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Blood and Water

Jane was crying. She snorted and sniffed, unable to wipe away the tears because both her hands were entangled in my corset-strings. The thin, unbreakable strings had sliced through the tender skin of her finger joints. Her blood was staining them reddish-brown.

"What will Papa say?" she wailed.

"Pull harder, you donkey!"

The corset was crushing my ribcage. I kicked my step-sister's ankle. She pulled harder. Breathless, I nodded encouragement. A curl paper fell out of my hair and fluttered to the carpet.

Controlling her tears, Jane stood back. "There." She paused to sniff. "But Papa will be so angry! I cannot imagine what he will say."

"Well, *I* can." It was hard to breathe under such restriction, but I thickened my voice and wrinkled my eyebrows in imitation of my father. "My dear child, anyone who inflicts such violence on their person is truly fashion's slave. You are a prisoner of vanity. I am much aggrieved."

I turned this way and that, admiring the effect of the corset on my body. My stomach was so flat it was almost concave. The whalebone had pushed my breasts, which were not very significant under ordinary circumstances, onto a sort of plateau, where they lay like jelly arranged on a plate.

"Do not forget," I reminded Jane, "I am quite safe from public disgrace, since Papa cannot say anything in front of his guests."

She had almost stopped crying, and was wiping her nose. "Why not?"

"Because, you innocent thing, he is a *Radical*." Hoping to amuse her, I struck a pose like a Greek goddess carrying an invisible urn on her head. "A new thinker, a philosopher unrivalled by the ancients. How can he *possibly* be considered old-fashioned?"

"Oh, stuff." Jane sucked her bloodied fingers wearily. "Your clever talk fails to impress me. You know you will have to endure Mama's scolding, and I will have to defend you, as usual."

"Jane..." Impatiently I turned round. As we faced each other in the candlelight Jane's troubled face looked like a yellow, shadowed moon. "Jane, dear, think of it as a *game*. Play-acting, a treasure hunt, what you will. Now, do you want to join in or not?"

My stepsister's fanciful nature was never oppressed for long. She dropped a maid's curtsy, her finger in the corner of her mouth. "Yes, Miss Mary. If you please, miss, what are my orders?"

I spoke in my lightest, most elegant voice – the voice I would use during the drawing-room farce which awaited

us downstairs. "Watch me and do as I do. Flirt. Laugh at all their jokes. Allow your profile to be seen in silhouette, with the firelight behind you, but protect your face from its heat with your fan. Make sure your stockings are showing when you sit down." I turned back to the mirror. "If Papa insists on the attendance of his daughters at this infernal gathering of lechers and pontificators --"

"Only *two* of his daughters," interrupted Jane. "Fanny is not expected."

"Fanny does not count. But if you and I must be shown off like circus freaks, the least we can do is have some sport with the gentlemen, if that is what they are."

Jane and I were both sixteen. As I watched her widen her innocent, already wide eyes, I reflected that no one, whatever they might say about my own appearance, would ever include innocence in the description. My face was thin, with a rather more obvious nose than I would have liked. When people noticed my eyes it was not only to admire them, though I well knew how beautiful they were, but also to comment on the maturity of their expression. *Born knowing*, I had once overheard a lady guest say when I was a ten-year-old being paraded as after-supper entertainment. *She will make her mark, that child.*

"Poor Fanny," observed Jane, with mischief, not sympathy, in her voice. "She is to have no sport!"

Her curls bobbed around her smooth, well-made face. She and her brother Charles had the kind of luxurious good looks that people remarked on with admiration, much to Jane's satisfaction. But a consolation to my own vanity was Fanny, my half-sister. When my father had married my mother, he had taken in her little daughter Fanny and

treated the child as his own. But after our mother had died giving birth to me, and Papa had married the mother of Jane and Charles, Fanny began to seem like an outsider, with little connection to anyone else in the house. Quieter than Jane and me, with a melancholy disposition, her inelegantly arranged features provided me with a daily reminder of my own good fortune. My loyalty to my half-sister was secure, but a shared mother could not make me admire Fanny's looks the way I admired Jane's.

"Jane, you really should try to find some affection in your heart for Fanny," I told her. "Now fetch my gown. Without getting blood on it, if you please."

