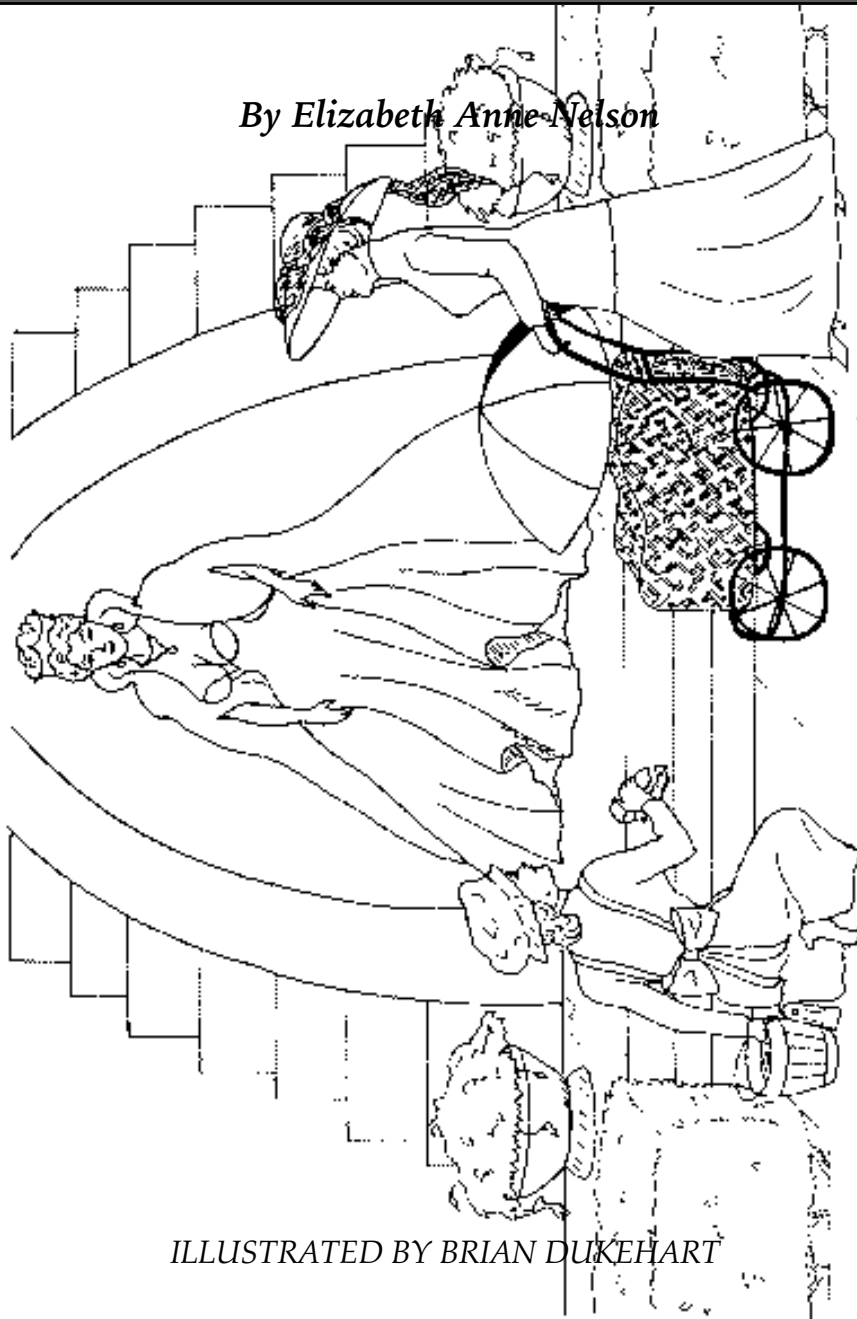


AUBERAN

By Elizabeth Anne Nelson



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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Chapter One: The Dowager Duchess Of Auberan - Begins Her Confession

Today, I pause to celebrate my ninety-sixth birthday. I attended my party, not because I chose to have a party, but because the family expected me to be pleased by this singular achievement of survival. This is said to be very English, or, to be more precise, British.

It may certainly be rather appropriate to consider ninety-six as an age when confession may well be good for the soul and rather safe for mortal remains.

Therefore, I take this moment to reveal the most singular events that describe what really happened to my three late step-sons who were reported perished at sea shortly after the death of their dear father, Sir John Percy Dinadan, my late husband, the Duke of Auberan, who awaits these seventy odd years for me to join him in the vaults below as another family heirloom.

A confession should have a starting point.

I was born Anna Maria Leslie in 1875 on an April morning full of grace. My father was disappointed and thought me quite plain enough to be the boy he so wanted, except MotherNature decided to please my mother's whim for a girl.

Sepoy Hall, where I was born, was named after the Indian revolt that led to our family fortunes and my father's retirement as a Brigadier in the Queen's service, so that he might enter commerce. The family was scandalized by his materialism. As one of my aunts exclaimed, "A Lord does not enter the trades in preference to the military!"

Both my father and I lived to please others in compensation. He led the life of an English Lord with Sepoy Hall as his country estate and a large house in London, when not engaged in the "Trades".

And I was torn between being the perfect young lady to please my Mother and a tomboy to please myself and father. At Sepoy Hall, I would indulge my masculine tastes and ride with the hounds astride my stallion dressed in breeches and shirt with my brown hair tied back in a boyish knot. In London I was clapped into petticoats and bleached with creams as a part of my mother's exhaustive efforts to undo the country's coarseness. But, whatever Mother tried, I remained a rather robust and plain girl.

Family trees are arbors of boredom, but it may be instructive to pause and view the forest of characters that my family presents to this accounting.

To begin with, my father was a Kitridge, and since he and his sister, Lady Greensmith, were the last Kitridges of his branch, suffice it to say no more of him, and much more of his sister later.

My dear Mother was a Farley. Her brother was therefore Lord Farley. Her sister married to become Lady Morely, which made a wonderful pun when I was a little girl. Now when Lord Morely died, she sold Morely Hall to a Mrs. Crisp. Mrs. Crisp converted the gloomy old hall into an orphan asylum for girls, who she raised to their proper station as servant girls for the best families. She was a very good but strict Christian woman.

And thus it was with the sale of Morely Hall that my Aunt, her daughter Susan, and a cousin named Mary Caldwell came to live at Sepoy Hall. This pleased Mother very much because now my favorite retreat had become a virtual harem of girls and women. Susan, Mary, my beautiful and fair sister, Angelica, and I were raised as if we were all truly sisters and we dearly loved each other, dreading that day when marriage would separate us. Susan was the first to leave by marrying Lord Brian.

Angelica attended an exclusive finishing school where she fell in disgrace by falling in love with the Head Mistress's brother, a struggling law clerk whom she married to become plain Mrs. Fell. A singular name, indeed.

Now my mother's younger brother, Lord Farley, married a stout Scot of the McDouglas wealth and kept her happy by having many children. Mary Caldwell became a Governess in their service and I am afraid to say, my uncle's mistress, until she fell in love and married a sea captain who was soon lost at sea. But, that tale is much later in my story.

So, back to the point where my parents died of the fever and father's wealth was placed in trust to care for my needs while my father's sister, Lady Greensmith, took charge of her rather plain and spinster niece of twenty-one to see what could be done about finding her a husband. Her approach was direct in its simplicity. She posted a dowry of several hundred thousand pounds, not to mention my allowance until I was twenty-five, and started me on a social whirl that declared me to be fair game for any desirable titled gentleman. School girl romance was not to be mine, for she was bound to arrange a "comfortable" marriage with no nonsense. I vowed that never again would I allow another to run my life in such a fashion.

I would control my own destiny.

Of course, I had no choice then. I was a strong-willed girl, but she had the strength of my father's family bloodlines and so amid many tears and much frustration, I followed her orders like a little school girl and dove into the social whirl of parties and balls. And it was at just such a ball that I met John Dinadan.

The Duke had just recovered from a grievous wound that he had received on the Northern Frontier and therefore he begged to talk rather than dance. I was delighted because my slippers hurt and my corset waist was killing me with its twenty-one inch lacing. Besides, he reminded me strangely of my father, perhaps it was his time in India, I do not know.

One thinks of her own father as being the age he was when she was a small child. John was that age, but the similarity ended there, for in all other aspects, he was the complete opposite of my father. He was barely my height with a lithesome slenderness that came to a waist smaller than mine, which made me quite envious, for nothing makes you wish more for a naturally tiny waist than a stiff corset! His hands and feet were almost delicately feminine in comparison to mine. And I could not help but observe that his face had the perfect heart shape with great beautiful eyes and a perfectly flawless complexion, he looked barely twenty compared to the other men in the room.

It was remarkable to think that he had fought bravely in the war, had already survived one wife and had three boys.

My aunt had a long chat with him after noting our brief retreat from the dance floor. She discovered that he was now retired and quite willing to remarry and settle down. When she mentioned her niece, he was cold, saying he had his wealth, but when he learned it was me, he accepted, saying that a plain girl would be best for the Dindadan bloodlines.

And so, the Duke of Auberan gained a tidy fortune in a dowry, control of a vast estate, and myself, in order of traditional importance. England, which will fight wars to end the slave trade, had a rather different attitude concerning her women during that modern Victorian Age. The idea that I had been married off in such a fashion steeled my resolve to take charge of my own life as soon as possible.

But, despite my resolve, I must confess that John was attractive and the Cinderella fantasy of any girl to be a Duchess in her own castle took romantic control of my sensibilities. I was actually a bride. And, as a plain girl, I was grateful. How silly it all seems now, but perhaps I owe John the debt of loving recognition that he never broke my illusions, for his burden was that he actually did love me in his own way. And I was soon to learn that I was going to have to control his affairs before I could control my own.

Auberan Hall stood starkly upon ancient battlements among rolling green hills like a shaft of red arising from grey upon green with a backdrop of clear blue sky. The Hall was larger than my aunty had described, but she hadn't seen it since she was a girl. A new wing, uncovered by the ivy vines of the old, stood to our right as the carriage swung up the circular drive to stop at a great pillared Georgian front entrance where my Lord's major-domo awaited with footmen to collect our luggage.

The major-domo simply took charge with the efficiency of his exalted position to present the staff to their new Mistress. The two rows of servants divided by their uniforms into a strictly observed class structure ranging from scullery girls in their coarse, blue cotton dresses with starched white aprons to the military livery of the major-domo. My own maids were shown to my suite so that my belongings could be unpacked and properly arranged, and under the guidance of the major-domo, we were swept past the curtsying staff to the library where my Lord's sons awaited their new mother.

“Now, Anna, don't fuss over them. Just imagine that they are all in their forties and you will know how to act and be accepted,” John offered, noticing my uncertain apprehension.

With this word of advice, we were ushered into the library to have the doors firmly closed behind me to face three young men for the first time. I think that none of us at that moment had any idea what a fateful meeting it was to be, for first impressions do have a lasting effect in the formulation of events.

Steeling myself against any sign of nervousness, I assumed the character of my governess, Mrs. Sharp, and vowed to take a formal tack of matronly responsibility and control. I would take their measure in my own good time. I must confess that even John seemed a bit childlike before my newly adopted role. It was most impressive.

With great poise, I surveyed my new charges as they arose to face their new mother, or was I to be the fabled “wicked step-mother?”

“Boys, this is your new mother,” John began as if serving a new meal, or presenting a gift. “My Dearest, this tallish lad is my eldest, John Charles.”

John Charles acknowledged his presentation with a whisper soft voice, as if to conceal his pre-pubic, clear soprano.

He bowed his “Madame” somewhat stiffly and I ignored his error of address in surprise over how charming he looked dressed in a fawn colored suit, framed by the library red velvet curtains. I drew my breath when he looked up from his bow to reveal Dresden blue eyes and a heart shaped face that would have been any girl's complete hope and vanity. Add to this a delicate nose, long, thick, golden lashes, a Cupid's bow lips, and sparkling golden hair to crown pastel pink milk skin and I could but hint at his strange beauty.

“Do you like to ride, John?” I asked, simply noting the crop in his hand. “Perhaps you could show me the estate?”

“If you wish. Your Grace,” he replied with a haughty coolness in such superior tones, despite the address that I had a sudden image of Catharine VanDeek, a rather snooty, middy blouse philosopher I had known as a child who deemed it a hardship to play with us stupid girls. “There is really little to see.”

“I shall show you, my Love,” my husband gallantly offered, turning to the next youngest, “and this is Randolph Abel.”

Randolph wiped his nose on the cuff of his blue velvet suit before acknowledging his introduction with a rather awkward bow of portly imbalance. He had undoubtedly just been dressed in the handsome, Eaton-styled suit, but already a button was missing and a chocolate stain marked his habits. His round, chubby face may have had the same delicate features of his older brother, but I saw that his basic character left him plain, plump and fair skinned with long lashes and unruly brown hair.

“I like to ride, Your Grace,” he offered, kicking one patent leather pump against the other as he turned more properly to look at his older brother.. “John can't really ride so well as I can.”

John let the challenge pass with disdain and I thought of my constant war with my beautiful sister. Had I been so slovenly at this age? How ghastly. He really needed a firm hand. I must find a crusty governess for him like Dear Mrs. Grinch. She would put him in order! With a little discipline, he could be a fine looking boy, albeit a bit pretty...

"And, my youngest, James Edmund, who is barely nine."

Little James curtsied, to his own chagrin, his brother's laughter and his father's discomfort. I could but laugh playfully and curtsy back, offering my hand to draw him closer for protection and comfort. He accepted this without any protest and smiled happily. "I am glad you are to be my step-mother. You don't look at all wicked like in the fairy tales, nor are you at all plain like my governess said you were!"

"And you are honest," I countered, looking at the doll like child all dressed in red velvet with a richly ruffled, white, satin and lace blouse.

Doll-like suited him as a description, for he was hardly as large as the average four-year-old. He was at least as beautiful as his eldest brother, except that his beauty was directed away from maturity towards an extended infantilism with plump cheeks, a dainty, up-turned nose between saucer eyes, and rosebud lips.

I simply could not accept him as a nine-year-old and I had the strangest feeling that of the three he was the best adjusted to his beauty. "Do you like to ride?"

"I have a pony, mother," he sighed, "but I like to..." he paused as if suddenly catching himself as he looked at his father in respectful awe.

"He plays with the girls," Charles revealed to his little brother's blush, adding with malicious relish, "I caught him dressed in a toddler's kilt suit yesterday, playing with June, a three-year-old, while Jane and Susan fussed over them like nannies!"

His father grew a bit pale and was about to say something rash so I took his child closer, saying, "You really should take me for a ride in the morning. I am sure that we shall have much fun together. Is your pony big enough to pull us in a cart?"

"Oh, yes," he sighed in relief.

And to think that at nine I was out to get a gun! I would have a real task keeping him away from playing with dolls.

"I think you should see the rest of Auberan Hall," John suggested, feeling nervous with the children, since most of his life he had lived away from them.

Seeing his strain, I kissed little James and released the others with a nod as I swept after my husband, out into the hallway.

"It is not so large as Sepoy Hall, but it is much older," John noted, seeing my thoughtful pause once the library door was closed, "what is it, Dear?"

"Are they why you wanted a plain wife?" I asked from my thoughts. "They are the most beautiful boys I have ever seen."

"It is the curse," he muttered darkly in mock tones of a secret horror that stalked Auberan Hall. "Tonight I have a very special guest who will explain the curse to you before it is too late, if you will accept a scientific guess. But, come, I can show you the

curse. But, I must warn you that it is said that one bride fled the house when she heard of our family secret. Her husband stoutly claimed that it was her first sight of his great virility that frightened her off."

"Oh, my Lord, let us hope that that too is a family inheritance," I laughed, taking his hand before he swept me into a crushing hug and kiss. "Oh, John, the servants..."

"Bother them," he swore with a shrug. "Come to see our curse."

"I really don't know...", I began uncertainly as we moved into a long hallway that proved to be a family portrait gallery.

"The Dunadan name is recorded back to the fourth century, and the curse is at least that old. In the Morte D'Arthur, it is told how one of my great ancestors fared under the curse:

"And then, with great scorn, they get Sir Dinadan into the forest there beside, and there they put upon him a woman's garment, and so brought him into the field, and so they blew into lodging. And every Knight went and unarmed him. Then was Sir Dinadan brought in among them all. And when Queen Guinevere saw Sir Dinadan brought so among them all, then she laughed that she fell down. So did all that were there.'

"As best as I can remember."

He paused before a metal plaque that was mounted beneath a very ancient sword. I could barely read the words and then I knew not what language it was.

"It is said to be an exact copy of a scroll. The sixth Duke put it on bronze to remind his heirs. It reads:

"This Christian Sword did slay Auberan in the hands of Sir Dinadan, and the Druid King's lands fell to these hands as a gift from a grateful Lord. But, mark well the dire curse of the Auberan. For as Sir Dinadan did dress in the clothes of a woman to slay their King, so from this day forward from Father to Son, shall pass a woman's beauty, until the House of Auberan shall fall when the last Duke is a woman proclaimed a Lord by his Peers."

"A bit long and utter nonsense. The Fairy King, indeed," I laughed, brushing back my hair with the back of my hand, to hear my laughter echo in the hall, or was it mine? "I should think that grown men would not accept such fairy tales."

"That plaque tells a simple story. Perhaps Celtic legend and truth are not too far apart. The Auberan were a people who lived in this area. They were not fairies, but their druid-like magic was well known. Perhaps that is why the names came to mean the same. The scroll predates the Family's elevation in title. The Duchy followed the Norman Conquest, due to a most fortunate marriage."

"Someone put words in the translation of the plaque. How could someone say the *Last Duke* centuries before there is a *First Duke*. After all, there is little proof that King Aurthur even existed, let alone his knights and fairy kings," I answered with a shrug, "and it's a silly curse to boot."

"Come look for yourself." He walked to the portraits.

The rows of Family portraits covered at least four hundred years, from primitive, unsung painters to not a few Masters, and the unmistakable image in each was the glowing beauty of each Dinadan male! "Of course it is due to very strong blood lines. It can simply be said that the Dinadans' breed true, like a fine strain of horse flesh."

I paused, looking at a portrait of a woman dressed in the fashion of the early Georgian Age at the turn of the last century. Her golden hair was quite natural to her shoulders which were bare to a wide, rather revealing décolleté. Her dress was a pale, pink, satin with a rather full skirt and a fantastically narrow waist emphasized by the inverted triangle of her deep bodice of white lace and full puff sleeves. In her left hand, she carried a golden fan with matching satin folds like her beautiful dress. I looked at the brass plate: "Denise Maria Dinadan, 1682 to 1746, Fourteenth Duke of Auberan, as a lady of fashion."

"Indeed!" I looked at John a bit uneasily. "You do not have the petticoat vice, do you?"

"My last time in petticoats was when I was four. Since then I have been properly breeched, my Lady. Denise had the vice which lost him a governor's chair in the Americas. He lived most of his life in dresses and it was thought that the line was doomed when his younger brother died. But, the rogue had caught a royal princess in Europe unawares, she thinking him a Lady, and she sired the next Duke. He left four sons and made a great deal from the rum trade."

I passed on to another portrait of the Regency to discover another transvestite Duke. "It is nice to have such a curse and be beautiful," I noted, "are you sure you don't sneak about in silks?"

"Father dressed up a couple of times for a fancy ball, but I haven't the slightest urge," John noted, turning from a portrait of his parents. "But, I must confess that my Mother had the most damnable affection for dressing me in frills. And when I went to school, I had to prove my masculinity more than once! It is not easy to undress..." He caught himself and moved on, pointing to a suit of chain mail. "That is from the First Crusade... But, enough of History and old Family curses. Let me show you the gardens before supper."

"Who is going to give me a scientific lecture on my first night of love as the Mistress of Auberan?" I asked, wondering what his undressing would show.

"A professor from Germany, Dr. Max Eberhart."

O-O-O

Dr. Eberhart returned to the library to accept a brandy from a tray held by Maxwell who then withdrew to the kitchen. Dr. Eberhart sniffed the brandy and then looked up, his cold blue eyes peering from beneath a high forehead and jutting brow like two little lights from caves. The flickering flames of the gas lights reflected off his bullet head that seemed most suited for his dueling scars and a helmet rather than a scholar's use.

"It was so kind of you to let me come and see your remarkable gallery and physically examine you and your sons, Your Grace. As a physical anthropologist, I am greatly honored to be permitted to examine first hand this so-called Family curse."

"It is real enough," John noted, motioning to a seat before the fire. "Perhaps we should sit?"

"What is your explanation of the curse, Doctor?" I asked with interest.

"Your own Professor Darwin and geneticists are your clue. If not the simple facts of animal breeding," he continued, taking his seat after I and my Lord. "The ideal of beauty is said to be the woman. Some say that she is more primitive than man, while others hold her to be more biologically perfect. I can not say. But I do believe that it is quite possible that certain dominant genes determine what is male and what is female. Nature is constantly changing and not always perfect. There are many babies born who resemble that sex which they are not. Now, the Dinadans have somehow bred into a family of feminine males. And, judging by your portraits and your appearance, Your Grace, it is genetically dominant. And thus, the fittest survive."

He raised his brandy in a salute and sipped from the goblet, then set it aside.

"The 'curse' is merely a tale told to explain away dainty feet and hands, slender, graceful legs, pleasingly plump seat and hips, slim waist, rudimentary breasts, lovely neck and soft shoulders, a beautifully shaped head, and some pseudo hermaphrodite tendencies. But, the facts are as simple as those isolated villages where we find six-fingered people everywhere and the like. It is merely genetic."

"Pseudo-Hermaphroditism?" I repeated in wonder.

Professor Eberhart shrugged. "If I may be frank. Biological sex evolves in the fetus from female to male, so to speak, for the male. It appears that your husband and the boys all have a blind gut under their male genitalia that might be a rudimentary false vagina. Most so called, hermaphrodites, share this birth defect. I have never seen a true hermaphrodite, as defined by the Greek legend. But, I have seen some cases that border on being awful close, with surgery being the only way to tell the child's true sex. Such is the case with your youngest boy, who might actually be female with an enlarged clitoris that passes as a penis. I would have to operate on him to establish what his true sex is."

"But, why? Is it just an accident?" John asked with growing concern for young James. "An operation?"

"When the child is older," Professor Eberhart noted in matter of fact tones. "My guess is that your family had a mutation of some sort and various versions of sexual organ defects tend to be passed on from generation to generation. Until recently, such defects have been treated as curiosities and have gone uncorrected. We can now surgically alter some of these defects." He paused to sip from the brandy snifter. "I suspect that your earliest ancestors were Anglo, rather than Celts. You may remember that Saint Mark once proclaimed that they were not Angles, but Angels," the professor commented. "That would explain the blond hair, blue eyes, and slender body. The Celts tend to be a sturdier stock."

"It certainly isn't a curse. European Families have been selective breeding for centuries for a beauty like this. Since pre-Roman times. There are many examples of the ideal male being somewhat feminine. Is it not natural that the proper genes mix to start a new bloodline, a perfected hybrid that becomes a new breed?" I noted in answer

to my husband's question, seeing the Professor's nod. "If it works with horses, why not with humans as well?"

"Why not, indeed," my husband replied thoughtfully. "And the dresses are..."

"Merely a minor delight of the mind. I have a great interest in Eonism, or Trans-Vestism, and I have studied many such cases. However, I have not dealt with cases like this, where the Eonism exists in several generations of the same family," the Professor noted with some satisfaction over his good fortune in having been invited to see for himself the curious Dinadan family. "I have studied some cases where men and women, who have to all intents changed their sex. It is not really all that rare when we discount those who are raised from birth in the wrong sex."

"Changed their sex? You mean a man can become a woman?" my husband asked in disbelief.

"Nonsense!"

"No, my Lady. There are men and women, who live full time as if they were born in the opposite sex. And there are a few who have had rudimentary surgical changes." Professor Eberhart shrugged. "Such a change is relatively easy in the case of the hermaphrodite. The classic historical example of such a transformation was the youth, Sporus, that Nero had altered to be his wife's replacement because of a similarity in looks. I have seen cases where the new woman married and her husband suspected nothing." Professor Eberhart smiled to himself.

"Not to feel a man in bed," I countered, not liking to be made fun of. It was impossible to believe what the professor said, but as events unfolded during the future I came to realize that he was telling the absolute truth as available at the time. "I think you are telling us a modern fairy tale."

"Ah, but true, nevertheless. I have performed such surgery myself," he paused to pull his watch from his coat pocket. "My train leaves in an hour and I must be in London tomorrow. I am giving a lecture to raise funds for my new clinic."

My husband stepped from the room to fetch a servant for the coach.

"Perhaps I might send you a check for your good works," I offered, thinking that it was only polite. And then a question brought a blush to my cheeks as I asked, "How do you make breasts?"

"A rare drug from the Amazon," he said casually, replacing his watch. He took a calling card from the same pocket and handed it to me. "Thank you, Your Grace, for your kind offer, and if I can ever be of service to you, please contact me."

"Thank you, Professor, but I doubt if I will ever need your help," I answered as my husband returned for Professor Eberhart and I retired to await my husband's pleasure on this, my bridal night...

Chapter Two: The Duchess Continues - Mistress Of Auberan House

With the morning sun I arose to be greeted by a maid carrying a breakfast tray. She was a pert girl with country ways and her uniform was rather worn but neat. While I took breakfast, she laid out my riding clothes and talked about how nice it was to have a new Mistress at Auberan House. I thanked her for her services and asked her to see if little James was up and ready to ride his pony and show his new Motherabout the estate. She curtsied her retreat.

By the time I arrived at the stables, I learned that John had taken the morning train to London on time. He was to see someone in the Foreign Office about some matter and thus I was left to see the estates for myself. I found the stable master to be a rather tall chap with reticent ways. He suggested nothing in the order of mounts, but instead furnished a smallish mare already made up with my saddle. She was a gentle animal that seemed to like little Master James' pony, and thus it was settled.

As I awaited the child, I walked about the stables to find them to be clean but poorly outfitted. It appeared that every effort was made to make do when it might have been best to replace things.

Little James arrived with his Governess and rushed into my arms with childish delight despite his Governess's desire for more manly restraint. He was dressed in a pale green riding suit with a white lace decorated blouse. Whatever the condition of the rest of the estate, its Lords were prettily dressed. "Where do we go, mother?"

"Where your fancy takes us, Master James," I replied, swinging into my saddle in a most unladylike fashion. I detested side saddles, but I was no longer a little girl. Taking my crop, I gathered the reins and followed little James down a narrow riding path, listening to his lovely voice as he told about how the old castle had been filled with knights and beautiful princesses. He wove a picture of the grove we rode through as a magic forest full of fairies, and he pointed to a tenant house, saying that it was occupied by a witch. "She is a very good witch," he hastened to add as the cottage door opened to reveal a very old crone dressed in black alpaca.

With a deep country curtsy, she greeted us and invited us in for tea, but I begged off, suggesting that I was about to see the entire estate and I would later call upon our folk. She smiled, pointing at the trail and waving at us as we left, saying, "You will be a good Mistress of Auberan, even if the young Masters are to find other homes."

We rode awhile in silence and then we came upon a plowed field. I dismounted and felt the soil, looking up at little James. "Does your father ride to see his estate much?"

"No, mother." James watched me dust the soil off my gloves. "They say that a new steward is needed, that all is taken from the estate and nothing is returned."

I looked at the land through my father's eyes and nodded, seeing that like the stables, all was worn. The estates were being drained and I dreaded the idea that such management might befall my own father's lands once my husband's steward took charge, but for now they were safe in my dear Aunt's trust. But, they really belonged to me as the Master, if I had been born a male. Sepoy would not be so mismanaged as these lands, nor would these lands continue to be so misused if I were to be Mistress.

James turned his pony back to the trail as I remounted. "The village is nearby and there is a place where my Nanny takes me for sweets."

"Nanny?" I asked, and then shrugged, taking the lead. "A tea would be nice, Master James."

Auberan sat comfortably in a gentle valley out by an old river that was straddled by a stone bridge unchanged in style since Roman days. The cottages of the village surrounded a few public buildings, three stores, a rail station, a large granary, a creamery, and a large inn bearing the name, The Fairy Kiss. To one side of the inn was a little tea shop which was James's hope for sweets.

Upon our entrance, the handful of country matrons arose to curtsy as the owner bustled about to prepare a table for us. The excitement must have been a complete day for the assembled matrons and I must confess, quite bothersome to me. I should let it be known that I wanted no such fuss, but then I was newly trapped by my station. I had wandered out of my place, not they.

"Ah, Your Grace," a familiar voice laughingly announced as Alice Denton flounced on to the scene dressed in a blue cotton travel suit followed by a maid servant. Her greeting was interrupted by the matronly kiss of the tea shop owner. "Betty is my sister. I'm visiting her while my husband visits London to find money for Thames End. I was so pleased to hear of your marriage to the Duke." And on and on she talked, reminding me of our brief childhood association. She was really a dear friend then, as girls are wont to have, but time had separated our stations and lives. At her request, I allowed her sister to join us, seeing that perhaps it might be best to learn what I could.

"Your husband is in need of money?"

"There was a fire and it damaged the inn," she sighed, launching into her hardships and the horrors of a fire. "The bank is most difficult, and to borrow from loan brokers is most risky."

"How much are you seeking?"

"Eight hundred pounds," she noted, in awe of the sum.

"Perhaps you can give it to her, mother," James offered from his gentleness. "She seems like a good woman, and I'm sure she can repay you."

"He is too kind," Alice laughed nervously, showing that the thought hadn't entered her head. But, I could plainly see that she wanted my help.

"It shall be done," I countered with the whim, knowing that James was right. "At bank interest. Who knows, someday I may be stranded at Thames End!"

"Your Grace is so generous. My poor Alfie will be so pleased," she exclaimed in delight, wandering on about how pleased her husband would be and how their inn was mine, "and what else can I really do to help you?"

"Your dearest sister can tell me all about Auberan," I countered with a motion for James to go out and play as we women talked privately. Of course, her sister was thrilled to gossip freely once Alice had begged her to. She confirmed my fears about the condition of the estate and the borderline poverty of the tenants. She then turned to the affairs of my household and whispered in conspiring tones how the steward was

probably stealing my husband blind, the major-domo was in love with a village wife, and other tales. She paused to study me with troubled eyes, causing her sister to beg her to go on, that I needed to know the worst.

My husband was rumored to have a Mistress, she continued slowly with each hesitant word, a Lady Blair, according to the steward's wife. My husband had known her since childhood, but her father saw it as an economically ruinous affair. From my vantage, I resolved to take the French view and tolerate the Mistress until I understood the Lord. Nevertheless, it was a well-kept secret, perhaps...

She then spoke of the children. John, the oldest, was spoiled and rather intolerant. Randolph was cruel to the point of having servants beaten and humiliated, a habit I would soon break. And little James was considered to be a perfect angel, but wont to play with the girls a bit much.

Betty continued expressing her grave sorrow that she was to tell me such awful stories. After her waitress had served us again and had withdrawn, Betty spoke more of the village and the general disappointment of the folk in their Duke. Much was excused while he was away to India, but now that he had returned, it was clear to all that he had no real interest in Auberan.

After much time had passed, I arose and explained that I should take James home to his Governess, and after promising to post the check to Alice, I left, deep in my thoughts, knowing that I had learned a great deal more than I had really wanted to know. As I mounted to a curtsying Betty, I promised that now I would make the lives of Auberan better, as Mistress of Auberan.

This was a promise that I launched into keeping the moment I arrived back at the house and James was secure with his Governess. I confronted the steward in private with his rumored affairs and before nightfall and my husband's return, I was poring over the estate books, safe in the knowledge that the steward had left Auberan for good along with half the staff!

John should have been concerned with events, but he merely shrugged and noted that I had been raised by a father sharp in the trades and I could be useful! With this, he retreated to bed without me, saying that he was quite tired from his trip. Sighing, I turned to my books, planning to bring Mr. Gretch, our steward at Sepoy, to straighten things out at Auberan. His wife could arrange the household staff and locate a new major-domo. She was very resourceful. As John had said, I intended to make myself useful... very useful!

By the time I was ready to retire, it was clear to me that whatever John may have believed, it was my dowry that stood between his estate and utter ruin! I had married a landed pauper, who loved another woman, and who expected me to be useful. Rightfully, everything he owned was mine...

From that moment of realization, I began to consider what my dear Aunt had done. It was now up to me to take charge of my own affairs through the management of my husband's. I would gradually shift matters until I had regained control, knowing from my conversations with my sister's clever husband, the law clerk, that a wise woman owned herself only when she held deed to her husband's wealth. Thus, I must get that young clerk to be my solicitor.

Within the month, I had restaffed Auberan and was well on the way to shifting affairs into my hands when we moved to London to participate in the social season. Dinadan House was a palace compared to Auberan and I realized that I had to close my father's London House in order to economize. This move brought my Aunt, Lady Greensmith, to my door with the realization that I was quickly gathering in the wealth of her brother's, my late father's, estate. She agreed to fall into my plan and settle herself at Dinadan House when not at Sepoy Hall.

My beautiful sister was settled also in Dinadan now, with her husband who managed all our legal affairs. Mr. Fell turned out to be very clever with my money and his beautiful wife delighted in the sudden luxury of our social world.

In fact, I was rather proud of how well I had arranged things when my husband's mastery proved itself in the form of pregnancy. When I announced the blessed news to John, he went through the motions of being pleased, yet I detected a certain uneasiness in his manner which I wrote off to his age and the prospect of having yet another child.

But, during a ball, my dearest friend, Susan, Lady Brian, informed me that Lady Blair was pregnant. Thus, both wife and Mistress were with child, leaving poor John to his resources. It really was a bit amusing, and I was tempted to tell Susan, but she was so deeply concerned about the frailty of her unfortunate daughter that I was afraid her morality might add to my amusements and into becoming her burdens.

"Once, such a beautiful, playful child," Susan continued with the subject of her daughter. "And now, she is hopelessly insane."

"You shouldn't dwell on it, my Dear," I mused, watching Lady Blair dance with my husband in her ball gown of rose satin adorned with rubies. A very beautiful woman, quite unlike plain me. "You had your lovely Charlotte for some eight years before the accident. What is she now, fourteen?"

"Thirteen, same as John Charles, your oldest. His middle name is after my husband's. Charles is a cousin to your husband. Or rather, was. I keep forgetting that Charles is dead." She bowed her head and then smiled bravely. "We all have our grief. Poor Mary Caldwell's little toddler, Emma, is said to be gravely ill of some rare illness," she continued with her sad tales in the midst of the lively music and swirling couples.

"Mary's toddler? I didn't know..."

"Oh, it's all very secret," she countered from behind her silver fan, arranging the skirts of her gown with her other hand rather nervously. "Mary has kept the child hidden. Some say the little girl is a love child of your mother's younger brother. Lord Farley has always been close to Mary, and she has been a Governess in his house."

"And, Mary?"

"A romantic tale of a love affair with a dashing sea captain. She married him, he drowns, and she discovers that he also has a fat wife with three children in Bristol. All so very complicated, you see."

"Does Lord Farley know?" I asked, seeing Susan's view of such matters as the most obvious and least romantic. Mary's imagination had always been very active with such romantic tales.

"I really don't believe so. The child is boarded at a nursery."

"My Dear," my husband announced, offering his arm as I arose to his lead into a waltz. "Excuse me, Lady Brian?" And then we danced.

And thus, Lady Brian's tales ended for the nonce, but the next day she called for tea. "It's always so depressing to visit that asylum. They are such cold prison-like places. Although I must confess that the head matron is a very considerate woman, even if she cannot help. I know that she spends a great deal of time cleaning Charlotte so that she looks presentable when I visit. Her name is Mrs. Stone, and I always slip her a few pounds to make sure that my little girl has the best. But, so little can be done." She sat down to spread her ecru, beige silk, shantung, suit skirt, a color that went well with her fair skin and golden hair.

"How did the accident happen?" I asked, suddenly realizing that I had never asked such an obvious question. I had heard that her little girl had fallen from a tree and had let that suffice heretofore.

Susan accepted a tea serving from my maid and looked strangely confused. "Why, I thought that you knew! It's all very awkward. We're such good friends."

"I fail to..."

"Why, your eldest son pushed her out of a tree during her eighth birthday party. Of course, he isn't your son and you were at Sepoy when it happened. I could hardly believe that you would marry the father of the boy who killed my lovely daughter. For she is most certainly dead."

"You were so strange at the wedding," I mused, realizing the weird tracings of life. The boy who once promised that when he became Duke, would keep me happy with all the luxury a Lady of Quality requires, had destroyed my best friend's daughter. "I really didn't know, Dear. It's all so very strange."

"Strange," she repeated, "do you know that your step-son looks just like... my Charlotte? That's why I can not look at..." Just then, a terrible clamor broke out in the rear hallway with the high pitched giggling laughter of toddlers and small children followed by the panic cries of a Governess soon followed by the calls of various servants called to battle by the Governess. The library doors swung open with a clatter!

"Oh, Your Grace," exclaimed a Nanny, dressed in her starched, prim, uniform in utter confusion and embarrassment. With a startled curtsy, she took to her heels, closing the doors almost as abruptly!

"What in Heaven's name?" Susan announced, rising with me. "What is going on out there?"

In uncertainty, I went to the doors to open them, to see a little girl in full, white, lawn dress running in laughter after a toddler boy dressed in pale, blue, velvet with pleated kilts flying as he ran holding a large French fashion doll. It took me a whole second to realize that the lovely little toddler was James!

“James Edmund Dinadan!” I ordered, clapping my hands, causing him to stop in terror and the girl to sweep him to the floor with her forward motion.

“Your Grace,” his Governess announced quite breathlessly, “Master James and Lady Edith, and...”

The others she was about to name flowed into the hallway in a cloud of lawn dresses of starched white, animated by giggling little girls ranging from four in toddlers' gowns to ten in pert, short skirts.

Susan looked from me to little James and then smiled, seeing his little kilted curtsy followed by the dainty curtsies of the others. “A Dinadan certainly has a way with girls. Come, let your Governess straighten this out.”

“How did you get into that kilt?” I asked.

“Isn't it pretty, Mommy?” he asked from a mixture of fear over having been caught and innocence that suited his toddler dress. “We found it. We're all playing tag and Edith was it.”

“I brought it,” Edith confessed, seeing my disbelief, “it belongs to my baby brother.” She glanced at him to cover her giggle with the back of her hand. “He is beautiful and so loves to play at being a baby. Isn't he sweet, Your Grace?”

“Sweet, indeed.” I turned to his Governess. “Aren't there any boys for him to play with?”

“They won't play with him,” another girl offered, taking the doll and James's hand in protective interest. “We promise to play quietly, Your Grace.”

I was about to probe the matter more closely with his Governess with an eye towards explaining that the last woman who let him in kilts was discharged, when Randolph's voice broke from his upstairs room.

“I tell you, I want the girl soundly birched!”

“You have a busy house, Anna,” Susan laughed nervously, following me up the stairs.



