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Winning a Wife

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Prologue

There was an officious rap-tap on the door, and no doubt about who it was. The butcher and the butcher's daughter. John opened the door as wide as it would go and stared this bristling, self-important little man full in the eye before transferring his gaze to Elsie. She flushed and looked away. He gave a mock bow and stood aside for them, sweeping his arm in the direction of that holy of holies, the front room. 'Come in.'

Hartley ignored the invitation. 'Where's your brother, and when's he expected home? Only there's a bit of business here he ought to attend to, and before much longer.'

'Why, come in,' John repeated, looking him up and down, for once feeling the advantage of a full three inches extra height.

'I wouldn't set foot in your house, but she'd better come in. He got her in this mess, and he can take her and the consequences.' Hartley attempted to push

Elsie into the house, but she broke from his grasp and walked a few paces down the street. 'All right, stand there and wait for him,' he called after her.

'She cannot stand there,' said John, 'and we've no idea when Arthur'll be back. He might not be back for another year or more.'

'He knew what he was doing, didn't he? Run off and leave her to face the music on her own. He ought to have been jailed, out of the way of hurting anybody. I don't know which is worse, having her not married at all, or having her married to that hooligan. That's if he ever does marry her. You'd better see to it that he does. Make him do right by her.'

'How am I going to do that, even supposing he ever does come back? He's a grown man. And it's got nothing to do with me.'

'It's something to do with your family, and you're at the head of it, so it is something to do with you, whether you like it or not. If you'd been any sort of a man you'd have come to see me yourself. That clever madam you sent round to do your dirty work made it clear enough the bairn's not yours, and if it's not yours it's your brother's. Bloody suffragettes. Bloody meddling destructive interfering bitches of hell, making a bloody nuisance of themselves everywhere they go. I'd give them the vote, I'd vote them all a bloody good horsewhipping.' Hartley stared at John for a moment or two, his expression a mixture

of revulsion and impotent fury. His pale, protruding eyes suddenly moistened, but his voice was full of anger. 'My daughter. She's insane. She must be to have anything to do with you people. I'll have her certified. I'll get her locked up out of the way, where she cannot cause any more trouble. That's what people have to do with cases like her. Moral defectives.'

Shaken by the man's sheer malevolence, John lowered his voice and insisted, 'Shut up. Shut up, man, and come inside, instead of trumpeting your business for the whole bloody street to hear. Come in, and we'll talk about it.'

'There's nothing to talk about. She's pregnant, and your brother's the one that's responsible for it.' His lip quivered, there was a catch in his voice, and for one awful moment John believed he would start weeping. 'She was promised to the parson's son. Did you know that?'

'Why, there's nothing to stop the parson's son having her, if he loves her. She's not married to anybody else.'

Hartley gave a short bark of a laugh. 'Are you mad?'

'No, just trained in Christian principles, like the parson's son ought to be. Love God and love your neighbour? Love your enemy, even? Remember that one? He'll mind what St Paul said, "Love suffereth long and is kind." If he loves her, this shouldn't be an obstacle to him. He'll want to protect her, just like

St Joseph protected Jesus' mother by marrying her. That's his example.'

Hartley drew back, his face a picture of contempt. 'You're making bloody game of me. Want to protect her? Now she's pregnant by a pitman? He might have some doubts about what kind of girl she is, to lower herself so far. Him? Marry her now? You're as mad as she is; you make a pair. This is the Church of England I'm talking about, and it's got principles – not like the bloody Jack's Chapels that spring up everywhere you people go. The Church of England! I don't wonder it will have nothing to do with pitmen. You people. This was a good place to live until you came here with your filth and your rioting, destroying the countryside, using other people's daughters. I wish you'd get back where you came from, the lot of you, and take her with you. She's one of you now. You look after her.'

Eyes tear-filled, and face almost puce, evidently not trusting himself to say any more, the butcher abruptly turned heel and walked away. Elsie moved swiftly towards him, attempting to catch his jacket sleeve as he climbed back into his cart but he jerked it free. He took up the reins and looked down on her. 'You! You're a disgrace, and the people that helped you disgrace yourself can either take you in or leave you in the gutter, where you belong.' He gee'd up the horse and drove away, shouting at her not to follow him home.

