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## MARCH 1818

The lawyer finished his cup of tea and turned to Cassandra. "Could I speak to you in private, if you please, Miss Trent?"

"In private? But why? My mother's will surely has no surprises for anyone here?"

Aunt Sophie was avoiding Cassandra's eyes. "Why don't you take Mr. Hurley into the dining room, my dear? You won't be disturbed there."

"But - " Cassie stared at her aunt, then led the way out. Perhaps this had something to do with bequests for her aunt and uncle, or her two cousins? Yes, of course. That would be it.

She sat down at the long polished table. "Please sit down, Mr. Hurley."

He obeyed and placed a pile of papers on the table. "Now - ahem - I have something of a surprise for you. Pleasant, I hope." He fiddled with his papers. "The question of your guardianship."

"But surely my aunt and uncle - "

"Not Mr. and Mrs. Trent. Your mother has nominated your other aunt and uncle as guardians."

"What?" Cassie jerked forward in the seat. "But my mother's family disowned her when she married my father! There must be some mistake."

"No. No mistake. Your mother wished very much for you to have a London Season, just as she had done, and Lord and Lady Berrinden have the entrée into polite society, which Mr. and Mrs. Trent do not."

"They didn't even write to my mother when my father was killed. I want nothing to do with

them." Cassie could hear the anger in her voice. "Besides, they won't agree to it."

"Ahem. I think you will find that they do agree. You see, there are some legacies involved for their own daughters if they do so."

"But that's bribery! I don't believe it! My mother wouldn't have done such a thing."

He continued to stare at her steadily.

Cassie could feel tears threatening and stood up hastily. "I still won't go to them. Bardsley is my home and they're complete strangers. Excuse me, please." She made her way up to her bedroom, hating the thought of anyone seeing her in such an emotional state.

Her mother's maid was waiting for her there, standing by the window with arms folded. Seeing the expression on the older woman's face, Cassie stopped dead in her tracks. "Did you know what was in the will, Mary Ann?"

The maid nodded. "Aye. But your mother thought it'd be better if you heard it from Mr. Hurley."

Tears were now streaming down Cassie's face. "Well, it doesn't make any difference who told me - I won't go to them!" She let Mary Ann draw her over to the bed and hold her until she had stopped weeping, for she had not given in to her grief before.

After a few minutes, the maid pulled away, saying briskly, "It wouldn't hurt for you to give it a try. It's only for a year, love, less than that, for you'll be 21 in a few months."

Cassie scrubbed furiously at her eyes. "It's only the shock that's upsetting me! I despise people who turn into watering pots." She stood up, peered into the mirror and winced at the sight that met her gaze - her eyes were reddened, her heavy brown hair looked duller than usual and strands had fallen down around her face, while her normally smooth complexion was blotchy.

Mary Ann picked up the pretty blue and white jug from the washstand and poured some water into the matching bowl. "Here, love. You'll feel better if you wash your face."

Cassie went to obey her, then looked down at her black gown and sighed. "I miss Mother

so much."

"All the more reason to try a change of scenery."

"But Mary Ann, whatever would I do with myself down there in the south?" It might have been the moon, so far away did the fashionable world her mother had grown up in seem from a bustling cotton town in Lancashire with its smoky chimneys and rows of terraced dwellings.

"Why, you'd do what all the other young ladies do, Miss Cassie. Find yourself a husband."

Cassie stiffened and turned round, her eyes flashing. "I'm not going to hand over my fortune to a useless nobleman who'll scorn the way my father made his money - and will probably scorn me, too. If I ever marry, it'll be for love, like my parents."

Mary Ann went over to the dressing table and began absent-mindedly picking the melted wax off the candlestick. "Your mother was fair set on you having a Season, lass. She often talked about it to me during those last few weeks and wished she could see you all dressed up in your hoops and feathers for presentation to the Queen. She wanted you to have a wider choice of husbands than you'll get in a small town like Bardsley." Her own eyes full of tears for the mistress she had served for over twenty years, she turned round and said firmly, "It's all you can do for her now, love, carry out her last wishes."

