

Barbara Cartland

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Wish For Love

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Queen's Ford, a beautiful house built in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, is crumbling into a ruin. The Forde family, blue-blooded and aristocratic, are so poor that they exist principally on rabbit.

Jeremy the handsome, twenty-one year old son of Lord Fordcombe is desperate for new clothes. He persuades his eldest sister Mariota who does everything to keep the family together, to join him in holding up a coach as Highwaymen, encountering a guest of the Duke of Madresfield.

The unforeseen dramas that arise from the action alter the lives of everyone in this exciting 321st story by Barbara Cartland.

Author's Note

Highwaymen and footpads were regular dangers to travellers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most Noblemen had outriders in attendance and if a highwayman was caught he was hung on a gibbet at the crossroads. If he was shot, it was considered a brave act deserving congratulations.

Many highwaymen had been footmen or servants in great houses where they learnt to covet the luxuries of their Masters. They were well aware of the risks they ran, but thought a few years of riotous living were preferable to a lifetime of drudgery.

Sometimes gentlemen took to the road. William Parsons was a Baronet's son educated at Eton and had been an Officer in the Royal Navy. Sir Simon Clarke was a Baronet.

The only known female highwayman was Joan Bracey, daughter of a rich Northamptonshire farmer. Dressed in men's clothes, she pulled off many daring robberies, but swung from the gallows before her thirtieth birthday.

CHAPTER ONE

1818

Jeremy Forde walked into the dining room and as he did so he shouted,
“I am down!”

He then seated himself at the table in the window, which was covered with a white cloth and at which the family usually had their breakfast.

In response to his shout his sister Mariota came from the kitchen carrying a plate of eggs and bacon in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other.

“You are late!” she said.

“I know,” Jeremy replied, “but I lay in bed thinking that there was nothing to get up for and wondering how we could make some money.”

Mariota laughed.

“That is not in any way an original thought.”

“I know,” Jeremy said gloomily, as he started to eat the eggs and bacon.

Mariota sat down at the table and, having poured out a cup of coffee for her brother, did the same for herself.

“I was thinking,” Jeremy went on, “that if I sold one of the miniatures, which I believe would fetch a fairly good price, nobody would know.”

Mariota gave a cry of horror.

“But we should all know!” she protested. “And you know as well as I do that not only would Papa be furious, but you would also be stealing.”

“There is nothing wrong with stealing from oneself,” Jeremy argued sulkily.

“It would not only be from you,” Mariota said, “but from your son, your grandson and all the generations that come after them.”

“As things are, it is very unlikely that I shall be able to afford a son,” Jeremy retorted. “Let alone a grandson!”

He finished his eggs and bacon and sat back in his chair.

“Seriously, Mariota, we have to do something. I need some new clothes, not because mine are old, but because I have grown out of them.”

Mariota knew this was the truth and made a helpless little gesture with her hands.

“I am sorry, Jeremy, you know I am. But we can hardly afford to eat, let alone buy anything to wear.”

“Is there nothing Papa can do about it?” Jeremy enquired.

“You think of something,” Mariota replied, “and I will talk to him about it – if he will listen to me.”

“Even if he does, I doubt if he will understand the straits we are in.” Jeremy said angrily.

There was a little pause.

Then his sister said,

“I don’t think that’s true. Papa does understand and, because it hurts him to see the house going to rack and ruin and to listen to us complaining, he tries to live in a world of his own with his books. It’s the only way he can forget Mama.”

Mariota’s face softened as she spoke of their mother and Jeremy was silent until he exclaimed,

“We have to do something. How much longer can we go on like this?”

Mariota asked herself the same question not only every day and every night but also every hour.

The Fordes had lived at Queen’s Ford, their beautiful, rambling and very large but inconvenient house, since it had been built in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. But each generation had grown successively poorer and poorer.

When their father, Lord Fordcombe, had inherited the title and the estate, they found that his father had run up a mountain of debts during the last years of his life.

Everything that was saleable and was not entailed onto the next heir had been sold and even then the creditors had been forced to accept ten shillings in the pound, thinking that half a loaf was better than no bread at all.

The new Lord Fordcombe had been left with the income from the capital his wife had brought with her marriage settlement and which was settled on his children when he died.

This brought in little more than two hundred pounds year and his only other source of income was the meagre rents from his farms and some better

properties on his estate.

The cottages, of which there were quite a number, were either occupied by pensioners or were in such a dilapidated state that only those who were otherwise destitute were willing to live in them.

The lack of money affected his three children to the point of desperation.

