MILLS & BOON

The Officer and the Lady

Dorothy Elbury

Vintage Historical

Dorothy Elbury

The Officer and the Lady

Серия «Mills & Boon Historical»

Аннотация

THE NABOB'S RETURNAn officer in the East India Trading Company, Matthew Beresford has made a life a world away from England and his father's malevolence. Now it's time for Matthew to return home.There he finds Miss Imogen Priestley, who's worked tirelessly to save the Thornfield estate from ruin. Cold and aloof, Matthew gradually thaws as he begins to imagine a new life–with Imogen. But he's torn–the blistering heat of India will wilt his English rose, unless he can vanquish his demons and find his home at last with her….

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Imogen stopped and turned to face him, a soft, warm glow lighting up her eyes.

Looking down at her eager expression, Beresford felt his heart seem to skip a number of beats, and it occurred to him that at this moment there was nothing in the world that he would not do to keep that ardent look on her face. He was then obliged to remind himself of the vow he had made less than twenty-four hours previously, and as he did so he felt a sudden lowering of spirits—for it was now becoming quite obvious to him that every minute he spent in Imogen's company was going to place him in serious danger of breaking that vow, and it was absolutely imperative that he should not do so.

To become involved in a casual affair with Imogen Priestley was totally out of the question, and any suggestion of a more lasting attachment, highly compelling though that thought might be, was even more impossible to contemplate.

DOROTHY ELBURY

lives in a quiet English village in Lincolnshire, an ideal atmosphere for writing her historical novels. She and her husband have been married (it was love at first sight, of course!) for forty-five years, and they have three children and four grandchildren. Her hobbies include visiting museums and historic houses, and handicrafts of various kinds.

The Officer and the Lady
Dorothy Elbury

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Chapter One

August 1816

A s the two carriages reached the brow of the hill, the driver of the first, having heard a sharp rap from within, brought his team swiftly to a halt and cocked his ear to await further instructions from his passengers.

'Well, here it is, David,' said Matt Beresford, as he lowered the window and, with a broad sweep of his hand, indicated to his companion the extent of his late father's property. 'Thornfield—I suppose you might call it my "ancestral home"—for what it is worth!'

David Seymour gave a wry smile. His friend's sarcastic tone had not failed to register.

'Still not really made up your mind, have you?' he observed.

Beresford shrugged. 'As I recollect, I hardly seem to have been given a great deal of choice in the matter.'

Leaning forward, he opened the door, leapt lightly out of the carriage and motioned to the driver. 'Wait here for about ten minutes, then carry on—my guess is that you will find the house gates about half a mile further up the road.'

Turning to Seymour once more, he said, 'I noticed a door in the wall further back—I have a mind to try and get into the park and see what sort of state it's in. You go on and I will meet you at the front of the house.'

With a resigned sigh, his companion watched him striding back down the lane. He had been acquainted with Beresford for some nine years now, ever since they had both set sail for India under the aegis of Seymour's father who had, at that time, been a Resident District Commissioner with the British East India Trading Company. With Colonel Seymour's help and support both young men had carved out very successful careers for themselves within the company and might possibly have remained in Hyderabad for the foreseeable future had it not been for the urgent and totally unexpected summons that Beresford had received from his estranged father's solicitor some six months earlier.

Over the years, Seymour had managed, partly from the occasional conversation with his friend, but mostly from local gossip, to glean a good deal of Beresford's early history. He was aware that Matt's father, Sir Matthew Beresford, who at that time had held the office of Governor of Madras, had been so racked with grief at the death in childbirth of his beloved young wife, that he had instantly rejected his newborn son, having chosen to lay the full blame for the unfortunate lady's demise upon the infant's innocent head.

Accompanied only by a returning Company junior and a hastily acquired wetnurse, the child had been bundled on to the first available East Indiaman to sail for the home country, where he had been abandoned into the care of his maternal grandparents. Although Sir Matthew had, through legal channels,

arranged adequate financial provision for his son's upkeep and education, these ageing relatives had been obliged, forthwith, to entrust their grandson's welfare to the hands of a succession of nursery maids and colourless governesses. Consequently, the young Beresford might have led a cheerless and somewhat prosaic upbringing had not an acquaintance of his grandfather chanced to recommend the services of an excellent, if rather avant-garde, tutor, one Thomas Hopkirk.

In addition to making sure that his young pupil was furnished with a wide and varied education, this highly enlightened academic had taken it upon himself to see that the boy was equipped with all the necessary sporting skills that a gentleman of his station might be likely to require. The very fact that Beresford had straightway knuckled down and made such a success of his mandatory career in India was, without doubt, due mainly to Hopkirk's years of devoted teaching.

'But, did you never attempt to contact your father?' Seymour had asked in amazement, when hearing his friend's history for the first time.

'My grandparents tried on several occasions to win him over,' Beresford told him. 'However, as he seemed bent on continuing to ignore all of our communications, Grandfather finally gave up trying.'

'But, when you yourself were older?'

'You may be sure I did,' said Beresford, with an emphatic nod. 'As soon as I had completed my time at Oxford and had gained

my majority, I made it my business to seek him out but, since his solicitor refused to divulge his current address, this was not at all easy. However, I eventually managed to track him down to his club in St James's and screwed up the courage to confront him.'

His bright blue eyes clouded over in remembrance of that fateful meeting. 'At the time, I was desperate to join my college friends in the Peninsula and I petitioned him to use his influence to recommend me for a commission.' He laughed, almost awkwardly. 'I seem to recall I fancied myself as a lieutenant in the Rifle Brigade!'

'Well, you always were a damned fine shot!' laughed his friend, then his face at once grew serious. 'But your father still refused to acknowledge you? After twenty-one years he must surely have recovered from his earlier resentment?'

Beresford shook his head. 'Apparently not. Certainly, my turning up had the most curious effect upon him. He took one look at me, his face went as white as a sheet and he then became quite abusive—accusing me of downright effrontery and so on. I was somewhat taken aback by his manner but, seeing that as soon as I finished my time at Oxford, he had chosen to withdraw his financial support, I felt that I had no alternative but to persevere with my request. He then insisted that he had no contacts with the military—I later discovered that to be quite untrue, of course.'

'But he did find you a position with the Company?' persisted Seymour, finding his friend's father's attitude hard to fathom, always having had the benefit of a close and harmonious

relationship with his own parent.

'Yes, he did,' admitted Beresford. 'Although, that came about in a rather odd way, too. He had all but dismissed me— I had, in fact, turned to go—when he suddenly called me back and offered to fund my passage on the East Indiaman that was about to set sail for the sub-continent. He then called for some writing materials and straight away scribbled out the letter of introduction to your father—and the rest, of course, you know.'

Seymour nodded. 'Sir Matthew was my father's mentor when he joined the Company back in '82—I heard he made a mint in his heyday. A regular "nabob"—or so I have been told.'

'Pretty much consistent with the type of man he seems to have been,' Beresford replied, his tone unemotional.

Seymour was chagrined. 'Sorry, old man. I meant no insult—it was just a phrase they used at the time when one of the Company chaps got back home with a huge fortune—no disrespect to your sire.'

Beresford grinned at his friend, giving him a playful punch in the shoulder. 'Forget it, David. We both know that most of our predecessors made their piles by underhand and far from scrupulous deals in the opium trade. I hold no brief for my father —I never even knew the man. Although, to be fair, it is thanks to him that I met you, and a truer and better friend a man would be hard pressed to come by.'

Since his father had made it clear that he intended to offer his son no further financial support, Beresford had reluctantly

found himself more or less obliged to take up Sir Matthew's offer, and had forthwith presented himself at the Company's Head Office in Leadenhall Street, from where he was directed to David Seymour's lodgings, just prior to that young man's own embarkation to join his father.

Almost nine years had passed since that fateful day, during which time neither Seymour nor Beresford had had occasion to return to England. Seymour had never hankered after his homeland, as both of his parents were permanently domiciled in Mysore, and Beresford had had no reason to do so. His grandparents were no longer living and, as far as he was aware, he had no other relatives apart from his father, who had, in any event, ignored all of his early letters from India. It seemed that all communication between the two of them had ended with that abrupt meeting in St James's and it was, therefore, with considerable surprise that, in the January of this present year, Matt Beresford had opened the letter from his father's solicitor to be informed, somewhat bluntly, of Sir Matthew's death. To his even greater astonishment the writer had then informed him that, due to an anomaly in the wording of his father's will, there was the distinct possibility that, since he appeared to be Sir Matthew's heir, he must return to England as soon as possible, in order to untangle the complications of his father's bequests.

Beresford had been inclined to ignore the summons, but his friend Seymour had eventually persuaded him that they were long overdue a trip to their native land and, now that the war in

Europe had ended, to be present at the prospective celebrations in London might prove to be quite exciting.

'And just think of the scores of lovely young ladies we shall meet!' Seymour had declared, his hazel eyes gleaming in anticipation. 'The only females we come across here are either taken or well past it!'

'Oh? I rather thought that you seemed to be doing pretty well with Mrs Ledger the last time I looked!' observed his friend, laughing. 'You were both certainly taking your time looking for her gloves in the shrubbery last week.'

'Oh, Susan Ledger!' shrugged Seymour carelessly. 'I have moved on since then—matter of fact, I chanced upon a rather pretty little ayah in Strickland's nursery on Saturday after the polo match—what about you?'

Beresford shook his head. 'Had a bit of a fling with Lillian Ashton before she went off to marry old Bunter in Madras last month,' he said briefly, 'but you are quite right, women are pretty thin on the ground this year.'

'And only the blessed monsoons to look forward to,' Seymour reminded him. 'Good time to get away, if you ask me—just for a few months, anyway. What do you say? You can sort out your pa's legal tangles, whatever they are, and then we can have some fun in dear old London Town!'

Unfortunately, Sir Matthew's legal tangles had turned out to be something of a nightmare since it appeared that, unbeknown to his son, he had remarried some nineteen years previously and had

produced a second family, comprising a wife and two children. However, although it had clearly been his intention to leave them well provided for, not one of his bequests could be fulfilled until it was resolved which of his sons was the rightful heir.

When he had instructed his solicitor to draw up his will, he had bequeathed the bulk of his estate to his 'son', obviously intending that his property should go to the now sixteen-year-old Nicholas, having either conveniently dismissed the existence of his firstborn or, as Matt was inclined to suspect, had presumed that, being as fair-skinned as his late mother, the boy must surely have succumbed to the rigours of the unforgiving Asian climate.

