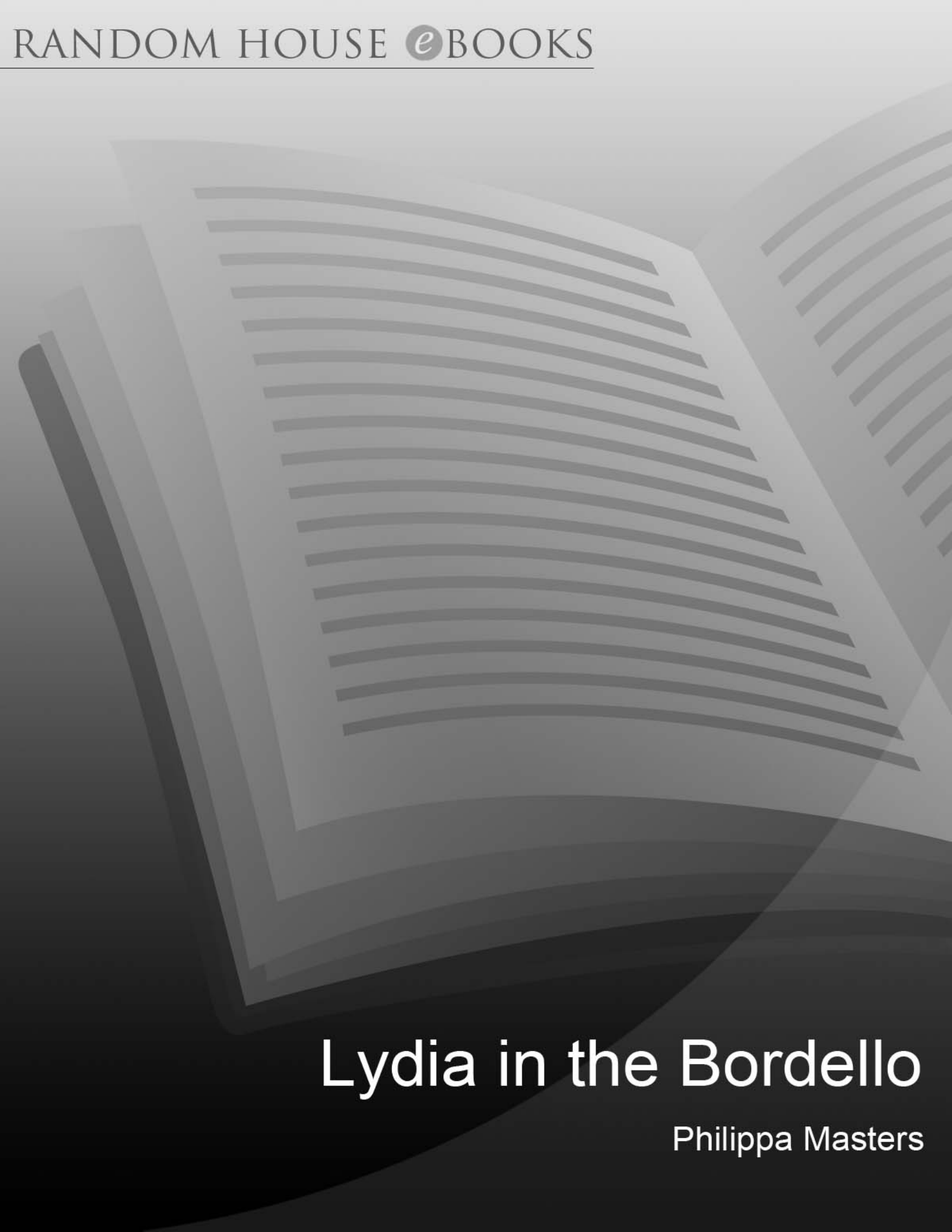


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Lydia in the Bordello

Philippa Masters

Contents

Cover

Also by Philippa Masters

Title Page

Foreword

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

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THE AWAKENING OF LYDIA
LYDIA IN THE HAREM

Lydia in the Bordello

Philippa Masters



Foreword

My Great Aunt Lydia's story, of which this is the third extract, continued to astonish me. I had gone with her, by means of her immaculate copperplate handwriting, through her awakening as the loving sex slave of Talesi and the men (and women) of his Tukkanna tribe, and her seduction of Hendrick, the Boer lay preacher who had rescued her. I had gone with her through her happy romps with Lieutenant Jonathan Andrews, and Captain Mackay, his commanding officer and Felicity's father (told in *The Awakening of Lydia*).

