It still looked uncomfortable -- I’d never been so grateful I was flat-chested.

Once wearing our shirts, breeches, waistcoat and stocks, Anne tied our cravats, winding them twice around the neck and in a bow at the front. Sophia was borrowing plain shoes from one of the younger footmen, helpfully nicked by Anne. Since it was one of those rare occasions when I could actually wear my own riding boots, I slipped these on, glad to feel connected to my own time.

Dressed as men, our hair was less high maintenance and only took a few moments to style, tied back in low ponytails with black ribbons.

The evening being mild, we wore short tailcoats rather than full-length great coats, double breasted, and with our shirt cuffs pulled past the sleeves. Dark tricorne hats completed the look, pulled low over our faces.

“Handsome pair of gents do ‘ee make,” said Anne, satisfied with her work. “Reckon you’d humbug any amusers coming yer way.”

“I rather like the ensemble,” said Sophia, pointing her right toe and flexing her calf. “And this is the common style for women, whence you hail, Darcy?”

“Not quite,” I said, grinning at her. “Close enough.”

Anne left to check the coast was clear, leaving me and Sophia alone. Our eyes met then darted away.

“Nice night for it,” I said, gesturing to the brilliant crimson sun setting over the bay. Seriously? Chitchat about the weather? I cleared my throat and shuffled my feet, unsure why I felt so embarrassed – nerves maybe?

Anne opened the door a crack and beckoned us out. We crept along the darkened hallway and down the staircase. Drunken chorus floated up from the basement below, the rest of the servants enjoying their night off. In a stroke of genius, Dr Hamilton had donated a hogshead of porter and from the sounds of it, they were getting stuck in.

After whispered assurances from Anne she’d watch for our signal to let us back in the next night, we set off down Castle Square.

“You need to have a wider stance,” I said to Sophia, watching her careful, close steps. “And slam your feet down harder as you walk. See?” I demonstrated, swinging my arms with confidence.

“You resemble an ape I once saw in a menagerie,” she said, unimpressed. “The effect is too great, lessen the sham.”

“I can’t believe I’m taking lessons from you,” I said grumpily, copying her strut. “I wear trousers all the time, it should be easy for me.”

“Perhaps therein lies the problem,” she said, throwing back her shoulders. “It is too affected and thus, unnatural.” We practised in the darkened side streets, nudging each other in the ribs and laughing all the while.

The first people we encountered were a pair of watchmen doing their rounds. They returned our nods, respectfully touching their forelocks before going about their business. Once out of sight, I turned to Sophia excitedly. “Did you see that? I think we fooled them!”

“Hush,” she said, though she also looked pleased. We rounded the corner onto the busier high street, but no one gave us a second look. Before we’d even reached the glover’s shop the door flew open, revealing the Doc, grinning broadly.

“I watched for you from my window,” he said, ushering us inside. “Come come, let me look at you.” Holding his lamp high, he cast its pale-yellow light over us.

“Oh yes,” he said nodding with approval. “Yes, gentleman, I think you will do nicely. Now, some final touches.” Smirking, he led us up the narrow staircase into his rooms.

“What do you mean, ‘final touches’,” I said, flinging my tricorne onto the settle and shrugging off my tailcoat. “We’ve nailed these looks.”

“I do not deny it,” he said, pulling a cork off a bottle with a loud pop. “Hence, I suggest mere ‘touches’. Nothing done with a heavy hand.” He poured healthy sized measures into three glasses and handed them out to us. “For Dutch courage,” he said, seeing Sophia’s disapproving look. “I dare say you think I drink too much, Miss Sophia, or William,” he corrected himself. “But I assure you it is medicinal. To your good health.” He bumped his glass against both of ours and drained his in one gulp.

“Now as to these final touches,” he said putting down his glass and picking up the cork. “The eyebrows need work.” He held the end over a candle, letting it blacken. “To give you that manly air.”

I swigged the last of my drink and he stepped so close I could smell the sweet port on his breath. Head tilted, square jaw clenched in concentration, he brushed aside a tendril of white-blond hair falling in his face. Gently taking my chin, he dabbed my brows with the end of the cork for about a minute on each. I held my breath the entire time.

“There now,” he said, taking a step back to admire his handy work. “Spruce as any fellow I’ve seen. Observe” He pointed me to a mirror, and I took in my image for the first time since my transformation. I still looked like me, but the alterations had endowed me with some subtle, masculine quality. My stance was wider, my chest puffed out, my gaze confident.

“John Smith, how do you do,” I said in a deep voice, thrusting out my hand to an invisible stranger.

“Very good,” he laughed, now turning to Sophia. He took a step, but she held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks.

“Darcy can do that for me,” she said, the coldness returning to her voice.

“Sure, I can,” I said keen to keep things amicable. “Chuck us the cork. Big brows are a thing in my time. I like big brows and I cannot lie,” I spoke-sung this and inwardly wanted to die. Neither made any comment, for which I was grateful.

Taking up the same position as Dr Hamilton, I took a deep breath and cupped Sophia’s cheek, the familiar scent of rosemary wafting over me. Slowly, I dabbed the end of the cork onto her eyebrows, lifting it up every so often to see how much of a mark it left. In the dim light her brown eyes looked very dark, almost pupil-less. It was difficult to stick to the task in hand and not stare at them. Whenever I did so, cork held suspended, she would glance up at me before lowering her eyes.

“You are slow, Darcy,” said the Doc, sauntering over to us with our re-filled glasses. “Let me see.” He scrutinised Sophia’s eyebrows before giving an approving nod. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master Blackwell,” he said giving a mock bow. “I look forward to our debauched night of gaming, drinking and whoring with the lowest orders of Southampton society.”

“A normal Saturday night for you then,” I said, laughing at the scandalised look on Sophia’s face. “You and your jokes, Doc, what are you like.”

He smirked, walking over to a cupboard and taking out a pipe. “Since I am no longer in the company of ladies, I trust you’ll not object to my taking some chierut?”

“Go ahead,” I said, realising with a start I was still holding Sophia’s face. I quickly dropped my hand and drained the contents of my glass, more to have something to do than anything else. The strong, sweet liquid made its burning progress down my throat, and I did my best not to cough and splutter over the carpet.

“My apologies,” said Dr Hamilton, drawing on his lit pipe. “The smoke is too much for a novice such as yourself?”

“Just went down the wrong way,” I gasped, indicating my empty glass.

“That is a relief,” he said, exhaling a cloud of smoke that swirled about his head. “No doubt the smells we shall encounter tonight will be noisome. I should hate for you to stumble at the first hurdle.” Sitting back comfortably in his chair, he crossed his legs and drew from his pipe again.

“We have ten minutes leisure,” he informed us, exhaling. “Or at least until I finish. In the meantime, let me see your best efforts at playing young gentlemen.”

He had us marching up and down his dining room, calling instructions and improvements in between taking leisurely puffs from his pipe. We then practiced how to talk, warning us not to go too low, as this would show us “cutting a sham”.

“Besides,” he said, tapping his finished pipe on the side table. “Being such beardless youths as you are, one could hardly expect you to have developed manful voices.”

“You have no beard, Doctor Hamilton,” said Sophia. “Your cheek is innocent of all but the faintest down.”

I looked sharply at her. Her cheeks were flushed, and I noticed she’d finished her glass of port.

“Lots of men can’t grow facial hair, Sophia,” I snapped. “And thank god they can’t, otherwise we’d be in real trouble. Well, George, ready to go?”

“Indeed,” he said coolly, not at all ruffled by Sophia’s lip. “*Tempus fugit*. The night is already running away.”

I followed him out, too annoyed to even look at Sophia as we descended the stairs and exited onto the street. George sauntered along the high street, shoulders thrown back, cane cracking a cool thwack on the cobblestones. His good humour was infectious, and I found myself striding confidently alongside him. He led us down French Street, past the theatre, through to narrower alleys, until we arrived at what looked like an ordinary townhouse. He lifted the brass knocker, in the shape of a mermaid, letting it

fall once with a loud clang that reverberated down the street. A man with a similar build to a hay bale opened the door, surveying us. Recognising Dr Hamilton, he stepped back, allowing us entry. We followed him down the hall into a heavily perfumed parlour, filled with women dressed in brightly coloured gowns and elaborate wigs. Men sat at tables playing cards or lounging in chairs drinking wine. The women wafted about, never leaving anyone neglected for long.

“Well well, George. Ain’t in been a while?” A woman in her forties, with an extremely low-cut dress swished over, powdered wig towering above her head.

“Queen Charlotte,” he said, opening his arms and giving her a kiss twice on each cheek.

“And who are these fine young culls?” said the woman, turning her attention to us.

“Novitiates soon to take their vows of chastity,” he said with a wry smile. “Only wine for them tonight.”

She pouted. “No sport at all? You are a tease, Doctor. You ‘aven’t paid our house a visit since January last and only to give the girls their variolation. Ent been sight or smell of the smallpox since your treatment, even if it was the wrong sort of prick.” She winked at Sophia, who turned scarlet.

“I never mix business with pleasure, ma’am,” he replied, smiling genially.

“More’s the pity,” she said, lowering her lashes. “Well, gentleman, take a seat. I’ll bring your wine presently.” She sashayed away, heavy gold skirts making a swoosh-swoosh noise with each step. Sophia and I followed George into a corner and sat down at a small table, our drinks soon following.

“My seat is sticky,” I said, shifting from leg to leg.

“Is this a cat-house,” hissed Sophia, apoplectic with rage.

“Naturally,” said Dr Hamilton, clamping his pipe between his teeth and fishing in his pockets. “Where’s the damn flint?” he muttered, before shrugging and using a candle for a light. “Oh, do not regard me so, *Will*,” he said, catching sight of Sophia’s face. “I did warn you of the class of establishments we would enter. This ought to come as no surprise.”

“It surprises me a great deal,” she spat. “Coffee houses! Hubs of intellect and controversial thought. Not...” she gestured at frisky couple before breaking off, shuddering.

“If you want to catch a fox, you must begin the chase out in his own terrain. We are searching for a criminal, thus must enter the underworld. This is merely the antechamber.”

I was only half-listening, my attention caught by a familiar painted face, laughing with a pair of gentlemen across the room. It was one of the women from the Long Rooms – Crimson – wearing the same gown. Her face was half-turned in our direction and without thinking, I waved. She did a double take, then threw back her head laughing. Without another word to her companions, she sauntered over. I glanced at Sophia too horrified to speak, apparently mortified at being recognised.

“Well, m’dear,” said Crimson in her husky voice. “Strange place for our paths to cross again. I like your evening’s rig.”

“Won’t you join us, ma’am,” said Dr Hamilton, quite comfortable in his chair, pipe still smoking. “There is someone we are looking for and perhaps you might lend your aid in the search.”

“Many a man do come here seeking someone,” she said, sitting down and raising Sophia’s untouched glass to her lips. “They usually find her. Aphrodite, Venus, Perdita...”

“Not the sort of person we’re seeking,” replied Dr Hamilton, lifting his glass with an elegant gesture, a passing girl to refilling it. “We’re looking for a certain man. A cove who bites the ill-gotten cole, if you take my meaning.”

“Aha,” she said, taking a long and thoughtful sip from her glass before placing it back on the table. “A bad sort, is it?”

“A rotten apple,” agreed Dr Hamilton, his pipe now finished. He tapped the excess tobacco onto a dish before stowing it back in his pocket. “One of the Sons of Chronos.”

Her eyes widened but she attempted to hide her discomposure by draining her glass.

“Well gents, if that be all,” she rose, making to leave. “There’s other culls wanting my attention.”

“Wait a moment, ma’am,” said Dr Hamilton fastening his fingers round her wrist. The gesture was soft, almost tender, and yet there was no mistaking the power and intent behind it.

“Give us your company a few moments more and we’ll see you’re well compensated.” He turned over her hand and place a fat gold coin into her palm. After a long moment, she slowly sat back down.

“I know of the men you seek,” she said, all the playful flirtation gone from her voice. “A friend of mine is on the game in a house run by the ringleader. Name of McGuigan. He’s the pimp.”

“A house like this,” pursued Dr Hamilton leaning forward. The coins in his pocket made a soft jangle. She noticed, eyes darting to his coat.

“Not like this,” she said, shaking her head. “A molly house.”

“Ah,” said Dr Hamilton, sitting back in his chair thoughtfully. “Is he...”

“No, or so my friend says. Just runs one. Says there’s more money in it, what with the risk being higher.”

“True enough,” said Dr Hamilton. “Will you tell us where to find the house?”

After a few minutes of haggling and more coins handed over, she gave Dr Hamilton the directions.

“My regards to your abness,” said Dr Hamilton, getting to his feet and touching his hat. “Gentleman, shall we?”

“Thank you,” I said, taking her hand across the table. “Won’t you tell us your name?”

“Margaret,” she said, looking touched. “Peg to my friends. Be well, miss, uh, sir. You’re wise to go about as you are. These are dangerous times for a woman on the streets.”

“Nothing changes.” Then, catching her meaning I said, “Hey, where’s your friend? The one in the canary-coloured dress?”

Margaret’s eyes immediately filled with tears. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “She ent been seen since the night after the ball.”

“We will keep our eyes open,” said Hamilton, his expression sympathetic. “And I shall put the word out with my contacts on the Watch.”

“Goodbye, Peg,” I said, getting up as well. “And thank you for your help.” Before I could suppress the impulse, I swooped down and kissed her cheek. “I’m sure you’ll find her.”

We hastily left, silently hurrying out onto the dark streets. Sophia was exuding a quiet fury. It seemed best not to engage. I tried to suppress my own irritation.

Dr Hamilton led on, the quality of our surroundings gradually declining the longer we walked. At every passing inn or tavern, I felt sure we had arrived, but on we went, buildings deteriorating from shabby to dilapidated.

“I had not thought to venture into such a part of the town,” whispered Sophia, more to herself, than us. “They call it the Pilgrim’s Pyt.” She ran a hand over a crumbling pile of medieval wall and my annoyance instantly vanished. Whatever else, she was putting herself at risk for me. I reached out in the dark, finding her hand to squeeze.

“It’ll be okay,” I whispered back, before letting go. I couldn’t see her face, but she returned my pressure.

“Here we are, gentlemen,” called Dr Hamilton, clacking his cane for a final crack on the ground. We squinted up at the dark and silent, run-down building.

“You must be mistaken, sir,” said Sophia, holding onto her hat as she stared up. “There is no one within.”

“Looks can be deceiving, Master Blackwell,” he said, a grin visible in the murky night. Raising his cane, he rapped it smartly on the door. A scuffle, a scrape, and the door opened a crack, releasing a narrow beam of light onto the street. Dr Hamilton leant his fine, delicate head towards the gap and exchanged a few words with the doorman. It flung open, revealing a small man wearing a brightly striped waistcoat. After taking the three of us in, he bowed, gesturing we follow. He was a much less intimidating bouncer than the heavy at the ‘cathouse’.

“Are you sure this is wise, Doctor,” said Sophia, low enough so our host wouldn’t hear. “A cathouse is one thing, and even our visiting that is entirely against my inclination. But a Molly House is another matter altogether. The punishment for such acts as committed by these men can be pillory or even death!”

“Do you intend to commit sodomy tonight, Master Blackwell?” said Dr Hamilton, the corners of his mouth twitching.

Sophia was unable to give any sort of coherent answer, stammering and blushing furiously.

“Well then,” he said, flashing his brilliant smile. “You have little cause for concern. A drink perhaps, ought to steady your resolve.” We took our seats, gaining the attention of a woman serving. She returned in a moment with three tumblers full of amber liquid. As she handed mine over, I realised this was no ordinary woman. In fact,

she was as much disguised as us. Her eyes swept over me, and I felt there was a knowing understanding in them.

There were several groups dotted about, drinking, laughing and dancing in the low-ceilinged room, over which hung the fug of cigar and pipe smoke.

“An uncommon number of women hereabouts,” said Sophia, observing a brightly dressed group laughing together in the corner.

“’Tis common for men to wear women’s apparel in such places,” said Dr Hamilton, following her gaze. “Many come completely rigged in gowns, petticoats and head-cloths fit for their wedding. We may yet see a mock ceremony before the night is done.”

“They ape a marriage?” asked Sophia.

“It is no mere performance. When society denies the fabled promise of happy-ever-after, one takes the chance to experience what the outside world lives.”

Unsure what to make of this, Sophia took a gulp of her drink, choked and returned her glass to the table.

“So, you’ve been here before?” I said, seeing a couple of young men in naval uniforms slip through a back door.

“No, but one hears things,” he said, taking out his pipe and lighting it. “Of such places to be oneself without fear of persecution. Havens for those who cannot or will not conform to the ton’s demands, nor be governed by the leviathan’s strictures.” He drew deeply from his pipe, the glow from the embers illuminating his eyes, apparently deep in concentration. Yet there was something remote in his look. The light seemed to show his mind was far away, his thoughts perhaps on another life. “Yes, by God, I do know about that.”

“What can a society doctor, a *bon vivant*, know about that?” said Sophia, her tone sharp.

I shifted in my chair, turning to look at her in amazement. She glared at George, arms and legs crossed. Her pose was far too feminine, so I gave her a kick.

“What the hell, Soph- I mean, Will?” I said, matching her glare for glare as she nursed her ankle.

“It is of little consequence,” she said, returning her dark look to him. “Merely, one does indeed hear ‘things’.”

I opened my mouth, an angry response on the tip of my tongue but George cleared his throat.

“McGuigan is here,” he murmured, under cover of taking a sip from his glass, eyes flicking from his drink to the door. The atmosphere in the room had changed with the entrance of one man. Plainly dressed, he wore mucky boots, each tread leaving a dirty smear on the floor. As he sat, he flicked back the tails of his coat and I glimpsed the flash of metal at his waist.

I half rose from my chair, but George placed a hand on my forearm.

“Hold,” he said, his expression nonchalant, idly swilling the liquid in his glass. “Let us first determine the lay of the land.”

“The Doctor is right,” interjected Sophia, anticipating my objections. “First, we must observe. Think of it as an ailment to be cured. Is stimulant or sedative needed? Once we have the measure of symptoms, then we might determine the right action for treating the complaint.”

“De Courcy!” I shouted, unable to stop myself.

The surrounding chatter died, leaving a heavy silence in its place.

“Well, gentleman, this is a bad loaf to be in,” said Dr Hamilton calmly, tapping the embers of his pipe onto the table and returning it to his pocket. “It seems we are to draw out the disease ourselves.”

“I’m tired of waiting,” I said, watching the man slowly rise to his feet and make his way over. To my left, the sound of Sophia’s anxious fingers tapping a nervous beat on the table matched the pace of my heart. Catching my eye, she clasped her hands in her lap, shoulders hunching over. My breath filled my ears – quick, quick, quick – not enough air. I leaned back in my chair, taking a deep, steadying inhalation, in through the nose, out through the mouth, eyes closed for just a second.

The man stood before us.

“Evening, my fine gents,” he said, grey teeth bared in a smile never reaching his steel blue eyes. “I’ve not had the pleasure. Might I join you?” He had a strong Irish accent – a good sign, surely.

“We would be honoured,” said Dr Hamilton, gesturing to the free chair opposite me. “I understand you are McGuigan, master of this house.”

The man cocked his head as he sat, apparently amused. “You have me at an advantage, I know nothing of you. It is not a position I am well acquainted with.” Again, as

he sat, he flicked back his coat, the gesture revealed a flash of metal. This time, I was close enough to see what it was: a knife, its handle well-worn.

Seeing me glimpse it, McGuigan gave a small chuckle. "I'm never one to keep my distance," he whispered conspiratorially. The hairs rose on the back of my neck.

"Will ye have a tippie, lads," he added before shouting over his shoulder for drinks. None of us spoke whilst we waited. Sophia seemed to be holding her breath and I resisted the urge to wipe my clammy hands on my breeches. McGuigan sat back at his ease, legs splayed, smiling pleasantly at us.

"So, gents," he said breaking the silence after taking an appreciative sip from his newly arrived glass. "Who are ye and what can I be doing for ye?"

"We're looking for someone," I said. Sophia shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Answer the first question, if you please," he said with deliberate politeness, eyes like chips of ice.

"I am Doctor Hamilton," said George, jumping in. "These are my young acquaintances hoping to apprentice themselves in the trade. Master Blackwell and Master Smith."

"Bear leader to these cubs, here to initiate greenhorns into a select society. Looking for a spruce fella, is it?" He made as if to nudge Sophia, but she flinched away. The man threw back his head and laughed, slapping his thighs.

"I wasn't thinking so," he said, serious again. "You, sir, I know to be a Doctor," addressing George. "I've heard your name about town. But I'd swear to the Holy Mother these pups are never student sawbones. What they are I could not say. The name you called out," he said, fixing his attention on me. "You would do well to forget."

My heart was hammering. "I can't."

"A pity," he sighed with a shake of his head. "I'll have to be slitting your throats then. It's always such a messy business, to be sure."

"Perhaps we ought to be going," squeaked Sophia.

"Wait," I said. "Please." I took a deep breath. "De Courcy, he's – he's my Dad."

Whatever the man was expecting, it wasn't that. He let out an offensively loud laugh, gaining the attention of the entire room as his whole body shook.

"The man has no offspring," he finally said, wiping his eyes. "If such a man were to exist," he added, his tone at once serious. "A poor ruse if you are spies for the watch."

“We are not spies,” said Dr Hamilton firmly. “If we were, surely I would not enter this place using my own name? My friend speaks the truth. We merely seek an audience with de Courcy, can you arrange it?”

“I’ll keep looking,” I said, throwing caution to the winds. “Loudly, without stopping. I will find him.”

Dr Hamilton cleared his throat. “Perhaps this might persuade you?” He took out a weighty purse, clinking onto the table.

McGuigan leaned back, clasping his hands over his head, mulling it over. His smile was slow and evil. “Perhaps,” he said, pocketing the purse. “Tomorrow. Gloucester Square, near the Wharfs. At the tolling of the second bell. Until tomorrow, gents.” McGuigan stood, as did we, pulled into his devil’s bargain. He raised his glass, before returning to his table. We left, the other patrons, jumping back like we were radioactive.

“Well, gentlemen,” said George, once back in his rooms, flinging off his coat to leave in a careless heap on the floor. “Another tippie before the night’s end?”

Sophia merely nodded, slumped in an armchair with an uncharacteristic lack of decorum.

“Mother’s ruin seems fitting,” he said with a hollow laugh, pouring a large quantity of a clear, viscous liquid into three glasses. Even from across the room, the fumes made me dizzy.

A toast,” he said, thrusting glasses into our hands and raising his own. “To going into the viper’s nest and emerging unscathed.”

Sophia swallowed the content in one with a dismal kind of indifference. The liquid burned my throat the whole way down, scorching a fiery path.

“Chin up, you two,” I rang out, my voice filling the room at a volume louder than intended. “This is exciting! I’m one step closer to finding my dad.”

Neither responded, both keeping their eyes downcast. The burning feeling in my throat prickled throughout my body. Didn’t they get how huge this was?

“You know,” I said, pacing about the room, bumping into a table as I went. “You could be a little happier for me.”

Sophia said nothing, looking up at me in amazement.

George cleared his throat. “Just so, Darcy,” he said, his smile strained. “You are quite right. How foolish of us to overlook your triumph. Tomorrow will be momentous indeed.” He glanced at Sophia before continuing. “I suggest we all retire for the night.

Ready to face the morrow with restored spirits. You may both make use of my room – the bed is passably comfortable. I shall sleep here.”

Without a word, Sophia rose, picking up a lamp before drifting into the other room. I made to follow but the doctor took hold of my wrist.

“Have a care, Darcy,” he said in an undertone, his face stern. “Remember your friends are willing to take great risks on your behalf. Do not make light of that sacrifice.” Before I could respond he turned away, taking his coat off the floor and draping it over the back of a chair.

I stumbled after Sophia. She was lying on the bed, boots off but fully clothed, staring up at the ceiling. As I entered, she turned on her side, facing away from me.

I slowly began to undress, clumsy in the flickering half-darkness. It would be so much easier with Anne’s help.

“What think you of Anne,” mumbled Sophia, as though reading my mind. “How does she fare? I should never have agreed to her involvement. She might suffer ruinous consequences if caught.”

“She’ll be alright, she’s tough,” I said, the bravado in my voice making up for my quickened heartbeat. “In fact,” I added, pulling off my shirt and slipping a shift over my head. “I bet she’s having the time of her life! Eating triple portions and not having to do any housework.”

Sophia didn’t answer, lifting the lamp to extinguish it, forcing me to find the bed in the pitch black. Swearing as my shin made unexpected contact with the edge, I collapsed into it, mindful of not getting too close to Sophia – tricky given it wasn’t much bigger than a single bed. I suddenly became aware of my breathing and how annoying it must be - every bodily shift and rustle seemed deafening in the dark. Yet the sounds of her own regular breaths had a calming effect, relaxing me into some sort of ease. The dark seemed to lift the barrier between us. With a little more courage, I could almost say anything.

“I am sorry,” I whispered, reaching for the right words. “For putting you through all this. I know I couldn’t do this without you but even if I could, and as selfish as it is to admit it, I wouldn’t want to.” I took a deep shuddering breath before continuing. “I need you, Soph. And no matter what happens, I’m so glad we met.” She didn’t say anything, the only sound being her deep, regular breaths. Minutes passed as I lay there, the silence

stretching out for so long I thought she must have fallen asleep. Then, a tiny movement at my side as her right hand found my left in the dark.

Neither of us spoke and we fell asleep just like that, side by side, fingers entwined.

Chapter 22. “Dressed in men’s clothes... I was tall and personable, but a little too smooth-faced for a man; however, I seldom went abroad but in the night, it did well enough.” Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 1722

Saturday, 29 August. Afternoon.

Above the Glover’s Shop

Dr Hamilton has furnished me with some writing materials to pass the time before the second bell tolls. Thus, I continue my habit and recount the day’s events. We arose with the sun well up, hearing his merry call and promise of his famous buttered eggs.

“I think some exercise is in order,” said he, our fast broken. “A welcome distraction before we begin our next night’s plotting. And the day being so fine, it seems a monstrous crime to let it slip by unenjoyed.”

Darcy agreed but I made my objections. “Think you the notion wise, sir? Are we not attempting to conceal our purpose and identity? Venturing out into society without the cover of night seems foolishness.”

“I shall see to it that your faces are not seen on the high street,” replied he, unperturbed. “I can hire two sedan chairs and whisk you within before anyone notes your appearance. And why should they? A gentleman may walk about the town in unremarkable indiscernibility. Members of the Royal Society of Archers are permitted to bring guests and try their skill. The lodge is in Bellevue, away from your ordinary acquaintance, and there is no scheduled meeting today, so there is little chance of our running into anyone.”

“Archery? Cool!” cried Darcy, her words as usual yielding nonsense. “I’m in.”

“It is as important to release tension from the mind as well as body,” nodded the Doctor, giving me a sly look. “By its very nature, archery does this. Why not take advantage of the freedoms your current articles allow?”

“For sure,” said Darcy, mouth full of yet *more* food. From whence did she acquire it? The table seemed clear but a moment ago. “I bet they don’t let women anywhere near a bow and arrow.”

“You are quite wrong,” replied Dr Hamilton, liberating a scrap of bread from Darcy’s waving hand to soften in his coffee before swallowing. “Ladies can be members and indeed, are exempt from paying any fees. However, today you shall pass for gentleman archers.”

He darted from our sight, returning with two green coats with buff waistcoats and breeches.

Fitted with orderly green and buff, Muscovy boots, belt, pouch, tassels and a felt riding hat, complete with extravagant feather, we sallied forth in our borrowed rigging.

Though blue is a colour that suits Darcy well, green brings out a remarkable lustre in her eyes, their hue resembling the bright, inner markings of a peacock feather.

Hats kept low, we bundled into a pair of sedans, curtains drawn. Arriving at the Lodge, the front chairman halloosed to his colleague at the rear, dropping the chair for the final time. Out of habit, I extended my hand for one of the men to take, little thinking how odd it looked.

Realising my mistake too late, I stepped out unaided, touching my hat in respectful acknowledgement. Darcy's dismount from her cabin was far more convincing, being familiar, as I am not, to foregoing skirts.

"Alright, let's do this," she called, slapping me on the back like any lusty tavern dweller and striding after Dr Hamilton.

Being lithe of limb, Darcy took to the sport with natural ease, hitting the target – or near enough – with every notch and draw. I was less successful, unable to follow the example of the Doctor, who is of course excellent. My arrow came close to the target only once when Darcy lent her assistance.

"You're being too hesitant," said she, taking in yet another dismal attempt. "You need to pull the string further back, almost to your eyeline. Here." Stepping to my side, she wrapped her fingers around my right hand, slowly drawing back the notched arrow back until it grazed my lips. Her breath tickled my cheek, raising goosebumps where it touched.

"Breathe in, nice and slow," said she, her voice low in my ear. "Close your left eye. Get the target in sight and... loose!"

Our hands released the arrow. It soared across the grassy plain before piercing the outer rings of the target.

"See?" she crowed, her smile as warm as a summer's day. "You're a regular Cupid."

"Quite," I managed, heart beating with a sensation I knew not what. Perhaps elation at my unexpected success. "Most invigorating."

Installed back at the Doctor's apartments, we supped on a jug of beer, chyne of mutton and hot gingerbread, fetched from the nearest alehouse. It was all excellent fare and I found myself eating with as little decorum as the role of Master Blackwell dictated. Never one to be surpassed, Darcy snatched the chyne's remains, picking it to the bone.

"A hearty cull, as I ever I saw," cried Doctor Hamilton, toasting his mug in mock appreciation. "Though perhaps more convincingly mammal than male."

We laughed, confederates once more, my sullens dissipated.

I could not resist once more pursuing the topic of medicine with the doctor, as we did in happier days. I wished to hear his thoughts on variolation and he expounded with alacrity.

“It’s why I came to Southampton,” said he, his face shining with enthusiasm. “To better understand the practice. Oh, I know,” he added, with a modest wave of his hand, “Being a spa town famed for its health benefits, Southampton would be a sensible choice for any physician to set up practice. No doubt a lucrative one too. But I do assure you, it was upon discovering Southampton’s inoculation campaigns that drew me hither.”

“I know a little of the practice,” said I, a little breathless to speak with a fellow enthusiast, for once on equal terms. “From reading Lady Wortley’s description in her ‘Turkish Embassy Letters’.”

“The principles remain much the same,” said he, nearly upsetting my glass as he took my arm in his hands. “Variolation then involved placing pus from a smallpox victim’s pustules into a scratch on the arm of a healthy person, thus giving them a milder attack but lifelong protection. Now it is merely a case of -”

“Stop, I’m going to be sick,” interrupted Darcy, and indeed she did look a little green about the gills.

“A squeamish youth, despite your stout air,” said Doctor Hamilton, his eyes crinkling.

“Darcy is unused to the methods of our time,” I replied. “Variolation becomes more sophisticated over the coming centuries.”

“But people don’t,” said Darcy, churlish. Her face softened however, when she turned to me. “You like it, don’t you? Pretending to be a doctor.”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted,” said I, for the first time speaking aloud the secret of my heart. In my mind’s eye a glorious future manifested. I was mistress of knowledge once obscured but now illumined. Learning, not as a diversion but for a higher cause: to help others – heal wounds, sooth ills and yes, save lives. We were all held in the clairvoyant spell for a time. Silent and dreaming of the impossible.

