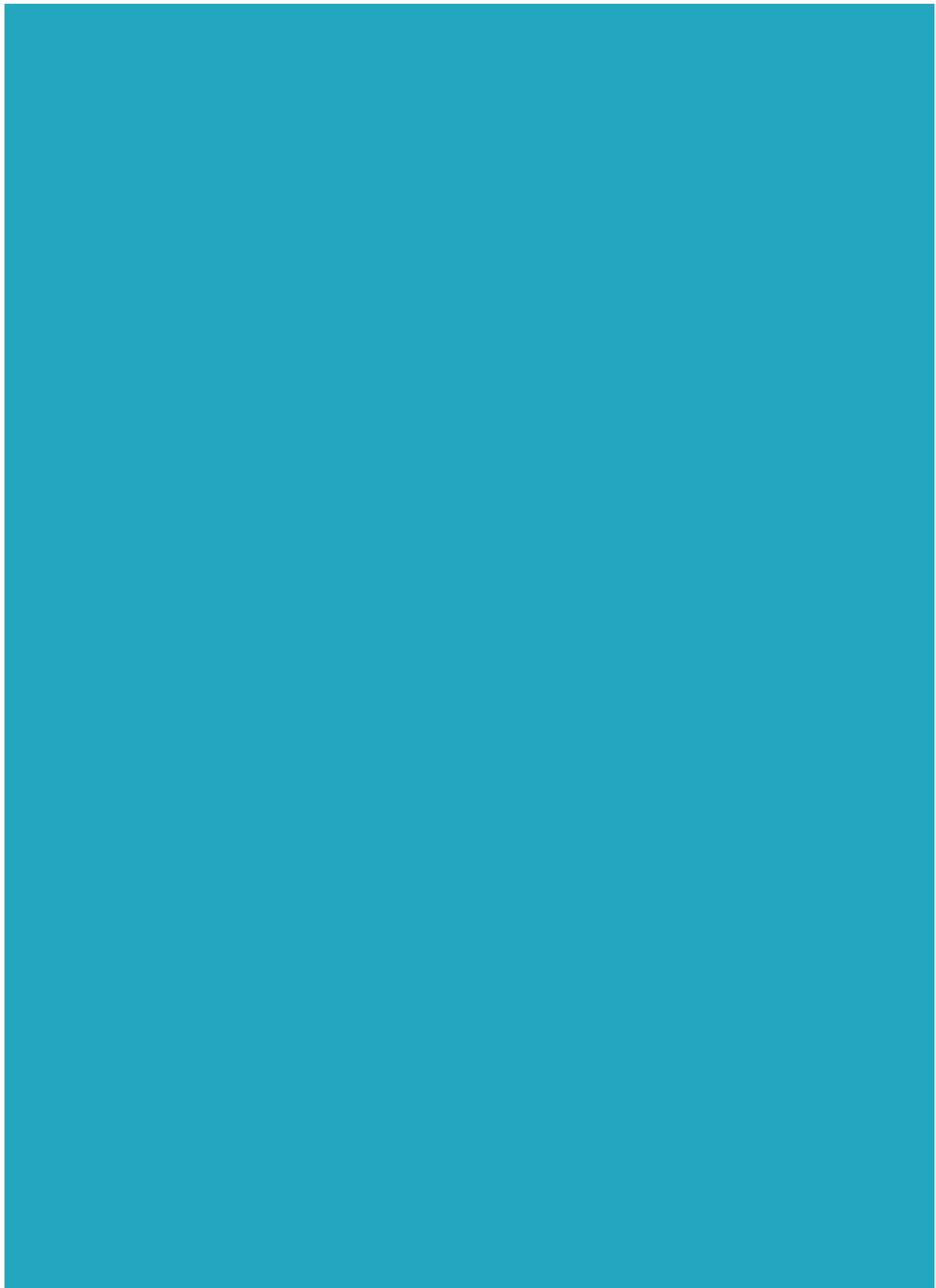


The Love Collection



VOLUME TWO

BARBARA CARTLAND



Barbara 6 Cartland

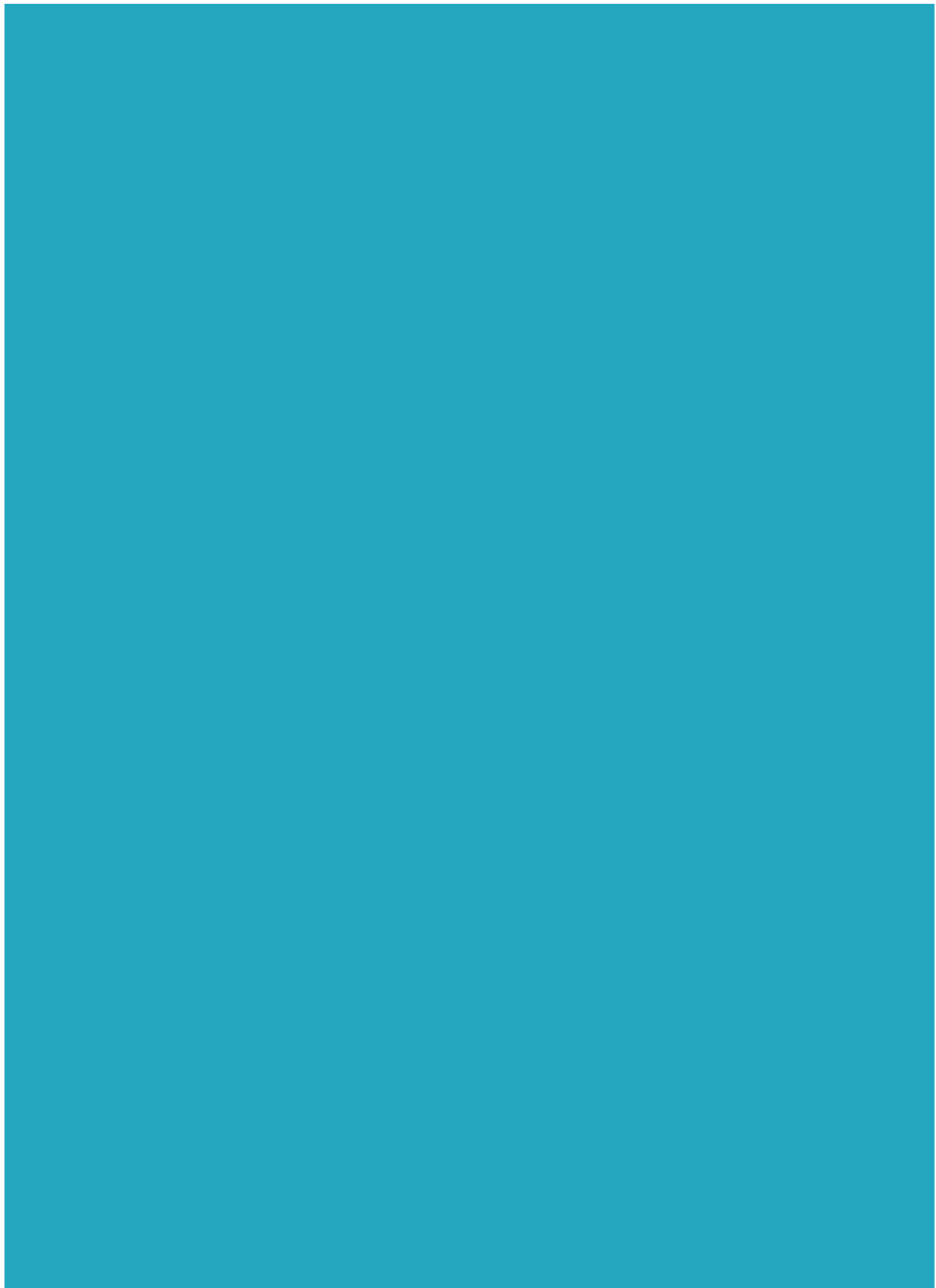


The Penniless Peer



the Barbara Cartland Eternal Collection

www.barbaracartland.com



The Penniless Peer

Eighteen-year-old Fenella is a mischievous as her freckled elfin beauty and feline green eyes suggest – but beneath that puckish charm she hides her ardent desire to do all in her power to make her beloved cousin Periquine, Lord Corbury, happy.

When to her chagrin the dashing Lord returns from the Napoleonic War after fighting with Wellington, penniless and passionately in love with another – a woman of great wealth and even greater beauty, whom he cannot marry without wealth of his own, Fenella sacrifices her private passion to his wellbeing.

Laying her life and her love on the line, she joins Periquine in a swashbuckling and death-defying life of crime as highwaymen, robbers and smugglers. Will their exploits reap the riches he needs? And will Fenella's all-conquering love remain unrequited? Only when Periquine faces losing her forever will he find the answer in his heart...

Chapter One

1817

“Kiss me, Hetty, kiss me again!”

“No — Periquine — I ought to go.”

“You cannot go - you must stay with me! I have been waiting for so long to see you alone,”

There was silence while Lord Corbury kissed Hetty so passionately that she could hardly breathe.

“Dear Periquine,” she murmured after a moment, “I love you when you kiss me like that.”

“And I love you,” he said in his deep voice. “When are you going to marry me, my darling?”

“Oh Periquine!”

He loosened his hold on her for a moment and looked down at her face. It was a very lovely face and it had been acclaimed by all London.

Very fair, with large misty blue eyes, Hetty Baldwyn had been the toast of St. James’s from the moment she appeared on the social scene.

Now after two Seasons she was an unrivalled beauty, the “Incomparable” who was pursued not only by the Bucks and Dandies of the *Beau Monde*, but by all the other young men who wished to be in the fashion.

“What do you mean, ‘Oh Periquine!’?” Lord Corbury asked.

Hetty laid her cheek against his shoulder.

“You know Papa would not allow it.”

“Damn it all, why should we trouble ourselves with your father?” Lord Corbury enquired. “We will run away, Hetty. We will be married, and then there is nothing he can do about it.”

He stopped speaking because Hetty was looking at him in wide eyed surprise.

“You mean go to — Gretna Green?” she enquired in shocked tones.

“Why not?” he asked roughly. “Once we are over the border and married, there is little your father can do except berate us, and who cares about that?”

Hetty pouted her red lips and looked more alluring than ever.