There was silence for several minutes, then Cassie confessed, "One day, just before she died, I promised Mother to do as she had asked in her will. I thought she meant me to see about the bequests to servants and - and things like that."

"No, she meant the London Season. And you can't go back on your word now, can you, lass?"

"I suppose not." Cassie looked at her pleadingly. "But you'll come with me to London, won't you, Mary Ann? Be my maid now?"

"Just let anyone try to stop me!"

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That same day in London, two gentlemen dined together in the Giffard town house. Not until

the covers had been cleared and the port was low in the decanter did Simeon Giffard sigh and share his news. "Susannah Berrinden is to come out this Season."

"Ah."

Simeon stared down into the glass. "She's grown quite pretty - " his voice tailed away.

"But - ?" his friend prompted.

"Have you ever been in love?"

"No."

"Neither have I. But - " Simeon shook his head. "Always that but, Albert." He hesitated, then asked in a low voice, "There ought to be some warmth of feeling at least, don't you think, if one is to marry someone?" He had seen no warmth in his parents' marriage - on the contrary, their quarrels had made his childhood hideous - and he did not wish to make the same mistake as they had.

Albert didn't pretend to misunderstand him. "And you don't feel any warmth for her?"

Simeon shook his head. "No. Oh, she's a nice enough girl, but she stirs nothing in me and her conversation is - well, insipid." Which was a polite way of describing Susannah's vapid prattling. "I sometimes fear there's something wrong with me, for no other woman has stirred me to the point of considering marriage, either." He took another sip, then added, "And I've been on the town long enough to meet quite a few of them." To no one else would he have admitted this.

"Your mother been playing up again about you getting yourself an heir, old fellow?"

Simeon nodded, but did not comment. He did not need to. Albert knew what his mother was like.

"Well, at least if you got married, she'd have to move to the Dower House and you'd get a bit of peace."

"Yes. That would be an advantage," the only one Simeon could think of, "though the place completely needs renovating. And she's right, really. I do owe it to the family to produce an

heir, since I'm the last of the Giffards. But - " he broke off. It would be ungentlemanly to say that the thought of facing Susannah Berrinden over breakfast every day for the rest of his life filled him with dismay.

"You're blue-devilled, old fellow."

"I am." Simeon tossed the fine old port down his throat like water and poured himself another brimming glass.

"Maybe you could find someone you feel a bit - well, a bit warmer about?"

He had wanted to do that, but had not met anyone who attracted him, and time was passing. He looked at Albert. "My mother has set her heart on Susannah."

"Ah."

Simeon grimaced. There was no need to explain matters further. For a weak and sickly woman, Flora Giffard knew how to get her own way, playing on her son's pity for her, after the years in which they had both suffered from his father's irrational and often unkind behavior. There was also the question of her health, and the doctor's warning that she should not be upset, that the storms of emotion with which she reacted sometimes could be fatal for her.

In a sense his mother was right. At thirty-three he ought to do something about providing an heir. He had put it off for the past few years, because he had been busy setting the estate in order after the years of neglect under his father. Now, you couldn't find a better-run estate in the whole of Hertfordshire.

And he had run out of excuses for avoiding marriage.

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In a tall house in one of London's most prestigious squares, Lord Henry Berrinden and his family were at breakfast. He picked up a letter from the silver platter presented to him by the butler, stared at it with lackluster eyes and slit it open. When he had finished reading it, he gasped and perused it for a second time. Then he crushed it, threw it on the floor and exclaimed, "Damn the woman! She's even causing us trouble after she's dead!"

Then he realized what he had said and looked guiltily at his wife and eldest daughter.

In the heavy silence which followed, the butler picked up the offending missive, smoothed it out and replaced it on the silver platter, his face expressionless.

