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**Opening Extract from...**

# Ace, King, Knave

Written by Maria McCann

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# ACE, KING, KNAVE

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To all those who, in the words of Louis MacNeice,
'were born and grew up in a fix'

# Note on Language

This novel contains some eighteenth-century terms that may be unfamiliar, including both the occasional French expression beloved by elegant speakers and also the more vital slang of the poor and the criminal fraternity. I hope that in most cases the sense is sufficiently clear from the context and that no dictionary is required. For convenience, and for those who like to know if they've got it right, there is a glossary at the end of the book.

# I

Provided they are accompanied at all times by Rixam, and on no account venture further than the shallows, Papa has given permission for Mr Zedland to take Sophia boating on the Statue Lake.

Clutching her gown with one hand, Sophia is helped on board. Rixam is about to follow her when Zedland pushes off from the jetty, leaving him stranded.

Sophia laughs at the accident. 'Wait there, Rixam.'

Zedland turns the boat round and pulls away with Rixam in full view. When they are some twenty feet from the jetty Sophia, making the best of a bad job, calls over to the servant, 'If you wait, Rixam, Papa will be quite satisfied.'

The man has no option but to wait, though his unspoken *I think not* is plainly legible in his stance.

'We should perhaps go back for him,' Sophia murmurs.

'He would be *de trop*.'

The lake's steely surface beats back to them the blue fire of August. The oarblades trail molten drops, the dimples and swirls they create flattened by the oppressive heat. Waterbirds call from the reeds; flying insects cross their bows, coming (Sophia thinks) a great way from the grass and plants where they have their homes. Zedland's hands, firm on the oars, slide back and forth with practised ease.

Associating it as she does with sailors and fishermen, Sophia finds this competence disconcerting. Possibly Zedland divines her unease, since he announces, 'Though a thorough gentleman, my father was something of an eccentric. He had no time for Latin and Greek, preferring that I should excel in riding, rowing and firing a pistol.'

'And leading a set in the dance? For you do excel at it.'

Zedland shrugs and smiles. Sophia feels her own smile rise to meet his, reflecting it as the reeds are reflected, upside down, on the brilliant surface of the lake.

'Is there good angling here?'

'I believe so. Would you like a servant to come out with you?'

'My hope was that *you* might. A lady with rod and parasol, a charming picture! You needn't soil your hands, you know. Titus will manage the bait.'

'I can't always understand Titus,' says Sophia, and blushes, for the boy was given her by Zedland. Too late, she recalls the good old English proverb concerning the mouths of gift horses. Perhaps, though, it is precisely a question of Titus's mouth: his lips are too large, she believes, and impede his speech. Papa disapproves of this present of Zedland's and wished the boy to be sent back, but since Zedland and Sophia are so soon to be married he contents himself with grumbling. Titus will go with them to Sophia's new home in Essex, and will cease to trouble Papa. He is still young and, Zedland insists, very capable of learning. With opportunities to hear the conversation of educated persons, Titus will surely improve.

The surface of the lake closes almost as soon as they glide over it. Sophia fancies that to Rixam, doggedly watching from the bank, boat and occupants must appear as a doubled creature, capable of turning topsy-turvy without coming to harm. Heat-haze rising off the water melts her grey satin robe into the surrounding air, and Sophia herself is incense dissolving before the sacred image that is Mr Zedland. How much more beautiful are dark eyes, she thinks, than blue. Blue eyes have been shamefully overpraised. How he gazes about him —

Zedland has shipped oars. 'Pray, where are the statues?'

'There are none. I wish Papa would give the lake some other name. That one is quite ridiculous.'

'Were there not statues in the past?'

'My great-grandfather found a marble cupid buried in the mud near the jetty. Since then it's been the Statue Lake. Of course, everybody asks, "Where are the statues?"'

'Then I'm *à la mode*,' he says, evidently amused. 'But why should it displease you?'

She searches his expression for a sign that she may open her mind to him. Zedland's mouth curls up in a teasing smile. It is hardly a reassurance and yet Sophia is unable to hold out against it.

'What I mean,' she begins falteringly, 'is that "Statue Lake" sounds as if we wished to pretend to . . .'

'To — ?'

'Well. One gentleman asked if we intended to erect copies of the sculptures at Bath.'

'What would it matter if you did?' asks Zedland.

Sophia shakes her head.

'You dislike them, perhaps? But why should you? Consider how much our modern elegance owes to their inspiration.'

'They are very well – where they are.'

'That is a lady's reason, I suppose.'

