

# 1

'Persons of our rank,' declared the Dowager, quivering with outrage at the mere thought, 'do *not* fall in love! They may, if they are that way inclined, come to feel some affection for their spouses - I have known it to happen, even in the best of circles, though I myself consider it extremely vulgar - but - are you listening to me, Eleanor? Beatrice? - I repeat, persons of rank *do not, under any circumstances, fall in love!*'

She rapped her cane on the floor by her chair to emphasise this point and added, with monumental scorn, 'Nor do they read puerile tales in half-marble covers about the sort of low-bred persons who *do* indulge in such habits! They leave such absurdities for menials and governesses who know no better!' Her eyes flashed with anger as she surveyed her niece Beatrice and her granddaughter, Eleanor, both in severe disgrace for being caught reading a novel together.

Lady Eleanor Graceover's bright blue eyes were still sparkling with indignation at seeing her enthralling tale thrown on the fire. Now she and Beatrice would never know whether poor Melissa managed to escape from the toils of the evil Count and be reunited with Gervaise, her childhood sweetheart! But she had more sense than to defy or contradict her grandmother, in whose charge she had been for ten of her nineteen years. One did not get one's own way by outright opposition to her ladyship. In fact, poor Beatrice rarely got her way at all, but Eleanor was never quite sure whether that was because she was submissive by nature or because she did not care enough about what happened to dispute Lady Marguerite's authority or judgement. There had been

one or two occasions when Bea had dug in her heels about something and then nothing had been able to move her.

She herself was cast, Eleanor felt complacently, in a more resolute mould. She had learned the trick of dealing with her grandmother over the years and had no intention of allowing Lady Marguerite to plan her whole life for her, let alone choose her husband. It would be just like Grandmama to try to marry her off to some knock-kneed idiot, because of his family connections. Why, she had spoken approvingly only last week about Eleanor's second cousin Maria's engagement to a quite elderly nobleman, who was thirty-two if he was a day. Just because his family had come over with the Conqueror!

Eleanor knew that her own future was presently under consideration, because she just happened to have overheard her grandmother talking to the family lawyer recently about marriage settlements. She bent her russet curls over her clasped hands and tried to look as if she were listening meekly, for Lady Marguerite did not like to be interrupted when she was delivering a peroration.

'Pray tell me, Beatrice, since you are the eldest, why you were reading such - such vulgarities?'

Eleanor sighed as she watched an agonised expression creep over Bea's face and her hands twist together.

'We only wanted to see what they were like, Grandmama,' she volunteered, seeing that an answer was expected. Poor Beatrice had never been able to fabricate a convincing tale. 'How is one to know about love and - and such things, if one cannot discuss them or read about them?'

'You have only to ask me. I can always tell you exactly what is or is not suitable for a

Graceover of Satherby Abbey. And rubbishy novels are highly *unsuitable!* She shuddered in disgust and added sharply, 'I forbid you, do you hear, absolutely forbid you to read such housemaids' trash again! Love! Pah! Love is only for the lower classes, who can afford to become quite ridiculous under its influence! Or for those fools who have forgotten their station in life. Fools like my younger brother Warren.'

Eleanor smothered a sigh. This was one of her grandmother's favourite cautionary tales and was regularly trotted out and held before them as a warning.

'Look what happened to him!' continued the Dowager. 'Married for love, dead in a year, wife and child left living in poverty. It's I who have had to provide for poor Beatrice! My brother's fate is a lesson to us all to remember our station in life and maintain our standards accordingly!'

She breathed deeply to calm the anger that always boiled in her, even so many years later, at the memory of her favourite brother's defection. Like their father, she had never forgiven him for marrying the daughter of a low-born apothecary. A disgusting mesalliance! However, her doctor had forbidden her to fly into rages, on pain of bringing an apoplexy upon herself, so she managed to swallow her temper. She needed desperately to go on living for a while longer.

