

## *An Unsuitable Suit*

Fiction by Courtney Seligman

*Erindale Tales*

(writing as Courtney Seligman)

#1 Two Pigs and a Chicken

#2 The Maiden All Forlorn

#3 An Unsuitable Suit

*short stories*

(writing as C. E. Seligman)

Well Met

The Last Time I Saw Paris

The Fools' Tale

The Last Dance

Wish Upon A Star

Short Shorts (a collection of the above)

*An  
Unsuitable Suit*

*An Erindale Tale*

by  
Courtney Seligman



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## In Memoriam

*She would'na see a farmer  
Nor a farmer's wife e'er be  
So she wed a handsome soldier  
An' what come o' that — were me!*

*In memory of my mother  
Mynabelle (Mohrman) Seligman  
1926 - 2016*



*To Aretaeus and Baillie  
and those who followed in their footsteps*





*She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes  
— Lord Byron*



# Notes

## *About meals*

The Erindale Tales are set in a time (see the Afterword for more about that) when the evening meal was usually called supper, dinner was the main meal, whether served at noon or in the evening, and lunch was a light afternoon meal. However, to avoid confusing readers unaccustomed to such usage, I have used lunch to refer to the noon meal and dinner for the evening meal.

## *Partial cast of characters*

*(see the end pages for a more complete list)*

Sir Robert Ballard, First Baronet Ballard of Colton  
Helen (Miss Ballard), his sister  
Harriet (Mistress Ballard), their mother

Lizzie (Lysette / Miss Ryanson), a shopgirl  
Owen and Jacob Ryanson, two of her brothers

William Hobbs, Master of Hobbs Hall  
Cecily (Mistress Hobbs), his (second) wife  
His first wife's children —  
    Edgar (Mister Hobbs)  
    Elisabeth (Miss Hobbs)  
His and Cecily's children —  
    Harold (Harry) and Rebecca (Becky)

Isaac Templeman, Jacob and Lizzie's employer  
Mirela, his wife  
Esther, his oldest daughter and Jacob's intended

Doctor Evans, Owen's employer



# 1

Robert, newly anointed First Baronet Ballard, scowled at the dark-haired reflection in his dressing mirror.

He'd had several reasons to be given pause recently, but none of them were the cause of his present irritation.

It wasn't the title he'd bought, or its appalling price. He loved his mother, and though her social-climbing seemed ridiculous to him, he'd have done anything to please her. And even as dear as the title was, it might prove a good investment, as it would afford entrée to a segment of society — and the piles of money that supported it — that a mere collier could never join, no matter how wealthy he was.

And it wasn't the lofty estate he'd bought in Benton, or its equally lofty cost. If nothing else the spectacular view it afforded of the Erindale was vastly superior to the dismal landscape buried under the detritus of a century of coal mining near Colton. Not that there was anything wrong with the land that made his fortune; but in looks and location the newly christened Colton Court would serve far better for wining and dining those he needed to finance his plans for his mines.

No, none of that had anything to do with Sir Robert's present frustration, which was primarily due to the costume his valet laid out for him, and the neckcloth he tried and failed to properly arrange a dozen times, despite having paid careful attention to how it was done when first shown.

And it didn't help that the reason for wearing it was as irritating as the neckcloth itself. Yet another trip to town for the sole purpose of filling his mother's and sister's closets to bursting. For which purpose he felt practically useless, being too accustomed to dressing in a more casual manner to offer any advice concerning matters of 'proper' dress, male or female. Which meant his presence was required merely to provide cash and cachet. And as far as the cash was concerned, his credit would have allowed his mother and sister to spend his money equally well and far more pleasantly on his part without him.

But then they wouldn't have had the opportunity to introduce "My son (or brother), Sir Robert Ballard," and in

one way or another strut him about in front of everyone they met, to make sure they bowed and scraped and envied his mother, his sister and him. Which, given the fact that anyone with enough money and too little sense to hold onto it could buy such a title, hardly seemed reason to envy him.

He gave the neckcloth one last try and finally admitting defeat, called his valet.

“Jameson! Come help me with this damned thing!”

His valet appeared so quickly that Robert could have easily believed him already present and merely invisible, and applying deft hands to the neckcloth finished in a few seconds the task his master had been swearing at for the past quarter hour.

“There you are, sir,” Jameson said, and after dusting him with a brush that made him feel like a horse being groomed for a show, announced himself well pleased with his master’s appearance.

“Thank you, Jameson. I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he sardonically noted.

“You’re too hard on yourself, sir. You have a fine figure, a fine mind and a fine manner, and with just a tad more practice will do yourself proud.”

“I appreciate the thought, Jameson, but no matter how long you polish a lump of coal, it will never turn into a diamond.”

“You shouldn’t think like that, sir,” Jameson said. “You may feel like a lump of coal sometimes, but you really are a diamond in the rough.”

Robert sighed. “If you say so.”

“That I do. I’ve served many a master in my fifty years, and you’ve got it in you to go as far as any of them.”

“Well, as far as going, I’m off to the coach, as I’m sure my mother and sister are impatiently awaiting my arrival.”



Sir Robert descended the broad flight of stairs leading from Colton Court to the coach and four waiting at its base, and the two women waiting inside it.

“There you are!” the elder exclaimed as he entered. “What took you so long?”

"I'm still learning how to tie this blasted neckcloth, and if Jameson hadn't come to my rescue you'd still be waiting."

"I don't see why you don't let him do it in the first place," his sister said. "That's what he's paid for."

"It makes me feel idiotic that I can't dress myself, but must be dressed like a child."

"You shouldn't feel that way," his mother reproved him. "We don't begrudge our maidservants their duties. Proper clothing requires proper help to don. You wouldn't have us do it ourselves, would you? We might as well go without clothes, as poor as the results would be."

"Mama!" Helen exclaimed. "Please!"

"Helen, my dear, you should remember that although some studied embarrassment is appropriate in society, there's no need to observe such niceties when we're alone."

Helen essayed a moue. "My tutor says if one doesn't practice proper behavior all the time it won't become natural, and one must always strive to appear natural, no matter how mannered you are."

"I'm not sure I'll ever feel natural like this," Robert said, "after nearly twenty-five years dressing myself in whatever happened to be handy."

"It would be easier if you'd been accustomed to it since birth," his mother admitted. "But think how much more difficult it is for me than for you, and how well I have settled into my role."

Robert nodded. Not that his mother appeared to him the way she hoped to appear to others. He'd known her too long as the collier's wife she used to be to see her as a society matron, no matter how she dressed or acted. Still, those in the shops they visited always seemed suitably impressed, so perhaps he was too hard on her and himself.

"So, where are we off to today?" he asked, not really caring what the reply was, but wanting to discuss something other than clothes and manners.

"Templeman's. I hear they have the finest stock of fabrics and fripperies in Benton."

"Templeman's? Sounds Jewish to me. Do Jews have any sense of fashion?"

His mother started to explain that many of the finest dressmakers of the day were Jewish, then realized he was

teasing her and made a rude remark, which drew a well-mannered reproach from her daughter.

“Well, whatever sort of place it is, I thought you said the last one we went to had the finest stock in Benton.”

“As you should have realized from how little we bought, it was not half so fine as I was led to believe. Really, we ought to have settled near Donton if you truly wanted us to have access to the finest stores and people.”

Robert did his best to avoid making a face. He'd been to Donton on business several times these past three years, and though it was a good place for doing business, the airs put on by its so-called 'upper class' would have driven any sensible man mad within a month. Which was precisely why he'd settled in Benton, instead.

“I'm sorry the efforts I've made aren't to your liking, but the mines require so much of my attention that if I settled you near Donton, I'd hardly ever see you.”

“That's true,” his mother replied. “Sad, but true. It's too bad you don't have a brother to take over the business, so you could enjoy your leisure.”

Given his mood Robert was tempted to point out that that failure could be laid at her and his late father's feet; but rejecting the idea even as it arose, he adopted a placating tone.

“I appreciate your sympathy. But I will do what I can to groom one of the men from the business to do the job, and perhaps some day I can enjoy the leisure you suggest.” Just so long, he thought, as that moment was as far off as he could manage to put it.

By now the carriage had turned onto the river road, and as they passed one ostentatious pile after another his companions' attention turned to comparisons of their situation and appearance with their own establishment, which Robert might have been happy to note invariably ended with the stated superiority of his choice of accommodations. However, he had already turned his attention to the natural beauty of the riverbank, and the river coursing in the other direction. It was an unusually balmy day for late November, and a slight haze in the air and the leaves scattered along the shore made the scene even more pastoral and colorful than usual. A skiff passed by, a man sitting at its tiller and another



mid-keel, each with a fishing line. Robert had never fished, but it seemed a lovely way to pass the time, just floating down the river, quietly enjoying the early afternoon sun, with not a care in the world. No mines or businesses to run, no women to cart from one shop to another, and no need to impress anyone with one's clothes or manners. He sighed a great sigh, for even in his dream he knew that those in the skiff would probably feel more envious of him than he was of them.