When Beresford learned of his father's duplicity, he had coldly instructed the solicitor to carry out what he felt must have been Sir Matthew's true intentions. Through his own hard work and diligent application to duty, he himself had accumulated more than enough wealth to last him a lifetime and he wanted no further part in his father's affairs.

'Unfortunately, sir,' Mr Robbins had sternly informed him, 'due to the continuous lack of funding since your father's death last year, the estate is now in a somewhat parlous condition and Lady Beresford who, if I might be so bold as to point out, is your stepmother, is, as such, entitled to expect your support!'

Further protestations had proved futile, with Mr Robbins constantly reminding Beresford of his duty to his family.

'I will do my best to sort out the title at this end,' he assured the exasperated Beresford, 'but you really must go up to Lincolnshire

and see Thornfield for yourself. The family has been without proper funds for almost a year now—it has taken me almost as long to establish your whereabouts. Your family is clearly in dire need of the help and guidance of someone who has had as much experience in land management as you have had, sir.'

'But surely you could have released the female portions?' retorted Beresford angrily. 'And, if I relinquish any claim to this —Nicholas's—inheritance, then surely they have some sort of estate manager who can deal with the other matters?'

'Best go and see for yourself, sir,' the solicitor advised him. 'Then you may return home with a clear conscience.'

Chapter Two

Beresford approached the wooden door in Thornfield's perimeter wall with slight trepidation. He was by no means a man of nervous disposition, but the idea of coming face to face with an entirely new and unwanted set of relatives—however tenuous their connection—was not one towards which he could bring himself to feel the slightest spark of enthusiasm.

To his surprise, he found the gate unlocked. He frowned as he entered the park, carefully securing the door behind him. This was certainly not good practice and, as he cast his eyes around the copse through which the path towards the house ran, he was quick to register a good many signs of neglect: fallen saplings, uncut brambles and a profusion of weeds, the extent of which threatened to overtake the path itself.

He walked on, dismally reminding himself that he might well have to use his own money to put these matters to rights, if they were to be attended to before winter set in, and his irritation grew as his mind dwelt on the vexing imposition with which he had been saddled.

As he rounded a bend in the path, he became aware of the sound of raised voices in the copse some short distance ahead. His curiosity raised, he began to tread more carefully and sidled quietly towards the clearing from where the altercation seemed to be emanating.

Peering through the bushes, he managed to make out the figures of a man and a young woman, apparently engaged in a heated argument. The man had the dark, almost swarthy look of a gypsy about him and seemed to be threatening the girl in some way. She had her back towards Beresford but, the minute he saw the man appearing to raise his fist at her, he cast aside the bushes and immediately leapt to her defence.

The man staggered back in astonishment at Beresford's sudden arrival and, as Beresford's hand reached out to grab his collar, one arm came up in self-defence and the other, holding a shotgun, swung wildly in Beresford's direction.

'Who the hell are you?' he spluttered, 'And what are you doing on private property?'

By this time he had his gun under control with both hands and aimed squarely at Beresford's chest. His dark eyes glittered as he took in the interloper's appearance, which, judging by the immaculate superfine breeches and made-to-measure jacket, was clearly not that of a tramp or vagabond. He hesitated, momentarily unsure of his ground until the sound of barely smothered laughter caused him to swing round angrily to confront the young woman behind him.

'What's so funny?' he demanded. 'You know this man?'

Unable to stifle her amusement, the girl, who had been watching the by-play between the two men with unconcealed interest, shook her head and delved into her pocket for a handkerchief to mop her streaming eyes.

'It has to be Matthew Beresford,' she choked, still trying to control her mirth. 'Thornfield's new master, Mr Wentworth—we were told he would be arriving shortly—and now, it seems, here he is!'

Wentworth's eyes swivelled back to Beresford, who was presently engaged in removing the leaves and twigs that had attached themselves to his clothing during his headstrong dash.

'You're Matthew Beresford?' he asked truculently. 'How d'ye come to be up here in the copse then?'

'I take it that you are a member of my staff, my good man,' replied Beresford coldly, casually inspecting his cuffs. 'I presume that you wish to keep your position, whatever it is?'

The man blanched as the girl quickly interposed on his behalf. 'This is Philip Wentworth, sir—he is—has been in charge of the estate since Sir Matthew died.'

Beresford gave her a brief glance; a strikingly pretty girl, with soft brown hair and wide grey eyes, wearing a faded blue cotton print gown, a rather battered chipstraw bonnet and carrying what looked to be a basket of wild strawberries. Probably one of the upper maids or some such. He concluded that he had probably interrupted a lovers' quarrel.

'And you are?' he queried.

Her amusement disappeared in an instant. A slight flush crept into her cheeks and she straightened her shoulders. She recognised a put-down when she heard one. 'I am Imogen Priestley,' she replied in an even voice, meeting his gaze squarely.

Beresford merely nodded and proceeded to walk back to the path.

'Perhaps you would see that the wall gate is kept locked in future,' he threw at the now sullen Wentworth as he passed him.

A slight exclamation from the girl halted him and he turned to find her at his elbow.

'I am afraid that was me,' she blurted out, her hand to her mouth. 'I went across the lane to see if there were more berries under the hedge and—I must have forgotten to lock the gate when I came back. Wentworth is not to blame—on this occasion.'

Intrigued, Beresford studied her more carefully. Something about her bearing, or perhaps it was the lilting timbre of her voice, caused him to reappraise his first impression of her. Not a servant, certainly, perhaps a governess?

'You are returning to the house?' he asked.

She nodded. 'I would be happy to show you the way, although, to be perfectly truthful, you can hardly get lost as the path goes straight down to the front driveway.'

He smiled. 'I had an idea that it might.'

Imogen, hurrying to keep pace with Beresford's long strides, found a great deal to admire in his appearance as they wended their way through the copse together. Tall and undeniably handsome, she could see that his complexion, even after the long passage home, still held the healthy glow of the fading remnants of the tropical suntan that he had acquired from his years on the Indian continent, emphasising the startling blueness of his eyes

and the guinea-gold brightness of his hair.

Slightly discomfited by the searching glances that were being cast in his direction, Beresford walked on in silence for a few moments then, 'How did you guess who I am?' he asked curiously. 'Wentworth was right in his assumption that I could have been anyone.'

Imogen laughed. 'Not so, sir. I have seen your mother's portrait. You are as like as a man can be to a woman—same golden locks, same blue eyes…' She stopped in confusion as Beresford gripped her arm and swung her towards him.

'My mother's portrait?' he demanded. 'Where have you seen my mother's portrait?'

She tried to pull away. 'You are hurting me, sir,' she protested.

He loosened his grip immediately, but kept hold of her nevertheless. 'I beg your pardon. It was not my intention to startle you. You say you have seen a portrait of my mother?'

'Well, yes,' she averred, 'although it was some years ago, when I was younger. It used to be kept in one of the attics where we were wont to play hide-and-seek and I often wondered who the lady could be, but when I asked about it Sir Matthew got very angry and forbade us all to go up there again, so it could well have been removed by now.'

She stared pointedly at his hand. 'You may let go of my arm now, if you please, sir.'

He dropped his hand as though it had been stung and pondered over her words. Then a thought struck him.

'You say you have lived at Thornfield since you were a child?'

'All my life, practically.'

At the questioning look on his face she smiled. 'Lady Beresford took me in when I was six years old,' she said patiently. 'Jessica was barely two at the time…'

'Jessica?'

'Your half-sister.' She looked at him quizzically for a moment. 'You do not seem to know a great deal about us, if I may say so.'

'Nothing at all, as it happens,' he said bluntly. 'I was totally unaware of your presence until two weeks ago. You have the upper hand here, it seems.'

'How do you mean?'

He thrust his hands into his pockets and strode purposefully on.

'Well, you all presumably know everything there is to know about me, I dare say.'

She hurried after him. 'No such thing!' she protested. 'None of us were even aware of your existence until a few months ago. Lady Beresford has barely recovered from the shock. Apparently, Mr Robbins was the only one in whom Sir Matthew confided and even he thought that you might well be—oh, dear, I did not mean to say that!'

Beresford let out a hollow laugh. 'I have long suspected that my father hoped I was—dead, that is. I am almost certain that was his intention when he sent me out to India. Robbins intimated that it had taken several months to track me down. Personally, I

wish he had not gone to so much trouble!'

'Oh, no! Please do not say such things! I, for one, am very glad that he found you!' came her incredulous rejoinder.

Intrigued at her somewhat vehement response, he swivelled his eyes in her direction and was startled to register the very animated expression that had suddenly appeared on her face. What was even more curious, however, was that her eyes, which he had previously thought to be an indeterminate shade of grey, now appeared to be a much more vibrant colour and streaked with the most amazing flashes of silver. For a moment he stared down at her lovely features in a fascinated confusion then, hurriedly collecting himself, he blinked and shook his head.

'Well, now that I am here, I will certainly endeavour to do what I can to sort out the mess Sir Matthew left you in,' he heard himself saying and then cursed himself for uttering such an insensitive remark.

Imogen, however, seemed to have taken no offence at either his protracted stare or his lack of tact. 'Yes, I was perfectly certain that you would,' she acknowledged. 'As soon as I set eyes on you I could see that you were not a man to be trifled with and I must tell you that I've been having such problems! Wentworth has been proving most uncooperative and the books are in such a state. It will be a relief to be able to go through them properly at last!'

Beresford frowned. 'I think you may leave all that sort of thing safely in my hands from now on,' he said. 'Is that what you and

Wentworth were arguing about back there?'

She hesitated. 'Well—no—not exactly. It was quite another matter—it will keep—anyway, here we are at the house at last!'

She sounded relieved and Beresford found himself wondering if his first supposition about her and Wentworth had been correct after all and was startled to find that the thought of such a liaison was quite distasteful to him.

The wooded pathway had taken them down to the gravelled driveway at the front of the house and, as he got his first glimpse of the building, Beresford felt bound to concede that Thornfield was certainly a fine-looking mansion house, its graceful neoclassical architecture highly reminiscent of the Senior Resident's house back home in Calcutta. Standing three storeys high, with more than twenty elegantly pedimented windows visible on its east-facing cream-stuccoed Palladian façade alone, it boasted a columned porte-cochère, which not only covered the impressive-looking flight of steps that led up to the front door, but a goodly portion of the front drive as well.

Motioning him in the direction of the steps, Imogen made for the archway that led to the north wing of the house. 'I need to get these strawberries to Cook.' She smiled. 'Otherwise we shall have no dessert with our dinner!' And with that, she whisked away through the archway.

