

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Scandal of the Season

Sophie Gee

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## About the Book

Beautiful, clever Arabella Fermor is seduced by charming Robert Petre, seventh Baron of Ingatestone. Eager to secure herself a rich and handsome husband, Arabella cannot guess that the enigmatic Robert is entwined in a treasonous plot against Queen Anne. Watching the pair from the outskirts is a crippled man destined to become the genius of his age - the poet Alexander Pope. In Arabella and Robert's flirtations he has found the tale of temptation, coquetry and danger that might just make his fortune...

## About the Author

Born in Sydney in 1974, Sophie Gee grew up in the inner-city suburb of Paddington and graduated from the University of Sydney in 1995 with a first-class degree in English. She won a scholarship to Harvard, where she wrote a doctoral thesis about pollution, filth and satire in eighteenth-century London. She received a PhD in 2002 and was immediately appointed as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Princeton. Recently she held a research fellowship at UCLA and taught a course at University College London before returning to Princeton.

FOR MY FATHER, CHRISTOPHER GEE  
1941-2003  
WITH LOVE

# The Scandal of the Season

Sophie Gee

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## Historical Note

In the sixteenth century, England changed from a Catholic to a Protestant country when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and stripped the Catholic Church of its wealth. But Catholicism was never quelled; even though the official religion in England was Protestantism, vast numbers of Englishmen remained true to the Catholic faith. The Catholics resented the Protestants for taking away their wealth and privilege, and the Protestants feared a Catholic uprising that would some day oust them from power. For the next two hundred years, England would be immersed in religious turmoil.

By 1711, England was finally starting to feel secure. Queen Anne—a Protestant, but descended from the Stuarts—was on the throne and for the first time in two centuries, the Protestants and the Catholics felt able to live in relative amity. The persecution of the Catholics declined. England was on the brink of unprecedented prosperity.

But one question remained. When the childless queen died, who would succeed her? A clandestine alliance had been formed among those who supported the return of a Stuart monarch. The allies called themselves Jacobites. Secretly, they conspired to bring back to England the Catholic King James III, presently exiled in France. So far, all attempted Jacobite plots had been discovered and prevented, but the Protestants in power could never be certain when the next rebellion was coming, or whether it might, after all, succeed.

*What dire Offence from amorous causes springs,  
What mighty Contests rise from trivial things.*

*Alexander Pope, The Rape of the  
Lock*

# Prologue

## **London, 1711**

THE NOISE COULD be heard streets away. There were bursts of music and drifts of laughter and talk, louder when the revellers spilled into the courtyard. Every few minutes new shrieks of merriment echoed on the night air. It was the French ambassador's masquerade ball.

The embassy on the Strand blazed with candlelight. Every window along the façade was bright, and the courtyard was lined with a hundred flaring torches. More lights burned a corridor down to the river, where boats pulled up at a landing stage to unload groups of guests. Everybody was in costume: carnival figures, Russian princes, Chinese merchants, butterflies and bears, fairies and goblins, piping shepherds. Cases of wine were opened, supper was carried out in silver dishes, and the maskers danced on. Scattered groups lingered in the courtyard talking to one another in English or French, often a mixture of the two. More laughing, yet more talk; an endless movement of carriages.

A little priest left the embassy and made his way towards a hackney cab waiting outside the gates. As he walked away, a pair of masked ladies turned to greet him.

"Good night, Father."

The priest bowed and stepped into his cab.

Across the courtyard, two figures called out to the driver, and then ran haphazardly towards the carriage, with much laughter and stumbling. They were dressed in the long silk gowns and black hoods of the domino costumes common among the masquerade guests; the robes almost entirely

obscured the men's forms in dark folds. One man's hood began to slip as he ran, and he pulled it back up clumsily, calling to his friend to slow down.

"Leave your damned hood behind!" the friend called back, a French accent inflecting his words. He ran up to the priest's carriage. "Father, will you be so kind . . ." he began, "my friend and I—"

Not waiting for a response, the Frenchman opened the door to step in, while the other fellow swept a low bow to a passing lady and gave a final pull to the costume. Then he too ran up to the carriage and scrambled inside as it drove away.

Behind them, the noise and light of the party continued unabated.

