

Adult Fiction

A full-page photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair, sitting on a white sheet. She is wearing a black lace corset with thin straps, black stockings, and black high-heeled shoes. She is looking upwards with her mouth slightly open, and her hands are resting on her hips. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

In Service

Rosanna Challis

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by

ROSANNA CHALLIS

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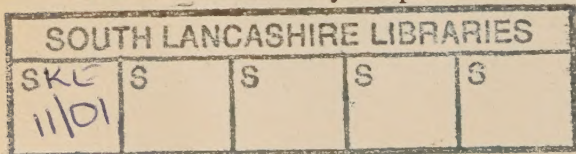
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IN SERVICE

Rosanna Challis

This novel is fiction – in real life practice safe sex

Hetty stared at him, amazed, and muttered, 'Y-yes, sir. I shall do my best, sir.'

'I'm sure you will.' Sir Victor came close, so that her nostrils were filled with the scent of cologne, brandy and cigars, with a twang of the stables, too. It was a rough, masculine scent that did something strange to her insides, and she shrank from the closeness of him.

'You are a very *good* girl, aren't you?' he whispered, placing his hand on her bottom.

She could not speak, and nodded dumbly. He gave her right buttock a slow and deliberate pinch, making her wince. The insinuating voice continued in her ear. 'In my experience, you *good* girls are often very bad underneath. I wonder just how bad you could be, given a little encouragement.'

Hetty wanted to speak, to rebuff him in some way, but she felt as though she had been turned to stone. Her heart was thudding frantically in her chest and she could hardly breathe.

Then, just as suddenly, Sir Victor drew away from her. He began to stride off and, as he went, turned back to say with a smile, 'Remember – more female society for the son and heir! You shall please me, Miss Hetty. You shall please me very well!'

Chapter One

‘So, Miss Addlehead, in view of your unfortunate circumstances, I am prepared to re-employ you in my own household as personal maid to my wife, Lady Alice. I am sure you will consider a wage of twenty-five pounds per annum most generous, in the circumstances.’

Hetty Addleston could scarcely look Sir Victor Carstairs in the eye, and her heart throbbed with a boiling mixture of emotions. She wanted to remind him of the correct form of her surname, but knew he was only making fun of her and would do so all the more if she objected. This was the man who was offering to engage her after her former mistress, Lady Dorothea, had passed on. She knew she could not afford to refuse. Yet something about Sir Victor, with his waxed mustachios and beetling brows, made her blood run cold.

They were in the library of the old house, which was about to be sold and its contents disposed of. Lady Alice Carstairs seemed a quiet, sober person and Hetty thought she would be a fair and kind mistress. She did not expect to have much to do with the man of the house, so she told herself it was foolish to refuse his offer. She was unlikely to receive a better one.

‘I know that you gave good service to poor dear Dorothea, in her declining years,’ Lady Alice remarked, her tone kindly. ‘Your duties for me will be similar, although probably not so arduous since we keep a larger household. Of course, you will be living many miles from your family, but I am sure we can allow an annual visit. If there is any other matter troubling you, Miss Addleston, please mention it now.’

Hetty could not put her vague apprehension into words, so she just shook her head and replied, 'Thank you sir, madam. I am pleased to accept your kind offer of employment.'

'Splendid!' Sir Victor rubbed his hands together enthusiastically, as if anticipating some pleasant diversion. 'Fetch your things then, young woman, and give them to Jack to stow in the carriage. Then you may take your leave of your family. We must begin our journey in an hour, or we shall not reach Longton Hall before nightfall.'

Knowing that she would have to vacate the place that had been her home for the past two years, Hetty had already packed her bag. She handed it to Jack, the coachman, and set out to walk the two miles to the small cottage in the village where she had been raised.

When she arrived, her mother greeted her with a brief peck on the cheek. She had a babe in her arms and a child tugging at her skirt so, as usual, she seemed preoccupied with other matters and scarcely took in her eldest daughter's news.

'Your da has a letter for you,' she announced, casually, putting the baby into its corner crib and taking the black kettle from the hob to make tea. 'He'll be in from the fields soon.'

Hetty's younger brother came in from the garden, where he had been digging up turnips. 'Oh, it's our Het!' he exclaimed, coming to hug her. She was pleased that someone in the family was giving her a warm welcome, as her overwhelming impression was that of having been 'out of sight, and out of mind'.

After a brief exchange of news between Hetty and her mother, Mr Addleston returned in his working clothes. He gave Hetty a curt nod and sat down to his tea and hunk of bread and meat.

'You've got yourself a new job already, then,' he commented, without interest. 'There's a letter from some

London solicitor upstairs. 'T' was marked private, so you'll find it still sealed. Some business to do with the old lady, I dare say. You'd best take it now.'

When Hetty found the letter on the mantelshelf in her parents' bedroom, she could hardly believe what she read. It was written in legal terms, and Hetty had only basic literacy, but she could understand the message clearly: 'A bequest of fifty pounds, granted by Lady Dorothea Marsden upon her death to her personal maidservant, Miss Hetty Addleston, the sum to be retained by Messrs Holden and Willow, Solicitors, until the said Miss Addleston shall reach her majority.'

Fifty pounds! A small fortune! Hetty's heart was bubbling over with joy and gratitude, but soon her happiness was tinged with regret. How sad it was that someone who received such a kind favour was unable to thank the donor in person! She had never imagined that she would inherit any more than the odd trinket from her mistress.

Now an uncharacteristic wariness came over Hetty as she thought about what to tell her parents. The money was intended for herself alone, she was sure of that. Lady Dorothea had often spoken of the need for a woman to remain independent if she possibly could and money was, of course, a means to that end.

If her parents knew she had money set by for her, they might consider she should share it with them. Again, uncertainty about her own future loomed large. Hetty knew that if she failed to please her new mistress she could be dismissed without a favourable reference, and then what would become of her? She doubted whether her family would take her in again, so she would be left to pick up the pieces of her life as best she may.

Hetty had heard terrible stories of young women who sunk to the depths of degradation, ending up on the streets of London dependent on the favour of passing men. She shuddered. With a lump sum behind her she might find

employment in some small, but respectable, trade. She tucked the letter into her bodice and, by the time she went back downstairs, her mind was made up.

‘What was in that letter?’ her father asked, whilst gnawing on a lamb bone.

‘It was about Lady Dorothea’s wish that, after her day, I should take up employment with her distant cousins, Sir Victor and Lady Alice Carstairs,’ she replied, smoothly. ‘As I have already decided to accept their offer, the letter is not needed.’

Her father and mother believed her implicitly, making Hetty feel slightly guilty, but her instinct for self-preservation had prevailed.

Jack, the coachman, had kindly offered to stop at Hetty’s home in the village, since it was on the way to Longton Hall. When the fine carriage drew up in front of her parent’s cottage the family gathered at the door to see her off. Hetty saw her mother gawping at the brief glimpse of Lady Alice, with her wide-brimmed feathered hat nodding at the window and her white kid glove waving to the children. For a moment she felt proud that she was in service, moving in a different world from the rustic squalor of her parents. She climbed up onto the box beside Jack, and waved gaily as the whip cracked and the horses set out at a spirited trot.

The journey was long, cold and arduous. Hetty was soon huddled up against Jack’s rough greatcoat in a fitful slumber, dreaming of her new home. She knew it would be a bigger household than she was used to. Lady Dorothea’s needs had been few, and she’d made do with just three servants, but Sir Victor employed a total of eight servants, four male and four female. It had been explained to her that Lady Alice’s previous waiting maid left ‘under a cloud’, whatever that meant, and it was convenient for them all that Hetty had been left without a post at that particular time.

‘Wake up, young miss, we’re nearly there!’

The deep tones of Jack’s voice woke Hetty. She sat up, rubbing her eyes. It was dusk, but through the gloaming she could glimpse the stone façade of an imposing country house, set in acres of parkland. A herd of deer was grazing nearby and they crossed a narrow bridge over a stream, no doubt teeming with trout. The air of spacious elegance that the architecture of the house suggested was emphasised by the wide approach road, lined with elm trees.

‘That’s it!’ Jack said, giving her a nudge. ‘What d’ye think of Longton Hall, then?’

‘It’s... very big!’ was all Hetty could find to say.

‘Aye – big and handsome, just like me!’ Jack commented, guffawing at his self-flattery.

Lady Alicé took charge as soon as they arrived. After being helped out of the carriage she ushered Hetty into the grand hall, where the other servants were lined up to welcome their master and mistress. Although she tried to concentrate on putting names to faces, Hetty was distracted by the sight of a pair of marble statues at the end of the hall.

They were in classical style, but more boldly delineated than she could ever have imagined. The one on the right was of a naked female, one hand at her bosom and one apparently attempting to conceal her naked sex. Yet the pose was ambiguous, almost as if she were trying to draw attention to her charms rather than conceal them.

On the left was a male satyr, with small horns on its head and its legs carved with whorls, to suggest fur or hair. But what drew Hetty’s gaze inexorably was his state of arousal, and the grotesque dimensions of his phallus. His hands were parting the furry mass at the base of his stomach and he was looking down, as if in admiration, at his own outsize organ.

Hetty, who had always imagined the male member to

be somewhere around the size of her own slender finger, was utterly shocked. She felt suddenly dizzy. Surely the sculptor had employed artistic licence to some dubious end in furnishing that creature, half-man and half-beast, with such prodigious privates.

‘...and this is Rose,’ Lady Alice was saying. ‘The under housemaid.’

Hetty forced herself to pay attention. Rose, a girl a little younger than herself, was smiling in a friendly fashion, unlike the other servants who remained po-faced. Hetty smiled back and the girl gave her a brief, but quite deliberate, wink.

‘Rose, bring us up some tea, shortly,’ Lady Alice continued.

As they ascended the grand staircase it was made clear that, as lady’s maid, Hetty was considered a cut above the other female servants and should not spend too much time with them. While they had their quarters in another wing of the house, Hetty would be required to stay close to her mistress at all times. They were merely responsible for the smooth running of the household, but Hetty would have access to Lady Alice’s person, as well as her wardrobe and toilet, so theirs would be a more intimate relationship.

‘I have furnished my dressing room with a bed and extra furniture,’ Lady Alice explained. ‘I hope you will find it comfortable. It adjoins my own bedroom, which will be convenient if I have need of you during the night.’

Hetty had been used to being up at all hours while the health of her former elderly mistress was declining, so she thought nothing of this. She followed Lady Alice along the upper landing, unable to see into any of the rooms because the doors were firmly closed. At last they reached the grand bedchamber, the private domain of Lady Alice. It was far larger and grander than Lady Dorothea’s modest and homely bedroom had been.

The room contained some dark mahogany furniture and a large four-poster bed with a yellow silk damask counterpane affording a touch of brightness. The two windows were tall and narrow, furnished with shutters on the outside that were half closed, and a fire blazed in the huge ornate grate. Hetty knew it would be her duty to keep the bedroom looking neat and clean, in between its more thorough weekly cleaning by the housemaid. She cast a biased eye over the cornices, the carved mantel, the baroque picture and mirror frames – noting anything difficult to reach or hard to clean.

‘Your room is in here,’ Lady Alice said, opening a door.

The dressing room contained a tallboy and chest of drawers, plus a smaller pine cupboard that Hetty guessed had been provided for her own use because it didn’t match the rest of the furniture. A small, narrow bed had been tightly fitted into an alcove. Hetty noticed that she would have to move it out to make it. A marble washstand and chamber pot had been provided for her use. A door led into another room, so small as to be little more than a cupboard, where there was an ironing table and blanket, with a box-iron, gaufering tongs and all the other implements necessary for keeping cotton flounces and lace collars neat.

‘I need hardly tell you what your duties are,’ Lady Alice said, reading Hetty’s thoughts. ‘Since I am sure you performed them well for poor dear Dorothea. However, I am not an invalid and I will, occasionally, be attending social functions both at home and elsewhere, so I demand that my wardrobe be maintained to a high standard. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, my lady.’ Hetty dropped a small curtsey, but Lady Alice waved her hand impatiently.

‘Oh you need not bow and scrape to me when we are alone. I find such niceties tedious. If you should be with me in company, that is another matter. You will then show

me all due deference, naturally. Now then, you may perform your first duty, which is to help me dress for dinner. Sir Victor is a stickler for punctuality and doesn't like to keep cook waiting.'

There was a knock at the bedroom door; it was Rose, with a tray of tea. She gave Hetty another surreptitious wink before she left, but Hetty ignored her. She didn't want to get into any trouble, least of all on her first day. Carefully she poured a cup of tea for her mistress, then one for herself. It was good to take some refreshment after the long journey.

They sat quite companionably, with Lady Alice going through many small details in connection with Hetty's duties. Most of the work was very familiar to her, but every mistress had her own preferences so she would have to learn quickly what prevailed in this household.

'Now you may perform your first service and help me dress for dinner,' Lady Alice said at last. 'There is not much time. Sir Victor is a stickler for punctuality and doesn't like to keep cook waiting. You will take your meals in the kitchen, but that is the only time you will be in the company of the other servants. Half an hour is permitted for meals, and there is to be absolutely no gossip. Is that understood?'

'Of course, my lady,' Hetty said, slightly shocked that she thought it worthy of mention.

Her new mistress had an imposing, matronly figure whose shape had to be maintained by much lacing of stays. After helping her into a lilac coloured gown, trimmed with *écru* lace, Hetty performed a brief coiffure. She was glad to be arranging that flowing mane of chestnut hair in a comely fashion; her hair was surely Lady Alice's crowning glory. It made a change from trying to make the most of thin wispy grey hair.

Looking in the glass, Lady Alice pronounced herself delighted with her new hairstyle and the meticulous way

her clothing was arranged. She gave Hetty a wide smile that lit up her sober grey eyes to an almost girlish sparkle. 'I can see you and I are going to get along very well, my dear.'

Even so, Hetty felt there was so much to learn about her new mistress's tastes that it had been quite a strain, being careful not to put a foot wrong. It was a relief when the dinner gong sounded and Hetty was allowed to join the other servants in the kitchen for her evening meal. She was feeling apprehensive at meeting so many new people, but as soon as she entered Rose called out, 'Sit here, by me, Miss Hetty.'

The food was good, solid fare and Hetty tucked in heartily but minding her manners, aware that everyone's eyes were upon her although they were trying not to stare. The cook, Mrs Saddler, asked her about her previous employment and when the quizzing was done Rose said, in a low voice, 'You will find things *very* different here, Miss Hetty.'

Hetty looked into the girl's pretty face and thought she saw an element of guile. There was something Rose wanted to tell her, she was sure, but it would not be possible until they were alone. Curiosity got the better of her when, once the meal was finished, Rose asked Mrs Saddler if she could show her the pantry. 'She will need to know where to find the soap and fig-blue, borax and soda, won't she?' Rose said boldly. 'I know where everything is.'

'Thank you, Rose,' the cook said. 'That will save me time, as I have to decorate the jellies and moulds. You will give me a hand there, won't you, Lily?'

The pantry was a large, cool room just off the kitchen. There was a door down to the cellar, with the scullery and washhouse beyond. To Hetty's surprise, once they were both in there Rose closed the door to the kitchen behind them.

'I want to tell you a few things about what goes on

here,' she began eagerly. 'Things you won't hear from no one else.'

Remembering her mistress's admonition that there should be no gossiping, Hetty felt uneasy, but Rose went swiftly on as if fearing they could be interrupted at any minute.

'I saw you staring at those statues in the hall, when you arrived,' she began.

'Oh, I...' Hetty felt a hot flush rise in her cheeks.

'Save your blushes! You won't need no false modesty here. If you ain't acquainted with the facts of life already you soon will be.'

Hetty felt most uncomfortable. 'I'm sure I don't know what you mean.'

'Then I'll speak plain.' She lowered her voice further. 'The master will try to take advantage of you, so be on your guard. Not to put too fine a point on it, he is a lecher and a rake. Our mistress is a dark one too, that's for sure. What she knows, she keeps to herself. What she does, is nobody's business but her own, if you catch my drift.'

Hetty didn't know what to make of Rose's warning. The words 'lecher' and 'rake' were still ringing in her ears, and she felt a cold chill envelop her. She shivered, and Rose touched her cheek. 'Lawks, you're feeling the cold. We can't stay long, but I had to warn you. Sir Victor is the pinching, kissing and stroking kind. Any chance he gets he will try it on, but you must be prepared to fight him from the word go, or he will only go on taking more advantage. The girl before you he got with child.'

'Oh!' Hetty gasped in horror, only now starting to realise what kind of position she was in.

'She left in disgrace, and I wouldn't like to see the same happen to you. I like you.' Rose gave her a direct and simple smile that warmed Hetty's heart.

But then came Mrs Saddler's voice from the other side of the door. 'Rose! I could do with an extra pair of hands

right now!’

As they turned to go back into the kitchen, Rose whispered in Hetty’s ear, ‘If he tries anything on, just stamp on his foot. That’s what I do. He’s got gout, so it hurts him something terrible. Chances are, he’ll leave you alone after that.’

Hetty had no time to thank her new friend for taking her into her confidence. Truth to tell, she was not sure whether thanks were appropriate. Their conversation had the tenure of tittle-tattle, and she was sure that Lady Alice would have been horrified if she’d heard her husband spoken of in those terms. She didn’t know what to think, but there was no time to ponder as her bell soon rang in the kitchen, summoning her upstairs.

‘I am retiring early,’ Lady Alice informed her, coming out of the dining room. ‘I have a headache. Please wring me out a cold flannel for my temples and make some valerian tea.’

A sudden roar of male laughter came from the dining room. Hetty started, and her mistress looked anxious. ‘My husband has a few guests for dinner,’ she said, as if trying to reassure herself as much as Hetty. ‘No doubt they are regaling themselves with some stories unfit for female ears.’

She gave her maid a shrewd look, as if gauging her reaction to that remark. Hetty was determined not to betray her ignorance. There were some strange undercurrents in this household, and she was unsure how to interpret them, but she would remain quiet and modest in her demeanour at all times and that would be her best defence.

The following morning, Hetty was awoken by the ringing of a hand bell. It took her a few seconds to remember where she was but then, realising she was being summoned by her mistress, she scrambled out of bed and drew on her dressing gown.

She found Lady Alice still in bed, with her hair in the long lustrous braids she plaited for her the night before. 'Good morning Hetty. Before my toilet, there is one small service I would like you to perform for me.'

'Yes, my lady?'

'Over in that drawer you will find a carved wooden box, containing everything needed for a manicure and pedicure. I would like you to cut my nails for me.'

Hetty had done this for Lady Dorothea on many occasions and felt confident that she could please her new mistress with her meticulous care. She filled a basin with some of the warm water that had been boiling in a copper kettle in her room, and sprinkled in a few drops of lavender oil. Then, while Lady Alice dangled her feet over the edge of the bed, she knelt to wash them then applied scissors and emery board. She was finishing off with a pleasantly scented cream, when the bedroom door suddenly burst open and Sir Victor appeared.

He was wearing a nightgown and smoking jacket, his hair dishevelled, lacking pomade, and his un-waxed moustache drooping. Hetty was shocked that a husband could enter his wife's bedroom in so summary a manner, without so much as a knock at the door. She looked up startled, but Lady Alice seemed quite unperturbed, merely saying in a calm tone, 'Good morning, Victor.'

'Ah!' He stopped in his tracks, as if he had forgotten something. Then, catching sight of Hetty, his expression changed. The dark eyes gleamed at her in a way that sent darts of fire through her breast, and made her feel slightly queasy. He came slowly round to her side of the bed, his soft tread in the light Moroccan slippers reminiscent of a stalking beast. Awkwardly, she got to her feet and effected a brief curtsy.

'What a charming scene,' he murmured, placing a hand on her shoulder. 'I wish I had a pretty young girl to attend to *my* pedicure!'

'You have your valet, Victor,' Lady Alice reminded him, tartly.

'Of course, my dear, but this is such a very *intimate* service that I would not require it of him.'

As he spoke to his wife, Sir Victor's hand travelled slowly down Hetty's back in a seemingly casual fashion. She froze as she felt his hand on her buttocks. It lingered there while he continued to address his wife.

'I came to tell you that I wish to discuss plans for Leonard's coming of age, but I can return at a more convenient time.'

Hetty felt his warm hand pass over the firm contours of her derrière and her whole body remained in a state of rigid alertness. It was as if he were describing her shape without words, his hand subtly implying far more than his lips could ever utter, but it was not to himself that he was communicating, but to Hetty. He was reading her body more expertly than she could do herself, despite having lived inside it for nineteen years.

The experience was profoundly disturbing, and she was relieved when he finally moved away and headed for the door. He had been in the room scarcely a couple of minutes, but for Hetty time had stood still in purgatory.

'Now for my hands,' Lady Alice said, her level voice breaking the spell. 'Sit on the edge of the bed, my dear. You can reach me better there.'

Still in a state of shock, Hetty did as she was told and the repetitive action of buffing her mistress's nails eventually restored her spirits. Fully awake now, her mistress was in confiding mood. 'My husband was referring to our only son, Leonard,' she explained. 'He is away at present, but we expect to celebrate his coming of age soon. I am in favour of throwing a ball, but Sir Victor has something more... private in mind. I expect he will prevail,' she sighed. 'He always does, in the end.'

Hetty was inclined to say nothing, for fear of offending,

but she was not to be allowed to remain silent. 'Lady Dorothea had strong views on female emancipation, did she not?'

'I... I believe so, my lady.'

'Hm. I believe in wives getting their own way by using their womanly wiles. When it comes to power, the law is all on the side of men. There is no use fighting against it. But women have a secret power of their own. Do you know to what I allude, Hetty?'

'I'm not sure, my lady.'

'I refer to the control we can exert over the opposite sex by means of our physical allure. My husband considers me to be a fine figure of a woman, and with your help I can constantly remind him of that fact. Of late, he seems to be forgetting that once he followed me around like a puppy dog, craving my grace and favour. I look to you, Hetty, to help restore to me some of that power. Do you understand?'

'I... I am not sure.'

Lady Alice's face which, when composed, might be called 'handsome' now took on a look of thunder. 'For heavens' sake, girl, do you have no conversation whatever? I cannot abide an empty-headed ninny! Tell me what you think of my husband, what are your first impressions?'

Hetty was tongue-tied. Rose's words, 'a lecher and a rake' kept running through her mind, although she dare not speak them. 'I... I think he is a very *manly* man,' she said, at last.

Lady Alice gave a snort of laughter. 'He is well endowed, that is for sure.'

Hetty was unsure what 'well endowed' meant, but it seemed to imply he was gifted in some way.

'What else?' her mistress asked, brusquely.

'I am sure you are well acquainted with his virtues, my lady,' she answered, tactfully.

Again Lady Alice laughed. 'And his vices too, I'll

warrant!’

Hetty lowered her gaze, afraid her eyes might give her away. If making free with servant girls was one of his ‘vices’ why did his wife seem to find it amusing? Surely it showed disrespect for her, as well as for those women in her employ? It was all very puzzling. Hetty had the uncomfortable feeling that here, at Longton Hall, a different set of rules prevailed from those she had been used to.

She felt an overwhelming nostalgia for her old life, lived within easy reach of her own family. Suddenly the girl she used to be seemed dead and buried, along with poor Lady Dorothea, and her own family were no more than strangers. She felt very alone in this perplexing new world.

And, try as she might to ignore it, she could still feel the warm imprint of Sir Victor’s firm, knowing hand on her bottom.

Chapter Two

It took Hetty a while to find her way around the vast edifice of Longton Hall. Although her movements were mainly confined to the suite of rooms inhabited by her mistress, occasionally a bell would ring for her in another part of the house and she would have to seek out Lady Alice in a lesser-known quarter.

It was while she was answering a call from the distillery that she encountered Sir Victor. The stillroom, where Lady Alice liked to make her own rose and lavender waters, was situated in an outhouse at the rear of the building. Access was gained through a dark corridor, which was also the shortest route to the stables. Hetty entered the corridor through a door from the hall, and at once saw Sir Victor coming towards her from the other end after visiting the stable block.

Her first instinct was to turn back towards the door to the hall, to return to that more public space full of light and air, but Lady Alice was expecting her. Caught between fear and duty, she hovered like a cornered animal for what seemed like an age as the heavy boots of her master strode towards her.

'Ah, Hetty,' he breathed as he drew near, with an unctuous softness that set up faradaic currents through her body. The electric tingling in her veins was not altogether unpleasant, but she was unused to being excited in this way and fear of the unknown prevailed.

Hetty shrank against the wall to allow him to pass with the minimum degree of contact. He did not pass, however. His fetid breath washed over her as he bent his face close to hers, so close that the point of his moustache brushed

her cheek. Cowering, she squealed, 'Oh, Sir Victor! You will not... you will not...' Words failed her when she realised that, in mentioning the unmentionable, she might put the very thoughts into his head that she wished to exclude.

'You have the most perfect pair of buttocks, my dear,' he murmured into her ear, his hand moving down until he had grasped the flesh of her lower cheek between his thumb and forefinger. He pinched, gently; she squealed, softly.

At that moment, the door to the stillroom opened and Lady Alice stood there, framed by light. Quick as a flash, Sir Victor turned around and walked towards his wife.

'Ah, there you are, Alice,' he said, his voice betraying nothing of the drama he had just enacted. 'Miss Hetty was lost, and I was showing her the way to the distillery.' He turned back to Hetty saying, in an avuncular tone, 'Here you are, my dear, safe and sound.'

Alice stiffened but said nothing, and Hetty felt obliged to walk towards her as if nothing untoward had occurred. She knew her face must be red, and her heart was extremely agitated, but she resolved to act in a restrained and moderate manner to avoid raising her mistress's suspicions. Mindful of what happened to her predecessor, Hetty knew that she must tread warily to avoid a similar fate.

She spent a pleasant hour in the scented stillroom, learning how to make Hungary water by steeping herbs and flowers in alcohol then straining through muslin, and how to mix a dry pot-pourri from scented petals, aromatic spices and orris powder. They were long processes, and she was instructed to attend to the mixtures a couple of times a week. A record was kept in a little book, and she had to check when a batch of homemade cologne, toilet soap or pot-pourri was ready for use. It seemed that Lady Alice was particular about scenting both the air and her

person.

The fragrant work helped to soothe Hetty's perturbed spirit, although she kept wondering if there was anything she could have done to avoid that last encounter with her master. Now she knew Rose had been right about Sir Victor, but not managed to affect the recommended remedy. There had been no time to stamp on the lecher's gout-ridden foot, but even if there had been she doubted whether she would have been able to bring herself to do it.

Yet something of her shame and anxiety must have remained in her, for when she went down to luncheon, Rose singled her out. 'Eat up quick,' she exhorted her, in a whisper. 'Then we'll take a turn in the garden. I have something to tell you.'

Their meal of mutton hodgepodge was soon consumed, then Rose asked cook if anything was needed from the kitchen garden.

'You could fetch me some parsley and some thyme,' Mrs Saddler told her.

So, armed with a basket they ventured forth into the afternoon sun, and while Rose gathered the herbs she told her the news about Master Leonard, the son of the house.

'He is coming home today,' she said, excitedly. 'And a fine young man he is, but somewhat shy. Unlike his father, of course!' Hetty blushed at the remembrance of what had happened that morning and Rose was quick to notice. 'Has something happened? You look flushed, Miss Hetty. Did the old rogue take a liberty with you?'

Hetty nodded, but could not bring herself to speak of it. Rose gave her a mischievous look. 'You are not used to speaking of such matters, I can tell. But I am curious to know what happened.' She placed one finger delicately beneath her chin and threw Hetty a coy look. 'All I require from you is to nod or shake your head. Understood?'

‘I’m not sure.’

Rose giggled. ‘I will go through all the things Sir Victor has done to me, and you can tell me with a nod or a shake of your head whether he has done the same to you. *Now* do you understand?’

Hetty laughed too, then. Her friend had a winning way with her, and the game sounded amusing. Besides, she too was curious to know what improprieties her master was prone to try upon the defenceless women in his employ.

‘So did he pay you a compliment, Miss Hetty? Some flattering remark about your person?’

Hetty nodded, blushing as she recalled his words.

‘It was something about your fundament, I dare say.’

Hetty forgot her dumb show and exclaimed, ‘How did you know *that*?!’

‘Because he has said the same things to *me*, of course!’ She made an attempt at Sir Victor’s gruff tone. ‘A bonny brace of buttocks you possess, m’dear!’ or ‘A fine figure of a woman, from the waist down’. I know all his naughty sayings.’

‘Oh.’

‘To proceed. Did he then pat you on the place he so admires?’ Hetty shook her head. ‘Was it a stroke, then?’

When Hetty shook her head again, Rose’s eyes brightened with merriment. ‘Don’t tell me you received a *pinch*!’ Hetty nodded. ‘Oh my, you *are* the favoured one! It took him three months to get to the pinching stage with me!’

‘Are there further... “stages”?’ Hetty asked, nervously.

‘Oh my word! There are as many *stages* as the man wishes to reach. He is a gross immoralist, and everyone in this house knows it, including his wife.’

‘Lady Alice knows? But...’

‘Come to the door, Miss Hetty. I want to show you something.’

The two girls wove their way through the raised beds of vegetables until they reached a wooden door in the brick wall surrounding the garden. Rose lifted up a nearby flowerpot under which was hidden a key, and soon the door was open. The view was of rolling lawns and ornamental trees with an octagonal building in the distance. It was of graceful architecture, painted white, and there were dark blue curtains drawn close at the windows.

‘That is Sir Victor’s summerhouse,’ Rose declared, with the air of imparting vital information. ‘He holds his secret soirées there.’

‘Swarees?’ Hetty repeated. She did not know the word.

‘’Tis a French expression, meaning evening do. In his case, though, I think it might be less of a French *soirée* and more of a Roman *orgy*, if you catch my drift.’

Rose shut the door and locked it swiftly, hiding the key again. Then she glanced up at the windows of the great house behind them. ‘I’ll warrant Sir Victor is gazing down on us, even now. He loves to peep and pry. Sarah – the girl before you, she who left in disgrace – she swore he used to spy on her undressing at night. Said there was a hole in the wall and a cupboard next door, with a knot hole, where he hid himself.’

‘Is that all he did?’ Hetty enquired. ‘Watched her remove her clothes?’

Rose shook her head, vehemently. ‘She told Lady Alice he came in to her when she was asleep and put a pad of chloroform over her face so he could have his evil way with her. Of course it was never proven and she did have a vivid imagination, poor Sarah. She used to read novels from the circulating library, but that’s by the by. The fact is, she got with child. They made out it was by Eric, Sir Victor’s valet. But we servants knew that couldn’t possibly be so.’

‘Why ever not?’

Rose’s face took on a cheeky look. ‘He’s the sort that

favours his own sex, that's why.'

Hetty had no idea what this meant, but it sounded unpleasantly like self-abuse. She didn't want to display her ignorance yet again, so she gave a knowing nod.

The faint sound of a bell came wafting from an open window of the house and Hetty feared she might be needed by her mistress. They retraced their steps hurriedly, and returned to the kitchen where Hetty found she was required in the drawing room. She checked her appearance in the glass on the wall, making sure her fair hair was tidily tucked under her cap, then she put on her clean apron and went upstairs.

Lady Alice was waiting for her in the large, airy drawing room but she was not alone. A tall young man was standing beside her. Hetty glanced at him briefly, before modesty overtook her and she averted her gaze. But even a mere glance can deliver a powerful first impression. The man had features of classical proportions, with a long straight nose and soft brown eyes that were framed by well-shaped dark brows. Yet between those brows was a deep ravine, etched by a constant frown. His mouth was full and sensual, but his lips were drawn tight over his teeth with habitual tension. Hetty sensed that he would be considered very handsome if he were more relaxed, but now his demeanour was that of one awaiting some terrible fate: not one that was imminent, but a prospect that had haunted him for some time.

'This is the latest addition to our household,' Lady Alice was saying, as Hetty effected a hasty curtsy. 'Miss Hetty is my personal maid.'

A large hand with long, delicate fingers was proffered and she reached forward to grasp it, briefly. 'How do you do, Miss Hetty?'

'I am very well, thank you, sir.'

'This is Leonard, my only son and heir,' her mistress said. Instead of the note of pride that Hetty would have

expected to detect, her tone was slightly anxious. 'He has been away at college, but will be living here for the foreseeable future. As yet he has no valet, so he may require your services with a needle from time to time. Do not be surprised if you find some of his garments in my dressing room, needing your attention.'

'Yes, my lady.'

'That is all, Hetty. Please return to your duties.'

Hetty went up to her room where a pile of mending awaited her. She had much to ponder as she plied her needle that afternoon. What kind of family had she come to serve? The husband was inclined to grope; the wife had a mind to mope; while the son was some kind of dope! She smiled to herself; later she would perhaps make up a little rhyme to tell Rose. At least she had one friend in that place.

Later that afternoon, Hetty was making her way down to the kitchen in order to wash Lady Alice's hair and clothes brushes in soda, when she heard a commotion coming from the library. There was no one around, and curiosity got the better of her. She crept to the door and listened, her eyes darting all round so that she could spring out of the way if anyone should come along.

'What you need, sir, is a good walloping!' she heard Sir Victor exclaim.

'No, father, I am too old for that,' came Leonard's calm voice. 'Or should I say, too big and strong? You chastised me brutally when I was a boy, but now I am a man you cannot treat me in the same way.'

'Don't you be so sure of that,' his father sneered. 'I have other means at my disposal now, my boy. I could cut you off without a penny, if I so desired. And I will too, by God, if you cross me! Your coming of age will be celebrated in the way I think fit, so let there be no more argument. Remember, I am the one who is to foot the

bill.'

'But—'

'But me no buts. You have not yet reached your majority and I am the master in this house. Go now, and...'

Sensing the door would soon open, Hetty darted back from it but lost her footing on the polished floor and went sprawling, dropping the brushes with a clatter. The door swung rapidly open and there stood Sir Victor, looking down at her.

'Listening at keyholes, missy?' he snarled.

'N-no, sir. I was just passing, and—'

'And happened to overhear our conversation, no doubt. On your feet, hussy! I will teach you that prying and snooping are not tolerated in this household. In here!'

Terrified, Hetty scrambled to her feet again and retrieved the fallen brushes. She did not want to venture into the study, but Sir Victor pulled her arm so roughly that she was obliged to follow, fearing her limb would otherwise be wrenched out of its socket. Once she was inside he shut the door behind them.

Leonard stood there, aghast. 'Father, do not treat the poor girl so roughly!'

'Roughly? I'll show you roughly!' Sir Victor exclaimed. He pulled Hetty over to the big leather armchair in the centre of the room. Still grasping her by the wrist, he sat down on it with his sturdy legs apart. 'Bend over my knee, missy! I'll show you how we treat spies here!'

'Father, no!' Leonard protested.

'Watch and learn!' his father said, pulling Hetty down across his outspread thighs. 'This is how you should treat a wicked woman. Show them who's boss, or they will always have the upper hand. Now she shall have a taste of *my* hand. Watch this!'

To Hetty's utmost dismay and horror he lifted her skirt so that her petticoat and drawers were exposed. She could feel the hard, masculine thighs beneath her stomach and

smell the odour of pomade and cigar smoke that the man exuded. At the same time she was aware of the warm weight of his hand across her backside. They were foreign sensations, both frightening and exciting, and she felt something equally alien stirring within herself.

'This is not right, sir,' Leonard said, coming forward, but Sir Victor pushed him away.

'She is new to our house, Leonard, and must learn that such behaviour as snooping at keyholes will not be tolerated here. I dare say she learned bad habits in your late aunt's employ, so she must have them beaten out of her.'

Hetty felt his hand strike the seat of her drawers with a resounding thud. The soft cotton cloth took some of the sting away, but she still felt the pain and humiliation of being spanked. Such a thing had not happened to her since she was a young child, living in her father's house. To think that her bully of a master would do such a thing in front of his own son! Her eyes stung with hot tears of rage and embarrassment.

He struck again, making her wriggle with discomfort, but despite her indignation, Hetty felt a stimulating warmth suffuse her lower quarters, back and front. It was not unpleasant, and filled her with a strange languor.

Sir Victor gave her a third smack then pushed her off his lap onto the carpet and stood up. He remained there in front of the window, legs planted firmly apart and hands behind his back, apparently well pleased with his efforts. Hetty got to her feet, but could not bear to look at either man. She stared down at the coloured pattern of the carpet, blinking away her tears.

'The wench will not act disrespectful again, I trow,' he said, speaking about her as if she were not there.

'You have acted shamefully, sir,' Leonard declared, and she felt a rush of gratitude. She knew what a risk the son was taking to stand up to so cruel a father.

'No, it is that hussy who feels the shame,' Sir Victor replied. Then, addressing her directly, he added, 'Are you not smarting with the pain of humiliation, missy, a pain just as sharp as that of your aching posterior? Answer me!'

Hetty wanted to echo Leonard's words, to tell the beast that he had acted wrongly, but she dared not. Instead she hung her head and murmured a cowardly, 'Yes, sir.'

'Now, dismiss!' her tormentor snapped.

She could not obey fast enough. Half stumbling out of the room, her mistress's brushes gathered in her apron, she made straight for the kitchen with burning cheeks – all four of them – and tears stinging her eyes. When she entered, Rose was there helping cook prepare vegetables for the evening meal. Mrs Saddler was too absorbed in her work to notice the state Hetty was in, but Rose's shrewd eyes took in everything – and guessed the cause.

'You'll be wanting some soda for those brushes,' she told her. 'I don't believe I showed you where it was, did I?'

Hetty was about to say she knew exactly where the soda was when Rose made a violent face at her, shaking her head and putting a finger to her lips.

'Er... thank you, Rose,' she said, understanding that the other girl wished to speak to her alone, in the scullery.

The girls walked through to the little room and, as soon as they were out of Mrs Saddler's earshot, Hetty broke down in sobs. She could not help herself.

'What has that animal done to you this time?' Rose enquired, fiercely.

'He... he... beat me!' The words burst out, brokenly, between sobs then gave rise to a further bout of unbroken sobbing.

Rose put her arms around her, holding her tightly for a few minutes until the storm of emotion had subsided. 'There, there!' she soothed. 'That wicked man shall rue

the day he laid a hand on you, Miss Hetty. I swear I shall pay him back for taking advantage of your innocence.'

Hetty raised her tearstained face to that of her friend. 'What can you do? We are both in the same boat, Rose. He is your master as much as mine.'

'He may be my master, but he shall not master me!' Rose declared. 'You wait and see!'

'But what will you do?'

'I shall think of something. Now, let me put a cold cloth to your face and help you look respectable again. It would not do for anyone but me to see how upset you are. Least of all that lecherous bully himself.'

Talking to Rose helped Hetty put the unpleasant incident behind her, and she returned to her room feeling purged of her distress. Rose seemed to regard the whole thing as a game – one of cat and mouse, no doubt. For Hetty, though, it was more complicated. She knew the corporal punishment she had received had been deserved. After all, she *had* been listening at the keyhole.

But the effect on her was unexpected. While she smarted indignantly at being subjected to such an ignominious form of chastisement, she could not deny that a certain excitement had been evoked by the ordeal. The aura of male power that had enveloped her, sharply contrasting with her own sense of helplessness, and the fact that her humiliation was witnessed by a comely young man, had all conspired to make the experience a bizarrely attractive one. For Hetty, who had known little drama in her life, the memory of it was strangely exhilarating.

She was still brooding upon it even as she helped Lady Alice dress for dinner. But soon her mistress distracted her with some conversation of a surprisingly confessional nature.

'You might as well know, Hetty, that I am at odds with Sir Victor about the celebration of our son's majority,' she began. 'I wanted to hold a ball for him, inviting some

eligible young ladies from the county to attend, but my husband adamantly refuses.' She sighed. 'It is not on account of the expense, but he has some plan of his own that he wishes to implement. He and I view the occasion differently, it seems.'

'How so, my lady?'

'For me, it would seem to be an opportunity to introduce Leonard to polite society. He has, as you know, been away from these parts for a good few years and now he is to settle here I consider it important for him to know his neighbours. And even more important for him to find a wife.'

'I cannot see how Sir Victor could object to that,' Hetty said.

'Neither can I,' Lady Alice agreed, warming to her theme. 'But he favours a small dinner party, attended by his own friends. It would be a virtually all-male affair. The way he talks, you would think he wanted to introduce his son to a Masonic Lodge, but I know he has no time for such organisations. It is all very frustrating for me. I am sure Leonard would prefer mixed company, with music and dancing.'

'Perhaps Sir Victor will change his mind,' Hetty offered.

'Unlikely. Once my husband's mind is made up there is no shifting him.' She sighed, examining the back of her coiffure in the looking glass. 'If you should marry, Hetty, as no doubt you wish to do one day, I hope your spouse will prove more amenable than mine.'

Hetty was gratified that her mistress trusted her enough to speak so freely, and after so short a time. If it were not for the constantly threatening presence of Sir Victor, Hetty felt she would be perfectly settled and content at Longton Hall.

The following morning, after she had seen to the fires, emptied the slops and helped to dress her mistress, Hetty

went down to the kitchen for her breakfast. The minute she walked in she knew something was wrong. Although it promised to be another fine summer's day, there was a frosty atmosphere in the room and cold looks fell upon her as she entered. She took her place at table and cook ladled out her porridge, but there was no sign of her friend.

'Where is Rose?' she asked at last.

The silence deepened, turning ominous. After a pause, Mrs Saddler said brusquely, 'Best not to enquire after her. She has been dismissed.'

'Oh no!' Hetty jumped up from the table in horror. 'What on earth has happened?'

Cook frowned and said nothing. Jack Bentley, the coachman-groom and his wife Lily, the upper housemaid, exchanged disapproving glances.

'Has she left already?' Hetty went on, greatly agitated. 'I must see her!'

'I shall be taking her into the village, later this morning, so she may catch the London coach,' Jack said at last. 'We shall all be glad to see the back of her. There has been nothing but trouble ever since...'

'Shh, Jack, do not speak of it,' Lily urged him, and he lapsed back into silence.'

'Where is she now?' Hetty asked. 'I *must* see her before she goes.'

'That is not advisable,' Mrs Saddler insisted. 'Now eat your porridge, before it gets cold.'

'I am not hungry,' Hetty said, pushing the dish away. She felt sick to her stomach. Something terrible had happened to Rose, she was sure. It was impossible to stay there in the kitchen, with everyone looking so glum. She just had to seek her friend out, to discover what had happened and offer her what comfort she could.

Turning her back on the sober sides in the kitchen, Hetty hurried off to the servants' wing. As she had guessed, Rose was in her room packing up her things. She looked

up when Hetty entered and gave a wry grin, but it was obvious that she had been weeping.

‘I came as soon as I heard!’ Hetty exclaimed, grasping her friend’s hand. ‘Oh Rose, what on earth has happened?’

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘Was it to do with... *him*?’ If she were in trouble because of their master, Hetty could not bear to speak the man’s name. Rose nodded. ‘Tell me... if you can.’

They sat down on the stripped bed together, Hetty still holding her friend’s cold hand. Rose began her story. ‘I heard a banging in the night, and went down to see what it was. To tell the truth, I thought I had forgotten to lock the side door after I came in from putting the cat out. Mr Brooke saw me go out and told me to take care to lock it after me. Anyways, I started to creep downstairs and when I got to the door I found it locked, as I thought. The banging noise had been someone letting the pantry door slam. You can guess who.’

‘What did he do?’ Hetty asked urgently. ‘Did he catch you?’

‘He comes out into the hall with a wedge of bread and cheese in his hand. When he sees it is me, in my nightclothes, a sly look comes over his face. “Well, pretty missy,” he says. “Are we somnambulating then? Or finding it hard to sleep?” I am dumbstruck, and think only of returning to my room, but I am scarcely on the first stair when he makes a lunge for me and catches me around the waist.’

‘Oh, Rose,’ Hetty commiserated. She could imagine how terrifying it must have been to be cornered by that brute when half naked and vulnerable.

‘He pushes me forward, onto the stairs, and pulls up my nightgown around my waist, with all my nether parts exposed. I cannot tell you how mortified I was. Then he starts stroking me and mumbling things. Hinting at how well endowed he is. Telling me I will like it when he shows

me what he is made of. And all the time he is mauling me, putting his hand between my thighs. I want to scream out, but my voice is trapped in my throat.'