I had felt with her the joy she had described in *Lydia in the Harem* when introducing the virgin midshipman William to the delights of sex on the voyage back to England, and when submitting to the desires of the Turkish Bey in the seductive atmosphere of his harem, where she spent a voluptuous month while the ship's engine was being repaired.

I thought I knew her, amazing as her story was. As I read on – as I sat in her own armchair, by her fireplace – and read through the pages I now present to you as the third extract from my astonishing great aunt's memoirs, I found it hard to register that so much had happened to one young woman in such a short period of time, and in such a period of our country's history. My admiration for her grew.

It is her perceptive honesty, I think, which impresses me most. Our mental image of late Victorian England is of decorum, and tight manners, and carriages, and ladies with fans who fainted a lot. Lydia saw through it, and clove to the truth.

The history books do not let us into the world beneath the surface unless we research deeply. And who amongst us bothers to research? Did you know, for example, that it's estimated that in 1880 there were at least fifteen thousand working girls in London alone! Did you know that houses of pleasure, or bordellos, or – more honestly – brothels, though not exactly legal, were at least tolerated in London well into the twentieth century?

I certainly did not, until I read my great aunt's story. And as I read, my respect for her grew even more. She was in her teens – a child in Victorian eyes, not even eligible to sign her name to a document without a 'responsible adult' backing it up – and found herself thrown out into the world by a prudish and bigoted relative.

Not only did she survive it, even the licentious advances of her legal guardian, but she rose above it. Her innate honesty, her abhorrence of hypocrisy and her curiosity about how people's lives really were had all led her down byways few girls would have even contemplated.

For me, she soars above her contemporaries. Who else would have put into action her curiosity about women who exchanged sex for money, and sought out the company of streetwalkers? Who else would have seen that they were actually less hypocritical than so-called proper ladies, and admired them for it?

You may find what you read herein shocking. For me, it is the testimony of a lovely girl, beautiful enough (and even in her nineties Great Aunt Lydia was beautiful) to attract attention, and intelligent and good-humoured enough to use what God had given her to make her way in a mealy-mouthed society, make her wholly admirable, and an example to any modern feminist. That she also revelled in the joys of the flesh, and states as much quite frankly in her memoirs, only makes her more delightful!

On a technical note, various sums of money are mentioned in Lydia's Victorian memoirs, and perhaps some translation would be useful.

In those days, a pound sterling consisted of twenty shillings, each made up of twelve old pennies. Lydia talks of half a crown: that was two shillings and six pence, or twelve and a half new pence in modern money. A sovereign and a guinea had the same value, at one pound and five pence each.

The average wage of a working man was thirty bob a week – a bob being one shilling (five pence), and thirty bob was one pound fifty pence. I will not insult you by translating these sums into today's inflated values: it should be enough simply to mention that Lydia's delightful experience in the little garden square after her second appointment with the bootmaker gained her the week's wages of a craftsman bricklayer!

But I must stop. Lydia's story of life beneath the surface of Victorian England stands by itself. As you read it I know you will come to love and admire her as much as I now do.

Philippa Masters

One

I CONFESS THAT I did not pay much attention during our slow approach to the coast of England and home. I was decidedly weary as was Tiliu, from our rather energetic encounter with those half-dozen Laskar seamen on our last night at sea. Let it be a warning to other young ladies that to get tipsy – even in celebration of the end of a terrifying storm as we had – can lead to strenuous consequences!

As I did my final packing in the bright light of morning I was tired indeed, and was aware of a little stiffness and bruising. A couple of the sailors – once their astonished nervousness at the invasion of their cabin by two giggling girls was over – had become rather vigorous and excited.

