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PART ONE. PIETAS.

CHAPTER 1. MILES CRAWFORD'S ATTITUDE.

Because there could only be one King, one Empire, and one brand of patriotism, four soldiers yanked an unsuspecting Miles Crawford out of bed, tearing him away from the pretty, jovial, vivacious woman whose company he had been enjoying lately. Because some pranksters led by a failed brewer seemed to have tossed a quantity of good tea leaves overboard half-a-world away, Miles was dragged through the streets in only his boots and undershirt – the two clothing items they had graciously allowed him to put on. His hands tied uncomfortably behind his back, his face and ribs bruised, his knees skinned and hurting like hell, they deposited

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him in a dungeon to starve – because over in the Colonies, where his estranged wife resided, a bunch of sulky landlords and lawyers had decided time had come to get good and angry about some of His Majesty's unseemly practices.

There were, of course, other reasons.

No matter.

Miles' relatives, wealthy and influential, could have stepped in. However, as Miles had as much right as any of them to all kinds of future inheritance, they viewed him as a dangerous rival, not to mention that his behavior (he was a free spirit) could seriously undermine the family's influence in London and elsewhere if he wasn't stopped. Had it been otherwise, they would not have hesitated – would have rushed to his side like the fearless lions they all were. Or something.

As soon as his captors dragged Miles out of the cozy house with ambers still smoldering in the fireplace, and into one of those damp, unsympathetic, ruthless London mornings, he made a brief speech to them. He found his eloquence failing him – he did not remember being fully in control of his mental faculties – ever. Nevertheless, he made an honest effort, citing the Magna Carta (a document stating, among other things, that English barons had some basic rights when dealing with the King). It was no use. One of the soldiers, an educated fellow, pointed out that while the ancient treaty did in fact mention barons, it said nothing about dukes. Being a duke, Miles Crawford tried to think of a loophole. He couldn't. Perhaps it would have been easier had they given him a readable copy of the said document to consult. He asked for one. They told him that, regrettably, such a copy could not be obtained at this time. Maybe later.

And so Miles had to spend three days in a chilly, damp, grimy, inhospitable cell. Twice a day they dragged him out in order to interrogate and threaten him. Each time upon returning to the cell, he checked for possible irreparable damage to his body and was vaguely happy to find that, so far, there was none. Water was available. Food was not.

Benjamin Carlyle, the Secret Service's pride and joy, dropped by.

"Gustave's buttocks!" he exclaimed, barging in and

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regarding Miles with mock astonishment. "Lord Crawford himself! Who would have thought!"

"Where's Carol?" Miles asked.

"Don't worry about Carol," Benjamin boomed. "Gustave's buttocks, the entire department racked their brains for a year, trying to figure out who the spy was! Let me tell you, Crawford, I suspected you from the start. You don't leave traces, though. You're a very good spy. See? I admit it. Still, even great spies have weaknesses. Someone got the idea of sending the lass to you."

"Carol?"

"Indeed. She's one of our best. Three days, Crawford! Gustave's buttocks, three days was all it took!"

He laughed obnoxiously. He bragged some more. He called Miles names. He mentioned that, had it been up to him, he would have broken Miles on the wheel a long time ago, evidence or no evidence. Eventually, he left, grunting contentedly.

At the end of the three days, Miles was exhausted, seriously annoyed, and generally in a bad mood. Four soldiers came for him. Putting up no resistance, he wondered vaguely whether he was going to be hanged or shot. Both possibilities struck him as unseemly. Mustering whatever still remained of his mental strength, he made an eloquent speech, promising the soldiers riches beyond their imagination if only they could set him free in front of some tavern, any tavern, and if one of them had a pound to lend him – perfection. The soldiers were too accustomed to this kind of speech to take it seriously. The fact that Miles sounded far more poetic than any of the previous orators failed to make an impression on them.

His hands tied behind his back, they dragged him through the streets. The area reeked of equine and human excrement, rotten produce, and what not. Some pedestrians stared blankly at Miles and his red-coated, black-booted escort.

Soon they reached Windsor Castle, of all places.

"Hey," one of the guards on duty asked, "where are you rascals dragging that?" He pointed at Miles.

One of Miles' guards produced a scroll, unrolled it

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solemnly, and held it under the inquisitive sentinel's nose.

"His Majesty's personal orders," he explained.

"Hey. Suit yourself."

The guard stepped aside.

Windsor Castle was a notoriously cold place.

His Majesty King George III was a tall, lean man of thirty-seven summers. His contemporaries regarded his behavior as eccentric – no matter. A sound thinker and an expert in many areas, he could hold his own in a conversation on virtually any topic – with pretty much anybody, which was no small potatoes in a country so irrevocably divided into classes, milieus, groups, and what not, that the number of one's peers hardly ever exceeded two dozen souls.

It was raining outside. Very little light penetrated through the enormous windows of the King's study. The candles in the chandeliers were lit. Morning in London.

When a servant announced they had brought Lord Crawford over to the palace, the King, formally attired, sat at his desk, picked up a large quill, and started making leisurely use of it by doodling on Lord Chamberlain's memorandum regarding the recent tax hike. His Majesty did not raise his head when two soldiers dragged in Miles.

"Your Majesty!" one of the soldiers said in considerable awe.

"One moment, gentlemen."

Finishing a profile sketch of his Versailles cousin, the King regarded the caricature with some satisfaction before putting down the quill and giving Miles a long appraising look.

At thirty-four years of age, Lord Crawford was a handsome, slender, black-haired, hazel-eyed man. The king could barely recognize him – he seemed to have been treated brutally, perhaps tortured. Slowly, the King rose to his feet.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Miles," he said, not unkindly. "Our old and very faithful friend. The Empire's most valiant defender. Would you care to sit down, Sir Miles?"

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Release him, gentlemen."

They did so. Immediately, Miles' strength left him. He fell on his knees.

Coming over to him, the King said, with a touch of irony in his voice, "That's not necessary now, Miles."

Miles, whose sense of humor resembled the King's in many ways, would have laughed had he not been exhausted and in pain. With a silly grin on his lips, he swayed, falling slowly on one side. After looking at him for a moment or two, the King turned to the soldiers.

"Gentlemen, please leave us alone now."