"She has no right to scold me for my room," Randolph yelled, pushing a poor girl barely in her teens over a foot stool while pulling her skirts up to her humiliated screams of protest which were cut short by the swift cut of a riding crop across her drawers! "I'll teach you!"

"Randolph! You stop that at once!"

He continued his strokes, sending the poor girl into hysterical whines of pain until I tore the crop from his hand. "How dare you?" he cried from his mad excitement up to the second he recognized me. "She was insubordinate! Insisted I clean my own room! I was only teaching her a lesson!"

The poor girl arose to straighten her skirts and apron, executing a very painful curtsy.

Observing the room, I could see the servant girl's point, and then I saw the perfect little punishment. "Girl, fetch Mrs. Gretch!"

The girl curtsied her retreat and rushed to my command. By the time I had walked across the shattered room, she had returned, still trying to hold back her tears.

"Your Grace," Mrs. Gretch noted with a curtsy, the anger clearly marked in her eyes from having one of her girls so mistreated. It was her sole responsibility to punish the servants' misdoings! Frankly, I suspected that she shared much in common with my son Randolph in that matter of perverse enjoyment.

"What is your name, girl?" I asked, turning to the maid with a nod to Mrs. Gretch.

"Roberta, Your Grace."

"Well, Roberta, you may take off your apron and help Randolph put it on and fetch off his trousers. Then you will have him clean this room to your desires as if you were Mrs. Gretch directing a girl. Mrs. Gretch will watch and if you are displeased, she will have your 'maid' soundly birched!"

Randolph watched the suddenly happy girl remove her full pinafore apron of the Dutch style. He couldn't believe his ears. "I will not be a servant girl's plaything. Father will not permit it!"

"When he returns you may discuss your problem then. But for now, take off those pants, Girl!"

"I will not!"

"Susan?" I asked, looking at my friend who burst into laughter as we four women, Mrs. Gretch, Susan, Roberta and I, closed in upon the suddenly frightened youth to depants him as the first insult to British manhood and then force him into the dress-like pinafore that offered him more modesty than he had the poor girl.

And thus he was arrayed before us in apron while the girl pinned her cap in place.

"I shall leave the new girl in your capable hands, Roberta," I noted. With a pleased smile, seeing Randolph's understanding of his fate in his fearful eyes, I paused and smiled again. "Abigail, 'her' name is Abigail, Mrs. Gretch."

"Quite fitting, Your Grace," Mrs. Gretch noted, closing the door as we left with a curtsy, requiring her new 'girl' to curtsy also. "Now, Roberta, I think 'she' should start with the closets, don't you think?"

Their voices drifted away as we moved down the stairs.

"I think that he will think a long time before he does that again," Susan noted with certain conviction, and then she laughed. "He did look quite pretty as a servant girl, and I swear that Mrs. Gretch will birch him before his duties are done."

"It is long overdue," I noted, trying to think of what I could tell my husband.

Almost as if to read my mind, Susan paused at the tea table while a maid poured two fresh cups, and asked, "Where is your husband?"

"Love's," I replied with a shrug, seeing her horrified expression at the revelation that I knew that my husband was attending one of London's most noted and notorious bawdy houses. She sat down in stunned silence while the maid finished her serving and withdrew to her post. "We're both pregnant, it seems."

Susan nodded her understanding from the midst of her moral indignation. "Men are such beasts! You must be heart-broken."

"Thankful," I countered with a sigh, taking a sip from my cup. "I..."

The doors swung open, breaking into my thoughts to admit Roberts, our butler. "Your Grace, your husband has had an accident and...", he paused with a trembling sound in his voice, "he needs you..."

Too stunned to speak, I followed him up the stairs to John's room to find Dr. Spencer supervising matters as the servants put John to bed.

"John?" I called, seeing that he was so very limp in their arms. "Oh, Doctor, what happened?"

"He fainted," Dr. Spencer noted with a knowing nod, "he will be a bit dazed when he awakes. Stepped into a carriage."

"Oh, are you sure he will be all right?" I pleaded with growing concern, suddenly realizing that beneath my coldness there was a real affection tugging at my heart for poor John. I loved him!

"Don't worry, Your Grace," Dr. Spencer commented, taking my arm to lead me to Susan who was to escort me from the room. "He will be all right in a few hours."

Unfortunately, he was quite wrong. John had dislodged the bullet a Hill Tribesman had fired many months before which led to his returning home. Now, that bullet was doing what the sniper had planned. It started by paralysis of his legs and then a slow wasting away, confined to his bed for the months of my rather gloomy pregnancy which ended in the birth of his fourth son, Percy John. With this little joy, I visited poor John to understand that my husband was really not long for this world.

"Anna, you must promise to take good care of the boys," he asked with whispered tones from the great vastness of his bed, his hair now suddenly as white as the linens of his surroundings, looking strangely like an aging, old woman. "You must..."

Suddenly, I realized that he hadn't left a will. "John, you must hold on longer," I called, realizing that he actually was dying. I turned to Mrs. Gretch. "Get Mr. Fell. Tell him to bring that will he drafted. The Duke is dying!"

She was shocked by my coldness, but she obeyed post-haste as I turned to take John's failing hand in mine.

"John, you must hold on."

He smiled. "My very practical, plain little millionairess. I will hold out." He clenched my hand ever so tightly. Just then, Mr. Fell entered breathlessly with his papers followed closely by Dr. Spencer and Mrs. Gretch. "Do you have any brandy, Doctor?"

"Yes," Dr. Spencer answered, opening his bag to remove his stethoscope and a small flask. "But first, to listen to your heart."

"My wife has some business," John noted, brushing him aside to take the papers Mr. Fell held and a pen, "this leaves everything to my sons?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Mr. Fell replied with a nod, "as your wife wishes."

"You will take good care of my little boys?"

"They shall have what..," I began, only to see that he was no longer with us! "Is he..."

"Yes, Your Grace," Dr. Spencer replied, drawing up the sheet as Mr. Fell took the signed papers. "Mrs. Gretch will attend to helping me, Your Grace. There is nothing you can do now."

Of course, he was quite wrong again. There was a great deal I had to do then. To begin with, I had to consider if I really wanted my eldest step-son, John Charles, to be the next Duke! Certainly, my late husband's will placed the boys under my control until they were each to reach an end of their minority at age twenty-five, but the Duchy really belonged to my son. I had not pulled it out of debt to give it away to anyone but my own child. And this is why I called together my council of war on the night of the funeral, to plan our next step.

Mr. Fell boldly planned the sea journey that would end in their deaths. He knew a sailing master who would execute the drownings for a price. "It would be simple, a drowning at sea..."

"The whole ship should go down," Susan mused, seeing in this a chance for revenge.

"That would not bring your daughter back from the asylum," Mary Caldwell noted, seeing why Lady Brian had agreed. "I know both you and Anna, you're not killers, especially of children."

I turned away rather than comment.

"Perhaps, I have a suggestion," my Aunt offered as we turned towards Lady Greensmith with interest. "You really don't need to murder them, although the accident has its merits. What I suggest is..."

She outlined her plans, causing us each to consider additional parts to her scheme.

Both Susan and Mary found it to be utterly satisfying and all their prior reservations concerning the drowning ended.

Of course, the first task was to get them aboard ship. So, I arranged to talk with them each in turn the following morning. As I remember, I held my last meeting with the boys that morning in the library as my Aunt and the others left the house to make all the arrangements. The first was John.

"I have thought over plans for your schooling," I began, motioning him to a chair, which he refused. "The school year is almost finished and I think that you might prefer to tour the Continent instead of returning to Harrow. It's time that you get out and see the world. Now that you are completely in my charge, I think we should expand your views of the world. I have great plans to perfect you."

"Now that I am Duke," John countered with a knowing smile, "I should have more freedom, and it is very wise of you to be good to me."

"I should not think of denying Your Grace a thing!" I interrupted with a shrug. "In fact, I promise you that you shall have absolutely everything that a personage of your station should have. I promise to absolutely spoil you with luxury." I arose to take his hand and lead him to the door. "I have made arrangements with Captain Hinton to take you across the Channel in our Family schooner. From there, you will be accompanied by Mr. Fell to anyplace your heart desires."

"Paris?" he asked as I opened the door with a curtsy.

"Yes, Your Grace, Paris, if you wish." I laughed as Randolph entered uncertainly. "And you are going to visit the Continent too," I said to Randolph with a broad smile, offering him a large slice of cake from the tea tray. "And I will close the house and meet you in Switzerland, at your new school."

"New school, mother?" he asked in wonderment.

"Yes, my Dear, a school where you will wear a uniform and learn the meaning of discipline," I noted, seeing his surprise. If only he could have known how exact my words were! "Within a few years you will be slim like your brother and as neat as a pin. Won't that be nice?"

"A military school," he mused thoughtfully. "Will John be going there too?"

"No, he will receive different training more suited to his station," I replied, seeing that Randolph was pleased to hear that he would not be in the same school as his brother.

"Is it true that you control our estate? John says that he will be in charge once the estate is settled, but Mrs. Gretch said that is not so," he asked, avoiding my eyes.

"I will control matters until you are each twenty-five or married," I replied, a bit surprised to see his pleased smile, and then I felt a pang of guilt, for I well sympathized with his fears of another running his life, one he hated.

"I hope the school will not be too strict," he sighed, finishing his cake. "But, I am glad that you will be running the estate, even if I don't like you, I know that you would be fairer than John."

"My Dear," I began, leading him to the door as James was ushered in by his Governess, "I promise you that you will be fairly treated in accordance with your proper station in life. At least as well off as you would be if I had not married your father."

He looked at me as if to ask another question, but he withdrew in favor of little James, who ran into my arms to the dismay of his Governess.

"Oh, Mommy, am I going for a boat ride too?"

"Yes, Dearest, and I am sending you to a new school too," I answered, taking his hand and leading him to the tea cart where I cut him a piece of cake which he daintily nibbled after the fashion of delicate manners. Of the three, he would be the least disappointed with our plans. In fact, I suspected, he would be delighted, if he knew. "You will love your new school."

"Will it be a military school?" he sighed, showing that he had been listening at the door. "I love you, so you don't need to send me to a military school."

"Oh, no, Dearest, no military school for you!" I laughed.

"Will I have to study hard? I'm really not very clever, you know."

"No, I'm sure that you are going to find the others in your school are just as bright as you and just as anxious to play," I laughed, knowing that I spoke the absolute truth. "Now, you must run and help your Governess pack your things. The ship leaves tonight."

"But it's going to rain and storm, Mommy," James complained.

"Yes, Dearest, I know," I replied, "and you must be very brave."

James smiled in an effort to be brave, but I knew that he held thunder in absolute terror. And I could see that a sea voyage was not among his fearless thoughts. I was glad that his journey would not be so long.

"I shall meet you in Paris," I promised with a nod towards his waiting Governess. "You can make the trip without your Nanny like a big boy, can't you?"

"Oh, yes!" he exclaimed, excitedly swelling to a brief manliness, perhaps his last such gesture, judging his real nature and fears.

"Very well," I sighed, turning to his Governess. "You will pack enough things for his trip. Say, two weeks worth of clothes since it may take some time to ship our things to our new home."

"Please, Your Grace, he is so young," she began, but seeing my frown, she curtsied, taking his hand and retreating from the room she said, "Yes, Your Grace, I am sure that he will do well."

Indeed he will, I mused, calling the major-domo to arrange for the closing of our London house and our trip to Europe. In a few moments, the house was utter bedlam in the flurry of packing. In fact, we were hard put to have the boys' things packed by

nine o'clock when their carriage was ready to take them to the docks of the Royal Basin where our schooner awaited their fateful journey.

Dressing in a simple black gown, I joined them in the carriage with a quick explanation that Mr. Fell was to join them at Thames End where he was now settling some business matters. They were far too excited to settle for such tales as a concern. At the docks, they rushed to our schooner to greet her new Master. John, with serious reservation and disdain for the captain's uniform, Randolph asking if there were anything to eat, and little James showing off his pretty white sailor suit. Each in his own way went aboard and soon the Ark Hawk was under light sail and pulled away from the dock under the growing blackness of rolling stern clouds.

"It be a bad night," a deckhand noted to one of my servants holding his lamp for our return to the carriage. "I feel a real storm coming on."

"Shush, you worry my Lady," the footman urged in a whisper. "She is vexed with the young Duke's eagerness to tour the Continent. She is said to have even begged him to stay. Mrs. Gretch told me that she is quite worried, omens and such."

"Aye, and she is a wise woman," the dock man replied, not caring who this Mrs. Gretch may be, but he knew that Lady Auberan was indeed a wise woman if she knew not to sail on such a night.

It was perfect. Taking one last look at the shadow ship as it moved towards the sea, I sighed to my personal maid, Claire, "I really dread their going on a night like this."

"It will be all right, Your Grace," she suggested, looking at the storm clouds nervously while she adjusted my dress skirt to suit her taste of perfection. But, I could see that she "shared" my worries.

By the time we arrived back at the house, she was positive that I had done all I could to discourage the all-too-head-strong young Duke from taking to ship so soon and not waiting for the rest of the Family. By bedtime, she could hardly serve my needs as she flinched with each roll of thunder. But, in time, I fell asleep, safe in the knowledge that my plan was well in motion.

With morning, I slipped into a black silk, house gown to take my breakfast. I had hardly begun when a servant introduced a Captain Hutchess who entered with two men from Scotland Yard!

"Your Grace, I am the bearer of terrible news," he began with a formal bow. "The Ark Hawk was found washed ashore off Thames Shoals. We have found no survivors except the Captain and three crewmen. The Captain is in the hospital. His crew took him off when the ship broke up. A crewman says that the boys were below when she went down like a rock."

"Oh, NO!"

"Please, smelling salts and brandy!" one of the detectives ordered briskly of my maid. "God, Captain, you didn't need to be so blunt!"

"Best said factually," he observed, coolly helping me back to my seat from the floor, "are you better, Your Grace? Perhaps bed..."

“No, thank you, Captain, you are most right in telling me straight away,” I replied, fetching a hankie for my tears.

“We shall make our investigation later.”

“I should hope so,” my dear maid protested, ushering the hapless detectives to the door. And thus, I was left to my grief.

Everybody was most understanding, considering the terrible sorrow I had been through. First, my husband, and then our poor boys. It was awfully gloomy and most difficult, especially the coroner's inquest. But, everybody was most kind and explained my efforts to detain the boys, but...

With saddened hearts, we moved back to Auberan Hall where I went into semi-retirement with my grief. All agreed that it was sad to have three such good boys cut off at the start of their life, but I bravely suggested that they were now enjoying a new life...

And the various matrons agreed with a knowing nod of comfort for the poor mother...

Yet, I spoke only the truth, and I leave my tale for each of them to tell in turn, for it has amused me to make them put their ordeal into writing...

Chapter Three: John Begins His Tale - I Meet My New Mother.

At the direction of the Dowager Duchess of Auberan, I write this account of my life, knowing that it is my Christian duty to please her, no matter how much it shames and humiliates me to give this accounting...

As I remember the night of the storm, I was quite confused by my step-mother's plans. Although I wanted to see the Continent, I was a bit put-out by the prospect that I would be separated from my chums at school. But, I would have a great deal to tell them after! To think that I was a real Duke, a Prince! And I was to see the world to boot! At least the important part of it...

When my things were stored below, I climbed out on the bow to watch the crew rig the stern sails that were to bring the Ark Hawk into the main stream. I wondered at why there were only three men aboard with the Captain and they all were strangers. Yet, they knew how to tend sail and soon we were caught in the wind, moving at a sizzling pace with the water burbling along the bow. I watched the Captain swing her wheel into a long, fast tack around a turn in the river and I knew that he was used to larger ships than our sixty foot schooner for she almost over-reached the wind, but he adjusted the helm while ordering the sail shift and she shuddered into course obediently, like a proud woman in a strong man's hand.

The wind grew in the gathering darkness and I could barely make out the yellow lights of the houses on the shore and the barges as they tied up near black docks. All was becoming blacker by the moment.

"Can, can we go to bed?" little James stammered with the sudden roll of thunder, showing how silly he was with his fright, near tears like a silly baby girl. His fearful eyes caused me to give up and take him to our cabin where I helped him undress, seeing that Randolph had already crawled into bed with a box of candy which he had smuggled aboard despite his valet's watchful eyes.

Turning James's covers up, I lowered the lamp light and was about to leave when James took my hand. "Please stay with me. My Nanny would stay."

"I'm no Nanny," I protested, but stayed, hearing the winds howl. I must have fallen asleep by James's side for a rough hand shook me until I almost bit my tongue.

"Come!" the strange man insisted, taking my hand and pulling me towards the flickering storm lantern which revealed him to be one of the sailors.

"How dare you? I am the Duke of Auberan!"

"Shut up!" He slapped me and when I opened my mouth to protest, he forced an old rag into my mouth to gag me as other men forced their way into the cabin to gag and bind my brothers also. Then, we were carried off the schooner into the torrents of rain that covered our docking by an old fire scarred inn that huddled to the shore upon a stone dockway. Anxiously, I looked for my brothers, but they had vanished ahead of me into the darkness. Suddenly, I was pushed into a carriage house where I was thrown at the feet of a woman dressed in a gray uniform of some sort under her rain cloak. The sailor touched his foul weather hood and left.

“AAGH!”

“Yes, Dear, nobody can understand you,” she mused, pulling me to a wood work bench where she lifted me into a sitting position before de-pantsing me! She pulled my pants down to my ankles and then cut the material away with a razor-like knife. Soon, my loins were also exposed sans my underclothes! “Well, despite your age, you are still very much a little boy. But, we shall soon take care of your little toy!”

“AGGGH! AHHH!”

Smiling to herself, she picked up a rubber ball, forcing it into my mouth the moment she removed my gag. The ball rested upon my tongue and was too big to dislodge, yet it compressed enough to allow my teeth and lips to close quite naturally so that nobody would see it. The ball had a strange paste like taste, and when she placed her hand under my chin to close my mouth, I realized that it was in fact coated with a paste that must have been like that used by denture wearer for my mouth was sealed shut.

“There, just like my little girls!” she sighed, hearing my whine. “Poor thing, unable to talk, quite mute!” She nodded to herself. “Well, we will take good care of you, Darling. You will not be our first Duchess!”

She released my arms and forced me into a blue gray cotton corset after pulling off the rest of my clothes. The heavy cotton corset was boned and was laced ever so tightly in back forcing me to sit up straight in shame while she took her cupped hand to each breast to create dainty mounds of plump maidenhood. “There, now, they are very sweet, but in time you will have lovely breasts like any other woman.”

She turned from this humiliation, leaving me to look at my dainty breasts. In a moment, she pulled over my head a blue-gray apron dress with pinafore, butterfly sleeves and a skirt that nearly reached my ankles because it was too big for me. On the front of the apron was a large, white threaded, embroidered shield with red stitching:

SAINT VITUS ASYLUM FOR THE HOPELESSLY INSANE.

“Yes, Dearest, a very special school for you,” she laughed, seeing the stark terror in my eyes as she forced my arms into a straight jacket and tied it before releasing my ankles and removing my shoes and stockings. She then made me climb into a buggy where she secured my ankle to a seat brace with a leg iron before she opened the doors to reveal the storm. In a moment, she had hitched a horse and we were on our way into the thundering rain lighted by searing flashes of lightning.

After several hours, we swung from the muddy road into a cobble street at the outskirts of London. Soon she directed the horse through a stone gateway and around the back of a huge red stone fortress.

“Your new home, little Jean,” she noted, stopping by a side door. Pushing aside the storm curtains, she bent over to release my leg chain. “Come along, Dear.”

I tried for the moment to struggle from the jacket only to be led forward to the door.

“MMMMMMMM!”

"Good evening, Matron," a woman dressed in a uniform similar to my abductor's greeted, opening the door to her knock. She hardly noticed my whine or struggles.

"This is Jean. Her parents called about her cutting off her hair and trying to kill herself. She doesn't seem to be able to talk, nor care for herself," the Matron noted, pushing me past the other nurse, "they were quite distraught and insisted that we take her."

"I will put her on the doctor's schedule in the morning, if you wish."

"Yes, she should be calmed down by then," the Matron agreed, taking me down a back hallway past rows of neatly spaced doors and the sound of sleeping or crying people. Opening a door at the end of the hall, she prodded me down a narrow flight of stairs into a dimly lit cellar room where I saw huddled forms seated upon plain wooden benches. "I want you to see somebody, Jean. She has been here in this room for the past four years. You will be here together for the rest of your lives."

"MMMM," I screamed helplessly, seeing her plans for me in the form of a pathetic girl sitting upon her bench in a huddled position with her arms under her knees and her eyes fixedly staring at a spot between her naked feet. Her apron was just like mine, but it was worn and stained with her waste and dribble. Her hair hung tangled to her waist covering her dirt streaked arms and face. "Isn't she a beautiful little girl? Her name is Charlotte. You remember Charlotte, don't you?"

I turned away in terror only to hear the Matron laugh.

"You will not be so delicate for long," she observed, pushing me towards a corner of the cellar, "I have brought a few special things for your training."

She pushed me into a seated position in a corner of the room by a large basket and a mirror. Turning me to face the corner, she located an iron ring fitted to the floor through which she passed a cord that was used to secure my ankles.

"I think you will grow to like your little corner and you won't have to look at anyone like your poor cousin. Of course, she can see you, if she can. You know, we don't know if she recognizes things at all. It's a strange question, but you will find the answer, only then you will be just like she is and we shall never know if you think either!"

"MMMMMMM!"

"She doesn't talk either, nor whimper," the Matron continued, pushing me forward so that my heels almost touched my seat. Taking off the jacket, she forced my wrists under my knees from each side where she tied them together before hiding my bondage with the full skirts of the dress so I appeared to sit naturally like poor Charlotte. "Comfortable?"

She laughed. Taking the mirror, she balanced it against the corner so that I had a full view of my position which was exactly like that of my cousin! Only I was sane! The Matron placed a red candle between the mirror and I saw that it was lighted.

"Now, I am the only person in this building who knows that you are sane," she noted, patting my head as if I were a pet, "the candle is really quite a luxury. The violent ones live in total darkness. It keeps them calm. But, as you can see, you are like

Charlotte. See the flickering light in the mirror, little insane girl. Oh, yes, you may be sane now, but in time you will be just like the other girls in this room. You will just huddle and stare, and Aunt Patty will have to clean and feed you. She is my special assistant, since I am the only nurse on this ward. See the pretty flame dance. You must be very tired from your journey.”

The flickering light licked at the air to turn and twist as if alive while she continued in monotonous tones about how she would soon let me sleep and how I needed all the rest I could get if I were to convince the Doctor that I was not an insane little girl.

Her words mentioned something about it being my only chance for at least another year, since the Doctor only visited the girls in the pit once a year. For of all the patients, the vegetables, as they were called, had the least likelihood of recovery. I couldn't think, my terror had leaked into my eyes, focusing upon the candle rather than the awful reflection in the mirror.

And then, I must have been in some sort of trance for she now was with an old, old crone dressed in an inmate uniform.

“Aunt Patty, this is Jean. She is one of our girls. She has a ball in her mouth to keep her from biting her tongue. When you finish feeding her, just put it back. I want you to feed her a bowl every two hours so that she will become nice and plump. Tonight you will not let her sleep, nor for the rest of the time until I say she can. She must sit just like this and look at the candle. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Matron,” the old woman said with an evil chuckle.

The Matron snapped her fingers and my mind faded away from her into a kind of trance and all I could see was the reflection of the insane girl and the flickering candle before her. The Matron's laughter came to my ears and I could feel the old woman's hand stuffing fistfuls of mush into my mouth. I must have begged her for help, but all I could remember is the forced feedings like a gander being fattened for the market.

I tried to sleep, but she sat and watched me and slapped me awake! I sobbed until I almost choked on my tears and the little insane girl mimicked me in the mirror. Soon, my bodily demands brought to me the primitive reality of my toilet with the urine soaking the floor through my skirts, soon followed by the warm ooze that I was forced to sit in! My protests of this condition during my next feeding only brought laughter. I was so very tired. I just wanted to sleep.

“Hello, and how is our little mad girl?” the Matron asked from the swirl of my dazed mind. “How is the pretty girl in the mirror? Are you her?”

I felt a swirling uncertainty, almost as if I were falling into the deep mirror into the image of the insane girl inside. I tried to hold on to my knees so that I wouldn't slip into her world and I kept my eyes upon her to be sure that she stayed away!

“You will hear what everybody is saying and understand, but when not helped, you will not be able to talk. You will sit and walk when led, but when not helped, you will just sit and stare vacantly in search of the candle and the little girl in the mirror, even if they are not there.” She released my bindings and lifted me to my feet. “My, you have been naughty! But, don't worry, Baby, the Doctor is used to insane little girls who soil themselves.”

We spun through the hallway in a swirling cascade of lights with the candle flickering in front of me. Deep inside, I knew that I had to talk to the Doctor and convince him that I was being kept a prisoner, but I was so very tired. We paused in front of an office door where the Matron knocked and deftly removed the ball from my mouth. I was no longer gagged!

“Come in!”

“This is our new girl, Jean.”

The Doctor looked at me and smiled, motioning me forward, but I could not move! “Put some papers on the table, Matron, and I will examine her.”

“She has been like this all night,” she noted, lifting me to the table where I automatically took the pose of the girl in the mirror. “I’m afraid that the shock of her attempted suicide...”

“Yes, that no doubt explains it,” he noted, shining a bright light into my eye. “Jean, can you hear me?”

I could only stare into space towards the imaginary red candle! I tried to speak by forming the words in my mouth, but nothing happened.

He shrugged, taking some papers from his table and signing them. “I’m afraid that you are right, Matron. She is hopelessly insane. I shall see her in a year unless there is some improvement.”

My heart paused in absolute horror as the Matron smiled to help me from the table. I was certified to be insane! In less than a day, she had transformed me into a mad being like my poor cousin!

“Yes, Doctor,” she replied, leading me from the room to the hallway where she slipped the ball back into my mouth and turned me back towards the pit where I was to be kept for another year! “Poor, little, Jean, so pretty like little cousin Charlotte, and now just as crazy! Well, not quite, despite what the good Doctor may think.” She opened the door and pushed me ahead of her down the stairs to secure me as before. “The little girl in the mirror is going away from you,” she observed with a snap of her fingers and I suddenly realized that I had been in a trance. “Ah, you are awake now. I won’t need to hypnotize you again. I’m sure that in a year’s time, the next time you see the Doctor, you will be as completely insane as your poor cousin.”

The world from that moment on extended into my mirror which I shared with the insane girl staring at a candle, who was force fed bowls of mush by an old woman. We shared the little corner, sitting in our own ooze until the old woman came and moved us to a large basin of steaming hot water and bathed us only to return us to the freshly scrubbed corner that we shared.

It was clear that my step-Mothermay have had something to do with this. But, it was most likely Lady Brian who had found the perfect revenge. She must have known that it would not help her daughter, but she had the satisfaction of knowing that I would soon be just like the poor child. I had to find a way to escape...

Whatever way you can measure time, think of it ceasing. I was left to nothing but a guess as to the days, for no sunlight entered the pit and there was no clock like rou-

tine that separated the day between activity and rest. The room was silent except for their breathing and the laboring breath of Aunt Patty as she came to stuff or clean me. Time had no meaning.

At some point in time, I vaguely remember sitting in a strange room with a large rag doll clenched in my arms. Suddenly, the room was expanded like a huge balloon with me in the center upon a cot that was now a dirty brown raft floating in space. From the wavering space I saw a girl about my age rush into the room carrying a long thin knife.

“YOU TOOK MY DOLLY! YOU TOOK MY DOLLY!” she screamed as she pulled her doll from my lap and thrust the knife at my groin. Sheer agony reached my lips in scream after scream!

“She is sleeping, Herr Doctor,” a nurse announced from the midst of my clouded thoughts where the images of the strange German Doctor who had once given me a physical on my step-mother's first day at Auberan. With him was the Matron.

My legs were held up, wide apart, upon a wooden frame with my seat raised likewise upon a pile of pillows! A strap was secured about my waist and from the waist down, I was naked with rubber hoses dangling between my legs. A mirror was placed against the wooden frame so that I had a clear reflected view as the Doctor used the mirror in checking to see that the tubes were properly fitted.

“It is not at all unusual for a mental defective to have sexual organs which are deformed. It was good of you to let me operate, Matron. Such explorations are good for science, even if the patient has no idea of what is being done or any hope of benefiting from the surgery as a functioning woman.” He bent over to examine a hard rubber object that protruded between my legs. “The vagina is no longer a blind gut now that I have removed those cancers tucked inside. When she is healed, we can remove this plug and she will be a complete woman.”

He turned the rubber object and wave upon wave of pain slashed through my body to cease when he removed his hand. His shameless hands then pulled the short night dress I wore open at the neck to reveal two plump breasts! “Quite perfect, and without a scar. My best...”

The Matron ran her fingers over my breasts causing the nipple to rise. “Oh, that's precious. Such a waste. But, how did you do it?”

“I used an Amazonian jungle herb and her own body fat.” He replaced the gown top to hide those new horrible proofs of my new sex. “I must thank you for the opportunity to operate. She is a most interesting case. Will she be going back into the, er, ah, pit?”

“Yes.”

“I suggest that you keep her here until the vaginal plug is removed and she is healed.”

“Yes, Doctor, of course.”

“How often are your patients examined?”

“Once a year for those like her. In fact, in about a month, the other girl by the door will have her examination. Her name is Charlotte, the girl that you thought looked like Jean here.”

“Ah, yes, Matron,” he replied, walking from the room with the Matron, leaving me to my thoughts. My plans for escape suddenly focused upon the fact that I stood my best chance from the pit itself. After what may have been months in a trance close to insanity, probably reinforced with drugs, the shock of my operation had at least brought me back to reality.

The nurse checked my pulse and then gave me an injection that sent me back into my dreamless daze.

A couple of weeks later, I was returned to my corner where Matron turned me over to Aunt Patty without bothering to tie me as I sat as I had so long before, staring at the mirror and candle.

“Feed her little. The Doctor wants her to lose weight, Aunt Patty. She can sleep sitting up as before, but when she is awake, the candle is kept for her to watch.”

“Yes, Matron.”

After some time, I saw Aunt Patty through the mirror as she left for her own meal. Pulling up the folds of my skirt, I pulled the razor sharp piece of tin I had found stuck under my mattress in the hospital room. Standing up, I took a good look at my hair, which now reached down to below my ears and covered most of my neck in a wild fashion. Moving to Charlotte and then the other two girls in the room, I cut their hair to the same length as mine, placing the tin and pile of hair by a girl. I just made it back to my position when Aunt Patty returned.

She began to feed the others and it was not until she reached the pile of hair, which the girl was playing with, did she realize what had happened. “You are naughty, Lucy.” She took the tin cutter and slipped it into her apron, leaving the hair for Lucy to play with as she turned to feed me about half a bowl of mush.

I heard nothing more about the short hair, so I decided to move. Again, when Aunt Patty slipped out for a meal a few days later, I crossed the room and undressed Charlotte to dress her in my things. Her clothes just fit me, so it was a fair trade. I moved her to my corner to face her towards the candle which caught her mind and left her staring at it. In a moment, I was upon her bench, assuming her customary stare and sitting position. It was perfect. When Aunt Patty returned, she fed and bathed us without discovering my switch.

A few days later, or at least it seemed that much, Matron arrived to speak with the inmate she thought was me before she came to me and had Aunt Patty give me a bath.

“You have gained a little weight, Dearest,” Matron noted when I was relaced in a clean white corset and dressed in a neatly cleaned and pressed inmate uniform. “Now to see your Doctor.” She fussed a moment with my hair and then she smiled. “And after your visit with the Doctor, I have a nice surprise for you.”

Soon, we were on our way up the stairs. Just as we reached the top, I pretended to slip and fall free from her grasp against the stair case wall with my head banging the stone. I almost fell from the hard blow.

“Poor dumb child,” Matron muttered in surprise, helping to catch me before I had a real accident.

“Who are you...”

She turned white and held me close for a moment to steady her self. “Thank God!” She then looked down at me, saying, “You have been very sick. I am taking you to see the Doctor.”

“Where is my Mommy?”

“She is waiting for you.” She hurried me up the hallway and knocked. When called in, she took my hand and opened the door. “Charlotte just bumped her head and she seems to remember things, Doctor.”



Suddenly, I felt the need for boldness. “Are you in charge, Sir?”

“Yes, I am the Doctor,” he replied, studying me with intense interest and surprise. “And who are you?”

“I am the Lady Charlotte Brian,” I countered, taking a deep breath, “Where is my Mommy?”

“In due time, Lady Charlotte Brian,” he said, motioning me to a seat, but I resolved to stand, doubting that I could but move in my fear. He nodded and sat with a sigh. “And where do you live?”

“Brian Hall in Middlesex and Brain House in London.”

“What is the last thing you remember?”

I tried to remember the scene. “I was dressed in a white lawn dress. John was playing with me in his tree house. It really isn't his, because it's on our estate. But, we called it his tree house. It was my birthday. I was climbing when my petticoat caught on a limb and I lost balance. John was reaching for me when I fell.” I looked up at them both. “How long ago was that?”

“Five years ago.”

"I want my Mommy," I asked in mock disbelief and then I looked at myself. "Am I really thirteen?"

"Yes, Lady Charlotte," the Matron answered turning to the doctor. "What shall be done?"

"I suppose that she should see her mother," he replied with a shrug, and then he added, "I should like to talk with her also, Matron."

"Yes, Doctor," she replied with a nod, leaving me as she withdrew. In a moment, she returned with Lady Brian, undoubtedly her surprise was more than mine had been.

"Oh, Mommy!" I cried in childish delight, rushing into her arms to hug her. "Oh, Mommy, Mommy."

"Oh, my little princess," she cried, taking me into her arms and kissing my cheek. "Oh, it's a miracle, Doctor! How can I ever thank you?"

"It appears that she suffered a loss of memory. We have had cases where a simple blow caused a recovery," he observed, rising to greet my "mother."

"My Lady, I must advise you that such accidental cures can be only temporary."

"However temporary it may be, I shall have her at my side," she noted with her personal authority, "I want to take the child with me now."

"If you wish," he replied with a shrug, "however, I must warn you that we cannot protect you nor the child. She may revert to the vegetable state she has been in, or she could become violent."

"She looks perfectly safe to me."

"We had a girl stabbed a month ago by another girl who we were about to release," the Doctor replied. "You must watch her."

"I intend to do just that. I plan to surround her with servants as a princess requires. A nurse, a Governess, and two lady's maids, and everything else of luxury a Lady of Quality requires," she smiled and took my hand.

"Somebody must be with her twenty-four hours a day," he continued. "She might try to run away or commit suicide. It may be years before we are sure that she has recovered fully."

"If you believe that I must mount a guard around the child, it shall be," she replied with a nod of understanding. "She shall be watched day and night."

"And, if she shows the least tendency towards misbehavior, she must be brought back here."

"You will be a good little girl, won't you, Charlotte?" she asked with deep concern. "If you do, you shall have everything a little princess could wish for, pretty clothes, servants and an excellent education. If not, you stay here..."

"Oh, yes, mother, I promise to do just exactly as you wish," I cried enthusiastically, seeing the possibility of escape. "Please take me away from here. I want to go home."

“Of course, Dearest,” she promised, pulling me close to look at me. “Ah, we have so much to do. A staff to hire, new clothes, and suitable rooms. I think it best that I leave you here for the rest of the week.”

My heart turned over and I almost went frantic with fear! “Oh, please, Mommy, please don't leave me here!”

“We have some very nice rooms upstairs, Lady Charlotte,” the Matron argued, “and you do not wish to be seen in that dress, do you?”

“I...” I looked at the two women and the Doctor and knew that I had to be very careful. If I emotionally insisted on leaving, my “mother” might change her mind. But, if I stayed, I might be found out. If I really had been a girl, I might have cried in frustration, but I needed to think. “If you want me to stay, then, Mommy?”

“Perhaps it might be best for a few days. I will come Friday for you with a pretty pink gown and we shall go shopping together for your new clothes. Won't that be nice?”

“Oh, yes, Mommy!”

With this, she kissed me again to withdraw.

“Come, Dear, I shall take you to your room,” the Matron urged, taking my hand to lead me from the examination room after receiving the Doctor's nod of approval. She led me to a clean, fresh hospital room where she turned me over to a nurse, who actually curtsied and called me “Lady Charlotte.”

When she left, I looked out of the window and began to wonder what I was escaping into... and what had happened to my brothers... were they too in some asylum, left to go mad as I almost had?

Chapter Four: Randolph Begins His Story - I Learn My Proper Station.

It is a rare honor to have a great lady like the Duchess of Auberan show an interest in a simple life like mine... It seems so very long ago when all came into focus and my proper station was determined by Her Grace.

The rush to the dock was frantic and I had had barely enough time to recover my secreted box of candy so that I may have something to eat. My new valet is an absolute detective and I have been nearly starved until I discovered the little niche in the wall by my window on the outside.

I could hardly believe that we were to set sail on such a frightful day. Poor James was whimpering in fear of the thunder and John Charles was playing at being noble. God, I hope he hates his new school as much as I think I shall hate mine. She is simply awful, yet fairer than he would be. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could jump. God, what a frightful wind and it is beginning to rain. If I watch the waves, I'll get sick. I always do. I must go below.

I can hear the boat creaking, there must be an awful storm. God, I'm hungry. Remembering the candy, I slipped from my stream of thought to open the box to take a piece. It was a soft center and the sweetness delighted my taste. I don't know how

many pieces I ate before sleep overtook me. I think I can remember hearing John and James come down into the cabin, but I'm not at all sure.

"GET UP!" a rough voice shouted, and before I could obey, I found an old oily rag jammed into my mouth while my hands were tied along with my feet so that I could be tossed over the man's shoulders and carried out into the rain like a slab of meat. The rain washed over everything like a wall of water so that I could see nothing. And then we moved into a narrow hallway and I could see that I was alone in the man's arms. My brothers were gone!

My heart jumped when we reached the top of the stairs and I thought he might drop me down the narrow, steep incline. But, he moved forward to knock a short series on the door which brought to mind the detective stories I so loved. Perhaps I was being held for ransom? Aye, that was it!

Then, the door swung open to reveal a neat little bedroom occupied by a strange woman I had never seen before, and Mrs. Gretch!

"Thank you, Ma'am," he replied to the silence of the room, dumping me to the floor and leaving me to the women with a closing of the door behind him.

"I'll take the foot, you take the head," Mrs. Gretch ordered, leaving the gag alone. With the removal of my bonds, she turned me towards the bed where I was confronted by a strange array of clothes. "Well, we have a long drive ahead, so best we get our little captive changed."

