

## PROLOGUE

*Autumn, 1811*

*He dragged himself out of the stream, cursing. Stream? It was a damned cascade, a torrent. In the half-light he'd taken it for a harmless gully, and, realising too late that he was mistaken, had grabbed at roots and rocks that had yielded under his hands. He had slithered and floundered in the almost liquid mud.*

*At last he had pulled himself clear of the raging waters and found a fallen tree to sit on, huddling his greatcoat about him, though it was so wet as to be a burden rather than a comfort. Why was one foot even colder than the other? He must have worn through the sole of his boot. But he had more miles to walk tonight. A smile approaching pleasure flitted across his face. If he folded the precious paper, it would fit inside the boot. There. All he had to do now was force his foot back in again.*

*He should never have taken it off. He was colder than ever,*

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*and ready to weep with the effort of cramming the frozen toes into the unyielding leather.*

*Darkness had fallen quite suddenly, a giant hand pinching out a candle. The day had been so cloudless he knew there must be stars, but the trees hid all but a few. If walking had been hard before, it would be cruel now.*

*A drop of brandy. That would help. There! The spirit burnt its way down his throat. One more swig – but a shake of his flask told him it was empty, and he slung it over his shoulder into the bushes.*

*Folly. He might have sold it, pawned it even, to raise a bit more of the ready. But the nobs would see him all right, wouldn't they? They wouldn't tell him to come all this way and not give him meat and drink and a fire to sit by while he dried out.*

*He heaved himself upright and staggered, cursing aloud again as he started to shake. Almost as if they weren't part of him, he watched his hands quiver and then dance as if at the rope's end. He couldn't have held them steady, no, not a guinea.*

*Best make a move. Move while he could still see. For the dark was more absolute than he'd ever known, since the Peninsula, that is, and he must get to the lights before he stumbled again. But where were the lights? Over here? Over there?*

*A voice moaned. It was his own!*

*There was someone coming towards him. Thank the Lord – it was the man he'd spoken to, wasn't it? The man who – but he must be wrong. There was no one there after all.*

*Maybe if he lay down a while. Just till the world stopped turning. Maybe some leaves would give him shelter. Give him warmth. He scrabbled some together.*

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*If only his mother would tuck him up, like she used to do. Here she was, leaning over him, smiling. She rolled him on to his side, as she always used to do, and then again so he lay on his face.*

*Smoothed his hair.*

*Pressed his head.*

*Smoothed and pressed and smoothed and pressed and he was falling deep and easy into sleep.*

## CHAPTER TWO

‘Good day to you. You must be Parson Campion.’ A stoutish man in his later thirties or early forties reined in his horse alongside mine. Despite the driving rain he doffed his hat, revealing pomaded mustard-coloured hair. The cut was unfashionable. For the colour to run from his locks down his forehead, revealing an unimpressive mouse, would be even more *démodé*, so he swiftly replaced his headgear.

I nodded, removing my hat too, with fewer worries about the consequences. ‘And you, sir, must be Sir Marcus Bramhall.’

Neither was as prescient as it might seem. My bands, of course, and the rest of my attire marked me down for a man of the cloth. As for my interlocutor, Lady Chase had told me that her late husband’s nephew had announced a visit. She had said little more. Though I was proud to consider that we were friends, she was as discreet and tactful as anyone in her position ought to be, and I knew she would prefer me to make any judgements of character for myself.

Bramhall had also brought with him, it was disapprovingly

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rumoured in the village, all his family and baggage large enough to suggest a protracted visit.

The man beside me was certainly not to the country born. He might be wearing sporting clothes, but they were the sort a London tailor would conceive, and not, I regret, the very best London tailor, who would know exactly what the country demanded. No one could accuse Bramhall of being a dandy, or, at the opposite extreme, affecting the Corinthian in his dress; indeed, there was something a little too careful about him.

He nodded, but said nothing. Believing that he was my social superior, Sir Marcus should have taken the lead in any conversation, but it seemed that he was unequal to the elementary task. The task, then, fell to me.

‘Are you making a long stay at Moreton Hall, sir?’

A direct question like that, a mere social counter played times without number, does not usually elicit a response I might only describe as shifty.