The priest smiled warily at the hooded men. He saw that they were both laughing, still out of breath. It had reassured him to hear one of them speaking in an accent—they were probably Catholics. The cab turned into the street and began to clatter across the cobbles.

After a moment's silence, he spoke. "Where are you travelling to, gentlemen?"

Neither of the men answered.

The carriage took a turn to the right. They were now on a road that was covered in straw to muffle the sound of horses' hooves, and the cab was suddenly much quieter. This street was empty and dark; the lamps had all guttered many hours before. He could hear the men's breathing, quick and rough, but he could not see their faces at all. They were no longer laughing. The darkness pressed on his eyes like a blindfold. He began to feel afraid. What if that Frenchman knew who he was?

He tried to stay calm, hearing his voice echoing in the intense blackness of the carriage as he repeated his question, "Where are you going to?"

Still there was no answer. His throat tightened. Perhaps they had not jumped into his carriage by chance. How easy

it would have been for two figures in domino robes to stand unnoticed in the busy courtyard, waiting for him. He had taken little care tonight to be guarded about his visit.

“For God’s sake, who are you?” he cried aloud. “What do you want?”

Neither sound nor movement from the two strangers. Suddenly the priest heard a rustle of fabric and a shuffle of feet. He shrank away, but felt the wall of the carriage against his back. He opened his mouth to call out, when a hand came out of the darkness to silence him.

He was struck violently on to the floor, and the back of his skull cracked against the seat. He felt a wave of dizziness; one of the men was upon him, pinning his body down. There was a rattling movement above as the other man closed the window shades. He knew that it was not necessary; nobody would see them on this deserted street. The gesture made him feel that a shade had fallen down upon his life.

He struggled free from the arm that stifled him. “You are too late,” he cried. “Others already know.” It was a gamble; the slimmest of chances.

There was a fraction of a pause.

“He lies,” came a new voice at last. An English accent, well-bred.

Before the priest could say more, he felt the cold edge of a steel blade pressed hard against his throat.

He struggled to retain a sense of what was happening. Again he opened his mouth, but as he did so he felt a prick of the knife going in like a needle. His throat felt suddenly loose, though a moment before it had been taut with fear, and his blood poured out as warm and soft as silk. He felt his skin and clothes become hot and sticky as it soaked into the fabric. The men remained silent, waiting while his life ebbed away. He could struggle no more. Already he was weak, his limbs heavy; even now he could barely frame clear thoughts; his mind was dim. He tried to hold fast to life, but the blackness closed in. It was over.

# Chapter One

*"In tasks so bold, can little Men engage"*

THE WORST OF country life was that the houses were always cold. Alexander sat as close to the fire as he could manage without blocking his parents' access to its modest heat. He suspected that his mother, at least, was suffering, but that she stayed further back to allow him most of the warmth. Outside it was either snowing or raining; Alexander could not be sure which. It had been dark since three o'clock. They had dined at noon; tea had been brought in at four, and there were still another three hours before bed. His father had not allowed him to go to his chamber to write, because the fire had been overlooked during the afternoon and had burned out. He had not finished twenty lines of verse since Christmas, nearly a month ago.

The *Georgics* was open in his lap, and he had been reading the same poem for two hours. Virgil was all very well when Alexander was feeling that he, too, might write a poem as good as the *Aeneid*, but tonight Virgil's youthful verses reproached him. Will it always be like this if I obey my father? he asked himself. He heard his mother cough, and guessed that she was about to break in upon his thoughts.

"Sir Anthony Englefield asks you to pay him a visit," she said, holding out a letter. "He offers to send his carriage. I think that you should go, Alexander. Are not Teresa and Martha Blount presently at Whiteknights?"

He made no reply. But his heart leapt at the sound of Teresa's name, and he looked up, knowing that he was

blushing. The Miss Blounts were both about Alexander's age. Their family seat, Mapledurham, was an estate on the other side of the Thames, but the girls visited their grandfather Sir Anthony Englefield at Whiteknights several times each year. Like Alexander and his family, the Blounts were Roman Catholics.

"I do not attend to the details of the Miss Blounts' arrangements," he said, in as careless a tone as he could manage.