Jacob raised a hand to summon his sister to his side.

"I want you to take over for Carrie," he softly said.

Lizzie turned toward Carrie and the women seated across from her at the jewelry counter — an older brunette with a scowl on her face and a young blonde with a frustrated expression.

"Is there something wrong with her work? Or are the customers being unreasonable?"

"Neither," Jacob replied. "She appears to be doing a reasonable job, and as you know, wealthy customers are never considered unreasonable. But they seem unhappy with what she's showing them, so try to smooth over any rough waters."

Lizzie nodded and made her way to the trio.

"Carrie, it's past time for your break," she lied, "so if you and your customers don't mind, I'll take over for you."

"I don't mind... but of course that would be up to the ladies." Carrie turned to the others. "Would that be all right with you?"

The older woman looked Lizzie up and down, then turned to the girl. "I'll leave it up to my daughter. Helen?"

Helen gave her mother an uncertain look and said, in a half-questioning way, "She can't be any... less satisfactory? I suppose?"

A termagant and a daughter anxious to please her, Lizzie concluded. The perfect recipe for an unpleasant encounter. No wonder Carrie was having trouble pleasing them. Still, as Jacob said, the customer was always right. So she smiled, expressed a hope that her efforts would leave them well pleased, and took Carrie's place.



Sir Robert leaned against a pillar, surveying the parade of humanity passing Templeman's windows. Rich and poor strolled or straggled past, singly and in small groups. A gaggle of youths ran past them, laughing and teasing each other and attracting baleful looks from those they ran into or otherwise disturbed with their high spirits.

"Robert? Come here, please."

Robert turned to his mother. "What is it n..." he started to testily reply, then stopped and goggled at the vision of beauty seated across from his mother and sister. Thick dark curls framed the prettiest face his eyes had ever had the pleasure to see, and the rosiest lips he might have ever hoped to taste.

"Robert?"

He jolted out of his reverie and strolled over to them.

"Yes, mother?"

"Which of these do you think looks best on Helen?"

He turned to Helen and watched as she held first one, then the other choker to her neck. "I don't know. They both look nice to me." He turned to the girl of his dreams. "Which do you prefer?"

Lizzie blinked her surprise, but quickly recovered. "I think either would go very nicely with her color. Otherwise, I wouldn't have suggested them. But if only my opinion counted..." She gave his mother a wary look, not wanting to imply that her opinion was of any real value.

"Pretend that it does," Robert said. "You seem very well turned out, and I'm sure that any woman's opinion is worth more than mine in such matters."

Lizzie gave him a wry smile. "In that case I'd say the violet, as it sets off her eyes so well."

"Then the violet is my choice as well," he declared.

"I don't know," his mother said. "The violet is very pretty, but the red is more striking."

"Then buy them both," Robert replied, "and let Helen wear whichever suits her fancy."

Helen gave him an angelic smile. "Really? As dear as they are, I presumed you'd only let me get one."

Robert blinked. "How dear are they?"

Lizzie quoted a sum that might have fed a family of five

for a year back in Colton.

That part of Robert that worked for three years to rescue his father's business from bankruptcy quailed at the thought of spending so much on baubles, no matter how pretty. "I hope you work on commission," he told her.

"I do," Lizzie replied, "but the commission won't be mine, as I'm merely filling in for Carrie."

"Carrie?"

"The brown-haired mouse who served us at first," his mother explained.

"Ah. Then Carrie should be very grateful to you for doing such a fine job in her place."

"I'm sure she will be," Lizzie agreed.

"So," Robert said to his mother, "are you done yet?"

His mother nodded and rose. "Yes, though we'll have to come back next week for the fitting."

"The fitting?"

"Yes," Helen replied. "I'll need a gown to go with the choker."

"Of course you will. How silly of me." He turned to the shopgirl. "I hope you will take care of that, as well."

Lizzie flushed from the heat of his dazzling smile. "I..." She looked toward Jacob, who nodded assent despite being unaware of what he was nodding for.

"It's not really my place," Lizzie explained, "but I'll be happy to provide whatever assistance I can."

Robert nodded. "In that case we shall all look forward to seeing you again."

"I can take the chokers now, though, can't I?" Helen asked.

"Of course you may," Lizzie replied. "We'll just put them on Sir Robert's account."

"I see I've been introduced to you in my absence. You have me at a disadvantage, Miss..." He looked at her inquiringly.

"Lys... that is, Ryanson," Lizzie answered, belatedly realizing how inappropriate it would be to use her first name with someone of such rank.

Robert's heart sank. He should have known that such a beauty would not remain long unattached. "I take it you are recently wed?"

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“You started to give one name, then changed to another.”

“I... well, I...” Lizzie stammered.

“What difference does it make what her name is?” his mother asked.

“Since she served you so well, we’ll want to ask for her next time. And it’s only polite to do so by name.”

His mother gave him a searching look. “Of course it is. So we’ll be sure to ask for Miss Ryanson.” She turned to Lizzie. “That is correct, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“In that case, you can escort us to the carriage now, Robert.”

“You and Helen will have to wait just a moment. I want to talk to the manager, to make sure there aren’t any problems with my account.”

His mother frowned as he left, then turned her attention to Lizzie. “Don’t think that my son’s interest in your welfare gives you any chance with him.”

“What?” Lizzie said in surprise.

“I said, don’t...”

“I heard what you said. I just can’t imagine why you would think I have ‘any chance’ with him. After all, he is a baronet, and I a mere shopgirl.”

“That’s right. He is, and you are. And don’t forget it for a minute.”

Under other circumstances Lizzie might have told the old gorgon exactly what she thought of her. But she did a good job of holding her temper, and only slightly hissed her reply. “I can assure you that an alliance with your family would be the farthest thing from my mind, even if your son were the most desirable man in the world.”

“Are you implying he isn’t?”

Lizzie looked at the dark-haired demigod talking to her brother. “No. I’m sure that he’s a fine man, in every way. But I am fully aware of how impossible any relationship between such as he and I would be.”

Sir Robert’s mother nodded. “Good girl. I apologize for chiding you, but not all girls are so sensible, and I wanted to make sure you didn’t get any ideas.”

“I think you underestimate your son, madam. He seems a

man of dignity and principle, and I'm sure he would never stoop so low."

The older woman laughed. "You don't know men very well, do you? I hope you can maintain that innocence as you grow older."

Robert returned, escorted his mother and sister outside, and Jacob made his way to his sister.

"You must have impressed Sir Robert," he said.

"He must be easily impressed, then. I hardly spoke to him, save for discussing his sister's purchase."

"Well, whatever the reason, it will give you a tidy bonus at the end of the month."

"It will?"

"Yes. He insisted on your receiving a commission equal to Carrie's."

"Surely you won't go along with that. It wouldn't be fair to Carrie to cut her commission in half."

Jacob smiled. "It won't affect her at all. He had me add a sum equal to her commission to the sale."

"You're joking."

"Not at all," Jacob said, and showed her the sales slip.

Lizzie shook her head. "It must be nice to have so much money that you can throw it away like that."

Jacob laughed. "It would be. But I'm sure that even those rich as Croesus think themselves ill used at times."

Lizzie thought of how Sir Robert's mother ordered him around and nodded. "Yes. I suppose they must..."

## 2

*About three weeks later*

Lizzie knocked on Owen's door, and not receiving any reply knocked again, with considerably more force.

Her brother opened the door and gave her an irritated look. "What's so important that you have to bang..."

"Dinner is in ten minutes, and from what I hear, Mrs. Horry's been in a mood all day; so if you want to eat you'd better be there on time."

Owen turned to the books and papers scattered all over his bed. "I'll just straighten up a bit, then be right..."

"I'm sure those will wait for you. Just make yourself presentable, so you can escort Carrie and me downstairs."

"Why do you need an escort?"

"I don't; but I want to make sure you're on time."

He sighed. "All right. I'll be ready in a minute or two."

Lizzie gave him the best part of five minutes, then with her roommate at her side, knocked on his door again.

"Owen? We're waiting..."

The door opened and her brother strode out, looking far better than he had any right to, given the short time involved. Men were so lucky, she thought; just give their hair a quick comb and throw on a coat, and... she brushed some lint off his shoulder... and they were ready to go.

"So," he said, as he took a place behind the two girls and followed them downstairs, "Did you have a good day?"

"Much the same as always," Lizzie replied, "though Annie stopped by..."

Owen smiled. "That must have stirred things up a bit."

Carrie nodded. "She was ever so interested in the holiday decorations..."

"What decorations?"

"Mr. Templeman had them put up all over the store," Carrie explained. "Wreaths and garlands and ribbons and imported ornaments. Oh, they're ever so pretty. You must come by and see them."