Looking slightly bemused, Beresford watched her until she vanished from his sight then, suddenly conscious of the fact that the two carriages were already standing within the porte-cochère

and that his friend Seymour seemed to be having some difficulty directing the disparate group of rather hapless-looking servants in the business of unloading the baggage, he groaned and hurried forward to take control of the situation. Having been used to the well-run, orderly life of a hill-station for so long, it seemed to him that the entire household looked to be in a total shambles.

When all of the trunks and boxes had finally been carried into the rather dust-ridden but magnificently appointed great hall, he looked about him, expecting to see some sort of welcoming (or otherwise) committee, but, apart from one elderly manservant who was shuffling uncomfortably at his elbow, there was no one else in sight.

'Remarkably shy lot, it seems, your new family,' grinned Seymour, unbuttoning his topcoat and handing it, along with his hat and gloves, to the servant.

Beresford frowned at him and looked down at the man.

'Where might I find Lady Beresford?' he enquired. 'She will be expecting me, I imagine. Kindly take me to her at once.'

The old man shook his head. 'Her ladyship will be indisposed, sir—that is to say, she never rises before noon and it is more than my life's worth to have Mamselle disturb her before then.'

Beresford's brows knitted together in exasperation and he bit back an angry retort, cautioning himself that it would not do to lose his temper at this stage. Taking a deep breath, he walked towards one of the rooms that led out of the hall, which, judging from the shelves of books that he had glimpsed through its open

doorway, appeared to be either the library or an office of some sort.

'Very well, my man,' he said curtly. 'You may bring me a decanter of brandy. Mr Seymour and I will take a little refreshment while we wait upon her ladyship's convenience.'

'Yes, sir. I will see what I can do, sir.' The man bowed and scurried away.

The room was, in fact, a large and very well-stocked library, but, to Beresford's dismay, it was dominated by a huge portrait of the late Sir Matthew that hung above the fireplace. Wearing the most forbidding expression, his late father seemed to be glowering down at them with arrant disapproval. Taking one horrified look at it, Beresford shuddered and swung one of the leather armchairs round to face away from the fireplace before taking his seat.

'What an extraordinary welcome!' commented Seymour, following his friend's example. 'It certainly looks as though you are going to have your work cut out here, Matt—not a friendly face in the place, as far as I can see.'

For no apparent reason, the image of a pair of laughing grey eyes shot into Beresford's mind. He shrugged it off, saying, 'We could certainly do with old Jimi and his houseboys here, David. A more slapdash set of servants I have yet to come across. It is clear that they need to be taken in hand—and so few of them—did you notice? One would have thought, in such a large establishment—'

His comments were interrupted by the arrival of the elderly

manservant, who entered the room bearing a silver tray upon which rested a half-empty decanter and a pair of glasses.

'Best I could do, sir,' panted the man, laying down his burden on the drum table at Beresford's elbow. 'Mr Wentworth keeps the keys to the cellar, sir, and I cannot seem to locate him just at the moment.'

'Who do you suppose this Mr Wentworth is?' Seymour asked curiously, after the man had departed and closed the door behind him.

'Oh, I have already had the dubious pleasure of making that fellow's acquaintance,' returned Beresford. 'Met him up in the copse—apparently my father's estate manager—a pretty shady sort of cove, if you want my opinion. Doubt if I will keep him on, but I suppose I shall have to make use of him to begin with. Or, at least until I get the feel of the place. Difficult to see why he should have the keys to the cellar, though. More the butler's province, I should have thought.'

The two men drank their brandy in companionable silence, each mulling over the strange events of the morning.

All at once, the door to the library burst open and a very young woman rushed headlong into the room, her eyes alight with excitement.

'It is really true!' she exclaimed, clapping her hands. 'You have arrived, at last!'

Beresford and Seymour scrambled hastily to their feet in some confusion, their discomposure due partly to her sudden arrival

but, more probably, because she was without doubt the loveliest creature that either of them had ever set eyes on. Ash-blonde hair, falling in entrancing ringlets to her shoulders, huge emerald green eyes, framed by long, sooty lashes and soft, rose-petal lips that were smiling the most captivating smile a man could ever wish to see. And, if that were not enough, beneath her simple white muslin gown, the girl clearly had the figure of an angel.

Both men held their breath as the vision looked from one to the other with a perplexed frown.

'But one of you has to be my new brother!' she said, with a small pout. 'I was sure of it—but neither of you resembles Papa in the slightest!'

Beresford let out a sigh and strode forward with his hand extended. 'I am Matthew Beresford,' he conceded. 'You must be —Jessica?'

She nodded swiftly and, reaching forward, took his hand in both of hers and proceeded to drag him towards the nearby sofa.

Highly amused, he offered no resistance and, at her command, sat down on the sofa beside her. She gave him a little flutter of her lashes before bestowing him with the full benefit of her extraordinarily bewitching eyes.

'You have been so long in coming,' she said plaintively, holding his hand in hers and stroking it gently.

The little minx, thought Beresford, grinning inwardly. Barely eighteen years of age and already well on the way to becoming a highly accomplished flirt! He would be prepared to wager that

she had broken quite a few hearts amongst the local swains. He turned his head, in order to catch Seymour's eye in a conspiratorial wink, but blinked in despair as he registered the look on his friend's face. Oh, Lord, he sighed, here we go again! It was clear that there would be no support from that quarter!

'England is rather a long way from India,' was his apologetic reply to his new sister.

She nibbled at her lower lip in the most provocative way. 'I have been wanting you to come so dreadfully. Everything has been so horrid since Papa died. I have not had a single new gown for over a year—and we missed all of the Victory celebrations in London! I did so want to see the Prince Regent in all his finery!'

Beresford hid the smile that was forming. 'Well, as you can see, I am here now,' he said soothingly as he patted her hand. 'And I am sure we can sort out all your troubles very soon.'

'And I may have my allowance again?' Her wide eyes were fixed upon his once more and she clasped her hands together in pleading entreaty.

'I dare say that can be arranged without a great deal of difficulty,' he assured her laughingly, as he rose to his feet. 'But I really do need to speak to your mama without delay—your butler tells me that she is indisposed?'

'Oh, Mama is always indisposed,' she retorted, with a careless toss of her silver curls. 'She will come down soon, I should think, but only to take her nuncheon in the little salon and then she will spend the afternoon resting on the chaise-longue in there.'

'But she knows I have arrived, surely?' he asked, perplexed.

Jessica pondered over this, then nodded. 'I should imagine so,' she said. 'Imo will have told her.'

'Imo?'

Jessica jumped up. 'Cousin Imo—you know. She is probably the one you will need to talk to, anyway. Mama never concerns herself with household affairs. Imo deals with all that sort of thing.' She flashed him another of her dazzling smiles. 'I will go and fetch her for you, if you like,' she offered, as she darted like quicksilver out of the room.

Beresford gazed after her in despair. What sort of a household had he inherited? A reluctant staff, an inefficient manager, a sister who was, clearly, far more proficient in the art of flirtation than she should be, a sickly stepmother and now, it appeared, some sort of dependant spinster cousin. He grimaced, wondering what on earth the boy, Nicholas, might prove to have amiss with him.

A heavy sigh from Seymour caught his attention and he turned to see his friend gazing soulfully into the far distance.

'What an absolute beauty!' his colleague gasped, as he caught Beresford's enquiring glance. 'Did you see those eyes?'

'Stow it, David,' replied Beresford, somewhat tetchily. 'I trust that I do not have to remind you that the child is my sister.'

'Hardly a child, old man,' Seymour was quick to point out. 'But I take your meaning—she will come to no harm at my hands, I promise you.'

‘I never thought otherwise,’ said Beresford absently, his mind on more important matters. ‘And now, it would seem that we have no option but to wait here for this Imo woman, whoever she is.’

Chapter Three

Imogen had barely had time to change out of her working garb into a more respectable morning gown when she was summoned by her aunt. Quickly pinning her soft brown curls into a careless twist at the back of her head, she hurried to her aunt's bedchamber.

'Oh, Imogen,' wailed Lady Beresford, wringing her hands. 'He has come! I feel sure that he will turn us all out! What is to become of us?'

Blanche Beresford was a plumper and more faded replica of her daughter, reluctantly owning to some thirty-eight summers. Sir Matthew had married her at the height of her first Season when she, too, had been an acclaimed beauty. But, unlike Jessica, she had always been of a rather retiring, delicate nature, which, living with the stern and autocratic Sir Matthew, along with the several miscarriages that she had suffered during her marriage, had gradually turned her into a nervous shadow of her former self. Privately she had regarded her husband's sudden death as something of a welcome reprieve from her marital duties, but the complications of the subsequent legal revelations, followed by the increasing privation, had had the effect of reducing her to a clinging neurotic.

'Hush, Aunt,' Imogen soothed her. 'I am certain that he will do no such thing. He seemed quite a reasonable sort of gentleman.'

'You promise me that you will not leave Thornfield until we know what the man's intentions are?'

'I have no intention of going anywhere until I see that you are perfectly comfortable, Aunt Blanche. Widdy is quite prepared to travel to Kendal without me and I shall join her as soon as it is convenient. Please do not distress yourself any further.'

'But how I shall ever manage without you I cannot begin to contemplate,' moaned Lady Beresford, clutching at her niece's hand.

Imogen gently extracted herself from her aunt's grip.

'Now, dearest, you promised me that you would not continue to repine about my leaving. We have discussed the matter many times and you must see that I cannot remain here. Mr Beresford is not my relative and, if he is to be the new master of Thornfield, I have no claim upon his generosity.' She gave a little grimace. 'Apart from which, I do not care for the idea that he might easily believe me to be dependent upon him.'

Aghast, her aunt stared at up her. 'Then you have already judged him to be the tyrant I supposed him?'

Imogen laughed and bent to kiss the other woman's pale cheek. 'I hardly had time to form any real opinion of him,' she said. 'But I did get the impression that he was not—how shall I put it—unapproachable.'

'Unlike your uncle,' exclaimed Lady Beresford bitterly then, closing her eyes, she lay back against her pillows. 'I have another of my headaches coming on, dearest. I believe I shall remain in

my room today. If you could send Francine to me…?'

Sighing with exasperation, Imogen quietly closed the door of Lady Beresford's bedchamber behind her and walked to the head of the long, curving staircase and stood for some moments with her hand on the balustrade, wondering how she was ever going to persuade her aunt to venture out of her bedchamber long enough to be introduced to her new stepson.

Suddenly, her brow furrowed in a despairing frown as, from her vantage point above the hallway, she was dismayed to observe Jessica dashing headlong out of the library. Her cousin then proceeded to hurl herself up the stairs two at a time, in a most unladylike manner.