Still, we had escaped without torn clothes, and Tiliu's impish comments and sidelong smile put it all in proportion. I packed my things and waited contentedly for the ship to tie up in harbour. As she said, with a giggle, we had both had more energetic times with her tribe and in the harem!

Everything seemed to be in turmoil when we finally debarked ship in Portsmouth.

The dockside was abuzz. It seemed that during our delayed (and rather pleasantly so!) voyage from South Africa home to England the Boers in Natal and Orange, led by somebody called Kruger, had had the impertinence to confront Her Majesty's Imperial representatives and threaten actual warfare! The cheek of it!

On top of that, in the harbour-master's office there was a telegraph message from Felicity's father, Captain Mackay,

refusing consent for her to wed her beloved Tapak Nasser, which caused her to dissolve into floods of misery.

Dear William, my sweet midshipman, was disconsolate that we would now be parting. I too was a little sad, for having been his first experience and pretty well trained him in the arts of pleasing a woman, I could not but feel a little pang at our impending separation.

I gave him the address of the aunt in Brighton to whom father had consigned me, however, and even though I was rather tired from the eager attentions of the Laskars into whose cabin Tiliu and I had stumbled all tipsy with wine that last night at sea, I enjoyed a slow and delicious shag with him on my little cabin bunk before William organised the crewmen who were to carry my boxes and chests to the dockside. It was made all the more enjoyable by the fact that his mood seemed to slow him down so that he took a long time before coming off and was very tender with me.

Tiliu was to come with me to my aunt's, still in the guise of my maid. Alice Prendergast, formerly Barnet, was generous enough to offer all of us accommodation at her new husband's establishment there in Portsmouth before we went off in our various directions on the morrow, and that was a blessing because poor Felicity was in quite a state.

That night – was it really only a few weeks ago? – of the Prince's visit to the Bey's palace, when that gloriously beautiful Malagasy girl had been presented as a gift to the corpulent Prince and such an orgy had developed after the consummation, Felicity had become besotted with her Tapak Nasser. So besotted indeed that she had even run off with him, and had to be brought back.

I did not know what had so enraptured her, but could see in her eyes, that very next day when the Bey and I had gone to find them, that she would cleave to no other, not even Jonathan her first seducer, for whom she had constantly

professed undying devotion (albeit sometimes with her mouth full!).

Her father, as I had been sure he inevitably would, had refused the telegraphed plea that she be allowed to marry Tapak. He was Egyptian, and unknown to Felicity's father, and naturally consent had been withheld.

We held a conference – Felicity, Tiliu, Alice and I – that first afternoon back on British soil. We had gone to the impressive establishment owned by Alice's new husband, where we were to spend our first night before going our separate ways the next day. Captain Prendergast and the other officers would be joining us when their duties at the dockside permitted.

We sat in Alice's drawing room with Felicity at the centre of our plotting, and histrionic she was too. If her father did not consent to her marrying Nasser, she wailed, she would commit some kind of scandal: run off with him, get with child, even do away with herself (though I could not believe this last was more than drama).

We concocted a four-pronged strategy. Felicity would send another telegram to her father pleading for his consent. We would get Tapak to do the same, repeating the plea and offering testimony to his background and fortune. Alice would compose a long letter setting out Tapak's wealth and standing in diplomatic circles, the sincerity of the couple's devotion, and so on, which she would get her husband to sign.

I, meanwhile, would write a second letter suggesting that unless he consented I would reveal to my father and the world how he had seduced me on that knoll when we were supposed to be watching the parade of his battalion, and all the other times he had got me aside to ease his lusts with me thereafter. The silly man had clung to his belief that he was my only seducer, and would be terrified of the scandal such a revelation would stir up.

Felicity's face when she realised that I had shagged her father was a universe of shock and surprise, and for a moment the news seemed to drive all else out of her mind. Much as I like her, I have to acknowledge that she has not the quickest of intelligences, but when at last she got it into her head that I was only revealing the facts in order to assist her, and not in any spirit of prurience or superiority, she was so happily grateful she wept and hugged me. It brought a lump to my throat.

