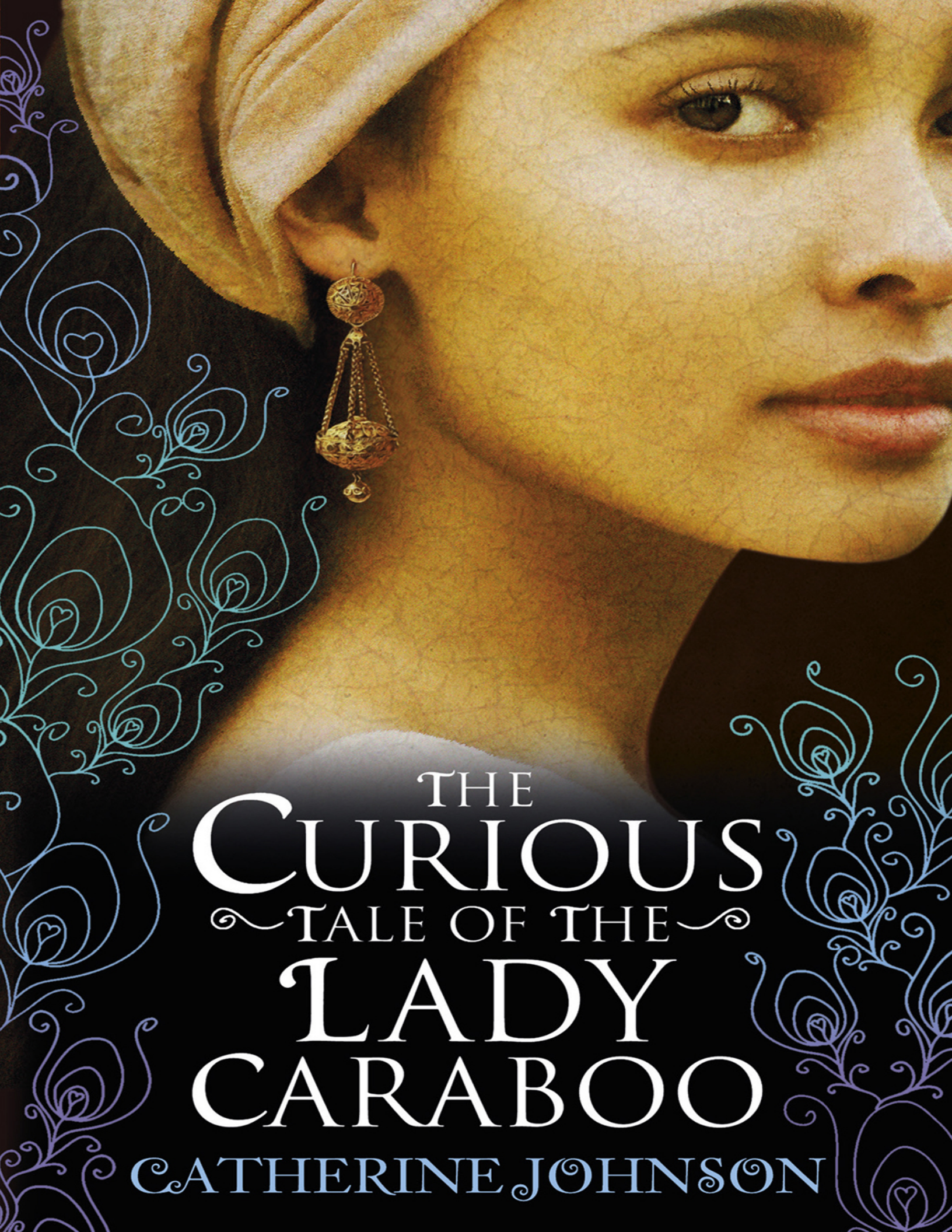

THE CURIOUS TALE OF THE LADY CARABOO

CATHERINE JOHNSON

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About the Book

A very curious tale indeed . . .

Out of the blue arrives an exotic young woman from a foreign land. Fearless and strong, ‘Princess’ Caraboo rises above the suspicions of the wealthy family who take her in.

But who is the real Caraboo?

In a world where it seems everyone is playing a role, could she be an ordinary girl with a tragic past? Is she a confidence trickster? Or is she the princess everyone wants her to be?

Whoever she is, she will steal your heart . . .

