The Counterfeit Guest

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Extract

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On the Suffolk coast some eight miles east of Woodbridge stood what had once been a priory for women adhering to the Cistercian order. Its appearance had changed over the centuries, and the nuns had long since departed. Yet it was called White Ladies in their memory and, in the spring of 1796, it was to be restored to female rule. A young woman named Mary Finch had inherited both the estate and a considerable fortune, and she had resolved to make her home there.

This resolution could not be enforced immediately. Miss Finch had come to Suffolk under somewhat unusual circumstances, and the lawyers had only recently determined that she was indeed the rightful owner of White Ladies. Various practical matters would also have to be settled before she could take up residence. So, for the time being, she remained at nearby Lindham Hall, as the guest and protégée of its owner, Mrs Tipton.

Lindham Hall was another sphere of feminine influence, a fact to which Cuff, the only masculine member of the household, could testify. Cuff held the offices of coachman and porter, and between Mrs Tipton, Peggy the maid, and Pollock the cook ('them old cats', as he was wont to call them, when he thought no one was listening), he rarely had a moment's peace. Mary Finch also made occasional demands of him, but he did not mind these, somehow. Indeed, sometimes he went so far as volunteering his services, and he joined her in the flower

garden on a sunny May afternoon without the least prompting. Observing the slim, straight figure poised on the edge of the lawn, a figure that managed to exude energy even when motionless, he reflected that Miss Mary surely had a way about her.

Mary was deeply engaged in horticultural matters and did not hear him approach. Fashionable ladies, she was convinced, spent a great deal of their time arranging flowers, and she knew little of the art. As a first step in her education she must learn the names of all the likely blooms, and now she repeated, 'Wallflower, wind-flower, cowslip, narcissus, rockfoil,' in the direction of the items in her basket.

'Just so,' agreed Cuff, nodding and touching his hat. 'And that one there?' He pointed at the colourful bed with the toe of his boot.

'Lungwort – what an unpleasant name! Like something witches might use for their spells.' A breeze lifted the curls that had escaped confinement while Mary's attention had been elsewhere, and her smile was similarly mischievous.

Cuff bent and plucked a pale blue flower to add to her collection, and Mary said, 'Forget-me-not. I did not pick any, as they are so small.'

'No, best left where they are, perhaps.' After a moment Cuff added, 'Nothing for him, then, miss?' removing his pipe from between his teeth and frowning, as if its failure to draw had something to do with his question.

Mary shook her head, and her voice lost a little of its enthusiasm. 'Not yet.'

The rather complicated logic of Cuff's remark had not confused her. 'Him' referred to a Royal Artillery officer of their acquaintance named Robert Holland. He was part of the unusual circumstances that had first brought Mary to Suffolk and had set in motion what she still privately called her 'Adventure'. Few people were privy to everything that had happened during those strange weeks in October when she had helped to defeat a French spy, and those few had been sworn to secrecy. For his part Cuff knew only that there was a sort of understanding between miss and the captain, and that he, old Cuff, meant to help it along.

The help he provided was of a particular nature. The two young people wished to maintain a correspondence, but they could not do so openly. Holland's letters to Mary, therefore, arrived under cover to Mr Josiah Cuff, and Mary's to Holland were posted by the same J.C. (Mary had also coached him in a likely story should a letter be queried, for she had no confidence in his innate powers of deception.)

'It has been less than a fortnight,' she explained, fretting with her scissors. 'I mean . . . not quite yet.'

'You know best, miss.'

Mary nodded, but she was far from certain that she *did* know best. It was all very difficult. She had not actually seen Holland for more than six months, and their communications in the meantime had been very sparse. In part this was because words did not flow easily from the captain's pen. Indeed, he seemed to hesitate over every line. His efforts had also been restricted, however, by circumstances beyond his control. He held a staff appointment at the regimental headquarters at Woolwich – a place known as the Warren – but in November he had been sent to Gibraltar, ostensibly to oversee an extension to the great siege tunnels. This had not been the only, or even the primary, reason for his employment there, but the epistolary effect had been the same – the mail did not travel very quickly between Gibraltar and Suffolk, and there was always the chance that shipwreck or enemy action might disrupt it altogether.