She continued more temperately, 'That is why I have never encouraged Beatrice to get married. My father quite rightly cut my brother off without a penny when he made a runaway marriage. She therefore has no money - and to marry without money is the height of improvidence, as I have told her many times. Have I not Beatrice?'

Beatrice nodded, her eyes shaded with pain, but said nothing.

'Not,' continued the Dowager, determined to be fair, 'that Beatrice could not have found herself some curate or gentleman farmer who would not care about her lack of

dowry. She's a Dencey, after all. And she's pretty enough to attract some gentlemen's attention, were she to set her mind to it. She takes after her mother there, more's the pity! Fortunately, she also takes after our side of the family in her common sense. And it is this which has saved her.'

They both turned to study Beatrice, who sighed and picked up her embroidery with fingers that trembled slightly. Like Eleanor she had heard all this before and over the years she had learned not to let it upset her. Well, not much. Lady Marguerite had taken her in when she was Eleanor's age and could well have afforded to provide her niece with a modest dowry, but it had never been forthcoming. And Beatrice, who had seen her mother cough her life away in a damp cottage, had at first been too relieved at being given a home to do anything that would upset her ladyship.

As she grew older, she had gradually grown accustomed to her role as the Dowager Lady Graceover's unpaid companion, and had developed a genuine affection for her aunt; but once in a while she could not help thinking wistfully how pleasant it would be to marry and have a home of one's very own - and even, perhaps, to have a family. She had always loved children, which was why she had welcomed the chance to help raise, Eleanor, also orphaned, but it was not the same as having a child of one's own.

'In future, kindly do not forget what you owe to the Family!' continued the Dowager, her anger subsiding. 'I have better things planned for you, Eleanor, than falling in love! You'll be the last of the Graceovers, more's the pity, but you're rich enough to seek a husband among the True Nobility.' Her ladyship had no opinion of newcomers whose families had only been ennobled in the past hundred years or so and, in the days when she still moved in society, had been known to snub them directly if they approached her unbidden. For the past few years, however, arthritis had chained her to her chair, and

county society, what little there was in the neighbourhood of Satherby Abbey, had had to come to her.

Eleanor risked rekindling the wrath. 'What have you got planned for me, Grandmama? May I not know?'

'No, you may not, miss! I'll tell you what you need to know when the time comes. In the meantime, you may go and practise your music. I want a word with Beatrice.'

Eleanor picked up her embroidery (for her ladyship could not abide people who left their things lying around in a slovenly manner), curtsied to her grandmother (who had some very old-fashioned ideas about young ladies' behaviour) and made her way to the Blue Salon, where her favourite piano had been placed out of her ladyship's hearing (only inconsiderate persons inflicted the sound of their practice upon the ears of their families). She was quite happy to do this, for she loved music and could lose herself in it for hours.

Once the two women were alone, the Dowager rapped her cane sharply on the floor. 'Put that sewing down and pay attention to me, Beatrice! This is important!'

Her niece did as she was told and sat with her gentle brown eyes fixed on her aunt, awaiting an explanation.

Lady Marguerite studied her for a minute before speaking. She very much approved of Beatrice's quiet self-containment. 'You're not to encourage the chit to think about love and romance and such vulgarities!'

'No, Aunt. Though it's only natural at her age.' And how anyone could stop Eleanor from doing something upon which she'd set her mind was more than Beatrice knew. It was, of course, Eleanor who had acquired the novels, but Beatrice had to admit that she too had enjoyed the improbable adventures of their intrepid heroines. She sighed. She

sometimes feared what would happen if Eleanor and Lady Marguerite ever crossed swords about something they both considered important, for Eleanor had all her grandmother's determination and spirit.

As she waited patiently to be given her orders, she was surprised to see that her aunt was groping for words. A slight frown creased her forehead. It was more common for Lady Marguerite to unleash a torrent of commands, and even abuse if her joints were hurting, than for her to hesitate like this.