'You poor, poor thing.'

'Anyways, I manage to turn myself around but he pins me down on the stairs. My skirt is still drawn up, and his lecherous eyes are poring all over me. I was desperate, Hetty.'

'Of course you were! Any girl would have been.'

'I truly believe he planned to take my virtue, there and then, like he did poor Sarah. So I do the only thing I can think of to prevent him. As he leans over me, with his nightshirt billowing out, I give an almighty kick and catch him fair and square in the cods.'

'Oh!' Hetty exclaimed.

'He bellowed like an enraged bull but I managed to get free. I was so afraid he would follow me up the stairs, catch me and do the dreadful deed, but he was too winded. He stood there all doubled up while I made my escape.'

Hetty clapped a hand to her mouth in dismay. Although she fully believed it served the man right, she knew full well what a terrible revenge he might enact upon her friend.

'I gave him one for you too, Hetty, and for poor Sarah. I put all my strength into that kick. But now I must pay the price.' She began to sob. 'Oh Hetty, what will become of me? I shall be sent back to my family but they will throw me out, and then I shall be on the streets!'

Hetty soothed her as best she could, but it was clear that Rose had no future. She would never get a reference and, without one, she would not find a respectable post again.

Suddenly Jack appeared in the doorway. 'Have you got your things?' he enquired of Rose, casting Hetty a brief and disdainful look. 'We must leave now. I've other duties later. Come!'

Realising the moment of parting had come abruptly upon

them Hetty, too, burst into tears. Jack made a clucking noise and took Rose's bag. 'Five minutes,' he said, as he strode off.

The two girls clung to each other. 'What will I do here without you?' Hetty gasped, as she realised what Rose's departure meant. 'You are my only friend in this house.'

'Then come with me,' Rose pleaded. 'Come to London. We will manage somehow, you and I. Even if we have to take to the streets, we will still have each other.'

Hetty was put in a terrible dilemma. She longed to be with her friend, but the thought of living in poverty and disgrace was too much to bear. One look into Rose's eyes told all.

'Of course I cannot expect you to come,' Rose said, dully. 'I will not pull you down with me, that would be unfair. But I fear for you, Hetty, with that bully around. Be on your guard, I pray. Remember Sarah, remember me, and be mindful of your own safety. Promise me, now.'

Hetty gazed in wonder at Rose's pale, tearful face. How could she think of another's welfare when her own was so in doubt? The girl must be a saint. Hetty felt terribly guilty, but she murmured the words Rose wanted to hear and then, in an instant, her friend had slipped from the room and was hurrying to find Jack in the stable yard.

Overcome with grief, Hetty threw herself down on Rose's vacated bed and wept her heart out.

Chapter Three

A sepulchral gloom seemed to hang over Longton Hall for the next few days. Hetty was kept extremely busy, since she had to take over some of Rose's duties until a new under housemaid could be found. She was also suffering from a deep sense of guilt. Rose had delivered that injurious and fateful blow on *her* behalf, as well as her own; yet the beating Hetty had received from Sir Victor was deserved. Then, when the chance came to accompany Rose to London, Hetty had lacked the moral fibre to turn her back on her comfortable – if morally perilous – life and face the great unknown.

She thought about Rose often as she cleaned the grates, swept the carpets and aired the rooms. Everything seemed to remind her of her lost friend. For the fireplaces she was obliged to use Rose's box, filled with black-lead and brushes, emery paper and cloths. When she threw open a window to air the sitting room, there was a view of the kitchen garden in which they had dallied together. When she went to the scullery for soda, she remembered the confidences they had shared in that place. Even the great staircase, which she trod several times every day, brought back visions of poor Rose's ordeal, its violent end and catastrophic consequences.

As for the instrument of Rose's demise, Sir Victor was conspicuous by his absence for several days. The doctor was seen to call on the morning of Rose's departure, but he did not return again and Lady Alice did not seem inclined to repeat her former confidences. On the contrary, she was silent and standoffish, as were all the servants, making Hetty feel tainted by her former association with

Rose.

The only person in the household who remained friendly with her was master Leonard. Whenever their paths crossed, which was only occasionally, he gave her pleasant smiles and enquired after her health in a way she found most gratifying. In return, she took special pains over the darning of his socks or the turning of his collars and cuffs.

‘Your needlework is very fine, Miss Hetty,’ he would remark. ‘You have made these shirts look like new again.’ She would blush and glow with pride, but at the same time her blushes would recall the time when he had witnessed her chastisement. It was as if they shared a shameful secret.

Hetty wondered whether the other servants knew the truth about poor Rose. If they believed the fault was all hers, it was grossly unfair. One afternoon she asked Lily whether Lady Alice had managed to secure a new under housemaid.

‘Not yet,’ Lily replied, shortly.

Hetty sighed. ‘If only Rose were still with us. Do you know why she was dismissed, Lily?’

‘I believe she injured Sir Victor to his face.’

Hetty could hardly prevent herself from giggling. ‘I don’t believe it was his *face* she injured!’

Lily stared at her blankly, which was all the proof Hetty needed that the true reason for Rose’s dismissal was unknown amongst the staff. She wanted to tell the full story, but feared she would not be believed. Already she was under suspicion for having been a friend of the disgraced housemaid. It pained her to the quick to be unable to defend Rose’s honour, but she must protect her own position now.

They were still very shorthanded, so when Mrs Saddler came to tell her that her services would be needed that night at table, Hetty was not altogether surprised. It used to be the task of Rose and Lily to assist the butler, Mr

Brooke.

'Sir Victor has guests dining tonight,' the cook went on. 'But you need not fret. They are the usual crowd and the meal is quite informal. You will be required to fetch and carry from the kitchen, and to be on hand if you are needed to help serve.'

Hetty wondered what 'the usual crowd' meant. She recalled standing at the garden gate with Rose, who told her about Sir Victor's dubious 'soirées' and hinted at nefarious activities in the summerhouse. What a long time ago that now seemed.

Cook continued, 'They shall be having cream of pea soup, with whitebait, followed by stewed pigeons and roast veal, then leveret, with gooseberry tart and fig pudding. That reminds me – I must dress the leveret for roasting. Fetch me a pot of redcurrant jelly from the larder, will you?'

For the rest of the afternoon Hetty felt nervously apprehensive. She knew a little about waiting at table from her sojourn with Lady Dorothea but her former mistress, being an invalid, had seldom entertained and certainly not in a grand manner.

When the time came for her to assist, Hetty first made sure she looked presentable. She performed a hasty toilet in the scullery and donned a clean cap and apron, then took the serving spoons up to the dining room. The table was already set, its centrepiece a pair of embracing figures in Parian ware surrounded by roses and lilies. The nakedness of the couple made it seem an unsuitable table ornament to Hetty, but she told herself she knew nothing about such matters and went about her business with quiet efficiency.

Next time she went upstairs it was with Lily, in the wake of Mr Brooke who was bearing the soup tureen. The room was full of deep-voiced chatter and she felt a tremor in her stomach at the thought of facing Sir Victor

again. There were six men at the table: Sir Victor, Leonard and four guests. The only women present were Lady Alice and an elderly lady. Hetty kept her eyes averted and attended to her tasks at the sideboard.

She was kept busy taking out the dirty plates at the end of each course and helping cook to dish up the next one. By the end of the meal she felt quite exhausted, but it was not over for her yet. When Mr Brooke set the port and cigar boxes on the table, Lady Alice and her elderly companion rose to withdraw.

‘Come, Hetty,’ her mistress beckoned. ‘You may fetch Lady Cosham and me some cowslip wine in the drawing room.’

Sir Victor broke in, ‘Pardon me, my dear, but I must have this table cleared at once. I shall be giving one of my lectures shortly.’

Lady Alice looked put out. ‘Very well; let Hetty serve us first, then she may return to help clear the table here.’

There was friction in the air, and Hetty felt caught between the pair. Sir Victor’s dark eyes flashed with obstinate fire. ‘Miss Lily can go with you. Miss Hetty shall remain here.’

The three women left, and Hetty went round sweeping crumbs from the cloth into her tray. She felt embarrassed and out of place, being the only female in the room.

‘Never mind that, ma’amzelle!’ Sir Victor said, testily. ‘Just clear away the cutlery and crockery, then the ornaments. Brooke, light my cigar, will you? Then set the port on the sideboard. We shall help ourselves, whenever we want to.’

When Brooke was dismissed for the evening, Hetty turned to go as well but her master’s voice detained her. ‘Not yet, mademoiselle! You have not finished here.’

Hetty heard a note in his voice that filled her with dread. She looked towards the door, but Brooke had already vanished and she was left alone in a room full of strange

men.

‘Yes, sir?’ she enquired, hoping with all her heart that she was required for some trifling duty and would soon be free to depart.

‘Wait there till you are needed,’ he said, turning back to his guests. ‘As I was saying over dinner, there are still many unexplored territories where a man may find challenge and adventure. The great continents of Africa and Australia still beckon the intrepid traveller, but there are also many unknown regions closer to home.’

‘The Peak District, for example?’ one of the men suggested. A guffaw ran round the table, although Hetty had no idea why they should find this so amusing.

‘I prefer the Welsh valleys myself,’ came another’s remark, only to be greeted with equal glee. More apparently innocent statements followed, each received as if it were the most clever witticism.

‘The lowlands of Scotland are my stamping ground.’

‘I prefer to delve into unexplored caves and potholes.’

‘How about a nice thick forest, with some marshy ground beneath?’

‘Give me a deep ravine, any time.’

Sir Victor held up his hand. ‘Enough, my friends. No lecture on the subject of geographical exploration should ever be given without a practical demonstration.’

A bearded gentleman next to him said, ‘And no expedition should set out without a map, either. Not to mention the usual equipment.’

The company laughed again – all except for Leonard, who had been sitting pokerfaced throughout. Hetty guessed that he was as baffled as she by all that inexplicable mirth.

‘Ah yes, the equipment,’ Sir Victor said. ‘Mademoiselle, go and fetch three cushions from the sitting room.’

Hetty was taken unawares. ‘Cushions, sir? What kind of cushions?’

‘Any kind; for parking your sweet *derrière* on, of course.’ He turned to his guests and murmured, just loud enough for her to hear, ‘And she does have a sweet one. Take a look as she leaves the room.’

So Hetty had to endure several pairs of male eyes all fastened on her behind as she made for the door. She hoped that Leonard, at least, had the decency to lower his gaze. Making for the sitting room, she could hear the quiet sound of female voices and wished she had been allowed to join them, instead of being exposed to masculine ribaldry.

‘Ah, Hetty,’ Lady Alice smiled as she entered. ‘Have you come to help with the wine?’

‘No, my lady. I have been instructed to fetch three cushions for the master.’

‘Cushions?’ Her mistress looked consternated. ‘What on earth are they wanting cushions for?’

‘I think Sir Victor is going to give some kind of scientific demonstration.’

Lady Alice gave a short, mocking laugh. She turned to the ancient dowager beside her. ‘My husband fancies himself a scientist.’

‘He has no right to fancy anything, at his age,’ the old lady replied. Hetty concluded that she was either rather eccentric or somewhat deaf – or both.

She gathered up three cushions and returned to the dining room, where the table had been cleared of its white cloth. The men sat around it, evenly spaced, each with his glass of port and cigar, looking for all the world as if they were anticipating some pleasant diversion. It came as an unpleasant shock to Hetty to realise that she was going to be the provider of that entertainment. All eyes were on her as she entered – predatory, rapacious eyes – and she felt her heart beating rapidly beneath her trim maid’s uniform.

‘Ah, mademoiselle, place the cushions in the centre of

the table, if you please.'

Trembling, Hetty stepped forward and quickly deposited the three cushions in an untidy pile.

'No, not like that!' Sir Victor thundered. 'Spread them out in a line down the centre of the table... no, closer together. That's right.'

She hung back uncertainly and, for a few minutes, her master seemed to ignore her while he continued his 'lecture' on the subject of geographical exploration.

'A different approach is required for wet or dry terrain,' he said, addressing a rapt audience. 'The wetlands may be entered quickly, with no fear of obstacle. Probably the route you are taking has been travelled by other men previously, and will be well worn in.'

The men chuckled, and one of them added, 'I prefer virgin territory myself!'

'Ah, in that case you may encounter something of a desert or wilderness, where your tactics should be altogether different,' Sir Victor countered smoothly. 'If you are the first to carve a path through uncharted terrain, you need to take more care. Your way should be carefully prepared before you penetrate the undergrowth. Make sure there are no hidden obstacles, and that the going is not too rough, or you may find yourself repelled and forced to turn back.'

Hetty glanced at Leonard. He was sitting there with an absent demeanour, as if he wished to be anywhere else at that precise moment. Then he caught her eye and gave her such a friendly smile that she instantly felt better and relaxed. She smiled back, but then grew aware of Sir Victor eyeing her in a forthright manner, and her smile froze on her lips.

'Mademoiselle, would you do us the honour of becoming our demonstration model for the evening?' he enquired.

'M-model?' she faltered. The only kind she had heard of was an artist's model, and she was horribly afraid they

were about to make her pose in the nude. All eyes were turned on her, and she felt a hot crimson flush creep in a slow tide up her face.

‘For my lecture, of course,’ her master explained. ‘I would like you to simulate uncharted territory. If you would kindly remove your uniform.’

‘My clothes?’ Her worst fear was being realised. ‘You want me to remove my *clothes*, sir?’

‘Only the top layer.’

The gentlemen guffawed softly, as if she had absurdly misinterpreted her instructions. But Hetty wanted to be quite sure. ‘You mean, my cap and apron?’

‘Yes, those. And your dress, too. Do you require any assistance?’

The thought of a man fumbling with her buttons and bows was even more horrifying. ‘Ah, no sir! No, I can manage. But—’

‘Then manage as quickly as you can,’ Sir Victor said dismissively. He turned back to his guests and continued his lecture. ‘As I was saying, a region which has not been penetrated by Western man may hold a few surprises...’

Hetty removed her mob-cap and apron first, folding them neatly and depositing them on a chair, then she unbuttoned her boots and stepped out of them. She did not want to remove her dress and expose herself in her undergarments, but she was afraid of what might happen if she refused. Sir Victor had had no compunction about putting her over his knee in front of his son. Surely he would not balk at performing the same act in front of his assembled guests?

The thought of such a public shaming sent waves of horror through her soul, yet her body found the idea quite exciting. She was coming to understand the delicate nuances of her new states of being, and she recognised that the quick throb-throb of her heart was not all caused

by fear. She undid the buttons at her cuffs and neck, then slowly pulled her heavy black gown over her head, ruffling her hair as she did so.

Standing there in her camisole and long drawers, Hetty felt suddenly hot and cold at the same time. Her skin felt cool, as draughts of air passed freely over her naked arms and chest, but her flesh was being warmed by some internal heat that was spreading through her veins and making her want to lie down and take a long, languorous rest.

Now she was instructed to do just that. 'Get up on the table, mademoiselle, and stretch out on these cushions,' Sir Victor instructed her. Seeing her terror, he added, 'Never fear, woman, we shall not hurt you. I merely wish to offer my friends a practical demonstration of the science of geographical exploration.'

Hetty sat on the smoothly polished tabletop and swung her legs up, then crawled on all fours towards the centre. The surrounding men made little throaty noises of appreciation as she did so, making her blush again. She felt so vulnerable in her undergarments, and the circle of men made her feel like a trapped animal.

'That's right, now stretch out, my dear,' Sir Victor told her, his tone not unkind.

Trembling, she lay down with the three cushions under her head, back and behind. There was a clink as the port decanter was passed around and the men refreshed their glasses. The thick odour of cigar smoke filled the air, having a numbing effect on Hetty's senses that made her want to slumber, but she knew that would be most inadvisable. In this precarious position she must be ever vigilant.

'So, gentlemen, let us start in the upland region,' she heard her master say. Something gently prodded the ribbons of her camisole and her eyes flicked open to see that Sir Victor was wielding a long cane. Its brass tip was probing between the ties of her bodice. It reached her

naked skin in the divide between her breasts and she shuddered at the cold impact. Then, with a deft movement akin to that of an angler hooking a trout, Sir Victor flicked upwards and the bow was untied, letting the two halves of her camisole fall open and revealing several inches of her chest.

Hetty lay inert, petrified. Was the plan to disrobe her, slowly, as a kind of torture? A man gave a low chuckle and she felt desperation grow in her. She longed to scramble off the table, to run to the safety of her mistress's quarters, but she felt pinned to the spot. A vague memory returned of a story Lady Dorothea had once read her: a giant called Gulliver, pinned to the ground by miniature folk. That was how she felt now except that she was the one who felt small, and the men around the table were giants by comparison.

The probing tip softly caressed the flesh between her breasts as Sir Victor continued. 'The uplands, in this case, are not your soaring mountain peaks but more modest elevations, the foothills, if you will. Ah, what man would not wish to set his foot upon these gentle slopes!'

One man commented, in a low voice, 'It's not my foot I would set there!' and the company around the table burst into loud laughter. Hetty fancied she could feel and smell their hot breath wash over her, redolent of port and tobacco.

'However, we must not linger on these slopes, however pleasant they may seem,' Sir Victor's voice went on. She felt the tip of the rod pass down over her cotton bodice to her waist. 'Here we descend via a gradual declivity to the flat plain, which we must traverse with caution. Somewhere in the centre is a small hollow, where we may stumble if we are not careful. It would be a good place to set up camp for a while, before we tackle the more perilous journey ahead.'

'Perilous?' someone queried.

‘Yes. We may encounter several obstacles on our route, starting with the great thicket that lies to the south. Within this dense vegetation small animals may lurk. They are not dangerous, but they are capable of infesting the unwary traveller.’

Up to now, Hetty had been puzzled by her master’s talk but suddenly all became clear. He was referring to the features of her body, describing them as if they were a landscape. Of course, the ‘small hollow’ would be her navel, and the thicket her bodily hair. She could not help but be amused by his ingenuity. But what were the ‘small animals’ he referred to?

‘You mean, creeping crawling creatures?’ another man suggested, and the table ran aroar again. In a flash Hetty realised they were referring to body lice and she grew embarrassed. No such creatures were to be found on *her* body. She was in the habit of dabbing her person with eau de cologne before retiring in order to ward off the pests.

‘Precisely. And it is by creeping and crawling that we should now proceed, making our way through the undergrowth at a steady pace, although in a cautious manner.’

He proceeded with the tip of his rod, travelling down beneath her waist within her bloomers. Hetty shivered as the cold brass tickled the skin of her lower stomach until it reached her pubic mound and became entangled in her bush, where it halted.

‘Shall we not be rebuffed?’ another guest enquired.

‘There may be setbacks,’ Sir Victor allowed. ‘The sudden appearance of digitate organisms, for example. These finger-like extensions are liable to grab and entrap the unwary, making progress almost impossible. In such circumstances it is often better to retreat and retrench, making a more stealthy approach at another time.’

‘And if we proceed beyond the thicket, what shall we

find?’

‘Ah!’ Sir Victor pushed the ferrule of his cane further down until it lodged between the soft folds of Hetty’s sex. She lay very still, horrified by his impertinent intrusion and yet powerless to resist him. The other guests were eagerly crowding round, their cigar smoke making her eyes sting, and the alcoholic fumes from their breath making the air heavy. She fancied the intoxicants were affecting her as well, for she felt faint and languid.

‘Now that depends on the geology of the area,’ her master continued. ‘And also on the climate. If the volcano is extinct, the rocky slopes will be arid and the vegetation shrivelled and dry. If the terrain is young and fertile however, with volcanic activity beneath, the ravine will be moist and well watered.’

All the time he was speaking, Sir Victor was slowly drawing his rod up and down between her nether lips. To Hetty’s amazement, the light friction was producing those juices that normally only flowed from her during the night, and her whole body was suffused with a voluptuous warmth. She continued to lie very still, but she could hear her heart thumping heavily, echoing loud in her ears.

‘How quickly should we proceed at this point?’ a gentleman enquired.

‘I recommend dallying a while in such pleasant surroundings, enjoying the lushness of the terrain and the anticipation of even greater pleasures. Slowly make your way up the ravine until you encounter a hard protuberance. This guards the entrance to the hidden cave.’

Hetty could feel the hardening of her own organ of pleasure as her master continued to work the brass tip up and down.

‘When might we enter the cave?’ came the eager question.

‘Wait until the cave seems to beckon you in, with its moist rivulets in full flood, then you may be assured of a

safe entry. Once inside, you should take a while to appreciate its delights. Move slowly; do not be in too much of a hurry to proceed. The treasures on offer are subtle and manifold, and the man who slows his pace and pauses to savour them will find the business of exploration far more satisfying.'

Someone asked, throatily, 'What may we find at our journey's end?'

At this point there was a general rustling amongst the company, with sighs and gasps rending the air. Hetty fought against the heavy and delicious sensations that were coursing through her and managed to open her eyes. She turned her head as far as she could to take in the two guests nearest her, and found one staring at her intently and the other with eyes closed, a rapt expression on his face. With a little contortion she was able to lower her gaze and, to her astonishment, found that the hands of both men were busily occupied beneath the table. They appeared to be working some mechanism and, for a moment, she feared that the table was a cunning torture device and some knives or spikes would appear to impale her, like an Iron Maiden.

She soon realised that she had let her imagination run away with her, as Sir Victor slowly withdrew his supple cane and made his final answer. 'That, my friends, I may safely leave to your imagination. Suffice to say that the treasures to be found in the hidden cave will make your long and arduous journey seem well worth the effort. Whatever dangers you have braved, whatever privations you have suffered, you will be amply recompensed by the satisfaction of arriving at your goal.'

There was a general sighing around the table, with a few intense groans, as Sir Victor tied up the ribbons of Hetty's camisole. His fingertips lightly touched her breasts, sending her into fluttering paroxysms of mingled terror and delight that she found hard to comprehend. What

was he doing to her innocent body? What secret mechanisms was he invoking? She felt like some kind of automaton, a doll that was filled with mysterious life at the touch of a button.

His voice now was dismissive. 'Thank you, mademoiselle. We no longer require your services. You may leave us.'

Shamefaced, Hetty sat up and slid to the edge of the table. She dared not look the assembled men in the face, but snatched up her discarded clothing and pulled it on, with scant disregard for propriety. As she hurried from the room she was followed by a gale of ribald laughter. They were laughing at her behind her back, she was sure of it, ridiculing her innocent participation in their game. A wave of anger swept over her, but her body was still weak from the unaccustomed onslaught of different feelings and her mind was mightily confused by it all.

When she arrived at her quarters, Hetty was relieved to find her mistress already asleep. No doubt Lady Alice had asked Lily for assistance, if she needed any. Quickly, Hetty removed her clothes. She disliked handling her undergarments, feeling they were somehow sullied by their contact with Sir Victor's indecently probing rod. Pulling on her flannel nightgown, Hetty knelt by the bed to say her prayers.

'Dear Lord, forgive me if I have sinned this night,' she began. 'I know not whether I should have struggled against my master, nor whether my virtue has been assailed. It all happened so quick and made me feel so queer. Forgive me, God, if I have done wrong but I swear I hardly knew what I was doing, or letting be done to me. Amen.'

Her conscience still troubled her as she lay down to sleep. She no longer felt like the same young woman she had been when she rose from her bed that morning. Something had changed in her, but she knew not what. There was a hollow ache inside that dark cave Sir Victor

had spoken of with such reverence, and her sex still throbbed with newly awakened need. She knew it was wrong to touch herself there – her mother had instilled that caution in her at a young age – but the urge was so strong, a tormenting itch that was hard to resist.

Hetty tossed and turned for some while before falling into an uneasy sleep. When she finally lost consciousness her night was troubled by strange dreams. Sir Victor did not make an appearance in person but he was present in those night dramas in a variety of rôles: the marauding lion that pinned her down with his great paw then repeatedly licked at her sex; the great bird that swept its wings across her breast and lodged on her pubic ‘nest’; the large snake that slithered slowly into her. Recalling some of her dreams when she awoke, Hetty found it hard to avoid the obvious conclusion, that her animal passions had been rudely awakened.

Chapter Four

‘Tell me, my dear, why did Sir Victor detain you for so long in the dining room last night?’

The question, put so unexpectedly by her mistress, took Hetty by surprise and she could think of no reply. Her fingers trembled as she tried in vain to secure Lady Alice’s coiffure with hairpins.

‘I... I cannot say, my lady,’ was all she managed to stammer.

In the mirror, Hetty saw Lady Alice’s face took on a knowing look. ‘You need not feign innocence, Miss Hetty. I am well aware of what goes on behind closed doors in this house when Sir Victor is entertaining his gentlemen friends. However, I should like to know more of the... detail. He did not behave too improperly, I trust?’

Hetty was aghast. What could she possibly say that would not implicate both herself and her master?

‘He... he required me to take part in a... demonstration,’ she said at last.

‘What manner of “demonstration”, pray?’

‘It was a geographical theme, my lady. I did not understand it, not being much educated.’

‘And what part did you play, Hetty? Please be frank with me.’

Hetty saw in the looking glass that her cheeks were bright pink. ‘I acted as his... model.’

‘I see.’ Lady Alice stared at her maid’s reflection, her expression sombre. ‘And I have no doubt that this involved some removal of your garments. Am I right?’ Hetty hung her head and mumbled her assent. ‘I thought so. My husband is prone to take advantage of innocents such as

you. I believe he consorts with women who are not so "innocent" as well, although I have no proof of that. But perhaps I shall be able to acquire some proof, ere long.'

Finding that she was not to be scolded, Hetty recovered some of her composure and finished off her mistress's hair to her satisfaction. But Lady Alice's mind was still running on the topic of her spouse's immoral habits.

'I have had an idea,' she began, turning to face Hetty. 'But it requires your co-operation, my dear. Would you help me discover what goes on at Sir Victor's private parties?'

Hetty stared at her in disbelief. 'Oh, my lady!'

Smoothly, her mistress continued, 'You would not be harmed, because you would be in disguise. I think you would make a passable young man, Hetty. Your breasts are not overly large and your face is of boyish appearance. Yes, I think we might pass you off quite well as a youth, if we found you some suitable clothes. What do you say?'

Bewildered, Hetty stared at her, wide-eyed. 'You wish me to dress as a man?'

'Yes, that way you may attend my husband's gatherings safely. Lady Cosham, whom you saw last night, is presiding over a sale of work tomorrow. There will be stalls of all kinds, including one for cast-off clothing; I have promised to donate some of my husband's. When I attend I shall purchase some men's clothes on the pretext of wanting them for my servants.'

'Oh.' Hetty was dumbfounded. It seemed that her mistress had thought of everything.

'I have decided it would be best if you posed as your own brother,' she continued, evidently assuming Hetty's assent. 'That way, a family resemblance will only be expected. You will strike up a friendship with my son, Leonard. That will not be difficult, since he is a lonely young man. I shall ask him to take you under his wing while you are here, visiting your sister.'

Lady Alice laughed with delight at the ingenuity of her plan, but Hetty was filled with a sense of foreboding. To masquerade as her own brother seemed a dangerous enough design in itself, but to attend one of Sir Victor's secret gatherings...

'You shall be invited to Leonard's coming-of-age celebration,' she went on, smoothly. 'I am quite sure that my husband has something planned for that event. He has refused to entertain the idea of a grand ball, and says he wants something "more intimate" for his son, and he is arranging all the details himself. There will be a dinner – as a concession to me, he has included some old friends and neighbours in the guest list – but afterwards he plans to retire with his cronies to the summerhouse. It is that gathering which I particularly wish you to attend.'

'I see,' Hetty said. Her heart was batting with fear, but after her last experience at the hands of Sir Victor she was disturbed to find that a certain eager anticipation was also making its unwanted presence felt in her breast.

Nothing more was said about the plan for the rest of the day. Hetty went about her duties in a state of heightened suspense, hardly noticing that the other servants were still ignoring her. She was used to their indifference by now and expected nothing more from them.

In the afternoon, while she was sewing in her room, there came a knock at the door. She opened it to find Leonard there, looking rather embarrassed. He was holding a pair of brown tweed trousers and a wine-coloured velour waistcoat.

'Good afternoon, Miss Hetty,' he began. 'I... er... wonder if you would be so kind as to mend these garments for me.' He pointed to a tiny blemish in the waistcoat. 'There is a little tear here, by this buttonhole.'

'Of course, Master Leonard,' she replied, in as businesslike tone as she could muster. She took the waistcoat from him. 'And the trousers?'

‘Oh... er... yes, of course. There seems to be a loose button on the waistband. If you would kindly secure it for me.’

Hetty knew these were trivial tasks that would not take her more than five minutes. She wondered whether to ask him to wait, but he had such a nervous air that she refrained.

Suddenly, he fixed her with his blue eyes in an uncompromising stare and came swiftly into the room, closing the door behind him. His words came out in a sudden rush, as if they had been pent up inside him all day. ‘Miss Hetty, I feel bound to apologise on behalf of my father for the disgraceful way he treated you last night.’

Hetty blushed, not knowing what to say. She realised that the sewing tasks had been but a pretext for this conversation. ‘I – I thank you, sir,’ was all she could manage.

‘You have no cause to thank me. I stood by and did nothing to save you, just as on that other occasion.’ Leonard’s fair cheeks were as flushed as Hetty’s, his eyes piercing hers. In a low voice he continued, ‘Not all men are like my father, Miss Hetty. I pray that you will remember that fact, and not despise our sex. There are good and kind men in the world.’

‘I know, sir,’ Hetty answered, feeling bold. ‘For you are one of them.’

His face seemed lit up from within as he smiled, then he swiftly took his leave. Hetty went back to her needlework with a new joy in her heart. When Rose had been dismissed, she believed her only friend had left the household, but she was wrong. She did have a friend, one who sympathised and wished her well, even though he seemed powerless to intervene on her behalf. Indeed, she hoped he would not. Remembering what had happened to poor Rose when she dared to strike back at their cruel master, Hetty would not wish Leonard to jeopardise his

future. She knew his heart; that was enough.

Now the thought of becoming his friend was even more appealing. Would he accept her disguise, taking her for her own brother? The question worried her somewhat, but she found solace in caressing the rough tweed of his trousers and imagining the sturdy legs within. If only their circumstances had been different, he was the kind of young man she might well have taken a fancy to. He was good-looking, kind and strong. She sighed; no doubt he would make some lady an excellent husband, one day.

Lady Alice returned from the sale of work with a brown paper parcel, tied up with string. Hetty knew very well what was inside it, and a strange excitement seized her. The idea of dressing in travesty was not one she had ever entertained before, but she had to admit there was something appealing about it.

Her mistress seemed quite excited too, as she unwrapped the clothes in the privacy of their quarters. They were rustic working men's clothes, of the sort that a groom or gardener would most likely wear as their Sunday best, and although they had been laundered they still smelt faintly of the countryside. The collection consisted of a pair of patched long johns, a brown shirt of rough linen, a pair of fustian breeches with leather braces and a tweed jacket with leather-patched elbows that looked as though it had been handed down several times.

'What do you think?' Lady Alice asked Hetty. She seemed anxious. 'I did my best to find you serviceable clothes, and ones that I thought would fit but hide your figure well. The only thing I could not find were boots, but I kept back a pair of Leonard's for you. I think you might find them an approximate fit.'

The idea of wearing Leonard's boots filled Hetty with a pleasant rapture. She eagerly stripped off her maidservant's uniform and pulled on the woollen long johns, then bound

her breasts with the cloth her mistress gave her and pulled on the shirt, trousers and jacket. When she looked at herself in the tall pier glass she gave a gasp. Except for her hair, she presented a fine figure of a man!

‘We must do something about those locks of yours,’ Lady Alice said. ‘A cap is the only thing, but I don’t know how you are to manage when indoors. I must try to procure a wig.’ She looked thoughtful. ‘Get back into your everyday clothes, Hetty. I have an idea.’

When Hetty was in her own dress, Lady Alice led the way up to the little used attics at the top of the house, where unwanted furniture and boxes of forgotten goods were stored. After rummaging through several boxes, she found a moth-eaten brown wig and held it up, triumphant.

‘I knew it! We used to parade in this, when I was a girl. I am so relieved it has not been thrown out.’ She shook it and a cloud of dust came billowing from it, making Hetty sneeze. ‘I am sorry, my dear. The thing needs renovating, but it is the best I can do. Let us go back down and see how we might improve it.’

Fortunately the wig was far too big for Hetty’s small head, being designed for a man, so there was some spare material that could be cut out and used to patch the threadbare areas. Hetty worked under her mistress’s instruction and made a good job of it, for she was deft with a needle.

When she tried the wig on with the rest of her disguise Lady Alice gave a gasp of surprise. ‘My dear, you are the very image of a country gentleman! No one would take you for a woman now. This is quite, quite perfect, exceeding all my expectations!’

When Hetty examined herself in the mirror once more, she had to agree. The clothes fitted her well enough but the wig, thanks to her painstaking needlework, covered her head and suited her face so well, that she was quite transformed.

‘Stand more boldly now,’ Lady Alice commanded her. ‘You must learn to walk with a swagger. Hold yourself more upright – that’s better – and walk up and down with a heavy tread. You must learn to sit like a man too, with your thighs apart. Practice on this chair.’

For the next hour Lady Alice schooled her in manly ways, reminding her to deepen her voice, walk with more of a dash, look the world in the eye and adopt the devil-may-care air that would suit a young man who was up from the country to visit his sister, and was anxious to show these la-di-da folks that he was as good as they were!

Yet Lady Alice was not quite satisfied with Hetty’s new persona. ‘There is something missing,’ she mused aloud. ‘A certain... dimension. A man of this type would be more... dominant. Yes, that is the word. You are too subservient in your demeanour, my dear. That is understandable, of course, but to carry off this impersonation you must learn to be more domineering towards others.’

Hetty felt troubled. It was not in her nature to assert herself. She could see her mistress thinking hard about the problem and, when light seemed to dawn on Lady Alice’s face, she feared that she was about to be given some difficult task.

‘We must find a way to fire up some masculine spirit in your feminine heart!’ she declared. ‘I have an idea of how this might be achieved. Most men of the countryside are given to a degree of physical violence – they beat their horses and dogs, if not their wives. You and I, my dear, must change rôles.’ She gave a playful smile that sat awkwardly on her usually solemn face.

‘We shall pretend that I am your erring servant, who deserves a beating. You will chastise me, as if you were my master. If we can find some implement for you to use, so much the better.’

Lady Alice rose and began searching about the room, ignoring the look of horror on Hetty's face. To be made to beat her mistress! What Twelfth Night tomfoolery was this? It was still the custom in some parts of the countryside for servants to lord it over their masters on the sixth of January, in an ancient tradition dating back centuries, but nothing so gross as this was permitted.

From the deep recesses of a cupboard, her mistress produced a riding crop. 'My hunting days are long over,' she said. 'But I have kept this souvenir of my youthful pleasures in the field. Now it will come in useful.'

She seemed to notice Hetty's consternation for the first time. 'Don't look so worried, my dear. I shall lock the door – no one shall know about our little game.'

'My lady, I cannot make so bold!'

'Of course you can,' came the sharp reply. 'You will do this for me, Hetty. If you are to pass as a man you must learn to act as a man. It will be the worst for you if you are discovered masquerading, so we must make sure that your disguise is impenetrable.'

'W-what will happen if I am found out?'

Lady Alice's expression hardened. 'Then you will be summarily dismissed, as Rose was. And I shall be unable to lift a finger to save you.' 'I shall dissociate myself completely from this entire pantomime, so please be under no illusions. I cannot afford to let my husband know that I have set you to spy upon him, so you must take all the blame.'

Hetty stared at her in disbelief but she knew, in her heart, that it must be as her mistress described.

Lady Alice's expression lightened. 'But it will not come to that, I am sure. Not if I train you properly. Come, let us make a start. Imagine I have insulted you and your anger is roused.'

It was hard for Hetty to imagine being angry with her mistress, who had never treated her unjustly. But when

Lady Alice suggested that she should think of Sir Victor, everything suddenly changed and she felt a real antipathy and loathing rise up in her bosom.

‘There, I can see how you hate him, Hetty. My own feelings are similar, although tempered by the duty that every wife owes her husband, however badly he treats her.’ While her blood was still heated, Hetty found the riding crop being placed in her right hand. ‘Remember how he has treated you, and poor Rose. Let your passion find its true expression.’

To Hetty’s astonishment, her mistress knelt by the bed and pulled up her skirt and petticoats, exposing her silk drawers. The contours of her large buttocks were clearly visible beneath the thin material. Nervously, Hetty fingered the worn leather of the riding crop. The situation seemed unreal: a dream-like, Alice-in-Wonderland scenario.

‘Punish me good and hard,’ her mistress exhorted her. ‘Do not spare me.’

Trying to summon up the will, Hetty forced herself to think of her debauched master. She recalled how humiliated she had felt on the occasions when he took liberties with her person. The first occasion was when he caressed her rump in the presence of his wife, in the very same room where she was now.

Then she recalled the time when she encountered him near the stillroom, and he pinched her buttocks with unashamed relish. If Lady Alice had not appeared that very instant, how much further would he have ventured? She fancied that he wanted to do more, and was only waiting for an excuse to take further advantage of her.

That excuse came when she was caught eavesdropping and he put her over his knee in the presence of his son, Leonard. She remembered how ashamed she had felt, having to drawing up her skirt and petticoat, as Lady Alice was now doing, to expose her cotton drawers. The hot flush of shame that assailed her when she thought of Sir

Victor was tempered only by the memory of his son's shy, sympathetic looks.

Then had come the most recent, and the most humiliating, affront to her modesty. Leonard had not been the only witness; a whole company of men saw her body used as if it were an object, a map to be explored. Her maidenly modesty had been completely disregarded, and her feeble protests overruled. Now the thought of how helpless she was made her quiver with righteous anger and she raised the riding crop with her right hand. Instead of the silk knickers, with their blue ribbons and creamy lace, she saw before her Sir Victor's cotton long johns, and imagined the sagging fundament beneath.

With all the might that she could muster, Hetty forced her arm down until the whip landed on Lady Alice's posterior with a dull thud. There was a gasp, then a cry of, 'Again!'

Some barrier had been broken inside Hetty, some taboo shattered. The next time it was easier, the third time easier still. She could feel a rush of power within, a dark exultation in turning the tables on her mistress, whose submissive body was standing in for that of her hated master.

'Do not spare me!' the abject woman cried. 'More, more of this sweet punishment!'

Sweet punishment? Hetty pondered these words for an instant, but was then urged on again. She began to beat her repeatedly with the leather crop, producing a regular rhythm, and forcing the woman's lower regions repeatedly against the bedding. The cries of her victim turned into one long, low moan, which nevertheless held a strange note of satisfaction.

Hetty's right arm was tiring and her blows began to fall less severely, but her mistress would not allow any slackening. 'Harder, harder!' she moaned. 'I... am... almost there!'

Her gasps were loud and her moans guttural. Hetty marvelled at how quickly her mistress's veneer of civilised composure could crack, turning her into something more like a hungry animal, with neither shame nor dignity.

'Use your hand on me, your hand,' came the urgent command.

Hetty put down the crop and knelt at her mistress's side. Beneath the thin silk she could see how pink the buttocks were and imagined how they must be smarting, yet still the voracious woman wanted more punishment.

'Quickly! Slap me hard!'

It was difficult to make contact at first. Hetty disliked the way the flesh shuddered beneath her palm and there was a musky odour in the air, but she knew she had to obey in this peculiar charade of servant-turned-master. As she smacked the slack cheeks of Lady Alice's upturned rear the moaning grew more excited and sensual. Soon Hetty was aware that, instead of allowing herself to receive the blows passively, her mistress was wriggling and rubbing herself against the padded mattress.

'Oh yes, punish me more,' she moaned. 'Do not let up until I tell you.'

Hetty began belabouring her with renewed force, in a kind of desperation. She thwacked her with a resounding noise over and over, until her mistress fell face down upon the bed emitting a long, loud groan of fulfilment.

'Enough...' she uttered at long last, and Hetty sank in exhaustion into the nearest chair. Her palm was stinging from the repeated punishment that had been inflicted upon it, and her whole arm ached from the unaccustomed exercise. Glancing down, Hetty noticed that she had – quite inadvertently – assumed the posture of a man, sitting with open thighs in her rough breeches.

There was a deep silence in the room, broken only by Lady Alice's ragged breathing as she lay, semi-conscious upon the bed. After a while Hetty grew anxious for her

state of health.

'My lady,' she called, nervously. 'Are you feeling well?'

To her surprise, Lady Alice leapt up in a sprightly fashion, smoothing down her skirts and smiling broadly. 'Oh yes, I am quite well. And you did well too, my dear, very well indeed. I am sure we have inspired some manly spirit in you after that little episode. Now, let us get you out of those clothes. I feel quite parched, and would like you to bring me some tea.'

When Hetty emerged from the bedroom in her normal clothes, and made her way down to the kitchen, she felt as if she had been away from the everyday world for some considerable time. The defiant mood she had experienced still lurked within her, and she felt she would brook no nonsense from anyone. So when, on her way back up to her quarters with the tea tray, she encountered Sir Victor lurking on the landing, she held her head high and stared him full in the face in a way she would not have dared to do, some few hours before.

'So, missy, you are recovered from the ordeal I put you through last night,' he said, a hideous smile on his mottled face and his thick brows quizzically arched. 'It was not so bad now, was it? Every woman likes to be the centre of attention, and you were certainly that. You will be pleased to know that my guests were of the opinion that you made an excellent model, mademoiselle.'

'Really?' she answered, throwing him a look of utter contempt. 'Then I value their opinion not one jot.'

He thrust his waxy moustache close to her cheek, murmuring with quiet menace, 'I shall have you my dear, never fear!' accompanying his words with such a hard pinch on her behind that she nearly dropped the tray, and her eyes watered all the way upstairs.

The thought of posing as a man in Sir Victor's company was both exciting and terrifying. What if she were discovered? Her master would have a perfect reason for

punishing her horribly in front of his guests, and her soul shrank from the prospect. Yet the thought of befriending Leonard, of being able to talk to him in a man-to-man way and perhaps grow close to him, was a delightful antidote to her fear.

With mixed emotions, Hetty continued to her mistress's quarters where she found Lady Alice in a calm and contented disposition. 'I have already informed Leonard that your brother shall be visiting us tomorrow,' she announced. 'He is looking forward to meeting Master George Addleston, very much indeed!'

Chapter Five

‘Leonard, I’d like to introduce you to George Addleston, Miss Hetty’s brother.’

Hetty listened to Lady Alice’s words with trepidation. Now was the moment of truth: would Leonard’s keen blue eyes penetrate her disguise and expose her as an impostor? She struggled to remain composed as she held out her hand.

But no such unmasking occurred. Leonard gave her a beaming smile and took her hand in his. The warmth of his handshake seemed to fill her very soul.

‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance, George. Miss Hetty is a very valuable addition to our household, as I’m sure my mother must have told you. You bear a striking resemblance to your sister, I must say. You are not twins, by any chance?’

Hetty was caught off guard. ‘N-no,’ she mumbled, only just remembering to deepen her voice. ‘I am older than her.’

‘Well I should like to see the pair of you together, to compare for myself.’

Horror-struck, she remained silent while Lady Alice came to her rescue. ‘I’m afraid that will not be possible today. Hetty is accompanying me on a visit to Lady Cosham.’

‘In that case, allow me to keep you company, George,’ Leonard declared, jovially. ‘Shall I take him on a tour of the estate, mamma?’

‘A splendid idea,’ Lady Alice beamed, then left the room.

Hetty felt awkward, not knowing what young men said to each other when they were alone, but Leonard’s friendly

manner soon put her at her ease.

‘How did you find the journey?’ he asked. ‘Not too tedious, I hope. I dare say this is your first visit up north, am I right?’

‘Yes, sir. The countryside is more wild than down south. I think I prefer it.’

‘Well said. But you must not call me “sir”, please, call me Leo. That was the name I had at school, and I prefer it.’ He sighed. ‘Things are very different here at home.’

‘You enjoyed your schooldays then, s... Leo?’

‘Not in every way, I have to say. I was not much one for study, neither did I excel on the sports field. But the male camaraderie I experienced there was wonderful.’

‘I expect it was quite new to you – not having any brothers, I mean.’