Jeremy was now twenty-one, but he could not afford to enter a Regiment as his forebears had done and he resented violently having to live at home with only old hobbledehoy horses to ride and nothing to do from morning until night except catch fish from the river and shoot in the woods.

This turned what had been an enjoyable sport into a monotonous necessity.

For Mariota it was different because, since they could only afford to keep one old couple to run the house, the rooms would have been inches thick in dust if she had not constituted herself housekeeper, housemaid, butler, footman and valet to her father and brother, besides being at times a cook when anything special was required.

Because she was practical and organised herself in what had to be done in such an efficient way, the family forgot that at nearly nineteen years old she would, if their circumstances had been different, have been having a Season in London, dancing at balls and receiving proposals of marriage from eligible bachelors.

But there was no likelihood of anything ever happening while, as Jeremy said gloomily, they were buried in the country and looked more like turnips than ordinary people!

The only member of the family who had less reason for grievance than her brother or elder sister was Lynne.

Not yet seventeen, she was fortunate enough to be exactly the same age as one of their neighbour's daughters and it was therefore arranged that she should share her lessons with her.

Every day a carriage from The Grange collected her and, if it rained or they particularly wanted her to stay the night, she did so.

Besides her other problems, Mariota worried about what would happen next year when Lynne was too old for lessons. She was lovely, so lovely that her sister could not help thinking that any young man who saw her would instantly go down on his knees and ask for her hand in marriage.

But there were very few young men in their part of Worcestershire and as Squire Fellows, whose daughter she had lessons with, was very strict about young girls being kept in the schoolroom until they were grown up, Lynne had so far not tasted the social life which Mariota longed for her to have.

If Lynne was lovely with her fair hair, blue eyes and pink-and-white complexion that made her look like a piece of Dresden china, Mariota was lovely too, but in a very different way.

Her mother had once said,

“Lynne is like a beautiful portrait by one of the great artists with colours so vivid that it is difficult to think that anything could be more attractive. But you, my darling, are like one of the exquisite drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, for once somebody has looked at you, they want to go on looking because there is so much to find beneath the surface.”

Mariota had not exactly understood this at the time, but sometimes she looked at herself in the mirror and remembered what her mother had said.

She thought, with her large grey eyes and her hair that was so fair it seemed sometimes to be silver, she did in fact resemble some of the drawings she had seen in the books in the library.

But she seldom had time to think about herself.

When she rose in the morning, she twisted her long hair into a bun at the back of her head and hurried downstairs to start pulling back the curtains and opening the windows.

Being practical, she had realised that it would be impossible to keep the whole house open without proper staff.

She had therefore closed off the wings on each side of the centre block, which together formed the ‘E’ shape in which the house had been built as a tribute to Queen Elizabeth.

But sometimes she would go into the low-ceilinged and beautiful rooms with their diamond-paned windows and look at the dust on the floor and at the pictures and the furniture shrouded by covers and feel that it was like the ‘Palace of the Sleeping Beauty’ which would never again wake to life.

Then because it made her so depressed she would go away, back to the shabby, threadbare centre of the house that still rang with the sound of voices, footsteps and laughter, except when Jeremy was in one of his bad moods.

She knew now that one of his bad moods was coming on and so she said,

“Don’t despair, dearest. I feel in some strange way that something is going to happen.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Jeremy asked crossly. “That another ceiling will fall down or a chimney pot drop off?”

“No, I don’t mean that at all,” Mariota said seriously. “Sometimes I have an instinctive feeling – what our old Nanny would call being ‘fey’ – and I am sure something exciting is coming towards us.”

“You have got bats in your belfry!” Jeremy said rudely. “The only thing that is likely to come towards us here is a thunderstorm, which will take even more tiles off the roof or a bill for something that has been forgotten and now requires immediate payment!”

“Now you are being definitely unkind and horrid,” Mariota protested. “Grumbling has never got anybody anywhere, but dreams do sometimes come true.”

“Not as far as I am concerned!”

Then, as he saw the hurt in his sister’s eyes, he smiled and it made him look very handsome and attractive.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I am behaving like a spoilt child and I am well aware of it. But you understand how frustrating it is.”

“Of course I understand,” Mariota replied, “and it’s worse for you than for any of us because you are the oldest.”

She paused before she added,

“And you are so handsome! Of course you want smart clothes and horses like those Grandpapa always rode until he died and we found he had not paid for them!”

“At least he had some fun even if it was on credit.”

Jeremy drank his coffee and then looked round the dining room.

“There is certainly nothing we can sell here,” he said, looking at the pictures of his Forde ancestors.