Owen nodded. "I'll try to stop by tomorrow."

Once at the bottom of the stairs it was only a few steps to the boarding house's dining room, and their conversation

ended as they greeted Mrs. Horry's other boarders and asked about their daily activities.

Half an hour later Owen escorted Lizzie upstairs, Carrie remaining in the dining room to visit with Mr. Philpott, a young man of uncertain prospects but considerable charm to whom she'd taken an equally considerable shine.

"Do you have any plans for Christmas?" Lizzie asked.

"Since it's still two weeks away, no. Why?"

"Annie would like us all to come out to the farm."

"I'll be happy to go if I'm free, though I suppose she must have had some ulterior motive in asking."

"What makes you think that?"

"This is Annie we're talking about, isn't it?"

Lizzie smiled. "Well, I'd like to imagine she was just thinking of how nice it would be for all of us to get together for once, but she did inveigle Jacob into bringing some of the decorations with us..."

"Ah... I see... so we're to help with some plan of hers?"

"No, all we have to do is bring the decorations. Gael's family will do the work; that is, presuming she can convince Gael and Mia of the idea."

He cocked his head in thought as they neared his room. "I doubt there will be much trouble there..."

"I wouldn't imagine so. So make sure your best suit is cleaned and pressed."

"For a visit to the farm?"

"There's nothing wrong with looking nice for family and friends, and she says it's to be a fairly formal affair this year, so we're to dress as nicely as possible. Jacob wants me to wear one of the store's holiday costumes, and he..."

"He does? Annie must have done more than wrap him around her finger. She must have tied him in knots."

Lizzie laughed. "Actually, it's as much his idea as hers. We're to leave as soon as the store closes, which won't give us time to change, and he's having several members of the staff dress up, to put the customers in a holiday mood."

"And with any luck, to leave more of their money in Templeman's till."

"Naturally. Why do you think he put the decorations up in the first place?"

"Well, whether I can go or not, I'll have to stop by the

store that afternoon, if only to see what you look like.”

They had long since reached Owen’s room, and half their conversation had taken place with him standing in the open doorway, while Lizzie stood in the hallway; and noting the papers still strewn across his bed, she wondered aloud what he was working on.

He glanced at the papers, then looked up and down the hall. “I shouldn’t really say where just anyone can hear...”

“I could come in...”

“And risk Mrs. Horry’s obvious temper?”

“She can hardly object to a brother and sister visiting, and it would be perfectly proper, as I want to watch for Carrie, so we’ll have to leave the door ajar.”

“Well...” He looked at the papers, obviously uncertain about the idea, then nodded. “I suppose it would be all right; but let me straighten up a bit, so you’ve a place to sit.”

She followed him into the room. “Can I do anything to help?” She picked up a thick tome and looked at its title. *The Morbid Anatomy...* “Of course. Medical books and journals.” She looked around. “Do you really need to go through all of these?”

“Yes and no,” he said, as he shoved things to the side to make room for her to sit on the bed. “Yes, if there is any hope of finding what I’m looking for, and no, if what I’ve yet to go through is as useless as what I’ve already examined.”

“What are you looking for?”

“That’s the trouble. I don’t really know. All I know...” He stopped and went to the door to make sure there was no one nearby, then pulled the room’s lone chair close to the bedside and talked low, to make sure no one could hear them without coming into the room.

“You know that Evans and I have been going to Hobbs Hall on a regular basis...”

Lizzie nodded. “For Miss Hobbs.”

“Yes. Evans has given up any hope of finding out what’s wrong with her, and is merely treating her symptoms. But he’s letting me go through his books and papers, to see if I can find some clue.”

“And have you found anything?” She shook her head. “Ask a silly question. Of course you haven’t... or you’d have told me all about it, half a dozen times over.”



"I don't rattle on that much."

She smiled. "I don't mind. It's good to see you in a good mood, even if you do go on at times."

He gave her a wry smile. "Well, I'll try not to wear out your ears if I do find something... but..." He sighed and shook his head. "I doubt you need worry about that anytime soon."

Lizzie raised her head and rose. "There's Carrie... Mr. Philpott must not have been as scintillating tonight as usual."

"Or Mrs. Horry's mood put a damper on things."

"You're probably closer to the truth." She turned and gave him a hug. "Don't wear yourself out trying to help Miss Hobbs," she admonished him. "I know you're concerned about her, but you don't want to take sick yourself."

"Especially not if Annie's expecting us for Christmas," he replied.

Lizzie laughed. "No. Especially not for that."

Owen followed her to the door, nodded goodnight to the girls, then closed the door behind him. He shrugged out of his coat and laid it over the chair, took off his shoes and sat them beneath it, then arranged himself as comfortably as he could on the still-cluttered bed and picked up the nearest paper. He silently mouthed its title, then started reading what followed.

Two hours later he startled awake, to find himself and the paper exactly as they had been.

"Lizzie's right," he muttered. "It's time I started worrying more about my own health, and less about Miss Hobbs'." He changed into his bedclothes and collapsed into bed, determined to forget about his patient at least until the morrow.

Not that anything came of that resolution, for even his dreams were filled with the problem posed by the ever so charming yet all too frail young woman who lived at Hobbs Hall.

## 3

Sir Robert unseeingly stared through the window at the faintly moonlit landscape, for his thoughts were not on the scene before his eyes, but on what he needed to say to Hobbs. Faint music drifted in from the ballroom where he was supposed to be, but he'd taken considerable time to greet his guests and would join them again as soon as his meeting was over. So other than his mother, who had expressed her displeasure at his taking any kind of leave, it was unlikely that anyone would think ill of his absence.

There was a light knock at the door and he turned and bade his visitor to enter.

Hobbs sat in the seat he was offered and accepted the glass of port that Robert had poured for him.

"So, Sir Robert, you wanted a private talk?"

Robert nodded. "Yes. I am new here, and have a limited knowledge of who is who and how much influence they have. And if I am to make good use of my time, I must talk with someone who does know."

"Good use? What do you mean?"

"I presume you know that my fortune is based on the mines in Colton."

The older man nodded. "I had made quiet inquiry — just out of curiosity, of course."

"Of course. The point is, I want to improve the colliery. Use the latest techniques for shoring, ventilation, extraction and the like to increase production without sacrificing safety. In fact, I'd like to make Colton Colliery the safest and most productive in the district."

"I imagine that will take money."

"Yes. Lots of money. And though I have plenty for any normal purpose, what I'm thinking of would require far greater sums unless I stretch the thing out over several years, which I'm loath to do."

"You mean to borrow against the future? That might be risky."

"I don't think so. The increasingly mechanized world we live in depends on coal, and the demand for coal is bound to increase. The extra production I hope for should more than

repay any cost, and even if it didn't, it would mean a lot to me to improve the safety of the mines."

"Mining is a dangerous profession, from what I hear. I imagine there will be some injuries no matter what you do."

Robert nodded. "Yes. Some things are unavoidable. But some things aren't. Three years ago there was a disaster at our main mine. Firedamp most likely, but whatever the reason, part of the mine collapsed, and another section collapsed when a rescue was attempted." Robert's voice broke and he stopped for a moment, then croaked, "A great number of men died... and... sorry..." He took out a kerchief and wiped his eyes.

"It must have been a terrible moment, to affect you so."

"It was terrible. More than fifty families lost fathers, sons or brothers. My own father..." Robert shook his head. "He was one of those killed in the rescue attempt."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I suppose that's why you're so keen on improving safety."

Robert nodded. "Yes. But it's good business as well, to ensure that the extraction of coal is uninterrupted. It took months to resume full production, and the loss of sales took a heavy toll on our finances, and on those who depended on work at the mine for their livelihood. It took me three years of hard work to restore the company to a firm financial basis. And I have no more desire to go through that again, than I have to attend another mass funeral."

"So... I take it you'd like to know who could help with raising the funds involved?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid you've picked a bad time to raise anything here. Most of the people I'd recommend are invested in plans of their own. You might do well in Donton, but I only know a few people there. Still, if you'd like, I can make inquiries."

"That would be very generous of you."

"Is there any date you have in mind, other than the obvious one?"

"You mean, as soon as possible?"

"Yes," Hobbs said with a smile.

"Actually, it needn't be all that soon. I'll be leaving Benton as soon as the holidays are over, to tend to affairs in Colton, and won't be back for at least a month. My wanting to see you

wasn't because I need a quick reply, but because I might not have another chance to see you before I leave."

Hobbs nodded. "In that case I should be able to sound out everyone I know before you return, and give you a list of possibilities and how promising they seem. Not that I can guarantee it will do you much good."

"Whether it will or not, it's good of you to make such an effort on my behalf, and I greatly appreciate it."

"Nonsense. What good are neighbors if they aren't good neighbors? Happy to do it, especially for someone of your standing."

