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1835

'Mr Wintermaine is coming to tea tomorrow.'

Helen smothered a sigh and said nothing. Even to think of Mr Wintermaine made her feel depressed. For some unknown reason, the new curate in the next parish had fallen in love with her as quickly as she had taken an aversion to him. And the more she got to know him, the more she disliked him, particularly his damp, thick-fingered hands and his cow-like eyes that lingered on her breasts when no one was around.

Her mother looked quickly sideways at her, assessing her reaction. 'He's a very good catch for a girl like you.'

'But I don't even like him!' Helen protested, desperation giving her the courage to speak out. 'Can't you ask Father to - to tell him I'm not interested?'

'You aren't even trying to like him!' Mrs Merling told her daughter severely. 'And you'll be mad if you whistle down the wind the *best chance* you are ever likely to get of *establishing yourself*.' She saw mutiny on her daughter's face and added severely, 'What's more, if your father hears you talking like that, he will be *most displeased*. I do not wish to hear any more talk of that nature, thank you very much.'

So Helen made no more protests, but neither did she change her mind. She could not, she would not, encourage the man who made her flesh crawl and as for marrying him, she would rather die.

The following day, Mr Wintermaine came to tea, as arranged, and when Helen's father sent her to walk round the garden with him, he tried to kiss her - making her feel sick with disgust.

She pushed him away, pretending to be shocked and he stopped trying to kiss her, thank goodness. She was very curt with him for the rest of their stroll, quite rude, in fact, but he didn't seem to notice. And he looked even more smug than usual as he chatted to her father at the front door before leaving. From the way their eyes turned towards her, Helen knew they were discussing plans to marry her off to the lecherous Wintermaine.

She went to bed quite sunk in despair.

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The following week Mary, the maid-of-all-work, turned her ankle when she was fetching in some wood. The ankle swelled to enormous proportions, thus rendering Mary incapable of walking into Stowby for her mistress, as she did every market day.

'What your Father will say, I don't know,' Mrs Merling complained to her daughter. 'He has a book of sermons waiting to be picked up from the post office in Stowby. He will be *most* upset if someone doesn't fetch it for him.' The only thing that ever roused Mrs Merling out of her mild apathy towards whatever life brought her was the thought of something disturbing her husband.

That worried Helen, too, for everyone in the house suffered when Father was in a bad mood. And she knew how much he needed this new book of sermons, because she had heard her parents talking. The Squire had sent word down to the parsonage that he was tired of hearing the same old thing year in, year out, and wanted something more cheerful than sin and damnation to whet his appetite for his Sunday dinner. Unfortunately, Parson Merling's mind did not have a cheerful turn, and he had striven in vain to compose something more to his patron's liking. Hence the new book.

A wonderful solution occurred to her. 'Could I not go and fetch it, Mother?'

Mrs Merling stared at her daughter. Too pretty by far. She would rather the girl did not go into Stowby alone. 'Your father would not approve of that. He hasn't forgotten the last time you went

to market for me.'

Helen hung her head. Once, she had lingered far too long and had not arrived home until after dark. Her father had scolded her severely and sent her to bed supperless, but nevertheless she had been thankful that he hadn't beaten her. 'I'd promise to come straight back this time. I was only trying to help.'

Mrs Merling hesitated. She, too, needed some things from Stowby, things which could not be bought in the tiny village shop. Only the linen draper's in Stowby sold the right colour thread for mending the church's fraying hassocks. And only in Stowby could one purchase fresh fish, to which her husband was very partial and which cost less than meat. 'Well, perhaps we'll give you another chance to show us you can behave properly.' Frivolous the girl might be, but her strong young body would make nothing of the three-and-a-half-mile walk, whereas Mrs Merling, with her bunions and her tendency towards breathlessness, would find it a severe trial.