‘Indeed, one hopes – but of course one never knows. But, yes, as long as her ladyship has need – unless she finds us—’ Such conversational ineptitude, not unexpected in a lad straight from his tutor’s care and lacking town bronze, came ill from a man in his prime.

I tried again. ‘I trust you find her ladyship well?’

He need not know that only the day before his arrival I had spent two hours in discussion with what she was pleased to call her little committee – the Hansards and myself, in other words – on the matter of emergency housing. The local cottages were literally melting away under the incessant rain’s assault on the mud bricks that constituted their walls. Every day our fears grew that the streams would break their bounds

and sweep away humans and animals alike.

My horse fidgeted. Titus had never liked the rain, and today was yet another when the skies did not clear even for an hour.

‘Still harking after that son of hers. You should tell her, Parson, to resign herself to the truth – to the Will of God.’

I bowed, having no such intention.

‘Rattling round in that great house there. No way for a woman to live. Not even some snivelling old woman to lend her countenance. She must have some aged relative who would fit the bill.’

If I too had wondered why she had not availed herself of the company of a respectable female companion, I did not admit it to Sir Marcus. A non-committal cough was all I offered.

‘Needs a bit of company. That’s what I told her.’

Sir Marcus, the son of his lordship’s elder sister, who had married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, was thus the heir presumptive. His visit might have been to cheer a lonely widow, but human nature being what it is, it might equally to have been to stake a claim in a house he reasonably believed to be his.

‘Indeed, sir.’ I must not be too quelling, since an important question was already on my lips. ‘May I hope that you will accompany her to Divine Service next Sunday?’

He hunched further into his coat. ‘Aye, they told me you were something of a Wesleyan, taking your duties uncommon seriously.’ He added, ‘I was trying to persuade her ladyship to refit the family chapel. It’s fallen into sad neglect, sir. When did it last see a coat of paint?’

‘Her ladyship has been pleased to sit alongside her villagers, in the church where Lord Chase’s ancestors are buried. And yours, of course,’ I corrected myself swiftly. ‘Do you care to

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see their monuments? There are two particularly fine tombs, and an excellent brass.'

He smiled briefly, displaying teeth better than most. 'I will bring my whole family to see them. My sister, Lady Dorothea, is of a particularly historical bent, seeing romance in every fallen stone. And you, pray, Mr Campion, must share our mutton with us – why not this very night?'

'I have not paid so much as a morning visit to Lady Bramhall—' I broke off to nod and smile at young Tom Fletcher, driving some of his uncle's heavy-fleeced sheep with the aid of Nip, a dog that did its best to live up to its appellation. 'I will not answer for the consequences, Tom, if you let your dog near Titus here,' I called.

Tom called him closer to heel. Tugging his dripping forelock, he said, consciously polite, 'Good day, Parson Campion.' Casting an inquisitive glance at Sir Marcus, he added hopefully, 'Is there any more wood to chop?'

'Tom, make your bow to Sir Marcus. That's better. There's plenty of wood ready for you – but only when you've learnt the psalm I set you, young man. As if,' I added, *sotto voce*, to Sir Marcus, 'he were interested in anything other than the sweetmeats my housekeeper will find. But I keep him to his books, sir, and one day he will thank me for it.'

Sir Marcus had watched the exchange with ill-concealed boredom, at last flipping the youngster a coin. So his affable reply took me by surprise. 'We will not stand on ceremony – not in the country. You will know that the Dowager Duchess keeps country hours. My dear wife is slowly prevailing on her to dine at a more fashionable time, but she is most reluctant to change. However, we have compromised on five-thirty, for the time being, that is. I will expect you then.'

'I would be delighted to accept. Thank you, Sir Marcus.' I trust my social smile covered my unease at his alluding already to her ladyship as the dowager. I hoped he did not do it within her earshot.

Our horses parted company with no backward glance. Titus was no doubt thinking of the vicarage stable and shelter from the drenching rain, and his, one of the oldest and most staid hacks from her ladyship's stable, a prompt return to its domain. His was the more fortunate – I had a deathbed to attend before we could return to the vicarage.