Once she had spoken Hetty feared she had been too bold but, on the contrary, Leo seemed to welcome her interest in his welfare.

‘You understand, exactly. I have always wished for a brother, especially as my father has been less than kind to me on occasion. I fear I have borne the brunt of his ill temper too often.’

They were moving out of the room and into the hall, so Hetty was afraid that Sir Victor might appear at any moment. They were fortunate, however, and reached the door to the garden without encountering him.

It was a pleasant day and Hetty enjoyed the freedom of being able to walk abroad in her men’s boots. Her clothing and footwear helped her to stride in a masculine fashion, rather than take the modest steps more becoming to her sex, and she was soon revelling in the exercise. Leo talked freely about the history of his family as they wandered through the well-kept gardens then across the lawns, towards the stream. Soon they were drawing near to the octagonal summerhouse, whose blue curtains remained tightly drawn.

Hetty hoped they would walk straight past, ignoring the place, but Leo made a beeline for it and ostentatiously tried the handle of the padlocked door. 'You see? This is always kept locked and padlocked. What secrets lie inside? You may well wonder. It may surprise you to know that I have never ventured there, because it is the exclusive domain of my father.'

'Does he use it as his study?' Hetty enquired with feigned innocence, although she could hardly keep from laughing.

'I rather think not,' Leo replied, darkly. 'See how the curtains are always kept drawn? This is where Sir Victor retires with his cronies, and they indulge in midnight revels. The exact nature of these revels I have yet to discover, but I fear I may be forced to experience them myself, soon.'

'*Forced*? You make it sound like an ordeal.'

'An ordeal is exactly what I fear, dear George, but no more of that. It puts me in mind of my first days at school, when I prepared myself for just such an ordeal but was pleasantly surprised. Let us walk by the river for a while, and I shall tell you about it.'

Hetty felt very much at ease with Leo now. He was treating her like a brother and she suspected that she was becoming his confidant, too. The warmth that flowed between them was comforting, and she lost some of her nervousness about being discovered.

'I am sure you know nothing about life at public school, George, so if there is anything you do not understand, please ask,' Leo continued. 'It is traditional for new boys to undergo some sort of test, you know. This is carried out by the boys themselves, and is a kind of initiation into their closed society. All quite primitive, really, and reminiscent of those native tribes one reads about. Anyway, the particular test devised at my school was a form of corporal punishment.'

'Oh,' Hetty gasped, remembering how Leo had

witnessed her own chastisement at his father's hand. 'How terrible!'

'That was what I thought, at first,' Leo agreed. 'I dreaded the prospect, naturally. The older boys laid it on thick, saying how I would not be able to sit down for a week, and so forth. I enquired whether any implement was used, but they just laughed. A time and date was fixed for the "ceremony" and I was warned that if a single tear were to fall from my eye, or a single cry escape my lips, I would be considered a traitor to my sex and no better than a feeble woman. You can imagine how that increased my apprehension.'

Hetty felt obliged to stick up for her own kind. 'In my view, it is men who are the babies when it comes to physical pain,' she said. 'My sister is a model of fortitude.'

'I dare say, George, but no man wishes to be considered effeminate by his peers. I had already seen how certain boys, called "fags", were despised by everyone. They were forced to become the servants – one might almost say slaves – of the worst bullies in the school. It was rumoured that they were forced to perform all kinds of debasing and demeaning tasks for their juvenile masters.'

'How many of you had to endure this "humiliation", Leo?'

'The ceremonies stretched out over some weeks, with three boys being initiated at a time. Lots were drawn, to determine the order of chastisement, and I found that I had come last. But I jump ahead of myself. Let me tell you about it just as it happened.'

They had reached a rustic seat by the stream, and Leo indicated that they should sit there together. Hetty felt her heart swell up with fond feelings. No one had treated her quite this kindly before, and he a well-born gentleman, too. It was making her feel quite light-headed.

'We were summoned to the prefects' common room one night, after supper. The three of us looked quite pale

and trembling, I recall, as we stood outside that great oak door wondering what fate lay before us. The ritual was that each of us should knock three times and be refused. Then the head boy would open the door and, seeing our wretched abasement, have pity on us and let us in.'

'Wretched abasement?' Hetty queried.

'As soon as the door opened we had to throw ourselves, face down, upon the floor. It was part of the old tradition, you see. Something about scholars and paupers – I never did quite understand. We had to make ourselves low before the prefects, which was quite amusing seeing as one of our trio was the son of a duke, and the head boy's father was only a captain of industry. Anyway, in time-honoured tradition we were allowed to crawl into the room on our hands and knees.'

'What happened next?' Hetty asked, finding herself surprisingly eager to know more.

'The casting of lots. We each had to put our hand in a black bag and pull out a piece of paper with a number on. Mine was three, signifying my turn was third and last. The duke's son groaned, I remember, to discover that he was to be the first.'

'Did you have to watch?'

'No, that was the strange part about it. While one of us was undergoing the initiation, the other two were blindfolded. But our ears were not stopped, so we could hear everything.'

'Was there much to hear?'

'Oh yes, my dear George, a great deal. At first a hush fell over the room as we were made to stand in a row and the head boy read out the charge against us.'

'Charge?'

'We were supposed to be trespassing, you see. It was all part of the ceremony. We were deemed to be there under false pretences, masquerading as men, when we were really no better than girls. We deserved punishment

for our effrontery, and so forth.'

The idea of men masquerading as girls sent shivers of apprehension through Hetty. Would her disguise ever be discovered? If it were to come to the ears of Sir Victor, she imagined that she might suffer a similar fate to that which Leo was now describing.

'There were some Latin phrases uttered, to which we had to make our response, that we had already learned by rote: *hoc nobis cordi est* – "This is agreeable to us". It was a form of consent, you see, for that which was to follow. We had to agree to it *omnium voluntate*, by the wish of all. You see how these words are engraved upon my memory, George, to this day.'

'They made you agree to your own punishment?' Hetty asked, wonderingly.

'Oh yes, giving consent was an important part of the ritual. We gave ourselves over to the head boy, body and soul, trusting him to administer the chastisement mercifully.'

'What was he like, this head boy?'

For the first time Leo looked vaguely uncomfortable. 'I was but a young lad and he was almost a man. He had fair hair and eyes that were a clear green. He was tall and strong, captain of rugby, superb at rowing and a tennis ace. I think – excuse me saying this, George – I believe I was half in love with him. Such affections do happen when impressionable youths are in the company of older boys, and the sexual urge was awakening in me. As you shall see.'

He paused, and Hetty sensed his embarrassment. She longed to say she understood how he felt because she felt much the same way about him, but of course that was impossible.

'Blindfolded and trembling, I waited for the first of my companions to submit to the ritual beating. It seemed a long time before the Latin chanting ceased and I heard

Crabtree – that was the head boy – declare, “Bring me the Rod of Chastisement!” I tried to imagine what kind of rod this might be: how long, how thick and of what material. I wondered whether the punishment would be taken on the hand, or on the seat of the trousers. Were the prefects all witnesses to the humiliation or were their eyes covered, like mine? A thousand questions surged through my adolescent mind, all attended by an excitement that was a kind of fever.’

Hetty also felt excited at the thought of this all-male ceremony. Now, wearing men’s garb herself, she could feel the rough chafing of the cloth against her tender thighs, and the bench was hard beneath her buttocks without skirt, drawers and petticoat to act as a cushion. It made Leo’s words seem all the more real to her.

‘You cannot imagine how tense the atmosphere was, George,’ Leo continued. ‘A hush fell in the common room, the silence so still and thick you could almost breathe it in with the air. There was a loud swish that made me jump, and I realised that Crabtree was trying out his implement before inflicting it upon his first victim. A slight thrill went round the room, a movement of air that made my skin tingle. I believe my senses were in a preternaturally heightened state, George. I have experienced it only once since, at a séance I once attended.’

Hetty was impressed by Leo’s worldliness, and gazed at his flushed face in admiration. He had been to public school and mixed with the sons of dukes. He had dabbled in spiritualism, and now he was heir to a grand estate. Yet he was sitting here talking to her, man to man, in the most natural way possible.

‘The next stroke made contact with the noble rear of the duke’s son. I heard the thwack of the rod on naked flesh and trembled, but I was quite unprepared for what followed. A huge roar went round the common room, accompanied by applause. Remembering the stricture not

to utter any noise when the rod fell, I began to wonder whether this was an act of mercy on their part, a chorus of approval which also served to drown any gasps or sighs, moans and groans.'

'You must have been terrified,' Hetty murmured, in a low, gruff voice.

'I confess I was somewhat discomposed at that juncture,' Leo admitted, with a wry grin.

'How many strokes did the poor chap receive?'

'Six of the best, of course. That is the traditional number. It does not sound very many but, believe me George, it is more than enough! I listened with mounting terror as the measured strokes were delivered, each followed by the chorus of approval. There was something unutterably primitive about the procedure, like a public flogging in some far flung corner of the Empire, and it stirred strange emotions in me, feelings I had never experienced before.'

Hetty fancied she knew just what he meant. The strange ordeal she suffered at Sir Victor's hands, when her body was used for demonstration purposes, had aroused similar emotions in her. It was disconcerting to feel such new and alien sensations yet seductively exciting, too. Even listening to Leo's story was producing echoes of those thrilling tremors.

'His sentence executed, the duke's son returned to stand beside me. I could feel the warmth emitting from his tormented body, and hear the ragged breathing as he struggled to regain control. At one point he brushed against me, as if he could hardly stand, and I put out a hand to steady him. "Thank you," he murmured. Then, more quietly, "Oh God!"

But it was now the next boy's turn and again I felt the dark fear run through me, suffusing my body like fortified wine, or as if the blood in my veins had been enriched with oxygen. I struggle to find a metaphor for the heady mix of fear and exhilaration, of apprehension and... yes,

I am not afraid to admit it, of a perverse longing to become the victim of so handsome and strapping a man. I could imagine his brawny arm wielding the rod, his green eyes narrowed in concentration, his mouth set in a determined line. There was something magnificent in the image I conjured up in my mind's eye: the image of a man born to master others.'

'A master who is kind, and just...'

'Precisely. I do not refer to the likes of my despicable father, who has already dominated your dear sister in ways... but I digress, more of that later. I confess I am enjoying telling you this tale, George. It is reviving pleasant memories.'

'Pleasant?'

Leo smiled and patted his hand. 'I know this will be hard for you to fathom, and I don't know whether I can even explain it to myself. But my overall memory of that extraordinary night is one of pleasure. As I awaited my turn my senses were subject to a kind of anaesthesia, and the tense atmosphere, coupled with the ecstatic cries of the assembled prefects, made my soul yearn to be the object of their attention.'

'Even at the price of being humiliated?' Hetty asked, in disbelief.

He nodded. 'As I was led towards the place of punishment my heart was thudding loud and fast in my chest, and there was a dull ache in the pit of my stomach. Two pairs of hands seized my arms and held me fast, while another pair deftly removed my trousers and pulled down my long johns to reveal my bare arse. I was still blindfolded, of course, which freed me from the immediate sense of shame I would have felt if I could have seen all those eyes staring at my naked buttocks.'

Recalling how she had felt when stripped to her undergarments, Hetty gave a sympathetic nod.

'I heard the swish of the rod in the air, a kind of

forewarning that Crabtree gave to each of his victims, and then the first blow fell. It stung like blazes and, although I managed not to cry out, I did utter a gasp as the air was – quite literally – knocked out of my lungs. Following the first couple of strokes, however, my rear began to glow with the pain and a warmth that I can only describe as “delicious” overtook me. The whole of my lower torso seemed on fire, and a languid stupor came over me so that, by the third or fourth stroke, I was in a state of blissful suspension from everyday reality.’

‘How strange.’

‘I confess it is strange. As I said, I am at a loss to explain it to this day. My loins were stirring with a sweet energy, which intensified as I imagined the scene I was part of: held on each side by two stalwart youths while a god-like creature administered a severe beating, his muscled arm rising and falling like a piston in a steam engine. To be part of that exquisite tableau seemed to me not so much a punishment, as a privilege.’

‘What happened afterwards?’

‘Some more Latin phrases were uttered, with a chorus of responses from the prefects. I did not pay much attention to it, still smarting from my lathering and in an oddly detached state. But then I heard my name called, and was told that I was the “Chosen One”. Chosen for what? I asked myself. I was made to walk forward, again supported by two helpers, and pushed down until I was kneeling upon a plump cushion. In my imagination it was a red velvet cushion with gold tassels, although I never discovered whether it was anything of the kind.’

‘You were still blindfolded, then?’

‘Yes. It was only when I reached the exalted status of prefect myself that I was able to see the whole proceedings.’ Leo’s eyes turned misty. ‘Oh, the bliss of witnessing what I had once endured! But let me continue, for this is the most delicate part of the initiation that I

received and I do not wish to offend your ears.'

'You will not offend me,' Hetty said confidently.

'Indeed, I hope not. But you have never known the hothouse atmosphere of a public school, George, and may well be shocked to know what goes on inside that closed world. Remember that we were all young and lusty lads, filled with the natural urges that I am sure you yourself have felt from time to time.'

Their eyes met, briefly, and Hetty found herself blushing, but Leo seemed not to notice.

'A hush went over the room as some dumb show was enacted, and then another Latin phrase was spoken, with great solemnity: *Ante omnium oculos* – before the eyes of all. I wondered what this meant, of course. It was followed by, *puer sedecim annorum* – a boy aged sixteen, then something about *summus honor* – the greatest honour. I understood the words, for I had been well versed in the Latin tongue at my prep school, but the import of those words I could only guess at. But in a few minutes, all became clear. I was that boy of sixteen years, chosen to perform a task which was deemed by all present to be the highest honour.'

'And what was that?' Hetty asked, innocently.

The flush had crept into her cheeks now spread to his, as if by contagion. 'I can hardly bring myself to speak of it.'

'Then do not,' Hetty said, although she was eaten up with curiosity.

'Suffice to say, I was obliged to pay lip service to the head boy – in the most literal manner. I had never performed such a shameful deed before, and I was grateful for the relative anonymity of the blindfold. Yet, I confess...' He paused, his cheeks reddening further. 'I have to admit, George, that the task was not entirely distasteful to me. I retained my vision of the handsome Crabtree throughout, and when I sensed the manly

proportions of his virile member I began to feel honoured indeed. Yet there was something else. A kind of freedom in being excused all responsibility for actions which, in any other circumstances, would have filled me with the greatest degree of shame, guilt and self-loathing.'

Although Hetty struggled to imagine what this 'shameful deed' might have been, she found that she could understand Leo's feelings very well. A glimmer of such emotion had seized her when she was laid out on the dinner table for the delectation of the gentlemen guests. She knew she had not been unable to avoid such a situation without risking her very livelihood, so she had endured the humiliation in silence. After a while, the tension and anxiety melted away, leaving a profound feeling of resignation that was a kind of bliss.

To her surprise, Leo suddenly took her hand and patted it. He smiled. 'George, it has done me so much good to confide in you. Of course, I have never told anyone outside school about this.'

'I will never tell a soul, neither,' Hetty swore, throatily.

He gave her a brief, somewhat embarrassed hug then stood up and began striding back along the path as if no confidences had ever passed his lips.

As they returned to the house Sir Victor, who had been in the stables, hailed them. 'Leo! I have been meaning to speak to you about – oh! Who is your companion?'

'This is George, brother of Miss Hetty. He is here on a visit.'

'How do you do, sir?' Hetty said, lowering her eyes.

She was terrified of being found out, but Sir Victor merely said, brusquely, 'New pal, eh? I suppose you'll be wanting to invite him to your birthday bash.'

'Oh yes, father, I should like that,' Leo said, with genuine warmth in his voice.

'Very well. Now come with me to the stables. I want to measure you up for a new saddle.'

'I... er... had better return to my sister,' Hetty mumbled, but Sir Victor had already robbed her of her companion and the pair of them were making for the stables at speed.

Feeling rather sad at being alone again, Hetty returned slowly to her quarters to find Lady Alice eagerly awaiting her.

'How did you fare?' she asked, locking the bedroom door behind them. 'Did your subterfuge succeed? I want to know every detail of your conversation.'

Hetty's heart sank, since she was not prepared for this. She had promised not to reveal Leo's story to anyone, so what would she now tell her mistress?

'May I get back into my own clothes?' she asked, hoping for a few minutes' grace.

'Of course, dear. Forgive me, for not thinking of your comfort. I dare say you found wearing men's clothes a trial.'

The role of mistress and maid was reversed again as Lady Alice helped her out of her rough working men's togs and into her servant's dress. After Hetty had removed her wig, Lady Alice insisted that she should sit at her own dressing table while she brushed her long hair out.

'Now, tell me everything,' she demanded, in a soothing voice.

'First, I am invited to the birthday celebrations,' she began.

Lady Alice gave a trilling laugh. 'Capital! I knew my Leo would befriend you. He is such a kind soul. And did his father agree?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'You have been gone a while. What did you talk about with my son?'

'He told me stories of his school days.'

'Did he, indeed? And what stories were they?'

'Oh, tales of his friends, the prefects, the masters...'

'Don't be vague, my dear. I want to know all.'

Over the next ten minutes Hetty let her imagination run riot. She invented characters, incidents, anecdotes, some running close to what Leo had told her but never venturing into the murky ground of nakedness, blindfolds, chastisement and the like. Lady Alice listened to it all, apparently without suspicion, then said, 'So he said nothing about his father?'

Hetty was relieved to be able to tell the truth, for a change. 'Only that Sir Victor has been unkind to him at times, and showed him ill temper.'

'And about the summerhouse – nothing there?'

'Yes. As we approached it he said only Sir Victor and his friends could enter there. He knows that late night revels are held there, and he believes that he may be initiated into them on his birthday, but he is not relishing the prospect.'

Lady Alice smiled. 'Never mind, Hetty, for you shall be there to support him in the guise of the manly George, will you not? It is all going precisely according to plan.' She lifted up the heavy curtain of Hetty's hair with one hand and softly stroked her neck with the other, sending shivering tingles down her spine. Then she wound the hair into a topknot and secured it with pins. 'I shall look forward tremendously to your account of that evening,' she murmured.

A strange atmosphere was developing in the closeted privacy of the bedroom, and Hetty found herself wanting to be elsewhere. The voracious appetite of her mistress for salacious details, her pawing fingers and conspiratorial tone were making her feel most uneasy. What dangerous business had she become embroiled in? She feared Sir Victor's wrath if her masquerade were ever discovered, but equally she shrank from exposing the machinations of his wife. It had been made quite clear that if the attempt to penetrate the secret fortress of the summerhouse failed, exposing Hetty as an impostor, she would bear the brunt

of the master's ire, and her mistress would not lift a finger to save her.

I am caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, she thought. But there was one light of hope, one shining beacon in the murky darkness of all that dangerous intrigue: Master Leonard. For his sake, Hetty would endure any amount of cruel punishment.

Chapter Six

A new girl was hired to take Rose's place, so they were not shorthanded for Master Leonard's coming-of-age party. Hetty was relieved. She had feared that her day would be spent performing countless domestic duties, leaving her tired and spent by the evening.

It had been a difficult few days. In order to avoid discovery, Hetty and Lady Alice had to devise many excuses to explain why 'George' could not be seen in company with his 'sister'. Several imaginary visits were made by Lady Alice, supposedly accompanied by her maid, and many urgent tasks were devised. The result was that George was often free to wander around the house and grounds in Leonard's company. They played chess and draughts together when the weather was inclement, or went to inspect the horses. One fine afternoon they took a walk over to the home farm and fed carrots to Leonard's beloved pet: Hercules, a pit pony, rescued from premature slaughter.

For Hetty it was sheer bliss to be so much in his company and privy to his secret thoughts. The day before his birthday she found him fuming in the library and asked, quite naturally, what was perturbing him.

'It's that wretched father of mine!' he exploded. 'I know it is the duty of a son to be respectful to his parent, but I believe that respect should be mutual. He still treats me like a child, George, and I will not stand for it.'

'What has he said – or done?'

'He actually suggested that I should make more free with the female servants of the house, mimicking his own disgusting ways. He had the nerve to say, "They expect it

from the master". He maintains that practising such familiarities as bottom pinching, hand holding or cheek kissing will help me when it comes to courting.'

'And you have no such inclination?' Hetty asked, wide-eyed, although she could not help reflecting that if he should practise such familiarities on *her* she would be loath to slap his hand or push him away. Strange that, since coming from Sir Victor, such impertinence would strike her as loathsome indeed!

Leo's expression turned grave. 'If – and when – I find a girl who steals my heart, I should wish to behave in a chivalrous manner towards her, not take unspeakable liberties. I confess, George, that I sometimes wonder whether I am truly my father's son.'

Hetty could understand his reluctance to acknowledge that brute as his father, but certain physical traits could not be denied. Leo had inherited his father's blue eyes, although Sir Victor's were faded and watery, as well as his sensual mouth and proud bearing. It was unlikely though, thought Hetty, that he would suffer from gout in later life or any other diseases born of excess and debauchery.

'I am so glad you are to attend my birthday celebrations,' Leo said, suddenly clasping Hetty's hand and giving her such a frank and piercing look that she could hardly endure the incandescence of his gaze. 'Whatever trials and tribulations my cursed father has in store for me, I shall bear them with more fortitude, knowing that I have a friend on my side.'

'It will be hard for me to stand by and watch you suffer any indignities,' Hetty admitted.

Leo took both her hands in his. 'Believe me, I know how that feels. I had to... well, you may as well know. I had to stand by while my father heaped such indignities upon your very own sister. It was impossible for me to intervene, since there were others present. But I felt for

the poor girl, and if ever I am in a position to help her avoid such a fate again I swear I shall do so.'

Hetty murmured, 'I thank you, sir,' seeing fit to add, 'she is a maid of good reputation, that I can swear to.'

Leonard sighed. 'I know – any man of sensibility could see that. Indeed, she will some day make an excellent wife, I dare say. Does she... does she have a sweetheart, someone from your village perhaps?'

'Oh, no sir!' Hetty said, rather more forcefully than she intended.

Leo nodded and sank into thought for a few moments, so that Hetty felt rather awkward. Posing as George put quite a strain on her at the best of times, and having to talk about herself as if she were someone else was even more of an imposition.

The great day dawned bright and clear, and Hetty was not the only one who felt a surge of excitement at the thought of that evening's entertainment. Her mistress too, seemed agitated.

'When you have told me what goes on behind the closed doors of the summerhouse, I shall be content,' she promised, as Hetty was arranging her hair. 'It will please me greatly to know my husband's little secrets.'

'I hope so, my lady.'

'We must just pray that you are not exposed in any way,' Lady Alice continued, thoughtfully.

She had expressed Hetty's deepest fears, for she too feared exposure – and of a more literal kind. Remembering how Sir Victor had made free with her person when she was in her underwear, her dread was that she would somehow be called upon to remove her clothes in the company of Leonard and the other guests. What shame and ignominy would be heaped upon her then!

Later that morning, Hetty was sent up to the dining room to clear away the breakfast things. There she found

Leonard, alone at the table, finishing his devilled kidneys.

‘Oh, sir!’ she exclaimed, flustered, because she had thought the room would be empty.

He gave her a charming smile. ‘Miss Hetty – do not discommode yourself, I am just finishing here. Please go about your business.’

‘Oh, Master Leonard – congratulations!’ she blurted out.

‘Thank you, Hetty. But I confess I don’t feel myself to be one jot older or wiser than I was yesterday, let alone more grown up.’

They both laughed, breaking the ice. Hetty found it odd to be talking to the young master with such reserve when, as George, she had been so intimate with him. The situation grew even more unreal, however, when Leonard asked, ‘Where is your brother, Hetty? I should like to speak to him.’

‘Er... he... I don’t exactly know, sir,’ she hedged. ‘Would you like me to find him for you?’

‘No hurry,’ Leonard said, drinking up his tea. ‘Tell him I shall be in the library for most of the morning, catching up with my correspondence.’

Hetty did not tell her mistress that she was going to pose as George that morning, since she presumed it would be a short meeting. After she had taken the trays of dirty crockery and cutlery down to the kitchen, she returned to her quarters knowing that Lady Alice was still talking to cook about the celebratory evening meal. She hastily donned her men’s habit – an outfit she was becoming used to wearing – and soon presented herself in the library.

‘Ah, George,’ Leo beamed, after she had knocked and entered. Hetty fancied the smile she received from him when dressed as a man was more hearty, and less wistful, than the one he had given her earlier, when she had been Miss Hetty.

She was invited to sit down in one of the tub-shaped

leather chairs. Now it was second nature to her to hoist up her tweed trousers at the knees, to prevent bagging, then to sit with thighs apart and her clean boots firmly planted on the fine Persian carpet.

‘I wanted to talk to you about this evening’s proceedings,’ Leo began, in a low voice. ‘As you know, I am somewhat apprehensive about what lies in store for me. My father has been dropping hints of late about initiating me into manhood, and I fear that something akin to what happened to me at school may occur tonight.’

‘Really?’ Hetty’s surprise was so genuine that her voice shot up an octave and she was obliged to give a cough afterwards. In a more gruff tone she added, ‘You mean, some kind of physical punishment?’

Leo gave a grim laugh. ‘I am sure Sir Victor would not regard it as punishment! But all I want to say to you is this: whatever happens to me tonight, whatever you witness in the privacy of the summerhouse, I beg you not to show undue surprise. Still less, would I want you to protest, or intervene on my behalf in any way. Do you understand?’

‘I – I am not sure.’

‘Then be assured, George, that I can fend for myself where my father is concerned. I would not want you dragged into it. I say this not just for your own sake, but for that of your sweet sister, Hetty. She is a dear girl, and any wrath that you might incur in this household would almost certainly rebound upon her. Neither of us would want that, would we?’

‘Oh, no sir!’ Hetty exclaimed, feelingly.

‘Just remember that in a few days you will be gone, back to the bosom of your family, and the time you have spent here will seem no more significant than a dream.’ He sighed. ‘I envy you, George. Your life must be so uncomplicated, compared to mine.’

Hetty almost laughed aloud at this. Little did he know

what complex machinations she had been obliged to perform at Lady Alice's behest!

When she left Leonard, she almost bumped into Sir Victor in the corridor outside. 'Is my son in there?' he enquired, brusquely, twirling one end of his moustache.

'Yes, sir.'

'And you – you are to be his guest tonight, are you not?' Hetty nodded. 'Well, I suppose you had better attend after dinner, too. I shall be holding a private party in Leonard's honour and things may get a little... risqué. No doubt you are used to that sort of thing, though, being a country bumpkin.' Sir Victor gave her a brief punch in the upper arm. 'Had a few tumbles in the hay with the odd dairymaid, I dare say!' He winked. 'Plenty of sport tonight, old chap! Plenty of sport!'

Chuckling, he disappeared into the library leaving Hetty feeling ill at ease. She guessed that her master's idea of 'sport' was a game where the players were paired off, and she prayed that she would not be expected to play – for either side!

The pace of life at Longton Hall was generally fairly leisured, but today it was brisk and bustling. Hetty was kept busy helping out in the kitchen but, after luncheon, Lady Alice insisted that she was needed upstairs. For an hour Hetty attended to her mistress's wardrobe, making sure that her best gown was clean and pressed, that her silk slippers were clean and her accessories in good order. She spent some time bringing the gold and diamond jewellery to sparkling life: first by immersion in clean soap suds, then by drying with a fine sponge, followed by a wipe with a soft cloth and a final buffing with chamois leather.

'You may take a rest now, Hetty,' her mistress told her. 'I shall have tea brought up at five, then you must get changed and go down for drinks with Leonard before dinner.'

Although Hetty lay quietly on the bed in her darkened room she was far too excited to sleep. By now she was more confident about her ability to pull off her masquerade, in normal circumstances. But these were not normal circumstances. What went on behind the closed doors of the summerhouse was anyone's guess. Suppose it turned out to be one of those mass orgies, such as she had heard of in ancient Rome, where clothes were removed and general debauchery took place? Then her feeble disguise would be instantly exposed.

So when the time came for her to don man's apparel, Hetty took extra care that her wig was held on securely and her breasts tightly bound beneath her vest. Lady Alice had provided her with a tidier pair of breeches for the occasion, and Hetty decided to stuff a roll of cloth into her long johns to simulate the male member, just in case she were 'de-bagged'. She dared not contemplate the consequences if the mass disrobing was to be complete, and compulsory.

Hetty could feel her heart thudding wildly as the time came for her to go downstairs, but she put on a brave face and submitted to a brief embrace from Lady Alice.

'Good luck to you, brave girl.' her mistress whispered. 'And remember, be eagle-eyed and commit all to memory. I shall expect a complete account of the proceedings when you return.'

As Hetty descended the stairs she could hear the hum of male voices coming from the drawing room and her stomach contracted with fear. Now was the moment she would surely be found out. She affected a male swagger as best she could, and gave an experimental cough to deepen her voice, but her hands were trembling as she knocked at the door.

To her utmost relief it was Leonard who answered. 'George!' he smiled, shaking her hand. 'I am so pleased to see you!'

‘Congratulations, sir.’ Hetty murmured, proffering the gift that Lady Alice had given her to present to her son. She did not even know what was inside the pretty red and gold paper.

He unwrapped it eagerly. ‘A pen – how splendid! I shall use it to write in the five-year diary mother has given me.’

Leonard led her over to a table where his gifts were displayed. The diary was a splendid affair, with a solid silver cover engraved with his name and the date of his coming-of-age. In addition he had a set of gentleman’s leather travelling cases, some monogrammed shirts, a leather-bound atlas, a silver hip flask and countless other items deemed indispensable to an Edwardian gentleman.

Hetty had focused upon the gifts so that she did not have to meet the eye of the other guests, but now that moment was inevitable. Leonard put his arm round her shoulders as they turned around, announcing to the room, ‘May I present to you all, my good friend George. He is here visiting his sister.’

She bowed her head, feeling very vulnerable. Sir Victor was holding court in the centre of the room and decided to throw in his two penn’orth. ‘Ah yes, the noble George. You see before you a genuine horny-handed son of toil, gentlemen. Good for Leonard to encounter such a fellow at close quarters, what?’ He then lowered his voice, but Hetty heard every word. ‘Mind you, my son will not be persuaded to mingle with the delightful *daughters* of toil. But no matter – we shall rectify that later tonight.’

A dozen pairs of male eyes looked her over, and she did her best to stare back coolly and seem unperturbed, even though every pulse in her body was ticking insistently – including one she hardly knew she had, concealed in the soft folds of her sex.

The inspection did not last long, however, as the men soon went back to their smoking, chatting and imbibing

of champagne cup. Hetty was invited to join them, and she took the glass of bubbling liquid when it was offered to her, but only sipped a little. Being unused to strong liquor she realised that if she drank every glass poured for her she would soon be quite incapable and would be bound to give herself away. Slowly she edged towards a large potted aspidistra on a corner table and, when she deemed no one was looking, she tipped a little into the plant pot to make it look as though she were drinking it all herself.

Leonard introduced her to one or two of the guests, but since the party was in his honour he was kept busy circulating and obliged to abandon Hetty to her fate. The two men she was with were middle aged country squires who, after enquiring briefly which part of the country she hailed from, omitted her entirely from their conversation about the price of oats and the likelihood of a good harvest, which suited her well. She was content to appear interested, without having to contribute a word, but when the dinner gong sounded it was a relief.

At dinner, Hetty was to be seated opposite Leonard, which pleased her well. There was a snooty young woman to her right, and Lady Cosham to her left. The old lady was deaf as a post, but her mind was still active and she caused Hetty some embarrassment when she actually recognised the clothes she was wearing as having come from the bring and buy sale.

‘So *you*’re the young gent that Lady Alice wanted kitted out,’ she said, loudly. ‘Well, well. I must say you look a lot finer in that shirt than the original owner, Bob Barnaby. No doubt Alice had the collar and cuffs turned for you.’

Hetty was so embarrassed that she could feel her cheeks flushing red and she prayed that no one would notice, and no one did. The snooty woman was engaged in conversation with a rather handsome young man on her right, and Lady Cosham immediately turned to the man.

on her left, but Hetty did not mind being ignored. The food was delicious and she could steal frequent glances across the table at Leonard, who seemed to be revelling in the glamour that attaining his majority had conferred.

As the meal progressed through what seemed like endless courses, Hetty found it a novel experience to be waited on and treated like any other honoured guest. She was nervous too, of course. In matters of dining etiquette she was used to thinking as a servant, not as a member of the middle classes. Although she was aware she should use her cutlery from the outside in, and that a fork should be employed with its tines facing down and so forth, there was the constant anxiety that she was breaking some rule of which she was totally unaware and she could only hope to be excused on the grounds of being a 'country bumpkin'.

She tried to observe her mistress's behaviour, but since Lady Alice was seated at the far end of the table it was difficult to see exactly how she was comporting herself. However, she copied the custom of leaving a small portion of food on the plate from every course, even though it went against the grain considering what small fare the people of her own class had. Most of it was exotic and luxurious, beyond their wildest dreams. She herself had never imagined she would be feasting on lobster salad, galantine of veal, grouse and pheasant, to name but a few dishes, whilst the custards, jellies, blancmanges and charlottes presented for dessert sent her head spinning.

As the meal neared its end, Hetty could feel her head swimming with inebriation, too. She had tried to take only a few sips from each glass but there had been many glasses, filled with a variety of wines, and the cumulative effect of the alcohol upon her inexperienced female constitution was beginning to show.

When the ladies finally rose to withdraw, Hetty almost joined them but remembered just in time. Instead of

remaining at the dining table, Sir Victor urged his guests to progress with him to the summerhouse where, he assured them, port, cigars and many other delicious treats would be laid on for their delectation.

As she left the room, Lady Alice threw her maidservant a meaningful look and Hetty remembered she had to give an account of the proceedings later. She must keep her wits about her and be alert to every detail. Nervously, she hovered near the door as the men filed out until she was able to fall into step with Leonard, who gave her a warm and encouraging smile.

‘Now for the real business of the evening,’ he murmured, as they entered the corridor. ‘Chin up, George; this is man’s work, so we might as well look as manly as possible.’

Hetty took this to mean that she was looking too timid, so she thrust her chest out and strode along in as masculine a style as she could muster.

The cool night air was sobering to her spirits and by the time they had tramped over the lawn she was feeling more clear-headed. The lights were already on in the octagonal building, and there was a faint murmur of voices from within. Sir Victor waited until they were all assembled at the door, then threw it open with a grand gesture.

‘Welcome, friends!’ he said, with a magnanimous grin. ‘Welcome to the portals of pleasure!’

Hetty was astonished at the sight that met her eyes. The room was decked out like an exotic bordello, the walls decked with lush red drapes and candle-bearing sconces, while divans covered with cushions stood all around. There were pictures on the walls, which, on closer examination, proved to be of lascivious scenes. The two nearest ones caught Hetty’s eye: one showed Chinese courtesans servicing their clients in a variety of positions, and the other was an extraordinary scene called *Sapphic Strokes*, with naked women kissing and fondling each other

whilst watching one woman, of Amazon proportions, scourging another on the buttocks.

The décor was the least surprising aspect of the place, however. Lounging on the divans were a number of scantily dressed women that Hetty at once realised could only be ladies of the night. She could hardly meet their bold stares, or let her eyes fall upon their half-exposed bosoms and thighs. Instead, she turned her attention to a woman at a low table where the port decanter, glasses and cigar boxes were laid out. She appeared to be acting in the rôle of a servant but, with her flaming red locks and emerald green gown, Hetty did not recognise her as a member of the household.

Only when the crowd of guests surged towards the table, and swept Hetty along with it, did she suddenly realise who this extraordinary looking creature really was. She gasped, and gave Leonard a sharp nudge.

‘That... person,’ she muttered, ‘could it possibly be...?’

She hardly dared utter the name, but Leonard supplied it for her. ‘Eric? My father’s valet? Well spotted, old chap. He likes to dress as a female on these occasions, and of course my father indulges him.’

Hetty stared in fascination at the carefully outlined features; the eyes were shaded with blue, and the lips a bright carmine making him look like a fairground freak, but he seemed perfectly at ease in his new guise. His hands fluttered daintily over the glasses of port, and he issued an inviting smile to each man who approached, including Hetty. She held her breath, wondering if he would see through her disguise too, but he appeared completely taken in.

‘Gentlemen, find yourselves a couch!’ Sir Victor called. ‘Soon the parlour games will begin!’

The guests began to spread around the room and Hetty soon realised there was a divan for each of them, including herself, with two of the shameless women allotted to each.

She shrank from making a choice, but Leonard encouraged her.

‘See those two, George? Rather sweet looking, don’t you think? If we have to go through this ordeal it might as well be in the most congenial company we can find. You take those, and I shall take the ones next door.’

Hetty took her glass of port, declining a cigar, and tried to look bold and enthusiastic as she approached the empty couch. The two girls – neither looked much older than Hetty herself – held out slender arms to her, drawing her into their embrace like sirens. She submitted, reclining on the padded sofa as she saw the other men do, and was soon being pawed and petted, to her secret embarrassment.

‘W-what are your names?’ she asked gruffly.

The dark-haired girl, with eyes like burning coals, murmured, ‘Sally, if it please you, sir.’

‘You may call me George. And you?’

The girl with auburn hair, tumbling loosely about her bare shoulders, smiled. ‘I am Maud.’

‘Sally and Maud,’ Hetty repeated. ‘And where do you both hail from?’

‘We shall not talk about ourselves,’ Sally insisted. ‘For we should far rather talk about you, George. What a delightful slim figure you have, and such singular penetration in your eyes, as if you might bore right into the bosom of any woman who takes your fancy. I’ll warrant you have set many a virgin heart a-flutter.’

Sally’s eyes were wanton and playful, but her fingers were busily undoing the buttons of Hetty’s waistcoat and she grew alarmed. ‘You will not undress me?’

Both girls let out a peal of laughter. ‘You will be far too hot in your jacket and weskit, George,’ Maud said, pushing the jacket off Hetty’s shoulders. ‘For we intend to raise your temperature by several degrees before the evening is over.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Sally concurred, planting a juicy wet kiss on Hetty’s blushing cheek.

Fortunately the proceedings were interrupted at that point by Sir Victor clapping his hands, to gain everyone’s attention.

‘I see you are all well ensconced, gentlemen, so – let the revels begin!’

Two of the girls rose from their places and took possession of the centre of the room. They were scantily clad in diaphanous trousers with a chiffon bandeau across their breasts and they struck up sensual attitudes as they waited for the music to begin. Eric was in charge of the wind-up gramophone, and soon the exotic strains of *Scheherezade* filled the room.

Hetty watched in awe as they began swaying erotically, holding hands and face to face, their expressions conveying a deep longing. She was acutely aware of the other two girls either side of her, stroking her hands and placing soft kisses on her neck, so that she began to feel decidedly uncomfortable. Unused to intimate physical contact of any kind, she was now experiencing a surfeit and her senses were reeling under the sudden onslaught.

She glanced at Leonard on the next couch: one of his women had opened up his shirt and was actually planting kisses on his bare chest. Hetty felt a stirring deep within, a dark hunger she tried in vain to ignore. The powerful feelings gathered momentum as she looked back at the dancing pair, who were now stroking each others’ breasts with unashamed relish. Her heart was thudding with alarming power beneath the tight binding across her own breasts and she feared that, one way or another, she would soon be humiliatingly exposed.

But the sight of two females obviously pleasuring each other was so extraordinary to Hetty that her eyes were riveted on the scene, and the attentions of her companions seemed mild in comparison. As the music rose to a

crescendo, each of the dancers unhooked the other's bodice until their breasts were fully revealed: one pair quite small, round and high, the others larger, more pendulous and pear-shaped. A small ripple of appreciation went round the room as they began to caress and suckle each other, their lower halves continuing to wriggle and gyrate in a suggestive fashion.

Hetty could hardly believe that two women could behave with such absence of inhibition before an audience, or even that they would find satisfaction in each other, instead of with a man as nature intended. Yet she was obliged to accept that it must be so, for there was little suggesting that the dancers were play-acting. In the quiet passages of music she could hear their little cries and moans of pleasure, and the undulation of their hips and thighs grew all the more agitated as their bosoms swelled with desire.

'Get down to it!' one of the men shouted, and the females obliged, sinking slowly to the floor where they proceeded to divest each other of their flimsy pantaloons. Soon they were naked, except for the gaudy bangles, anklets, rings and earrings they were wearing.

Hetty felt her worldly horizons being expanded still further as the pair curled up together, each with their face between the other's thighs, and proceeded to lick and suck with noisy delight. Their hands still fondled the nipples they had made erect with desire, and as she glanced about the room Hetty saw that some of the girls were taking fresh liberties with the guests, their hands straying beneath the outer garments and doing nimble work within.

So when Maud tried to undo the buttons of her fly, Hetty was ready for her. 'Not yet,' she murmured, as if she wished to concentrate on the spectacle without distraction.

Maud instantly withdrew her hand and knelt at her feet, where she proceeded to take off Hetty's boots and socks.

She looked up enquiringly, as if to say 'Shall I go further?' and Hetty gave her a curt nod. Little harm could come of allowing her to stroke her feet, surely?

The dancers were writhing and moaning with complete abandon now, their tumid breasts heaving and their hips working hard, each striving to wrest more gratification from their partner's busy tongue.

As the music reached its final climax, so did they. Hetty felt a shudder pass through her in sympathy and then felt something soft and wet enclose her big toe. To her astonishment Maud was sucking on it, with as much apparent relish as a child enjoying a jujube. Shivers of excitement were travelling up her legs to the secret valley at the top, and Hetty could feel herself longing to cry out, to give vent to the veritable maelstrom of unfamiliar emotions that was churning around within.

She was in deep now, and there seemed to be no escape. All the while she must remind herself to keep tightly buttoned up – both literally and metaphorically – retaining the stiff upper lip of an Edwardian gent. For once she let go and allowed her true nature to reveal itself she would surely be hailed as an impostor, and then all hell would be let loose!

Chapter Seven

After the Sapphic display came to an end, with much histrionic expression of ecstasy, Sir Victor took centre floor again amidst loud applause. Hetty glanced at Leonard and saw that one of his girls was almost naked, rubbing herself against him while the other kissed the soft skin of his neck, with her hand on his fly. His eyes were quite glazed over, but Hetty couldn't work out whether from boredom or some other, more hypnotic state of sensual arousal.

'A fine hors d'oeuvre, I'm sure you will agree, gentlemen. But now it is time for my lecture on controlling the weaker sex, which I am sure you have all been eagerly awaiting.' He cleared his throat and an air of expectancy filled the room. The girls, as if at some secret signal, all sank to the floor beside the divans and sat there like household pets, curled up and passive.

Sir Victor cleared his throat, took a sip of port, then began. 'Woman, as we all know, was created for the pleasure of man. However, not all women are mindful of their true place in the order of things, which is below that of the male, their natural master. From time immemorial it has been the duty of every true male to subjugate the female of the race, to chastise and chasten her until she acknowledges her inferior status, humbly and sincerely. Only then can a woman be truly happy and fulfilled in this life.'

An enthusiastic chorus of 'Hear, hear!' went around the room, yet Hetty felt a deep sense of foreboding. She recalled how Sir Victor had practised upon her what he was now preaching, and feared that he might inflict further

indignities upon her if her gender were to be revealed in this company.

‘The manner of correction has been the topic of much debate,’ Sir Victor continued. ‘Some favour the imposition of a curfew. The ultimate expression of this is the Eastern harem, where women are forever kept indoors under the guardianship of a eunuch. There is much to be said for this method. Women know that their function is to please their master in the bedroom and, perhaps, to bear him children. No other duties are required of them, and as members of a polygamic household they are required to perform even these duties only rarely. During their long hours of leisure they may indulge themselves in the pursuit of Sapphic joys, such as we have already witnessed this evening. Some would say this was a perfect female heaven.’

The two girls at Hetty’s feet gave enthusiastic sighs of pleasure yet, to her ears, they sounded rather false, intended to impress her rather than being true expressions of their feelings. One of them bent and kissed her naked foot, invoking sharp tingles of sensation.