"Your Majesty." Bowing almost to the ground, they withdrew.

George III stood towering over Miles. For a while, he pondered. Soon, shrugging and leaning on the edge of his desk, he picked up the memorandum again.

After attempting to roll over, Miles looked up in astonishment.

"You don't look well," the King observed.

"Sire..."

"Care to tell me what happened, exactly?"

"Sire," Miles said with some difficulty, "I'm going to faint, I'm afraid. I hope Your Majesty doesn't mind."

"Not at all," the King replied civilly. "Go ahead."

"Thank you, Sire."

Miles fainted. Picking up the bell from his desk, the King studied it with some disgust for a while. He looked at Miles again, and then at the windows. He shrugged. He sighed. He rang. Almost instantly, a servant entered.

"See if there's any pudding left from breakfast," the King told him. "While you're at it, pick up a pitcher of milk."

"Yes, Sire."

The servant ran out. Squatting beside Miles, George rolled the traitor over onto his back and slapped Miles' cheeks lightly. Miles opened his eyes.

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"Let me help you up."

As the King lifted Miles to his feet, his elbow touched the prisoner's ribs.

"Ouch!" Miles shouted.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"My ribs!"

"Sorry."

"Please be more careful, Sire."

"Certainly. I apologize."

Gently, carefully he helped Miles to a chair. The servant returned carrying a tray – pudding, a pitcher of milk, a silver cup.

"Thank you, James," the King said.

"It's Alexander, Your Majesty."

"I don't give a shit," the King explained. "You may go now."

"Very well, Sire."

Taking a finely designed silver spoon from one of his desk drawers, the King wiped it clean with a silk napkin. Pouring some milk into the cup, he brought it to Miles' lips. Miles sipped.

"Thank you, Sire."

"Don't mention it, old boy."

Standing beside Miles' chair, the King reached over, picking up a lump of pudding with the spoon. "Open," he said. Miles opened his mouth. The King deposited the pudding in it. "So," he said, picking up more pudding with the spoon, "why don't you tell me all about it."

"Well," Miles said, chewing appreciatively. "There was this woman, Sire..."

"I already know that part. You can never trust a woman, Miles. I thought you knew."

"Well..."

"Don't argue with your mouth full. It's uncouth. What

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made you become a spy?"

"Well, it was sort of like... I don't know..."

"Do you hate your own country, Miles?"

"Uh, no," Miles sounded puzzled. "Of course not... Uh... some milk, please, Sire?"

"Certainly."

He raised the cup to Miles' lips. Miles sipped. King George resumed the feeding process.

"I've never been much of a politician," Miles explained apologetically. "They approached me...."

"The rebels?"

"Yes. They said, listen, you were born in the Colonies, and your wife is as American as they get..."

He swallowed. The spoon stopped in mid-air.

"Yes," the King prompted. "Go on."

"Well, you know... Some people are suffering... The farmers..."

The King winced. The spoon moved forward. Miles chewed.

"Nonsense," the King said. "You divide your time between headquarters and the palace. What would you know about the farmers."

It was not a question.

"You're absolutely right, Sire," Miles said. "Not a thing. Although maybe I should."

"I don't know much about them either," the King said pensively. "I daresay I know more than you ever will. They're a heathen lot, those farmers, I think... Very well. Now the true reason, Miles. Why did you become a spy?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Sire. I guess I sort of drifted into it. They arranged my... uh... meeting with a Thomas Jefferson."

This caused the King to raise his eyebrows.

"Indeed?"

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"Yes, Sire."

"What kind of person is he? Milk?"

"Yes, please."

The King brought the cup to Miles' lips. Some of the milk dripped on Miles' chin. His Majesty wiped it off deftly with the napkin.

"Well? Jefferson. What kind of person? Go on."

"He's... sort of... Well, kind of tall... a sharp dresser... for the Colonies, anyway. Clever. Well-read, I think."

"I see."

"So that's just it. Sort of. I sort of just drifted into the whole thing."

"And then," George said pensively, "you had to tell a woman all about it."

"Well, Sire..." Miles observed philosophically, swallowing the food. "We all make mistakes."

"That we do, Miles."

"Kind of silly, don't you think, Sire?"

"I suppose so. There's so much hate these days, Miles, and it's everywhere. So much deep and ancient loathing. Kings come and go, their deeds are soon forgotten, but the hatred stays. That regal locksmith across the Channel..."

Suddenly falling silent, he appeared to be lost in thought. Miles became concerned. He did not mind the silence. As soon as the talking stopped, however, so did the feeding process.

"Yes?" Miles prompted. "The regal locksmith, Sire..."

Staring into space, the King said absently, "The Frog Prince... Ha, ha ... He's fond of locks... makes his own locks... has a workshop in the cellar. You'd never think he's a king. Not the king of France, anyway. Locks, imagine. Old Louis knows nothing about politics. In a sense, he's not a king at all, just a debonair something or other, a good-natured idler... Except for one thing. England is the enemy! That part he knows very well. And he acts on it! Do you imagine they'd ever think of rebellion in the Colonies if it weren't for the Frog's gold?"

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Frog Prince... He's only been king a year. He has a peanut for a brain, and compounded in that peanut is the age-old hatred for this here island. This precious... how does it go? ... this precious... uh... jewel, or some such ... set in silver seas. Or something."

A fresh spoonful finally found its way to Miles' mouth. Miles chewed, half-closing his eyes. The King looked at him, wincing, the way an intelligent, well-read, reasonably advanced person does at an ignorant glutton who is only interested in his food when the destiny of the entire world is at stake.

"Does the name Gallic Faction mean anything to you?" asked the King suddenly.

Miles pondered.

"I'm sorry, what kind of faction?"

"Gallic. Gallic Faction."

Miles pondered some more. "Not really," he said at last. "It does ring a bell. I must have heard it before."

Laughing unhappily, the King shook his head.

"You know, Miles," he said lucidly, pointedly, "for the first time in history, Russia and Sweden are of the same mind; and their respective fleets are ensuring safe passage for the Frog Prince's vessels carrying gold and gunpowder across the pond. It's England against the world, pretty much. It's fascinating, Miles. It's the greatest challenge an empire has ever faced. Can you imagine ... can you grasp the sheer historical significance of it? Spies, everywhere. Oceans, swarming with fleets. Everyone's looking on. Being part of it, being one of the spies, can you imagine?"