Jane and I had been stepsisters so long that neither of us could remember a time without the other. But the bond between us was based more on familiarity than on spontaneous feeling. Indeed, I sometimes wondered if I was capable of true love for either of my sisters. Perhaps it is not possible for sisters who are competitors for the attention of a beloved father to find any attention left over for each other. And however close Jane and I were, I could never forgive her mother for her invasion of the place in Papa's heart which my own clever, sad mama had occupied.

The gown Jane held out was made of white muslin. It had an underskirt, also of muslin, decorated at the bottom, where it showed under the gown, with a simple scrolling of looped ribbon hastily sewn on by Fanny, the only needlewoman among us, the previous afternoon. Its sleeves were short, barely covering my shoulders. My bosom nestled in the deeply cut, high-waisted bodice as if it had been fashioned by a master sculptor.

I looked at my reflection. Charming. Desirable. Even

with my hair, bright as silk, still in papers.

"And now, Jane – the bucket."

"Oh..." she began uncertainly.

"Now, or the water will be cold!"

She lifted the bucket of water which stood in the corner. It was heavy. "My fingers hurt," she complained, hauling the bucket across the room to where I stood barefoot in the largest basin we had been able to smuggle out of the kitchen.

"I don't care a straw about your fingers or any other part of your ignorant carcass," I told her. "Go on, do it. I am ready."

I put my hands over my hair and closed my eyes tightly, bracing myself. Huffing and puffing, Jane stood on a chair. As she tipped the bucket, the water ran over my shoulders and down my back and chest and legs, splashing into the basin. Gasping, stifling screams behind my clenched teeth, I bore the soaking. I did not want my stepmother, who had not yet discovered that we had sent the maid away and locked the door, bustling towards the source of the noise.

The looking-glass reflected exactly what I wanted to see. The soaked gown clung to my body like skin. Better still, it had made both the dress and the chemise I wore under the corset almost transparent. Grinning with satisfaction, I picked up my fan and spread it. "Quick, my hair. I must get downstairs before the gown dries. Quick, quick!"

Her fingers trembling, Jane began to take the papers out of my hair. "Lord, how you shiver! And the drawing-room is so draughty. What can you be thinking of?"

"I am thinking of my father's favour," I told her truthfully. "Making him attend to *me*, not to ... anyone else." I could not admit that I meant her unlovable mother. "And

if a wet dress is good enough for the ladies of the French court, it is good enough for me."

"There!" Jane let the last curl spring back from her finger. She looked at me over her fan. She was at her most appealing, in her evening dress with the light falling on her jewellery and her jewel-like dark eyes. "Oh, Mary, have you considered that tonight might be ... you know ... the night?" she asked in a rapturous whisper. "The night when we find the love of a true gentleman, who desires us above all others, and is prepared to declare his passion?"

"If so, he had better be of a strong constitution," I declared, picking up my train. "Our passion may well be greater than his!"

"Perhaps he will be a poet," she suggested, taking my arm. "And you know how passionate *they* are."

"To be sure," I agreed, "a poet is the only acceptable sort of lover these days."

Jane and I had often discussed the possibility of falling in love with a poet. If poetry was any measure of a man, we had observed, everything we longed for in a lover – romance, desire, spirit, soul – was clearly contained in it.

Excited but wary, we stepped onto the landing. Jane gripped my arm with more force. "Oh, Mary!" she breathed. "If only a poet could fall in love with me, or even *you*!"

Frivolous words, but prophetic ones. And prophetic words revisit us, in and out of our dreams.



Riches and Ruin

*M*y father was not rich or noble, but he was an influential writer, and so had my mother been. Although I was only sixteen, I was determined to follow the ideals of freedom set out in my parents' work. Freedom for women! Freedom for slaves! Freedom from marriage! These things seemed to me right and joyous and true, and from the moment I had been old enough to understand them I had resolved to adopt them as principles for my own life.

It was scarcely credible, then, that my dear father could have taken for his second wife a woman so different in her outlook.

"It's disgusting," said my stepmother peevishly. "Respectable young women do not display themselves in public half naked."