The cottage was little more than a hut: I have seen pigs better housed. Predictably, another was there before me, still in his great coat as the damp seeped relentlessly through the rotting thatch – my dear friend, Edmund. The little fire, recently lit, gave hardly more warmth than a candle, and certainly not enough to dry the damp bedewing the walls.

'Her ladyship sent coal and beef-tea,' he said, drawing me into a corner. 'But poor Mrs Kemp's daughter "didn't like to waste the coal",' he said in a mincing parody of the girl's thick accent, 'though goodness knows her ladyship would have sent thrice as much had she known the need! But Polly never did have much in the way of sense. Goodness knows how she'll manage without the old lady's guidance.'

I hid a smile. Dr Hansard might have carried nearly as many years as Mrs Kemp, but he never referred to himself as old, nor permitted anyone else to do so. Indeed, his marriage had brought a new spring to his step. No one would have taken him for a man who would not see fifty again.

'My dear friend, have you done all you can do for Mrs Kemp's body?' I asked gently.

'Indeed I have.' He nodded at the cadaverous face, the eyes

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already closing. Together we listened to the painfully drawn breaths, each seeming to be her last until another rasp surprised us.

'In that case, Edmund, while I see what I can do for her soul, you should go home and find some dry clothes, lest you too take an inflammation of the lung,' I told him, gently mocking as I usurped his medical privilege.

Chilled to the bone and saddened by the loss of a regular and devout communicant, I would have preferred to spend the rest of the day in my own study, with my books for company. I had after all a paper to prepare for no less a body than the Royal Society. Last year they had been kind enough to approve my study of the nesting habits of the genus *Sylviidae*, and had suggested that I might care to follow it up with a similar study of another bird. Should it be genus *Strigidae*? Only last night I had seen a long-eared owl, rarer in this part of the world than its larger tawny cousin, its ears making two exclamation marks above the surprised eyes.

Yes. Owls would prove a rewarding subject. I reached for my books.

Enough of this. I must make up for any lapse in manners Sir Marcus might have detected, and, of course, meet the other newcomers. Any meetings with her ladyship were always pleasurable, whatever the circumstances. So I duly presented myself at Moreton Hall, punctual to the minute.

According to Edmund, the entrance hall had been Lord Chase's pride and joy. It was a double cube, with painted and gilded ceilings and magnificent plaster fireplaces either side of a staircase which bifurcated halfway up to very grand effect.

Family portraits from the school of Van Dyke to works by the very hand of Madame le Brun graced the walls. Greek and Roman statues occupied specially designed niches.

To my amazement, not only were both fires lit, but Sir Marcus – and what I presumed was his family – were huddled about the one on the right, their breath making little puffs of steam when anyone spoke. In none of my previous engagements at the Court, apart from a small reception for the gentry of the county, had such formality prevailed: guests always being received upstairs in the drawing room, whether the gathering was large or small. What could be the reason for such a departure from comfortable ways? I looked for Lady Chase, anxious to make my bow to her first, of course, but she was nowhere to be seen.

My host, however, was very much in evidence, wearing, to my intense embarrassment, the knee-breeches and silk stockings of fashionable evening apparel.

He waved aside my swift apology for appearing in boots, clicking his fingers quite superfluously for a footman to relieve me of my dripping greatcoat and hat.

‘Welcome, my dear Mr Champion! It hasn’t eased yet? No? We shall have to build an ark, shall we not? Let me introduce you to my wife, Lady Bramhall.’

I bowed low, taking in an anxious lady not yet forty, in lavender mourning which did not suit her colouring. She slid her eyes to Sir Marcus before moving her lips in something of a greeting.

‘And my sister, Lady Dorothea.’

There was no agonising shyness about this creature, who would have been no more than one or two and twenty. She had indeed defied fashion so far as to wear a thick pelisse over

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her dark grey silk dress, and I for one would have applauded had she seen fit to swathe herself in muff, bonnet and furs, provided she still allowed her charming countenance to appear. For charming was indeed the word. Her face was heart-shaped, the sort of beauty one often associates with the more vacuous female. But hers was enlivened by a pair of speaking blue eyes, and a firm, even amused, pair of lips. Her brother's faux-yellow hair appeared on her head as magnificent corn-gold, the dazzling curls almost having a life of their own.