The character and frequency of Holland's correspondence had naturally affected Mary's. She could hardly answer his cautious reports, in which details of fortress routine featured prominently, with wild displays of emotion. Her letters must mirror his, with accounts of her days at Lindham Hall, or the progress of her legal affairs, or references to the weather. Nor could she reply too promptly. If *he* waited a month between letters then so must she. None of this was the result of indifference or coquetry on her part, but rather a half-understood notion that she must not commit herself any further than she had done. What did she really know of Captain Holland, after all? A correspondence like theirs was not strictly proper – not

proper at all, in fact – and people who did improper things often suffered for them, or at least were found out. And being found out, especially whilst she was under Mrs Tipton's authority, was not a pleasant prospect.

Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, the latter a particular gesture of decision, Mary told herself not to think about Captain Holland and informed Cuff that she must go inside. He agreed, saying it was just like Peggy to come out for a squint, and then they'd catch it. They parted on those wise words, Mary to the Hall, where she intended to arrange her flowers, and Cuff to the stables to give the harnesses a thorough clean, by which he meant that he was going to have a nap.

Mary pushed the heavy front door closed behind her, kicked off her old boots, and retrieved the neat leather slippers she had left in the passage. She had promised Mrs Tipton to give up ineligible footwear, but with a private exception for gardening, long walks, and any activity that might prove particularly wet or muddy. Others of Mary's station might not have taken such a frugal view, but she could not easily forget a girlhood of genteel poverty and, until very recently, the prospect of a straitened adulthood. Perfectly good shoe leather – or boot leather – oughtn't to be wasted.

Having made the necessary change, she dropped her boots into the large urn that held a collection of walking-sticks, a sword that had allegedly seen action at the Battle of Sedgemoor, and Mrs Tipton's umbrella, and proceeded with her flowers to the kitchen. From there she was ordered to the pantry by Pollock, who suspected that worms and other undesirables were concealed among the blooms, and she wouldn't tolerate none of them crawlies in *her* kitchen. It was from the pantry, therefore, that Mary emerged some time later, clutching two jugs of tastefully arranged spring flowers. One she placed on the sideboard in the entrance hall, and the other she carried into the parlour. This was strictly the second parlour, for the first parlour was grim and uncomfortable, as befits a room preserved for 'best' and, consequently, almost never used.

As Mary crossed the room Mrs Tipton awakened. She had

been 'resting her eyes', but now she sought to ward off any suggestion that she had been asleep and might have missed something. She was a small, sharp, imperious old lady, and she blinked at Mary from behind steel-rimmed spectacles. 'Ah, there you are at last,' she cried. 'What have you been doing?'

'Gathering these flowers, ma'am, as you asked. I hope you are pleased with them? The garden is looking lovely in the sunshine.'

'Yes, yes – very pretty. And where is Mr Cuff? He ought to have been helping Peggy to lift the stair carpet, but I expect he has made himself scarce, as he generally does on such occasions.'

'No, ma'am, indeed, he was helping me,' said Mary, loyally, although she had heard something about the carpet project and suspected that it had stimulated his interest in the garden.

Mrs Tipton made a scoffing sound and then declaimed pointedly on Cuff's several shortcomings, all of which threatened to undermine the smooth operation of the household. 'Something will have to be done about it,' she decreed. 'That is how all the trouble started in France, you know.'

'In France, ma'am?' asked Mary, trying not to smile.

'Certainly. Servants getting above themselves, and people unwilling to take a firm hand. And what has been the result? Revolutions, and guillotines, and now this fellow Bonaparte. Well, I shall soon put an end to it. We shall have no *Rights of Man* at Lindham Hall, nor any other nonsense.'

Mary had to bite her lip to maintain her countenance. 'Oh dear.'

'It is a serious matter, and one must regard it as such. Heaven help us if we go the way of the French – the whole country in an uproar and men taking off their breeches.'

Mary knew rather more about the political situation in France, and she attempted to explain. 'I think, ma'am, that you mean—'

'I *mean* men with no breeches,' Mrs Tipton repeated, her eyes flashing. She disliked being interrupted. '*Sans culottes*, they call themselves.'