"But you have not seen Sir Anthony since the beginning of December, Alexander," his mother replied. "Your health is enough restored. And you must make yourself pleasing to women," she added.

If only she knew how much he wanted to please Teresa, Alexander thought. But he said instead, "I think that Sir Anthony might have written the letter to *me*."

Alexander's spirits rose excitedly, even as he began to feel nervous. It was always thus. Teresa loved to tease him, but she did so with a sly smile that made him like her even more. Not wanting to appear too eager to reply to Sir Anthony's invitation, however, Alexander turned to his father, who was reading a newspaper. "What news from town?" he asked.

"A priest has been murdered, and the body left in Shoreditch," came the reply.

Alexander felt a surge of alarm. Shoreditch! Poor Catholics still worshipped there secretly, in chapels above the taverns.

"Murdered?" Alexander echoed. "A priest?"

His father would never allow him back to town now. He had paid one short visit eighteen months previously, after his first poems had been published, and had longed to return ever since. But the capital would always be haunted by the persecutions his father had once seen. Alexander's parents had been driven out when the Ten-Mile Act had been passed forbidding papists to live within daily reach of

the city. Years had gone by since then, and Catholics were returning to London, but Alexander's father was immovable. His son would not live in town. Alexander knew that the place had changed—for three glorious weeks he had seen it with his own eyes. But supposing he were to disobey his parents' strictures, only to find himself in danger?

He reached for the paper and began to read the story.

"This man was not a priest, sir!" he exclaimed. "Indeed he may not have been a Catholic at all. It says here that he was dressed in ecclesiastical costume to attend the French ambassador's masquerade. A ticket for the ball was found in his pocket." He looked up with a smile. "So you see," he finished, "the murderers made a mistake."

Alexander's father gave a mirthless laugh. "If the men thought the fellow was a Catholic priest, it hardly matters if he was not," he replied shortly. "The town is a dangerous place. I was sorry to see you so eager to visit last year."

Alexander felt the protest rise within him. "I was there but three weeks, sir," he burst out, "and staying in Westminster with my friend Charles Jervas!" His father knew perfectly well that Jervas was a Protestant, and that Alexander's contact with Catholics had been confined to the few wealthy families who kept houses in Westminster and St. James's. There had been no secret masses in alehouse garrets—indeed there had been no talk of religion at all. "Queen Anne is a Stuart! You have said yourself that we have nothing to fear while she is on the throne."

The older man's face remained grave. "I was not sanguine while you were there, Alexander," he said. "I should be disappointed to learn that you have thoughts of returning."

His parents rose for prayers, and Alexander was obliged to join them. His father darkened the room, old habit prompting him to make sure that they could not be seen. As he watched his father's bent head and the quiet movement of his lips, Alexander felt a pang of remorse. Had not his parents once been banished from their old home like

vagrants, forced to leave the city where they had lived respectably? Now Alexander, scorning what his parents had suffered, was demanding to return to the place of so much misery. Ashamed, he bent his head, trying to feel the piety that he knew was proper.

After their worship was over, Alexander asked his father if he would leave the candles burning downstairs so that he could sit up by the fire to work.

“Late hours will make you ill,” his father replied, and waited until Alexander had gathered his books, following him up the stairs to his bedroom.

Alexander said good-night and closed the door of his chamber, pushing a rug against the space at the bottom to mask the light of his candle. His father had been right—it was freezing cold, but he must finish ten lines before the end of the night. He pulled a blanket over his shoulders, spread another across his knees, and set to work. He wrote for an hour, ignoring the headache and sore throat that had begun to nag. It was not hard to do so. After so many years, the symptoms seemed like old, familiar foes, urging him to greater efforts, reminding him that his time was short.

He had been fourteen when he became ill. The sickness fell across his memory like a curtain, shrouding the weeks, and then months of pain that followed in suffocating darkness. At first the doctors had thought that he would not survive, but slowly he began to get better, the recovery more agonizing to him than the blank days and nights of feverish coma that preceded it. His clearest memory was of a morning when at last he had been able to stand up from his bed and walk to the window. Outside, the first marks of autumn were just beginning to rust the landscape, and he had been sad to find that he had missed a whole summer. His parents had come into the room, the physician following behind them. They had sat him down upon the bed and the doctor had told him the news. Though he had survived the illness, it would cripple his growth. His back would become

hunched, until eventually he would be unable to move. The physician could not say when it would occur—perhaps by the time he was thirty, later if he was lucky.