"Well, Sire ... "

"It's truly ironic, Miles, that the world's destiny may have changed its course virtually overnight, between your damp sheets... Don't you think that's ironic, Miles?"

"It sure is, Sire."

"Milk?"

"Yes, please."

George III emptied the cup over Miles' head.

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"I don't blame you, Miles," he said, setting the cup on the desk. "Politics, the destiny of the Empire – these concepts are much too abstract for you to take seriously. I mean, they may be amusing enough to gab about. When, however, something more concrete turns up, a new comedy at the theatre, a chance to get into a woman's bed, or whatever – you forget all about those silly so-called global matters. It's only natural. After all, you're an English duke, not some Greek or German philosopher. The important thing is to have a good time. You want to impress the woman you're sleeping with. You spill the beans. It could have happened to anybody. Right?"

"Sire ... "

"You wax poetic about your role in global affairs without even suspecting that she's a spy too, and a far better one than you. With all due respect, Miles, she's a lot better. She was having a good time too. You're probably a much better lover than a spy. At dawn, the lovebirds went about their business. You, to pass information to the rebels; she, to denounce you to the authorities. I'll miss you, Miles. Do you prefer to be shot or hanged?"

Miles had to think about this. Picking up the napkin, the King wiped Miles' head and face as best he could. He tossed the napkin on the floor.

"Well, Sire..." Miles said thoughtfully, "To be absolutely frank with you.... I'd rather go on living, if it doesn't displease you too much."

"Sorry I did that to you," the King said, sounding apologetic. "Nerves, my friend. I've been very impulsive these past few months. Anyway, what did you just say?"

"I'd rather..."

"Now, do be sensible, Miles. I can't let you go on living now that it's been officially established that you are, in fact, a spy for the rebels. I don't mind your being a spy, goodness no, I mean, one should be entitled to be what one likes in this life, but really, old boy, you should not have embarrassed yourself like that."

"You could let me slip away quietly, Sire," Miles suggested. "Like, you could announce that I've been shot, and just let me go."

For a while, the King seemed to be considering Miles'

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offer. Miles fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable.

"Your wife lives in the Colonies," the King said at last.

"Yes, Sire."

"You'd only go home and join the rebels."

Good point. Now Miles had to convince the King he would not join the rebels should he be set at liberty. This was tricky. The King knew Miles too well.

"I don't think I'd want to join anyone at this point, Sire. I've had enough of political games to last me a century."

Picking up the bell, George rang. "I don't know, Miles. I can't promise anything. I don't think I can afford to risk you inadvertently embarrassing me and yourself a second time."

A servant entered.

"Call the guards," the King told him.

The servant bowed and left.

"Well," the King went on. "You'll be shot, or not, two days from now. In the meantime, do some thinking, man. Please?"

Entering, the two guards bowed to the King.

"Take him back," George III said calmly. "No torturing, and let him have something to eat from time to time. Good-bye, Miles."

"Good-bye, Your Majesty."

CHAPTER 2. THE BALLROOM AFFAIR.

I.

It was the first truly cold night of the year. The chill reminded everyone that the good season was nearly over. Soon everyone was going to depend on the savings they had managed to put up over the summer, and also on chance lodgings and the market. The men around the campfire were hoping that tonight's venture would be their most rewarding one yet, would bring enough loot to tide them over till spring.

The party consisted of twenty-three old hands and one newcomer – a brawny, ruddy-faced man with a curly

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mane of greasy black hair and a pair of eyes like two black olives in a mawkish Dutch painting. His nickname was Mongoose. He had a shady reputation. His attitude was a mixture of arrogance, self-complacency, and astonishment at the incompetence of his fellow human beings (this latter is a feature endemic to all natural leaders whose immediate plans include claiming their proper place in a new milieu).

The fire crackled merrily. The oldest of the robbers, a wiry middle-aged man with a perpetually morose expression, called Throaty, lit his pipe and blew a cloud of smoke over the fire, casting an expressive glance towards the log cabin positioned strategically between two large oaks. This hut, as well as several others across the great forest, had been built two years earlier on the Mistress' orders. Jenna always bathed all of her flesh before business. It was a whim of hers no one dared discuss, never mind question.

Jenna's authority among the robbers was absolute, with good reason. For two years, their ventures had been consistently lucrative; only two men had been killed; only one wounded; no one in Jenna's gang ever went hungry or lacked warm clothes. Jenna's men were better off than most of the country, or most of the world, for that matter. No one argues with that kind of success.

Mongoose the newcomer was aware of this. And yet, an ambitious, enterprising spirit that he was, he proposed to change things around here soon – in his favor.

"What's the wench doing inside?" he asked loudly.

Everyone looked up. Some shook their heads, others shrugged noncommittally.

"She's bathing, Mongoose," Throaty said calmly. "You know. Washing herself."

Mongoose looked around, inviting folks to share his bafflement. He paused rhetorically before asking, "Is that why everybody's just sitting outside, doing nothing?"

"Yes," Throaty confirmed, blowing a ring.

Mongoose grunted, appealing to everyone's common sense. He did not like the robbers' reaction. Well, he thought, let's try a different angle, then.

"She's pretty good-looking, isn't she, though?" he asked

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playfully.

The robbers were suddenly ill at ease.

"Yes," Throaty confirmed. "She is. Listen, fellow, you just got here."

"Yeah, so what," Mongoose countered defiantly.

"You'll learn," Throaty promised.

The others grinned. Looking around again, Mongoose noticed with some concern that everyone was trying to avoid locking eyes with him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Her name is Jenna Jameson, man," Throaty said, nodding sagely.

"I know that. So?"

"No one can hurt Jenna."

The silly geezer, who obviously had some clout here, was not cooperating.

"Who's talking about hurting anyone?" Mongoose asked incredulously. Again he appealed to all of them at once, "Did I say I wanted to hurt her?" Shrugging, he explained to Throaty as if the latter were a child, "She's young and good-looking. There's nothing wrong with a bit of lovemaking before business."

The remark made some of the robbers chuckle. Smoking his pipe, Throaty remained impassive.

"What's funny?" Mongoose demanded.

"She's married," Throaty told him.