“But Periquine, I want a big wedding with bridesmaids and all my friends there. I have planned my gown already, and I want to wear Mama’s diamond tiara.”

She saw a dark and ominous look in Lord Corbury’s eyes and added hastily,

“Of course you would make a most alluring and handsome bridegroom!”

“What the devil does it matter how or where we are married as long as we are?” Lord Corbury enquired. “Bridesmaids, spectators, they are all of no importance! What matters is us, Hetty! You will be my wife and then no-one can take you from me.”

“It would be wonderful,” Hetty breathed softly. “At the same time Periquine, I would not wish to upset Papa. He is proud of me and it would break his heart if I did anything so shameful as running away to Gretna Green.”

“Then what are we to do?” Lord Corbury asked despondently.

He was an exceedingly good looking young man, tall with broad shoulders, and features which caused a flutter in the heart of every maiden on whom he cast his grey eyes.

He also had a slightly raffish air about him which even the fastidious Hetty found irresistible.

She disengaged herself now from his arms and stood looking up at him, her riding-habit of turquoise blue velvet revealing the exquisite curves of her slight figure.

She had taken off her hat with its gauze veil when she had entered the room, and the sun coming through the diamond-paned casement-windows seemed to halo the pale gold of her hair and gave her an ethereal beauty which made Lord Corbury gaze at her as if spell-bound.

“I love you, Hetty,” he said unsteadily, “I cannot live without you.”

“And I love you, Periquine,” she replied, “but we must be careful, very careful. I have not told Papa that you are home, so he has no idea that we are together at the moment.”

“Then what is your excuse for being here?” Lord Corbury asked.

“I told Papa I was riding to the Priory to call on your house-keeper, Mrs. Buckle, who is ill. He commended me on being so thoughtful.”

“He is certain to learn sooner or later that I am back,” Lord Corbury said sulkily.

“I have thought of that,” Hetty replied. “I shall tell him that Mrs. Buckle expects you any day. If one is going to lie, one should always tell a good one.”

“And do you think I enjoy all these lies and subterfuges?” Lord Corbury asked.

“What else can we do?” Hetty asked.

“You can marry me!” he answered sharply.

“And what would we live on?” she enquired.

“We could live here.”

He looked round the room as he spoke, noting for the first time that, while the wood panelling was old and beautiful, the rest of the furnishings were threadbare and needed renewing.

The fringe was falling away from the velvet curtains, the pattern had almost disappeared from the once valuable Persian carpet, several of the chairs needed repairing, and it was easy to see there were places on the walls where pictures had once hung.

Hetty followed his gaze.