And, as it turned out, he was lucky. At twenty-three, his back was bent, but if he stood up straight it was barely noticeable. He was not tall, but his face was handsome, he thought. And he was quick and funny. When he was in good health, he knew that he could be very charming.

An image of Teresa came to his mind, running across the lawn on a summer afternoon long ago. He had been completely well again after the sickness, restored to his old self, and she was fifteen or sixteen—it was before her father died. She had taken him by the hands, starting to tell a story about the convent school in Paris where she had been living. How lovely she had been then; how lovely she still was. As soon as his poems became famous, Alexander would claim her, and he believed that she would receive him once more with open arms. But he looked again at the pages on his desk. Still no closer to a finished poem. He needed a new subject, something that would give his talents their proper range. In his heart he knew that he would never find it in Binfield. Somehow, anyhow, he must get to London.

Two days later, Sir Anthony's carriage took him to Whiteknights. As he drew up outside the old house, Alexander saw that it was Martha Blount, and not Teresa, who had waited to greet him. He stepped down, and she came towards him, smiling and blushing.

"My dear Martha," he said, taking her by the hands. "You look very well."

"Alexander!" she exclaimed. "We knew that you were coming to see us today, but you are here so soon! My grandfather is abroad seeing to a tenant." She pushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen across her face, but it slipped again, and she pulled it up with a little laugh. It was a

gesture that Alexander had seen her make since she was a young girl.

Martha led him through the great entrance hall into a morning room where she had been working. As he took a seat beside her, Alexander found himself almost glad that the elder sister was absent. Martha's morning gown was covered in little threads from her needlework, which she had not noticed. Teresa would have picked them off instantly. He was determined not to ask where Teresa was, and spoil this moment that he and Martha had together.

"A cold day for Sir Anthony to venture out," he observed. But he could not help himself, and after a little pause he asked, "Is your sister also out?"

Martha's face fell for an instant as she answered, "She is writing letters in her sitting-room, and probably does not know that you are arrived." Before he could speak again she composed herself, and smiled. "Shall we find her?" she asked, putting her sewing to one side.

When they entered the upstairs parlour, Teresa was reading a letter at her table by the window. The pale sunlight fell upon her face and on the delicate folds of her silk dress. On the desk was a little vase with a few snowdrops and narcissi, which Alexander guessed must have come from the hothouse. The curve of Teresa's arm rested beside the flowers, and the dark curls of her hair fell forward loosely as she bent over the pages.

"Teresa!" Martha exclaimed. "Alexander is come. Look—he is here to see us."

She did not turn around immediately, and her smile was far less forthcoming than Martha's. It was arch and teasing. But how pretty she was!

"Here already indeed," Teresa said in reply. "It is not done, Alexander, to visit a lady before eleven o'clock. If you are to be a man about town you will need to know such things."

The note of provocation thrilled him. "I cannot bear to be a short coach ride from the brightest eyes in England, and

yet remain apart," he said, looking back at her with a playful smile.

Teresa raised an eyebrow. "Alexander is being very charming this morning, Patty," she answered, looking away from him and calling her sister familiarly by her pet name.

"My office is to charm those who charm the world," Alexander replied. He gave a bow, but as soon as he had done so he cursed himself. He was talking like a fool; the truth was that Teresa was making him awkward.

Martha watched closely as the exchange unfolded. She guessed that Teresa was nervous about seeing her old admirer again; she was always at her most contrary when she felt ill at ease. Martha blushed for her, and at the sight of Alexander's eager, anxious face. How little he understood her sister.

But Teresa and Alexander were sparring again.

"In speaking as gallantly as you do," Teresa said, "I fancy that you try to imitate your London friend, Charles Jervas, of whom you love to boast. You are always copying the manners of those around you."

Alexander knew better than to let this rattle him.

"Then I hope that I shall not omit to imitate yours," he replied. "Your wit has a sparkle that makes it as precious to me as gold."