'Yes, but they—'

'A perfectly ridiculous practice when it comes to governing

a country, but history provides us with many instances of men behaving foolishly, and this is but the latest. In fact . . .' She hesitated as it suddenly occurred to her that this was not the best topic of conversation to pursue. Young persons were impressionable, after all. '. . . your letters have arrived,' she finished.

'My letters?'

'Yes, certainly – on the table.' Mrs Tipton gestured irritably. She also disliked being misheard or misunderstood.

Mary likewise decided to abandon the *sansculottes*, albeit for different reasons. Instead, she gathered the small pile of neatly folded and sealed papers and sat down on the sofa. She was used to her friend's crochets, and she quite enjoyed receiving letters, particularly those that did not engender anxiety. Before she had come to Suffolk a letter had been a rare event. Her circle had consisted of other penurious females, and no one else had had occasion to write to her. Her circle was still small but lately she had begun receiving invitations to dinner parties, and dances, and musical evenings, often from people whom she did not know, but always expressing an earnest desire for her presence. This was what came of being well off, and it was really very charming.

Mary smiled as she glanced at the first message, and Mrs Tipton's own gaze softened into complacency. Almost since Mary's arrival at Lindham Hall Mrs Tipton had entertained an ambition for her – that she should succeed in County society. This ambition might have had something to do with Mrs Tipton's lack of a daughter to mould and influence. On the other hand, she liked to mould and influence most of the people with whom she came into contact. However it had come about, Mary Finch was her particular project, and Mrs Tipton was not displeased with the changes she had wrought during the past seven months. Mary had always been a pretty girl, but pretty in spite of her dowdy, unadorned gowns and ingenuous manner. No one could have mistaken her for anything but a schoolmistress or governess. Yet now her celery-coloured muslin might have been described in the pages of the *Lady's Magazine*, and the colour set off her auburn curls admirably.

That is what a pretty girl needs, mused Mrs Tipton, *a proper setting. And now that those rascally lawyers have consented to turn over her inheritance, who can say what might happen?* It was fortunate that Mary had neither the freckles nor the pale complexion that often accompanied red hair – *no, auburn*, she corrected. And as for the sharp temper . . . 'Well?' she demanded, nodding at the letters in Mary's lap. 'What is the tally?'

'Dinner at Woolthorpe Manor in a fortnight.'

'Yes, very well.'

'A card party at Miss Carmichael's.'

'Negligible, and she will undoubtedly attempt to throw that nephew of hers in your path, which is tiresome. When is it to take place?'

'Saturday.'

Mrs Tipton pursed her lips. 'Do not reply straightaway. Something better may arise.'

'And there is to be a concert at Ickworth Lodge. The countess of Bristol begs we will attend.'

'Hmm. The Herveys are curiosities and not in the best of taste, but a plain refusal might do you harm in other quarters. We must consider how best to respond. What sort of concert?'

Even when she remembered to control her smiles or frowns, Mary's eyes often testified to her state of mind, and now a sense of fun shone through the green depths. '"In the Italian style".'

'Good Lord,' complained Mrs Tipton with a shudder. 'A decent collection of letters, however. What is that thick one?'

'It looks,' said Mary, turning over the wrapper, 'to be from Storey's Court, but I do not think it is Sir William Armitage's hand.'

Mrs Tipton urged her to open it. 'If they are planning a ball you must certainly attend. With Susannah Armitage as good as married there may be some excellent opportunities. There is the carriage to consider, for I do not know that Mr Cuff can drive such a distance . . . his rheumatism, you know, but I daresay something can be contrived.'

'I beg your pardon? Oh, yes,' agreed Mary, absently, as she continued to examine the packet. Was it really a ball? She had

received a letter from Sir William quite recently, and he had said nothing about any sort of entertainment. Of course, he might have forgotten. She could almost hear him gaping at Lady Armitage and murmuring, 'A ball, my dear? Here? Ah, certainly, but remind me when it is to occur?'

She smiled. Sir William had proven himself an exceedingly good friend. He had been ever so helpful about her Adventure; it was because of him that Mrs Tipton had never been alarmed or distressed by it. He had managed to charm her, which was no mean feat, and he had not minded her outrageous hints about helping Mary to find her place in society. On the contrary, he had immediately invited Mary to spend Christmas at Storey's Court! Were it not for Sir William she would never have met Susannah and Charlotte, and of course he was Captain Holland's cousin—

Captain Holland.