Soon after, Doctor Hamilton departed to make some afternoon calls. Darcy attempted sleep and I have spent these hours committing our deeds to paper. I too shall rest before our next night of adventures begins.

Sunday 30, August. Castle Square.

I am undone! All is ruinous, my life in smouldering wreckage. And what of Darcy? But I am overhasty, yet how to write in an orderly fashioned when my mind is so disordered?

Confined to my chambers, I know not how to pass the time except in confiding in you, Journal.

Returning to where my pen last left off. Nerves being strained, we all partook in the Dutch method of courage before the allotted hour of departure. Every one of us was wary and tense, fearing the outcome of a certain trap. The tension broke as the bell struck one.

Clearing his throat, the Doctor began thus: "Though deceit is not in my nature, in my life, circumstances have dictated such necessities. Today was such a day." He paused, and with deliberate care, filled his pipe, lighting it and taking a luxurious pull.

"You believed I was treating patients this afternoon. In fact, I was making enquiries of McGuigan, and indeed, de Courcy."

Darcy leapt to her feet. "What?" cried she, quite ready for a display of passion. "You did this behind my back, how could you –"

"It was not a spot of rum fun," said he sharply, cutting her off. "Merely, to discover more of the people we are to meet under cloak of dark. I earnestly hope you find your Papa, Darcy, but a little caution never goes amiss."

Darcy resumed her seat with an ear more willing to listen.

Dr Hamilton also sat, steepling his hands before him, face somber in the half light. "There is much I still do not yet know," said he, in a half whisper, his eyes fixed on the flickering candle's flame. "By all means, call me coward if you may, but what I hear I dislike. The name McGuigan and his associates, these so-called Sons of Chronos, conjure much ill. Scamps, rum padders and highwaymen at best, but at worst, barbarous brutes who will stop at nothing to achieve their ends."

Still, Darcy made no answer, yet to me her mounting fury was clear. Upon her shanks rested tight fistled hands, face dark with rage. I wished to diffuse the tension, but I own curiosity got the better of me.

"What are these ends," said I. "What mischief is intended?"

Hamilton sucked in his cheeks before releasing his breath in a puff of frustration, shrugging.

"You don't even know!" cried Darcy, jumping to her feet, her passion at last bursting forth. "You're just saying all this stuff based on nothing? Unbelievable." With shaking hands, she thrust on a coat and marched towards the door.

“Where are you going,” called Dr Hamilton to her retreating back, making no move to follow her. “It is gone one in the morning; you cannot be abroad so late.”

Darcy’s only response was the forceful slam of the door, strong enough to rattle the glass stopper within the decanter.

I was after her in a moment, down the stairs and onto the street. She had made fair progress being swift of foot, but I caught her at the Bar Gate, staying her progress with a tug on her sleeve. I thought she would cast me off, curse me away as she had the Doctor, but no, it was as if she had wished for me to find her, though her pride would not admit asking for any comfort.

“Are you... well, Darcy?” said I, unsure where to begin my enquiry. After all, the chance to meet one’s long-lost parent is not an everyday occurrence. The moonlight glimmered off Darcy’s shimmering cheeks, on which some tears had fallen, though hastily wiped away. In a fit of gallantry more akin to my role as Master Blackwell than Miss Woodforde, I offered her a scrap of material found in my coat pocket. In truth, I wished to embrace her fully but dreaded her pride casting me aside.

“Never better,” said she at last, wiping the last of her hurt away. I took a tentative step towards her, placing my hand on her arm. To my relief, she did not throw me off.

“I am sure the Doctor only means well,” said I, surprised at myself for seeking their reconciliation, when for many days jealousy had stood between us. Yes, Journal, I can now name that emotion, for circumstance has since revealed that truth.

“Yeah, well,” answered she in tones of great bitterness, slumping against the stone of the great archway. “He doesn’t know everything, and he doesn’t know my dad.”

“Indeed,” said I, not wishing to drive her away, yet still on my guard. “I dare say the Doctor is merely being cautious. He is concerned with the idea of this rendezvous.”

I did not press further, though I saw my words made an impact. Her fingers traced down the length of my arm until finding my hand to clasp.

Her eyes were very dark, yet somehow in the night’s shadows I still saw their blue shades.

My very core seemed to burn, scorching every recess of my extremities. A distant part of my mind felt sure Darcy should have blistered at my touch, though she did not pull away.

I felt a flutter within my breast. Her eyes lowered, then returned to mine. A step. The gap between us closed until only a breath separated us.

“By Jupiter!” came an obnoxious voice from behind. “If it isn’t a pair of mollies in our path. Clear the way, lads or we’ll have the watch on you.” Then came a familiar laugh.

Under ordinary circumstances it is one I heartily dislike but at this a moment, its trill spelled disaster.

“I say,” said Pinhorne, for Pinhorne it most certainly was. “If it en’t Miss –”

I heard no more of his speech, nor did I hear his companion’s response. Fear overtook me and I ran from the place, dragging Darcy in my flight. Pinhorne seemed disinclined to pursue, perhaps too in awe by what he’d seen. My only hope lay in his not recognising me, being half hidden in the shadow of the old stone archway.

Within moments we reached the door of Doctor Hamilton’s quarters, the pain of exertion searing my chest. Darcy threw open the door and the pair of us tumbled over the threshold, landing with a clatter over the hearth.

“Shut the door,” I gasped, which she did at once.

“Well,” said Darcy, her face barely visible in the gloom. “That’s not good.”

To be sure, I found breath enough to answer her flippancy.

“We shall be sent to Coventry!” cried I, springing to my feet and grasping her by the arms, attempting to strike the stupidity from her.

“Hey hey, no need to get so upset,” said she in soothing tones. “I mean, I’ve heard Coventry’s not great but maybe we can visit Warwick castle whilst we’re there –”

“Leave off your foolishness for one moment, I beg of you!” I all but screamed at her. “To be ‘sent to Coventry’ is an expression that signifies social disgrace – the inevitable conclusion of our frolics.” The force of Pinhorne’s discovery struck me anew. Whether he saw me clearly or no, he certainly *had* recognised one of the shadowy figures as a “Miss”. If he thought it me, he would surely tell my brother and parents. And then? Undoubted ruination.

“Oh, that I had never met you,” said I, beating my fists against the wall. Still Darcy did not approach. Her apparent coolness goaded me further. I continued, addressing my words to the silent dark. “Your influence has been profligate, immoral and reckless in the extreme, careless of naught but what concerns yourself. It is without doubt you have ruined my life. You were the frail bark upon which I ventured all, and the wreck has been total. Were we to never meet again, I should be glad of it,” I said so more, great sobs heaved my body, overtaking any power of speech.

What answer she might have given I shall never know. Great thundering steps heralded the arrival of Dr Hamilton, a lamp in his hand, his expression startled. In a daze, I stood, unheeding of his many questions and Darcy’s various answers.

The truth of what needed to be done became clear: I must leave at once, return to our house on Castle Square - before the alarm was raised by Pinhorne. Not a soul could learn of my part in this affair.

Moving as though in a dream, I turned, hand on the latch. Dr Hamilton, grasped my arm, impeding my progress.

“Unhand me at once,” said I, making fruitless attempts to prise his fingers from my arm.

“Peace, Sophia,” said Dr Hamilton, his grip still firm. “We must first think what to do. All is not lost but let us not lose our heads. Peace, Sophia.” He repeated, for still, I fought him with the little strength remaining following my outburst.

“Do NOT call me Sophia!” I cried, at last wrenching myself free. “It is Miss Woodforde to you. I am weary of this foolish sham. Weary of putting my life and reputation at risk for a fruitless mission to find a missing man. And weary of being in company with one whose disgraceful reputation pollutes all around. Yes,” said I, squaring myself against the doctor, an accusing finger raised to his face. “I have heard much of you and your character. There is not a wealthy widow in all of Wessex safe from your seductions. Mr. Richards told me all and it was only at my earnest behest he did not pass the information onto my parents. Fool that I was,” said I, turning away in bitterness. “Now, here I reap the rewards.” I stepped towards the door but was once again impeded.

“Where are you going?” It was Darcy, staying me with her hand, her face a mask of anguish.

“Home,” said I simply, not daring to meet her eyes. “I cannot stay here a moment longer.”

“No!” cried she, placing her body between me and my exit. “Please, Sophia! Tonight might be the only chance to meet my dad. We can’t go back; we have to hold out for one more night. *Please.*” I chanced another glance at her face and saw tears bathe her cheeks. “Please don’t go.”

“You are quite at your liberty to stay,” said I, surprised at the coldness in my voice. “I wash my hands of you.” I took a step and then another, before fleeing the place entirely, making for Castle Square as though the very hounds of hell pursued me.

It took several attempts to rouse Anne from her post, lacking the dexterity to toss a stone to the required window. At last, she came, dreary eyed and mob cap disordered. It was easy to ignore her inquiries, blaming the need for discretion.

I sent her away as soon as I could and lay down to sleep. Alas, it eluded me and thus have I sat for many an hour, recounting all. The sun rises on another day. What fresh horrors shall it bring?

Chapter 23. We'll burn that bridge when we get to it

I couldn't let Sophia go home by herself. Not at that time of night. Not in that state. As a lone girl in my own time, I wouldn't walk home from Southampton city center and that's *with* proper streetlights, not that oil lamp nonsense these Georgians used.

Yes, she had made it clear she didn't want to see me ever again. That didn't mean I worry she'd be pointlessly murdered running home in the dark.

A few seconds after the shock subsided, I made to follow but George stopped me.

"You are not fit to go, I will see to her," he said, his voice gentle. He seemed to understand I wasn't leaving to follow her but just to make sure she was alright – that she was safe home.

I shook my head, words impossible.

"She will not see me, I swear." He led me over to the couch, throwing a blanket over me and putting a mug of thick, caramel coloured liquid into my hands. "Buttered toddie," he said with a sad smile. "To restore you. She will be far gone, I must go." At the door, he turned back, taking in my shifty air. "I swear to you, Darcy, I will watch over her until she is safely returned. But I cannot do so if I am concerned for you. Swear to me you will not stir from these walls?"

I nodded and wasting no more time, he left.

The drink was warm and sweet but heady. By the time he came back it was almost finished. I hadn't moved at all, except to bring the mug to my lips with mechanical regularity.

Even when the catch lifted, I still didn't move, only muttering, "Is she --"

Hearing the murmured "yes", I sank back into my misery. It pooled in my gut, a weighty stone refusing to shift.

Sophia had left. That was that. She'd abandoned me and for what? Some poxy bit of propriety. So what? Didn't she understand how much more important all this was? How much was at stake?

Dr Hamilton was leaning against the bay window, anxious eyes flicking up and down the street. Deep lines of worry etched his mouth, forehead creased in uneasiness.

Needing to direct my hurt somewhere, I went on the offensive. "So, you're abandoning me as well? You think this some sort of wild goose chase? Typical." Bitterness

replaced my grief. "Can't count on anyone." I stood, completely clueless as to where I intended to go but, in that moment, not caring at all.

"Darcy," said Dr Hamilton, his voice weary. "Have I not said before? Beware taking your friends for granted. Stay a moment and listen."

I did so, unsure how to arrange my limbs. He took in my perplexed state and let out a soft, low laugh.

"And here I was sure I would be the uneasy one of the pair." He shook his head, then leant forward, steeping his hands together. "The accusations laid at my door by Sophia must be addressed. I do not know how to justify some of my life's actions but perhaps I might offer some explanation?"

I nodded, surprised at the direction the conversation was taking. In all honesty, I didn't care who he was getting with – that was one tiny element in the madness. Saying his piece clearly mattered, so I didn't interrupt. If anything, it reminded me how much of a prude Sophia was and I became angry all over again.

Misinterpreting my scowl, he sighed heavily, getting to his feet, and staring out the window. "Perhaps you too wish to depart. Perhaps you would if able. I therefore offer to find you lodgings elsewhere in a more respectable establishment. You must not stay simply because of circumstance if virtue bids you leave." He stood framed against the window, looking away, head resting against one raised arm.

"When you're done being a drama queen?" I said lightly. He whipped round. "Friendship keeps me here." I said, getting up to meet him. "Yours and mine. I know you're a good man and a good friend. That's all that matters."

"You are not curious to know more?" he said, still unsure of me. "Find out the nature of my misdeeds?"

"I can guess," I said with a shrug. "And I bet they're not even that mis-deedy."

A slow smile played across his face. "You have guessed much about me, I believe," he said with a laugh. "Much has gone unspoken between us, yet there exists such a degree of trust and understanding. Is not that uncommon?"

"I think those are the best kinds of friendships," I said smiling back at him. "Knowing you can talk if you want, but also knowing it's okay if you don't."

He gave me a searching look before giving a small nod. He knew without me having to say it. I didn't want to talk about Sophia, and he wouldn't press me. The situation was overwhelming enough. The almost-something-moment that happened

between us would have to be shunted into a tiny little box and ignored for now. I could burn that bridge when I got to it later.

I breathed out slowly. "Big night," I said, trying for a winning smile that was more of a grimace. "Finding my dad after all these years."

"It is quite natural you know," he said, glancing at my trembling hands. "To feel some trepidation over this reunion. I will not think less of you for acknowledging it."

I balled my hands into fists, willing them to steady. "Let's add that to the list of things we don't need to talk about, okay?" I said, keeping my voice light.

"As you please," he said, giving me an exasperated smile. "Though I own, you are an odd dog. Queer as any I ever met."

"You can talk," I scoffed, pointedly looking him up and down, raising my eyebrows as my gaze lingered over his chest.

"I was not born as I choose, but I choose who I am," he said, lifting his chin. "If that makes me a queer cove, then so be it."

Silence lay heavy between us, and I chose my next words carefully. "I think it makes you brave," I said in all seriousness, hoping he didn't misunderstand my earlier teasing. "I think it makes you interesting. And I'm proud to be your friend." Not wanting him to see the tears springing to my eyes, I jumped forward, wrapping my arms round him in a tight hug. Though startled, he didn't fight me off, instead resting the side of his head on the top of mine in brief acknowledgment.

"Right," I said as I released him, clearing my throat. "Nearly time to go."

The air was close and humid as we set off, thick and full of the promise of heavy rainfall. I would have welcomed it, just to relieve the night's stuffiness.

As we scurried down the High Street, Hamilton's eyes swept left to right. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and we met no one. Pitch black, we turned down a narrow passage that opened onto Gloucester Square. Light from the street's oil lamps didn't reach this narrower recess. Tall buildings closed us in on all sides, the atmosphere claustrophobic. On the opposite side of the small square was another passage shrouded in darkness. Stepping towards it, Hamilton grabbed my sleeve.

"Wait a moment," he breathed, his golden eyes catching something in the gloom. Then I saw it -- a sense of darkness detaching itself from one form and shifting to another. Finally, a discernable shape moved forward, stepping into the light.

“Evening to you ye, gents,” smiled McGuigan, baring his teeth. “A fine night for it, wouldn’t ye say?”

“Where’s my dad,” I said, unable to bear the tension any longer.

McGuigan leant against the alley wall and laughed his horrible chilling laugh.

Out of the dark, unseen hands shot out and grabbed me. To my right, Hamilton was thrown to the ground.

“We had a deal, McGuigan,” roared Hamilton, his face pressed into the hard cobblestones.

“Sure, it’s only business,” said McGuigan, crouching down and peering into his face. “Naught against ye, like. But we can’t be having ye get in the way of our cause.”

Hamilton managed to twist his head and free his mouth, gasping with the effort. “Cause?” He scoffed, somehow still managing to maintain his haughty air despite the circumstances. “What do you villains care for but money? What would you risk your rascal carcasses over -” The rest of his speech was cut off by a vicious shove from his captor, twisting his face back into the hard ground.

“Don’t!” I screamed, kicking wildly and getting nowhere. “You’ll suffocate him!”

“Quiet the wench, will ye, lads?” said, McGuigan, still crouched down, considering Hamilton with icy detachment as his struggles became weaker and weaker. A rank cloth was stuffed into my mouth, shoved so far back I bent double, gagging. McGuigan ignored me, even as I became more frantic.

Finally, he flicked his hand and his thug hauled Hamilton to his feet. He was still conscious but fading, spluttering dirt from his filthy mouth, face purple.

“We wouldn’t want to finish you off now,” said McGuigan, clasping Hamilton by the jaw and raising his head up. “You’ve a fair few enemies, Doctor. One in particular wants satisfaction and will pay handsomely for the privilege.” He patted Hamilton’s cheek, the sound a hard slap in the night. Hamilton barely flinched, almost out. “Put him down the vault,” he called to his comrades, gesturing to a narrow passage of dank stone steps behind him. They bundled Hamilton down, his collapsed body crashing into its hard floor.

I smashed my heel into the toe of the man holding me, eliciting a grunt of pain, repaid in kind as he ripped my shoulders back until my muscles screamed in agony.

“Now, now,” said McGuigan, turning his attention back to me. “Rest easy. We wouldn’t be putting you in there, now.”

I blinked, unable to comprehend the meaning. Then I looked at McGuigan who grinned, enjoying my confusion. "Even the best of friends must part ways. We've a place in mind better befitting a lady."

They knew. My blood froze at the implication. In that moment, I'd never felt so vulnerable. Boxed in. No escape. McGuigan square in front, an unseen captor behind. Hamilton taken. Sophia bailed. And my dad? Had these people captured him too? Had they killed him? Or was he never even here.

Hopelessness washed over me, sapping my muscles of all their strength and resistance. I sank under the weight of it all, body going limp until I sat forward on my haunches, legs curled under. The fingers wrapped around my arms loosened just a touch.

"There now," said McGuigan, crouching down until we were nose to nose. "Best not to make a fuss. 'T'will be easier for you in the end. I won't say you'll enjoy what comes next, but you'll be the better for it. A little suffering is good for the soul."

I launched myself forward, the crown of my head smashing into his nose. McGuigan collapsed on his back screaming, clutching his bleeding face. Hearing the commotion, the thugs re-emerged from the vault, Hamilton nowhere to be seen.

Springing forward, I ran for my life. Past the vault. Through the alley. Blocked.

No time to think. Footsteps running behind. Nowhere to run. Turn right.

A bundle of cloth on the ground, supplies and there! A glint of metal. I plunged down and felt the smooth handle of a pistol.

"Don't come any closer," I screamed, pointing it at the looming mass of approaching figures. I swear, in that moment, I felt ready to shoot to kill.

A soft chuckle emerged from the dark. Not McGuigan's, but one I did know. A shape disengaged itself from the rest and stepped forward, moonlight glinting off his blonde head.

Mr. Richards.

"Ill met by moonlight, Miss de Courcy." His voice full of its usual courtesy but now with an added hardness.

"What are you doing here," I asked, the pistol hanging limp by my side, almost forgotten. "Are you with these men?"

He laughed, his cold, society laugh. The figures around him chuckled too. "No disrespect to McGuigan's fine company but we do not run in the same circles. At present we merely have interests that overlap. No, I am here to convey a message, namely, you

no longer have a welcome place at the Woodforde's table. It is my task to see you do not return. With force if necessary. It is a commission come directly from Sophia."

"LIAR!" I screamed, raising the gun and pointing it directly at his face. To my surprise, it was steady, the weight of the long barrel keeping it balanced.

He didn't flinch but continued to smile his placid smile, eyes fixed on mine.

"Quite true," he said, his smile curling into a snarl. "She wishes to remove all trace of her shameful connection with a degenerate whore. Oh yes," he added, seeing me flinch. "Upon her return to Castle Square this night she confessed all. She sincerely regrets her part in the affair. I assured her she was not to blame, for she was taken in by a creature of vile wantonness. She quite agreed and sent me hither."

"She wouldn't," I whispered, the gun lowering again. Doubt assailed me from all sides. *She left she left she left.*

"And yet," he said, tilting his head to one side, eyes full of triumph. "Here I am. Now, enough of this foolishness," he said, becoming business-like and taking a step forward. I raised the gun again, pointing it directly between his eyes.

"Miss de Courcy," he said, shaking his head in mock exasperation. "You are not going to shoot me."

"Oh yeah?" I said, squeezing the trigger until I felt the mechanisms make a tiny click. "You sure about that?"

"You don't even know how to use that barking iron!" crowed one of the voices from the alley. The dark multitude laughed, a pack of hyenas toying with their cornered prey.

"I am quite sure," said Richards, smiling once more. He took a deep breath, inhaling the night. "What is that I smell in the air?" he said, making a pantomime of looking around. "Or rather, what is the lack?" He returned his gaze to me, eyes full of malice. "Powder. That pistol is not primed." He took a step forward. "Nor is it loaded." Another step. "And lastly." The gap closed between us so that the barrel of the gun rested against his chest. "You have not even cocked it."

Click.

Nothing.

They all descended. Everything went black, memories of how I ended up at the next place swallowed in the darkness.

Regaining consciousness, a slow process. Restraints round my wrists. Lying on my back, on something hard, arms tied by my side. Hamilton's clothes gone, replaced by a scratchy, shapeless smock.

Everything sounded muffled, like I was under water. Gradually, my hearing became clearer, the monotonous drone of a lecture beating its way into my brain. Meaning dripped down slowly, like moisture wrung out of a damp rag. A religious reading, I think – lots of mentions of “fallen women” and seeking the Lord's redemption. Out of the corner of my eye, other similarly restrained women, all in the same brown smocks and all with the unmistakable air of being roughly handled. A man dressed in black with a white neckerchief and cropped hair stood in front us. He wore a sanctimonious expression, reading from a large, leather-bound Bible.

“May God have mercy on your souls,” he finally intoned, looking down his nose, before snapping his book shut to leave.

“Excuse me,” I called, wanting some sort of an explanation. The man's mouth fell open in an undignified ‘O’. It would have been funny if the situation wasn't so dire. “Who the hell are you and where the hell am I?”

Gasps issued from the girls around me, although I'm sure one of them tittered. The man purpled with rage, swelling on the spot before marching over, coat tails flapping in time to his stamps.

“How *dare* you address *me*?” he sniffed, laying emphasis on every other word. “I, who am the *chaplain* of this *borough* and deign even the *lowliest* of God's *creatures* worthy of saving. Even you *fallen* wimmin,” he added with contempt. He swept one final, disgusted look over us before flouncing out, slamming the door and locking us in.

“You didn't even answer my question!” I shouted after him. “What the hell,” I whispered softly, tugging at my restraints.

Someone laughed. “Well, Miss de Courcy, you're a cockish wench, I'll say that for ye.” I whipped my head round.

A young woman with a shiner over her right eye grinned at me. Lank hair hung about her shoulders, greasy and mouse-coloured. She shook it back, revealing scarred cheeks and a black smudge near the corner of her mouth.

“Canary,” I breathed. Without her towering hair, powdered face and shining red lips she was almost unrecognisable. Younger than I thought, probably only a few years

older than me. Only the remnants of the beauty spot – a shadow of her old, dazzling life – gave me a clue.

She chuckled again. “Canary? I might sing for ye,” she said glancing round the dismal room. “But you’ll already know we’re in trouble whether I stop, or no. Call me Liza if you will.”

“Your friend,” I said, suddenly remembering our meeting in the brothel. “Peg. She’s looking for you.”

A strange look came over her, almost like she was in pain. “Aye. Like as not she’ll be worried for me. The goosecap,” she added affectionately.

“How did you get here,” I breathed. “And where are we? What is this place?”

“Ah well,” she said sighing as a woman in the corner started sobbing quietly to herself. “Should never have walked the streets by myself, Peg said not to. But I had a fella, very particular like, always bid me come to his lodgings. Paid for a chair home but I thought to save the shillings for meself. More fool me,” she added bitterly.

“Yes, but what is this place?” I said, pulling at my restraints in frustration.

“Pest House,” she said, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world.

“A pest house?” I said slowly, looking round the airless room with its dank stone walls. “Pest... To treat fleas and lice and stuff?”

“Bless me, what you don’t know,” said Liza, laughing again, apparently finding our chat diverting. “It en’t those sorts of pest they treat us for.”

“What are they treating us for?” I asked, unable to quash my curiosity but dreading the answer.

“The French disease,” she said rolling her eyes. “They reckon all the mortis here been Frenchified.” Seeing my baffled look, she added, “We’re fireships? Tipping the token? Peppered. Got the clap? The pox.”

“Oh,” I said, horror settling over me like a swarm of insects. “They think we’ve got STDs?”

“Haven’t heard that one,” she said, staring up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “But if you mean a touch of the venereal then yes.”

“But how do they know,” I asked, outraged. “They can’t just go round accusing people of random stuff because they feel like it.”

“Not people,” she corrected, giving me a shrewd look. “Only what they call ‘low women’. They think us “foul”, in need of repentance. An’ they don’t know whether or no

we're poxed 'alf the time. Just need to be seen cleaning up the streets, else the Society of Manners will be on them like carrion on a corpse. So, they see a mort alone, walking in certain place, at certain time o' night and they pluck us out. As to how they find out if we're poxed, well," her voice became bitter. "They have a damn fine go taking a look when they can. Not that," she said, seeing my horrified expression. "They wouldn't do that; fearful we'd pass on our taint. But they look and they look hard. The lowest and grossest insult." Her jaw clenched and she returned her gaze to the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," I said, my imagination not requiring much. Even so, I couldn't help asking more questions. "How do they treat it, though? What do they do to you?"

"Mercury," she said and although I pressed her, she would say no more about it.

"You know a lot about this place," I said, wanting to keep conversation going, if only to cover the sobs of the other women. "Have you been here before?"

"Oh no. There's no coming back to a place such as this. That would be seen as encouraging our wantonness." She laughed bitterly. "But being a *lady of easy virtue*, as they say, I know where chance might take me. Being here is none so bad. They say they can cure you of the pox and hardly a body dies from the treatment."

"Small comfort," I said, struggling against the bandages wrapped round my wrists, the hard wood of the pallet boring into my back.

"Worse is knowing naught of the outside world," she said, more to herself than me. "No word or warning to those left behind. Just hope they wait and carry on best they can till you return."

"She will," I said, remembering Peg's frantic look when speaking of her missing friend. "She won't forget."

Liza's eyes filled with tears. "What did I say? Goosecap." She cleared her throat. "How came you to be here?"

Before I could answer, the door flew open.

Three men marched in.

"That's the one," said one, jabbing a thuggish hand at me. "That's the tomboy." He had deep set eyes, a heavy brow and looked, as Sophia might say, villainous.

His companions thrust their way forward, roughly untying my wrists and forcing me to my feet, the smell of dried sweat and other foul things choking me.

"Heyday," said Liza, propping herself onto her elbows, pulling at her bandages. "Now, hold just one moment. She en't got the clap."

“Why?” sniggered one of the men holding me. “Been looking for sores down there? En’t she the one who’s...? he asked the other man.

He nodded, grinning with a horrible smile, revealing broken and decaying teeth. They dragged me off, feet slipping with futile resistance underneath, stubbing my toes and catching splinters. I was reminded vividly of my encounter at the assembly rooms. No Hamilton or Sophia to come to my rescue.

“She en’t even a harlot!” Liza screamed after us, but they paid no heed, dragging me out and shutting the door with a clang. Liza was still yelling my innocence. It gave me fresh heart and I twisted and pushed against the two men. No good.

The leader stopped and yanked my hair until I cried out.

“Reform,” he whispered, his breath hot on my face. “Do not resist.”

We looked at each other for a long moment. Catching a shard of resistance in my eyes he tugged my hair again until I gasped, “Alright! I’ll come quietly.”

“Good,” he answered before striding down the dismal, lamp-lit corridors, the two others dragging me behind. We climbed a spiral staircase, past other cells with bars over their doors.

Reaching a room at the top of the stairs, they threw me in. I staggered but kept my balance.

“Hello, Darcy,” said a familiar voice that made my stomach drop.

Chapter 24. “Rule 10. Any insult to a lady under a gentleman’s care or protection, to be considered as, by one degree, a greater offence than if given to the gentleman personally, and to be regulated accordingly.” *The Irish Code Duello*, 1777

Sunday, 30 August. Night.

Woolston House

Once more, life has taken me to new and strange places. Still, I write to you, Journal, whether I have your pages or no...

When Mama and Papa returned from their two nights at Townhill Park House, I was all anxiety, believing they must have heard some substance of Pinhorne’s tale. Fortune smiled -- they had not seen James or his friends since the first night of the party.

“No doubt on some frolic,” laughed my Papa jovially, coming to my room with Mama to see how I did. “But where is Miss de Courcy?” asked he. “You still do not look well, Sophia. I was certain she would not leave you thus.” Indeed, my face was swollen from a night filled with shed tears.

Hardening my resolve, I spoke shades of truth. “Darcy has elected to leave this house in search of her father’s hearth. That is to say, she believes she has found him at last.”

“*Believes* she has found him?” replied Mama, able as ever to find a flaw in any weak explanation. “And this belief is such she seeks him alone and unprotected?”

“She has the protection of Dr Hamilton,” said I, bitterness near consuming me all over.

“From whence does she gather this intelligence? Surely, she is better served remaining here. When will she return?”

“I do not know, do not ask me,” said I, choking back a sob, and taking refuge under the coverlets.

“We will leave you to rest,” said Mama, planting a light kiss on my head before departing. Thereafter, I languished for many hours, the sun slinking beyond the horizon, the night well advanced. Perhaps, in such a position, I might have continued for the next several days had Anne not thrust her way in with intelligence impossible to ignore.

“Oh, miss!” cried she, bursting in, unheeding of both my pathetic state and vehement wish to be left alone. “Such a thing! How to tell it? Indeed! How to believe the

truth of it? But I knew, 'pon first hearing of it, you would wish to know, it concerning yourself and –”

“Heaven save us, Anne!” I cried, emerging from my nest of bedding to cease this non-stop prattle. “Say what you must and have done.”

“Well, Miss, it’s like this y’see. You know how you’re always telling me to pay no heed to servants’ gossip?”

“A directive, presumably disregarded?” I replied drily.

“I do try, Miss. But oftentimes it’s useful, see? And such a thing! It’s to do with... well. Names weren’t mentioned but a body can guess when put to.”

It took all powers of resistance not to return my head to its recently vacated haven. To be interrupted for something of such little consequence! Mere hearsay from the servants’ hall -- disputed names and facts! Still, I affected interest since Anne was not to be put off.

“An appointment!” she shrieked, coming to it at last, her body rigid with the damning announcement. “A meeting by the young Mr. Woodforde.”

“What of it?” said I, sinking back down, lethargy creeping over me. “My brother is his own master and may see who he chooses.”

“Nay!” she cried, passion roused by my apathy. “’Tis a meeting held on Netley Common. An appointment *at dawn*.” She pronounced this last with dreadful emphasis, leaving no doubt to her meaning.

“Dawn?” I replied, attention now caught. “You are certain? But surely,” said I, more to myself than Anne. “It cannot be what it seems. James is feckless but not so foolhardy to risk his life in a fancied affair of honour.”

“Nay but ‘tis so!” cried Anne. “Honour was the very word! And the need to punish the man’s conduct.”

“But who’s conduct? And why? Who has provoked James to take such action?”

“The name weren’t said,” she twisted her hands fretfully. “But ‘twas overhead by Jenny, the maid-of-all-work, ‘that society quack’, she said. And so, says I, who else but Dr Hamilton?”

“Hamilton?” said I, surprise all but thieving seriousness from the matter. “How can he have offended my brother? It is impossible. They have not encountered each other these several days. I have been in the Doctor’s company and seen naught to offend James.”

“There, Mistress!” said Anne, stamping her foot, frustrated by my slowness. “You have it! The matter concerns you! The young master believes the Doctor has seduced you and is determined to punish his conduct.”