Amelia Berrinden breathed in deeply, annoyed to hear such language at her table. But for all her high principles and elevated breeding, she was as prey to curiosity as the next person, so she said quietly, "Thank you, Meckworth. Susannah, you may go and visit your sisters in the schoolroom."

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Amelia turned to her husband. "To what, Henry, do we owe this shocking language?"

He cleared his throat. "My dear, this is a letter from Mr. Hurley, who is a lawyer from Bardsley in Lancashire."

Lady Berrinden clutched the lace at her ample bosom. "Bardsley!"

After a moment, his lordship fumbled into speech again. "It - er - it appears my sister has died and - and her lawyer has written to say he wishes to see me as soon as possible regarding her will and the," he hesitated again, then finished in a rush, "the guardianship of my niece."

"But we do not even acknowledge the girl's existence!"

He observed her agitation with a certain perverse satisfaction. "Gave me a bit of a start, too, I can tell you."

"One cannot forget that you have a sister, Henry - nor can one forget the scandal she caused - but to speak of us becoming guardians to the daughter of such a misalliance - why, the very idea of such an ill-bred person coming here is unthinkable!"

"Ahem - not exactly ill-bred. The Trents are landed gentry, after all." He picked up the letter again, his lips moving as he read the words under his breath. "What I can't understand is why this Hurley fellow should want to tip the girl's guardianship into our dish. Never heard a word from them over the years, apart from the announcement of the child's birth and Robert's

death - and you decided not to reply to those."

"I should think not!"

"So why can't they look after the girl now?"

"Why not, indeed?"

When Lady Berrinden held out her hand he placed the letter in it, then re-arranged the crockery and drew patterns in some spilled sugar, while she read and re-read it.

After giving the matter some thought, she announced, "You will have to go to the North and investigate this unsavory business in person."

"Eh - what? Go where?"

"Go to the North, Henry, to Bardsley."

He wriggled uneasily. "Is that really necessary?"

"What else can one do? This is not something we can entrust to anyone outside the family - think of the scandal! You must tell this Hurley person to settle the guardianship upon her paternal relatives. He'll probably have to draw up some papers to that effect. You can sign them before you return."

"Er - well, if you say so, my love."

Lady Berrinden stood up, her thoughts already turning to her day's engagements. "And I cannot think of a more inconvenient time for you to be away, just as the Season is about to begin! Still, what can one expect from a woman who eloped with a person whom she met in a book shop? Your parents were quite right to forbid her to marry him! She should not even have spoken to him in the first place."

Becoming aware of the time, she whisked away to complete her toilette, don a new lace cap and summon her daughter. The two ladies then arranged themselves in the drawing-room to wait for the callers who never failed to attend upon a woman so well-connected in the ton.

After due consideration, Lady Berrinden informed Susannah of the reason for her Papa's

departure.

"I have a cousin?"

"A cousin whom we do not recognize," Lady Berrinden said firmly. She made no mention of the guardianship. Henry would simply decline the responsibility, then they could all forget the idea had ever been broached.

"But Mama, shall we not have to go into mourning?"

"For a relative the family has disowned? I think not. I do not intend to mention this to anyone else and neither should you. I am telling you merely because you are almost grown-up now and entitled to know."

"Yes, Mama."

Her ladyship then put the whole annoying business from her mind until her husband should return, and devoted herself wholeheartedly to the pleasures of this Season to which she had been looking forward for many years. She had no doubt that by the end of it, her lovely eldest daughter would be safely engaged to a gentleman of impeccable breeding and respectable fortune - and she rather fancied she knew which man it would be.

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The season was not yet in full swing, but by the time Lord Berrinden returned to the bosom of his family a sennight later, her ladyship and Susannah had attended a reception, a musical evening and two pre-season dancing parties designed especially to give those in their first season a chance to accustom themselves to the etiquette of the ballroom. The two ladies had also visited fashionable shops to make last-minute purchases of stockings, silk flowers, ribbons and other trifles essential to a lady of fashion, as well as having some final fittings for gowns designed to outshine those worn by other hopefuls and their mothers. In between, they had driven in the park and made morning calls on those persons whom her ladyship deemed worthy of such attentions.