Sir Victor bestowed an ironic smile upon the assembled women. ‘Others favour more severe measures. Incarceration, for example, preferably in chains. Women kept in this fashion, like dogs in a kennel, often become meek and agreeable to their masters, yet something is lost in the process. To break the female spirit entirely is not desirable, for then that wanton fire, so delightful in the bedroom, may be quite extinguished by an overwhelming melancholy and dullness.’

Hetty gave Leonard a sidelong look, to see what he was making of this ‘lecture’. His expression was impassive, yet she fancied a sullen fire burned in his eyes. Did he hate his father? She could well believe so, yet he was powerless in the company of so many like-minded males who were all murmuring their approbation of their host’s

appalling words.

‘The traditional method of ensuring fidelity in the female has always been the chastity belt,’ he went on, after taking another long draw at his cigar. ‘This was designed to bar access to her privates by other men. Yet there are other ways in which a woman might betray her lord and master. Even those who would not allow another man to enter their bedroom might be unfaithful to him in thought and deed. We all know how lascivious these carnal creatures can be, how incontinent and lustful, how insatiable in their desires. When their master is absent they may take it upon themselves to discover the pleasures of the flesh with their own wanton hands.’

A murmur of disdain went through the assembly, yet Hetty was well aware that they were all enjoying this discourse immensely. Some were toying with their women all the while, fondling their naked breasts or stroking their behinds, as if to underline their absolute possession of these treasures.

‘Is this not, gentlemen, the most cruel betrayal of our manly potency?’ Sir Victor exclaimed, his thick brows lifted quizzically and his voice raised in indignation. ‘A woman should hold herself in readiness for the satisfaction that only her rightful mate can bring her. She should not anticipate those joys by stealing them from him, in his absence. His hands alone are fit to caress her intimately, and his proud organ is the only true instrument of her delight. All else is no less than blasphemy!’

‘Ay, blasphemy!’ came a chorus of assent.

‘Blasphemy against Hymen, the sacred god of marriage, and guardian of a man’s rights over his wife. To prevent such foul deeds man has invented some ingenious preventatives, chastity devices that permit the woman to pass water whilst preventing access to her privates. A woman prevented from performing acts of self-pollution will be all the more eager for her master’s attentions when

he releases her from this bondage.'

Hetty could sense that some of the male guests were growing restive. They were eager to proceed with the evening's entertainment, riven with delicious suspense, torn between the sweet torment of their desire and the strong urge for satisfaction.

'But even the most extreme preventative measures cannot be infallible,' Sir Victor said, his voice grave with disapproval. 'There will always be women, daughters of Eve, who through their feminine wiles will betray their worthy masters in the most unworthy fashion. For them, corporal punishment is the only effective cure and deterrent. Erica, wheel on the Chevalet for the demonstration.'

The audience grew alert at these words, anticipating a spectacle. Eric, alias Erica, went behind a screen and brought out a kind of ladder on castors, freestanding and with padding on one side. He wheeled it out to the centre of the room then withdrew, leaving Sir Victor to explain its function.

'This is the Chevalet, or Berkley Horse, invented by that wonderful lady Theresa Berkley, some eighty years ago. It was originally intended for her gentlemen clients, but as you shall see it is equally useful for the correction of members of her own sex.'

Hetty shuddered: what disgusting exhibition would she be forced to witness now? Yet beneath her distaste there was an unmistakable shiver of excitement. Once again she glanced at Leonard and, this time, caught his eye. There was a feverish excitement in his face, a mixture of dread and fascination that almost mirrored her own feelings, and her disquiet grew.

Sir Victor turned to the guest who was positioned nearest the door. He gave a brusque nod, as if this were some prearranged signal, and the man stood up.

'Which of your two beauties has betrayed you, Mr

Reid?' Sir Victor enquired.

Reid took the hand of a raven-haired girl, whose pert breasts were half exposed, and drew her to her feet. 'Miss Dorothea,' he replied.

'Then bring her forth for punishment.'

Hetty watched incredulously as the girl hung her head in apparent shame, approaching the Chevalet with mincing steps. Her companion watched from the divan with cheeks so flushed and eyes so glowing that Hetty had the distinct impression she would rather have been in Miss Dorothea's place.

'Miss Dorothea, confess your crime,' Sir Victor commanded, sternly.

The young woman turned to face the assembly, speaking loudly and clearly so all could hear her story. 'I have revealed the secrets of my master's bedchamber to my friend,' she began. 'I know it is wrong to gossip, but I could not help myself. The things that Mr Reid required of me were so strange, I had to tell someone about it.'

A muffled ripple of amusement went round the room, but Sir Victor looked very stern as he said, 'Do you not know that it is wrong to betray your master, to whom you owe a debt of gratitude?'

The girl put on a good show of contrition. 'Oh yes, and I am very sorry for it. I deserve to be punished, so I do.'

'Indeed you do, and Mr Reid shall have the pleasure of chastising you with whatever implement he chooses. Do you submit to his will, Miss Dorothea?'

'I do, for I am glad to be purged of my guilt and punished for my shamefully loose tongue.'

Sir Victor turned to Erica. 'Bring on the implements.' A trolley containing an array of whips, rods and straps was brought out from behind the screen. 'Now bind this young woman to the whipping place, Miss Erica.'

Dorothea allowed herself to be led up to the ladder and its height was adjusted to fit her slender body. Then her

wrists and ankles were bound to the frame with straps. She was already stripped to her petticoats and now they were lifted to expose the pink rotundity of her behind, which drew forth a brief round of applause from the audience.

Hetty watched with mounting anxiety as Mr Reid stood before the trolley, taking his time. He seemed to be considering the merits of the various tools on display. At last he chose a long, thin whip that he flicked in the air several times, producing a vicious sounding noise. Hetty shuddered, wondering how the hapless Dorothea was feeling now.

‘Three strokes I think, Mr Reid,’ Sir Victor advised. ‘But do not spare her. Like every woman who has breached the privacy of the bedroom, she deserves to suffer. Every man here will applaud your right to administer justice in this case.’

The first stroke of the cane elicited a gasp from Hetty that she was unable to conceal. She saw the rosy buttocks shudder at the blow, then blush to a deeper shade as the pain spread visibly, yet the victim remained apparently unmoved. How could the other women look on, so unconcerned? She looked down at her own two companions and marvelled at their rapt expressions. Anyone would imagine they were watching some pleasant spectacle – a ballet, perhaps, or musical performance – for their eyes were bright with a strange glee and each had a curious half smile playing about their mouth.

The second stroke fell with a stinging sound that made Hetty’s eyes water in sympathy. She remembered her own beating – the physical pain, the spiritual humiliation – and felt she knew what poor Dorothea must be experiencing. Yet she could do nothing to prevent this ignominious show from continuing.

At the third stroke a round of applause broke out, accompanied by cries of ‘Bravo!’. Miss Dorothea was

finally released from the torture frame, but to Hetty's surprise her eyes were clear and bright with no sign of tears, and a smile of satisfaction was on her lips as she returned to her place. The other girl welcomed her with open arms and a loving kiss that soon became more erotic, while Mr Reid became embroiled in their sensual game, kissing and caressing both young women by turns. It seemed all was forgiven, indeed!

Hetty felt that some game was being played but she was completely ignorant of the rules. When a second girl was called to give an account of herself to her 'master' she feared that everyone would be required to take part in this charade, including Leonard and herself. There was danger ahead, she was sure of it, but for the moment she was mesmerised by what was being acted out before her.

The girl was called Helena, and she was quite plump with full and pendulous breasts and buttocks. Her expression was more lascivious than that of Dorothea, and Hetty thought she looked as though she were thoroughly enjoying the situation, even though she put on a show of bashfulness.

'I refused my master full access to my body,' she declared.

'In what way?' Sir Victor enquired.

'He wished to enter by the back door, but I refused him.'

'Do you not know that refusal to please your master, in any way he demands, is a sign of ingratitude, wretched woman?'

Helena hung her head. 'Yes, sir.'

'And do you know what is the punishment for such ungracious behaviour?'

'Yes, sir. I should be whipped, sir.'

'Whipped it is, then. Lord Randolph, shall it be the thong, the cat or the flagella?'

Randolph deliberated, then picked up a thin strip of

leather, knotted at one end and with a bound handle at the other. 'The thong.'

He held it tight and bound a few inches around his fist, to make it more controllable. Then he wielded it viciously in the air, making it sing and whistle. The girl sank against the Chevalet in a kind of swoon, while Eric lifted her voluminous skirts and exposed her rump. The sagging buttocks were pale and smooth, but the first lashing of the thong left a red stripe across them. The next crossed it, and the next, until a red lattice was imprinted on the soft, yielding flesh. After six strokes, Sir Victor declared it enough.

When Helena was released she sank to the floor, but her face showed a look of utter bliss. Sir Victor addressed her, unperturbed. 'I trust you shall please your master in every way from now on, allowing him access to every nook and cranny of your voluptuous body.'

'Oh, yes,' she cried, faintly, raising herself up. Randolph supported her back to the divan; where she proceeded to open his fly and lick his large, tumid organ. While she did so, the other girl rubbed soothing cream into her inflamed buttocks.

But Hetty's attention was diverted once again as she realised, with a sinking heart, that Sir Victor's beady eye was firmly fixed upon his own son. She saw Leonard's mouth frame a protest, but his father continued. 'Now, a special treat for the man we are honouring this evening, my son Leonard. It is his turn to experience the delights of subjugating the weaker sex. Choose your victim, Leonard, from your two companions.'

'No father, I cannot,' he insisted.

A gasp of disapproval went through the watchers, as if Leonard had offended against some inviolable tenet of their faith.

Sir Victor's face took on the cruel cast that Hetty knew all too well. 'This is your initiation into manhood, my

son. Do you wish to remain a baby all your life, the plaything of women instead of their master? You must learn to command obedience from these creatures, or be forever in their thrall. Come forth, and show us what you are made of!’

The two young women pulled Leonard to his feet and coaxed him towards his father, but he looked pale and trembling.

‘Please do not make me do this, father,’ Hetty heard him murmur.

‘Will you shame me in front of all my friends?’ came the harshly whispered reply.

‘I have no stomach for it.’

Seeing that everyone was in suspense, Sir Victor tried to make light of the situation. ‘My son says he has no stomach for the task. Shall we set these vixens to provoke him?’

‘Ay!’ came the shout.

So the two girls proceeded to taunt Leonard, calling him impotent, a coward, a mere shadow of a man. They danced around him, mockingly displaying their naked buttocks and even slapping themselves to demonstrate what should be done. One danced up to the trolley and picked up a birch broom. She started to sweep the floor with it, but the other girl snatched it from her and demonstrated its other purpose on her friend’s behind, accompanied by much laughter from the men.

This comic dumb show did much to reduce the tension in the room, but seemed to do nothing to strengthen Leonard’s resolve. He stood there looking utterly miserable, and Hetty’s heart went out to him.

‘Very well.’ The hint of menace in Sir Victor’s voice silenced the men’s ribald laughter. All eyes were on their host now as his son cowered before him, appearing to be the prisoner of the two nubile women on either flank. ‘If you will not punish, then you must *be* punished. Strap the

boy to the frame, ladies. I call him boy, because he has yet to prove himself a man even though he is a man in years.'

Hetty watched in helpless horror as Leonard was bound to the whipping frame with the leather straps. Then the order came to pull down his trousers and expose his naked butt. Hetty recalled the stories he had told her about his experiences at school, and wondered what emotions were going through his soul at this point. Was he dreading a repetition of that same humiliation, or was he secretly relishing the prospect? With his back to her, and his face hidden, there was no way of telling.

When the firm round buttocks were revealed, offering themselves up to the cane or flagella, Sir Victor made a surprise announcement. 'Since he is neither man nor boy, we shall instruct one who is neither man nor woman to administer the chastisement. Erica, the task shall fall to you. But to increase his shame, we will pile pleasure upon pain. Kneel before him, ladies, and do what you may to ensure that he is satisfied.'

Sir Victor went to his seat in a far corner of the room and left them to it. The two young women went to the other side of the frame and knelt before his bound thighs. Eric first turned the contraption around so everyone could witness Leonard's humiliation from both sides. Then he raised the cruel cat o' nine tails on high, and a feeble applause broke out, yet Hetty fancied there was an air of unease about the room. Up to this point, the revels had been light-hearted and punishment inflicted only on those who willed it. Now it was obvious that Leonard was hating every second of this ordeal, yet no one dared raise a hand to stop it.

With much mincing about and flourishing of his tackle, the valet-in-disguise prepared to strike. At the same time, the lascivious girls were stimulating Leonard's privates, one with her tongue licking around his scrotum and the

other fondling his long, slender cock. The recipient of these attentions was groaning softly, but whether from anguish or ecstasy no one could tell.

‘Get on with it,’ Sir Victor growled, from his vantage point. He was scowling, and appeared to derive no satisfaction from the prospect of his son’s punishment.

Eric raised his right hand and brought the bunched thongs down sharply, with a resounding thwack, on Leonard’s posterior. At the same time, one of the young women took his member into her mouth, but then withdrew. This same sequence was repeated several times, with Leonard uttering many loud moans, until he gave a long, excruciating wail and shot his seed into the mouth of the whore, who drank it down gleefully.

‘Release him,’ Sir Victor said as his son hung there, spent and humiliated. The girls quickly released his bonds, but then, gathering up the very last of his strength, Leonard suddenly made a dash for the door and disappeared into the night.

‘The young devil!’ his father cried, hurrying to the door. But Leonard had been swallowed up by the darkness. ‘He shall pay for this!’

Eric came up, sweating from his exertions, and persuaded Sir Victor to return to his seat. Hetty was in a state of utter confusion. She longed to follow Leonard, but dared not. Yet, if she stayed, she risked exposure. It was a terrible dilemma.

‘Now, George,’ Sir Victor said, catching her eye. Hetty felt her insides melt with fear. ‘Let us see if you can do better than your friend. You know the penalty if you fail, but I am sure you will not.’ He turned to the room, pasting on a broad grin, and gave his instruction with a flourish. ‘Choose one of your lovely ladies to suffer punishment, and show us how it should be done.’ His tone changed to a sneer. ‘That way you will partly redeem your noble friend’s honour. Just imagine you are on the threshing

floor, Farmer George, and you shall do well!’

Hetty knew that if she were to bolt as Leonard had done, it would be worse for them both. Somehow she must steel herself to go through with this. She recalled how she had forced herself to smack her mistress on the fundament, and how Lady Alice appeared to derive some gratification from the spanking. Now she would be obliged to use a weapon, but the principle was the same. She would be chastising another female who was not averse to the whip, and might even desire it, although she would no doubt put up a show of fear and loathing.

‘Come, George, which young lady is it to be?’ Sir Victor insisted.

Hetty fancied that Maud was gazing the more beseechingly at her, and picked her out. Slowly Maud moved her slender form into the centre of the floor, so that she might go through the motions of declaring her guilt. Hetty thought she looked beautiful, with her red-gold hair tumbling free.

‘Tell us why you deserve to be punished,’ Sir Victor demanded.

Maud simpered a little, tossing back her auburn mane. ‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ she began, turning her bashful grey eyes towards Hetty. ‘But I have on occasion pretended to be asleep when you required my services, because I was too much fatigued. I know it was wicked of me, that I should be ready to serve you in all ways and at all hours, day and night. But your prodigious appetite for my body sometimes overwhelms me, and then I feign slumber. I am truly sorry, sir.’

‘Disgraceful!’ Sir Victor muttered. ‘Select your means of reprisal, young George. The choice is yours, naturally, but I would recommend the birch rod. It is supple and flexible, performing well on a pert and well upholstered pair of cheeks, and producing keen sensation in the recipient.’

In a kind of dream, Hetty moved towards the trolley and gazed down at the assortment of implements. She picked up the tapering birch rod and tried it in the air, as she had seen others do. The sound was oddly pleasing to her ears: a sharp swishing noise with a clean finish. She was amazed to find herself looking forward to wielding it, although she had never before imagined enjoying such a task.

Maud was now strapped to the Chevalet, her pale arms lifted submissively and her petticoat tucked up around her waist to reveal her creamy-fleshed posterior. Hetty moved towards her, gripping the rod tightly, and the buzz faded in the summerhouse as all eyes and minds were fixed on the tableau in the centre of the room.

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Hetty raised the hazel wand in her right hand. She felt a hot exhilaration rise up in her as she remembered the way Sir Victor had treated her. Now she could pretend to be punishing him, just as Lady Alice had suggested. It worked then, when Hetty was obliged to give her mistress a beating, so it should work now. Through narrowed eyes she stole a glance at her hated master, noting the expression of smug anticipation on his ugly face, and soon the rod came down with a vengeance upon the rotund hindquarters of her victim.

Now that the ice had been broken, Hetty set about the task with relish, letting the birch fall unmercifully upon Maud's naked behind. Soon the fair skin was reddened, and the girl clutched at the padded surface each time a new stroke assailed her, moaning softly. Her glorious locks were tangled with perspiration, and her thighs trembled as the punishment continued. Hetty began to exult in the rhythmic strokes she was inflicting on those blushing nether cheeks again and again.

'Enough!' cried Sir Victor suddenly, when Hetty felt she was just getting into her stride. 'You have done us

proud, George.'

Coming out of her trancelike state, Hetty let the switch drop to the floor and a wave of nausea crept over her. She wanted nothing more but to be out of there, to feel the cool air on her overheated face and enjoy the freedom of solitude. Still half in a daze she made for the door.

'Where are you going?' called Sir Victor, in astonishment, but she did not answer. Instead she followed where Leonard had led, out into the dark and silent night.

Once she left the summerhouse Hetty began to run through the grass, hither and thither, without knowing where she was going. All she wanted was to put as much space as possible between her and the scene of her shame. She reached a small copse at the far end of the grounds but there she suddenly stopped in her tracks. A dark figure was leaning against the gnarled trunk of an ancient oak, with his forehead pressed on his upraised arm.

'Leonard,' Hetty murmured, for she was in no doubt that it was he.

He turned at her voice, and she saw in the moonlight that his face was wet and besmirched, but as soon as he recognised her he smiled with relief. 'George!'

'I had to get out of there,' she told him gruffly. 'They made me do what you would not, Leo. I feel so ashamed.'

A manly hand was placed upon her shoulder, lifting her spirits. 'Never fear, George, we are both free of it now. Come, let us go where we may talk undisturbed. I know just the place.'

He led her to the stables, where the warm smell of hay and manure was strangely comforting. They shinned up the ladder to the hayloft where, to Hetty's surprise, Leo burrowed under the hay in the corner and produced a box containing a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

'Jack Bentley will not mind us having a tippie,' he grinned. 'He's aware I know his little secret, and he also knows I will top it up for him. Hold your glass, George,

while I pour.'

The warming effect of the whisky helped Hetty to relax and soon she was relating everything to Leo, her confidant.

'Tell me exactly, George,' he began. 'Tell me exactly what happened after I made my ignominious departure from the summerhouse.'

'Your father made me do what you had failed to do. At first I was aghast, as you were, but then I reasoned that I would rather punish than be punished, so I went ahead. I chose the birch, which I imagined would inflict less pain than some of the other cruel implements. I'm not sure I was right about that, but I went through with it anyway.'

'How did you feel, George, having to perform so loathsome a task?'

'I confess it was easier than I expected. The young woman seemed to relish it, and I sensed that her show of fear was just that; a show put on for the men's entertainment.'

'You know, some like to inflict punishment, while others prefer to be punished,' Leonard said, thoughtfully. 'We human beings are a strange mix, don't you think? That fellow Freud – no doubt he'd have something to say on the subject.' She looked at him blankly, and he added, 'Oh, he is a doctor who studies the workings of the mind, but you won't have heard of him. Sometimes I forget that you are not as educated as I. Yet you seem more like my equal than many of the fellows at college. I feel I can talk to you from the heart, George, man to man.'

Hetty almost laughed aloud, yet she was flattered all the same.

'I wish you were as close to your father,' she murmured.

Leonard sighed. 'So do I, but that can never be. The man is a savage bully, and I am only sorry that I drew you into his circle tonight. I had no idea that things would

take so disgusting a turn. Those women – to degrade themselves so, and before a whole company of men. I cannot understand such females, although I know they will be well paid for their services. The only women I feel any real warmth towards are those like your dear sister, George. If only she were of my rank I would propose to sweet Hetty Addleston tomorrow. What say you to that?’

Hetty was speechless, and downed her glass in one draught. Leonard chuckled softly, his face beautiful in the half shadow. If only I were able to be Hetty now, she thought. Would he kiss me here, in the warm intimacy of the stables, with the horses whinnying softly and the smell of hay in our nostrils? The thought pleased her, yet she found a tear trickling down her cheek at the same time and hastily wiped it away with her sleeve.

‘Ah well, we’d best get back to the house, I suppose,’ Leonard said, breaking the spell. He concealed the box beneath the hay again, and then held out his hand. ‘Up on your feet, young George.’

Hetty took his hand, relishing its warm smoothness for a few seconds, and followed him down the rickety ladder to the ground. As they left, her heart grew lighter. Those few minutes alone with him in the stables had quite eclipsed the ordeal they had both suffered that evening in the summerhouse, and she felt ready to face her inquisitive mistress once again.

Chapter Eight

When Hetty went up to her room she could hear Lady Alice snoring away, and she hoped her mistress would remain asleep until the morning. However, it was not to be. Although Hetty tiptoed quietly across the bedchamber on her way to her little bed, Lady Alice suddenly awoke, with a start.

‘Who is there?’ she called.

‘It is only me, Lady Alice. I have just returned.’

Hetty was still in her male attire, although she had removed her boots on the landing outside and held them in her hand.

‘Light the candle for me, will you?’ her mistress said, sitting up in bed and rubbing her eyes. ‘What o’clock is it?’

‘I think we are still in the early hours, about two o’clock,’ Hetty told her, hoping that would prove a deterrent to further conversation.

But the reply came, ‘No matter, I must hear it all now it is fresh in your mind, Hetty. Quick, give us some light and lie down beside me. You shall not catch cold then.’

It was strange lying beside her mistress, with the counterpane wrapped over her and the dim light flickering on the walls and ceiling. The room took on a ghostly air, and there was something faintly indecent about her position, yet Hetty could not avoid the inevitable.

‘Now then, tell me the whole story from start to finish, and omit not the smallest detail,’ Lady Alice said, her voice thick with emotion. Hetty could feel her rustling around beneath the sheets, trying to get comfortable no doubt, yet she herself felt most *uncomfortable*.

‘Well, when we got to the summerhouse it was full of young women,’ Hetty began.

‘Trollops, you mean! Just as I thought. How were they dressed? *En déshabille*, I’ve no doubt.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘I mean scantily dressed,’ she explained impatiently. ‘Go on.’

‘Well they were all showing more of their legs and bosoms than is considered decent in polite society,’ Hetty agreed.

‘How many of the little tarts were there?’

‘I cannot say, except there were two provided for each male guest present.’

‘Two per man!’ she laughed heartily. ‘That must be costing my lecher of a husband a small fortune. No doubt he felt he could splash out on the occasion of his son’s coming of age. Talking of whom, how did Leonard seem? Was he pleased by his father’s generosity?’

‘Ah, not exactly m’lady. He gave me a few anxious looks, as if he knew not what would be expected of him. I felt sorry for him.’

‘Don’t waste your sympathies on the boy, my dear. He is his father’s son, I’ve no doubt, and destined for a life of debauchery sooner or later. But what happened next? I’m dying to know more.’

‘The men chose a couch for themselves and the women started to fondle and caress them.’

‘Including you, I suppose?’ came the amused interjection.

‘Well yes, but I would not let them go too far for fear of discovery. At any rate, it was not long before Sir Victor laid on the entertainment. Two women began to dance in a strange, exotic fashion. I had never seen women behave so before, as if they were lovers rather than friends. They kissed and caressed each other quite... intimately.’

‘Indeed,’ Lady Alice murmured. Beneath the sheets

Hetty could feel her mistress rubbing her thighs, as if she had an itch. 'And how far did this "entertainment" go, Miss Hetty?'

'I am too embarrassed to say.'

'But you must,' she insisted, sharply. 'I want to know everything, every small detail. Were they naked, these women? Did you see how large or small their breasts were? Did they open their legs in a shameless fashion? Did they touch each other, all over?'

'Yes, I am ashamed to say they did. They kissed each other... down there, too. And fondled each other's breasts, the one having large floppy bosoms and the other rather smaller, prettier ones. They became very excited, as did the watching men.'

'I'm sure. Did they proceed to a climax?'

'I believe so,' Hetty whispered. She could hardly bear to remember the scenes she witnessed that night, let alone describe them graphically to her mistress. But she recalled the frenzy the women had been in, and reasoned that was what was meant by a 'climax'.

'Do you know what a "climax" is, Hetty?'

The question flummoxed her, for she had no idea except it seemed to cause great agitation in those experiencing it. 'I... I am not sure, m'lady.'

Lady Alice gave a low, guttural chuckle that made Hetty feel quite alarmed. 'Oh, you are so innocent, little Hetty, despite what you have seen tonight. But tell me more of it – what did my husband do? Did he not have some pretty little piece for himself?'

'I do not think so. He played the part of the master of ceremonies, presiding over events.'

'What "events", pray?'

'Well after the two women had... I suppose I must say "performed", he made a speech about how women were the weaker sex and needed to be kept in their place, and all.'

Lady Alice gave a grim smile, her features distorted in the candlelight. 'He would not dare say so in *my* presence! You need not tell me what he said, though; I can guess the gist of it. What happened next?'

'Next he called up the men one by one, to punish one of their women.'

'Punish? Had they been misbehaving, then?'

'I believe it was all a game m'lady, and the girls were just pretending they had done wrong. It was all so they could be punished.'

'And how were they punished? Physically, no doubt.'

'Yes. Sir Victor had Eric, his valet, wheel out this ladder contraption. Oh, I forgot to say – Eric was dressed like a woman.'

Lady Alice laughed so loudly Hetty was afraid the other servants would hear. 'Priceless! The man always struck me as a bit effeminate, I must say. So he – or should we say "she"? – she brings out this contraption, as you call it.'

'Well it wasn't no ordinary ladder, m'lady. It had straps and padding. The idea was to fix the ladies to it, with their backsides bare, so they could get a whipping or a spanking.'

'Ah, now we come to the nub of the matter.'

'The first woman was made to say what she had done wrong. She said she had gossiped about her master. Then they brought out this trolley so the master could choose what to punish her with. He chose a whip, which he used on her tender behind. I saw it grow red, and it must have hurt something terrible, but the girl didn't seem to mind much. She was smiling when she went back to her place after.'

'No doubt she was well paid for her pains.'

'The second woman got the same treatment with a leather thong. Afterwards she fell to licking her master's organ, as if she was really grateful. I couldn't understand

that.'

'You will never understand the ways of such women, Hetty, and you should be glad that you do not. But what happened next?'

Lady Alice seemed to be rubbing herself more and more vigorously beneath the sheets. It was on the tip of Hetty's tongue to ask if she needed some ointment for an itch, but she thought better of it, not wanting to seem presumptuous. If her ladyship wanted any such medication she would ask for it.

'Then it was the turn of your son, Leonard,' Hetty began hesitantly. She did not like having to relate this part of the proceedings at all; it seemed like a betrayal of the man who believed 'George' to be his true friend. Yet there was to be no turning back. 'He was commanded to act like the other men and beat his woman, but he refused, saying he could not.'

'Bravo,' came the soft response. 'He has stood up to his bully of a father at last. But I dare say Sir Victor did not let that go, did he? Come, my girl, tell all.'

'Because he would not wield the rod himself, his father declared that he must be the victim. It was Eric who had to whip him, and with a most cruel implement that they called a "cat", although I could see nothing cat-like about it apart from it having several long tails. While he was being lashed with this, his two female companions were fondling him in the front. I could hardly bear to watch this strange scene, with pleasure and pain being inflicted upon him in equal measure.'

'Interesting...' Lady Alice sighed.

'But when it was done and they let him go, Master Leonard made a bolt for it. I was afraid he would be chased, but no one bothered so he was allowed to go free. Then it was my turn.'

'Yours, good George?' her mistress laughed again. 'So you sampled the delights of flagellation too. Well, well!'

‘I could not get out of it, m’lady. I chose the birch, because that is what I have heard the children get at school and I thought perhaps it might not hurt as much.’

‘And how did you feel, using the rod and not sparing the child?’

‘It was... strange. I had never done such a thing before...’ But then she recalled that she had in fact punished the very person she was speaking to, and in that same room. The memory overwhelmed her, and Lady Alice seemed to understand for she threw back the counterpane and clutched her maid suddenly to her bosom.

Hetty found the lace and frills of her nightgown stifling, but she held her breath and hoped the embrace would be brief. Then came a whispering in her ear. ‘I’ll warrant you enjoyed it a little, Hetty, did you not? All that power to thwack and torment another’s body? Did she have fine, smooth buttocks and did the switch make a satisfying sound as it made contact with her naked flesh?’

‘I...’ Words failed Hetty, but her mistress released her. In the dim light Hetty could see she had a strange look on her face.

‘Get up now, and show me exactly how you did it. Pretend I am her.’

Hetty was horrified at the prospect of inflicting more pain upon her mistress, but Lady Alice was in earnest. She got up herself and knelt beside the bed, pulling her voluminous nightgown up around her waist to reveal her own flabby buttocks.

‘You may use the silver-backed hairbrush from my dressing table,’ she told her.

Despite her unease, Hetty felt a rising heat in her loins and a flicker of enthusiasm for the task ahead. The fact that she was merely obeying her mistress made it easier to quash her scruples, and she picked up the hairbrush with a rapidly beating heart. Its handle felt reassuringly familiar: this was the same brush she had used on Lady

Alice's hair a thousand or more times. Turning, she saw the pale globes of her mistress's behind gleaming in the soft light, and a strange sense of exultation seized her.

'Do not spare me,' came the hoarse plea from the bedside. 'Spank me good and proper, so I may feel what that trollop felt when you belaboured her. Hurry now, whack me repeatedly on the bare behind and do not cease until I tell you!'

Hetty soon got into the rhythm of the game, first using the back of the brush against the shuddering nether cheeks but then, at her victim's behest, turning it over so that the coarse bristles came into contact with the naked flesh. She pretended, playfully, to brush the woman's buttocks with a circular motion, as one might apply the currycomb to a horse's coat, until the pale skin grew red with the friction.

All the while Lady Alice was moaning softly, making similar sounds to those of the young women in the summerhouse when they were being whipped, and soon the noise began to rise to a crescendo.

'Harder, harder!' came the urgent cry. After a few more strokes Hetty's mistress threw back her head and uttered a long, plangent moan that startled her so much she let the brush fall to the floor.

'More of that brushing motion,' Lady Alice begged, so she hastily retrieved the brush and began to apply it again, in circular strokes. The moaning intensified and then a great shudder went through the woman's whole body until she collapsed, breathless, on the bed.

There followed a few minutes of utter stillness, during which Hetty feared that some terrible mishap had befallen her mistress but she dared not call out. Then, slowly and wearily, the older woman clambered into bed and drew the sheets up over her.

'That is all, thank you,' she said in a faint voice. 'You may go to bed now. I shall talk to you again in the morning.'

It was not easy for Hetty to sleep that night. The extraordinary events of the evening stayed with her, images of half-naked women and bullish, arrogant men flitting in and out of her dreams so that she woke several times in a feverish state, tossing and turning in her narrow bed. Her body felt hot and aroused, but she knew no way of relieving herself so by the time day dawned she felt drained and irritable.

Presenting herself to her mistress once she was washed and dressed, Hetty made an effort to appear polite and amenable, but inside she felt sullen and resentful.

‘Good morning, my dear,’ she was greeted by Lady Alice, who seemed in an excellent humour. ‘Give me my usual hundred strokes, please.’

She grinned coquettishly as she handed her the hairbrush. Hetty took it without comment and began to attend to her mistress’s coiffure, as she did every morning.

‘I have been thinking about Leonard,’ Lady Alice told her, more soberly. ‘No doubt he is feeling rather upset today, although he would never admit it, either to me or to his father. I think you should dress up as George and visit him, one more time. He will have need of a companion, I am sure.’

‘If it please you, m’lady,’ Hetty said, without enthusiasm. She wanted to forget all about her ordeal, and disguising herself as her own brother would only bring back disturbing memories.

‘Just this one last time,’ her mistress gently urged her. ‘You will much oblige me, and I am sure that Leonard will appreciate it too. I want you to discover what is in his heart, Hetty. There is no other way. He is like a solitary prisoner here, in his own house. It is regrettable, but true. I have given much thought to his welfare, but up to now I have had no idea how I might improve his lot. Please try to find out for me, will you?’

‘I shall do my best, madam. Now shall you wear the

white pin-tucked blouse or...'

At that moment the door to the bedroom burst open and there was Sir Victor in his dressing gown. It was open at the front and he made no attempt to hide the fact that he had a huge erection. Hetty could not take her eyes off it; with its purplish bulbous head and thick stalk mottled pink and white it looked like some giant toadstool.

'I have been waiting all night for this, wife,' he announced, striding towards the bed, 'and now I mean to have it!' He threw Hetty a disdainful look. 'Go about your business, girl, and shut the door behind you!'

Mesmerised by this blatant show of male power, Hetty made for the door. As she left the room she turned to see Sir Victor throwing back the sheets and Lady Alice receiving him enthusiastically. It was not a sight she was used to seeing.

Hetty remained in the kitchen for an hour or so, finding small tasks for herself or obeying Mrs Saddler's orders, then she set a breakfast tray and ventured back upstairs. She listened at the bedroom door and, hearing no sound, knocked tentatively.

'Come in!' came the call from within.

Lady Alice was sitting up in bed with the pillows at her back and her lacy bed jacket around her shoulders, looking very pleased with herself. There was no sign of Sir Victor.

'Well, my dear, that was very satisfactory,' she smiled, as Hetty approached and set the tray down. 'We have not celebrated our connubial rites so successfully for a long time. The proceedings you described to me last night must have roused Sir Victor very effectively.'

Hetty poured the tea. 'Yes, my lady.'

'When a man gets to his age the spirit is still willing but the flesh, alas, is often weak. The advantage is that once he is on form, so to speak, he can remain in that state for quite some time. I was fortunate that he wished to prolong his amatory impulse with me, and not with one of those...

professional women.'

She gulped down her tea eagerly, then asked for more. Hetty hoped she had forgotten her earlier request that 'George' should be resurrected, but it was not to be.

'Get dressed in your man's clothes now,' her mistress urged. 'I want you to find Leonard before his father does. Tell him Sir Victor is in a better temper now, and he need not fear him.'

It was a cheerful message, although Hetty was by no means convinced of its accuracy. Still, the thought of seeing Leonard again was very pleasant. Lady Alice agreed that she should pretend to be going home later that day, and so their meeting would take the form of a leave-taking.

It felt strange putting on the wig and rough clothes again. Hetty would rather have consigned them to the flames because they reminded her so uncomfortably of the last time she had worn them. But when she entered the library and saw Leonard's face brighten at the sight of her, she was glad that she had this one last chance to pose as his friend.

'My dear, dear George!' he exclaimed, coming forward to greet her. 'I have been wondering how you are this morning. It is good to see you looking so well.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'No Leo, please.' To Hetty's surprise Leonard gave her a warm hug. 'To me you have become more than a friend, George,' he declared, somewhat bashfully. 'You are more like the brother I never had.'

'It is kind of you to say so.'

Leo placed his hand on her shoulder and looked her straight in the eye. 'I meant every word of it. What you and I went through last night...' He tailed off and, for a moment, Hetty feared he would break down, but he recovered himself. 'I am sorry you had to witness such scenes. You must have thought me a frightful coward, too.'

‘Oh no!’ Hetty exclaimed, her voice rising so she had to cough harshly to regain its masculine pitch. ‘I was shocked by the way that dreadful Eric fellow treated you. One day you will be master here, and he is just a servant.’

Leonard’s eyes took on a thoughtful cast. ‘You say I shall be master here, but sometimes I wonder if I ever will be. My father holds me in such contempt, as you saw last night. He thinks he can humiliate and subdue me.’

‘He is a bully – and a coward too!’

‘It may seem so but he is still my father, with the power to rule my life. Ah well, at least I have a good friend here now. Your soul may be sullied by having to perform that despicable task on that wanton woman, but I hope you will never have to endure a thrashing...’ Leonard paused, and then resumed his train of thought. ‘You know, George, I have often pondered the mystery of why some like to do, and others like to be done to. It is almost a philosophical interest of mine.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. I should like to talk to you about it in more detail. Will you take some refreshment? A coffee, perhaps?’

Hetty hesitated, knowing her mistress would expect her to return before long and carry out her daily duties. ‘I must go back to see my sister,’ she explained.

‘Of course. But this is not your last day here, is it?’

She was about to say that it was, but the look in Leonard’s eyes prevented her. He seemed so disconsolate at the thought of being bereft of his only friend that she hesitated. ‘Oh no, I will stay a little longer I think. My family has no real need of me until harvest time, when it is all hands to the scythe. I have other relations, in York. I shall stay with them awhile and maybe return here on my way back down south.’

The relief on Leonard’s face was patent. ‘Then we shall have our talk another time,’ he smiled. ‘Go back to your

sister now, George. She is a sweet girl, and I am sure you will find much pleasure in her company.' He added, darkly, 'after being in the company of some very different women last night.'

Hetty was relieved too when she returned to her room, knowing she could become George a few more times and enjoy the special intimacy that her *alter ego* had with Leonard. She decided to keep George's clothes in a cardboard box beneath her bed, where Lady Alice would not think of looking for them. It would not do to have the garments sent out to the poor as cast-offs once again.

Noticing that her ladyship needed more lavender water, Hetty set off for the stillroom. She was always nervous when in those dark corridors, far away from the other servants, and this morning another dreaded encounter occurred when Sir Victor suddenly loomed before her, on his way back from the stables.

'Aha!' he said as he caught sight of her. 'Where are you going in such a hurry, missy?'

'To the stillroom, if it please you, sir,' she uttered feebly.

He flung open the door for her and stood aside as she entered. Then, to her horror, he came in after her and closed the door behind them both. He stank of the stables, and there was something else on his breath that smelt stale and sour – brandy, perhaps, although it was too early in the day for him to have been imbibing.

His bulk loomed before her, dark and threatening, but she turned away and set about her tasks. While she worked he spoke in a low, insinuating tone that made the hairs on her nape stand erect.

'This morning you saw me perform the old dance, *Sir Roger de Coverley*,' he began, with a smirk. 'Or should that be "Sir Roger Cover-my-Lady"? Either way, the old cow was well and truly "rogered". She was wet and ready for me, too, and that is by no means assured these days. Normally her channel is as dry as a witch's tit.'

Sir Victor might as well have been speaking in a foreign tongue for all Hetty could make of it. She knew he was referring to his act of connubial union, but that was all.

‘Now that brother of yours,’ he went on, and Hetty held her breath. ‘He’s quite a young blade in his way, you know. You’d better not cross him, or it will be the worse for you! But maybe you have already had a taste of his medicine, eh?’

She felt him approach, and soon his hand was beneath her chin, turning her round to face him. Helplessly she looked into his odious face as his eyes crept like insidious fingers all over her body. ‘Has he had cause to punish his little sister, then?’ he murmured, his eyes glazing.

When she failed to reply, he went on in an even more insinuating tone. ‘Or perchance you like to *dance* together, brother and sister, like me and your mistress? I would not put it past the pair of you, with your sly ways and lascivious appetites. Of course, Farmer George would have to punish you afterwards, for leading him astray!’

Hetty found his words disgusting, but even worse was the way his hands started creeping about her person. She froze, hoping that if she showed no sign one way or another he might desist, but her hope was in vain. He squeezed her breast as hard as if he hoped to express milk from it, and then pinched her equally fiercely on the buttock. She yelped.

‘Don’t you appreciate the pleasures of the flesh then, missy? Look how red your cheeks are. I’d like to make your other cheeks blush as strongly, so mind you don’t cross me and give me the excuse!’

He laughed, harshly, then turned towards the door. Hetty prayed he would leave at once, but he hesitated and said, ‘What do you think of my son, Leonard?’

The question took her completely by surprise. She stuttered a little, and then recovered herself. ‘He... he is a fine gentleman, sir.’

‘Like myself? No, I did not expect you to say that. Still, it is good that you’ve taken a fancy to him. He is bosom pals with your brother too, I understand, although God knows what they see in each other.’ He gave her a long, penetrating stare that chilled her to the bone. ‘Maybe they talk about *you*, Miss Hetty, when they are alone. Think on that!’

He left rapidly, slamming the door behind him. Hetty was so put out she could not hold the little glass bottle and funnel, her hands were shaking so. She sat down on a stool and tried to calm down, but the grinning mien of Sir Victor with its wicked black mustachios, came back to haunt her at every moment.

How dare that filthy man suggest there was something unnatural happening between her and her brother?

But then, remembering that George was not her real brother but a fiction, Hetty burst into hysterical laughter. How absurd that beastly man’s imputations were. If what he had said were true, she would have been making love to herself!

Chapter Nine

‘So, George is banished forever,’ Lady Alice declared, with a smile of satisfaction. ‘I think he served his purpose well, Hetty. I know it was not easy for you to do what I asked of you, but I am grateful that you carried it off so well. Here, child...’ She beckoned her maid towards her dressing table and picked up a small box. ‘Here is a little trinket for you, a token of my appreciation.’

Hetty glanced down as she opened the box to reveal a pretty pendant, on a chain.

‘It is only coloured glass and cheap silver,’ Lady Alice went on. ‘But I thought you would like to have it.’

‘Oh, thank you, thank you! I’ve never owned anything so beautiful in my life.’

Hetty felt a rush of guilt as she bent her head to allow her mistress to fasten the slender chain around her neck. For George was not ‘banished forever’ as Lady Alice presumed. His apparel lay dormant beneath her bed, awaiting the next call to duty, whenever that might be.

Lady Alice no longer seemed to mind that her husband amused himself and his cronies in private. Perhaps she hoped that she would reap the benefits herself.

Two weeks passed and then, on a Tuesday afternoon, Leonard waylaid Hetty in the hall. ‘Have you heard anything from your dear brother?’ he asked, taking her by surprise.

‘Oh – er, yes. He is well, thank you, sir.’

‘Still in York then, is he? I did not see him to say goodbye and now, I confess, I miss his company sorely. If you write to him, please send him my regards.’

Sir Victor’s next dinner party was due to be held on the

coming Saturday, and Hetty guessed that Leonard was filled with trepidation at the prospect. How much easier it would be for him if 'George' were to reappear that weekend. Her mind worked fast to come up with a new plan.

'He – he said in his last letter that he would be visiting some more distant relatives of ours on Friday, in Sheffield. That is not so very far from here, as you know. Would you like me to suggest that he comes over to visit here, too? I am sure he could do so on Saturday, stay the night, then set off for home the following day.'

Leonard's face lit up like a Christmas tree. 'Do you think he would? That would be simply marvellous!'

So it was arranged. George would arrive at Longton on Saturday afternoon and stay until early Sunday morning. She knew that a large part of Leonard's desire to see him again must derive from his fear of being exposed to more lewd tomfoolery in the summerhouse. Perhaps there was a way that George could help him avoid that altogether.

This time, though, it was harder to allow Hetty to fade away and George to take her place, since it must all be done in secret. Lady Alice was in a skittish mood on Saturday morning, perhaps anticipating another nocturnal visit from her husband. She seemed to relish Hetty's company, talking animatedly about how amorous Sir Victor had been in the early days of their marriage and how, after years of feeling shunned, she had feared that he would never desire her in that way again.

'He must be sated with all that young flesh, and his appetite for a mature body has been rekindled,' was how she explained it to herself. 'I have been patient, Hetty, ever ready to accept his advances if they should arrive, and now I have reaped my reward. He will come to me again, for sure. You should have seen the vigour with which he exercised his conjugal rights last time. It was very, very satisfying.'

She breathed a long sigh, but then gave orders that her nails should be clipped, her hair washed and set in ringlets, her teeth whitened with tooth powder, her skin softened with cold cream, her hands and feet massaged with glycerine and rose water, her underwear scented with lavender water and her breath with cachous, so that she might look and feel her best when the time came to retire and await her amorous husband.