She is conscious of appearing at a disadvantage. 'Perhaps it's an oddity in me, but I confess I dislike this endless copying. We're not Romans but English. I find such fakery dishonest, and the works it produces worthless.'

During the later part of this speech she glimpses in Zedland's obsidian eyes a curious look: a not altogether friendly look. Then it is gone. He takes up the oars again and propels the boat smoothly towards the centre of the lake.

## 2

The deck is bound up in a silk handkerchief. Betsy-Ann Shiner wipes her hands with cologne, unwraps the handkerchief, spreads it out and examines it for holes before turning her attention to the cards themselves.

Even to a woman as fly at Betsy-Ann, thoroughly acquainted with this line of goods, these are a novelty. Each card is divided diagonally, corner to corner, combining two pictures in one: a dancing lady on the top left, and on the bottom right, upside down, a marching soldier. Betsy-Ann fans out the deck: a gay assembly. She turns the fan upside down, shakes it and spreads it again, and now she holds an army in her hand.

Very pretty!

She turns over the fan and counts the cards. The deck is ranged in order, every card present – no soldier wounded, nor lady indisposed. Is pretty *all* they are, or have they something more to offer? Damned if she can see it. They reveal themselves directly you handle them; they can't be dealt without the trick becoming plain, and are consequently of no use to sharps.

'Where'd you find these?' she demands of the boy standing before her.

'Off a coster's cart.' He grins. 'Reckon he was fencing, too.'

Betsy-Ann glares. 'I don't *fence*, I buy second-hand goods. On that understanding we can do business.'

The boy mumbles something.

'All right, then. Your coster wants to sell, does he?'

A nod.

'I daresay he does, but they're no use to me, sweetheart. Say a penny.'

'He won't let them go for that.'

'Won't he?' She hefts them expertly from palm to palm and then, seeing the boy impressed, holds her hands wide apart and springs the entire deck from the right to the left, the cards arcing, forming a momentary bridge in the air.

'Penny-ha'penny,' she says, slapping down the deck onto the handkerchief, '*and* the wiper, and *that* only 'cause I like the look of your face.'

'The wiper's silk,' the boy complains.

'Take it or leave it.'

When he has pocketed his money and gone, she binds up the cards again in the handkerchief and lays them by.

It is almost noon: a hot, airless day. Betsy-Ann keeps the window closed and the gaps plugged with rags. As she says, better your own smell than someone else's; better the stale breath of one jordan under the bed than the arsehole belch of outside, where slops lie baking on the cobbles. There's a courtyard at the back of here, with a necessary house, but not everybody in the street enjoys that convenience and the maidservants, little slatterns some of them, won't always take the trouble of carrying a full pot downstairs. Betsy-Ann stands and rubs at the glass, cleaning a space in the dust. She sees the boy's figure dwindle along the street, hopping and skipping as it crosses a blemish in the pane.

The deck ought not to stay here. She takes it to the chimney-cupboard, where she presses on a protruding nail. The back of the cupboard opens out into a cubbyhole fitted out with shelves and hangers, and with ropes suspended from the ceiling: her secret place, her Eye. The name is a precaution in case she's ever brought before the Beak. With one of these, you can swear as innocent as the day: *I've no more, my Lord, than I could put into my eye*. This is a large Eye, a dry Eye, a dark and deceptive Eye. Inside she keeps a tub of umbrellas, picked up from the stands inside shops on rainy days. A teapot in the corner contains watches;

a wooden box, children's tops and other toys. Here are ribbons, needles, thimbles, a hoard of rings laid away inside a cracked cup and an entire drawer of mufflers, wipers and gloves: silk, cotton, linen, wool, silk, lacy, embroidered. Betsy-Ann sells on these goods, sometimes to trusted visitors, sometimes by loading them on a cart fitted with hidden compartments and carrying them to another district. Thimbles, ribbons and suchlike can be sold as quickly as she likes, but no wiper ever leaves these premises until she has unpicked the embroidery.

Groping under the stuffs lying in the drawer, she fishes up a box of soft green leather, holds it to her nose and inhales. Attar of roses. It hasn't faded so very much, not yet. Her breath comes quickly as she lifts the lid on its contents: white satin shoes, fresh and unworn. Betsy-Ann takes one of the shoes and presses it to her cheek, then feels inside the toe. There they are, the earrings of black pearl. Entangled with them is a hoop of gold, finished with a coral heart. She slides it onto her finger, takes it off and studies the inscription inside it.

*It's only a fawney*, he said, and smiled. She said, *What's that writing?*

Betsy-Ann pushes earrings and fawney back into the shoe and hides everything away again at the bottom of the drawer, beneath the piles of wipers.