Teresa looked away. "I fear that it shall likewise be as scarce," she said. "My sister and I go to London tomorrow."

He knew that his face betrayed the terrible sting of disappointment he felt. He had not expected this!

Martha rushed to join the conversation. "We were to tell you this morning, Alexander," she said. "We are to travel up to town for the season with our mother, and to take a house in King Street."

"Your grandfather is not afraid of your being in danger?" Alexander asked, turning to her with a look of appeal.

"Of course not," Teresa interjected. "What do you imagine will happen? Plague and fire! Nobody is afraid of London

anymore, Alexander.” Although it was the sort of impulsive naivety Teresa always showed, Alexander did not smile.

“Alexander is talking about the recent murder in Shoreditch,” Martha said, cutting her sister off. “We did think of postponing our journey, but Shoreditch is a long way from St. James’s. Though it was vicious, it can have nothing to do with our own circle.”

Teresa tossed her head at the serious turn their conversation had taken, and began to gather up her letters, suggesting that they take a turn out-of-doors.

The day was cold, but they were well wrapped up in fur collars and muffs and shielded from the wind by the high yew hedges that grew up around the edges of the lawns. Alexander and Teresa walked on ahead. When they had been outside for a few minutes Alexander smiled and said, “Were I a handsome fellow, Teresa, I believe that I could do you a vast deal of good.”

Teresa laughed, and Martha knew that she was in high spirits once again.

“Were you a handsome fellow,” Teresa answered with a taunting smile, “I should devour you as I do my other admirers. You owe your preservation to that very oddity of person which you so lament. But as it is, you are safe, and I must look elsewhere for somebody to feed upon.”

Martha wondered whether Alexander meant his reply to sound as serious as it did.

“Take care, madam,” he said to Teresa. “The handsome fellow who adores you for a few months will neglect you for many years together. The fawning servant turns the haughty lord.”

Teresa was silent a moment, contemplating, Martha suspected, the pleasures of being married to a lord, be he ever so haughty. But she replied instead, “I am rather glad, Alexander, that you will have to write to us while we are in town. You do have a way of expressing yourself that can be exceedingly diverting.”

Before he replied, Alexander turned to Martha with a wry smile of apology for the excesses of his gallantry.

“In truth, Teresa,” he said at last, “when I consider how often and openly I have declared love to you, I am a little affronted that you have not forbidden my correspondence altogether.”

Everybody smiled at this observation, reflecting that it contained a good deal of truth.

When they came in from the garden, they found that Sir Anthony had returned from seeing his tenants. He greeted Alexander and led him into the library, leaving the girls together for the half-hour that remained before dinner.

“You were rather more severe upon Alexander than usual today, Teresa,” Martha said as soon as they were alone.

“But I am always severe upon him,” she replied. “He expects it, and would think it strange if I were otherwise.” She looked away as she said this, pretending to adjust the sleeve on her gown so that she need not meet her sister’s eyes.

“I always anticipate that Alexander will be rather afraid of you—yet your severity seems to make him more fond,” Martha added.

“Most gentlemen are fond of the ladies whom they fear,” Teresa replied evasively. “It is a paradox of the sex. In rebuffing him as I do, I am preparing for the gentlemen I shall meet in London.”

Martha caught a note of uncertainty in her voice, and took her sister’s hand. “Are you concerned for our arrival in the city?” she asked. “I thought that you were eager for it.”

Teresa stepped forward quickly to open the door into the drawing-room, saying with a little laugh, “Well, I am eager and afraid of it at once—just as Alexander is of me.”

The sun had gone from the room now, but the candles had not yet been lighted. Outside, the grounds were already in shadow, though it was only two o’clock. They sat down on

the sofa where Martha had left her sewing, and Teresa leaned across to move it. Martha used the chance to take her sister's hand again, and this time she did not pull away. Martha hoped that she might get Teresa to talk more about Alexander.

But before she could frame a question, Teresa began to speak in a low, fretful tone. "Suppose that people should think me rusticated?" she asked. "I will be going about with Arabella's friends, who may find my appearance dowdy. Here everyone thinks that I am pretty—but I should be ashamed of seeming plain in town."

Martha looked at her sister's face, vulnerable in the melancholy half-light. So this was what preoccupied her! Not Alexander at all, but their cousin, Arabella Fermor.