These clothes were for me! I struggled in panic as the two women quickly undressed me to the absolute buff! A simple, black hose supported belt was secured about my waist and attached to an old, somewhat worn but clean pair of black cotton stockings. Over my naked shame was placed a simple cotton chemise, and a worn pair of cotton drawers. Before I realized it, I was being strapped into a corrective corset and back brace combination that held me stiffly erect for perfect posture while the laces pulled in my plump waistline under the firm boned control of this torture chamber designed to prepare a child for her coming needs for proper bearing and waist. Next came simple, black, high, calf boots and a flannel petticoat. The dress was quite used as a hand-me-down of rough blue cotton. It had a high collar, huge puffed leg of mutton sleeves and a childish short skirt. Over this dress was fitted a black wool coat with a cape hood that they fixed over my head.

And thusly dressed, I was taken by Mrs. Gretch to a hansom carriage that quickly moved out into the rain as I sat by her side in enforced silence.

After a long time, I fell asleep and in the morning I found myself still dressed as a girl, but my gag was gone and I could see that the storm was over and we were still moving. "Where are you taking me?"

"Ma'am," she corrected, causing me to add this insult to the list. I chose to remain silent rather than submit to calling her by a title of station she didn't deserve. Seeing my silence, she smiled and returned her interest to the morning countryside. "We shall be there in a few minutes. And then your questions may be answered."

I nodded in silence. And, as promised, the carriage began to move up a hill along twisting turns to suddenly stop. A coachman swung open the door and Mrs. Gretch

pulled me after her into the sunlight causing me to tremble in the shame of being seen by a man. And then he drove away without a word, leaving a clear view of an old keep postern gate bearing a huge knocker and a sign:

MORELY ASYLUM

As I tried to place the name Mrs. Gretch slammed the knocker, and in a moment, the gate was opened by a scrubbed little girl in a black, cotton dress with a Dutch apron of sparkling white, starched cotton in contrast with a matching huge white hat.

"Whom may I say is calling, Ma'am?" the child asked with a curtsy as she opened wide the door to look at me with bored disinterest.

"Mrs. Gretch."

The girl curtsied in retreat, leaving a view of polished shining floors and a cleanliness that brought Mrs. Gretch's nod of approval and the words, "I do believe this will do quite nicely for you, quite nicely indeed."

I chose to retain my silence as the little girl returned to curtsy, saying, "This way, Mrs. Gretch, may I take your wraps?"

Upon her gesture, I hesitantly removed the cloak, knowing that my hair was almost a dead give-away, but she took it without comment along with Mrs. Gretch's coat. "Thank you. Will you please follow me, Ma'am?"

She led us from the rear entry hall to the front grand foyer, where she paused by one of the many doors that flanked the three storied chamber with its wooden stairways and balconies reflecting in mirror polish the fine grained wood. The girl paused to look at Mrs. Gretch as if to suggest a final check.

"When you are presented, curtsy," Mrs. Gretch ordered, taking advantage of the pause to straighten my dress before smiling towards the girl who knocked politely. When a voice replied, the child opened the door to step aside with yet another curtsy as we passed into an oak paneled study of the Tudor period and the door closed behind.

Standing by a great massive table was a rather tall, slender woman dressed in a black, mourning dress with huge sleeves and a high collar that blended with the gleam of the study and contrasted with her chalk white face and hands. Her black hair was smoothly swept back into a tight bun on the back of her head. About her neck hung a massive silver cross which was her sole item of jewelry, if one could call it that.

"How nice to see you again, Mrs. Gretch," she said with cool authority from thin, almost pouted lips while offering her hand to a kindred soul. Her eyes shone like a small dog's, studying me with intense, silent interest. "And who is this little girl, so plump and pretty with such short hair?"

"Mrs. Crisp, this is my late sister's love child, Abigail Smith," she noted in introduction, causing me to look at her in disbelief.

'Love Child,' indeed!

"Curtsy, Abigail."

I sighed and curtsied as best I could, wondering what their game was to be. Perhaps this was where I was to be held for ransom, although I was not at all sure that Mrs. Gretch would reveal herself if they planned to return me. Perhaps they planned to kill me? I bowed my head to hide my uncertain fears.

“Abigail is an unprincipled girl, completely spoiled and impolite,” Mrs. Gretch continued, taking a seat upon Mrs. Crisp's motion to be joined by her in a nearby chair so that they faced me while leaving no other chair for me. “How many times have I told you, girl, stand with your feet together, your back straight, and your hands palm to palm at your back?”

“I...” my voice faltered, but courage failed and I complied, taking the formal posture of a little girl.

“I see,” Mrs. Crisp noted with a thin smile that eased the stern lines of her face.

“Yes,” as if in agreement to an unspoken observation, and then she continued in a perplexed tone, “My dear sister passed away shortly after her birth, and Abigail has been raised by various relatives who have passed her on once they became aware of her slatternly ways and inability to accept authority.” She paused with a vexed sigh, checking to be sure that I was correct. “In fact, she cut her hair and ran away to become an apprentice boy in London. Fortunately for the Family name, she was caught by a sharp-eyed shopkeeper who fetched me.”

“It would have been awful if she had fallen into sin at such a young and tender age,” Mrs. Crisp observed, “I have heard of girls being kidnaped and being forced into ordeals of sin.”

Mrs. Gretch nodded with a deep sigh of agreement.

“As you know, I work for the Duchess of Auberan, and my husband has no time for children. So, I must find a suitable place for the girl.” Mrs. Gretch smiled hopefully. “Lady Morely made mention of your school from time to time, so I thought I might impose upon our past friendship when we worked as maids at Hull Hall. Although I am not rich, I can pay for her simple needs.”

“We do have so many girls,” Mrs. Crisp noted with a shrug, “and we do want to be sure that every girl is most properly trained. I am sure that you understand.” She fingered the cross as if in benediction. “It is our Christian duty to elevate these poor, homeless waifs to a proper, humble, but honest, station suitable to their intelligence and talents. We give our girls the very best of Christian discipline to rid them of slovenliness and poor work habits. Every girl who comes under our care learns that honest work with rote learned skills is the only way she can hope to earn her way, considering her limited abilities and unfortunate birth.” She turned more directly to me. “Do you understand what I mean, Abigail Smith?”

This was utter nonsense! What in the world was going on? I was certainly not an orphan girl and...

“You see, she is totally ungrateful,” Mrs. Gretch explained, clasping her hands in partial despair. “What can I do? I have nobody who will take her.”

Mrs. Crisp nodded sadly before arising to ask me, "Would you like to stay here, Abigail?"

"No!" was the simple truth, with an added, "Ma'am!"

"You naughty, thankless child!" Mrs. Gretch complained.

"I cannot take a girl who does not want to be with us," Mrs. Crisp stated, going to a bell cord which she pulled. In a twinkling, the door opened to reveal our escort in curtsied reply. "Tell Miss Adams that I should like to speak with her and Madame Birch. And a uniform, in case Abigail changes her mind."

"Yes, Ma'am," the girl replied, looking at me with an odd smile as she retreated with another curtsy. In a moment, she had returned with a huge, dark woman carrying a school dress, apron and cap in one hand while under her arm she held a long birch switch like a military baton.

"Miss Adams, this is little Abigail Smith and her Aunt. It appears that Abigail has some difficulty in asking politely to be allowed to remain so that she might be less of a burden upon her Family while learning her proper station in life. Perhaps you may convince her?"

"I shall try, Ma'am," was the curtsied reply once the clothes were placed carefully upon the massive table and the little escort girl had withdrawn. She drew the switch in a single motion like a sword and it swished against the air to her side where she held it while bending slightly forward towards me by placing her free hand at her lap as if summoning a small dog or child.

"Now, come here, Dearest," she said in a soft, coaxing voice that suited her stance and made an ice cold chill of terror race up my back as I eyed the ever present switch. "And tell me why you don't want to stay here with the other girls of Morely Asylum?"

I swallowed hard, looking at the smiling woman who seemed to expect an answer. I bowed my head, saying the answer that was expected of me, knowing that I stood no chance. "I should like to stay at Morely Asylum, Ma'am."

"I thought that you told me that she was unwilling to stay with us, Mrs. Crisp?" Miss Adams noted with surprise and then she frowned. "I think that you should beg your Aunt to let you come to stay with us, and beg Mrs. Gretch for the chance to stay here. You will give your reasons for your prior discourtesy and explain thoroughly why you have changed your mind. And you will show your best manners."

She touched the switch against my hip as a pointed reminder. "And you will make note of the fact that a servant girl curtsies for permission to speak and is ever so polite to her superiors." She then motioned me to my seated "Aunt."

This was clearly the contest between how far she could push my self degradation before I surrendered without pride or revolted to bear the switch.

It was totally unfair, quite unsportsmanlike, and womanly! Only a woman would take fun in such a cat and mouse game of subtle cruelty. If ever I had been aware of my hand-me-down girls' clothes, it was this moment when I was squarely placed between manly courage and all too-too girlish actions. Could they really expect me, a Duke's son, to beg for permission to be trained as a domestic?

'Proper station,' indeed!

And did they actually intend to keep me here?

"I shall not! I am not a girl, I am a man!"

The three women laughed in dear appreciation of my joke!

"I am! I am! I am!" I screamed, stamping my foot in frenzied anger, tearing at my dress. "I will not be made sport of!"

Miss Adams turned to the solid oak table and with force equal to my exclamations, she struck it with the switch! You will! You will! You will!"

The savage violence of her blows terrified me! Suddenly, I saw her turn upon me! "No, please, no! I'll be good, really I will! Please!"

"Of course you will," she countered in sweetness, placing the switch to the top of my head. "We have waited for your request, Abigail, do you have a favor to ask?"

Again I swallowed, feeling like a reprieved murderer before the axe, half knowing that it was yet to come, but thankful for the moment. Composing my frightened thoughts towards Mrs. Gretch to lift my full skirts for a curtsy that brought a smile to her serious face.

"Yes, Abigail? You wish something?" she asked with shrugged disdain, turning away towards Mrs. Crisp, only to look back at me impatiently. "Well, girl?"

I wet my trembling lips and managed another humiliating curtsy.

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Gretch. You are so very kind to have brought me here and I have actually been a wicked girl." I gritted my teeth, almost biting my tongue, but continued. "I was so disappointed at having been caught and I guess I blamed you for my own failure. I know now that I should be grateful to you for saving me from utter disgrace, Ma'am." I bowed my head. "I have been very foolish."

"That is perfectly understandable," she noted with approval. "You are foolish and quite dull-witted to boot. But, one can not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

"Yes, Ma'am," I sighed, seeing the direction of her points, "I have never been very bright, Ma'am."

I looked about the study, trying to think like a simple minded girl. "This is a very fine place and although I would dearly love to live with you, this might be the best place for me. I know that if I do not have a proper education, I can not hope for a chance and that is why I ran away. Now I see how very stupid I was." I allowed my hands to play with the fold of my skirt like I had seen James play with his kilt. Oh, how he would love this game! "Perhaps here, I might learn how to be of use like a good Christian girl seeking to be of service to others."

Mrs. Crisp positively beamed, but my "Aunt" sighed unhappily, saying, "I have asked her to admit you, but Mrs. Crisp believes that you will be undisciplined as you were a moment ago. Imagine, claiming that you were a boy, of all things! Anyone can plainly see that you are a girl, can't they?"

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. It was foolish of me to pretend to be a boy," I replied, following her direction. "May I ask her if I can stay?"

“Of course, child, if you want to?”

“I do, yes, thank you,” I countered with a curtsy, turning to Mrs. Crisp, seeing a taunting amusement in her little eyes. It was almost enough to make me rebel, but I saw the birch switch and I curtsied.

“Yes, Dear?” she asked, taking her seat before me and motioning me to her.

“Mrs. Crisp, my Aunt has asked if I could attend your school,” I began, rushing to a, “may I, Ma'am?”

“Well, Dearest,” she observed, taking my hand into her's, to feel my trembling heartbeat express my fears, “Our school is not for little boys and you said you were a little boy.”

“I'm sorry, Ma'am. I told a lie,” I confessed, anxiously hoping that my ordeal would end soon.

“Little girls who tell lies should be punished, shouldn't they?”

“Yes, Ma'am,” I ventured, feeling my heart pause, only to see her smile.

“If you were a boy, would you still want to stay here?”

I took a deep breath, not liking her direction one bit. “Yes, Ma'am.”

She turned me slightly so that her hand could slowly unbutton the back of my dress.. “Would you still want to be taught how to be a proper scullery girl?”

I bowed my head, only to hear her continue her questioning.

“Do you know that I only take in orphans? Are you an orphan? What of your Mother and father?”

Ignoring her question concerning the scullery, I repeated Mrs. Gretch's story about my heritage.

“Well, that may be so, but you see, I have another criteria for my girls. Although I do run a charity, I have learned from hard experience not to take girls who are unfit for simple domestic positions. Bright girls make trouble and tire quickly of menial work which would be best for their souls instead of their fancy dreams. Frankly, my Dear, my girls are of the simplest minds, since only the dull-witted see a crowning achievement in a well polished pot or pair of boots, find joy in not being more than a household furnishing, or hasten to scrub toilets with the hope that their efforts will draw no comment, ill or good. Do you understand what I am explaining to you, child?”

“I think so,” I replied, feeling the dress slip to the floor so that I stood in the shame of my underclothes before the women. The awesome truth of her words closed about me as she picked up the black dress that might be my way of life!

“NO! I WILL NOT SAY WHAT YOU WANT! I AM A BOY, NOT A DULL-WITTED GIRL!” I turned away from her hand to face Miss Adams down. “If you strike me, I shall have the Law upon you all. I am Randolph Abel Dinadan!”

“Not here, child,” Miss Adams sighed as Mrs. Gretch arose and Mrs. Crisp went to the bell rope to summon the little girl. Miss Adams came between us so I could not see, but Mrs. Crisp was taking a box from the girl which she placed upon the oak table

as the girl left. The huge woman caught me with ease as I tried to follow, dressed only in my lingerie.

"I was once a nurse," Mrs. Crisp noted as Miss Adams forced me to sit upon the very edge of the great table with my shoulders and arms trapped behind her arms while her palms braced my legs apart and her insulting fingers parted my cotton drawers and chemise, exposing me to their amused titters. "We shall soon see if you are a boy or a girl!"

"I'm a boy!" I screamed helplessly as Miss Adams's breathing became more excited when she leaned forward to lock her double arm lock, bending my head also downward so that I saw my little masculinity between her fingers.

"Like a little boy," she suggested with a mocking sneer, "a very little boy!"

"Little girls are often mistaken for little boys," Mrs. Crisp noted, opening the box, "and she is probably a victim of such a mistake, judging by those little tumors."

"Oh, how sad. Can you do anything to help her?" Mrs. Gretch asked, taking a look. "I must confess that when I first saw them, I was misled also, but she is a girl, isn't she?"

"Of course," Mrs. Crisp replied. "A very confused little girl, but I shall soon correct that!"

"What are you going to do?" I protested in mounting terror, trying to break free from the powerful Amazonian arms that clamped me helpless to do anything but watch as Mrs. Crisp took a hypodermic needle and jabbed it into my arm. As I sat there, trying to think of what to do, the room began to slowly turn around and around and my mind thought it all quite funny. How could I be spinning, when I was sitting down? Then there was a long tunnel of pain that ended with my being on a cot in a row that lined each wall of the gallery. Interspersed with each cot by the wall was a simple, open closet, and at the foot of each bed was a wooden chest. In the middle of the hall was a line of simple wooden benches and tables.

I hurt something awful, and then the terrible thing they had done came to haunt me. Turning in bed, I could see that each cot was occupied by a girl close to my own age.

"Good morning, girls," Miss Adams called, causing the girls to jump to their feet, to move to the aisle where they stood to curtsy.

"Good morning, Ma'am."

"Ah, I see that little Abigail is awake. You may join the other girls now, my Dear. I'm sure that you are going to enjoy being one of us."

Weakly, I struggled to arise, finding it all but impossible to walk. I must have been there for days, for I could remember being fed and bathed by hands from the dark. Sullenly, I stood at the foot of my bed.

"Curtsy your good morning, Abigail," she noted as I paused, only to painfully obey. "Welcome to your form, child. I'm sure that the other girls will help you."

"Yes, Miss Adams," they replied with a curtsy, only to repeat their curtsies she withdrew.

"My name is Nancy," a girl offered with a smile, "do you need any help in dressing?" With this question, she removed her night dress as did the others, causing me to almost faint in shock.

"I can't undress in front of you," I protested in shame, but she waved to a friend and I soon stood in my birthday suit among a dozen other girls seeing to my utter chagrin that I looked exactly like them! Numbly, I put on my chemise, hose, corset, (which Nancy laced as I helped her with her's), drawers, slip, and flannel petticoat. Over this went a high-necked black cotton dress and the white apron. Putting on my half boots and white maid's cap, I joined the file of girls, to be walked silently to morning chapel, where we were each inspected and then allowed to hear the lecture.

After an hour long lecture on the virtues of knowing one's proper place and station, Mrs. Crisp paused in her sermon to smile and say, "I see that little Abigail Smith is better. I think she should come before you all and tell you about herself and why she is grateful to be here. Abigail, come forward, Dear, so that the other girls may see you."

Completely docile in the fear of what she had done and could still do, I walked to the front of the chapel to be turned by Mrs. Crisp to face the two hundred girls all sitting in perfect stillness in row upon row of exact neatness in black and white. I curtsied towards Mrs. Crisp, seeing that she expected it.

"You may begin with the truth of your sinful birth," she noted with stern certainty. When I repeated Abigail's story, she listened without a word, her hand upon my shoulder. "And tell them how grateful you are to be a girl who has a chance to be a domestic servant.

Meekly, I followed her instruction to be thanked and released to Miss Adams who said nothing.

We were soon marched, if you can call it that, to our "classes." The form I was in was the youngest, ranging from ten to eleven years old. I was to later learn that the girls had been hand picked from various foundling homes and asylums by Mrs. Crisp, for entry at her school at this, my new age. Each form was a progressive step from cleaning girl to lady's maid so that at age sixteen, the girl was ready for her proper station as a domestic, based upon Mrs. Crisp's judgment of her performance at the asylum.

A word from Mrs. Crisp to my new superior, whether butler or housekeeper or chef, would seal my life's work to only scrubbing floors, cleaning chamber pots, or washing pans! Or, I might be given a chance to be a maid. I resolved to either escape or be a perfect student, knowing that one preceded the other. Fortunately, I selected this route on my first day as an inmate since it was not for several weeks before I learned most of the facts about the power Mrs. Crisp held over my life.

As I followed my form into a large banquet room, we were arranged standing about a table piled with silverware which I later learned was sent here from London by merchants.

Miss Adams offered me a seat explaining that it was not good form for a servant girl to ever sit when on duty, but for the moment due to my illness, I could. She then faced the class to begin a process of instruction unlike anything I had ever heard.

"This is a spoon," she began, picking up a spoon, "it must be very clean."

"This is a spoon and it must be very clean, Ma'am," the girls replied, starting a mimic of her every motion, repeating her word for word instructions for polishing a spoon until it glistened like a mirror. Then she held up a fork. "This is a salad fork." We then identified the fork only to continue word for word her former instructions again and again, driving all thought of anything else from our minds but the exactness of her requirements.

Can you imagine days of this, just cleaning silverware? Or learning the proper way to cleanse a pan?

Such classes were endless, with pauses for meals, tending to our clothes or toilette, or sleep. When we were not in class, we were not permitted to speak unless spoken to by one of the upper form girls or one of the Mistresses. This was to teach us the gift of silence which a servant owes her superiors. Only in the brief space of getting ready for chapel in the morning and during the final hour after evening chapel before bedtime were we allowed to exchange words. But, to my utter dismay, I discovered that my classmates seldom managed to converse beyond the egocentric prattle of a six-year-old, for that was the simple limit of the majority's intelligence, or perhaps, expectations. As the days passed, it began to dawn on me that I too was gradually slipping to simplicity. Time had lost all meaning. Weeks drifted day by day into a steady routine of work, work, work. And, changes were taking place. I began to lose weight soon after my arrival and now I was almost as slim as any of my roommates. I could see that although I was not beginning to enter puberty like a few in my form, I was wider in the hip than most, and my constant indoor life without sweets had led to creamy white, smooth skin that was the envy of most. My hair was now cut in a plain Dutch boy fashion below my



ears, and since I had heard that hair grew six inches a year, I guessed that I had been there but half a year when the Christmas decorations went up to confirm my guess.

So many of the girls did have distant relatives who would call for them to take them in for the holiday, that schooling during the holidays was left to the upkeep of the great hall while most of the teachers and staff went home. I was left with only two girls in my form, so we were assigned to the scullery to keep us busy. It was hard work and the days passed rather quickly despite our loneliness.

But, I had to learn what it meant to be without a Family, for that was now most certainly to be my lot. The idea of escape left me with the problem of: "Where to?" At least here, I knew my proper station and I was learning service. I wondered if my brothers were doing as well...

Chapter Five: James Begins His Story - I Find Security.

The Duchess of Auberan has requested that I put in writing my life's adventures after the night of my kidnapping. Perhaps it may be instructive. The basic lesson to be learned, however, escapes me. Unless it is sufficient to say that our lives are not our own.

It was an awful night with great flashes of lightning lighting up coal black clouds that hung low in the sky like burnt cotton on a blue-black mirror. The mirror, however, was broken into thousands of shimmering pieces that moved the wind to tear at our skins. Oh, how I wanted to be home with my Teddy. Why Mommy sent me away to this, I will never know.

I clung to the railing, seeing John ahead of me, sitting on the wooden post that stuck out of the front of the boat! Oh, he was brave, and I really was afraid that he would fall into the river, we were moving so fast.

"Can... can we go to bed?" I yelled, cringing under the flash of lightening that raced overhead.

"Okay, baby face," he laughed, running along the wooden post like a log roller might until he came to where I stood and he jumped to the floor. "Our cabin is all made up. I'll tuck you in, but I'm not staying."

I could see shadows steal over the deck from the fluttering sails like great bat wings and I thought of the horrible ghost stories about the sea where the dead were washed on deck and then claimed the ship as theirs. My Governess liked such awful stories. We moved down the stairs to a room where Randy was sleeping, and John picked out a bed for me and helped me undress. When I crawled into bed, I clung to John's hand and begged him to stay. He nodded and sat by my side as the ship rolled and tossed with strange creaking noises like she was coming apart. And it was the longest time before I fell into a deep sleep.

Suddenly, I was pulled from my bed in the terrible darkness and I saw one of those terrible dead men with glassy eyes caught in the light of the stern lantern! I screamed and kicked at him as he carried me towards the rail where he planned to drown me so that I would be just like him! I twisted and turned and bit his neck until he yelled and pulled me from his shoulder and held me under his arm like a bundle. Hanging with

my head backwards, I could see my brothers being carried also and we were not being thrown into the sea, we were being kidnaped!

My yells of terror were drowned out by the screaming winds and when the sailor pushed open a door to an old stone building, he covered my mouth. "If ye scream, I'll slit yer gullet! Do you hear?"

I nodded and he removed his hand. He closed the door and walked down a narrow hall to a back room lighted by a brass lamp. It was a regular bedroom.

"Oh, my poor lamb," a woman's voice cried, taking me from the sailor's arms to hold me close. It was Mistress Caldwell! "You poor baby, you must be soaked. Here, let me help you out of those wet clothes."

"Wwwhhat..."

"Shh, baby, everything is going to be just perfect," she promised as the sailor left. "I will put you in some dry clothes and you can sleep all warm and snug while I watch over you. I even have some hot milk for you and some cookies."

"My brothers..."

"They are being taken care of too." She stripped me naked, much to my chagrin, and began to dry me off with a large towel in front of an open wood fire. "All I have is this nightgown," she observed, showing me a full skirted girl's night gown richly trimmed and hemmed in lace. "You really don't mind, do you?" she added with an amused smile, helping me into the awful thing! Straightening the skirts, she pulled back the bed covers and helped me into the large, warm bed, tucking me in.

Uncomfortably, I turned in the soft bed, wondering why it felt so very strange under the sheet. And then I remembered the rubber sheeting that my Nanny had used to protect my bed when I wet it at night. Turning over, I fell into a deep sleep, feeling Mistress Caldwell sitting at my side to protect me from the awful storm.

The bed was ever so comfortable that when I awoke in the night to the sound of the fresh wind that follows a storm, I didn't really want to get out of bed. The room was filled with shadows cast by a ghostly tree swaying outside my window in the cold night air. I reached over to see if I could see the commode in the flickering light of the dying fire, but it must be someplace else. I was so very sleepy, so I just rolled back into the warm comforters and fell into a deep sleep.

With the sound of the cock crowing, I came awake to feel the shameful dampness between my legs! Oh, if I had only gotten out of bed! My Governess will be furious and I will not have cakes for two whole weeks. What an awful night! And the dream was horrible, with ghosts, and ships, and being kidnaped in a storm. It was so frightening. Uncomfortably, I moved from the dampness, feeling that my gown was less wet than the bed. Perhaps it would all dry by the time she came to awaken me. Just then, the door opened and closed. It must be one of the servants to start the morning fire.

"Good morning, little Sweetheart.."

It was Mistress Caldwell!

I sat up in surprised realization that I was indeed in a strange room and the night before had not been a dream! “Are you going to take me home, Ma'am?”

“Yes,” she replied, placing a breakfast tray by my bed, “would you like to join me for breakfast? I am sorry that I had to wake you up, but the drive back to London is quite long and we should be leaving soon. After breakfast, I will help you dress and we shall take you home.”

Somewhat encouraged by her promise, I ate my breakfast, wondering why she seemed so very amused. She watched my every movement with a strange sort of fascination that seemed to be most possessive. I had the uncomfortable feeling that her attentions were almost motherly...

“Is it true that you like to pretend to be a little toddler?” she asked from her rapt interest. “And dress up for your little games with your playmates?”

“Did my Mommy tell you that?” I countered, somewhat embarrassed.

“Oh, I heard that you enjoy dress up games,” she hedged, reaching her hand under the comforter! “And that you still wet your bed like a baby! It is wet now, isn't it, baby?”

Sheepishly, I bowed my head. “Yes, Ma'am.”

She nodded her understanding, saying, “You are still very little. Perhaps as you grow up, you will have more control. That is why your step-Mother advised me to have a baby sheet put on your bed.” She paused thoughtfully, looking at me as if measuring me and I was struck by her erect posture and the fact that she really was a rather large, matronly woman. “You are hardly big enough to pass as a four year old. My little girl was about your size and she was three or so. Did you know that I had a little girl called Emma?”

“No, Ma'am, I didn't know that you were married.”

Mistress Caldwell smiled, “Yes, you see, my little girl passed away just last week, poor child.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You're wearing her night gown. Isn't it pretty?”

“I never liked girls' things,” I countered defensively, gazing at the lacy gown with distaste. “Even when I played with the girls at being a baby, I never let them dress me as a girl.”

“I see,” she said, reflecting a slight disappointment. “Babies are pretty much alike at that age. Blue dresses and pink dresses and such. Do you know that I am a Governess?”

“Oh, yes, Ma'am.”

“Sometimes when a child wets the bed, I put her in diapers to remind her to get up out of bed the next time. It's really quite effective. Wouldn't you think so?”

Fearfully, I thought of this punishment, knowing that it would be just awful! Especially under short pants. Everybody would know! “It's awful and cruel.”

"That's why it's so effective at your age," she laughed, reading my fears with her mocking amusement. "Just think of how plump full diapers and rubber drawers would look under your pretty white sailor pants."

"No, please don't, Ma'am. I won't ever forget again, I promise!" I pleaded, seeing her exact intent!

"We'll see, baby," she teased, picking up the breakfast tray and leaving me alone, only to return with a lady's traveling bag which she placed on the edge of the bed. "It's time to get out of your damp bed and prepare for our trip home."

"I can dress myself," I insisted hopefully.

"Well, I think that we shall play our favorite game and I shall be your Mommy and you shall be the little toddler all dressed up in pretty things. Only this time, I think that you shall be dressed as a baby girl since your little sailor suit was ruined last night and all I have with me is Emma's clothes for you to wear. Won't that be fun?" she suggested with mock childish delight.

"I'm not a girl! And I won't...":

"Oh, I shall remedy that right now," she laughed adding to her insults the soft, full cotton folds of a thick diaper covered by pliable rubber drawers!

A white cotton vest was pulled over my head by her trained hands before she placed a garter waist about my middle that was soon attached to long black stockings. My kicking feet were fitted into white kid, fat baby shoes and over my head went a long, full-skirted, high-waisted toddler slip with lace ruffles and rich, pink embroidery to trim the soft, white cotton. To complete my chagrin, she forced me into a toddler's white, lawn-cotton, summer dress with a wide, lace ruffled yoke, puff sleeves and an infantile high waist that topped a full skirt that barely hid my baby shoes.

"There now, let's fix your hair," she sighed, heating a French curling iron by the lamp to use it deftly to roll my longish red hair into tight ringlets all over my head in baby curls. Patting my diapered rear, she laughed in sheer delight of her transformation and my blushing frustrations.

Standing back from her handiwork, she nodded her approval before taking from the suitcase a white bonnet and matching summer cloak. After helping me into the cloak, she adjusted the bonnet and tied its silk ribbons into a bow under my chin. She then completed her amusements by pulling from the suitcase my most infantile secret, Teddy, the large stuffed teddy bear I always slept with!

"And here is your little Teddy to play with," she exclaimed as if addressing a small child, and perhaps she was! She took my other hand while I clung to the silly stuffed toy, feeling every bit of three years old. My tender seat felt the soft folds of my diapering which made me walk in an open waddle so typical of toddlers. She paused to open the bedroom door before sweeping me into her arms for a hug and kiss. "You are just too adorable to resist!"

My fears mounted at the thought others might guess the truth, for I would not only be parading about this inn, but would be seen in London as a girl!

She released me to ask, in an ever so quiet whisper, “Are you thinking that you might attempt to escape or publicly exclaim that you're a boy, or say that you've been kidnaped? A spanking might be your reward!” she paused to chuckle. “But, I wonder if you've ever thought what it might be like to be a toddler who has her diapers lowered in public to prove that she is telling tales. It would be especially awful if they had to be changed. Or would you like such an experience?”

I swallowed hard and bowed my head to follow her lead to an awaiting hansom cab that soon began to move down the muddy road to London.

After we had started our journey, Mistress Caldwell adjusted herself in the seat so that she could observe me while I sat back rather primly with Teddy in my lap. The height and depth of the seat, like most, did not permit me to either sit comfortably on the edge since my feet did not touch the floor, nor could I sit back without my rather short legs sticking out almost horizontally in a most childish fashion. The rough road dictated the later, most embarrassing position which made me almost thankful for the padded diapering that protected all my too tender seat from the jarring motions of the cab. I tried to look straight ahead because I could not bear to look at the obvious shame of my infantile dress.

“You must be very uncomfortable sitting so stiffly. Why don't you take advantage of the benefits of being a toddler and pull your little feet up from the edge of the seat so that you can play with little Teddy in a more natural position between your skirted legs like any other girl your age might. It will be a long ride and I'm afraid that you are far too young to sit primly like a young lady under the hard eye of her strict Governess.” She smiled, adding, “it might also be less painful.”

I refused to reply to her suggestion, not wanting to play the role she had assigned. But, as the ride continued, I sighed and moved into a more “natural” position as she had suggested.

She nodded her approval. “I have rented this cab to take us to London. In order to ease your embarrassment while we travel, you shall be my little Emma. If you behave naturally, no one will be the wiser. If you are difficult, I shall spank you regularly until you appear to be the typical, crying, ill-tempered, cranky baby, being hauled about by an exasperated mother, complete with scoldings, jerking tugs to get you to move, and face slappings to enforce sullen silence and obedience if you scream, whine or complain. Do you understand how obvious you would appear then, in such an embarrassing scene?”

“I don't want to be spanked, diapered, or publicly abused in any way,” I protested. “I don't like this silly game and I don't want to play at being your baby girl.”

She considered my protests with an attitude akin to my Governess when she merely tolerates my balkiness, knowing that she will have her way. “Well, then, we must compromise,” she noted with mock seriousness to mimic me. “If you don't want to be spanked, diapered or publicly abused in any way,” she stated firmly, “you will like this silly game and you will want to play at being my little baby girl. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

“Mommy!”

“Yes, Mommy,” I half whispered, looking down at Teddy and my pretty skirts which did nothing to hide the white baby shoes. The last thing I wanted in the whole world was to have anyone discover who I really was! And then I had an awful thought. “Will I be taken home like this so that my step-Mother and others will see me?”

“Oh, I'm sure that would be great fun. I don't think they would know who the sweet little toddler is. Do you?”

I really didn't want to give them the chance to guess! It was bad enough to be seen by her and strangers, but my Governess or step-mother, that would be cruel. “You wouldn't be that cruel, would you?”

She smiled and fussed with my dress with motherly attentions. “No, we shall stop someplace to find you more suitable clothes. You may have to wait, but you will not be taken to see your step-Mother until you are perfectly presentable. Until then, you shall be my little Emma and nobody will know your secret. Agreed?”

“Yes, Mommy.” I turned to watch the passing scenery while she began to read a book, only to pause from time to time to study me with amusement.

The rented cab pulled to the side of the road in front of a Tudor styled inn. “Lunch time, Ma'am.”

“Thank you, driver,” my self-styled Mother replied, waiting for his assistance before stepping from the cab and pausing while the driver placed his hands beneath my arms to lift me to the walk.

“There you are, little miss,” he laughed. “Got two of my own her age, but not half so pretty.”

Mistress Caldwell beamed her pleasure. “Thank the nice man, Emma.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I managed, accepting her hand while I left Teddy on the seat a bit hopefully, which she corrected by handing me the toy to carry. Meekly, I accepted her gesture, seeing that other people were gathering for lunch at the inn. All eyes seemed to be on me, but I tried not to think about it.

“Come along, Dear,” she urged, finding a new amusement in my fears and toddling walk. Entering the inn, she moved to a table where an aproned waitress automatically fetched a high chair for me!

“Thank you.”

And in a moment, she had me into the chair after removing my bonnet and cloak. Adjusting the infant tray, she took charge of Teddy. “Do you need a bib, miss?”

“Yes, Ma'am,” the waitress replied with a half curtsy, to quickly return with a pink ruffled bib which she helped me into. “She is a very pretty baby. How old is she? Two and a half?”

“Three.” Mistress Caldwell then checked my diapers! “Be sure to tell Mommy if you need a potty.”

Completely shocked by this new public insult, I could barely manage a nod, seeing the amused gaze of the two matrons who closed in on us in the crowded area.

"May we join you?" the first matron asked politely as the other began to sit down to mother's acceptance. "She is so beautiful. She will be a beautiful woman."

"Why, thank you," Mother responded, positively glowing, "although at her age, it's so hard to tell."

"I read someplace about these new rubber pants," the second matron noted, changing the subject. "They must be too warm for the baby, aren't they?"

"I'd never use them, except for travel," the first matron suggested, "but, they must be terribly practical under such pretty clothes."

Mother saw her chance and bent over to pull up my skirts to pat my plump, pliant diapers! "See, they are really not warm, are they, Emma?"

Completely frustrated with such adult lack of concern for infantile privacy, I could only blush and nod.

"My last one is out of diapers and she's two."

"Well, we have been traveling," Mother almost apologized, recovering my shame with the help of the second matron who satisfied her curiosity by not only examining the rubber drawers but checking the warmth beneath them too! "it's a very wise precaution."

"Indeed, yes," the first matron agreed, pausing to order lunch and then returning to her discussion. "Is she toilet trained?"

"Yes, except she occasionally wets her bed at night. Don't you, Emma?"

Helpless to avoid this terrible confession, I replied, "Yes, Mommy."

"Well, at three, that is perfectly understandable. It's when a child gets over four that it becomes a problem. Of course some boys are pretty slow." She then launched into a long conversation about her oldest boy who had a very weak bladder. And then she shifted to her personal ailments which left me thankful for her problems since they drew attention from humiliating me further. I was left out as if I had ceased to exist in their company while they compared notes upon a myriad of womanly matters.

But, this respite soon changed with the arrival of the meal. A baby plate was placed before me with a large cup of warm milk and eating utensils for a small child. On the plate I saw, to my dismay, foods which I detested, as if purposely selected, mashed sweet yams, mutton chunks and spinach.

"Oh, that looks so good," Mother exclaimed, noting my reluctance, so she dipped my spoon into the yams to direct it towards my mouth! "Open wide, baby!"

Not wanting to be further embarrassed by being fed as if I were but a few months old, I accepted the food and took the spoon to feed myself. She opened her purse to take a bottle from it which she used to fill a table spoon of powder that was dipped and stirred into my milk. She then had me hold the cup in both hands to drink. "That's a good baby."

The two matrons shared mother's burden to totally dominate me while allowing themselves a chance to eat as each alternated in making sure I chewed my food slowly, wiped my mouth or chin, or urged me to clear my plate. By the time I had finished, I

was on the verge of regurgitation in reaction to these hated foods. The results were babyish, to say the least!

"Oh, poor dear, she is so easy to upset. The Doctor said the potion would help," Mother explained, helping the waitress to remove my food stained bib and clean the tray. "I do hope she will stop doing that."

"Her tummy is probably upset by travel," the first matron observed. "She did seem too anxious to please you by eating everything. Control will come."

A coach trumpet sounded, causing the two matrons to settle their bill and arise. "It was kind of you and Emma to let us join you. But, we must run." She patted my head. "Be a good little girl, Sweetheart."

"Wave bye-bye," Mother urged with delight over my chagrined compliance as the matrons left, waving back to baby to the observance of all.

"Do you need to go potty?" Mommy asked, lifting the high-chair tray. Seeing my denial, she smiled and quickly replaced the bonnet and cloak, helping me from the chair. "Don't forget Teddy, Dearest."

Thus, we walked to the waiting cab where I was required to crawl into the seat to the far side in childlike fashion before the driver helped my mother. Before long, we were on our way.

After about two hours, I began to feel the certainty of my bladder, wondering how much further we would have to go. Uncomfortably, I shifted in the seat.

"What is it, Dear?"

"Can we stop, Mommy? I need to go to the bathroom."

"You should have thought of that earlier, when I asked," she replied matter-of-factly, returning to her reading, yet watching my childish wriggings in the seat with undisguised anticipation.

"Oh, please," I begged, feeling the first sharp contraction that warned me that my bowels were in need of relief too! "I must go, Mommy, please?"

"Shush, we will be there soon," she chided, looking out at the London scene along the post road we traveled. "Be a good girl and sit still."

Another long pause, not helped in the least by the rocking of the cab which seemed determined to jar loose my control. The urge was so strong that I felt as if I had been given a purgative! "Oh, Mommy, I can't hold much longer. Please?"

She chuckled. "Well, you are diapered and nobody will know."

"Oh, no, I won't!" I protested in utter dismay over her suggestion. "Please don't make me."

"Oh, I'm sure you will do it all by yourself like any other toddler might," she teased, reaching over to pat me between my skirted legs upon the yielding, plump diapering. "You do love playing toddler games, maybe this will cure you."

"I promise never to..." The muscles suddenly relaxed in the face of a trickle that ended into a bursting flood, soon followed by a warm, mushy release at the seat!