Helen listened meekly to her mother's instructions and admonitions, then escaped into the sunshine. Even when she was caught in a shower, Helen didn't mind. She just sheltered under a tree until it had passed and enjoyed the sound of the rain pattering through the leaves. What was a little summer rain, after all? Not even enough to dampen her straw bonnet. She grimaced as she straightened it. The bonnet had been her mother's for several years and had been refurbished for Helen last year with a narrow brown ribbon to match her everyday dress. It looked old and tired, as did the dress.

Sometimes she imagined herself wearing pretty muslin or rosy pinks, instead of these dark, uninteresting colours. She dreamed of gowns made in fashionable styles, like the dresses the Squire's daughters wore. They were so pretty. She realised she was dawdling and daydreaming, which she had promised faithfully not to do, so she walked on more quickly, determined to earn her parents' trust for once.

When she got back home, her mother was delighted with her purchases. That evening, since

Mrs Merling found herself sixpence better off than usual, she broached the idea to her husband of making the marketing a regular task for the girl. 'I think the exercise did her good, Septimus. Perhaps we forget that young people need exercise. She's been very quiet and well behaved ever since her walk.'

Helen, who was crouching quite shamelessly outside the study window, since the only way she ever found anything out was by eavesdropping, held her breath and crossed her fingers while waiting for her father's response. As neither of her parents knew about the glorious half-hour she had spent in the woods on the way back, paddling in the stream and just lying there, lazily 'wasting the Lord's valuable time', they decided in favour of a trial period.

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For the rest of the summer, Helen made the most of her freedom, for she knew it would not continue - good things never did. One day, one terrible day, Mr Wintermaine would stop courting her and actually ask for her hand in marriage, then she would have to refuse him, because she absolutely could not bear the thought of spending the rest of her life with him. She did not know precisely what was involved in marriage, but if she didn't like him to touch her now, it stood to reason that it would be even worse if she were to live with him.

In addition to being a man of the cloth, the curate apparently possessed a small private income and had influential friends who might one day do something to get him a good living of his own. Helen's father had no influential friends, which was why he had remained at Dendleford and why he wanted her to marry Wintermaine.

Only . . . if she did not accept the curate's proposal, her father would be more angry than he had ever been before and would undoubtedly beat her. If she'd had anywhere else to go she'd have run away rather than disobey him openly.

'The girl must have a new dress,' her father said one day, studying her with disapproval. 'That one is far too tight. It is unseemly. *More* expense, Mrs Merling!' From the way he spoke, the new

fullness of his daughter's breasts was something shameful.

Helen hid her delight. A new dress was a very rare treat.

'Something dark and serviceable,' he added.

Helen stared down to hide her disappointment.

The next week, her mother accompanied her to market, which meant they had to walk very slowly. They came home with a length of material in such a dark shade of blue that it almost verged on black. 'It'll be very suitable for a clergyman's wife,' Mrs Merling said—happily patting the heavy parcel which lay on top of the basket her daughter was holding—when they paused on the way home for her to get her breath back.

Helen, who had protested in the shop, said nothing, and just scowled at it. 'May I cut it out and make it up myself?' she asked, not very hopefully. 'You know I'm good with my needle.'

'Certainly not. You would make it in a frivolous style. Your father and I have already discussed the matter. We do not approve of these huge sleeves which are in fashion nowadays. They waste a lot of material. Nor do we approve of clothing which emphasises the figure.'

Helen did not say a word for the rest of the walk. What was the point?

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The following day, there was talk at the dinner table of seventeen being a very good age for a young woman to marry.

'It allows her husband to form her character to his taste,' Mr Merling pronounced, dissecting his pork chop with his usual precision. 'You are far too capricious, Helen. But a husband will know how to chastise you until you mend your ways.'

So Mr Wintermaine continued to visit. They went for sedate strolls round the village together, and he brought her gifts of posies and verses from the Bible, copied out for her in a florid script.

'Too mean to spend his money, that one is,' Mary said one day in an incautious moment.