"But people will find you more charming if you are natural," Martha replied.

"Not the people of whom I am speaking," Teresa insisted, her voice rising sharply. "When gentlemen go to town they wish to avoid nature, not to be charmed by it. Simplicity is regarded with the deepest suspicion, and sincerity with a kind of abhorrence."

Martha laughed at this formulation. No wonder Alexander liked her sister's quick wit; it was a side of her character that Martha did not often see.

"Oh, Teresa, you will have plenty of admirers," she replied. "Quite as many as Arabella, I am sure." Martha was surprised by Teresa's intimation that she and Arabella had been exchanging letters. When she had seen them together in the past, affection had not figured visibly in their interactions. They had seemed rather to be locked in an unspoken contest as to which of them possessed the greater share of wit and beauty—and if Arabella was now offering to take Teresa around town, she must be sure of a victory on both counts. They were interrupted by a maidservant coming in to light the candles. The crackling of

the fire, which had seemed so desolate a few minutes before, began to sound cheerful again.

“So Bell has been writing to you?” Martha asked when the servant was gone.

“Not lately,” Teresa replied after a short pause. “But I told her that we were coming, so I expect we shall spend a great deal of time together.” Martha was silent, knowing how much Teresa longed for a fashionable companion. It would be cruel to dampen her sister’s hopes by expressing her scepticism of the friendship with Arabella.

Teresa, too, fell silent, deep in thought. When Alexander had come into her room that morning, she had felt a thrill but she had recoiled, not wanting to show how pleased she was to see him. She wanted to think of Alexander merely as a friend from her past; to show him that things were different now. She was determined to make a splendid match in London. But how funny Alexander had seemed when they were younger! His jokes, his letters, his amusing gallantries—all so delightful to her. If only he were more successful, she reflected. He was a Catholic and a gentleman, and her grandfather, at least, believed that his talents as a poet were considerable. His suit might one day be worth a good deal. But she shrank from the thought. Such an odd man, subject to headache and ill-humour; writing his poems and talking about Virgil, with no fortune to speak of. So why did she feel such a lurch in her heart when she saw him?

The girls’ thoughts were interrupted when they were called to dinner. As soon as they were seated, Sir Anthony proposed a toast to his young guest.

“My congratulations on the printing of your verses, Alexander,” he said. “And to have been published by the great Jacob Tonson, too: the best in London.”

Alexander bowed and thanked him. “Another of my poems is to be printed very soon,” he said, “by an old schoolfriend

of mine who has gone into the trade. I have called it *Essay on Criticism*."

Sir Anthony paused, and looked at him. "Not by Tonson, then," he said.

"The poem is somewhat out of the ordinary," Alexander said hastily. "I feared that Tonson might not care for it."

His host frowned. "I wonder whether you have given careful thought to pursuing poetry as a profession," he said. "Most poets are poor, dreary fellows who hang about at the court in hope of a pension. I should not like to see you join them."

Alexander suspected that Sir Anthony had deliberately saved his remarks until Teresa was present, and he felt a blush of self-consciousness. She looked at him with a mocking smile. With an effort, he exerted himself to sound unconcerned.

"The main trouble with poets," he said, "is that so few of them ever write a poem worth reading. Men of perfectly sound mind in their letters, who express themselves in eloquent, red-blooded prose, become mincing fools when they turn to verse. Their poems either descant in purple epithets upon the joys of spring, or salivate over a glimpse of some lady's bosom in a tightly laced dress. Verse makes a eunuch or a whoremaster of them all."

"Are you talking about Thomas D'Urfey's success with his poem 'Paid for Peeping'?" Teresa asked lightly. "It was very shocking. But I haven't the slightest doubt that for all your railing against it, Alexander, your own copy is well worn along the edges."

Alexander brightened at Teresa's teasing.

"I would as soon read that man's verses as I would write like him," he answered. "D'Urfey's poems come out of him like a succession of noisy farts," Alexander continued. "Diverting, but exceedingly nasty."

Everybody laughed at this, and Alexander looked at Teresa with a self-deprecating air, pleased with the success of his

joke. With renewed confidence, he said, "In any case, Jacob Tonson doesn't need my help to make his fortune. He has made thousands since he bought the copyright to *Paradise Lost*."