“There is nothing you can sell anywhere,” Mariota said firmly. “We have been through all this before, Jeremy, and you know as well as I do that anything worth sixpence was sold when Papa inherited.”

“It’s a pity he cannot sell his title,” Jeremy reflected, “or his book that he has been writing for the last three years.”

Mariota gave a little sigh.

“When it is finished, no one will want to buy it, as it is only about us and there are so few Fordes left.”

“And the few there are, are as poor as we are,” Jeremy finished.

He got up from the breakfast table and, as he did so, he looked at the highly polished table that could seat thirty, which ran down the centre of the room. Then beyond it to where on a sideboard Mariota had left a silver candelabrum whose candles were lit every evening for dinner.

It was too much trouble to put it away every night in the safe and Jeremy stared at it reflectively.

As if she knew what he was thinking, Mariota gave a little cry.

“No, no, you cannot sell that, Jeremy! It is in all the inventories, and you know perfectly well that it was given to our great-grandfather by George I, and is an heirloom.”

Jeremy did not reply and then suddenly he cried,

“I have an idea! If you will not let me steal from myself and the hypothetical sons I am very unlikely to have, I will steal from somebody else.”

“What do you mean? How can you be a thief?” Mariota asked.

“I am not going to be a thief, I am going to be a highwayman!”

“You are crazy!”

“No, I am not. Do you remember when there was all that talk of a highwayman in the vicinity? It was about two years ago and he held up quite a lot of carriages and never got caught.”

“But, Jeremy, how could you even think of such a thing? You must be joking and it’s not funny.”

“Why not? I am sure I am very much poorer and more in need of money than any highwayman who ever terrorised travellers.”

“You are not – serious?”

“Yes, I am! And now I think of it, you will have to help me.”

“Help – you?”

“If highwaymen have any sense, they hunt in pairs. Otherwise, while one of them is taking money and jewels from the passengers in a carriage, the men on the box could shoot him in the back or at least hit him with something.”

Mariota began to clear the breakfast things onto a tray.

“I am not going to listen to you,” she said. “You are talking nonsense and, if you want something to do, you might see if there are enough new potatoes in the garden for luncheon.”

Jeremy did not answer, but walked across the room to stare out of the window.

Mariota looked at him apprehensively, thinking once again how handsome he was and how difficult it must be for him to have nothing to do but ride inferior horses round the estate, which was as neglected and impoverished as the family who owned it.

She knew by the way he was concentrating and the expression on his face that he had one of his madcap ideas which she dreaded, because they invariably proved disastrous and landed him in a great deal of trouble.

“You are not listening to me, Jeremy.”

“I have got it!” Jeremy ejaculated. “We will go to the Worcester Road this afternoon. There are certain to be carriages containing rich people going either to Worcester or Malvern and we will pick out one and see if we can fill our pockets as highwaymen have done for the last five hundred years!”

“How can you think of doing anything so ridiculous and so dangerous?” Mariota questioned. “You must surely be joking!”

“I am not joking. I am going to have some money so that I can go to London just for a week and buy myself some decent clothes and perhaps find an heiress to marry.”

“An heiress!” Mariota exclaimed.

“Why not? If I can marry somebody rich and restore the house, we could all live here in comfort. I want to be doing all the things I ought to be doing at my age instead of mouldering away like a rotten apple.”

The bitterness in Jeremy’s voice was very apparent and Mariota walked round the table to put her hand on his arm.

“I am sorry, dearest,” she said, “but we will just have to go on hoping that something will turn up.”

“For how long?” Jeremy asked sharply. “Until I am in the grave?”

Mariota had no real answer to this. She merely sighed and looked up at him and her grey eyes were very soft and sympathetic.

“No!” Jeremy said so loudly that she jumped, “God helps those who help themselves! That is what I am going to do and you are going to help me.”

“That is something I will not do!” Mariota said positively.

“Very well. I shall be a highwayman on my own and, if I am shot in the back with a blunderbuss and lying in my own blood, you will be sorry!”

“How can you say such – wicked things?” Mariota asked.

“I am only being practical,” Jeremy replied. “If you come with me there will be no danger. We will hold up a coach together. You can keep the coachman and the footman with their hands above their heads, while I snatch everything I can from inside. Then we gallop away and are never seen again!”

“I am sure it will not be as simple as that,” Mariota said feebly, “and anyway, we might be – recognised! Think of the – scandal that would – cause!”

“We shall not be recognised,” Jeremy said scornfully, “because we shall be wearing masks. But wait – I have another idea! You will be dressed as a boy.”

“As – a boy?” Mariota said faintly.