Were her countenance not so desperate, I should have laughed. Seduce me?

Absurd.

“There has been some misunderstanding,” said I, finding voice to answer. “It is a jape, or James has been misled. Where is he now?”

Aye, James must have been tricked into these hot-headed proceedings. Goaded into action on some perceived sense of family dishonour. My knowledge on such matters is limited, but my understanding was that ‘seconds’ are generally charged to resolve the dispute before blood is spilled. Had such a course been undertaken by his friends? Pinhorne is a fool and would encourage James into any imprudence, but Richards? Surely, he would see my brother right.

“I have it from the stable boy!” cried she, near frantic. “The young master left this morn’ to buy a pair of pistols and make ready for the duel. He goes straight to Netley Common to fight the Doctor at day’s break.”

There seemed no denying it now. James’ course seemed bent upon destruction. Springing from the bed, all fatigue fell away from my limbs.

“This cannot be,” said I, voice fortified with authority. “I will determine the truth of it.”

“How, miss?” whispered Anne, quite awed at the change in my resolve.

“Fetch Hulbert. Tell him to bring the carriage round.”

Flying down to the stables, the empty bays of Hector and Hotspur all but confirmed Anne’s story, yet still, I wished for further proof.

Several anxious moments passed until Hulbert arrived, bleary eyed and cross. He moved at a snail’s pace, harnessing two horses, rather than the splendid four as when we rode from Thropden.

Anne huddled in the darkened stables, suffering to stay behind and tell a tale to cover my absence.

Hulbert drove the carriage to the glover’s shop and had hardly reigned in the horses before I flew from the carriage into Doctor Hamilton’s apartments. The door was unlocked, the lamps doused. Yet this was not a place recently vacated. A night and a day had passed since they last were here.

Turning about the room, I made my minute observation. It was out of the question the Doctor was calling on his patients, his medical bag lay open before me.

Might he have simply left Southampton? But no. Some coin was carelessly tossed on the table.

And where was Darcy in all this? Did she stand as his second? Absurd.

There was nothing for it but to seek the men on the Common and prevent this dreadful calamity. Snatching up Hamilton's bag and the coins, I hurried back onto the street, where Hulbert fought off sleep

"Netley Common!" I called, jerking him from a stupor.

Praying there would be no need for its use, I examined the contents of Dr Hamilton's surgeon's bag. Amongst the assortments of drugs and dressings was a small kit of needle, thread and knife used for minor procedures, as well as a quantity of moss.

The night was dark. Several times, Hulbert checked our pace so our steeds would not stumble on New Road to Northam Bridge. How much quicker the journey would fly if we could take the Itchen Ferry!

My thoughts galloped apace with the horses. Why would James engage himself thus? For family honour? Such a thing might be possible. Our humble life in Portsmouth never truly left us, and perhaps he still felt the lash of those early years in the Naval Academy. A hard period of his life that I knew he resented and tried to lose in gaming houses and bottles of fine drink. One barbed remark might prick his delicate pride, particularly if gentlemanly honour was questioned.

From whence had this tale of my seduction arisen? Had Pinhorne, no stranger to stirring the pot, indeed recognised me under the Bar Gate? But that did not explain Dr Hamilton's supposed part. Unless... merely glimpsing Darcy garbed in male apparel, he mistook her for Dr Hamilton?

Yet would Pinhorne go so far? True, the fool was fond a lark but a coward through and through. If Pinhorne did bring the scandal to James, goading him into challenging Hamilton, he would have to stand second. Acting as a mediator for a duel required a cool head and controlled manner, both of which Pinhorne lacked.

We crossed the river, fishing boats bobbing unattended, fog hanging in damp clouds over the surface. Moonlight glinted off the smooth water, still as glass. Not a soul stirred abroad.

It was two miles yet to Netley Common and still there was the issue of *where* the party might assemble. Near enough to the road that should aught go ill, a quick getaway might be possible; far enough out of sight proceedings would not attract notice.

Passing through Bitterne, the first signs of sleepy activity appeared with tradesmen beginning their day. I nearly called Hulbert to stop, teetering on the edge of begging their assistance, but what could I say? Seek their advice on where a gentleman might hold a duel on the common? Where was the wisdom in spreading the scandal

further? On we rode, knowing the power to stop this thing lay with me alone, though I wished with all my heart otherwise.

“Why are we stopping?” I called, feeling the motion of the carriage slow to a halt.

“We’re at the Common, Miss Woodforde,” returned Hulbert from above. “Where now?”

Leaning out of the carriage window, we had reached a fork in the road, both routes enfolding a corner of green turf stretching beyond view,

The dull night was slipping away, a grey morning creeping about the edges of the horizon. Still, the plain became no more visible, heavy swathes of mist hanging about the grounds.

Instinct bade me take the road to the right, leading into the very heart of the Common. There beyond lay the ruins of Netley Abbey, site of so merry an evening and where Darcy supposedly saw her father.

Could this be a likely spot for a duelling ground? Yes. The trees offered discreet cover, the fork giving several points of escape if necessary.

Taking up Dr Hamilton’s medical bag, I bid Hulbert turn the carriage about and keep an alert eye.

“Be prepared to beat a hasty retreat,” said I, heaving the bag over my shoulder. “Call me if you see anything of note.”

Ignoring his protestations, I darted away, pulling my cloak tight, the single button tied high round my chin. It did little to warm me – my own sense of dread chilled me too completely to the marrow.

Skirting about the cluster of trees, every bush and bramble looming in the mist appeared as some assembled party. There seemed little sign of life, bar the disturbed activity of some creature in the undergrowth. A path in the trees opened onto a clearing, through which the fog lay at its thickest.

At the rustle of movement ahead, I stayed my progress, catching the following exchange:

“Dog! I say you are a villain and a rogue.” It was a voice I knew well, my own brother’s!

“Do you know where you are?” came another, more measured questioner.

“Dante’s fourth circle?” returned Dr Hamilton, apparently in a satirical mood, despite his mortal peril.

“Peace, James,” came the second voice, apparently restraining some violent action. It could only be Richards. Was he to be my brother’s second? “Though the Doctor

be without honour, let not the same be said for us. A choice lies before you, sir, in this unavoidable meeting. Make right the slight you have paid this man's family or defend your conduct with pistols. If your life be forfeit, then so be it."

"A strange proposition, given I neither know what slight I have supposedly paid, nor how I am to redress it. Though unlearned in these matters, should not such a meeting be to the mutual agreement of both parties at an appointed hour, and with my own second? Not with this oaf standing before me."

"Oaf, by Jupiter?" came the spluttered return of Pinhorne, apparently also present.

"Not to mention," continued Hamilton, unconcerned by the offence caused. "The ill usage of rough hands and even rougher words by a band of mercenary brigands? Kept overnight in a dank cell under the city, bound and gagged, before being dragged hither."

What madness was this? Had Hamilton been a prisoner this long night and day as I languished in my chamber? Surely now was the moment to make my presence known, but my brother was making his answer, and straining to hear, I made no move.

"No doubt such force was necessary to keep you restrained," declared James, untouched by remorse. "I trust my friend treated you with all the kindness you deserved. Richards certainly knows the meaning of fidelity. I requested he bring you hither and here you stand. Let no more be said of the means."

"I have a great deal more to say," cried Hamilton, amid sounds of his struggles, apparently held fast against his will, perhaps by Pinhorne. "But not of my treatment. Where is Miss de Courcy?"

"Miss de Courcy?" came my brother's reply, blank in its confusion. "What has that baggage to do with it?"

"Naught, James," Richards cut across. "Let us not forget, this concerns the honour of your house alone. Our demands are these, Hamilton. Either make right your disgraceful debauchery of Miss Woodforde through marriage, or pay for this violation with your honour, or your life."

Surprise alone held me rooted to the spot. Marriage to Dr Hamilton? Preposterous! Not only did I have no love for the man, but further, I was none too pleased with his conduct of late. And yet... to be the wife of a doctor would surely be a splendid thing. I could accompany him on his visits to the sick without hindrance. Indeed, no one would think it strange that a wife was a helpmeet in all things, including works that bettered one's fellow creatures. The knowledge I could acquire! If Dr Hamilton allowed me to assist him in his procedures, then perhaps in time I might carry them out myself unaided.

I was given little time for my wild fancies, for Dr Hamilton made his answer.

“I do assure you, gentleman, this accusation of seduction is quite false. I hold Miss Woodforde in too high esteem. She is a maid; of that I am certain.”

“Poppycock!” cried Pinhorne, no doubt still smarting from the doctor’s earlier insult. “I saw you last night under the Bar Gate with Miss Woodforde, in a most *intimate* position--”

“Spare the details,” interjected James in tones of disgust.

--just so, James,” blustered Pinhorne before continuing. “I saw you, making an attempt on Miss Woodforde’s virtue, plain as day, though ‘twas night. I’d swear my oath to it, as would Richards, there also.”

My blood froze. So, Pinhorne had recognised me, and what was more, his companion had been none other than Richards. Darcy, being rigged in Dr Hamilton’s clothes, had passed for the latter in Pinhorne’s mind.

“I...” there was a long pause as Hamilton seemed to find the words. “I can give no answerable explanation for my conduct. If I have erred then so be it. I cannot deny my presence under the Bar Gate.”

“Ah hah!” cried Pinhorne. “So what’s it to be Hamilton, eh?”

“Gentlemen, I regret to say, I cannot marry the honourable Miss Woodforde, though I esteem her greatly. It would be unlawful for me to do so.”

Wonder beyond wonder! What could this mean? Again, I had no time to ruminate, for my brother’s angry response came swift.

“So, this your answer?” cried James, his passion rising to a pitch. “Your actions must answer for your conduct.”

“Peace, James,” repeated Mr. Richards, apparently restraining my brother. “It is as it should be. You do not want this rogue for a brother-in-law, not when there are other, better men.”

“Just so, Richards,” replied Dr Hamilton, a hint of his old satire back. “I am certain one particularly comes to mind. But enough of this. If this must be, then so it be it.”

“Have you the pistols, Richards?” panted my brother eagerly.

“Primed and ready,” said Mr. Richards. “Let us move to the plane,” with that, the four men moved off.

It seemed a lifetime passed in the span of a few breaths. Yet still I stood, routed to the spot.

Dr. Hamilton had *lied*. He had accepted responsibility for my indiscretion rather than plead his own innocence. Why? Had his quick mind penetrated the truth of what

occurred? He was willing to mask my own shameful secret with an undeserved acknowledgement of accountability. His integrity astounded me. It made me braver. Till that moment, I never knew myself. There were stores of courage within, now rising to the surface.

Shame. For *shame*. Though I did not fully comprehend my feelings towards Darcy, I was not ashamed of *them*. Society may look ill on my choices but that counted for naught if I could not live with my own actions. Now was the time to act. Straightening my shoulders with new determination, I sprang forward, leaping after the party.

The men had moved quickly, James and Hamilton already assembled in position and pacing out towards their doom.

“No!” I cried, voice feeble as my limbs, carrying no further than half a dozen useless yards.

They stopped. Turned.

A great bang rent the morning air. Shouts of confusion. Then, another.

Two shots fired.

Smoke from the pistols’ discharge melded with the morning’s mist, consuming all parties. It cleared, revealing... naught. The figures had apparently vanished. Through the brush, my skirts dragging on the damp bramble, I ran. As I dashed closer to the scene, my heart seemed to fail. The nearest duelists had collapsed. It was Hamilton who lay alone, fallen, not stirring. To him I ran.

The sleeve of his left arm was entirely covered with blood. The sight of it, instead of weakening, strengthened my resolve. I saw my way through.

Find the wound.

Stay the flow of blood.

I threw myself onto the ground beside him, heedless of the mud and blood seeping onto my gown.

“George,” I whispered, touching his deathly pale face, finding no response. “Can you hear me, George?” The situation being desperate, I took action.

Opening his bag, I drew out a variety of raiment’s consistent with his trade: bandages, smelling salts, bottles, herbs wrapped in paper, until finally seizing on the object most needed – his surgical kit.

Taking up a pair of long edged, steel scissors, I cut away his now soaked shirt sleeve, revealing the gore underneath. With a bandage, I next dabbed the wound, trying to discern the damage. The source of blood streamed from his shoulder and with as much care as possible, I shifted his arm, adjusting his position to better see the rear of his shoulder.

Though blood pooled beneath, I detected no further sign of hurt. The bullet had not left his body.

A groan escaped him and eyelids fluttering, he opened them.

“Damnable way to start a morning,” he muttered, flickering his glance to the sky before finding my face. “Devil are you doing here?”

“The ball is still within,” said I, sparing no time for meaningless pleasantries. “I fear it is lodged against the bone.”

“You’ve spoiled one of my best linens,” said he, seemingly more distressed by the state of his attire than health. “Fine bleached Holland. Cost me a pretty penny, no mistake...” To my alarm, his voice was fading and recalling the smelling salts, I placed them under his nose.

“Wha- what?” said he, returning to his senses. “Ah yes,” taking in his mangled limb. “We were talking of ruined linens.”

“Never mind that!” I cried. “Damn your linen. I will mend your shirt at another, less urgent moment.”

“Your skill with a needle and thread may yet prove useful,” said he, spying his medical bag at my side. “But you say the ball is still within? Then it must come out at once. Hand me my rongeur.” Unwrapping the leather thongs, I pulled out the heavy handled pliers with flat-tipped jaws. Taking them from me with his right hand, he made a clumsy adjustment before hovering over the injured flesh. The little colour remaining in his face drained away.

“No good,” said he through clenched teeth. “The angle is impossible. I lack the proper dexterity. I...” he groaned once more, sweat springing to his brow. “You must remove it yourself,” said he, lifting the rongeur with feeble power. “Else the blood will continue to pour forth and with it my life. Take it,” added he, now with more urgency.

I did so, finding my hand quite steady. Upon closer inspection, the wound was just below the shoulder in the upper part of the arm. With my fingers I pushed back the flesh around the circle of gore from whence blood pulsed. The Doctor gasped with pain but made no further sign of distress, taking up a wad of bandage and thrusting it between his teeth.

There! The flattened edge of the ball was just visible amidst the ruin of tissue. Wasting no more time, I plunged the rongeur within, seeking purchase on the bullet and withdrew at once.

“Jack whore!” he gasped, eyes bulging. “Zounds. Mine arse. That hurts,” broken curses continued through his makeshift muzzle. Though in mortal pain, he seemed yet to fit to give me orders. “Is it all out? Does the ball seem intact?”

Despite being covered in a quantity of gore, the ball appeared whole, without jagged edges.

“Yes,” said I, turning the instrument this way and that to make certain.

“Then press the wound with sphagnum moss and bind it as best you can. We must away before the watch is upon us. Where is my coat? ‘Twill be keep the whole in a better state.”

“Yes,” said I absently, marveling at my success. “Yes,” I repeated, with more conviction. Taking up the last of his bandages, I pressed hard on the wound, fastening them in place using the torn sleeves of his shirt, cut into strips, winding them round the upper part of his arm and looping it under the armpit and over his shoulder to make it secure. Finding his fallen outer article, I helped him shrug it over his wounded extremity, binding it all tight, his left hand resting below his clavicle like some perverse declaration of love.

The doctor was brave throughout, though the procedure pained him dear. Helping him to a seating position, he shook his head.

“We must return to my apartments,” said he in somewhat slurred tones. “The wound, it... it must be properly bound.”

A cry rent the air, a scream of agony and despair.

“James?” I whispered, voice trembling, every nerve affected.

“What?” said Hamilton, suddenly alert. “Nay, impossible – it cannot be. Miss Woodforde,” his eyes met mine, all seriousness. “I assure you; I did not fire upon your brother. Nay, I did not fire at all. On my life! ‘Tis against my oath as a physician. When the time came, I did not shoot, nor indeed take aim. I was deloping.”

“Deloping? You mean, you aimed your pistol at the sky? Then, how came he to be hurt?”

“Little enough time to answer riddles,” said he, rising to his feet with great effort. “The procedures have been grossly maltreated in this duel. However, at least one rule was observed – a surgeon is on sight. If there is a man in need of medical attention, then I must see to him. Come.” After a few staggered steps, he found his balance and strode across the plain. I followed in his wake, having gathered up the tools of his trade, thrusting them into his bag.

In the interim, the fog had descended once more – one could barely see past one’s nose. It swirled about our feet as we trailed forward, gathering in gusts and dispersing into mist.

There before us, lay a great quantity of blood, dashed across the grass.

The ground tipped beneath me. Had I fallen to my knees? Feverish as though in a troubled dream, I ran my fingers through the turf, wet with the morning’s dew and blood. “How can this be,” said I, fear rising within. “JAMES!” I screamed, again and again, voice tearing through the skies.

“Here,” said Hamilton, some feet ahead, his figure a silhouette in the gloom. I crawled, not trusting my limbs to properly function.

Reaching him at last, I found Dr Hamilton beside the lifeless body of my brother. Such a vast quantity of blood I have never seen. It peppered the entirety of James’ torso, covering his beautifully tailored silk waistcoat, customarily pristine. Even his face was not spared, grazed with shot. More worrying was his pallid complexion, blue lips and utter stillness.

Kneeling on his right side, I trailed my gaze along the path of destruction wrought across his body, falling at last on the mangled remains of his hand. One finger was clean blown away, the rest faring little better. The crumpled and blackened remains of ruined metal lay by him.

Two shots fired.

“Damn pistol,” said Dr Hamilton with bitterness, kicking it aside. “Must have misfired. He sank to his haunches on James’ other side, taking up his wilted wrist. Then reaching for his bag, he drew a small knife, hovering it just over James’ parted lips. Several moments passed before he examined the blade.

“A breath of life,” said he, showing me the fogged metal. “Though faint. His last cry cost him his final strength. We need to get him indoors at once. Back to my rooms. Where are his friends? Did the cowards leave him in such a state?”

Nearby retching drew our attention. Out of the mist staggered Pinhorne, clammy and covered in blood and other bodily excretions. More than usual, he looked a man lost of all sense and reason.

“Get here, clod pole, and make yourself useful,” ordered Hamilton, his look full of loathing. “He must be moved out of the damp air. First, we stay the flow of blood.” Seeing Pinhorne routed to the spot, a pillar of fright, Dr Hamilton’s eyes narrowed in disgust. Handing me more of the bandages, he rose to his feet, marched over to Pinhorne and with his uninjured arm, seized a quantity of his shirt and dragged him back to my brother.

“If you were coward enough to leave your friend in such a state, the least amends you can make is assist in keeping him alive.”

Meek as beaten dog, Pinhorne took my proffered bandages and made pitiable attempts to dab James’ wounds, pausing often, apparently suppressing the urge to vomit.

Never have I seen a man look so pathetic. My brother, his friend, lay on the threshold of death beside us, likely caused by this fool’s own mischief, and there he sat, near collapsing at the sight.

Unable to bear his feebleness any longer, I spoke. “You are a worthless creature,” I began, glaring amid the ruined flesh of my brother’s body. “I knew you to be a silly, idle fop but thought you at least a loyal companion to James. Yet, you and Richards were so quick to abandon him! May the shame haunt you both to your graves.”

He winced, though whether from a fresh onset of nausea or my damning words, I could not say. Finding voice at last, he said, “I could not, I — Richards bid me stay but the sight of it all, it was too...” he broke off, unable to continue.

“Where is Richards?” said Hamilton, taking a measure of James’ pulse once more. “We will need his strength if we are to successfully move him. There is no doubting your stout heart, Miss Woodforde,” said he, giving me a faint smile. “But a collapsed body is a heavy burden indeed. Your brother is large and wounded as I am, can be no more than a guide, much less support. I have little to no faith in *you*,” he added, dismissing Pinhorne with a flick of his hand.

“He went to fetch the horses,” said Pinhorne, now taking great gulps of air. “He too saw the need to get James out of the open.”

“Horses?” cried Dr Hamilton, dismayed. “He would not last a hundred yards in the saddle – not like this. Were *you* to ride with him? Or walk beside? What is the mount, could it take the weight of two men?”

“Do not ask me, I do not know,” said Pinhorne, shaking his head like an old sow attempting to warn off bothersome flies. “It all occurred so quick and such a deal of blood, I...”

“I came in the carriage,” said I, cutting Pinhorne off in his feeble explanations. “Hulbert is with it, perhaps if I summon him, we may yet—” The sound of hooves was a welcome interruption. Whether the law or a mere passerby, I cared not, so long as they were the means of delivering my brother’s life. Out of the mist came Richards, leading three horses, a pistol hanging at his belt.

More troubling was his expression, decidedly complacent. This fell away entirely upon catching sight of our trio gathered on the ground.

“Sophia?” said he, surprise removing formality of address.

“There is no time!” Dr Hamilton’s commanding tone rending through the heavy air. “Go you now, Miss Woodforde and fetch the carriage. Pinhorne, you oaf, make yourself of use and hold fast the horses. Richards, a word.” Seeing me hesitate, he near lost composure, repeating - “Fly! Fly at once,” - urgency etched in every line of his face. “You do not yet know the danger. Fly!”

Gathering up my skirts, I flew from the scene, as though pursued by the very Devil himself.

The sound of angry voices, raised above the morning birdsong and rattling carriage wheels guided us back to the spot, else we might still be searching for my dying brother on that miserable common.

“Of what do you accuse me, sir?” came the voice of Richards, dignified yet undeniably affeared.

“No small thing. Merely, consorting with highwaymen, kidnapping, an attempt at murder. Whether mine or this man who lies before us near perished, I cannot tell.”

A duel at dawn takes place in a removed location. Two shots are fired. Both combatants are wounded, yet one swears he engaged in deloping.

Two shots fired.

Who shot the second?

Horror subsumed me. Richards, such a villain? Painted with the smiling countenance of friendship, all the while plotting my brother ill?

“Absurd,” protested Richards. “You dishonoured Miss Woodforde, James had no choice but to meet you.”

“And you gave him the pistols, no? They are of the same ilk as the one on your person. His misfired. And the second shot? From you. You would have me blamed for your friend’s destruction.”

A pause.

“He is no friend of mine,” sneered Richards, his malice unrecognisable to the smooth-tongued man who had charmed my family. “Upstart that he is, beneath my consequence in the ordinary course of events. Through mischance, the Woodfordes received an inheritance to which they have little right. I am merely keeping wealth within its proper sphere – its proper class.”

“So, you remove James and create a scandal around myself and Sophia, leaving her little choice but to take your offer of marriage and save her reputation?”

“Leaving my way clear to the Thropden estate, free from the stain of the Woodforde name,” agreed Richards, triumphant. “Theirs is a borrowed respectability that should never have been theirs. Without it, they would be back in the dirt and squalor of Portsmouth docks, scraping a living amongst the filth who live there.”

A burning hatred coursed through me with such suddenness, all breath flew from my lungs. I screamed gasping for cool air as I attempted to master the heat’s power. So vivid was its presence, it seemed to appear before me in my mind’s eye, first a mere gleam, then as a red blaze crackling my bones, bursting, flower-like, into bloom across my skin.

I swayed, teetering on a knife’s edge. Regaining myself, I swept forwards, finding Richards vanished.

“Where is he?”

“Fled,” said Dr Hamilton, still bent over James. “When he heard you roar, he knew the game was up.”

“We must find him,” said I, turning about wildly. “He cannot be far if on foot.”

“And will you pursue him?” replied Dr Hamilton irritably, wincing as he stood. “Alone, unaided and whilst your brother shuffles off this mortal coil?”

“He must answer for his actions.”

Dr Hamilton held my gaze for a long moment. “Come, Sophia you are a healer, not a Fury seeking vengeance. Your skills are needed here.”

Rage coursed through me unchecked, burning away sense and reason. With a great effort, I doused the sensation, leaving them smouldering ashes within the hearth of my heart. He was right. I am a healer. I seek to aid and do no harm. Thoughts of revenge must wait.

Cajoling Pinhorne to action and directing myself and Hulbert, Dr Hamilton guided James’ limp form into the carriage. The doctor dragged himself up onto the box to sit with Hulbert, insisting he direct our course. Pinhorne was bid to fetch a list of medicines and ingredients post haste, to which he did, hunched over the saddle – a forlorn figure.

I stayed within the carriage with James, mopping his now feverish brow with the one scrap of lace on my person not covered with blood or grime.

“Be of stout heart, Jamie,” I whispered, quelling my mounting dread. “We shall soon see you right.”

Hardly five minutes passed before the carriage juddered to a halt – not half enough time to reach the Itchen, much less Southampton town itself.

“Why have we stopped? Is it the Watch?” I gasped, flinging open the carriage door. Before us was a large and ancient house, highly ornamented and set within the

shades of an extended coppice. The mansion was situated within a truly romantic scenery: views of the Southampton water peeped through the sequestered wooded veil, the early morning's gloom now giving way to what promised to be a bright day.

From above, Hamilton struggled down to *terra ferma*, wincing at the effort but manfully shaking off the hurt before leaping up the stone steps and hammering upon the great black door.

"Where are we?" I called, seeing villains in every shaded gloom. "I thought we were to return to your lodgings."

"Change of plan," said he, striding past me to check my brother's pulse, brow etched with worry. "I felt it unwise to return to so visible a site. Particularly with Richards and McGuigan at large."

Though a flurry of questions bustled at my bosom, any further inquiries was put paid by the arrival of a cross looking servant.

"Go and fetch her Ladyship," cried Dr Hamilton, without preamble. "Tell her Dr Hamilton is here. The matter is of life and death. Fetch as many men as you can, I will need assistance in carrying in the invalid."

Too startled to object, the servant beat a hasty retreat, whether to carry out the doctor's orders or return with bullies to send us on our way, I knew not.

"What —"

"We are at Woolston House," said Dr Hamilton, swiftly cutting me off. "The property of Lady Holland. Though seldom occupied by her Ladyship, I happen to know she is here taking the waters for the summer season."

Catching my disapproving glance, he added, "No doubt you would describe her as a widow unsafe from my powers of seductions." Cheeks overspread with blushes, I attempted to stammer out some sort of apology, which he waved away with an airy and dismissive scoff. "She is a dear friend. I know she will help us."

As if his words summoned the fabled hostess, she appeared as a vision, robed in a magnificent blue silk housecoat and framed under the portico.

"A little earlier than your accustomed hour, George?" she called in a quavering soprano's voice, affecting supreme indifference at the scene before her. How we must have appeared! The doctor, in his makeshift sling and bloody clothes. I, a perfect stranger, no doubt a slattern to her eyes, blood and mud smeared across my person. Behind, visible through the open carriage door, the dreadful figure of my wounded brother. Though remarkably calm, I detected a quirk of the eyebrow, betraying no more than a slight show of surprise.

“Harriet,” sighed the doctor in tones of relief. He leapt the few stairs and saluted her warmly and with great affection. I busied myself with James, unwilling to witness any moment of intimacy.

“But, *mon dieu*,” she cried, stepping away from the embrace to survey him with greater scrutiny. “You have been in some *contre*?”

“A mere scratch,” said he, gesturing to his wounded shoulder with a shrug. “My opponent is far worse off, though, I hasten to add, not by my hand.” Becoming serious, he clasped her hand. “He is grievous ill, Harriet. I would save him.”

“Say no more.” With a snap of her fingers, a manservant appeared at her elbow more staff soon appearing. Put to work, they conveyed my brother up the stairs, drops of his blood falling to mingle with the claret-coloured carpet. I dogged their heels all the way, finding no compunction in ordering them to take greater care. Dr Hamilton and Lady Holland brought up the rear, her musical voice floating over the grunts and scuffles of her labouring servants. It vexed me beyond belief that this woman considered James’ suffering a mere jape, set before her like mere harlequinades in a pantomime.

We entered a comfortable room, less ostentatious than the house’s exterior belied, with lightly proportioned furniture, the wallpaper a tasteful pink. The men laid James upon the bed, as I supported his head. Released from their burden, the room was cleared of all, excepting myself, Dr Hamilton and Lady Holland. On she wittered in her high trill, distracting from the rather urgent matter at hand. More infuriating was Dr Hamilton’s apparent indulgence of her inanities. Affecting to ignore this interchange between beau monde socialites, I set about to save my brother. Pulling back his tattered articles, I near sank under the sight of angry wounds, already inflamed and no doubt soon to fester. Several metal shards seemed buried deep under his skin and certainly beyond my skill to extract.

Leaping to my feet, I practically collapsed into Dr Hamilton who stood unbeknownst at my elbow.

“Remove the shot, before it poisons his blood” I cried, clutching at his sleeve.

“You are too hasty, my dear,” warbled Lady Holland, sweeping between us to peer at the inert figure in her rooms. James barely stirred throughout.

“What would you know of it,” I retorted, tone as snappish as my patience. “Do you merely wish to prolong the tragic entertainment? Our presence is not some passing amusement for you to occupy hours otherwise spent in idleness--” I might have continued in this vein had not a servant arrived, bearing a steaming bowl that elicited a pungent scent, not unlike boiled cabbage.

“Just here, Smith,” directed Lady Holland, gesturing to a mahogany tripod table, the top of which she revolved into place. “And you have the compress? Good.” Taking this from him, she dipped it into the bowl before passing it into Dr Hamilton’s good hand, who set to work, applying it to the aggravated areas. All the while I stood dumb as a dog.

Breathing deep, I found myself standing over the steaming bowl, unsure how I came to be there.

“Achillea,” said Lady Holland, at my elbow. “The warrior’s herb.”

Yarrow.

“You have an interest in botany?” said I, unable to hide my surprise.

“One of my preferred hobby-horses that gives passing amusement,” said she, a glint of mischievous humour lighting her grey eyes. Then, becoming somber, she turned to look at my brother.

“Nothing stops the blood like yarrow. Named for Achilles, you know. The remedy for those who, despite their strength and resilience, still yet have that famed weak spot they cannot protect. A place of delicate frailty inherent in our mortal existence. ‘Tis a wound we all of us carry within.”

It seemed strange to hear so girlish and affected a voice utter such philosophic words.

The room seemed to hold her words in the still air, the power of them settling on each of us. It was as though the yarrow’s perfume was drifting under our skin, sinking into the core of our being and healing that sacred wound all carried.

A groan of agony broke the spell. James stirred at last. “Here, Sophia,” said Dr Hamilton, lifting his surgeon’s bag onto the bed and beckoning me to his side. “The time has come, help me remove the pieces. This is work that requires more than two hands. Harriet, have you any laudanum? It would be better if he not wake.”

Opiate was fetched and soon administered, the three of us working quickly, an unspoken fellowship now formed. Each broken shard of metal made a sharp ting as me or Hamilton dropped it into a willow pattered, porcelain bowl, held in place by Lady Holland. Not once did she flinch, even as the gore besmirched her once pristine linens.

“That is all, I think,” said Dr Hamilton, laying aside his tools and wiping a sheen of moisture from his brow. “I think I have done.” He straightened and turning a ghastly white, sank to the floor in a dead faint.

“George!” cried Lady Holland, throwing aside the bloody bowl of shrapnel and falling to his side.

He muttered incomprehensibly, eyes half closed, the whites alone visible. Placing her lily-white hands upon his wounded shoulder, she drew them back, now scarlet. To my horror, the capes of his dark greatcoat were saturated in blood.

Peeling away his outer layers, my own hands came away, sticky and red. All that remained was his tattered shirt, the very same he condemned me for ruining earlier that day. A glint of metal flashed at his waist – a small knife.