"What were you about to say, Sweetheart?" She studied my humiliated silence and then giggled like a taunting school girl to brush her finger at me, delighted by the absurdity of the situation. "Well, then, I guess you did need to go potty more quickly than I thought. But, never mind, I will make sure that you are changed soon. Meanwhile, you can see what being a toddler is really like." With this promise, she picked up her book, leaving me to sit in the damp warmth of my infantilism.

After a long while, the cab swung through a great iron gateway to the front of a Georgian town house. The cabby knocked on the top of the cab and opened the door to help Mistress Caldwell to dismount as I uncomfortably followed, hoping that the rubber pants were effective. I had no desire for baby stains! Clutching Teddy under my arm, I was led rather awkwardly into the house with the cabby behind carrying an assorted array of boxes and packages.

Mother paused to knock and the door soon swung open to reveal a maid who curtsied her greeting as Mistress Caldwell spoke to her in a foreign language! The maid replied and ushered us past two women sitting in an alcove with toddlers about my age. She then knocked upon a door and ushered us in, taking the cabby in charge.

A woman dressed in a blue nurse's uniform with a full apron and high white hat arose to greet Mother in the same language and then turned to me with a pleased smile. "And this must be your darling little Emma who has been so very ill. She looks very healthy to me, Mrs. Caldwell. I can hardly believe your story about her past illnesses, but Mrs. Gaines Nursery School has forwarded her records at your request."

"Excellent," Mother commented, looking down towards me as she took a chair facing the head nurse, having me stand by her side. She switched to the strange language again, joining in matronly laughter with the head nurse who gazed at me with amusement before pulling a bell rope.

In a moment, a tall nurse arrived with a curtsy, to receive her instructions while Mommy turned towards me. "You may go with her, Emma. She will change your diapers."

The idea of having a strange woman change me seemed unusually cruel to me. But, what really frightened me was the thought that Mommy might actually leave me here as her conversation with the head nurse suggested. Emma was being enrolled in her new nursery! "You're not leaving me, are you, Mommy?"

The nurse smiled down at me with the smile reserved for toddlers who just don't understand adult expectations and she took a firm grip upon my hand which Mommy released to her care, speaking a few words to her that I didn't understand.

"Now don't be cranky. The nurse will change you and put you to bed for your afternoon nap," Mommy replied, avoiding my question by pulling me close for a motherly hug and kiss. "I will be back to see you soon. Now be a good little girl and don't cry. This is a very good nursery and your new nurse will love you too."

"But, Mommy..." I began to protest, only to be lifted by the nurse into her arms and briskly carried out a side door and up a flight of stairs. "You can't do this to me, she isn't my Mommy! I'm being kidnaped! You must call the police!"

The nurse paused by a door to speak her language in soothing tones, making me realize that she hadn't understood a word I was saying! Opening the door, she carried me into a large, bright yellow nursery with white furnishings. I saw four cribs, bureaus and clothes cabinets with one large dressing table. Upon the table I recognized several of the boxes and packages that the cabby had been carrying. These undoubtedly contained Emma's toddler clothes for me to wear at my new home!

Placing me upon the table, she efficiently removed my clothing until I sat unclothed except for my rubber drawers and soaking, warm diapers. And then I was deprived of those shameful items, to be made to sit stark naked while she carefully wiped me clean with a damp cloth, wiping from the front rearward to be sure that baby's femininity was not befouled by her infantilism.

With this embarrassment completed to the total deprivation of my personal privacy, she rediapered me in fresh linen and pulled a long, pink flannel sleeping gown over my head. The gown tied behind my neck and was pinned up at the hem like a sack. The long, full sleeves ended in little mittens. Satisfied with this bundling, she carried me to a crib where I was neatly tucked in, linen tightly made over rubber sheeting with a thick blanket which was pinned under my arms so that baby could not turn over from her back. Taking Teddy, she tucked it under my arm, kissed me, and left.

A few minutes later, she returned with another nurse maid and three toddlers in tow who were about two years old or less! These were quickly changed and put into their cribs for their afternoon naps and we four infants were left to sleep.

After about two hours, the nurse maids returned to redress us in a single cotton vest, long pink cotton slip and gown set and white booties. Then, each nurse took two of us in tow.

We were led to a large airy windowed porch with a dozen play pens! Other nurses were fetching infants to place them each into a pen. To my dismay, I found myself being lowered into a similar white play pen with a yellow floor pad. Scattered upon the pad were a collection of large wooden blocks, a rubber squeeze duck, my Teddy and a musical pull toy! And thus, I was left to survey my new play world as any toddler might. Standing up, I could see that play pen bars and a watchful nurse maid combined to make a perfect prison, at least for little Emma!

It then dawned on me that now was my chance! "Help me, I'm not a toddler, I'm James Dinadan!"

The nurses went about their watching of their particular charges as my nurse came to my pen to clap her hands as if to engage me in a game of patty-cake! Nobody understood a word I had said. It was just as if I were speaking baby talk! With a sigh of defeat, I turned from her silly game to sit upon the padding. The time moved slowly, to be interrupted by my nurse who checked me to be sure I were dry, fed me in a high chair and, in time, put me to bed.

In the middle of the night, I awoke to think about escape. Turning in my bed to try to slip from the secured bed clothing, I managed after a long struggle to slip down under the covers and then around the pinned opening. I then discovered that the pinned enclosure of my gown prevented me from standing up and the mittens upon my hands

prevented me from being able to remove the gown or open the pins that secured the hem.

I was trapped by my clothes which were designed to keep baby safe and secure. Reluctantly, I crawled back under the covers to soon return to where I had been when I started out. In the morning, my nurse found me wet, just as she had expected.

She changed me.

The day started with a play period alone on my crib covers.

Then a morning feeding.

After my meal, my nurse took me to a large rocker where she sat with me in her lap to talk to me and cuddle me with affection while I was dressed in nothing more than my diapers. From this mothering, she dressed me and took me to the play room.

Lunch.

More play with my nurse and alone again in my play pen.

A nap.

Returned to the play pen.

And then the wet nurses came to feed the smallest and I knew that another day had passed with supper, a little play period and then bedtime.

And thus, each day became the mirror of the one just past, except that I began to accept playing with my little toys, for what else was there to do? And, I began to respond to my nurse's words, trying to repeat them to her amusement, as any baby learns.

After several weeks, I had picked up the actual meaning of a dozen or so words and I thought I understood twice as many more. In short, I had the limited vocabulary of an eighteen month old baby. The problem was that I really didn't hear many more words that I could actually use for my peers had nothing more to babble and my nurse kept her conversations to a minimum. I had learned that words had to have a purpose if you were to learn a language at its simplest without any translation of symbolic meanings.



And then, my nurse began my rituals.

My gown was changed for a sleep dress that would allow me to crawl from my bed if I wanted to reach my potty. My nurse ceased to spoon feed me and turned to supervising my meal instead.

I learned a whole mass of new words associated with step by step procedures to arise from bed, wash, participate in dress, eat, ask for my potty, greet my nurse and indulge in our mutual play, and prepare for bed.

A new treat was added. I was no longer kept in diapers except at night. And a stroll in the estate garden in a baby carriage was a new freedom.

Of course, I had no idea of how long I was to stay there. And I soon found out that the doors were locked by the nurse maids to be sure that the toddlers stayed out of trouble.

After several months, I gave up the idea of escape, accepting the notion that I was secure.

I do not know when I stopped thinking in English and began to focus upon my prattled efforts to learn my new language, but it made it easier to learn new things.

It was easier to associate my identity as Emma in my new language, and I knew that I was most certainly a little girl, especially after the Doctor came to operate upon me so that I would not become ill again.

In a few weeks, I was up and around and I learned that it would soon be Christmas, and most certainly Mommy would come to visit me!

Maybe she would take me home to live with her...

Chapter Six: Charlotte Continues Her Story - I Become A Princess.

I must confess that the idea of being placed between the choice of staying in the asylum and being required to be a perfect little girl seemed to be a slight choice. Yet, I found that escaping the asylum was the most important decision in my life, even if I were kept as a little girl in a different kind of ordeal! With each passing day of the week, I dreaded that the head Matron might discover my deception and I would be returned to my mirror to never escape again, except through a doorway leading to insanity. And then the nurse came to give me a wonderfully fragrant bath in a real bath tub, for today was the day I was to leave!

When I stepped from the tub, the nurse wrapped me into a fluffy towel to take me back to my room..

“Oh, such pretty clothes, Lady Charlotte!” she sighed with envy, picking up a white silk and lace chemise which she held up for me to see, and I had some little doubts about my choice!

I stepped into the feather light garment that clung delicately to my body with every little curve all the more feminine. Over this went a white satin corset which pulled in my waist narrower than its own childish slimness in order to establish at an early age a basic hour glass figure with a waist which would fit in between the span of a large pair of men's hands.

I shivered at the very idea!

Next, came pale pink lace stockings to be attached to the corset waist garters. The white cotton and lace drawers came next. followed by a child's corset vest, a flannel petticoat to help shape the dress skirt, a full-skirted slip that barely touched my knees, and then the dress itself.

The dress was an absolute weapon of femininity with a short, full, pink velvet skirt, narrow bodice, huge plump sleeves and lace trimmed high collar and sleeve cuffs. A gold locket adorned my neck to rest in the gentle valley between my little girlish mounds.

“We must fix your hair,” the nurse observed, taking time to heat a French curling iron while she helped me into soft, white leather boots. When the iron was ready, she had me sit while she fussed my hair into a lovely golden short hair style. “You are beautiful, my Lady.”

I looked at the mirror she held for me and I had the strangest fear, knowing that the beautiful little girl in the mirror was me. Just then, the Matron entered, to clap her hands.

“Oh, Lady Charlotte, you are adorable. Your Mother will be so thrilled to see how absolutely beautiful her daughter is! But, first, I want to show you a little reminder.”

With these words, she took my hand and led me past the nurse out into the hallway. We walked down the stairs and I suddenly realized that she was taking me back to the pit!

I wanted to panic and run as fast as my little white boots could go! I feared that she was going to leave me in the pit dressed as I was, as she opened the door and led me down the stairs. I almost breathed a sigh of relief to see Charlotte sitting in my corner before the mirror and candle. What if she were to become well? I tried not to look at her.

"This is where you have lived these past years," the Matron noted, pointing to my old bench, "that was your bed. You just sat and stared like that poor girl by the mirror. This is where you will be returned, Lady Charlotte, if you do not make your Mother happy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Matron," I replied, understanding all too well.

"Good!" she concluded, leading me from the bowels of this pit of Hell, back to the Doctor's office. "Your Mother is waiting for you. Remember to kiss her after you curtsy your greetings like a polite young lady of fourteen."

"Yes, Matron," I replied with a curtsy, and entered the room after a light knock.

Lady Brian looked up from her discussion with the Doctor to study me. "Please come forward, Darling."

"I must advise you again..."

"Shush, not before the child! Isn't she beautiful, Doctor?"

I curtsied and then ran forward with childish delight, to throw my arms about her and kiss her. "Oh, Mommy, you came back for me!"

"Yes, Darling," she replied, after returning my hug and kiss and arising, "I've brought a coat, hat and muff for you. It's quite chilly outside."

"Oh, they're beautiful!" I sighed with proper appreciation, taking up the white, full length fur coat, to slip it on, allowing her the pleasure of buttoning it up. I was impressed with the fact that girls certainly wore comfortable coats, and I must confess, I really felt a strange thrill being dressed so, even if the corset did seem a bit tight.

"I want to thank you, Doctor, for your understanding," Mother said in formal tones before taking my hand and leading me through the door to the front hall foyer where she accepted the Matron's curtsy by embracing the woman and kissing her! "You have been so very kind to give me back my lovely Charlotte, Mrs. Stone. How can I ever thank you enough?"

"You have been more than kind, my Lady," Matron replied as they separated. "My boy is doing very well at Harrow. It's such a wonderful school for boys, my Lady!"

"It's little enough to repay your many kindnesses to my Charlotte," Mother acknowledged, leading me from the front door to an enclosed carriage where a footman held the door for us. "Come, we have a long ride ahead of us. If you wish to sleep, you may," she invited.

"Oh, no, I would rather talk with you, Mommy," I replied, seeing that it was Spring despite the early morning chill. Mother kept the conversation to fashion and efforts required to find a suitable wardrobe for me.

After hours of this same sort of aimless, feminine prattle, I fell fast asleep...

A soft warm wisteria laden breeze daintily filled my lungs, causing me to slowly stretch in the soft, ever so smooth and cool, sheets, feeling the full folds of a padded satin covered comforter between my legs. Although I could move my arms, I still felt as if I were tied by those compressing ropes. Brushing my hand along the smooth sheets, I opened my eyes with a start, realizing that they were made of slipper satin!

I sat up in a profusion of white satin and lace bedclothes to discover that I was similarly dressed in a full puff-sleeved, pink satin nightgown. Under the gown, I felt a tightly laced satin corset that created at the bodice of my gown an all too feminine waist with the added emphasis of two lovely little maiden breasts!

Looking about, I saw that I was in a large bed chamber with French windows leading to a lovely, flowering, Spring garden fresh from the evening rain in the warm glow of the morning sun. The room was decorated with dainty, floral trimmed, pastel pink, wall paper, lovely golden framed mirrors, a crystal chandelier and white furnishings to match the fluffy white rug. In short, a completely feminine boudoir!

In a wall mirror, I caught sight of a beautiful, little, golden haired, girl with her short hair done in tight, pert little curls. She wore a pink satin nightgown just like mine! And then I realized that it was me...

Uncertainly, I pulled up the skirts of my flowing pink nightgown, feeling even more feminine at the sight of the gown's richly ruffled, lace, hems and then the smooth, pink, satin of the tight corset that insured feminine curves from my loins to an incredibly narrow waist to the insulting reality of full little mounds of baby fat that created my breasts.

Arising from the bed, I held my skirts with one hand as my other tried to remove this humiliating piece of feminine armour, but it was too tightly laced in the back with the lace ends tucked in at the small of my back. Almost timidly, my fingers explored the tightly fitted loin covering which seemed more like a chastity belt than a Venus shield as the matrons called this monthly security belt. Just as I discovered how it opened to change the napkin and allow proper toilet, I discovered in the mirror two highly amused girls dressed in blue with white starched aprons and caps. I could have died in shame, dashing in a flurry of pink satin and lace for the bed.

"Good morning, Lady Charlotte," they chimed together in a giggling curtsy. The tallest arose from her curtsy to open a nearby door that led into a little dressing alcove, while the other made as if to remove the uncertain protection of my bedclothes, saying, "I am called Alice and my sister is Janet. We're your personal maids."

"Personal maids..." I repeated uncertainly. "Oh, my goodness!"

They both burst into fresh giggling over my silliness and I merely wished I were dead, especially when Janet began to display a white satin corset, pink silk hose and other dainties that quickened my fears. "Can't I dress myself, alone?"

The girls giggled again with Alice pulling the covers from my hands. "Oh, don't be so silly. We both have seen you completely naked. How do you think you came to be dressed as you are? And, if you knew anything about dressing and you were just the average little girl, perhaps you could dress yourself like my sister and myself do. But, we don't wear corsets, for most girls our age don't, nor do we have such beautiful

clothes or other feminine concerns of your station. It's our duty to bathe you, massage you with wonderfully feminizing lotions, arrange your golden hair and dress you so that your toilette is perfectly suitable for a princess. If your Governess is not pleased with how we attend you or your boudoir, she will birch us well!"

"Oh, if you must, you must," I shuddered, crawling from my bed to allow her to pull my nightgown off while her sister began to undo the lacing of my corset.

"Do I have to sleep in this thing?" I asked, thinking the talking might ease my total shame of being so quickly naked before two pretty girls barely my own age. "It's so tight!"

"Your Mother wants you to have a perfect waist and nicely shaped hips," Alice laughed, taking a pink lotion to spread it over my soft skin while Janet joined her in working the fragrant lotion, leaving me not one single inch of personal privacy! I think I must have blushed as pink as the lotion and I sighed with relief when they slipped a soft silken chemise over my chagrin.

Next, I stepped into a pair of pastel pink hose which were secured to a little set of garter snaps hanging from a white satin corset. "After all, it's only lightly tied," she continued, proving her words through pulling in the laces of the boned corset until I doubted that I could ever breathe again! "See what I mean?"

"Please, not so tight!" I managed, seeing that she was tying the laces without mercy while her sister added to my blushing consternation by taking her hand to each breast to raise them slightly until held by the satin busk forms. I closed my eyes, taking a moment to hide while Alice helped her sister with my drawers, flannel under petticoats, and then my short white lace slip.

And then came the dress!

It was of an ever so soft, polished pink silk with Dresden designs and lace trim. The newest style of full puff, Marlborough sleeves, a blouse effect front and high lace collar with fancy embroidery trimmed bolero; shirred around the neck, collar and cuffs, trimmed with a deep edge of fancy open work embroidery; two rows of embroidery in back running from shoulder to waist line; and a very full skirt that had a deep hem which reached to just below my knees, signaling that I was barely a teenager.

The boots were of white glace that was a bit tight, yet not nearly so tight as my corset. In the mirror I saw a remarkably beautiful girl in pink and white lace with a fantastically narrow waistline of unmistakably female curves.

"Do you know how to curtsy, Lady Charlotte?" Janet asked, surveying her handiwork with appreciation. "Your Mother and Governess will expect that."

I nodded and executed a curtsy.

"Oh, that will never do! You are as awkward as a tomboy," Janet scolded in disappointment to her sister's giggle. "You will watch my sister and do exactly as she does," Janet resolved, clapping her hands. "Curtsy!"

This embarrassment of monkey see, monkey do, progressed to a standing, walking, and sitting like a little lady and then Janet decided that her work was cut out for her but that I would do for the nonce. And then, to my terror, she opened the door to di-

rect me down the hall. "Follow the hall to the stairs and thence to the first door on your left. Your Mother is waiting for you there, my Lady."

"Thank you," I replied as I exchanged a curtsy with them, to see a nurse who I had seen at St. Vitus Asylum. She nodded and walked into a room...

In utter disbelief, I walked down the hall feeling my skirts floating with every dainty step with the teasing threat of revealing lacy slip or worse! It was quite impossible to think at all by the time I reached the base of the steps. My heart raced like a frightened rabbit's and I knew I would have screamed if anyone had seen me.

Slowly, I pushed aside the sliding door to reveal a sparkling white, sunlighted breakfast room with its French doors opened wide to a garden very much like mine, and then I realized that it probably was at the bottom of a hill that was crested by my garden. Shaking from head to foot, I entered the room while my eyes adjusted to the sun. Just in a cool shaded area was placed a white damask covered table at which sat a woman in a white house gown attended by a servant girl. With racing heart, I almost fainted when the door slid shut behind me with a loud click of its latch, leaving me with my back to the sea, so to speak, faced by the hordes of femininity in the form of Matron and maid...

Meekly, I curtsied in abject surrender.

"How perfectly adorable you look, Charlotte," my mother's all too familiar voice announced with sugared amusement. "Breakfast is just ready."

I came forward to deliver a dutiful kiss before taking my seat, remembering to spread my skirts as the girls had taught me. I knew that I would have to learn a great deal about being a girl if I intended to stay away from the asylum!

"Good morning, mother. It's a beautiful day, not at all chilly like yesterday."

"You were sleeping so well that I took the liberty of having your maids put you straight to bed," she replied, turning to the servant. "You may bring Lady Charlotte's breakfast, Jane."

She returned to study me for a moment in serious thought before smiling. "Are you pleased with your lovely clothes? And your boudoir? I so want to keep you happy with all the luxury a lady of quality requires."

A faint memory of these words haunted my mind and then I remembered a similar promise to my true step-mother. Yes, Fate had turned the tables!

I nodded and said, "I have never seen such a wonderfully feminine suite in all my life, and the garden nearby is so lovely. And if the rest of my clothes are as pretty as these, I shall be totally spoiled!"

And that was the truth...

"Oh, I'm so happy to hear that," she laughed, seeing that the servant girl was busy talking with somebody at the door. The girl curtsied to withdraw and fetch yet another tray as a woman dressed in pink entered to curtsy in a single flow towards our table.

"Ah, Miss Teasdale, may I present my daughter, Charlotte?" she introduced, motioning for me to arise and curtsy as a child must.

As I did her bidding, she smiled and continued, "Miss Teasdale is to be your Governess until this fall when school starts, and then each summer afterwards. She will see to it that you are completely made aware of the graces required of a young lady of quality, and I am sure that you will obey her every wish. I have told her that if you become uncontrollable, we must send you back. Do you understand?"

"It is hardly needed to threaten the child, my Lady," Miss Teasdale laughed, taking her seat as the servant entered to serve our breakfast.

I bowed my head and ate in silence with the two women. I was very much aware of their eyes studying my every movement. I was to be a prisoner in satin and lace as long as I stayed. I had to escape! They might even say I was younger!

"Come, Lady Charlotte," Miss Teasdale suggested, offering her hand across the table as she arose, "your Mother has much to do today and she doesn't need a... fourteen-year-old underfoot. We shall retire to the music room where we shall review the basics of posture and poise. Kiss your Mother and beg to be released with a sweet curtsy, Dearest."

She had just confirmed my fears...

Seeing no choice, except for a scene, I meekly asked for permission to leave, received it, and retreated with a curtsy, hand in hand with Miss Teasdale.

She led me into the music room where she located two straight backed chairs which she set about five feet apart, facing each other. Beaming a happy smile, she waved her hand in a sweep that took in most of the room and I noticed that its walls were almost completely mirrored so that everywhere I turned, I saw our full length reflections extending multiple times into glassed space.

"You have been ill so long that your Mother has requested that I assume you are without even the basic graces of a small child. She appears to have been quite correct. You stand with your legs apart like a gangling boy with your hands in hopeless disarray on your hips, of all places!" She gracefully swept into one of the chairs. "You will stand in front of the other chair."

Meekly, I moved to her wish.

"Now, you will place the heels together with your toes slightly turned out. Your back will be as straight as that of a soldier with your chin level." She nodded. "Place your hands behind your back, palm to palm, with your fingers pointed down the middle of your spine. Exactly. That's how a little girl is supposed to stand before her elders."

And thus, began my instructions.

From the childlike pose, I was taught to walk with dainty grace with elbows slightly bent and hands to my sides while I moved along an imaginary line. The image of a girl floated in the mirrors wherever I moved, in a thousand lovely mimics of my grace, with each perfectly executed turn resulting in a gentle flow of my full pink skirts. From standing, to walking, to turning, to sitting down and standing up, I moved to her whim, feeling more uncomfortable with the certain knowledge that I would soon acquire the grace they expected to be quite natural!

With my completion of these morning instructions, I learned from Miss Teasdale that she was to be my constant mentor from morning to night to be sure that my every manner and mannerism suited the wealth of feminine knowledge that I was to soon also acquire.

My instructions would not plumb the clever sciences or mathematics, nor would it explore strange foreign languages. Instead, I was plunged into the clever graces and manners to learn a language just as foreign to me as Latin; the strange dialectics of women and girls.

I soon learned, for example, that a mere sleeve could be dolman, bishop, melon, leg-of-mutton, envelope, short round, raglan, and such just by shape. In fact, everything seemed to acquire a myriad of names and meanings that I had been totally unaware of as a boy! It was as if a woman's mind was caught up with the variety of simple possessions that they cherished in an inwardness that pivoted upon a self conception of being beautiful and desirable.

With these lessons came the certainty of self possessiveness and an understanding of my new world where I knew how to be its center as a beautiful girl. From luxurious beauty treatments at the hands of my maids which left my body flawless in femininity, to the perfectly fitted and lovely clothes that suited a pretty young princess, to my every thought came a flood of praise from mother, Governess and servants over how perfectly beautiful and ladylike I was. Flattered by the truth of what I saw, I soon thrived upon this new image until it had captured my soul and I began to wonder if this weren't the real me!

Perhaps it was.

But, I suddenly sought to reverse this feminization, knowing that it was dominating whatever had been my real personality. This moment of truth came during my fifth week at a rather tedious session with Miss Teasdale who was teaching me how to fluctuate the tonal quality of my voice to suit the feminine manner of speaking as a lady of breeding.

"I will not prattle," I suddenly exclaimed after repeating the same phrase fifteen times. "This whole thing is impossible, quite impossible!"

"What's the matter, Dearest?" she asked in surprise.

"I am not your Dearest, I am not a lady, I'm, I'm... oh, Hell!" I turned and fled from my Governess, seeing her expression of horror from either my conduct or the very unladylike swear word.

Once out of the room, I stormed to my bedroom where I all but ripped my dress off, only to be frustrated by the material and the tears that welled into my eyes. I didn't want to cry, but my new soul had its way. I just stood there and cried like a spanked child until my maids came and undressed me without a word and prepared me for bed.

It was as if I'd been a very cranky baby that needed her rest to be better, yet I sensed their anxiety and I had too a moment's realization that they feared being punished for my misconduct. But, I was wrong, as events proved, they feared for my sanity.

With morning, they returned as if nothing had happened the day before. They chatted about their plans for a little holiday that Miss Teasdale had announced they could have. And they noted that I should go visiting with my mother. When I apologized for my actions the previous day, they nodded and noted that Miss Teasdale had told them that I wouldn't misbehave again, so all was forgotten.

I then slipped into a silk chemise, hose, feminine drawers, corset, petticoats and slip over which went a summer weight green suit dress with a bolero jacket and white blouse. My little feet were slipped into dainty black boots.

"Ah, Lady Charlotte is all prepared for her first trip," Janet teased, reminding me of the fact that in the past five weeks I hadn't been outside the house!

Nervously, I checked the fit of my clothes before my dressing mirror in wonder and fear that anyone might detect something amiss with the lovely little girl I saw. "Oh, Alice, do I look presentable?"

"You are beautiful, as always, Lady Charlotte," she countered with a little giggle, "and your petticoat is showing!"

"Where?" I demanded anxiously, brushing my skirts to hear their teasing laughter which brought a pout to my lips over their unfairness. Wasn't it bad enough to be seen by others this way and have to worry that I might not look proper?

"Good morning, girls," Mother announced, entering the room with Miss Teasdale to accept our curtsies with a nod. Under her arm she carried a large basket and by her dress, I could see that she was ready for our visit, wherever that was. She looked at me with a sad sort of smile, announcing, "I think you should put on a wrap and a little hat, Dear. You shall eat later."

"I am so sorry about yesterday," I offered, "I really am, Mommy, and Miss Teasdale."

"And well you should be," my Mother observed with a shrug. "But, I am sure you will never shock us again with such insane behavior." She nodded in agreement with herself while Alice adjusted a little flowered hat to my head and Janet helped me into a summer reefer styled jacket. "We must go now before I change my mind."

"Yes, my Lady," Miss Teasdale replied, taking my hand in tow and soon we were riding in an open carriage through the crowded morning streets of London, with Miss Teasdale at one side of me and Mother at the other, as if to guard me.

I was certain that all eyes were upon me as we moved along the streets. At least it suited my mixture of ego and fear to think that. Yet, I knew that the hundreds of moving people and carriages had little or no interest in just one more carriage. I resolved to sit with my back to the driver by moving to the front seat, but just then our carriage stopped and a footman held open the low door after adjusting the step.

After my Mother had disembarked from the carriage, she took my hand to help me out, to be followed by Miss Teasdale.

"We're here now, Dearest," she observed, allowing the footman to take her basket and follow as she and Miss Teasdale took me in tow. "Please do not make things more difficult than they are!"

We passed through an iron gate into a high stone fenced yard that surrounded a massive red stone fortress with barred windows and an imposing door with a brass knocker and plate which my Mother struck several times.

Glancing upward, I saw a keystone over the door which had been carved with the inscription,;

SAINT VITUS ASYLUM FOR THE HOPELESSLY INSANE.

“NO! DEAR GOD! NO!” I screamed, tearing free from my mother's hand to kick at Miss Teasdale while the door swung open to allow two powerful nurses to grab my kicking, scratching and screaming form and drag me inside past a matron who forced a wet gag into my mouth!

“There, my Lady, it appears that she is quite under control now,” a man's voice sounded in the midst of my continuing struggles as the matron and nurse began to undress me! “She is obviously quite insane.”

“Oh, please take good care of her,” my Mother sobbed, being supported by Miss Teasdale. “She's my only child, Doctor.”

“UMMM!” I tried to scream as I was held stark naked before them and I could see the Doctor's interest and rejection because I was too childish! “UMMMMA!”

“Put her in the violent ward,” he ordered, turning to console my Mother as the two nurses pulled my naked form up the staircase and then along a hallway that ended at a solid oak door with a metal peep hole and some sort of little trap door. They opened the door and pushed me naked into a pitch black room with a narrow shaft of light high above where a little window must have been! And then the door slammed!

Frantically, I ran to the door. “GUUUMPH!” My fingers tore at the gag and pounded the padding inside the door while the dank smell of the padded cell flooded my hysterical mind.

I don't know how long it took before the gag was out and I screamed my pleas to be released. But, finally, I sank to my knees on the canvas covered, padded floor and cried. It must have been hours later when the urge to satisfy my bodily urges forced me to search my little room to discover a tin basin. I responded to my needs and found that the basin slipped through the trap door at the base of my door.

A few minutes later, someone pushed it back in and I yelled for help, declaring that I wasn't insane, that I was being held against my will. The reply was a moronic chuckle and then silence.

Lifting the basin to set it aside, I discovered that it had not been emptied, but then the smell was gone and I smelled oatmeal mush.

“Oh, God!” I cried, thinking of how I was to be fed from the same pan! I just wouldn't eat. And so, hours again passed, leaving me to the blackness and my fears that I would indeed go mad if I were to be left here long. Responding to nature again, I pushed the pan outside.

In a little while, a great screaming sounded down the hall, to be joined by others until I huddled in fear in the corner, clasping my knees to my chest...And then the screams and wild laughter calmed down and I fell asleep...

Morning came to the sound of screams and the door opening! A hand lamp revealed the Doctor and a nurse.

"Put her in a hospital gown," he noted as I clung to the wall at my back in terror, seeing a syringe in his hand. He deftly caught my wrist and the needle struck my inner arm, burying itself deep in the flesh as he pushed down the glass plunger. "There, that should keep her calm."

"I'll be good," I begged. "Really I will. Please tell my Mother I'll be good! Oh, God, I will!"

"Of course, child," the nurse sighed, slipping a plain blue pinafore gown over my head to tie the wrap around apron in back to permit me reasonable modesty. "Come along. We shall try the open ward. And if you are quiet, perhaps we can find a nice room with sunlight. Come, Dear."

She led me past the Doctor, along the hallway past past basins full of warm meal upon a cart being pushed by an old crone dressed in a uniform like mine.

The old crone gave a chuckle. "She says she isn't insane, nursie, just visiting us for the rest of her life, poor missy." It was Aunt Patty...

I shuddered, thinking of the word "hopelessly." I looked at the nurse in disbelief. "I can't be here for the rest of my life! Tell me it's not true!"

She slowly shook her head to dismiss her own thoughts rather than to answer my pathetic question. She opened a door at the end of this hall and motioned me into a large room with rows of beds mostly occupied by women staring fixedly at nothing while others sat huddled against the wall rocking themselves as they sang nonsense songs.

"Oh, no, nurse, please, I don't belong here!"

"She don't belong here," a dozen voices cackled and hands reached out to pull me into the room as the nurse closed and locked me inside with the insane!

"What be your name, girl?" a lanky girl asked, pushing the others back. "Mine is Karen."

"Charlotte," I managed, seeing her nod and then walk away as if that was not the name I was supposed to have. I was feeling quite sleepy from the drug so I found an unoccupied bed and fell asleep, to wake up later huddled in a corner! I don't know how I came to be there. And when I turned, I saw that the inmates were eating at a long table from tin basins with their fingers cupping the mush to their lips. I was terribly hungry, so I moved to the basin rack to claim one which Aunt Patty filled with two scoops of mush.

"Don't worry, Dearie, I used it just awhile ago myself," she laughed, lifting the back of her skirt in delight over my blanched white disgust and sudden sickness. "Dainty little girl, poor child, poor child. I was just teasing. Aunty Patty gave you a clean pan. Eat or you will lose your strength."

I nodded and slid to the bench, to scoop my hand into the mush, trying not to think what it felt like as I forced the ooze into my mouth. When the meal was over, I re-

treated to a bed and sat there seeing that my efforts to escape had failed because of a moment's rebellion. Oh, how could I have been so utterly foolish?

"Charlotte, come here!"

I arose from my staring at a ray of sunshine. The floor cracks raced back and forth before my eyes, tracing their way through the stone slabs to keep up with me. The nurse paused at the great staircase and then she took my hand and led me down toward the pit and the fear of the black cellar came back to my mind where I knew that the hopelessly insane, like poor Charlotte, awaited me! Perhaps in time, I would...

The nurse paused to straighten my pinafore before she opened a set of doors to allow me into a waiting room to see Miss Teasdale!

"Oh, Miss Teasdale," I exclaimed in wildest joy, thinking to rush to her side, but a moment of sanity clung to me and I quickly curtsied to stand just as she had taught me with my palms pressed behind my back. "Good day, Miss Teasdale. It's so nice to see you."

"And you, Lady Charlotte," she observed in mock courtesy, motioning me forward, observing my efforts at walking as she expected. "Your Motherwonders if you would like to try to come back home?"

"Oh, yes, Ma'am!" I exclaimed. "And I promise to be a perfect little girl and..."

"As the Doctor says," she countered with cold detachment, "it's not likely that you'll be perfect, but he thinks that we may be at least safe. You are only a threat to yourself. And, if you become rude, we shall simply return you here."

I bowed my head with a knowing nod, seeing that I was their prisoner in either case. "Yes, Ma'am."

She took a cloak from a basket by her chair. "Slip this on. And when we get home, I shall scrub you clean. I cannot let your maids see you all dressed in filth. They are sensitive girls."

With these words, she wrapped me in the cloak and took me to the carriage, and suddenly I was on my way home, crying my heart out in sheer disbelief that I had left that awful place. Whatever they did to me, I would never cause a bit of a fuss. I resolved to be perfect. Anything to stay away from those cruel walls. True to her words, Miss Teasdale gave me a complete bath in near boiling water, using laundry soap to make sure that I was completely free of anything that crawled. She then bathed me twice again to be sure, ending my bath with a lovely, fragrant rub with warm, rich creams.

By supper time she determined that I was suited to a light meal, after which I was bathed again and my hair was set in lovely curls before I was dressed in my pink satin night corset and gown for an early retirement into the absolute glory of my luxurious bed.

It was perfectly divine as a reason to love being a young lady. I actually liked being laced into the pink corset to see my little breasts swell into maidenly mounds under the firm satin and bone. My satin bed was like a pink pool of coolness and I moved through the slipper satin sheets like a fish, delighting in sweet, clear water. I think it

must have been hours before I surrendered to sleep, so afraid was I that I might be taken away from this joy.

"Oh, Mistress! Oh, Alice, Lady Charlotte is here!" Janet's voice said, awakening me from my sleep. "Oh, Mistress, you're so pale," she exclaimed, fetching a pink frock from the closet to see my pinafore from St. Vitus hanging upon the door, all neatly cleaned and starched. "What's this, Mistress?"

"An apron," Miss Teasdale replied, entering the room, to smile with amused pleasure when I stood properly. "She is to always have it on the door to remind her of what happens to bad little girls."

The girls looked at one another and shrugged, continuing to dress me into a pale pink satin corset, lovely pink lace hose, pink slip and petticoats with layers of ruffles. Over this went a short dress of sheerest pink embroidered lace and ruffles over an underlining of white silk.

As I stepped into my white glaze boots, I could see my lovely skirts float upon a cloud of lace dainties and I just knew that I was beautiful, even when my maids teased me in front of Miss Teasdale, saying, "See how darling our little baby girl is, all ruffles and lace!"

"We must show her to her mother, who has a little surprise for her," Miss Teasdale promised, taking my hand and leading me down the stairs to breakfast where my Mother awaited.

"Good morning, Mommy," I exclaimed with a dainty curtsy, causing her to look up from her eating to beam happily and open her arms to summon me for a kiss. Moving into her arms, I kissed her again and again. "Oh, Mommy, Mommy!"

"There, there, baby, you're safe at home with your Mommy," she said, comforting me with another hug and kiss before she straightened my dress and waved me to the chair facing her. "Your hair is lighter, like your skin, so pale gold against the snow. It's just beautiful!"

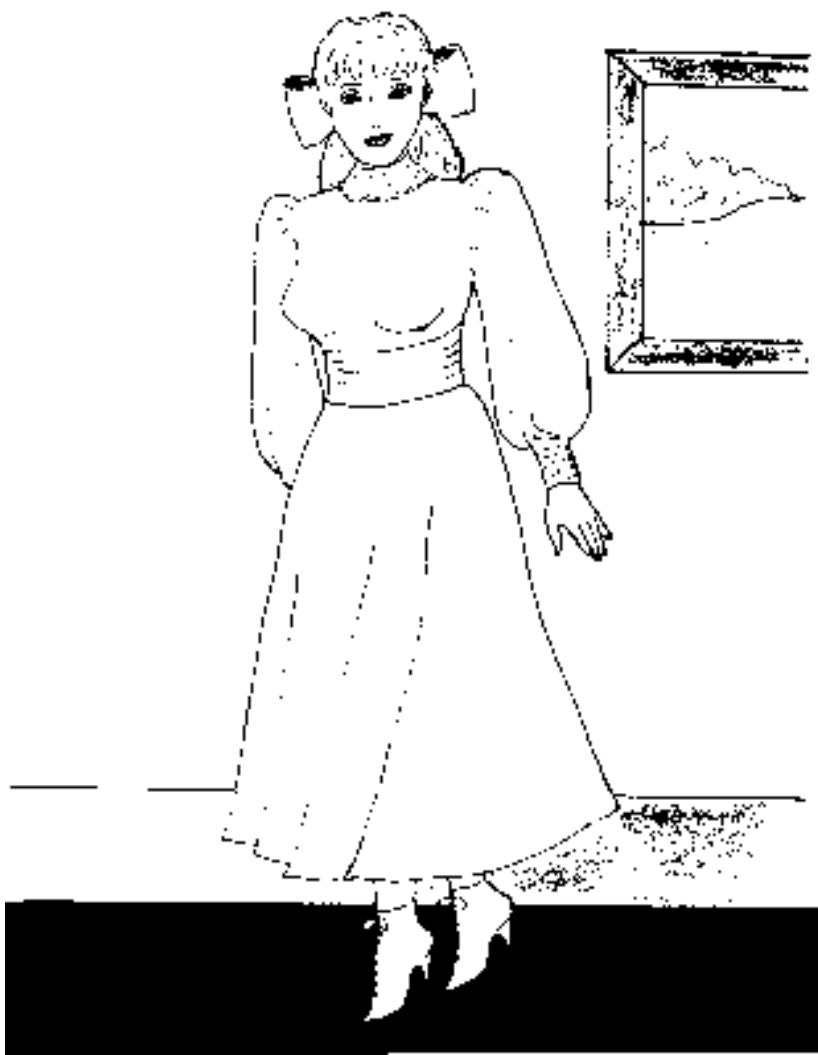
"Thank you, Mommy." I almost dipped my hand into the bowl of mush and a shudder touched my spine, but I caught myself and picked up my spoon.