She is as beautiful as any woman I have ever known, and we had been through much together. To have her, then, weeping gratitude and kissing and clinging to me gave me a strange feeling of separation, as though one part of me was simply an observer of all this. It is a feeling I had had before and have known since, as though the me that is my mind is one thing – detached and observing – and the me that is my corporeal being is entirely another, feeling and responding wholly bodily.

I felt it then, and echoes of those wonderful sensations when we had lain naked together in loving friendship and Felicity's glorious copper-hued mane had nestled between my thighs in the Bey's harem rose in me, so that even as I soothed the weeping girl I was myself becoming quite stirred up.

I controlled myself, though, and our plan went ahead.

It turned out to be rather a moving and energetic night, there in Alice's new establishment. Quite how the still rather straight-laced Captain Prendergast blinded himself to what was occurring among his wife's guests and his ship's officers I cannot say, but blind himself he did – or at least seemed to. After our plotting was finished, and the menfolk had arrived and we had enjoyed a pleasant dinner, Alice took him off to bed, whispering to him her eagerness for their first night together in the marital home.

Within minutes of their departure Tiliu smiled coyly and, taking Sharpe by the hand, well nigh dragged him towards the bedroom that had been assigned to her. At once, Nasser's arm was about Felicity's waist and he was leading her, blushing and melting against him, towards the door.

There ensued a rather awkward pause, for I now remained in the Prendergasts' drawing room alone with William and Donaldson. Quite why the men behaved so oddly I could not fathom. Both had been my enthusiastic lovers during the voyage, and not only separately. The difference now was that we were on dry land, in their commanding officer's drawing room.

William sat looking at his hands as though he might be reading something there. Donaldson stood up abruptly, went to examine a picture on the wall, his hands behind his back, and *pom-pom-pommed* some tuneless refrain.

One could almost feel what was going through their heads. Three couples had gone upstairs, each clearly intent on something other than sleeping. Now they were left, two men alone with a girl they knew to be rather enthusiastic for the games of the bedchamber, and they could not think where to begin, what move to make!

I glanced from one to the other, feeling mirth rising in me at how silly this was. Somebody had to do something! I stood and covered my mouth with my hand in a pretend yawn.

'Ah well,' I said. 'I think I shall retire now. Would any kind gentleman like to escort me to my chamber?'

Almost before the words had left my lips, both of them were at my side looking like eager puppies. Their hands actually bumped together as both attempted to put an arm about my waist!

Alice, knowing as she must what was likely to transpire under her roof this night, had provided me with a pretty

chamber complete with a double bed. So much more convenient than the narrow bunks aboard ship!

It was a very pleasant night, and both William and Donaldson were nicely enthusiastic and caring. They crept away in the early hours of the morning, and I then enjoyed a deep and satisfied slumber.

The morning brought one sadness, though I should not have been so surprised by it as I was. Sharpe and Tiliu came to me hand in hand. They were awkward and embarrassed, but finally blurted it out.

They wanted to stay together. They were in love, would find a way to be together as man and wife, were desperate not to be parted.

I myself did not want to lose the best friend a girl could ever have: the friend who had been my constant companion during my time as slave to her tribe, the Tukanna, and ever since, the girl whose prettiness and minxish wit was a constant source of joy. Even so, it was not from selfish motives that I argued with them.

There were many practical objections. Tiliu knew nothing of England, and nothing of English ways, save what she had gleaned from me while pretending to be my maid. There were very few people of Tiliu's beautiful dark colour in England, and ignoramuses might treat her as some kind of freak when Sharpe was away at his sea duties; indeed, his next voyage was only a month or so off. Where would they live? Who would help her learn to run an establishment? Who would befriend her?

Alice came to the rescue. They could stay here with her until the ship sailed; she would square it somehow with her husband. When Sharpe was off abroad, she would send Tiliu to me at my aunt's place in Brighton.

Thus, everyone was happy because Tiliu could stay with her beloved Sharpe; and I would only half-lose her, for she would be with me for much of the time. I set out for Brighton

with, if not exactly a light heart, at least with one that was not down.