THE CURIOUS TALE OF THE LADY CARABOO

CATHERINE JOHNSON

RHCP DIGITAL

To Harry Catlin,
who helped so much with this one

FROM THE *BATH HERALD*

Oh! aid me, ye spirits of wonder! who soar
In realms of Romance where none ventur'd before;
Ye Fairies! Who govern the fancies of men,
And sit on the point of Monk Lewis's pen;
Ye mysterious Elves! Who for ever remain
With Lusus Naturaes, and Ghosts of Cock-lane;
Who ride upon broom-sticks, intent to deceive
All those who appear pre-disposed to believe,
And softly repeat from your home in the spheres
Incredible stories to credulous ears;
With everything marvellous, everything new,
We'll trace a description of Miss CARABOO . . .

And where did she come from? and who can she be?
Did she fall from the sky? did she rise from the sea?
A seraph of day, or a shadow of night?
Did she spring upon earth in a stream of gas-light?
Did she ride on the back of a fish or sea-dog?
A spirit of health, or a devil incog.?

The End of Mary Willcox

On the Bristol road,
just outside Malmesbury
4 April 1819

They hit her from behind.

It didn't take much to fell the girl, on account of the fact that she had been walking for the past seven days and eaten very little, so was close to utter exhaustion. She did not think, in the state she was in – caked with dirt from hard travelling – that any man would look twice upon her. Not in *that* way. She knew what to do, what to say when men looked longer than was decent. But she had felt powerless and weak since she had lost the baby. Like an empty ghost.

She had heard of this happening to girls, both in Devon and in London, acting the coquette and suffering the consequences. But she had done nothing, not a word, not a smile; she had kept her head down, afraid that she looked like a savage, her hair full of twigs from sleeping in hedges and barns, her slippers worn quite through. She had done nothing.

The men were laughing. One pushed down hard, a booted foot in the small of her back. The girl hadn't the strength to struggle, nor even the breath to cry out.

There were two of them, and she could not bear to open her eyes to look, even though she could smell the cider on them, and feel their breath on her neck as they pulled and tore at her clothes.

'Ent never seen an arse as brown as this!'

‘It’s flatter’n a boy’s! Jesus’s bones! You sure she’s a maid?’

‘How would you know a maid’s arse, eh? I heard it’s only chickens have made your acquaintance!’ The laugh came out as a snort.

‘Chickens and your ma!’

They both laughed this time, and for a few moments the girl thought that perhaps they were both so taken with their own wit, they would forget she was there. She concentrated all her strength and tried to inch herself along the ground.

The laughing stopped.

‘’Ere, is our maid wriggling herself away?’

Her arms were dragged back behind her and her face pushed into the dirt.

The girl murmured a prayer, but she knew that the Lord did not look kindly on girls such as herself. If he did, she would have had the means to pay for a coach some of the way from London to Exeter, perhaps even the whole fare, maybe somewhere to sleep that had a roof. As it was she had prayed hard every night, and never so much as a penny found its way into her purse. She had only herself to rely on, to believe in – hadn’t her short life proved this? Other people, men especially, bought only pain and suffering. Here, she thought, face down in the leaf mould, was more proof. Perhaps God thought she deserved no more than this.

So if praying would have no outcome, maybe she would be better off wishing. She would wish for wings so she could leave her attackers confounded on the ground and fly, up and away, and all the way home. She would shake her wings free of her short travelling jacket, the one the Magdalenes had given her, and the men would stand back open-mouthed as she rose up into the air. If she had wings, the girl thought, she could travel around the country fairs

and fill her cap with coins till it overflowed. She wished hard.

‘Hold her, boy!’

The girl did not need holding, she was so tired. She was lying under the trees face down in the dead leaves, where the cherry blossom drifted down like pink snow and the afternoon light dappled green and gold through the branches. It should be beautiful. She could feel the air on her nakedness and it was cold.

There was the sound of belts unbuckling.

The girl knew it should not matter because she was ruined already. She felt the tears running down her face and could not wipe them away as her arms were pinned behind her.

If only she had been born in another time, in another place, as another girl. Not a cobbler’s daughter from Devon, nor even a girl with wings, but maybe an Amazon warrior woman who could turn on her attackers. Better still, a fighting princess, a beautiful girl with a dagger at her waist and a quiver of magical arrows. They would not dare touch her then.

When the pain became worse, she thought of little Solomon, the one good thing that had come from her existence. He had never breathed the air, though he had come into this world a month ago this day, grey and still.

Perhaps, if she would not live long enough to make her peace with her father, this was her time.

The girl screwed up her eyes tighter and tried to shut out where she was and what was happening behind her. She pictured Solomon, his tiny body swaddled and still, perfectly beautiful in death.

Perhaps these farm boys – the girl thought they smelled like farm boys – would do her the service of dispatching her quickly. She did not imagine that St Peter would stand aside and admit her to Heaven, after all that had happened to her.