“I know you love your home, Periquine.” she said, “but it would cost thousands of pounds, really thousands, to put it in order and make it habitable.”

“And I have not even a thousand pence,” Lord Corbury said bitterly.

“I know, I know,” Hetty said, “and that is why it would be quite useless for you to speak to Papa or even to hint that you wish to marry me. He is determined that I shall make a brilliant marriage. At the moment he favours Sir Nicholas Waringham.”

“Waringham!” Lord Corbury ejaculated furiously. “Do you think you would be happy with that stuck-up, stiff necked snob, who is far too conscious of his own consequence?”

“He is very very wealthy,” Hetty said softly.

“While I am penniless!” Lord Corbury exclaimed. “A penniless Peer! That is a joke, is it not?”

Hetty appeared to shiver.

“I must go, Periquine, I dare not stay here talking to you, but I will try to come over tomorrow. I will tell Papa Mrs. Buckle is still poorly, that I have promised to take her some nourishing soup. Mama will approve of that too, she is always saying I do not pay enough attention to the sick and poor.”

“Then pay attention to me! “ Lord Corbury demanded, taking her into his arms and lifting her chin to look down at her blue eyes. “You are so lovely, so incredibly, unbelievably lovely!”

His lips were on hers and as he felt her respond to his passion, he drew her closer and closer still.

There was no doubt he aroused an emotion in the beautiful Hetty which few other men were able to do.

She was considered rather cold by the majority of her admirers, but now her lips quivered beneath Lord Corbury’s and her arms crept round his neck.

When finally he raised his head, her eyes were warm with passion and her breasts were moving tumultuously beneath her velvet jacket.

“I love you! I love you!” he cried. “God, how I love you!”

He would have kissed her again, but she put out her hands to stop him.

“No, Periquine, I must go, it is getting late. We must not arouse any suspicion, or it will be impossible for us to meet again.”

She turned towards the door as she spoke, and when he would have followed her she warned him,

“Do not come with me. My groom must not see you.”

“You will come tomorrow?” Lord Corbury pleaded.

“If it is possible,” Hetty promised. “But Sir Nicholas is arriving to stay with us and Papa will expect me to amuse him.”

“Curse Waringham ! Why should he have so much money, when my pockets are to let?”

“That is the question I have already asked myself,” Hetty answered. “Periquine, I promise you things would be very different if only you were rich.”

She gave him a provocative glance from under her long eye lashes and added,

“Can you not make some money somehow? If you had only a small fortune, I am sure Papa would look favourably upon you. After all, yours is an ancient title.”

“As old as the Priory,” Lord Corbury replied, “and in the same rotten state of disrepair.”

His voice was bitter again. Hetty turned back to stand on tip-toe and plant a soft kiss on his cheek before she went across the room as lightly as a butterfly.

She opened the door, made a graceful gesture with her hand that she knew herself was very alluring and then disappeared, leaving Lord Corbury with an impression of beguiling blue eyes and smiling red lips.

He stood for a moment staring at the door when it shut behind her as if he expected her to return, and then he walked gloomily to the window to stand looking out at the unkempt lawns, the broken sundial, the flower-beds which were a mass of weeds, and the balustrade edging the terrace which was overgrown with moss.

As he stood still deep in his thoughts, unexpectedly he heard a sound behind him. There was a faint click and then a slight scrape of something being moved.

He turned round. A part of the panelling beside the fireplace was opening and as he watched it, a small face peered round the room. Lord Corbury saw two very large enquiring eyes, below an oval forehead and a head of very deep red hair which curled in untidy profusion.

Lord Corbury stared.

“Fenella !” he ejaculated and walked to the open panel.

The newcomer gave a kind of squeak of surprise at seeing him. Putting out his hand he took her by the arm and dragged her into the room, shaking her.

“What are you doing here, Fenella?” he stormed. “How dare you hide in the Priest’s Hole! Your behaviour is intolerable! I have a very good mind to give you a good spanking!”

She swayed backwards and forwards with the fury of his shaking and at the same time her eyes laughed up at him

“No, no! Periquine!” she cried. “Last time you spanked me it hurt abominably! And anyway I am now too old.”

He released his hold on her.

“What do you mean ‘too old?’”

“I am eighteen. Had you forgotten?”

“Good God, it’s not possible!” he exclaimed. “You were only a child when I went away.”

“Nonsense!” she retorted. “I was nearly fifteen, but I looked younger. Now I am a grown-up young lady!”

“You certainly do not look or behave like one,” he answered.

It was true she was very small and her head barely reached his shoulder. He might be excused for thinking she was very much younger than her age.

She wore a cotton frock which she had long ago outgrown, and it clung to her body revealing the new maturity of her small breasts.

It had lost its colour through frequent washing, but nevertheless it could not disguise the perfection of her figure or the fact that her hair caught in the sunshine had fiery lights which looked like tiny tongues of flame.

Her eyes seemed over-large for her face. Their colour was the strange green of the pools in the wood, and they had the same clarity as the streams which glittered and glimmered in the sunshine seeping through the branches of the trees.

She was not classically beautiful like Hetty, but she had a kind of elfin loveliness which was irresistible. Her lips curved upwards at the corners and her eyes seemed to dance with laughter.

Her skin was white except that on her small slightly uptilted nose there were a number of freckles.

“Eighteen!” Lord Corbury exclaimed, “and still getting into mischief! Perhaps you will explain to me what the hell you are doing in the Priest’s Hole eavesdropping on my conversation.”

“It was very edifying!” Fenella said with a mischievous glance.

He put out his hand as if to take hold of her shoulder and shake her again, but she slipped quickly out of his reach.

“I could not help it, Periquine ! I could not really!” she explained. “I heard you coming and there was nothing I could do but hide myself. I knew Hetty would not be pleased to see me.”

“Why ever not?” Lord Corbury enquired.

“Hetty does not much like other women,” Fenella replied, “especially when she has a romantic assignation with a handsome Beau!”

She looked at Lord Corbury as she spoke, noting the intricate folds of his white cravat, his exquisitely cut coat, and tight yellow pantaloons.

“You do look smart, Periquine ! I thought you were irresistible in your uniform, but now you are a perfect Adonis.”

“I wish to God I were back in the Army,” Lord Corbury snapped. “At least I had something else to occupy my mind besides lack of money.”

“I was afraid you would be upset when you learnt what was happening on the estate,” Fenella said sympathetically.

She perched herself as she spoke on the arm of a sofa.