It was a slow and circuitous railway journey from Portsmouth to Brighton, though not a tedious one, for we passed through much delightful countryside. I had forgotten how green my homeland was, and was entranced by the woods and pastures we rattled through, and the small villages I glimpsed between trees and beyond little hills.

The station at Brighton was bustling with people and noisy with whistles, the hissing of steam and the cries of newspaper sellers. I purchased a copy of the *Daily Chronicle*, whose front page was loud with news of battle in South Africa.

The porter who helped me with my trunks from the guard's compartment quickly found me a hansom, and soon I was trip-tripping behind a smart dun mare, my head buried in the pages, which told of disasters at Talana and Lombard's Gap, and of Boer treachery under a white flag at somewhere called Elandslaagte.

A chill went down my spine to read that the towns of Kimberley and Mafeking had been under siege for several weeks, and that now Ladysmith had been encircled.

Father's assurance that the British forces were too strong for the Boers, and Jonathan's easy confidence in 'giving them a drubbing' echoed in my mind. I shivered as I prayed that the people I loved, so far away there in Africa, were safe and well.

My aunt's place turned out, at first glance anyway, to be something of a disappointment. I suppose I had been spoilt by father's extensive place in G. . . . , and by the open airiness of the Bey's harem in M. . . . , and then again by Captain Prendergast's substantial residence (sixteen rooms, no less!) in Portsmouth.

Aunt Maud – she was not actually my aunt, but a distant cousin of father's, and apparently my only living relative in England – lived in what seemed a rather pokey house built quite close to those on either side of it. She had only received my letter, despatched from Alice's house the day before, a couple of hours before my arrival, and was in something of a fluster. I soon learned that flustering was her natural condition.

A short, round, rabbit-like woman, seemingly unable to decide whether she should be walking forward or stepping sideways, and chattering all the while, she managed to tell the cab driver both to put my trunks in the front hall and on the porch, and to direct me into the parlour while herself proceeding up the stairs still talking to me. I found her both frustrating and delightful.

The house was actually rather more substantial than I had first thought, having five good-sized bedrooms (of which one at the rear, overlooking a pretty garden, had been allocated to me), three attic rooms for the servants, a bathroom, a parlour, a music room, a dining room, and what Aunt Maud called the lounge, which had French windows leading out to the garden.

My room was light and airy. Aunt Maud busily told me what things were – 'This is the wardrobe where you can hang your clothes. This is your dressing table' – as though I had come from the moon instead of father's station in Africa, and, had I not professed weariness and begged her to allow me to change from my travelling clothes, I think she might actually have gone on for ever, even telling me which was the floor and which the wall!

A pretty housemaid I heard Aunt Maud call Roberts dragged my trunks up the stairs, and I happily threw off my dusty jacket, skirt and petticoats, and unpinned my hat. The girl hovered about, picking up my things and shaking them and hanging them in the wardrobe. I learned that her name

was actually Kate, and she seemed surprised and pleased when I said I would call her that if I may.

When I told her I would like to have a wash, she told me with wide-eyed pride that they had cold and hot running water in the bathroom, and she ran off to fetch me some towels.

My first mistake in my new abode was to leave my bedroom to go to the bathroom wearing only my chemise and drawers. It had not occurred to me to put on a wrap. For some reason, I had expected Aunt Maud's to be an all-female establishment; for her to live alone perhaps, or with a companion. I knew that she was a widow, but father had never mentioned any children. So imagine my shock when, several steps out on to the landing between my room and the bathroom, I was confronted by a young man emerging from one of the other rooms!

He coughed and 'Oh deared' and 'Sorried' and went the deepest red before turning away so hurriedly he barged into the door-frame before rushing back into his room.

I stared at the door he had slammed in his rush, as flustered as Aunt Maud could ever have been. I looked down at myself. My pale-blue cotton chemise with the broderie anglaise around the scoop neckline and the short-legged drawers Alice always made me these days did little to cover me, and the young man, whoever he was, had clearly been rather put out.

Oh, Lydia! In the house less than an hour and already causing a rumpus!