“Nothing for it,” I muttered, taking it up and beginning to slit the fabric from neck to shoulder. To my utter amazement, Lady Holland laid her hands on my wrist, staying my progress.

I stared at her face, expressive with some livid emotion.

“Don’t,” she hissed, her entire frame shuddering. “He would not like it.”

“*Like it?*” said I, startled beyond belief. “I daresay he would much less like being dead. If I am to operate, I need to see what I am working on.”

“We all make choices,” said she, and though her voice was dreamy and far away, eyes staring off into some unknown distance, her vice-like grip on my wrist did not relent. “It would be a much crueler thing to rob him of his choice, merely for the sake of his life.”

“For the sake of his shirt!” said I, near explosion. “Would you have him die on your carpet?”

Still, her grip did not slacken and meeting her determined gaze, I knew I must either kill her, or concede.

Choosing the latter, I handed her the knife. “Cut away as much as his choice would permit,” I said icily.

Flying to his fallen bag, I drew the instruments necessary to seal his wound. Returning, I found she had cut away the entirety of his left sleeve and a portion covering his shoulder, but no more.

So much blood.

“Yarrow!” I cried, attempting to staunch his life’s flow with my fingers before finding suitable cloth. “Here! Lady Hamilton, hold here.” Whilst she applied pressure, I handed her the compress, used to save my brother, and now put to the same task for Dr Hamilton.

Finding a needle, I threaded it with dexterity, a distant part of me pleased at the steadiness of my hand.

“Remove the compress,” said I, hovering over the wound, ready to begin the surgery. Lady Holland obeyed and at once, blood oozed forth, pulsing with each failing heartbeat.

“What is it?” said she, hovering besides. “Why do you waver?”

I had read Herr Heister’s work, *A General History of Surgery* and knew of Dr Hunter’s theories couching with a needle, though was yet to put the task into practice. Confronted with the gore of a living body was another matter altogether.

Pulling the skin on either side of the wound together, I began. One, two, three, four stitches, neat as any sampler made in Thropden’s withdrawing room.

Not yet done, I took a more earnest hand in cleaning the wound, touching the bare flesh of his shoulder with little delicacy. However, Lady Holland was on hand to prevent me straying too near the doctor’s modesty, at least that is what I perceived she protected.

She seemed to be holding her breath, as though stopping air from entering her lungs could stay ill tidings with them.

Now finished with my ministrations, I laid a gentle hand on her wrist, hoping my voice was kind. “I think he will prosper, though it is hard to say of course – he lost a vast quantity of blood. Infection is our nemesis now. The wound must be cleaned again – a solution of boiled water, wine and vinegar.”

She closed her eyes, a great sigh of relief released with a portion of her fears. “Smith!” she called, still not opening her eyes. Upon the approaching sounds of his step, she stood. “Fetch the men, we are to move the good doctor into Sir Nathaniel’s appartements. They adjoin onto mine,” she added to me by way of explanation. “I wish the doctor to be near, should he take a turn for the worse.” If the servant thought his instructions strange or indeed improper, he made no sign, bowing.

Continuing her instructions, Lady Holland said, “And see that the room besides this is prepared for Miss – good heavens! I declare I do not know your name.”

“Woodforde,” said I, coming to myself again. “Sophia Woodforde. Thropden Hall. Though we stay in Castle Square when in town.” I spoke idly as though this was a mere social call and not some dire event in which two men teetered near death.

“Might I trouble you, Lady Holland, for some writing materials? My brother and I have been absent from home some time -- I must needs give some account of our whereabouts.”

She gave me a penetrating look before nodding. “Follow me.” Descending the grand staircase, she stopped a passing maid, ordering her stay with Master Woodforde until we returned. Entering a handsomely appointed study, lined with mahogany panelling, shelves filled with books bound in the same, beautifully matched gilt leather. In one corner was a terrestrial globe, the other a celestial. Seating herself at a fine davenport, Lady Holland cut herself a quill, dipping it into a silver and crystal inkpot.

“I am writing to your parents,” said she, not looking up from her apparent missive. “To thank them for the pleasure of their excellent children’s company, whom I have invited to stay with me at Woolston House. They will know it,” added she with a confident smirk before continuing. “No need to concern them with the bad business of this affair. Might you add a line about having certain articles brought here? Spare no detail. It will add credence to the tale.” Regarding me with true penetration, her humour diminished at once. “Why, child! Sit. Sit at once!”

I did so immediately, sinking into an armchair. Clarity of vision somewhat faded. There was a bustle of items brought before me and forced into my hand. Drinking a glass of wine helped return my senses and I ate a little food at Lady Hamilton’s absolute insistence.

“Ah, the chocolate is made, here, child, drink. I find it always helps restore me. Now,” said she, breaking her own fast from the platter of sumptuous food brought before us. “Kindly explain how you came to my house.”

Keeping my account brief, I began only at my setting off from Castle Square the previous night, fatigue averting any fuller explanation.

“That will do, child,” said she, when I came to our disordered arrival upon her carriage circle. “There is more to this tale. Now is not the time for hearing. You need rest. Write some word to your parents then to bed you go. I will lend you clean linens for sleep. Come, come.”

Too tired to object, I followed her orders meekly – a serf who wishes for nothing but the respite of oblivion before another day of drudgery begins.

Hulbert was duly dispatched with my note, in good humour after meat and flagon of ale enjoyed amongst my lady’s servants. Though near collapse, I insisted I hand him the missive myself, summoning enough strength to maintain a degree of deportment. The carriage receded; the Woodforde family crest still yet visible in the gloom.

Thereafter, sleep consumed me utterly. I must have slept for many hours, for it was dark when I woke, the house quiet. A taper burned besides me, which I took up and used to penetrate the dark to where my brother lay quiet. In the corner snored a maid, no doubt set to watch by Lady Holland.

Not wishing to return to my room, I retraced my earlier steps to the library, using my light to ignite the sconces.

The habit of writing is too well formed in me to neglect, even when from home. I hoped setting out the events of the previous day into some order might offer clarity, but all that comes is more questions.

Foremost in my mind is this: where is Darcy?

Chapter 25. Thin places

“Dad?”

Five years thinking he was gone. In all that time, I realised I hadn't remembered him right. His image always vague and unformed – incomplete features. The blurred outline of a man with light brown hair and copper tinted beard. The man who stood before me was clean shaven, shoulder length hair streaked liberally with grey.

He smiled, deep lines – deeper than I remembered – crinkling around his eyes.

“Darcy dear, my Deedle.” An old nickname – ‘Darcy-dear’ becoming DeeDee and then Deedle. His accent was stronger. It used to come and go, now it coated his tongue, like an extra layer of paint added to a fading wall.

Half forgotten, yet still, so familiar. Before I knew it, I was breathing him in, strong arms wrapped around me. The last time we'd hugged I barely reached his chest. Now, we were nearly the same height, my head resting on his shoulder. “They told me you were dead,” I whispered into him.

Stepping away, his face became serious, like the sun disappearing behind clouds. “Sure, they would. Simpler that way. Must've known I'd stay in my own time once I return.”

My brain jammed with a million questions, but where to begin? I just stood, drinking him in. With a shrug and a shake of his head, he turned his back, fiddling with a pouch of tobacco and lighting his pipe.

Finding my voice, I said, “Since when do you smoke?”

He snorted, eying me over the pipe's bowl before taking a deep inhalation. “The cheek on ye, I'd nearly forgotten. You wouldn't be speaking to me like that if I'd raised ye in this century.”

“So, is that — are you... How are we even here?!”

“Thin places,” he said, as if that explained everything. Seeing my blank expression, he tutted. “D'ye not know yer Celtic lore at all? There's a veil that separates the then and the now. It's like the old saying, ‘Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is smaller.’ We crossed where the veil is *thinner*. Porous. Ye can just slip through.”

“So, it’s a place?” I said, mind reeling. “If you go to a thin place you can move between times? If we went back to the same spot where I travelled, we could go back to our own time?”

“*Your* time,” he said with a shrug, taking a deep pull on his pipe. “Sure, I never really belonged there. As to your returning, well, I thought thin places were just wild landscapes and the like, somewhere ancient and austere. But now I think they pop up when needed. Putting the right people on the right paths. Sometimes brought on by a powerful emotion. What were ye thinking about when you crossed?”

You.

“But how...” I said, not answering his question.

He waved his free hand, shrugging again. “The how’s not what matters, it’s the *why*, y’see.”

“Okay...” I said slowly, trying to stay on top of my mounting frustration. “Why are we here then?”

“Taking you at your nearest meaning,” he said, gesturing around the grim little room. “We’re *here* because there’s a spot of bother that’s needing to be sorted. Plans are under way. It wouldn’t do to disrupt them. And that, my girl, includes you.”

He said all this so casually, as if his words weren’t completely earth shattering.

“Are you telling me,” I said, my voice surprisingly level considering the fury mounting in my chest. “That I’m in this *shithole* because of you? I thought you were breaking me out! You haven’t seen me in years, what kind of dad chucks his daughter into prison?”

“Sure, it’s hardly a prison,” he said with an easy smile, tilting his head as though to shake off any blame or responsibility. “Lovely building is God’s House Tower. Didn’t your Ma and I take you here to visit?”

“It’s not exactly a tourist attraction right now,” I said through gritted teeth. “They told me it’s a Pest House. To treat women with STDs!”

“Ah now,” he said, narrowing his eyes down the length of his pipe, now gone out. “Only one room is for that. The rest is for debtors and the like. Besides, I bid them not treat ye that way. No need, I’m sure.” Finding his flint, he relit the pipe, taking a grateful and luxurious draw. Breathing out a steady plume of smoke, he said. “Yer just to stay here until all the trouble blows over.”

“What does that mean?” I exploded, wanting to smash his pipe against the wall.
“Why do you need me out the way? What exactly are you up to?”

And why don't you seem happy to see me?

Pride and resentment held me back. I seethed, breathing heavily, clenching and unclenching my fists.

“Time,” he said thoughtfully, barely taking me in. “This ability of mine to move between times is a gift. I must use it for the good of my cause. A cause freeing those in bondage. It falls to me to save millions from suffering at the hands of their oppressors.”

“What cause?” I said, interested despite myself.

“The emancipation of my country. I am going to bring about the liberation of Ireland!”

Silence.

“What?” I said at last.

“Revolution!” eyes alight with a manic gleam. “It’s happening now across the water. From it, we take the spark and blaze across the sea. It happens in Haiti in years to come, why not Ireland? She suffers under the yoke of an unjust, Imperial majesty, but no more! In just a few short years there’s to be a failed uprising. Using what I’ve learned in the twenty-first century, I could make it succeed!”

“What?” I repeated, unable to manage anything else.

“Don’t you see? I fell into your time, then returned to the eighteenth century for a reason,” he paced about the room, gesturing wildly, ash from his pipe flying everywhere. “Now, when the spirit of revolution still seems rational, we gain support. Then when England’s eye is fixed on her war with France, we strike.

“Am I not a God? I have moved through time and know what the future holds. I can effect change. I lead the Sons of Chronos, and we bend time to my will!”

So, this is what you left us for?

I had mourned this man, this *lunatic*, all these years. Meanwhile he was fighting, not to return to his family but for some stupid scheme.

To cover the hurt, I scoffed, putting as much disdain into the noise as possible. He turned, genuinely surprised.

“What a total waste of time.”

No response.

I carried on, unable to hold back.

“Can’t you do something useful? Like, I dunno, speed up the abolition of slavery? In case you hadn’t noticed, Ireland is doing fine in the twenty first century. The effects of the slave trade – you know, the actual enslavement of millions of people – is still felt hundreds of years later.” I folded my arms, feeling a flush of savage pleasure flood through me at the sight of his mounting fury.

When he did manage to reply, his voice was level but clipped, speaking through a clenched jaw. “I have great sympathy for their plight, of course I do. They too are in bondage and suffer under the heavy hand of a cruel and forbidding master. But charity starts at home. We must fight our own fight. Who knows,” he added, warming to his theme. “Perhaps when the West Indian slaves see my Irish brothers throw off their Imperial tyrants, they might do the same. For we *are* the same!”

I laughed, bitter and full of disbelief. I couldn’t even contend with this mad comparison so latched onto his other grand claim. “Charity starts at home you say. What about your own home, what about me and mum? Did you even try to get back to us? Travel home to my time.”

He gave me a hard look. “Have you,” he said, a sarcastic note in his voice. “By all accounts you’ve been having a grand old time about the town. Out at all hours in whore-houses and spending the night in men’s rooms.”

“I didn’t try and go back because I wanted to find you!” I screamed. Then, realising the implication of his words, said, “You’ve known I was here but didn’t try and see me. Why?”

“Like I say,” he said, dismissing me with an airy wave of his hand. “Plans are in motion. Changing history is a delicate balance and you know too much. The risk is too great for you to be involved. ‘Twas all well and good when you were playing the part of a society belle in bows and dresses. But when I heard you were looking for me, shouting my name all about the place, we had to step in. Put you out of harm’s way.”

I was shaking. Managing to keep my composure, I said, “And who’s causing harm? For all your noble talk of changing the status quo, I don’t think much of your methods.” I never wanted to believe he was behind the attacks – the robbing and brutality – but his words supported all the evidence I’d chosen to ignore.

“Change,” he said carefully – a politician deflecting a difficult question. “Even when it is for the good, is usually painful. You and I know what will happen in France, the bloody outcome it holds, yet how necessary to the cause of freedom!”

“Oh yeah?” I said, sarcasm my only defence against his betrayal. “Can’t make an omelette without breaking a few oeufs, is that right?”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand, though I hoped you might,” he said with a sad shrug. The regret seemed fleeting. “When the Rebellion of 1798 in Ireland fails, it leads to what those dogs in Parliament call *reform*. It is the downfall of our nation.” He turned his mad eyes on me, grabbing me by the arms and physically shaking me. “I could stop the Act of Union! Just think, our own independent Fatherland! Free to govern, free to live, free from a corrupt regime!”

I couldn’t reason with him. Whatever had happened in the interim years, he was no longer my dad.

“Well, thanks for the lovely, father-daughter chat,” I said, shrugging him off. “But if that’s everything, I think I’ll be going. There are people out there who actually care about me and are probably worried sick.”

I crossed the room and placed a hand on the door.

“See now, if you’re not with me, you’re against me...”

The door flew open, revealing the looming figure of McGuigan blocking my way. He stepped forward and I stumbled back, falling into something hard. A vice-like grip pinned my arms and I gasped in pain.

“You’ll have to stay here a little while, Deedle. Just until the next phase is under way and we’re safely overseas.” I struggled and McGuigan stepped in, helping to drag me away.

“You be good, now Deedle,” he called after us, a hand raised in farewell.

Another henchman appeared and between the two of them forced me back to the cramped, stinking room with its other imprisoned occupants.

I fought, kicking, scratching, biting; curses and expletives blurring into one furious tirade of incomprehension. Foul tasting liquid forced its way down my throat and took away my consciousness. It returned, slow and painful – a fug, like tar dripping through a drainpipe.

Even awake, the horror of my surroundings took on a nightmarish quality. The walls slipped and melted into blackness. Faces distorted and sank into their skulls. Ugly men with huge gaping mouths that could swallow me whole.

My hands were tied but I thrashed and fought whenever I saw them. They poured more of their black tar into me until I fell away.

Sometimes I saw faces of people I cared about. Anne, Dr Hamilton. Liza with her kind eyes. Once she turned into a canary and flew away. Usually, she just exploded into a burst of feathers.

Mum appeared in confused flashes, dressed in her funeral black and shaking her head. "He didn't really belong here." Jethro nodded. "From the before."

Sophia came the most often and with the sharpest clarity. Whenever she appeared I would raise my arms, but she would turn, fading into nothingness. Leaving me again.

Darcydarcydarcydarcydarcy.

My name spoken over and over, hissed over a rustling breeze.

Strength left my body, leaving only nightmares.

Soon, I learned to stop fighting.

Chapter 26. “To be always wandering, is the Condition of a Vagabond; and of the two, it is better to be a Prisoner to one’s own home than a stranger.” *The Lady’s Companion: Or, an Infallible Guide to the Fair Sex, 1743*

Monday, 31 August. Evening.

Above the Glover’s Shop

The sun was well risen when next I opened my eyes, unanswered questions of the previous night at my mind’s forefront. Yet, those in possession of the truth were beyond my reach – James and Dr Hamilton in the clutches of Morpheus – Mr. Richards absconded. Once satisfied with the invalids’ respective conditions – asleep but prospering – I broke my fast with her ladyship.

We sat in the northwest wing of Woolston House, commanding a fair view of the approaching drive. Lady Holland confided it was her favourite place to pass a morning as, “One always prefers the leisure of a slight warning should visitors arrive unexpectedly.”

Such an occurrence took place with the arrival of a pony and trap. The flash of a crimson pate was visible even at this distance. It was Anne, come with our belongings.

Quite forgetting myself, I flew from the room and down the great staircase. Such is the vastness of Woolston House that when I flung open the front door, the cart had been and gone, depositing Anne and her burdens at the servant’s entrance. Thither Lady Holland led me and where we found the maid, surrounded by the house’s servants and obstinately clutching a valise, despite their efforts to relieve her.

As we entered, they all fell away, eyes respectfully downcast at the appearance of their mistress. In marked contrast Anne raised her chin, her customary scowl spread across her countenance.

The look was so familiar I nearly wept.

“Well,” said she, flinging down the valise and crossing her arms. I believe she held fast to the heavy bag, merely to enact the greatest effect upon my arrival. “You left me in bad loaf and make no mistake. Quite under the hatches with questions thrown this way and that. In a peck of troubles over your windmills in the head. And where is Darcy in all this? Ent seen hide nor hair of her since Friday last.”

This was too much. *Darcy!* Annoyance swiftly supplanted affection.

“Follow,” said I, turning on my heel and sweeping from the room. To her credit, the girl kept a pace, trotting at remarkable speed. Soon we came to James’ room, neither one of us speaking, though the scene affected her. Retreating, I next led her to Dr

Hamilton. He lay unmoving, excepting the gentle rise of his breaths, swathed bandages visible beneath the deceased Sir Nathaniel's over-large linens.

"Now you see how it is?" said I, indicating his wan state. "How calamitous the situation stands."

"Gents and their honour," she said with a sad shake of her head. "What they do to save their groats. But Mistress, what of Miss Darcy? Where is she in all this?"

"I can answer that," came the groaning response from the bed. Dr Hamilton stirred at last, attempting to raise himself. The effort near finished him and he fell back with feeble exertions.

"Anne, fetch help, see that Lady Holland is informed," said I, falling to his side. Though burning for more information, his need superseded all.

"Those men attacking wealthy nobles," said he, gratefully accepting a cup of wine from the recently arrived Lady Holland. "Highwaymen and bandits. Rogues and villains. We have heard whispers of their deeds already. The Sons of Chronos."

"And they have taken Darcy?" said I, chilled to the marrow. "This gang named for the God of Time."

"Yes," said he, meeting my gaze. "It is a coincidence not lost on me."

We exchanged a look full of significance.

"But where is she now?" said Anne.

"I do not know," replied Dr Hamilton, throwing back the coverlets and planting his feet on the floor to general protest. "But I intend to find her and cannot do so convalescing here."

"Be reasonable, George!" cried Lady Holland, her voice a veritable warble in its anxiety. "You cannot sally forth facing every blackguard in search of your friend in such a state. You must rest!"

Though much weakened by the effort, he seemed resolute. "I failed in my duty to protect her," said he, jaw clenched. "There is a debt owed. The balance must be redressed."

No argument from Lady Holland could move him, he *would* be gone.

"I can do nothing here," said he, rising to his feet with a determined air, gripping the wooden bedstead to steady his trembling limbs. "Indolent and unable to affect any certain outcome. I must return to my rooms in town and make such inquiries as within my powers. Such matters are too delicate to leave to others. Letters can be intercepted. Responses can be forged. No, I must go."

Again, she reasoned against such a course and again he parried her points, fixing her with a look of such intensity I felt compelled to look away.

“You know the life I chose was never to be one of idleness, but of action. I must act.”

Seeing the futility in further debate, she relented, a tiny sigh escaping her fey frame.

“Thank you, Harriet,” said he, taking her hands in his. “I am more grateful to you than I can express.”

“There is nothing I would not do for my friends,” said she, the wry smile returning to her lips. “But I would ask that you have a better care with your life and at least accept my assistance, such as I can give. Since you are bent on returning to Southampton, take my carriage. You are in no fit state to take to the saddle.”

“How soon are we to leave?” said I, creating a stunned silence.

Lady Holland was the first to break it, stepping forward with a kindly air.

“My dear, you cannot think of leaving your brother. There is none better placed to care for him. Not to mention, your parents expect you to bide with me some days yet,” she drew a letter from a pocket within her skirts, Mama’s script discernable. “Besides, it would not do to return to Southampton in the Doctor’s company without a chaperone.”

“She is right, Sophia,” said Dr Hamilton kindly, the use of my Christian name no doubt an attempt to convince me of his sincerity. Or meet me on equal terms. “Lady Holland’s carriage and postillions are too well-known within the town. There is no chance of arriving back onto the High Street without the coats of arms being remarked upon and the news being spread top to bottom over Southampton. We certainly could not conceal your arrival nor secret you up to my rooms without comment. Castle Square would know of your return within the hour. With your parent’s suspicions raised, how could we hide the story of James’ condition? Never mind the damage done to your reputation.”

All this was true, I knew it well. And yet, how could I sit idly whilst Darcy’s fate hung so uncertainly in the balance?

“You talk of inaction and indolence,” said I, meeting Dr Hamilton and Lady Holland’s glances in turn. “But why do you presume I will be content to sit within indoors, quiet and confined? I know my brother is now beyond danger and will be well cared. Of what use can I therefore be? Do you think, because I am not a man, I do not also need the continual occupation of exertion? That my feelings will not prey upon me, confined as I must be?”

“Too well do I understand your need to take action,” said Dr Hamilton, heavily. “Better than most I daresay. Indeed, I cannot fully do justice to my feelings under such

circumstances. But it does not remove the difficulties before us -- the impossibility of concealing your entry into Southampton.”

“She could sham being a lad again,” said Anne from behind, surprising us all with her boldness in such company. “Miss Woodforde played the part of a boy with the doctor before, breeches and all. Why not again? Only this time, mark her as her Ladyship’s footman.”

“It could work,” said the doctor thoughtfully. “Miss Woodforde arriving in Lady Holland’s carriage to my apartments would set tongues wagging. My returning with a small retinue of servants is hardly worth comment. Society knows, or certainly speculates, on the nature of our relationship, Harriet. It is hardly worth their notice if I make use of your carriage. The news, as they say, is old. Perhaps the most eagle eyed amongst the gossip mongers might take note of my wounded appearance,” he gestured to his sling, with a shrug. “But if there are inquiries, I shall say I strained my shoulder practicing archery. Such injuries are not uncommon.”

We all assented to the plan with alacrity. For my part, I would have offered a bandbox for a seat if it brought me closer to Darcy.

Anne was to stay at Woolston House and keep watch over my brother. A familiar face in a house of strangers when he woke.

For the second time, Anne assisted me in donning male clothing.

Being one of the leaders of the *bon ton*, the livery of Lady Holland’s staff cut above the commonplace. My articles included knee breeches and green braided coat with shoulder knots, silk stockings, gloves and pumps. Not content to powder my pate, a horse-hair wig was found to sit beneath a fine cocked, continental hat.

Once dressed, I presented myself to the waiting Lady Holland and Dr Hamilton.

“Not quite tall enough for my taste in footmen,” said Lady Hamilton as she scrutinised me, a quirk at her lips. “But you will do well enough. We won’t have you run besides the carriage of course,” added she, warming to her theme.

“Of course,” said I acidly, unable to help myself.

“But you will need to occupy the boot,” she continued blithely, overlooking my scorn. “A footman of your station could not sit with the driver for such a journey. If you take a firm grip of the railings where you stand, I am certain you will not be dislodged.”

“Shall we,” said Dr Hamilton, striding forward, adding slyly. “Oh, and could I trouble you to carry my bag? It seems only fitting giving the circumstances.”

I could not resent him the request, given how he came by his current state of injury, though I deemed the wink unnecessary.

We three swept across the house's flagstones steps, Lady Holland's retinue already assembled, alert and resplendent in their matching livery. No mere gig to convey her friend Dr Hamilton back to Southampton, but a magnificent coach-and-four, the late Sir Nathaniel's heraldry emblazoned on the door. There was no coachman, but a postillion sat on the first horse to the left, ready to command his team of horses.

"Fare thee well, my dear," said Lady Holland with real warmth, taking both my hands in hers. "I expect to hear from you soon. I shall write if your brother's condition changes, good or ill."

I had not the words to answer this, merely nodding my acknowledgment.

"Harriet," said Dr Hamilton, saluting her with a familiarity, bordering on indecency. "Never let it be said I do not keep you entertained."

"Your visits are never uninteresting," answered she, her thrilling laugh drifting over the day. "*A bientot.*"

Dr Hamilton was so good as to help me up onto the boot, finding purchase where I could. Though the roads are good and Lady Holland's carriage is of the finest quality, the journey was bone-rattling to say the least. Every jolt of the wheel bouncing over uneven terrain clacked my teeth with unpleasant regularity.

Upon re-entering the town, the doctor felt compelled to wave at those he knew with an airy hand so that by the time we pulled up by his lodgings there was quite a crowd halloaing him with enquiries, along with lists of their ailments. I kept my hat pulled low upon our re-entering the town. Once pulled up outside the glover's shop, the postillion stayed with the carriage whilst the other footman and I accompanied Dr Hamilton within doors. The former departed, giving me a discrete nod.

Left alone, awkwardness lay heavy in the air. So much had passed between us, yet so much more lay unsaid. I broke the silence, bold in my breeches.

"Why did not you wish to marry me?" said I, frank.

He laughed, or perhaps choked.

"Is this a proposal, Miss Woodforde? I did not think you so forward."

"Why?" I pressed. "Was the prospect so much worse than duelling my brother?"

"I cannot marry anyone," said he, busying himself with tidying the room's debris. "It would be unlawful. Though I care little for society's prescriptions, I could not drag an innocent into my complicated situation."

"This situation, does it relate to your great secret? The one that near cost you your life when I operated. Lady Holland was quite fierce on your behalf."

He didn't answer, seemingly making up his mind to something. "She understands I would want it to be my choice," said he, softly. He raised his golden eyes to mine. "I always knew who I was and what I wanted to be. I simply had to make certain alterations to my exterior that matched the interior."

Realisation dawned. "You are a — you were born a —"

"Just because one is born something, does not mean one must remain so," said he, a little irritable. "Grapes are fruit until they become wine. Which is the true nature? I say, why deny the divine alchemy of self?"

Ever on the practicalities I asked, "How do you disguise the marks of your monthly courses from your washerwoman?"

He laughed at this abrupt departure from philosophy. "A surgeon's work is bloody," he remarked with a shrug. Then, serious once more, "What think you, Miss Woodforde?"

"I think, *George*," said I, laying emphasis on his name and placing my hands on his shoulders. "You are the finest doctor I have ever met and together we will find our friend."

Smiling, he took my hand and kissed it, before departing to find word of Darcy's whereabouts.

"I have news," said he, arriving after several hours had elapsed. To his credit, he had brought a porter of wine and a steaming chop, which I wolfed with little decorum. "An old friend of ours believes she knows where they are held."

"They?" said I, pausing in my unsightly consumption to properly take in Hamilton's arrival. He was not alone. The woman from the brothel, nay, first the assembly rooms, stood before me.

"Evening, miss," said she, making an elegant bob. "Or might I say, sir?" eyeing my breeches and shirtsleeves. I stood, clearing my throat, wiping my grease smeared mouth with the back of a sleeve. How unladylike. Truly, it is our clothes which wear us, rather than we them.

"You remember Margaret," said Hamilton, enjoying my confusion.

I had risen to my feet, unsure how to return her greeting. Dressed as I was, I felt compelled to bend a knee but made do with a stiff nod.

"You make a fine boy, miss," said she, amusement painted over her unpowered cheek. "Though a touch too buxom to convince the more discerning. Miss Darcy was far more natural in the guise."

“Darcy,” said I, darting forward and clasping her about the arms. She gasped at my sudden gesture, attempting to draw back but I held fast. “What do you know of her? Have you seen her?”

“Peace, Sophia,” said Dr Hamilton, stepping between us. “Give the girl a moment. A cup of wine, Peg?”

“Thank you, yes,” said she, sweeping into a dignified seat, adjusting the rumples in her gown.

Though bursting with vexation, I too sat, attempting to practice patience as Margaret took her bumper of wine and drank deep.

“You may recall I was seeking my companion of the assembly rooms?” said she, fixing me with a gaze that did not waver. “Eliza is her name. Very dear to me.” Margaret paused, apparently overcome. “Miss Darcy was so good as to ask after her. She is kind, to be sure.”

“Yes,” said I, a catch in my throat. “She has a good heart.”

“Aye,” replied Margaret, a look of mischief about her. “I noticed you stare at her good heart, betimes.”

“You believe you know where the pair are hidden, Peg?” interjected Dr Hamilton, gallant in his attempt to overlook my furious blushes.

“Well, I believe she and Miss Darcy were taken to the Pest House, found within God’s House Tower,” replied she, serious once more. “To be sure, not a good place but some comfort they reside together.”

“Not a good place!” I cried. “You and I have entirely different ideas on the definition.” I spared the foolish doxy a dismissive sleight of hand before pacing about the room. “A Pest House indeed. And within a medieval gaol to boot. This is no mere Bridewell prison! To set foot within is enough to ruin reputation. ‘Tis no place for one such as she. It is for women of the lowest order, women who —”

“— women who what?” returned Margaret, also on her feet, eyes narrowed, a hair’s breadth from my own nose.

I raised my chin with an insolence worthy of Darcy herself, delivering my answering blow. “Women devoid of any morality. Harbingers of vice. Creatures who have given up their souls to ungodliness.”

“—now, Sophia,” said Dr Hamilton in an undertone, grasping me at the elbow with his good hand. “Margaret wishes to help us. Do not be so callous.”

“And you would consider me such a one,” cried she, patches of pink blotching her cheeks, her hands curled into fists.

“Your nonchalance over my friend’s situation speaks of your character,” said I, throwing the doctor off.

“It is those gargoyles who imprison the likes of we who are without morals!” cried she, seizing her wrapper and throwing it around her shaking frame. “And you are without Christian charity if you believe any deserve such treatment. Do you know,” said she, turning back to face me, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. “The only difference between us is circumstance of birth. Who can say what you might have done had you fallen so low? Yet here we both stand in the same spot. Wishing to save the ones we love. Are you so high you will refuse my aid? Or stop at helping in return?”

My head rang as though filled with church bells; the truth of her words too monumental to face.

A sudden shock returned me to my senses.

Margaret stood before me, empty cup in hand, wearing a satisfied expression.

Drenched and sopping, liquid dripping into my eyes, I struggled to find breath.

“Here, sit,” said Dr Hamilton kindly, leading me to the sofa.

“Drink this,” said Margaret, handing me another glass of wine. “Perhaps I shan’t throw this one over your pate.”

I could not meet their eyes, certainly not their pitying stares and knowing understanding

“Forgive me, Margaret. I -- I do not think you are morally bankrupt,” said I, voice small.

She snorted but was so gracious as to accept my apology, such as it was. Taking my hand in hers she said with an almost unbearable kindness. “You didn’t know? How you felt about her, I mean. That you love her.”