"I do believe that she has lost a little weight. But, other than that, she seems little changed," Miss Teasdale noted with a smile, adding, "I do believe that her little vacation has improved her manners slightly."

"It's not nice to tease the girl," Mothersighed, watching me as I ate. "She looks so very beautiful, like an angel in pink fluff. And the Doctor says that she's a perfect little girl in every way despite her vacation at the asylum, and she is now domesticated and docile. For that, we should be thankful."

She saw my hurt wince and turned to her morning mail which the maid had placed upon the table on a silver tray. "Oh, my goodness! School is about to start in two weeks and Charlotte hasn't a thing to wear!" She turned from her letter towards Miss Teasdale. "You must take her shopping, now!"

"Yes, my Lady," Miss Teasdale replied, seeing this as the opportune moment to make our withdrawal, which we did, hand in hand with polite curtsy. At her direction,



the carriage was hitched and I put on a pink reefer coat, white gloves and a little hat, and we were on our way. Soon, the carriage was in the heart of London, making its way through the morning traffic and I had the awful feeling that she might be taking me back to the asylum, but we drew up instead before a corset shop.

The lady in white was delighted in my figure as I was forced to stand in the shame of my pink chemise while she measured me in detail and paraded out a frightening array of dainty foundations and lingerie, until my Mother was convinced I might actually die of shame. With this ordeal hardly left, I was ushered into a dress shop that specialized in young ladies of quality and there I was stripped to my corset and stuck with pins until I felt like a little satin cushion in a sewing basket filled with many needles.

With the boxes of my new school wardrobe, at least that little that did not need to be altered, I was returned to our carriage and taken next for shoes, and then hats. Without pause, I was returned to the dress shop where I changed into a lovely white velvet dress with a party sash of pink satin to match my hose and hair bow. In a moment, white lace gloves, a dainty flowery hat and white reefer coat completed my wardrobe as I was led to the front of the shop to await my Mother and Governess who soon arrived, dressed in evening clothes, to fetch me to our carriage.

"You're beautiful, Little Princess," Mother exclaimed, taking her seat and signaling the driver to move on, "we're going to a very special affair."

Ignoring my girlish questions, Mother turned to Miss Teasdale to discuss matters concerning the opening of Brian House and the delivery of my school wardrobe. And then the carriage turned down Barre Lane to stop before Dinadan House!

An array of carriages surrounded ours to discharge little girls about my age with their mothers, to be greeted at the door by Mr. Fell's Mother who I knew to be the Head Mistress of a very fashionable girls' school!

"Mrs. Choisey, may I present my daughter, Charlotte," Mothersaid in her sweetest tones as the amused Head Mistress accepted my childishly nervous flurry of skirts as an awkward affair that she would soon correct. "Mrs. Choisey is the Head Mistress at your new school, Dearest, Choisey Finishing School for Young Ladies."

"How do you do," I managed rather lamely, trying to move on.

"I do hope that you shall like our school, Lady Charlotte. Your Motherhas told me of your unfortunate past, but with proper beauty treatments and with my firm instruction, I am sure that you will be most happy. Our girls are all from the very best families, and it is my singular purpose to assure each girl that she will be suitably prepared for a good marriage as a loving and devoted wife. When you are of age, I'm sure that it will be quite easy to find a husband for a girl so beautiful as you will be."

"Thank you," I acknowledged, trying to find the thread of her conversation, and dire prediction, wishing to avoid it at all costs. A good marriage, indeed! My Mothertook me in tow to present her daughter to her friends, who in turn, introduced me to their daughters. I had never thought that I should ever be so at a loss, but all my life I had avoided girls. Now I wanted to kick myself for such stupidity, for what was I to do among my peers? My problem paused as we were all ushered into a formal meal which was the test of manners that kept my mind off the curious glances of some of the matrons and their children.

But then I heard their whispers and I could soon see that their curiosity was directed to two subjects, my illness and my curious likeness to the Family Dinadan. The former was satisfied by tales of how I really wasn't dangerous, just pathetic. The other was answered with a knowing look at my Motheroffset by the fact that her late husband was a cousin of the Dinadan Family.

It was just that simple. I was accepted as Lady Charlotte and given to play with the girls after supper under the eyes of various mothers selected to be our games Mistresses. With this finished, we were treated to a lecture on Choisey Finishing School, which stressed academic achievement and the fact that the school had everything a young lady needed. I was sure that half the girls dreaded the place almost as much as their mothers looked forward to shipping them off to such a fine school. When the affair was over, Mother collected various papers and booklets about the school and bid farewell to almost all. I then realized that we were left with Mrs. Choisey who led us to the second floor to a large white and crystal boudoir where I saw the Duchess of Auberan!

I was about to run to her as her step-son and beg for protection, but my hours in St. Vitus had taught me restraint, and it was very likely that she had been responsible for sending me there in the first place! I had not overlooked the fact that her true son was now the Duke! My security depended upon her believing that I was indeed, the Lady Charlotte Brian!

"Ah, our little girl," she announced as my new Mothersqueezed my hand in a downward motion, all but forcing a curtsy. "Come here and greet your Aunt. I've heard so much of your recovery and progress."

Biting my lip, half in fear of anger, half in fear of tears, I moved to face her strangely towering, seated form. My heart was racing with the shame of being pre-

sented before her, of all people, dressed as a little girl in white velvet, satin and lace. And then, to my utter confusion and chagrin, she took me into her arms to kiss me and then straighten my dress as if I were a baby.

“Your Mother and I grew up together,” she noted with approval, feeling the stiff corseting beneath my dress. “You will have a perfectly divine figure by the time you are finished with school. I would have loved to have seen you with the other girls at play, but I have been a bit fragile of late.” She smiled.

“I suppose girls haven't changed all that much since I was a child. My sister was angelic like you and she loved presents. I have one for you, and that is why I wanted to see you.” She took the liberty of straightening my satin sash, causing me to blush. She smiled and picked up a small wooden chest from a nearby table. “Your father was a cousin of my husband's. I suppose that I am your distant Aunt. But, more important to you is the fact that you are a relative to a line that now consists only of myself and my dear son, now that the other boys are dead.”

Dead! Were the others really dead, or buried in an asylum! I shuddered.

“Your Mother and you are Dinadans too. We four are the last of the noble line,” she continued. “That is why I think you should have these. They were my husband's first wife's gift from his mother.” She opened the chest to reveal a beautiful diamond necklace and earring set! It had been my late mother's. I had seen her wear it at parties. She loved them so! And now they were to be mine to wear, as a young lady! How twisted was Fate!

“Oh, they're magnificent,” my new Mother exclaimed, causing me to see my duty as I kissed the Duchess and gave her a hug. “She will wear them at her presentation. They will go perfectly with her white satin!”

“Oh, thank you,” I fairly gushed, seeing that the audience was over.

“I shall sponsor her, if you wish,” the Duchess offered, taking my mother's hand. “When she has finished school.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Mother replied with a deep curtsy as we withdrew, leaving Mrs. Choisey with the Duchess.

“My little Princess,” Mother exclaimed, placing the jewel box into her coat. “You are to be presented at Court when you graduate from school. That means that your social life is assured and you will meet the most eligible men in the whole Empire!”

This new terror traveled with me home and thence off to school when the time came. I was to be paraded before the Queen! I must escape...Somehow!

Chapter Seven: Abigail Continues Her Story - I Learn Not To Believe In Cinderella.

I guess that it's best to measure a year by its seasons. From the Christmas holidays through Spring, I could not really testify to too much change, unless it was in the type of drudgery. Even my dreams were filled with the step by step process of cleaning something. It was clear that there would soon be nothing in the kitchen that I had not cleaned a dozen times or more!

With the end of one particular chapel in the late Spring, I was about to march two by two with my form to learn more of the pleasures of pot cleaning when Mistress Adams stopped me and had me follow her to Mrs. Crisp's office! She motioned for me to knock and enter, which I did with a curtsy.

"Come in."

Fearing the worst, I entered, knowing that there were only two reasons why a girl came to her office; to receive a visitor or a beating from Madame Birch. Thus far, I had had no reason to expect the first and was perhaps long overdue for the latter! I curtsied.

"Abigail, your guardian wishes to talk with you."

"Yes, Mrs. Crisp," I curtsied again towards Mrs. Gretch. "At your service, Ma'am."

"Ah, that is a wonderful improvement," Mrs. Gretch commented with a nod of approval. "Do you like your new school, Abigail?"

"It's a good school, Ma'am," I replied with a curtsy, not wishing to lie. "It will teach your humble servant her proper place, Ma'am."

"Indeed, yes," she agreed with a pleased smile, "a vast improvement. You are no longer fat and slovenly, and your manners have improved immensely."

"Thank you, Ma'am." A curtsy of acknowledgment.

"Mrs. Crisp has been giving me her report upon your progress," she noted.

"Abigail is basically flighty with a tendency to day-dream," Mrs. Crisp observed, opening a report book. "She works very hard under supervision, but tends to dawdle when left alone."

She scanned the page. "A talkative child filled with silly impertinences. Much in need of a firm hand. Curtsies prettily and has excellent feminine posture. Far too pretty for her best behavior. She will do."

Mrs. Crisp placed the report book aside. "I recommend she stay here this summer. She is not ready for the service you propose."

My hopes fell almost before they arose. Did Mrs. Crisp plan to take me in service for the summer? Bowing my head in shame, I awaited my dismissal.

"I think that the girl needs to gain a little experience," Mrs. Crisp countered. "Would you like to serve in a great house this summer?"

"If it would please you, Ma'am," I replied formally with a happy smile of hope.

"She will be a burden," Mrs. Crisp observed coldly, "she is capable of only the simplest of chores and her manners are still quite rough."

"Perhaps you are right," Mrs. Gretch replied, but then she shrugged. "I think that the child needs a chance to prove herself. If she fails, I shall leave her here next summer, unless you are pleased with her progress at school. But, for now, I will promise to give her chores that are simple, and she shall be kept where her lack of manners will be least noticed."

"Very well, Mrs. Gretch."

Mrs. Gretch fetched a lady's travel casket from the side of her chair. "I have brought a dress and cloak for your travel clothes. Please dress. We have a long journey."

"You may withdraw, girl."

I curtsied and withdrew with the chest in hand, feeling joy at my chance to see the outside world.

I would not fail her.

Retreating to the dormitory, I quickly opened the chest to find a simple, dark blue, cotton dress with white, lace collar and cuffs. It was classically beautiful to my eyes as was its full length under slip with real lace trim. A real dress and not a plain uniform. The cloak was of matching blue and just as pretty to my eyes. Undressing, I arranged my sleeping space before dressing in my new clothes. Packing my uniform and few toilet articles, I checked my sleeping area to make sure that all was well.

I then went to Mistress Adams to report the good news and accept her kiss of departure before I returned to the Head Mistress's chambers.

In a few minutes, I was riding with Mrs. Gretch in an open carriage. It was a beautiful Spring day with the sun smiling from a clear blue sky and birds all aflutter like my own joys. I was to be a servant in a great house all summer long!

"While we are traveling, perhaps you can tell me of your training, girl, so that I may best judge your value to the household?"

"As you wish, Ma'am," I began, recounting my experiences with a hidden humiliation of being humbled before a mere housekeeper. But, she was now so high in rank above me, that I knew my place, even if my pride were hurt. She asked a myriad of questions, seeking every detail to make certain of my truth and training. When I was finished, she nodded her approval.

"Mrs. Crisp does very well by her girls."

From then on, the ride was silent. We paused for lunch at a wayside inn, and despite my fears, I passed well as a young girl. Soon, we were on our way again. Just prior to supper, we pulled through a great stone archway and moved up a poplar lined driveway to a great Late Georgian mansion with sprawling, well-kept grounds. In a moment, we were in the servants' yard where the driver stopped the carriage and helped us dismount to follow behind to the servants' entrance with our luggage.

"Ah, Mrs. Gretch," a tall matron in black greeted, opening the door to our knock, "and this must be the child, Abigail."

I curtsied and then followed her lead into the servants' foyer.

"Mrs. Pliss is in charge of the domestic staff, Abigail. A Mr. Abbot is the major-domo, but you shall not have reason to see him," Mrs. Gretch commented as I repeated a deep curtsy towards my new Mistress, Mrs. Pliss.

"Where shall I assign her?"

"Scullery and chambers," Mrs. Gretch advised. "She is still a bit rough and not at all too bright."

"I see," she observed, looking towards a maid. "Fetch Mrs. Demming."

The girl curtsied to leave and in a minute, returned with a plump woman dressed in a white uniform spattered with food.

"This is Abigail, Mrs. Demming. She is to work in the scullery and clean chamber pots. Susan can serve as a cook's helper."

"Yes, Ma'am. Come girl, you have work to do," Mrs. Demming ordered, taking my hand as I executed a curtsy to withdraw in her brisk charge. She took me up a back flight of stairs to an attic room much in need of cleaning. "Your uniform is in the closet. You will change and I shall wait to be sure that you are neat."

I curtsied and quickly removed my cloak and dress to fetch from the closet a pink and white candy striped uniform with a Dutch pinafore apron. Hanging my dress, cloak and pretty slip, I put on my school slip and the new uniform before turning to face Mrs. Demming.

"Come, I have supper to prepare," she noted, leading me back to the kitchen and then to a large cleaning scullery just filled with pots and pans and dishes! "When they are clean, you may go to bed. In the morning, you will fetch the chamber pots from the rooms during breakfast and clean them good enough to eat from."

Hours later, after finishing the supper dishes, I half dragged myself to the dirty room to realize that it too needed to be cleaned before I went to bed. By the time I was half dead, I managed to find my cotton gown and crawl into bed. I had hardly slept a second when the cock crow awakened me to yet another day. Dressing in a clean uniform, I reported to the scullery to handle the breakfast pots before I was released to collect the bedroom chamber pots onto a wheeled, covered cart. I disposed of the waste and then set about cleaning the china bowls until they glistened clean, which was good, since Mrs. Demming actually made me eat my breakfast from one!

It was humiliating, but instructive.

The days of summer were without any real human contact during the work day which started from dawn and continued until well into the night. All I saw were piles of kitchen goods to clean along with thousands of smelly chamber pots. It was an endless stream. In my spare time, I had to clean my own clothes and keep my room clean so that I would be presentable.

From time to time, I would see the splendid country guests of Sepoy Hall, to be entertained by Lady Greensmith, but it was not my place to notice them nor be noticed by them. I was but a shadow that passed unnoticed through the corner of their eyes.

And then, my summer ended with my return to the asylum where school began again. The school year moved quickly despite the exactness of each day and then suddenly, Mrs. Gretch came to collect me for the summer again. This summer, I served as a scrubbing girl to keep polished the long halls, stairs and many rooms of Sepoy Hall until each shone like the wall mirrors. With the end of that summer, I was returned to school. It had been a strange summer. Like the previous summer, I was not really in human company. I could not really explain why the summers seemed so empty to the other girls who sought to hear of life in a great hall. I was almost relieved when schoolwork came again.

I can not honestly say that when Mrs. Gretch came to fetch me the next summer that I was actually happy. I could see nothing but more pots or floors to be kept clean. It was good that I could keep them clean so that Mrs. Pliss wouldn't complain, but it was so lonely. When I dismounted from the carriage, I was greeted by Mrs. Pliss who took me to a Mrs. Claire.

"This is our little Abigail," Mrs. Pliss announced as I curtsied to the rest of the presentation. "She shall assist one of your chamber maids. And, she is to have one day off each week."

"Yes, Ma'am," Mrs. Claire replied with a curtsy, motioning for me to come closer, and when Mrs. Pliss left, Mrs. Claire smiled. "I have seen you the past two years. You are a hard working girl. Mrs. Pliss has given you a wonderful chance for advancement. Do you appreciate that?"

"Yes, Ma'am," I curtsied.

"Ah, so solemn a child. Remove your cloak and let me see you better."

I followed her request.

"Turn about." I turned about, feeling a bit silly.

"You are a beautiful girl," she commented seriously, bringing a blush to my cheeks, "a real catch when you are of age. And such a pretty smile."

She nodded her approval.

"You shall live with Misty. She's about your age and the same size. I think you will find her a good teacher."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"Yes," she replied, leading me out of the room to the servants' quarters where she stopped by one of the room doors, to open it, revealing a neat little bedroom with two beds, a dressing table, two dresser chests and a commode. The room was a far cry from my little attic room. It was quite cheerful. "Do you like it?"

"Oh, yes, Ma'am," I replied with a happy curtsy.

"Well, then," she half laughed, opening the closet to remove from it a pink and white candy-striped uniform, "you had better change into your uniform, child."

I curtsied and dressed in the basic household uniform with a chamber maid's full apron and puff hat while she watched, commenting upon my slim waist and wide hips. "We shall have to find a young man for you sooner than I thought. You are really in full bloom. I was married when I was sixteen, barely a year older than you are now."

The idea frightened me, for I could see that she clearly meant do do as she had suggested. She had taken a matronly interest in me and now resolved to find a husband for me.

"We shall discuss the matter again. Misty is changing beds on the third floor of the west wing. You will report to her."

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied with a pert curtsy, withdrawing to my duties. I could not believe it, I was to be a maid's assistant! Moving quickly down the stairs, I executed a

curtsy before a lady and continued up the hall until I came to a bedroom where a tall, dark-haired girl was changing the sheets.

"At your service, Miss."

"Oh, you must be Abigail," the girl exclaimed happily. "We are to be roommates. I have the bed by the window, you know."

"Yes, Miss," I replied with a curtsy.

"Oh, Dearest, please relax," she laughed, fluffing out a pillow. "You will find the linen at the end of the hall. Take the next room."

I curtsied and fetched the clean linens for the next room to begin my duties. For the rest of the day, I helped to change bed linens and clean up the rooms in the west wing. At lunch and supper, I helped to serve the servants' table and just after supper, I was released from duties to join Misty.

"Now," Misty exclaimed, sitting upon the edge of her bed, dressed in her night gown, "let your hair down and we shall have some girl talk. I'm Misty Brown. My folks work one of the tenant farms. I heard that you were an orphan?"

"Yes, Misty," I replied, removing my apron and dress. "I'm related to Mrs. Gretch."

I continued, finding the first person a bit difficult to use after so many years of hard instruction to drop any personal thoughts in favor of my superiors. The slip and drawers came next with the flannel petticoat. "Would you help me with my corset?"

"Of course, how did you tie it so tight?"

"One of the girls at school did it," I sighed, feeling the corset release itself. "Do you wear one too? All the girls at school must."

"Mom is death on them," Misty replied, looking at the garment with pure envy. "Can I put yours on, just to see?"

"Sure," I laughed, helping her into the corset noting that her natural waist was a bit plump. "We must not tie it too tight. It might hurt."

In a minute, she was holding her breath and exhaled with a giggle. "Oh, it feels like I can hardly breathe," she exclaimed, turning to look at my naked form. "Why, you're perfect. My breasts aren't anywhere near as full as yours and your waist is so narrow. You don't need a corset, Abigail!"

"I must wear it," I sighed, slipping into my night gown. "It helps my posture."

"Well, I'm going to talk to Mom," she resolved, allowing me to help her from the garment. "And you are going to come home with me on our day off. I want you to meet my cousin, Will. He's home from India and he has ever so many great stories, and he's a real man." She giggled at the thought. "He'll like you."

"Oh, I don't think I should," I countered, feeling strangely attracted to the idea of a real man.

"You must. A girl must be seen if she is to attract a man," Misty said with authority. "And I'm sure Mrs. Claire will approve."

Thus it was settled and with Mrs. Claire's permission, I joined Misty in a pony cart for the ride to her home. I wore my blue cotton with a little flowered hat and white gloves.

The Brown cottage was about two miles from the hall. Mrs. Brown greeted us at the door dressed in a simple house dress and a broad smile to match her rather ample plumpness. She exchanged kisses with her daughter and took me in for a matronly hug and kiss with much concern for my "half-starved" look. "I have tea and fresh bread with lots of churned butter and sweet honey.. Come in, girls, and tell me all about the great hall. I've heard that Mrs. Pliss is expecting and Mrs. Jones, the Game-keeper's wife is about due for their fifth."

"Is there anything I can do to help, Ma'am?"

"You relax, poor child, I know well enough about your work. I slaved for the Lady herself when I was younger." She presented a serious nod and fetched a tea pot while her daughter cut the warm bread. Soon we were at tea and talked about anything that took Mrs. Brown's fancy. First we ran through the local folk and then matters concerning the Duchess of Auberan's affairs and growing wealth, and Mrs. Brown's opinion that she was a great woman who all would gladly die for. "She being so kind and blessed. No mark against Her Grace!"

"Oh, Mom, poor Abigail is full of gossip," her daughter laughed from her eating. "Is Bill still visiting?"

"Ah, a girlish plot," Mrs. Brown chuckled, looking me over more closely. "You are of a marriageable age, Mistress Smith, and Bill would be a fine catch for any lass. He's a corporal in the regular army and a fine figure of a man." She smiled and studied me intently. "Yes, my daughter was right bringing you. What sort of dowry do you have?"

I blushed and wondered if I shouldn't run, but the thought of having a real boyfriend attracted me. I would be the envy of all the rest of the girls at school!

"Mom, she isn't ready for that!" Misty laughed, taking my hand into hers. "Where are they?"

"Cutting hay in the south field."

Without a chance to protest, I found myself following in tow across a spring field to a stone fence and then along the fence to a little wooded area with a duck pond and thence to another stone fence where Misty cautioned me to be silent. In the field, two men were cutting the hay and tying it before dumping the bales into an ox cart. The gray haired man was undoubtedly Misty's father.

He was almost six foot tall and stripped to the waist. His golden brown skin rippled in glistening sweaty sheen over powerful hard muscles. From time to time, he would pause and roar with laughter over something her father said, the deep masculinity of the laugh touching my very soul as my eyes saw him pause to scratch the bulging proof of his sex beneath the tight pants.

And then, I saw him calmly undo his trousers as Misty clutched my hand in anticipation. His strong fingers encircled an organ of great size that emptied in a stallion's pouring!

“Better not let Misty's girl friend see that,” Misty's father laughed. “You'll scare the poor girl right out of her wits!”

“That's for later,” he replied in deep masculine tones that actually speeded my heart as Misty pulled me forward as if to catch him buttoning his pants! He blushed like a schoolgirl to her giggling laughter and he turned his back to tend to the rest of his buttons. He then turned around to greet his cousin and examine her friend.

His eyes were walnut brown with funny little flecks of light that sparkled with manly amusement, studying my reflected image.

“Miss Smith, may I present William Brown,” Misty announced with my submissive curtsy. “And my father.”

“Ah, youth before brains,” her father laughed, tossing the next bale. “You girls belong at home, not chasing after handsome soldiers.”

“Father!”

“It's nice to meet you, Miss. Are you from these parts?”

“She's an orphan, related to the Ma'am of Auberan House.” Misty took our hands together. “Her name is Abigail which suits her service as well. And I think that you and she should chat while I take my poor Father to the shade for a cool drink.”

“Are you daft, girl?” her Dad protested, but laughingly withdrew. “Beware of women lad, they'll be ruining your life!”

And then, I was alone with Bill!

My heart ran away and I was weak to the point of sitting down upon the low portion of the stone fence, being careful to arrange my skirts. “I hear that you are in the Queen's service?”

“Yes, Miss, a corporal. I'm on leave. Was wounded on the frontier.”

“Oh, where?” I exclaimed in girlish interest.

“Not where a lady might look,” he laughed, patting his hip gingerly. “It was deep, but I'll soon be posted back to my unit.”

“Are corporals allowed to bring their wives to India with them?”

He smiled. “Asking for anyone in particular, Miss?”

“Oh, no,” I exclaimed in a fluster, hearing his wonderful laugh and knowing that I was falling head over heels for him. He took his seat by me and I could smell the richness of his work with the newly cut hay.

“Just curious...”

“How old are you, Abigail?”

“Fifteen, but close to sixteen,” I added. “And, you?”

“Nineteen. Enlisted at fifteen. I was full grown.” He smiled, looking at my bodice. “Like you, Miss.” He took his great powerful hands and encircled my waist with them. “A perfect fit. You were made for my hands, Abigail.”

I must have blushed three colors of pink. “Please, Sirrah!”

He bent over, and kissed me!

I slapped him proper and stood up, straightening my skirts and heading for the Brown house!

"Abigail, you cannot leave me so," he pleaded, following close at my heels until I lifted my skirts and began to run, trying to make it to the house and safety, for I did not trust the emotions that flooded my heart. God, he was a real man! And to him, I was a woman! I ran awkwardly until a clump of dirt turned my right ankle and I landed face down in the grass with him behind, turning me over with a happy, triumphant laugh. "Did you hurt yourself, Miss?"

"Oh, my ankle!"

"Let's look," he suggested, taking the liberty of lifting my skirt full to the knee and taking my ankle into his hands! Ignoring my modest efforts to lower the skirt, he removed my boot to feel the ankle. "Ah, such a dainty ankle, but it looks like a simple sprain. Perhaps I had better carry you home. But, first..."

He moved me to his lap and placed his arm about my waist to kiss me again, full upon the lips until my breath came in a yielding sigh!

And then he kissed me once more before he suddenly swung me into his arms like I was a mere babe and stood up, picking up my loose boot.

"If you are going to marry a soldier, you will need to plump up a bit. I like my wives plump, like Mrs. Brown!"

"Whoever said I would marry such an oaf as you?" I protested, only to be kissed into silence as he strolled to the cottage where he entered the front door with bowed head to avoid banging his head.

"She sprained her ankle," he announced to their amusement, lowering me to a chair. "Runs like a duck..."

Mr. Brown burst into laughter and I all but died as the women joined.

"Shame on you," Mrs. Brown scolded, taking my hand. "We'd better take a look at that sprain."

Misty helped me into a bedroom where I removed my stocking and Mrs. Brown fetched something for the swelling. "Did he kiss you?"

"Yes," I confessed from my girlishly secret with a little laugh.

"Oh, you must tell us all about it. Promise?"

"Oh, Misty."

"You leave her alone," Mrs. Brown ordered, wrapping the ankle. "You lie back and rest. You can not walk about on that for the next few hours."

Detecting my anxiety, she smiled.

"He will be here for another week."

I sighed and stretched out in the bed, not knowing that after supper that night, before the pony cart ride back to the hall, I would not see Bill again for a long time. The

hall had a great party the next week and I was required to help with the table on my day off. And then Bill was gone!

With summer over, I was returned to the asylum.

About a month later, I received a letter from Bill, which Mrs. Crisp required me to read aloud to her! She then had me post a formal reply indicating that my services came first and I was not ready for marriage.

“You will tell him the truth, that you cannot have children,” she insisted coldly. “No man's seed shall be wasted upon such a sterile bed. It would be a sin! Do you understand, eunuch girl?”

I wrote as she asked and cried my heart out when the post left with my shattered girlish dreams...

Chapter Eight: Emma Continues Her Story - I Follow In My mother's Footsteps.

“Good morning, Emma,” my nurse greeted, lowering the railing of my crib and helping me to my potty. “We have a wonderful surprise for baby.”

“Turpwise, oh, Emma woves turpwise,” I exclaimed in a toddler's version of my new language, finishing with potty and allowing my nurse to help me complete my ritual before helping me to wash and then dressing me in a simple waist to hold up my long black stockings, a cotton vest, cotton lace trimmed drawers, a white cotton slip and a lawn, white cotton and lace toddler dress with ever such short skirts that revealed the lace trim of my drawers if I were careless.

Of course, I knew that short skirts made it easier for me to handle potty and my nurse to see if I was a good little girl. “Can I take Teddy?”

“Of course, Darling,” she replied, taking my hand after I claimed my only link to the distant past from the crib. “Do you know how to behave before company?”

“Yeth, nursie,” I gleefully said in pure delight, somebody was coming to see me. “Ith it Mommy?”

As if to answer my question, the doorway to the toddler playroom opened to reveal our beautiful Christmas tree with its colorful boxes, which I just knew held toys and things, and, my Mommy!

“Oh, Mommy, Mommy!” I shouted, running to her outstretched arms as Mistress Caldwell swept me up in a motherly hug with a kiss before fussing with the sash bow of my toddler dress. “Emba go home?”

“Emma, say Emma?”

“Ebma, Emma, Emma, Mommy.”

“Much better, Dearest,” she laughed, kissing me and taking my hand. “I think we shall go for a little ride. Would you like that?”

“Oh, yeth., Mommy,” I sighed, seeing that nursie had returned with a long, white fur coat, bonnet, mittens and a pair of white, rubber, baby storm boots to wear over my pretty things.

When I was all bundled up, Mother took me into her arms for another kiss before lowering me to the floor and taking my hand to lead me out into the crisp morning air to a waiting coach.

And soon, we were on our way!

The coach rumbled towards the river docks and as I watched in wide-eyed wonder, we entered a steam packet to settle into a little bedroom compartment.

“Where are we going, Mommy?” I asked as she removed my outer coat and things once she was sure that the compartment was orderly.

“You are going with me to a country far away from here,” she replied, placing my coat and things away. “And we are going to spend the next few hours all alone together.”

The joy of being with her chased all fears from my mind while she asked me all about my days at the nursery and then produced a beautiful storybook from which she read me a wonderful story teaching me many new words. I insisted that she read it over and over again so I could be sure of the new words. From the boat, we went by train and Mother stayed with me in our little room where she fed me and spent the hours and days with me. It was so wonderful. We changed trains twice in great big depots and then we were left at a wooden depot with a pot belly stove and an old man with wonderful whiskers that made him look like Teddy.

A white sleigh driven by a massive man came to collect us and our things. The ride over the snow covered country- side was beautiful and after some time, we came to a great sprawling house with high domes covered with snow. The windows sparkled with lights and soon we were inside, greeted by the warmth and a large woman dressed in pink velvet. All about there were women and girls all in a swirling of pretty gowns mingled with blue middy blouses and white skirts for the girls.

"And this is little Emma," the lady in pink exclaimed, taking my hands into hers. "Oh, she will be a great beauty! You are so fortunate, my Dearest..."

"Be kind to her, Countessa, she is a delicate angel."

"Oh, she will love her new school," the Countessa promised, seeing that I was about to cry because I realized that Mommy would be leaving me here in this strange place!

"Pwease, Mommy, don't go!"

"Mommy must leave in the morning. This is a very good school." She hugged and kissed me. Seeing that I was crying, she turned to the Countessa. "Is her room ready?"

"Oh, yes, Nanya? Show Mrs. Caldwell where Emma will live."

A maid curtsied and led us from the ballroom down a darkened hall to a large room with six beds. Five of the beds were already occupied by sleeping girls.

"Oh, Mommy, don't leave me!"

"Shh, you will wake the other girls, Dearest," she sighed, kissing me as Nanya began to undress me. Before I realized it, Mother was gone with a kiss and I was in my new, warm little bed.

The Countessa Debachek School for Young Ladies was a sort of convent in that she insisted on firm religious training in Greek Orthodoxy with hours of prayer and strict observance. There was nothing meretricious about her classroom instruction. Before she had married the late Count, she had been a governess and had belonged to the somewhat radical Governesses Benevolence Society in England which advocated educational reform for women.

She had converted her palatial home into an exclusive school for girls from the wealthy and emerging middle class with an eye to making sure that her pupils were ready for life. She was a devotee of the new, progressive movement from America and combined it with a rather strict classroom expectation. This conflict of philosophy and practice did not at all concern her. Her sailor-suited girls were taught to be homemak-

ers through doing. They were ladies through hours of practice in manners and mannerisms, and they were scholars by rote memory.

We were organized into little living groups of twelve girls with a tutor and an upper-classwoman who served as our Mistress and expected slavish attendance upon her every need and whim. The tutor only required respect and our absolute attention to her instruction. Disobedience in either situation always led to the same result; the vigorous application of a birch to our seat followed by a ritual recanting of our sins in tearful confession, a prayerful promise to be very good and then a penance such as asking to scrub the chapel floors or the like to prove our good intentions.

I was no exception to this firm rule of Madame Birch applied to my naked bottom before my classmates with my short skirts high over my head, but I quickly resolved to be a model student because I really grew to like both my tutor and my class Mistress.

My tutor, a Miss Rostov, taught me English and was absolutely delighted with my progress. I thought better of telling her the real reason, for she assumed that I was Russian like all the others despite my name.

Miss Travich considered me to be her little doll and delighted in the pretty clothes that my Mothersent from England which were hand-me-downs from her charges.

When I sent a letter to Mommy and asked for a ball gown for Miss Travich to wear, even I was surprised at the lovely, sky blue, satin gown that came. Needless to say, Miss Travich considered me to be an absolute joy.

I would not be telling the truth if I were to say that I was not lonely. Although I got along with my classmates well enough to have many bosom buddies to exchange secrets with as girls are wont to do, but they had homes to go to during the holidays and the summer months. The years that passed left me to realize that my real home was where I was.

I cannot explain how quickly I grew up to be fourteen, it seemed like just a few years, and perhaps it was my real age. A German Doctor came all the way to the school to examine me in a humiliating personal manner to determine why I was not entering my puberty. He injected something into my breasts and left the next morning. And then they began to hurt with a swelling painfulness until my tight corset had to be loosened to ease the discomfort and control their hard fullnesses.

"They look like a wet nurse's bounty," Countessa Debacheck observed in fascination, subjecting me to her careful examination upon Miss Travich's request, since she knew of my shameful swelling and the lactation that stained my nightgowns!

"But, the good Herr Doctor warned me that the drug from the Amazon might cause this to happen. I wonder..." She smiled and squeezed the little teat to squirt the liquid into her hand and taste it. "mother's milk, and very sweet and rich! My little daughter's wet nurse and I could hardly boast in comparison."

"But, they hurt so," I complained from my shame, covering them with the front of my gown, "can't you help me, Countessa, please?"

“Oh, yes,” she suddenly laughed, looking about my little room where I lived alone since I was now a tutor for the very little girls. “I have the perfect cure for your problem. I know just what it is as I had it myself.”

With this comment, she whispered something to a young maid who giggled and left in a curtsied flurry.

“You will stay in your room for the next few days to enjoy the delights of your cure to its fullest. I will have my maid and Miss Travich attend you during your lying in, so to speak.” She chuckled to herself as her maid returned.

The maid was carrying a little bundle wrapped in a heavy blanket which she carefully placed in the natural cradle of my arms. It was a tiny baby hardly two weeks old! The maid left with a curtsy.

“What's this?” I asked in disbelief.

“Your cure, Dearest, as any Mother would know,” the Countessa laughed, placing the nub of her little finger into the baby's mouth to test and be sure, and then she gently parted my bodice cover to draw the little lips to my engorged tit.

It suddenly seized my tit with avaricious hunger to massage it until milk was let down! “There now, he shall require feeding every four hours as he wishes from his delightful wet nurse. He is your little Master!” she noted with amused delight, looking up to see her maid return with another baby. “As is his twin brother!”

“Oh, Countessa, two babies?” I complained doubtfully, wondering as his little mate seized the other tit in sheer, suckling delight. “I can't feed them both!”

“Oh, you will want them to be healthy and plump,” she noted with a wise nod. “And so, you will just swell with milk enough and plenty.”

The Countessa arose from her seat upon the edge of my bed. “I shall see that you have plenty of diapers and their cradles along with whatever else their Mother may desire. She is one of my cooks and despite her ample size, she seems to be



quite dry. She is ever so very grateful.”

The next two weeks were actually rather peaceful and comforting and I grew to wish that I should really be able to have my own babies, and perhaps I would. I must confess that I adored babies, and the Countessa's cure actually did reduce the swelling pain of my breasts in a wonderfully effective way, but my breasts grew plumper by the day as a result and for the rest of my life, they never ceased to be capable of nursing! Whatever it may have been, the Amazonian jungle drug or the excessive nursing afterwards, my breasts were eye-catching to babies and men alike!

At the end of the two weeks, I returned to my classwork to occasionally sneak down to the servants' quarters to nurse my little twins for their delightful Motherwho positively spoiled me with little sweet cakes made in the style of her home, Turkman.

During those brief moments that progressed for almost a year, I learned all about her family, customs, and a bit of her language.

Mother sent me a lovely green, velvet, gown complete with a corset, slip, chemise, drawers and corset cover to match in green silk. The corset was quite full at the bosom to indicate that the Countessa had told Mother of my change in maturity.

With the beautiful clothes came a letter stating that I should take the train and packet to return to England! My Mother had found me a position as a Governess in the service of Lord McDougal in North Inverness Glen. I would be in charge of his two toddler daughters and a youth of eleven.

Miss Travich accompanied me as far as Paris where her father was an embassy official, and thus I was left to travel the rest of the distance in the loving care of one of his military friends, a young Captain Blue of Her Majesty's Light Guard.

Needless to say, for an impressionable girl of fifteen, the handsome young captain was an absolute source of wonderment after so many years among women and girls. Yet, he was very proper despite his roving eyes upon my lovely bosoms, full hips, narrow waist and beautiful red hair which was styled in the loose French fashion rather than secured in a bow like an English schoolgirl's.

His cold reserve was betrayed by little glances and the stray touch of his hand upon my female rear so poorly hidden by my tiny skirts. For, despite my short skirts, I knew that he saw me as a woman grown, and nothing pleases a girl more, nor more easily leads to her ruin.

We had much time together to talk, and the Countessa had taught me well that a girl must listen if she is to find her man. So, I learned all about his duties, his education and his ambitions.

He was the first son of a titled but poor father who died in battle, leaving but enough to pay for his wife's support and his son's education. After military school, he was offered a commission in his father's old regiment which was called to South Africa. He had fought with distinction and was knighted by the Queen herself for his singular bravery. He was transferred to embassy duty in Russia where he met General Travich, and after his duty there, he had transferred to the Light Guards. Although this was a singular honour for one so young, he was bored with parades and such and sought activity in another post.

Although it was not necessary for him to do so, he took me to the very gates of Keep McDougal. As I went to the gate, he bent over from his saddle to kiss me before waving and riding away, saying, "I shall call on you again someday, Mistress Caldwell!"

Somewhat flustered, to say the least, I managed to knock upon the front gate to be greeted by a curtsying maid whose smile betrayed what she had seen.

"I am Miss Caldwell, the new Governess and Nanny."

"Yes, Miss, her Ladyship is in the library," the curtsying girl stated, showing me the way to the library before taking charge to see that my belongings were sent to my new quarters in the dark, brooding castle that sat so coldly stark in the rolling Inverness Hills.

"You are Emma Caldwell?" Lady McDougal noted, dismissing a servant girl who was helping her with her knitting. "Hold my yarn and tell me about yourself."

"Yes, my Lady," I replied, taking up the yarn in a handle cradle. I spoke of my schooling, answering her polite questions about Russia quite simply.