After regaining my composure, I had a delightful bath, and Kate fussed about me while I dressed. Though a little older than myself, she was clearly somewhat in awe of the young lady who had actually been to *Africa* and sailed thousands of miles over strange seas. She was a striking girl, much the same size as myself, with a round, interesting face, light-

brown hair drawn in a tight bun beneath her little cap, and soft brown eyes made all the more attractive by the fact that her pupils were large and black and her eyebrows soft and curved. I was drawn to her at once, and felt that we could become good friends.

Aunt Maud was in her drawing room when I descended the stairs. For a moment she seemed surprised to see me, as though she had actually forgotten my arrival. I soon learned that this was typical of her, for she was as absent-minded as she was inclined to fluster.

She soon recovered herself, though, and sent for some tea and cake, which Kate brought within minutes. Aunt Maud asked me how my journey had been, and complained about the weather, and generally chatted on. After a while we were joined by a young woman who Aunt Maud introduced as her daughter Emily.

She was about the same age as me, or perhaps a little older, and was very soberly dressed in dark grey worsted, with a white cotton blouse buttoned high at her neck. She was very quiet and had an air of nervous shyness about her. Her dark hair was drawn back in a rather severe chignon and, although she sat round-shouldered and mostly looking down, I suspected that she might be quite nice-looking and have a good figure, which later proved to be true.

Suddenly, Aunt Maud clapped her hand to her mouth as though stung, and positively leapt out of her seat. I was startled and rather puzzled as she rushed out of the room. What on earth could be the cause of such strange behaviour? Should I follow her in case she needed assistance in whatever was the emergency? I glanced to Emily, but she was concentrating on stirring her tea.

Before I could do anything, Aunt Maud bustled back into the room with a beaming smile on her face and a bundle of letters in her hand. She had been keeping them for me, and forgot to give them to me, and was terribly sorry, but now here they were. She handed them to me and plumped

herself down into her chair for all the world as though she had solved some great emergency.

Trying not to giggle at her odd behaviour, I accepted the bundle of letters. There were a couple from father and several from Jonathan Andrews, my sweet Lieutenant.

I opened the letters from father first. The earliest one, despatched only a week after our departure from South Africa, hoped that I had enjoyed a peaceful voyage and was settling in nicely with Maud. The second had been sent after he had learned, via the telegraph, of our ship's delay through trouble with the engine, hoping that all was now well.

I noticed that Aunt Maud was eager to learn the content of the letters by peering sideways at the pages I held, and I decided not to open those from Jonathan, which I guessed might be rather more intimate in their content. I opened them later in the privacy of my room: how right I was!

Although they told me something of the situation in South Africa, they naturally said rather more about how he missed our little adventures. The second letter almost made me blush, he went into such detail about what he would have been doing to me had I only been with him, and the third positively did make me redden it was so explicit!

I giggled a little when I read that he supposed I was missing 'it' as much as he was. If only he could have known! Since leaving Africa, Sharpe, Donaldson, dear William, and eight or nine of the crew members - not to mention the wonderful Bey and a number of his palace guards - were all now in a position to reflect on pleasant encounters with an accommodating English girl not yet eighteen!

It is an entertaining quirk of men's natures that, while they pride themselves on getting inside the clothes of as many females as possible, they always seem to believe that it is they who are the active ones, and we ladies passive. They seduce girls at every opportunity, while we cleave only to them, our seducers. Why, even though Jonathan had

known full well about my liaisons with Captain Mackay and Arthur Phelps and the other officers, both at the ball and afterwards, he still seemed to think that, once away from him, I would be deprived of the delights of shagging!

Silly man!

The young man I had encountered on the landing before my ablutions turned out to be Aunt Maud's son, George. I met him again at dinner, and it was at once clear that the impression I had made then had remained, for he was a little awkward and seemed unable to avoid glancing at my bosom.

He was a presentable young man of about twenty-two, who had grown a rather incongruous moustache in order to seem older. His light brown hair was thick and tidily cut, and he was tall and well set, with shoulders so broad even his tight, high-buttoned jacket could not disguise them. His voice was light, and I was pleased to see that his hands were very well kept. I think it a good sign in a man that he looks after his hands and keeps his nails well trimmed. There are few things more off-putting than being handled by a man with ragged nails!