I thanked years of training for what I hoped was a passable bow, and a polite greeting – which was cut cruelly short.

Sir Marcus was speaking again. 'These are my sons, Adam and Charles—' he paused while the two pasty-faced lads, perhaps seventeen and fifteen, made their bows '—and my daughters Honoria and Georgiana.'

The two schoolroom misses curtsied. Both in satin, they were overdressed for such an informal occasion, but underdressed for the temperature. Mumbling incomprehensibly, they resumed their places beside a hunted-looking young woman, presumably their governess, sitting at the furthest point from the fire, which only intermittently lit her rigidly braided black hair. Even though Sir Marcus had not deigned to introduce us, I had opened my mouth to greet her, and would indeed have sat beside her.

'Nonsense, man, nonsense! Come nearer the fire!'

In a more subtle man than I deemed Sir Marcus to be, the invitation could have been embarrassing, since he indicated a place beside Lady Dorothea. I sat, trying not to shiver. I always did my best not to indulge in personal vanity, but no one wished to appear in a positive quake before a young lady

of such elegance and beauty. Before we could exchange more than a formal smile, and no doubt embark on a disquisition on the inclement weather, Lambert, the butler, summoned us to dine. I might regret the haste with which it was done, but I could not regret the move to a warmer apartment. I could rely on Lady Chase to keep a properly heated dining parlour. But where was her ladyship? To ask our self-appointed host where the real hostess was would surely be a solecism. So as Lambert bowed us up the double staircase, which was guarded on either side by a dithering footman, I spoke to him.

His reply disconcerted me.

'Her ladyship indisposed?' I exclaimed. How could I have been invited to dine in such a circumstance?

'Her ladyship is not so indisposed that she cannot ask you to take tea with her in her *private* sitting room after dinner, sir.' There was a slight but unmistakable emphasis on the word. Since the whole conversation was far from the social norm, neither of us was inclined to pursue it.

Dinner was the strangest affair, served, amazingly, not in the by now familiar dining parlour but in the grand saloon. Despite the presence of the schoolroom party, it seemed the event was formal enough to discourage conversation with anyone but one's immediate neighbour. Indeed, a monstrous gilt epergne I knew had been relegated to the attic had reappeared, dominating the centre of the table. I was partnered with Lady Bramhall, with whom it was possible to exchange commonplaces for the duration of the meal without uttering or hearing one memorable phrase. Each time she spoke, she half covered her mouth. Having sunk into deepest mourning, she might never resurface.

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I could hear Lady Dorothea's laughter but could not without causing offence have asked the cause or joined in. Sir Marcus, having vigorously carved a chine of mutton and a venison pasty, considered his duty as a host done until the second course appeared, when he seemed quite offended that I could no more than taste the chicken fricassee or the sweetbread tartlets. It always pained my conscience to over indulge myself when my dear flock did barely more than exist, food and dry fuel alike being so scarce.

But Lady Bramhall had initiated a subject for discussion! I agreed that the fire was giving plenty of heat; she, poor creature, wondered aloud about the extravagance of so many candles.

'But Sir Marcus is so anxious that the ceiling and the painted panels appear to advantage,' she pleaded.

'They are indeed worth seeing,' I suggested. 'They were painted by Madame Kauffman at her very best.'

My reluctance to speak down the table was not shared by Sir Marcus. 'Aye, even better than those at Attingham Park. Have you seen those, sir? Not a patch on these.'

The fellow was as full of puffery as if he had commissioned and paid for them himself.

I bowed ambiguously. My origin – in fact my family were members of the *haut ton* – was not a matter for public discussion. All I wished to be known as, all I *was* now, was a country parson.

He ignored my coldness, expounding on the artist's superiority to her contemporaries, with examples culled from who knew which country houses. If I had believed he had seen them all, I could still not acquit him of name-dropping.

Just as I was dreading a prolonged session with the port,

during which the young men learnt how to hold their liquor while their father continued centre-stage, a footman approached me, telling me quietly but audibly that I had been sent for.