"Your mother," she paused to smile, "has suggested your service. Her Master, Lord Farely, spoke well of her. Let us hope that you walk in her footsteps."

She then outlined my pay which was little, and duties, which were many!

She then took me to see her toddlers who turned out to be barely eighteen months old and hardly toddlers. Her son, who was with his tutor was a short, heavy-set youth with the sandy hair of his bloodlines. I could easily see his forefathers as savage kilted warriors, he had the look of a savage. She had it in mind that I would teach him manners and how to dance since his tutor knew little of either.

I took my supper with the boy, his tutor, and a crusty old soldier who liked his drinking more than our company. I never did learn his duties except as they may be to teach the boy the roughness of the hills and the manly vulgarities.

After supper I met the Lord of the House and his younger brother. Both men studied me with almost lewd interest before retiring for their favorite pastimes which were cards and drinking. Her Ladyship sat silently with her knitting and I left to attend to my little charges.

The twins were strangely unlike the rest of the household, so warm and comfortable to hold. Taking a seat before the open fireplace, I held them both in my lap after changing into my nightdress. They giggled and laughed with my attention and played patty cake with each other, enjoying the game.

A matronly housekeeper brought me a tray and joined me to tell me how happy she was that I had arrived to care for the children. The last girl had run off during the night for some reason, leaving her with the responsibility. Mrs. Douglas talked on about her boy who was in the service, "Like your young man, Miss, though not so high in rank." Her warm, rich Scottish accents blurring her words as I was all but lulled to sleep thinking how very much she was like the motherly Turkman cook who talked endlessly of her hopes as her babies delighted in my bounty.

Suddenly, she stopped talking and I looked up to see Her Ladyship, and following her startled glance, I saw that her sons had discovered my sweet tits!

“Well, well, Mistress Caldwell,” Lady McDougal noted with a thin smile, “I see that my babies have discovered your shame.”

“Shame?” I asked in all innocence.

“Oh, come now,” she laughed, taking a seat next to me and pulling one of her sons from my breast to calm his cry of disappointment by opening her own gown to reveal her full breast. “Only a woman who has had a child can nurse,” she observed. “Did your little bastard die, Mistress Caldwell?”

My anger swelled, causing my nursling to withdraw and howl his protest. “I haven't ever had a baby. A Doctor treated me for...” I paused, trying to find words.

“Hush, child, we are women, not schoolgirls,” she scolded in disbelief. “I shall keep your secret as long as you nurse my babies. We three women can then sit and talk. I think you are the perfect Nanny for my household, whatever your fairy tales may be.” She looked at me with a thoughtful, sly smile. “I am sure that you will be very useful to have around. You will have much to teach my sons.”

I looked down at the little baby as he returned happily to his little pleasures and I wondered at her words. What did she have on her mind...

Chapter Nine: Charlotte Continues Her Story - Upon Instructions From My Queen.

Dressed in a short skirted, pink travel suit with white ruffled blouse and tight waisted, bolero jacket with full leg of mutton sleeves, a pair of white boots, pink reefer styled jacket and dainty floral hat, I slipped on my white gloves and followed Miss Teasdale to our carriage. Janet and Alice had already taken their seats and were all excited about our journey. In a moment, we were on our way with our baggage wagon following behind.

The ride paused after a few hours for a light lunch at a wayside tea house and then continued for the rest of the afternoon. It was almost sunset when our little caravan swung from the post road through a large wrought iron gateway with a golden lettered white sign that looked like a formally engraved announcement:

CHOISEY FINISHING SCHOOL
FOR YOUNG LADIES

A uniformed watchman closed the gate behind us to speak briefly with our coachman before we rolled on down the broad, gardened roadway that consisted of two roads on either side of a row of great shade oaks that bespoke the age of the estate.

Swinging about a sweeping oval with a fountain pool in the center, we stopped before a sprawling mansion of our own Victorian era. Just as we stopped, a woman in green velvet stepped from the entrance of the main building to approach and curtsy while our footman arranged the carriage steps and helped my Governess and I to step from the carriage before it moved to the servants' entrance with our baggage.

"Miss Teasdale, I am Mrs. Duggan." She smiled and curtsied before me. "Lady Charlotte, would you please follow me?"

We followed her past a black taffeta and white lace, curtsying maid into a grand foyer and thence to an office occupied by Mrs. Choisey, who accepted my curtsy with a pleased smile, approving my prim little girl posture with my hands behind my back palm to palm.

"Miss Teasdale, Mrs. Duggan will show you to your quarters and you may join us shortly for supper. A maid will escort you to the faculty dining room."

Mrs. Choisey took her curtsy with a slight nod and waited until the ladies had withdrawn before turning her attentions to me. After a long pause that did nothing to calm my nervousness, she smiled, saying, "Lady Charlotte, it's so nice to have you attend our school. I am sure that you will grow to love our little academy. I do not believe that you should be needlessly humiliated before your Governess, so we shall have our little chat alone. You might wish to remove your coat, hat and gloves."

With this, she pulled the bell rope to summon a taffeta uniformed maid who took my travel things while I moved to sit down.

"Miss Charlotte, were you given permission to sit?"

"No, Ma'am," I replied in surprise, to quickly stand properly after a little curtsied apology.

"Yes. Now, where were we?" she asked rhetorically with an amused nod of approval. "All my girls in their first years here are treated exactly alike. You shall follow the excellent manners of a young girl that your Governess has taught you, including the rules of curtsy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied dutifully with a curtsy, feeling like a six year old.

"I am aware of your mental frailty," she noted coldly, "and I shall not delay one minute your return to Saint Vitus if I hear of any infractions of good conduct and manners. Do you understand me completely?"

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied with another curtsy of growing fear.

She pulled the bell cord again and the maid returned.

"Show Miss Charlotte to her room. You may withdraw, child."

I curtsied in unison with the maid and withdrew. She led me up a great spiral staircase to the second floor and thence to another stairway to the top floor and then down a long hallway passing several doors to stop before one where she knocked.

"Ah, Miss Charlotte," Mrs. Duggan observed to my curtsy. Standing aside, she motioned me inside, dismissing the maid with a slight nod.

The entry room into my suite was a beautifully appointed drawing room decorated with white satin drapes, gold framed mirrors and crystal chandelier to cascade sparkling light over white satin upholstery of golden lounge chairs, secretary and table placed upon a white, deep pile rug.

"Come, child, you must change for supper," Mrs. Duggan urged, leading the way into a pink and white bedchamber very much like my feminine world at home. It was all too clear that Choisey was not a Spartan Academy. "Your clothes are upon the bed. Janet will help you dress."

In disbelief, I stared at the black taffeta, short-skirted dress, white lace apron and cap, and black silk stockings and pumps; it was a maid's uniform!

"All the new girls are expected to serve an upper-class girl as her maid. It will teach you humility, and her how to deal properly with servants." She watched while a completely delighted Janet helped me change into the humiliating, short-skirted uniform. "You shall attend to the wishes of a Miss Arthur. She will expect you to awaken her in the morning, dress her and serve her breakfast. She will dismiss you for your classes and require you to return to her service afterwards. You will serve her supper and attend her until she retires."

Without a protest, I soon stood dressed as a maid, to follow Mrs. Duggan to the suite of my new Mistress who greeted me with instructions as to how I should serve her and three other young ladies barely my own age.

I shall not tarry upon this humiliation and its sequences since it should suffice to say that I had a very demanding Mistress and my fear of a fate worse than any of her amusements kept me a model maid servant during my first year at Choisey.

But, the school was not merely a source of servitude, nor was it at all as presented to us. The academic excellence was meretricious compared to a boys' school, yet I had the uncomfortable feeling that the course work at Choisey was more than adequate for a lady of quality. The basic curriculum could be divided into two broad areas of enlightenment. The first area was ennobled as "Domestic Sciences." The other, "The Arts."

Domestic Science dealt with the basic home crafts which would prepare us as future housewives. It was very practical during the first year since it was very much in vogue to train a young girl how to keep house, cook, sew, launder and such, as if she were without proper staff.

This domestic hardening suited our maid's uniforms and seemed a bit harsh for girls who had not the slightest idea of what happened after they filled a chamber pot at home. The school domestic staff were our tutors and I suspect that they were all too happy to ensure that the "young ladies" were properly taught.

And, much to my surprise, I discovered that Mrs. Choisey was not at all inclined to allow a damsel to leave school, no matter how much she screamed that she would not be spanked by a scullery girl. She was simply spanked and made to understand that her parents knew quite well what she was to be taught, and she would be taught!

Needless to say, Domestic Science had few snobs...

Now, The Arts... could be viewed as dilettante culture, yet it was really very practical in its own way for a young lady of proper breeding. There were three general fields of instruction; conduct, culture, and costume.

Conduct dealt with poise, posture, elocution and etiquette.

Culture sub-divided into recognition and execution. Recognition consisted simply of being able to identify an art object such as a painting by a Dutch Master; the style of furnishings, a musical piece, a flower, tree or bird, personage, and an amazing myriad of other cultural items.

Execution represented the ability to execute a simple painting, decorate a room, play a series of simple recital tunes on the piano, speak and read French, Spanish, Italian, German and Russian at about the level of a small child, but with perfect diction. This conversational level and ability to read a newspaper or book of light verse seemed suitable for ladies who shouldn't strain their minds on the complexities of complete grammar.

And, I must confess that I have never met a man who was not amazed at my command of these languages and my ability "to turn the simple phrase without a hint of uncultured accent."

Costume consisted of simple vanity from toilette to selection of proper clothing for all occasions.

This curriculum broadened and became loftier as we progressed from year to year, but the basic focus remained the same: We were destined to marry and live as genteel and cultured wives and mothers capable of handling ourselves properly before ser-

vants, children, husband and his associates, our own peers, and those few who were our obvious betters. All in all, a perfectly adequate education. Or so it would seem.

At the completion of my first year, I returned home to discover that Mother had resolved to use the summer to visit all her friends and relatives with her lovely daughter as company! This social tour suited mother's objectives of repaying her social debts, introducing her lovely daughter to her large coterie of matrons with an eye towards letting them see what an exquisite young lady I was and making sure that I would be seen as an emerging debutante worthy of future social consideration when the proper time for my presentation in a more formal way arrived. Needless to say, it was an exhaustingly feminine experience to be put upon constant display in the height of feminine fashion before peering matrons who asked me humiliatingly childish personal questions and expected perfect manners.

I was delighted to get back to school. My second year at Choisey ended my tour as a maid and introduced me to the lovely array of school clothes that Mother had decided that a young lady should have. I was positively surrounded by luxury from morning until my complete beauty massage by Janet and Alice before I went to bed at night. My classroom instruction passed quickly day by day until the year ended with a summer grand tour of cultural sites in Europe with my classmates.

The third year found me in the sixth form, so to speak, with a student maid in addition to my own service. Domestic Science expanded into the art of overseeing a large domestic staff and household. The Arts were directed towards the four key social events of my eighteenth year, and soon after; my coming out ball, my presentation to the Queen, my debutante social conduct, and my marriage. It was assumed that, with the possible exception of being unable to see the Queen, I was destined to be present at the other affairs. Now, I had the privilege of accepting this wonderful fate or trying to escape. I resolved at the close of Easter Holiday to escape!

My plan was really very simple. I would pack a complete man's outfit which I had carefully stolen, item by item, from our household staff. I would tuck my golden hair into a workman's cap and merely walk away from the wayside inn where my carriage would stop en route to school. The railroad was a few miles down the road and I had hoarded several pounds which would last until I proved that I was the rightful heir to the titles and lands of Auberan. Then, I would insist that my step-Mother was insane, for only an insane person would commit such a crime, and have her committed. Hopefully, at St. Vitus, where I would go if I were caught!

The plan was perfect and I soon found myself dressed as a likely looking lad, if not extremely fair and slim waisted, bundled in a heavy jacket that hid curves no boy would care to have. The day was a bit chilly for Spring and I found it difficult walking in the man's boots I had stolen. From time to time, I had to hide from passing horsemen and carriages, knowing that they may well be searching for me. Twice I saw my own carriage pass slowly by as I hid, and once I saw two of the watchmen from the school coming in the late afternoon to join in the search. But, I evaded their efforts with care, only to discover that one had ridden straight to the railroad to block this route!

Turning back down the road, I sought to return to the post road, finding every step more painful.

“Ho, lad, need a ride?”

Looking back in terror, I saw in the evening shadow a rider dressed in a dark brown tweed. “If you may, Sir,” I replied, almost curtsying, but touching my cap instead.

“Here,” he laughed, taking my wrist and pulling me up behind. “You’re a feather, light as a lass. How old are you lad, twelve or thirteen?”

“Thirteen, Sir, going to apprentice in London,” I lied, causing him to nod.

“I’m headed for London myself. What say we go on together?” he asked, patting my leg in masculine friendship as he urged his mount forward. “Do you have enough for lodging?”

“A few coins, Sir.” Although I was tired, I wasn’t sure that I could ever pass as a boy in an inn room. “Perhaps we could find a barn...”

“No need to spend your money, I have enough,” he laughed, turning his horse into an inn stable and helping me to dismount. “We’ll stay here. I know that you would love a little ale and supper up in the room and a chance to sleep.”

Lord, would I! Yet, I knew that I could not. Just as I was to offer my protests, I saw one of the school watchmen, so I followed my host into the inn to hear him greet the innkeeper.

“Yes, Squire Denton, take the room at the top,” the innkeeper replied, handing him the latch key and looking at me with a wink! “I’ll have Mary bring up your suppers. I’d lock the door. We have a wild bunch here, lad.”

He winked at me again and nudged my companion, causing me to wonder. “What is your name, lad?”

“John Dinadan,” I announced, “Duke of Auberan.”

“Ah, Your Grace,” the innkeeper proclaimed in a loud voice, repeating my name to the pub drinkers and his waitresses, *if that were their real job...*

We moved up the stairs to enter the room.

“Now, Mistress with the plump behind, what is your real name?” my host asked, locking the door.

“Oh, please, Sir. I really am John Dinadan. I have been changed into a girl by my step-mother, and...” I stopped, seeing his laughing disbelief. “It’s true!”

“Wicked step-mothers and all. Here I thought I had latched upon a run-away servant lass, and I find an enchanted prince!” He stepped forward and pulled my hat off, jerking open the front of my jacket at the same time. “Let’s have a look then.”

I cringed back, seeing his disbelief turn into amazement and then I heard a long, low whistle that measured his appreciation of my beauty and brought terror to me when I saw the naked lust in his eyes!

"You may not be a prince, but you certainly are a princess!" he said in a low, husky voice that chilled me with a strange kind of excitement and caused me to blush with feminine modesty as I realized that my bosoms were half bare to his coveting eyes!

"I shall leave now," I suggested hopefully. "I have a few pounds..."

"Tarry, Fairy Maiden, we shall rest upon my bed and you will tell me your tale while I explore your secrets to discover if ye be maid or lad!"

I backed towards the door in panic, forgetting that it was locked and before I could turn and run into the room, he caught me in his arms and placed me upon the bed!

Eagerly, his hands undid his jacket and he dropped his pants after putting a pistol upon the floor. He was without underclothes and his male vigor hung in hairy splendor like a great pink snake between pink prunes in black grass!

He stood closer and my eyes must have absolutely bulged in terror as the great snake slowly emerged from the grass to unsheathe its shining pink head in anticipation of its trembling prey.

"See? I can prove to you that you are a girl." As his hand reached to pull down my breeches, I dodged under his grip, seized the pistol and shot him!

The roar of the revolver silenced the noises downstairs and I watched him slip to the bed in a loose heap! Grabbing my jacket, I dashed for the door, hearing yelling from below and the sound of men running up the stairs!

I cleared the back stairs two at a time in pounding terror of being caught. I must have killed him.

Pushing aside the back door, I ran for the stable to find his horse still saddled. Releasing the animal, I took to its saddle and soon was on the night road, riding as fast as I could towards the school, knowing that it might be my only chance for escape, for the police would be looking for a boy. I could hide perfectly as a girl. It was one thing to be sent to Saint Vitus, quite another to be hung!

Within two hours, I arrived at the school gate, to ride around to a little used side gate which the girls used to sneak out at night. I had never dared such an adventure, but my girl friends had confided the secret that a watchman usually used this gate to sneak outside himself to a local pub, thus leaving a way for the braver girls to meet their lovers in secret. Releasing the horse, I walked until sure that it would not linger and then I tried the gate, to discover that it was locked! But, I was dressed for such a test, so I climbed a large oak tree and soon was on the wall, only to locate yet another tree and climb inside of the estate grounds. With heart pounding, I climbed a fire escape ladder and managed a window, only to find myself in a darkened hallway.

Tucking my shoes in my arms, I silently moved down the hall to the staircase and soon I was in my own drawing room to see that my two girls were sitting in their little bedroom, awaiting word of their missing Mistress. I quietly slipped into my own bedroom to undress and hide the torn clothes for a future day when I could dispose of them in safety. My luggage had been returned by the carriage and in the bottom of a large hat box I found the clothes I had been wearing. In a minute, I was redressed and

I passed out into the hallway, to the fire escape, and then across the grounds to the back gate which was now unlocked!

I must have missed the watchman by just a minute or so! Moving to the front gate, I knocked on the watchman's little hut door.

"Oh, Lady Charlottel!" the watchman exclaimed in surprise, looking about for a coach. "How did you get here?"

"My carriage left me in Jospet when I retired to the ladies' room. A kind farmer gave me a ride part of the way, as did another. And I walked the rest," I replied, keeping my story simple. "I stopped at an inn on the way also."

I had a chance to repeat my story to Mrs. Choisey herself. She scolded me for not waiting for my carriage, but was pleased to see that I was safe and to my surprise, she hugged and kissed me and pleaded that I never scare her so again. She escorted me to my suite and released me into the care of my overjoyed maids who treated me to a late supper and a warm bath before I was safe in bed. The next morning was the first day of school and I heard nothing more of the incident. Satisfied that I was safe, I soon fell into the classroom spirit, and it was not until after supper that night that I caught a glimpse of the Times left on the school library counter. I closed the paper and wondered why the Squire had not reported that I was a girl, and then I realized that he was probably married and did not want his wife to know about any extramari-tal activities.

Smiling to myself, I closed the paper and retreated to my suite.

It was my hope that the incident was closed.

Perhaps it was...

Two months later, my Mother arrived at Choisey to observe my graduation. It was a lovely commencement and a perfectly charming tea which ended with fond farewells.

When I arrived home with Mother, she handed me a silver jewel box, saying, "The Duchess of Auberan wanted to give you this herself, but she has had to go ahead of us and she thought that it might be best for me to give it to you."

I opened the little box to find inside an envelope and yet another about an engraved card. It was from The Queen!

"We shall take the train tomorrow in the morning. You are to be presented to The Queen after lunch at a formal tea she is holding for various charities. Your Aunt has graciously offered to sponsor you."

And thus, we took the train to Scotland and a carriage to the great house of Balmoral. We were escorted to rather plain rooms in the great house and it was simple to see why Her Majesty's ministers thought ill of the place. With a Spartan fare for supper, we soon went to bed.

Just after lunch, the Duchess of Auberan floated into the room dressed in a rather simple, gray taffeta gown without jewels, except for her tiara. "We have much to do," she announced, seeing that my Mother was lacing my white satin corset over a sheer white silk chemise. "You are a very beautiful girl, my Dear."

Swallowing from being caught so by her, I managed a curtsy, thinking that I would die of shame if The Queen were to see me thus! I had once thought that I might confess the truth to The Queen when presented, but now I feared that a warrant for attempted murder might be my reward! So, I stood quietly while my Mother arranged my silk and lace drawers and satin slip. Over the slip went a pure white satin gown with little puff sleeves and a portrait neckline that had a low decollete that clearly displayed my natural cleavage! White glaze gloves reached almost to my shoulders and my matching white pumps were hidden by the full train of my gown.

My Mother opened the little jewel chest that contained the beautiful diamonds my real Mother had so loved. Soon, I too wore the same necklace, earrings and tiara!

I must confess that I was as excited as a schoolgirl by the time of the formal tea and I can barely remember the passing events until suddenly I was standing before a woman in black seated in a great oak chair. I dropped a deep curtsy by my Aunt and Mother as my Aunt murmured her words of sponsorship.

Queen Victoria leaned forward to look at me closer. "Stand up, Dear," she requested a bit gently and with a deep German accent. As I looked at her in girlish fear, I was struck by the fact that she seemed strangely thin in the face and about the eyes, despite the Germanic matron form. "A golden haired swan. It is my hope that her most gracious sponsor who has been most hospitable to her favorite good works, shall sponsor her in seeking a suitable husband as well."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

And thus, we were permitted to withdraw.

Later that night, we were en route back to London with my Mother and Aunt completely delighted by my conduct and The Queen's charming request. But, little else was said until the night of my coming-out party.

I wore the same gown and jewels I had worn before The Queen. I stood for what seemed to be hours in the reception line, accepting each guest who entered, watching the cream of society pass before me into the glittering ballroom of my Aunt's palace. At the end of this ordeal, I turned to enter the ball room myself when a maid became quite excited and almost dropped her serving tray of cocktails on my beautiful gown!

"It's me, don't you..." she cried as Mrs. Gretch stepped in, in her most efficient manner to remove the impertinent girl.

"Who was that?" my escort, Lord James asked, watching them leave.

"Truly, John, one simply doesn't know every servant girl in a house this large. She obviously lacks the proper training and must have sipped the drinks, don't you think?" I noted, a bit disturbed by his masculine interest in the girl.

"She is damned pretty," he observed, turning back to me, to smile a bit apologetically, "but a bit broad in the rear."

"I venture to say that she will have a hard time sitting upon that feature when Mrs. Gretch finishes with her," I laughed, to be joined by his roar, and we moved out on to the dance floor to open the grand march. But, aside from that little incident, the ball was a total success.

After the ball, I was all excited and could hardly believe all the nice words people had said to me and all the promised invitations for teas and balls I received. Janet helped my Mother undress me while Alice busied herself by arranging the suite which the Duchess had provided for the evening in her palace.

With a little knock, the door swung open and the Duchess entered, dressed in a pink hostess gown and carrying a rather large chest with the aid of the servant girl who had been so careless earlier that evening. She directed the girl to place the chest upon the floor by my bed and then dismissed the girl with an amused smile, watching the trembling girl curtsy her withdrawal as if in tearful pain despite her fixed servile smile.

"A very pretty girl, despite her rather dubious ancestry," the Duchess mused, turning towards Janet. "I shall help your Mistress prepare for bed. You and your sister may withdraw."

"Your Grace," Janet replied with a curtsied withdrawal, leaving me alone with the two matrons.

"I think that this gown will do for the night," Mother commented, taking a sheer, pink silk gown with a plunging neckline from the bed while the Duchess helped me from my chemise to study my nakedness with curiosity. "She is a most beautiful girl, isn't she? Her husband will be very pleased."

My Aunt placed her hand to the front of her gown and smiled to ask, "Do you daintily shave yourself here, my Dearest?"

My hand hid that which she asked about while I must have blushed to the tips of my toes in shame, wondering if women did have hair there, or men! "No, Ma'am."

"Certainly never tell your husband, Charlotte. 'Tis better to be thought dainty than unusual," she mused, looking at my humiliation closer, taking the shameful liberty of placing her hand beneath my breast, causing the nipple to tense, to my utter chagrin. "My how very sensitive you are. Your husband shall find that most amusing. Or are you one of our middle class prudes who plan to mate in the dark rather than be thought animalistic?"

"Please," I protested in shocked surprise over her rough crudity.

"But, my Dearest," she continued, spreading her skirts to sit by a vanity while my Mother handed me the sheer gown, "you should learn to speak frankly with an experienced woman. Schoolgirls are hardly the source of frank discussion or honest knowledge of such matters, are they?"

"No, Ma'am," I sighed, slipping on the gown to see that its very sheerness highlighted rather than hid my shame. I sought my negligee to cover myself, only to see my amazed Aunt was sitting upon it.

"A girl in a finishing school is hardly likely to learn about men," she observed, turning her finger in the soft pink satin fabric of her gown. "I think that your Mother and I shall have to explain."

And then she smiled. "You are a very fortunate girl." She paused to nod her head. "Yes, if your Mother had not insisted against my disbelief in your sanity, you would never have left the asylum. I now see how wrong I was. Please forgive me?"

I bowed my head, trying not to think about her in the light of what she actually believed and the horrible truth of her crime against a little boy left to become hopelessly insane.

"Do you know, Anna," Mother exclaimed, breaking the long silence with a rather amused tone, "that my dear friend, Mrs. Stone, the Matron at St. Vitus told me a rather amusing story."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, as you know, the very worst cases are kept in a place called the pit." She paused as if uncertain of the humor of her story, started on the spur of the moment, rather thoughtless of my own feelings, but then she shrugged. "Well, it appears that one of the girls in the pit claims that she is my daughter, poor insane child."

The blood drained from my legs and I had to sit down.

"Is something wrong, Charlotte?" Mother asked, looking towards the Duchess.

Could it be that poor Charlotte was returning to normal after all these years? Could I be so cruel as to let her be destroyed by the reality of that awful place? I looked at the two women, trying to understand my fears, for they would most certainly return me to that pit to live the rest of my life in growing insanity. A year, that was how long Matron said it would take. But, she could help the real Charlotte, if she only knew. "She is Charlotte. I am John Dinadan."

The Duchess of Auberan arose, handing me the pink satin negligee. "We know, Dearest. Your poor cousin died two years ago, quite unchanged. We were just testing you to see if I made the right decision to let you be Lady Charlotte."

I stared at her in disbelief. "You knew?"

"Of course, Dearest, it was planned from the day you were taken from the ship," Lady Brian noted with a gay little laugh. "Could you think of a better way to tame a wild, spirited youth into a lovely young lady like yourself?"

"All of it?" I asked in astonishment, holding the negligee in my lap in trembling disbelief, feeling the complete fool. "But, why?"

"It really doesn't matter, does it?" my former step-Mother commented casually, turning to the chest by my bed. "I have not completed my plans for you. For as you once promised to keep me as a lady of quality, I have promised to do that much for you and right a serious wrong which your father caused another."

"And when I ran away?" I asked, still trying not to believe.

"Squire Denton is the husband of one of my dearest childhood friends. He owns the inn where you were taken the night you drowned," the Duchess of Auberan observed. "His account of the incident was most amusing, especially your reaction to his ample virility. He was quite disappointed when you fled, to say the least."

I swallowed hard, causing the matrons to laugh at my blush. "What are you planning to do to me now, send me back to St. Vitus to be made insane?"

"Oh, no, for that I am truly sorry," the Duchess countered in shocked horror. "You will be allowed to continue as Charlotte. Why not?"

For the longest moment, I sat silently considering my past, seeing the utter reality of her simple remark, "why not?"

I nodded my understanding.

"You cannot be anything but a woman, and you are very fortunate to be beautiful as well as titled. You may not be a Duke, for that belongs to my son, but you very well may marry a Duke. There are one or two in your age bracket who are quite suitable. However, you should marry a man with children of his own." She stood up, seeing that I was on the verge of

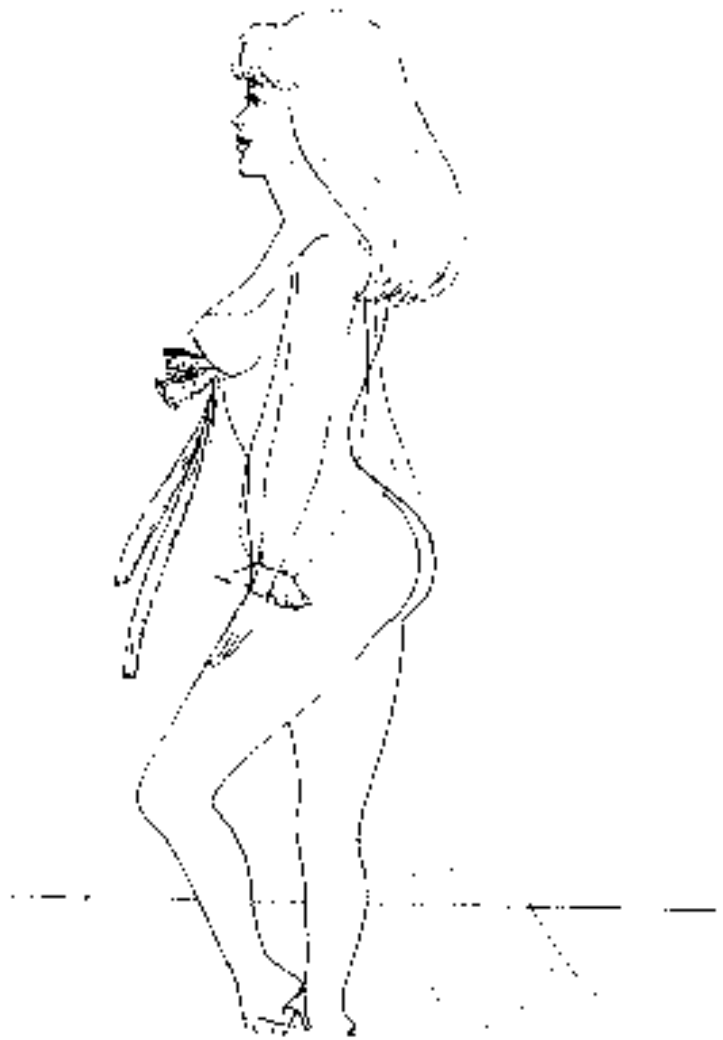
tears. "Your father married me for my dowry, for I was not half so lovely and feminine as you. I am quite hairy and not at all buxom like you. You will be a real catch, my Dear, especially when word gets out that you have a dowry of one hundred thousand pounds, which is one third of my original dowry. And certainly more than you would have had if I had not married your nearly bankrupt father. In fact, you stand to come out quite well, young lady."

"A hundred thousand pounds," Lady Brian repeated.

"To compensate for a fragile mind," my former step-Mother observed rather coldly. She shook her head, seeing that I was crying from her cruelties. "Women quickly learn about such matters. I was sold into marriage. Why should you object to our national slavery system for women, you are one yourself, you know... don't you?"

I nodded, silently wiping my tears on the hem of my gown, feeling all too much my helplessness as her slave.

"In the lower animal world, the female has an attractive scent that tells the male she is ready to mate. You will have your beauty and a dowry. I venture to state that your dowry will draw the males to you like a bitch in heat attracts the pack."



She nodded, seeing me wince. "It will be interesting to see if you can even hope to drive them away once they catch your allure. Do you really believe that you can escape any more than a rutting slut?"

"That is enough, Anna," Mother protested. "The child is completely heart broken. You are being much too cruel to her."

"Yes, perhaps I am. I shall leave, Charlotte, when you dry your foolish tears and smile prettily."

She waited until I had composed myself. "Ah, that's much better! Now, open the chest and see what I have brought for you!"

Not really wanting to open the chest, I hesitated as if fumbling with the latch, but it sprung open to my touch and I lifted the lid to see carefully folded paper metal foil which I opened to smell the scent of rich lavender and see the froth of beautiful antique Belgian Lace over pure white brocaded satin.

It was a wedding gown!

"I found it stored with this card," she said, handing me the engraved card that announced my Mother's wedding to the Duke! "It seems quite appropriate for you to wear your Mother's bridal gown. I'm sure that it would have pleased her."

"It's a beautiful gown," Lady Brian exclaimed, placing it upon my bed with a pair of white slippers. "You must try on the slippers to see if they fit, Sweetheart."

Tearfully, I thought of rebellion, but my memories of St. Vitus were rekindled by that moment of truth concerning the real Charlotte, and I knew that my step-Mother and foster-Mother were both capable of sending me back to that horrible place despite their words of apology. It was indeed an effective way to tame a wild spirited youth into a lovely young lady! Meekly, I slipped my feet into the slipper, a bit surprised by the perfect fit.

"Amazing," the Duchess mused, picking up the gown itself. "Try the gown, Dearest."

Turning my back to her, I slipped off my sheer nightgown, to be helped by my foster Mother into the gown's bustle over which went the white satin dress and train with its lace negligee-like gown. The neckline was off the shoulder and completely daring for a current taste in fitted sleeves to the wrist.

"Why, except for the skirt and train requiring a bit of shortening, it fits you as if it had been made for you," the Duchess observed, fussing with the train. "Yes, it will do perfectly." She smiled, asking, "Don't you agree, Charlotte, Dearest?"

I was a bit confused, to say the least. My mind fought the gentle trained fascination of my heart which adored the dress and what it represented as a rightful goal. "Yes, it's beautiful!"

"And, what's this?" Lady Brian exclaimed, removing the basic lingerie of the bridal wear, to come upon a pink satin packet. Opening the envelope, she removed a white satin nightgown with a lace negligee. "Why, it's her bridal bed dress. How thoughtful of her! Charlotte, you shall wear this too!"

I looked at the nuptial garment, seeing my destiny. What was I to do?

“Well, I must confess, your daughter will make a beautiful bride,” the Duchess sighed, studying the effect of her gift upon me and knowing that I had no choice. “We have much work if we are to find a suitable husband for her as The Queen desires. I suggest that we leave her to catch up on her sleep and dream of her marriage.”

After the Duchess had withdrawn, Mother helped me to undress and packed my wedding dress while I slipped back into my nightgown and negligee. She closed the lid of the chest. “She can be very cruel, Dearest, but you must realize that she actually has your best interests at heart. She didn't have to let you leave the asylum and she did have it within her power to have you murdered. I was there. I think that you are actually happier as a girl than you would have been as a boy. You were actually a rather wicked boy and you did push my daughter from that tree.”

I looked at her for a long moment and shook my head. “You may be right about my being happier as a girl, but you are quite wrong about your daughter. I did not push her from that tree.”

“Very well,” she agreed, looking at me for the longest moment in silence. “Whatever may be the truth, you are now my only daughter and I am very proud of you. No Mother could be happier with her daughter.”

With this, I instinctively ran to her arms and kissed her. “Stay with me tonight?”

And she did, to speak of things which Mothers and daughters share in their hearts.

In the days that followed, I was pulled into the center of a social whirlpool to discover the truth of the Duchess's dire predictions. I was indeed chased after like a bitch in heat. But, I must confess that I was really quite flattered in a very feminine way to have my pick of escort. The real secret was to keep moving, as Lord Blair suggested.

Lord Blair was a very nice gentleman who rescued me from the rather tactless youth who tired of polite games and tried a head on assault while with me in the moonlight. The boy had me pinned to the wall and was about to steal a kiss despite my protests when a middle-aged man with full beard and massive hands used powerful muscles to separate the youth from me, and toss him clear across the porch.

“May I return you to the ball room, Lady Charlotte?” he asked, pulling his vest as he towered over me by at least a foot of masculine strength. He must have been a wonderment when he was but half his age!

I accepted his arm, wondering if he might have a son. If one had to be married... “We have not been properly introduced, have we?”

“No, but your Aunt pointed you out to me,” he replied, releasing me as we entered. “It would not do to be seen with such an old fossil. I shall allow you to seek your own way.”

The band struck up a waltz and I recaptured his arm. “A brave knight deserves a reward,” I teased, sweeping my train into my free hand to accept his lead. “I have a great need for a protector, it seems.”

“Always at your service, Miss,” he laughed, taking the turn like a man of half his years. “And I shall always be near if you need any fatherly advice. Your father and I were very good friends.”

“Did you know my Aunt's husband as well?” I asked, noticing my Aunt watching us and talking behind her fan to my Mother.

“Yes, I knew the Duke,” he replied frostily, causing me to realize that I had touched upon a subject that he preferred not to discuss.

“Do you have any children?” I asked politely.

“Five,” he replied, to my utter astonishment.

“And, your wife?”

“Died of childbirth,” he countered in a sorrowful voice.

“I am sorry. I didn't know.”

“My oldest child is a boy of eight,” he continued with a shrug. “Your Mother is going to visit my home for the hunt. You may see my children then.” With the end of the music, he brought me back to my Mother and Aunt, where we were formally introduced.

I found his country home to be quite charming and his children very angelic, ranging from one to eight in age, three girls and two boys. From my mother, I learned a bit about his great sadness. It appeared that his wife was my real father's paramour, a rather scandalous affair, and it ruined him. As her final parting gift, she gave him a bastard son. According to mother, the Duchess of Auberan loaned him the money he needed to retain his estate and recover. He had since paid back most of the money.

Of course, I liked Lord Blair, but my main interest was in pretty ball gowns and younger escorts. I guess his greatest service was to advise me concerning the potential worth of my various suitors and warn me of those men who were not at all worthy. It was very kind of him and a bit amusing, considering the facts.

My Mother and Aunt announced one evening that they had at last settled upon a man who would be the perfect husband for me. He had agreed upon the matter and would propose to me that evening. With this announcement, they left me to face the prospect of the dance. My heart was all aflutter with the very idea that some man might actually propose to me that night.

I just had to tell Lord Blair of this turn of events, wondering if he might know who the man was.

“Well, as a matter of fact, Lady Charlotte, I do know who the man is,” he replied, clearing his throat in his nervous fashion, taking my hands into his, “would you do the honor of becoming my wife, Charlotte?”

Suddenly, I remembered her words, “right a serious wrong which your father caused another.” She had planned this marriage all along!

Did he know?

“Did my Aunt suggest this?” I demanded coldly.

“No, my Dearest.” He released my right hand to produce a ring box. “I know that I'm a bit older, but...”

“Or my mother?”

“No, you silly girl, don't you think I'm man enough to select my own wife?” he laughed, opening the box and taking the liberty of slipping the diamond high crown ring upon my finger.

“Yes, I must confess I believe you,” I sighed, looking at the ring and seeing that he was hardly fit to judge the matter, he was indeed in love.

And then, I became enraged. “And you gave me advice on who I should or shouldn't...”

He kissed my protests away and I sighed my, “Yes, I will be your wife, My Lord,” in feminine happiness, knowing that whatever my Aunt had done, she had indeed found me a wonderful man for a husband...

Chapter Ten: Abigail Continues Her Story - What Really Happened To Cinderella.

Work is good for the broken heart. The complete drudgery of my training as a dutiful menial left little time for sorrow or thought. As the days passed, I began to dread the thought of returning to the great hall. What could I say to my dear friend who must know of my refusal of love.

As the Summer days began to grow from Spring, I thought only of escape. I had saved twenty pounds from tips and my wages after they had taken most for my "education" costs. Perhaps I could escape to London and find a position? But, they were with me every moment...

"Now, Abigail, Mrs. Gretch has sent us your railway tickets and a little for expenses," Mrs. Crisp noted, handing me the tickets and a few coins, "Mistress Adams will take you and your things to the station. Are there any questions, girl?"

"No, Ma'am," I replied with a smile and a deep curtsy; to have her dismiss me into the capable hands of Mistress Adams. I placed my bag by my side in the pony cart and was soon left at the station to await the train. Soon, the sound of the train roared up to the little platform followed by the cries of the brakes.

"Hello, Dear," a blonde matron called, waving to me and opening her compartment door. "Are you going to London?"