Lady Berrinden saw the family carriage turn into the square as she sat by the window of

the drawing-room, where she and Susannah were entertaining a gentleman caller. Simeon Giffard was the son of her ladyship's dearest friend, Flora, with whom she was in frequent contact by letter now that Flora was too frail to withstand the rigors of a London Season. Since their recent arrival in town Simeon had, to her great satisfaction, called on them several times.

"So you think that - " Lady Berrinden drew in her breath sharply and stopped in mid-phrase as she saw her husband help a young woman in a crumpled traveling cloak out of the carriage and escort her up the steps to the front door.

"Is something wrong, Lady Berrinden?"

Simeon Giffard's cool voice recalled her attention and she managed to smile at him, while at the same time controlling a surge of anger. This unknown female could only be the niece from the north. Fury sizzled through her at that thought, though her expression of polite interest did not change. How *dared* Henry bring Harriet's daughter back to London?

She realized that her guest was still awaiting a response. "I do beg your pardon, my dear Simeon. My husband's carriage has just drawn up and that distracted me for a moment. As you know, he's been away in the North all week on urgent family business."

"Then you'll wish to speak to him privately, so I'll take my leave of you."

But before he could do so, the door of the drawing room was flung open and Lord Berrinden breezed in, followed by a maypole of a girl in a dowdy cloak that even her ladyship's maid would have scorned to wear.

"Ah, there you are, my love," His Lordship announced unnecessarily. "See what a pleasant surprise I've - Oh, Simeon! Nice to see you again, my dear fellow." Becoming aware of the thunderous expression on his wife's face, he came to an abrupt halt and stood like a fish stranded on a beach, mouth opening and shutting in a fruitless search for words that would fend off her wrath.

Cassie halted by the doorway, dismayed to find that the older lady, who must be her aunt,

was glaring at her, that a fair young lady, Cousin Susannah no doubt, was looking very apprehensive, and that an unknown gentleman was staring at her with a disdainful expression. It was the latter who caught her attention and she could not resist staring as he rose to his feet.

He was very tall, well over six feet, with a presence you could not ignore. His lustrous brown hair was cut short and brushed into an elegant tangle, which she later discovered to be called coups de vent. Fawn trousers were molded over muscular legs and worn over gleaming half boots. His sage green frock-coat was stretched across broad shoulders, with not a single wrinkle marring its fit, or that of the fawn waistcoat beneath it. A high and intricately tied neckcloth worn over even higher shirt points, gave his head a haughty elevation which perfectly matched the expression on his lean aristocratic face.

He was extremely handsome, or at least, Cassandra amended mentally, he would have been handsome if he had not looked so bored and world-weary. Whoever he was, she decided, as the silence stretched across the room, she wished he'd stop staring at her. Turning, she saw her uncle put up a finger to ease his neckcloth as if it were choking him.

"Er - I'm back, my love," he offered in greeting.

Lady Berrinden breathed in deeply.

It took him a few seconds to realize what she was waiting for. "Oh - ah - my love, this is my - I mean our - niece, Cassandra Trent, and Cassie, this is my wife and, er, of course she's your aunt - Aunt Amelia, that is." His voice faltered to a stop.

For all her tiredness and her embarrassment, Cassandra had a sudden urge to chuckle. After several days in her uncle's company she was aware that he lived directly under his wife's thumb and was terrified of upsetting her. Their time together had also shown her that he was not at all quick-witted. But he was a lord and as a consequence, no one seemed to notice the slowness of his wits or the banality of his conversational offerings.

Cassie was given the merest tip of her ladyship's fingers by way of a greeting.

"And this is your Cousin Susannah," added His Lordship in a falsely hearty voice, beaming round at everyone. "Suzie, come over and shake your Cousin Cassie's hand!"

