

## CHAPTER ONE

I was musing on my future, seated in the room I had been kindly allocated in the east wing of Moreton Priory, when I heard the scream of terror. Bursting out into the corridor, I saw a copper-gold waterfall of hair, spotlit by the late afternoon summer's sun, tumbling straight to the floor. Cruel male hands were gripping it, as the girl tried to evade her assailant's unwanted embraces. Even at this hour, he was jug-bitten, already too foxed to heed my urgent remonstrations, or to loosen his grip when I tried to tear the poor girl free. There was only one thing to do. I landed him a facer, all the science that Cribb had taught me in that single blow.

He fell senseless, or near enough, at my feet. The girl – a housemaid, already trying to gather her hair back under an ugly cap – now cowered as far from the wretch as she could, pressed against the ancient wainscoting. Her slender body was wracked by great dry sobs. I feared an attack of the vapours, and would have run to summon another servant had she not piteously grasped my hand.

'You're safe now,' I reassured her, pointing to the prone youth, who was much younger than I'd realised.

'You've killed him, sir. And you a parson!' she cried.

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‘Dead! He’s not dead, the ill-bred oaf. Look, he’s moving already. Which is his room?’

She pointed. I shouldered open the door, and gathering the creature by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his breeches I heaved him bodily away from her. He was by now conscious enough to kick it shut behind him.

‘He’ll lose me my place!’ she whispered.

‘Did he hurt you?’ I helped her to her feet.

She modestly rearranged the neck of her gown, and smoothed her apron. ‘What if he complains to her ladyship? I shall be sent packing! And then what will become of me?’ she ended, close to tears.

‘What’s your name?’ I passed her my handkerchief, as she brought the hem of her apron to her eye.

‘Lizzie, sir.’ Fingers touching her clothing as if she were still troubled by her state of dishevelment, she sketched a curtsy. She was tall for a woman, but neither willowy nor Junoesque. Indeed, her figure was perfection itself; the plain clothes of her household uniform could not deny it. Her complexion was pale, as you often find with hair the shade Titian would have been proud of. Her eyes were the blue-green of the far-distant sea and, despite her lowly station, her voice as sweet and low as the Bard himself would have liked.

‘Nothing will happen to you. Because I shall speak to Lady Elham and explain what I saw. And if that young cur—’

‘Lord Hednesford, sir—’

‘Should he ever lay a finger not just on you but on any other young woman here, he will answer to me. Do you understand?’

Understanding me was one matter, believing quite another.

And here I came to a stand. What should I do next? Six months ago I would have slipped half a guinea into her hand and sent her on her way, adjuring her to think no more about it and taking my advice myself. That would have been all she would have expected. But now I stood before her an ordained clergyman, as my neckbands had plainly declared. Did a parson in his first evening in his new parish bless her? Or ask if she went to church regularly? What I should certainly not be doing was standing transfixed by her beauty. I swallowed.

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Can I go now, sir?’

‘Of course, Lizzie. But tell the housekeeper to send someone else up to light Lord Hednesford’s fire and bring his water in future. Ask her. Tell her I told you to ask her.’ By now I was almost as embarrassed as she was, and tried to redeem the situation by bowing to her as if she were a lady with whom I’d just stood up to dance.

Turning, she fled down the corridor, and thence the backstairs.

I returned to my room, closing the door quietly behind me, and sat with my head in my hands. Had I done wrong? Should a man of the cloth ever resort to violence? The smarting of my knuckles testified to the force of my blow.

There was a tap on my door.

‘I thought you might want this, sir,’ a wooden-faced manservant announced, producing a jug of hot water. ‘Will you be needing basilicum powder, sir?’

‘I think not.’ But I could scarce forbear to wince as I sponged my hands. ‘Is someone attending to Lord Hednesford?’

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‘I should think he might be left to the ministrations of his man, sir. Do not you?’

Despite my protestations, he dusted the raw areas with the powder with which he had provided himself. ‘The maid insists that his lordship – a friend of Lord Chartham, his lordship’s heir, sir – behaved in a far from gentlemanly way, sir, and that you rescued her from his clutches.’

‘She tells the truth, no more, no less. I trust no one will doubt her word?’

‘I will inform Mr Davies, sir, of the truth of the affair.’

Davies was the Elhams’ steward, who had put in train the arrangements for the living here in Moreton St Jude. The gift was in the hands of Lady Elham, a distant but generous cousin of my mother.

‘Thank you.’

‘I understand that your effects have had a mishap, sir?’