Robert smiled. *Of your standing...* Nice to know that his title had some value, after all.

Hobbs rose. "Anything else you wanted to discuss? Or should we join the others? I noticed some very tasty looking dishes laid out in the side room... and I'd like to find out if they taste as good as they look."

Robert laughed. "They'd better, as much as I'm paying the French cook."



Sir Robert circulated among his guests, doing his best to remember how names, faces and positions were connected while asking if they were enjoying themselves and politely accepting their universal approval of his splendid taste and hospitality. Not that he'd had much to do with anything, the fare having been planned and prepared by the cook and almost everything else decided upon by his mother and those she'd hired to help her make the arrangements. And he had plenty of time to be hospitable, as he had no intention of taking part in the dancing, the dancing master having failed to give him much grace at that exercise. Helen, on the other hand, had proven an excellent pupil, as at least in his eyes she danced more gracefully than any of the other women there. And between her natural good looks, the gown and jewelry he'd bought for her and the radiant smile on her face, she was certainly the most enchanting...

He startled to see a familiar figure on the other side of the room, as he couldn't for the life of him imagine what Miss Ryanson could be doing here. Still, he moved in her direction

with the irrational hope that it really was her, only to be disappointed when the young woman turned and revealed that although reasonably attractive, she was not the woman he hoped she might be. Given his approach to her party he felt obliged to chat with them for a while, but thanks to the number of other guests eager for his presence, was able to make an escape within a few minutes. He was not, however, able to escape the thoughts raised by his misidentification of the girl. Given the late hour that the last guests left, the time taken by his mother to congratulate him and herself on the success of her efforts (her earlier scolding having been completely forgotten), and the ecstatic thanks of his sister (who proclaimed that she'd had the most wonderful night of her life), it was very late when he was finally alone with those thoughts, and could decide what to do about them.

*Tomorrow is Sunday, so Templeman's will be closed. But Monday is Christmas Eve, so they should be open. Perhaps I should take a trip to town and see what I can get as a last-minute surprise for mama and Helen.*

He went over his plans for Monday, decided there was nothing that could not be put off till a later date, then smilingly went to bed and to pleasant dreams of what delights the holiday season might bring.

## 4

Since it turned out that there was nothing requiring Owen's presence in town on Christmas Eve, he was able to make his way to Templeman's late that afternoon, and as soon as the store closed he, Lizzie and Jacob piled themselves, the things they needed for that evening and Christmas Day and the boxes of decorations for Annie into a carriage, and took the north river road to Gael's.

Since the farm was the best part of ten miles west of Benton it took some time to get there, and they whiled away the time by talking about how things were going for each of them. The first topic of conversation proved to be Jacob's engagement to Templeman's daughter Esther. The terms of their engagement had been finalized the previous evening, and besides being immediately promoted to manager of the entire store, he also had the promise of a partnership once he and Esther were married, a few months hence.

"And what promises did you have to make for that?" Owen asked. "The last I heard, some were rather extreme."

Jacob gave him a wry smile. "Fortunately, Templeman agreed that the rabbi's insistence that I be circumcised was too extreme, as it would be a far more traumatic experience at my age than for a babe in arms. And although most of the traditional rituals will be performed at the wedding, all I'll otherwise have to do is change my last name to Templeman, so the business is kept in the family."

"Well, since none of us were Ryansons until we took jobs in town and needed a surname, that won't be a terrible sacrifice," Lizzie noted.

"That's true," Jacob agreed.

"I'd say congratulations were in order," Owen said, "though the nature of the negotiations sometimes makes me wonder whether you're marrying Esther or her father."

Jacob shook his head. "I'm sure that Esther and I will get along very well. We enjoy each other's company, and what little opportunity we've had to be alone makes me certain we'll get along in other ways, as well. I wouldn't have considered marrying her, otherwise."

"Still, it does seem more a business contract than a love-

match.”

“From what I’ve seen, so-called love-matches are rarely any happier than arranged marriages, as long as the parties involved make an effort to be kind and caring. And you can hardly blame Templeman for wanting to be sure that Esther has a husband willing and able to provide a good home for her and their children.”

“And to carry on the business when Templeman’s too decrepit to do it himself,” Owen countered.

“Stop it, Owen!” Lizzie exclaimed. “If Jacob and Esther are happy with the arrangements, what business is it of yours? Besides, it’s not as if you’ve shown any signs of being an expert on love.”

Owen rubbed the arm she seized when she chided him and mumbled, “Just because I haven’t done anything about it doesn’t mean I haven’t been interested in one girl or another from time to time.”

“Not that I’ve noticed,” she retorted.

“I would hope not. I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve when I know there’s no point in it.”

Lizzie looked puzzled. “I don’t follow you.”

Jacob cocked his head. “Neither do I. Do you mean to say that you have your eye on some maiden?”

“Not at present, and even if I had I wouldn’t tell you, since I can’t do anything about it.”

“And why not?”

“I’m only an assistant to Evans, making barely enough to pay for room and board and to set something aside for the future. So what kind of life could I provide for a wife?”

Jacob smiled. “That sounds like you’re just as concerned about the ‘business’ aspects of marriage as I am.”

“I suppose I am in some ways, though I’d like to hope that when the time comes I won’t need a contract to marry the girl I choose.”

“And when will that be?” Lizzie asked softly. “And for that matter, have you chosen someone?”

Owen shook his head. “I’ve met several girls who seemed more than pleasant enough to please me. But I can’t imagine marrying anyone until I have a practice of my own, and that’s probably five or ten years away.”

“So your Miss Hobbs is out of the question?” Lizzie said

with a teasing smile.

“In the first place she is not ‘my’ Miss Hobbs, but merely my patient. And even if I were foolish enough to take an interest in her, Hobbs would never allow his daughter to marry a mere doctor, no matter how successful his practice. It would be just as pointless as you pursuing ‘your’ baronet.”

Lizzie blinked. “You mean Sir Robert?”

“Have you any other baronets swooning at your feet?”

“I would hardly say he was swooning at my feet, and even if he had been...”

Owen grinned. “I saw him following you around like a puppy while I was waiting for you to close up shop.”

Jacob’s brow furrowed in thought. “He has been exceptionally generous where you are concerned...”

Lizzie flushed and became quite vehement. “You’re both being utterly ridiculous! There is no way that a gentleman like Sir Robert would be fawning over some shopgirl, and even if he were his mother would soon put a stop to it!”

Owen looked her up and down. “Perhaps you are right. It might not be you, but the charming costume you’re wearing that drew his attention.”

It was now Lizzie’s turn to furrow her brow. “He did say it showed me off to excellent advantage...” She shook her head. “I’m sure you are reading too much into his visit. He was just looking for a last-minute Christmas surprise for his mother and sister, and like many men was too much at sea about what they might like to make up his mind.”

Owen nodded, though he made no effort to hide the twinkle in his eye. “I’m sure you are right.” He looked at Jacob. “I’m sorry to have teased you about your relationship with Esther. You are obviously the only one of us who has the position and the sense to make a reasonable decision to marry, and I wish you and her a long and happy life.”

“As do I,” Lizzie added. “And on that note, I think we should find something better to discuss the rest of the way, so we don’t spoil our journey.”

And at least on that point they all found agreement.



Despite the length of the trip, the fact that Templeman’s



closed early on Christmas Eve allowed the carriage to reach the trail leading from the river road up the eastern slope of Blind Man's Bluff and onto the gently rounded area at the top before evening twilight turned into night, and with a quarter moon lighting their way they had no trouble reaching Gael's farm without even bothering to light the oil lamps. But as they made their way into his home the gossip swirling around them made it clear they had just missed a spot of trouble involving Annie, who had caused a blowup between their brother Danny and Moira, the girl Gael hired to help Mia with the children in August. Given the nature of such gossip it took as little time to find out what happened as it did to reach the main room, which was festooned with wreaths and garlands gathered from the nearby woods, and featured a Yule log blazing away in the fireplace and a Yule tree that barely fit between the rafters in the ceiling.

Moira and Annie were standing beneath the garland of mistletoe that was the centerpiece of Annie's trickery. Annie had an uncharacteristically chastened look on her face, while Moira was speaking to her in a conciliatory tone.

"But I appreciate the sentiment, and hope we will always be friends," she said as Owen approached them.

"A very forgiving attitude, from what I understand," he noted.

Moira whirled to face him with a look as pleased as surprised on her face. "Owen! When did you arrive?"

"Too late to enjoy the show," he smilingly replied, "but early enough to hear all about it. Are you all right?"

Moira blushed. "Of course I'm all right. It isn't as though your brother's kiss was poisonous."

"From what I heard, it sounded remarkably chaste. I'm not sure I would have been so considerate."

Moira flushed. "I didn't realize you were such a roué."