From one of the ropes attached to the ceiling hangs a deep basket. She winds it down and inspects the contents: small bottles of gin, intended for display on the upper layer of her cart. She beds down the strange deck among the gin bottles, perhaps as a tribute to their shared power of illusion, and takes up another from a nearby shelf: the Tarocco.

# 3

'Peter is party to a plan,' Sophia says. Titus looks blankly at her; she points at her mouth and then at his to indicate that he should repeat her words. 'Peter is party to a plan.'

'Feeter iss farty to a flan.'

'Party.'

'Farty.'

Were this an English boy, she would suspect him of vulgar insolence as well as the coarsest possible language, but his eyes, that seem to be all pupil, show only perplexity and distress.

Is it possible that he is deaf? If so, it must be a very particular kind of deafness. He pronounces *m* and *n* without difficulty, so why should he not distinguish between *f* and *p*?

'Titus, listen!' She tugs on his ear. 'P-p-p-p-p-p-p! Party!'

'F-f-f-f-f-f —'

'Stop!' Sophia cries. If they are all so difficult to school, she wonders that the *ton* should find them desirable as servants. Apart, of course, from the saving in wages; but persons of quality need hardly fret about that.

The boy's mouth is trembling.

'We'll try again another day,' she tells him, ringing the bell for the housekeeper. 'Wait here.'

Mrs Hooton appears and makes a point of not looking at Titus.

'Mrs Hooton, kindly take Titus to your room and keep him with you an hour or two, conversing with him as you carry out your work. Pray correct his pronunciation.' Mrs Hooton nods with no great show of enthusiasm. 'Titus, go with Mrs Hooton, listen carefully to her and endeavour to reproduce the sounds of a native English speaker.'

Panic flares in his face: he has not understood.

'Go with Mrs Hooton,' she repeats, betrayed into gesturing like a fishwife. 'Go away.'

When they have left the room Sophia flings herself down in a chair. How can she rid herself of the boy without offending Zedland? Titus is intolerable; he will bring her into ridicule wherever she goes. What is she to do?

She could leave him at home, of course, but how can he be made a contented servant, when he cannot be fitted into the servants' world? If his age is what Zedland says it is, he will never be tall and substantial enough for a footman, even supposing one could find just such another and make up a matching pair. It is a great pity: two coal-black men in cream-coloured livery would look exceedingly well. But (*revenons à nos moutons*) there is nothing to be done with this particular black. Even in the stables he would be the butt of the other lads. Sophia has never witnessed the cruelties that underlings inflict upon one another but she is aware that they take place. Papa was right on this occasion, as on so many others: when he offered to decline Zedland's gift on her behalf, she should have agreed.

Perhaps when they are married her husband will come to understand that Titus is unsuitable. With this thought comes an inner prompting to rise and examine herself in the glass. Sophia could not explain the origin of this impulse, which is as irresistible as it is trivial. Though not vain, she now carries out such inspections several times a day, a habit which took hold around the time when Mr Zedland first began to pay court.

This morning she perceives a young lady of the middle height, narrow-laced and graceful in her posture. She is thankful that from her earliest years she was trained to carry herself well. The restrictions she found so unbearable as a child have become second nature and whenever she sees some bumpkin girl wad-

dling along, jaw poked out in front, back humped and elbows thrusting, Sophia is filled with an agreeable sense of superiority. A gentlewoman's very shoulders convey composure, the essence of breeding. Such an elegant female can take comfort in the knowledge that, while not listed among the first in Beauty's golden book, she is of goodly report in that of Beauty's sister, Grace. As for her natural advantages, she has fair ringlets, a white skin, blue eyes. She is not pockmarked or coarse-featured and is neither fat nor thin. On the debit side, it must be admitted that a gentleman once described her, when he thought she could not overhear, as a 'blank'. Nobody has ever written sonnets to her features, which are so mild as to border upon dullness. Sophia, who can bear witness to the power of bewitching eyes, knows that she cannot pretend to such attractions.

She reads aloud with pleasing expression, has a good French accent, sings in tune, plays the harpsichord, can make correct sketches in pencil, is in health, is kind to the poor and considerate towards the servants. She is considered a satisfactory young woman by those judges whose opinions count for most, namely those who know her well. She is her parents' sole heir, with a modest fortune of her own and more to follow on that terrible day when Papa and Mama are no more. She takes no pleasure in anticipating this future wealth; on the contrary, she tries to forget that such a day must come.