‘Indeed they have – if the complete disappearance of two baggage carts laden with furniture, clothing and books can be called a mishap.’

‘No doubt an accident with an axle or a wheel, sir.’

‘No doubt. Meanwhile, I have had to throw myself on Lady Elham’s hospitality, as you can see. Fortunately I had my valise with me in my gig.’

I could have ventured into Moreton St Jude’s wretched-looking village inn, the Silent Woman, slumped across the village green from the rectory, my new and empty abode, but my experiences at a similar hostelry the previous night had deterred me.

Travelling for the first time without all the uproar attending my family’s journeys, and no longer enjoying my own bed linen

in the finest of coaching houses, I had realised for the first time at least one of the consequences of my decision to eschew the leisured, moneyed existence of the rest of my family and to take holy orders – lack of readily available comfort. My bedchamber, directly above the taproom, was filled with the sound of rustic conversation and the stink of the cheap tobacco with which the drinkers filled their pipes. When all had become quiet below, the noise began above, was the servants clattered around above me in their attic room. When sleep had at last become possible, I found I was not alone in the vilely lumpy bed, but that I shared it with a variety of viciously biting insects.

‘If you would permit me to unpack, sir?’

‘Thank you.’

‘One presumes that your manservant has been mislaid along with your other effects, sir?’ Shaking out here and smoothing there, he padded silently backwards and forwards, disposing of all my apparel, although I intended to take advantage of the Elhams’ hospitality for no more than one night.

I looked at him sharply. He was not many years my senior, perhaps in his early thirties, but had already cultivated the impersonal demeanour of a good valet. To my chagrin I did not know his name.

As reading my mind, he bowed, but not obsequiously. ‘Sutton, sir.’

‘Alas, Sutton,’ I smiled, ‘my valet and I had to part company. A country parson needs a man – or rather, woman – of all work, rather than someone to devote himself to the care of his garments. So all I shall need is a housekeeper-cook.’

‘And a little maid? And a groom?’

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I could not refrain from laughter. ‘Sutton, you wish to fill my humble dwelling from cellar to attic. However, I am not in need of a groom, at least. Jem Turbeville is even now enjoying the hospitality downstairs.’

He nodded tepid approval. ‘A gentleman has his position to maintain, sir,’ he insisted.

For a moment I thought he was going to say something more, but he occupied himself with gathering some sadly crumpled neck cloths. ‘If that is all, sir, I will see to these and return them in time for you to dress for dinner. I take it you will not be wearing your bands, sir?’

Cravenly, I shook my head. I would be wearing full evening dress.

Sutton seemed relieved rather than shocked. ‘We keep town hours, here, sir. Her ladyship receives her guests in the Green Saloon at seven. Dinner is at seven-thirty.’

‘Thank you, Sutton.’

‘Thank *you*, sir.’

Sutton’s ministrations stood me in good stead as I joined my fellow – but in their case, *invited* – guests in the Green Saloon, a room of perfect elegance dominated by family portraits.

Lady Elham received me graciously, as I made my bow to her. She was a very handsome woman, though it would have taken one of my sisters to tell me if the flaming locks of her hair, partly concealed under a dark brown turban in homage, I fancied, to Lord Byron, owed more to art than to nature. She dressed in a dark green evening dress with an overtunic of silk the exact green of the wall hangings, set off with a heavy emerald necklace. She bore an uncanny resemblance to a

portrait on the wall behind her – an enchanting damsel well caught by Lely at his most sensuous.

‘Now, Cousin Tobias – for I decline absolutely to call you Dr. Campion, lest anyone confuse you with a physician, and Rector is altogether too formal and as for Parson...’ I rather liked being called Parson, and resolved to keep to myself the secret of my doctorate. ‘Cousin Tobias,’ she continued, ‘may I present you to my husband?’

With little enthusiasm, I fancied, on his side, Lord Elham and I bowed to each other. Like me he was in evening dress, as were all the older men present. Only his son, Lord Chartham, wore pantaloons. He was a sulky youth who tried to outstare me, wondering, no doubt, whether he could refer to what he probably considered my ill-treatment of his friend, Hednesford. Of Hednesford himself there was no sign.

When we took our places in the lofty dining room, complete with huge Tudor fireplace, I hoped that the occasion would offer me the opportunity to meet some of my new parishioners, but the young ladies either side of me at dinner were also visitors, Lord Elham’s Cornish cousins. Both found my choice of career sadly unromantic, not to say unpromising financially. Clearly both wished to marry well, and since I was careful not to disclose the identity of my own family they cared do no more than practise their flirtation skills upon me. Conversation with the gentleman opposite me, Squire Oldbury, was limited by a huge and extremely ugly epergne, the sort my mother had long since banished to a distant attic. He barked an enquiry about hunting, and whether I intended to keep a pack of hounds, but lost interest the instant I answered in the negative.