He laughed. "I'm not. If anything, I'm practically a monk. But how often would I have such an opportunity to kiss such a beautiful girl?"

"You are a shameless flatterer. But as my most amiable admirer, I wouldn't deny you a kiss, providing it were similarly chaste."

"In that case, I'll seize the opportunity while I have the chance." He gently kissed her cheek, then gave her a wink.

“And having had my fun, I’ll say adieu till I’ve finished my greetings.”

Lizzie was practically dying of curiosity, never having seen Owen so animated with any girl, let alone someone like Moira, whose fiery hair and stunning figure were even more alluring than Annie had led her to believe. So though she held her silence during the preceding conversation, she finally spoke up.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us, first?”

Moira turned to them, and Owen made his belated introductions. “Of course. This is my brother Jacob and my sister, Lizzie. Lizzie, Jacob, this is Moira.”

Moira smiled as she greeted Jacob. “Owen said all his brothers were fine men, but I see he failed to do you justice. And no one,” she said to Lizzie, “told me what a beauty you were.”

Lizzie blushed. “I’m not usually made up like this for family gatherings; but Annie said it would be a formal affair this year.”

“I suppose that was her excuse for having you abscond with your store’s decorations?”

Jacob’s explanation of the situation included a mention of his recent promotion, which led to a discussion of his engagement to Esther, and by the time Annie and Moira had been told all he was willing to tell, Owen had finished greeting the rest of those present and returned.

“I’ll join you for supper once I’ve attended to Lily,” he reminded his siblings.

Jacob nodded, having known in advance that Owen planned to use the visit to see how their pregnant sister-in-law was doing, but Annie shook her head.

“I’m afraid you won’t see me till well after supper. I’m going to stay here and help with the decorations.”

“Do you have someone to bring you home?”

“Danny was going to, but I doubt that he’ll feel like it.”

Owen laughed. “I suppose not. But I’m willing to take his place. So,” he said, smilingly turning to Moira, “I’ll see you later.” Then he kissed her cheek again.

She blushed furiously and stammered, “I... yes... I suppose...”

Owen grinned. “I take it you’ve forgotten your offer.”

"I didn't expect you to take advantage of it every time you passed by."

"Ah, but how many times do I get a chance to pass by and find you still standing under the mistletoe?"

Moira glanced up and skittered to the side. "I assure you, I didn't realize I was..." She turned an accusing glance toward Annie. "And no one bothered to warn me."

"Don't blame me," Annie protested. "I was busy talking to Jacob, and didn't realize you'd stepped under it."

"I didn't mean to start an argument," Owen interjected. "So when I return, I'll be on my best behavior... unless you're under the mistletoe." He gave Moira a wink, then turned to Annie. "When should I return?"

Annie looked at the boxes of decorations Jacob and Lizzie had brought. "I'd guess about three hours. That will give us time for supper, and most of this."

Jacob nodded. "That should be plenty of time, since you already have the garlands and ribbons up."

Gael's wife Mia joined the group, to announce that supper was ready, and agreed that three hours should be adequate.

Owen nodded. "In that case, I'll be back about then."

"And we'll see you tomorrow," Lizzie added, giving Mia a hug.



Despite the short ride from Gael's to their parents' farm, Lizzie had adequate time to discuss Owen's behavior at Gael's.

"I was surprised to see you so forward with Moira, though given how beautiful she is, I suppose it's no wonder."

Owen looked at her in surprise. "What are you talking about? All we did was exchange some light banter."

"And several kisses."

He laughed. "A couple of pecks on her cheek? I'd hardly consider that unreasonable, since she was standing under the mistletoe."

"Still, it seems very out of character for someone who is usually more sober than a judge."

"Well, as I told her, how often do I come across such a pretty girl standing under the mistletoe? Not once before that I can recall."

“So you admit you admire her looks?”

“Of course I do. A man would have to be blind not to. And if I recall correctly, I already told you how exceptional her looks were after I met her at Gael’s birthday party, in August.”

“At the time, what you seemed most impressed by was her education and intelligence. So I took what cue I could about her looks more from Annie than you.”

“Attractive young women can be found most anywhere; but exceptionally intelligent ones such as Moira are as scarce as hens’ teeth. So though I felt she looked very nice, I was far more impressed with her mind.”

“Very nice?” Jacob snorted. “She’s one of the most beautiful girls I’ve ever seen.”

Owen glanced at him. “But that won’t make you throw over Esther for her, will it?”

“Of course not. Esther is quite attractive enough to please me, and has other qualities that should make us good partners in life as well as in love; whereas I know nothing of Moira save what she looked like tonight, so I have no reason to believe she’d suit me.”

“Especially since she doesn’t come with a partnership in Templeman’s,” Owen noted.

“That too,” Jacob agreed, as he pulled the carriage up to Ryan’s home. “But I’d be very fond of Esther even without that.”

Owen offered Lizzie a hand to descend from the carriage, then took Jacob’s place at the reins. “Besides,” he told her, “if you wish to continue spouting such nonsense you’ll have to wait till later, as I need to stop by Michael’s and see how Lily is doing.”

“I made my point already, so you needn’t worry about anything more. Just don’t forget to pass on my love and best wishes.”

“Mine, too,” Jacob added.

“I won’t. I’ll see you in an hour or so.”



As it turned out, Owen’s estimate of how long he would be at Michael’s was far off the mark, and long after he was supposed to pick up Annie he was still not back. As a result,

around midnight Danny was roused and reluctantly agreed to fetch Annie. Since Owen had the covered carriage he and his siblings brought from town, Danny used the open wagon kept at the farm, and due to its lack of cover had an uncomfortable ride to Gael's in the near-freezing weather, and expected an even more uncomfortable ride back home, as he was still angry with Annie for having exposed him to ridicule. Not that he would have minded kissing Moira under the mistletoe if the opportunity had arisen on its own, but being ambushed in such an embarrassing way made him furious with his sister, and if not for the fact that she was quiet and withdrawn during the entire ride home he would have been more than willing to give her a good piece of his mind. But since she said not a word he thought it best not to goad her, and they spent the whole trip in silence.

Owen finally returned closer to dawn than midnight and went directly to bed, so it was late morning before all of Ryan and Sarah's brood were up, and even then Owen still looked far from rested. Still, that didn't keep him from discussing Lily's condition.

"Someone must see to it that Lily eats more," he stated. "She eats little enough when all she has to feed is herself, and too little to serve two. I know she has little taste for food when she's feeling unwell, but she must eat, even if all she eats is soup and biscuits."

"I'll take some things over before we go to Gael's," his mother offered.

"I can do it," Annie replied, "and stay to make sure she eats them."

Danny looked at her curiously. "I presumed you'd be anxious to go to Gael's and accept the compliments his guests will give you for the way you festooned his home."

Annie shook her head. "I'm not that anxious; we were up late and I didn't rest well, so I don't feel up to facing a crowd."

Owen frowned at her. "If you're not feeling well you shouldn't be with Lily."

"I'm not ill. Just tired. I'm sure a quiet visit with Lily will be good for both of us."

Owen nodded. "Well, at least it will save me from having to go back there again today. So..." he added as he rose, "I think I'll do what I can to make up for last night, and take a

nap.” He looked at Lizzie. “Be sure to wake me in time to go to Gael’s; I don’t want to miss all of my first Christmas at home in three years.”

Lizzie nodded. “Rest well. You’ll need plenty of sleep to be as gallant as you were last night.”

Owen smiled. “I *was* gallant, wasn’t I? Who would have ever imagined it?” He chuckled, then returned to his bed.

Annie looked at her half-eaten meal and sighed. “I think I’ll take a nap too, so I don’t sleep through my visit with Lily.” She looked at Lizzie and added, “Just be sure to wake me as well, so I can say my good-byes before you head back to town.”

Lizzie nodded, watched Annie go to her room, then looked at Danny. “Is it just me, or is Annie unusually quiet this morning?”

“I suppose. She was certainly unusually quiet on the way home last night. Still, you don’t live with her and get your ears worn out from it. I’d be glad to have her on the quiet side for a while.”

Sarah chuckled. “As long as it don’t mean she’s ill I can agree with that. But I’m willing to venture she’ll be back to her usual mood before we get home tonight.”

Danny had been giving some thought to what might have made Annie so quiet, and the most likely thing that sprang to mind suggested otherwise, but rather than risk any questions he simply nodded and told their mother, “You’re probably right.” Then he turned to Jacob. “So tell me... how are things going with you and Esther?”

“Or more importantly,” Lizzie laughingly noted, “with Esther’s father, Isaac.”



By the time Ryan’s family went to Gael’s at least half the neighborhood had gathered to see the festive display and partake of Gael and Mia’s hospitality, so it took quite a while to greet and visit a little with everyone. At first Danny avoided being near Moira, as he had little desire to risk another scolding for his behavior the previous evening, but at one point she caught him alone on the front porch, and a long talk in the barn resolved the problems caused by Annie’s

interference in their affairs. So by the time Moira wandered under the mistletoe and received another kiss on the cheek from Owen, Danny added a peck on her forehead to show that things had been settled between them.