Emily had changed into a rather less sombre frock of cream cotton, heavy and with many flounces. The short puffed sleeves revealed slender, graceful arms, and even though her bodice was loose it was clear she had a high, pert bosom. She did indeed look quite attractive when she occasionally smiled at her brother, but for the most part she was as quiet and shy as when I'd first met her earlier.

As the dinner progressed – it was very well cooked and served: vegetable soup, an excellent leg of lamb and a fruit pudding – George relaxed somewhat from his initial nervousness. When he understood that I was not going to be hard with him for catching me in my underthings, he

became quite charming and even, under his mother's constant flow of small talk, a little flirtatious.

The imp inside me decided that he was a definite prospect. I found myself enjoying the way his eyes would so often drop to my bosom, and flick away from my own when I looked straight at him, and he would give a little wriggle of discomfort when he thought I had caught him being too bold.

I delight in those little games of prevarication men play when they meet a girl they fancy, but about whom they are unsure. Their thoughts are always obvious, and it is always equally obvious that they think the girl in question is unaware of what they are thinking. It is as though they believe that only men size up potential partners and women are entirely oblivious until the approach is made.

If only they knew that it is nearly always the girl who causes that first move to be made!

Discreetly, for I was aware that Emily was observing all, I began to flirt back at George. I used the tricks I had learned over the last year and a half, becoming fascinated with what he was saying, gazing admiringly at him, keeping my lips moist and a little parted. I even, when he told me of some incident at his place of work, pretended amazement and put my hand upon his arm in wonder.

It was delicious to feel his arm go tense and to see his face redden.

By the time dinner was finished and we withdrew to the lounge, I had him positively trembling with confused eagerness.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly. George turned out to have a good, light baritone voice and to be quite an accomplished pianist, and we continued our little flirtations as he entertained us with some popular new songs. I turned the pages for him, and had to contain my giggles when he

played wrong notes whenever my skirt 'accidentally' brushed against his arm.

Emily sat in a deep armchair and busied herself with some embroidery. I realised after only a short while that she was actually more aware of our flirtations than of the music and her needlework. Her reaction, though, was odd, for she seemed both fascinated and appalled, and too tongue-tied to say anything, but at the same time she seemed more admiring than disapproving.

My discretion, lest Aunt Maud disapprove of my teasing her son, proved to have been entirely unnecessary for, as I was soon to learn, she was not the kind of woman to notice the behaviour of others unless directly aimed at her – and sometimes not even then!

Before long George, convinced that I would not repulse him, was flirting quite openly (though rather clumsily, I thought), glancing at me sidelong, preening, even – bold fellow! – brushing against me when he went to fetch a book he wanted to show me. By the time I announced that I was weary and intended to retire, he was convinced that he was on the way to making a conquest of me.

I was certain I had already made one, and could have him whenever I wanted.

I was in my nightgown and about to climb into bed when I heard someone mounting the stairs. It was a masculine tread. George.

It flashed into my head that he might just be so emboldened by our earlier flirtations as to try his luck with me. I whipped my nightgown off again and hurriedly pulled on my chemise. It was a short one, of fine cream cotton with a lacy neck and hem, and would surely give him a delicious sight should he knock on my door.

It was all in my head in a second. He would knock; I would beg him enter on the excuse I thought it was Kate. He would enter and catch me in the act of taking off my chemise. It

would be pulled up to my neck in the act of removal. He would be unstrung by the sight of my naked body. I would be shocked and distraught. He would take advantage of me. I felt my tummy give that familiar delicious lurch at the thought of how he would react.

But he failed to knock. I heard his footsteps falter, as though he were indeed thinking about it, then continue across the landing to his own room. I climbed into my solitary bed only a little disappointed, for it was early days yet. I found myself idly contemplating possibilities as I snuggled into my soft pillows. He was not an unappealing man, if a little awkward, and he had very nice hands – and our bedrooms were in close proximity.

As I pictured and imagined, in consolation my hand slipped itself beneath the covers and drew the hem of my nightgown up above my thighs.

