

*An Onerous Duty*

*By Beryl Matthews*

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From This Day Forward  
Together Under the Stars  
An Onerous Duty  
Beautiful Innocence

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# *Prologue*

London, 1802

Harry Sterling leaned against the gnarled oak tree, closed his eyes, and sighed contentedly, not giving a damn about the speculation he was causing. He listened to the birds and the sound of his horse chomping eagerly on the lush grass. Lord, but it was good to be home, after the noise of battle this was sheer paradise. Serving as an exploring officer had been dangerous and he was glad to be free of it now. His sorties behind enemy lines had often placed him in desperate situations.

But if only his homecoming could have been under happier circumstances. His father had died, and

when he had finally arrived home it was to find that his brother had also died, killed in a riding accident. The pain of knowing that he had missed his brother's funeral as well, was still with him, and it had taken a while for the full import of his new responsibilities to sink in.

The sound of a musical laugh caught his attention. He opened his eyes and saw a girl running across the grass after her bonnet, which had been dislodged by a gust of wind. She was flying along, the skirt of her dress lifted to give her more freedom and her deep chestnut hair in disarray.

Harry straightened up, his interest immediately engaged, and he chuckled as she caught the bonnet with her foot, stamping on it with complete disregard for its fashionable elegance. While she was trying to punch it back into shape an elderly lady came puffing along, red in the face and clearly embarrassed.

'Isabella!' she gasped. 'What do you think you are doing? I do declare that you put a body to shame with your conduct.'

The girl kissed the flustered lady affectionately. 'I am sorry Aunt Dorothea, but how else was I going to retrieve my bonnet?'

'You should have left it.' She eyed it distastefully. 'It is beyond wearing now, anyway.'

The hat received another punch. 'I think you are right.'

Harry kept perfectly still; they had not noticed him and he eavesdropped shamelessly.

‘I do wish you would pay more attention to your actions,’ the lady scolded. ‘How can we expect any man of quality to offer for you when you show such a disregard for proper conduct?’

The musical laugh floated on the breeze. ‘Oh, you know that isn’t going to happen. Not when I have two beautiful sisters – younger than me,’ she said pointedly.

‘Now, Bella, you must not put yourself down so. You have much to offer the right man.’ She hesitated and looked at her niece thoughtfully. ‘A strong man, of course.’

The girl slipped her hand through the elderly lady’s arm and started to urge her back the way they had come. ‘You must not take on so. You know I am past my last prayers and no man is going to offer for me, unless he is after my fortune or needs a strong wife in his old age. In either case I would rather remain a spinster.’

Their conversation faded as they walked away, and a smile of amusement tilted Harry’s well-shaped mouth. He patted his horse and then swung himself up with all the grace and fluency of a man used to spending long hours in the saddle.

Then he cantered through the park, his whole attention now focused on the distasteful task ahead of him.