Cassie watched her cousin move across the room, her carriage graceful and her voice as soft as a strand of silk. At least her smile seemed genuinely friendly as she shook hands and said, "I'm so happy to meet you. I do hope you're not too tired after such a long journey!" before returning to her place on the sofa.

The strange gentleman cleared his throat.

Lord Berrinden jerked round. "Oh - ah - Simeon, forgot you were there, old fellow. Pray let me introduce you to my niece. Cassandra Trent, Simeon Giffard." In a hurried aside to Cassie, he volunteered the information, "Families known each other forever. Giffard's got a seat in Hertfordshire close to ours. Excellent hunting. Dashed draughty house. In all the guide books, though."

Cassie found her hand being shaken again and frowned up at Mr. Giffard. He was so tall that he made her feel quite small, which was an unusual sensation for her. That must be what was making her feel breathless, she told herself, as she stood there with her cold fingers clasped in his warm hand.

"Delighted to meet you, Miss Trent," he drawled, staring down at her with a light frown wrinkling his forehead as if he was puzzled.

He started to turn away without venturing to offer a comment about her journey, as the merest courtesy would have demanded, and Cassie's temper began to rise. She had never met so many ill-mannered persons in her whole life! Any new-found relative, however distant, coming to the Trent household in Bardsley would have been made warmly welcome not stared at like a bear in a sideshow. "I'm equally delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Giffard," she tossed at him, her tone contradicting her words.

He froze for a moment, looking as if he did not know what to make of her. "Indeed."

"Yes, I've heard so much about polite society that I knew I should soon be made to feel

welcome here." Was that a softening of the expression in his eyes, she wondered, as if amusement were creeping in behind the boredom?

"I hope you will soon feel comfortable among us, Miss Trent. You must be tired after such a long journey."

"A little tired, sir. Nothing that a good night's sleep will not mend." She had the satisfaction, then, of being the one to turn away from him. She had not been invited to sit, but did not intend to stand like a supplicant, so took a seat on a fat overstuffed sofa and waited to see what her relatives would do next.

"I really must take my leave now," murmured Simeon Giffard to his hostess.

The hint of animation had vanished from his face and Cassandra wondered whether she had been imagining the amusement. She admired the address with which he shook his hostess's hand and made a swift exit from the room. Perhaps he could tell that a storm was brewing? The rigidity of her aunt's expression and body spoke volumes, contrasting as it did with the trepidation on her uncle's face and the way her cousin glanced from one parent to the other with wide, nervous eyes.

Lord Berrinden crossed to stand in front of the fire and remained there, shifting his weight from foot to foot and making a great show of warming his hands. "Cold weather we're having, eh? And nearly April, too." Under his wife's basilisk stare, his voice trailed away.

Cassandra watched Lady Berrinden punish her husband by allowing the awkward silence to continue for a few moments before commanding, "Kindly ring for the butler, Henry."

She did not speak again until he arrived. "Meckworth, pray tell the housekeeper to prepare a room for our niece, Miss Trent, who will be staying with us for a while. The room next to Miss Susannah's should be suitable."

After the butler had left, her ladyship set one hand to her forehead. "Susannah, kindly fetch me my vinaigrette. I feel a headache coming on. A severe headache."

Lord Berrinden's expression became, if that were possible, even more apprehensive.

How ridiculous! Cassie thought. Why do they allow the woman to bully them like this? She leaned back on the sofa, wishing she were back in Bardsley.

Lady Berrinden's sharp voice cut across the room, "A lady never lounges in her seat, Cassandra! Kindly remember that while you are under this roof."

Cassie jerked upright, anger welling. This was worse than her blackest imaginings. If it were not for her promise to her mother, she would walk out this very minute and return to those who loved and wanted her.