“Why did not somebody tell me?” Lord Corbury enquired.

“I did think of writing to you,” Fenella replied, “but what good would it have done? You were in France, and even if you had received my letter, which I doubted, there was little that could be altered until you returned.”

“And what do you imagine I can do now?” Lord Corbury asked aggressively. “Swayer came to see me in London the day before yesterday and informed me that I could not let the farms unless they are first repaired, and that I could not repair them because I had no money! How could things have got into such a state?”

“Your father was very ill before he died,” Fenella said quietly, “and things just went from bad to worse. MacDonald gave up his farm, and Grimble refused to continue unless the barns were repaired, and naturally no-one would rent them as they are now.”

She paused and added almost reluctantly,

“The other farms have been without tenants for nearly three years.”

“I asked Swayer why he did not write to me,” Lord Corbury said, “and he said it was not his business.”

“I suppose that Johnson, your father’s agent, should have done so,” Fenella said. “But he was always a surly and difficult man, and he was so incensed when he received no salary for six months that he just packed up and went. He did not even say goodbye.”

“Empty farms! No rents coming in and the house collapsing over my head!” Lord Corbury exclaimed. “I have seen the holes in the roof, I have seen how many ceilings there are down.”

“The ceiling in the Picture Gallery is the only one that really matters,” Fenella said.

“Picture Gallery!” Lord Corbury scoffed. “Why should that matter? There are no pictures there. They have all gone years ago.”

“They had to sell the last Van Dyke so that your father could have a few luxuries in the six months before he died,” Fenella said. “I believe they obtained quite a reasonable price for it, but there was already so much owing, so many debts unpaid, so many wages overdue, I am afraid there will be nothing left.”

“There is nothing left.”

“Oh Periquine, I am so sorry! I have been so looking forward to your coming home. I have thought about it and longed to see you, and now everything is spoilt.”

“You can hardly expect me to be jubilant,” Lord Corbury said sourly.

“No, of course not,” Fenella agreed. “And you also want to — marry — Hetty?”

It was a question spoken in a soft nervous voice.

“Of course I want to marry her!” Lord Corbury replied. “She is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen! And she loves me, Fenella. I know she loves me. We could run away together if it were not for that pompous and snobbish old father of hers.”

“Sir Virgil is very proud of his daughter,” Fenella said as if she were finding an excuse for him.

“I should be proud of her too, if she were my wife,” Lord Corbury said. “What the hell am I to do, Fenella?”

He walked back to the window as he spoke, and Fenella watching him realised it was just like old times.

There were six years between them in age, and yet, because they were second cousins and lived within half a mile of each other, they had always spent much time together, first as children, then when Periquine came home from school in the holidays and found that in the near vicinity there were few companions of his own age.

He had treated Fenella as if she were a small boy, compelling her to do his bidding, fag for him, run after him, fetch and carry, and because there was no-one else to be his confidante.

Now without really thinking about it they were back on the old easy terms they had always known.

“How much money have you got, Periquine?” Fenella asked.

“None, absolutely none!” he declared. “After I had seen Swayer, I gave up the rooms I had taken in Dover Street, sacked my valet, sold all my horses

except the two I have driven down here today and paid up the greater part of my debts.”

He paused a moment. Then he said, almost speaking to himself,

“I curse myself for being such a fool as to give that ‘bit of muslin’ two gowns she fancied only two weeks ago. But how could I know that things were so desperate?”

“You still have the Priory,” Fenella said hesitantly.

“Yes, I still have the Priory,” Lord Corbury answered. “But I could not sell it even if I wished to because it is entailed to my son. The son I am not likely ever to be able to afford!”

“At least it is a roof over your head.”

“And I should be grateful for that,” Lord Corbury agreed ironically. “I also have a thousand unproductive acres of land which I cannot afford to farm myself and certainly am unlikely to find tenants who will do it for me. Do you realise, Fenella, that since the war all over the country farmers are going bankrupt?”

“I do realise it,” Fenella answered, “and I think it is disgraceful! While we were at war with the French we all needed food and were grateful if the farmers could feed the country. Yet now in 1817 only two years after Waterloo, the same men who were cheered and acclaimed cannot even raise a loan to carry them over the harvest.”

“They say the country banks are going broke one after another,” Lord Corbury said, “so you can hardly expect them to grant loans which are never likely to be repaid.”

Fenella sighed.

“What are you going to do?”

“That is what I am asking you,” he answered.

“I was hoping that when you came home you would be able to help people on your estate. But it does not now appear you will be able to do so.”

“What people?” Lord Corbury asked without much interest in his voice.

“Well, the most important is Mrs. Buckle,” Fenella answered. “After all, Periquine, she is your responsibility. She has been at the Priory for nearly fifty years. She first came when she was twelve as a scullery-maid to your grandfather.”

“What is the matter with her?” Lord Corbury asked. “I saw her when I arrived and she seems all right to me.”

“She is all right in her health,” Fenella answered. “It is Simon, her son. You know how she dotes on him.”

“I understood he came through the war without a scratch.”

“He did and he married a girl from the next village last year. As he wanted to earn a living, he borrowed twenty pounds so that he could buy a horse and cart and set up as the local carrier. The old man who used to be the carrier died two years ago.

“Well, what is wrong with that?” Lord Corbury enquired.

“There is nothing wrong with it except that he went to Isaac Goldstein, who is one of your new tenants. He has rented the Old Mill House.”

“The Old Mill,” Lord Corbury said wrinkling his forehead. “I thought that was too dilapidated for anyone to take.”

“He pays only a very small rent for it,” Fenella said, “and he is the horriddest man you can possibly imagine. I would never have let him put a foot on the estate, if it had been anything to do with me. But Johnson let him the house because, I imagine, he was desperate for tenants. Periquine, he is a Usurer!”

“Here in Little Coombe!” Lord Corbury exclaimed. “Good heavens, what do we want a Usurer for?”

“We do not,” Fenella answered, “except for someone like Simon. Mr. Goldstein goes regularly to Brighton and all the towns nearby, and I understand he has a thriving business. But he is crooked, really crooked, and that is what is so wrong.”

Lord Corbury moved a little way from the window obviously interested in what she was saying.

“What do you mean he is crooked?”

“Well Simon borrowed twenty pounds from him a year ago,” Fenella answered, “and Mr. Goldstein says he now owes him a hundred, and it goes up every month.”

She made a gesture with her hands.

“How can Simon possibly pay him back £100? And you do see that however hard he works he gets deeper and deeper into debt.”