How to answer such a thing? I squeezed her hand in some small acknowledgment but let the moment pass. The present trouble was of urgent immediacy

“So, we know where they abide. How do we retrieve them?” asked I.

“We strike by night,” replied Dr Hamilton, leaning against the sideboard, crossing one shank over the other. “The Sons of Chronos will be on the alert. It must be done by stealth.”

A plot was hatched. Once we had taken Darcy and Eliza from God’s House Tower, we would spirit them away in a waiting hack chaise to the outskirts of town. There, we would part ways, Eliza and Margaret removing to a safe location with a trusted acquaintance, we back to Woolston House in Lady Holland’s carriage.

“Lady Holland’s heraldry is too well known,” said Dr Hamilton, forestalling my suggestion. “We cannot risk the escape being traced back to her before we are well away.”

I saw the wisdom in this, though did not revel in the idea of travelling in so public a mode of transport. True, it would be quickest, but so exposed.

Dr Hamilton left to fetch the necessary tools to aid us in this wild endeavour. Margaret too departed, soon to return, rigged in borrowed and more functional male attire.

I have passed the hours in waiting preparation recounting all to these makeshift scraps. Scraps which, god willing, I will transcribe to my journal in moments of tranquillity.

Tuesday, 1 September.

Thropden Hall.

My dear Journal. It is good to be returned to your slim volume, no longer making use of borrowed papers. That is the only change in my fortunes one could describe as “good”.

Nay, perhaps not the *only* alteration – but more on that later.

All else is misery and misfortune. Closeted up in disgrace and isolation, entirely ignorant of the world outside, my mind dwells on the passing hours as my pen dwells on these pages.

Enough morbidity! How came you here, you ask. I will tell it – there is little else to occupy the tedium...

We set off at full night, blessing the cloaking darkness and cloud covered moon. Dr Hamilton had arranged for the cab to meet us on the darkened streets, having watched for it from the vantage of the apartment’s bay window.

Following the arc of the medieval walls, we arrived at the town quay, God’s House Tower looming above the gate, three stories high. The portcullis was down but mercifully the streets were deserted with not a soul abroad, saving ourselves.

Dr Hamilton bid me keep watch as he and Margaret disappeared down to the docks, every whisper of the night agonising my strained nerves as I waited. They returned with a rickety ladder carried between them, the doctor holding one end with his uninjured arm.

“This is your cunning plan,” I muttered, helping them balance it against the great, stone wall, anger barely in check.

“Oftentimes the most direct approach is the best method,” said the doctor, panting with the effort. “Now climb, they will not lock the window, high as it is. The rooms are unoccupied at night. Peg will remain here to keep watch and steady us.”

Steady, the ascent was not. It took all my courage to keep my progress as the ladder rattled and jolted on the uneven cobbles. Reaching the window, I saw naught within, being dark as pitch. Mercifully it was indeed unlocked, and I made my ungainly entrance, clumsily dropping inside. Dr Hamilton soon followed, slow with his injured arm.

Once inside, he gave a low whistle, signalling to Margaret all was well.

Pulling out his tinder box, the doctor lit a rush, handing it to me. Bathed in its feeble glow, the surroundings revealed themselves to be what we expected: a disused clerk's rooms.

"You surmised correctly," I whispered, edging my way around a cluttered table towards the door.

"I have some experience of such places," said he, following close behind. "Though more beneficial to the patient's health, they are never kept in rooms with windows, nor indeed good ventilation. My contacts have told me of a crude route of where we might find them. Follow me."

Leading me out onto a narrow corridor, we crept down the passage. He seemed to be following his nose as much as his information. As we made our progress, the stench become more and more noxious - the unmistakable scent of many bodies living together in close quarters. At last, we came to a heavy oak door with a formidable lock placed over it.

"Villains." I spat, wishing harm on any man responsible for this inhumane incarceration.

The doctor made no answer but squeezed my shoulder in brief acknowledgment before bending down and setting to disarm the lock.

"Hah!" whispered Hamilton in a triumphant undertone. With a click, the lock yielded, the door swinging forth. A fecund stench poured out; the malodorous odour so powerful it near enough knocked me down. The Doctor seemed unaffected, plunging into the midst. I followed, closing the door behind us before covering my mouth with a kerchief. The dim light of the rush revealed two close rooms, without chimney, court or water and an offensive sewer. Rows of pitiful forms lay on pallets, some shrunken and hardly moving, others tossing and turning in their wretchedness.

"Corrupted, poor devil," said Dr Hamilton, standing over one such. "The wound has been entirely left to fester. She will not see the morning."

One source of the smell. This poor pitiful creature left to rot in her own filth.

"Where is Darcy," said I, fumbling for Hamilton's sleeve in the dark. "We have to find her."

"Over here," came a whisper. "She's here."

Stumbling in my haste, I dropped the rush, instantly extinguishing its light.

“Is that you, Eliza,” whispered Hamilton, grasping my hand and guiding me towards her. The blind leading the blind.

“Aye, ‘tis,” said she, a guide in the black. “I’m right glad to see ye, or at least hear ye.

“Peg is outside,” said Hamilton, releasing my hand to find hers and take. “She waits below.”

“Where is Darcy?” I repeated, scrabbling to grasp at Eliza.

The other inmates were stirring, slowly awakening to our presence.

“Hush,” whispered Dr Hamilton, staying my progress. “Another light.” Striking at his tinder box, he lit another rush, handing it me. Contrasted with the near pitch black, it seemed as bright as the sun in those dismal surroundings. Groans met the illumination, the pitiful forms shrinking away within themselves.

Dr Hamilton commanded them be quiet before drawing a small knife.

“You are bound, I presume?” said he, sinking onto her pallet and searching for her bonds.

“Aye, we all are,” said she, adjusting herself to help his progress. Her face was pale and wan, her hair lank and disorderly - a marked contrast to the glittering canary of the assembly rooms.

“Here, let me,” said I, stepping forward and handing back the light. One handed, his work was too slow. I was impatient to be gone.

“Now,” said I, helping Eliza to her feet. “Where is Darcy?”

“Here,” said she, without preamble, leading on. “I should warn you, she ent... She wouldn’t eat nothing, though her daily threepennyworth for bread was paid. She’s in a bad way.”

In the flickering, feeble rush light and the monstrous dark, all seemed distorted. Yet even so, nothing could prepare me for the horror of Darcy’s transformation. Black rings shadowed her eyes, cheeks marked with scratches and contusions. Long strands of hair tangled about in wild disorder, her lips chapped and bloody.

“Darcy,” I whispered, sinking on the pallet and reaching for her hand. “Darcy, it’s me, Sophia. I’ve come at last. Darcy?” She did not respond, muttering incomprehensibly and tossing against her bonds. I leaned in close, pressing my cheek to hers, emotion threatening to burst forth. “Darcy, please, Darcy.” I said her name again and again until tears overflowed and bathed her skin. Dr Hamilton dragged me away and I clung to him like a drowning man clutches a piece of bark tossed helpless on the sea.

“Calm yourself,” said he, one arm about me, hand stroking my hair. “We will get her out. I promise you. Remember our intentions here tonight. Remember the plan.”

“Yes,” said I, straightening my posture and stepping away from him. “Yes.” With an effort, I recalled myself to my senses. The other inhabitants were truly stirring themselves now. All those not stupefied as Darcy was had awoken, making no trouble to keep quiet, despite Dr Hamilton’s shushing.

Recognising time was short, I withdrew my own knife and cut the bonds over Darcy’s wrist, wincing over their bloody appearance.

This drew more mutterings from our uncalled-for audience, now alive to the situation.

“Hear me,” said Dr Hamilton, in a whisper that carried through the room. “You have been placed here as females of dissolute and disorderly habits. I say it is false. You are of a better character than those who keep you here against your will. We seek to release our friends and will do the same for you, so long as you are *quiet* and allow us to do our work quickly and unimpeded.”

Such authority was irresistible, and the room became quiet for some time, though the nervous shuffling of anxious limbs seemed to ring louder than any clanging bell to my stretched nerves.

“How are we to escape?” said I to the doctor as he took stock of Darcy, a hand placed on her brow. I found myself curled against her insensible form. “Our plan depended on her making use of her own limbs.”

“We three must carry her,” said he, now feeling for the faint jump of a pulse at her wrist. “First, we have a duty to these women.”

Though reluctant to leave Darcy’s side, even for a moment, I did so in the knowledge liberating these women was the only means we could take her. You may think, Journal, this was done with noble intentions. It was not. I was all mercenary. Were they not victims of a cruel justice but murderers or villains, I would free every one of them without hesitation. With the keepers distracted by their patients running amok, our chance of slipping out amongst the chaos was all the greater. Perhaps some of them might even find their own way to freedom. I hoped so for their sake but so much the better for us if they did. If the hospital’s manpower was stretched thin hunting down their delinquents, we might slip the net.

Dr Hamilton kept calm order whilst we worked, preventing the women leaving at once and raising the alarm too soon. When the last of the conscious bodies were free, we returned to Darcy, now muttering incomprehensibly and stirring feebly.

“Sophia,” she slurred

“Yes, Darcy, I’m here,” said I, falling to my knees and clutching her hand. “I’m here to take you away. Can you stand? Will you walk a little?”

She was too far gone, still within the clutches of Morpheus’ drug.

“She’s been oft calling for you,” said Eliza softly at my shoulder. “I try an talk to her, bring her back round. But she’s deep in the poppy sap.”

“Make haste,” hissed Dr Hamilton. It was now or never.

“Open the door,” I cried. The last vestiges of civilisation broke with my shout. Dr Hamilton flung open the door and the women burst forth, their shrieks loud enough to wake the King in Kew.

“Eliza, take her legs,” called the doctor, taking Darcy by her right arm and heaving her against his injured shoulder, grimacing with the effort. I took her other arm, bracing as much of her weight as I could manage over my shoulders. With Eliza at her feet, we made a lopsided but efficient carrier. The hallway was chaos with bodies darting hither and thither, panicked screams now mingled with brutish shouts. Fortunately, the latter cries seemed still yet far off and none of the keepers accosted us.

Throwing ourselves down the spiral stairs, we collapsed at the bottom, Darcy’s lifeless form falling on top of me.

“There,” gasped Dr Hamilton, clutching his shoulder and nodding at the great arched doorway. “The exit is in sight.”

Thundering footsteps punctured our jubilation at escape, so near at hand. They came from a door behind, flimsy and without means to bar it.

“Take her!” I cried, flinging myself against the door just in time.

Angry fists pounded against it, accompanied by shouts and calls to open it at once.

Hamilton and Eliza joined me, we three holding ourselves against the inevitable onslaught. On cue, the pounding became a veritable battering, the sound of splintered wood discernible amongst the clamour.

“They will be on us in a moment,” said Hamilton, back against the door.

“Go,” I gasped, the door near falling off its hinges under its assault. “You must take Darcy and flee. I will delay them as long as I can.

“You cannot hold them off,” said he, his body jerking against the attacks from without.

“Better than you,” said I, jerking my head at his sling. “And you can make her well again.”

Still, he hesitated. “Please, George. She needs your help above all.”

Convinced at last, he and Eliza took up Darcy and plunged into darkness.

Wood splintered behind. They poured forth, water bursting a dam. I tripped the first, the rest stumbling over his fellow. All was confusion and pain as we hit the hard floor.

Over the shouts and struggles the rattle of the carriage wheels reached me and I felt a triumphant despair. Darcy was away.

Hauled to my feet, they dragged me to the porter's office and demanded to know my identity, which I gave, my womanhood apparent and not wishing to be confused with a pest house occupant.

The three men, for three there were, understanding my position, saw their opportunity for monetary gain.

Another hack was ordered and what followed was the unceremonious return to my parent's house, a hefty bribe uncouthly demanded in order to keep the story quiet.

"What will Lady Holland think of your abandoning her house?" wailed Mama, hysterical at my bruised and dishevelled appearance. "The talk it will incur... I dread to think! To have you thrown at our feet in disgraceful male weeds. No doubt waking up half of Castle Square. The sneers and titters will follow me to my grave."

Worse than all this noise was Papa's confused disappointment. He could only look at me. Though weary all over, I summarised the previous few nights' events: of James' foolhardy challenge to Dr Hamilton; Mr Richards' treachery and finally my attempt to free Darcy from bondage.

Mama has taken to her bed amidst many tears and assurances she will die. For my part in the deception, I am to be sent home in disgrace. All communication with the outside world is strictly prohibited.

Wednesday 2, September

Thropden Hall

I am returned home after several uncomfortable hours travel.

When the time came for me to quit Castle Square, Papa appeared on the portico, face grave and solemn as he watched Harry carry out my valise. No words passed between us, in contrast to Mama's never ceasing stream of talk flowing around me at all hours,

As I brushed past him on the front step, our eyes met for the briefest of moments. He looked as though he might speak, but no. Breaking the glance, he stepped forward, pulling me in a tight embrace before retreating indoors. I do not know whether it is

disappointment in my behaviour or in himself for allowing such a man as Richards into our family life.

“Remember, it’s a shilling a mile,” said Mama, handing me a purse before fussing about my cloak and straightening my bonnet. “Do not forget to tip the driver and ostlers each time the horses are changed. And there is some more in there for refreshments along the journey.” She paused, gazing at me intently. “Your hair has come loose, Sophia.”

I was back in my old articles, already missing the freedom of breeches, and apparently making a poor job of my appearance.

The family carriage, being considered too good for such a wayward, flighty daughter, was not given over for my convenience. Instead, a hack post chaise with only Harry as companion. We were alone the first ten miles, keeping to our silence. Then two strangers filled the hack at the first posting inn. A merchant and his wife – the former odorous and the latter odious and unbearably loquacious.

Thursday 3, September

Thropden Hall

Mama and Papa write to say they journey to Woolston House to see how James does.

Sunday 6, September

Thropden Hall

Four days since my disgraceful removal. Four days of the servants stopping their mouths when they see me approach. Four days of their knowing glances and speculations. Four days of loneliness. Four days since I sent a letter to Woolston House begging for news.

Four days without word of Darcy.

Monday 7, September

Thropden Hall

Word at last! An express has arrived with the following missive, here transcribed:

Dear Sophia,

I cannot conceive the depths of your disquietude – it can surely only match the desperate unease I felt when you did not return to the carriage all those nights ago. Therefore, I will be brief. Darcy is... Forgive me, I find I am now without words. Her condition is not so easy to describe.

Undoubtedly, you must thirst for news, being closeted up as you are – Lady Holland is well informed – so I will describe the circumstances of our removal and perhaps her state will reveal itself to you in the telling.

After our flight from God's House Tower, I attempted to revive Darcy, though had little to no means to accomplish this beyond brutish methods. This, of course, I did not employ, understanding that a quiet body was preferable as we made our way back over the river to Weston House.

Once sufficiently away from the town, the carriage dropped our two friends in a safe locale. I needn't tell you of their touching bond, their devotion to one another. It offered a glimmer of light in an otherwise bleak night.

Reunited with my medical kit, and with the sage knowledge of Lady Holland's botanical mind, I have been tending to Darcy with all the care and attention within my powers. Your brother too is not neglected. The greatest part of his wound is healing and mercifully remains uninflamed.

However, he is afflicted with low spirits, unable to countenance the betrayal perpetrated by his friend. Lady Holland is very good with him, as she is with all, charming the boy as well as the parents. When her ladyship invited the Woodfordes to Woolston House, she put the truth of Mr Richards duplicity in such light which has absolved us all and laid the blame at its proper quarter. Darcy too is vindicated in their eyes.

Lady Holland's good offices convinced them to allow Darcy to convalesce at your family home and thither we shall go. Master Woodforde is to remain some weeks at Woolston House now that he is out of danger.

I cannot write in the correct order, forgive me, I go too fast. We – Darcy and I - are to join you within the day of my letter arriving, assuming the roads are good. You must prepare yourself for what you find. It is necessary to continue with a daily dose of Black Drop – now she is dependent, it would be dangerous to cut off her supply entirely. I lessen it daily.

She is weak in body, but the cause is more from a dereliction of mind than any physical ailment. She flails and will not speak in any lucidity, instead raving. A fever ravages her, sapping her strength. Your presence will surely be a balm to her disorder. I pray it is so.

Yours,

G Hamilton

Chapter 27. Going home

Thin spaces, thin places, thin faces. Sunken eyes, waxy skin, mouths sagging. Looming. Rippling and distorted. Melt and twist.

Abandoned.

Black tar drags me down. Then rosemary washes through me -- its comforting scent taking me away from the bad thoughts.

Back to thinking and holding onto thoughts longer than a second.

Incoherent voices garbled over, difficult to untangle. Listen. My name. Words floating up, settle. Listen. Two voices. Almost slipped away again. So easy, so tired, bones so heavy.

With an effort, I forced my chest up, leaning heavily on elbows.

Staggering out of bed, I took in the view from the mullioned window and knew at once where I was – nowhere else has stone walls like it, the light gleaming off the flint like silver. Thropden Hall. East Hampshire sprawled out below, fields and trees stretching away like decorated ribbon. The gravel drive stretched before me, the green carriage circle directly beneath my window.

Voices floated up from below. Windowpanes so thin I could hear everything, like they were standing right beside me.

“Now that the fever has broken, you must rest awhile. You have tended her well, but it is no good if you founder in exhaustion.” Dr Hamilton. Professional as ever.

“How can I leave her now –” My heart lurched. Sophia. “– six days since God’s House –”. “She lies quiet most hours–”

“– still no sense from her. When will lucidity return? She ate yesterday’s broth like an automaton.”

I gripped the sill, trying to stay present.

“And the same words over and over,” continued Sophia, her voice fading. I leaned forward; head pressed against the glass.

“Thin places.”

I jerked back, stumbling over a stool and tumbling onto the bed. A rapid, repetitive noise filled my head. Only when the shakes took over my whole body did I realise it was my teeth chattering.

The next time I opened my eyes it was dim, a faint, flickering light making dancing shadows across the walls. I'd stopped shivering, coverlets wrapped round me and something warm placed by my feet. Someone had tucked me back in bed. The wind rattled the panes and the room breathed.

No, not the room. I peered into the gloom and there was Sophia, asleep in a chair -- hair and clothes rumpled -- a block of wood balanced on her lap. Her writing slope. Papers spilled out from a slim volume, hand dangling over the armrest, her quill dropped.

Slowly, quietly, I pushed back the covers and stole towards her. She frowned in sleep, worries dogging her even in unconsciousness.

I picked up a sheaf of paper, her clear, cursive script legible even in this light:

“Words, spoken with authority, like I was not the fearful girl a breath away from weeping. *Don't die*. This thought came, frantic as a hare caught in a trap. *Live, damn you...*”

What was that about? Who was dying? Then I took in the dark circles under her eyes, the deep lines of worry etched around her mouth. Me. Did she mean me?

Kneeling, I placed the paper back on her lap and breathed in the heady scent of rosemary.

“Oh Sophia,” I sighed. She stirred, fighting through her debilitating exhaustion to reach me. Slipping back into bed, I turned away, shutting my eyes fast.

“Darcy,” she moaned. “Darcy!” she said, jerking fully awake. I sensed her approach, flickering taper in hand. She leaned over me, her body so near mine, and I felt such an ache of longing to touch her, be held by her. Could she feel it too? Did I imagine a hand hovering over me, so close to my skin?

“I must to bed. The night plays tricks on me,” she muttered, speech slurred with tiredness, stumbling to the door. Then she returned, her cool hand on my forehead, brushing back my hair, followed by a swift kiss.

Rain softly pattered the window. I rolled onto my back; the room empty.

Thin places.

Time to leave.

Chapter 28. Rosemary. Rosmarinus. It is Accounted good for affections of the Head & Nerves. It Strengthens the Sight and Memory, and opens Obstructions of the Liver & Spleen.” Elizabeth Blackwell, *A Curious Herbal*, 1937.

Saturday, 5 September. Morning.

Thropden Hall

Dawn’s light did not wake me but a terrible feeling of dread. Its icy fingers slipped under the coverlets, chilling my very marrow.

Wind roared around the house, rain beating against the windows. Though bone weary, sleep evaded my attempts to settle back into oblivion.

Pulling back the curtains, I looked out over the south lawn and sprawling parkland. The day was cold and stormy, every blast seizing the tall trees in their grip, wrenching them hither and thither.

The clock struck five.

A speck of white in the far distance, an errant lamb wandered far from its flock. Though difficult to perceive in the morning’s grey gloom and thick lashing rain, the creature seemed in distress – perhaps injured – swaying with the storm’s vicissitudes.

It plunged out of sight before making its dragging progress onwards.

A lamb, certainly. The shepherd would need to be told at once – poor creature could not be alone in such conditions. Sighing, I picked up my cloak, committing the lamb’s locale to memory before setting off.

But no. Not a lamb.

Darting forward, I threw open the window shutter, crying into the storm.

‘Twas no good. The wind tore away my voice, scattered uselessly over the gale.

Bare foot, bare headed, I flew, running as though the very demons of hell dogged my paces. Near falling into the kitchen maid on her early morning rounds lighting fires, I bid her wake Dr Hamilton and fetch Anne.

Ignoring her flabbergasted countenance, I was gone, flying out the front door, heedless of rain falling in torrents. Violent winds made snatching attempts at my cloak, offering little protection over my thin chemise. Too late to return.

Slipping on the drenched ground, I made towards the ha-ha and thence to the parkland. United clouds set a driving rain full in my face. With no shelter between me and

my quarry, I was obliged to run at all possible speed down the slope, leading immediately to the sunken fence. Mud and rain dragged my progress but still I sped on.

Panic rose, for in the dip of the landscape I had lost sight of her. There! A heap, a collapsed form beyond the field's edge, lying under a hedge within some ditch.

"Darcy!" I cried, heart breaking at the sight.

Face pallid, lips like ice. Falling beside her, I drew her into my lap, rocking her like a child, murmuring her name again and again. Her pulse was lower and quicker than ever!

Darcy started hastily up, crying out with feverish wildness, --

"Dad! Why did you leave, why did you --" She sunk back and then renewed, carrying on in the same hurried manner. "Thin places. Am I home yet? Did I jump through? Or gone the long way round..." Her voice trailed away.

"Darcy, oh Darcy," I cried, stroking her hair, pushing back wet strands from her face. Unclasping my cloak, I wrapped it about her, terrified by her coldness.

"It won't work," she moaned, silent tears pouring down her cheeks, mingling with the relentless rain. "Everything you've done, the lives you've ruined and the people you've hurt. For what?" She choked out a heart-rending sob and I clutched her tight.

"Shh," said I, tortured by her pain and delirium, hurt by the implication of what *jumping through* might mean.

She breathed deep, her face buried in my chest, and seemed to calm. "Sophia," she murmured, slipping into some sort of quiet.

"Yes," I whispered, not wanting to miss her, desperate to catch her before the dark summoned her. "Darcy, I'm here."

She turned her face upwards, blue eyes meeting mine. "I'm sorry Sophia." Her gaze was lucid. I had her for this moment at least. "I tried to go without saying goodbye. I'm sorry. I just couldn't take it anymore. He--"

"It's alright," said I, holding back a fresh torrent of tears and gently brushing her cheek with my thumb. "You have to be well now. That I might scold you in earnest."

Her laugh swiftly turned into racking sobs. Gathering control of herself, she continued. "I had to go back. To see... See if he did it... If he—changed it..." she was slipping away again.

"Darcy," I said, urgent, shaking her. "Stay with me, Darcy. Stay."

"I won't try to leave again," she said softly, voice becoming fainter. "I'd miss you..."

Shouts and halloos came over the fields, discernable through the thunder.

Dr Hamilton materialised, his greatcoat flung about his shoulders, breeches, boots and shirtsleeves hastily thrown on. Falling to his knees, he made his rapid examination, taking Darcy's pulse and feeling her brow.

A moment later, Anne arrived, out of breath, red hair a wild tangle.

"HERE," she screamed over her shoulder and two stable lads appeared, slipping a little in the waterlogged mud. Under the doctor's direction, they lifted Darcy and returned to the house, the hem of my cloak trailing along the black-and-white chequered floor beneath her slumped form.

Everyone within shouting distance was put to some tasks by Dr Hamilton, all bent on producing heat: wet garments removed; fire in my room set to blazing, whither I insisted we place her; hot coals in three bed warmers, all at her feet under layers of wool and fur.

Seeing Darcy at last settle into some sort of restless slumber, I resolved to sit with her until she woke.

Dr Hamilton, however, had other ideas. "Out of the question," said he, over my shivering form at Darcy's beside. "Not until we have warmed the chill out of you. You're no good to her in a wet shift and soaked stockings."

"I'm not wearing any stockings," I returned, attempting a smile through chattering teeth. I sagged. "I should never have left her. Had I been present when she woke, she would never have ventured into the storm."

"I know you would attend her this whole day and night," said he gently, kneeling beside me and taking my hand. "But I swear I will not leave until you return. I promise you, Sophia, she will recover. When she does, she will need you to help her ailing spirit."

Monday, 7 September

Thropden Hall

Her spirits do not recover. There was a fever of course. I was a little feverish myself, being so long out in the storm. In body we both recover.

Monday, 14 September

Thropden Hall

Darcy, languid and low from the nature of her malady, for some days could not be exerted upon to return to her usual good humour. She would sleep, take some food, but mostly stare into the middle distance.

One of us, Anne, myself or Dr Hamilton, would always be with her at any given time. Anne sharing the household gossip or begging she join her in a game of cards, Dr Hamilton regaling Darcy with deeds of his past lives, of which there are many. I sitting quietly by her, writing in you, Journal, or reading, sometimes aloud, and carefully administering the cordials Dr Hamilton prescribed, which she took without protest.

It was she who at last broke the spell of her languor. "I think I'll go for a walk," said she, utterly nonchalant, as though she had not maintained a silence so complete, she might have passed into another world.

"Oh!" cried I, dropping the letter I had been reading to the floor. "Of course. Here, let me help you." Darting forward, I eased her feeble frame from beneath the heavy covers. It broke my heart anew to feel how thin she'd become. Her strength sapped from the combination of her illness, weaned off Black Drop, a plain diet and being indoors. The latter, it seemed we could now remedy.

I insisted she be wrapped up warmly, though the day was fine. She suffered through my ministrations, quietly accepting the layers of wool, flannel and fur, wrap, muff and hooded cape.

Glancing at her reflection in the glass, she said, "Honestly, Sophia, it's just a stroll outside, not an expedition to the arctic."

I laughed with as much relief as humour. It had been so long since she'd teased me, I'd forgotten how much I missed it.

"You've naught to blame but yourself," said I, business-like, tying a scarf about her neck. "The fright you gave me, wandering about in a storm, half-fevered. Count yourself fortunate I have not locked you up and thrown away the key."

I could have bitten off my tongue. A shadow passed over her face and I cursed my foolishness.

"Forgive me, Darcy," said I, clutching her limp arms, trying to capture her before she sunk back into desolation. "It was a thoughtless thing to say, I --"

"It's alright," said she, meeting my concerned gaze and giving a weak smile. "I know what you meant and I'm sorry I put you through all that." She took both her elbows in mine, giving a gentle squeeze. There we stood, faces inches apart, arms encircled.

"Come on," said she, leading me away. "There's some things I need to tell you."

Out of doors, the warm breeze caressed my cheek and I sighed with pleasure at the scent of early autumn. The warmth in the air brought its own sweetness as the flowers began to fruit.

Darcy had not the strength to go far. We sheltered in the lower terrace, and she spoke, telling me of her father, his plans and misdeeds. Her hurt was plain, his betrayal complete.

I, in turn, spoke of Mr. Richard's duplicity. "We were all of us deceived in Richards," said I. "Though none of us could have foreseen his resentment. Despite it all, I was sure he loved my brother. But to set out to kill him?" I shuddered. "He hoped to marry me and take the Thropden fortune. Conspiring with the Sons of Chronos to remove you first."

"Murderers and thieves," she muttered, face black. "All this time, all those years of missing my dad and for what? He turns out to be this terrible person bent on some hairbrained scheme to give Ireland independence. I was just so..." she broke off, her eyes glassy and I took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"When I first came here," she continued, a slight tremor in her voice. "I was so sure there was purpose to it, that all the pain of losing him had shaped me into the person I needed to be to find him again. Like, I was on some destined path leading me here. Stupid. Life isn't like that. There's no grand plan or smiling universe. There's no higher meaning, no spirituality. Just a stupid girl, wandering around, trying to find home."

I took her hands in mine. "You are not stupid, Darcy. You are courageous and beautiful. And whatever forces brought you here, be they benign, malignant or random, they cannot be wrong because they brought you to me. Since knowing you, I have become braver, dared such things I can hardly believe. Become friends with Lady Holland and Dr Hamilton, seen that pursuing the life of my choice, unbound by convention is possible. I know now what it is I want. I will never wed. Instead, I will dedicate myself to healing the afflicted and treating the hurt. Above all, do no harm."

"You want to be a doctor," she said, a slow smile forming.

"In all but name, yes. If Dr Hamilton can do it, then why not I? I may not go to the same lengths as he, but I see the path is laid and what is possible. Infinite worlds." I met her gaze, feelings threatening to overpower. Returning my look, I saw infinity.

Monday, 21 September

Thropden Hall

Each day this past week have we walked together. With a joyful heart I watch her strength return. More heartening is the return of her good humour and cheerfulness. This time we spend together, I have never known myself happier.

Chapter 29. Home is a person

I love Septembers. The summer's dying light gives the world a golden colour. Everything is more beautiful because it's ending.

Look at me being all deep and stuff. Sorry to get side-tracked. It was Dr Hamilton leaving Thropden that got me thinking that way.

Once he saw I was better, it was time for him to return to Southampton.

"Goodbye, my dear lads," he said scooping me and Sophia into a hug. "I shall miss our frolics, though won't regret a period of peace," he added with a wry smile. Then he looked at me and it was like he knew. "I shall miss you," he said softly. "There are few who can see who I truly am and not balk. Thank you for that."

"I've never been a balk-er," I shrugged. "Besides, it's me who should be thanking you. How many times have you saved my life? Three?"

"Four, actually," he laughed, jostling me affectionately. "I haven't forgotten the ballroom incident."

"Nor I," said Sophia, shuddering. "You do seem to delight in plaguing my nerves."

"Been a bother since day one," I agreed, laughing at her expression.

"Long may it continue," said Dr Hamilton, turning to Sophia. There seemed to be too much to say, the air heavy with something sacred and unspoken. Then he laughed again, shaking his head.

"If you need me, I shall always answer the call," he said, solemn and sincere. "There will always be a place for you, if you wish it, working by my side, or with Lady Holland. You have remarkable powers. It is a gift. I am glad you intend to share it."

She threw herself into his arms. His eyes boggled, meeting mine. We laughed.

"How far we've come," he said as they released each other. "No longer the decorous young lady, I fear."

"Alas, long since departed," she replied, stepping back to stand next to me.

"I have no doubt this new version will have a long and interesting career," he said, stepping into Lady Holland's waiting carriage, sent down from Woolston House to collect him. "Adieu my dears." With a touch of his hat, he was gone.

Most days were spent outdoors, enjoying the soft September days. On one particularly balmy, autumnal morning, we planted an acorn at the bottom of the south lawn.

“It is hope we plant,” said Sophia, covering the seed with soil. “Long after we are gone, this tree’s shade will remain hundreds of years hence.”

We walked to the walled garden and as I stood amongst the plants I breathed in the heady scent of rosemary.

“You said you’d never get married. What makes you think that?”