As Susannah re-entered the room, carrying the little silver box of smelling salts, even Lady Berrinden's grim expression relaxed at the picture her daughter presented - silvery blond hair, blue eyes, a delicate complexion and a slim figure, just a trifle lacking in height, perhaps. Above all, a sweetness of expression and a willingness to please that made her universally liked. Such a pity her sisters took after their father! Still, one should count one's blessings. Susannah was exactly the sort of daughter any mother would have chosen, just as Richard was exactly the sort of son and heir one would wish to have, though why he had insisted on going off to tour the Continent in that ramshackle manner just before the Season started, Lady Berrinden would never understand.

She sighed audibly as she studied her niece. Some might have described the girl as handsome with a well-proportioned figure, but Lady Berrinden considered her too tall. Why, the girl looked to be the about same height as Richard, and he stood five feet nine inches. Yes, and she had a pert look to her, too, decided her ladyship, meeting a steady gaze from across the room. Well, Miss Cassandra Trent had better mind her manners. This was London, not the wilds of the north.

Susannah smiled encouragingly across at her father, then gave her mother the vinaigrette, saying softly, "I do hope your head gets better soon, Mama."

She means that, thought Cassie in amazement. Is she too stupid to see that her mother is playing games?

The butler returned. "Miss Trent's room is ready, your ladyship."

"Thank you, Meckworth. Susannah, pray take your cousin upstairs so that she may change for dinner."

"Yes, yes! You go with your cousin, Cassie," added Lord Berrinden with a heartiness he clearly did not feel.

The jovial expression dropped from his face the moment the door closed behind the two girls.

"Pray explain yourself, Henry!"

He launched into a description of the journey north.

"Kindly reserve the no doubt interesting account of your journey until a more felicitous occasion."

"Er - yes, my love. Well, I went first to see the lawyer. Whatsisname. Always forget what he's called. Thin little fellow, got a cast in one eye."

"The letter was signed by a Mr. Hurley."

"Yes, that's it! Hurley! Anyway, what he had to say gave me a nasty shock, I can tell you!" He paused and took a deep breath.

Her Ladyship rolled her eyes towards the ceiling. "Do get on with it, Henry!"

"Yes, dear. It seems the girl's grandfather, Robert Trent - well, her father too, come to that, they were both called Robert - anyway, the Trents are now rich. Talk about recouping the family fortunes! Used to be squires, then lost almost everything, so they took to trade and now they're as rich as Croesus. Couldn't believe my ears when that lawyer fellow told me! They own half the town now, you know. Well, perhaps not half, but a deuced lot of it. Not that you'd want to own a town like that. Dirty sort of place."

Lady Berrinden permitted herself a loud sigh.

His lordship hurried on with his tale. "Where was I? Oh yes. Cotton, you know. That's where the Trents get their money from now, but they were into canals as well, I believe,

before that. And property. They used to own some country acres near Manchester. When the city grew bigger, they sold 'em at a juicy profit, that lawyer fellow said. Dashed ugly countryside round there. Surprised anyone wanted to buy. I don't like those moors at all. No trees, wind always howling and you'd break your horse's legs the minute you tried to gallop. And there's no game to speak of, well, there's no cover, you see . . ." He realized from his wife's expression that he had strayed from the point yet again and made a heroic effort to gather his thoughts together.

"So - it seems Harriet's husband died unexpectedly a few years ago - well, he was murdered, actually, by those damned - er, those rascally Luddites. Caught 'em trying to smash his new machinery and they turned on him. Shocking affair. Shot through the heart. Militia called out, but never caught the villains. Don't know what the world's coming to! Didn't make old bones, did he, Robert Trent? Only forty-six when he died, younger than me."

"And his money . . . ?" she prompted.

"I was coming to that. He left everything to his wife and daughter - as was only proper, can't fault the fellow there. Then the grandfather died shortly afterwards, leaving most of his fortune to the other son, Joshua - well, he was the elder, after all - but there were some rather generous bequests to all three grandchildren, as well. So Cassie came in for more of the old pewter - er, I mean, more money."