"Yeah?" This was news to Mongoose. It was too late to pipe down, though. He had a reputation to uphold. "Well, what's she doing being here with us, in the middle of the forest?"

"Keeping her husband's estate together," Throaty replied.

Heaving a sigh, Mongoose grinned, got up, and proceeded slowly towards the hut's entrance. The others watched him curiously.

Inside the hut, the wood in the stove crackled merrily.

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There was a quantity of hot water in a number of wooden vessels. The whole interior was a washroom, really.

Two persons were inside, one male, the other female.

The woman, known for hundreds of miles around as Jenna Jameson, a robust, broad-boned, small-breasted, tall blonde with shoulder-length hair and ordinary features, was, in fact, bathing.

It was her smile that made all the difference. It invariably began with a slight twitch of her nose. Then the corners of her mouth would quiver very slightly, after which the eyes would open wide and begin to sparkle, like the reflection of two Nordic stars in a forest lake. Her lips would part, baring the upper teeth, and suddenly her entire being would issue forth – warmth, magnanimity, kindness, sincerity, and good nature.

She also had a different kind of smile – icy, ominous, and frightening – which she kept for very special occasions. Not too many people along the East Coast had seen that smile. Those who had wished they had not.

She was twenty-four.

The other person in the hut did not really belong there. His features resembled Jenna's somewhat. Accordingly, he claimed to be her direct descendant. He was medium-height, thin, russet-haired, and about twenty-eight. His attire suggested no epoch Jenna was familiar with. She was perfectly happy to think of him as a figment of her imagination and leave it at that. No one else could see him; she never told anyone about him. On his part, the young man claimed to be a ghost from the future, which was, in Jenna's opinion, an astoundingly stupid thing to say.

He never told her any stories about this future of his, and she never asked him to tell her stories – she was not really interested. He did seem to have a great deal of insight where it came to today's politics, though. For instance, he had very correctly predicted who was going to be present at the Continental Congress (not that Jenna cared much about that); what England's reaction was going to be; and where the initial battles of the Rebellion were going to take place, which was important. At the dawn of her career as a robber chief, Jenna had taken his advice, staying away from Lexington. As it had turned out, she and her gang would have been killed had they ventured near it on the eve of the great battle. Some of

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his other predictions, on the other hand, did not make any sense. Thus, it was plain silly of him to mention, even facetiously, that the rebels – poorly clothed and ill-trained, their army consisting mostly of careless losers who could not find any other work – were going to defeat His Majesty's very professional, business-like, matter-of-fact regiments. Not a chance.

"Turn away," Jenna said, getting out of the tub.

"Oh, come on, Ruth," the man shrugged, chuckling. "I can't even touch you. Besides, we're related."

"That's what you say. Do stop calling me Ruth please."

"I am your descendant whether you like it or not."

"I told you a thousand times, I can't have any descendants. I'm barren. I can't conceive."

"And yet here I am."

"You're just a fantasy. You don't really exist. I've made you up."

This amused him even more. "You have one hell of an imagination, then," he told her, inclining his head. "The portrait's title reads, Ruth Josephine Crawford of Maine. Maine is where you were born. As for Jenna Jameson, there's a statue in the square; the woman doesn't look anything like you."

"No?" she asked, smiling.

"Not at all. She's shorter and has a lot more curves."

"I see."

"She's a lot less vital than you."

"A statue, really? You're not joking?"

"In bronze. The pedestal is sandstone, I think."

Tactfully, he did not mention that, according to the legend on the pedestal, Jenna Jameson was going to die the following year while fighting for the rebels' cause.

Wrapping herself in a sheet, she smiled again and became unspeakably beautiful.

"Don't you think I'm pretty?" she asked.

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"You're stunning. Someone's coming, I think."

"Never a dull moment. Who?"

"Must be the newcomer. I can him wheezing."

"Oh, bummer. This is going to be messy. Big fellow, isn't he?"

"Yes. Should I stand aside?"

"Yes, do that. Don't leave, though."

"I wasn't going to. I really enjoy watching you kick those idiots' asses."

Jenna laughed. Some of her descendant's expressions struck her as comical.

The door swung open. On entering, Mongoose cast a haughty glance at Jenna. She winked at him. He grinned lasciviously.

"Hello, Jenna," he said in a condescending voice.

"Good evening, Mongoose. What do you want?"

"I'm fond of seeing a beautiful girl like you washing herself. Do you know what I mean?"

"Kind of," she said. "Go on."

"So why don't I just make you happy tonight."

"Oh, really?" she asked, pretending to be naïvely interested. "Don't tell me. Let's see ... I got it! You're you going to become intelligent all of a sudden!"

"No," he said, frowning.

"Pity. With so much ignorance around, seeing an intelligent person around here would make me happy."

"I'm going to show you what a real man can do," he declared proudly.

"Oh. You're going to build a house? Beget and rear an obedient son? Plant a tree?"

"No."

"Bummer."

"I'm going to make you feel like you've never felt before."

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"I can't wait."

"Come here."

He stepped forward. She smiled. He thought she was a very pretty broad. He figured this was not going to be at all unpleasant. Becoming the leader of a successful gang while getting a pretty mistress in the process – things were definitely looking up. She was a strong woman. He expected some resistance, which pleased him as well. He looked over his shoulder one last time to make sure no one was going to interfere with his plans.

Outside, the men sat listening.

"Now, I think," Throaty said.

"Not yet," said a man who had managed to place a wager in the meantime, taking three-to-one odds that Jenna would take more than two minutes to kick Mongoose out.

"I trust Throaty's judgment," another man said. "If anyone's got a good sense of timing, it's Throaty. He's part-Redskin, that's why."

"Well..." the contestant said doubtfully.

"When Throaty says now, now it is," another man insisted.

Suddenly, a great clatter resounded inside the hut. Furniture and various other accessories were being wrecked. Soon everyone heard Mongoose's wild shrieking. It stopped as abruptly as it had started.

"Told you," the first speaker said. "Throaty, he knows it all."

More noise came from inside the hut. A horse neighed nearby.

The gambler complained, "To hear you morons talk about Throaty, he's some kind of prophet or something."

The door of the hut swung open. His shirt in tatters, a large shiner under his left eye, Mongoose stepped out, staggering, clutching his ribs. He moved forward, reeled, relaxed, and fell flat on his face.