“It is their usual method of extortion,” Lord Corbury exclaimed, “I may be a fool in many ways, Fenella, but I have never been so cork-brained as to get into the clutches of Usurers. I have seen only too often what they have done to my brother-officers. One chap actually committed suicide because

they squeezed him dry and went on threatening until he just could not pay any more.”

Fenella clasped her hands together,

“I knew you would understand, Periquine,” she said, “and that is why I hoped you would do something when you came home.”

“What can I do?” Lord Corbury asked. “I certainly cannot give Simon £100!”

“It is worse than that, it is not only Simon,” Fenella said.

“Who else is involved?” Lord Corbury enquired.

“Well, you remember Mrs. Jarvis who kept the ‘Green Man?’”

“I remember Jarvis well,” Lord Corbury replied.

“He died about five years ago, but Mrs. Jarvis carried on by herself. She had Joe, her son, to help her until he went to the war. But she managed after he left and she saved every penny she made for him, so that when he came home he could take his father’s place.”

“What happened?” Lord Corbury asked.

“Mrs. Jarvis fell ill in the winter before last. It was very cold, and I think she economised on coal so as to save more money. Anyway she got pneumonia, and when she was dying Isaac Goldstein came to see her.”

“Why should he do that?” Lord Corbury asked.

“It appeared he was married to her sister, and whether she sent for him or whether he just chanced to drop in I do not know. Anyway she gave him her money in safe keeping for Joe when he came back from the war. She also asked him to look after the Inn or, if it had to be sold, to keep the purchase money for Joe too.”

“Go on,” Lord Corbury said.

“Mrs. Jarvis died and when Joe came back and was told what his mother had arranged, Isaac Goldstein said that his mother had left him nothing.”

“It is impossible!” Lord Corbury exclaimed. “How could he get away with it?”

“Apparently he just said to Joe, ‘You prove that she gave me any money or that she wished you to have the proceeds of the sale of the ‘Green Man’.”

“He had sold it then.”

“Yes he sold it a week after Mrs. Jarvis died, and according to local gossip he sold it well. But of course no-one knows for certain. It was quite a flourishing little Inn in its way, and there was also the money she had saved.

Joe reckons it must have been over a thousand pounds in all and he has not had a penny.”

“This is the most disgraceful thing I have ever heard!” Lord Corbury exclaimed, “I would like to tell this man Goldstein what I think of him.”

“A lot of people have tried to do that,” Fenella said, “but it does not do any good. He does not care, he is rich and he is a miser. I have seen him...”

She stopped suddenly and her face lit up.

“Listen! Periquine ! I have an idea!”

“What is it?” he asked.

“I have thought of how you can get back the money for Simon Buckle, for Joe Jarvis, and perhaps make some for yourself.”

“What are you talking about?” Lord Corbury enquired.

Fenella rose from the sofa to stand with her hands clasped together, her green eyes staring across the room as if she was concentrating fiercely.

“I know where Isaac Goldstein hides his money,” she said. “I have seen him come back from his trips to the coast and take bags and bags from his cart, carry them into the house and hide them under the floor-boards.”

“How on earth have you seen that?” Lord Corbury enquired.

Fenella drew a deep breath.

“I have told you he is a horrible man. Well, he has two very fierce dogs who guard his house when he is away, to protect his money of course. But, Periquine, he does not feed them properly. I suppose he thinks it keeps them savage if they are hungry. He gives them little enough when he is there, but when he is away they often go for three or four days without food and sometimes even water.”

“The dirty swine! But what can you do about it?” Lord Corbury said.

“I feed them,” Fenella answered.

“You feed them !” he repeated incredulously.

“I started by throwing them food over the fence,” Fenella explained. “So now when they see me they wag their tails and I can do anything I like with them. Of course Isaac Goldstein does not know this.”

“But you are quite certain they would not hurt you?” Lord Corbury asked.

“I really believe now they would protect me against anyone else,” Fenella smiled. “But do you not see, Periquine, it makes it so easy! We will take Goldstein’s ill-gotten money, give Jarvis and Simon what they are owed and

perhaps there will be enough over for you to do at least a few repairs to the farms.”

“Are you suggesting I should steal?” Lord Corbury asked in a voice of thunder.

“I am suggesting that you should take from the rich and give to the poor,” Fenella retorted.

“I have never heard such a ridiculous idea in the whole of my life!” Lord Corbury exclaimed. “You do not suppose I would stoop to being a thief, do you?”

“Well, if you will not do so, Simon will remain in the clutches of this monster,” Fenella said, “and Joe Jarvis is in such depths of despair that he just drinks away every penny he earns while he ruminates over the manner that he has been treated.”

“I should have thought he could do something better than that,” Lord Corbury remarked.

“What can he do?” Fenella enquired. “There was no witness present in the room when Mrs. Jarvis handed over the money, only we all know in the village how hard she worked, and how she saved every penny for her Joe. We also know that she certainly would not have wanted her brother-in-law, whom she hardly knew, to sell ‘The Green Man’ and put the money in his pocket.”

“Perhaps I could speak to a lawyer on young Jarvis’s behalf,” Lord Corbury suggested.

“And how will you pay him?” Fenella enquired.

Lord Corbury made an impatient exclamation and walked towards the window.

“I must say, Periquine, I think you have grown very old,” a soft voice said behind him.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“We used to do some daring things together,” Fenella answered. “Do you remember when we stole all the prize peaches from the Lord Lieutenant’s green-house because his gardener was so offensive to all the poorer people who entered for the Flower Show and made certain they never had a chance of winning anything? We ate some of the peaches and threw the rest in the lake. No-one ever discovered who the thieves were.”

“We were young then,” Lord Corbury said.

“And another time you took your father’s horses without his knowledge and we drove to a Mill on the Downs. It was one of the most wonderful days I have ever spent in my whole life, Periquine. Do you remember how exciting it was?”

“It was indeed,” he answered. “Thirty-eight rounds and both bruisers so exhausted at the end they could hardly strike at each other.”

“We drove the horses home,” Fenella said, “and because old Sam the groom was fond of us he never gave us away. I remember when your father asked what we had been doing, you said we had been fishing. At least you were not afraid in those days.”

“Damn you, I am not afraid! But stealing is just not the sort of thing a gentleman does.”

“It is not much use being a gentleman with only pride in your pocket,” Fenella said.

“It is the only thing left for me,” Lord Corbury said bitterly.