'Oh, there you are, Imo,' she panted, as Imogen put out her hands to prevent the girl falling at her feet. 'Why ever did you fail to mention that the man was an absolute Corinthian! Just like one of those Greek gods you see in the paintings and both he and his gentleman friend are so adorably bronzed!'

Imogen shook her head. 'I do wish you would try for a little more decorum, Jess. All this rushing about is not at all seemly at your age, you know. If Widdy were to have seen you…'

Jessica made a little moue and tried to flatten her disarranged curls. 'Sorry, Imo. I was so excited. I am to have my allowance as soon as Matthew—' She stopped and a questioning frown appeared on her face. 'I suppose I may call him Matthew?' she asked.

'I should imagine so,' laughed Imogen. 'He is your brother,

after all—although you had, perhaps, better check with him first. It is possible that he may prefer some other form of address.'

Jessica considered this. 'Well, he is not Sir Matthew,' she reasoned. 'Papa was awarded his knighthood for his commercial success in India and it was not hereditary, was it?'

'Very true,' nodded Imogen, as she turned to leave. 'Your brother is plain Mr Beresford.'

'Hardly plain!' chuckled her cousin saucily, then gave a little gasp. 'Oh, but I almost forgot! I am come to fetch you to him—he is waiting for you in the library with the other gentleman.'

'Waiting for me?' Imogen was puzzled. 'Why should he be waiting for me?'

Jessica wriggled uncomfortably. 'Well, I sort of told him that you ran the household!' she said, with an apologetic blush.

'Oh, Jess, you really are the limit!' began Imogen crossly, then paused as she realised the intrinsic truth of her young cousin's remark. It was true; for the past twelve months or so, at any rate, the entire day-to-day running of the household had devolved upon her and it was she, along with the Beresfords' stalwart governess, Miss Jane Widdecombe, who had striven to keep all their heads above water. Using her own quite generous allowance, which had been left to her by her parents, she had succeeded in eking out a fairly basic living for the family when the estate funds had eventually dried up. By careful budgeting she had even managed to pay some of the servants parts of their wages, although the majority of the staff, having seen how

matters were turning out, had gradually drifted away to seek other employment. Matthew Beresford had arrived not a moment too soon, as far as she was concerned, and as soon as she had acquainted him with the bones of the various problems that were besetting her, she and Widdy would be on their way to the Lake District to join Miss Widdecombe's friend Margery Knox in running the little school that she had recently set up.

She smoothed the folds of her blue-sprigged muslin gown into place, tucked back a wayward tendril that was threatening to escape its confinement and, tentatively tapping on the library door, entered the room.

Beresford, who was sitting in the window embrasure on the far side of the room dismally contemplating the park's neglected state, failed to register her knock and it was Seymour who was first made aware of her presence.

Leaping to his feet, he walked forward to meet her. 'How do you do?' he said eagerly, his hand outstretched in welcome. 'David Seymour, at your service, ma'am—friend of Matt's.' He gave her a wide smile, his candid hazel-coloured eyes lighting up at this fresh onslaught on his rather susceptible senses.

The slight tension Imogen had been feeling evaporated as she returned his smile. She perceived that he was not as tall as Beresford, his tan was slightly deeper and he was of a stockier build, with short, dark brown hair. He, too, was dressed immaculately although, as Beresford approached, she found herself observing that Seymour's kidskin breeches and superfine

jacket did not seem to sit nearly so well on him as did his colleague's. She turned to greet the newcomer.

'You asked to see me, I believe?'

Momentarily taken aback at Imogen's altered appearance, Beresford looked perplexed. Good heavens! Surely this attractive young woman could not be Cousin Imo? Now that he was able to study her more closely he saw that she was really quite lovely, her oval face blessed not only with a smooth, creamy complexion, but also a neat, straight little nose and wide, well-shaped lips. Barely a head shorter than his own more than six foot height, she had a very fine figure, 'nicely rounded in all the right places', as Seymour would say. He cleared his throat.

'Ah! Cousin Imo!' he exclaimed, taking her hand in his.

Their eyes met and, once again, he noticed those tiny flashes of silver.

'I believe I have already informed you that my name is Imogen Priestley,' she said, in a level voice. 'And you are mistaken about our kinship, Mr Beresford. Lady Beresford is my aunt—my father was her brother. Her ladyship was good enough to take me in when both of my parents perished in a carriage accident.'

'I beg your pardon,' he replied, bending over her hand. 'It seems that I still have a great deal to learn. Please forgive my ignorance.'

She looked at him suspiciously. She could have sworn that his lips were twitching. Surely the man was not laughing at her? She swiftly withdrew her hand and moved towards the sofa.

Taking her seat gracefully, she adjusted her skirts with studied nonchalance before saying, 'Jessica said that you wished to speak to me. If there is anything I can help you with, I am at your service. As I mentioned earlier, I, too, have one or two matters that I should like to bring to your attention.'

She looked pointedly at Seymour, then turned once more to Beresford. 'Perhaps your colleague would care to be shown his room?' she suggested. 'Shall I ring for Allardyce? I am sure that your luggage will have been taken upstairs by now.'

'No need, ma'am,' cut in Seymour, as he made for the door. 'I'm perfectly happy to seek out the old fellow myself—give me a chance to get my bearings.'

'There does seem to be the most incredible shortage of staff,' remarked Beresford, taking his seat again as soon as his friend had departed. 'I should have thought a place this size would have warranted a good deal more help.'

Imogen pursed her lips. 'Most of our workforce left within three months of Sir Matthew's death,' she replied. 'There were insufficient funds to pay them all on the first quarter day and those of them who had families to support were bound to seek other employment. We have managed to persuade the remainder to stay on by giving them parts of their wages whenever we could afford to do so—and by promising to make the rest up to them as soon as the will is ratified. The few who have stayed are the older members of staff who have been here for a good many years, of course,' she added, her bright eyes clouding over. 'Most of whom

were due to be pensioned off and have nowhere else to go until they receive their promised annuities.'

Beresford was silent for a moment, then, 'I shall speak to Wentworth as soon as possible,' he said, his voice quite firm, although his heart was beginning to sink once more at the thought of all the problems that were mounting up. 'No doubt he will have a list of all outstanding items. You must not concern yourself. I shall deal with the matter immediately.'

'There is a slight difficulty,' stammered Imogen, her cheeks colouring. 'That is—I am not perfectly certain—it is merely a suspicion on my part…' Her voice trailed away.

At her continued hesitation, Beresford frowned. 'If you have something to tell me, Miss Priestley,' he said briskly, 'and, especially if it has anything to do with my putting the estate to rights, I suggest that you stop all this shilly-shallying and come straight out with whatever it is!'

Imogen was mortified. She had been perfectly prepared to confront Beresford with all her growing worries and suppositions, but somehow, now that she was actually sitting here in front of him and the man's infuriatingly discerning eyes were fixed upon her, waiting impatiently for her to explain herself, she began to wonder if her suspicions about Wentworth were flawed. Could she have overreacted? Her cheeks took on a deeper hue and she struggled to control her breathing.

'It is simply that I cannot understand what has happened to all the revenue,' she began, then, to her horror, the words seemed

to trip over themselves in their efforts to be heard. 'There should have been more than enough to get us through the year—and there are the rents—I have barely managed to get a peep at the books, but what I did see simply made no sense to me—and I could swear that some of the stock has disappeared…'

'Now, now, my dear Miss Priestley—' Beresford raised his hand and, in a calm, soothing voice, interrupted her incoherent monologue '—estate management is a very complicated business and hardly one for a young lady to be bothering her head about. You really had best leave it all to me. I shall sort it all out in no time at all, I assure you.'

Imogen sprang to her feet in consternation. 'No, no—you do not understand—there is so much that you do not know…'

His face darkened as he, too, rose to his feet. 'I do not need your constant reminders of my unfamiliarity with the situation here, Miss Priestley,' he said coldly. 'I intend to remedy that deficiency as soon as I may. In the meantime, I would really appreciate it if you would do me the honour of allowing me to go about it in my own way. Let me assure you that I have a great deal of experience in these matters. And now, with your permission?' He turned from her and started towards the doorway, adding curtly, 'If you could, perhaps, arrange some refreshment? I was given to understand that that is your province?'

In a mounting fury, Imogen stared after his departing back. She could hardly believe what had happened. He had treated her like a child—or worse—more like some sort of feather-brained

nincompoop! She who, for years, had sat at Chadwick's right hand, mastering the fascinating intricacies of estate management, even riding with the elderly manager on rent collection days and doling out the servants' wages while he marked them off in his book. In fact, so adept was her understanding of how the estate functioned that she had gained even the uncompromising Sir Matthew's grudging respect.

Her whole body seemed to be trembling uncontrollably and she was forced to sit down rather abruptly. As she subsided on to the sofa, her mind was filled with a whirling mass of conflicting emotions.

Very gradually, as her anger dissipated, she began to review Beresford's manner. She could leave the arrogant beast to his own devices and hope that he would discover Wentworth's scheming for himself—if, indeed, it did transpire that it was Wentworth who was at the bottom of all the inconsistencies, she hastily reminded herself!

She had wanted desperately to share her suspicions about the man with Matthew Beresford, but had clearly made the mistake of expecting him to listen seriously to what she had to tell him. She had also assumed that the two of them would sit down together and discuss the problem rationally and, hopefully, reach some sort of agreement as to how best to deal with it. She had never at any time considered the man's contemptuous dismissal, not only of her, admittedly, rather clumsy attempts to furnish him with the truth behind the estate's unanticipated impoverishment

but, seemingly, of herself as well!

At this point, it seemed to her that she might as well leave Thornfield without further ado, just as she and Widdy had planned to do last year, had not the complications of her uncle's will prevented their departure.

As if prompted by Imogen's thoughts, Jane Widdecombe appeared in the doorway.

'Oh, there you are, my dear,' she smiled, advancing into the room. 'Jessica said that I would find you here. But—Mr Beresford? I thought he would still be here with you.'

A plump, neat dab of a woman, Miss Widdecombe had been the mainstay of the Beresford family since shortly after Imogen's own arrival at Thornfield. In addition to having guided all three children through their academic studies, she had been, without doubt, the principal shaper of their manners and moral codes, Lady Beresford having involved herself very little in their upbringing.

Still undecided as to what would be the best course of action for the two of them, Imogen shook her head.

'I believe he went to look for his friend,' she replied with a dismissive shrug.

Peering over the top of her glasses at her one-time charge, Miss Widdecombe frowned.

'Is there something wrong, my dear?' she asked in concern. 'You seem a little put out.'