Sophia paused as she collected herbs, back to me. Slowly, she straightened

“It is not possible for me, I think,” she said carefully, still facing away. “I could not marry without love. And the laws of the land... prohibits my choice, thus I will not wed.”

She turned, meeting my eyes and looked and looked and looked. I knew then. Maybe I always knew, deep down.

Breathing suddenly felt very difficult. “I uh...” looking down, fumbling for words, any sort of coherence. She took a step and then another.

“You shouldn’t look at me like that,” I said, glancing up then looking away.

“Why would I not?” she said, so close I could feel her breath tickle my cheeks. “Why should I not, when I can see depths of oceans and fathoms of constellations. The very barriers of heaven seem broken. Why would I not look when I can see starlight and universes in your eyes?”

“Oh Sophia,” I said, hardly able to bear it. When had I become the cautious one and she the bold risk-taker? “Don’t you get it? It’ll just be more painful when I leave. You’ll be here, I’ll be there, time and space between and maybe no way for me to get back to you.”

She placed one hand on my clenched forearms and with the other brushed my face, her thumb delicately tracing my cheek.

“What did you think of,” she said, softly. “When you tried to leave in the storm?”

“I thought about home,” I said honestly. “Dad said maybe a powerful emotion can create a thin place to travel through, so I thought of home. But maybe home is...”

“Yes?” she said, not pushing me.

“Home is a person. The person who protects you, welcomes you with open arms, changes for the better with you. Home makes you smile, brightens your day, creates small, tiny changes in your life to make it that much more bearable. I think that’s what love is: a simple essence of Home.”

“It isn’t possible to love and part,” she said, softly, still holding me. “One can feel all of time and space between but never lose it from oneself. It is eternal.”

I thought she'd move then, take that final step and close the gap. But she didn't. She just looked and looked and looked. And I realised she was waiting for me. Waiting for my decision. Waiting to see if she was my choice. She was. She is. Eternally.

I raised my own hand, brushing away some of the loose hair from her face. Then I traced my thumb along her jawline, marveling at the light patten of freckles on her cheeks. In the early autumn sun, her dark eyes seemed amber, tawny like the fallen leaves, little dapples of bronze illuminated in the irises.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I moved, tilting my head until our lips finally, *finally* met.

Everything stopped. There was only her and me in the world, heart against heart, the moment holding a promise of infinity.

She sighed, her forehead resting against mine. Then we realised as one, the air felt different, the scent of herbs gone, replaced with the smell of freshly cut grass. Nearby, there was a humming not of busy insects but something more mechanical. It broke off, sputtering into silence.

Still holding tight to Sophia, I looked around. The herb garden was gone, replaced by a smooth, recently cut lawn.

"Hello," said a voice from behind. "Back at last then?"

We turned. No hat, no breeches, no waistcoat or necktie just ordinary jeans and a t-shirt.

"Jethro," I breathed, taking a step toward him, hardly daring to believe it.

He nodded seemingly unsurprised. "Came home I see. Took the long way round. Did you find him, yer Dah?"

"How did –" I broke off, seeing him for the first time. "You're from then, aren't you?"

He shrugged, then made a bow, tugging his forelock to Sophia in a very un-modern gesture.

"It'll take a time adjusting," he said to her kindly. "But I reckon you'll do fine in the here and now."

"Hold on," I said, mind still reeling with the implications. "You travelled in time too? With dad?"

"Aye. When he was a tacker, barely older than you are now. We spent a while trying to get back, then he met your Ma. As for me, well, I liked it here. So, we stayed. He built a life and so did I. Good ones."

“He’s totally insane now,” I said bitterly, remembering the zealous gleam in his bright blue eyes. His unhinged, manic plan to play at God and change history.

“Ah,” said Jethro slowly, shrugging again. “The old dream of a free Ireland never really left him. Staying in the past to change things must’ve been too much of a temptation. But he did love you, even though you were parted.”

“It isn’t possible to love and part,” I said, reaching back and finding Sophia’s hand. I turned, meeting her warm gaze, full of love. “Come on, let’s go home.”

“What will you do now?” said Jethro, following us as we walked down the slope.

“Anything we want,” I said smiling at Sophia, leading her to where a great oak tree now stood. “Here and now, we can be who we are and who we want to be. Together.”

Epilogue

Darcy and Sophia,

1792

A bad loaf you left us in when you hopped the twig. No word, explanation or by your leave! I knew of course what must have happened, least ways, I think I do. Suppose I shan't rightly know, 'cepting somehow, I do know. Know it in my soul. 'Tis the same knowing that drove me to write this letter and leave it for you to find.

Couldn't very well explain it to Parson and his lady, not without finding passage to the madhouse. I don't deny, they were frantic with worry, and I was sorry to see them so bereft. They love you very much, Miss W. It took Dr H coming down to see them, talk it through, make them understand. I think he did.

Master James comes along bravely. He's no longer given over to a life of pleasure but means to take orders like your Papa. He wants to make more of himself, I believe. Came to be awful fond of him during our stay at Woolston House...

That villain Mr. Richards has slunk off to France. Seems he was caught up in this business of highwaymen and revolutionaries. He might slip the net of justice in this Kingdom but if things are as bad as they say over there, I'd rather be tucked up at home thankee very much.

Dr H and her ladyship are all but courting. They send their love, what's spared from themselves besides!

You'll find all your papers in the packet, Miss W. Makes a marvelous tale, though there's naught here who'd believe it, I daresay. Best left with you.

I must leave off. I wish you all the luck in the world and God bless you both.

Anne.

It now falls to me to bring this narrative to a close. Darcy and I found this last missive hidden under the secret slab within the old Woodforde pew at St Nicholas Church, and with it, all my papers and journal entries. Thus, this compendium could form, supplemented with Darcy's own account – after much cajoling to write her portion!

I was desperate for news of my family and had a sense that answers would be found thither. We entered the holy place outside the proper hours. In short, we broke in. Darcy

was particularly pleased with herself for correctly guessing the lock's combination code – “St Nicholas... Father Christmas, of course it would be 2512!”

It grieved me to read of my parent's distress but with time I am certain they will come to terms with their loss. Whether or not they can countenance my removal, I hope they know I am happy with the freedom to make my own choices.

I speak of them in the present tense. To me, they are still alive and prospering, though we are separated by the passage of some 200 years. Experience has taught me that time runs differently to the simplistic view of linear progression.

Time travel is real. I do not mean in the very literal sense, of which Darcy and I have undergone. But ordinary, everyday time travel. It is happening here and now in the act of me writing and you reading. You and I, gentle reader, currently occupy the same fragment of existence withdrawn from time. By reading this account, you have travelled in time. In writing it, I have felt time. And time stops when you kiss the one you love.

Yours faithfully,

SW

THE END

Critical Commentary

Female Agency and Queer Choices in the
Late Eighteenth Century

Introduction

As a phrase, ‘life is a chequered scene’ pronounces a sense of changeability within everyday choices.¹ Found within Mary Cooper’s memoirs, I first read it in the library at Chawton House in 2014, researching for my Masters in Eighteenth Century Studies. The line struck me as significant, evoking life’s mutability and the contradictory nature of how it evolves, both due to planned design and capricious chance. To me, the striking image of moving between black and white spaces perfectly captures the perilous existence of living in the light of society’s rules, whilst manoeuvring the shadowy underside of impermissible proclivities. Likewise, the lives of eighteenth-century women are reflected in this ‘chequered scene’; they must behave appropriately, yet still exercise some agency within limited confines.

‘A Chequered Scene’ is therefore the title of this thesis, as it embodies my exploration of female agency and queer choices in the late eighteenth century.

My novel, and accordingly this commentary, reflects the inherent struggle found in navigating gendered behaviours, roles and cultural expectations in late eighteenth-century society. However, before I engage with these topics fully, I begin with how and why the intention of my original discussion altered. Working at Chawton House has naturally had an impact on my doctoral studies, given its significance in contextualising Jane Austen’s world, and its collection of women’s writing from the long eighteenth century. In 2020 I curated Chawton House’s annual exhibition, *Man Up! Women who stepped into a man’s world*. Whilst researching for this project, I discovered fascinating lives of extraordinary individuals who apparently existed, and sometimes thrived, during a period when the rules

¹ Mary Cooper, ed. Clarke Adam, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Mary Cooper, of London; who departed this life June 22, 1812, in the twenty-sixth year of her age. Extracted from her diary and private correspondence*. (London: Printed For J. Butterworth And Son, 43, Fleet-Street; And Sold By Thomas Blanshard, 14, City Road; J. Cooke, And Martin Keene, Dublin, 1818) p.14

of gender binary were arguably more rigid. The concept of eighteenth and nineteenth-century women playing with gender roles and making their own daring choices, regardless of societal expectation, was far more interesting to me than the liminality of female adolescence in this period, my previous research focus. Therefore, my first chapter discusses the development of my thesis, and how curating the exhibition *Man Up!* influenced the direction of *A Chequered Scene* and critical commentary.

Once the development, writing process and rationale of my treatise is set out, the second chapter in this critical commentary engages with the choices and options women in the period faced, as reflected in the novel. I discuss which pathways were available to women – which black or white square they could move themselves onto – as well as the potential benefits and pitfalls of their respective choices. I demonstrate how these choices can play out for women of the time, taking examples from *A Chequered Scene*, various characters from Jane Austen's novels, as well as real-life example Elizabeth Knight, one of Chawton House's owners. From marital prospects to the benefits of widowhood, I also discuss potential careers for women, exploring their feasibility and appeal – or lack thereof!

This leads onto my next chapter, which engages with the implications of Southampton as a spa resort in the Georgian era. Having lived in Southampton for ten years, it felt natural to set the bulk of the novel there, carrying out research by using the city's archives and physically walking the historical parts of town. From a narrative point of view, it made sense for the Woodforde family to visit Southampton during the summer months, given its status as a fashionable watering place. Being a holiday destination with scope for people to come and go in unremarked fashion, I will discuss Southampton as a liminal space in which vice can flourish. I give instances in Austen's novels where mishaps, mistaken identities and misbehaviours occur at seaside towns. I posit that where

rules in society are less clear-cut, and where social status is unclear, this can lead to further freedoms or licentiousness, depending on one's point of view.

My final chapter engages with this very dichotomy, namely, queer existence, identity and choices. I give a brief overview of gay culture in the eighteenth-century, taking a look at the dangers posed for gay men, versus women, wherein the former risked ruin and pillory, whilst the latter could avoid public censure if passed off as strong female friendship. Within this, I also discuss cross-dressing and molly houses, which had a licentious appeal to those who wished to transgress. I go into further detail about the genesis of Dr Hamilton's character and the figure he is based on before concluding the thesis.

I make it clear throughout this commentary where my various sources of inspiration have come from, be it historical works from the period, or critical works about them. However, the final chapter engages more fully with the idea of using film and television adaptations as a form of 'public history', and how consuming these mediums developed my own sense of the past and created an interface between the 'historical' and the imaginary.²

These sources used together, from novels and newspapers to period dramas and exhibitions, provided me with a useful framework in which to create a historical novel that demonstrates the challenges faced by a young woman in the late eighteenth century.

² This theoretical approach to historical television drama is advocated by Hannah Grieg in her essay, 'The new Downton Abbey?': Poldark and the Presentation and Perception of an Eighteenth-Century Past', in which she references Jerome de Groot's work, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*.

In conclusion, this thesis aims to engage with the dual topics of female agency and queer choices through the extended metaphor of life being ‘a chequered scene’.

Chapter 1: Developing the novel and its focus: from teenage uncertainty to ‘manning up’

Female adolescence as a liminal period

The original intent of my doctoral research was to discuss female adolescence as a liminal space. I found the concept intriguing, given there was no clear definition of the period between childhood and womanhood in the eighteenth century. This evolved from my masters research, where I contended that the lack of a definition equivalent to ‘teenager’ meant young women confusingly existed outside the more clear-cut phases of life, neither child nor adult. Given the creative part of my thesis (the novel) was originally intended for young people –with a target age range of thirteen to seventeen – engaging with adolescence as a concept seemed apposite. However, as the novel developed, and my writing style matured, so too did the intended reader’s age. The themes moved away from the specific challenges of youth to the choices faced by women and those who identify as queer within the confines of eighteenth-century society. Therefore, whilst the novel’s genre might well be considered young adult (YA) I believe it also fits within a more recently introduced category, “new adult” (NA). This was a term coined by St. Martin’s Press in 2009 when they called for novel submissions “with protagonists who are slightly older than YA and can appeal to an adult audience”.³ The two genres are closely related with characters similarly undergoing an identity forming process. The difference between the two is that NA novels contend with “a person who is newly thrust into the adult world”.⁴ Although my two main characters, Darcy and Sophia, are sixteen, qualifying them and by extension the novel as YA, within the novel’s Georgian setting, they are effectively older

³ St. Martin’s New Adult Contest [accessed on <https://web.archive.org/web/20161209211749/http://sjaejones.com/blog/2009/st-martins-new-adult-contest/>]

⁴ ‘What is New Adult Fiction? Definition, Controversies, and Examples’ by Cole Salao [accessed on < <https://www.tckpublishing.com/new-adult-fiction/>>]

because they are beyond the contemporary age of formal education and face adult problems. In Chapter 2, I will expand upon these “adult” problems with a discussion on possible choices women had in the eighteenth century. Darcy and Sophia are “thrust” into the adult world of society, romance, matrimony, and later the criminal underworld. I will discuss the implications of their entering the seedy side of Southampton in Chapter 3.

Although my main examination has shifted, the metaphor of a ‘chequered scene’ is still applicable. As mentioned above, I came across the phrase ‘a chequered scene’ in Mary Cooper’s memoirs. Published posthumously in 1818, there is a certain degree of frankness in Cooper’s memoirs, given she “certainly never wrote it to meet the eye of man”.⁵ Her musings on life stray into melancholic profundity, perhaps foreshadowing her early death at the age of twenty-six. It was whilst suffering from infirmity that she wrote the following:

When disappointment lours, and the cloud of affliction seems just ready to burst; then it is the world is stript of its mask, and its true character rushes on the view. *Life is a chequered scene*. As soon as our frail bark is committed to the mighty deep, the waves and billows of disquietude roll over our heads. If religion be the pilot, we are safe in the storm. I desire to lay the foundation of my happiness upon that Rock, against which the afflictive uncertainties of this life must dash in vain: on this foundation the peace of my soul shall rest secure.⁶

The imagery Cooper uses here is striking. The individual facing life’s unknown, represented by the ‘frail bark’ tossed into a careless and immeasurable sea is frighteningly relatable.

Cooper’s anchor amidst constant ill health was religion: the belief that there is some shelter found in the ‘billows of disquietude’. As is clear from the above, Mary Cooper had a religious upbringing, with the editor of her work claiming, “her pious parents

⁵ Mary Cooper, *Memoirs*, p.iv

⁶ Mary Cooper, *Memoirs*, p.14 (emphasis added by me)

taught her to fear God from her youth”.⁷ Despite the prevalence of adolescents being taught to ‘fear God’ from youth in the eighteenth century, the importance of religion is often overlooked in modern portrayals of the past. In her work *The Parson’s Daughter*, Irene Collins notes this is frequently the case when it comes to depicting Jane Austen’s life. She states:

Her Christian convictions have either been ignored or mentioned briefly and with apparent reluctance, as though they form an embarrassing topic, likely to make Jane Austen unapproachable to present-day readers.⁸

Collins makes a pertinent point with which I am inclined to agree. It is easy to dismiss religion, rather than acknowledge its practical and lively addition to the quotidian. To help build an authentic setting I have therefore tried to not shy away from the everyday influence religion had at this time. To emphasise this, I made Sophia’s father a clergyman and taken his surname, ‘Woodforde’, from the eighteenth-century diarist and author of *The Diary of a Country Parson*.

Another development I made to the novel is allocating a greater degree of wealth to the Woodforde family. Sophia’s father is a gentleman, which is unsurprising, given ‘clergy at the time were so ubiquitously involved in the activities of the gentry’.⁹ Though already respectable, Mr Woodforde, like ‘lucky’ Edward Austen, inherited his property from distant, childless relations, thus elevating the family into a higher stratosphere of society. Sophia’s older brother James has moved from his hard-bearing, meritocratic naval life to being the son of a wealthy squire, idling his days away with spendthrift friends. Sophia has become a prize in the marriage mart, with Mr Richards eyeing her as a potential match.

⁷ Mary Cooper, *Memoirs*, p.iii

⁸ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen: the parson's daughter*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1998) p.xi

⁹ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the clergy*, (London; New York: Hambledon and London, 2002.) p.xi

From the perspective of writing a novel, this development allowed me to expose my protagonist to a greater cross-section of society, as well as introducing more narrative tensions.

Throughout the numerous drafts of *A Chequered Scene* one issue has persisted, namely, my (somewhat egotistical) desire as a researcher to detail the text with historical specificity. For instance, in an earlier draft, I made a point of writing a scene in which Darcy notices that the teacups have no handles. Upon the advice of one of my supervisors, I removed this allusion as its inclusion served no narrative purpose – I was not making a point about the Woodfordes following Chinese fashion popular in the 1790s, it was simply a fact that I personally found interesting. Instead, small historical details are peppered throughout the narrative, for instance the colour of the sea-bathing gowns worn in Southampton, or which popular novels the Woodforde ladies read. Each chapter written from Sophia's point of view is titled with a quote or paragraph from whatever she has been reading at the time, be it novel, newspaper or medicinal receipt, both to illuminate her character and also give a greater sense of the world *A Chequered Scene* is set without impeding the narrative's flow or pace.

In her work as historical advisor to television series *Poldark*, Hannah Grieg asserts that Winston Graham's "scene-setting historical description ... are used at moments to contextualize his characters' motivations within eighteenth-century mentalities" in his *Cornwall* novels.¹⁰ This inclusion of historical content allows Graham to give a "broader characterisation of the period against which the narrative unfolds".¹¹ One particular instance where I employed the same justification is the allusion to the Irish Rebellion of

¹⁰ Hannah Grieg, 'The new Downton Abbey?': Poldark and the Presentation and Perception of an Eighteenth-Century Past', 2019. Accessed on: <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/143634/1/JBTV_GriegThe_NewDASUBMISSIONFINAL_edited.docx> p.8

¹¹ Hannah Grieg, 'The new Downton Abbey?': Poldark and the Presentation and Perception of an Eighteenth-Century Past', p.10

1798 and its driving factor in keeping Darcy's father in the eighteenth century. I went back and forth over whether to remove its mention, given it has no immediate impact on the narrative, in which the story takes place in 1790 Hampshire. At no point does the action move to a troubled Ireland and the reader is given no further detail as to what happens, beyond the failure of its efforts. As an aside, perhaps Jane Austen would approve of this decision, for when giving writing advice to her niece Anna, she said "Let the Portmans [her characters] go to Ireland; but as you know nothing of the manners there, you [the narrative] had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations".¹²

Returning to my original point, why include the connection to Ireland, if it serves no narrative purpose? Why even have Darcy's father originally from the past at all? In answer, I return to Grieg's praise of Winston Graham, whose foregrounding of eighteenth-century events has just the lightest of touches on his novels' plots. I had to give Darcy's father a strong motivation for not returning to his family – a grand ambition he deemed above his ordinary familial ties. How else to justify his apparent abandonment and subsequent treatment of his only daughter? By placing his motivation within an eighteenth-century mentality his sympathy is removed from her modern sensibilities. To him, her need for a father seems small when contextualised against the fate of his home nation. Darcy's shattering realisation that her father is not the idealised hero she once thought plunges her into a downward spiral, mirroring Marianne Dashwood's psychosomatic illness in *Sense and Sensibility*.¹³ Although Marianne and Darcy are similar ages, Austen does not posit her character's disappointment as an adolescent problem but as a romantic, and therefore adult,

¹² Letter LXXXVI, dated August 10, 1814, from Jane Austen to her niece, Anna Lefroy Austen, Brabourne edition, Accessed on: <<https://pemberley.com/janeinfo/brablt16.html>>

¹³ In the "Introduction" to the Penguin edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, Tony Tanner states "Marianne's illness is clearly psychosomatic and in many of its symptoms ... her behaviour is pathological in a way which for the late eighteenth century could have been construed as madness." Tony Tanner, "Introduction" to Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 13.

one, being rejected by the man she loves and subsequently becoming “sick with the intensity of her own secret passions and fantasies”.¹⁴ Marianne’s heart is not only broken but her prospects are endangered with the loss of her “bloom”, without which, as her brother callously remarks, means it unlikely she “will marry a man worth more than five or six hundred a year at the utmost”.¹⁵ What this highlights to me is that any given difficulty Darcy faces in the eighteenth century is inherently due to the constraints of her sex, rather than her age. Hence, it helped justify the shift in my thesis focus and placed the novel’s genre in the older YA or NA category. The next part of this chapter delves into why I chose a novel as the means to tell this story and why I believe my choice of epistolary form contributes to the success of my core aims – namely, engaging with the dual topics of female agency and queer choices in the late eighteenth century.

Why tell the story in fictive prose?

“‘And what are you reading, Miss—?’ ‘Oh! It is only a novel!’ replies the young lady... or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world’s best-chosen language”.¹⁶

Like Jane Austen’s well-known defence of the novel, I too believe it best depicts the subtleties and nuances of human nature. Furthermore, the novel as a form allowed me to capture a more authentic sense of the eighteenth century than say, a script might, because of my ability to weave descriptive passages into the narrative.

¹⁴ Tony Tanner, “Introduction” to Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p.15

¹⁵ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), (London: Richard Bentley edition, 1833) p.195

¹⁶ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, (London: Penguin, 1994) Vol I, Chapter 5

By splitting the narrative between my two protagonists, I was able to portray two very different perspectives, capture their interiority, as well as create suspense in the narrative by switching at moments of tension. In terms of form, *A Chequered Scene* is an epistolary novel predominantly made up of Sophia's diary entries and Darcy's retrospective account of events. Given the popularity of epistolary novels in the eighteenth century, it seemed an appropriate narrative choice and one novel I particularly engaged with in formal terms was Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778). The novel proved particularly useful when it came to inspiring certain plot incidences – both Darcy and Evelina enter society with mixed success. Indeed, Darcy meeting 'Crimson and Canary' is a nod to Evelina finding herself in the company of two *women of the night*. I will expand upon this episode more fully in Chapter 3.

Speech is an integral part of identity and is reflected both by internal monologues and outward conversation. The novel as a form is best able to depict both usages. How characters in my writing express themselves is essential, not only to make them well rounded, but also to make them believable inhabitants of their respective times. I believe normal patterns of speech are found in colloquialisms and incorporating these into my narrative was key to creating convincing rhetoric. I therefore relied heavily upon *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, originally published in 1785. The author justifies the work's existence in the preface, stating 'the many vulgar allusions and cant expressions that so frequently occur in our common conversation and periodical publications make a work of this kind extremely useful'.¹⁷ The idea of using 'cant expressions' particularly appealed, as it would pose further difficulty for my modern day protagonist negotiating the eighteenth-century. 'Cant' – described as 'the jargon of a class, group or profession, often used to exclude or mislead others' – is both jarring because it is

¹⁷ T. McArthur (ed.) *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: Printed For Hooper And Co. No. 212, High Holborn, Facing Bloomsbury Square, 1796) pp.ix-x

only meaningful to those who use it, yet it also lends a degree of realism because it is partly recognisable, if only as dated vernacular.¹⁸ Therefore, the differences between people of 1790 and today is starkly presented in speech.

The diction found within *Evelina* helped me find Sophia's voice. Her speech would naturally be more formal than Darcy's, given her genteel background. As a young lady of good breeding, she would be more greatly concerned with her conduct, ensuring her addresses are polite and conform to convention. Indeed, 'a young woman of virtue and good sense, will never think it beneath her care and study to cultivate the graces of her outward mien and figure, which contribute so considerably towards making her behaviour acceptable'.¹⁹ What is interesting about this instruction addressed to young ladies of eighteenth-century is the emphasis on their 'outward mien'. The word mien implies that their deportment, preferably silent, decides their modesty, rather than their speech. Therefore, what Sophia does not say is just as important as what she does. Hence, having Sophia's point of view written in her Journal, where she can be more open, helped illustrate her thought process when her 'outward mien' remained discreet. Her choices as a young woman of the eighteenth century are limited yet can be explored when she writes to herself.

Thus, I believe my choice of form, the epistolary novel, contributes to the success of my core aims: namely to engage with the dual topics of female agency and queer choices in the late eighteenth century. In moments of crises, such as when she contends with her confusing feelings towards Darcy, Sophia grapples with her choices and attempts to find some agency within society's narrow confines. By reading the novel of Darcy and

¹⁸ *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.88

¹⁹ *The polite academy, or school of behaviour for young gentlemen and ladies. Intended as a foundation for good mrs and polite address, in masters and misses* (London. Darton and Harvey, R. Crosby, and B. C. Collins. By B. C. Collins, Salisbury), 1762, p.vi

Sophia's story, modern-day queer girls might relate their own experiences to those of teenagers in the past.

The final part of this chapter outlines how curating the Man Up! exhibition further influenced the development of the novel and direction of this thesis.

Man Up! Women who stepped into a man's world

“That she might execute her Designs with the better Grace, and the more Success, she boldly commenced a Man, at least in her Dress, and no doubt she had a Right to do so, since she had the real Soul of a Man in her Breast”.²⁰

Thus begins the published account of Hannah Snell (1723-92), known as James Grey, who lived for a time as both a soldier in the British Army and a marine in the Royal Navy. The work recounts Snell's adventures dressing as a man throughout her military service and how she maintained the secret of her identity for several years until eventually revealing the truth to her astonished shipmates. I chose to display it as part of my exhibition *Man Up!* and it was the focus point for the section on Soldiering. Another figure featured in the exhibition was Mary Ann Talbot, (1778-1808) alias John Taylor, who masqueraded as a soldier and sailor during the French Revolutionary Wars, all the while wearing “a complete suit of male attire”.²¹

I found myself fascinated by these cross-dressing women who fought for their country and rebelled against societal constraints. Whilst Snell and Talbot undoubtedly faced difficulties and danger in their guises as men – both were wounded during various conflicts – what struck me was the freedom with which they could move throughout

²⁰ The Female Soldier; Or, The Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell, (London: R. Walker, 1750). 1st edition, p.7

²¹ The life and surprising adventures of Mary Ann Talbot, Mary Ann Talbot (London: R. S. Kirby, 1809). 1st edition. p.3

society. Indeed, even back on land and living as a woman once more, Talbot states “I could not entirely forget my seafaring habits, but frequently dressed myself, and took excursions as a sailor”.²²

The experiences of these women demonstrate that they simply had more choices living as men. They had freedom to travel unchaperoned and unmolested. This freedom of movement also extended to the more literal practicalities of physically moving their bodies more easily. Take Anne Bonny and Mary Read, real historical figures who operated in the Caribbean around 1720 as part of a pirate crew. Unlike Snell and Talbot, they did not intentionally disguise their sex, but wore male attire for practical reasons. According to an account given by Dorothy Thomas during their trial “... that each of them had a Mchet and Pistol in their Hands and cursed and Swore at the Men, to murder.” Thomas added: “... that the Reason of her knowing and believing them to be Women then was, by the largeness of their Breasts”.²³ Despite acting in a decidedly ‘unfeminine manner’, committing their violent deeds without any intention of covering their chests indicates that masquerading as men was not Bonny and Reed’s intention. Wearing the equivalent of trousers allowed them the freedom to climb, work with ropes, and go up and down ladders. Not to mention, it was easier to afford, launder, patch or replace breeches than several layers of skirts.

In my own experience of wearing historical clothing as part of my working life at Chawton House, I can attest to the difficulty in moving about in my usual manner whilst wearing a heavy, sack-back, taffeta gown, over chemise, petticoat, stays and silk stockings. Before continuing, I should take a moment to state I do not fall into the common

²² The life and surprising adventures of Mary Ann Talbot, Mary Ann Talbot (London: R. S. Kirby, 1809). 1st edition. p.37

²³ Charles Johnson, A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates, 1724 (Dover Publications, 1999) p.133

misconception of “the Corset Myth” often perpetuated by Hollywood. As Hilary Davidson emphasises, “people often judge corsets by projecting modern standards of embodied comfort onto the past”,²⁴ and this is what I am doing by applying my own experiences of dressing up in historical costume. It is relevant, given Darcy is a girl from the twenty-first century, attempting to pass in eighteenth-century society.

The physical restriction imposed by these clothes, causes me to take greater care walking and moving and accordingly my posture is more upright and my steps more graceful. In short, I feel different: more of a lady. This psychological alteration recalls the following from Virginia Woolf’s novel, *Orlando*:

“There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking... Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath.”²⁵

Thus, one’s outward appearance affects the internal machinations of one’s psyche. I attempted to capture this sensation in *A Chequered Scene* when Darcy dresses in full eighteenth-century attire for the first time. Furthermore, those who witness her new appearance treat her differently. The housekeeper Mrs Jenkins becomes more respectful and delicate in her treatment of Darcy, making a deferential curtsy as she enters the room. Yet, although Darcy moves differently, making “slow and stately progress”, she is still inclined to make indelicate comments, unconsciously rebelling against her sartorial constriction. As Sophia wryly notes to Darcy, “your new apparel has not entirely erased your nature.”

²⁴ Hilary Davidson, ‘Bridgerton Keeps Perpetuating One of Hollywood’s Most Stubborn Myths’, article for Slate, March 24 2022 accessed on <<https://slate.com/culture/2022/03/bridgerton-season-2-netflix-corset-simone-ashley.html>>

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: a biography*, 1928 (London: Penguin Books, 1993) p.132.

In contrast to Darcy's experience of feeling more constrained in her genteel, feminine clothing, freedom of movement in male attire affords more opportunity for fun. Take, for instance, Harriet Freke, the supposed villain of Maria Edgeworth's novel, *Belinda* (1801). Harriet is a cross-dressing agent of mischief, delighting in frolics, japes and generally causing chaos. She is described as having "no conscience, so she was always at ease; and never more so than in male attire".²⁶ Although Freke is cast as the main antagonist in *Belinda*, her merry enjoyment of various cross-dressing adventures makes for a far more interesting character than the eponymous heroine. I can't help but admire her as she moves through society in "the character of a young rake with such spirit and *truth*, that I am sure no common conjurer could have discovered any thing feminine about her".²⁷ Sophia likewise becomes more spirited after she first dons male clothing in order to enter Southampton's seedy underworld. From taking uncertain steps during her first venture into manhood, considered too "careful and close" in Darcy's opinion, to sitting in Dr Hamilton's apartments wearing breeches and shirtsleeves, wiping her "grease-smearred mouth with the back of a sleeve". Sophia has enough self-awareness to acknowledge the alteration, calling herself "unladylike". Her altered exterior gives her the confidence to say and do what she might ordinarily not. Having absconded from societal rules and expectations during the moments of performance, she has like, Mary Ann Talbot, found she is not able to "entirely forget" those masculine habits.

Returning to *Man Up!* not all the women featured in the exhibition were cross-dressers. As mentioned in the introduction, Elizabeth Martin Knight was a landowner and "squire" of Chawton House, amongst several other estates. An undeniable character, it is said whenever she arrived at Chawton House, the church bells rang to herald her return.