She and Jane and I were in the drawing-room, after the guests had gone. My father, who considered the chastisement of daughters women's work, had retired to bed. I was tired and miserable: tonight had *not* been "the night". My prediction of a roomful of lechers and pontificators had

proved uncomfortably accurate, and the wet dress had proved uncomfortably cold. I was silent.

"A *wet* dress!" she persisted. "Do you think you are the Emperor's mistress? Or an actress? Or — may God forgive me — something lower even than an actress, that you shame your family so? That *corset*, Mary!"

Low though my spirits were, I rushed to defend myself. "Mama, it is precisely *because* I am young, and respectable, that I can wear the height of fashion. I want people to notice me. Are you not forever reminding Jane and me that we must attract rich husbands since Papa can give us no fortune? But I want some gaiety in my life before I am married."

"Gaiety! Then it was merely to amuse yourself that you embarrassed your father, shamed me, set the servants tittle-tattling and——"

"Enchanted the entire room?"

She was silenced. The three of us sat there, not quite glaring at each other, while she collected herself. It did not take long.

"It is true that you must marry men with money," she said. The flesh on her neck quivered as she spoke. She had been as attractive as Jane when she was young, but had turned into a too-ample middle-aged woman, with rouged cheeks and girlish clothes. "But you will not attract wealth if you behave like a harlot. Respectable men want respectable wives!"

Jane could no longer contain herself. Secure of her position as the indulged daughter of a vain woman, she was even more careless of her mother's authority than I.

"Why should we care about wealth?" she asked. "Is not a gentleman a gentleman because of his qualities, even if he

has no fortune? Might we not earn our own living, as men do?"

Her mother shook her head in vexation. "Jane, I will not have you repeating these dangerous ideas. Earn your own living? Piffle!"

Under the table, Jane pressed my foot with hers. The message meant, "Go on, Mary, deliver the final blow".

"But, Mama," I said sweetly, "surely these are principles which Papa himself believes in?"

Mama was annoyed, but powerless. She opened the fan she had been twisting in her hands and shut it again with a whipcrack. "You do not understand what you are saying, child," she said to Jane. Then she turned her small eyes, as dark as Jane's but devoid of innocence, on me. "And as for you, my pretty miss, you had better remember that no good ever came of impertinence."

I did not reply. Neither did I lower my eyes. I looked at her fearlessly, my heart gripped by dislike so profound it gave me courage.

"I expect more ladylike conduct in future," she continued. "I do not expect to be embarrassed by a young person in whose upbringing I have invested such unstinting effort. If you end in ruin, you silly girl, it will be by your own hand. And you will *not* take my daughter down with you."

I awoke in darkness. I was screaming. Unaware of the darkness, unaware of my surroundings, unaware of myself, still in my dream, I sat up, rocking an invisible baby in my arms. "Mama! Mama! Dear God, I have killed her!" Jane was there. She must have left her own bed when she heard my cries. I could feel her beside me, a shawl flung over her nightdress, her hands searching in the dark, her voice whispering.

"It's only a dream, Mary dear. Let me stay with you until you go back to sleep."

Taking me by the shoulders, she lowered me to the pillow and climbed into the bed beside me. I swallowed the next scream, shivering in the warm bed, my body tense, my brain active with silent words I had not the breath to utter. Mama, Mama ... forgive me. Because I was born you died. But I never meant to be born, or for you to die. What manner of ungodly baby kills its own creator? A vile, pitiless creature, with no regard for life's beauty or meaning.

A monster-baby. A freak.

I listened to the rhythm of Jane's breathing. My nightmares had become routine to her. Now that she had silenced me, and the rest of the household could resume their slumbers, she would soon be asleep. I found her hand and tightened my fingers around hers.

"Mama, forgive me," I said silently. "Your earthly nightmares were real enough, but now you are free of them. Will I ever be set free, and allowed to sleep in peace?"



Second-best Blue Silk

Our family business was a bookshop. It stood in a row of other shops, in a part of London which Papa said was good for business because it was always crowded. But it was noisy and dirty too. We lived above the shop, our drawing-room window overlooking the street. Mama's sofa, strewn with cushions which Fanny had embroidered with peacocks, was positioned by the window so she could see who came and went while screened from view by lace curtains.