Hetty was in despair when she realised that performing such an elaborate toilet would take her well into the afternoon. How would she then find time to change into George's clothes, let alone get the chance to evade detection? Her mistress needed her by her side for most of the day, not just to perform those intimate tasks but also to be an audience for her excited anticipation and gloating accounts of her husband's prowess.

'I hope you may find such a manly spouse as mine some day,' she remarked, as Hetty massaged her feet. 'Even though he has shunned my bed for a large part of our marriage, I truly believe that he did it to spare me. Men believe the act of sex is hateful to women and to many it is, I am sure. But I have never been of that mind. To me there is no greater pleasure than to be the object of a man's physical appetite.'

She continued in that vein for some time, but Hetty was listening out for the clock in the hall, and soon heard it strike two. What would Leonard be thinking? If George did not appear by three, he would be disappointed and perhaps make other plans for the day.

'Oh Hetty – do take care,' Lady Alice grumbled, as she unthinkingly pressed on her bunion. 'You know how that pains me so!'

'I am sorry, m'lady. I – I have rather a headache today, and my concentration is poor. I will endeavour to do better.'

She made up the story on the spur of the moment, but

it had an unexpectedly fortunate outcome. Lady Alice gazed at her with genuine concern.

‘My poor child. Here am I prattling on, and making you work so hard to satisfy my vanity. Take your rest, Hetty. I can manage perfectly well for the rest of the day. I shall not need your services again until tomorrow morning.’

This was so unlike her mistress that Hetty could only put it down to her being in an exceptionally good mood, induced by the expectation of more bedroom activity. Hetty thanked her and retired to her room, but then she had a new problem to solve. How could she change into George and then make her getaway without being spotted?

Fate, it seemed, was on her side. Within a quarter of an hour she heard the familiar sound of her mistress’s snoring coming from the next room. A peep through the door confirmed that Lady Alice was taking an afternoon nap – no doubt because she wished to conserve her strength for the evening. Hurriedly, Hetty dressed as George and then tiptoed through her mistress’s room to the door, praying she would not awaken.

Her luck held. Once she was on the landing it was a simple matter to pretend she had been to the bathroom and was on her way to find Leonard. She came across him near the library, and he greeted her with a fond embrace.

‘My dear George, you have no idea how it gladdens my heart to see you here again.’

‘I think I do know, sir,’ she confessed. ‘For I am as glad to be back.’

‘Have you seen your sister?’

‘Yes, we have had a good long chat. But Lady Alice needs her now.’

‘Then let us find some quiet corner where we may converse uninterrupted. It is a fine day – shall we walk in the park? My father is out riding to hounds, but I have no stomach for it.’

Hetty felt happier than ever to be in his company again. Although she had encountered him several times since her last incarnation as George, it could not be on such an equal basis as this. There was always a formality in his tone and manner when he spoke to her as 'Miss Hetty', although he was always kind and courteous, but when he addressed her as 'George' it was in a mood of relaxed and intimate comradeship.

'How went your visits to York and Sheffield?' he enquired, and Hetty was obliged to invent some tales of her imaginary relatives. That was not too difficult, since she did have some cousins in those places that she had seen a few times during her childhood.

It was soon clear that Leonard's enquiry had been made for the sake of politeness, however, and she did not have to furnish many details. Of more pressing concern to him was the forthcoming dinner party, which he was expected to attend.

'It will not be so bad around the dinner table, when the ladies are present. My father and his hideous friends will be obliged to temper their speech and behaviour then. But I dread having to accompany them to the summerhouse for more of those obscene revels. What think you, George, is there any way I can get out of it?'

'We might be able to slip away, on some pretext,' Hetty offered, vaguely.

'I doubt my father will stand for that, if he truly wants me to attend. You too, I suppose, since you will no doubt be invited to dine with us. Or...' An idea seemed to strike him, but at the same time he looked fearful. 'I suppose... but perhaps that would be courting disaster.'

'What would, Leo?'

'I was just thinking, suppose that instead of staying here for dinner we went to *The Crown*. It is a rather nice inn, not far from here, where I am known to the landlord. I could say that I was meeting a friend from school – it

would be like playing truant! And I could explain to mama that I wanted you to meet him too, and this was our only chance since you are here for one night only, and...'

Alarm bells sounded loud in Hetty's head. 'Oh, you must not tell your mother I am here!'

'Why ever not? Does she not know already?'

'No, no she doesn't,' Hetty explained hastily. 'It's my sister, you see. She – she didn't want her to know, in case Lady Alice thought I was taking too much advantage of her hospitality. Anyway, I came back to see you really,' she ended lamely.

Leonard seemed to swallow the story. 'I see. Then there is even more cause for us to absent ourselves this evening, since you would not be able to dine in my parents' company. That settles it, George. *The Crown* it is, and I can guarantee that we shall have a far better meal there than at home. There's nothing wrong with cook's cuisine, of course. But to have to dine under the baleful eye of my father, with the prospect of another disgusting soirée looming over me, would always destroy my appetite – even if the dishes were cooked by the great Escoffier himself!'

Hetty giggled, then coughed because her laughter sounded too girlish. George gave her a brief hug then offered to race her through the copse – the same small woodland where she had caught him weeping by the oak tree. Today, though, he was in high spirits and beat her easily as they raced through the shadowy, dappled paths towards the stream.

They collapsed, panting, under a similar oak and, because the day was hot, took off their jackets. Afraid that Leonard would notice the swelling of her bosom beneath her shirt, despite the tight binding, Hetty slumped forward with her chin on her knees and pretended to be observing the wildlife.

'You know, George, I have had much time to reflect on

that terrible night in the summerhouse,' Leonard began. 'It was the women who terrified me, if the truth be known, not the fear of being whipped or caned. As you know, I am well used to that from my school days. But I was always the one to be beaten, not the perpetrator. Even when I attained the exalted status of a prefect I could not bring myself to inflict such pain on others, although it excited me to think of it. Do you think some of us are born to be victims in life, while others tend more towards tyranny?'

'I cannot say.'

Hetty felt awkward discussing such topics. She had now experienced flagellation from both sides, and knew that she would rather inflict it than be subjected to it, yet she felt a strange fascination for the subject, which seemed unhealthy. It was as if passions lay dormant in her that she could not understand and did not wish to subject to scrutiny. Those dark corners of her soul might some day be illumined – but not yet.

Fortunately she did not have to contribute much to the conversation, since all Leonard really needed was a sympathetic ear.

'It is not just the sensation of being beaten,' he continued, reflectively. 'It is the emotional impact of being subjected to punishment, whether in public or private. Now why should a man want another to display his mastery over him with physical force? I cannot say. All I know is that there is a deep satisfaction in being so used by a person that one admires.'

'Yet you would not wish your father to treat you in that way, surely?'

'You are quite right. It is another matter altogether when you loathe and despise your tormentor. Then it is a kind of torture to be subjected to his will. Only those which one considers to be in some way superior to oneself can bring about the satisfaction of which I speak. And then –

oh, my dear George! The experience can be quite rapturous!’

‘How did you feel when Eric, alias Erica, used the cat on you?’

Leonard shuddered. ‘It was horrible, horrible! I cannot tell you how utterly humiliated I was, and with those women...’

He broke off, too embarrassed to speak of it, and Hetty took the liberty of patting his hand, to show she understood. ‘They were paid to do it, Leo – do not forget that. Paid by your father.’

‘Yes, you are right. I should not take it so personally. But I am afraid my father will not leave it at that. He has some long-term plan for me, I am sure of it. To him, it is all about getting me to prove my manhood. But am I less of a man because I cannot bring myself to act brutally towards a woman? I cannot believe so.’

‘Neither can I,’ Hetty agreed, with feeling. ‘Although I suppose it is a different matter if the woman consents. Do you think it is possible that some women enjoy being physically abused?’

‘It is hard to imagine so. As you rightly point out, those women were paid to put on a show of pleasure.’

‘My mother used to say that the very act of sex is distasteful to a woman of genteel breeding,’ Hetty observed. ‘She made out it is a kind of torture, and that a considerate husband will abstain from inflicting himself upon her as often as possible. She had borne five children before she was twenty-five, so I imagine she knew what she was talking about.’

Leonard rose and brushed his trousers down. ‘Well, we should be getting back. I shall meet you here again at seven. It will still be light then, and we shall have a short but pleasant walk down into the village. I shall tell my mother that I have an engagement with an old friend, nothing more, and let her break the news to my father.’

They walked back across the lawn, passing near the summerhouse on the way. Hetty gave it a brief glance of distaste, which Leonard noticed. 'Ghosts, George,' he said, with a wry smile. 'They need to be banished, you know. One day we shall find a way to rid ourselves of those unpleasant memories.'

Hetty wondered how she was going to avoid confronting her mistress, but as she approached the house she could see Lady Alice taking tea with Lady Cosham through the drawing room window, so she knew she was safe. Swiftly she returned to her room and, after removing her outer clothes, huddled up beneath the sheets and pretended to sleep. She was, in fact, replaying the afternoon in her head, delighting in the conversation and company of Leonard once again.

Yet even as she relished her friendship with him, in the guise of her imaginary brother, Hetty cautioned herself to remember that Leonard was not of her class and whatever intimacies they had shared were ephemeral and, in the long term, insignificant. She told herself she could never be a real friend to Leonard, neither as George nor Hetty, for the social gulf was too wide between them. Even so, she relished the way he had opened his heart to her that afternoon.

She could hardly wait for seven o'clock to come round, yet she was always fearful that her ladyship would appear and demand some service. Dinner at Longton Hall began at eight and was generally over by nine-thirty, so there was a dangerous period when Hetty might be discovered by her mistress.

At around six-thirty she heard Lady Alice enter her room. Now her mistress would have to change from her tea-gown into her evening wear, but would she require assistance? Hetty was in a quandary. Should she put on her own clothes, in case she was called for, or should she remain in the long johns and shirt? When the familiar tap

at the door came she was quite jittery and her voice quavered as she called out, 'Yes, madam?'

Lady Alice put her head round the door. 'Oh, Hetty, you sound quite out of sorts. I shall not bother you to help me dress. Lady Cosham's maid has promised to attend on me and I am expecting her shortly. Rest, my dear, for you sound as if you need it. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Although she was relieved of her duties, Hetty was nevertheless alarmed. How on earth would she get to the rendezvous undetected? She could hear Lady Cosham's maid knocking at the outer door already, and no doubt she would be occupied in helping Lady Alice for the next half hour at least, so her escape route was barred.

There was no time to spare, so Hetty got out of bed and put on her jacket and trousers. In trepidation she went to the window and gazed down at the gardens, and the park beyond. She felt like Rapunzel, trapped in her tower. But then she realised that her window was not so far from an iron fire escape, with a drainpipe between. Could she possibly make her sortie that way? She flung open the window and peered out, assessing the distance. Wearing her man's trousers she could almost stride across.

The thought was only just conceived when she was cocking her leg over the windowsill and sitting precariously on the edge, summoning up the courage. Hetty was not a feeble girl. Raised in farming country, she was well used to acting like a boy when she was younger and her muscles were well developed. It was time to put her physique to the test.

Cautiously she reached out and found, at the extremity of her reach, that she could clutch the drainpipe in a firm embrace. Without a second thought she swung her legs across and gripped the pipe like a monkey, praying it would hold her weight. Being careful not to look down, she fixed her eyes on the narrow steps of the iron staircase. If she put out her right foot she could place it on the uppermost

step, but her next move would be more precarious. Momentum was the key: she would have to propel herself forward and clutch at the handrail in order to avoid dropping to her doom. It was a daring manoeuvre.

Hetty took a deep breath and then took her reckless leap. To her utmost relief she landed square on the step and, after swaying a little, regained her balance. Swiftly she descended the fire escape then made her way through the kitchen garden so as not to be detected. She skulked along the old brick wall until she had only a small area of lawn to cross, then she was safely in the small wood.

Leonard was already waiting for her at the appointed place. He grinned when he saw her.

‘George! I was beginning to think you would not come.’

‘I would not miss this for the world,’ she replied, as they strode out together.

The walk to the village was as pleasant as Leonard had promised, and the old inn was welcoming when they arrived. The landlord had known Leonard from infancy and greeted him respectfully, showing the pair to a discreet table within a high-backed stall. The fare was excellent: green-pea soup, followed by pigeon pie and lamb cutlets, with a greengage tart to finish. Best of all, though, they had the privacy to talk about any subject under the sun without fear of eavesdroppers, for the few customers who were in that part of the inn were clustered around the bar and engaged in spirited conversation of their own.

‘Imagine them all sitting round the table at home,’ Leonard grinned. ‘I do not begrudge them their grand fare. This is far more suited to my palate tonight.’

‘Did you tell Lady Alice you were meeting a school friend, like you said?’

‘I did. She was a bit put out at first, but I said my friend was in the area for one night only and I was missing his company. She knows I am like a fish out of water at Longton, you see. She has almost said as much, though

not in so many words. And she knows how my father bullies me, too – although not the full extent of it, of course,’ he added hastily.

‘How has he been towards you since... that night?’ Hetty enquired.

‘He has treated me with contempt – but then, he always did. More interesting has been the change in Eric Faraday’s behaviour towards me. Where once he was respectful, with the proper manner of a servant, now, if he encounters me when no one else is around, his manner is positively insolent and gloating.’

‘Oh Leo – I am sorry to hear that.’

He shrugged. ‘It does not bother me one whit. He may fancy that he is superior to me in some way, but I have seen him dressed in a skirt and simpering as a woman. You would never find me behaving in such an effeminate manner.’

‘Of course not,’ Hetty said feelingly. ‘You are one of the most virile gentlemen I know.’

He looked surprised. ‘Am I? Am I really? You surprise me. I have always felt less than a man, somehow.’ He sighed. ‘Sometimes I wonder whether any woman will ever love me. I fear I am most unattractive to the fair sex and, to tell the truth, I am quite terrified of them. Have you had much experience with women, George? One imagines you country chaps are always flirting with milkmaids, and so on. Is it really like that?’

Hetty wanted to giggle. It seemed absurd to be asked such a question, yet she was anxious to maintain her disguise so she thought her reply up quickly. ‘I have not had much time for courting. These few weeks are all the holiday I have had for years, and that only because my sister, Hetty, is away from home. I used to visit her at the old lady’s house – where she used to work, near our village.’

‘I dare say you miss her, George. I certainly would, if

she were my sister. She has such a sweet face and pleasant way about her. I confess that if I chance upon her – on the stairs, say, or when she does some needlework for me – she quite brightens up my day. If only I could find a girl as fair as her I should be content to plight my troth and, in time, to wed for I am sure such a woman would make me happy.'

Hetty hoped she was not blushing at this compliment. 'It is kind of you to say so, sir,' she muttered.

'Like sister, like brother, eh? The pair of you are a couple of treasures! Now eat up, and I shall order a bottle of port. We may as well act like gentlemen and not deprive ourselves.'

Once the dinner plates were cleared away, they began drinking port in a mellow and companionable mood, oblivious of their surroundings. Suddenly, the inn door was thrust open and a cold draught came in, causing both Hetty and George to look round in alarm. At the same time a horribly familiar voice shouted, 'There they are, the young rascals! I knew they'd be in their damn cups, the swine!'

The blustering figure of Sir Victor was closely followed by a young woman wrapped in a dark blue velvet cloak, who took a seat near the door.

'F-father!' Leonard faltered, half rising from his seat. 'W-what on earth are you doing here?'

'I might ask you the same!' snarled the squire, his face distorted with outrage. 'How dare you come skulkin' down here when you should be at home!'

Leonard looked deathly pale, but he squared up to his father in such a bold fashion that Hetty felt really proud of him. 'Didn't mama tell you? I wanted to see my friend, George.'

'She said it was a school friend of yours. That layabout has never bin to school in his whole damn life! What are plottin', you skivin' pair of scoundrels? I'll warrant you're

up to no good.'

'We just wanted to talk, father, that is all.'

'Well you're going to do more than talk, my lad, if I have anything to do with it.' He turned towards the bar. 'Landlord? Can we have the use of your upstairs room?'

Hetty blenched at the words. What did that bully have in mind for his son now? The landlord nodded and unlatched a door to the right of the bar. Sir Victor caught his son by the elbow and pushed him roughly towards this door, while Hetty and the blue-cloaked young woman followed hesitantly.

They ascended the creaking stairs and were soon entering a large room at the back of the inn, containing a four-poster bed, a couple of chairs, a wardrobe, chest of drawers and a marble washstand. There was a small fireplace too, although the fire was unlit. Leonard stared round with wild eyes, and Hetty's heart went out to him. 'What do you want with me, father?'

'I want to make a man of you – if that's possible. You wouldn't perform in front of my friends, so let us see how you behave in private. Marie, take off that cloak!'

Hetty turned round as the young woman untied her ribbons; the cloak dropped to reveal that she was naked, except for a pair of black leather boots. Her breasts were full and round, as was her pale stomach, and the slenderness of her arms and legs provided an intriguing contrast to her voluptuous body.

'Turn around,' Sir Victor commanded her. Marie obeyed, revealing a pair of large, firm buttocks, and the squire turned to his son. 'Now doesn't that make your sap rise?'

'I wish you wouldn't do this, father,' Leonard said miserably.

'What? You want to remain a snivelling brat all your life, with no knowledge of the finer things of life? For God's sake, learn to grow up a little! I want to see you give this magnificent behind six of the best. Bend over,

Marie, and display those comely cheeks!’

From his inner pocket Sir Victor took out a telescopic whip, which he proceeded to assemble. It was small but serviceable, and looked as though it could deliver a vicious enough sting if wielded boldly.

Hetty and Leonard watched helplessly as Marie sauntered over to the bed and sank to her knees beside it. She rested her large breasts on the mattress, laid her curly head on her forearms and arched her back, so that the curvaceous mounds of her bottom were lifted and defined. Pert and inviting, they seemed to demand attention of one kind or another.

Sir Victor tried to hand Leonard the whip, but he shrank away. ‘No, father, I cannot! You know I cannot do this. Please do not try to make me.’

‘You *will* obey me!’ growled his father. ‘I have taken enough insolence from you. Perhaps you have scruples, do you? Well, I can assure you Marie is well used to this sort of treatment. In fact, you like it, don’t you my dear?’

The coy face turned with a simpering smile and she spoke in a little girl voice. ‘Oh yes, master, I like being punished when I have been a bad girl.’

‘And how bad have you been this time, Marie?’ he enquired.

‘Very bad indeed, master.’ She pouted, with her finger in her luscious, full lips.

‘What did you do?’

‘I came out of the house with no clothes on, sir. I forgot to wear even my undergarments, so beneath my cloak I was quite, quite naked. I am a lewd and wicked slattern, and should be severely punished.’

‘Quite right!’ He turned to Leonard. ‘Well, your choice is simple now. Either you administer correction to this wayward creature, or I shall whip you myself and show you no mercy. Which is it to be?’

Hetty saw Leo blench, his expression so agonised that

she could hardly bear to look, but slowly he reached for the whip and she knew he was going to take the first option.

‘Do it properly, mind,’ his father warned. ‘Use your full strength or you’ll feel the whip yourself, on the seat of your pants.’

Hetty found she was holding her breath; the suspense was so great. The room felt airless, as if the atmosphere were thick with strong feeling and could hardly be breathed. She longed to intervene, to save Leonard this ignominy, but knew she could not come between father and son with impunity.

Marie was wriggling now, pushing her mound against the bed and flexing the muscles of her buttocks. Leonard lifted the whip against her and brought it down with a crack on the pale, quivering flesh. Marie gave a low groan, but it sounded more like a cry of pleasure than pain and, once again, Hetty found herself marvelling at the response of this woman of the street. Was she made differently from other women? Had her body grown callused and inured to pain through constant use? There was certainly no outward sign of it for her flesh appeared as fair and tender as her own, and just as vulnerable to hurt.

Once Leonard had the bit between his teeth he began whipping the girl as if he would never stop. Hetty understood how he felt, having been in that strangely elated state herself, but she hated the look on Sir Victor’s face as he stood witnessing the flagellation. He was standing with his legs astride and his hands on his hips, in an attitude of self-congratulation.

‘That’s my boy!’ he murmured, several times.

But now Hetty was growing alarmed at the frenzy Leonard seemed to be in. The once pale buttocks were now latticed with red stripes and Marie was showing signs of distress. Instead of low moans of pleasure, the sounds that came from her were sharp and agonised.

‘That is enough, surely?’ Hetty ventured, at last. ‘He is hurting her, Sir Victor.’

‘I suppose so,’ the man reluctantly conceded. ‘All right, son, you may stop now.’

But Leonard would not – or could not – stop. He was red-faced and panting, his eyes staring wildly and his hair dishevelled, so that he resembled some mad devil rather than a human being. Hetty was terrified to see him in that state, fearing he had lost his reason.

‘Stop, I say!’ his father commanded, but Leonard appeared not to hear him.

The squire stepped forward and grabbed his son’s right arm, trying to force the whip out of his hand, but Leonard continued to strive against him, like a demented automaton.

‘Leonard, céase!’ came the sharp command, but the implement was merely transferred to the other hand and the relentless lashing continued apace.

‘Marie, get out of here!’ Sir Victor yelled, and she scrambled to her feet and grabbed her cloak before fleeing from the room. Although the space she had occupied was now vacant Leonard continued his manic whipping, the strokes falling upon the mattress and raising clouds of dust in the process.

‘Are you crazy?’ Sir Victor exclaimed, sounding genuinely alarmed.

Hetty had an urge to intervene and went up to Leonard, speaking softly. ‘Leo, it’s me, your friend George, remember? You can put the whip down now, it is all over.’

At first she was afraid her words were falling on deaf ears, but then a glazed look came over Leonard’s eyes and his arm faltered, before coming to rest at his side with the whip clattering to the floor. While Sir Victor hastened to pick it up, Leonard turned to stare at Hetty. ‘George? What came over me, George? One minute we were sitting talking over a glass of port, and then...’

‘It is all right, Leo,’ she reassured him. ‘There is nothing more to worry about.’

He sank, face down, on the bed and she saw his shoulders heaving as if he were weeping. Sitting down beside him she placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it, hoping the gesture would give him some comfort. She was angry with his bully of a father for forcing him to lose control in that way, but relieved that the hideous charade was ended.

For some time she was focused on the prone figure at her side, but then curiosity prompted her to look around the room. When she did so, it was quite empty; Sir Victor had slunk away after his fancy woman. She hoped with all her heart that some vestige of shame and guilt was festering in that man’s breast, but it seemed unlikely. He was a man without conscience, a monster with monstrous appetites, and she was very relieved to find him gone.

Chapter Ten

‘Oh George, George! Never have I sunk so low in my entire life!’

The agonised cry came from Leonard’s lips as he sat upon the four-poster bed, his expression tragic. Hetty longed to take him in her arms and comfort him like a woman, but she knew she could not. Instead she gave him another pat on the shoulder, and then rose to her feet. She felt uncomfortable being so close to him while he was in such a distraught mood.

‘You must not fret over it,’ she told him gently, striving to keep her voice low. ‘It was your father forced you to do it.’

‘But once I started I could not stop!’ he moaned. ‘That poor, wretched young woman! What terrible injuries have I inflicted upon her?’

‘I am sure she is quite all right,’ Hetty assured him. ‘Remember, she is used to such treatment.’

‘A few strokes, maybe, but not that endless savage beating. I felt as though I were possessed by some devil, George, that would not let me stop the cruel work. I have never felt that way before. It was horrible!’

‘It was horrible of your father, to make you do it.’

‘I know I do not shape up to his idea of manhood,’ Leonard continued miserably. ‘And perhaps I never shall. But if acting with such brutality against a woman is considered manly, then I would prefer to be like effeminate Eric and wear skirts! Honestly, George, I never wish to harm a member of the fairer sex again.’

‘There is no reason why you should. All men do not beat their wives. I have never seen my father raise his

hand to my mother, and there are many other examples of domestic harmony in our village.'

Leonard gave a weak smile. 'Oh George, you are such a breath of fresh air in this place. Everything about you seems wholesome and honest. I – I do respect you as a person, George. In fact,' he looked away, shyly, 'I fervently wish I could be more like you, for you are my idea of a true man.'

Hetty had to smother a laugh. 'It is kind of you to say so,' she murmured.

'I know not what I shall do when you are gone for good,' Leonard continued. 'Come, sit by me a while. I dare not go home yet, for I am still agitated, and my soul is sick. Maybe you can help purge me of these evil spirits.'

'Would you like a drink?' Hetty asked, solicitously. 'A brandy, perhaps?'

'What a good idea. Ring the bell by the door, George.'

Soon the son of the landlord appeared and agreed to fetch them half a bottle of brandy and two glasses. Hetty already felt light-headed, but she was determined to drink at least one glass to keep poor Leonard company. When the spirits arrived, Leonard consumed his drink in one desperate gulp then poured another, but Hetty took only a small sip then lay the glass down on the table beside the bed.

'I have been thinking,' Leonard said. 'I fear I made the wrong choice when my father insisted that I should punish or be punished. I should have known that to wield the whip would be utterly distasteful to me. Now I must bear the consequences, which are quite fearful. I feel as if my heart is encased in lead, George, and I must carry this burden around with me forever.'

'You will feel better in time, surely.'

'That is easy for you to say. I doubt you have anything much on your conscience. But perhaps you can help to ease mine.'

‘How?’

‘By punishing me, of course. Ideally, justice should be served by having Marie whip me, a hundred times more severely than I inflicted upon her poor, defenceless body. But she is not here, and you are. Do you think you could bring yourself to lambaste me, George, for the good of my wretched soul?’

The request startled Hetty. ‘I... I do not know.’

He was staring at her with wild, beseeching eyes. ‘I know it is an onerous office for a friend, especially such a true one as you. The task will no doubt seem utterly distasteful to you. And yet if it is for my own good, if it is the only way that my suffering soul can find absolution, could you not bring yourself to perform it?’

Hetty could make no sense of her mixed feelings, stirring beneath the constraining bands around her chest. The thought of physically chastising Leonard was strangely exciting to her. She had memories of slapping the fat behind of Lady Alice, and of birching the compliant Maud, but this would be quite different.

‘Please, George, just this once. My need is great, and there is no one else I can entrust with the duty, least of all my bullying father.’

The thought of Leonard putting himself at his father’s mercy was, indeed, horrifying. Hetty hesitated no longer. ‘Well, if you are sure that is the only way...’

Leonard jumped up and drew her powerfully to his chest, where he held her for a few moments then broke away. ‘You may choose whatever implement you can find,’ he told him, glancing around the room. ‘That curtain sash, perhaps, or the sole of a boot. Your bare hand, even. But do not spare me, I beg of you. Punish me as vigorously as you like, safe in the knowledge that you are performing the deed out of love, not hatred.’

Leonard was quite animated now, his blue eyes bright as cornflowers and his cheeks flushed pink with

enthusiasm. He took off his jacket and then began to remove his trousers.

‘Oh!’ Hetty exclaimed. ‘I did not realise you meant—’

‘That I meant to bare my flesh? It is the only way, George, the way we used to do it at school.’ He gave Hetty another impetuous hug. ‘It will be just like the old days. I shall close my eyes and imagine you to be Crabtree, head of school and captain of rugby!’

Hetty tried to avert her eyes as the trousers went down, followed by the long johns, to reveal Leonard’s long, thick member, but her gaze seemed drawn to his privates like steel to a magnet. She could see the pleasing dimensions of his member, the hanging sac that held his testicles and the thick golden fleece at the base of his stomach, and her own stomach fluttered uncontrollably at the sight.

Leonard seemed quite unconcerned about exposing himself to her. He sat on the edge of the bed with his penis and bollocks dangling, and said, nonchalantly, ‘Have you decided what you are going to use on me yet, George?’

He might as well have been discussing which item of cutlery to use at table. Hetty marvelled that it all seemed so natural to him, almost second nature, whereas when called upon to be the perpetrator of the flagellant act his agony had been extreme.

Hetty looked around the room in desperation. She wanted to feel his smooth buttocks beneath her bare hand, wanted it more than anything right then, and yet she felt shy of suggesting it. Using some kind of implement would place a barrier between her flesh and his, making it seem less personal, less improper. Her eye lighted on the fire irons that stood in the grate. ‘I suppose I might use that brass poker,’ she said, doubtfully.

‘Excellent! Have another tot of brandy, George. It will fire up your spirit for the task,’ Leonard suggested.

She took a gulp of the brandy and felt her head fizzing with excitement. That was the last thing she needed.

Already her pulse was racing and her heart thudding beneath the tight constraints binding her breasts.

Picking up the short brass poker, she reflected that this was potentially a lethal weapon and she should wield it with great care. Despite her scruples a sense of power surged through her, making her stand tall. She spoke, and her voice came out deep and commanding. 'Leonard! Prepare yourself to receive your punishment!'

Leonard gave her a fleeting glance with his blue eyes then stood up. His cock was stirring at the prospect of the beating, increasing both in length and girth, and Hetty stared fascinated until he turned away from her and stretched over the bed, his pale behind presented to her. An urge to run her fingers over those taut mounds seized her, and she decided to indulge it, briefly. She moved to the bed and let the palm of her hand run over the twin buttocks, feeling the smooth coolness of the skin, the well toned flesh and springy muscle beneath.

Then, before she fully realised what she was doing, her hand came down with a sharp slap over both halves of his bottom, as if she were testing the response. Leonard groaned and seized a pillow, which he drew into his arms then buried his face in its downy softness.

Hetty transferred the poker to her right hand and raised it in the air. She let it fall with only moderate force, but even so it left a red weal on the pale surface of his backside. Fascinated, she watched the skin blush deeply. Leonard continued to lie there inert, his face smothered by the pillow.

She delivered a second blow, and this time he winced aloud. Apologies hovered on her lips, but she quashed her compassion and dealt a third stinging stripe across both buttocks. Now he really bore the mark of her exertions and she felt a peculiar sense of pride in the achievement.

'More!' Leonard urged her, with muffled voice. She obeyed, this time striking alternately at left and right

hemispheres, and his moaning reached a crescendo. The sound seemed to come not just from his throat but from the depths of his soul, it was so full of longing and desire.

Hetty found echoes in her own soul: deeds as yet unknown that she would like to do; words as yet unspoken that she longed to say. She could feel a great throbbing in her loins and a corresponding lightness in her head, twin poles of her being that seemed to be communicating directly now, by-passing the rest of her body.

Flashes of desire caught her up in their energy, like eddies in a storm. She imagined lying naked on top of that long, lean back and thrusting her pelvis against his springy mounds. She could see herself kissing that bundle of manhood in the front of his body – the sturdy staff and pendulous balls. There was something primal and almost desperate in her longing, so that she felt dwarfed by it, made to feel helpless by her own towering instincts. The sense of shame, induced in her by so many years of repression, melted from her soul like morning dew.

The brass poker felt solid in her hand, something to hang onto in her wavering state of consciousness. Blindly she thrashed him again, and was rewarded by sobbing cries of 'Yes, oh yes!' Again she hit out at his shuddering behind, but then she noticed how red his flesh was and came to her senses. She would not bruise him badly, or make him bleed. It was time to call a halt.

Putting the poker down on the carpet, she knelt beside the bed and ran her palm again over the weals. They made a raised pattern beneath her hand, like the damask cloth of Lady Alice's best bedspread. She longed to kiss the fevered flesh, but the rough clothes she was wearing reminded her that such behaviour would be inappropriate. Instead, she gave his back a gentle slap.

'That is enough, I think, Master Leonard. You are quite red raw and truly punished for your misbehaviour.'

Hetty took another sip of brandy. The drink had a calming effect on her, and soon she was breathing normally again, although she still felt very hot. She watched Leonard all the time, but he remained face down on the bed and almost motionless. He seemed to be in a world of his own.

Then he suddenly leapt up from the bed and went over to the washstand. His cock was huge, fully erect, and when he positioned the china jug on the floor Hetty wondered how he would manage to aim at it successfully, since he looked as if he were about to pass water.

‘I am sorry, George, but there is one thing I have to do,’ he said, his tone urgent. ‘Please do not take offence.’

Instead of pissing into the jug he began to rub his organ vigorously, moaning aloud as he did so. Hetty knew it would be more polite to look away but she continued to gaze, fascinated, and since Leonard had his eyes closed she knew he was oblivious to her altogether now. The viscid glans at the end of his cock was sticky and ripe, and a strange musky odour filled the air – half attractive, half repellent.

It took less than a minute for Leonard to shoot a stream of white liquid into the jug. It dripped from his penis like milk from a cow’s teat, and seemed abundant. All the time it was spurting Leonard emitted a low bellow, much like a cow in labour, so Hetty could not help but grow nostalgic for the farmyard. For a few seconds she wished she were really George and that she could go home tomorrow.

When Leonard had shaken the last few drops from his glans he returned to the bed and lay there, face up, with his tackle lying flaccid and spent. Acute embarrassment overtook Hetty now, since she had no idea what to do or say next. She replaced the poker in the grate, and took another small sip of brandy, then offered some to Leonard.

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ he grinned, sitting up. He downed

his glass in one, and then clapped a hand to his temple. 'Oh, I shall regret this in the morning!'

'Are you all right now?' she asked, somewhat anxiously.

He gave her a broad grin. 'All right? I should say so. Right as rain, thanks to you! My bottom aches, but it is a sweet pain I can assure you. I feel cleansed, George, completely.'

Hetty, too, felt purged of something, although she was at a loss to identify the unfamiliar emotions that still possessed her, faintly, like the fragments of a dream.

But the spell the flagellation drama had cast over them both was fading fast, and Hetty was growing anxious about how they would get back into Longton Hall without detection. Would Lady Alice be missing her? Would Sir Victor be lying in wait for his son?

Leonard seemed to share her concerns. 'We'd best get back, I suppose,' he said, his tone heavy with regret. 'It has been wonderful, George. Quite the best experience I've had since school. But all good things come to an end and you have a long day ahead tomorrow if you are returning down south.' His voice broke as he added, 'I shall miss you, dear George, truly.'

Ten minutes later they were out under the night sky. The air was balmy and a nightingale was singing in the copse as they strode silently towards the lighted windows of the summerhouse. Evidently the revels were still continuing, so it was likely that Sir Victor would be otherwise engaged for some time. Hetty breathed a sigh of relief as they turned towards the darker, more sombre silhouette of Longton Hall. What awaited her there? She dreaded to think what would happen if Lady Alice discovered that not only had she been masquerading as George again, but she had been out half the night, with the son and heir of the estate.

They paused at the side door and Leonard proffered his hand. 'I shall never forget this night, George, I swear.

You have turned an experience I wished to forget into a memorable one. Perhaps you will never know the true extent of what you have done for me, but I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Good night, and God bless!’

They parted then, with Leonard heading for the west wing and Hetty bound for her mistress’s apartment. It was dark and quiet, but she did not let the apparent calm lull her into a sense of false security. Taking off her boots on the landing, she tiptoed in through the door and heard the steady rhythm of Lady Alice’s snoring. But her ladyship had been known to waken with a start in the middle of the night, disturbed by the stentorian tones issuing from her own nostrils.

On this occasion, Hetty made it safely to her own room where she divested herself of George’s clothes for what she presumed would be the last time. She had taken a great risk in dressing as her brother that night, and it would be foolhardy to repeat the charade. If Sir Victor reported to his wife that Leonard had been with George at *The Crown*, she would have some explaining to do.

But in the morning it was Leonard who was the focus of Lady Alice’s thoughts. While Hetty helped with her toilet, she gave her version of what had happened the previous night.

‘Leonard told me he wanted to meet a school friend of his. I thought this a good idea, since I know he has been lonely of late, and thought nothing of it. However, his father took exception to his absence at dinner and kicked up a terrible fuss.’

‘Oh dear,’ Hetty murmured, teasing out a ringlet.

‘He set off to look for him, I believe. I feared there would be ructions. When he returned he was in a vile temper and by the time he joined his guests in the summerhouse he was very inebriated. There was no sign of Leonard, so I know not what time he got back – if,

indeed, he returned at all last night. It was a terrible to-do, Hetty, indeed it was.'

'No doubt it will all have blown over by now, m'lady.'

'I doubt it. There seems to be bad blood between father and son, but I know not why. Do you think it could have anything to do with those dreadful meetings of my husband's?'

Hetty thought she had better contribute something more to the conversation. 'Perhaps Sir Victor wanted his son to attend, as before.'

'That is possible, I suppose. But it sounds as though poor Leonard was not a great success when it came to doing the necessary. I am hardly surprised. Any young man called upon to perform in front of his father must surely quail at the prospect.'

Hetty was surprised that Lady Alice seemed so sanguine about it. But then her mistress said something that quite put her out. 'Those clothes you wore as "George", Hetty, where are they?'

Did Lady Alice already know that she had posed as her brother last night? Hetty felt her cheeks flush as she stammered, 'Er... under my bed, m'lady, out of the way.'

'I was going to give them back to Lady Cosham, but I have changed my mind. They might well come in useful another time. Don't look so dismayed, my dear. I know you found the masquerade rather trying, but to my mind we should not be too hasty in disposing of the young chap, so we shall let him lie in peace, for the moment.'

She gave a coy smile in the mirror, which Hetty was at a loss to interpret. Evidently she was not in trouble for resurrecting him last night, at least. Relieved, she finished off Lady Alice's coiffure and hoped that the rest of the day would pass without incident.

It was not to be. In the early afternoon, Sir Victor waylaid her on the upstairs landing. He had that look on his face that she had come to dread – a lascivious,

predatory expression – and if she could have avoided him, she would. But he caught her just as she was coming out of Lady Alice's apartment and there was no escape.

'Ah, Miss Hetty,' he said in a low, conspiratorial tone. 'Where is that brother of yours?'

Hetty felt panic rise in her as she wondered what to say. 'Erm... he is gone, sir. Back home, sir.'

'What, left already?' Sir Victor boomed, making her fear she had said the wrong thing. 'I wanted to say goodbye to him. Shake him by the hand and wish him well.'

'I am sorry, sir. The coach left the village early this morning.'

'Hm.' There was a long pause, in which Hetty felt very uncomfortable. Then he said, 'Did you know he was with my son last night, at *The Crown Inn*?'

'Er... no, sir, I did not.'

'Well you will miss him now, I suppose. My son, too. You look very alike, you and your brother. I dare say Leonard will be reminded of George every time he sees you.'

His voice was heavy with insinuation and, for a moment, Hetty wondered if he had guessed her secret. But then he went on, 'My son needs encouraging, where women are concerned. It would please me if you would engage him in conversation more often, get him used to conversing with the opposite sex. He has not had much to do with your sort, and the practice will do him good.'

Hetty stared at him, amazed, and muttered, 'Y-yes, sir. I shall do my best, sir.'

'I'm sure you will.' Sir Victor came close, so that her nostrils were filled with the scent of cologne, brandy and cigars, with a twang of the stables, too. It was a rough, masculine scent that did something strange to her insides, and she shrank from the closeness of him.

'You are a very *good* girl, aren't you?' he whispered,

placing his hand on her bottom.

She could not speak, and nodded dumbly. He gave her right buttock a slow and deliberate pinch, making her wince. The insinuating voice continued in her ear. 'In my experience, you *good* girls are often very bad underneath. I wonder just how bad you could be, given a little encouragement.'

Hetty wanted to speak, to rebuff him in some way, but she felt as though she had been turned to stone. Her heart was thudding frantically in her chest and she could hardly breathe.

Then, just as suddenly, Sir Victor drew away from her. He began to stride off and, as he went, turned back to say with a smile, 'Remember – more female society for the son and heir! You shall please me, Miss Hetty. You shall please me very well!'

Hetty was still standing on the landing, her mind numb with the shock of the encounter, when the door to her mistress's apartment opened and Lady Alice beckoned her in.

'I heard everything,' she said at once. 'You are not to heed my wicked husband, dear. The only sensible thing he said was about Leonard. I shall not mind if you engage him in pleasant conversation once in a while. You are a sweet girl, and your company will do him good. But be careful not to overstep the mark.'

'Your ladyship?' Hetty enquired.

'I mean, do not make him think he can take liberties, Hetty. You may disregard entirely what my husband said about good girls being bad underneath. That is just his wicked way of talking, to tempt young ladies into losing their virtue. Believe me, I have overheard such speeches a thousand times in this house. I would not like you to end up like wretched Sarah or poor Rose.'

'Oh no, m'lady!'

'Well then, go to Leonard now and see if he wants any

mending done. Talk to him about your dear departed brother; if it pleases him, then report back to me. I want to know how he is after last night.'

Although Hetty was cheered at the prospect of seeing Leonard again, she found the close interest in their relationship taken by both the master and mistress of the house very puzzling. Was it to do with his friendship with 'George'? Lady Alice knew the true identity of Hetty's imaginary brother, of course, but Sir Victor did not... or did he? The possibility that his wife might have informed him about it struck her for the first time.

Life at Longton Hall was certainly very different from anything she had known before. As she made her way to the library, where Lady Alice had said her son would probably be, Hetty considered the unpleasant possibility that she was being duped by all and sundry, an innocent pawn in an elaborate chess game between the major players of the house.

But the instant she saw Leonard she knew that any such devious pact must be between his parents alone. He could not possibly be party to it, because he greeted her with such a frank and pleasant smile, a picture of spontaneous innocence.

'Good morning, Miss Hetty! Now you are all I have to remind me of George, so I must get used to making do with the family resemblance. Come, sit here a moment and let us ponder on his long journey home. Where will he be by now: Leicester, do you think? Or maybe Gloucester? I have never ridden on the stage myself, although I should love to do so. I suppose that is how you came hither? Describe the route to me, if you please, so I may picture George's journey.'

It was pleasant indeed, sitting in the mellow light that poured in through the library window and remembering how intimate she had been with Leonard only last night. It was hard to imagine him submitting to the rod now,

though. How strange people's secret lives are, thought Hetty. Outwardly so respectable, yet inside seething with forbidden urges and the lust for perverse pleasures.

Maybe one day she would understand it for herself, but now she preferred to think of Leonard as the friend and companion she had known. This was but a shadow of the 'male' comradeship they had shared, yet it was all she had left and she would make the most of it.

Chapter Eleven

Hetty was not given to gossiping herself, but it was impossible to turn a deaf ear to what the other servants were saying as she went about her daily tasks in the kitchen. She gathered that Sir Victor had taken his son in hand and begun to train him in the duties of being lord and master of Longton. One day he was expected to take over the reins, and so his days were filled with visits to the stables, the game reserve, the home farm and any other place where servants toiled to keep the estate running smoothly.

The opinion below stairs was that Leonard was not taking kindly to this practical education. Hetty overheard cook and housemaid discussing the matter one afternoon.

‘He’s just not cut out for it, that one,’ Mrs Saddler commented. ‘Tis my belief master Leonard is a sore disappointment to his father.’

‘That’s hardly surprising,’ replied Lily. ‘He’s terrified of Sir Victor, anyone can see that. The poor lad fears criticism and ridicule above all else, so how can he succeed in anything he undertakes? You need self-confidence to run a place like this, but his father has knocked all the stuffing out of him.’

Cook nodded. ‘It’s a crying shame, for he’s a nice enough young man. But I heard Jack say he was near to tears yesterday after his father had berated him in the lower field for missing a sitting target at shooting practice.’

‘Well give me the son rather than the father any day. He is a proper gentleman, not an old rogue like Sir Victor. Never once has master Leonard tried it on with me – nor with anyone else, far as I know.’

‘That’s another reason why his father despises him so,’

Mrs Saddler continued, warming to her theme. 'He'd rather his son was a lady's man, I'll wager. Sees all that slap and tickle as the sign of a real man. In fact, if young Leonard got you with child, Lily, I think Sir Victor would be secretly pleased as punch!'

'Fat chance of that!' Lily declared, primly.

'Of course not. You'd put up more of a fight than that wretched Sarah, but not be so vicious as that foolish Rose. You've more sense than both of 'em put together.'

'Even so, I wouldn't mind the odd kiss and cuddle with Master Leonard. He don't seem the sort to force a girl.' Lily sighed. 'Gentility in a man should be valued more than blood, in my opinion. Gentle is as gentle does.'

It pleased Hetty to hear such a good report of him. Although she could speak to none of the other servants about her special relationship with the son and heir, it gave her a deep private satisfaction to know that he was thought well of in the household.