Imogen gritted her teeth. 'Honestly, Widdy! The man is so

dreadfully arrogant! He refused to listen to a single word I said! He dismissed me as though I were not so much as a boot-boy!'

Miss Widdecombe considered this statement. 'Perhaps he was tired after his long journey,' she suggested.

'Long journey!' scoffed Imogen. 'They stayed the night down in Kirton Priors—Cook recognised the driver of the chaise they hired from The Wheatsheaf.'

'Well then, my dear, you must try again. He certainly needs to know what has been going on in his absence.'

Imogen jumped up. 'Then he must discover it for himself! I have decided that we shall leave for Kendal as soon as possible, Widdy!' she pronounced.

'But, my dear!' Miss Widdecombe stared at her in distress. 'We do not have the wherewithal to travel until the will is settled. I cannot imagine that it will take very long now that Mr Beresford has finally arrived. Surely we should wait until he has had time to familiarise himself with the situation?'

Apart from the pension Sir Matthew had arranged for the governess to receive at her retirement, there was also the matter of the small personal sum that he had bequeathed to her, which she intended to use to buy her own share in the little school in Westmorland.

'It is but four weeks until the twenty fifth of September,' declared Imogen stoutly. 'Then I shall have the whole of my next quarter's allowance. That will be more than enough for both of us to hire a chaise to Kendal and to purchase our shares.

You can reimburse me when you are in funds—it is really of no importance, I promise you.'

'The idea is very tempting,' admitted Miss Widdecombe. 'Margery has been waiting for us to join her for almost a year now and, in the normal way, I would be more than happy to acquiesce.' Pausing, she slowly shook her head. 'However, Imogen, I am afraid that it will not serve. We cannot leave Lady Beresford to deal with this monster, if he is as overbearing as you say he is. She simply has not the resources to cope, as you are perfectly well aware.'

Imogen gave a little grimace. 'I know, Widdy,' she said. 'And I did promise her that I would stay until she was settled. But, when I first met Beresford, he did not seem at all like Sir Matthew —although,' she recollected, 'it is true that he did fly up in the boughs when I mentioned his mother's portrait.'

Miss Widdecombe regarded her with interest. 'Sir Matthew's first wife,' she acknowledged with a sigh. 'I fear that she has, unwittingly, been the cause of so much grief in this family— your uncle was forever holding her up to Lady Beresford as the paragon of all that was good and clever but, no matter how hard she tried, our poor lady was never going to be able to live up to her dead predecessor's alleged faultlessness.'

'Presumably because my uncle was still obsessed with her memory,' suggested Imogen thoughtfully. 'As a matter of fact, I have often wondered why it is that anyone who has had the misfortune to die before their due time seems to be forever

imbued with some sort of unlikely perfection.'

'That does often seem to be the case,' agreed the governess, 'although I am inclined to believe that it is often merely because one prefers to dismiss the bad memories and remember only the good. No human being could possibly have been as unflawed as the first Lady Beresford was depicted as having been. I am told that, at one time, your uncle was used to creep into the attics at night and sit staring at her portrait until the early hours!'

'That presumably explains why he was in such a dark mood on so many occasions!' Imogen remarked drily.

'I dare say,' nodded the governess. 'Although, sadly, it seemed that many things in life were wont to irritate him. Jessica was the only one of us who had no difficulty in reviving his spirits.'

Imogen laughed. 'I'd like to meet the man who holds himself impervious to that little baggage's wiles! I really do not know what will become of her!'

'She is a worry,' Miss Widdecombe acknowledged with a smile. 'Had her father not died, she might have had her London Season and could well have been safely married off by now.' Her faded blue eyes suddenly lit up. 'Do you know, my dear, I believe that I have had the most wonderful idea!' She tugged at Imogen's hand and pulled her down on the sofa beside her. 'Do you suppose that we could persuade Mr Beresford to sponsor his sister's come-out?'

'I cannot imagine anyone persuading Mr Beresford to do anything he did not want to,' declared Imogen, with a disdainful

sniff.

'Nonsense! We simply need to do some little thing to make him grateful to us!'

'Oh, Widdy, really! What in the world would make him grateful to us? I doubt if we shall even be able to provide the pair of them with a decent nuncheon—oh, bother, I clean forgot!' She scrambled to her feet and smoothed down her gown. 'I shall have to go, Widdy! I was supposed to be organising refreshments for them and it's almost two o'clock!' She gave the governess a swift hug. 'We will work something out, dear. There is no need for you to worry unduly, I promise you.'

Chapter Four

Beresford had been allotted his father's suite of rooms and he was far from pleased about it. The heavy, dark furniture in the bedchamber was not at all to his liking and the plum-coloured velvet curtains and bed-hangings were highly oppressive. There was, moreover, a sickly cloying scent that pervaded the whole atmosphere.

He glanced at Babcock, his late father's elderly valet, who was shuffling nervously in the doorway, awaiting instructions.

'Are these the only rooms you have available?' he demanded.

The man flinched. 'This has always been the master's suite, sir,' he stammered. 'Mr Allardyce thought it would be the right thing to do.'

'Well, you may tell Mr Allardyce that I'm not at all happy with it!'

He strode over to one of the bedroom windows and thrust it wide open, then proceeded to do likewise with its fellow.

'You can get someone to remove those ludicrous bed-hangings for a start—and what the devil is that infernal smell?'

'Smell, sir?' The man's nose wrinkled as he sniffed the air. 'Do you mean Sir Matthew's pomade?' He walked across to the dressing room and, picking up one of the many jars that stood on the dressing table, held it out for Beresford's perusal.

Beresford backed away in disgust. 'Take it away, man—take

them all away and burn them!'

'All pretty depressing, ain't it, old man?' came a familiar voice from the doorway.

Beresford spun round, a look of relief on his face.

'God, David, it is all far worse than I expected! The sooner we can sort out this damned mess the better! I cannot wait to get away from this place.'

'Learnt nothing helpful from the lovely Imo, then, I take it?'

'Not a bit of it. She was rambling on about the books being in a mess—although how the devil she knows anything about estate matters escapes me. Women have no business messing about in men's affairs, in my opinion!'

'Steady on, old chap!' laughed his friend. 'My father used to say that Mother was better than his own right hand when it came to checking the tax revenues in the province.'

Beresford gave a rueful grimace. 'Perhaps I was a touch short with the girl,' he admitted. 'Probably that damned picture of him in there glowering at me for having the effrontery to survive him —that will certainly have to come down before I am prepared to use that room again!'

'When are you going to cross swords with this Wentworth chap, then?'

'After we've had a bite to eat, I thought—if that unlikely event ever takes place,' said Beresford. 'Seems that this Imogen female is in charge of all the domestic matters—as well as poking her fingers into estate management!' he added, with a grin. 'Hope

she knows a bit more about feeding her guests than she appears to know about accountancy!'

At that moment the strident clanging of the gong was heard and Beresford turned to Babcock, who was busily shovelling his late master's collection of toiletries into a valise.

'You may go and have your meal, too, Babcock, but, when you return, I want you to clear all Sir Matthew's belongings out of these rooms—everything, you understand? Empty all the closets, drawers, whatever! I do not want to see a single possession of his when I return. Understood?'

The man, wide-eyed with trepidation, nodded, picked up the bulging valise and scurried from the room.

Seymour shook his head. 'Becoming quite the little martinet, aren't you?' he said, with a slight frown. 'It don't sit well on you, Matt. You ain't usually this boorish with people.'

Beresford hunched his shoulders. 'Must be this infernal place, old chum. It is almost as though he is here—watching me—I simply cannot seem to shake it off.' He smiled apologetically to his friend. 'Need some sustenance, I suppose—better go and see what delights our young hostess has arranged to tempt our appetites!'

Allardyce conducted the two men into what, to Beresford's surprise, appeared to be the breakfast room, where he saw that places had been set for six at one end of a large mahogany table and a meal, of sorts, had been laid out. Imogen and Jessica were already in attendance, along with a dumpy grey-haired lady of

indeterminate age and a slim, pale-faced bespectacled youth, whom Beresford took to be his half-brother Nicholas.

At the men's entrance, the boy rose from his seat and came forward to greet them, tentatively holding out his hand.

At once, Beresford reached out and clasped the boy's hand firmly in his own. He had seen the look of apprehension in the boy's eyes and was, in turns, angry and full of remorse. Angry that the youth should be so obviously afraid of him before they had even met and full of remorse that his sixteen-year-old sibling should have been allowed to grow up to exhibit so little self-confidence. Yet another indictment to lay at his father's door, he thought darkly.

'You must be Nicholas,' he said, smiling warmly. 'How very pleased I am to meet you at last!'

'And I you, sir,' answered the boy warily.

'Matt, if you please, young man—if we are to be friends—and I hope that we are?'

'Y-yes, of course, sir—that is—I mean—M-Matt, sir,' came Nicholas's shaky reply.

'This is my friend David Seymour,' said Beresford, nodding towards his colleague. He could see that it was not going to be at all easy to gain the lad's confidence. 'Miss Priestley and your sister we have already met. Do be a good fellow and introduce us to your other lady guest and then we may all sit down and eat. I, for one, am famished!'

At Seymour's grin and hearty handshake, a slight smile

appeared on the boy's lips and he went quickly to Miss Widdecombe's side and, taking her arm, brought her to Beresford and nervously performed the necessary introductions.

'I must explain that we have lately taken to having all our meals in this room, Mr Beresford,' said Imogen when, at last, they were all seated at the table. 'With so few servants we found that it proved a more sensible size than the dining room.' His surprisingly gentle treatment of her young cousin had not escaped her notice and she was determined that he would find nothing in her own manner that could cause him displeasure. 'Although, I fear that our refreshments may seem rather niggardly to you. Cook was able to manage only part of a raised pie and some fruit and cheese, but you have my word that she is hoping to conjure up something a little more substantial for your dinner.'

'Pray, do not apologise, Miss Priestley,' he replied, helping himself to a generous slice of the rabbit pie before passing the dish to Nicholas, who was seated on his left. 'I am sure it all looks most appetising.'

Silence reigned for several minutes as they all got down to the serious business of doing justice to Cook's hastily prepared offerings, although Beresford could not help noticing that both Imogen and the governess took very little.

'That was delicious!' he said, finally laying down his knife and fork. 'And, please allow me to take this opportunity to say how truly sorry I am that you have all been placed in this dreadfully awkward position.'

‘Oh, it has all been absolutely beastly!’ Jessica blurted out, ignoring Miss Widdecombe’s admonishing frown. ‘You have no idea! Rabbit stew or pigeon pie every single day—whatever Nicky manages to shoot—and hardly any desserts at all, lately! You will get us all back to normal very soon, won’t you, darling Matt?’