“All those old clothes of mine are hanging up somewhere. You will find a pair of breeches to fit you and I am sure the riding coat I wore when I was at Eton is about your size.”

“I cannot do it – I cannot!”

“Very well, if you will not help me, I will do it alone,” Jeremy said. “Goodbye, Mariota! You will not have to put flowers on my grave because they will hang me from the gibbet at the crossroads as a warning to other highwaymen.”

Mariota gave a cry of sheer horror.

“You cannot be serious – you cannot!” she said pleadingly.

Even as she spoke, she knew that in his usual impulsive manner Jeremy would become a highwayman with or without her help.

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Riding from the house at four o'clock that afternoon, Mariota was extremely conscious of how unladylike she appeared.

She was wearing a pair of breeches, which Jeremy had worn when he was thirteen and a coat that was actually a little large for her. But there was nothing smaller in the wardrobe where all his old clothes had been put away when he had no further use for them.

She also wore a velvet hunting cap pulled low over her forehead and a well-tied cravat around her neck added to her disguise.

When they were some way away from the house in the shelter of a small wood, Jeremy pulled a black mask from his pocket and held it out to her.

“You must put this on,” he said. “I made them this morning and I am quite certain that once you wear it nobody will recognise you.”

Jeremy certainly looked unrecognisable behind his mask.

Yet Mariota thought that with his tall hat on the side of his head, his broad shoulders and the way he sat his horse, it would be easy, even with the mask, for anybody if not to recognise him, certainly to remember him.

But she knew there was no point in saying so.

They had argued most of the morning while Jeremy went on looking through his clothes for her to wear and she knew that anything she said now was just a waste of breath.

When Jeremy made up his mind, she thought, it would take an earthquake to move him and only because she was desperately afraid he was right when he had said that doing this crazy thing alone was dangerous had she finally consented to go with him.

Now she put on the mask, tied the narrow ribbon at the back of her head and hoped that in whatever lay ahead, her hat would stay firmly in place, otherwise her hair might come tumbling down and reveal that she was not the young man she pretended to be.

“Now take your pistol,” Jeremy was saying, pulling it from the pocket of his coat. “It is primed and loaded, so be careful!”

“I don’t have to – use it – do I?” Mariota asked in a low voice.

“Not unless it is to save yourself from being captured, in which case if you don’t you will be hanged.” Jeremy replied. “But if you do need to use it, shoot at the arm or the leg, not the body or the head.”

Mariota’s lips tightened, but she did not say anything.

She was actually a good shot because, when they were much younger, her father had taught Jeremy to shoot first at a target before he attempted to shoot at live game and she had pleaded to learn too.

“You are a girl. You will never have to use a pistol!” Jeremy had said scornfully.

Their father had contradicted him by saying,

“It’s always useful for a woman to know how to defend herself.”

He had therefore taught Mariota to handle not only a shot gun but also a duelling pistol and, although she hoped now she would never have to use it, she felt that she was experienced enough not to kill a man by mistake.

“Are you ready?” Jeremy asked. “At least, Mariota, you must admit this is more exciting than sitting in the house and counting the cobwebs!”

Mariota did not reply because her heart was beating frantically and her lips felt dry.

She was quite certain that Jeremy’s new idea would be disastrous and already she was thinking how terrifying it would be if they were captured and taken before the Magistrates.

However, there was nothing she could say and she could only pray that her father would never know what they were doing

He had luncheon with them, but he was in one of his most absent-minded moods and she knew that he was concentrating on some particular research he was doing into the family history.

Because Jeremy too had been concentrating on a very different project, the meal was almost a silent one and, as there was not much to eat, it did not take them long.

Only Jeremy exclaimed as Mariota brought in a dish from the kitchen,
“Not rabbit again!”

“I am sorry, dearest,” Mariota replied, “but there is really so very little else at this time of the year and it’s the only thing we don’t have to pay for.”

Old Jacob, who ran the house with his wife, caught them in snares in the shrubberies and, because there were plenty of rabbits and very little else, it had become their staple, if very monotonous diet.

There were ripe gooseberries to follow and the bushes, which were vastly overgrown, had scratched Mariota abominably when she picked the fruit from them.

But while her father ate them like an automaton without appearing to taste what went into his mouth, Jeremy gobbled them up and said when he had finished the dish,

“I am still hungry!”

“I am afraid there is only a very little cheese left,” Mariota said, “but Mrs. Robinson has promised me some this evening.”

It was Mariota who had arranged that the Home Farm, which had once been run to serve the big house, should be let to tenant farmers for an infinitesimal rent, so long as they provided them with eggs, milk, butter and when it was available, cheese.