But surely Hell could not be any worse than this.

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The Girl from Nowhere

Knole Park House
Almondsbury
Near Bristol
April 1819

Cassandra Worrall was bored. She felt utterly and completely trapped; immobile and immoveable – like the ship in that terrifying book her brother Fred had left with her when he went back up to school after Christmas. *Frankenstein*, it was called, and although entirely different to the usual gothic romances Cassandra favoured, it had been utterly thrilling. And it began with a ship held fast in a desert of ice.

Cassandra was not trapped in ice, but suffocated by fields of nothingness, by acres and acres of boredom made real as good English earth. Outside the window, the velvet-green park stretched away to the trees. Beyond the trees, a full half-mile off, lay the village, the church spire just visible. She sighed.

'Cassandra! *Attention s'il-vous-plaît!*' Miss Marchbanks looked sour. She always looked sour. When Cassandra asked her parents for French lessons she had imagined speaking the language of romance, not long hours in the airless schoolroom copying lists of verbs. Worse still, instead of employing a native speaker, as her friend Diana Edgecombe's family had, her parents had engaged their old

governess, Miss Marchbanks, a woman who could render any fascinating thing as dull and brown as ditchwater.

Inside the schoolroom the air was warm and still; the only sound was the ticking of the large clock cutting the silence into bars. Downstairs, she knew her mother was busy with her ladies' circle – Cassandra had been happy to avoid it, but now she thought she would rather sit through one of her mother's anthropological discourses on the habits of the Pequot or the Nipmuc or the Mohican, or whatever group of happy carefree woodland peoples were to be discussed this month, than endure another hour of French with Miss Marchbanks. At least, she thought, she had not been obliged to take tea with the imperious Lady Gresham, who had arrived that morning. If only she had brought her son with her . . . But soon, Cassandra thought, Edmund Gresham, along with her brother, would be home from school, and then no doubt he would visit.

Edmund. She let her thoughts turn to him as Miss Marchbanks droned on. He was her brother Fred's oldest school friend and quite the handsomest man she had ever met. And it was not just his figure and face, which were straight out of the latest romance – his manner, too, was so modern, so daring. During the reel at the New Year's Ball he had held her so tightly that even thinking about it now, all these months later, caused her to catch her breath. He had not written to her since then, but Lady Gresham had assured her he barely wrote to anyone, and that he was always enquiring after Knole Park . . . He must, after all, be quite busy, preparing for his tour of Europe. He would not be bored. Not as she was now.

'Miss Marchbanks,' Cassandra said. 'Since it is three o'clock, and the weather is good, may I go out now, please?' Miss Marchbanks did not look up from the page, although one eyebrow was raised. Cassandra went on, 'Zephyr is in need of some exercise.'

‘Well, Cassandra, let me see.’ Miss Marchbanks held out her hand. ‘If your work is correct . . .’

Cassandra passed over her copy book. ‘I had not thought that French would be so tiresome.’

‘Miss Cassandra, I do believe the French lessons were at your own request?’

She said nothing. She had imagined romance and travel and the possibility of Alps, lakes, glaciers. Not verbs.

‘French is a very desirable accomplishment for a young lady,’ Miss Marchbanks said.

Cassandra pushed herself up from her desk. ‘Fred learns science at school. He said that last term they had a man come in to demonstrate electricity. He said you could see it jump across the air, glowing orange like a kind of lightning. Imagine! Just like Professor Frankenstein’s experiments!’

Miss Marchbanks harrumphed. ‘A most sensational and overstimulating novel. I am not sure that novels do the brain any good – all those ideas heat the blood, don’t you know?’ She paused, shaking her head. ‘You need to learn to apply yourself, Cassandra Worrall. I have never known a girl so fickle and eager to jump from one thing to another. When you began your studies you were so keen. Your brain is young and unformed, a weather vane changing direction every few moments. I am sure you will find the French language a useful accomplishment when you are grown up.’

Cassandra seethed, but bit her tongue. Poor Miss Marchbanks had probably never been admired. Cassandra knew she was quite grown up enough. The Ball at the Edgecombes’ had been a success – she had surely turned heads, even if the none of the young men in attendance had been half as handsome or a fraction as interesting as Edmund Gresham.

‘Cassandra,’ Miss Marchbanks told her, ‘you may take your leave. But if you intend to go out, make sure that silly

grin is off your face or you will surely be mistaken for an idiot.'

Cassandra was out of the schoolroom and across the landing before the governess had finished her sentence. She lifted up her skirts and took the steps at a run; past the painting of her mother's family in Philadelphia in America, past the marble bust of her father that the bank had given him, past the dainty Chinese drawing room, Mama's pride and joy, pale pink and blue in the not-quite-latest fashion, past the library where Father's books on finance and Mama's books on all the countries of the world lined the walls – then across the black and white marble-tiled hall and out into the sun.