In short, her character is virtuous and refined, her father's offer honest and plain, her person elegant. All this shall be Mr Zedland's portion.

What will he lay down to match it?

Here Sophia's breast begins to rise and fall, her blood to beat up into those blank cheeks.

She has heard the term *worship* used to describe some preference of man for woman, or woman for man, but always in such a way as to imply that the tenderness thus referred to was a

frivolous, perhaps immoral, connection. Now, however, she herself has arrived at a condition for which there can be no other expression. Zedland's manners, so different from those of her rustic neighbours, seem the attributes of a god. It is true that his skin is a little brown, but an olive complexion has a charm of its own, and as for his hands – so long and fine – Sophia would be surprised if any gentleman in the whole of her native county could match them. The truth of the matter is that Zedland is Sophia's maiden passion, the only man whose flesh has ever spoken to hers. It murmurs and wheedles all the time she is with him, until she scarcely knows how to breathe.

Her one instinctive defence has been to conceal her fevered condition both from him and from her parents, who believe hers to be a union recommended by reason. Since childhood she has been accustomed to their 'Sophy is rational' – high praise for a girl – and could not bear them to witness her infatuated.

How can the dim creature peering out of the looking-glass be worthy of *Mr Zedland*, whose very voice makes Sophia squirm with unspeakable sensations, as though a child were already kicking in her belly? His eyes, deep and dark (their whites so clear as to be tinged with blue), are the bewitching orbs with which she forlornly compares her own, and sees how very unenslaving they are. Yesterday, when he proposed taking her out in the boat and Papa consented, Sophia actually shook to think of the coming *tête-à-tête* and when her suitor pulled away, marooning poor Rixam, her mouth grew dry. After this initial wickedness, however, Zedland acted quite correctly. He spoke of his own love for Sophia and his wish that his domestic arrangements might please her; yet he smiled on her so long, gazing into her all the while, that she was persuaded he had fathomed her entire secret, penetrated right to her soul and seen his image enshrined there, with herself thrown at his feet.

It is of course natural and proper for a young lady to feel

love for her intended. But what is love? Sophia thinks, in those fleeting moments when she is able to think at all. Is this what is meant – this *cruelty*? For as they sat, seemingly balanced, in the boat, each reflecting the other, she knew that they were not balanced at all, that Zedland's strength rendered her powerless, that he could make her do anything, and that if he did not understand this now, he very soon would. Again she examines her person in the mirror. How calm and controlled that reflected image! How dignified!



*My Dear Sophia,*

*I trust this finds you and your esteemed parents well. For my part, I am fully recovered from the chill of which I told you, free of bottles and boluses and master of my own time. The last of the papers being now come from Essex, I propose to bring them with me on my next visit to Buller. That is, on the sixteenth or seventeenth of this month.*

*How it grieves me that my beloved parents cannot share our joy on that day which is to witness our entry together into perfect happiness! For perfect, my Sophia, I am convinced it must be. Where two persons, as well matched as we, are surrounded by universal goodwill and cemented by mutual tenderness, happiness must be the inevitable outcome. For proof of that you need look no further than your own dear father and mother, whom I may soon address, with the warmest affection, as my own.*

*I must now come to something less agreeable. I trust you will not be too disappointed when I tell you that my agent has not purchased the silks, &c., as agreed. There were none of the best quality to be had at the price we had allowed, London being so very expensive just now. On consideration it appears to me that*

*you might buy as good at Bath, where you may consult your own choice entirely and have them made up while we are there*

Sophia clutches the letter, almost crumpling it.

'What is it, darling?' Her mother's gentle voice invites confidences. 'He hasn't taken a turn for the worse, I hope?'

'No, no, Mama, he's quite well now, but the most provoking news! He's neglected to act for us – he says I can buy the stuffs in Bath and have them run up on the spot.'

'He has a great deal of business to attend to,' is Mrs Buller's comment. 'Still, you must have your trousseau.'

'You didn't wish him to buy the stuffs,' Sophia admits with shame.

'No, indeed. We should never have consented, only he made such a point of the superior choice and quality. I must say,' Mama sniffs, 'we were very open-handed with him. Enough, I would've thought, even for London prices.'

This is Sophia's first disagreement with Mr Zedland (although the man himself does not know it yet) and her courage fails her at once. 'Perhaps it won't matter so much, in the end? What do you think, Mama – could the things be made at Bath?'

But Mama says, 'Of all men, he *ought* to understand. His own tailoring is so very elegant, and everyone knows how much time that takes. I shall write to him.'

'Oh, Mama, you won't quarrel with him, will you?'

'Don't you know me better than that, child? Let me see the letter.'