My cousin kept a very good table. The young lady to my

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right confided in a stage whisper that her ladyship employed a French chef, at goodness knew how many pounds a year. The three courses set before us gave veracity to the theory, with the estate and the succession houses providing an array of delicacies, including Davenport fowls, salsify fried in butter and a Rhenish cream, that would not have disgraced my family's kitchens even on the most formal of occasions and would certainly not have been offered to the mere twelve couples now sitting down. No doubt her ladyship had sighed hugely with relief when she had learnt that Hednesford was indisposed, or she would have had to sit down with uneven numbers, not a solecism to appeal to her.

Left alone, the gentlemen did not sit long over port, to my great relief. It inescapably dawned on me that my host was decidedly lacking in understanding, incapable of discussing anything except the hunt or gunsport. His son, still smouldering with resentment against me for what he presumably saw as my officiousness in the matter of his friend and the maid contributed even less to the conversation. His father said in a brusque aside that the lad's less than robust health was the excuse for his having been tutored at home. In my experience, that often meant a youth was beyond control. Whatever the reason, Chartham lacked the social skills and ease with one's peers that a spell at school imposes. Much as one strives to love all one's fellow men, I confess to having it found hard to be attracted to this ginger-haired, loose-lipped, ungainly young man, whose ease in ferreting out his interlocutors' weaknesses was matched only by his enjoyment of exploiting them. An aristocrat he might be by birth, but a gentleman in behaviour he was not.

The other gentlemen were arguing over the points of a horse I had never seen. I was delighted, even though it was a clear breach of manners, when Squire Oldbury heaved himself to his feet with the proclaimed intention of joining the ladies. Chartham announced he was going to make himself scarce for the rest of the evening. He had enough time, however, to jostle with me in the doorway as we left.

‘Mighty fine guest to strike my friend!’

I wanted to reply, schoolboy-like, ‘Mighty fine friend!’ But I restrained myself. Instead I said quietly, ‘Sir, your friend went so far as to forget himself. I’m sure in the morning he will wish to apologise to the young lady concerned and possibly make some financial reparation.’

‘Pay for squeezing a skivvy!’ He pushed past me, and that was that.

The ladies awaited us in the crimson drawing room. I must confess to being unnerved by the effect my entrance had upon them. It was as if someone had put a large pot of honey near a bees’ nest. Suddenly the room was abuzz with feminine voices. A harp was dragged forward, a piano opened, there was a veritable flutter of sheet music. Even when the word went round that I was no more than a country clergyman, some damsels persisted with their inviting smiles and fluttering lashes.

My inclination would have been to read aloud, as her ladyship indeed invited me to do, despatching the butler to locate her favourite volume of Cowper. ‘Quite an unexceptionable poet for a clergyman,’ she added archly.

The mood of the young people, however, was not for pastoral verse, but for country dancing, and it would have

been a hard heart indeed that could have withstood their pleas to form a set.

When her ladyship judged we had made merry long enough, she called for tea, soon afterwards dismissing the younger sort to their bedchambers. I was permitted to seek the masculine entertainments on offer from his lordship, grumbling away over cards in the library or billiards. No card lover, I sought the billiards room. One glance showed me Chartham and Hednesford in occupation. Half of me wanted to remonstrate further with the latter, but I must try for a more private occasion, since I had no wish to antagonise my young cousin further.

No sooner had I made my way upstairs than there was a discreet tap on my door and Sutton appeared.

Assured that I needed no help undressing, he prepared to withdraw.

‘That maid, Sutton – has she recovered from her ordeal?’

‘I believe so, my lord. I presumed to suggest to Mrs Beckles, the housekeeper, that she might in future carry out her duties in another wing. It seems that Mrs Beckles had already resolved on such a move. She has been sufficiently conscientious in her duties, sir, to become lady’s maid, whenever a visitor does not bring her own servant. Mrs Beckles will instruct her fully.’

Satisfied on that score I should have slept the sleep of the just. But at one point I woke sharply, my heart beating with violence. Had I heard a scream? I sat up, straining my ears to hear more. But there was nothing but the creaks and groans of the aged timbers settling for the night, and at last they lulled me to slumber.

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