All at once Mary experienced that prickly, shuddery feeling that Peggy said was caused by someone walking across your grave. That was nonsense, but might something have happened to Captain Holland . . . and Sir William had learned of it? Gibraltar was probably a very dangerous place – there were tunnels, after all – and if he *had* received bad news, dear Sir William would certainly write to her straightaway . . .

Her fingers were shaking. Something *had* happened, and she had been bothering about card parties and Italian singers!

'They might send a carriage and servant for you,' mused Mrs Tipton. 'It would be a thoughtful gesture on Sir William's part, and I am sure that if he were reminded . . .'

Mary tore open the seal; the paper inside had a black border. 'He is dead!'

'. . . of our situation. *What* did you say?'

Mary was reading quickly, and now she frowned in confusion. The colour had drained from her face, and she felt stricken and relieved at the same time. 'It is . . . dreadful news . . . Lady Armitage writes, and there is a message from Susannah as well. It was an apoplexy, they believe, and . . . the doctor says he did not suffer.'

'But what *is* it?' demanded Mrs Tipton.

'It is poor Sir William . . . He is dead.'

2

The death of Sir William Armitage dealt a stunning blow to Storey's Court, his Norfolk estate. The house itself, an eminently comfortable, if somewhat eccentric mansion, went into deep mourning, with black baize hangings at the windows and wreaths of willow and rosemary at the doors. The servants were also transformed into silent, ghostly figures, who performed their duties without a smile. The butler, Jeffries, tearfully obscured his master's portrait with a black veil and adorned those of other deceased Armitages with black bands, as if thereby they might meet their kinsman in properly sober attire. Few lights were lit in the public rooms other than the twelve, large, silver candlesticks that burned each evening in the drawing-room. This was where the body had been laid out, and where tenants came to pay their respects in a solemn procession. The death of a landlord inevitably provoked uncertainty among those who lived under his regime, but Sir William had been both respected and liked, and the men and women who sought admittance at the kitchen door in their Sunday clothes expressed genuine sadness at the loss of the 'good gentleman'.

Many who knew the Armitages in happier times would have said that Sir William was ruled by the female members of his family, and therefore his passing would but dimly affect the actual conduct of his affairs. To a certain extent this was true. He had retired from public life, and in his retirement he had

liked to avoid 'unpleasantness' whenever possible. His wife, by contrast, was a woman of definite opinions and not easily swayed from her purpose, while the liveliness of one daughter and the beauty of the other also made them remarkable. However, the three ladies felt their loss most keenly, although they behaved differently in consequence. Charlotte, the younger daughter, was inconsolable and initially refused even to acknowledge what had happened, while her mother and elder sister masked their grief with action. Lady Armitage grappled with her late husband's legal and business affairs, and issued detailed instructions to the funeral-arranger she had summoned from Norwich, while Miss Susannah Armitage eased the distress of the servants and tenants, and tried to make comfortable the family members and friends who were descending upon Storey's Court.

Mary was immediately immersed in an atmosphere of gloom and anxious activity when she and Mrs Tipton arrived. Indeed, their arrival contributed to the latter. Mary's presence had been particularly requested by Susannah, but Mrs Tipton had, unfortunately, not been included in anyone's calculations. As it was quite impossible that a girl of twenty-one – an *heiress* of twenty-one – should make the journey alone, however, Mrs Tipton, a fragile septuagenarian, had necessarily accompanied her. (Mary had not been convinced that a solitary journey was impossible, but she had been overruled.) The appearance of an unexpected guest momentarily disturbed Lady Armitage's arrangements but, like Marlborough before Blenheim, she speedily rearranged her forces. The result saw Mrs Tipton settled in the Jasmine Room, a school friend of Sir William whom Lady Armitage had never liked removed to a large closet renamed the Blue Room for the occasion, and an unusual, octagonal-shaped apartment at the top of the house given to Mary.

'Of all the rooms in Storey's Court I like this one the best,' Susannah affirmed when she appeared with a cup of tea and an offer to help Mary unpack. 'I do hope that you will be comfortable.'