"He seems all right," someone said.

"Splash some water on him, somebody," Throaty said

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quietly.

"Throaty knows," Throaty's loyalist said.

Throaty did know.

He was an odd, taciturn man with an odd, taciturn sense of humor, the son of an English earl a Cherokee girl. His mother had abandoned him shortly after his father abandoned her – Throaty could not have been older than five back then. A mean and cruel Virginian farmer adopted him, and he ran away when he was fifteen, traveling extensively, working odd jobs, and finally landing a position as a butler in a wealthy household. He liked a good drink, never read books, was indifferent towards women, and to some folks seemed considerably wiser than he really was.

His devotion to Jenna was unquestionable. There existed between them a bond which neither was inclined to discuss – with anyone.

II.

The Viscount's New England estate featured a large garden, a greenhouse, a paved road leading up to the junction of two major highways, a fountain, and a mansion whose sheer sumptuousness had once prompted the Viscount's guests to dub it our answer to Versailles.

Every year, from May through October, the Viscount gave two or three extravagant balls a month. Whatever nobility and gentry could be found along the East Coast never missed their chance to come calling. The Viscount employed four French chefs. The servants were so numerous, their master himself was never sure how many of them he employed at any given time. New musicians were brought over from Europe every season in order to please the guests' refined ears with pleasant-sounding musical compositions.

Utterly comfortable in the fiftieth year of his life, married to a very pretty woman twenty years his junior, the Viscount was a man of high ideals. Generally regarded as the most influential person in the Maplewood vicinity, he upheld his reputation by ensuring that the profits were steady, the population quiet and reasonable, and England happy. The local peacekeeping force was paid very well.

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The sumptuous ballroom was brightly lit. A string quartet made pleasant background noise on a carpeted dais. The guests were numerous, buoyant, and very elegantly attired.

From his chair positioned not too far from the entrance the Viscount looked on contentedly. Scanning the crowd, Margaret, the Viscount's better half, soon spotted last year's debutante, Mildred by name, whose marriage to John McLachlan, a baron, was regarded by one and all as a misalliance. The Viscountess went over to the Baroness.

"Mildred?"

"Oh, hello, Margaret."

"How was your trip?"

"Oh, just lovely. Italy is so lovely. The peasants are very friendly and so much more amusing than the riffraff you see in these parts."

"Did you encounter many of them, then?"

"Many of? ... "

"Peasants."

"Oh, two dozen, at least. They laughed and hooted as we rode past them in our carriage. John explained it to me. It's supposed to be a form of Italian peasant greeting."

"Hector is coming."

A tall, dark, lean man in an indigo coat materialized beside them, glass in hand. He had a short beard and wore no wig. His blue eyes sparkled with wit and a touch of purely artistic madness. Mildred regarded him with some discomfort.

At the opposite wall, a young robust fellow who, like Hector, was too fond of his own hair to wear a wig, seated himself beside the Viscount, adjusting with a casual sweep of his wrist his platinum-blond locks.

"Hello, ladies," the dark-haired Hector said suavely.

"Ah, Hector!..." the Viscountess exclaimed as if noticing him for the first time, whereas in fact she had been carefully monitoring his progress across the room. Baroness Mildred gave Hector a fresh apprehensive look

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before turning her eyes on the blond man seated beside the Viscount. The artistic Hector was definitely not her type.

With mock pedantry, Hector informed the Viscountess that an amazing new composer had recently emerged over in Europe. Knowing Margaret's love of music, Hector reckoned he would oblige her. Smiling coquettishly, the Viscountess struck his shoulder with her fan in a playful manner. "Oh, Hector, you shouldn't have."

"My acquaintance sent me this tiny piece. The fellow's surname seems to be Gluck." Pronouncing the composer's name, Hector rounded his eyes and lowered his voice conspiratorially.

"What a comical name for a musician," the Viscountess observed.

The Baroness furrowed her brow.

"Oh, Hector," Margaret went on, "I believe you and the Baroness have not been introduced."

Hector regarded Mildred with some amusement. She averted her eyes immediately, which amused him further.

He said quietly, as if disclosing a great secret, "Indeed, I think not. Baroness, permit me to introduce my ugly self. Hector Eriksson, amateur of arts, builder of elegant-looking ships, aged thirty-five." Bringing his lips close to the Baroness' ear, he half-whispered, "Also, I must tell you, I have a very large..."

With genuine horror, Mildred turned to the Viscountess, who was trying hard to suppress a string of giggles, "Margaret, that word, what does..."

"It doesn't mean anything," Margaret assured her promptly. Seeing Mildred's horrified expression, she could not help laughing. "Dear Hector wants to sound original, that's all."

Excusing himself, Hector detached himself from the group.

He crossed the room diagonally. Each woman he passed turned to look at him.

Soon Mildred was able to compose herself. Once again, she glanced across the room at the blond man

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conversing amiably with Margaret's husband.

"Margaret," she said. "Who is that man?"

"Which one?"

"The one with the golden hair."

Peering, Margaret soon spotted the fellow, whom she knew slightly. In her opinion, he was unimaginative, dull, and too pompous for his age.

"Jerome? He's just a youngster. Ignore him."

"Oh, I'm sure you don't mean that!" The Baroness shook her head, astonished.

Margaret believed the Baroness to be downright stupid. Or maybe she was very good at pretending. Either way, unless Hector was currently involved with someone, Margaret did not care much. Was he involved? Was the little Baroness having an affair? The way they had looked at each other a moment earlier – she, without blushing, he, without blinking once – was there anything between them? Was Mildred's silly attitude and Hector's theatrics a disguise?

"How do you like Hector?" Margaret inquired dryly.

"Hector? He's... very odd."

"Odd?" Margaret was genuinely puzzled. "Well, he is part Danish, I believe, if that's what you mean by odd."

No, there was nothing between these two. Nothing at all. Margaret sighed. She could go after him if she wished – if she dared. Did she? Risk her prosperity and good name? How would he respond?

"Still," she added slyly, "don't you think he's more interesting than Goldie Locks over there?"

"You can't possibly mean that! Would you introduce me?"

"To Jerome? Are you sure?"

"Yes. Well?"