So there she stood, some distance away and alone, and John leaned against the door jamb watching her. Her once shapely figure was now beginning to look just a little ungainly, her clothes stretched too tight round her expanding girth. Her face looked thinner and older, her shoulders were bowed. She was looking helplessly round, but avoiding looking at him, making no move towards either her home or his. The perfect little Venus who was so far beyond his reach a few short months ago had been hurled at him, whether he wanted her or not. Now a sullied goddess with feet of clay, she could so easily be taken, that she was no longer wanted. Because he knew that in her lying little heart of hearts she was Arthur's lass, and her belly was the proof of it. Arthur! How does he manage it, John thought. And why did I have to meddle with things?

His mother took hold of his waistcoat, dragged him inside and shut the door. He made no protest, but walked into the front room, snatched up the paper and sat down. It was nothing to do with him. Nothing. It might have been different if she'd ever shown any interest in him, any liking even, but there was none. And he was courting strong now, and Alice was the best lass in the north. He felt his sister Sally's eyes on him.

'Her father'll be back for her.' His words were curt, final, and he knew he lied as he uttered them. He fixed his attention on the paper, determined to

obliterate the thought of the butcher shaking off his daughter's hand, and the words he'd shouted at her as he drove away. But the print might as well have been hieroglyphics for all the capacity he had to take it in. At last, unable to resist, he got up to look through the window and see her sitting at the foot of the market cross, head bowed and hugging her knees, looking like a bundle of unsold rags after market day. All the fire and pride in her, all the promise of sensual delight, everything about her that had attracted him was extinguished; his heat for her was as cold as yesterday's ashes. He refused to care about her pain and her humiliation. Why should he? He was nothing to her. Why should she be anything to him?

Chapter One

'Oh, there's naught like hunting! Nothing like it! To be up and out on a morning like this, moist and still, and perfect for the chase – why, man, it's heaven!'

The pale sun was rising in a grey eastern sky presaging a fine day, its dullness enlivened by the scarlet coats of the riders waiting at the edge of the gorse bushes. The two men in black were sitting on a pair of hunters, smoking cigars and conferring as they waited with the rest of the crowd for the fox to break from the covert. Black-coated herself, and wearing the unmarried woman's veiled bowler, Elsie watched through narrowed eyes, detecting too much condescension in the smile the rector gave her father.

'A pleasure to have your company, Hartley. Any man as enthusiastic about the sport as you are makes a very welcome guest, I assure you.' The booming heartiness of his response set her teeth on edge, and the hunting clergyman's eye fell on her, as if it were

appraising a bitch or a mare. 'And Elsie, damned fine girl she is, what? Not very big, but damned fine all the same. First time you've ridden to hounds, Elsie! I charge Rupert with making sure you enjoy it.'

With all the assurance of seventeen years and a perfect knowledge of her own flawless beauty, Elsie coolly turned her face towards Rupert, who was a few yards distant. A younger version of his father, he sat astride a fine black stallion with the appearance, as he returned her gaze, of being the master of all he surveyed.

My God! The arrogance of him, she thought, not deflecting her eyes for an instant. If he were as rich as Croesus, or as handsome as Arthur Wilde, it might be justified, but he's neither!

'On you go, Elsie, my girl. Go to Rupert, and he'll explain the ins and outs of riding to hounds,' the rector urged her.

Her father nodded her to obey. 'Go on, Elsie. You'll enjoy it all the more with a good teacher, a fine horseman like Rupert.'

His voice was loud enough to carry to Rupert, and ingratiating enough to puff that self-important young man to bursting point. Elsie gave her father a look, and reluctantly urged Love me Long, her young chestnut mare, in Rupert's direction; catching as she went, the words: 'Of course, we're only *tradespeople* . . .' Two bright spots of fury rose to her cheeks, and under her breath she muttered, 'Has he no pride at

all?' If only her father would not abase himself so, especially before that – clergyman. If he thought she was going to demean herself to the son, he was mistaken.