'I think I should be very hard to please if I were not,' said Mary. The room was certainly charming, with its vaulted ceiling

and lime-washed walls of stone. The furnishings were all in blue and green. 'It is like being in a tower,' she murmured, opening one of the windows and gazing out.

Susannah stood against the adjacent wall and kept her gaze directed into the room. 'It used to be the nursery, you know, and we had the most marvellous games . . . sometimes we pretended that I was a captive princess, and our cousin Bobs would rescue me.' She smiled gently. Grief had, if anything, rendered Susannah more beautiful than ever. Her hair fell in a golden shower about her shoulders, and her long-sleeved mourning gown was of a severe, almost medieval style. It was not difficult to imagine her a princess in fact, as well as imagination. 'Charlotte ought to have taken a turn, but as the princess generally stood at the window and waved her handkerchief, or listened for the rescuers at the keyhole, Charlotte always insisted on being the wicked gaoler or one of Bobs' loyal henchmen.'

'Y-es, I expect she would,' said Mary, flinching at the mention of Captain Holland and then telling herself that she had done no such thing. 'How did they manage to rescue you?'

'Sometimes the wicked gaoler was slain on the stairs,' Susannah admitted, 'but sometimes, well . . . we oughtn't to have done it, but if you are careful you may get right out onto the roof from here, and sometimes the rescuers came that way.' She joined Mary at the window and explained the process. 'You hold onto the sill and let yourself down until you reach that ledge, and then you walk along it – it is wider than it looks – to that lumpy bit, which you climb.'

Mary leaned out to measure the distance to the ground, and Susannah added, hurriedly, 'I oughtn't to have let Charlotte do such a thing, but I thought that if I could do it—'

'*You* climbed onto the roof?' demanded Mary. It was the last sort of admission she would have expected from the demure Susannah.

'Only once, and it was dreadful, but I knew that, once she had seen Bobs do it, there would be no stopping Charlotte. She might even have tried it on her own, which would have been very dangerous.'

Mary nodded. She did not mention that such a hazardous and potentially fatal activity could have been avoided by the simple expedient of informing a responsible adult, being well aware that this would have been impermissible under the laws of childhood.

'We oughtn't to have done it,' Susannah repeated, 'but . . . I do not suppose that we shall ever have such fun again.'

Susannah's hand was beside hers on the sill, and Mary squeezed it companionably. 'I am so sorry for you. It has been a terrible blow.'

'We never knew that Papa was ill, beforehand, so we did not have the chance to accustom ourselves to it . . . or even think that it might happen. Really think about it, I mean, for of course people die . . . all of the time.'

Susannah's sentence ended in a quavering swallow, and Mary drew her away from the window. They sat, arm in arm, on the low bench at the foot of the bed. 'It is very hard when someone dies unexpectedly,' she agreed, 'but it must have been worse if he had endured a long illness.'

'Yes, of course you are right, and I must not . . . but poor Lottie. These last few days have been worse for her. She has been dreadfully upset . . . and I fear that Mama is beginning to lose patience with her. Mama has had so much to do, you know.'

'I am certain that you both have,' said Mary. 'Would it help at all if I were to have a talk with Charlotte? Do you think she would like it? It is a family matter, I know, but—'

'Oh, *would* you?' cried Susannah. She had been wiping her eyes with a handkerchief, and now she clutched it to her breast. 'I did not like to bother you. If our cousin were here he would do it, but— And she admires you so much.'

Mary completed a discreet search of Charlotte's bedchamber, her maid Elsie's room, and the kitchens before she sought expert assistance in locating her quarry. Jeffries, conducting a lonely vigil in the drawing-room, suggested that she try the stables. Apparently he had been arranging for food to be sent there,

secretly. 'I'm grateful the nights have been so mild,' he sighed. 'You won't give her away, I'm sure, miss?'

'No, indeed,' said Mary. They were standing beside the coffin, now enclosed in lead and a wooden casket, richly upholstered in black velvet with gilt and brass fittings. She had never seen death so magnificently arranged. Despite the engraved inscription plate and the heraldic figures, it was difficult to associate the massive box with Sir William, and yet, somehow, she felt that she was speaking as much to him as to the butler when she explained that she would not reveal Charlotte's hiding place if she did not wish to be found. 'I hope that she will agree to come into the house, however.'