‘Jessica!’

Deeply shocked at her cousin’s outrageous behaviour, Imogen was about to remonstrate with the girl when she felt Miss Widdecombe’s hand gently squeezing her knee beneath the table. She hesitated, not entirely sure what the governess intended.

‘Poor dear Jessica misses her little treats,’ interposed the governess, nodding in Beresford’s direction. ‘It has all been rather difficult for her to understand. A young lady of her age, as you must be aware, should really be concerning herself with assemblies and balls and other such entertainments as her contemporaries enjoy.’ Smiling at him in, what seemed to Beresford, an almost conspiratorial manner, she went on, ‘Still, we have no doubt at all that, now that you are here, you will be more than happy to take charge of your new sister’s début, will you not, Mr Beresford?’

He cleared his throat. ‘I’m afraid there are a good many matters to deal with before we can think of that sort of thing, Miss Widdecombe,’ he managed, sensing rather than seeing the pout of disappointment that appeared on Jessica’s face. ‘But I have no doubt that something can be arranged for next year.’

Privately, he was determined to have dealt with all the problems with which he was presently beset well before spring came round. David Seymour, however, seemed to have other ideas.

'Now, please do not fret yourself, Miss Beresford!' he cajoled, crinkling up his merry eyes at her woebegone expression. 'You have my word that there is very little going on in London at this time of year—most of the celebrations are over and nobody of note stays in the capital during the warmer months. However, I am quite certain that there must be local entertainments not too far afield that you may be allowed to attend—even before you are fully "out". Is that not so, Miss Priestley?'

He looked questioningly at Imogen, who felt obliged to smile and nod her head, although she too was planning her imminent escape from Thornfield.

'There you are then!' exclaimed Seymour, leaning back in his chair in satisfaction. 'You see, Miss Beresford! You have an excellent chaperon in your cousin and I, myself, would deem it a great honour if you would allow me to act as your escort to any local rout or assembly.'

Jessica's face immediately lit up and she began fluttering her lashes at Seymour in what seemed to Beresford to be the most irritatingly obvious manner.

'I should think that Miss Priestley is rather too young to be placed in a role of such responsibility, David,' he remarked drily, glancing across the table to Imogen.

A soft blush appeared on her cheeks. 'I believe I am perfectly capable of ensuring that my cousin conducts herself as she should in any public gathering, Mr Beresford,' she said, defensively.

'You have a good deal of experience in these matters then, I take it?'

She was momentarily confused as she registered the unmistakable trace of sarcasm in his voice.

'I was often wont to attend the local assemblies when my uncle was alive,' she replied, unable to tear her eyes away from his intent gaze. 'You may be surprised to learn that I am not quite as green as you apparently take me to be, sir.'

His deep laugh rang out across the room as he rose and pushed back his chair.

'Clearly not, Miss Priestley! However, if you will excuse me, I believe I shall leave the matter of Jessica's launch into society until some other time. There are other, more pressing matters to deal with today. Where do you suppose I might find Mr Wentworth?'

At this, Nicholas got to his feet. 'I can take you to him, if you like,' he offered shyly. 'He is normally in the office at this time of day. We can go through from the hall—if the door isn't locked.'

Beresford was puzzled. 'Why should the door be locked on the house side?' he asked the boy.

Nicholas flushed. 'It always is these days, sir. Wentworth does not care for any of us poking about in there—not that I would ever do so,' he added quickly. 'I am pretty useless when it comes

to stuff like corn yields and livestock sales—Father always used to get rather angry with me over my lack of understanding of estate matters.'

'It will all be yours one day, Nicholas,' Beresford reminded him. 'I would not like you to think that I have come here to steal your inheritance from you. I merely want to sort out the most urgent problems as quickly as possible and leave you to it.'

A look of alarm appeared in the boy's eyes. 'Oh, I wish you would not, sir! I really do not wish to keep the property—and nor does Mama—apart from her jointure, of course. I, myself, will be perfectly content with the allowance he left me.'

Frowning, Beresford regarded his brother intently. 'You are not interested in taking over Thornfield when you come of age?'

Nicholas shook his head vehemently. 'Never! I was as glad as I could be when I heard that you were to succeed. I intend to go into the Church—it is what I have always wanted. And, if you do not intend to stay, I shall sell the place as soon as I am able!'

A breathless silence filled the room as Beresford, in perplexed dismay, struggled to come to terms with this new and unexpected development.

Seymour got to his feet. 'The estate still has to be put back to rights, old chap,' he pointed out. 'Whether it is to be kept or sold makes very little difference at this stage. The debts have to be cleared and, judging by what I could see from the lane as we passed, there are at least two fields well past their best for cutting. You simply cannot pull out now, Matt.'

Beresford's face darkened. 'I had not intended to,' he said shortly. 'But this does pose an entirely different problem.'

'I am awfully sorry, sir.' Nicholas's voice was shaking. 'I had not meant to cause you any more worry.'

Imogen rose and came to her cousin's side. 'It is probably just as well that Mr Beresford knows your intentions, Nicky,' she said firmly. 'There are certain aspects of your father's temperament of which he cannot possibly be aware.'

'I believe I had the pleasure of discovering several of Sir Matthew's delightful idiosyncrasies some years ago,' was Beresford's terse rejoinder.

She coloured. 'Yes, of course. I do beg your pardon.'

He suddenly found himself musing over the extraordinary colour of her eyes. One minute they were a bright, clear grey and then, before you knew where you were, they had changed to the colour of a thundercloud! And that, he noted, was when those fascinating little sparks of silver were at their most obvious. A useful warning sign for future reference, he thought, turning away with an appreciative grin.

Somewhat flustered over his intense examination of her features, Imogen's thoughts became erratic, her pulse began to race and she found herself obliged to sit down quickly. At first, the idea that Beresford might find her amusing filled her with a cold fury and yet—there had been something else in his penetrating gaze, she could swear—something she could not identify. And, whatever that something was, it had caused her to

experience a momentary flutter of a feeling somewhat akin to panic!

Chapter Five

Beresford followed Nicholas out of the room and into the hall, from where the boy led him down a side passage and indicated a doorway at the end.

'This is the office,' he said, trying the handle. To his surprise, the door appeared not to be locked. 'I suppose Wentworth must have known you were bound to want to look around,' he grinned, as he pushed it open.

It seemed that Wentworth had indeed been expecting them, for he was sitting at the big mahogany desk leafing through a pile of papers. He stood up as they entered and held out his hand.

'Mr Beresford,' he said, his voice fawningly apologetic. 'So sorry we got off on the wrong foot this morning, sir—I thought you were an interloper at first—a natural mistake in the circumstances, as I feel sure you'll agree.'

His lips twisted into an insincere smile. 'You'll no doubt be wanting to take a peek at the books—I think you'll find everything in order, sir.'

As far as Beresford was able to judge, Philip Wentworth appeared to be one or two years older than himself. With piercing black eyes and crisp, dark curls falling about his temples, he was not unhandsome in a raffish sort of way. In addition, he had a brash, self-confident air about him. Beresford quickly decided that he had been quite correct in his first impression of the man

and liked him no better on second contact.

'I will look at them later, perhaps,' he replied. 'At the moment I believe we need to deal with the staff shortage. How many outside hands do you have?'

'No one permanent, really—not unless you count old Chadwick and his son.'

'And they are?'

'Chadwick was the estate manager before I came,' explained Wentworth. 'Sir Matthew brought me in to replace him—said the old man was getting senile, and that's a fact! Still potters around doing stuff about the place—can't keep him away, seeing as he still lives up at the farm—seems Sir Matthew gifted the house to him for life several years ago, which means that I have to make do with a measly gamekeeper's cottage.'

Choosing to ignore the man's somewhat petulant grievance, Beresford paused momentarily before asking, 'And the son?'

'Ben—got his foot shot off at Waterloo—came back late last year—no use to anyone, if you want my opinion.'

'Hold hard, Wentworth!' Nicholas cut in heatedly. 'That is pretty shabby of you! Ben Chadwick was a fine soldier and a brave man—he was injured fighting for King and Country!'

'More fool him, then, is what I say. Should have stayed at home like the rest of us did and kept out of trouble,' sniffed Wentworth.

Seeing that the scarlet-faced Nicholas was about to round on the manager once more, Beresford put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

'Leave it, Nicky,' he said gently. 'Mr Wentworth is entitled to his opinion, however unenlightened it may be.' Ignoring the flicker of animosity that appeared on the man's face, he went on. 'Our immediate concern is the speedy acquisition of a good many more hands—you have a hiring fair hereabouts, I imagine?'

The man shook his head. 'The annual fair isn't until Michaelmas—although these days you can usually be sure to find quite a few chaps looking for work at the weekly market in Ashby—tomorrow, that'll be.'

'Tomorrow? Excellent! There should be no shortage of suitable men available, given the current high level of unemployment. About a dozen to start with, I should imagine. We will, presumably, be able to accommodate at least that many in the estate cottages that have been vacated—and we will need house staff, too—although, upon reflection, perhaps it would be preferable to leave that side of things to Miss Priestley?'

'Might as well. She'll be sure to want to have her say anyway. Always poking her nose in—' He stopped, having caught sight of Beresford's stony expression. 'Well, women—you know,' he finished self-consciously, with a half-hearted attempt at a careless laugh.

Beresford studied him in contemptuous silence for a few moments then, as his eyes alighted on the bunch of keys that lay on the desk, he said, 'I have been given to understand that you have the keys to the cellars in your keeping. Why is that, pray?'

Wentworth warily shifted his stance. 'Thought I ought to stop

anyone making free with the master's—that is—Sir Matthew's wines. Quite an expensive collection, I understand. Wouldn't do to have any of it go missing, now, would it?'

Beresford picked up the keys. 'These will remain in my possession for the time being,' he said curtly. 'And now, since I imagine that you have plenty to attend to, you may continue with your outside activities. I will send for you should I require your services.'

For a moment Wentworth looked as though he were about to protest at Beresford's summary dismissal of him then, with a nonchalant shrug, he turned and swaggered out of the room into the stable yard, giving Nicholas a mocking grin as he passed him.

'Hateful man!' muttered Nicholas, slamming the door shut. 'Shouldn't be at all surprised if Imo ain't in the right about him.'

Beresford looked up from the papers he was reading. 'In what respect?'

The boy coloured and looked down at his feet. 'No—it's nothing, really. I should not have said that.'

'Come clean, Nicky,' Beresford advised him. He had suddenly recalled Imogen's disjointed words. 'If there is anything in the least bit havey-cavey going on, I really think I ought to be told about it, do you not think so, old chap?'