Two

NEXT DAY I had two errands. The first was to call upon the firm of solicitors father had arranged would handle my affairs on his behalf. The second was to purchase clothes, for my own were far from suitable for the weather of an English October.

I was accompanied by George, who did not (it seemed) have to go to his office that day, and Kate, who was to help me shop, though not Emily, who apparently was busy. Even though the walk was only half a mile or so and I was wrapped up in several layers and more petticoats than I had worn in my entire life, I was quite chilled by the time we reached Mr Fortescue's office.

Mr Percy Fortescue was a man in his fifties, spare of build and soberly dressed, as befitted his profession. He had a hooked nose rather too large for his face, and deep lines curved from either side of his nostrils to the corners of his rather full lips. His eyebrows were very bushy below a broad brow, and his eyes were quick and shrewd.

He greeted me warmly, accepted the letter of introduction father had given me, ushered me to a seat, and then proceeded to irritate me immensely.

Why do so many men think that young women are incapable of discussing business sensibly? Although it was my affairs that were under discussion, and I myself the subject of the matter, Fortescue actually had the nerve to address most of his remarks to George, as though he would understand what I, as a mere slip of a girl, was clearly quite incapable of grasping!

It was that same old attitude I had encountered in Africa when I had asked about the dispute with the Boers; that

‘Don’t you worry your pretty little head’ attitude which always so irritates me.

I bore myself with as much patience as I could, as annoyed that George seemed not even to notice his and Fortescue’s patronising behaviour as I was with Fortescue himself. I asked the questions I needed answered, took the letter of introduction to the bank he was actually about to offer to George, and was no more than polite when making an appointment to meet next week, and departed.

It was a sad fact of my life at that time, though I did not discover its full import until my next meeting with Fortescue, that my being a minor meant that I had virtually no authority over my own affairs. Father had vested it in Mr Fortescue, so that he acted as my guardian.

It was most irritating until I learned how to manipulate him, for I had to go to him cap in hand for any funds in addition to my regular allowance of money, and had to seek his permission for all but the most mundane matters.

The people at Markworth’s Bank eased my mood somewhat, for they were politeness itself and did not treat me as an empty-headed appendage of George. I had never had my own bank account before and the chief cashier, a very pleasant elderly gentleman, explained the system to me entirely, and without condescension. By the time we left the bank, having drunk a cup of tea and examined my brand-new cheques with not a little excitement, I was in a much better frame of mind.

All the while, George – except when he had been patronising me in Fortescue’s office – had been acting the attentive escort, taking my elbow at every opportunity, leaning close to point out objects of interest, always keeping to the outside of the pavement as a gentleman should. He clearly had in mind our little flirtations of the evening before, and was minded to press for advantage over me.

I decided to tease him.

The crisp new banknotes folded in my reticule were crying out to be spent and I asked Kate, who all this while had been a shadow in the background, to take us to the best clothes shop in the town.

Since we left Aunt Maud's house George had never been more than a couple of feet from my side. He remained thus now, handing me through the door of the surprisingly large shop, staying close as we moved from department to department, listening attentively to my comments on the various fashions that were on display.

Only when I stopped and addressed a smart-looking saleswoman did he become uncomfortable. I had enquired, quite loudly, about certain items of underwear. I smiled with inner delight when George coughed and reddened and hurrumphed and looked about him distractedly before saying something about a purchase of his own and hurrying off, still blushing.

Such a silly reaction to the mere mention of the word drawers! It is as though men must deny any knowledge of such things as undergarments lest their prim and proper world fall about their ears. Or perhaps it is that they find the very idea of underwear too exciting. After all, they leap at any chance of getting their hands inside a girl's drawers, and getting them off her if she lets them!

Kate saw my smile at George's discomfiture. At first she, too, blushed, but when I grinned at her and began to giggle she was soon giggling herself in complicity.

Having purchased some warm underwear, some gloves and a very nice cape of thick worsted to keep out the cold, I found George and suggested that we take a further stroll so he could show me something of Brighton. With Kate in tow carrying my few purchases, we set off.

Although I found the town fascinating, being only a small place by English standards, but much larger than G . . . the wind off the sea was very chilly indeed, and I looked around