Sir Marcus obviously concluded that one of my parishioners had need of me, perhaps at yet another death bed, a misapprehension I did not correct. I bowed myself out, with all courtesies to the ladies and gratitude for the evening's repast, and was escorted swiftly to her ladyship's sitting room, the least formal of all the rooms in the house, despite the silk hangings and the Grinling Gibbons fireplace.

'My dear Mr Champion, you must be chilled to the very marrow. Come in, my dear young friend.' Lady Chase extended a warm and friendly hand. In the kind firelight she appeared one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen – not for her features and figure alone, but for the sweetness of her smile.

'Pray, sit down here, Mr Champion.' She indicated the chair closest to the fire and adjacent to hers. 'I have so longed for one of our comfortable chats. Although I have been back in your parish such a short time – no more than four months, I think? – you have quite become part of my family. Now, are you still pinched with cold, or has a warm meal restored you a little?' She paused while a footman brought in more logs. 'Thank you, Jenkins – and some more candles over here, if you please.' She picked up her tambour frame as if she needed to justify her request to a man whose only function was to serve her, smiling kindly as he set a branch beside her. 'I will ring for tea when we are ready.'

As Tom Fletcher's young cousin left the room, I broke the news of Mrs Kemp's passing, receiving a sad press of the hand

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and a promise of a few shillings for the funeral.

When we were alone once more, she shook her head quizzically. 'I'm afraid I cannot offer you the sort of entertainment you could expect in the salon – yes, indeed! Lady Dorothea has a pleasant little singing voice. Lady Bramhall accompanies her very well on the harp. I would have expected so foolish a creature to abandon her accomplishments on marriage, but she must have more sense than is immediately apparent. How do you find the family?' she asked, a twinkle in her eye.

'It is not how I found them but how I find you, your Ladyship, that concerns me. Are you unwell?' Truth to tell, she looked in as a perfect bloom as a widow of middle years might wish.

She pressed a slender finger to her lips. 'I am suffering from nothing more than a severe attack of ennui. Sir Marcus is almost as conscious as he ought to be of the impropriety of making a long uninvited visit, and his poor wife ran out of conversation within three hours of having stepped inside the entrance hall – where you were no doubt received this very day?'

'I was indeed, ma'am.'

'*A custom more honour'd in the breach than the observance,*' she smiled. 'Dear me, what notion does the man have of living in a house like this? Does he not realise the absolute necessity of keeping warm? Which reminds me, my dear Mr Campion, this continuing rain greatly concerns me. As we know, more than Mrs Kemp may be at risk.'

I smiled sadly.

'As our little committee agreed on Monday,' she continued, 'I have told Furnival to make sure any barns left empty – and

there are all too many, after such a poor harvest – should be prepared to accommodate families driven from their homes. One can be set aside for young men, another for young women. I would dearly like to keep families with young children together, but he does not see how it can be managed. So I have suggested that the nursery wing here at the Court be opened up again. It will not accommodate many, but that is better than nothing. Poor Furnival is horrified, of course.’ Her steward was ever torn between his desire to do the best for the estate and the late duke’s insistence that his tenants’ welfare was also his responsibility. ‘But we want no more deaths.’

‘You are all goodness, my Lady.’

She shook her head in irritation. ‘Goodness? You know that I am merely doing my Christian duty. You will inform me of any households experiencing particular hardship, Mr Campion, just as you told me about Mrs Kemp. As I hope I will one day make clear to Furnival, I disdain the increasingly fashionable notion that you can distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor. In this weather poverty is even-handed, and so must we be in redressing it.’ Her voice changed, taking on a curious inflexion. ‘Sir Marcus tells me the roads are quagmires, so sticky and deep that they hardly permit wheels to traverse them.’

‘This is their reason for protracting a visit that brings you so little pleasure?’ Knowing I would be forgiven, I spoke freely.

‘Indeed.’ She leant forward confidentially. ‘Mr Campion, Sir Marcus mentioned a court case the other day – to establish the succession, as he put it. Such a commonplace man, but capable of inflicting such great hurt.’ She struggled to master her features. ‘If I am to retire to the Dower House, I would

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rather it were to make room for someone...' She spread her hands helplessly. 'Will Lady Bramhall ever...?'