Bang! went the cane again. 'It's time we were thinking of the chit's future.'

Another pause. Beatrice saw that her aunt was chewing her lip and scowling down at her twisted hands and her interest was piqued.

'I'm out of touch with the younger set,' the Dowager announced at last. 'Don't know who's who any more.'

Beatrice frowned. 'I don't understand. Why should you have kept in touch with the younger set, Aunt Marguerite?' Her aunt did not seem to care for anything save her own family and the respect she considered due to her rank?

The Dowager continued to scowl at her niece. 'And I'm too old to do another Season, more's the pity.' She glared at her twisted hands. 'So *you* will just have to go up to London for me.'

'Me?' Beatrice sat bolt upright on the edge of the chair.

'Yes, you, ninny! Who else is there? No men left in the family now. Only ourselves to rely on. Ah, we women are weak vessels!' The Dowager attempted to look frail and ill-used, but only succeeded in looking even more ferocious than usual. 'And here's me with the chit's whole future to settle. So I'm going to need you to go up to London for me.'

'What about Johanna?' ventured Beatrice. Her ladyship's only surviving daughter was a wealthy widow, who lived in London and was a devotee of its pleasures. They had occasionally visited her in town until the last few years, though they had never gone about much in society during those visits. More often, it was Johanna who came to Satherby, descending on them in a flurry of presents and luggage and servants, and rarely staying above a day or two. However, she regularly sent her mother long screeds from London about the doings of the ton, which the Dowager pretended to despise, but which she read with visible enjoyment.

'Surely Johanna would be the best person to deal with any business you wish conducted in London?' repeated Beatrice. 'After all, she lives there.' Her face cleared. 'And she knows everyone.'

The Dowager's scowl deepened. 'Johanna's a fool! I shan't trust *her* judgement when it comes to finding a husband for Eleanor.'

'Finding a husband for Eleanor!' Beatrice clutched the arms of her chair, finding comfort in its solidity. Somehow she had thought it would be years before the Dowager allowed Eleanor to marry.

'Stop repeating what I say! Makes you sound like a sheep.' She looked down at her cane for a moment, her wrinkled claw of a hand trembling on its silver handle. 'What else d'you think I'm talking about when I mention the chit's future? And I won't ask Johanna to do this for me! Look at the sort of men she allowed *her* daughters to marry! Johnny-come-latelies, both of them. A mere baronet! And a nabob! What's the world coming to when a direct descendant of the Graceovers and the Denceys marries a tea-merchant!'

She fell silent and her breathing deepened for a moment or two, for this connection

had rankled for several years. 'Though you'll stay with Johanna when you're in London, of course. You'll need her as a chaperone, and she'll be able to introduce you to the right people. She knows everyone, whether they're worth knowing or not. I'll write and tell her what I want and to whom you're to be introduced. Then you can do the Season and look 'em all over for me.'

By now, Beatrice was feeling quite bewildered. 'Look who over, Aunt?'

'I've been telling you! Young people don't know how to listen to their elders any more! Why am I always surrounded by ditherers and half-wits? I'm talking about the younger set! Persons of rank, mind, not tea-merchants! You'll have to go and look 'em over for me! How else can we find a husband for Eleanor.'

Beatrice looked horrified. 'But I can't . . . '

'Of course you can! I'll give you a list of acceptable families, though few of them can match up to the Graceovers in their lineage. *We* have not married out of our rank, except for your father, of course. Then you'll only have to sort out one or two possibles and invite them down here to meet Eleanor. I'll do the rest. We should be able to get the knot tied before the end of the year - if *you* will only bustle around a bit, that is!'

The room reeled around Beatrice. 'But Aunt, really, I couldn't possibly . . . '

The old face grew grim. 'I'm not lettin' the chit loose on the town without me to keep an eye on her. She's far too rich for her own good. And too innocent.'