“Well, it will not get you very far with Hetty,” Fenella said. “It is not only Sir Virgil who is ambitious.”

Lord Corbury turned round angrily from the window.

“You will not say anything against Hetty. She is perfect! The most beautiful, the most wonderful, the most adorable creature on whom any man has ever set eyes. I have known a lot of women since I have been away, Fenella, but there has never been anyone as beautiful as Hetty.”

“Yes she is very — beautiful,” Fenella agreed with a little sigh on the words.

“You would not be bad-looking, Fenella, if you took a little more trouble with yourself,” Lord Corbury said with the critical familiarity of a brother. “Why do you not get yourself a new gown and take more trouble over your hair.”

“A new gown!” Fenella laughed. “You seem to have forgotten my condition is very much the same as yours.”

“I am quite certain your father is not bankrupt,” Lord Corbury retorted.

“Oh, he is not bankrupt,” Fenella answered, “but he has no money to spend on frills and furbelows for his daughter. He is intent at the moment on buying a first edition of Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’. Three months ago it was a first edition of Francis Bacon and the month before that a very expensive volume of Alexander Pope.”

“But if you are eighteen, surely your mother wants you to meet people and go out into society.”

“Mama!”

Fenella threw up her hands.

“You have been away a long time, Periquine. You know Mama is only interested in her garden. She is buying some special lilies from China. The Azaleas which arrived last week from India cost an absolute fortune. Papa and Mama still behave as they did when I was a child - as if I did not exist. When they remember I am there, they send me on an errand.”

“Poor Fenella, it was always the same, was it not?” Lord Corbury said.

He moved beside her, put his arm round her shoulder and gave her an affectionate hug.

“Well, we seem to be in the same plight!” he said. “Which, if you think about it, is nothing new.”

“We used to manage to have some fun all the same,” Fenella said softly.

“We will have some more in the future,” Lord Corbury promised.

There was a silence while he was still holding Fenella close against him.

“Mrs. Buckle has not had any wages for nine months,” Fenella said quietly, “and she told me to ask you for something with which to pay the trades-people. Since the gamekeepers all left, there have not been any rabbits or pigeons off the estate, although of course you can go out and shoot some.”

“If I can afford the cartridges,” Lord Corbury said bitterly.

He released Fenella and then stood staring down at her.

“How much risk is there in taking this money you were talking about?” he asked.

Fenella gave a little cry of delight.

“You will do it? Oh, Periquine, I knew you would! Even if there is not a penny over for yourself, you will be able to help Joe and Simon, and perhaps there will be enough to pay Mrs. Buckle and old Headstone, the butcher. He told me to tell you he would be deeply obliged for even a little towards his account.”

“Curse you, it is crazy!” Lord Corbury said. “But it does not appear as if I have much alternative. Is there anything in the house left to sell, Fenella?”

“Not unless you sell the beds,” she said, “and they will not fetch much. The hangings are all moth-eaten and every blanket is full of holes, as I found when I helped Mrs. Buckle make your bed.”

“You knew I was coming?” Lord Corbury asked sharply.

“I knew you would come soon after Mr. Swayer had seen you. He came down last week and had a look round.”

Lord Corbury was silent for a moment, and then he said,

“Well if I have to be hanged, I may as well make it worth their while. When do we start on this crazy robbery of yours?”

“Isaac Goldstein went away to-day,” Fenella answered. “That means that he is very unlikely to return before the day after tomorrow. It would be safest if we went tomorrow.”

“You had it all planned out for me, did you not?” Lord Corbury said accusingly.

“No, I swear to you I only thought of it at this moment,” Fenella answered. “And you know quite well I did not expect you home quite so soon, or I should not have had to hide in the Priest’s Hole when Hetty arrived.”

Lord Corbury looked at her searchingly to see if she was telling the truth.

“If I thought this was one of your plots to get me into trouble, Fenella -” he began.

“No, Periquine, no!” she interrupted. “You know I do not wish you to get into trouble. That anyway is a most unfair thing to say, because in the past half the time I took the blame for your misdeeds. What about when your cricket-ball went through the Church window? You would not own up because you said your father would have you flogged at Eton for it.”

“Good Lord, what a memory you have!” Lord Corbury said. “That was years ago.”

“I have not forgotten anything,” Fenella said, “and I have been hoping that when you came back it would be just like old times.”

“At least in those days I had a father who paid for things,” Lord Corbury said. “Now I have to find the money myself.”

“And you will find it — I know you will!” Fenella cried enthusiastically. “You have always been clever, Periquine, you always had a quick brain. Look how well you did at school! And the Duke of Wellington said you were one of the best Captains he ever had under his command.”

“Fat lot of use it is now!” Lord Corbury said disagreeably.

“I think you are being unduly despondent,” Fenella said. “You will think of something brilliant sooner or later. Meanwhile let us collect a little money. You could call it a — fund for — Hetty if you — like.”

She spoke the last words hesitatingly and she saw Lord Corbury's eyes light up.

"That is a good ideas Fenella," he said. "I will collect money somehow, even by the most nefarious means, and when I have enough I can go to Sir Virgil and ask him for Hetty's hand. It will not seem so reprehensible if I am doing it so that I can marry her."

"No of course it will not," Fenella agreed, "and you do — love her — very very — much — do you not?"

"You know I do," Lord Corbury said. "And if it means I can marry her, I swear to you, Fenella, I shall not quibble at robbing the Bank of England!"

"Then you must indeed — love her," Fenella said in a very small voice.

Chapter Two

Lord Corbury, sitting in front of the fire with a glass of wine in his hand, heard a noise at the window. He turned his head to see Fenella clambering through the casement.

“Why do you not come in at the door?” he enquired, only to perceive the answer to his question as she came towards him.

She was wearing pantaloons and a tightly buttoned jacket. With her slim figure she looked very much like a small boy.

“Good heavens!” Lord Corbury ejaculated.

“They are yours,” Fenella explained. “You wore them last when you were at Eton.”

She laughed and added “Do not look so shocked! You must realise that long skirts are not conducive to climbing through the fan-light of the door, which is what I shall have to do.”

“Well I only hope no one sees you,” Lord Corbury said.

He made no effort to rise but lay back in his chair, and Fenella knew by the expression on his face that he was feeling depressed.

“What has happened?” she asked as she reached his side. “Did Hetty not come this afternoon?”

“She came,” Lord Corbury replied.

“And she has upset you?”

“She made me feel how impossible it is for me ever to contemplate marrying her,” Lord Corbury said sourly.