'I've seen you ride.' Rupert's smile contained a strong taint of his father's condescension. 'You ride well. But do you ride well enough to keep up with me?'

'I should ride better than you if I had your advantages.'

Rupert raised his thick, sandy eyebrows, and his eyes widened. 'Oh, and what are those?'

'I should think it's obvious. You ride a massive stallion, and you straddle him.'

His fleshy lips stretched in a grin that revealed large yellow teeth. 'And you perch side-saddle on your little mare, and very prettily too. But you've thrown down the gauntlet, and I shall see that we have matched horses at the next meet, though I doubt you'd manage this one. No woman's son would be his master, if he could help it, far less a daughter. He's not called Tempest for nothing.'

She held his stare, though a shiver ran through her. 'I like my gentle mare. Don't trouble to choose any horses for me.'

He laughed. 'I'd take any amount of trouble to test your brag.' He opened his mouth as if to say something more, but checked himself and smiled.

Another inward shudder, and she was mercifully saved from making any reply. A red fox broke from a clump of gorse, and a cry of 'Lui in, lads, yoi over!' accompanied the wail of the hunting horn, and a shout of 'Forrard, forrard, forrard!' as twenty couple of frantic hounds gave tongue and flew as fast as hawks after it.

'Keep up with me – if you can!' With a feverish glance back at her, Rupert drove his spurs into the stallion's flanks and was gone, tearing after the fox.

The rest went in his wake. 'Come on, Elsie, come on, get after him,' her father shouted as he passed her, picking up speed. He rode well for a man of over forty who, until recently, had spent every waking moment of his adult life tending his business, and had never sat astride a horse until a couple of years ago.

She sat stock-still on Love me Long and watched him go. Hunting had become his passion. He was ambitious to get his scarlet coat, and to be in with these people he would once have called his betters. His butcher's business now had branches in twenty villages, and he supplied the Co-op, giving him an income that surpassed that of many a finer friend, and he was having a large house built, just outside the village. He was proud of his wealth, made lavish contributions towards the expenses of the hunt and imagined that earned him the right to be in among the gentry. They tolerated him, but Elsie saw the looks

on their faces whenever he opened his mouth, and heard the sneering tones in their voices when they spoke to him, and wondered how he could endure it.

'I haven't done much hunting, but I've done plenty of reading about it, and talking about it. You know you've got to give way to the Master, and the Huntsman, and the rest of the hunt servants, and you've got to do what the Field Master tells you, but after that, the first thing you've got to understand is, you're not chasing a fox. You're riding to hounds. The hounds chase the fox, and dogs are like men, Elsie. Some of them are like your dad, as keen as mustard; they never let a chance slip by. Others are only followers.' Her father had told her all this on the way to the meet in Old Annsdale that morning. 'Watch the hounds that are out in front, and mark the one that turns before the others turn. He's the one that's hot on the scent. Ride alongside him, if the Huntsman will let you, and keep just wide enough not to get in his way or the hounds'.'

In the heat of the moment her father seemed to have forgotten his own sage counsel, for she saw him haring after the black coat-tails of his friend the rector, quite oblivious of the hounds. She began to fear his ambition, and to have misgivings about his familiarity with the rector. Did he mean her to pursue the fox, or Rupert, Elsie wondered – or was she herself the

quarry? The rector might tolerate a match between a butcher's daughter and his son, if the butcher were willing to put enough money in his hand. A little snort of derision escaped her. If that was their scheme, they were reckoning without the daughter. She could twist her father round her little finger. He'd never been able to make her do anything she didn't want to do. Never had, and never would; and if he tried, she'd elope with Arthur, to Scotland.