A few days later she came across him as she was on her way to the stillroom. His blue eyes brightened when he saw her. 'Ah, Miss Hetty, I have been meaning to ask after your brother. Have you heard anything from George, at all?' Dumbfounded, she shook her head and he looked disappointed. 'Oh well, I suppose it is too soon for a letter. You do write to each other, I suppose? He told me you had reached a good standard of education and wrote well.'

Recovering, Hetty nodded vigorously. 'Oh, yes!'

A thought suddenly seemed to occur to Leonard. 'Do you have a few minutes? There is something in the library I should like you to see.'

Hetty followed him into the library with eager anticipation. She could feel her pulses racing, and marvelled at the way being close to him affected her. How her day was instantly brightened by his presence! The marvellous thing was, she seemed to have exactly the

same effect on him, although she told herself it was only because of her resemblance to George.

Leonard drew up a chair for her near a large desk, and then opened a drawer beneath a bookcase. He drew out a flat, leather-bound portfolio with marbled cover, and untied the string as he returned to her side. Opening up the covers he laid it flat on the desk, for her to see.

‘This is strictly between you and me, Miss Hetty,’ he told her confidentially.

There was a blank sheet of cream paper on top of a pile of others. He lifted it and set it to one side, exposing something that made Hetty gasp aloud. On the page beneath was an exquisitely drawn portrait of – her, as George!

‘My brother!’ she remembered to exclaim. ‘What a perfect likeness!’

‘I did it myself, from memory,’ Leonard said, with a modest smile.

Hetty stared at him in disbelief. ‘*You* made this wonderful drawing?’

‘Art was my favourite subject at school,’ Leonard went on, as if this somehow explained his gift. He sighed. ‘If only I could paint and draw all day long I should be the happiest man on earth but, alas, my father insists that I should study agriculture and estate management, subjects for which I have no inclination.’

‘But you will be heir to Longton some day.’

He grimaced. ‘Sir Victor never ceases to remind me of that fact. He fears the place will fall into rack and ruin in my hands, and I am inclined to agree with him. My only hope is that I shall find a competent manager to run it all for me. Yet father insists I must know the ins and outs of everything, and try my hand at the practicalities too.’

Hetty picked up the portrait and studied it closely. Leonard had captured her features very well, despite the fact that she was shown wearing short hair and a collar

and tie.

'I should be much obliged if you would send that to George, next time you write to him,' Leonard said, shyly. 'It is a kind of tribute to our friendship, which I hope will afford him some pleasant memories of his stay at Longton.' He sighed. 'I do not suppose we shall meet again.'

'Of course I shall send it,' Hetty agreed, with a smile. 'And I know he will be delighted.'

'Perhaps you would care to see some more of my work?' Leonard suggested, leafing through the portfolio. 'I've made several views of the landscaped gardens, and of the house.'

After Hetty had admired the scenes, Leonard went back to the drawer and withdrew a second folder of work. 'These are all portraits,' he told her. 'I am much encouraged by your interest, Miss Hetty, but if I am boring you please let me know. I would not wish to impose.'

'Oh no,' she protested, with genuine feeling. 'I am enthralled to see such talent, Master Leonard. Your mother must be very proud of you, at least.'

The look of horror that passed over Leonard's features was alarming. 'Miss Hetty, you do not understand. You are the only person in this house that knows about this. That was what I meant by us sharing a secret. You must promise not to tell a living soul – please swear it, I beg of you!'

He was so distressed that she readily swore not to divulge his secret, although it seemed a shame. Surely Lady Alice, at least, would be pleased that her son showed some artistic talent?

He handed her a portrait of an aristocratic looking youth in cricket togs, standing casually at the wicket with his bat. 'That is Crabtree, head boy and captain of the school team,' Leonard said, his voice glowing with admiration.

'You have captured his noble profile very well, I'm sure.'

He continued to go through them. 'This is one of the

science masters... Here is matron, looking rather girlish, don't you think? And... oh, I did not mean to show you that one!'

Hetty stared at the drawing in fascination. It depicted the scene Leonard had described to her when she was posing as George, the school initiation ceremony. Around the room stood ranks of older boys in their high wing collars – some smiling, some frowning, but all staring with rapt attention into the centre of the room. To one side stood two smaller boys, black scarves tied around their eyes, while in the middle of the cleared floor a primitive ritual was taking place.

A stereotyped 'Greek God', that Hetty recognised instantly as Crabtree, was standing there entirely naked, his legs apart to display an erect organ of impressive proportions. Another blindfolded boy was kneeling before him, the curves of his bare buttocks clearly differentiated, their cheeks latticed with red stripes. It was obvious that, in a few seconds, those rosebud lips would be coming into contact with the swelling glans of the head boy. Leonard had captured the moment of maximum suspense and anticipation in the proceedings, and Hetty could feel the sexual tension seep through her like a draught of intoxicating wine.

Now Leonard was blushing to the roots of his hair. 'This was not meant for a maiden's eyes,' he said, hastily starting to slip the picture back into the folder.

But something in Hetty made her stay his hand. 'No, please, let me see.'

'It is improper – I should not have drawn it, let alone allowed anyone to see it,' Leonard insisted, clearly embarrassed, but he let her gaze upon it for a few more seconds all the same.

'Is that a faithful representation of the head boy?' she asked innocently.

'I believe so. It was the custom at my school that the

best endowed of the prefects should become head of school.'

'How marvellous! It is like some primitive tribal tradition, do you not think?'

He seemed surprised at her frank analysis. 'I suppose you could say that.'

'Do you have any more drawings like this?'

'Not like this, exactly.'

'I should love to see more, in any case,' she insisted.

For a moment he looked deep into her eyes. 'Oh, Miss Hetty, I see so much of your brother in you!' he exclaimed, softly. 'He and I grew so close. I told him things I would not dare tell any other man. If he had stayed longer I might, perhaps, have shown him my artwork. Perhaps, if I reveal all to you, it will seem as though I am sharing my innermost secrets with dear George, as well.'

'I am quite sure you are right,' she fervently agreed.

'Then I shall not think of you as being filled with maidenly modesty. Rather I shall imagine that you are as keen as your brother was to share my secret soul. Here, take a look at these most private sketches now and tell me what emotions they bestir in you. I shall be most interested to know your responses.'

The next drawing he unveiled was a most extraordinary sight, and Hetty could hardly stop herself from gasping aloud when her eyes fell upon it. The main figure was a woman wearing a riding outfit of black leather, her magnificent breasts jutting so firmly beneath the fitted jacket that the buttons could scarcely contain them. Within the deep V of her lapels could be seen several inches of cleft, suggesting that she was naked beneath. She had tall riding boots that only served to emphasise her already impressive height, and her hair was scraped back in a bun. The expression on her face was both imperious and impassive, and in her right hand she wielded a long black whip.

On the ground before her was a naked man on all fours, saddled and bridled. His member stood proud, like a stallion's, and his testicles hung heavy and low, while his rear end was dappled with red. To add the final, bizarre touch he was blinkered like a dray horse.

'You find it... strange, I expect,' Leonard prompted. 'It is the product of my fancy, that is all. Sometimes I like to allow my imagination free rein...' he smiled, nervously. 'If you will pardon the pun.'

Gazing at that disturbing image, Hetty felt those strange stirrings once more. She was growing used to them now, although she still did not understand their origin and nature. They made her heart and pulses race, the sweat stood out on her brow and, deep inside, a throbbing kind of hunger arose, that nevertheless had nothing to do with food.

'A man saddled and bridled like a horse!' she exclaimed, her voice sounding rough and foreign to her ears.

'As I said, just my fancy. What do you make of this?'

He drew out another sheet and placed it before her. This time the setting was Roman, with manacled slaves, both male and female, languishing at the foot of tall columns. A centurion stood proudly to one side in his little leather skirt and bare, sinewy legs, while a bare-breasted woman of Amazonian proportions was sitting astride a vanquished black slave, kneeling on all fours. The expression on the woman's face was blissful and Hetty noticed that her skirts were drawn up around her waist so that her nether parts were in contact with the man's broad, sweaty back. Was she 'riding' him?

'Another strange picture,' she murmured.

'Yet there is a kind of theme emerging, is there not? You might describe it as strong, dominant women and weak, submissive men. I know not why I am so fascinated by such scenes, but they come unbidden to my mind's eye and then I cannot rest until I have captured them in pen and ink.'

‘They are very well executed.’

‘Thank you.’ Leonard sighed and pushed the sheets back between the boards, tying them with the ribbon again. He had just replaced one portfolio in the drawer and was about to put the landscapes back into the other folder, when the library door was suddenly flung open and in strode Sir Victor, looking purple about the gills.

‘There you are, boy!’ he roared, stomping straight up to the desk and totally ignoring Hetty. ‘What are you fooling around with in here? You should be out in the paddock helping Bentley with the horses.’

He caught sight of the drawing his son was desperately trying to conceal, and snatched it from him. ‘What’s this nonsense? Where did you get this from?’

The sight of the beautifully executed sketch of his own summerhouse and grounds seemed only to enrage him further. ‘What tomfoolery is this?’ he snarled.

Hetty felt a desperate urge to act as advocate. ‘Master Leonard drew it himself. It is a fine drawing, is it not?’

Her voice faltered as Sir Victor’s beady gaze fell on her. His eyes were popping half out of their sockets and his cheeks were puffed and purple; he seemed in a state of apoplexy. ‘Drew it *himself*?’

More out of wishful thinking than realistic assessment of his mood, Hetty told herself that Sir Victor was merely astonished by this evidence of his son’s gift. ‘Yes, sir. He is a talented artist, don’t you think?’

‘Artist my *arse*!’

To Hetty’s utter horror, he ripped the page in two down the centre. He crumpled up both halves and threw them onto the carpet, then proceeded to stamp on them and grind them with his heel, all the while gasping and exclaiming, referring to Leonard as if he were elsewhere.

‘Bloody damned wastrel! Scribbling and dribbling his life away when he should be facing up to his responsibilities! I’ll give him *drawing*! If these were more

civilised times the likes of him would be *drawn* all right — hung, drawn and quartered!’

Leonard took a faltering step. ‘Father—’

Sir Victor turned on him. ‘Don’t you “father” me, for I wish to God I had not fathered you!’

Fearing for the rest of his collection, Leonard bundled the portfolio together and stuffed it into the drawer while his Sir Victor, in his mad rage, was attempting to reduce the crumpled halves of the already destroyed sketch to confetti. Eventually, when the carpet was strewn with the remains, he appeared to calm down and an ice-cold hardness possessed him instead.

‘What are you doing in the library with my wife’s servant?’ he enquired, sternly.

The question seemed to throw Leonard. ‘I-I thought she might like to see—’

‘What — your rampant cock? Your magnificent erection?’

Leonard blenched at the improprieties. ‘No, sir, I—’

‘You mean you didn’t bring her in here to seduce her, then?’ Sir Victor sneered. ‘No rumpy-pumpy in the library? No chasing around the desk, or floundering on the carpet?’

‘Of course not, sir, I—’

‘Of *course* not!’ his father mimicked, cruelly. ‘You would have to be a real red-blooded male to get up to those tricks, wouldn’t you, my lad? And we all know what a lily-livered apology for your sex you are. I’ll wager even this young ninny here secretly despises you for not groping her a little. Ain’t that right, missy?’

Hetty was appalled. ‘No, sir, indeed I do not!’

‘What? You mean to say you are not attracted to my son? He looks well enough, don’t he? Got his looks from my side of the family.’ He turned to Leonard, apparently in discursive mood now. ‘Women like a fair-faced fellow, and I admit yours ain’t too bad when you’re not looking

like thunder, which is most of the bloody time. It's a crying shame not to press home your advantage, boy. God gave you the means to winkle your way into a woman's heart, so why don't you use it?

'I-I don't know, father.'

Leonard looked so miserable that Hetty longed to put her arms around him, but she could only stand witness to the strange scene between father and son.

Sir Victor moved close to her, and a sudden revulsion overtook her as he put his arm around her shoulders. 'Now take this little missy. You're a virgin, ain't you?' Hetty nodded, squirming with discomfort. His breath was fetid, and his grip on her arm uncomfortably tight. 'Virgin girls, they're all eaten up with curiosity about the one thing they're supposed not to be thinking about. Am I right?'

The question flummoxed her, so all she could do was nod. Sir Victor pressed his thick, fleshy lips to hers for a few seconds. She closed her eyes, held her breath and prayed as his stiff-pointed moustache brushed her cheek. His clumsy hands squeezed her breasts, making her gasp, then all contact was mercifully ended for the time being.

'She's a tasty little thing,' Sir Victor continued, his eyes on his son. 'And if you're not going to enjoy her, then I will – when the time is ripe and the place is private. But right now I would rather use this girl to teach you a lesson, a lesson you won't forget in a hurry, neither.'

Hetty's soul shrank at these words. What devilish scheme did the master have in mind now? She knew exactly what he was capable of, but he seemed to enjoy playing a cat-and-mouse game with both her and Leonard.

'Hitch up your skirts, missy,' he suddenly commanded. 'And bend over the desk.'

Hetty was horrified, but an equal alarm showed in Leonard's bright eyes. 'What will you do, sir?' he asked his father.

‘Tis not what *I* shall do,’ Sir Victor replied, with a nasty smile. ‘You have balked at this task once, my lad, but you shall not escape it again. This young lady needs correction, and you are just the man to provide it.’

‘Oh no!’ Leonard exclaimed, as the full import of his father’s words struck him. ‘I cannot! Do not force me, sir, I beg of you!’

His words were ignored as Sir Victor pushed Hetty’s torso down over the desk and pulled down her drawers. ‘There now, isn’t that a sight for sore eyes?’ he eulogised. ‘Two perfect hemispheres, and enough to make any red-blooded male’s heart leap with excitement.’ Hetty felt his warm hand stroking each of her buttocks in turn. ‘Skin so velvety soft,’ he murmured. ‘You may caress each of these sweet cheeks, Leonard, in between the strokes you give ’em. That way you might convince yourself you are delivering pleasure and pain, in equal measure. Isn’t that right, Miss Hetty?’

He put his hand beneath her chin and forced it up until her eyes met his. She gave him a look of scorn, but he merely laughed at her token protest, knowing he had the upper hand. Then he bent close and whispered in her ear, ‘Rest assured, madam, one of us shall have you before the month is out. Your hot little pussy has been ignored for too long. Her hour *shall* come, I promise you!’

Hetty froze, her whole body in a suspense so rigid it was as if rigor mortis had set in. Sir Victor appeared not to notice. He stepped back, giving way to his son.

‘Come boy, the flat of your hand will do it. A couple of stinging slaps are all that is required to satisfy me – and this maid too, I’ll wager. Give it to her good and proper, son.’

Hetty stiffened as she felt, rather than heard, Leonard’s approach across the carpet. When he was right behind her she heard him murmur low, ‘Forgive me, Miss Hetty,’ then the first of his slaps making her buttocks quiver with

shock. There was no pain, only a sharp exhilaration that seemed to fill her whole body.

By the time the second slap came she was ready for it, her *gluteus maximus* taut and firm. Leonard gasped with the exertion as he made contact with her naked flesh, and then – oh, bliss! – his palm turned from tormentor to benefactor, moving with gentle caresses over her inflamed skin.

‘That’s it,’ she heard the hateful Sir Victor croon, as his son gently stroked her smarting bottom. ‘They like a bit of that too. Softens ’em up, so they don’t resist you when the time comes. Spread her cheeks and finger her puckered rose – they like that too, the little minxes!’

Hetty gasped as the entrance to her anus was exposed and a gentle finger began to tease and tickle all around, making her squirm with the sudden keen sensations.

‘That’s enough for now,’ came the sharp admonition, just when she felt she would swoon with the unaccustomed bliss of it. ‘Give her another slap, just to show her who’s master.’

She felt Leonard draw close for an instant, murmuring once again, ‘Forgive me,’ before he withdrew and delivered another sharp smack to her bottom.

But then his place was taken by Sir Victor, whose low insinuations sent a thrill of fear up her spine. ‘You have had a taste of the medicine, my dear, but there shall be more, I promise you.’ His hand, more firm and confident than that of his son, proceeded to delve between her bottom cheeks and stroke the aroused orifice within. She gasped.

‘This is not the only fount of pleasure in your sweet body,’ he continued, nuzzling at her ear and causing the hairs on her neck to bristle. ‘We shall discover many more, my merry maid! But first you must be thoroughly subdued and subjected to my son’s will. I shall make you his true servant, his willing slave. That is my design, missy, and I

promise you I shall accomplish it ere long!’

He pinched her right buttock, so hard it made her eyes water, then she felt her drawers being roughly pulled up again. Surmising that her ordeal was over, Hetty turned around and caught Leonard’s eye. He blushed and looked away, but Sir Victor gave her a hearty grin.

‘That is all for now, Miss Hetty. You are dismissed.’

With trembling knees she made for the door of the library. Her soul was in turmoil, and she could not bear to think of what had just happened. The promise of more to come filled her with dread, and yet there was a strange longing, too.

Hetty reflected that if only she and Leonard had been alone, and he had been acting from his own free will and not at his father’s command, the experience would have been so very different. But he was as much afraid of Sir Victor as she was: they were both his victims. The sense of them being in the same boat gave her some consolation, but it was no real comfort. There was more to come; unspeakable horrors, nameless deeds she could not even imagine.

Should she tell Lady Alice about her predicament? If only she could trust her mistress to protect her, but she feared that the lady of the house was as cowed by the master as everyone else seemed to be. If only someone could stand up to that tyrant! Leonard had tried to at first, emboldened by his friend ‘George’, but now he seemed unable to defy his father any more. Had he obeyed this time in order to save his artwork? Hetty could not find it in her heart to blame him, yet it was a sad disappointment to her.

She had thought Leonard would turn out to be a knight in shining armour, but he now seemed to be a cowardly weakling where Sir Victor was concerned. When Rose resisted him, she had been dismissed, so what course remained for Hetty? Must she suffer in silence to keep

her livelihood?

The question troubled her as she hurried on to the stillroom, to fetch some rose water. However liberally she sprinkled it about Lady Alice's apartments, she fancied there was a stench at Longton that no amount of rose or lavender could extinguish: the scent of moral turpitude.

Chapter Twelve

In the days that followed, whenever Hetty's path crossed with that of Sir Victor, the encounter would produce some lewd remark or, worse, obscene liberty with her person. If they were in some hidden corner of the house – and there were many of those – he thought nothing of unbuttoning her blouse in order to give her nipple a sharp tweak, or hitching up her skirts and pulling down her drawers, in order to give her buttocks a pinch or slap. Then he would laugh uproariously at her distress before passing on, often whistling a merry tune.

Hetty decided she would tell Lady Alice about the way she was treated by the master of the house. She felt the need of an ally, and although at first she had thought Leonard would defend her against Sir Victor it now appeared that he was as much in his father's thrall as the rest of the household. But surely her mistress would be concerned if she knew how often, and in what manner, her personal maidservant was being abused.

She chose her moment carefully. A mood of intimacy usually arose when she was performing Lady Alice's toilet, but often the recipient of Hetty's services was too engrossed in her own concerns. One morning, however, an opening was provided for her.

'Hetty, you have been looking rather pale of late and I have been quite worried about you,' her ladyship began. 'You need fresh air and exercise. There is nothing troubling you, I trust?'

'There is something, my lady,' she began hesitantly. 'Only it is hard to speak of.'

'My dear, you *must* tell me. I am *in loco parentis* for

your mother, you know, and regard you as my own daughter. You may speak freely to me.'

Hetty found this speech unconvincing, coming from the woman who had forced her to don men's attire and spy on her husband's indecent revels. However, she was determined to reveal all. 'It is your husband, Sir Victor. He—'

'Oh, do not bother yourself about *him*,' Lady Alice broke in. 'I suppose he has been teasing you, or even stealing the odd kiss? It's his way, you know, with all the young female servants.'

'But he has gone further. His advances have grown quite improper, and they offend me.'

To Hetty's surprise, her mistress seemed very interested. 'Tell me exactly what he has done, my dear. He has not... you are still pure, are you not? You haven't lost your virtue?'

'Not yet, but I fear it may only be a matter of time.'

'How far has he gone? I need to know, my dear.'

Lady Alice's eyes were bright and piercing, and her eager manner was disconcerting. Nevertheless, Hetty continued. 'He has beaten me on my naked behind, several times, and will often delve beneath my clothes to pinch or stroke me.'

'Really! And how do you feel when he does those things?'

'Very uncomfortable.'

'Is that all? Are you not in the least roused by such male attentions, my dear?'

Hetty feigned ignorance. 'Roused?'

'I mean, excited. Do you get all hot and bothered, with beating heart and racing pulses?'

Hetty frowned. 'Yes, of course. Out of fear.'

'And something else?' Lady Alice prompted. 'Do you not gain some secret satisfaction from being the object of a man's desire, Hetty? Do your secret places swell and

ache with physical hunger, while a desperate longing fills your breast? Sir Victor is a red-blooded male, after all, and such men always evoke admiration and desire in a woman.'

She seemed lost in some rapture of her own, and Hetty began to despair of ever getting any help from that quarter. Yet still she persevered. 'I find it offensive, my lady. Your husband should not treat his servants in that manner. I cannot help thinking of poor Sarah, who got with child, and my dear friend Rose, who—'

'That slut Sarah lay with the stable boy!' Lady Alice said harshly. 'And as for your impudent friend, she grossly insulted my husband. I hope you will not take those two wretches as your models, Hetty, or your days in this house will surely be numbered!'

It was then that she knew for certain that there would be no help for her if she should fall victim to Sir Victor's lust. She suddenly felt terribly alone, and wished she could become George again. She missed the hours of easy contact with Leonard but, most of all, she missed the sense of invulnerability that posing as a man had given her.

To assuage her nostalgia for her make-believe brother she decided to write a letter, purporting to be from him. She would deliver it personally to Leonard, saying it had been enclosed with one to herself. In the kitchen, she found a brown paper bag that she carefully opened up and ironed over a damp cloth until it was a suitable surface for writing. Then, during her free hour in the afternoon, she sat in the kitchen garden with the paper and a pencil thinking hard about what to write.

Dear Leonard, she began, but then crossed out the 'nard'. *I am home now and hope you are well. I often think of Longton and news from my sister Hetty is always welcome. I trust you are keeping an eye on her for me. You know*

only too well what dangers await her there, and she is very precious to me. Hetty tells me you are a grand artist and how I should like to see more of your drawings. The one you did of me is very fine and anyone can see it is a good likeness. I have put a frame around it that I made myself and I shall treasure it forever. Yours respectfully, George.

The effect on Leonard when she handed him the letter was quite unexpected. They were in the drawing room, where Hetty had been to collect the tea things after her mistress had taken tea with Lady Cosham, and Leonard had popped his head round the door. Prepared for just such a chance encounter, Hetty had taken the folded letter out of the pocket of her apron and handed it to him with a smile. 'From my brother, George. It arrived with his letter to me.'

Once Leonard had scanned the words he drew Hetty into his arms with a deep sigh and planted a lingering kiss on her curls. Then he held her at arm's length, his eyes glowing. 'Oh Hetty, my dear, if you only knew what this means to me. To have some communication from your brother cheers my heart. He is the only real friend I have found here, and I miss him sorely. If only he could make another visit... but I know that is impossible.'

Not so impossible as you might imagine, Hetty thought. Her mind was racing on, trying to find an excuse for her brother's return, but it was hard to think of a convincing reason why he should visit Longton again so soon. Meanwhile, she was quite dizzied with the after-effect of Leonard's embrace. She gazed at him dumbly, while he continued to pour the radiance of his complexion upon her.

But then his expression grew abashed. 'George has urged me to protect you, his beloved sister,' he went on. 'But I fear I have already neglected my duty in that regard. The

other day, in the library, I allowed my fiend of a father to persuade me to abuse your chaste person, even though my soul cried out against it. Will you ever forgive me?’

‘There is nothing to forgive. I knew that if you refused your father he would destroy your precious drawings, and I could not bear that. A couple of slaps seemed a small price to pay.’

He seized her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her fingers fervently before letting her go back to her duties.

That brief encounter with Leonard was enough to raise Hetty’s spirits. She felt she could bear life at Longton if only the young master would give her a few kind words or a friendly smile each day.

On the other hand, she tried to steer clear of Sir Victor. If she heard his voice booming in the corridor she would dart into a nearby room to escape him, and whenever she was forced to be in his company she would studiously avoid his eye. In that way she managed to go for a whole week without attracting his unwanted attentions, and she fancied that perhaps he had forgotten all about her.

The time for another infamous dinner party came round, however, and Hetty was asked to wait at table. She was dreading it, and even asked Lady Alice if she might be excused, but they were shorthanded again and so she was obliged to take the place of Lily, who was visiting a sick relative with her husband Jack.

‘You should not be frightened of unwanted attention from the gentry,’ her mistress told her, correctly surmising the cause of her reluctance. ‘They will have their own *divertissements* this evening, in the summerhouse after dinner, and I am sure the attractions of those professional ladies are far greater than those of a simple housemaid.’

‘Very well, my lady.’

Lady Alice smiled condescendingly, patting Hetty on the shoulder. ‘You need not bother your head about such things, my dear. It will be time enough when you marry,

although I do not know how you will find a husband hereabouts, I'm sure. Sir Victor is considering employing a new stable hand. Perhaps he will be to your liking, with sturdy calves and a smell of manure about him, eh? What?' She gave a vulgar laugh.

Hetty did her best to remain almost invisible throughout the meal. She recognised many of the male guests, which did not improve her equanimity. It was unnerving, knowing that she had witnessed Sir A soundly beating a fair pair of naked buttocks, or recalling the sight of Mr B thrusting his small member between a woman's voluptuous breasts. Of course none of those gentlemen realised that the girl who served them with their oyster soup was that same 'George', who had accompanied Sir Victor's son on that night of debauchery.

She couldn't help wondering whether Leonard would be drawn into the proceedings again but, after the women retired to the drawing room, she was taking the dishes back to the kitchen when someone slipped past her in the corridor. It was Leonard. He gave her a wink as he opened the door to the library.

'The treasures in here are more to my taste than my father's dubious entertainment,' he told her. 'If anyone asks after me, Hetty, you haven't seen me.'

'Very well, sir,' she smiled, pleased that he seemed to have escaped the ordeal this time.

Two hours later she went down to the kitchen to prepare a posset for her mistress, who had a slight headache. While she was waiting for the herbs to infuse, Sir Victor suddenly appeared. His face was flushed and he appeared unsteady on his feet. Hetty feared the worst.

'Ah, there you are!' he exclaimed, compounding her fear as she realised he had come looking for her. 'What foul brew are you mixing there? Trying to poison my wife?'

'No sir. It is Lady Alice's usual tisane with chamomile,

valerian—'

'I'm not interested in your devil's concoctions!' he snarled. 'It's you I want. Upstairs. In my room. In five minutes!' With that he stormed off.

Hetty was at a loss. She had never been summoned to his private apartment before, and at this late hour, too. The prospect horrified her. Now, of all times, she must seek the protection of her mistress. She hurried back upstairs with the steaming mug of tea and found Lady Alice in bed, propped up by pillows. She greeted her with a faint smile. 'Thank you, my dear. Set it down on the bedside table.'

'My lady, I have received an unusual request from your husband,' Hetty began, nervously.

'Really?' Lady Alice hitched herself up, her expression more alert. 'Tell me about it.'

'He found me in the kitchen and asked me to go up to his room. I cannot imagine what he wants with me there, but I am sure I should not go there alone, at this late hour.'

'Dear dear, that is somewhat unusual as you say. Yet I am sure Sir Victor means you no harm. He probably has some small personal service he wishes you to perform.'

'But surely his valet, Master Eric—'

'I should imagine *Master* Eric is otherwise engaged this evening,' Lady Alice said, with a wry smile. 'But why my husband has left his guests to their own devices I cannot imagine. I hope he is not unwell.'

'Perhaps you had better come with me, in case he needs a doctor?' Hetty enquired. Her tone was anxious, but more on her own behalf than out of real concern for her master.

At once her mistress sank back against her pillows, putting her hand to her forehead. 'Alas, I am wondering whether I need the doctor myself,' she complained faintly. 'Lift the cup to my lips, would you dear? Perhaps a sip or two of tisane will clear my head.'

Hetty knew, then, that she was on her own. She did as asked, then rose from the bedside with a heavy heart. As she made for the door, her mistress's feeble voice followed her. 'Let me know if he needs anything...'

Hetty made her way along the silent corridors to the far end of the house, where Sir Victor had his quarters. She had never ventured there before, but the hunting prints on the landing outside together with the smell of cigar smoke that lingered in the air made it very obvious that she was now in a male domain.

Tentatively she knocked at the bedroom door, which was soon flung open. Sir Victor stood there in a smoking jacket with a cigar stub between his lips and a brandy glass in his hand, his greying hair in a wild mane and his eyes rheumy.

'Aha, the wench has arrived!' he announced, his voice thick and plummy.

He pulled her into the darkened room that was lit only by a few candles. Stark terror seized her as she saw two dim figures in the corner. As her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom she recognised Leonard, pinned to a chair by a blowsy beauty who was sitting on his lap, her voluptuous breasts half out of her skimpy corset and her bare thighs adorned by frilly blue ribbons. He looked half scared to death.

Sir Victor locked the door, much to Hetty's dismay, then turned up the oil lamp so that the dishevelled figure of his son and the sultry charms of the raven-haired beauty were illumined like some risqué fresco from the ruins of Pompeii.

'It's high time this filly was broken in,' Sir Victor declared. 'I can't stand having virgins under my roof. And you are just the stud to do it, Leonard. I want to see my son become a man, and prove himself. But first I intend to demonstrate how it's done.' He took the young woman's hand and she gracefully rose from Leonard's

lap. 'Come, Evelyn, let us show these two young ignoramuses what it is to be a man and woman in lust!'

He led her over to the big bed, where he began to tear the flimsy blouse from her torso as he planted ravenous kisses on her throat. The woman chuckled softly, raising her leg and rubbing herself against his thigh like a cat on heat. Soon Evelyn's large, dusky breasts were completely exposed, the nipples provocatively erect, and Hetty felt an echo of those strange feelings in the pit of her stomach. Her belly ached with a new kind of hunger and her own breasts began to tingle as their small buds swelled and hardened.

Sir Victor saw Hetty standing there in frozen fascination, while Leonard was sprawled in a daze. 'Sit on my son's lap,' he commanded her. 'Take the place of the lovely Eve.'

She did as she was told, feeling more somnambulist than fully alert. To be nestled on Leonard's warm lap was somewhat comforting, although the prospect of losing her virtue was terrifying. Had the old lecher really meant what he said? If Leonard was to do the fateful deed perhaps it would not be so bad, but she feared he might balk at the deed and his father might decide to exercise his *droit de seigneur* instead. Seeing him now, slobbering all over that pretty young woman, it made her gorge rise.

Yet as she sat on Leonard's thighs and felt his arms about her waist, something delightful stirred in Hetty and she felt comforted and relaxed. They were thrust together in this nightmarish situation, neither of them capable of gainsaying that dictator who held them captive, so they might as well make the best of it. She could feel Leonard's tender breath upon her arm and feel his bodily warmth through her clothes. Instinctively she nestled up to him and sensed his almost imperceptible sigh.

Soon, though, her eyes were riveted in fascination on the scene unfolding before them. Sir Victor was divesting

the lovely Evelyn of her garments and her naked body was shown to good effect in the warm glow of lamp and candlelight. As Hetty observed her languid responses to the rough caresses, she felt her own body start to melt and glow in sympathy. She felt a shameful longing for Leonard to caress her own breasts as his father was caressing those of Evelyn. She saw the other woman's nipples grow hard and the perfect orbs swell and firm up; beneath her prim blouse she could feel her own breasts behaving in a similar manner.

'Oh, Sir Victor...' Evelyn murmured, as his hands parted her willing thighs to find the damp cleft within.

Hetty watched in fascination as her master pushed the woman back onto the bed and opened her legs even wider to reveal the soft folds of her sex. Hetty had never seen a woman's vulva displayed so openly before, and the sight was shocking. Yet she was obliged to acknowledge that she was made the same way.

To her amazement, Sir Victor put his head between her open legs and began to lick and suck at the woman's private parts. Evelyn began to buck and moan, her hands seeking her own breasts, which she proceeded to knead vigorously. Her cries reached a crescendo of wild moans and screams, and then died away.

At once Sir Victor unbuttoned his fly and, remembering his audience, turned to address them briefly. 'See this?' he said, brandishing his sturdy member. 'It's well prepared for the sport you are about to witness. No use bothering if it's at half cock, so mind you get a good stiff erection, son, before you even think of entering.'

Hetty stole a glance at Leonard; he looked terrified. Yet she could feel his form already beneath her, and she instinctively squirmed a little in his lap. She was strangely gratified to feel him harden even more, his member making small thrusting movements beneath the cheeks of her bottom and, within the confines of her white cotton

drawers, she could feel her own sex throb and moisten in response. It made her wonder at the power of nature and yet, in her virginal state, she was still fearful of the consequences.

But then Sir Victor's voice insisted that they should both 'Watch and learn!' Hetty noticed that Leonard's eyes were, on the contrary, tightly shut as his father knelt above his supine prey and prepared to enter her. The master's phallus looked red and angry in the faint light, seeming to rear and stretch like an independent being, twitching with impatience. Hetty wondered how on earth the woman could accommodate a tool of such proportions and was amazed when it slid into her with a single stroke, like a sword through flesh, plunging right up to the hilt.

Evelyn, instead of crying out as Hetty would have expected, gave a long moan of pleasure as the solid member entered her. Soon Sir Victor was ramming her with vigorous strokes, gasping and puffing with the exertion, but all the while she was uttering soft noises of appreciation, bucking her hips in time with his thrusts. Hetty marvelled at the sight of the pair of them moving as one. There was a rhythm to their coupling that seemed both natural and extraordinary, like a horizontal dance. Despite herself, she was mesmerised.

At last she stole another glance at Leonard and found that he, too, was staring at the pair with rapt attention. He gave her a look of helpless wonder and she leaned her head against his broad chest in quiet supplication. Would they be obliged to do likewise? It seemed incredible, and yet she found herself filled with a secret yearning. To feel Leonard inside her, as Evelyn was feeling Sir Victor, now seemed less horrendous than she had imagined and she was greatly surprised to discover that she almost longed for it.

Almost, but not quite. There was the spectre of Sir Victor hanging over them and she wondered if Leonard

would be capable of performing in such circumstances.

The couple on the bed reached their paroxysms of mutual pleasure and then the show ended in quiet exhaustion. Sir Victor flopped down beside Evelyn on the mattress and, for a few minutes, there was perfect silence in the room. The flickering shadows lent a sinister aspect to the scene and Hetty felt as if she were about to take part in some age-old satanic ritual. Yet with Leonard there she felt safe.

The unfamiliar mix of feelings threatened to overwhelm her, but then Sir Victor suddenly rose from the bed and buttoned up his fly. 'Right, son, now your turn,' he said brusquely.

'Oh no, father,' Leonard protested feebly, but his father would brook no delay. 'Either you deflower this maid, or I shall do the deed,' he said, striking terror into Hetty's heart.

'I – I cannot bring myself to take her maidenhead,' Leonard said unhappily.

'What? You are squeamish? Then you are no son of mine! Come here, girl!' he ordered. 'Let us see whether you are truly a virgin, or an impostor!'

Hetty knew there was no escape now. She slid off Leonard's lap, and although she shrank from contact with the hateful Sir Victor, her feet slowly propelled her towards the bed.

Evelyn was regarding her with fascination, sitting near the pillow with her legs drawn up beneath her. Hetty heard her murmur, 'Go easy on her, sir,' and she was grateful for that, but Sir Victor was in no mood to listen.

'She needs breaking in, like a wayward filly,' he declared. 'Come here, girl, and show me your flower. We'll soon discover whether it has been plucked or no.'

She found herself being roughly seized, her skirt and petticoat lifted and her drawers pulled down. He pushed her back on the bed and forced her legs apart, making her cry out with fear. But then he called his son over.

‘Leonard, come here! It’s time you examined a woman’s pudenda closely. If you find out how to tell whether a woman is a virgin, you will not be fooled when the time comes to take a bride. Come!’

The cool night air was fanning her open crotch as Leonard came and sat beside her on the bed, a look of horrified fascination in his eye. Sir Victor made him part her swollen nether lips with his fingers. They felt cool and gentle, so she began to relax a little.

‘Now feel between the folds – is she moist and warm, or dry and cold?’

His finger probed a little and Hetty could feel herself grow wet and soft. It was so pleasant that she hoped he would prolong the digital examination, but his finger merely dabbled for a second or so then withdrew. ‘She is wet,’ he told his father.

‘Hm, that could be the sign of an experienced woman, but not necessarily so. The ultimate test comes when you try to penetrate her and discover whether or not there is a barrier. Let your finger probe further and see if you meet with any resistance.’

Hetty stiffened; the thought of being invaded in her most tender parts was alarming. Yet when Leonard’s forefinger returned to her vulva she felt the moist softening of her flesh increase and a deep longing for him filled her being. His face was blank, as if he were hypnotised, but his approach was tentative and she knew he was concerned not to hurt her.

If he must take her maidenhead, so be it, she thought. Although she would rather remain *virgo intacta*, she could not imagine a sweeter man to deflower her.

Yet she wished, with all her heart, that they could perform the deed in private. To have Sir Victor standing there, giving instructions to his son, made the proceedings seem sordid and matter-of-fact. This was not how she had imagined it would be, and looking at Leonard’s pained

expression, she suddenly realised this was not what he had envisaged either. They were sharing each other's shattered dreams but in that, at least, they shared a common destiny and she drew some small comfort from that.

Chapter Thirteen

Sir Victor was huddled up with Evelyn at the top of the huge four-poster bed and Hetty realised, to her dismay, that he intended to watch the whole proceedings from that vantage point. He urged his son to be bold and test her virginity. 'Use your finger on her – open her up.'

Leonard hesitated, his face twisted with conflicting emotions in the half-light. Hetty feared the consequences if he refused and forced herself to give him an encouraging smile. He put his forefinger between her labia again and she felt herself grow wetter. Despite her fear, she could feel something down there throbbing with excited anticipation and, as his finger tentatively ventured towards her opening, the delicious feelings multiplied so that she began to moan and wriggle softly, her body unconsciously urging him further.

'The bitch is on heat,' Sir Victor said, his tone tinged with scorn. 'She cannot wait for it. Get in there, son, and do the deed. You will be doing the slut a favour.'

Leonard would not look her in the eye, but his finger was now dabbling in her entrance. The throbbing hunger increased in her and she was moaning almost continually now.

'What can you feel?' she heard the master say. 'Is there a wall of flesh barring your way, or is she as wide open as a barn door? I'll warrant the hussy has let many a cock cross her threshold, and is just feigning innocence.'

Hetty felt the probing finger make an experimental thrust and she winced as a sharp pain shot through her. 'She is tight shut against me,' Leonard said.

'Then wiggle around until you can get in there. No

matter if she bleeds – you'll know she is pure then. Oh, how I envy you! To be the very first man to penetrate virgin territory! 'Tis a while since I've had that privilege.'

Both he and Evelyn gave a low chuckle, but Hetty could feel Leonard's finger inside her now and the trickle of something liquid down her thigh. Was she bleeding? He had taken her maidenhead, for sure, yet it seemed such a little thing. She began to wonder what all the fuss was about.

Leonard withdrew his finger and held it up for his father's inspection. 'See, it is bloody!'

'Then you must follow it through. Take your breeches off, lad, and let's see if you're equipped for the task.'

Hetty braced herself for worse to come. She lay there inert, all feeling subsiding in her, while Leonard divested himself of his trousers and long johns. Soon, in the dim light, she could see his long, pale penis dangling between his lean thighs, but his face looked blank and still, like the death mask of a corpse.

'That will never do!' his father exclaimed. 'Call yourself a man? Just take a look at my erection, which is still strong even after doing the deed!'

For one terrible moment Hetty believed Sir Victor would volunteer to cover her instead of his son, but she soon found he had other plans. 'Evelyn, give the young master a helping hand.'

To her amazement, the whore knelt before Leonard and took his flaccid organ between her lips. She proceeded to lick and suck him while she caressed his scrotum and it was not long before his recalcitrant member was showing signs of life.

'That's better,' she heard Sir Victor say in her ear. He seemed far too close for comfort and soon he was unbuttoning her blouse and thrusting in his hand. While Evelyn continued to stimulate Leonard's cock, his father played with Hetty's breasts and nipples, rousing her almost

unbearably against her will. His breath stank in her nostrils, and when he suddenly moved down the bed and thrust his hand between her legs she gave a horrified shriek.

‘Shut up, you ninny,’ he told her. ‘I’m giving you a boost, just like Evelyn is doing for him, you ungrateful cow.’

His fingers were working at her soft flesh, kneading and rubbing her to a frenzy of desire. With his other hand he was pinching her buttocks, and the sharp stimulation made her gasp and moan by turns. She could feel her body straining with every fibre, straining after some goal of which she was still ignorant, and her heart was beating so rapidly she feared she would pass out before much longer.

Then she heard Leonard groan and was aware that Evelyn had got up off her knees. ‘He is good and ready, sir,’ she said.

Sir Victor stepped off the bed and took hold of his whore, at the same time commanding Leonard to claim his prize. ‘Give it to her now, hot and strong.’

Hetty saw Leonard’s face loom at the foot of the bed, his expression rapt and vacant, and soon he was kneeling there between her thighs. She could not help noticing the dimensions of his penis, which now seemed a good eight inches long with a bulbous, oozing tip. She feared that she would never be able to take such a lengthy cock in her small vagina. He positioned the head of his glans at her entrance and she held her breath: now, now he would take her! A flood of confused emotion filled her soul, and her body responded with a sudden paroxysm of longing that left her gasping.

Without further ado Leonard thrust straight into her, his chest pressing down on hers. She gasped as the air was pushed from her lungs, then felt his hard flesh fill her up inside. It astonished her how well she could accommodate his length and girth, her cunny opening up to him with

perfect ease, like a mere curtain of flesh that parted as the visitor entered the hall.

After the first thrust Leonard waited a few seconds, gasping and red-faced, then he began to withdraw. For a moment she feared it was all over, and he had spent himself, but then he pushed back in again and so it continued in a seesaw motion, over and over.

Beyond his shoulder she could see the dim shapes of Sir Victor and Evelyn. His lordship seemed to have the woman pinned against the bedroom wall and was thrusting into her in the same animal fashion, so she guessed that he, too, was inflamed by the sight of their coupling. A part of Hetty felt detached from it all, yet her body was awakening fast and she could hear her own sighs and moans rising to a climax as Leonard's speed of thrust increased.

Suddenly he gave a series of groans and she felt something hot spurting inside her: it was all over. Leonard collapsed onto her in a swoon, so that she could scarcely breathe, but when he came to he pulled out of her suddenly, leaving her feeling strangely bereft and empty.

'I am so sorry, Hetty,' he whispered in her ear, as his father and Evelyn were still otherwise engaged. 'But it was bound to be either me or my father, and...'

'I know,' she murmured, smoothing the hair from his brow where it lay flattened by perspiration. 'I am so glad it was you.'

He gave a faint smile, but his eyes looked tormented. A couple of loud groans from behind signalled that Sir Victor's business was now done too. Hetty began to relax for the first time since she had entered that dark, fateful room. Would he let her go now?

The master approached the bed, his cock still at half-mast and glistening. He clapped his son on the shoulder. 'Well done, lad, but your duty is not done yet. You may have broken the seal but now you must ensure the wench

does not stray. If you played your part well she will have acquired a taste for it, so you must show her who is master.'

Hetty wondered what was coming next, but when Sir Victor commanded her to lie face down on the bed she quailed, and her fears were confirmed by his next words to his son.

'Here, take this riding crop that I keep in my room for this very purpose. Three good strokes on each buttock should suffice.'

'But father—'

'But me no buts! The deed must be done and if you will not chastise her I shall do it myself. And, as you know, I am not one to spare the rod.'

Hetty gave an involuntary shudder. Already she could feel the cruel bite of the whip on her defenceless behind. There was a silence of a few seconds, but to her it seemed to last forever. Then the first stinging lash came, the shock of it causing her to cry out in pain.

'Don't spare her!' came Sir Victor's brusque admonition.