“What did she say?” Fenella enquired.

“She did not put it into so many words,” Lord Corbury replied, “but I received the impression that no suitor with less than £50,000 in the bank would be acceptable to her father.”

Fenella pursed her lips together to prevent herself from saying aloud what she thought. After a moment Lord Corbury went on,

“I may as well acknowledge defeat right away! What is the point of fighting when there is not a chance of winning?”

“That is exactly what we might have said in England during the war,” Fenella answered. “Who would have thought that a little island like ours, so tiny on the map, could defeat the might of Bonaparte when he had already conquered nearly the whole of Europe.”

There was a pause. Then Lord Corbury said,

“You are very sweet, Fenella, and somehow you always manage to cheer me up. Do you really believe in miracles?”

“Of course I do,” Fenella declared, “especially where you are concerned. I am sure, Periquine, that God helps those who help themselves.”

“So you are still intent on this madcap robbery?” Lord Corbury said.

“Do you suppose I have dressed myself up like this just to sit beside you in heavy gloom?” Fenella enquired.

She looked at Lord Corbury’s glass and added suspiciously,

“You are not drinking to drown your sorrows, are you?”

“Precious little chance of that,” Lord Corbury replied. “This is the last bottle in the cellar. After tonight I shall not be able to drink anything but water.”

“After tonight things may be very different,” Fenella said.

She walked across the room to the window.

“We must start soon. We ought to arrive at the Old Mill when it is dusk but not too dark for us to see our way to the house. We also have to go through the wood.”

Lord Corbury tossed back the rest of the wine that was in his glass.

“Let us get going,” he said recklessly. “Do you want me to wear some sort of fancy-dress?”

Fenella regarded him critically. He might be poor but at the moment he appeared as elegant and as exquisitely garbed as any Beau she had ever seen.

Then she remembered that when these clothes were worn out he would not be able to afford others.

“Put on the oldest things you have, Periquine,” she said. “We have got to climb over a fence and I will have to stand on your shoulders to get in through the fan-light. You will find some of the garments you wore before you went into the Army upstairs in your closet. I tidied them only last week. And wear a black cravat - it is far less noticeable than what you have on now.”

“I suppose there is sense in what you are saying,” Lord Corbury said grudgingly.

He went from the room and Fenella heard him going upstairs.

She picked up his empty glass and carried it to a tray which stood on a side-table. Then she looked round the room to see if there was anything else she could tidy.

She had been over during the morning and had made the Salon appear as habitable as possible. There were bowls of flowers on the table, and while the cushions were old and worn they were clean because she had washed and pressed them herself.

Yet there was no doubt the whole place looked sadly shabby, and she knew only too well how it must appear in Hetty's eyes.

The Priory was, Fenella thought, as far as she was concerned, the most beautiful place in the world. After the Dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII, the King had given the Priory and its estates to one of his courtiers who had served him well, and invested him with a Knighthood.

By a miracle the Priory and its lands had remained in the hands of the family through the troublesome times of Cromwell's dictatorship, and on his Restoration Charles II created the barony of Corbury.

‘However poor Periquine may be,’ Fenella told herself, ‘I am glad that he cannot sell the Priory or dispose of its lands.’

Somehow she felt sure that something would happen which would enable him one day to live in his home in the style in which he wished to do. She could only pray that that day was not too far ahead.

She knew Periquine so well. She knew how easily he got depressed, how quickly his spirits would rise again. But there was a depth, although he was not really aware of it, in his character and a resilience which would eventually, she was certain, carry him through to victory.

‘He must succeed, he must !’ she told herself, and then with a drop of her heart realised that success for Periquine meant that he would marry Hetty.

It was hard to contemplate Periquine being married to anyone, but least of all to the girl they had both known since they were children.

Hetty Baldwyn had always been spoilt and had shown it by her air of disdain and condescension towards other girls, and the manner in which she assumed as her right that every man of her acquaintance should be at her feet.

While Periquine had been away with the Army in France, Hetty had captivated all the young men of the neighbourhood and had then gone to London to captivate the *Beau Monde*.

'It is understandable that Periquine cannot resist her,' Fenella told herself now.

She thought of Hetty's classical features, golden hair, unblemished skin, and knew she was not likely to be missed by Periquine's roving eye once he returned from the war.

'All I want is his happiness,' Fenella thought, but she knew if she was honest with herself that she did not feel he would find happiness with Hetty Baldwyn.

She was still standing in the Salon with a worried expression in her green eyes when Lord Corbury came downstairs again.

He had obeyed her instructions and was wearing a very old pair of pantaloons which Fenella knew had been darned on one leg.

He had on a jacket which having been made for him some years ago, was slightly too small. A black cravat encircled his throat and was tied in an elegant knot on the front of his shirt.

Nevertheless he managed to look smart because he wore his clothes with an air and they seemed to accentuate the raffish glint which was never far from his eye.

Fenella gave a little laugh.

"Can this really be the Robber Chief in person?" she asked mockingly.

"If you say any more," Lord Corbury replied, "I will give you what I used to give my fag at Eton who looked just like you in that suit - six of the best."

"I am sure you were a bully," Fenella retorted, "and if you stay here bullying me we shall never reach the Old Mill before it is too dark for the dogs to differentiate between friend and foe."

"Oh Lord, the dogs!" Lord Corbury ejaculated. "I had forgotten them!"

"I had not," Fenella answered. "I have brought them some food, it is outside the window."

"Do we have to enter and leave the house in this surreptitious manner?" Lord Corbury enquired.

"You can go out through the door if you like," Fenella answered, "but I certainly do not want Mrs. Buckle or old Barnes to see me. Not that I expect

that they would move from the kitchen fire at that very moment.”

“Let us take no chances,” Lord Corbury said with an air of resignation.

He followed Fenella over the window-sill and out onto the terrace outside.

Being so small she had some difficulty in clambering out while he could almost do it in one stride.

There was a basket on the moss-covered flagstones and Fenella picked it up.

“I hope you have brought plenty,” Lord Corbury said.

“There are always masses of scraps at home,” Fenella answered, “our cook is very extravagant.”

“It is more than Mrs. Buckle is ever likely to be,” Lord Corbury said bitterly. “As she informed me tonight she cannot cook what she has not got.”

“Poor Periquine, are you hungry?” Fenella asked.

“Not at the moment,” Lord Corbury replied, “but I have a suspicion that by the end of the week I shall be setting rabbit-snares with old bits of wire, and trying to charm pigeons down from the nest.”