Beatrice wondered what her ladyship would say if she knew some of the exploits which the innocent chit had been up to lately, the little excursions unescorted, or the way Eleanor would talk to anyone - gipsies, shopkeepers, farmers' boys. She tried desperately to reason with the Dowager. 'But surely, Aunt Marguerite, Johanna could - she could . . . '



'Johanna could not! She encourages the attentions of upstarts and mushrooms! I want better breeding than that for my girl's husband. When you're my age, you'll realise how much that sort of thing counts.' She bowed her head for a moment, then looked at Beatrice and for once there was no hauteur in those knowing old eyes. 'The doctor don't think I'll last much longer, Bea. Get a pain in my chest if I do much nowadays. He says there's nothing he can do about it. A year at most, he thinks.'

'Oh, Aunt, I'm so sorry!' Beatrice moved across the room to kneel by her aunt's chair and clasp her hand. For once, her overture was not rejected. The bond between the two of them was a strange one. Love was something her ladyship affected to despise, but she had grown to respect her niece, in spite of the bad blood she carried from her mother's side. For her part, Beatrice felt enormous gratitude for having been taken in and given such a comfortable home. She might not have been helped to a suitable marriage, but she had been well cared for and treated in every way like a daughter of the house. Affection had been demonstrated a thousand times, if rarely expressed.

The hand let go of hers. 'I believe you mean that, for which I thank you, Bea, but I'm five and seventy, so I don't need anyone to feel sorry for me. I've had a good long life and I'm not complaining. I've seen most of the people I've loved die and - well, it gets a bit lonely at times.'

She sighed and looked across the room into some distance only she could see. 'The pity of it is that with two healthy sons I didn't get even one grandson to carry on the name. That idiot, William Herforth, will inherit. No, he died, didn't he? I keep forgetting. All the fault of that stupid will! How my husband came to write it, I'll never know!' She sat still for a moment, her eyes half closed, then jerked upright. 'What was I saying?'

'You were talking about the Herforths, Aunt.'

'Yes, so I was. You grow forgetful as you get older, Bea, however hard you try to remember things. It's Herforth's son who'll be inheriting. What's the fellow's name again?'

'Crispin.'

'Yes. Crispin! Did you ever hear such a ridiculous name? No one with Graceover blood in him should have been so lacking in sense as to christen his heir Crispin!'

'It's only a name,' Beatrice said softly.

'It's not a Graceover name! We call our sons Paul and Simon and

William.' There was a minute's silence, then the Dowager's mouth worked, as if she were swallowing something distasteful. 'I swore that Herforth fellow wouldn't set foot across the threshold till I was gone, but I've changed my mind, had to change my mind. He'll have to come and stay for a while, because he needs to learn how to manage the estate. Got to make sure he looks after it properly when I'm gone.' Her voice trailed away again and for a moment or two she dozed, as old people will.

Beatrice remained quiet. She had noticed that her ladyship was beginning to show her age, but it still came as a surprise to see the redoubtable Lady Marguerite Graceover succumbing to any normal mortal weakness. She had seemed invincible for as long as anyone could remember, terrifying her children and her servants, arrogant and capricious, but surviving every other family member of her own generation and most of the next generation as well. She had also endured stoically through a series of tragedies that had wiped out her menfolk and would have broken a lesser woman.

Now, if her heart were indeed failing, she had some reason to be worried about Eleanor's future. Her husband, who had died twenty years before, had left his wife life-long use of and control over the Graceover properties, which would then pass to the

next male heir. With two sons living, he could be forgiven for expecting that one of them would inherit, but although both had survived him, neither had lived beyond the age of thirty and neither had sired a living son.

The Dowager woke up with a start, coughed and spluttered for a moment, then reverted to her topic. 'Have to settle you both, but Eleanor's more of a worry, d'you see. She's a considerable heiress, even if she don't get this estate. Her mother had pots of money and inherited a good deal more. That's why I chose her for my Paul. Pity she was such a poor breeder!'