"I'd have expected you to take better advantage of your opportunity," Owen teased him.

"Ah, but I'm not as desperate for female companionship as you," Danny retorted.

"I wouldn't say I'm desperate. Why, just yesterday I spent more than six hours in the company of two very lovely young women..."

"Patients of yours?" Danny supposed.

Owen smiled. "Well, I'll have to admit that the blonde was Lily... but the brunette..."

"Would this be the brunette we discussed at Gael's party?" Moira smilingly asked.

"Gads, but you have a good memory."

"And how is your suit with her going?"

He waved a hand absently. "The young lady appreciates my finer qualities, but her father is another matter."

Jacob looked at him with interest. "You didn't mention a young lady. Are you really pursuing someone?"

"I imagine as handsome and amiable as Owen is, all the girls pursue him," Moira suggested.

"All but those I most desire," he said, placing his hand over his heart, and she gave the wink he directed at her a cheerful smile in return.

The chime of Jacob's pocket-watch reminded him of the hour, and he pointed out it was getting late; so without further ado the three siblings bade goodbye to all and sundry, and headed for town.



Despite the jovial mood in which Owen, Jacob and Lizzie left Gael's, it was a bit of a wrench to leave family and friends behind for what would certainly be weeks and perhaps even months, and they'd been so busy since leaving town the previous day — especially Owen — that all of them were quiet for a while. However, eventually Lizzie broached the subject she'd been wondering about ever since Owen's final

conversation with Moira.

“Was Moira joking, or do you really have a brunette?”

Owen smiled. “I’m sure she said it jokingly, as the brunette we talked about at Gael’s party was Miss Hobbs, and as you know quite well she is only my patient, not a would-be *amour*.”

“Then why did you answer as you did, about her and her father’s opinion of you?”

“To keep up the joke. If I’d admitted the truth the joke would have been on me, not Danny.”

Lizzie nodded. “That’s true.” Still, she thought, Owen spent far more time trying to figure out what was wrong with Miss Hobbs than any other patient, so perhaps there was more truth to the joke than either he or Moira realized. But rather than waste any further thought on the possibility she yawned, asked if he’d mind if she leant against him and took a nap, and was soon asleep. Not long after, one arm wrapped around his sister, Owen joined her in slumber, so Jacob, forced to remain awake by the necessity of guiding the horse, was left alone with his thoughts.



## 5

Once the terms of Jacob and Esther's marriage contract were finalized, the next step was setting a date for the wedding. Templeman not only wanted Jacob to take his surname, but was also going to build a house for the newlyweds near his own, so they could be close in every way. It probably wouldn't be finished until late April or May, but no one saw any reason to put the wedding off for that long, for as Isaac said with a wink, "I'm sure you'll want some time alone before moving in." So after consulting a calendar to make sure the ceremony wouldn't interfere with either Passover or Easter, the date was set for the first Sunday in April.

As usual, things slowed down at the store after the holidays, but there was always some business, and Lizzie was happy to serve the regular customers who came in, and to greet the newer ones who stopped by from time to time.

One of those was Sir Robert's sister Helen, who came in about once a week, sometimes with her mother, but as often as not with a chaperone. At first Lizzie had mixed emotions about serving Helen, but soon found out that save when her mother or chaperone were close by, the girl was a very pleasant young woman. Apparently her occasionally distant moods were not an expression of her own feelings, but an effort to please those with harsher ideas about how she should behave toward those of lesser station.

During the last week of January, at one of the times the two had a few moments alone Lizzie noticed that Helen seemed less happy than usual, and wondered aloud if there was anything she could do to be of help.

Helen made sure her chaperone was not within earshot, then expressed her regret at having failed to conceal her feelings, as they had nothing to do with Lizzie or the store, but were due to her brother's absence.

"I knew he hadn't come by recently, but didn't know he wasn't in town," Lizzie replied.

Helen nodded. "He left after Christmas to take care of business in Colton, and has yet to return."

"I take it you find it lonely without him? I would have thought there were plenty of things to keep you busy at a

place like Colton Court.”

“I very much like it there. But this is the first time in years we’ve been apart for so long, and I didn’t realize how different it would feel to have him gone. And of course all my old friends live in Colton, and although the people we’ve met here have been very friendly, it’s not the same as being with people you’ve known a long time.”

“No, I suppose n...”

At that moment Helen’s chaperone returned from her perusal of the stock at the other end of the counter, so Lizzie cut short her comment and nothing more was said of the matter. But though short, their discussion gave her a more sympathetic view of the girl, and the wish, ridiculous as it was, that she could do something to make her feel better.

Completely ridiculous, she thought to herself as Helen left the store, for of what use could a shopgirl be to a baronet’s sister?



As January turned into February, life went on much as usual for most; but a storm was gathering in the west, and as its winds swept upriver from Seaside, those who lived in the low places reserved for the poorest of the poor began to feel its cold fingers reach out for them.

Among those who were better situated, it was those who tended to the poor who first became aware of the problem, and at first they did their best to deal with the situation on their own. Owen, Evans and the other doctors in town gradually became more and more busy, but as the dead piled up in pauper’s graves, expressed their concerns to the Mayor and other dignitaries, though always with the hope that the situation would get better, rather than worse. Even Lizzie, though living directly across the hall from Owen, thought his longer days as much due to the demands of those at Hobbs Hall as any other cause, as he saw no need to burden her with his or Evans’ worries.

As a result, Lizzie had no reason to suspect there was anything amiss when Helen came to the store on the twelfth of February to buy a gift for her brother.

“I take it Sir Robert has returned from Colton?”

Helen shook her head. "No; but we expect him back by the weekend, and I'd like to have some kind of Valentine's gift for him when he arrives."

Lizzie thought of how forlorn Helen seemed a couple of weeks earlier, and suggested she buy a locket of the sort used for a small lock of hair. "That way, when he's parted from you he'll have something to remind him of you."

Helen looked dubious. "I don't know. That seems more like something you'd get for a sweetheart, not a brother."

"That's true; but if you are as dear to him as he is to you, it might be a gift he would treasure. I'm sure you would have liked to have a locket of his hair when you were feeling low a couple of weeks ago."

Helen thought for a few moments, then nodded. "You're right; and I don't suppose it would be very expensive — would it? Because it would be nice if I could pay for it out of my pin money, instead of having him pay for his own gift."

"No, not at all. Even a gold one would be far less than the things you've been looking at recently, and you can have it engraved for free."

Helen flashed a dazzling smile. "That sounds wonderful. Do you have a list of inscriptions I could look at?"

Lizzie returned her infectious smile. "Of course. Let me get it for you."

Since customers of Helen's station received the finest and swiftest treatment, the locket was not only purchased but also engraved and delivered to her before she left the store, and when she left Lizzie thanked her for her business and expressed her hope that she'd see her again soon.

Helen smiled. "I'm sure you will, as my brother told me that when he returns he means to stop at the chocolate shop on the corner, since his purchase there was so well received at Christmas; and I can hardly allow him to come to town without bringing me here, so I can show him some of the lovely things you've shown me that I've been reluctant to buy without his approval."

And so it was that a small purchase on one day gave Lizzie dreams of a much larger sale only a few days hence.

In a change from their usual routine, on Friday evening Owen knocked on Lizzie's door before dinner. He looked unusually sober, even for him, and she asked if there was something wrong. He nodded and asked if he could talk with her in his room before going downstairs. She nodded and followed him across the hall.

As soon as they entered his room he turned and said, "I just received news that Mary died this morning."

"Mary?" Lizzie repeated, obviously not connecting the name with anyone in particular.

"Aaron and Alice's little girl."

Lizzie practically collapsed into the nearby chair. "Little Mary? The charmer we saw at Christmas?"

He nodded. "The same."

"But how? Why?"

"I don't know for sure, but there's been an outbreak of the grippe in the poorer parts of town, and from what Jemmy was able to tell me I wouldn't be surprised if this is the same."

"There has?" she said in surprise. "I hadn't heard anything about that."

"I don't imagine it's something your customers have been likely to encounter, and although things seem to be getting more serious, the Mayor and Council feel it should be kept quiet unless things threaten to get out of hand."

"How serious?"

"Serious enough that when I go to the farm tomorrow to examine those who are ill, I want you to come with me."

"What good can I do?"

"It has nothing to do with your doing anything; I just want you to get out of town in case things get still worse."

"But I have my work — and the hope of a very large commission within the next couple of days, as Sir Robert and his sister are expected — and if there's also illness in the countryside, what good would it do for me to go there?"