Her keen eyes searched beyond the bobbing scarlet coats towards the maddened, running hounds. 'So, go for the *first* dog in the hunt,' she murmured, 'or at least keep the Huntsman in sight. He'll be onto it.' She marked the likeliest hound now, not running directly away from her, but separating from the pack and making an oblique turn to her left. The rest followed him. She inhaled the wintry air, scented with field and wood, and her spirits lifted. If she were cunning enough, she might get to the fox before Rupert, and prick that bubble of self-satisfied superiority; show him she was not the inferior, submissive female he imagined. And even if she could not, the day was fine, and she would have a glorious ride. Her canter became a gallop as she raced to catch the leader of the pack.

They were hot on the scent and the going was fast, the ground heavy. Elsie began to fear for Love me Long. She had ridden her too hard. The game little

mare had given everything, and was almost spent. Three-quarters of the way across a ploughed field she stumbled and staggered, and Elsie just managed to throw herself out of her side saddle before she fell. Plastered in plough, Elsie was struggling to her feet when the rector's wife brought her horse to a halt beside her.

'Have you fallen orf?' the voice boomed, sounding mightily amused. Elsie raised her eyes to the woman who leaned towards her, taking in the black habit, the enamelled fox head that pinned her silk stock, the ruddy, mannish, mocking face under the top hat. Really, the question was too stupid to merit an answer. Not deigning to reply, Elsie staggered towards Love me Long, her habit and boots heavy with mud, her sole concern to catch her frightened little mare's reins, to soothe and calm her.

With resolute eye, the rector's wife urged her brown steed forward. 'I'll soon have the horse!' she cried.

'No!' Elsie protested, and watched helplessly at the sight of the little mare's alarm as the massive horse and rider bore down on her. With a fresh spurt of energy she made her escape, then galloped away towards a hedge and tried to leap over it at the very moment that Rupert was taking it. She caught Tempest at an angle, bringing horse and rider down with her.

'Oh, no!' Elsie shrieked, moving as fast as she could towards her animal, fearing she may have broken a

leg. But Love me Long was up, and moving towards her mistress, apart from her fear none the worse for the mishap. The rector's wife was watching her son with an expression of some concern as he and his stallion struggled out of the mire.

Elsie caught her little horse's reins, and began to laugh as she approached them. 'Oh, poor Rupert,' she called, her voice full of mock solicitude, 'have you fallen orf?'

With three other deputies, John squared up to a horde of hostile strikers. One of them stood at the back of the crowd, a head taller than the rest and unmistakable with his mop of black curls and his pristine white shirt. Arthur. Deathly silent, strikers and deputies stared at each other for breath-holding seconds, then a voice bellowed and a bolt of pure fear shot through John.

'Bloody blacklegs! Bosses' men! Get the bastards!' A shower of stones, bricks and bottles hurtled towards them, and the rattle of boots on the concrete and shouted insults and obscenities accompanied the advance. Outwardly calm, the deputies stood their ground, until the man next to John was felled with a pickaxe handle and the other two were swept off their feet by the surge of men.

John threw a punch in self-defence, and would have got the best of a fair fight but two men held his arms while a third punched him in the stomach, knocking

the wind out of him. A severe mauling seemed a certainty, and then another shout went up: 'Run for it, lads! They've got the cavalry out!'

The missiles were dropped. The mob turned and ran, with nineteen-year-old Arthur now conspicuously, victoriously at the head of it.

He stood at the kitchen sink, bathing his bruised face, with his mother hovering at his elbow. 'Never bother, Mam. We had to stand a bit of pushing and shoving, but there's no damage done, nothing broken. You might know, our Arthur was with them, playing the bloody Byronic hero. Anywhere there's any trouble, he's got to be at the front of it.' He caught hold of a rough towel, and started dabbing his bruised eye and mouth. 'You'd think he'd know better. He knows we've got to go down, strike or no strike. If we don't keep doing the safety checks they'll not have a pit to go back to.'

There was a knock at the door. 'Is Arthur in, John?' Seventeen-year-old Elsie Hartley stood before him dressed in the latest fashion, and immaculate, her mahogany curls glinting in the low February sun. Eyes the colour of bitter chocolate stared out at him from thick fringes of lashes the same hue as her hair. They, and the dark ivory of her skin with its flush of deep rose across her cheekbones almost stopped the breath in his throat.