"Mildred, you've only been married a year," Margaret pointed out with mock piousness.

The Baroness gave her a huffy look. "Are you

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reproaching me? Surely you don't suppose I have designs on him? I just want to be introduced. Sheesh. Really, Margaret!" She sounded indignant.

"How old is your husband?"

"John? Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure. About fifty, I guess. Or sixty."

"I see."

"Why?"

"For someone as easily bored as you, a witty lover can be a great consolation."

Mildred became very indignant at this, which made her look very pretty, freckles and all. There is something inexplicably alluring about women who retain a degree of adolescence in their twenties. They are especially charming in evening clothes, resembling children who pretend to be grownups, yet enjoy all grownup advantages. Margaret had an idle urge to pat the silly girl's cheek.

"Well, I'm faithful and I mean to remain so for quite a while," Mildred declared.

"Of course. But if I were you, I'd sooner remain faithful around Hector than Goldie Locks."

"You don't think he's handsome?"

"I don't think he's amusing enough to risk a scandal."

An elderly gentleman attempting a minuet with one of the younger female guests suddenly fell down, losing his consciousness. Some sympathetic souls rushed to him. Others appeared disinclined to do so. They were here to have a good time, not revive old fools who did not have the good sense to stay home after reaching their dotage.

Managing to say hello to everyone he knew in the room, Hector navigated cautiously towards a very tall, yet very charming woman of twenty-five whose name was Clarisse and who had taken similar precautions measures against unwarranted interruptions and was now waiting for him at the enormous fireplace.

Hector was a tall man, but Clarisse was taller still.

After months of being apart, they were naturally shy and cautious. Clarisse, who had not expected to encounter

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Hector tonight, seemed to be self-conscious. Even though her shoes and stockings were impeccable, she knew, her mauve-and-white dress must be at least a year out of date. She should have put on a new wig. She had ordered one recently.

They conversed quietly, trying not to smile too often.

"You can't imagine, my dear Hector, how we all missed you," she said, blushing.

"Clarisse, you're as delightful as ever."

"I wrote you a letter, only I had no idea where to send it. How are things in England?"

"Shh. King George..."

"Oh, King George! ... Yes?"

"He's a bit mad, I'm afraid, though rather pleasant to be around. He's very witty."

"Did you get to speak to him?"

"Of course. That's part of the etiquette. Never mind that. I saw some excellent new ships over there."

"You and your ships! All you ever think of is the shipyard."

"Sometimes I think of you, too."

Clearly their conversation was in danger of becoming completely incoherent and absurd in a moment or two. Fortunately, the old electricity worked marvelously. After only a few minutes together by the fireplace, both felt powerfully aroused – so much so that all Clarisse had to do was indicate with her eyes the balustrade encircling the main hall. Hector was off in the direction of the stairwell in an instant. Clarisse stayed behind.

Passing into an adjacent room that was also full of guests, she found a spiral staircase located purposefully out of everyone's way. Removing her shoes and carrying them in one hand, she ran upstairs on tiptoe.

Up on the balustrade, she had to keep close to the wall. Unseen, she passed two closed doors before slipping through a third one that was ajar.

The guestroom, recently dusted, was illuminated by a lone candle. Clarisse noted the bed covered with an

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ornamented silken sheet. Suddenly she had doubts. She was about to slip out to make sure this was the right room when the door closed behind her and Hector's sword fell on the floor.

They were all over each other immediately, he, kissing her wrists, neck, cheeks, and lips, she, undoing his buttons, hooks, and straps, and then her own. Using the bed would have been too dangerous – and too time-consuming, perhaps. Besides, beds can mess up one's dress and wig something awful. Without any further ado, Hector lifted his impetuous mistress by the waist, seating her on the massive oaken dresser. Slipping inside her, he winced, annoyed and embarrassed.

"No, no, no, no, no, not yet," she whispered hotly into his ear, sensing that things were getting out of hand too early.

He stopped moving. He stopped breathing. He wished the world would stop as well.

Downstairs, Margaret, who had observed and understood everything, was heartbroken. Pale, reserved, her hospitable smile gone, she rejoined her husband, seating herself beside him and placing her hand on his. Deeply touched by this token of affection from her, the Viscount beamed.

III.

Outside the mansion, the first cold night of the year was getting colder still. The drivers of the guests' carriages were fast asleep on their boxes, except one. After helping himself to one of his master's cigars, the fellow jumped off the box, glanced at the row of carriages, frowning at the common injustice of a world in which some people danced and ate delicacies while others waited for them outside like a bunch of fucking dogs, and walked off to urinate under a tree.

After relieving himself, he gazed at the stars, wondering, as was his habit, why some of them were positioned just so. When he lowered his head again, he was shocked to realize that the muzzle of a pistol was pointed at his nose.

"Hello," Throaty said suavely, his hand steady, his expression calm. "I'm here to ensure that you make no movements of any kind. Whether you accomplish this in a vertical or horizontal position is your own affair and not

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mine.”

IV.

Hector managed to control himself. They waited some more. Eventually, Clarisse started moving again, very slowly. He bid her to stop.

“What is it?” she asked impatiently.

“Hush!” he said.

“No!” she said. “What are you doing?”

Releasing her, he went over to the window and looked out cautiously. Whistling softly, he adjusted his trousers and vest as best he could, reached for his sword in the corner, and pulled it out of the scabbard.

“What is it?” she whispered urgently, burning with frustrated desire.

“Danger,” he said, pressing his index finger to her lips. He slipped out of the room.

V.

The heavy entrance doors of the mansion swung open. Wearing a mask, Jenna entered the ballroom, followed by two dozen matter-of-fact men, also wearing masks. The hum of voices died down. An eerie silence ensued.

The fact that she was a woman, the numerousness of her associates, and the sheer insolence of her casual entrance told them who she was. Most of the guests refused to believe it at first, thinking maybe it was a practical joke of some sort, a charade. This couldn't be Jenna Jameson in person, no way. In a moment these ... actors ... were going to remove their masks, and everyone was going to laugh. Jenna Jameson? Of course not. Not at the Viscount's house.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” the woman said, not too loud. “My name is Jenna Jameson.”

So complete was the ensuing silence, even the Viscountess' half-whispered remark, uttered in shock, came out distinctly audible, “What an obnoxious woman.”