"There might be occasional cases in the countryside, but the population is spread out, and if people are careful and keep to themselves it should be almost completely safe. Whereas in town people are crowded together, and things could get far worse in a hurry."

"I don't know," she dubiously said. "I can understand your reasoning. But perhaps what killed Mary isn't the same thing

at all. And I can't possibly take off work tomorrow when you don't really know what's going on."

Owen shook his head. "I should have known you could be just as stubborn as Annie, especially if there's a chance for you to see your baronet again."

Lizzie flushed. "You know very well that he is no more 'my' baronet than Miss Hobbs is 'your' intended."

He sighed and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I don't want to argue with you. I'm just concerned about the way things are going here, and want you to be safe. Perhaps I'm over-reacting to the news about Mary; but if I'm not, will you agree to consider the matter again?"

"I will consider it, but what I'll agree to depends on the circumstances. If things are as bad on the farm as in town, there wouldn't be much point in going there."

There was a knock at the door, and Lizzie's roommate told them it was time to go down to dinner.

"Go on down," Owen told Carrie. "We'll be there in a moment." He turned to Lizzie. "One last thing. As I said, the Council wants this kept quiet, and would be upset if they knew what I told you; so don't tell anyone else."

Lizzie nodded. "That's something I *can* agree to. I wouldn't want to alarm anyone else."



Owen spent most of Saturday in the country, examining Aaron and Alice and instructing their son Jonathan about how to care for them, then examining Hazel, their four year old daughter, who'd been taken to his family's home by Sarah after seeing how ill her parents were. By the time he met his and Gael's families in Gael's home late that afternoon, he was certain that Mary had died of the grippe, and save for Jonathan, all the other members of Aaron's family were also ill. However, none of the other families living in the area reported any trace of illness, so though he gave thorough instructions on how to care for the currently ill and those who through bad luck or carelessness might also become ill, he returned to Benton feeling that the situation on the farms was far better than in town.

To help ensure things stayed that way he brought Hazel to

town with him, rather than leave her in the care of his mother, lest she transmit her illness to Lily, as in her condition a case of the grippe would be far more dangerous than for anyone else. Unfortunately, by the time he returned most of the places he'd thought to place Hazel were already closed for the evening, and by the time he finally found someone who'd care for her and returned to the boarding house it was well after closing. His landlady was upset about having to get out of bed at such a late hour, and although she finally relented and let him in, since you had to expect doctors to keep odd hours, she gave him a lecture and resolved to never rent a room to a doctor again.

There are no days off for doctors in the midst of an epidemic, so although Owen slept in on Sunday morning he left the boarding house soon after he woke, and didn't have a chance to talk to Lizzie till that evening. He described the situation at home in the most optimistic terms, and asked her to talk to Jacob on Monday about taking some time off. And though she felt the same as the day before she saw no point in repeating their argument, so she promised to make the request, though taking the edge off her promise by saying that since she couldn't tell Jacob why she wanted time off, she couldn't guarantee he would give it to her.

At the time Owen felt that was the most he could expect, and made no further effort to convince her of the need to leave town. But he did remind her of her promise when they parted the next morning, and said he would stop by the store later to hear Jacob's reply. Lizzie was sorely tempted to box his ears for the reminder, but since they were standing on the front porch at the time, all she could do was give him the sourest look she dared show in public and silently wish him at the antipodes.



Sir Robert returned to Colton Court late on Saturday, to the enthusiastic greetings of his mother and sister, and though tired as a result of the long journey from Colton, was glad to stay up and visit with them until late in the evening. He slept a good part of Sunday to make up for that, and by Monday was sufficiently refreshed to take Helen to town,

ostensibly to help him choose what to buy at the chocolate shop, but he suspected almost as certainly to show him something at Templeman's. Not that he minded that, as he was touched by the locket Helen gave him, and wanted to thank Miss Ryanson for suggesting it.

Robert had taken a couple of driving lessons while in Colton, and since it was just the two of them going to town, considered trying his hand at driving the phaeton. But the morning proved cold and blustery, so he had the coach and four brought round and had John Coachman brave the elements while he and his sister continued to catch up on what happened during his absence in relative comfort.

Once in town they spent a pleasant half hour picking out a large selection of confections at the chocolate shop; but as they neared Templeman's, Robert was surprised to see Miss Ryanson standing in the alley at the side of the store, arguing with a tall man who was a stranger to him. Frowning, he motioned for his driver to stop the carriage, and walked down the alley as quickly as he could without appearing to be particularly concerned about the situation.

"Excuse me, Miss Ryanson. Is this man bothering you?"

"Yes, he is, Sir Robert," she testily replied, "but there is nothing you can do about it, as he is my brother, and has as much right to quarrel with me as anyone."

The now partially identified stranger turned to Robert. "Perhaps you can help *me*, as I'm having a terrible time convincing my sister of the danger her folly is putting her in."

Robert raised his brow. "What folly? And what danger?"

"I'm trying to convince her to leave town and go to our home in the country before the quarantine is put in place."

Robert stared blankly at Miss Ryanson's brother. "What quarantine?"

Owen decided to start at the beginning. "I understand you have been gone for several weeks, and in any event the disaster that is threatening Benton has been kept quiet, in the hope it would end as quickly as it started."

"What disaster?"

"There's an epidemic of the grippe that has killed a number of people, especially among the poor near the river, and now threatens to reach into the heart of Benton. As a result this morning the Mayor and Council held an emergency

meeting and voted to put the town under quarantine, blocking all roads into and out of town, and if my sister — and for that matter you and what I presume to be your sister,” he added, nodding toward the head poking out of the carriage window, “wish to leave town before the quarantine is in force, you must do so immediately.”

Robert frowned. “That does sound serious.” He turned to Miss Ryanson. “Where does your home lie?”

“To the west, off the north river road,” she replied. “But what difference could that make to you?”

“Since my sister and I should also leave town, we could take you to Colton Court, which lies in the same direction, then provide you with a carriage to take you home.”

Lizzie hesitated. She hadn’t wanted to leave without a chance of making the large sale she’d been hoping for. But since the quarantine had ruined that prospect, perhaps it would be best to take advantage of the Baronet’s offer, especially since Owen said things were far better on the farm than in town. It was even possible that the store might be forced to close for the duration of the quarantine, and it would be far nicer to visit family and friends than to be stuck at the boarding house. Still, it seemed a great imposition on Sir Robert and his sister, and she said so.

“That’s very kind, but I shouldn’t inconvenience you.”

Robert shook his head. “It’s no inconvenience at all. My carriage comfortably holds four, and there are only the two of us. And as I presume your brother has said more of this situation to you than to me, you could further enlighten us during the time it would take to reach Colton Court.”

Owen offered his hand to Sir Robert, who allowed him to take his and enthusiastically shake it. “Thank you so much! I hope that my sister will not be so foolish as to turn down your generous offer.”

“I hope so as well, Mister...” Robert said enquiringly.

“Doctor Ryanson,” Owen replied. “I work with Doctor Evans, though I suppose you have probably not been in town long enough to have heard of either of us.”

“No, I’m afraid not; but it is a pleasure to meet you, and I must thank you for the warning.”

Owen turned to Lizzie. “I hope you won’t need much time to get your things together, as I have no idea how soon the



blockade will be in place.”

“I have a few things at the farm, and can always borrow from Annie, so I won’t need anything. Just give me a moment to let Jacob know what happened to me.”

So only a short time later Lizzie was comfortably sitting across from Sir Robert and Helen and waving goodbye to Owen, who thanked the Providence that sent Sir Robert their way, then headed toward his next engagement, completely putting their meeting out of his mind.



As it turned out, what little delay was involved in Owen’s effort to get Lizzie out of town proved longer than the time it took for blockades to be put in place on the four roads out of Benton. So to Robert’s consternation, after crossing the bridge from the main part of town to the north river road and turning west traffic quickly turned heavy, then completely stopped near the Benton Home for Orphans and Foundlings. He told his driver to tend to the horses, then walked toward the front of the queue. There were only a dozen or so carts and carriages ahead of his, so he soon reached a barrier placed across the road, and a half dozen well-armed men making sure no one could breach it.

“Now see here, my good man, what must one do to pass this barricade?”

The head guard looked him up and down and sniggered. “I see we have one of the high and mighty with us, lads.”

Even though only one of the ‘high and mighty’ for a short time, Robert took exception to the condescending tone of the rascal, and said that he saw no reason to be insulted just because he’d asked a very reasonable question.

“As you can see from the sign there,” the fellow said, pointing to the quarantine sign, “there be a quarantine, and no one may pass without proper papers.”

“What papers?”

“Ones issued by the Council, in Benton. I take it you have none, or you wouldn’t need ask.”

“I have to admit I do not, but I can’t see that it is really necessary for me to obtain them, as the entrance to my estate is not far from here.” He pointed toward the bend, and

explained that he lived less than half a mile beyond.