In my view Lady Bramhall was rather to be pitied than otherwise, at having to assume a duchess's mantle, and, moreover, having to replace the present Lady Chase in the villagers' affections.

I replied, more in hope than in expectation, 'Pray God that she will never have to attempt to take your place. Let us trust that one day—'

She raised an eloquent hand. 'There are dark days, Mr Campion, when even my faith fails, and I fear that Hugo will never return. But yet, as his mother, I would know if he were no longer alive. I believe I would know the instant he died. And here – here – I know he lives still!' She pressed her hand to her bosom, averting her eyes.

'Pray God you are right,' I said quietly.

She made a visible effort. 'And now, Mr Campion, tell me if Lady Dorothea has stolen your heart yet. Ah, you blush. You cannot answer me.'

'Indeed, I cannot.' For blush I fear I did.

She patted my hand. 'It is time you fell in love, my young friend. A parish needs not simply a vicar but a vicar's wife. Your good Mrs Trent, excellent housekeeper as she is, can never be a substitute for the helpmeet you need – and, dear Tobias, deserve.'

My neck, my face, my very ears now aflame, I said, 'However much an ordinary man may wish for a beautiful wife, the *clergyman* must value virtue even more.'

'And you suspect that Lady Dorothea might not be virtuous?'

'I cannot think that Sir Marcus would permit her to sink

herself so far socially...' I began with caution.

'If he knew the truth of your birth he would not regard it thus. But I tease you, Mr Champion. Let me offer you tea. I cannot think whither my manners are fled.' With a gracious smile, she reached for the bell-rope.

A card table set between us, the rest of the evening passed in a gentle game of cribbage.

At last, I was led from her presence down the back stairs, both of us laughing at the mild conspiracy into which we had been forced. But it was conspiracy of another sort that sprang to my mind – the sort that featured in Mrs Radclyffe's novels. Here in these cold, dark corridors one might imagine – if one were that way inclined – that armed men lurked in deep recesses, that abducted maidens were locked inside the rooms within. In fact, the only figure I saw was that of Furnival, the steward, running gnarled fingers through his snow-white locks. He nodded but made no attempt to pause for conversation. Then I glimpsed the weary features of that unhappy governess, whose name had never been vouchsafed me. As before I bowed, offering, I hoped, the sort of smile one might give to a child caught in mild mischief.

'Miss...?'

But, without a word, she bobbed a curtsy and scuttled back upstairs, like a church-mouse startled by a flaring candle. How could the daughters of the house ever learn their manners with such a craven exemplar? No one expected a young lady in such an ambiguous situation, neither family nor servitor, to be full of social grace, but she should at least have a modicum of poise. And why had she left a trail of damp behind her? Had she been out in this rain? The candlelight

had been too weak to show if her hair or garments had been wet, but undoubtedly the corridor showed large muddy footprints.

As an excuse for being seen in the domestic quarters, I made it my business to call in on Mrs Sandys, the housekeeper, in an attempt at social ease so far denied us. Why Lady Chase had kept in her establishment such a gloomy and pinch-faced woman defeated me. She had certainly provided her with a generous-sized sitting room, and a fire the villagers must have envied. Although there was a handsome bookcase, full of enticing volumes, Mrs Sandys was engaged in sewing, her needle stabbing away at the cloth in a way I always found disconcerting. Her ladyship could make sewing calming and peaceable; Mrs Sandys' activities suggested barely suppressed violence.

'I come to thank you for your continuing generosity to my parishioners,' I said, though I knew all too well that the liberality was her mistress's.

She nodded curtly, still driving the needle through the innocent fabric.

'And now I have to ask you another favour, Mrs Sandys,' I continued. 'That young governess of the Bramhalls looks very unhappy, and I fear she may not be eating properly. Tell me, is she as...well treated...as she deserves to be?'

'Miss Southey?' Mrs Sandys sniffed.

'Indeed,' I said firmly. At least I now knew the poor creature's name. 'Does Miss Southey have a fire in her room, for instance? And hot water in the morning? Dear Mrs Sandys, consider her position, amongst strangers, serving a family that does not, in my view, value her as it ought.'