The Viscount laid a hand on his wife's arm – too late. Sword in hand, Jenna approached the Viscountess. Margaret started to back away – her second mistake.

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Jenna grabbed her by the hair. Margaret shrieked.

"Look folks," Jenna continued, inflicting just enough pain to keep Margaret from trying to twist free, "we have a problem. Do I have everyone's attention? Good. It's been a terrible year for the farmers in this area. We had a cold winter and a dry summer." Releasing Margaret's hair, she pulled a pistol from her belt. "The English want their share, of course. We give it to them. Old George can afford to have his palace dusted twice a day. That's our duty as subjects to the crown. You, on the other hand ... all of you people ... We asked you nicely to go easy on the taxes. We told you some of the people were starving. Houses are falling apart, cattle is dying. Half our laborers have run away to Massachusetts, others have joined the rebels' army out of despair. We explained it to you all, and still you wanted us to pay so you could gather here and talk a lot of nonsense about the weather and the new playthings you smuggle from Europe. And here we are. Some compensation is in order. We'll appreciate all and any voluntary donations. Valuables, gold coins – anything."

The guests exchanged frightened glances. The Viscount rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. Calm and composed, and only a little pale, he said, "Excuse me, my dear lady, but don't you think you're going a little too far? If only your husband knew..."

"I don't have a husband, Viscount," Jenna replied quickly and authoritatively. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

She aimed her pistol at him. He blinked, putting up a palm in a placatory gesture.

"No, of course not," he agreed. "What was I thinking."

Jenna nodded. Turning around, she addressed the rest of them again. "Donations, ladies and gentlemen. Now." Turning back to Margaret, she observed, "That's a quaint-looking necklace you have there. Kindly hand it over to me," She extended her hand.

"Margaret, you will not do any such thing," the Viscount cautioned.

Like everyone else in the region, he had heard of Jenna Jameson. A man of fifty accustomed to command will always find it difficult to accept the fact that his authority is not universal. Set in his ways, he was still clinging to the idea that a few well-chosen, severe words could clear

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it all up and the robbers and the insolent wench would quickly leave his house, their heads hung in shame.

Jenna inclined her head, smiling ominously. The Viscountess removed the necklace.

"My dear lady," the Viscount said to Jenna. "Would you kindly..."

She interrupted him. "Nice ring, Viscount. Not nice enough to die for."

A gentle ripple of horror passed through the Viscount. He suppressed it. Another one followed. He and Jenna stared at each other for a moment. Jenna won.

One of the robbers rushed over with an open leather bag. Jenna tossed the ring into it.

"Now," she said, "uh... Margaret?"

The Viscountess threw the necklace in the bag.

"The rings?" Jenna prompted.

"I must insist..." Margaret protested.

This was ridiculous.

The male guests outnumbered the robbers five to one. It was a matter of just one person standing up to the ingrates, one person putting up resistance of any sort for the rest of the guests to pounce on the intruders, overwhelm them, tie them up, and turn them over to the police, whereupon they would be charged, tried, and sent to prison. With a sudden surge of courage, Margaret decided she would become that one person. She straightened, spreading her shoulders and looking arrogantly at the robbers' chief.

Jenna made a sweeping motion with her sword. The Viscountess' dress opened in the front. Margaret panicked.

They locked eyes.

Holding the dress together with her elbows, choking on anger and fear, the Viscountess began to remove her rings.

VI.

Observing the events from the balustrade, Hector was

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fascinated, hugely amused, and somewhat alarmed, not necessarily in that order. He knew he was not about to rush down to defend anyone – it wasn't his place to do so. However incomplete the results, no man who only moments ago had sexual intercourse with a woman can help feeling a little responsible for her welfare. Hector owed protection to Clarisse, not the clowns down in the ballroom.

He slipped back into the guest room, closing the door as quietly as he could.

Downstairs, the robbers started to approach the guests one by one, with open bags.

Baroness Mildred, who had managed to engage Jerome's attention earlier and was now standing next to him, felt she was about to faint. Seeing this, Jerome said, "Never fear, Baroness. They will not dare touch you."

The remark reached Jenna's ear. The robber chief turned around. Establishing the speaker's identity with a brief glance, she approached him.

"Hello, lovebirds," she said in a patronizing voice. "Oh, you do look very appealing, both of you." For a moment, she wavered. "All right, pay time," she announced.

Calmly and very distinctly, Jerome replied, "Keep away, slut."

All heads turned in their direction. Everyone in the room, including the robbers, feared an outburst. Having resigned themselves to giving up their valuables and hoping that the robbers would leave after appropriating same, the guests resented Jerome's interference that might annoy the intruders and cause them to do more damage than originally planned. The robbers – they just wanted to get it over with and leave.

"Slut?" Jenna repeated the word. "Perhaps. I'm a slut who has a great deal of power, though."

"Spare me your philosophy," Jerome scoffed. "You're ... "

"Cross me, and I'll make sure that my name is mentioned in your obituary. That's how powerful I am."

Shielding the Baroness, Jerome drew his sword. Instantly, ten pistols were pointed at him. Jenna raised

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her hand.

"The fellow wants his chance," she said mockingly. "Oh, you daring rascal, you. Well. I feel like obliging you. It's your lucky night."

Stepping back, she threw herself on guard. "Come on," she said. "Show me you can fence, pretty boy."

Sure of himself, Jerome lunged. An expert fencer, his plan was to disarm this presumptuous broad, press the point of his sword to her throat, and negotiate the robbers' withdrawal from the Viscount's home.

Jenna drew back abruptly. Jerome lunged again, and this time she parried.

"Oops. Lost a button, pretty boy," she observed.

Jerome looked down. Taking advantage of his gullibility, Jenna disarmed him. His sword hit the floor with an ominous clatter.

"Young idealists are easy to trick," Jenna observed. "Do you write poetry, too? Well, don't just stand there. Pick up your weapon, you wild creature you."

He did. He rushed at her, and this time he meant business. She did not budge. He lunged. She parried. For a while they fenced, he frantically, she calmly. Then, leaping backward, Jenna kicked a chair into Jerome's path. Tripping over it, he lost his sword again. The robbers laughed.