'Yes, Aunt.' Beatrice had heard all this many times and needed only to murmur suitable sounds at intervals to show that she was paying attention.

'Still, it's only fair to leave you properly provided for as well, Bea, and don't think I've forgotten you.'

She was talking to herself and Beatrice let her run on. Somehow she had never doubted that she would be provided for.

'You've been a good girl, Bea, put up with my megrims, not fussed over what couldn't be helped. Needed you to help me bring up the chit. Too old to do it all myself. And you did a good job, too, young as you were.'

'That was a pleasure for me, as you know.'

'Yes. You're a born mother. You should have had your own family by now. But it's not too late.'

Beatrice flushed. 'I'm nearly thirty, Aunt.'

'Twenty-eight last month. Don't exaggerate!' Rap! went the cane. 'Now! Hold your tongue and listen! It's not too late at all! I've settled enough money on you to get yourself a decent husband, one whose breeding we needn't be ashamed of.'

Beatrice's face flushed and she spoke up with a vehemence that was unusual for her. 'I don't care to have you buy me a husband, Aunt!'

'Hoity-toity! You'll do as you're told, Miss!' Then the Dowager sighed and her face softened. 'You'll do as you're told, because it's my dying wish to see you settled. And because I know you'd like to have a family of your own.'

Beatrice choked back the indignant words she longed to utter at this cavalier disposal of her future, but shook her head still.

'If I have to beg you, I will.' The thin old voice paused, then her ladyship spoke in tones of desperation unusual to her. 'I can't go in peace if I'm leaving you two girls to be turned out of your home by those Herforths. I'd hoped to last out for a bit longer, but I know now that I won't. *Please*, Beatrice! I beg of you! Please do this for me!'

Beatrice could only gape at her in amazement. Never once in the past ten years had she heard this autocratic old termagant plead with anyone for anything.

'But Aunt, I . . . ' Her voice tailed away.

The sunken eyes stared at her unwinkingly. 'Didn't think to hear me plead, did you? And I didn't think I'd have to do it, either. Just goes to show. Death is a great leveller.' She paused, then asked sharply, 'What's got into you, girl? You've shown nothing but good sense since you came to live with me. Never been any trouble since the day you arrived. What've I asked you to do now that sticks in your gullet?'

'I don't - I cannot like the idea of - of having a husband bought for me. Someone who will only be interested in my money.'

Her ladyship cackled loudly! 'Is that all?'

'Isn't it enough?'

'No! It ain't enough! What other way is there for persons of our rank? Whether you

admit it or not, marriage is a business transaction like any other. You're a Dencey, after all, in spite of your mother. And my family, apart from your father, has always known its own value. Good Saxon stock. The original English. Then a bit of Norman blood to leaven it. *We* have never needed a title. Always loyal to the Crown. Always respected. Besides,' she glared at Beatrice, angry for being made to continue pleading, 'I can't die with you on my conscience, girl! Should have found you a husband years ago. Selfish of me not to, but I needed you. Eleanor needed you.'

Beatrice shook her head. 'I - Aunt, I just can't like the idea!'

The old eyes narrowed in cunning. 'Eleanor will need you even more once I'm gone! And you'll be able to look after her much better if you're a married woman, not to mention looking after yourself! Single females have no status, no freedom. Don't deserve it, either, if you ask me. A woman's business in life is to marry, and marry as well as she can.'

Beatrice went back across the room to stare at the embroidery. Anything to avoid those sharp old eyes. She saw nothing of the rich silks she had sewn into her tapestry. 'I - I shall need to think about it, Aunt. I can't just - just - snap up your offer straight away. I *can't!*'

Her ladyship nodded. 'Don't object to that. It's a big step, marriage. We're not talking of vulgar things like love matches, you know, but of sensible arrangements between persons of breeding. Yes, you go and have a think about it. In fact, you *ought* to take the time to think about something so important. It's what I'd do myself in your place. Come here, first!' When Beatrice approached her chair again, she pulled her niece's head down towards her own and planted on the soft cheek the first and last kiss she would ever give her. 'You're a good girl, in spite of your mother. It's the Dencey blood.