Mrs Sandys bit her lip at my rebuke. Hoping that such a

hint would be effective in improving the poor young lady's lot, I turned the conversation. I had spiritual care over the whole household, and would have the pleasure in preparing the younger ones for confirmation in the spring. Unfortunately, it was also sometimes my lot to remind a young man that he must marry his sweetheart before their baby was born.

But tonight Mrs Sandys mentioned no miscreants and I soon left her to the doubtful pleasures of her needlework.

The rain had ceased. Although there was no moon, the starlight reflecting on the puddles was enough to illumine my path home. Titus, irritated at quitting the temporary warmth and keen to return to his own cosy stable, indulged in unwontedly spirited napping. Once we had established who was in control, however, I let him pick his own way through the ruts.

I told myself I wished to review the whole strange evening, from the huddle in the hall to the charitable concerns of my patroness, and indeed the poor self-effacing Miss Southey. In truth, I wanted only to think of the beauty of Lady Dorothea. But it was only a few short months since I had been in love with another female, and one very different from this. Poor Lizzie. I had never declared my passion for her and now it was too late. Would it be an insult to her memory to love another?

Even as I thought of her, I fancied I heard her moan, as she might have done in her dying moments. Rebuking myself firmly, I nonetheless pulled Titus to a reluctant standstill, straining my ears for another sound. The copse in which I had found her dear body was scarce a mile away – on a night as still as this a sound might easily carry that far.

There was nothing. Unless—

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I stood in the stirrups, peering into the ghostly darkness. I believe I actually called out loud, 'Lizzie? Lizzie, is that you, my love?'

The unmistakable sound of a cow lowing in a nearby byre replied.

Shaking my head at my folly, I gave Titus his head and we wended our way home.

'Could it be,' I stammered at last, 'that she has come back to haunt me?'

In the warm breakfast parlour of Dr Hansard's house, bright and cheerful with morning sunlight, a fire blazing in the grate, the words sounded ridiculous even to my ears.

'Because you were attracted to another young woman? What nonsense you do talk, my dear young friend,' Dr Hansard exclaimed, his words and tone at odds with his affectionate squeeze of my arm. His deep blue eyes fixed mine with stern kindness. 'Did I, did my beloved Maria here, imagine our former spouses would rise from their graves to complain that after decent periods of mourning we would marry again? The thought is unworthy of you, a man of the cloth. Pray, have some more of Maria's best ham, Tobias, or she will be the one offended.'

She clicked her tongue. 'As if Tobias could ever cause offence. I know how much from your kitchen finds its way to the tables of the poor – I honour you for your generosity! – but here you must indeed eat your fill. Indeed you must, out in all weathers as you are.' It was not only I who usurped Edmund's role as physician.

'No more than Edmund,' I parried.

'But you do not have a wife to look after you.'

Despite her kindness, I shook my head, staring dismally at my plate.

She poured herself more chocolate, then leant forward animatedly. 'Now, if a woman might offer a word of advice on this matter of the heart, it is that you should say nothing of your former love to this new object of your affections. A lady does not like to think she is competing with the dead.'

My blush was painful. 'Nor is she. I have scarce met her.'

'She has clearly made a deep impression on you,' she laughed. 'Her blue eyes, pink lips, clear complexion and lustrous hair – she must indeed be a paragon.'

'A paragon? But true beauty lies in the soul,' I insisted, as I had to her ladyship, 'not in such outward show. Truly, Mrs Hansard, with one word you have opened my eyes to my folly. It lies not only in thinking myself unfaithful to Lizzie, but in imagining I could have fallen in love on such superficial acquaintance.' I smiled across the table at them both. 'Thank God I am blessed in my good friends. And yes, if I may, I will have another slice of this excellent ham. And that beef too.' As she heaped my plate, however, another thought occurred to me. 'But I still find it hard to believe that the first sound I heard was a cow. If it was not ghostly moaning I heard, what was it?'

'That is a question I can take more seriously,' Dr Hansard said. 'Indeed, when I go on my rounds today, I will ask everyone I see. But I think the answer is not in your ears, Tobias, but what lies between them – your over-fertile conscience and imagination.'