Cassandra turned Zephyr up the hill, urged him on into a canter and let her mind wander.

Every night she thought about Edmund, imagining all sorts of contrivances whereby Fred invited her and Mama to London – no, not Mama, just her; they would travel together and she would stay at the house of some aunt, or perhaps a relation from America who was just off the boat. This imagined aunt would have a house in one of the smarter new streets in St James's, and would be younger than Mama. Fred and Edmund would call round and take her out for a walk, and she would be wearing . . . This part of the reverie was always the most difficult. Her cream muslin with a new sash, cornflower blue to match her eyes? Or the new Indian print with the neckline Mama thought too daring? Or better still, a dress entirely of her own devising, in lilac with some satin trim. Oh, and she would have some new slippers too . . .

Once she had decided on her gown and her hair, there was merely the matter of getting Fred out of the picture. She had imagined several scenarios in which Fred had to assist a passer-by whose horse had cast a shoe, or perhaps a stray dog needed to be caught – in any case, exit Fred,

and there she was, alone with Edmund, in the best possible gown, in London.

He would look at her the way he had done at the ball – his eyes intense, almost desperate. And she would feel that power over a man experienced by the heroines she read about. She thought of him kissing her, his lips on hers, his body pressing into hers, and she was so involved she did not realize that her eyes were shut and Zephyr was about to jump a hurdle gate that lay across the track to the village.

'Oh!' The landing unseated her for a moment and Cassandra clung on for dear life, while Zephyr, true to his name, galloped like the wind down towards the village. She sat back and pulled hard on the reins, hoping to slow him down. Zephyr tossed his head – he was cantering now, slowing a little. Just when Cassandra thought she had him under control, he stumbled, and the reins were tugged out of her hand. Then Zephyr knew he had his head, and he tossed his mane and was off again at full pelt. Unable to reach the reins, Cassandra bent low, took a handful of mane in her hand and threw her other arm around his neck. She resisted the urge to scream or yell – she was after all a more than competent rider – and said to him, 'There, there, Zeph!' in what she hoped was a calming way.

Zephyr had flattened out into a long thin streak of iron grey, and Cassandra, seeing the track hurtle past under his feet, imagined that perhaps this near-death experience – maybe a broken ankle or wrist, nothing serious or scarring – might necessitate Fred coming home early from school, and Edmund too. Then the thought of some real harm – a blow to the head rendering her insensible, a cut to the face which might spoil her features – sent her giddy with fear. Mud flew up and spattered all over her as the horse careered towards the village.

'Zephy! Stop!' Cassandra knew she sounded pathetic, and naturally Zephyr took no notice. She realized it was

merely a matter of time before she fell off. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. At least she would die knowing that a young man had held her; had held her so—

Zephyr's hooves clattered and splashed to a halt. Cassandra opened her eyes. This was not heaven. This was the village pond. Thank goodness she was still in her seat. She sat up. Then Zephyr gave a snort and shivered, making every bone and hair on his body twitch and ripple, and Cassandra, having stayed on while he flew down the muddy track, fell off into the filthy water, surrounded by a knot of small children laughing louder than thunder.

She got up. 'Stop it!' she yelled at them. 'Stop it at once!' She recognized the taller of the children. 'Robert Shaston, and you, Jonathan, the smith's boy! I will tell my—' She was about to add 'father' when her foot slipped on something indescribably slimy and she fell down again.

The laughter grew even louder. The whole village would be here soon. Zephyr had his head lowered to drink, swishing his tail at the flies, only pausing to give a little snort every so often, as if joining in with the village rabble.

Cassandra picked up the reins. She was aware that she was drenched from head to foot and splattered with mud, she felt she might burst into tears at any second. She knew she must get back on the horse and ride home. Her riding coat, pale blue and of the finest wool, was filthy. However would Mrs Bridgenorth restore it? She would hurry home as fast as she could, slip into the house through the stables, and hope to God, and all that was fair and just, that Mama's ladies would be so taken up with engravings of semi-naked American Indians that they wouldn't notice.

'Get off with you!' she shouted at the children, but they stood their ground, pointing and laughing.

'Come on, you lot, ent you got something to do? Here, miss, let me take the horse.'

The children scattered. She looked up. A young man with thick dark hair was shooing the children away.

‘Are you all right, Miss Worrall?’