The second stroke landed on her left buttock and Hetty bit her bottom lip hard to avoid making a noise. She would not give her cruel master that satisfaction.

'I have marked her!' Leonard protested, in anguish. 'Please, sir, I cannot continue or she will be black and blue by morning.'

'Those marks will soon fade,' came the uncompromising reply. 'Do not flinch from giving her full measure, or she will think you a weakling. Continue!'

Hetty braced herself for the next blow, and the next, tensing her buttocks against the searing pain. Yet beneath her torment she could feel a warm glow envelop her, back and front, which was not unpleasant. She found herself thinking about what had passed between her and Leonard, the strange mystery of it all, and her body began to relish

the memory. Once again the pulse between her nether lips began to throb, kindling a yearning for more intimate contact. It amazed her that she wanted him inside her again, so soon, but each time the whip landed on her flesh she felt the pangs of that strange new hunger, more keenly than ever.

At last the six strokes were over, and Hetty had to bear the humiliation of having Sir Victor stroke her smarting bottom. 'There, that wasn't so bad, was it?' he murmured in her ear. 'Now you know what it is like to be mastered by a real man, both in pleasure and pain. You are no longer a maid but a woman. Do you feel different?'

Hetty raised her head, but said nothing. He slapped her bottom hard, causing her to cry out with the shock of it. 'Answer me, woman! Do you feel any different?'

'I-I am not sure, sir.'

Suddenly the ghost of poor ruined Sarah returned to haunt her and she turned around. The master was staring down at her with curiosity on his face. 'There is one thing, sir,' she began, unsure how to broach the subject.

He grinned at her. 'What is it? Spit it out.'

'I am afraid I might get with child, sir.'

He gave a sudden laugh. 'No danger of that, my dear. Wrong time of the month. The moon is waning, and no woman can conceive during that phase. Ain't that right, Evelyn?'

The dusky beauty came up beside him, and they exchanged a knowing smile. 'That's right,' she confirmed. 'Take it from one who knows.'

Sir Victor turned to kiss his harlot and was soon occupied in mouthing her neck and breasts, leading up to another coupling. Hetty glanced at Leonard, who was skulking in the shadows looking most uncomfortable, and she wished they could vanish together, into the dark bosom of the night.

So her relief was almost palpable when Leonard

beckoned her, nodding towards the door. She realised at once that he wanted her to leave the room with him, but she was afraid. He took her hand and gently pulled her up from the bed. They stood there, embracing lightly, while the lewd couple on the floor were sweating and groaning through their exercise, oblivious to everything, and everyone, in the room.

Realising this, Hetty nodded her assent and the pair crept hand in hand to the door. Leonard unlocked it with the key that lay on the washstand and in seconds they were out on the landing beyond. Hetty felt relief flood through her, and her eyes streamed unbidden.

When he noticed her tears, Leonard gasped in dismay. He led her down the corridor until they were safely out of earshot, then he produced a kerchief from his breeches and wiped her damp cheeks solicitously.

‘I have made you cry,’ he said dolefully. ‘I am so very, very sorry.’

‘No, it is not *you* who have upset me,’ Hetty protested. ‘It is your beast of a father, who even now is carrying on as if nothing much has happened. Yet my world has changed forever. No man would want me as a wife now that I am... impure.’

‘Nonsense, Hetty,’ Leonard softly told her. ‘You do yourself an injustice. No one would blame you for what happened in there tonight. Rather, they would blame me – as I do myself,’ he added, bitterly.

‘You were trying to protect me, I know that.’

‘A fine way to protect you, by taking your sweet maidenhead. No, Hetty, I have sinned gravely towards you and failed in my duty to protect you. I promised your brother I would let no harm come to you in this house, and yet...’

To Hetty’s alarm he also burst into tears. Fearing that he might waken the household, she led him into the guest bedroom nearby. It was always kept ready for visitors,

and was pleasantly furnished with armchairs and a writing desk as well as the usual bedroom furniture. They occupied the two easy chairs, and now it was Hetty's turn to wipe his eyes.

When he calmed down she did her best to assure him that she bore him no grudge, neither could she find it in her heart to blame him. He stared at her beseechingly, his face pale in the waning moon that shed its feeble beams through the window.

'Was it so very terrible an ordeal for you?' he asked, at last.

Hetty smiled. 'Oh no, Leonard. I can honestly say that, once the first little pain was over, you were as tender and considerate as any husband on his wedding night.'

'But afterwards, when my brute of a father insisted that I should beat you.'

'It is not the first time I have suffered such chastisement. I am almost used to it by now. Sometimes, you know, the *dread* of pain is worse than the pain itself. It was over quite quickly and, as you see, I am well able to sit down without wincing.'

She did not want to tell him that the experience of being whipped, following so soon after their coupling, had been peculiarly stimulating and satisfying to her. It seemed a shameful secret.

'So you are not to worry, Master Leonard, for I shall forget all about it tomorrow,' she told him. 'And there is no need to tell my brother, either, for I certainly shall not. I am of age, and it is none of his business how I behave myself now. Yet I know in my heart that I did nothing to wrong anyone else and that is the most important thing, is it not?'

She was shocked when Leonard burst into a fresh bout of weeping. 'No, dear Hetty, it is *I* who have done wrong,' he moaned. 'And it is you I have wronged, the sweetest, dearest...'

Hetty feared he was set to carry on in this vein all night, and neither of them would get to their bed, so she thrust the kerchief at him and stood up. 'Leonard, I will not listen to such talk. There is nothing more to say on the subject tonight, so I advise you to sleep on it. You will undoubtedly feel better in the morning when you see me up and about, hale and hearty, as if nothing untoward has happened. Good night, sir, and I hope you will sleep well.'

She left him there and hurried back along the landing to her mistress's apartments. Carefully she tiptoed across the floor to her own room, where she undressed and got into bed. For once she did not put on her nightgown, but lay between the sheets completely naked. Her body felt so different, and she wanted to run her hands over it, to feel its contours as if for the first time.

Hetty had never touched herself except when washing, and to stroke and caress her bare flesh was a novel sensation indeed. Her curiosity about her own body had been roused that night, and she could not rest until she had awakened some of those alien feelings again, and examined them in her heart.

First her hands brushed lightly across her breasts, and she felt her nipples instantly swell and tingle. It had never occurred to her that the organs whose function was to nurture infants might also afford such sensual delight, but now she grew bold, pulling at her nipples and stroking the surrounding flesh until she could feel her bosom strain and grow taut with longing. The feeling spread downwards, through her stomach to her thighs, which she moved restlessly between the sheets.

Already she could imagine Leonard lying there with her, ready to thrust into her with his male member and fill her up inside. Her fingers crept down to the damp warmth of her sex. Growing bolder still, she began to explore her vulva. There was a fleshy knob there, just above the entrance to her dark chasm; when she rubbed it carefully,

with her forefinger, it produced the most exquisite sensations. If anything, it was rather too sensitive for friction applied at the wrong angle made her gasp with keen discomfort. She soon learned where to press, however, and how hard. The warm feelings began to flood her lower parts until she writhed and moaned in abandon, just as the more experienced Evelyn had done. Was this the sweet drug that made men and women addicted to carnal pleasures? She could well believe so.

But then the thought that she herself might become a slave to passion, that all the dire warnings she had received from priest and teacher were about to bear fruit in her, made Hetty cease her nocturnal explorations. Had she awakened a sinful appetite that would be the cause of her downfall? What if she now found men irresistible, and would throw herself at them in her desperate craving to assuage her lust? What if she ended up on the streets, as Rose had surely done, or in the workhouse like poor Sarah? The awful prospect made her pull on her nightdress and bind it tight around her fevered body, as armour against her newly awakened appetite.

Yet it was hard for her to sleep that night, tossing and turning ceaselessly, in the grip of one lurid dream after another. When she awoke she felt emotionally and physically exhausted, her body limp and listless. She made an effort to appear normal as she entered Lady Alice's apartments, but as soon as she had drawn the curtains and let in the morning light her mistress sat up eagerly in bed and demanded, 'What happened last night, Hetty? You must tell me all.'

She had not bargained for this, and her words stuck in her throat. 'Nothing much, my lady.'

'But how did you find my husband?' she asked impatiently. 'What was the reason for him summoning you to his bedroom, so late at night? I had fallen quite asleep before you returned.'

Hetty's wits, like everything else about her, were sluggish and she could not invent a story straightaway. Instead, she prevaricated. 'He – he wanted me to perform some small service, just as you said, my lady.'

Her mistress tut-tutted. 'But *what* service, Hetty? My word, you are slow this morning.'

At last an idea came to her. 'He wanted me to massage his feet, for his gout.'

'His *gout*?' Lady Alice gave a scornful laugh. 'Surely he would not let you touch his sore toes. The last thing he would want is for anyone to *massage* his gouty feet! He cannot even stand to wear his kid slippers when he is in such pain.'

Realising she had made a foolish mistake, Hetty did her best to cover it up. 'It was meant to prevent an attack, my lady. He was not in pain last night.'

Her explanation was received with a suspicious stare. 'That sounds like a feeble excuse to get you alone in his room. Tell me, did he make any advances to you? Did he behave improperly?'

Scenes of gross impropriety flashed before Hetty's eyes, yet she summed up the courage to lie. 'Oh no, my lady.'

'Are you quite sure?'

Under the gimlet-eyed stare of her mistress, Hetty almost cracked. 'He – he did try, a little, but I evaded him.'

'How?' she snapped. 'What did he try? Tell me all the details, I must know.'

'He put his hand on my fundament, but I shrugged it off. Then, when I was working on his feet, he tried to stroke my hands. I said if he continued I would have to leave him, so then he left me alone.'

'I see. You did well, Hetty. A man like him must be held in check.' She sighed. 'Such a dilemma for a woman, since to be desired by such a strong man is so exquisitely exciting. Yet it is our lot to play the elusive prey, forever avoiding capture. Once a man has gained a woman he

often loses interest, Hetty.' She sighed again, more loudly. 'I fear that, for a man like Sir Victor, a woman loses her attractions the instant the knot is tied between them. Then she is fit only for childbearing, while his fancy roves free.'

'Yes, my lady.'

She had been dreaming, but her grey eyes returned to scrutinise Hetty's face. 'For you, of course, the case is different. You have the dreadful examples of Sarah and Rose to act as a warning. Where there is no hope of making a respectable match, a young girl must be all the more cautious and protective of her precious flower.'

Her words had a sobering effect on Hetty – as, indeed, they were intended to. But Lady Alice had no idea that, as far as her personal maid was concerned, it was already too late to preserve her virtue.

Later that day, when she was alone and at her leisure, Hetty reflected on all that had happened during the past twenty-four hours. She felt like a different person, but what did the future hold? A life of unsatisfied longing seemed to stretch out before her. The alternative scenario was that she would become a fallen woman, left to sink or swim in the maelstrom of city life. Then there was the ultimate degradation of prison, or the workhouse.

Yet she refused to let such dismal prognostications occupy her mind. Instead, she thought of Leonard and how he might be suffering similar pangs of guilt and shame about the previous night. There was only one way she could think of to help him: 'George' must make another visit to Longton. But it was less than a month since her fictional brother had, allegedly, returned home, so she must think up a convincing reason for his return.

Hetty spent a happy hour or so anticipating more intimate contact with Leonard. She knew he would be delighted to see his friend again, but he must not entertain the least suspicion about him and it was of the utmost importance that no one else in the household caught a glimpse of him.

Scrupulously Hetty plotted and planned until she believed she had a watertight scheme for his reintroduction. Oh, how she looked forward to putting her plan into action. There was nothing that would please her more than to gain Leonard's close friendship once again!

Chapter Fourteen

It didn't take Hetty long to work out that the only reason why her brother George would make another visit up north, so soon after the last one, would be a death in the family. She decided that poor Great-Uncle Wilfred would be the one to pop his clogs, and George would attend the funeral as the sole representative of their branch of the Addlestones.

She told Leonard as much when she next saw him. 'Poor, dear Uncle Wilfred,' she said, dabbing at her eye with the corner of her clean kerchief.

'Were you very fond of him?' Leonard asked, solicitously.

'We hardly ever saw him, but he would always send a shilling at Christmas, when we were little,' she invented. 'It is only right that George should go to his funeral in Yorkshire. He will call here on the way home and spend the night.'

'Then I hope you might spare him for an hour or two, dear Hetty, for I should love to talk with him again.'

'Of course!'

Leonard looked a lot more cheerful after that. Hetty had decided to pose as her brother on the day that her mistress had been invited to dine with Lady Cosham.

'You need not come with me,' Lady Alice told her. 'I know you find such visits tedious, and I cannot blame you. Conversation is a real endurance test, what with Judith being so deaf, yet I feel obliged to visit her. She was my mother's best friend, you see.'

As soon as her mistress left Longton, Hetty changed into male attire and fixed the wig on her head. It felt good

to be back in George's clothes after such a long while. She associated the outfit with pleasant memories, and she was looking forward to another few hours of happy camaraderie with Leonard – or Leo, as she must now remember to call him.

He greeted her very warmly when they met in the library after lunch. 'George! It does my heart good to see you again!' He clapped Hetty on the shoulder, but then grew grave. 'I say, I'm sorry to hear about your Uncle Wilfred.'

'He was only a great uncle,' she explained. 'We hardly saw him, yet he was kind to us.' She heaved a sigh. 'Fond memories.'

Once the condolences were out of the way, Leonard seemed excited and bursting to tell her something. They sat side by side on the sofa, and he produced something from his pocket, which he kept concealed in his palm.

'You remember my birthday celebrations, George?' Hetty nodded. 'Of course you do. How could you forget such a momentous occasion! But so much has happened since.' Again his face was shadowed by a brief pang, of which Hetty thought she knew the origin. 'Anyway, it seems I have since gone up in my father's estimation, because he has decided to give me the key of the door at last.'

To her surprise, he dangled a real door key in front of her. 'What key is that?' she enquired.

'Wouldn't you like to know?' Leonard said, playfully. 'We shall go there anon, and you shall see. Come George, the sun shines and we should be out of doors. You must tell me how you find Hetty. Is she well? I have a particular reason for asking, as you will learn later.'

'Yes, she is very well,' Hetty replied. 'Positively blooming, I'd say. Life at Longton certainly seems to agree with her.'

'I am very relieved to hear it,' Leonard answered, gravely. She found his manner a peculiar mixture of elation and depression. No doubt he would reveal the cause of

both, eventually.

They began walking in the kitchen garden, but not for long. Soon they went through the door in the wall onto the open grass and Hetty was surprised to find they made a beeline for the summerhouse. When they were within a few yards of the octagonal building, Leonard produced the key from his pocket again.

'I'm sure you've guessed which door this key opens by now,' he said, with a broad grin. 'I saved my first visit for when you were here, George. We can explore the place together. I believe my father keeps his private collection in here, so it should be interesting.'

'There are no women inside, are there?' Hetty asked, pretending to be fearful.

Leonard laughed heartily. 'I certainly hope not. The women my father knows are all night birds and creep away at first light, leaving the place deserted. We are quite safe.'

He unlocked the padlock that secured the door and soon they were in the dark interior. Leonard lit one of the oil lamps, then another, and soon the summerhouse took on the air of an intimate salon once again, a place wholly dedicated to the pleasures of the flesh.

Remembering what had occurred the last time she was there Hetty shuddered, but in her *frisson* there was only a modicum of distaste. Now a delicious feeling of curiosity took over, as she surveyed the daring pictures on the walls.

She walked up to one of them and examined it more closely. It showed a woman holding up her petticoats and displaying her naked sex to a trio of interested male observers, each in a state of disarray. The painting next to it was of a voluptuous woman riding barebacked – and bare everything else – upon a horse.

'Lady Godiva, I presume,' Hetty murmured.

'I wonder where my father acquired such lewd paintings,' Leonard commented, dispassionately. He went

over to a large bookcase and opened the glass door. 'He has an impressive book collection, too. Some of these have extraordinary titles: "*Secrets of the Harem*"; "*Confessions of a Loose Woman*"; "*Copulation: a Global Perspective*"; "*How to Satisfy a Lascivious Female*"; "*Corporal Punishment, Pleasures and Practices*" ... I could never believe such literature existed if I were not seeing them with my very eyes!'

Hetty came to his side and began to scan the spines, her eyes goggling. Leonard picked out one book, a French work called *Les Belles Dans Leurs Boudoirs* and began to flip through its pages, pausing at the illustrations. They showed beautiful women in various stages of undress, posing in their private dressing rooms with an assortment of servants and visitors. One showed a woman being laced into her corset by a negro maid. She was naked from the waist down and rubbing herself between her legs as the maid pulled hard on the laces to nip in her waist and make her already large breasts spill over their cups.

'Oh my, that really does something to me!' Leonard exclaimed. 'How about you, George?'

'Hm,' Hetty said, noncommittally. He showed her more pictures. There was a woman having her naked breasts powdered by a male servant with a giant powder puff. The huge bulge in his tight breeches left the viewer in no doubt about the effect this activity was having upon him.

Another showed a woman taking tea with two female guests, but all three had their legs crossed high in such a way as to display their naked crotches. The curious thing was, each had a little tasselled cord hanging from between her labia.

Yet another scene showed a woman actually suckling her little lap dog! She had a blissful expression on her face as the pretty white creature licked at her nipple. All these erotic illustrations were drawn in a clever style that somehow managed to suggest the utmost propriety, whilst

portraying scenes of utter indecency. Hetty found them fascinating, if somewhat disturbing.

Leonard was soon absorbed in the book about corporal punishment, which had elaborate engravings. She peered over his shoulder and saw various scenes of flagellation. One showed a naked female slave being flogged by a slave master in ancient Rome. She was tied to a broken pillar and her Grecian-style robes were in a state of disarray, displaying the fine curves of her bosom and hindquarters. Another scene showed two nuns whipping each other with flagella, expressions of rapture on their beautiful serene faces. Their habits were tucked up around their waists to expose their nether parts, which were surprisingly rotund and sensual.

It was soon clear that the theme of this book was 'corporal punishment through the ages' for there followed a medieval tableau called *The Adulteress* with an irate husband, wearing a cuckold's horns, whipping his errant wife. She was completely naked and in a corner of the picture skulked her lover, still eyeing her lasciviously despite her disgrace.

'What do you think of these, George?' Leonard asked at last. 'Are they more to your taste?'

'They remind me of what took place in this same room.'

'Me too. I can never forget that night, yet I must admit the memory is not entirely unpleasant. I believe that when my father first exposed me to such practices I recoiled in horror because it all seemed so new and strange. However, I have now had time to reflect on my experience, and I find I am strangely drawn to the idea of having such punishment meted out to me. No doubt it is because of my school days.'

'It seems that many others share your tastes,' Hetty observed.

'Yes, that is the strangest thing of all. But let us sit down over here now. There is something I have to tell

you, and the weight of it is burdening my heart. It is about your sister, Hetty.'

Hearing her own name, she felt a sudden surge of elation. What was Leonard about to reveal? She sat down eagerly beside him on the *chaise longue* and he looked straight into her eyes. For a moment she feared she would be discovered, but no light of recognition shone there, only a look of shame and guilt.

'George, I pray you will not hate me for what I am about to tell you. But I regard you almost as a brother, and I feel there should be no secrets between us.'

'Do not fear, Leo. Whatever you wish to confess I shall hold in strictest confidence.'

Leonard heaved a great sigh and his manner grew extremely nervous. He would not meet Hetty's eye as he began to speak.. 'I promised you that I would take good care of your sister, and yet circumstances have forced me to be the instrument of her downfall. I hardly know how to tell you...'

He looked as though he were about to weep. Hetty seized his hand and squeezed it. 'I shall not think ill of you, whatever you have done. Remember, I have already seen my sister and she seemed in excellent health and spirits. Whatever has happened to her cannot be so bad, can it?'

'That depends how you view these things. But let me start at the beginning. Last weekend my father held another of his dinner parties. You and I know only too well what that entails. However, this time I really believed I had escaped him and his lascivious guests. Instead of coming here, to be exposed to more of their lewd revels, I hid in the library after dinner. I had hoped my father would soon be embroiled in another orgy, but it seemed that I was on his mind. He left his guests to their obscene carousing and returned to the house with one of his women, determined to seek me out.'

'To what end?'

‘Well may you ask! He found me in the library and ordered me up to his room. When I resisted, he and the woman manhandled me up the stairs and forced me to sit in a chair. The woman was strong and well built. She sat on my lap and began to talk and behave immodestly, but I could not escape even when my father left the room for a few minutes. I now know that he was setting a trap to snare your poor innocent sister.’

‘A trap?’ Hetty pretended to be alarmed.

‘Indeed. He pretended he had need of her services and summoned her to his bedroom. I think she might have guessed that some dirty work was afoot, for when she eventually appeared she looked half scared to death. I need not tell you how my heart went out to her.’

‘She found you imprisoned in a chair by this woman?’

‘Yes, and by now she was in a state of undress. Remember how father tried to force me to chastise such a female and how I fled from this place? I thought he had something similar in mind for me again, but what he envisaged was worse, far worse.’

‘It involved my sister, you say?’

‘Yes.’ His lip trembled and he paused to compose himself before continuing. ‘Sir Victor was of the opinion that since your sister and I were both virgins we should be initiated into the mysteries of copulation, shown the way by his own example with that whore. I tell you, George, when I learnt of his plan I was never so disgusted in my life. As for Hetty, she went white and red by turns.’

‘My poor dear sister,’ Hetty murmured, adding mischievously, ‘I trust you endeavoured to defend her honour though?’

‘I would have done so if I could, I promise you,’ Leonard said miserably. ‘I swear I would have killed my father on the spot, had it been in my power, to prevent the deflowering of so sweet a maid as your sister. However, I was overpowered and the bedroom door was locked.

My father's room is in a remote wing of the house and no one would have come, even if I had bellowed "Fire!" at the top of my voice. Believe me, I thought through all the possibilities but could find no way out of our joint predicament.'

'So... what happened next?'

'I can hardly bear to speak of it. My father decided that he would couple with the woman first, to show us how it was done. So Hetty and I were obliged to sit through his foul display. In fact, she was forced to sit upon my lap – the pure taking the place of the impure. If ever a woman were aptly named it was that Evelyn, for she was truly a daughter of Eve, the fallen woman.'

'So my innocent sister was forced to witness a scene of lewd copulation?' Hetty said, in a shocked tone.

'Indeed, and I must confess that whilst I watched my own appetite was inflamed. Not for your sister, for I still regarded her as pure, yet the phallus has a will of its own and the sight of so much invoked an erection in me, of which I was entirely ashamed. Unfortunately, I believe Hetty was aware of it too, for she squirmed uncomfortably in my lap which only made the beast grow harder.'

'How humiliating for you both!'

'There was worse to come, far worse. Although I tried to keep my eyes shut during the disgusting scene of copulation, my curiosity overcame me and I watched my own father pleasuring his mistress with shameful curiosity. Once my father had spent his passion on the lustful Evelyn and left her sweating and stewing in his bed, he turned his attention to me. I tried to resist, but it was useless. Then I reasoned that if I did not perform the deed Sir Victor most certainly would. I even ventured to believe that, out of the two of us, Hetty would prefer me to take her maidenhead. That was my only consolation in a situation which I viewed as entirely hopeless.'

'How terrible for you both.'

‘It was indeed, especially when my father seized your sister and pulled her over to the bed. I wanted to kill him then and, had I been in possession of a gun, I would have done it without hesitation. But I knew my father and his whore would overpower me if I lifted a finger against either of them.’

‘So what happened?’

‘My brute of a father pulled down your sister’s clothes and forced me to examine her, to see whether she was truly a virgin. I’m sure it must have been utterly hateful to poor Hetty, to have aspersions cast upon her purity.’

‘Indeed.’ Hetty felt obliged to defend her ‘sister’s’ honour. ‘She has been well brought up and would never dream of straying from the path of virtue.’

‘I know that, dear George, which is why it is all the more painful to have to relate this sorry tale. But you are my father confessor, and I pray that when you know the truth you will be lenient with me.’

‘Do not tarry, for I fear to know the worst.’

‘Then I shall proceed, although I am sure you know what inevitable deed followed. I was obliged to take your dear sister’s maidenhead – with my finger. There was no possibility of avoiding this with my hateful father standing over us, uttering obscene remarks. But I endeavoured to do it as gently as possible and, I swear, Hetty showed only a brief sign of discomfort, although she bled a little.’

‘I am glad of that, at least, since it demonstrated her virginity beyond doubt. But what a way to lose it! I am dumbfounded, Leo.’

‘The effect on me was just as upsetting, for when the full import of what I had done struck home, I instantly lost my erection. My father then ordered his harlot to revive my flagging member by any possible means. Meanwhile he began playing with Hetty’s tender breasts and nipples, making her moan and groan against her will. The lascivious Evelyn set to with her fingers and tongue

until my organ betrayed me by standing up for itself against my better judgement. At that point I was ordered by my father to proceed with the full penetration of your sister.'

'How terrible! My poor, poor Hetty!'

'I swear that I could see no way out of this tragic situation. All I could do was to be as careful as possible not to hurt her, despite my own inexperience. Yet, when the time came to enter her, I was amazed at how smoothly my cock slid into her wet orifice and how sweetly she gazed up at me. From that moment on, George, I swear that I gave myself to that paragon of wronged innocence, body and soul!'

This was startling news indeed, and Hetty found herself speechless. Was Leonard actually declaring love for her? She could scarcely believe her ears.

'Yet there was even worse to come. My father had some perverse idea that now she was broken in, as he so crudely phrased it, she needed to know who was master. He obliged me to deliver six of the best upon the tender flesh that I had so recently enjoyed. Oh George! I can hardly bear to think of it, let alone speak of it...'

To Hetty's dismay he burst into tears and hid his face on her shoulder for a while. She patted him awkwardly on the back, distressed to see his pain and longing, to tell him that she did not hold it against him. She wanted to ease his guilt yet, as George, she felt obliged to express her anger.

'Your father is a wicked, wicked man. I believe you when you say he forced you to do these terrible things to my sister, that to resist would only have made things worse for her. Yet I cannot help but mourn the loss of her virtue. Any man would feel ashamed if his sister had been so used and abused.'

Leonard gripped her hand hard, before recovering himself. 'I told her how sorry I was afterwards, yet my words seemed as empty to my ears as they must have

sounded to hers. She did not want you to know her shame, yet I could not live with such a terrible secret and when she told me you were coming here I made up my mind to tell all.'

'I am glad you did,' Hetty told him, with a smile. 'I do not blame you, Leo, and I am sure that my sister does not either. She would surely realise that you had no choice in the matter.'

'Of course I am all too aware of the social gulf between us,' Leonard continued. 'But if there is anything I can do to make amends for what I have done to her, I will happily do it. I would not insult you by offering money, but I give you my word that I bitterly regret having been forced to do what I did. I long to protect her from further harm, and have been pondering how I might achieve this. Yet so far I have come up with no ideas.'

'All I ask is that you protect her from Sir Victor in future, whenever you can.'

'Of course. I am only sorry that my lack of vigilance resulted in such terrible consequences. I can only hope that my father will lose interest in her, now she is no longer a maid. Yet I fear that is a faint hope.'

Hetty did not know what to say, so she fell silent. Leonard's earlier mood had been shattered by his revelations and he now seemed absent and preoccupied. She stood up.

'I should be getting back to my sister now, since I must leave early tomorrow. I promise to say nothing of this to her, Leo. Please be assured that I do not blame you. As I said, Hetty appears to have come to no real harm and, if the time comes when some young man desires her hand, I dare say he will not question her virginity too closely. We country folk are more practical in such matters than you gentry,' she added, with a grin. 'In fact, if a girl has not lost her cherry by the time she comes of age, we wonder what is wrong with her!'

Leonard gave a hearty laugh, full of relief. 'Oh George, you are wrong to make light of it but I thank you all the same. You have eased my burden somewhat.' Suddenly he clasped her to his chest in a long and fervent embrace. 'Goodbye, my dear friend. I am sorry to have such foul news to impart, but pray that time will be the healer in this, as in so many things. Pray, give my best regards to your sister.'

His voice faltered and Hetty felt her own eyes fill with tears. In many ways the incident seemed to have affected him more than her, and she was touched that he harboured such tender feelings for her, even though nothing could come of it. She left the summerhouse, scene of so much debauchery, and walked alone across the grassy meadow, back to her other life.

Chapter Fifteen

Hetty did her best to sneak back into the house unobserved, and the last person she expected to encounter was her mistress. As she let herself into Lady Alice's apartment, however, she heard a familiar voice greet her. 'Is that you, Hetty? Oh!'

She was so astonished to find her mistress there, that she simply gaped. Then, recovering her wits, she stammered, 'I thought you would be at Lady Cosham's, my lady.'

'She had been taken ill, so I came straight home. I must say, I am surprised to see you in those clothes, Hetty. I thought you had done away with them. Didn't we agree that George should be decently buried? What are you thinking of, resurrecting him in my absence?'

Although her words were chiding, her tone was amused. Hetty gave a wry grin. 'I could not bear to be parted from my "brother".' She decided to come clean. 'Besides, I thought his presence might cheer up Master Leonard. He has been looking so melancholy of late.'

Lady Alice sighed. 'You are right. But I would rather have had you consult me first. Still, since you are in men's attire perhaps we can have a little diversion of our own. First, help me out of my mohair dress, Hetty, which has become rather damp.'

Hetty was unsure what kind of 'diversion' her mistress had in mind, but as she undid the buttons of her light woollen dress she could feel Lady Alice trembling with a kind of excitement. The origin of her agitation soon became apparent when she murmured, in a low voice, 'Shall we pretend that you are, indeed, a man called

George? And shall we say that you are my handsome young lover? The master is out riding point to point, and not expected back until just before dinner. There is plenty of time for some sport of our own!’

Hetty was disconcerted by these words but continued to perform her duties as a maid, taking off the damp garment and hanging it up on the front of the wardrobe, where it could air. By the time she turned around, Lady Alice was lying on the bed in a kittenish pose, clad only in her corset and undergarments.

‘Come here, George,’ she cooed.

Hetty felt as though she had been duped, and her chest was tight with anxiety. What perverse demands would her mistress make on her now? She could tell by the way Lady Alice was moving her limbs restlessly that the woman was aroused, and wanting some kind of satisfaction. The sight of her had the unexpected effect of heating Hetty’s blood, too. She remembered her own sexual awakening and realised that women, too, had physical needs, which once aroused, needed to be satisfied regularly.

Even so, the idea of posing as her mistress’s lover was disturbing. Slowly she approached the bed, where she was invited to unlace the heavy stays that bound Lady Alice’s plump torso. As she did so she could smell the odour of lavender and perspiration that emanated from the warm skin. Her deft fingers brushed against the warm, trembling flesh of her bosom only to rouse the quivering breasts even more. By the time she pulled off the corset she could see, through the thin muslin of her under-bodice, that Lady Alice’s nipples were hard and needy.

‘Explore my body, kind sir,’ the woman murmured, her glazed eyes no doubt exploring some fantasy of her own. ‘Remove my camisole and touch my heaving breasts. They long for your cool, gentle fingers – as do my more private parts.’

Hetty was most disconcerted by the shamelessness of her mistress but, cast in the rôle of a man, she felt somewhat protected by her disguise. Slowly she untied the drawstring and exposed the heaving bosom. A new curiosity seized her as her mind ventured more deeply into the male persona she had adopted. How did men feel about women's bodies? What was it like to explore the female form, to be eager to kiss and caress and, ultimately, to penetrate a woman's body? She recalled how Leonard had seemed to be both attracted and repelled by the prospect of deflowering her, but what had it felt like for him?

Slowly she reached out and caressed both of her mistress's breasts. A great sigh emanated from her and her nipples seemed to strain even more for attention. Hetty seized them between her thumb and forefinger then pinched, gently. Her mistress emitted an even greater sigh, followed by a guttural groan.

'Oh yes, young sir, you are pleasing me greatly,' she sighed softly. 'But if you would use your mouth I should be even more obliged.'

Hetty put one of the erect nipples between her lips. It tasted faintly of the lavender water her mistress sprinkled liberally about her person, but was not unpleasant. She sucked a little harder and a deep moan of pleasure was to be heard. Lady Alice then took her hand and placed it on her breast. Warming to the task, Hetty kneaded the soft flesh while she suckled and soon a constant flow of gratified moans and sighs was filling her ears.

After a few minutes of uninterrupted activity, Lady Alice seemed to grow restless and demanded that her stockings and knickers be removed. Now the scent that arose from her body was musky and not so pleasant, causing Hetty to wrinkle her nostrils. She felt disinclined to proceed further, but knew that her mistress would not be satisfied unless she did.

‘Look in my bedside drawer,’ she was told.

Glad of the momentary respite, Hetty opened the drawer of the small mahogany chest and found a strange assortment of contents. There was a pot of some cosmetic cream, labelled as *Intimate Unguent*. The instructions read: *For the use of ladies in the bedchamber. Aids connubial bliss by facilitating the act of conjugation. Use sparingly, prior to point of entry.*

Hetty was mystified. Even more baffling was a smooth ivory-like object that looked as if it had been carved from the tusk of a walrus or the bone of a whale. It was about eight inches long, and an inch or so thick, with one rounded and one flattened end.

‘Take out the unguent, and the dildo,’ came the urgent command.

‘The... what?’

‘That ivory thing.’ She did as she was told, placing them both on the bed beside her mistress. ‘Quick, quick! Open up the pot of cream and smear it on the dildo.’

Hetty found the order strange, but she obeyed nonetheless. The cream was very oily, and soon the ivory piece was glistening and slippery.

‘Now, dearest George, you may tease me a little – you know where – with the tip of that little wand.’

But Hetty did not ‘know where’ so she had to be shown. Lady Alice guided her hand towards her open thighs and soon made it clear that she wanted her labia to be stimulated. Hetty rubbed her gently with the lubricated ivory, and was soon hearing appreciative cries.

‘Oh yes, George. Inflammé my appetite before you satisfy me! You know how I love it so!’

Lady Alice was caressing her own breasts now, writhing and moaning like a creature possessed. Hetty continued to stroke her between the legs until a guttural cry came from the woman’s throat and then she urged, ‘In, in! Push it in now, George, while I am dying for it!’

Hetty let the object penetrate into the fleshy depths and, at the same time, wondered how it would feel inside herself. Now she understood that she was wielding a substitute for the phallus, and she sensed how it must be used: in and out, in and out – just as when Leonard had thrust his flesh-and-blood member into her own secret chasm. From the noises her mistress was making she knew that it must be affording her the most exquisite pleasure.

It was not long before she felt the walls close tightly over the moving part, so that she was almost engaged in a tug-of-war with her mistress's cunny. Over and over the spasms seemed to wrack the woman, who had long since ceased to care that she was being serviced by her own maid in the guise of a man. Observing her in these extreme throes was an unsettling experience for Hetty, yet she found it oddly compelling. Now she was like a man, watching a woman that he had caused to climax in this way, and it gave her a peculiar sense of power. Was this how Leonard would feel if she were to respond in like manner? Of course she would never have a chance to find out, but it was peculiarly satisfying to speculate.

'Now, George, quick, quick!' her mistress urged, and Hetty wondered what she was supposed to do next. Lady Alice seized her wrist and pulled out the dildo, throwing it carelessly to the floor. Then she turned over, exposing her plump buttocks. 'Slap me!' she almost screamed. 'Now, while I am still hot and throbbing! Slap my fundament!'

Hetty obeyed, using her right hand to deliver several smarting blows on each buttock. Each was received with a loud groan as the woman ground her mons against the mattress, wresting every last iota of gratification from her pulsating vulva.

'Oh, George!' she gasped, her buttocks blushing pink after Hetty's exertions. 'You certainly know how to give

a girl a good time!’

Hetty felt embarrassed, now the heat of the moment was passed, and decided she had better retreat to her room. Soon she could hear Lady Alice snoring loudly, thoroughly sated. She took off her men’s clothes and folded them neatly, stowing them under her bed again, and then stretched herself out on the mattress in the darkness, staring blankly at the ceiling.

How bizarre her life at Longton was becoming. For a while she had been caught up in it unthinking but now, when she stopped to reflect, she felt decidedly unhappy. Her feelings for Leonard were growing daily, yet there could be no question of requited love between Hetty, the lady’s maid, and the young master. On the other hand, she had the feeling that George held the keys to Leonard’s heart.

But then there were her superiors to contend with – Sir Victor and Lady Alice. Both had shown themselves to be steeped in debauchery, and she felt trapped between the pair of them. As George she could win favour with her mistress, but as Hetty she would be used and abused by her master. She was quite sure that, having overseen her defloration, Sir Victor would not stop there. No doubt she would be forced to attend another of his vile parties, and submitted to further indignities. The thought made her shudder. Perhaps she should return home now, while she was still relatively unharmed, find a new post nearer her family and put the horrors of Longton behind her.

She continued to consider this course of action over the next few days, but her prevarication proved her undoing. Before she could act, Sir Victor cornered her in a corridor one afternoon and began mauling her, as was his custom.

‘Well, missy,’ he began, his beady eyes staring at her bosom while his fingers tore open her blouse. ‘Tonight I shall have need of your services once more, since I am

having a few friends round.' His rough fingers pinched at her nipple, making her cry out loud. 'Still peppery, then? I like a gal with some fire in her. Makes it all the more satisfying to master her!'

He gave a filthy laugh, sending a chill down her spine, and then passed on. Hetty cowered against the wall, filled with dread. Did he mean to visit further shame upon her? She began to do up her blouse but was still fumbling with the buttons when Leonard appeared.

'Hetty!' he exclaimed. 'I saw my father pass by just now. He did not trouble you, I hope?'

But it must have been obvious from her flustered state that she had, indeed, been indecently assaulted by Sir Victor. Leonard's face darkened.

'My dear,' he began, 'has your brother gone back down south?' She nodded, and Leonard heaved a sigh. 'What a pity! I had made up my mind to ask him to take you home. This is no place for a sensitive soul like you, Hetty. You have suffered enough already.'

His thoughts so exactly mirrored hers that Hetty was amazed. She stared at him, dumbfounded. He took her hand and squeezed it, looking deep into her eyes.

'Do not worry, dear girl, I have vowed to protect you in the absence of your brother. I promised George that I would see no harm came to you, but I have failed you both. Rest assured, I shall not be found wanting again. You have no more to fear from my father, I promise you that.'

Although Hetty found his words reassuring, she doubted whether Leonard could do anything against Sir Victor. That tyrant had a stranglehold over everyone in the household, including his wife and son.

When she returned to her room, Hetty found Lady Alice dressed in her afternoon clothes, reading a novel in her armchair. She looked up and smiled as she entered.

'Hetty, my dear, come and sit by me,' she said, patting

the eiderdown with an ingratiating smile. 'I suppose your brother has returned home by now?'

Hetty stared at her, uncomprehending, but her mistress continued. 'Such a dear boy. He and I had a very pleasant encounter while you were otherwise engaged.'

Has the old lady taken leave of her senses? Hetty wondered. She was talking as though she and 'George' were two separate people.

'He is quite a man, is he not?' Lady Alice continued, with a girlish giggle. Hetty began to feel decidedly uncomfortable. 'I'm sure he must be a one for the ladies. He is most manly and dashing, quite domineering too when faced with a humble soul like me. Is he like that with you too, Hetty, when you are alone?'

She could not imagine what the woman was implying, but Lady Alice continued in a slyly suggestive tone. 'Has he ever had cause to chastise you, Hetty? I know big brothers can be somewhat heavy-handed on occasion. Has he ever smacked your bottom with his hand, or used an implement upon you? Perhaps he has behaved improperly with you?'

'Er... no, my lady.'

'What never? I find that hard to believe. You must have been a little minx when you were younger, Hetty. I detect a certain air about you, a stubbornness, perhaps. No elder brother worth his salt would brook such impertinence as you are capable of, on occasion.'

Hetty felt she was entering deep waters and she did not know what to say. Lady Alice was obviously leading up to some further drama, but she was most reluctant to take part in any such fantasy. 'I try to do my best, mistress,' she murmured.

'Of course you do. Yet we all need a little correction from time to time. Tell me, Hetty, are you still a virgin?'

The question horrified her, coming out of the blue like that, and she fumbled for a response. 'Oh, I... must I

answer that? I feel quite embarrassed, my lady.'

'Either you answer me, plain and simple, or I shall examine you myself. You see, Hetty, there are rumours in this household that you have enticed the master to take your virginity, in the same way that he was seduced by that disgraced slut, Sarah. All men are weak, Hetty, and my husband is particularly susceptible to a pretty face. If you will not tell me the truth—'

'Yes, I will!' she broke in, anxious to avoid a humiliating physical examination. 'It is true, I have lost my maidenhead. But not to your husband, I swear it!'

'Then to whom? Speak, now!'

Hetty was caught in a cleft stick. She did not wish to implicate Leonard, but could think of no other candidate.

Lady Alice gave a horrid laugh. 'You need not bring yourself to speak his name, for I am well aware that your brother was the one to claim his rights over you. How old were you when it happened?'

Hetty stared at her mistress in dismay. She really had lost her mind if she was still thinking of George as her brother. What perverted game was the Lady of Longton playing, to gratify her own sordid fancies?

'I will take your silence as an admission of guilt,' she continued. 'Do you not know it is a mortal sin, Hetty, to lie with your own brother? Shame on you! I think you deserve to be soundly whipped for such vile behaviour. Come, kneel by the bed and hitch up your skirts. If you will submit to me, we shall say no more about it.'

'But Lady Alice...'

Bewildered, Hetty knew that while she was in this strange mood there would be no reasoning with her mistress. Better, perhaps, to do as she was instructed and hope it would soon be over. She knelt by the bed as if about to pray, her hands clasped in front of her.

'Did you not hear me?' came the sharp voice from behind. 'I said, pull up your skirt.' Meekly, Hetty obeyed,

and cool hands pulled down her drawers, caressing her buttocks.

‘Such smooth, warm flesh,’ came the murmuring voice. ‘But we’ll make it warmer still, I’ll warrant. Flesh upon flesh, I think, so I may feel you quiver and smart beneath my palm.’

The first slap stung a little, but Hetty was able to maintain her composure. The effect was not unpleasant, rousing her to a state of erotic excitement almost immediately. Then came a blow on her other cheek and the glow spread all over her hindquarters.

‘Your hide should have been tanned years ago, then you would not have grown up so wayward,’ she heard her mistress say. ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child – isn’t that what they say? Well, we shall make up for it now.’

Soon Hetty could hear her mistress gasping with the exertion as she laid into her vulnerable parts, smack after smack. Her skin felt raw and stinging, but the punishment continued and Hetty felt herself in a strange state, almost as if she were about to lose consciousness. Again and again she was chastised until her smarting buttocks grew almost insensible and she felt as if she were floating upon her knees.

‘There, I can manage no more!’ gasped Lady Alice, collapsing into her chair.

Hetty allowed her weary head to rest upon her arms, but made no attempt to pull up her knickers or pull down her skirt. The air was cool around her bottom, and although her flesh was throbbing as the sensation returned to her buttocks, she felt oddly detached. A languid sensation filled her veins and she lolled voluptuously against the bed in a kind of stupor.

If only Master Leonard would enter now, she thought. What if the mother were to absent herself, leaving Hetty alone with the son? What if he were overcome with desire for her, remembering the occasion when he had deflowered

her at his father's command? She let her thoughts run on. Perhaps he would see how sore she was and offer to rub in some of that unguent that was hidden in the drawer. His fingers might stray into the crack between her buttocks and then lower, lower, to caress and anoint her aching private parts...

Guiltily, Hetty came to as she heard her mistress cough. 'Fetch me some water from the carafe, Hetty,' came the command, as if nothing untoward had happened.

She rose, rearranged her clothes then poured Lady Alice a glass of water. Still half in her dream, she began to wonder how she could bear to continue in that household. On the one hand, her body shrank from the torments visited upon it by her master and mistress. Yet, on the other hand, her soul longed for the sweet conversation she had enjoyed with Leonard, in male guise. And a secret part of her desired him physically too, longed to repeat at leisure, and in private, the act they had performed so perfunctorily under the eyes of Sir Victor.

'Help me get into my walking boots,' her mistress commanded in that same even tone, as if the bizarre activities they had just been engaged in had never occurred. 'I think I shall take some air.'