²⁶ Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda, in three volumes* (London: Printed For J. Johnson, St. Paul's Churchyard, 1801) 1st edition, p.98

²⁷ Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda, in three volumes* (London: Printed For J. Johnson, St. Paul's Churchyard, 1801) 1st edition, p.98

Born in 1674 as Elizabeth Martin, when she inherited Chawton from her deceased brothers at the age of twenty-five, she took the surname Knight, along with control of the management of the estate. The large amount of land and wealth Knight owned made her powerful. However, what makes her such an interesting figure is that she seemed to relish her authority, taking an active role in managing her estates. Her letters indicate that she knew the minutiae of her accounts, as demonstrated by the financial reckonings written in her own hand. In one letter, Elizabeth Knight writes to her steward, Mr. Heath, that he must “go immediately to Chawton” and cut down wood on some disputed farmland.²⁸ Knight believed the wood belonged to her and wished to sell it before anyone could contest her right. She tells Heath that if anyone opposes it, “let it be at his peril”. Not only an astute manager of her land, Knight was clearly a woman not to be crossed! Knight concludes the letter with further instructions for Mr. Heath to find “a good Market for my Bricks”.²⁹ This not only demonstrates her active role in managing her estates, but also an unladylike assertiveness in doing so. She takes ownership of her role, writing “I have very good authority for what I transact in this affair”,³⁰ certain of her capabilities and assured in her place as proprietor.

Despite Knight’s assertiveness and apparent delight in her grand role, she was still a woman manoeuvring within patriarchal confines. Eighteenth-century coverture laws meant all her property and land belonged to her husband once she married, because of “the legal fiction that a husband and wife were one person”.³¹ Legal historian Joanne Bailey sums up the limitations of eighteenth-century wives neatly:

²⁸ 39M89/E/B17, letter from Elizabeth Knight to Mr Heath, 8/9 Dec 1703, on deposit at Hampshire Records Office

²⁹ 39M89/E/B17, letter from Elizabeth Knight to Mr Heath, 8/9 Dec 1703, on deposit at Hampshire Records Office

³⁰ 39M89/E/B17, letter from Elizabeth Knight to Mr Heath, 8/9 Dec 1703, on deposit at Hampshire Records Office

³¹ M. E. Doggett, *Marriage, wife-beating and the law in Victorian England* (London, 1992), chapter 3.

“Lacking any separate legal existence under ‘coverture’, a wife could not technically enter into economic contracts in her own right and in order to make basic purchases on credit had to do so in her husband’s name. A husband gained outright permanent possession of all his wife’s moveable goods and had the right to manage his wife’s land and to receive its rents and profits during marriage, though he required his wife’s sanction to dispose of it.”³²

In other words, a woman’s legal existence ceases once married “or at least it is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection and *cover*, she performs everything”.³³ In her detailed historical analysis of coverture, Bailey provides a feminocentric point of view, asserting that within the confines of coverture's regulations on credit and property ownership, women’s economic activities were fairly broad and flexible.³⁴ Indeed, women had an instinctive sense of possession over some goods during wedlock. Elizabeth Knight was one such woman, finding ways around her lack of legal identity.

Knight married twice in her life, first to her cousin William Woodward and after his death, to Bulstrode Peachey. Thereafter, all her moveable goods belonged to her husband, who could dispose of it as he willed. Although Knight’s respective husbands could not dispose of her lands, they were entitled to the rents and profits that came from them.

Both her husbands were obliged to take her surname as part of the marriage agreement. The marriage articles are a fascinating set of documents, appearing as some sort of pre-nuptial agreement, demonstrating Knight’s awareness of coverture and the ways

³² Joanne Bailey’s ‘Favoured or Oppressed? Married Women, Property and ‘Coverture’ in England 1660-1800: Continuity and Change 17 (3) 2002

³³ Anon., *The laws respecting women, as they regard their natural rights, or their connections and conduct* (London, 1777), p.65

³⁴ Joanne Bailey’s ‘Favoured or Oppressed? Married Women, Property and ‘Coverture’ in England 1660-1800’ Continuity and Change 17 (3) 2002

in which she could get around them. Before marrying Bulstrode Peachey, Knight sent a letter of instruction to her lawyers, outlining the terms of her marriage agreement.

Written in her own hand, she states, “to be reserved to my own use, my estate in Hampshire during our joint lives, and if I desire it, the rents and profits to be paid to me, or trustees, to my own use only”.³⁵ Knight is thus making it clear that she wishes to keep control of the property, profits from the land and prevent her husband Peachey from receiving any of the funds therein garnered.³⁶

The marriage settlement was on display as part of the *Man Up!* exhibition, as I wished to show the physicality of the document as site for live negotiation. Throughout, there are amendments and crossings-out, the gall ink burning through the parchment in some places. Evidently, there was a negotiation taking place, one in which Elizabeth Knight took an active part. Knight’s use of the law of agency demonstrates her astuteness in such matters and how to navigate her precarious place as a woman *in a man’s world*. This knowledge enabled her to become increasingly independent of her husband and thus I wished to reflect the shade of her strength in certain characters within *A Chequered Scene*, namely the widow Lady Holland and Sophia’s mother, Mrs Woodforde. I will go into greater depth on this matter in the next chapter.

³⁵ 39M89/E/T16, the draft marriage settlement of Elizabeth Knight and Bulstrode Peachey, 1725, on deposit at the Hampshire Record Offices

³⁶ In terms of *why* Elizabeth Knight married again, it is unclear although presumably to produce an heir to inherit her various estates. Why Peachey as a choice though? Dr Alison Daniell, who has done extensive research on Knight, anecdotally told me that it was perhaps political, given he ran for the Midhurst Parliamentary seat to which she owned the votes through her lands.

Chapter 2: Marriage, Widowhood and Working: Women's Choices and Chances in *A Chequered Scene*.

The Economics of Marriage

Having discussed the oppressive problems of coverture in the previous chapter and the various ways in which wives could negotiate around these strictures, this chapter considers the practical options open to women in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. From marriage, to widowhood, to working, I will briefly outline some possible options for women, discussing the potential benefits and disadvantages and whether there was any agency to be found within the paths chosen. I will then discuss how these options are reflected in *A Chequered Scene*.

Staying with the indomitable Elizabeth Knight for the moment, during her married state, the draft marriage articles demonstrate she managed to, as Joanne Bailey puts it, “act as her husband’s economic agent in the domestic and business spheres and in gendered marital economic roles”.³⁷ Besides running the household, dealing with the servants, overseeing the menus and taking a personal interest in what food is purchased from the market, a throwaway comment made by Sophia demonstrates that Mrs Woodforde likewise yields similar levels of power and influence in the running of the estate’s income. She is described as the one who “manages the accounts for the glebe and tithes”, terms which naturally mean nothing to Darcy and who thinks no more of it, beyond understanding Mrs Woodforde holds a degree of power despite being a woman. Although these terms go over the head of my main character, and indeed likely most readers, I wished to show how integral Mrs Woodforde is to the financial operations and management of the Thropden estate. To briefly explain the definitions, a priest’s income was financed in two ways: the first was the income from the glebe, “an area of land donated to the church (often in the distant past) for the benefit of the incumbent”.³⁸ In the case of Jane Austen’s father, the glebe land at Steventon was gifted by the Knight family, with additional fields rented to George Austen to farm. The second

³⁷ Joanne Bailey’s ‘Favoured or Oppressed? Married Women, Property and ‘Coverture’ in England 1660-1800’ *Continuity and Change* 17 (3) 2002

³⁸ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen: the parson's daughter*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1998) p.52

income was from tithes, an ancient custom recognised since the ninth century as “the right of the clergy to receive a tenth of the annual gross product of all cultivated land in the parish”.³⁹ Whilst the system of tithes cushioned the clergy from inflation, it could put them on bad terms with the tenant farmers, as it placed them in the role of tax-gatherer.⁴⁰ Sophia, however, describes her father as being “good to his tenants” and “a popular man”. Whilst this can be read as a daughter’s biased fondness, I do not merely intend it as such. Mr Woodforde is given space to be considered popular striding about the land, speaking to his tenants in a jovial fashion, without having to deal with the unpleasantness of tithing. Instead, this task is overseen by Mrs Woodforde who, like Elizabeth Knight, would feel well within her rights ordering wood from disputed land be cut down and sold. The power of her position is demonstrated by the cold deference shown her in church by the villagers.

The benefits of widowhood

What of a woman’s position if and after she was widowed? Coverture lasted until the wife outlived the husband, when her property would revert back to herself and she would become a single woman. Therefore, once unburdened by her husband, a widow was in control of her own finances with the same legal rights as a man. Although it is impossible to say whether Jane Austen was aware of Elizabeth Knight, her portrait did hang at Chawton House during the time of her visits, and I cannot help but draw parallels with certain matriarchal widows found within the novels. Consider the widowed Mrs Ferrars, who has the power to disinherit her eldest son when he does not marry a woman of her choosing. Likewise, the formidable Lady Catherine de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice*, resembles Elizabeth Knight’s disposition. The former has no qualms about browbeating Elizabeth Bennet over the rumour of her engagement to Mr Darcy, and that:

“though this great lady was not in the commission of the peace for the county, she was a most active magistrate in her own parish... and whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too

³⁹ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen: the parson's daughter*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1998) pp.49-50

⁴⁰ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen: the parson's daughter*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1998) p.50

poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints and scold them into harmony and plenty”.⁴¹

As with Elizabeth Knight, anyone who considers opposing Lady Catherine, “let it be at his Peril.” However, the Austen character who, to me, most closely resembles the twice widowed and impressive Elizabeth Knight is Lady Denham from *Sanditon*, “a very rich old Lady, who had buried two Husbands, [and] who knew the value of Money”.⁴² This knowing the value of money, and knowing how to protect her own capital within the confines of coverture, is epitomised in the following passage:

“After a widowhood of some years, she had been induced to marry again. The late Sir Harry Denham, of Denham Park in the Neighbourhood of Sanditon, had succeeded in removing her and her large Income to his own Domains, but... she had been too wary to put anything out of her own Power, and when on Sir Harry’s Decease she returned again to her own House at Sanditon, she was said to have made this boast to a friend, ‘that though she had *got* nothing but her Title from the Family, still she had *given* nothing for it.’”⁴³

That Lady Denham “boasts” of keeping control over what she considers her due is strikingly similar to Knight’s own astuteness at playing the system. The boast reflects the tone of Elizabeth Knight’s letters, and how she relished her own position. Were she a real person, I am quite certain Lady Denham would have ordered her lawyers to draw up similar marriage articles to those of Elizabeth Knight, with the addendum that any rents and profits from her estates be reserved for her own use.

Whether or not Elizabeth Knight did influence the creation of these landowning matriarchs in Austen’s novels, their independent positions served as inspiration for my own independently wealthy widow, Lady Holland of Woolston House. Like Lady Denham, Lady Holland has the freedom and money to pursue her own interest, this being botany in the latter’s case. Before continuing, I should mention that the situation of Woolston House is based on a description found

⁴¹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813 (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1990) p.174

⁴² Jane Austen, *Sanditon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) p.15

⁴³ Jane Austen, *Sanditon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) p.15

in the 1802 *Southampton Guide Book*, detailing an estate located in Southampton's surrounding countryside:

“one and a half miles from Itchen Ferry on the way to Netley Abbey is a large ancient house, the property of Sir Nathaniel Holland, the situation and prospect of which is beautiful”.⁴⁴

The fictional (and deceased) Sir Nathaniel Holland in *A Chequered Scene* bears no more likeness to the real man than his name. However, I hope the fashionable portrait painter Nathaniel Dance, as he was born before adding Holland to his own name, would make no objection to this theft, given his former artistic profession.

In *A Chequered Scene* Lady Holland is a fashionable figure in society with ready wealth at her disposal and an interest in botany. Without a husband, she is free to pursue this interest, although that is not to say botany was a study closed to women in the eighteenth century. Indeed, botany was seen as a safe subject for women, being considered a means for them to informally link to scientific practice, as well as being widely recommended as “an antidote to the world of accomplishments”.⁴⁵ Some commentators saw botany as “an inoffensive hobby for women excluded from more significant work”, although “others considered it problematic because of the sexuality of Linneaus's system”.⁴⁶ Regardless, Lady Holland's interest would not be considered unusual to her eighteenth-century contemporaries. However, whilst an acceptable pursuit, it is worth mentioning the case of Mary Eleanor Bowes, Countess of Strathmore, a keen botanist and England's richest heiress who married Andrew Robinson Stoney, “Georgian Britain's Worst Husband”.⁴⁷ As recounted in Wendy Moore's biography of Bowes, Stoney's assaults on his wife were “calculated and sustained”, maintaining “constant control over Mary's life with elaborate rules and rigid constraints” that extended to blocking her entry to the walled garden and

⁴⁴ *The Southampton guide: or; An account of the antient and present state of that town.* (Southampton: Printed and published by Elizabeth Skelton and Co. 1802) Originally published in 1768

⁴⁵ Ann B. Shteir, “Botanical Dialogues: Maria Jacson and Women's Popular Science Writing in England.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, [Johns Hopkins University Press, American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS)], 1990, pp. 301–17, p.304

⁴⁶ Ann B. Shteir, p.304

⁴⁷ Wendy Moore, *Wedlock How Georgian Britain's Worst Husband Met His Match* (Orion Publishing Group, 2009)

greenhouse, thus denying “any consolation in her chief interest: botany”.⁴⁸ Though extreme, and indeed his ill-treatment resulted in a scandalous and public divorce, Stoney’s marital abuse demonstrates the power a Georgian husband had over his wife. If a woman married a man who wished to quash any interests straying beyond the domestic sphere, he was well within his rights to do so, even having a right to beat his wife if felt necessary.⁴⁹

Fortunately, Lady Holland is free to pursue her chosen interest and has her late husband’s income to fund her habits. Likewise, Sophia is interested in all things botanical and is influenced by Elizabeth Blackwell’s *A Curious Herbal* (1737-1739). Born c.1700, Blackwell’s life is an example of botany being “an economic resource for women” from which she earned money for her botanical work.⁵⁰ This was necessary, as her husband found himself in debtor’s prison and needed funds to secure his release. Thus, Elizabeth Blackwell created the herbal to raise the money, taking rooms near Chelsea Physick Garden and making detailed botanical drawings of plants, later painstakingly sketching, engraving and hand-colouring each illustration. A copy of the beautifully illustrated *A Curious Herbal* is in the Chawton House library collection, and the story has always been one which greatly interested me, hence the reference to Blackwell’s work in *A Chequered Scene*. However, there was a dual purpose in my inclusion of Blackwell, both to demonstrate the perils of making a bad marriage, as well as leading into Sophia’s scientific interests.

Botany as an acceptable science

Throughout *A Chequered Scene*, I hope my numerous examples of Sophia engaging with herbs and medical practices make her calling as a healer apparent. Mr Richards praises her as being “rather clever with herbs”, when she once concocted a tea to treat his headache. In a darker moment, Sophia spikes Darcy’s drink with a mixture intended to send her into a healing rest, telling

⁴⁸ Wendy Moore, *Wedlock How Georgian Britain's Worst Husband Met His Match* (Orion Publishing Group, 2009) p.46

⁴⁹ M. E. Doggett, *Marriage, wife-beating and the law in Victorian England* (London, 1992), Chapter 1. *Eighteenth-Century Judicial Practice*, p.11

⁵⁰ Ann B. Shteir, p.304

herself, “sleep is the greatest reserve for an immediate recovery”. The fallout following the duel on Netley Common, when she is required to perform necessary surgery on Dr Hamilton, is the climax with which her abilities are truly called into action. My intention was to show that herbs and botany are no mere interest, but feed into an earnest desire to be a doctor. As she says herself, “I am a healer. I seek to aid and do no harm”, a direct call back to Hippocrates’ first law to physicians.

Could women in the eighteenth century even be doctors? Given, “women found no place in most formal institutions of science”, the short answer is no.⁵¹ One extreme pathway is the equivalent one taken by Dr Hamilton, although I will discuss his character more fully in my final chapter on queer lives. This is because the current discussion is devoted to female choices and possibilities, and I do not consider Dr Hamilton a woman. Returning to the point, the YA novel, *The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* (2018), written by Mackenzi Lee, encapsulates the impossible odds faced by any young woman wishing to join the medical practice. Set in the early eighteenth-century, the narrative centres around Felicity Montague, a disowned peer’s daughter who dreams of becoming a doctor. The opening scene occurs in Edinburgh, where she has based herself in order to apply to the university for a place. Receiving no reply to her three letters, the following occurs:

“As soon as I gave my name to the secretary, he informed me that my correspondence had indeed been received, but no, it had not been passed on to the board of governors. My petition had been denied without ever being heard, because I was a woman, and women were not permitted to enrol in the hospital teaching courses. I was then escorted from the building by a soldier on patrol”.⁵²

Throughout the course of the novel, Felicity’s ambition is constantly met with derision and resistance, despite her obvious capabilities. That a soldier is employed to escort her from the university’s premises, demonstrates the violence of opposition she is up against. Felicity understands that in order to become true physician, she must study and become affiliated with a teaching hospital, something that was not possible until the 1876 “Enabling Act” was passed,

⁵¹ Ann B. Shteir, p.303

⁵² Mackenzie Lee, *The Lady’s Guide to Petticoats and Piracy*, (Harper Collins, 2018) p.13

which allowed the licensing of both male and female doctors.⁵³ Prior to her many unsuccessful applications, Felicity gains knowledge by reading various medical tracts, referencing the real-life Scottish surgeon Dr John Hunter, and the fictional Dr Alexander Platt, whose work titled *Treaties on Human Blood and Its Movement through the Body* is the sacred text on which she bases her “mental compendium of medical knowledge compiled over years of study”.⁵⁴ Likewise, Sophia is a voracious reader of equivalent works, aware of Dr Hunter’s theories on couching, as well as Herr Heister’s, *A General History of Surgery* and declaring herself, “a great admirer of Dr Cullen’s work”, an eminent physician, author of several medical texts and central figure in the Scottish Enlightenment.⁵⁵ I made mention of Doctors Hunter and Cullen In *A Chequered Scene*, as they were well known in eighteenth-century society. The former’s eminence led to his appointment as King George III’s surgeon, the latter’s works being so popular, they went into several editions and was translated into several languages.⁵⁶ Therefore, although a Miss Sophia Woodforde of Thropden Hall, Hampshire, would not be the target demographic for these medical treatises, she would also not have much difficulty in laying hands on the works. Sophia tells Darcy her father inherited the library collection as part of the Thropden estate, and given Mr Woodforde’s liberal character, I wished to show she had free rein of the contents. This trait was modelled on the Reverend George Austen, who allowed his daughter Jane to “have used some of the same schoolbooks as the boys, as well as having free use of her father’s library”.⁵⁷

Regardless of the privilege however, clearly Sophia was not furnished with books in order to find a place in the medical profession, the impossibility of which has already been outlined above. She, like Jane Austen, was merely lucky to have access to an expansive library, as well as a benign father who permitted access. Likewise, Lady Holland was lucky to be widowed in such a comfortable situation. But what of those less fortunate women?

⁵³ ‘Women in Medicine: The Edinburgh Seven’, published online by the General Medical Council on 09/03/2020. Accessed here <<https://gmcuk.wordpress.com/2020/03/09/women-in-medicine-the-edinburgh-seven/>>

⁵⁴ Mackenzie Lee, *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy*, (Harper Collins, 2018) p.5

⁵⁵ John Thomson, *An Account of the Life, Lectures and Writings of William Cullen, M.D.* Volume 1. William Blackwood & T. Cadell, 1832.

⁵⁶ W.F. Bynum (1994). *Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 11.

⁵⁷ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen: the parson's daughter*, (London: The Hambleton Press, 1998) p.42

The Georgian heiress Mary Eleanor Bowes was lucky to have inherited great wealth, yet suffered years of violence from her husband, at his mercy and under his control. Sophia is not permitted to earn a wage as a doctor but nor does she need to. She is of a class in which many parents thought only of equipping their daughters with a show of accomplishments enabling them to compete in the marriage market.⁵⁸ Although dependent on her father's security, within patriarchal strictures, her life is comfortable. The same cannot be said for Eliza and Peg, or "Crimson and Canary", the prostitutes Darcy befriends. I do not give their histories within *A Chequered Scene* but regardless of what brought them to their position, they are not, as euphemised in *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, "friends of Madame Ran" by choice.⁵⁹ Sophia is confronted with the reality that her virtue is merely down to luck and privilege when Margaret angrily states, "The only difference between ourselves is circumstance of birth. Who can say what you might have done had you fallen so low?"

As well as demonstrating the precariousness of a woman's situation in society without the protection of wealth, position and marriage, Eliza and Peg's inclusion gives an insight into Southampton's less genteel side. This, along with Southampton's history as a watering place during the Georgian period, will be the discussion in my next chapter.

⁵⁸ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen: the parson's daughter*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1998) p.34

⁵⁹ T. McArthur (ed.) *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: Printed For Hooper And Co. No. 212, High Holborn, Facing Bloomsbury Square, 1796) p.102

Chapter 3: ‘Taking the flounce’: Southampton as a Georgian watering place

Georgian Southampton, the bathing resort

In this chapter, I engage with the historiography of Southampton’s time as a popular bathing resort, recounting various activities enjoyed by both the real-life *bon ton*, as well as characters in *A Chequered Scene*, including balls, excursions and of course sea bathing, colloquially known as ‘taking the flounce’. The latter part of the chapter considers the concept of a holiday destination, in particular coastal towns, and the ramifications of transient visitors and looser morals, and thus the inherent dangers they pose as a liminal spaces.

It was this aspect of Southampton, as well as having lived there for several years, which compelled me to set half the novel there, as opposed to London, which was my original intention. Characters with a mysterious past, as both Darcy and Dr Hamilton have, can move about society with less scrutiny than in a small village, something which Austen implied was a place permanent and known.⁶⁰ Moreover, it was reasonable for a Hampshire-based family, such as the Woodfordes, to summer in Southampton, being a popular holiday destination. From the mid-eighteenth century, Southampton was an established bathing resort, as evidenced by a letter written in 1747/48 to the Admiralty, stating “the Towne which is noted for its healthy Situation and now in respect for its salutary Medicinal waters so that People of all Rank and Quality resort hither to receive great benefit”.⁶¹ However, it should be mentioned the letter is part of a request to remove sick prisoners of war from the town, lest disease spread, thus undermining Southampton’s emollient powers. Jane Austen herself was nearly wiped out by an infectious fever whilst at school in Southampton, possibly spread by the large number of troops returning home from abroad.⁶² Regardless, Southampton’s reputation was unaffected by these occasional outbreaks of pestilence. Indeed, in

⁶⁰ As asserted by Kathryn Sutherland, “In two letters Jane Austen described the country village as her ideal fictional terrain”. See *Letters*, 287 (to Anna Austen, 9 September 1814) – ‘3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on.’

⁶¹ Southampton City Archives. Miscellaneous Town Clerk Records. (SCA TC Box 4/15/41)

⁶² Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin Publishers, 2012)

1750, two years after the above letter was written, the town received a visit from Frederick, Prince of Wales, who extolled the virtues of bathing in the waters of Southampton's western shore.⁶³ Darcy and Sophia take a sea dip in this very spot, making use of the bathing machines. The episode is modelled on a description given by Mrs Constantia Orlebar, who visited Southampton in 1771. She, like Darcy and Sophia, made use of Martin's Baths, described in a Baths promotional leaflet as "contiguous to the Summer Assembly Rooms" and which Mr Martin had "rendered the Whole completely elegant, and furnished the separate Apartments for Ladies and Gentleman".⁶⁴ The level of detail in Mrs Orlebar's account furnished me with all the information I needed, from the colour of the flannel gowns (green) to the cost given to the guide (a shilling, of which the proprietor gets eight pence) and even the guide's name (Mrs Tring). The moment when Mrs Orlebar first enters the water is too charming to omit:

"Being myself ordered to Drink Sea Water two Days before I bathed, did not begin till the Saturday after our Arrival: own a Panic struck me, but I gave my hands to Mrs Tring and took the Flounce, which was for the Moment the most wonderful Sensation! I rose above Water nearly strangled with the Quantity (by not shutting my mouth) I inadvertently swallowed. How happy did I feel myself when on dry Ground again!"⁶⁵

Before reading Mrs Orlebar's account, I had not encountered the phrase *took the flounce* and have had trouble finding it used elsewhere. It is perhaps an affected adaptation of the well-known phrase *take the plunge*, which Oliver Goldsmith used in his popular novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*,⁶⁶ thereby demonstrating it was, or perhaps *became*, part of common parlance in the eighteenth century. To me, it better captures sea bathing as eighteenth-century women would have experienced it: stepping off a horse-drawn cart, dressed in a full-length flannel gown as it billows out into the rippling waters and plunging into the sea. Despite being a former resident and frequent

⁶³ Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017)

⁶⁴ Southampton Record Office, referenced in Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017)

⁶⁵ Quoted in A.J. Brown's *Georgian and Victorian Southampton* (Southampton: City of Southampton Society, 1984)

⁶⁶ "Mr. Thornhill's assurance had entirely forsaken him: he now saw the gulph of infamy and want before him, and trembled to take the plunge." Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, 1766 (Oxford World Classics, 2008) p.165

visitor of Southampton, there is no record of Jane Austen bathing there, although she did approve of the practice in general, once declaring “Bathing... so delightful... I believe I staid in rather too long.”⁶⁷ However, whether Austen found miracle cures when bathing in its shores, as promised by the 1781 *Guide to Southampton*, that treated “tedious agues, black and yellow jaundice, schirrus of the spleen, scurvy, green sickness, paralytic disorders”, as well as being invincible against the barrenness in women, will probably never be proven!⁶⁸ Regardless, Georgian Southampton experienced its vogue as a spa and holiday destination for the fashionable.

Georgian Southampton, a place for excursions and society

Part of Southampton’s appeal as holiday destination were the varied excursions that could be enjoyed in a single day. From a trip to the New Forest, to boating on the Solent and a visit to Netley Abbey, all served to make Southampton, “not deficient in those attractions which should characterise fashionable resorts”.⁶⁹ To those wishing to indulge in their romantic sensibilities, taking an aquatic excursion to the ruins at Netley Abbey best served this purpose. Indeed, according to *The Southampton Guides* this “once noble fabric affords pleasure to the antiquary without failing to excite a lively feeling of curiosity in the casual beholder”.⁷⁰ This seems to be no exaggeration, as Jane Austen’s niece, Fanny Knight, found when she visited Netley Abbey in 1807 and was “struck dumb” by the ruins, which were “compound of every thing that is striking ancient and majestic.”⁷¹ As well as being a tourist attraction, visiting the Abbey’s ruins was at one time a highlight of the social season, as reported in the local press:

“A grand rural Fete was held at Netley Abbey... where upwards of 300 of the most fashionable took part of a cold collation; 40 couples danced on

⁶⁷ *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.99

⁶⁸ *Guide to Southampton* (1781), pp. 50-1, quoting Dr. Rowzee, taken from A. Temple Patterson, *A History of Southampton, 1700-1914: Vol.1: An Oligarchy in Decline 1700-1835* (Southampton: At the University Press, 1966) p.57

⁶⁹ *The Southampton guide: or; An account of the antient and present state of that town. To this ed. is added The Southampton rooms, a poem [&c.]* 1823, p.109

⁷⁰ *The Southampton guide*, 1823, p.111

⁷¹ Fanny Knight, Letter C.1,06/8 of 25.1,0.1807, taken from Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017)

the turf till a late hour and broke up with extreme regret. The parties went in general by water and returned in carriages.”⁷²

Although I could not find evidence of such another “grand rural Fete” occurring in 1790, when *A Chequered Scene* is set, I decided to employ my well-used *artistic licence* and transplant it into the narrative. As well as the report above, I based *my* grand rural Fete on the frivolities enjoyed by Jane Austen in the 2007 film *Becoming Jane*, including dancing, fire displays and pastoral acting scenes.

“A fine moonlight night” is “the best time to visit these mouldering yet magnificent remains”, according to Phillip Brannon, who declares “a visit to Netley by moonlight is one that will dwell on the memory with ever freshening vividness, so long as it is capable of recalling any images of the past”.⁷³ Of course, whilst the ruins’ sublime grandeur is better captured at this gothic time of night, returning home after dark engenders risk of criminal incident. Robberies committed by highwaymen “as near the town as the Common” were apparently so frequent, “it might almost have been called the Hounslow Heath of Southampton”.⁷⁴ The morning following the grand rural fete of *A Chequered Scene*, the Southampton ton is abuzz with rumours of revellers beset by highwaymen. Mrs Woodforde describes how “one man was forcibly removed from his carriage and the ruffians made a football of him”. This is based on a real incident that happened in Southampton in 1773, as reported in *The Hampshire Chronicle*, when a young man dressed for a masquerade was set upon by a rabble and “tossed like a football for some time”.⁷⁵ Thus, although “football” may seem anachronistic, it is the precise term used by the contemporary source to describe an act of violence.

Besides bathing and excursions, another societal delight enjoyed by both a young Jane Austen and the characters in *A Chequered Scene* is dancing. The main venue for Balls was the Dolphin Hotel, where Jane Austen enjoyed her eighteenth birthday.⁷⁶ However, the Dolphin held

⁷² 11 August 1806, Hampshire Chronicle from 1772, Southampton Reference Library, taken from Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017) p.52

⁷³ Philip Brannon, *The Stranger's Guide and Pleasure Visitor's Companion to Netley Abbey Giving the Fullest Directions for Examining Every Part of the Ruin, ...* 1850 p.29

⁷⁴ A. Temple Patterson, *A History of Southampton, 1700-1914: Vol.1: An Oligarchy in Decline 1700-1835* (Southampton: At the University Press, 1966) p.43

⁷⁵ *The Hampshire Chronicle*, 27 September 1773

⁷⁶ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin Publishers, 2012)

the fortnightly assemblies throughout the winter until the beginning of May, besides which the premises on the high street were considered too small with the growing influx of fashionable people entering the town.⁷⁷ Hence, I set the scene of the novel's ball at Mr Martin's Long Rooms, the same purveyor as the bathing establishments visited by Sophia and Darcy. The details recorded of the Long Rooms in A.J. Brown's *Georgian and Victorian Southampton* imply a beauty and elegance found within the surroundings, making mention of "five glass chandeliers, pretty pale stucco walls" and "looking-glasses with papier-mâché decorations".⁷⁸ Darcy is certainly impressed with the beautiful setting, although finds the comment, "this is meeting quite in fairy-land" a touch over the top. This is a direct reference to the enthusiastic Miss Bates' response to The Crown's transformation in Jane Austen's *Emma*, where the party gather for a ball.⁷⁹ The Long Rooms were open every day, except on Sundays, during the Season, which extended from July to early November,⁸⁰ precisely the time the Woodforde family visit. The 1795 *Guide to Southampton* tells visitors, on Thursdays and Sundays there is dancing until 11pm and card assemblies at which whist, quadrille, cribbage, casino, commerce, vingt-et-un, loo and lottery were played.⁸¹ Plenty of opportunity for a gamester such as James Woodforde, Sophia's older brother, to lose a fortune. As James haughtily tells his parents, "Debts are considered fashionable" and the family are certainly rubbing elbows with the cream of Southampton society at the Long Rooms.