Nicholas shuffled uncomfortably. 'Imo said that she tried to tell you in the library, but you refused to listen to her,' he blurted out. 'You really should hear her out, sir! She has been running the place almost single-handedly since Father died and it is only

because she has been using her own money that we have managed to survive this far!'

'Miss Priestley has her own finances?' asked Beresford in surprise.

'Oodles. Her father was filthy rich and both her parents left everything they had to her. She only gets it as a quarterly allowance until she's twenty-five, though, but she has managed to eke that out in the most fantastic way over this last year. Chadwick is always saying…' He hesitated and an expression of shame appeared on his face. 'It really is pretty bad form to be discussing Imo like this, you know.'

Beresford drew in his breath. 'You are quite right, Nicky. Tell me about her suspicions instead. What has she told you?'

'Not a lot, really. Fact is, incomes and revenues and so on are a total mystery to me, but Imo seems to think that the books have been tampered with. She is convinced that there should have been more than enough money available to run the estate properly for at least a year, without any cutbacks at all!'

'Does your cousin have some understanding of accountancy methods, then?' enquired Beresford, incredulously.

'Lord, yes!' nodded the boy. 'Chadwick says she is an absolute genius with figures! She has been doing the books with him for years—she knows as much about this estate as Wentworth does—probably more, I dare say!'

Beresford sat in dismayed silence. A fine fool he'd turned out to be, he thought with a shudder, remembering his unwarranted

rebuff of Imogen's tentative attempts to caution him. Small wonder that she had been treating him with such disdain. He got to his feet and began to pace up and down, cudgelling his brain for some way to put matters right, having discovered that he really didn't much care to be in Miss Priestley's black books.

Nicholas watched him, a perplexed frown on his face.

'H-have I said something to upset you, sir?' he asked anxiously.

'Not at all, Nicky,' Beresford hastened to reassure him. 'It is merely that I have just realised what an absolute idiot I have been! I really should have listened to her!' He gave his brother a rueful grin. 'Hardly the most auspicious start to a budding friendship, would you say?'

The boy's face cleared. 'No need to worry about that, sir. Imo has never been the sort to bear a grudge, I promise you.'

'Thank God for that,' exclaimed Beresford. 'For I intend to try and remedy the matter without further ado.' He paused, weighing up the possibilities of an idea that had just come to him. 'Would you mind popping back to the other room and asking your cousin if she would be willing to spare me a few minutes of her time—and Mr Seymour, too, if he is still about?'

Nicholas nodded and at once made for the house door.

'Oh—and one other thing, Nicky!' called Beresford, just as the boy was about to leave. 'Do stop calling me "sir"! Matt is my name—understood?'

'Understood—er, Matt!' shot Nicholas over his shoulder, as

he sped up the passageway to carry out his errand.

Beresford laughed and returned to the desk where he began to take a more serious interest in the pile of papers that Wentworth had left behind. He had barely begun this task, however, when he was interrupted by the sound of a man's teasing laughter, interspersed with a breathless giggling, which he had no difficulty in recognising as his sister Jessica's.

He got up at once and peered curiously out of the window into the stable yard. A sudden fury overcame him as he surveyed the scene.

Philip Wentworth was leaning over the top of the stable's half-door, casually chatting to Jessica Beresford. His manner, insofar as Beresford could determine from this distance, seemed highly impertinent and over-familiar. His sister, in return, was behaving in what Beresford could only describe as the most 'hoydenish' way imaginable, tossing her curls and flirting abominably with the grinning Wentworth.

With an angry, forbidding expression on his face, he flung open the office door and strode over to the couple.

'Go to your room this instant, Jessica,' he ground out forcibly.

At his sudden intervention the girl's giggles subsided into a squeak of dismay.

'Oh, honestly, Matt, we were only—' she started to protest but then, having correctly interpreted the warning light in Beresford's eye, she clamped her lips together and, without a backward glance at her co-conspirator, flounced off in the direction of the

kitchen.

'Don't be so hard on the lass—she's entitled to a bit of fun!'

Wentworth, apparently unperturbed at Beresford's sudden arrival, had turned back to his work and was nonchalantly coiling a leading-rein. Beresford leaned over the stable door and beckoned to him.

'A word, Wentworth, if you please,' he said, in a voice that brooked no argument.

Somewhat warily Wentworth approached the door, his lips parted in a tentative smile. 'Now then, Mr Beresford, you surely aren't going to fly off the handle about a bit of harmless teasing,' he challenged his new master. 'Jess and I often have a bit of a chat when she's in the yard.'

Beresford gritted his teeth. 'I do not care for your attitude, Wentworth. In future you will oblige me by referring to all members of the family in the correct manner and, if I have any more of your insolence, I shall have no hesitation in dismissing you. It has become increasingly clear to me that you have taken to acting well above your station since Sir Matthew's death. Allow me to inform you, my man, I have no intention of putting up with it!'

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel and strode back to the office, where he perceived that Imogen and Seymour, having witnessed the final moments of the conflict, were standing in the doorway, anxiously awaiting his return.

'God's teeth, Matt!' muttered Seymour, as he stepped aside

to allow his friend to enter. 'You have certainly made an enemy there! You should have seen the man's face! What the devil did he do to get you so riled?'

Still inwardly fuming, Beresford described the events that had led to the confrontation. 'I shall have to get rid of the fellow as soon as possible,' he said. 'Unfortunately, we will have to keep him on until we get some more hands, but I doubt if he will cause any more trouble—not if he values his position!'

Privately, Imogen was not at all sure that Wentworth would take his public chastisement quite so meekly, but she was glad that Beresford had warned him off Jessica and was happy to tell him so, adding, 'I must admit that I was getting quite worried about the way she hung around the stables whenever he was there. Miss Widdecombe and I have both spoken to her about it on several occasions and when I challenged him about the matter in the copse earlier he lost his temper and told me to mind my own business.'

Much as I did myself, Beresford was thinking and, determined to clear up the matter without further ado, he cleared his throat and said, 'I believe I owe you an apology for my own crass behaviour this morning, Miss Priestley.'

'I am inclined to think that we should put that regrettable episode behind us, Mr Beresford,' replied Imogen, endeavouring to keep her tone light, for she had not totally forgiven him for his previously dismissive attitude towards her. 'I am sure that it was merely an unfortunate misunderstanding on your part. You had

no reason to suppose that I would know anything about estate matters. I understand that Nicholas has informed you that I used to help Mr Chadwick with the accounts before Wentworth took them over?'

'It is somewhat unusual in one of your sex,' he pointed out, with a smile that suddenly caused Imogen to experience the most extraordinary palpitations.

With an effort, she forced herself to tear her eyes away from his and, somewhat flustered, began to fumble clumsily with the sets of accounts books that were situated in a cabinet behind the desk.

'Yes, so I believe,' she managed somewhat breathlessly, at the same time selecting and preparing to take down two of the heavy volumes. She found herself forestalled by Beresford who, realising her intention, had promptly reached out to relieve her of her burden while Seymour, who had been watching the highly charged interchange between the pair with unconcealed interest, swept aside the piles of papers on the desktop to make space for the books.

'Your cousin tells me that you suspect some irregularities in the figures,' said Beresford, as he motioned Imogen into the big leather chair behind the desk. 'Do you think you could show us what you have found?'

'You will need to look at the two previous years' accounts first,' she replied, already thumbing her way through the pages of one of the volumes. Having managed to still the disquieting

sensations that had threatened to overcome her resolve, her voice was now perfectly calm. Now that she finally had the opportunity to vindicate her suspicions, she was determined not to allow anything to distract her from that task.

'This first one is for 1813—it will give you some idea of the rents we normally received from the tenant farmers and the revenue from the corn yield. Corn prices, as you must be aware, have increased quite dramatically throughout the war years but, when you look at last year's figures,' she said, indicating the relevant column in the second ledger, 'you will see that the corn revenue for the year appears to be considerably lower than one would have expected it to be.'

Beresford and Seymour studied the figures she had indicated and both men agreed that there was certainly a surprising difference.

'Perhaps last year was not as good a harvest,' suggested Seymour. 'I understand that the weather here was pretty poor during the summer months.'

'Yes, that is perfectly true,' admitted Imogen. 'But, as a result of the war, corn prices have almost doubled since 1813 and now—if one of you gentlemen would be so kind as to pass me 1814…?'

Beresford again sprang to carry out her request and laid the book at her elbow, watching her with interest as she riffled through the pages.

'Yes, here it is,' she eventually announced, her face alight with

satisfaction. 'If you look carefully, you will see that some of the figures have been altered—someone has scratched parts of the eights out to make them look like threes, sevens have been turned into fours—and here…' She jabbed her finger on place after place in the neat columns of figures. 'Sixes to noughts—all giving the impression that the revenue was much lower than it actually was—and that, gentlemen, is by no means all.' She flicked over the pages, searching for more anomalies to show them. 'See here, on the debit side, threes and fives have been altered to the figure eight and the number one has become either a four or a seven and, sometimes, even a nine!'

'They certainly look like alterations,' agreed Beresford, with a puzzled frown. 'But there is no way of knowing whether they have been tampered with recently or were merely corrections made at the time of entry—even the best accountants have been known to commit errors!'

Dismayed at his negative reaction to the quite considerable research that she had managed to carry out under very difficult circumstances, Imogen heaved a sigh. 'There is a perfectly simple way to prove my point, Mr Beresford,' she said wearily. 'In the first place, if you tot up the columns you will see that the altered totals do not agree. Secondly, I know that the figures have been altered, because they are in my own handwriting!'

She looked up at him with a triumphant smile, having assumed that he would now be highly impressed with her discoveries, only to find herself confronted with the beginnings of a cynical smile

hovering on his lips.

He raised one eyebrow, and the mocking note in his voice was unmistakable. 'And you, Miss Priestley, never make mistakes, of course,' he drawled.

Imogen's self-confidence collapsed in an instant and all of the original hostility she had felt towards him came rushing back. Resolutely squaring her shoulders, she drew in a deep breath. 'It was always Mr Chadwick's practice to set out his figures in pencil,' she informed him, her voice even. 'My contribution was to double-check the entries and agree his arithmetic—he believed that it was the best way of learning the system and—since his own hand was getting a little shaky in later years—only then would he allow me to ink in the final figures. So you see, Mr Beresford, there is simply no way that any of these rather numerous alterations could have occurred.'

In the silence that followed her words, Beresford almost groaned out loud at the ill-thought-out foolhardiness of his remark. He had not missed the sudden darkening of her eyes, nor those entrancing little silver flashes that had emanated from them. You utter fool, he apostrophised. Hoist by your own petard yet again!