I could go mad if this continues, Hetty thought. The subterfuge, the hideous acting out of perverted fantasies and the continual exploitation of her body were beginning to take their toll on her sensitive spirit. She was dominated on the one hand by fear, and on the other by desire, and she did not know which she dreaded the more.

At long last Hetty was left alone in the apartment. She went to the window and soon saw her mistress strolling in the sunken garden, so she knew she was safe for half an hour or so. Her bottom was still smarting from its punishment and, although the feverish excitement the beating aroused had now abated, Hetty was still in a dazed and confused mood. Wearily she laid herself down on her

mistress's four-poster bed, her mind again turning to Leonard. What would it be like to lie with such a man on your wedding night, in such a bed as this?

Languidly she stretched out her slender body, aching with suppressed longing. The hunger latent in her loins gradually increased as she thought of the young master, dwelling on his kind, sweet face and gentle voice, yet remembering too how surprisingly manly and assertive he had seemed when called upon to take her maidenhead. A strange thought came to her: how she envied his future wife!

Hetty began to imagine their wedding night, casting herself in the rôle of blushing bride. She knew it was all make-believe, of course. For one thing, she had already lost her virtue.

If only she could turn back the clock and regain her lost innocence. Tears began to fall as she contemplated her likely fate. No decent man would have her if he knew she were not pure, and yet if she deceived him and he discovered the truth on their wedding night she could not hope for a good marriage. Perhaps she would end up with some rustic boor of a man, who couldn't care less about such things. Either that, or die an old maid.

But the image of Leonard would not shift from her mind. Fondly she recalled his looks, his voice, and his touch. His body had felt hot and strong when it covered hers, and she had been excited by his rhythmic thrusts. Even now she was growing hot at the thought of their congress. Her hand went to her breast, which was ripe and swollen with desire. Between her thighs she could feel that insistent pulse throbbing again, making her long for some physical contact. She hitched up her skirts and held her hand between her damp loins, squeezing tight. A sudden thrill passed through her, making her moan softly.

Then she remembered what was lodged in the bedside drawer. If it satisfied her mistress, might it not do the

same for her? The wickedness of the thought evoked a new thrill. Slowly she turned towards the mahogany cabinet and drew open the drawer. There was the pot of cream and the dildo, wrapped in tissue paper. She took them both out and began to anoint the tip of the ivory wand with the cream.

What if her ladyship should return and find her maid lying so wantonly on her own bed? There would undoubtedly be more punishment, but the thought of it only increased Hetty's arousal. The cheeks of her bottom were still tender, and her lower quarters were now inflamed with heightened sensation. Slowly she pulled down her knickers and exposed her nether parts, sighing as the cool air bathed the delicate tissues. Then she experimentally placed the greasy object between her labia.

A flow of liquid from her interior was accompanied by renewed throbbing from her secret pulse. Hetty moved the object in and out, without penetrating herself completely, and the sensations that flooded through her were quite exquisite. She could hardly stop herself from crying out in ecstasy. No wonder Lady Alice had been so transported with delight!

What had been before a moist chasm was now a raging flood, as the lubricant flowed more freely. Soon Hetty was letting the ivory nose of the dildo enter her a little. It just slipped in on the tide, so to speak, but as her ardour increased she was emboldened and was soon thrusting it in and out of her wet vestibule, while uttering involuntary sighs and moans as her feelings reached their zenith.

'Oh, Leonard!' she whispered as the feelings intensified, sweeping her up in their relentless path towards the ultimate bliss. 'If only it could be like this for you and me!'

Now the thought of him took root in her fevered mind, and she fancied that she could feel him deep inside her, a rod of flesh and blood thrusting there instead of hard ivory. She imagined his lips upon hers, his strong arms around

her, and soon her soul was filled with happiness and her body with delicious fire. It did not take long for her to tip over the edge into one long, pulsating climax that both astonished and delighted her. For what seemed like several minutes her entire being was engulfed by the glorious sensations until, like a beautiful sunset, they began to fade away leaving only a glowing warmth behind.

For several minutes Hetty lay in a semi-swoon, her mind struggling to encompass what she had just experienced. So this was the end of love, the magic that bound two souls together! No wonder people desired it so. No wonder they would go through fire and water to reach their loved one, the source of such passionate and all-consuming fire!

As she came to, panic set in as she realised that Lady Alice was due to return before long. She washed the dildo in the hand basin, dried and replaced it in the drawer, then washed herself also, since she was aware of a sticky residue between her thighs. There was a musky smell to it that embarrassed her: she must not allow anyone else to smell it on her, least of all her master or mistress. She had no doubt that they would recognise its nature immediately.

When she had washed and dressed again and ensured the bedchamber showed no signs of her debauched self-pleasuring, Hetty descended the stairs to the kitchen with an air of composure, determined not to reveal how she was feeling inside. Now I must learn to dissemble, she told herself. But oh, how she wished she need not! If only she were able to share such bliss with the man of her heart! If only!

Chapter Sixteen

Hetty felt quite a different woman now – a woman, in fact, and no longer a girl. Yet she had to keep up appearances of being a naïve young lady's maid, and that was difficult. She was relieved that, over the next few days, her path did not cross that of Leonard. Somehow she was sure he might guess what a profound change had taken place within her, and she felt embarrassed.

So when Sir Victor encountered her near the stillroom once again, she was doubly afraid. He pinned her to the wall with his jodhpur-clad thighs, his boots smelling of stable dung and his stinking breath in her nostrils. His mean eyes seemed to stare right through her, penetrating to the very depths of her soul.

'Well, missy, you have crossed the Rubicon but not yet tasted of the pleasures beyond,' he murmured. His words mystified her, yet by their tone she knew he was making some lewd reference to her ravishing. 'We shall have to develop your tastes a little, shan't we now?'

Hetty stared into his cold eyes mesmerised by the naked power, the urge to dominate, she saw there. She attempted a feeble struggle and opened her mouth, but her voice came out as a little mousy squeak. 'Please sir, someone may come...'

He gave a roar of laughter. 'Yes, indeed! Someone *may* come! But not here, and not now. Your hour awaits you, pretty missy. You shall wait on my guests and me this Saturday night. I shall arrange it. And then, who knows? Someone *may* come!'

He strode off, still laughing to himself, and Hetty was filled with the usual sense of defilement that assailed her

whenever she had any dealings with her hated master. Now she wished Leonard *would* appear, to wipe away the unpleasant memory of his father's crude aggression, but it was not to be.

As Saturday approached Hetty felt a dire foreboding seize her. When nothing had happened by late afternoon she hoped Sir Victor had forgotten about her, but her hopes were short-lived. Just before dinner he appeared in the kitchen where she was helping to prepare food. Tearing off a leg from a dish of roast fowl, he proceeded to nibble delicately upon it while surveying operations.

Suddenly he pointed the half-gnawed bone in Hetty's direction. 'You, missy, will wait on table tonight,' he announced. Then, turning on his heel, he left the kitchen, still tearing the flesh from the bone with his teeth.

'Oh my, we *are* the favoured one!' Lily began, but Hetty threw her such a venomous look that the housemaid's grin froze to a rictus.

It is all very well for you to laugh, Hetty thought, you are safely married to Jack Bentley. Sir Victor would never dare prey upon the likes of you!

As the time approached for her to go upstairs, Hetty felt a dreadful lethargy seize her. She dreaded facing the assembled company, imagining what 'entertainment' their host had lined up for them later that night. Yet there was to be no way out. If she pleaded a headache she would only be postponing the ordeal, since she knew her cruel master would not fall for that excuse twice running. Better, perhaps, to succumb and get it over with than to live in fear for another few weeks.

But there was one bright spot in the evening, at least. When she went into the dining room, Hetty saw Leonard at the dinner table and he threw her a charming smile. Would he be present later, in the summerhouse? She hardly knew whether to hope for that or not. If he attended the

vile revels and his father attempted to debauch her, would he feel obliged to protect her? After his promise to George he could hardly fail to intervene a second time. But if that were to happen she feared the consequences.

With that in mind, she half hoped that he would be excused. As the meal progressed, however, it seemed increasingly unlikely that he would be spared the after dinner ordeal. Sir Victor was making a great fuss of his son, praising his manly virtues as if letting his friends know that Leonard had at last passed the test. Leonard sat silent and white-faced throughout, only looking once in Hetty's direction when he threw her a brief, and somewhat wry, smile.

The atmosphere in the dining room was electric, and Hetty wondered whether Sir Victor's guests had already been informed of what was to happen later. She fancied some of the men were gazing at her with hungry eyes, and others were making lewd comments to their neighbours behind their hands.

Sir Victor himself took the chance to touch her in some way whenever she came near his person. This resulted in constant contact, since she was obliged to refill his glass or take away his plate every few minutes. Sometimes he would squeeze her hand. At other times he would pat her on the behind. Once, when he was sure Lady Alice was deep in conversation with her neighbour, Sir Victor put his hand up Hetty's skirt and caressed her thigh, whispering in her ear at the same time, 'Oh yes, missy, we shall have some sport tonight!'

When the ladies eventually withdrew, Hetty took the dishes back down to the kitchen. Later, she had to take the coffee tray upstairs and found the master and his friends in ribald mood. Leonard was still there, looking thoroughly miserable, and as Hetty put the tray down and started to pour the dark brown liquid into the coffee cans she sensed him approach her from behind.

‘Let me take the tray round, Miss Hetty,’ she heard him say.

Turning, she was treated to another of his charming smiles, yet his eyes were wary. As he took the tray from her he murmured, ‘Don’t let my father bully you into going to the summerhouse. Make any excuse, but stay away, I beg of you.’

Sir Victor suddenly came up, probably sensing a conspiracy. ‘Not planning to elope, are you?’ he guffawed. ‘At least not tonight. You’d miss the show I’ve laid on, and so would everyone else – since you two are to be the star performers!’

The fears that Hetty had been harbouring had her in thrall now, and she gasped in dismay. Leo, too, looked as though he had seen a ghost, but his father left them no time to discuss the situation. He led his son back to the table and helped him distribute the coffee, while Hetty was ordered to go round with the decanter.

Only when Sir Victor left the room for a few minutes did the pair get a chance to speak briefly to each other. Leonard collected the empty coffee cups on the tray and brought them over to the sideboard, where Hetty was standing.

‘Listen,’ he murmured, urgently. ‘When the party starts to leave the house and head for the summerhouse, you and I must make a break for it. As we cross the open field we shall run towards the woods. It will be quite dark by then. We should be able to make it to the village.’

‘But—’

‘Shh! Just do as I say!’ Leonard implored her. ‘There is no other way, believe me! If we go to that summerhouse again and my father lays a hand on you I shall strike him dead, I swear it. Then we shall both be ruined!’

Sir Victor was returning so they had to break apart, but Hetty was still terrified. She made as if to take the tray down to the kitchen, but the master barred her way.

‘Not so fast, young miss,’ he grinned, taking a cigar from between his yellow teeth and blowing the smoke in her face. ‘Leave that here, and forget about going downstairs. I have dismissed the women and now I shall lock this door. We shall remain here and amuse ourselves until morning, if need be.’

‘B-but are you not proceeding to the summerhouse?’ she stammered. He shook his head. ‘But your... those ladies... are they not awaiting you?’

He gave her an unctuous smile. ‘I have not invited any “ladies” this night, Miss Hetty. The summerhouse is in need of repair as the roof is leaking. No, as I said, tonight *you* shall provide the entertainment, along with my fine figure of a son. Now that won’t be so bad, will it? He is a very personable young man, don’t you think? And you already know each other *intimately*, do you not?’

The full horror of the situation struck her then, and she burst into tears. Sir Victor ignored her outburst, taking her by the hand and leading her to the table.

‘Gentlemen!’ she heard him say, above her distressed sobs. ‘You see before you a young woman who needs schooling in the art of love. Yet see how she weeps at the prospect!’

A ripple of amusement went round the table. Then a lone, dissenting voice called out, ‘Leave her be, father! Can’t you see how upset she is? You are tormenting the poor girl!’

‘We shall turn those tears into smiles before long, and that dolorous weeping shall be transformed into sighs of pleasure.’ Sir Victor smiled at his guests, who spontaneously burst into a round of applause. Hetty stared at Leonard; he looked pale and drawn but the sight of him stilled her sobbing.

‘First, the hussy has to be chastened,’ his father continued. ‘We shall draw lots for the privilege, I think. Leonard, pass these papers around for each man to write

his name on – including your own, of course. Then I shall put them all into this hat and the lucky winner shall be drawn.’

Hetty was mesmerised by the sight of so many middle-aged men slaving to be the one to chastise her. Leonard’s face was chalk-white and yet he passed the papers down the table, as if in a dream. When she caught his eye he threw her a keen look and gave a slight inclination of his head. Somehow she thought he was asking her to be patient, that he had a plan. Or was it just wishful thinking?

Inside, Hetty was trembling like an aspen but she tried to appear calm. If Leonard did have a plan of escape it would not do to alert his father. She would go along with whatever was asked of her, until the time was ripe.

The hideous lottery was performed and the winner was Sir Angus McTavish, a sanguine gent with fishy eyes that gleamed horribly as he surveyed his victim. Hetty stared back boldly, trying to seem unconcerned, but inside she was a nervous wreck. Only the sight of Leonard, looking equally calm and determined, raised her spirits.

‘Well Angus, shall you use your crop on her?’ Sir Victor enquired. ‘Or do you prefer to feel that firm young flesh quivering beneath your palm? Perhaps we should put it to the vote. All those in favour of the crop, say “Aye”.’ A few voices spoke up. ‘Now those in favour of the hand, say “Nay”.’ A loud braying went round the table. ‘So, the nays have it! Leonard, you are used to handling the wench. Prepare her for this act of submission. Now, Angus, there’s not a man here does not envy you at this moment. Do us proud, won’t you?’

‘I shall do my best, Victor,’ he replied, detaching his cufflinks and rolling up the sleeve of his right arm with a sickening smile.

Leonard came up to Hetty and lifted her skirt, as if to pull down her drawers. Instead he whispered urgently in her ear. ‘Now we must make a break for it. He has locked

the door, but we may go through the communicating doors into the drawing room, then out of there and down the stairs. Are you ready?’

‘Yes, oh yes!’

‘Then brace yourself. Take my hand. On a count of three...’

Hetty’s heart began thumping even more wildly in her chest as he began the countdown to their freedom bid. She was pretending to fumble with her underclothes, but then his hand clasped hers and he murmured, ‘Three!’

The hectic dash that followed took everyone by surprise, including Hetty. She would not have believed she was capable of running so fast. Leonard burst through the elegant doors into the drawing room, where a handful of startled women were lingering, then made for the door to the corridor. There was a brief hiatus back in the dining room but as soon as reality hit him, Sir Victor and several of his guests, followed in hot pursuit.

Hetty and Leonard clattered down the main stairs and reached the bottom just as Sir Victor and his crew reached the top. There was not enough space between them for a comfortable getaway, but it could not be helped. With Hetty in tow, Leonard swung off down the narrow corridor that led to the stillroom, much to the amazement of the servants who had come up from the kitchen to ascertain the cause of all the commotion.

‘We need a horse!’ he gasped, as they reached the door at the far end. Soon they were out under the night sky and heading for the stables. The horses were put to bed for the night, but Leonard’s beloved pony, Hercules, heard him coming and whinnied.

‘That’s it, my boy, you are to do us great service now,’ he murmured, unhitching the beast. ‘No time to saddle you up – you must take us bareback.’ He threw a blanket over the broad chestnut back, climbed onto the mounting block then swung his leg over. ‘Hop up behind me Hetty

and hold on tight. Quick, now! I can hear them coming!’

She pulled up her skirts and obeyed unthinkingly. As the doughty pony made for the open stable door, amidst the restless whinnying of the other horses, she could see Sir Victor puffing and panting as he emerged from the side door of the house.

‘Go, go!’ Leonard called, digging his heel in lightly to spur the beast on. At once the creature began to gallop towards the main road that led through the estate. Although Leonard was used to riding him the pony had not been bred for speed. Yet he did his valiant best, lumbering down the road under his double load. Hetty held on for dear life, but over the rhythmic clatter of hooves she could hear Sir Victor call, ‘Consider yourself disinherited, you young swine! You’ll never darken my doors again! I’ll set the dogs on you!’

The night breeze soon swallowed up his threats, and then there was nothing but silence all around, punctuated by the distant barking of hounds. Hetty clung to the back of Leonard’s comforting jacket, but soon the night chill began to bite and she shivered with cold. The moon was almost full that night and the road stretched like a silver ribbon ahead.

Hetty did her best to accustom herself to the regular motion of the animal, and eventually knew when to rise and fall, to avoid the awkward bumping that made her behind sore. There was no help for the rough coat chafing against her thighs, however, since she had been obliged to hoist up her skirts. This, and the fact that she could feel the heat of Leonard’s body seeping into hers, excited her somewhat. She hugged him tighter, placing her arms right around his waist, and pressed her chest against his back, taking comfort from the teeming life of the two male animals as they warmed her through.

After about ten minutes, when there was no sound of pursuing hooves, Leonard slowed the horse and drew it

to a halt. He whispered, 'Steady old boy!' then turned to speak to Hetty over his shoulder.

'I do not think they will give chase now,' he said, his voice filled with relief. 'We shall continue southwards until we reach a coaching inn, where we shall spend the night. Tomorrow we must rise at crack of dawn to continue our journey south.' He gave her a radiant smile and kissed her hand. 'We are safe, dearest Hetty. Take no thought of the morrow – we shall take that as it comes. For now, just give thanks that we have both escaped that brute's clutches.'

'Oh yes, yes indeed,' she answered fervently, kissing his fingers in turn.

'Are you cold?' he asked, seeing her shiver a little. 'You may have my jacket. Here.'

'Oh no!' she protested, but he insisted on placing his dinner jacket around her shoulders and fastening the top button, so that it hung around her like a cape. 'Only another half hour or so, then we shall rest.' He patted Hercules' flank lovingly. 'He was not bred to ride, but see how eagerly he serves us now. We must catch the coach in the morning, but I shall see that he is well looked after and given a good home.' He sighed, and took up the reins again. 'Come now, old boy, just a few more miles and then you, too, shall rest.'

Hetty was too tired to question him further, but leaned her head against his back and fell into a doze as the pony settled into a steady trot. Eventually she woke with a start. They had reached a darkened inn, and Leonard was shaking her gently.

'Wake up, Miss Hetty. I have to get the landlord up.'

He helped her down and then rang the bell at the door. After three rings an upstairs window was flung open and a head wearing a nightcap peered down. 'What is it?' the man hissed. 'D'ye know what hour this is?'

'I am sorry to get you up, sir, but my sister and I are

desperate for lodgings,' Leonard called.

His refined tone must have impressed the man, who said he would be down in a few seconds. While they waited, Leonard gave Hetty her instructions. 'I am your brother George – that will be easy for you to remember. We lost our way in the dark. I have some sovereigns here,' he chinked a purse beneath his shirt. 'I dare say the innkeeper will be civil to us when he knows we have money.'

The door was flung open and they were invited in. Some dying embers remained in the grate, so Hetty warmed her hands while Leonard did his bargaining. Leonard was offered the settle, with an eiderdown to make a bed for himself, while Hetty was taken upstairs to a small room with a narrow bed. She stripped to her underclothes and scrambled into the warm nest. When the landlord had returned to his own bed, Leonard came up to say goodnight.

'I feel responsible for you, Miss Hetty,' he began, squeezing her hand as she lay tucked up beneath a mountain of bedclothes. 'But I do have a plan of action. My own intention is to travel to Paris, where I hope to study art. Although my father says he will disinherit me I do have a small fortune of my own that my father cannot touch, left to me by an uncle. I only stayed at Longton for my mother's sake, yet now I know that I cannot bear to be there so long as my brutish father is alive. I will take my chance in the French capital.'

'Oh, Leonard,' was all Hetty could find to say. Suddenly she realised how much she would miss him if he went to live in France. But what would become of her?

'As for you, Hetty,' Leonard continued, as if reading her thoughts. 'I shall deliver you to the safekeeping of your dear brother. I am sure he would not wish you to remain at Longton if he knew the half of what you have had to endure. My duty will be discharged then, and I

shall feel free to go on my way. George will protect you, I am sure, and see that you obtain a more suitable post. You are safe here, little Hetty, and soon you will be safe forever. Good night and God bless.'

Chapter Seventeen

Once Leonard had left the bedroom Hetty realised what a dilemma she was in, but she was too tired to give it much attention and fell asleep almost immediately. She was awoken by the dawn chorus, as usual, but soon realised that she was not in her usual bed. Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes then pulled back the curtain at the window, adjacent to the bed. A scene of open fields and distant woodland met her eyes. As her mind pieced together the events of the previous night a shudder passed through her. What would become of her now?

A tap at the door made her pull on her blouse and run a hand through her hair before she called, 'Come in.'

It was Leonard, with a breakfast tray of coffee and toast. His face had lost the haunted, haggard look of yesterday and was brightly wreathed in smiles. 'Good morning, Miss Hetty,' he announced jauntily. 'We have an hour before the London coach passes this way. I trust you slept well?'

But Hetty was in no mood for pleasantries. 'Please sit down, Leonard,' she said, indicating the cane chair at the bedside. 'There is something I must tell you.'

'Why so grave?' he asked, taking her hand. 'Are you not happy to be free at last?'

'Oh yes, but my destiny is so uncertain now.'

'But your brother...'

'That is what I must tell you,' she said firmly. 'George, that "young man" you thought of as my brother, does not exist.'

'What?' Leonard gave a dismissive laugh. 'But I have talked intimately with him, man to man—'

‘I know, but...’ Hetty decided to put on her ‘George’ voice and lowered her tone. ‘Here’s a rum thing, Leo old chum. Your close friend George turns out to be his own sister, all along.’

‘What? But I don’t—’

‘It was *me!*’ Hetty insisted, in her own voice again. ‘Lady Alice made me wear men’s clothes so I could spy on Sir Victor’s parties for her. I was supposed to be your friend and report everything back to her, which I did. But I am sure she never expected us to be so close.’

Leonard resembled a stunned fish. His sensual mouth kept opening and closing but no words came out. Now it was Hetty’s turn to give his hand a reassuring squeeze.

‘I’m sorry I had to deceive you,’ she went on, ‘but there was no escape. And besides, after a while I looked forward to our conversations. No one had ever spoken to me like that before, “man to man” as you say. It was a wonderful experience, and I shall never forget it.’

‘So... you’re... George,’ Leonard managed to utter at last. ‘Well, well, well...’

Hetty could almost see the thoughts racing around his brain as he played back the past few months like a reel of film. At one point he blushed and averted his gaze.

‘So you were not so innocent as you seemed, Miss Hetty.’

‘Please, do not think ill of me,’ Hetty pleaded, suddenly afraid that she might be abandoned forthwith.

‘It is not you I think ill of, but my accursed parents,’ he snarled. ‘You have been used by both of them like a pawn, Hetty. They are cruel and heartless. I knew my father was an unscrupulous rake, but I thought better of my mother.’

‘She is not so bad,’ Hetty insisted. ‘Imagine what her life has been like, married to Sir Victor. She longs for him still, and yet he turns to lewd women. I felt sorry for her.’

Leonard took her face between his hands and regarded her lovingly. 'You are a little angel, Hetty.'

But then the fear that had seized her on waking prompted her to say, 'But what shall become of me, Leo? I have no George to protect me. My real brothers are still boys, and my father will be angry if I return home. There is no work where I live, and I shall be a burden on my family if I stay there.' Tears began to course down her face.

Leonard was silent for a few seconds, sunk in thought. Then he kissed her wet cheek tenderly. 'I shall be your brother, Hetty. We shall live out the pretence we made last night, when we came here. I shall protect you, if you will accompany me to Paris.'

'To Paris!'

'I am determined to go there, Hetty, and now I am equally determined to take you with me. I have this small allowance—'

'So have I!' Hetty exclaimed, suddenly remembering the gift of old Lady Dorothea Marsden, her former mistress. 'If we can contact the solicitors in London – Mr Holden and Mr Willow, I think their names were – they will vouch for it. I left their letter behind...' she ended, forlornly.

'Holden and Willow of Bond Street – the same firm that dealt with my uncle's estate!' Leonard exclaimed. 'What a fortunate coincidence!'

'It is a sum of fifty pounds, which I can claim on my majority,' Hetty added. 'I shall be twenty-one in six months' time.'

'By then we shall be happily ensconced in our Parisian apartment,' Leonard smiled. 'Imagine, Hetty, what complete freedom will be like! I shall learn to draw and paint, and perhaps you shall gain some employment as a lady's companion, or suchlike. I have a school friend who married a Frenchwoman and he shall introduce us to Parisian society. We shall live like lords and ladies, Hetty,

despite our meagre means!'

It was an attractive picture, yet Hetty felt dissatisfied. To live as Leonard's sister was infinitely better than being parted from him and left to find her own way in life. Yet she could not erase from her memory the fact that he was the one who had taken her virginity. According to her simple country morality she already regarded him as her natural husband.

Still, this was no time to quibble. Being under Leonard's protection, living in his apartment and enjoying his company on a daily basis would be more than enough for Hetty. After breakfast and a hasty toilet, she joined him downstairs where they awaited the London coach.

The journey to London was long, and they arrived after dark. They put up at a modest inn and first thing next morning paid a visit to Messrs Holden and Willow, where Hetty was introduced as Leonard's ward, and their financial affairs were sorted out. In six months' time, Hetty's small fortune would be paid into Leonard's account at the bank in Paris where his own money would be deposited. It seemed a declaration of his earnest intention to look after her for at least the next six months, and Hetty told herself she would have to be content with that. Once she had her own money she would reassess the situation.

It was all to be one big adventure, and as they took the boat train to Dover, Hetty felt her heart lift. By now she had settled into an easy companionship with Leonard. It was not quite as free as when she had been disguised as George, but neither was it the relationship of master to servant.

They embarked on the cross-channel ferry and were soon on their way across the English Channel. As she felt the fresh sea breeze on her face, and saw the white cliffs of Dover vanish over the horizon, Hetty clung close to her protector.

‘Oh Leonard, I never dreamed that I would be going abroad!’ she exclaimed, as the coast of France could be dimly discerned in the distance.

He smiled down at her. ‘We are both fortunate indeed. I only hope I can get by with my schoolboy French. Perhaps you should learn some too. *Parlez-vous français, mademoiselle?*’

They arrived at Calais and transferred to the train, then spent a hilarious few hours conversing in pidgin French. Just as the sun was setting, the Paris skyline appeared with the Eiffel Tower and Sacré Coeur darkly outlined against a red and purple sky. Hetty was entranced.

They took lodgings in a small atelier – an artist’s garret – in Montmartre. The previous occupant had left some of his paintings behind, a couple of voluptuous nudes, and Hetty stared at them in astonishment; she found she was no longer embarrassed by the sight of naked flesh.

‘They are very lifelike, are they not?’ she said, marvelling at the way a few brush strokes could convey the texture of flesh. ‘From this side of the room you can see them better, Leonard.’

‘You are developing an artist’s eye already, my dear.’ He smiled at her lovingly, then turned the paintings over to read the French inscriptions on the back. The artist had written: *Dear tenants who come after me, please keep these. I have had enough of dull grey skies and am off to the sunny south. Do with my paintings what you will.*

‘What a strange thing to do,’ Hetty commented. ‘Perhaps we should ask our neighbours about the painter.’

‘Maybe. But first we must get this stove working. I’m freezing. Next we must go out and buy, beg, borrow or steal some coffee and bread.’

Those first few days in Paris were idyllic. They felt as though they were picnicking in their quarters for the first week, but as they picked up some second-hand furniture

and stocked up the larder it felt more like home. Hetty was given the small bedroom, with the double bed, while Leonard slept in the other room, on a couch. The main room was where they cooked and ate, but the corner with the most daylight became Leonard's studio, where he set up his easel and kept all his painting materials.

Leonard acquired a reputation for 'saucy' drawings, which he was able to sell in the Place du Tertre for a few francs apiece. Soon they got to know other artists in the area, since they all frequented the same few bars. Hetty was almost always taken for Leonard's mistress, and when he introduced her as his 'sister' some of the men made ribald remarks. Sometimes they asked if she modelled. Hetty felt uneasy about her position, since she could see that they were looking on her as fair game. She was flirted with, even propositioned on occasion, but she dared not tell Leonard any of this.

Then something happened that distressed Hetty greatly. She came home from the market one day to find a nude woman posing for Leonard. All kinds of turbulent feelings began to foment in her breast as he told her the model was called Hélène, and had the nickname of 'La Belle Hélène'. She was beautiful indeed, with long tawny hair that fell down her back in tumbling curls highlighted in gold, lustrous brown eyes and a wide, sensuous mouth. Her breasts were large and well shaped, and she was blessed with a slender waist and curvaceous hips.

For the first time in her life, Hetty felt the sharp pangs of jealousy.

That night, after he had finished his sketching, Leonard took the woman to the famous haunt of Parisian artists, the *Lapin Agile*, but did not invite Hetty along. Worse, he failed to return that night. Hetty hardly slept, and when Leonard crept back mid-morning with a guilty air she was almost beside herself with anger and despair.

'Ah, Hetty, make some coffee, there's a dear,' he

addressed her, trying to pretend everything was normal.

Something snapped in her then. 'Make it yourself!' she snarled, fleeing through the door with tears burning her eyes.

He made a feeble attempt to follow, but Hetty was too quick and soon she was lost amongst the street markets of Montmartre. She wandered amongst the stalls until suddenly she came across one selling second-hand clothes. Of course! She had been missing her chance all these weeks! There before her was a man's striped shirt, a leather jerkin and a pair of woollen breeches.

'*Combien?*' she asked the old woman, holding up the bundle.

She obtained them for a few francs and, on another stall, found a pair of boots and a boy's peaked cap, the kind she had seen street urchins wearing. On her way back home she hid in the cemetery and changed her clothes behind a tomb. She emerged a few minutes later – George again! This was how she would win back her advantage. Whatever physical pleasures 'La Belle Hélène' might provide, 'George' had the edge over her when it came to companionship and the memory of old times. It was her last card in the game to win Leonard's heart, and she was desperate to play it.

The attic apartment was quiet when she returned and, at first, Hetty thought that Leonard must have gone out. But when she opened the door she saw him sitting on the couch, his head in his hands. He looked up as she entered, and an expression of amazed joy passed over his face. 'George! I mean...'

He faltered, and Hetty said in her gruff man's tone, 'Hullo again, Leo. I thought you might have forgotten me, but here I am again.'

For a moment Leonard looked dazed and confused, but he slowly rose to his feet and embraced Hetty. 'You are right, I had forgotten you – almost. At least, I thought

perhaps you were dead. But now I see you resurrected before me!’

Hetty strode over to the easel, where she surveyed the half-finished portrait of Hélène. ‘Hm, is this your latest effort?’

Leonard was blushing now. ‘Erm... yes. She agreed to model for me, and I...’

‘A comely wench indeed,’ Hetty continued, getting into the part and starting to enjoy it. ‘Did you enjoy her company too, Leo? Come, you may speak to me man to man as you used to do back at Longton. Remember?’

‘Of course I remember! And yes, I did enjoy her... company, last night.’

‘Then let us drink coffee together, and you shall tell me all about it.’

It was strange how quickly they fell back into the old routine. Soon Leonard was confiding in her as if he had completely forgotten her true identity.

‘The *Lapin* was full of the usual crowd when we arrived,’ he began. ‘I had promised to buy Hélène some absinthe in return for the sitting – the poor woman is addicted, you know. I ordered some food but she barely ate it, and soon began to look pale and sick, so I said I would take her home.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘A few streets away from here – I had to half carry her there, and then up some rickety stairs to the room where she lives with her sister, Jeanne. It was no surprise to her when I showed up. The pair of them are both models and they often bring men home. I was going to leave, but Jeanne offered me some wine and so I stayed. I confess I was curious about them; I had never met women like that before.’

‘Women of the streets?’

‘Not exactly, but almost. They live a free life, posing for artists and sometimes procuring clients who will pay

for their services. Jeanne made it clear that we could have a threesome, if I liked. The more I drank of her rough red wine, the more attractive a proposal that seemed.'

'So is that what you did?' Hetty asked gruffly, straining to keep the emotion out of her voice.

'I was soon flopped out on the bed and the two women – for H  l  ne had recovered by now – undressed me. Soon we were engaged in quite a frenzy of lovemaking. One woman was licking my parts while the other placed my hand on her breasts and urged me to stroke them. I scarcely knew who was doing what, but soon one was astride me and urging me to penetrate her. At that point I suddenly remembered the awful warnings against prostitutes and, having no wish to contract a vile disease, I pushed them aside.'

'That was very sensible of you,' Hetty commented, primly.

'But the two women were not satisfied. They said they could do other things for me. I could see they wanted my money, and I tried to leave, but the pair of them pinned me to the bed. H  l  ne told me to put my member between her fine breasts and she would pleasure me that way. With her wonderful bosom exposed before me, that was too hard to resist. So she lay on her back and I positioned my erect phallus between her luscious orbs. She pushed them together, squeezing and rubbing them against my erection as I bent over her.'

'That must have been quite exciting.'

'Oh, it was! But then Jeanne came up behind me and I felt a sharp sting on my buttocks as she called: "*Allez, mon jockey! Allons donc! Allez-oups!*" She was whipping me like a racehorse, and my entire hindquarters were on fire. I thrust between the fleshy mounds, harder and harder. I felt soft wet lips close over my glans and again the whip fell on my defenceless buttocks, urging me on.'

'A race against time?'

'More like a race against my own inhibitions, dear George. Although I was finding the experience quite exquisite, I could not help feeling guilty.'

'Guilty? Why?'

'Because it reminded me of my licentious father and those whores he used to invite to the summerhouse. And then I thought of sweet Hetty, the poor girl I had been obliged to ruin. What would *she* think if she could see me now? As my mind ran on my erection began to flag. But then Jeanne whipped me all the harder and, before I could help myself, I reached a shattering climax. My seed spurted all over Hélène who, far from recoiling in disgust, seemed to relish it. In fact, she lifted her tumid nipples to her mouth and licked the salty ejaculate from them in turn.'

'Did you stay there the rest of the night?'

'I was too exhausted to do otherwise, dear George. Exhausted, and confused. For in my drowsy mind there was but one constant thought recurring: I have betrayed my sweet Hetty!'

Hetty felt her spirits rise, despite her horror at what she had just heard. 'Betrayed? How?'

'I realised that I had a duty to complete what I had begun, albeit against my will, back in my father's bedroom at Longton.'

'When you deflowered her?'

'Yes. It was a shameful deed, and the fact that I was under duress did not excuse it. I have ruined poor Hetty, taken her virtue, and yet done nothing more about it.'

'But you have taken her under your wing,' Hetty said, aware that she was playing Devil's advocate. 'Surely that is enough?'

'No. Being with those two women reminded me that the female of the species *can* experience pleasure in the act of sex. Yet I have been denying this to the young woman who holds a special place in my heart. What kind

of man am I? I should finish what I have started and share my life and love completely with that sweet, loyal girl whose worth I am only now beginning to understand.'

Hetty could hardly believe what she was hearing. All her anger and jealousy melted away, and she wanted to throw off her disguise and embrace him. Yet something in her urged caution. She would play George for a while longer.

'You have taken my sister under your protection,' she said. 'But what if that is all she wants? Suppose your advances were to be unwelcome? What then?'

'Oh, then I should be in despair. At least, at first. Once I had rallied, I would set about winning her love.'

'And how might you do that?'

'To be honest, I am not sure. Do you have any recommendations, George? You know her better than I for you have lived with her all your life.'

Hetty could hardly keep from smiling. 'I think she needs a strong man, someone to master her,' she told him at last. 'A woman like my sister is consumed by inner fire, although you would never think it to look at her. She is devoted to the one man who has forced his will upon her — you. But you must continue to show your mastery over her, if you are to win her heart for good.'

Leonard stared so earnestly into her eyes that Hetty imagined the illusion was complete, and had forgotten to whom he was really speaking.

'And how may that be accomplished?' he asked.

She pretended to reflect for a few seconds. 'Physical chastisement is the best method I believe. She was not beaten much as a girl, so I think she will appreciate it all the more now she is almost come of age. So long as it is undertaken in a spirit of loving care, of course.'

Leonard clapped her on the shoulder with a grin. 'By George, I think you've got it! As a preliminary to lovemaking I believe it cannot be bettered. It shows a

manly supremacy of will and spirit and, as I can testify from my own experience, it rouses the flesh to a state of excitement which can only be assuaged by sexual pleasure.'

Hetty nodded, unable to speak. Beneath the rough trousers she could feel her sex moisten with excited anticipation. Her breasts were hard and firm beneath her shirt, and she began to long for close contact with her lover.

'So, George, I have you to thank yet again for you have shown me the key by which I might unlock your dear sister's heart. Will you visit me again? Your company has cheered me so greatly.'

'Of course I shall,' Hetty said, rising and offering her hand. 'Whenever I am in Paris. You shall tell me all about your adventures, and I shall know that my dear sister is being well taken care of.'

They shook hands, then Hetty left the room feeling elated. She left the door ajar, however, and on the landing outside found the bundle of her own clothes. As soon as she saw that Leonard was busy with his painting in the corner near the window, she crept back into her own bedroom where she changed back into her skirt and blouse.

When Hetty emerged, Leonard at first pretended not to notice her and carried on painting. At last she plucked up the courage to approach him.

'Erm... Leonard, I...'

He turned, his expression thunderous. 'And where do you think you've been, my girl?'

'Oh, I am sorry. I should not have gone running away like that.'

'Of course you should not! Anything might have happened to you, roaming the streets in this part of town. Men might have taken you for a streetwalker.'

'Oh no! I am a good girl, even though...'

He strode forward and tilted up her chin so she was obliged to look him in the eye. 'Even though *what*, Hetty?'

'Even though I have lost my virtue, master.'

Leonard's face, usually so kind and gentle, took on a more threatening cast and Hetty felt a thrill of apprehension pass through her. 'Then perhaps you *are* no better than a streetwalker! You should be punished for your misdemeanours, and then you should learn to submit to a *good* man, someone who will protect you from harm. Do you think you can accept chastisement from such a man, Hetty, and then submit entirely to his will?'

She knew his game, but was not going to let him have all his own way. 'I – I am not sure, sir,' she prevaricated.

'Not sure? Would you rather be cast out to take your chance in the steaming bordello of Montmartre? Would you rather earn your living posing in the nude as an artist's model, and become the prey of any rakish bohemian who fancied you? Answer me, Hetty!'

'Oh no, sir.' She cast her eyes down, demurely. 'To escape that fate I would be glad to give myself to a kind, but stern, master.'

'Then I see you have some sense. Well, we shall put you to the test. Go into your bedroom and remove your clothes, then lie upon the bed, face down.'

She pretended to demur, but he pointed his finger at the door. 'Go, now!'

Hetty was in a state of boundless joy for she knew that her ultimate fulfilment was about to occur, yet she was obliged to continue playing her part. She stripped off her clothes and lay on the bed as Leonard had commanded, but then he kept her waiting a while. Her body ached for him, and she ground her mons impatiently against the mattress. Her nipples tingled, and her pulses were racing so immoderately that she feared she might suffer a seizure.

But, at long last, he entered. She began to look round but he barked at her, 'Face down, I say!' and she lay

trembling and naked before him.

'You are a wilful young woman,' he said, and she felt the weight of him on the mattress beside her. Then his hand began to caress her buttocks, sending sweet sensations throughout her whole body. 'You must be made to submit to me, body and soul, before I can regard you as my own. Do you wish that, Hetty? Do you want to belong to me, body and soul?'

'Oh, yes!' she breathed fervently.

'Then prepare yourself for punishment. The flesh must be subdued before it can experience righteous pleasure. Brace yourself, for I will not spare the rod.'

From the moment that the first stroke fell upon her behind, Hetty held the image of her beloved master firmly in her mind, adoring his features even as he dealt her blow after blow. The sweetness that was to come sustained her, and soon the utter abandonment of her body to him brought with it the most exquisite pleasure. He delivered just seven strokes, with some implement that stung and stimulated her flesh without unduly tormenting it, and left her in a state of high arousal.

Then, like gentle rain after the searing heat of noon, she felt him kiss the nape of her neck and her spirit soared. He stroked her back, her tender buttocks, murmuring endearments in both French and English, making her want to laugh hysterically with utter happiness. She tried to turn over, to take him in her arms, but he pinned her down and bade her submit to him. After a while she stopped struggling and simply luxuriated in his soft caresses, not trying to reciprocate.

His lips were kissing her buttocks now, soothing the pain, while his hands gently parted her thighs. Then, to her utter delight, she could feel his erect member insinuate itself between her thighs, seeking the way to her cunny. The hard knob of his glans pushed softly at her vulva until it lodged in the opening. Hetty held her breath as all

her desire was concentrated upon that one place, willing him to enter her.

Seconds later she felt him thrust inside, and a series of voluptuous thrills passed through her, making her almost swoon with ecstasy. Leonard thrust again, harder and faster, and she felt the sensations more keenly. A wave of bliss swept her upward and onward, in tune with his rhythm, and the delight seemed endless, infinite. She moaned and sighed her love for him, and he kissed her neck at the most tender spot which sent her into further paroxysms of rapture.

‘Oh Hetty, I never dared dream of this,’ he murmured, then let out a long moan as his own climax came and his seed spurted within her, a hot fountain that triggered one last peak of pleasure in her before they both sank into a mutual embrace, arms and legs intertwined and their hearts beating rapidly as one.

Six months later, Leonard and Hetty were married in a small church near the Sacré Coeur, then moved into a larger apartment. They were now quite well off, since Hetty’s inheritance had come to her and Leonard was selling more of his work. To their surprise they had sold the nude paintings they found in their first apartment for a large sum, since they turned out to be by a painter who was now renowned and much sought after.

Then, a few months after their marriage, Leonard received a letter from his mother at Longton. He had remained in touch with her, sending her the occasional letter, although she only had his *poste restante* address in Paris.

He read it aloud to Hetty:

My dear Leonard,

I am sorry to have to inform you that your father has had a riding accident and is now paralysed from the waist

down. He very much regrets your leaving, and has changed his mind about disinheriting you. Will you consider returning? Your loving mother.

Hetty felt dread seize her. What if Leonard considered it his duty to return home? She could not bear the thought of being at Longton again. It held too many terrible memories.

Leonard sensed her anxiety. He turned to her with a smile. 'Now here's an interesting situation, Hetty dear; my father reduced to being an onlooker. I can imagine how much that must pain him, can't you?'

She gave a wry smile. 'But what about your mother? She seems to need you now.'

'I confess I am unsure what to do for the best. My father presents no threat to me now, so I do not fear returning. And I feel man enough to put him in his place if he dares try to bully me verbally. Yet I feel sorry for mother. Perhaps we should return to England for a spell. You could visit your family, Hetty, while I made a brief visit to Longton.'

'Perhaps,' Hetty said. 'But I feel my life is here, now. I have almost forgotten about my family.'

Leonard's blue eyes twinkled at her. 'Except for your brother George, of course.'

'Oh yes, I could never forget him.'

'Perhaps he will make another visit soon,' Leonard said. 'Then I could discuss the situation with him. Talking to George has always helped me to sort out my thoughts. In fact, my dear, it was talking to him that persuaded me to take you as my wife.'

'Really?' Hetty smiled. 'Then I owe him a great debt of gratitude.'

'Oh yes, my dear. I think we both do.' Leonard smiled, taking her into his arms for a rapturous embrace.

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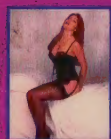
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In Service



When young Hetty goes into service at Longton Hall, she falls victim to the depraved appetites of her master, Sir Victor. Lady Alice, suspecting her husband of debauchery, persuades Hetty to disguise herself as a man and spy on him.

Pretending to be 'George', her fictional brother, Hetty is obliged to take part in Sir Victor's licentious revels. But she has a secret ally in Leo, his son.

Hetty and Leo are increasingly involved in the dark doings of the lecherous lord, enduring all kinds of humiliation, and they plan to escape. But Leo still doesn't know that his beloved Hetty is also George, his best friend...

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