'That's right, miss,' replied Jeffries. 'I daresay you'll know how to put it to her.'

On venturing into the stables Mary wondered whether Jeffries had been mistaken or Charlotte had moved to another location. The stalls were either empty or had four-footed occupants, and none looked to have been recently vacated. In the end it was Clemmie, Charlotte's chestnut gelding, who gave the game away. There was an open loft above the stalls on one side of the building and, after Mary had stroked him and given him a piece of sugar, he stood staring upward in a marked manner.

'Good afternoon, Charlotte.'

Silence.

Mary raised her voice. 'I know that you are up there in the loft – Clemmie has pointed you out.'

There was a rustling from somewhere above, and then a girlish voice complained, 'You tricked him into giving me away.'

'No, he simply appreciated that stables are for horses and houses are for people.'

A tousled, fair head appeared at the edge of the loft, and several wisps of straw floated down to the ground. Clemmie nodded and made a sound between a huff and a snort. 'I suppose I ought to come down, now that I have been discovered,' said Charlotte, grudgingly.

'Unless you are the princess held captive by the wicked gaoler,' Mary agreed. 'I expect that she generally combed her

hair, however, or her rescuers might not have been so keen to free her.'

'*I* was *never* the princess.'

Presently Charlotte descended from the loft and joined Mary in front of Clemmie's stall; a slight, rather dishevelled figure. Her costume of unrelieved black made her look younger than her fifteen years, and her usual rosy, cheerful countenance was sallow and wan. She presented a truculent front, hunching her shoulders and scuffing her shoe against a wooden post, but this crumbled when Mary turned to her with a sympathetic smile. All at once she was in her friend's arms, clutching fiercely and whispering, 'I did not mean to stay away so long, only it was so terrible, you know, and when they brought the . . . coffin downstairs, and we were obliged to look at poor, dear Papa in his nightcap— Mama said that I ought to kiss him, but I simply couldn't.'

Mary agreed that she would have found it difficult, had it been her father, but after the tears subsided she suggested that Charlotte might not find the current arrangements quite so off-putting. 'The . . . structure is much less *coffinish*, now – more like a large treasure chest, and very magnificent.'

'Oh. That is not so bad.' Charlotte drew back but continued to hold Mary's hands. 'Do you think that Papa will forgive me for *not* kissing him?'

'Of course he will,' said Mary. 'And he is in heaven now.'

'Yes, but I suppose I have made everyone else cross as well, and *they* are not in heaven.'

'Well, they have been worried, so you mustn't mind if they are a bit sharp, just at first.'

'Mama, you mean. Susannah is never sharp, however naughty you have been.' A faint smile had crept, reluctantly, to Charlotte's lips with these words, but now it disappeared. 'I suppose a great many queer people have arrived by now . . . our relations.'

Mary acknowledged that she had encountered several persons named Armitage since arriving at Storey's Court, although she could not attest to their characters. 'And I expect that they are not so very odd.'

'Oh yes they are,' Charlotte retorted. 'The Gorgons, for instance – only they are not so much odd as bad. Very likely there are some of them prowling about.'

'*Gorgons?* What on earth do you mean?'

'They are really our cousins – Armitages, although the particularly grand ones have turned themselves into Hyde-Armitages. But we always call them "Gorgons", because they are so awful. I read about them in a book; they turned you to stone if you looked at them, and our Gorgons could certainly do that.' Charlotte paused, conscious of Mary's enquiring look, and acknowledged, 'It is hard to explain Gorgon-ness unless you have actually seen it; they are terribly proud, and nasty . . . and of course they treated Cousin Sophia *very badly*. My cousin Robert's mother,' she added.

'Captain Holland, do you mean?' Again Mary's heart seemed to skip a beat, but she sternly ignored it.

Charlotte nodded. 'Yes, of course. I had forgotten that you know him. I daresay you will want to hear all about it.'