"I'm bound to say that I've never got through that book myself," said Sir Anthony. "I know one shouldn't admit it," he added.

To Martha's delight, Alexander shot her a glance of companionship. They had often talked about *Paradise Lost* together—it was the poem that both of them most admired.

"I heartily assent to your estimation of Grub Street, sir," Alexander was saying to Sir Anthony, "but Tonson and his ilk are my own best hope for making a fortune."

"But surely you will inherit your parents' house at Binfield," he answered.

"Yes, of course," said Alexander quickly. His father had entailed the house on two Protestant cousins who would inherit it on Alexander's behalf. This must be what Sir Anthony was hoping to hear; he would know that he could inherit nothing directly.

At this moment Teresa stood up to leave. Martha therefore did the same, but she looked back regretfully as she quit the room; she had been a good deal interested in the men's conversation.

With a sigh of his own that the girls were gone, Alexander turned to Sir Anthony and said, "Your granddaughters' situations are little different from my own, after all. We are engaged in most risky speculations! The Miss Blounts wager that their beauty and good nature will find them rich husbands—and I am gambling my talents as a poet on an open market. No wonder we all long for London, where stock-jobbing is the rage."

Englefield seemed to deliberate before answering.

"I will bring you into my confidence, Alexander," he said. "The girls will soon find themselves in an awkward position.

When their brother Michael inherited Mapledurham last year, it was encumbered by far greater debt than we had imagined. When Michael marries, I fear that he will no longer be able to support the girls and their mother. I have not told them, of course. They must not feel that they are being sent to London to be sold off."

At another moment Alexander might have observed that nothing would give more pleasure to the elder Miss Blount than knowing that she was to be sold to a rich husband. But he checked himself, considering more carefully the implications of this news. Sir Anthony must know that the girls' prospects would be doomed.

"Surely Blount will not leave the girls without dowries and their mother without a proper living," he said.

"The expense of maintaining Mapledurham is great," Sir Anthony replied. "We all pay double taxation still, you know. Mapledurham will require almost all of Michael's income."

Alexander felt anger rising within him. "But it is never beyond a man's power to do what is right," he insisted.

"In this case it may be," said Sir Anthony. "A Catholic who is forced to give up his land these days is in a pretty desperate predicament. No, the estate must be held at all costs."

"But the Miss Blounts have been brought up with expensive habits and extravagant expectations," Alexander protested. "They were educated in Paris; they have lived in the best society. They go to London confident of their success with the first men in the country. It is not fair to allow them into the world under such a misapprehension. Every sacrifice must be made—"

"That is precisely why I am hoping that they marry soon, Alexander. It is a wretched thing to say, and there is hardly another person with whom I would share this confidence. But I pray they will become attached to persons of fortune before their full circumstances are known. I speak to you as a man of the world."

Alexander's reply to Sir Anthony was cool. "As a man of the world, sir," he answered, "I know that there is not a baron alive who will marry a girl without a dowry, be he more in love with her than Romeo."

When Alexander bid them adieu at the end of the day, Martha turned to him with a hopeful look. "Perhaps you will come to town to see us, Alexander," she said.

Alexander felt a wave of sympathy and affection, but he replied with an attempt at reserve, aware of Teresa's scrutiny. "I hardly think that it will be possible," he said. "My obligations in the country—"

"What nonsense, Alexander," Teresa cut in. "One has no obligation to the country but to quit it as quickly as possible. You have told us that your friend John Caryll is always inviting you to ride in his coach. 'Tis but thirty miles."

Alexander wished that he was not so pleased by this careless encouragement, but he could not help himself. He bowed, hoping for more.

But Martha said instead, "I do think that Mr. Caryll is very civil to you, Alexander. And he has a great regard for your family. The esteem of such a man is worth a good deal." John Caryll was a Catholic landowner like Sir Anthony, whose estate, Ladyholt, was a short distance from Alexander's family home in Binfield. But Caryll's good opinion mattered very little to Alexander this afternoon.