Throughout Imogen's halting evidence of her findings, Seymour had been continuing to peruse the three ledgers, comparing the figures one with another and closely inspecting the suspect alterations. He straightened up and shook his head at Beresford.

‘Well, old man, it seems perfectly obvious to me that Miss Priestley was quite right to voice her suspicions. There is absolutely no doubt that somebody has been messing about with the figures in these books.’

At the look of concern in his friend’s eyes, Beresford’s face grew grim.

‘And I think we all know who that person is likely to be,’ he said shortly. ‘Yet another reason to dispense with his services, it appears!’

Then, still conscious of the undercurrent of tension that had, once again, developed between Imogen and himself, he turned to her and executed a little bow.

‘I appear to have excelled myself today, Miss Priestley,’ he confessed. ‘I fear I owe you yet another apology. My remark was totally unwarranted—please tell me that I am forgiven for exhibiting such appalling bad manners.’

This time Imogen, who could not rid herself of the feeling that he was merely trying to humour her, was careful to keep her eyes averted from his face.

‘It is of no moment, I assure you, Mr Beresford,’ she replied, rising from her seat. ‘And, now that I have delivered the problem into your hands, you will please excuse me, for I must go and try to persuade my aunt to join us for dinner.’

Seymour grinned appreciatively as he watched her departing figure.

‘Two enemies in one day, Matt!’ he chortled. ‘Must be

something of a record!'

'Stow it, David!' grunted Beresford sourly, as he picked up the three ledgers and thrust them back on to their shelf. 'I am not in the mood!'

With a speculative gleam in his eye, Seymour regarded his friend silently for a few moments before making his way to the house door, saying, 'So it appears! Well then, old boy, if you have no objection, I think I will just cut along after the lovely Imogen and see if we can't arrange for some decent fodder to be sent up from the village—what do you say?'

'Good idea,' returned Beresford, mentally kicking himself for not having given any thought to that equally pressing matter. 'I suppose I had better go and find this Chadwick fellow and get his version of events.'

After a cursory perusal of the papers on the desk, the majority of which proved to be demands for immediate settlements of outstanding accounts, he left the office and walked out into the stable yard, carefully locking both doors behind him. Wentworth was nowhere to be seen but, recalling what the man had told him about Chadwick's place of residence, he made his way around the stable-block into a little back lane where he found a neat little row of cottages, all twenty of which were clearly uninhabited.

At the far end of the lane, situated next to a cluster of farm buildings, was a slightly larger, more dignified-looking property that must, he assumed, be the ex-manager's residence. Seated on a bench in the front garden of this house was a well-built

young man, who Beresford took to be the injured ex-soldier, Ben Chadwick.

At first glance there appeared to be nothing amiss with either of his legs, since they were both encased in the strapped knee-high leather boots that were common wear among countrymen. In fact, it was not until the sound of Beresford's approaching footsteps caused the young man to hurriedly lay aside the coach lamp he had been polishing and scramble awkwardly to his feet that Beresford realised that he was having to support his weight with a stick.

He motioned the young Chadwick to return to his seat, ignoring the discomfited flush that covered his face. Both men were well aware that it was normal practice for an employee to remain standing in his master's presence but, in this instance, Beresford was disposed to do away with protocol and, catching sight of the wooden bench beside Chadwick's chair, sat himself next to the young man.

'My name is Beresford,' he announced, somewhat unnecessarily, since his identity was hardly in question. 'May I take it that you are Ben Chadwick?'

'At your service, Mr Beresford,' the young man faltered. 'Was it my father you were seeking?'

'In a moment, Ben,' said Beresford pleasantly. 'I thought I would have a few words with you first, if I may?'

Ben nodded in surprise. 'What can I do for you, sir?'

'I could not help but notice that, although you are fully booted,

you are not able to bear your weight on your right leg. I imagine your injury still causes you a great deal of discomfort?'

'It is improving daily, sir,' came Ben's flustered reply. 'I pack the boot with clean rags but, after a while, there is a certain amount of friction which makes long-distance walking impossible at the moment—I try to make myself useful in other ways though,' he added, defensively. 'I do the milking and keep all the tools and tackle in order.'

'Pray do no think that I am criticising you, Ben—far from it,' Beresford assured him. 'I merely wanted to assure myself that you had received the full benefit of all available medical treatment—I understand that it is possible to have special surgical footwear fitted, for instance.'

'Somewhat costly for a man in my position, sir,' said the young man with a grim smile. 'I dare say that that sort of treatment is probably considered to be standard procedure for the likes of Lord Uxbridge and his ilk, but, seeing as it takes Father all his time to cater for our basic necessities, I think the last thing he needs is me badgering him for fripperies of that sort!'

Beresford regarded him seriously for a moment or two. 'I understand that you were a lieutenant with the 7th Light? Can you still mount a horse?'

'Aye, that I can do, sir,' affirmed Ben, adding bitterly. 'Not that I get much chance to ride these days, if Wentworth has anything to do with it.'

'Well, I am happy to inform you that you need no longer

concern yourself with that particular problem,' Beresford replied, rising to his feet. 'In fact, that is mainly what I wanted to speak to your father about—is he within?'

Ben directed him to the rear of the farmhouse where he found Chadwick senior tending vegetables in the kitchen garden. Eyeing the displaced manager's activities with considerable interest, Beresford was surprised to see that Ben's father was far more agile than Wentworth had given him to suppose.

At Beresford's approach, the elderly man straightened up, took a kerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands.

'Welcome to Thornfield, Mr Beresford. Miss Priestley informed me of your arrival.'

The man's well-modulated manner of speech made it quite clear to Beresford that both Chadwick and his son had been the recipients of a good education and, on an impulse, he reached out and grasped Chadwick firmly by the hand.

'Miss Priestley has been informing me of quite a few things too, Chadwick,' he told him. 'It seems that we have something of a problem on our hands.'

'Perhaps we had better go inside, sir,' the man replied carefully and, ushering his visitor into his neat little parlour, he motioned him to take a seat.

'How the devil did this Wentworth manage to get such an upper hand here?' demanded Beresford, as soon as Chadwick had sat down. 'And, more to the point, what on earth possessed my father to appoint him over you?'

‘As a matter of fact, he did no such thing!’ replied Chadwick, with a sigh. ‘Wentworth was originally taken on as head gamekeeper, shortly before my dear wife was struck down with an inflammation of the lung and, since Sir Matthew was adamant that I should spend the greater part of my working day with her, he was obliged to hand over a good many of my outside duties to Wentworth. Sadly, my wife did not recover from her illness and…’ He paused momentarily and passed his hand across his eyes. ‘For several weeks I was somewhat—how shall I put it—distracted.’

Although Beresford gave a sympathetic nod at Chadwick’s attempt to conceal his natural distress, his mind was reeling in disbelief at hearing of this new and totally unexpected facet of his father’s complex personality.

‘I had hardly begun to take up the reins again,’ the man went on, ‘when I was notified of my son’s battle injury and impending arrival. This, of course, necessitated me travelling down to Harwich to collect him. By the time we returned, Sir Matthew had suffered his heart attack and Wentworth was already beginning to make his presence felt and, although I expressed my concern to Miss Priestley, I confess that I was too preoccupied with my son’s welfare to do anything about it.’

‘Which was perfectly understandable, in the circumstances,’ Beresford assured him. ‘What can you tell me about my father’s death? He had a heart attack, you say?’

Chadwick nodded. ‘For some time his doctor had suspected

that Sir Matthew suffered from an abnormal pressure of the blood and had been bleeding him regularly during the weeks preceding his death. I understand that he had just returned from his usual morning ride when it occurred. Apparently, Wentworth found him lying in the yard next to his mount but, by the time he had raised the alarm, your poor father had expired!'

The discovery that Chadwick actually seemed to mourn his father's death stirred Beresford's curiosity. 'Do I take it that you were quite happy to be in my father's employ?' he asked.

'After almost twenty years it would be surprising if Sir Matthew and I had not managed to reach some sort of an understanding,' replied Chadwick cautiously. 'And, if I may say so, I am surprised that you should consider it necessary to ask such a question! Those of us who chose to remain in his service for so many years would soon have sought alternative employment had he not been a just employer, I can assure you!'

'I rather seemed to get the impression that certain members of his family were somewhat less than enamoured of him,' returned Beresford drily.

Chadwick eyed him thoughtfully. 'There is some truth in what you say, Mr Beresford,' he admitted. 'Sir Matthew had a very short temper and he was not one to suffer fools gladly. Some might say that he was a hard taskmaster but, over the years, I discovered that it was simply a downright refusal to accept slipshod work or any form of incompetence or ineptitude. However, so long as one performed one's job well, one would

eventually earn his respect—Miss Priestley will vouch for that!'

Beresford was silent. Having, for so many years, harboured such strong feelings of anger and resentment towards his father, he now found himself in something of a quandary as to understanding the real nature of the man and, as he was forced to remind himself, with very little likelihood of discovering the truth behind the enigma.

With an effort he drew his attention back to the waiting Chadwick.

'Would I be correct in thinking that you would be willing to be reinstated to your former position?' he asked him.

'Without question, Mr Beresford,' the man was happy to assure him. 'Although I fear that we shall need to address the matter of staff shortage with some urgency if we are to return the estate to any semblance of its former prosperity.'

Beresford nodded. 'I agree, and it is my intention to remedy that problem as quickly as possible. I shall be paying a visit to Ashby market first thing tomorrow morning with the express purpose of hiring more men.'

He stood up and was preparing to take his leave when a sudden thought occurred to him. 'I wonder if your son would be interested in becoming your deputy?' he asked. 'Since he tells me that riding is not a problem for him, I should have thought that he could well prove to be a most valuable assistant to you.'

'How very good of you to consider such an idea, sir!' cried Chadwick, his lined face wreathed in a delighted smile. 'The boy

has been growing rather dispirited of late. He has a sharp mind and these months of enforced inactivity have not sat at all easily with him. I am sure that he will be thrilled at this opportunity to demonstrate his worth. He will not let you down, I promise you!'

'Well, do talk it over with him first!' laughed Beresford and, before making for the door, he handed Chadwick the bunch of keys he had confiscated from Wentworth. 'Meanwhile, I suppose I had better go and give our contemptible friend his marching orders!'

When he got back to the stable yard, however, there was still no sign of Wentworth and, after consulting his pocket watch and registering the growing lateness of the hour, Beresford decided to postpone the unpleasant interview until the following morning and went, instead, to his chamber to change for dinner.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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