The upper strata of rank and society enjoyed sports and pastimes established in Southampton, such as archery, the Royal Society of Southampton Archers being formed in 1789 with the Duke of Gloucester as patron and Lady Palmerston as patroness.⁸² The society's principal meetings became leading events of the season and being a member was a reputational boon, as indicated by the four pages devoted to who they were in *The Southampton Guide* of 1793.⁸³ This was part of the reason why I gave Dr Hamilton the honour of being a member – I wished to give

⁷⁷ Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017) p.36

⁷⁸ A.J. Brown's *Georgian and Victorian Southampton* (Southampton: City of Southampton Society, 1984)

⁷⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma* 1815 (London: Dent, 1909)

⁸⁰ A. Temple Patterson, *A History of Southampton, 1700-1914: Vol.1: An Oligarchy in Decline 1700-1835* (Southampton: At the University Press, 1966) p.116

⁸¹ *Guide to Southampton* (1795), pp.29-30

⁸² A. Temple Patterson, *A History of Southampton, 1700-1914: Vol.1: An Oligarchy in Decline 1700-1835* (Southampton: At the University Press, 1966) p.59

⁸³ Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017) p.6

him the same glamour afforded to militia officer Captain John Fuller, whom Frances Burney described as having “a good figure, understanding, education, vivacity and independence” and whom Hester Thrale called “wild, gay, rich, loud.”⁸⁴ That is, a *beau vivant* well established in the *beau monde*. Part of Dr Hamilton’s immediate appeal is his uniform, for as the narrator wryly notes in *Pride and Prejudice*, “the young man wanted only regimentals to make him completely charming.”⁸⁵ The Archers’ uniform seems to have been particularly splendid: dark green coat with black Genoa velvet cuffs and collar, buff waistcoat and breeches of cloth, double gilt uniform button with shooting accoutrements that included a black hat with two feathers, one green, the other black, a buff-coloured leather belt with a pouch and tassel and black leather brace.⁸⁶ As well as giving Dr Hamilton a certain glamour, I also wished to give him an established footing in society, perceptible even to the boorish Pincham, who recognises this is a man not to be crossed in a public setting.

As with most aspects of polite society, there were strict rules for the Ball, upheld by the Master of Ceremonies, who from 1786 was Mr A.G. Haynes.⁸⁷ His role was considered as second only to the Mayor during the proceedings, and accordingly Sophia makes mention of his call to Castle Square two days prior to the ball, as this would decide whether the Woodfordes were respectable enough to be admitted into polite society. Darcy jeopardises this respectability when she makes a social *faux pas*, or “fox paw’s”,⁸⁸ in the Long Rooms, accidentally stepping into the black square of society’s chequered scene.

Georgian Southampton, a den of iniquity?

Upon her official entry into Southampton’s social scene, Darcy, naïve to the correct sort of company, is nearly thrown out the Long Rooms for accidentally consorting with prostitutes.

⁸⁴ Quoted in A. Temple Patterson, *A History of Southampton, 1700-1914: Vol.1: An Oligarchy in Decline 1700-1835* (Southampton: At the University Press, 1966) p.66

⁸⁵ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813 (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1990) p.73

⁸⁶ Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017) p.7

⁸⁷ Cheryl Butler, *Jane Austen & Southampton Spa* (The Diaper Heritage Association, 2017)

⁸⁸ In the *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, the term “fox’s paw” is described as ‘the vulgar pronunciation of the French words *faux pas*. He made a confounded fox’s paw.’

Like Darcy, Frances Burney's eponymous heroine Evelina, also in society for her first season, meets two amused prostitutes without realising their profession. The scene occurs at Vauxhall Gardens, when Evelina unwittingly throws herself on the women's protection. In an entertaining turn of events Evelina soon realises with horror that she "had sought protection from insult, of those who were themselves most likely to offer it!"⁸⁹ They hear Evelina's entreaty "with a loud laugh" and she is perplexed to find that "every other word" she speaks produces the same reaction.⁹⁰ It is this particular act of uncouthness that alerts Evelina to the nature her company. Sophia warns Darcy of the dangers of laughing in public, when the pair are studying conduct literature. Reading from John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, that a girl laughing is "then believed to know more than she should do".⁹¹ Darcy recalls the lines but unfortunately not the lesson, quoting with amusement John Fordyce's claim that smiling makes you a "prostitute to every vagrant eye".⁹² This is precisely what occurs when Darcy tipsily laughs with Eliza and Margaret, or "Crimson and Canary" as she thinks of them, and the three are soon asked to leave at the behest of Mr Haynes, who does not permit the presence of women of "ill repute". Unlike the two "unhappy women" as Evelina repeatedly terms them,⁹³ Margaret and Eliza are not garish monsters bent on mischief, but ordinary women in difficult circumstances. Their presence in *A Chequered Scene* both serves as a foil to this literary incident of dehumanising sex workers, as well as touching upon the ubiquity of criminality within society. The fleshing out of Margaret and Eliza's characters was further influenced by *Harlots* (2017-2019) the television series which follows the fortunes of two rival brothels in eighteenth-century London. Creator Moira Buffini emphasised that whilst the show never shied away from the harsh reality of these women's lives, it nevertheless demonstrated "how strongly they turned very difficult circumstances to their

⁸⁹ Fanny Burney, *Evelina: Or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (Dublin: Nonsuch Publishing, 2007).

⁹⁰ Fanny Burney, *Evelina: Or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (Dublin: Nonsuch Publishing, 2007).

⁹¹ John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (London, 1774), 115-16 cited in Hill (ed.), *Eighteenth Century Woman*, pp.77-8

⁹² James Fordyce; with an introduction by Susan Allen Ford, *Sermons to young women* (Southampton: Printed for Chawton House Press [Chawton House Library Books], 2012)

⁹³ Fanny Burney, *Evelina: Or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (Dublin: Nonsuch Publishing, 2007).

advantage”.⁹⁴ Inspired by Hallie Rubenhold’s *The Covent Garden Ladies*, the show’s title scenes are lifted from Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress*, creating a modern and fascinating dialogue between the famous set of engravings and modern television adaptation. Allowing *Harlots* to inspire aspects of *A Chequered Scene* is thus one of the many ways I have used “a drama’s specific historical content” as a form of public history during my creative process.⁹⁵

Returning to *A Chequered Scene*, the next time Darcy encounters one half of the “Crimson and Canary” pair is when she is incarcerated in the “Pest House”. Whilst speaking at the “Stinking Fish of Southampton” Festival in 2017, celebrating Jane Austen’s time in the town, I met local historian Mary L. South who mentioned a “Lock Hospital” in her talk. The term intrigued me, especially as I knew the narrative required Darcy to find herself held captive. Dr South directed my research towards the aptly named *Clio’s Consciousness Raised* as well as generously sharing her unpublished thesis ‘Homophobia in Eighteenth-Century Southampton’. Walkowitz and Walkowitz’s essay in *Clio’s Consciousness Raised* outlines the details of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, instituted in order to check the spread of venereal disease among unmarried soldiers and sailors in various British towns.⁹⁶ Women accused of being common prostitutes were registered and subject to a periodical examination. If found suffering from a venereal disease, they were incarcerated in a certified lock hospital, which was a hospital containing venereal wards.⁹⁷ I took this Victorian law and turned it into Georgian principle in *A Chequered Scene*. Southampton’s lock-up hospital was situated in the old Pest House, attached to the workhouse.⁹⁸ However, rather than accurately situate the Pest House in the workhouse, I decided to place it within God’s House Tower, a building that still stands today. My choice in doing so was based on historical fact, rather than mere fancy. In the eighteenth century, God’s

⁹⁴ Moira Buffini on ‘Is Harlots a true story? How real 18th century London inspired the series as it returns for season 3 on BBC2’ accessed on < <https://inews.co.uk/culture/harlots-true-story-bbc-two-season-3-london-real-history-571854>>

⁹⁵ Hannah Grieg, ‘The new Downton Abbey’?: Poldark and the Presentation and Perception of an Eighteenth-Century Past’, 2019. Accessed on:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/143634/1/JBTV_GreigThe_NewDASUBMISSIONFINAL_edited.docx> p.2

⁹⁶ Walkowitz, J and Walkowitz, D 1974 “We are not beasts of the field”: Prostitution and the Poor in Plymouth and Southampton under the Contagious Diseases Acts, *Clio’s Consciousness Raised* Hartman, M and Banner, L (eds) New York p.193

⁹⁷ Walkowitz, J and Walkowitz, p.193

⁹⁸ Mary L. South, ‘Homophobia in Eighteenth-Century Southampton’, Unpublished thesis, p.9

House, the medieval tower, situated on the south-east end of the town on the water's edge, was the bridewell or house of correction, in other words the town jail, and had been since 1707.⁹⁹ Two of these rooms were designated for debtors and described by the philanthropist John Howard as having "no chimney in the women's apartment, no court, no water and an offensive sewer."¹⁰⁰ Howard describes the felons' jail within the tower as comprised of "two close rooms... very dirty" and also without water. The prisoner's food intake was "three-pennyworth of bread a day" with "ten shillings a year for bedding".¹⁰¹ I reasoned, if God's House Tower already held three different types of prisoners during this period, then why not a fourth, and if so, why not women accused of having a venereal disease.

Horrifyingly, the vague definition, "common prostitute" gave police employed under the Contagious Diseases Acts broad discretionary powers, with women expected to voluntarily submit when accosted.¹⁰² Enforcers could therefore stop and examine any unaccompanied and/or single woman under the pretence of checking them for signs of venereal disease. As Eliza bitterly recounts to Darcy when they are both captured, "they see a mort alone, walking in certain place, at certain time o' night and they pluck us out." No more is needed. Although the Act was not passed until the Victorian era, South asserts there is "an indication that the Pest House was already fulfilling such a role in the eighteenth century".¹⁰³ She takes the word of Thomas Bernard, the Poor House Visitor at that time, as evidence. On 7 June 1781 a scandalised Bernard recorded that "about 1am Sarah Ware escaped out of the House with the assistance of Soldiers who raised a ladder to the Pest House windows".¹⁰⁴ South suggests that this demonstrates the inmates of the Pest House may have been locked in, and that it was thus serving as a lock hospital for venereal diseases as it would later do in the nineteenth century. As with Sarah Ware, I likewise have Darcy rescued from the Pest

⁹⁹ A. Temple Patterson, *A History of Southampton, 1700-1914: Vol.1: An Oligarchy in Decline 1700-1835* (Southampton: At the University Press, 1966) p.56

¹⁰⁰ John Howard, *The State Of The Prisons In England And Wales With Preliminary Observations, And An Account Of Some Foreign Prisons And Hospitals*, (William Eyres; and sold by T. Cadell, J. Johnson, and C. Dilly, in London, 1784) p.373

¹⁰¹ John Howard, p.374

¹⁰² Walkowitz, J and Walkowitz, p.193

¹⁰³ Mary L. South, 'Homophobia in Eighteenth-Century Southampton', Unpublished thesis, p.9

¹⁰⁴ Southampton City Archives SC AG/4/1, Poor House Visitors Book, 7 June 1781; Caulfield 1793, under Lock Hospital

House with a ladder raised to the windows. Aside from using the incident as inspiration in the novel, more pertinently to my argument is South's belief that this evidence demonstrates the authorities' perception of the town's moral turpitude.

The significance of Southampton as a seaside resort

As with any city, there is, and was, crime and vice in Southampton. However, I believe this is expounded by the nature of it being a seaside resort. In an exchange between Charlotte Heywood – the young heroine of Jane Austen's unfinished novel *Sanditon* – and her father, Andrew Davies' script for the television adaptation pinpoints an issue that is alluded to numerous times throughout Jane Austen's novels: namely, seaside resorts are dangerous places:

"A chance accident brings Charlotte Heywood to Sanditon, a seaside resort on the cusp of dramatic change.

MR HEYWOOD

Just a word, my dear. Just a word. Now, these seaside resorts can be odd places. No-one quite knows who anyone else is, where they come from and what they're up to.

CHARLOTTE HEYWOOD

That sounds...stimulating

MR HEYWOOD

Yes, well, I suppose it is. But... the normal rules of conduct tend to be relaxed and sometimes altogether flouted.

CHARLOTTE HEYWOOD

But if I'm with Mr and Mrs Parker, nothing bad can happen, can it?

MR HEYWOOD

Just... Just be careful. That's all.

CHARLOTTE HEYWOOD

Careful of what, Papa?

MR HEYWOOD
Everything.”¹⁰⁵

Although the dialogue is somewhat on the nose for my taste, it does manage to precisely explain which elements allow a coastal town to engender scandalous occurrences. Visitors are unknown, only sharing personal facts they wish to share and with new acquaintances unable to refute the information with any certainty. Seaside resorts in the Georgian period were thus considered places of liminality, being both a threshold between sea and land, and a metaphorical place of transition where one can be as ambiguous as they like with fewer questions asked. Take, for instance, the courtship in Jane Austen’s novel *Emma* between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, the former set to inherit a fortune from his capricious and controlling aunt, the latter a penniless dependent, whose only respectable prospect outside of making a good match is becoming a governess. They meet in Weymouth, another popular watering place in the Georgian period, and form a secret engagement. I believe such an engagement is only possible *because* they are in a coastal spot: the differences of their respective circumstances are confused and momentarily forgotten because they are in a place where *the normal rules of conduct tend to be relaxed and sometimes altogether flouted*. Another example in Austen’s novels of respectability being flouted is when Lydia goes to Brighton in *Pride and Prejudice*. As asserted by Kathryn Sutherland, part of the coastal resorts’ “attractions (and dangers) for giddy teenagers... were only enhanced by the presence of army garrisons and scarlet-coated officers”.¹⁰⁶ In this heady, indeterminate society, propriety is totally destabilised.

To conclude, with every glittering element of Southampton society, there was often a seedier, criminal undercurrent present, partly due to its literal and metaphorical position as a coastal, liminal town. For both women and queer individuals, the pressure to conform, to stay within the confines of society’s strictures, is akin to a chess piece remaining only on the board’s white squares in a chequered scene. However, as I will discuss in the next chapter, *there is freedom in the dark*.

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Davies. *Sanditon* (2019): Season 1, Episode 1 – Episode #1.1 Full transcript accessed on <https://sublikescript.com/series/Sanditon-8685324/season-1/episode-1-Episode_11>

¹⁰⁶ Kathryn Sutherland, *An Introduction to Jane Austen’s Sanditon*, (Oxford University Press, 2019)

Chapter 4: “Freedom in the dark”: Queer Lives and Fringe Existence in the Eighteenth Century

“They paint the world full of shadows and then tell their children to stay close to the light. Their light, their reason, their judgements, because in the darkness there be dragons. But it isn’t true. We can prove that it isn’t true. In the dark, there is discovery, there is possibility, there is freedom in the dark when someone has illuminated it”.¹⁰⁷

Previous chapters have focussed on exclusively *female* choices, *female* agency, without particular regard to sexuality. Indeed, given the discussion leant toward societal constraints, which are inherently heteronormative, there was little room to include sexual preference and desire when discussing female agency in the late eighteenth century. For a woman, queer or not, navigating survival superseded mere wants. However, my final chapter examines queer living in this period, both male and female, giving an overview of the culture, and the risks involved. This chapter also considers the historical figure Mary Hamilton, the Female Husband, as a case study of queerness in the eighteenth century.

To begin with the above quotation, it is taken from the television series *Black Sails* (2014-2017) set during the Golden Age of Piracy and a quasi-prequel to Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel, *Treasure Island* (1883).¹⁰⁸ The lines are spoken by Captain Flint, who in his days prior to becoming a pirate, suffered social disgrace when his homosexual proclivities became publicly known. Distraught over the incarceration of his male lover inside a lunatic asylum, James McGraw, as he then was, adopts the persona of Captain Flint, relocates to New Providence Island in the West Indies and declares war on the British Empire, becoming the most feared pirate in the process. Superficially, his motivation is gold but in truth he seeks revenge against a regime that declared his love for another man monstrous. When asked to accept a pardon for his crimes, he refuses,

¹⁰⁷ Robert Levine & Jonathan E. Steinberg, *Black Sails* (2014-2017): Series 3, Episode 10 – Episode #3.10. Full transcript accessed on < https://sublikescript.com/series/Black_Sails-2375692/season-4/episode-10-XXXVIII>

¹⁰⁸ As a brief justification for using a television series to illuminate my argument, as opposed to a contemporary novel or real historical incident, I am thus analysing historical drama as a form of public history, outlined by Jerome de Groot in his work, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*.

claiming this would be an “intolerable” sacrifice. Such an act is akin to apologising to England which “took everything” and then “called me a monster... The moment I sign that pardon, the moment I ask for one, I proclaim to the world that they were right.”¹⁰⁹ By violently opposing the Empire, Flint believes this act of rebellion exposes the falsehood on which its structure built: that order and morality isn’t akin to decency and goodness, but a means to control individual nonconformists and stifle imagination. By criminalising homosexuality, men such as Flint are branded social deviants, are villainised and dehumanised and “called a monster”. The “chequered scene” metaphor echoes Flint’s above speech, whereby one is forced to stay within the light squares of society – “their light, their reason, their judgement” – entering the dark squares at one’s peril, for “there be dragons” when one deviates from oppression.

In an interview, *Black Sails* showrunners Robert Levine & Jonathan E. Steinberg describes Flint’s sexuality as an “initial impulse to tell a story about people who are outside of civilization”.¹¹⁰ To again apply the chequered scene metaphor, *Black Sails* tells the story of a homosexual man who too publicly stepped into the black square, was branded a monster for his supposedly unnatural love and tried to upend the chess board. Giving context to contemporary cultural views of homosexuality, as popular historian Ian Mortimer states, “*nothing* is more likely to make you the object of widespread detestation. A guilty verdict on a charge of sodomy usually results in the death penalty” (author’s italics).¹¹¹ Likewise, male transvestism could ruin men, although it is not so much the wearing of women’s clothes itself that was an issue but rather, if done to encourage the sexual attentions of other men. The crime for men thus lies in importuning members of the same sex.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Robert Levine & Jonathan E. Steinberg. *Black Sails* (2014-2017): Series 1, Episode 7 – Episode #1.7. Full transcript accessed on <https://subscribescript.com/series/Black_Sails-2375692/season-1/episode-7-VII>

¹¹⁰ Inverse interview with Robert Levine & Jonathan E. Steinberg, published on 28 March 2016. Accessed on <<https://www.inverse.com/article/13381-black-sails-season-4-outlined-by-showrunners-jonathan-steinberg-and-robert-levine>>

¹¹¹ Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Regency Britain*, (Penguin Random House, 2020) p128

¹¹² Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Regency Britain*, (Penguin Random House, 2020) pp.128-129

Molly Houses

Gay men, from all strata of society, including tradesmen and gentlemen, could, according to contemporary sources, meet in ‘Molly Houses’, or ‘Molly Clubs’ to make and keep “assignments with one another”.¹¹³ These were “set up as inns or drinking houses, often in the premises of tradesmen”,¹¹⁴ the need for secrecy obvious. As a result, I have found it difficult to determine the presence of any Molly Houses in eighteenth-century Southampton, although naturally that does not mean there weren’t any. As historian of queer lives Rictor Norton puts it when discussing gay culture in the seventeenth-century, “I think we have to exercise some caution and avoid jumping to the conclusion that just because we do not hear of the molly subculture or effeminate queens before 1700, therefore they did not exist until 1700”.¹¹⁵ The same principle applies here. Had a Southampton Molly House been raided by the authorities at the time, there would be evidence in a magistrate’s report, being a criminal offence. Although there are several cases of individuals being prosecuted for sodomy in Southampton,¹¹⁶ I did not find evidence of a Molly House raid over the course of my research. However, just because I did not find absolute proof of a Molly House in Southampton does not mean they did not exist. True, authorities may have accepted bribes in lieu of carrying out raids. Or perhaps instead, individuals frequenting these homosexual establishments managed to successfully live within the dark squares of society’s chequered scene undetected. The Molly House visited by my characters is therefore fictional, but I believe not dissimilar to its historical equivalent.

Molly Houses were “a cross between a homosexual brothel and a drinking-place” where activities ranged from loud music and wild dancing, to mock marriages between sodomites.¹¹⁷ Dr Hamilton alludes to such a practice when Sophia observes the cross-dressed men around them:

¹¹³ E. Ward, *A Compleat and Humorous Account of all the Remarkable Clubs and Societies in the Cities of London and Westminster: Compiled from a Gent who Frequented Those Places upwards of Twenty Years* London. 1745 p.265-69

¹¹⁴ Mary L. South, ‘Homophobia in Eighteenth-Century Southampton’, Unpublished thesis, p.10

¹¹⁵ Rictor Norton, *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*, ‘The Gay Subculture in Early Eighteenth-Century London’. Accessed on < <http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/molly2.htm> >

¹¹⁶ Mary L. South, ‘Homophobia in Eighteenth-Century Southampton’, Unpublished thesis, p.12

¹¹⁷ P. McNeil, P 1999 “‘That Doubtful Gender’”: Macaroni Dress and Male Sexualities’, *Fashion Theory*, 3 issue 4. Pp. 415-17

“Many come completely rigged in gowns, petticoats and head-cloths fit for their wedding night. We may yet see a mock ceremony before the night is done.” Sophia’s question, “they ape a marriage” is more out of curiosity than disapproval, but its dismissive tone is reasonable given the contemporary context. At best, these practices were thought of with derisive scorn, at worst, abject horror. Consider the following in a magistrate’s report from 1792 when a Molly House was raided at the Bunch of Grapes in St Clement’s Lane, London: “two wretches dressed in women’s apparel... the degradation of man and in indecent familiarities with each other”.¹¹⁸ The hyperbolic terminology used – “wretches”, “degradation”, “indecent” – is unfortunately common within the rhetoric that describes homosexuality in the eighteenth century. Indeed, the newspaper reporting the incident calls the men, “a gang of the most infamous wretches that ever disgraced society”, who are “persons of the most notorious and abandoned characters”, committing “with impunity, every species of offence, both against laws, moral, and divine.”¹¹⁹ Whilst this homophobic bombast is undoubtedly the most harmful way to consider cross-dressing and mock marriages, I find even the mitigating statement from Mortimer that it’s merely “dressing up as a bit of innocent fun,”¹²⁰ a dismissive way of regarding the culture. I believe these mock marriages are fulfilling a need felt by those forced to love in the margins of society, and yet still yearn for the domestic. As my Dr Hamilton explains to Sophia, “it is no mere performance. When society denies the fabled promise of happy-ever-after, one takes the chance to experience what the outside lives.” This view of transvestism and modern trans culture is expounded in the television series *Pose* (2018-2021). Set in 1980s New York around the ballroom scene, the narrative follows a group of trans women and gay men of colour during the peak point of the AIDS crisis. Part of ballroom culture is attending ball events, where members compete on the “runway” in a series of categories.¹²¹ Depending on the category, participants are judged on “realness” – on how convincingly they pass within gender and

¹¹⁸ Rick Norton (ed.) ‘Newspaper Reports, 1792-1793. *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*. Accessed on <<http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1792news.htm>>

¹¹⁹ Rick Norton (ed.) ‘Newspaper Reports, 1792-1793. *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*. Accessed on <<http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1792news.htm>>

¹²⁰ Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Regency Britain*, (Penguin Random House, 2020) p.130

¹²¹ Marlon M. Bailey “Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, Feminist Studies, Inc., 2011, pp. 365–86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23069907>. p.367

sexual norms that are dominant in heteronormative society.¹²² As Marlon M. Bailey describes it, “ballroom members literally perform and present their bodies to make an impact on how they are “seen” in a society where the Black body, specifically, is read as a text”.¹²³ In other words, these performances mirror the illusion of gender and sexual conformity in the outside world.

Returning to *Pose*, the character Elektra Abundance explains to a cis man why his marrying a trans woman holds such talismanic importance to the community: “You’ve been to the balls and seen the girls walk bridal runway... That category was invented, like all other categories, in order to give us a chance to experience what the outside world gets to live.” I found the line so influential, I included it *A Chequered Scene*, as it spoke clearly to the experience of those trans people who do not see cross-dressing as “a bit of innocent fun” but a profound form of expression. Dr Hamilton embodies this sentiment, taking offence at the casual way Darcy suggests she and Sophia “just dress up as men”. His response – “How flippant you are... You speak as if such things were easy. As if it were of little consequence.” – hints at his identity at a trans man as well emphasising how important his outward appearance is in delineating his sense of self. Referring again to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, considered a trans text, “Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath”.¹²⁴

Dr Hamilton, the ‘Female Husband’

Dr Hamilton’s story in *A Chequered Scene* is partly based on Henry Fielding’s 1746 pamphlet, ‘THE FEMALE HUSBAND’, which in turn is based on the scant facts given by Mary Hamilton in her deposition, who practiced as a quack doctor under the name of Charles Hamilton. I found the tale fascinating despite, as Sheridan Baker puts it, “everything in Fielding’s first twenty pages, and much in his last three, looks fictitious”¹²⁵. Fielding creates an admirable figure in *his* Mary Hamilton, writing as “the comic moralist trying to sustain his principles and his comedy within

¹²² Marlon M. Bailey p.378

¹²³ Marlon M. Bailey p.367

¹²⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: a biography*, 1928 (London: Penguin Books, 1993) p.132.

¹²⁵ Sheridan Baker, “Henry Fielding’s the Female Husband: Fact and Fiction.” PMLA, vol. 74, no. 3, Modern Language Association, 1959, pp. 213–24, [accessed on <<https://doi.org/10.2307/460583>>] P.214

recalcitrant material”.¹²⁶ Whilst condemning Mary Hamilton’s actions and proclivities throughout, Fielding nonetheless refers to her as “the female gallant” off seeking adventures in the guise of a male doctor and marrying various women in the course of her life.¹²⁷ As Sarah Nicolazzo puts it, by framing the story as “a rake’s progress of repeated seduction and sexual misadventure”, Fielding’s Hamilton very much falls into the category of an “incorrigible rogue”.¹²⁸

“The Doctor” is arrested and sentenced to a public whipping but her spirit remains unbroken, for “the very evening she had suffered the whipping, she offered the goaler money, to procure her a young girl to satisfy her most monstrous and unnatural desires”.¹²⁹ Although Fielding denounces *his* George Hamilton’s desires as “monstrous and unnatural”, I found this resilience and bravado in the face of such public pain humiliation hugely admirable. I therefore decided *my* George Hamilton deserved a successful career and a happy ending with Lady Holland.

Whether sapphic or queer, Dr Hamilton and Lady Holland’s relationship has enough of an appearance of heteronormative performativity to pass for societal “realness”, to borrow the ballroom scene term. It therefore exists as a known and unknown quantity, being openly acknowledged as a relationship, but with the true nature of it hidden from society. As Terry Castle writes in her foundational reading of ‘The Female Husband’, both the “impudent heroine” and text exist “on a symbolic margin-at once present and absent, notorious and unmentionable, sublime and taboo”.¹³⁰ Indeed, in a way, Castle’s statement can be applied to all eighteenth-century sapphism, being something “notorious and unmentionable” occupying marginal spaces and thus both absent and present. As Ian Mortimer rather broadly puts it, “people simply don’t talk about lesbianism... it is not against the law, and two women spending time together is utterly harmless in the eyes of the

¹²⁶ Sheridan Baker, p.213

¹²⁷ Henry Fielding, ‘THE FEMALE HUSBAND’, 1746, published with *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, 1749 (London: Vintage, 2007) p.867

¹²⁸ Sarah Nicolazzo “Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband’ and the Sexuality of Vagrancy.” *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 55, no. 4, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 335–53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24575109>. P.336

¹²⁹ Henry Fielding, ‘THE FEMALE HUSBAND’, p.877

¹³⁰ Terry Castle, “Matters Not Fit to Be Mentioned: Fielding’s The Female Husband.” *ELH*, vol. 49, no. 3, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 602–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872757>. p.602

public”.¹³¹ Accordingly, if women have the means and desire to do so, they can choose to live romantic lives together. One such historical example are the ‘ladies of Llangollen’, who “retired from the society of men, into the wilds of a certain Welch vale” and maintained a discreet ‘romantic friendship’.¹³² Although the 1790 article reporting on the women in the *St James Chronicle* comes close to acknowledging the true nature of their relationship, stating they “bear a strange antipathy to the male sex, whom they take every opportunity of avoiding” and Miss Butler “appears in all respects as a young man, if we except the petticoat, which she still retains”, the tone of the article is one of polite puzzlement over their hermitage, in contrast to Fielding’s condemnation of Mary Hamilton’s seductions.¹³³ The ‘ladies of Llangollen’ made their choice to live in the margins of society, rather than conform and make suitable marriages to men: they found a way to navigate “the chequered scene”. As a result, they found happiness with one another, living out their lives in “their sweet retreat”.¹³⁴

Eighteenth-century lesbianism

Another pair whom I wished to give some semblance of happiness to, despite their “unhappy” circumstances, are Eliza and Margaret, whose love for one another is their greatest source of comfort. If their profession condemns them in society’s eyes, then at least their love can inhabit the undetectable, marginal space. As novelist Phillipa Gregory demonstrates in her doctoral thesis, “Unchaste women decline into prostitution and death. Their stories serve both as a didactic negative example and enable the author to introduce some thrilling and erotic scenes which do not endanger the heroine”.¹³⁵ If I have a didactic, *positive* example to give it is this: sapphic love is sublime and redemptive.

¹³¹ Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Regency Britain*, (Penguin Random House, 2020) pp.128-129

¹³² Rick Norton (ed.) ‘Extraordinary Female Affection, 1790’ *St. James’s Chronicle*. 17-20 July 1790 Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England. Accessed on <http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1790extr.htm>

¹³³ Rick Norton (ed.) ‘Extraordinary Female Affection, 1790’ *St. James’s Chronicle*. 17-20 July 1790

¹³⁴ Rick Norton (ed.) ‘Extraordinary Female Affection, 1790’ *St. James’s Chronicle*. 17-20 July 1790

¹³⁵ Phillipa Gregory, ‘The Popular fiction of the eighteenth-century commercial circulating library’, Ph.D. University of Edinburgh, 1984. p.252

However, when lesbianism is “mentioned” in eighteenth-century society, it is certainly notorious and accordingly, discretion is of paramount importance. Take the case of one Ann Marrow, who, like Mary Hamilton was sentenced to the pillory for “going in men's clothes and personating a man in marriage, with three different women”. Tragically, “so great was the resentment of the spectators, particularly the female part, that they pelted her to such a degree that she lost the sight of both her eyes”.¹³⁶ The crowd is thus aware of Ann Marrow’s sexual proclivities, given their “resentment” is exacerbated by *the female part*, in other words, that a woman successfully seduced other women. Although both Ann Marrow’s and Mary Hamilton’s “queerness was no crime... it was the transgression that enraged the crowd.”¹³⁷ Accordingly, Sophia is justified in her reaction when she and Darcy are caught by Pinhorn in a compromising position under the Bargate. Her reputation within the social sphere certainly would suffer “undoubted ruination” as she thinks to herself despairingly, if her desires became public knowledge. Being unwed, unable to make her own living and dependent on her father’s wealth, Sophia Woodforde does not have the means to pursue her sapphic choices in the way that Lady Holland and Margaret and Eliza do. If she were to do so, it would have to be under the strictest secrecy, for if she loses her reputation, she loses her position.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, in order for queer people to live happy, or at least unmolested, lives in the eighteenth century, they must occupy themselves in the marginal spaces of society. My intention in the course of both this chapter and the novel, was to demonstrate the choices such people had and the freedoms they enjoyed, albeit in a fringe existence, living in the black squares of a chequered scene.

¹³⁶ Rick Norton (ed.) ‘Tragic Story of Ann Marrow, 1777’, *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*. Accessed on <http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1777marr.htm>

¹³⁷ Peter Ackroyd, *Queer City: Gay London from the Romans to the Present Day*, (London: Vintage, 2018) p.140

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