He tried, however, to speak lightheartedly. "It is certain that the greatest magnifying glasses in the world are a man's own eyes, when they look upon his person," he said. "But even in those, I appear not the great Alexander Mr. Caryll is so civil to, but that little Alexander the women laugh at."

Martha gave Alexander's arm a squeeze as she kissed him goodbye. She wished that she could make him smile, and was sorry when it was Teresa who said, "You are in your sad dog pose today, I see, Alexander. Mind that you have cast it

off before we see you again. I shall certainly not stand up to dance with a Great Dane caught in a fit of melancholy.”

Alexander straightened his back and stepped into Sir Anthony’s carriage.

As he drove home, he reflected upon the situation in which the girls would find themselves in town. For all Teresa’s pretended sophistication and Martha’s good sense, Alexander knew that they had never lived in the world. London society would not give two pennies for a pair of pretty, high-bred girls without expectations. The fashionable world was a precarious enough place for the daughters of the very wealthy, who were prey to the designs of heartless young adventurers. But for lovely young women without a fortune, mixing with men who were bred to think that they had a right to every imaginable gratification, the danger would be serious indeed.

Though he had dismissed his father’s fears about London, Alexander shuddered at the thought of the guest at the ambassador’s masquerade, arriving at the ball for an evening of lighthearted pleasure: murdered by men who thought that they were killing a priest. An innocent bystander; perhaps he had passed by his assailants all night, feeling no shadow of suspicion. Even as the knife sliced into his throat, had he realized what had happened? But was he really the chance victim of an anti-Catholic crime—or had he, in truth, been a man with a secret?

## Chapter Two

*"He saw, he wish'd, and to the prize aspir'd"*

ALEXANDER RETURNED TO find his house in darkness, save for a candle burning in the kitchen, where a meal of bread and cheese had been left out. He warmed himself by sitting close to the oven. The clock sounded eleven, and he listened as its strokes echoed hollow through the empty house. He had expected to find his mother waiting up for him, but it seemed that nobody was awake. His candle's uncertain flame made long shadows on the walls, looming up around him like the grotesque fingers of a hand. He was reminded of nights towards the end of his illness, when he had lain awake in the silent house, stranded between the worlds of the living and the dead.

But once he was inside his little bedroom the candle burned steadily, lighting the familiar forms of his bed and books and fireplace. He undressed and sat wrapped in his nightgown before the low fire. They had not forgotten him, then. After a short time he took his candle over to the desk and began to look at the lines of the poem he was writing. For a few minutes he sat and worried at a couplet, crossing out a word, changing a rhyme, and then changing it back. But he pushed the paper away.

He could not remain here. This house, and his parents' elderly habits, the suffocating routine of their religion, even the countryside itself, with its chill and damp seeping into his bones—slowly but steadily these things would kill him. During his weeks in London last year he had been filled with more energy than he had imagined his meagre frame could

contain. But, home again, he was growing increasingly feeble as the months went by.

Though he had scarcely acknowledged it until now, it had been Whiteknights that had kept him here; his pleasure in seeing Teresa and his hope of recovering the old, happy intimacy of their childhood. But how long would pleasure persist in the face of her new resistance? And soon she would be gone, Martha with her. Martha: so patient, and with so keen an understanding. The picture of his parents came to him, setting aside their own comforts for his sake; year upon year of deferring to his delicate health. The thought moved him to tears, but he knew that they could do nothing more for him—and he believed even they had begun to see it.

No matter that he was a Catholic. No matter that he was a cripple. Fear and doubt must not stop him. He would go to London and seek his fortune.

He seized a clean sheet of paper and wrote to John Caryll, asking him for a ride to the city in his carriage. He sealed the letter and, taking up his pen once again, he began a second letter to Charles Jervas, asking if he might stay at his house in town. He told Jervas that the visit would be for about three weeks, but in his heart he knew that it would be much longer.

The next day he shrank from telling his parents what he had done, deciding instead to wait until the arrangements were certain.

He did not wait long. Caryll was delighted to get the letter, and wrote to say that they would be gone as soon as the roads were dry. And Jervas urged him to come as soon as he could and to stay for as long as he liked. At last, Alexander steeled himself to tell his father about the plan.

He was sitting in a chair by the fire when Alexander broke the news, and, to Alexander's astonishment, he was not