Quality will always tell.' She patted her niece's cheek, then pushed her away again. 'Go and do your thinking! But send Lippings in to me first. And not a word about this to the chit, mind!'

Beatrice's thoughts were in a turmoil as she went to summon her ladyship's maid and then take refuge in her own bedchamber. She locked the door, then plumped down in front of the fire. One of the few indulgences she allowed herself was to sit on the rug and toast her toes. The Dowager would have been horrified at such undignified behaviour, but Beatrice had long ago found that staring into dancing flames was a good way to sort out one's thoughts. She had needed to do that many times when she had first arrived at Satherby Abbey, a grieving and inexperienced girl of seventeen, with no understanding of her father's world and only a lawyer's assurance that she would find a home there.

Her Aunt Marguerite had not been overtly kind - that was not her ladyship's style - but she had taken her niece in without hesitation and had looked after her well, in her own way, teaching her with surprising patience the manners and tricks of polite society, with which most young women of her age were already familiar. And she had allowed Beatrice to love and mother Eleanor for most of those years. That had made it all worthwhile for Beatrice, that and knowing her Aunt did not mean to upset her when she spoke slightly of her mother. It was just her way. She spoke slightly of most people, including her own children.

And now the Dowager was expecting Beatrice to repay her by getting herself into a position where she could continue to look after Eleanor. It was not an unreasonable expectation. Although Beatrice spent over an hour staring into the flames, she had to conclude that there was really no choice. Her ladyship was acting in a sensible manner

by anyone's lights, and was offering generous provision for the niece whose maternal family she considered to be so unworthy of alliance with the Denceys.

Well, Beatrice had come to terms with many things she disliked since she had come to live at Satherby Abbey. She could come to terms with this as well, no doubt. But, she thought, frowning into the embers, although she might not be able to find a husband whom she could love (and unlike her aunt, she did believe in love, for her mother had loved her father's memory all her life and taught her to do the same) she would insist on having some say as to whom she married. That would be her one condition in agreeing to her ladyship's last wish.

With a shock she realised that she had allowed the fire to burn down low and that she was feeling thoroughly chilled. She reached out to put on some more wood, then lit the candles. She had long ago found that she disliked having a personal maidservant, so now she changed her clothes quickly and tidied her hair in time for the dinner gong.

'I'll have to do it,' she told her reflection in the mirror, 'but if there's any choice of husband to be had, it'll be mine, not my aunt's!' Two clear hazel eyes stared back at her in a face anyone else would have considered remarkably pretty, but which Beatrice rather despised, for the full redness of her lips and the slumberous beauty of her eyes were, to a mind schooled by long years with the Dowager, rather theatrical in appearance.

She smoothed the creamy skin of her cheek with one fingertip and turned to study her profile in the mirror, then shrugged her shoulders. She supposed she'd have no trouble in finding some sort of husband if she had a dowry, but she rather suspected that she was too fastidious in her tastes to make a marriage of convenience to someone she did not respect.

As she had never yet met a gentleman to whom she had been particularly attracted and as she did not hanker after a fashionable life, she had been quite happy to stay on at the Abbey with the Dowager. She enjoyed the beauties of the changing seasons in the country. She enjoyed the power she had to improve the lot of the poorer tenants on the estate. She was the one to whom the servants referred their everyday queries. In fact, her life was very satisfying in many respects.

She stood up and smoothed her full silken skirts, shaking the frills around her feet into place, then picking up a warm shawl to counter the draughts that abounded in that aristocratic residence. No use worrying about the future now, when she had not even sealed her bargain with the Dowager.