Her ladyship's expression was bitter, but she said nothing. There was no justice in this world if someone who disobeyed her parents and eloped with a common northern mill-owner could be so richly rewarded.

"And then last month, after a long illness, poor Harriet died, leaving a rather surprising will and this letter for us." Lord Berrinden hesitated, fumbled in his pocket and produced a crumpled piece of paper, which he handed to his wife with the air of one passing across a live coal.

As she read it, Amelia Berrinden's face turned a dull red. "How dared your sister write us

such a vulgar letter!" She tossed the offensive scrap of paper towards her husband, did not wait for him to pick it up, but jerked to her feet and began to pace up and down the room, firing remarks at him each time she passed.

"No one with the slightest sense of decency would have made such provisions in a will!"

Her rose-colored skirts swished viciously. "That someone born a Berrinden could pen such words!"

"No, er, yes, my love. But it would be a nice little addition to our girls' dowries, would it not? Two thousand pounds each."

No answer, just another flounce of Lady Amelia's skirts and a curl of her lips.

His lordship tried again. "It's a most generous amount, isn't it? I mean, well, have we not always wished that we were a little better placed with regard to the girls' settlements?"

"It is blackmail! I am amazed that I did not faint clean away at the mere sight of that letter!"

"Yes, yes! Dreadful, my love. Dreadful. Though I don't know if I'd call it blackmail exactly. It's more a form of bribery, wouldn't you say?"

"I am no expert in such matters! And the one seems to me quite as reprehensible as the other."

"Yes, er, no, my love. But it is a generous amount of money, very generous, and it's less than a year till Cassandra turns 21 and then . . ." His voice trailed away as he saw his wife draw a deep breath.

"Your sister knew very well that we should not be able to refuse. Only the most unnatural of parents could turn away such a bequest for their children!"

Her husband waited for her to pronounce judgment.

"Well," she said acidly, "we have one consolation, at least, Henry."

"My love?"

"We shall know that we are not only helping to provide for our daughters, but that we are behaving with true Christian charity in taking that northern nobody into our home." The high

moral tone slipped a trifle and she added waspishly, "But goodness alone knows how she has been brought up and what her table manners are like!"

She sank into a chair, delicately applying a fine lace handkerchief to her eyes.

He stood beside her and patted her shoulder clumsily. "I do believe, my love, that you'll find Cassie a polite and ladylike girl. Her behavior on the journey down here was all that anyone could ask, I promise you. Why, she was as quiet and well-bred as our little Suzie. And her table manners are perfect, too, though she don't eat much, hardly a thing, in fact! Can't imagine how she grew so tall if that's all she eats."

Her ladyship's tone was ominous. "Her manners had better be impeccable, if I am to introduce her to our friends!"

"But I can see that it's all going to be very difficult for you, introducin' a girl with a trade background into polite society, not to mention the effort of gettin' her a suitable wardrobe and all the fallals you ladies seem to need. Perhaps it's too much to ask? Your welfare is, as ever, my first consideration, my sweet."

She glared at him, bosom swelling with outrage. "Difficult! Difficult! I can assure you, Henry Berrinden, that if I choose to introduce your niece to our friends, and if she proves to be well-mannered, then there will be few difficulties. There is nothing like a fortune for smoothing one's path in the world! And after all, her father came from what was once a respectable county family, even if they have turned to trade. If there were not some good blood there, I could do nothing for her, were I the Queen herself."

"My love, you are marvelous!" He took her hand and kissed it gallantly. "I knew I could rely upon you. And about the, er, the legacies . . . ?"

She drew herself up. "We accept them, of course. Let alone we have our girls' futures to think of, only the most uncaring of parents could turn down such bequests. No one could accuse me of not caring for my children's welfare, I hope!"

He kissed her hand again. "You are the most devoted of mothers, my dear! Indeed, a

model parent in every way! Cassie will be in good hands."