Neither Jane nor I, nor Fanny, were allowed to sit on Mama's sofa, but we preferred the window-seat anyway. It was just big enough for two children or very young girls. I used to sit there for hours, writing and reading and dreaming, while Mama was about her housekeeping business, or unwell and keeping to her room, or out paying calls and gossiping about her wayward daughters. Her dear Fanny was the only sensible one, she would declare. Jane and I were "miss-ish", she had decided. Our heads were full of "notions", as she called them.

Notions they may have been, but I preferred to think of

whatever was in my own head as dreams. I dreamed of traveling, far beyond the confines of London and England, to the other side of the world. I dreamed about heroes and heroines of stories I had read, and imagined my own hero. Often I wrote stories of my own. My first effort, written to amuse Jane when we were nine years old, was the tale of a maiden whose foolishness led to her being eaten by a bear. Later I began several romantic novels, influenced greatly by those of more experienced authors. But I did not show them to anyone except Papa, who, being a writer himself, understood the desire for self-expression that burned within his daughter.

"Your dear mother would have been happy to see you take up the pen, Mary," he told me. "And, I must confess, so am I."

Aside from my writing about bears or betrayals, Jane and I wrote down our dreams. Do all girls do this when they are growing up? Jane and I turned it into a game. We would each take a piece of paper from Mama's writing desk and write at the top, "The man I marry will..." Then a good many silent minutes would pass while we made our lists, sharing the inkstand like good girls working for their governess. Not that we ever had a governess.

Jane and I knew there was a world beyond marriage. It was the world envisaged by my mother when she had written about women's freedom. But we also knew that marriage was the only means by which we could escape from the narrow house above the bookshop and truly begin to live.

My list always began with "swear utter fidelity". I liked to picture whoever-he-was kneeling before me, his hand on the breast of his fashionable coat, bowing low enough for

me to inspect the elegance of his long, curly hair, telling me in a breaking voice that he had forsaken all others and wanted only me. Me, me, *me*, for ever.

Jane's beginnings varied. She liked "buy me a great house in the country, where I can give parties and eat ice cream" when she was younger, but by the time she was fifteen this had changed to either "adore babies" or "keep a carriage and six".

Further down my own list came "be clever", though I was vague as to how this cleverness would show itself. A banker, or a lawyer? A mine or factory owner? A publisher? Journalist? Or a political philosopher like Papa, thinking, writing, being toasted at dinners and celebrated in society? A musician or a painter, sought by every salon hostess in London? Perhaps even ... no, a romantic poet was merely a joke between Jane and myself.

The shop was dark and low-ceilinged. The day after my wet dress escapade, when I had been instructed by my loving mama not to venture outside as I would catch my death, I sought my father there.

"Papa, I am so bored upstairs," I pleaded. "Mama will not let me go out."

"Quite right."

He emerged from between the bookshelves with a pile of books, smiling his serious smile. The sharp nose I had inherited looked sharper than usual. "But since you are here, you may make yourself useful. If you please, my dear, would you put these back on the top shelf? You are more agile than I."

"Of course, Papa."

He hesitated before he gave me the books. "And about last night's performance..."

"You forgive me, do you not, Papa?"

He nodded, more with relief than condescension. "You are your mother's daughter, Mary, in more than name. A wild spirit. But I know you are a good girl."

I sighed. I *was* a good girl. I spent my entire time trying to please unpleasable people, it seemed. I took the books and, lifting the hem of my skirt, made a shaky ascent of the ladder. When the books were safely on the shelf I gathered the skirt around my knees and prepared to go down.

The bell on the door clanged as a customer came in. I stayed where I was, perched on the top rung of the ladder, obscured by the darkness. I often hid in the shadowy shop like this. I liked to watch my father being a Great Mind, encouraging those with money to part with it and those without to share as much philosophical discussion as time and idleness would allow.

I shifted my position to obtain a better view of the visitor. The light from the front window revealed a tall, slightly-built man, still wearing his hat. He was young, no more than twenty or so, with a blue jacket, tan breeches, a badly tied tie and an armful of books. He put the books down and said cheerfully to Papa, "Good afternoon, sir. What chance a sovereign for these?"

His voice was measured, yet at the same time urgent, as if the simple words had important meaning. Curiosity crept over me. Was this young man a regular customer, known to Papa?