Cassandra stared at him but couldn’t place him. She knew every soul in the village. Her parents were the residents of Knole Park, the biggest and most important house in the district. But this young man, wading towards her through the pond, was a stranger, she was sure of it.

‘Will – William Jenkins from the Golden Bowl.’ He ran his hand along Zephyr’s neck and the horse greeted him like an old friend. ‘You don’t remember me, do you, Miss Worrall?’

‘Of course I do,’ Cassandra lied. She swept the wet hair away from her face and realized, too late, that she had merely transferred the black mud of the village pond from her hand to her cheek.

She waded out of the pond, attempting to pull Zephyr along behind her. Zephyr didn’t move.

William Jenkins gave the horse a firm thwack across his hind quarters and he obediently stepped out after her.

‘I could have managed!’ Cassandra snapped.

‘I am sure of it, miss.’ Will was looking straight at her with his cool blue eyes, as if he were her equal.

‘Thank you. I will go home now.’

‘If you’d like, miss,’ he said, ‘you could clean yourself up at the Bowl – well, not in the inn, naturally, but I could let you in the kitchen. There’s no one around the back – just myself, miss. Father’s away in the city.’

Now she remembered who he was. Will Jenkins, the innkeeper’s son. Hadn’t he gone to London years ago? Hadn’t Fred knocked this savage down more than once when, as little boys, they used to play in the churchyard?

Cassandra hesitated. She must look an absolute sight. It couldn’t hurt to try and clean up a little . . .

‘Very well, my man,’ she said, and followed him with all the dignity she could muster round the back of the village inn.

He was shorter than Edmund and Fred, but his shoulders were broader for sure, and the linen of his shirt was pale against his sun-browned skin.

He looked back at her over his shoulder. He was smirking, she was certain of it, trying his hardest not to laugh as hard as any of those scruffy children. Cassandra scowled back at him. She thought she would have liked Fred to be here so he could have knocked him down all over again and wiped that smile clear off his face.

The inn was dark inside, and the kitchen, although not unlike the kitchen at Knole Park, in that there was a fire and a large scrubbed table, was a good deal smaller and more cluttered. Herbs hung from the ceiling and the fire glowed red in the grate.

Will Jenkins took a poker and riddled the embers, then put on a couple of logs. 'There, sit yourself down by the fire and dry off, Miss Worrall,' he said. 'If you need some clothes, you could wear mine.'

'Oh, I don't think so, William Jenkins! Some water, please, so I can wash my face, and then I will be off.'

'I didn't mean—' he began, but Cassandra glared at him. 'As you wish.' And he left her alone in the kitchen.

She stood by the fire, unbuttoned her coat and opened it out. The dress underneath was damp, and no doubt she stank of pond weed. She noticed her reflection in the bottom of a copper pan: her golden curls were dishevelled and her face smeared with mud, not unlike the war paint of the Pequot or the Mohican. Edmund would think her ridiculous.

She sighed.

'You are not hurt?'

Cassandra spun round. How long had Will Jenkins been standing there?

'No, I am not.'

'And neither is Zephyr.'

'How do you know my horse's name?'

‘Stephen, the lad who works in your stables with Vaughan – he’s brought him down to be shod more than once. The animal’s a stunner.’ Will put a basin of water and a bar of home-made soap down on the table. ‘I only ever saw one as fine as him, and that was in London.’

‘Really?’ Cassandra sat down by the bowl and began to wash.

‘A mare – Arab, I’m certain, a blue roan; it was on its way to Paris to race.’ He crossed his arms and stared into space. ‘I wouldn’t have minded going with it – on that boat to Paris, I mean. Although saying that, I’d rather America.’

Cassandra stopped and sat up; she wiped her face and looked at him. Will was in a kind of reverie. She had never imagined that people like him might think of travel; not in the way that she or Edmund would.

‘You?’

‘Don’t mock me, Miss Worrall! I would’ve done too if Father hadn’t called me back. Would be there right now, riding west . . .’

‘I wasn’t mocking.’ She checked the cloth he’d given her to dry her face.

‘It is clean, miss.’

Cassandra blushed. ‘Yes, of course, I—’

He leaned forward and looked straight at her, his voice low and deep and gentle. ‘In America, Miss Worrall, there ent lords and ladies or gentry or nothing. A working man may look at a lady, such as yourself, and—’

Cassandra realized she couldn’t look away. His eyelashes were so dark and long.

There was a loud thump from the saloon, and then Cassandra heard several smaller faster ones. Will Jenkins turned and left the room; she watched him go, suddenly realizing that the smaller thuds were her heart beating fast against her ribcage. She swallowed hard.

How could it be, she wondered, that he had changed so? He could not have been gone long, now that she thought