My mind spun in the sudden realization that I could do just that! "Yes, Ma'am, I believe I shall. But my ticket is to..."

"Never mind, child, the conductor will change it," she announced with a dismissing wave of her hand before motioning me to a seat opposite of hers. "I'm Mrs. Love, Dora to my friends. Please, won't you sit down and join me in lunch? I must watch my weight and I appear to have packed a huge lunch. What is your name, child?"

"Abigail, Ma'am," I replied with a trained curtsy, taking my seat.

"Ah, you must be from the orphan asylum," she mused, opening the hamper to produce a sandwich. "One of Mrs. Crisp's poor lambs."

I bowed my head, wondering what to say in reply. She would report me to the authorities as a runaway and Mrs. Crisp would punish me horribly like poor little Eva who cannot even speak anymore as a cure for a talkative servant!

"A cruel place I'm told," she continued, handing me a sandwich. "A girl needs all the friends she can get, Sweetie, don't you agree?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Call me Dora, child," she countered, pouring some punch. "Do you have friends in London?"

"I... no, Ma'am."

"Well, you have me," she laughed, seeing the conductor. "Give me your tickets, Abigail." She handed him the tickets with a one pound note. "We both got on at Birmingham, a matron and her maid."

"Yes, Ma'am," the conductor replied, pocketing the money with a wink towards me. "See you, love."

"Men are all alike, bless them all," Mrs. Love laughed, taking another sandwich. "See how easy it is? When we arrive at London, you can go your way and I shall go mine. You will simply never have gotten on the train." She laughed. "Now what are your plans?"

"You have been so kind to me," I replied, opening my bag to draw out a pound note which she accepted with a smile, tucking it into her bodice. "What can a girl do to find work?"

"Well, the shops hire many girls. Of course, with your training, you could easily find work as a domestic or perhaps, housekeeper," she suggested.

"Anything rather than be a domestic!" I vowed with a shudder.

"Well, Dearest, it does seem that you are trained for such work," she noted with a shake of her head. "And I doubt if you could do anything else. Domestics are scarce and earn well enough. I hear that the orphanage only takes in girls with limited intelligence, so if I were you, I would stick with my class, Dearest."

Accepting another sandwich, I sat in silence as she launched into a detailed accounting of my proper station and how I should go about finding a satisfactory situation. This was followed by a rather lurid tale she had read about a poor runaway girl who had wound up becoming a toy for a white slavery ring. It was an awful story and I guessed that she had probably read it in some pulp story magazine.

Before I knew it, we had passed the station for Sepoy Hall and the die was cast, I was on my way to London. I began to grow more frightened by the minute. At least at Sepoy I had work and a place. In London I would be alone...

Perhaps I was with limited intelligence, no doubt about it.

The conductor announced something...

"That's our station, Dear, fetch our bags like a proper maid," Mrs. Love announced as the train pulled into the great tunnel to suddenly stop at a platform. Mrs. Love and I left the compartment and she began to look for someone. She smiled at a ruffian and then turned to wave at another matron dressed in pink velvet with a massive flowered hat. "Susan, Susan, over here!"

It was not at all ladylike, but effective, for Susan came to her call with a porter and a cab man.

Suddenly I felt a tug at my arm and the ruffian I had just seen was dashing away with my bag and all my money! "Stop thief, stop!"

"Oh, mercy sakes alive, Abigail, he has your bag!" Mrs. Love exclaimed, seeing him dash through a door. "What will you do now, child?"

Seeing my awful situation, I burst into tears, knowing that I was completely helpless. "Oh, how awful!"

"Well, she could stay with us," Susan offered. "We could always use an extra girl."

"A perfect idea. I'm sure we can find work suited to your abilities, Sweetheart," Mrs. Love exclaimed with her boundless joy, taking me into her arms to comfort me. "You just come along child, Mrs. Love will take good care of you."

With tears of hope, I accepted her kindness and soon found myself in the jump seat of the cab as a proper servant and we made our way through the soft light of the evening streets of London to stop before a great town house.

"Here we are, Sweetheart," Mrs. Love announced, taking the lead past a curtsying maid dressed in a quite daring French maid's uniform of black satin with white lace. "Good evening, Marie, this is Abigail, a new girl. Show her to the front bedroom in the east wing and help her undress for bed and then fetch her a little supper in bed. She is very tired and needs rest while we decide what she may do about our house. She may use my white silk gown after a bath."

"Yes, Madame," Marie replied with a curtsy. "This way, please."

I could only observe that Marie would please the masculine eye with her dress and provocatively sexy walk. Mrs. Crisp would never approve. Following Marie up the front stairs, I noticed that the town house had a rather nice drawing room with a piano and several beautiful couches for Mrs. Love's many guests. The spiral staircase led to an open balcony with at least a dozen bedrooms. "Does Mrs. Love use all those rooms?"

"Oh, yes," Marie replied with amused delight over the country girl's silly question. "And this is your room, Abigail."

She opened the door to a lovely bedroom with a full four poster bed, vanity table, night stand, bureau and dresser. And, wonder of wonders, a complete bathroom with a beautiful marble tub!

"I will start your bath," she suggested, taking a bottle of bubbling salts and starting the hot, running water. "You may bathe while I fetch your night dress and start the heater." She handed me a large bar of soap that smelled of country roses like the bath salts. "Use the brush, Dear."

With this advice, she curtsied and withdrew leaving me to delight in this sudden luxury. Undressing, I stepped into the tub filled with hot, bubbling water and relaxed in the sheer wonder of such a clever man who had invented this new way to be rich. Playing with the bubbles, I took the brush in hand and scrubbed off the day's dirt until my soft white skin became as pink as a baby's. As I stepped from the bath, wrapped in a soft, fluffy towel, Marie returned to lead me to the vanity.

"I will style your hair and help you prepare for bed. Mrs. Love will be up with a special treat for your supper." With this announcement, she heated a curling iron and soon my wild hair was styled into cascading curls instead of the severe bun style I usually wore. She manicured my nails as if I were a princess and then treated me to the arts of female make-up, showing me how it should be used, just enough to highlight the lashes and brighten the lips. It was really very shocking to think that I was actually doing such a thing. "And, perfume of roses to finish your toilette. I will help you with your night dress."

Night dress, indeed! It was the most shameless and daring gown I had ever seen! It was made of sheer, white silk with lace trim. Its melon sleeves were like clouds and the neckline plunged to reveal my breasts as if the sheer silk did not. At the empire waist, it flowed to the floor so that when I walked, it opened to reveal my legs.

It was beautifully feminine!

“Where is the robe, Marie?”

“Robe?” Marie asked in wonderment, turning me towards a mirror so that I might see the wondrous change. “You are absolutely beautiful, are you not?”

Staring at the mirror in disbelief, I realized that I was indeed a beautiful woman! The years of hard work had reduced the fat of my chubby childish body to the sleek, feline lines of a well-formed woman, with high, almost pointed, maidenly breasts; soft, full-blown hips with just a hint of a belly, like a little pillow, ever so flat; long legs and soft arms; soft, white shoulders and lovely neck; and a pretty head with brown tresses and a lovely heart shaped face.

A knock sounded on the door and I turned to see Mrs. Love enter with a huge man, all of seven feet tall and built like a circus strong man; and hung like a great bull in his nakedness!

“Take her, Samson, she's yours for the night!”

In panic, I screamed, knowing just what he was going to do as my dream shattered and they locked me in the room with the huge, smiling ape of a man whose great organ began to swell from its black, hairy bush like a pink python!

Its very size caught my terrors in its throbbing growth like a poor bird caught by the sight of an uncoiling snake. I couldn't move and I knew that my voice was no longer screaming as he moved towards me, opening his arms.

“Samson want... Samson play with you,” he roared, breaking the spell!

I spun towards the window, to pull the curtains. Steel bars blocked the way! Dashing by his ponderous form, I jumped over the bed and ran for the door, to find it locked, as I had thought it would be. Panicked, I turned into his arms as they enfolded me so close that I could feel his organ pressed against my bodice. His great hand held my arms behind me as his other hand took the top of my head and began to squeeze until I screamed.

“Play with my cock, suckle it like baby,” he ordered, pressing harder!

He backed away, allowing me to bend forward, to clutch the awesome shaft in my trembling fingers.

“No, please, no!” I cried, seeing the swelling pink head emerge in moist eagerness for my lips. Tighter, his fingers clamped over my little skull.

“Lick it dry, and if you bite, I will crush your skull like a ripe egg,” he whispered, pushing my lips toward the throbbing tower. “Carefully.”

Swallowing my shame, I touched my tongue to the damp meatus, feeling a taste of oil and salt as I licked all around it until his hand pushed my face closer and the great tool slipped between my lips, to fill my mouth with its life giving throbings.

"Suckle, baby, suckle," he urged with growing need, until my lips began to massage his desires. Suddenly, he released my head with a great sigh and the organ pumped forth great gulping flows of sperm, pumping them down my throat until I gasped for breath from his largess. "Ah, now lick it all dry like a child with a stick of candy."

Meekly, I followed his orders until he was satisfied that I had cleaned his monstrous organ!

"Come, it is time to pop a cherry," he laughed, lifting me into his massive arms and carrying me across the room to toss me unto the soft bed!

"Oh, no, please, don't!" I cried, feeling his hands explore my breasts as he crawled on to the bed, his great weight soon half resting upon me so that my struggles proved absolutely useless. The silken gown was ever so gently pulled up until my loins were pressed by the soft mass of his organ which slowly began to move as if having a life of its own as the great shaft that I had suckled began to emerge again to batter at the portals of my virgin femaleness. If ever I had any doubts about my sex, his organ was now tearing them away, battering its way into my very truth!

Slowly, the heat of a bitch afire for its mate coursed my breasts to spread towards my vagina with each searing thrust until in utter shame, my own hands guided him through my portals, seeking the fulfillment of his needs, and mine! Thrust after thrust drove deeper into my femaleness until I could feel that he was holding back until my own waves of desire were caught up in the cycle.

Savagely, I bit into his shoulder as our orgasm met in pumping joy.

"Good, you are now a woman," he laughed, rolling away to rest while I burst into tears, seeing that I had indeed been changed into a woman!

I cannot believe it, but he took me four more times that night!

"You should take a douche," Mrs. Love's voice announced, opening the drapes to allow the afternoon light in. "It will prevent pregnancy. I will show you how." She produced a rubber device and a pan. "You must use it after each man, and you must be sure that he is clean before you go to bed with him. Otherwise, you will catch the Spanish Plague."

"Let me go, Mrs. Love, please," I begged.

"You are ungrateful. Perhaps you miss Samson?"

"No," I sighed, taking the douche and pan, knowing that I was trapped...

"When you have cleaned yourself up, put on this dress and come to the drawing room," she stated, placing a dress upon the bed along with a few other items. She then left.

I inserted the horrible insult and flushed out the residue of passion, wondering if I would ever forget the taste of his passions as they filled my throat. Arising, I returned to the bedroom to finish my toilette. The garments consisted of silken drawers, a white corset, lace and silk slip to match the drawers, and a white silken taffeta ball dress. The pink hose and white leather pumps finished my dress.

Marie came to check on me and help with my make-up before showing me the way to the drawing room where I was introduced to a half dozen other girls, all dressed up for an evening dance. After a light supper, we were paraded into the drawing room again before several young men who took us one by one for their love partner.

I cannot honestly say I remember who the first was after Samson. But, I soon learned to be pleasing and to obey their every whim. As a prostitute, I had no other choice, for I had heard soon enough from the other girls of places where men stood, organ in hand, in line for a few minutes before the next came. I had no desire for such a fate, so I worked hard to please my men and Mrs. Love.

Time lost all meaning until that morning when Mrs. Love sent for me. Dressing quickly, but carefully, I soon knocked upon the drawing room door to enter, expecting to see my next customer. It was Mrs. Gretch!

I wanted to die, but I curtsied instead...

"That's the girl," Mrs. Gretch exclaimed in surprise. "You shameless harlot! To think that you would become a common prostitute after all we have done to help you!" She turned to Mrs. Love.

"Now, Mrs. Gretch, I merely took her in from the street. I had no idea that she was a relative of yours," she smiled. "I will give you her earnings, if you wish."

"How many men did you lie with, girl?"

I surrendered to years of training and curtsied. "Thirty-seven, Ma'am."

"God help us if you have a bastard!" she protested, taking the money Mrs. Love offered and looking at my dress. "Do you have your honest, God-fearing clothes? I'm not going to drag a painted lady through the streets."

"I shall find a dress for her," Mrs. Love offered, pulling the bell cord.

Marie arrived for her orders and returned with a blue wool dress.

Dressed in a more proper clothes, I was taken in tow by Mrs. Gretch to an awaiting carriage as she counted the roll of bills that Mrs. Love had given her.

"Seventy nine pounds and six," she noted with a shake of her head, stuffing the money into her purse. "I really should take you directly back to the asylum where Mrs. Crisp would deal with your sinful ways. But, that shall have to wait. We are pressed for help at Dinadan House. Lady Brian's daughter is being presented for her coming-out party.

When we arrived at Dinadan House, I was escorted to a basement room where Mrs. Gretch left me behind a locked door, after making certain that I would say nothing of my life of sin.

A few hours later, she returned with a light green uniform dress with a starched white pinafore apron and high cap. "You shall serve drinks in the main ball room. And if you make a single mistake, you shall be scrubbing chamber pots for the next several years! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

She withdrew and soon I was dressed to present myself to the bar steward. I was to carry drinks from the main ballroom where footmen would serve them more properly.

Before I knew it, the house filled with guests and the band began to play light, comedy, march music to liven things up. I spun with the great tray and carried it into the main ball room to place it behind the service bar as the footmen, serving as barmen, began to serve the guests. Occasionally I would pass a man who looked quite familiar, but I feared detection and when a playful hand patted my hip, I was not certain if it was a man who knew me for what I had been, or just a playful guest. I was so ashamed that I feared my blushing would never end.

I heard the other servants whispering and looking at me, and I just knew that the truth of my sinfulness was known by everybody. And then there was a murmur of words about "Lady Charlotte."

I turned with my tray to see her enter with her handsome escort. Her golden hair was crowned with a diamond tiara, her white satin gown had little puff sleeves and a deep neckline that revealed her full maidenhood and a diamond necklace. Her white glove gloves were as white as her lovely skin and I thought she must be the most beautiful woman... The little circle of moles on her left shoulder... Why, she was John! Barely balancing my tray, I ran to my brother in shocked disbelief. "It's me... don't you know me?"

Suddenly, I tripped, seeing Mrs. Gretch grab me and spinning me away so that the tray almost fell into that beautiful dress, but Mrs. Gretch caught it and pushed me roughly from the room.

"Who was that?" her escort asked, turning towards Lady Charlotte as I passed through the door.

"Truly, John, one simply doesn't know every servant girl in a house this large. She obviously lacks proper training and must have sipped the drinks, don't you think?"

"She is damned pretty," he observed with an observing wink only to turn towards Lady Charlotte to add apologetically, "but, a bit plump in the backside."

"I venture to say that she will need it to sit down when Mrs. Gretch finishes with her," she laughed, taking his arm as the door closed and Mrs. Gretch fetched me to a side room where she took me over her knee like a small girl to pull down my drawers and whip me with a cane until I passed out.

I awoke in a dark room where I cried my heart out in pain. Suddenly, the door swung open to reveal the Duchess of Auberan herself! Frantically, I sank to my knees before her. "Please forgive me, please..."

"What is your name, girl?" she demanded, turning up the light to reveal Mrs. Gretch standing beside her.

I arose to curtsy properly. "Abigail, Your Grace."

"Abigail," she mused with a frown of displeasure. "All servant girls are called Abigail. Are you lying, girl?"

"No, Your Grace, my name is Abigail Smith, Ma'am."

"She is my niece, Your Grace. The girl who almost ruined Lady Charlotte's ball. I caned her and put her in here until later tonight. In the morning she will start her life's work cleaning chamber pots as I promised."

"Oh, really?" the Duchess observed, wrinkling her nose in distress at the thought. "How dreadfully cruel. She is a lovely child. How old are you, girl?"

"Sixteen, Your Grace," was my curtsied reply.

"A girl should be married at your age," she observed with an amused smile. "Don't you think, Mrs. Gretch, that you could find a good, healthy stable boy for her, or a steward?" She turned toward me. "Of course, Abigail, a pretty girl like you should have a boyfriend or two."

"No, Ma'am."

"Oh, that's not true, Your Grace! Have her tell you what she has been doing this past fortnight."

"Well, Dearest?" she asked, seeing my trembling shame.

Bowing my head, I muttered, "I was working for Mrs. Love, Your Grace."

"And whom is Mrs. Love?"

"A madame, Your Grace," I continued, wanting to die on the spot.

"You mean you were a whore?" she exclaimed in disbelief and shock. "How did this happen?"

"Oh, please, Your Grace, your servant is so ashamed of herself..."

"You simply must tell me everything, girl," she insisted sternly as she paused to take her seat at a nearby desk. "And you will look me straight in the eye and smile as a proper scullery girl."

Too ashamed to disobey, I recounted the past events of my bartered passions in detail, answering her awful questions concerning the most intimate and degrading incidents. When I finished in near tears of chagrin despite my fixed efforts at smiling, she shook her head in disapproval.

"Mrs. Gretch, is this the girl whom you have educated on your carefully saved earnings?"

"I regret to say that is true, Your Grace. A most ungrateful child." She bowed her head. "I have tried my best to provide her with a Christian upbringing and understanding of her proper position. The Morely Asylum is an excellent school for the training of young orphan girls of limited ability to become domestics. She has been there several years since she last tried to run away, and although her performance at the school leaves much to be desired, she appeared to have been a well disciplined girl until this incident."

"We cannot have scandal," our Mistress observed thoughtfully. "If it were not for your long and faithful service, I should send you both to the streets, one for misconduct and the other for misjudgement! But, we must find a more fitting punishment." She studied me intently before she asked, "Are you pregnant?"

I blushed three shades of pink and shook my head. "No, Ma'am."

"A likely story," she countered, looking at Mrs. Gretch. "You shall find her a strong, disciplined man, preferably a man in his middle years who has been married and can rule her with an iron will."

"Most of the servants know her story, Your Grace," she protested. "That will make it most difficult to find a good man to marry such tarnished goods."

"That very well may be true," was the bemused answer. "Do you have a dowry, girl?"

"No, Your Grace," I replied, hardly believing this turn of events. It was a shock almost on the order of realizing that John was now a beautiful debutante, if it were actually he... Suddenly, it began to dawn; if I were a girl, why shouldn't he have been made one also, and little James? But, why? Who?

"Hmmm, and no family?" she asked, looking at Mrs. Gretch.

"None to furnish a dowry large enough to overcome her past reputation, Your Grace. I do have her past month's earnings." She searched her skirt pocket to fetch out the bills and coins Mrs. Love had given her.

"Hardly enough," the Duchess observed, counting the money with a wry smile. "Just over two pounds a covering, a fine price a dandy must pay for bedding a slut." She handed the money to me. "You have earned it. Mrs. Gretch shall take you to a fine shop to buy your wedding gown and bridal trousseau."

She nodded as Mrs. Gretch took the money from me. "I presume that the traditional color for a prostitute is red, and Abigail is most certainly not entitled to wear virgin white, are you, my Dear?"

"No, Your Grace," I replied, trying not to think of the humiliation she was forcing upon me. No man would ever marry me if I were dressed so shamefully! Why was she so anxious to see the punishment of a mere menial in such a fashion?

"Yes, we shall have the entire staff attend so that all will know that you will henceforth belong to only one man, and that you have given up your harlotry," she continued with a nod of self agreement, seeing my wince. "Although you shall be married at Sepoy Hall, for I am sure that we shall find your husband to be there, from the stables, undoubtedly. Your honeymoon shall be spent there. There is in the west wing a lovely bridal chamber where my late husband's first wife spent her first night of connubial bliss. The bed is wondrously large for the most joyful and passionate delights. A most suitable place for your proper mating. I am sure that the late Duchess would have approved, don't you agree, Mrs. Gretch?"

"It is a beautiful bridal chamber, Your Grace. What do you say, girl?"

I curtsied my thank you, protesting that it was much too grand for a mere scullery girl, yet an awful thought came to my mind.

She knew!

My step-Mother was the force which had stripped me of my birthright and had severed my manhood, putting me forever in skirts!

"When I was to be married, my dowry was set at three hundred thousand pounds. One hundred and seventy thousand of that went to pay my husband's debts. In fact, had he not married me, his three sons would have most certainly been paupers. If they had lived, my son would have been fourth in line, but he is now certain as Duke..."

"That's why!" I blurted without thought of the consequences.

She smiled. "How did you really recognize Lady Charlotte, Abigail?"

"By the circular of moles, Ma'am. She is John, isn't she?"

"Would you really have blurted out the truth that you were who you are before Lady Charlotte, in the midst of a crowded ballroom? What if you were wrong? If you were not, why should she confess to a maid her shameful state? Are you so sure you want anyone to know about yourself? Would anyone believe you? Her story would never be believed, for she has spent many months in an insane asylum. Where you would no doubt be sent after telling such an improbable story."

She laughed with amused delight.

"Why, Mrs. Love probably could produce a dozen men, at least, who would testify quite convincingly of your female ways. Do you really believe that anyone would believe you? I am curious to know if you really do?"

In utter confusion, I realized how dangerously close I had come to my own confinement in a bedlam, and the possible ruin of John's own future. The contradictory logic of such thought only added to my confusion as I thought of John seeing me dressed as a servant girl. Meekly, I curtsied. "Abigail is your servant, Your Grace."

"Exactly, that is the future you chose when you elected to torture our servants. I have done exactly as I promised. You were sent to a school where you wore a uniform and learned the meaning of discipline. You have become slim and as neat as a pin, losing your slovenly ways. And you have been fairly treated in accordance with your proper station in life, at least as well off as you would have been had I not married your father," she recounted, bringing her original words to my mind, "have I not kept my word?"

I bowed my head, knowing that any protest would be a waste of time.

"Very well," she sighed, "of the balance of my dowry, I plan to give one hundred thousand pounds for Lady Charlotte's dowry. She will also be difficult to marry off because of her fragile sanity, which you could have shattered. But, I believe that her dowry will attract the suitor I have in mind for her, a man ruined by your father's adulterous conduct."

She smiled.

"Your father delighted in Mrs. Love's establishment. I'm quite sure that he would have approved of my charitable efforts to make an honest woman of one of her unfortunate courtesans. If it takes a hundred thousand pounds to marry off a lady, what would be a fair dowry for a mere scullery girl, Mrs. Gretch?"

"Her bridal clothes will cost more than an honest laborer earns in a year, Your Grace. Few girls of her station would earn such money in two years. If she had been

working since twelve, she may have earned twice that amount," Mrs. Gretch calculated. "Misty, a tenant girl, of good family, had two hundred and fifty pounds at most."

"Yes, but she was a virgin without a pale pastel red bridal gown," was the counter. "I want her to have many suitors so that we may pick the right man. A strict Christian man who will curb her willfulness and require all of her time not spent in service to the Hall so that she has no time for mischief. If she becomes slattern in her ways the least bit, he should have the strength to whip her as he would desire. But, most of all, he should have need of her as a wife, mate, housekeeper and perhaps Nanny for his motherless brood. A widower would be a good choice, I think."

She paused to study my reaction to her desires, seeing my docile acceptance, she continued, "would twenty-five hundred pounds given at the rate of fifty a year after the first year and five hundred of it given the first year attract a suitable man?"

"It would be like the scent of rut to the pack," Mrs. Gretch laughed. "We would have to stand guard over her!"

I shuddered at the comparison, causing my step-Mother to nod her delight.

"It would not be enough to support them alone, for I do not believe that she should leave her proper station. Menials do not understand money."

"It is a simple dole, and with children to support, they will be kept at work. Although it would be difficult for her to work if the children were small, unless they lived with his folk."

"No, although an old, ill-tempered Aunt or mother-in-law would keep her on her toes!" She beamed at the idea. "An invalid she would have to serve hand and foot, whose word her husband obeys implicitly!" Turning the thought over in her mind, she mused, "And children are a delight, especially when they are in the cradle, twin sucklings."

"She would need a wet-nurse then, Your Grace."

"If we find such a delightful family, I know a secret which will give Abigail the full benefit of her endowments and delight her sucklings!" she countered, completely delighted at my startled disbelief. "Oh, yes, like a cow!" she laughed, touching her breast to my wince. "Then, it's settled. You shall tell everyone of her dowry and my wishes for her prompt marriage to avoid any possibility of her bearing a bastard."

"Yes, Your Grace," Mrs. Gretch replied with a curtsy.

"And what have you to say, girl?"

I curtsied dutifully, knowing full well that I had no choice. "Thank you for your limitless generosity, Your Grace. Abigail, your servant, is certain that she does not deserve such happiness."

She nodded, pointing to a woman's clothes chest that sat by the closet, saying, "Mrs. Gretch, your niece and I shall carry that chest to our lovely Lady Charlotte's room. I am most anxious to see if she will be as perceptive as our Abigail has been, and if Abigail now knows her proper place. Perhaps Lady Charlotte will explain it to her."

The Duchess of Auberan took charge of her half of the chest and waved me to mine while my heart fluttered in fear of the dread thought that he might in fact recognize me and guess the awful truth. Still feeling the pain of my caning, I gingerly walked with my end of the light chest, knowing that I had no desire to be revealed. Then she paused and knocked gently upon the door and then entered.

Lady Charlotte stood by the bed dressed in her white silken chemise, leaving no doubt in my mind that she was a completely beautiful woman in every detail. By her side stood a maid servant helping her to undress while Lady Brian watched. Another girl was arranging the bed. They all curtsied as we entered.

"Your Grace, we are honored," Lady Brian greeted, looking at me with curiosity, noting my rather stiff and painful walk with a trace of amusement.

"Here, Abigail, we shall place it by Lady Charlotte's bed," the Duchess announced, setting the trunk down and winking at me. "You may wish to take this opportunity to apologize to Lady Charlotte for your rudeness at her ball."

Lady Charlotte paused in her undressing to look more carefully at me as I performed a deep curtsy and begged her forgiveness. "Mrs. Gretch, you have had a chance to whip her for her clumsy behavior?"

"Yes, my Lady," was the amused reply.

"Perhaps my cousin Randolph had been right," Lady Charlotte mused with a wave of dismissal towards me. "My late cousin believed that a servant girl should always be shown a firm hand."

"Oh, my Lady, Abigail will always know the true measure of Randolph's belief," Mrs. Gretch responded with utter delight.

"A most beautiful girl for mere peasant stock," Lady Brian observed, walking about me, causing my fears to grow by the moment.

Did she know the truth?

"Despite her possibly dubious parentage, she has a trace of Dinadan blood, don't you think, Dearest?"

My heart almost stopped, but Lady Charlotte shrugged, saying, "She looks like any other servant maid to me, a bit full at the bust and wide at the hip, with pretty, but short, legs. She will become a typical, stout scrub woman in a few years, worn by her duties and too many children." She shrugged, undoing the hem of her chemise at the crotch. "What did you want of me, girl?"

I bowed my head, knowing that I had been an absolute fool. She would have thought me insane. The past was best forgotten. She would never be disturbed by me again.

"I thought that I had once served your Ladyship before," I managed, "but, I was mistaken."

"That will be all, Abigail," the Duchess noted, dismissing me with a wave of her hand. "You will take her to her proper duties, Mrs. Gretch."

We curtsied and withdrew.

Mrs. Gretch took me to my basement room without a word.

The next morning I found myself surrounded in a scullery with chamber pots left by the maids from the forty or so guests of the house. One by one, I dumped the human waste and slop water and then began the task of scrubbing them with soap and water until they were clean enough to eat from.

No sooner had these china pots been cleaned when the servants' pots began to stream into the room, filling the room with their awful stench. By nightfall, the chamber pots had been finished and I washed myself before tumbling into bed to await another awful day.

It must have been two weeks before I was permitted to emerge from my basement chores, to be returned with Mrs. Gretch to the asylum where Mrs. Crisp took me to the school scrub room where I began anew to scrub chamber pots from dawn to dusk, only pausing to eat my meals from a pot which I had cleaned.

Except for the silent Susan who served my meals in the scrub room, I was not permitted to see another human. Posted above my sink was a sign in red:

A PROSTITUTE SEEKS HER OWN HELL, REJOICE IN THE FRUITS OF THY LABOUR!

I cannot say that I really saw any moral in that sign, except that I would never try to escape again, if they permitted me to serve as a maid or even housewife to an absolute tyrant. I had little hope for such fine fortune, for I knew well the careful cruelties of my Mistresses.

I cannot say how many months had passed before Susan came to fetch me from my pots to bring me to Mrs. Crisp's office, after allowing me to wash off the stench and change uniforms. In a few moments, I spread the cleanly starched white apron in a deep curtsy before Mrs. Crisp, awaiting her nod before arising and standing in dutiful readiness.

"Here are the tickets for the train. You shall return to Sepoy Hall in the morning. You will go alone." She looked at me and shook her head sadly. "You are leaving our care, child. We have done our best to train you in your proper duties. Mrs. Gretch has been most seriously advised that you are not suited for any domestic duties more demanding upon your abilities than doing scullery service. She will undoubtedly assign you to such duties, as we have advised. You shall serve her well enough, I suspect. You are dismissed."

I curtsied to withdraw.

In the morning Miss Adams took me to the station and with a parting kiss, I was left to go my way alone. From the train window I could see the fortress tower of Morely Asylum fade into the mists of morning, to be forgotten.

"London, Miss?" the conductor asked with a leer of recognition.

"No, Sir, not this time," I sighed, handing him my ticket and turning to watch the scenery flash by.

It was summer.

The sky was richly blue and the woods rippled to the wind like waves of green clouds against the sky. It was beautiful to smell the clear, fresh air only touched by the smoke of our engine.

Misty met me at the station with a matronly hug and schoolgirl kiss and soon she had my things in the pony cart. As we made our way from the village to the great hall, she gushed forth about her marriage, changes among the folk in terms of birth through deaths, and the utter excitement caused by the announcement that Lady Greensmith had taken my sponsorship at the request of her niece, the Duchess of Auberan and had posted a great dowry for me! At Lady Greensmith's call, the stewards of the entire Dinadan estates were carefully interviewed to identify those men who best met the conditions of suitability for my husband. Misty refused to expand upon the aforementioned "conditions," saying that Mrs. Gretch would not be pleased if she did tell me. She then turned to the subject of her own married life.

As we pulled into the service yard, Misty parked the cart and helped me with my bag. "Abigail, I am so glad you are back at the Hall. Whatever you may have done that causes others to say that you were a sinful girl, remember that I am your friend. Time will heal all wounds."

"Thank you, Misty," I replied, taking her hand for a brief moment before we entered the side door to be met by Mrs. Gretch and Mrs. Claire.

"I see that you made it this time," Mrs. Gretch noted rather primly, turning to Mrs. Claire. "Against the asylum's advice, I will assign you to Mrs. Claire as an upstairs maid. You shall stay in the room you once shared with Misty until your husband takes you to his service. Mrs. Claire will outline your duties after you have cleaned and changed into your proper uniform. Misty will take you to your room. You may withdraw, girl."

"Yes, Ma'am," was my curtsied reply.

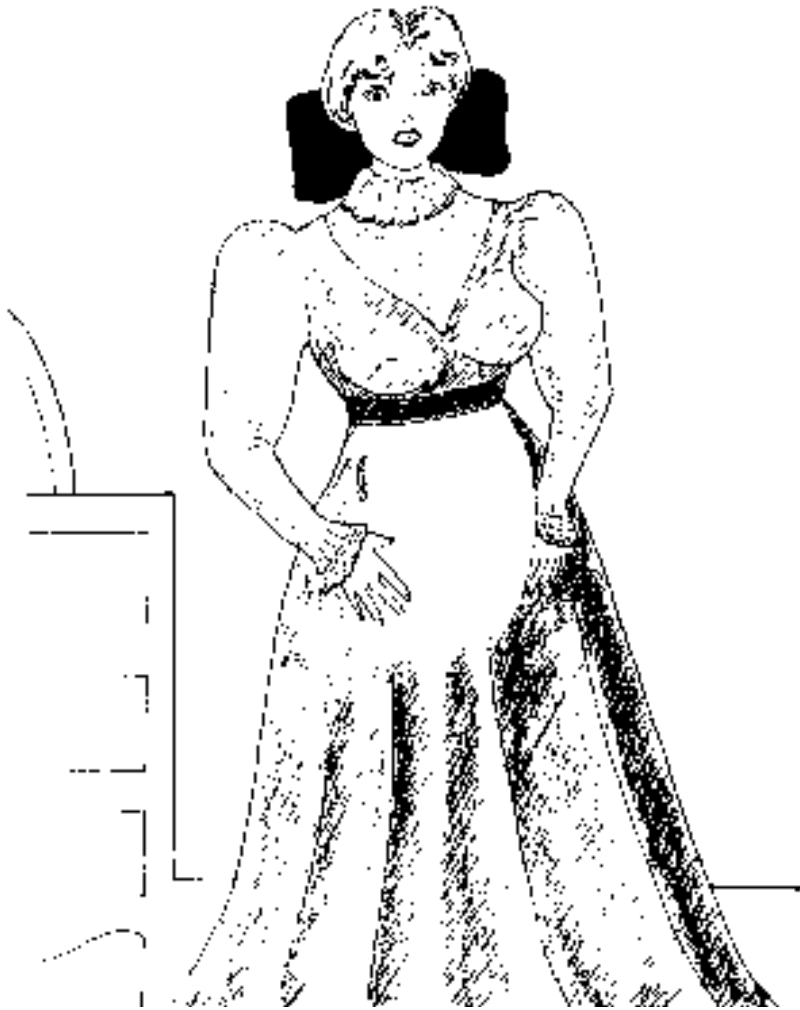
And thus, I found the joy of being a chamber maid. I was free one day a week to visit Misty or her folks and to taste the simple joys. As a fellow woman, I knew of the whispers of the staff and the obvious gestures and suggestions whispered by the men, but despite such taunts by the few, most of the folk were kind and forgiving like Misty's folks. As a servant, I knew my proper place and was eager to serve, knowing of worse duties than chamber maid chores.

At the end of the first week, Mrs. Gretch fetched me to Lady Greensmith's private drawing room where I entered by Mrs. Gretch's side to follow her own curtsy with my own deeper one.

Lady Greensmith looked up from her writing table to set aside her pen so that she might study me through her deep set eyes surrounded by the fine lines of her aged, yet strangely vigorous features. "It would appear that you are the servant girl whom my niece has taken such a fancy to. You are Abigail Smith, eh?"

"Yes, My Lady," I replied with a dutiful curtsy, wondering if she too knew the truth.

"Here, stand in the window light so that I may see you better," she commanded. Shaking her head in a nod of approval, she removed all doubts by an amused twitter of a laugh, saying, "I swear that the Dinadan line produces fine brood mares. Your



Mother must have been bedded by the late Duke. He was a real rake by all reports. Do you know your father, girl?"

Knowing well the charade, I swallowed and replied, "No, my Lady."

"Perhaps that explains the dowry," she mused with delight. "But, I must confess that you are well favored for a mere servant girl. Wide, full hips, narrow waist, and high, ample bust, not to mention a beautiful face. You are a very lucky girl." She picked up a letter from her desk, ignoring my "Thank you" with a dry smile. "My niece was rather specific about her desires for your mate. It was not easy to find exactly what you desired. For I assume that her wishes are yours, child?"

"Yes, my Lady," I replied submissively.

"Mrs. Gretch, you may bring

Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Baxter in."

Mrs. Gretch curtsied and retreated to usher two elderly women into the room. Each was dressed in widow black, undoubtedly their Sunday best. Each made a deep curtsy to be greeted by Lady Greensmith and waved to a seat before me so that they might better view me.

Mrs. Jones was a woman in her late sixties with thin drawn features that could only be described as "crone."

Mrs. Baxter was much younger, perhaps thirty-five or so. She was rather solid looking with the plain features and thin-lipped attitude of a woman well in charge of things.

"This is Miss Smith," Lady Greensmith announced, focusing their eyes upon me. "You may ask her any questions you wish. She will be quite truthful, I'm sure."

"Is it true that you were a common prostitute?" Mrs. Jones asked with pure disgust.

"Yes, Ma'am," I managed with a curtsy of shame.

"Well mannered, at least," Mrs. Baxter commented. "Do you have any knowledge of child care?"

"A little, Ma'am. They taught me such things at the asylum."

"I can imagine," Mrs. Jones muttered. "Can you wet nurse?"

"She will," Mrs. Gretch commented before I could deny, causing my hands to unconsciously touch my breasts before I trembled and withdrew them behind my back, palm to palm, as they belonged.

"She is large busted and quite rich with milk."

"She will need to be," Mrs. Baxter mused. "Turn around, girl."

With this, they arose to examine me quite closely, even to the chagrin of having me undress completely to the buff so that they might check against any sinful disorder that a whore might have. They asked all sorts of questions about my health and the timeliness of my female flow to determine if I were now pregnant!

When told to redress, they were satisfied that I was suitable enough despite my used condition, which they had probed also, noting that I was a clean girl to shave myself so carefully.

When I was redressed, Mrs. Baxter withdrew with Mrs. Gretch and as Mrs. Jones asked of my domestic training, they returned. I almost died of disbelief for Mrs. Baxter carried in her arms two little nurslings barely a few weeks old. In Mrs. Gretch's arms was another baby about a year old. Behind them was a parade of toddlers! Two little girls of but two years and a three year old boy.

"This is your new mother," Mrs. Jones announced to the children. "There are two other babies belonging to my son's first wife at home. They are about a year old."

"A suitable family," Lady Greensmith noted with delight over my stunned disbelief. "I presume that all the infants are nursing?"

"Yes, my Lady, even the two year olds take to the breast if allowed," Mrs. Jones replied, noticing my shock. "How soon will she be wet?"

"In a week she will lower her milk and be as plump as a cow with two udders," Mrs. Gretch replied.

"Very good," the women agreed a bit doubtfully.

"Fetch her Master," Lady Greensmith ordered, sending the two women away as Mrs. Gretch opened a side door to admit a tall, heavily framed man dressed in work clothes. It was Mr. Jones, the estate game keeper. It was rumored that he had whipped his wives if they didn't respond to his every whim, and there was a strange story that he had actually made his first wife submit to a hound when he caught her talking with a stable boy. He was known to be jealous, to say the least. Both of his wives had died in childbirth from twins. "This is the girl, Mr. Jones."

"You will curtsy to my Mother and mother-in-law as if they were your great lady. You will curtsy to me and call me Mr. Jones."

He studied me with deep brown eyes as mine studied his masculine form, seeing that, whatever other cruelty my many Mistress's may have planned, I was certainly destined to have a husband who was well hung, if the bulge at his loins were any sign!

"If I am displeased with you, I shall whip you as if you were the bitch you are. And if I find you flirting with another man as a whore might want to do, I shall have you covered by the pack one by one in the breeding frame. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Jones," I replied, completely in fear.