Though the greater part of the contents remain unread, Sophia hands it over without hesitation. Mr Zedland never descends to 'warm expressions'; his communications might be read by the Archbishop of Canterbury himself.

'He hasn't bought the mare either,' her mother murmurs. 'Quite right, since it appears she was lame – but to fancy you can

be married out of a mantua-maker's! No, no, that must all be finished with before your honeymoon.' Mama folds the letter up briskly and hands it back to Sophia. 'You shall see what I write.'

Sophia hugs her – 'Thank you, darling Mama!' – before going off to read the remainder of her letter in private.

It is partly her own reaction that she wishes to hide, since she finds his letters strangely disappointing. Could it be their very correctness which is so lacking in charm? Uniformly polite, they breathe chaste love and dutiful affection, when what she craves is some hint that he thinks of their approaching wedding as she does, with mingled desire and terror. Sophia reflects bleakly that the coming ordeal may be all her own, men's lives and bodies (her mother has explained) being differently constructed from those of women, so that the act which bathes a husband in voluptuous sensations may pain his wife, though as Mama said, 'it will soon pass off'. (Sophia turned scarlet on being told this; it was the fault of the words *voluptuous sensations*, which themselves brought about curious stirrings she would be puzzled to describe to Mama.) It seems that Nature has allotted Mr Zedland the lion's share of happiness in the marital embrace: should he not be correspondingly more eager to lay claim to it than his yearning, yet shrinking, bride?

Sophia has more cause to shrink than most. Since childhood she has been troubled by a 'little weakness', as Mama insists upon calling it; according to Mama, such weaknesses are not uncommon in the gentle sex and Mr Zedland, as a loving husband, will soon accommodate himself to a flaw which can in no way be traced to any vice. It is plain, however, that Mama is not quite so easy on this head as she wishes to appear, since a few months ago she wrote to a celebrated physician residing at Bath. Dr Brunt's reply, when it came, was encouraging: though one could not undertake with absolute confidence to cure the condition, patients often responded well to simple, practical measures and those who did not, even

those of Sophia's age, might still grow out of it. He wrote that he had a particular interest in such cases, and it had long been his opinion that parents should endeavour to treat their afflicted children with tenderness, striving to discover and remove any little sorrow or suffering that might weigh upon their spirits. It was imperative that no beatings or other punishments should be used or even threatened, and that all should be done to foster a romping, carefree disposition. Such a course of action, faithfully adhered to, not infrequently brought about everything that was desired; patience was essential, however, as several weeks might pass before any improvement could be detected. Marriage itself, if happy, might well effect such a change, but it was (he had underlined the words) *desirable for the happiness of all parties that the utmost frankness should be employed towards the bridegroom.*

The good doctor added that he must not be understood to be accusing either Papa or Mama. It sometimes happened that cheerful young people, guided by the most loving parents, were afflicted by reason of an innate weakness in the body. For these, also, treatment might do much. He respectfully submitted details of a regimen which, if scrupulously followed, would reduce the symptoms or even do away with them altogether.

Sophia assured Mama that she had no secret sorrows and that nothing distressed her save the condition itself. They therefore pinned their hopes on Dr Brunt's regimen. At table Sophia takes as little salt, or salted food, as may be; she shuns dishes swimming in any kind of sauce or gravy, takes no liquid after eight o'clock, and is careful to visit the necessary house frequently before retiring to bed. She has made considerable progress this way, and hopes she may make more.

In her chamber she unfolds the letter and reads:

*The little mare I told you of has had a fall and now limps*

*intolerably. Paterson tells me she will hardly recover within a month. It is a pity, as I am persuaded you would have taken to her, but since I had not closed the bargain when she fell I have instead purchased a hunter, a real beauty. I am now seeking another mount for you; Paterson knows of a quiet grey*

Sophia sighs. She understands that female happiness depends upon attracting a protector who takes just such pains as these to secure her comfort. And yet . . . an ardent *billet-doux*, a forbidden familiarity, would comfort her more than any amount of such household stuff. What is more, she finds it difficult to reconcile Zedland's glamorous person and intimate, teasing manner with his prosaic outpourings on paper. Her parents, however, seem quite satisfied. Possibly she is the only person to perceive him thus – and this because of what older people call 'youth and innocence'. Perhaps, after all, these different aspects of Mr Zedland are perfectly reconcilable, and the mixture a proven recipe for married bliss?

In the meantime she has domestic concerns of her own. She rings the bell and asks the servant to send Titus to her, to see if he has made any progress in curbing his defective speech.