"It make no difference whether you live half a mile or fifty miles beyond. Without papers y'cannot pass the barrier. Them's me orders, and I mean to follow them, so that's all there be to it."

Robert stood and thought for a few moments, shrugged and returned to his carriage. He could have offered the fellow a bribe, but aside from not wanting to resort to such measures, the lout's greeting suggested that he'd relish the chance to turn it down and give him the ultimate snub. The question was, if they couldn't leave town without papers, what could he do? He didn't care for the idea of going back to town, getting the necessary papers, then returning to what would probably be an even longer line. Especially since if he returned to town he'd probably lose his charming guest, and he didn't want to risk that. The trouble was, he couldn't think of anything else to do.

Suddenly, he had an inspiration. He'd meant to arrange a meeting with Master Hobbs within the next couple of days, and from what he understood Hobbs Hall could be reached without taking any of the roads out of town. So as he reached the carriage he lightly sprang in, explained the difficulty with the barricade, then proposed his solution.

"As it happens, I have to see Master Hobbs on an important matter within the next couple of days, and I'm sure he wouldn't mind putting us up for the night while I arrange for this mess to be straightened out."

Lizzie blanched. "I... I am sure that Master Hobbs would not mind seeing either you or your sister. But you can hardly expect him to greet me with open arms."

"Nonsense. I shall present you as a guest of ours, and if necessary, make it clear that you are to be treated as equal to any such guest. There is no need for you to tell him you work at Templeman's."

Lizzie wasn't sure that would make any difference, as she knew that at least one of the Hobbsses had visited the store and might recognize her, even if she'd taken so little notice of her that she couldn't remember where she'd seen her. Still, she found it hard to argue with Sir Robert's confidence, so she stifled any further objection, and once his driver managed to extricate their carriage from the surrounding vehicles the

party headed eastward, with Sir Robert and Helen looking forward to their reception, and only Lizzie distressed by the prospect.



Less than an hour later Sir Robert's carriage rolled up to a considerably less imposing barricade manned by only three men armed with adequate but far less formidable weapons.

"Ho, there!" one of the men said. "Who be you, and why come you here?"

Robert descended from the carriage and presented his card to one of them. "I am Sir Robert Ballard, First Baronet Ballard, and a friend of Master Hobbs, whom I presume to be your master. I would appreciate it if you would grant us entrance to his estate, or send for someone who can authorize our entrance."

The men looked at the engraved card, the impressive looking coach and four, and Sir Robert and the young women with him. None of them could read the elegant script, so they had only their eyes and his words to convince them, but the confident manner in which he spoke proved convincing enough, and they returned his card and opened the gate.

"I apologize for challenging milord," the first one said. "But as you know there be sickness about, and our master told us to be careful as to who we allow to enter."

Robert nodded. "That seems perfectly reasonable. I hope my own men have equally good manners and sense."

He returned to the carriage, winked at his companions as he chuckled about how much easier it had been to gain entrance to Hobbs' estate than to pass the blockade, then made himself at ease as the carriage lumbered up the long rise from the edge of Hobbs' vast estate toward the ancient pile at the top of the hill.

## 6

Since Hobbs' estate was so large, Sir Robert's party had a long ride from its outskirts to the Hall. Its outer border was practically a wilderness, and the road not much more than a wide dirt trail through the woods. But as they neared the Hall they found themselves in a park that was not only well laid out but also well groomed, and as the dirt road turned into a smoothly paved brickwork lane their carriage seemed to almost glide along, with hardly a bump or a thump.

The Hall wasn't as grand as some of the newer homes in Benton such as Colton Court, but more than two centuries' worth of renovations and additions gave it considerable charm, and its size and apparently good condition suggested that whether or not its interior was in the latest style, it should be comfortable and roomy.

As they drew up to the steps leading to the entrance a tall, slender young man strode down the stairway and asked who he should announce to his master.

"I am Sir Robert, Baronet Ballard." Waving toward his companions Robert added, "This is my sister, Miss Ballard, and our guest, Miss Ryanson."

"If you will have your driver take your carriage round to the stables I'll escort you to the front sitting room and announce your presence to Master Hobbs."

In a few moments the trio were seated in a moderate size room a little dated in its style, but cozily arranged with comfortable chairs and chaises, and a lovely view of the front park. They were there only a few minutes before they heard rapidly approaching footsteps, and immediately after saw the beaming face of Master Hobbs.

"My dear Sir Robert," their host exclaimed, "what good fortune brings you to my doorstep?"

"I wouldn't say it was good fortune," Robert replied, "but from your enthusiastic reception I hope it will prove more welcome than not."

Hobbs looked puzzled and asked him to explain, and Robert related how they'd been prevented from reaching Colton Court, and how his need to talk with Hobbs led them to his door, in the hope that he was willing to provide them

with shelter till they could make other arrangements.

“Why, of course! I’ll be happy to put you up for as long as you need; and since it’s near lunchtime I’m sure you must be hungry, so if you’ll join me and my family we can discuss how to provide for your stay while we dine.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose on your hospitality for any longer than necessary...” Robert noted.

“It’s no imposition at all,” Master Hobbs insisted. “We have plenty of empty rooms and no one coming to visit anytime soon, so there’s no reason you can’t take advantage of them for as long as you need.”

“I do need to speak to you of the matter we discussed last year, and of course must arrange for papers for passage through the blockade.”

“And we should let mama know where we are,” said Helen, “so she won’t be worried when we fail to return.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Robert replied, “but you’re right; she will worry if she hears nothing about us.”

Master Hobbs nodded. “That can be easily arranged. Just write a note or notes after we eat, and I’ll arrange for their delivery this afternoon. I can even send someone to town tomorrow to obtain the passes you need. But if you wish, I see no reason why you can’t remain here until the quarantine is lifted, and avoid the risk of running into those who are ill on your way home.”

“We can’t impose on you for that long a time,” Robert objected.

“Well, I’ll leave it up to you to choose how long you want to stay, but I won’t have it said that I can’t be a perfect host — or for that matter, my wife a perfect hostess — no matter how unexpected the situation.”

“It is certainly generous of you to make such an offer,” Lizzie said, feeling that if she was supposedly one of Sir Robert’s party she should utter at least an occasional word.

“A pretty speech from a pretty maid,” Hobbs said with a smile. He looked at the three of them and smiled even more broadly. “I look forward to having you here for as long as I can keep you. But for now, as I said, let us see about something to eat.”

Hobbs turned to his butler, who was now standing in the doorway. “Edwards, see that our guests are settled in the best

rooms in the east wing, so they may freshen up before joining the rest of us in the dining room.”

Edwards bowed acknowledgement. “The rooms have been set in order, and a manservant and maidservants are waiting to help your guests with anything they need. Felton will escort them to their quarters and wait to show them to the dining room. And the other members of the family have been informed of the change in luncheon plans.”

Hobbs nodded his approval and turned back to Sir Robert’s party. “It sounds like all is in readiness for your stay, so I will meet you in the dining room in about — thirty minutes?”



Lizzie left the room assigned to her, still marveling at the attached washroom and its essentially magical methods of delivering water and removing waste. Seeing Helen emerge from her room at the same time, she temporarily forgot their difference in station and told her how strange it felt to have such luxury at one’s fingertips.

“I felt much the same when we moved into Colton Court,” Helen replied, “but though I greatly appreciate it, especially at night, I’m more accustomed to it now than in awe of it. Still, it was a relief to find that despite the age of the Hall we won’t have to rely on chamber pots.”

Lizzie gave her a wry smile. “Of course. Your home *would* have the newest conveniences. But I can assure you that for someone used to sharing far more antiquated facilities in a boarding house, it is a very pleasant surprise.”

Robert was already standing at the head of the stairs, idly chatting with Felton, who had turned out to be the footman who met their carriage. As the two girls neared them Robert offered his arm to his sister, and as Felton led them downstairs, Lizzie fell in behind them.



Lizzie felt more than a little out of place, sitting as she was in an ornately decorated room with half a dozen people any one of whom would be considered by the world at large as of

infinitely more consequence than her.

Master Hobbs was of course at the head of the table, with his very attractive wife at his left and Sir Robert on his right. Sir Robert's sister Helen was seated next to him and Master Hobbs' son Mister Hobbs was across from her, while Lizzie sat next to Helen and across from the Miss Hobbs who took up so much of Evans' and Owen's time and effort.

It was easy to see why Miss Hobbs was of such interest to Owen. Though strikingly beautiful in some ways, with nearly black curls and sparkling blue eyes, she was so pale and frail that though of normal height for a young woman of seventeen (as Lizzie learned from her maid while asking about those she'd be dining with), it seemed as if a light breeze could lift her from her chair and waft her through the window. There must be something seriously wrong with her for her to appear so wan, and something wonderful in her spirit for her to sparkle so despite her illness.

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