"Then it is settled," Lady Greensmith noted. "Do you understand her sinful past?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"And you understand what we plan for her wedding?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"Abigail Smith, do you accept this man to be your husband?"

"If he will have me, my Lady."

"Mr. Jones?"

"Yes, my Lady, I will take her as my wife."

"Very well, you both have my blessing."

With these words, we were dismissed to our separate ways.

The wedding was held at the Dinadan chapel at the great estate where I had played as a child. The folk from all the estates were brought to the affair with a great picnic set for afterwards. Summer flowers were ever present and one would think that a princess were to be wed instead of a mere scullery girl. It was a rumor that I was spending all my earnings as a prostitute on this affair as a condition for the marriage. I secretly think that a half dozen girls there must have decided that being a whore had its advantages!

I was dressed in the minister's cottage. With red drawers and chemise, red satin corset that barely contained my painfully swollen breasts caused by the strange drug Mrs. Gretch had used two days before. Little pads covered the nipples to absorb their fluid bounty! Over this went a red satin petticoat and the white lace and silken bridal gown with full train, huge puff sleeves, high narrow waist, deeply cut V-neckline to reveal the half orbs of my breasts and the red satin sash that adorned its waist. The sheer silk and lace gave the rich red satin beneath it a pastel white on red glow.

Despite its shameful significance, it was a gorgeous gown.

Something old was a pair of white wedding slippers which the Duchess herself brought, saying that my Mother would have been pleased...

Something borrowed was a pair of pearl earrings from Lady Greensmith.

And Mrs. Love gave me blue garters to wear!

I cannot describe the wedding itself, I was too humiliated by the event. I can remember the minister asking the most shameful questions of my man, making it perfectly clear why I was dressed in other than virgin white and making sure that he would teach me the proper ways of a wife. My vows promised to give up the sinful and

wanton past and to serve my husband in fear of his wrath as my Master. To love, honour, and to obey!

The wedding led to a picnic.

After the wedding party, I changed to a red velvet dress and accompanied my new husband to London. That night, in the same bridal bed my own Mother had surrendered upon, I wore a red satin gown trimmed with white lace and surrendered in turn to my own Master!

A few days later, I found myself surrounded by babies under the command of two women in black. Mrs. Jones directed my energies towards the household chores and her son's needs while Mrs. Baxter carefully held me to my motherly duties.

I cannot say that life was easy. My days were far busier than I should believe that I could stand, from the early hours to the nights spent in my Master's warm and demanding grasp.

But, in a strange way, I feel that I am now a complete woman and I really want for nothing.

If Lady Charlotte's wedded life could be more complete and fulfilling than this, I doubt it, despite her wealth.

That we were both married well, I knew. No woman could ask for better husbands. But, this was also the fate of the third...

Perhaps I would see her also, for I am sure that the three of us are now women. It is indeed strange that one is now a princess and the other is merely Cinderella.

Cinderella would never have become a princess. The best she could have hoped for was a marriage like mine. If mine were the fate of the real Cinderella, and Lady Charlotte is a princess, could our poor sister have a stranger fate?

Chapter Eleven: Emma Continues Her Story - Love Is Wickedly Cruel, Yet Mine At Last!

The old castle was a barren place and with little comfort. Lord McDougal was a rough man with red hair to match his temper and his younger brother was little better. Lady McDougal was basically a cruel woman who had a driving need to order about her limited staff, and I was her new toy. Her main delight was to search my past to discover my secret shame, my lover and what I had done with my little bastard. All this came from her careful probes as I nursed her greedy babies.

It was no wonder that I thought of nothing but escape...

"It is settled," Lord McDougal swore, slapping his cards upon the table. "You have won her fair and square." He took a deep, gulping swig from his goblet and leaned back from the card table to look at his brother as I entered the room, having been summoned by a maid. "She's yours."

"Now, don't be a sore loser, brother," Robert McDougal laughed, tossing the coins from the table back into his kit, "I may share her."

"Ah, now that's a fine offer, brother," was the hopeful counter as he looked up at me with lust in his eyes and my heart thudded beneath my breast in fear. A month

ago, they had gambled for poor Alice and she had jumped from the wall, poor servant girl that she was! Could this be my turn?

"My brother has won the night with you, girl. If my wife be true, you have had a man before and you will not do anything foolish, will you?"

"Oh, NO!" I cried, picking up my skirts and running from the room to hear Robert's laughter as he followed me down the hallway. "Help me!" I cried, seeing Lady McDougal, only to hear her laughter as she pushed me into Robert's arms. "Oh, please, don't! I swear I'm a virgin!"

"All the better for me," Robert laughed in delight, swinging me over his shoulder and patting my rear. "But, don't worry, you won't be one for long!"

As I kicked and screamed, he carried me upstairs to his chamber and tossed me to his bed! Before I could arise, he was busy with my skirts and I could see that he had dropped his linen with his kilt bobbing up from the tilt of his organ! I tried to keep my thighs together, but he hit me full in the belly with his fist and I nearly passed out, feeling his legs thrust between mine and then his weight as the soft, damp throbbing of his maleness suddenly jabbed its way into me!

I screamed and bit him many times, trying to break free as he pumped his way deeper into my body with laughing delight, and then he suddenly paused as the wet gushing of his semen found his completion deep within my femaleness!

He undid my dress while holding his penetration, and then to my complete humiliation, he pulled down the front of my nursing corset to suckle at my breast like a baby! Slowly, his lips and hands began to arouse fires deep within me and before I knew it, my voice was whimpering like a bitch in heat, begging to be taken! He covered me again and then pushed me from his bed!

"Tomorrow night we shall play cards for you again," he laughed, turning his back and going to sleep, leaving me to gather my things and flee in shame...

The next morning, Lady McDougal presented me with a red dress of soft taffeta which she insisted that I wear under my nanny apron as my new "uniform."

It left little doubt in any mind as to my new, shameful duties in the Keep McDougal.

And thus, by the turn of the card, I passed from Lord to brother with my Lady making nasty remarks to all who would hear about the loose ways of some governesses.

My survey of the castle and surroundings soon revealed that I was at least twenty miles from any hamlet of refuge, and as my Lord pointed out one day, it would be an easy affair to ride down an escaped servant with horse and hound as in the old days. He had seen a girl ridden down by his father's hounds and it was great fun to watch...

I was trapped...

It must have been a month before I was alone with the housekeeper who seemed to be the only good soul in the whole household. "I must leave this place."

"It is nigh impossible," she replied, closing the door. "They will not let you escape. You are their Mistress and they will have their way, girl."

I nodded and changed one of the screaming babies. Even she was a prisoner of the McDougals. I thought the matter settled, but then a week later, Lady McDougal called me to her room.

"Is it true that you have asked my housekeeper for help to leave our household? Haven't we been more than good to you? It's not every nanny who has taffeta uniforms and such. My husband has nothing but praise for your services, although it must be services beyond carrying the babies, for men know little of such things. What you do on your off time is your care, just as long as you do not bear out of wedlock, girl."

"You know very well what they are doing to me," I burst out in anger.

"Hush, mind your place, girl!" she warned. "I want to hear nothing of your sinful, wicked ways, or I shall have you whipped. My husband would like that, I wager."

I knew of his ways well enough to bow my head in complete submission.

"I have a suggestion," she noted, turning over her embroidery frame to examine the stitching with care, with a cruel smile on her face. "I shall see you discharged if you will do me a favor."

"Anything, my Lady, anything!" I cried, throwing myself at her feet. "I must leave this place!"

"If you will tell me of your first lover," she mused with a thin chuckle as she threaded a needle, "you will confess everything."

"I..." I stammered, seeing her housekeeper enter. "Now?"

"Of course, now," she countered, biting the thread off. "We would both like to hear your tale, my Dear."

Meekly, I saw little hope in clinging to a virtue that was now well worn, as I made up a story about a love affair as a schoolgirl in Russia. My lover was a Guardsman and he was killed before we could marry. My baby was killed by a midwife before its time when my school Mistress discovered the scandal.

The two women asked all sorts of questions about the affair as if searching out the lies I had told, but I managed to keep it consistent.

"So, you have had experience with a man," Lady McDougal noted when her housekeeper had left to attend to some matter. "A harlot's red is your color, then?"

I nodded, seeing no choice. "When may I leave?"

"Well, I should have to think about that," she mused. "It would not be easy for you to find a job without good references from me, would it?"

I nodded thoughtfully. What did she want?

"We are women of some sensitivity," she continued, taking her next stitch on a pretty red rose pattern. "Men are so fragile, especially when they are budding like my son. He needs instruction. Unfortunately, his tutor knows little about certain subjects. You have been teaching him how to dance and my son thinks that you are quite beautiful. In fact..."

“NO!” I cried, seeing her desires at once. “Not with your son too!”

“Too? Have you been a harlot in my own household, girl?” she countered, placing her hands to her ears as if to close out my words. “I shall have you caned if you utter another shameful word of slander!”

Trembling in shock, mingled with the fear that she actually might have me caned in front of the household staff as she had Mary, I stood silently.

“That is much better,” she countered, seeing my docility. “I cannot endorse your behavior, but I shall not try to rule a willful girl. It is a waste of time. However, I do believe that if you were to help my son to understand the mysteries, I should find a way to release you from our service.”

She smiled over her choice of words. “Do you understand, child?”

“Yes, my Lady,” I replied with a curtsy, half running from the room in my haste to withdraw to the sound of her soft chuckling.

The following night, I heard a gentle knock upon my door which brought me to turn up the lamp. Pushing aside the covers, I pulled on the lace robe that Lord McDougal had given me that morning with its matching white satin gown. It was not very practical in the cool of the night, but it was much too pretty to leave unused. Moving to the door, I opened it to see young John McDougal dressed in his nightshirt.

“Father said I should come visit you,” he whispered half in fear as I took his hand and led him inside to close the door. From his trembling hand, I knew he was half frightened and half excited by this turn of events. He knew full well why his father had sent him. I shuddered at my almost motherly concern, feeling his eyes upon me in disbelief. “You are beautiful, Mistress Emma.”

“Why, thank you,” I managed, wondering if he really were a young man yet. His voice still cracked with the sounds of puberty, but was he...

I shrugged.

“Are you sure you want to play with me, my Dear?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied happily, jumping into my bed to watch me sit by his side. “What do I do, Emma? father said that you would teach me just what a man should do. He said you would do it for the pretty nightgown I gave you.”

“I must thank you then,” I sighed, kissing him rather than hear more words.

“He said I was to sleep with you all night and do... do it as often as I want,” he continued earnestly with youthful excitement. “Do we do it like dogs?”

“Sometimes,” I whispered, trying not to believe this was happening to me. Resting upon my back, I offered my hand to him, pulling him gently closer. “We shall rest in each other's arms instead. And to begin with, you will stroke my body about the breasts as if petting them and then you will slowly raise my skirts while I play with you.”

“Yes, Emma,” he promised, doing as I asked with a gentle care while I carefully raised the skirts of his gown and sought his little organ which was actually not at all as small as I had thought it might be. My fingers felt the organ swell in the soft hairs

until it filled the length of my palm. Feeling the warmth on my own bodily urges, I gently inserted his organ, taking him into a firm kiss as he began to thrust himself deeper and deeper until I felt the unmistakable surge of sperm as it pumped life into me. "Oh, Emma, that was beautiful!"

"Yes, my little man," I sighed, holding him close. I do not know if he tried me again later that night, but in the morning I found his lips held tightly to my pap like a nursing infant. Laughingly, I squeezed my breast, causing him to awaken in blushing disarray, swallowing the mother's milk in embarrassed surprise. "Would you like some more, baby dearest?"

He suddenly laughed and began to stroke my breasts only to suddenly find his way between my thighs as he took me upon his own.

"That is what I want!" he laughed, finishing his mounting with delight. Rolling off, he patted my hip with mock masculine possession. "My father was right, you are a good woman for love. I'll be back tonight."

With this, he walked away, leaving me to my thoughts.

By the end of the week, I began to suspect that Lady McDougal was not at all in a hurry to keep her promise. So, during a quiet evening together, I waited until her housekeeper served our usual hot chocolate. As was her custom, she served my chocolate in a blue china cup while she and her Ladyship sipped theirs from a white china set. It seemed to be a sort of slight, or perhaps I was being poisoned. The idea had come to me a few days before when I felt dizzy in the morning and a bit more tired than usual. Of course such a notion was foolish. In these wilds, more direct methods would be used. Turning my cup handle, I rested the saucer upon my red satin taffeta skirted knee before taking a sip from the cup.

"I have kept my end of our agreement, Lady McDougal," I began, "I am sure that you are aware of the fact, Ma'am."

"Agreement?" she asked, a bit puzzled, and then with a shake of her head, "I do not know what you are talking about. Are you still seeking to leave your duty here?"

"As you promised," I countered firmly, "You would find some way to release me."

She shrugged. "I see no reason to dismiss you. It is plain enough that you are not the best nanny I could find for the price, but you are not so bad that I would have cause to turn you out." She winked towards her housekeeper. "Our Lord seems to fancy your presence and has told me that you are an excellent influence upon young John. He seems to be becoming quite a young man every day. No, my Dear, we are quite pleased with your services..."

I saw that I was still trapped. "But..."

"Of course, we are not so cruel as to turn you out even if you do become a bit lax. My Lord would resort to the cane to remind you of your duties first. But, that shall not be needed, shall it, Mistress Caldwell?"

"No, Ma'am," I replied as expected, finishing my hot chocolate.

The evening passed with a visit from his Lordship and thus my days continued in the service of the babies during the day and the men at night. It was the rigors of this

routine that seemed to find me so tired in the morning. In fact, I noticed several things wrong and feared a strange malady. I seemed to be gaining weight despite the frugal meals. In the morning, I awoke feeling a bit dizzy and sometimes suffering from nausea. My breasts seemed to be taunt with swelling and I had to wean the babies, causing Lady McDougal to be a bit disappointed. But, when I explained my strange illness, she merely smiled and noted that we women should understand each other's burdens. She questioned my symptoms with frank interest and curiosity, only to shrug, saying that I should know them well enough.

It was undoubtedly some female discomfort I had no knowledge of. I detected from her attitude that it was only a natural situation, so I was determined to brave things through. After all, I was equal to any womanly ailment. Or, at least, so I thought...Pausing at the supper table, I turned to take my seat for the Sunday meal which was with the Lord and Lady of the Keep.

"Mistress Caldwell," Lord McDougal called, studying my waist with fascination, causing me to wish that I had a proper corset for my new poundage. "I do believe that you are pregnant!"

"Pregnant?" Lady McDougal repeated in disbelief, turning to examine me closer. "Come here, Emma!"

"My Lady," I protested, "I have just been gaining a little weight..."

"Oh, really?" she countered with disbelief mixed with taunting undertones that brought strange fears to my mind. Could it be possible? "Have you been sick in the morning?"

I looked down at the shining little bulge below my waist. It was impossible, of course.

"And tired," she continued, patting my lower tummy with a knowing smile. "Yes, my Dear, you are undoubtedly pregnant."

"Pregnant?" I repeated in stunned disbelief. "How?"

Lord McDougal and his brother laughed.

"How, indeed," his wife countered sternly. "The question is who? Who among our servants have you been sleeping with, girl?"

I bowed my head in amazed wonderment. Was I really pregnant?

"It is little enough to answer, girl, we only want to see you properly married," Lord McDougal mused quite seriously. "I will make the man marry you."

"Hear, hear!" his brother cheered, joining the game.

"You all know perfectly well," I shouted from my fear, realizing that it could very well be possible after all! I had breasts and could serve a man, so why couldn't I also have been made completely into a woman? It was awful!

Unwed, and...I turned and stormed from the room, retreating in shame to my own bed chamber. I must have cried myself to sleep...

My condition brought no comment the next morning nor in the days that followed. It was merely accepted that I was in fact pregnant, and with the passing weeks, my swelling tummy gave proof to their expectations, and my worst fears.

It was particularly cruel to be forced to continue in their household, for all pretended not to know who my lover might be, and their scorn of my "sin" was directed towards me in word and laughter.

Any protest of innocence on my part brought justified laughter, and my single effort to accuse my Lord led to a public whipping and a forced "confession" that I had secretly lain with a gypsy from a caravan that had visited the countryside a few months before.

Never had I ever been so painfully abused! With my Lord's whip and my Lady's inquisition, I confessed to this "sin," saying that I wore red as a gypsy bride, and I had sunk so low in my animal desires as to try to seduce the Lord's son, a mere child...

Whomever may have thought otherwise, now believed the truth of this humiliation, and I was thus branded as a most wanton bawd. None would speak to me and they all henceforth had that sly, knowing look of accusation.

"It just will not do," Lady McDougal noted, angrily turning from her secretarial table to face me as I curtsied to her summons. "Your behavior has become a scandal in our house. I must discharge you!"

In stunned disbelief, I felt the blood drain slowly from my legs.

What could I do?

I could hardly contact my mother. She held a position of trust and the scandal would harm her reputation as a Governess. As Lady McDougal often threatened!

"Please, my Lady, what will I do?"

"You should have thought of that when taking your lover's gifts," she noted with scorn.

"Oh, Lady McDougal, you could not be so cruel," her housekeeper protested. "She has a weak virtue, but she will certainly perish if you throw her out in her present delicate condition."

"She can go to her mother," Lady McDougal countered with a shrug.

"Oh, I couldn't face her," I cried, looking down at my "sin."

"It would ruin her. She is a good woman.," her housekeeper suggested, "the sins of the child..."

"Like daughter, like mother, there was a story concerning Emma's father," Lady McDougal noted maliciously, watching my stunned disbelief.

"You cannot abandon the child. Think of the poor babe."

Lady McDougal grew sober, causing hope. "It would not go well if any heard of such well deserved punishment. We are Christians, after all!"

I stood silently.

She opened her desk thoughtfully, to examine some envelopes. "There is little enough charity in this world, but perhaps my sponsorship of one may serve the baby's interest. The Mother is her own punishment."

She opened an envelope to examine its contents. "Yes, I shall sponsor you at the next meeting. We go to London next week."

"But, where, my Lady?"

"Away from here. Isn't that enough?" she replied.

A week later, I climbed into the coach, aided by a footman, for in my sixth month, it was already becoming difficult to move about freely. I no longer wore a corset and the oversized white silk dress Lady McDougal found for me, left little doubt as to my condition in its taut sheen. The ride was uncomfortable and the train compartment was little better as he shared our way with the two matrons.

"You shouldn't wear such a tight dress, Dearest," one offered with interest. "Is it your first?"

I blushed my "yes" to Lady McDougal's stern nod of denial while her right hand played with her wedding band, causing the matrons to see now that I wore none!

"Humph," was the cold withdrawal of interest as they both withdrew in indignant disarray from being so close to such obvious sin, true middle class Victorians.

Lady McDougal nodded her approval and opened her magazine to leave me to lick my invisible wounds of shame. As the train made its way to London, I wondered what further humiliation she had planned for me. To be paraded about in my condition was torture enough, little could be worse...

Or, so I thought...

From the train, we disembarked to a hansom cab, to move quickly through the narrow streets while Lady McDougal nervously glanced at her necklace watch. It was clear that she had made the appointment for a set time. Then, the cab stopped.

"We're there, Ma'am," the driver announced through the trap, opening the doors. "Shall I wait, Ma'am, for you?"

Then I shall be alone!

"Yes, driver, in an hour," she replied, handing him some coins and dismounting to leave me to struggle to the sidewalk and take my bag. "This way, Mistress Caldwell."

Walking up the stairs, I noticed the golden lettered sign:

AUBERAN HOME FOR UNWED MOTHERS

The old house looked vaguely familiar and then I remembered that I had once visited it when I was a small child. It had been my step-mother's home in London before she had married the Duke. It was now a charity home for girls who...

I followed Lady McDougal into a hallway before a curtsying girl who wore a simple, gray wool dress over her obvious condition beneath a starched white apron. "This way, my Lady, the Charity Committee is expecting you."

She took my hand with a slight smile and helped Lady McDougal with her wrap before she opened a sliding door to reveal a rather large waiting room. There, waiting for us, was my mother, Mary Caldwell!

"Oh, my poor Darling, how could you shame me so?" she exclaimed with tearful distress, taking me into her arms. "You foolish, foolish girl!"

"Oh, mother," I cried, trying to think of what to say. "They made me sleep with them; Lord McDougal, his brother, and the boy!"

"Oh, wretched girl!" she protested, shaking my shoulder. "If it were not for their charity, you wouldn't have this chance. I would be ashamed, and..." She looked pleadingly at Lady McDougal who was leaving! "Please beg her forgiveness, Emma! I know that you were a gypsy's love toy! Their housekeeper is a dear friend of mine! Oh, think of your baby, if you can think of naught else!"

Bursting into tears, I sank to my knees, seeing that none would believe me now. "Please, Lady McDougal, I will never lie again! Please help us!"

She paused.

"It is difficult to be charitable to the ungrateful, but, for your mother's sake..."

Double panel doors opened to reveal a woman dressed in black taffeta.

"The Charity Committee is ready, Lady McDougal."

"Be careful that you do not slander our name again, Emma," Lady McDougal warned. "You can be caned into telling the truth and put out to starve as you well may deserve. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"Come," she noted, taking my hand as my Mother took my other and I was led between them into a large study. We came to a large table placed at the end of a long room where I could see four women seated, facing towards our entrance. About ten feet before the table, facing them, were two chairs on either side of where we came to stop and executed our curtsies.

When I arose, the lady in black had taken her seat and my Mother had taken the other to leave me standing alone to face the Charity Committee.

From memories of a distant past, I recognized the elderly Lady Greensmith, Lady Brian, whose daughter was insane, a beautiful golden haired lady who could have been a fairy princess in pink satin, and my step-mother, the Dowager Duchess of Auberan!

"Mrs. Birch, we may begin," the Duchess announced formally.

"Lady McDougal wishes to sponsor an Emma Caldwell. The girl's Mother is here," the woman in black replied. "The girl stands before you, Your Grace."

Seeing Lady McDougal's nod, I curtsied, causing the beautiful princess to giggle!

"Lady Charlotte, that is hardly proper," Lady Greensmith admonished.

"She looks so silly when she curtsies. They all do," Lady Charlotte countered, adding, "I'm sorry..."

"Emma, the Charity Committee was formed to do various good works in true Christian belief in deeds." The Duchess paused to study me more closely and then my mother. "She favors the Dinadans. Is there such blood among the Caldwells?"

"No, Your Grace," my Mother replied, lowering her head as if in shame.

"I see."

"If we accept you for the home, you shall have employment here until your baby is born. The baby will be given to more deserving parents and you shall be helped to find suitable domestic employment. We could not trust you with the care of children anymore. I am sure you understand."

"Of course, if you will tell us the name of the father, we shall try to locate him and arrange a marriage for the child's honor," Lady Charlotte suggested. "Would you know his name?" She smiled as if to reveal her doubt...

"Well, Emma?"

"No, Your Grace," I half whispered with bowed head.

"No, what?" Lady Greensmith pressed.

"I do not know my lover's name, my Lady."

"We shall hear of your education and upbringing to see if you are of some birth. You will tell us, my Dear, of your childhood and such," Lady Brian noted. "Your Mother will verify the facts, so tell the simple truth, child."

Tracing back my memories, I briefly outlined my history from the Russian nursery school to my duties at McDougal Keep as a Governess.

As I told my tale, my eyes reflected upon the lovely features of Lady Charlotte, thinking of how very beautiful she was with long golden hair, little pink ears that were so delicately adorned with pink white pearl earrings, and...

Something from my past flowed through my mind, causing me to pause and stare at her...

"Yes, child, pray continue," Lady Greensmith prodded, seeing my stare with a trace of amusement. "You were telling us of the babies?"

Numbly, I managed to continue, realizing in that moment of insight that Lady Charlotte was none other than John! The right ear still bore the little triangle shaped scar I had given him when I had hit him with my doll in a fit of anger. He was now a woman, like me. Seeing the other women through new eyes of truth, I knew that they all had had their roles to play in this fantastic plot.

Was lovely Lady Charlotte now one of them?

"You may undress now," Lady Charlotte announced as I finished my tale. "We have to see your general physical condition to be sure that you do not have any, er, social illnesses. Do you understand, girl?"

My whole being fought against the idea that I might have to undress before my tormentors! To be made to dress and act like a woman, to become pregnant as a love toy, and now to parade my swollen belly and breasts before them! With trembling fingers, I began to undo the buttons of my dress, seeing Mrs. Birch arise to assist me.

"Turn about, girl," the Duchess ordered as my drawers lowered, leaving me naked to their amused survey. "She is a well formed child, isn't she, Lady Brian?"

"Yes, a very beautiful child. Don't you think she is well suited to motherhood, Lady Charlotte? Her hips are almost as wide as yours are."

Her lovely daughter was about to say something when she turned pale before their very eyes, to stare at me in sudden horror, causing my heart to speed up in knowing that John had recognized me and the possibilities of my condition! Lady Charlotte quickly recovered, seeing her mother's curious interest.

"Are you well, Dearest? Are you having one of your unfortunate spells?" she asked of her daughter with her eyes flowing from the girl in pink to me. "You have seen many other girls in her condition. If your own husband is as virile as he seems, you may well be as lovely! It is, after all, a woman's burden."

The other women laughed to themselves, causing her daughter to smile and nod her head. "Of course, mother, I understand my duty as a wife!"

"Wife," the Duchess repeated with a smile, turning from Lady Charlotte to me. "Would you be pleased if we were to find a suitable husband for you, Emma?"

Lady Charlotte studied my nakedness in disbelief until our eyes met and then she swallowed hard and bowed her head with a slight, knowing blush. Suddenly, she looked at the Duchess, muttering something about a servant girl.

"Yes, Dearest, quite so," the Duchess replied with a slight chuckle, repeating her question to me.

I was about to protest this charade when it dawned on me that the truth would not change a thing. I was a wayward Motherwith no possible future but to bear a little bastard, and then...

She may have planned this shame for me.. She may be enjoying her little torture with her allies knowing that poor John was now fearful that in time Charlotte might also swell forth in womanhood...

But, what could I do?

I bowed my head thoughtfully. "Yes, Your Grace."

"An intelligent girl," Lady Brian noted. "I think she may put on her new uniform and corset." The others agreed, including a very subdued matron in pink.

"Yes, my Lady," Mrs. Birch replied.

A girl was summoned to fetch the home uniform for me while the women came from behind the table to add to my total chagrin their services in dressing me. Drawers, chemise and stockings were made ready for a strange corset with nursing shields and special boning designed to support a pregnant woman's womb comfortably by distributing its weight. When the stockings were gartered, a flannel petticoat was added and

soon I was dressed in the home's gray wool dress and white apron. Black slippers completed my dress and the pleased matrons withdrew to their places behind the table as I dutifully thanked them for allowing me to stay at their home.

"You were discussing her marriage," Lady Greensmith asked of the Duchess. "She is quite far gone in her condition. It would be quite impossible to have her married before the baby comes, poor babe."

"Lady Charlotte, what do you think?" the Duchess asked with amused interest, seeing how suddenly reserved the girlish matron in pink had become. "If she doesn't wish to reveal her lover, should she be punished by allowing her to bear a bastard?"

Lady Charlotte shook her head in distress, probably realizing the true meaning of the statement, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

"She should be married, if she wishes." She looked at me as though apologizing.

"Then we shall find her a husband," Lady Brian agreed, only to shrug. "But, how? Who would marry a girl several months pregnant with another's child?"

The Duchess of Auberan took a little book from her purse. "My dowry was three hundred thousand pounds. What would a suitable dowry be for her, Mrs. Birch? You know of such unfortunate girls. How much would a man require to marry her in her present condition?"

"What sort of man?" she asked, looking at me.

"Yes, of course," Lady Greensmith observed, "what manner of man would you like for a husband, child?"

The others, including Lady Charlotte, agreed to look at me also.

Uncertainly, I bowed my head, realizing suddenly that the Duchess had within her wealth the capability to grant my desire for a certain man. And she fully intended to...

No mouse in a cat's paw fared worse.

"Well, child?"

Moistening my lips, I quickly reviewed the men in my life, trying to believe that I could actually list my expectations and they would be met...

"Well?" the Duchess insisted, seeing my uncertainty. "Butcher, baker, candlestick maker?"

The others laughed, including Lady Charlotte.

"Very well," I sighed, looking down at the shame of my dress. "In my dreams I see a handsome officer of the Guards, a Captain, a bit taller than I in heels," I continued, describing Captain Blue!

"I think that we shall consider your request," the Duchess mused with a smile. "A military man should be a good influence on you." She turned towards Mrs. Birch. "What would be a fair dowry, in such a case?"

"A few thousand pounds under ordinary circumstances, perhaps five."

The Duchess examined her notebook. "Ten thousand pounds. We shall give her ten thousand pounds in dowry."

"You are most generous, Your Grace," my Mother exclaimed happily, taking my hand into hers.

"You shall attend to such matters, Mrs. Birch."

"Yes, Your Grace," my new Mistress agreed with a deep curtsy as the matrons and my Mother withdrew, leaving me in Mrs. Birch's care.

I was then shown to a bedroom which I was to share with two other girls. It matters not to deal with how we attended to our household chores as the waiting domestic staff of the home. Conversations skirted our histories and spoke of our condition from mood to mood as women in common need.

"Mistress Emma, you have a caller," Mrs. Birch announced with a broad smile. "A gentleman to see you!"

"A gentleman?" I repeated, following her with a curtsy. In a moment, I was ushered into the drawing room to see Lady Charlotte and a balding man dressed in a deep green uniform wearing the pips of a Captain. "Mistress Caldwell, Captain Martin of the Light Infantry Guards."

"Mistress Caldwell," he repeated, taking my hand and motioning me to a love seat while Lady Charlotte took her seat as chaperon. Looking down at my swollen belly, he smiled uncertainly but moved on to the task at hand. From his conversation, he managed to obtain a fair understanding of my background and he explained his own life away, allowing me to know that it was to be my choice of husband which won the prize, if the Charity Committee agreed.

Needless to say, he was just the first of the parade. One each night, until a full dozen men in uniform had been paraded before me for my approval, and then, he came...

For waiting in the drawing room was Captain Blue with Lady Charlotte!

"Mistress Caldwell?" he noted in disappointment. "I had hoped that it was you, and then, I had hoped not..."

He took my hand into his with tender care. "What can I say?"

"Did you come for my dowry, like the others?"

"Yes," he replied honestly. "Tell me what happened at McDougal Keep."

I looked towards Lady Charlotte, knowing full well why I was being watched.

Lady Charlotte had heard our brief exchange and arose, causing him to suddenly stand in respect to her, as I did with a curtsy. "Emma and I have a belief in true love," she observed, walking to the window after taking my hand into her's for a brief squeeze.

"He is very handsome. Do not be foolish..."

His eyes followed her blue silken form across the room. "She is a beautiful woman. Emma, are you somehow related?"

I nodded. "Distant cousins."

"That explains the dowry," he mused. "It's a great deal of money."

"Enough to overcome my handicap, it seems," I observed rather coldly. "Would you believe the truth? That I fell in love with a gypsy and accepted him?"

He looked to the floor pattern of the rug.

"No. I may have only been with you for a few hours, but I could not believe that of you."

He paused.

"You seemed to be frightened of men under your girlish ways. I do not believe you, Emma. Now, what really happened in that gloomy castle?"

I bowed my head and whispered to him the true story while Lady Charlotte looked in silence out the window. With each word, he grew angrier, until I began to realize the potential of my own words.

"I shall kill them," he exclaimed, causing Lady Charlotte to turn in a fright.

"I pray, Emma, that you are not being foolish. Take your love and flee!" she whispered in fear. "As a sister, I beg of you. You may both have happiness."

He looked confusedly at me. "What is this all about?"

"Would you be so insane as to take another's life and be sent to the gallows?" she continued with a shudder, "Or to be locked up alone in a dark cell?"

She turned to me.

"You are a fool. Think not of revenge when you can have love instead. And I have been foolish to think that you really may love each other."

She spun on her dainty foot, returning to the window.

"She is right," I managed. "I do not want revenge. It is all over. If you want me, I am yours, but not for revenge. I just want to be your wife."

And so it was that he took me into his arms and kissed me.

A week later, the matrons of the Charity Committee assembled in the home to hear of my selection.

"So it shall be a Captain Blue?" the Duchess of Auberan noted. "Since it is the bride's family which shall arrange the wedding, I shall observe the honor."

"Do you have a bridal gown, Mistress Caldwell?" Lady Brian asked.

"No, my Lady."

"Very well, I think that my daughter should select one for you since she was your chaperon. Won't that be splendid?"

Lady Charlotte's eyes showed her sorrow over my torture.

"She should be married at Dinadan House. It is much better than here," Lady Greensmith suggested. "They can use the bridal suite there that the servant girl, uhm, Abigail, used."

"Abigail?" Lady Charlotte repeated, as though trying to remember.

“Mrs. Abigail Jones, my Dear,” the Duchess of Auberan noted with a smile. “You met her the night of your presentation ball. She married our game keeper at Sepoy Hall. He has several children, I am told.”

She turned towards me with a nod.

“It is a lovely bridal suite. In fact, my husband's first wife was taken there on their honeymoon.”

She glanced at Lady Charlotte. “In fact, my niece wore her bridal gown and night dress.. They both have a high waist to let out. Perhaps they might be perfect for a young lady in your condition. Of course you shall need to wear a colored sash for white is for virgins, Dearest.”

“I have a lovely pink sash,” Lady Charlotte offered hopefully. “Wouldn't that be lovely, Emma?”

“Oh, yes, my Lady,” I replied, seeing that Lady Charlotte was hoping to shorten their little game by being helpful.

“Perfect, Dearest,” the Duchess of Auberan replied happily. “I shall leave the wedding in your hands. We shall have family all come and we shall provide everything else. Lady Charlotte would love to be your Matron of Honor, wouldn't you, Dearest.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” was the servile answer.

My poor husband-to-be must have loved me very much to go through that awful marriage with all his relatives seeing my condition. He manfully took responsibility for the child-to-be and introduced me to his parents with every hope for their charity.

They were very reserved and middle-class, but not unfriendly under the circumstances. Whatever else may be said, Lady Charlotte had staged a beautiful wedding.

A week later, my husband received orders to post to India with his regiment. The Duchess of Auberan offered to allow me to remain at Dinadan House until I had our baby and then I was to follow. My husband would have refused, but he could not take chances with my taking the long country ride to his parents' home.

And thus it was that our baby was born in Dinadan House.

Whatever my doubts may be, I am certain that I am a woman, and I do dearly love my husband who I joined soon after his son's birth.

For, although I have found love to have been wickedly cruel in its delay, I am content with it at last...

Chapter Twelve: The Dowager Duchess Of Auberan Concludes Her Confession.

I should not be so hard on the poor dears. They have written their stories as I have requested. I do find some parts of their stories to be quite amusing. Considering their alternative futures, you might not be so shocked.

Consider the fact that the three of them would have been all of an age during the Great War. In all likelihood, they might have been killed as so many of our best were. I think that my decision not to murder them saved their lives once, and the fact that they became women saved them yet anew.

Of course, I may have amused myself with the events of their new lives, but such was our little game. Each lived a story as classic as any girl's romantic tale with all the terrors and the joys. They were a delight to play with, but we all decided that their marriages were a suitable ending. After all, a girl is raised to believe in the fairy tale that they will live happily for ever after, once they are married.

Considering the sum I should note the fact that they cost me exactly three hundred thousand pounds to capture, change, school and marry off. It was the sum of my dowry and rightfully belonged to them in exchange for all else. I think that I was more than fair.

Lady Charlotte served on many of the charities that I did, so we both grew to know each other as the years passed. During the Great War, she helped to form the Women's Volunteer Corps and rose to the rank of colonel. At the end of the War, she returned home with the blessings of our King. I have often wondered if she would have done so well as a man. She served again during the Second War and has since retired to her late husband's estate with her oldest son and his family.

Abigail Jones vanished into the slavery of her life as a domestic wife. Perhaps we were too cruel towards her, but strangely enough, she was all the better for it. As the years passed, she gradually survived her harpies and her husband, to raise her children to solid adulthood. She left the farm when her last girl was married to care for the household of Lady Charlotte. She made an excellent housekeeper and is still one now.

Emma Blue went with her husband to India. He was killed soon afterwards. On her return to England, the War struck and she was stranded in Egypt where she met General Sumpter who she had first met when he commanded her first husband's regiment.

They married.

After the War, he retired to his family estates in Dover and she raised her son and his three children.. She now lives with her oldest son on the family estate.

The twisting of events is strange. For all of this was for my Percy. He grew into a handsome man, well gifted except for the feminine graces of the line. He was another beautiful Dinadan. Too beautiful! He became caught up with feminine ways and became homosexual. I had to arrange a marriage to continue the line, but he only sired a girl!

During the Second War, he was captured and the camp commander used his vice to break his will. He betrayed his comrades and shamed us all.

His bravest act was suicide.

Thus, the Dinadan line has come to an end...

Lady Gloria, my grand daughter, has been the comfort of my declining years. She is a strong girl with dark brown hair and almost manly features. She would have made a fine boy.

Her life's joys sprang from the hunt, race cars and besting her dates in their favorite sports. I'm sure that she will remain single because this is no longer the age of the dowry. During the Second War, she served in the Intelligence Services and more than made up for her father's shame.

She left the Service after the War and lives a rather wild life that leads me to think that she may still be in some sort of Special Branch even now.

I had not seen her in months, until she arrived at my birthday party.

She was completely changed!

She was dressed in a man's suit and claimed to have had one of those sex change operations!

She claimed to be a man!

To my utter amazement, she stated that she intends to claim the Peerage of Dinadan!

Most unusual, wouldn't you think?

LADY GLORIA BECOMES DUKE OF AUBERAN

LONDON... The House of Lords accepted the formal request of Lady Gloria Dinadan to be declared as the Duke of Auberan. Lady, now Lord John, had a sex change operation about two months ago and has since lived as a man. Her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Auberan, could not be reached for comment.

AUBERAN HALL COLLAPSES

AUBERAN...At three o'clock this afternoon, a strange screaming sound rent the air as servants fled ancient Auberan Hall to watch in disbelief as the great old castle slowly crumbled into dust before their very eyes. All that remains of the old house are the family vaults which were untouched. Local civil engineers believe that the ancient foundations, built in the fifth century A.D., which protected the family vaults, were built of granite. The superstructure of the old castle, built in Norman times, and the changes made there-after were basically of wood, limestone and brick. Recent efforts to restore the west wing of the great house may have weakened the structure...

DOWAGER DUCHESS OF AUBERAN DIES

AUBERAN...The Dowager Duchess of Auberan, age 97, died this evening. Her death was attributed to the shock of seeing the great castle of Auberan reduced to rubble. She is survived by her grandson, Lord John Dinadan.

UNTIL THE HOUSE OF AUBERAN SHALL FALL WHEN THE LAST DUKE IS A WOMAN PRO-
CLAIMED A LORD BY HIS PEERS...