My father began to inspect the books. While he did so, the young man removed his hat, leant on the door frame and gazed around the shop. I saw that his face was well shaped, with a high brow and clean-shaven chin. He had

extraordinary eyes – large, and expressive even at a distance – and light, curly hair.

Curly hair!

I lifted my skirt a little higher. Happily I was wearing my second-best dress, a blue silk. It was fine stuff, trimmed with recently replaced lace. And my hair, washed for the party last night, had been curled again this morning. I looked as well as I ever *could* look.

“Papa!” I called boldly. “Would you hold the ladder? I fear it is a little unsteady.”

The customer looked up when he heard my voice. “Er... Miss? If you please ... may *I* assist you?”

Peering into the recesses of the shop, he located first my boots, then my stockings, then my skirt, then my face at the top of the ladder. He placed his foot sturdily on the bottom rung. His upturned face showed amusement, but no mockery. “My apologies,” he said. “Are you this gentleman’s daughter?”

I began, slowly, to descend. “Yes, sir.”

My father could not allow himself to be excluded. He advanced and made a small bow. “She is my middle daughter, sir. Her name is—”

“Mary,” interrupted the gentleman. “You see, I know it. By repute, all your daughters are charming.”

Papa bowed lower. As I gained the lowest rung, and the young man had to remove his foot to make way for mine, I felt the blood rise to my face.

“I see repute is not mistaken,” he said.

It was gallantry, but I was flattered. Although in my mother’s philosophy women were equal with men, and curtsying was reserved for servants and sycophants, I performed a low curtsy. Very prettily, I thought.

The man bowed. "Shelley," he said.

"Mr Shelley is a poet, my dear," added my father proudly.

I could not prevent myself from blushing. The rules of flirtation I had recited to Jane last night deserted me. This man had been plucked from romantic fantasy and placed here before me. In the blue-coated figure I saw my dreams and excitement beyond any "sport" my sister and I had ever concocted. I managed to say "How do you do?", but so quietly he could not have heard.

"I believe I dined in your company some years ago, when you were a little girl," he said.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, raking my brain for the memory of this occasion. Suddenly it was there: pink ribbons in Jane's hair, flowers on the table, a young man laughing with my father and drinking a lot of wine. "Oh, was that *you*?"

"Mr Shelley will be a great poet one day," observed Papa.

"Sir, you flatter me," said Shelley, bowing.

As I watched him, another memory came to mind. A few weeks ago Papa had shown Mama something in the newspaper, shaking his finger at it excitedly and telling her that this poet, a man of his acquaintance, was on the verge of success. Jane and I had taken no notice. We had assumed that the poet, like the rest of Papa's acquaintance, would be middle-aged, tedious and less talented than he supposed.

Papa recollected that he was in the middle of a business transaction. He went to the desk. "I can offer you fifteen shillings, Mr Shelley."

"You are kind, sir, but eighteen would be the least I could accept."

"Sixteen shillings and sixpence."

Shelley nodded, replaced his hat and touched the brim in

my direction. He pocketed the coins gravely. "My thanks, sir. Good day."

The door clanged. Papa and I exchanged a look. Then the door clanged again.

"Will you allow me to call?" Shelley asked my father.

"Certainly."

He bowed, and was gone.

I no longer had to worry my father for useful employment. Hitching the second-best blue silk dress above my knees I bounded up the stairs two at a time, in a fashion long since banned by my stepmother, laughed at by Papa, imitated by Jane and disapproved of by Fanny. All the way up I called, "Jane! Jane!"

But it was Fanny who came out of the drawing-room, sewing in hand. "What are you doing?" she asked sharply. "Mama and I wondered what the noise could be."

Fanny was barely four years older than Jane and me, but she seemed ancient. Even Papa, with his habits of pursuing famous people and drinking more than was good for him, seemed younger. She was wearing an ill-fitting afternoon dress, and her hair was in its usual severe braids, with no softening curls at the temples such as Jane and I wore.

"Well?" she demanded.

"I am looking for Jane."

"You are always looking for Jane," said Fanny, and went back into the drawing-room. "She is in her room."

Climbing the next flight of stairs no less noisily, I opened Jane's door without knocking. "Guess who has just come into the shop!"