“No cartridges!” Fenella said perceptively.

“Only a few,” Lord Corbury answered. “God knows I have never seen a house containing so little of everything.”

There was a bitterness in his tone which told Fenella that he must have made an inspection of the place during the day and she wondered if it was after Hetty had left in the afternoon.

Perhaps she had not stayed for long. Lord Corbury had been cheerful enough when she had left him to go home for luncheon.

“I have not told Papa and Mama you are here yet,” she had said. “Not that they would be particularly interested, but I thought the fewer people who knew, the less likelihood there would be of Sir Virgil hearing of your arrival.”

“That was thoughtful of you,” Lord Corbury approved. “The only thing I have to live for is Hetty’s visits and if she does not come to see me I shall feel like blowing a hole through my head.”

Fenella did not answer this. She had only hoped that Hetty would make an effort to go to the Priory during the afternoon.

She would not do so, Fenella knew only too well, unless it suited her. If she herself wanted to see Periquine, she would get there whoever tried to stop

her. It was a question of going out of her way to bring him any comfort. Fenella very much doubted if she would make an effort.

'I am being catty,' she told herself. 'I must not be unkind about Hetty. And I must not be jealous of her because she is so beautiful.'

Even as she thought of it, Fenella knew it was not Hetty's beauty that made her jealous, but the fact that Periquine was interested in her.

Always in the past when he had been home he had seemed to belong to her, there being few distractions to take him from her side.

She had gone out shooting with him in the Autumn, she had sat beside him when he fished in the summer. They had rowed a boat on the lake and ridden their horses through the woods.

Merely country interests, country pursuits! And yet Fenella could never remember a time when either of them seemed bored. There had always been something interesting to do.

But now Periquine was depressed. That she could understand, where money was concerned. But it was not like him to have lost his enthusiasms, and not to be amused by ordinary everyday things which had entertained him in the past.

They walked across the lawn side by side in silence. The sun was sinking behind a great wood of fir trees in a blaze of crimson, gold and saffron.

Already the sky overhead was a translucent blue and the first evening star twinkled faintly in the midst of it.

'There is nothing more lovely,' Fenella thought, 'than the Priory in May.'

There was the fragrance of lilacs, the heavy scent of syringa, and everywhere that she looked there were patches of colour in shrubs and trees which while undoubtedly overgrown, were nevertheless very lovely.

As they walked along moving towards Robin's Wood that lay parallel to the long drive which ran to the Highway, she thought that the peace and beauty of the evening was having a soothing effect on her companion.

After they crossed a narrow bridge over a stream which fed the lake she said,

"There are some very fat trout since you last fished here."

"Are there?"

She thought that Lord Corbury's eyes lit up.

"Then I must certainly have a try at them. It is so long since I had a rod in my hand that I dare say I have lost the art of hooking a fish."

“I expect it will come back to you,” Fenella said.

He looked at her and smiled.

“Forgive me for being so blue-devilled,” he said beguilingly, “I realise you are trying to cheer me up, and even if you cannot do so, I have no right to inflict my miseries on you.”

“It is not a question of inflicting anything on me,” Fenella answered. “We have always shared our difficulties in the past.”

She looked up at him as if she hoped he would agree with her, but now he was watching the rooks coming in to roost and merely said absently,

“Yes, of course.”

They moved into Robin’s Wood, which was now thickly overgrown as the trees should have been thinned years before.

There was a twisting path between the tree-trunks and they followed it. It grew darker and still darker as the sun dipped into the horizon, and the evening light did not percolate through the thick branches above them.

It was as they were moving without speaking that they heard someone coming. Fenella stood still, and quickly Lord Corbury, with a reaction which must have come from his service training, took her arm and pulled her behind a thick briar-bush.

“Who can it be?” he whispered.

“I have no idea,” Fenella answered. “There is never anyone in the woods at night.”

The sound of someone moving rather slowly but heavily came nearer. Then they heard the murmur of a voice.

It seemed to Lord Corbury the words were foreign and then when the speaker was nearly level with them, he realized the man whoever he might be, was saying a prayer.

Restraining an impulse to raise his head to look, Lord Corbury still holding on to Fenella’s arm remained crouched down beside her until the footsteps and the voice receded into the distance.

“It is quite all right,” Fenella said, “it is only the old Vicar.”

“The old Vicar?” Lord Corbury questioned.

“You must remember him. He was the Vicar of Little Coombe for years. Then he got so vague and absent-minded that the Bishop gave him charge of the Church-in-the Wood.”

“Do you mean the Monk’s Chapel?” Lord Corbury asked.

“Of course. It is just as it used to be when we were children. It is still full of squirrels, birds and even rabbits. I often go there on a Sunday when the old Vicar, if he remembers, holds a Service.”

“Does anyone else go?” Lord Corbury enquired.

“There are two old women from the village who adore him, one of whom cleans his tiny house. It is little more than a hut, but he is happy there. The Parish has grown too much for him. He always forgot funerals, and someone invariably had to fetch him to a wedding long after the bride had arrived.”

Lord Corbury laughed.

“That must have caused a great deal of trouble.”

“It did,” Fenella replied, “especially as the old Vicar was usually lost in the woods. You remember how he loved the animals? He still tames the squirrels, and the deer eat out of his hands.”

“I must go and see him one day,” Lord Corbury said. “I might have spoken to him just now.”

“I thought of that but it is wisest that no-one sees us,” Fenella said, “Isaac Goldstein is so crooked that I do not think he would dare make a fuss about his monies being stolen, but one never knows and it is safer if we are not seen anywhere in the vicinity.”

“Quite right,” Lord Corbury approved.

They went back onto the path and now it was getting very difficult to find their way.

Fenella went ahead and finally as they emerged through the trees, Lord Corbury saw ahead of them a high fence of over-lapping wattles.

“That was never there in the past,” he ejaculated.

“No, Isaac Goldstein put it up,” Fenella answered. “He said it was to keep the dogs in, but I have a suspicion it was to keep intruders out.”

The Mill House looked very dilapidated. The stream ran by it on one side, on the other it was only a short distance from the highway on a drive which had not been repaired for years.

Some of the windows had been boarded up, the others were dark and there was no sign of any light.

Fenella had the idea that Lord Corbury was feeling apprehensive.

“It is quite all right,” she said soothingly, “I saw with my own eyes Mr. Goldstein go away and if he has been extorting money from his victims all day