Mary did want to hear, but she did not feel quite comfortable asking. And yet, not to ask seemed false – very much like the falseness of her unacknowledged correspondence. Even as she debated with herself whether she could justify remaining silent, however, Charlotte began her account, and Mary's conscience was salved. It was impossible *not* to listen, after all, and Charlotte ought to be distracted from her own sorrows.

Thus, through no fault of her own, Mary learned that Sophia Armitage had fallen in love with a handsome but penniless gentleman named Mr Holland. Sophia's father, as might have been expected from his title 'the Old Gorgon', had forbidden the match on pain of disinheritance and other terrible and unfair penalties. The marriage had taken place nevertheless, and the young couple had settled down to what would have been a happy, if impecunious, wedded life. Unfortunately, however, tragedy had struck with the untimely death of Mr Holland – probably while performing a noble act. The grieving Sophia, abandoned by all the family apart from Sir William and Lady Armitage, had been obliged to come and live at Storey's Court.

Even accounting for a certain degree of poetic licence on Charlotte's part, it was a sad story, and Mary knew from her own experience how family members could fall out with the bitterest consequences. A quarrel between her own father and uncle had lasted for more than twenty years, and there too a marriage had been the root of the trouble. 'Poor Sophia,' she agreed. 'What was she like?'

'Oh, I never knew her,' Charlotte confided. 'She died when Bobs was a little boy, and he is miles older than Susannah and me. I know that she was very beautiful because I have seen her picture, and Mama says she was quite shy and delicate. I expect it was because of the tragedies. Then Bobs went away to the military academy, but he always came home to Storey's Court during the holidays – that was before he went to India. But the Gorgons simply ignored him – they still do.'

'How very spiteful of them,' cried Mary, 'for I suppose there is no question of . . . money any longer.'

'Oh, no. Although Bobs is quite poor, really.'

'But he must feel it – their unkindness, I mean. I know *I* should.'

Charlotte considered this. 'Perhaps he does. He never talks about things like that. But we mind for him, Suz and I. I wish he were here now. It is too bad, having to make do with the Gorgons, when we would so much rather have Bobs.'

'Is he coming, do you know?' Mary could feel a blush rising as she asked the question. 'I suppose you have written to him?'

'Yes, of course – Susannah wrote straightaway, and he ought to have arrived by now.' Charlotte brooded. 'How far is it to Woolwich?'

'Oh, a good long way,' said Mary, sounding very much like someone who had not calculated the exact distance. 'And . . . is that where he is?'

'Yes, I think so. Why do you ask?'

Mary started to answer, but had proceeded no further than a flailing, embarrassed gesture when Charlotte continued, 'He *was* at Gibraltar – that is in Spain, you know – but he came back to England in April.'

So casually spoken, those words provoked a wave of confused emotion. Relief that he had returned safely and dismay that he had not written to tell her so. Mary struggled to reply naturally, focusing her gaze on the hay-rack in Clemmie's stall. 'Ah, did he? I mean, how interesting. Yes, very likely he is in Woolwich, then, as you say, and very likely to be here . . . in a day or so.'

Fortunately, Charlotte was too absorbed by her own anxieties to notice those of her friend. 'I hope so. We want him dreadfully, you know. I am afraid that the funeral will be . . . I may not be able to bear it, if Bobs is not here.'

'Well, you needn't attend if you do not wish to,' Mary reminded her. 'Some ladies feel—'

'Oh no, that would be cowardly,' scoffed Charlotte. 'Of course I *must*— And you are coming, aren't you?' Her voice quavered again with the second question.

Mary reassured her, 'Yes, certainly – and I am sure that Captain Holland will be here as well. The funeral is not until Tuesday, so there is still plenty of time.'

'Ye-es.'

'And no doubt *he* will be quite cross if he hears that you have been fretting about him.'

Charlotte's worried frown relaxed. 'Yes, and he will tell me not to be a silly shrimp, and did I expect him to *fly* to Norfolk?'

'Precisely,' Mary agreed. 'And now, shall we . . . return to the house? I daresay we can creep in without anyone seeing – especially the Gorgons.'

'No, we shall keep a particular lookout for them. And Mary, you will be a dear, won't you, and not say a word about this to Mama? About the Gorgons, I mean. She has never quite approved of our calling them that.'

'Oh, no, certainly not.'