"What's the matter?" Jenna asked, sounding concerned. "Why do you keep dropping your sword?"

"Slut!"

"Stop teasing me. You know you're attracted to me. Do something about it."

Picking up the sword, Jerome sprang to his feet. He attacked her again. Jenna drew back. The guests backed off, giving the adversaries more room. As Jerome lunged frantically, Jenna stepped aside, allowing momentum to carry her adversary past her. She kicked him in the thigh. He ran into the wall face first, staggered, and fell down.

Mildred gasped.

VII.

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In the guestroom, Clarisse finished adjusting her clothes.

"What's going on?" she asked again.

"Don't panic," Hector said, smiling. "It's only about two dozen highway robbers, pretty hideous to look at."

"They're robbing the Viscount?"

"And the guests. We have twenty minutes to finish what we were doing earlier before they start raping the women and beating up the men."

This frightened her.

"Oh, Hector," she whispered.

Fumbling with his coat, dropping and picking up some scrolls and diagrams and shoving them into his inside pocket, he said, "I'm only joking. It's Jenna Jameson. According to rumor, she never allows anything remotely inappropriate when she's robbing people. Puritan mentality and all that. Come."

He dashed to the window. After opening it with some difficulty, he looked down.

"The ledge is pretty wide. That's good. Can you see that haystack?"

She could see it, alas – very far below, and slightly to the left. Was Hector insane? Or just kidding? No. She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "I can't leave without my husband, though."

"He's very busy right now. This is no time to ask his permission. Tomorrow, you'll tell him you suddenly felt indisposed and left early."

Stepping out onto the ledge, he moved laterally.

"Come on," he said.

Placing one foot on the ledge, Clarisse took Hector's hand. With a single violent effort she climbed out onto the ledge, ripping the edge of her dress in the process. Cautiously, they moved further along the wall, away from the window. Stopping suddenly, Hector jumped, landing in the haystack. Spitting hay out, he whispered urgently, "Come on, Clarisse! Don't be afraid! And please don't cry

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out!"

"What?"

Balancing on the ledge, she hesitated. This is my finest moment yet, she thought. Taking a deep breath, she leaped forward, thinking courageously and tragically she was as good as dead. He caught her by the waist, breaking her fall. Both collapsed into the haystack. They chuckled nervously.

"Are you all right?" Clarisse was first to ask.

"Yes. You?"

"My foot hurts," she reported unenthusiastically. "And my knee, too."

"That's wonderful. Come along, my intrepid one," he said, rising and winking at her. At least she thought he winked. It was too dark to be certain.

Out front, two robbers armed with muskets were watching the carriage drivers. Peeking from around the corner, Hector scanned the surroundings. Indicating to Clarisse she should follow his lead, he moved soundlessly towards the first carriage, trying to keep out of sight. For the second time that night, Clarisse removed her shoes and followed Hector in her stocking feet.

They reached the carriage. Delicately, Hector opened the door and whispered, "Get in. Try not to shake the carriage too much. Lie down on the floor."

Clarisse, who, despite the very obvious danger, was beginning to enjoy the adventure, complied. Closing the door after her, Hector braced himself and hopped onto the box. Grabbing the whip, he lay a stinging lash across the horses' backs. They started off at a trot.

"Hey! Hey, mister! Stop!" one of the robbers shouted.

Frightened by the flurry of lashes and the musket shot that knocked off Hector's tricorne, the horses broke into an enthusiastic, life-affirming gallop. After considering the possibility of pursuing the carriage, the robbers changed their minds.

Hector drove rapidly into the forest. The road leading to the shore was narrow, too narrow for the luxurious carriage, and yet he did not have the nerve to slow down. After about fifteen minutes of frenzied galloping, he

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looked over his shoulder from the box. No one was after them.

He slowed down.

The forest ended. The road continued along the shore. Less than an hour later, Hector reached the harbor and stopped the carriage. Jumping down, he opened the door.

Clarisse was not lying on the floor anymore. Sitting up bravely, she smiled at him.

"We dead yet?" she asked.

He bowed gallantly, offering his hand.

"We came close a couple of times," he said. "It's all right. We're safe now."

Leaving the carriage behind, they continued leisurely on foot, soon reaching a pier at which two newly built ships of unusual design were docked. Hector put his arm around Clarisse's waist.

"Look at them. Beautiful, aren't they? I designed them, and supervised their construction, too."

Clarisse smiled uncertainly, looking fondly at Hector, three inches shorter than herself, and turning her eyes on the ships again.

"What will my husband think?" she asked with melancholy in her voice.

He paused, swallowing her tactless indifference. Women can never grasp the big picture right away. It has to be introduced to them gradually. In the meantime, they will continue chattering about their husbands and clothes and jewelry and what not. Sooner or later, Clarisse would be able to appreciate a good ship.

"You'll tell him you slipped away and waited in the forest until you thought it was over."

"We should have stayed."

"We would have been robbed. I'm sorry. I can't stand being humiliated."

"So we ran."

"Yes."

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"That's cowardly."

He shrugged.

"What kind of man are you, anyway?"

Freeing herself, she drew away from him, pouting. This annoyed him further.

"What was I supposed to do – fight twenty armed robbers for your amusement?"

"You've never even fought in a duel. Ever. You said so yourself. Everyone duels these days."

"So they say."

"All you're really interested in is ships."

"I know. You already told me that."

He drew her towards himself. She bent down a little. They kissed.

The ocean was perfectly calm. Offering Clarisse his arm, Hector led her up the gangplank on board his creation. The cabin they entered was packed with blankets and clean sheets. Stars shined mysteriously and cozily on the two lovers through the porthole. The vessel rocked ever so slightly from side to side. They were no longer in a hurry. They undressed and made love slowly, savoring each moment.

They fell asleep almost immediately afterwards. Hector was not certain whether the words I love you he heard were whispered by Clarisse or suggested by Morpheus. Suddenly he felt as happy as he had ever been in his life. At dawn, they resumed their lovemaking. Hours later, getting out from under the blankets, dressing and straightening their clothes, they walked on tottering legs to the carriage and rode into town.

The tryst ended in a fight. He wanted to have breakfast. She did not wish to be seen for fear of being compromised. He reacted by saying something perfectly tactless. Incensed, she left.

"Good," he thought.