Jane was lying on her bed reading a novel. When I entered she put the book down, puckering her eyebrows.

"The King? The Duke of Wellington? Napoleon himself?"

"I am in earnest." I sat on the bed. "Do you remember when we were about twelve, a man coming to dinner whom Papa said was going to be a poet?"

Her eyes took on a faraway look. "Do you mean Mr Coleridge, who recited that dreadfully long poem about an albatross?"

"No, that was much longer ago. I was only six then, and you were asleep, and you only know the story of *The Ancient Mariner* because I told you afterwards, so do not show off, please. This is a Mr Shelley. Papa says he is an aristocrat – the son of an earl, or something, though he does not use his title. He came into the shop today and sold Papa some books, and spoke to me and said he remembered me."

Jane looked cynical. "And did he *buy* any books?"

"No, but what has that to do with it?"

"Have you never noticed how titled people are always the least ready to part with their money?"

"Jane!" I was exasperated. "Sometimes you sound more like your mama than is good for you!"

She smiled her beautiful smile. "I am teasing you because I am envious that you were there and I was not." She leant towards me. "*And* you were wearing that blue dress which I covet so shamelessly. What was he like?"

I took her by the shoulders. "Like a god. Like an angel. Like every hero in every romance you have ever read." Releasing her, I took up her book and looked at the title. "Like the most perfect example of male beauty represented in this book. Which, by the way, I have never heard of."

"Why, Mary, how old-fashioned you are!" Peevishly she

took it back. "It is newly published. Mama borrowed it from somebody."

"It must be a novel, then, since Mama reads nothing else."

"It *is* a novel." She sighed. "But so far it is rather dull. Three or four families in a country village, that is all."

"Abominable!" I put my hand to my throat, affecting shock. "Do you mean there are no haunted castles? No thunderstorms? No abducting and rescuing? Why, Jane, what possessed you to begin such a serious book?"

She responded to my mockery by kicking me gently. I looked at her foot, elegantly shod in one of the soft kid slippers she always wore indoors, aware how much smaller it was than my own.

"It is supposed to be a comedy," she said. "And I must admit that the story is very true to life. There is a family of daughters whose father can leave them no fortune, so they must find rich husbands."

"In that case," I retorted, "male beauty will certainly appear soon. Perhaps in the very next chapter."

"The most beautiful daughter is called ... now, let me see." She turned the pages, frowning prettily. "Oh! Her name is Jane! How penetrating this author is!"

She said this with the coyness she had learned from her mama, which never failed to drain my reserve of tolerance. But I collected myself. "Shall we speak of Mr Shelley, or do you not want to hear?"

"I can scarcely contain my impatience!" she said, putting *Pride and Prejudice* aside. "Describe his looks immediately. In every detail, please."

"He has curly hair, quite long, over his collar. And beautiful eyes."

"And are his clothes new, and well kept?"

"Jane! I thought you were a romantic!"

"I assure you I am," she said gently. "But if you are going to fall in love with an earl's son, or whatever he is, do you not think you might make sure he has money, as well as a title?"

I paused before I spoke. "His clothes are shabby, actually. His boots are quite worn out."

"Ah."

"Papa knows he has money, though. I could hear it in his voice when he spoke to him. You know, that way Papa has of speaking to people who admire his work, and whom he considers might be induced to give him financial support."

Jane looked thoughtful. "Mama told Fanny that Papa is in debt for the rent. He has not paid for the shop or the house for six months. Do you suppose he is hoping this Shelley will help him?"

I said nothing. I was surprised enough by this news, without having to consider Shelley's potential involvement.

"But of course ..." said Jane with a sly look, "if he were to become Papa's *son-in-law*..."

"Jane, do not torment me!" I stood up and walked about her room. "I must not invite ridicule by throwing myself at him." I was glad Jane had not witnessed the performance with the ladder. "All he did was remember my name. If you had been there, do you not think he would have done the same for you?"

"No, I do not," she said decisively. "And if we do not receive a call from Lord or Viscount or Whatever-he-is Shelley in the very near future, I will eat this novel, pride

and prejudice and all, with potatoes and gravy." She took up the book again. "Now, go away and let me read about the lover of the beautiful Jane. He must surely enter soon!"