Helen absolutely agreed with the maid, but refrained from saying so in case her mother

overheard.

'Your father and I think Mr Wintermaine should propose to you on your birthday,' her mother remarked the following morning. 'You can marry soon afterwards. In October, perhaps.'

Helen tried to tell herself that her parents could not actually force her to marry Mr Wintermaine. But in the cold, clear light of morning as she heard her father's voice booming from her parents' bedroom, she was not at all sure of that.

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Two months after her first outing to the market, Helen heard talk in the village that a party of travelling players was to come to Stowby for three months to give a series of performances at the Assembly Rooms. They were fresh from triumphs in Cheltenham, and were to put on several plays, ranging from classical drama to comedies.

She knew better than to hope that her father would even take them to a performance of 'Julius Caesar', which was surely classical and very respectable. He had never been inside a theatre and had said many times that he hoped he never would. She decided not to mention the players to him. It would only put him in a bad mood.

She lingered beside the handbills in the linen draper's shop window and then grew breathless with excitement when she had the good fortune to catch a glimpse of the players in person. Magnificent creatures, dressed in the latest fashions, peacocks to the dowdy country fowls around them. As they strolled along, they laughed and chatted as if they had not a care in the world. How beautiful they were! How bright and fashionable! And the lady players had such wonderful sleeves, such full skirts.

With tears in her eyes, she stared down at her brown everyday dress, very tight around the chest now, with its narrow sleeves and frayed hem. How she longed for clothes more like theirs!

But when she got home, she found that someone had already told her father about the players. Over the evening meal, he mentioned it to his wife. 'I'm disgusted to think of such a - a contagion

coming so close to Dendleford. Actors are all thieves,' he lowered his voice meaningfully, but he needn't have bothered, for Helen did not understand the implications, 'and the women are worse.'

'Yes, indeed, Septimus,' murmured Mrs Merling. 'Very shocking.'

Her mother would have spoken in the same tone of voice whatever the situation—even if the bread had failed to rise, Helen thought mutinously. And why were players so shocking? Why were certain subjects not to be mentioned? One day she would find out more about life, she promised herself. Realising her father was speaking to and glaring at her, she jerked to attention.

'I tell you plainly, I would not willingly have an actor step inside the door of my church, not even one foot.'

'Certainly not, Septimus.'

There was a long discussion between Mr and Mrs Merling that night, after their daughter was in bed, about the wisdom of allowing her to continue her market trips.

Helen listened carefully, for they had no idea how sound carried in the small house, since no one else dared make much noise. She clenched her hands at her flannel-covered bosom and waited in terror for their final decision. If they stopped her going, how would she bear it? How would she bear anything if she didn't have her Thursday outings?

'I do think she is growing more sensible. She is nearly seventeen now, after all, and we've brought her up most carefully,' Mrs Merling pleaded, thinking of the cheaper purchases Helen always seemed to make at the market. She had been so grateful for the savings that they permitted. 'And she is very innocent. She is not at all like your mother.'

'A young woman should be innocent. It is for her husband to educate her as he sees fit.'

'Yes, Septimus.'

'I shall ponder upon it and pray for guidance,' he decreed.

As a result, Helen prayed more fervently in church that Sunday than she ever had done before and prayed again later, quite voluntarily, to thank the Lord when her mother informed her that she

was allowed to continue her weekly excursions, but must not, under any circumstances, *dillydally* in Stowby or go near the players.

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The following Thursday, on her way home from market, Helen was again tempted to linger in the woods by the long spell of hot dry weather. Dreamily splashing her feet in the cool water of the stream and watching the sunlight sparkle on the droplets that were thrown up, she didn't hear anyone approaching until a voice behind her laughingly declaimed, 'A dryad! A nymph of the woods!'

She was horrified at being caught with her bare limbs exposed, and jumped to her feet in a panic.

'Please don't go!' begged the owner of the voice.

Helen caught her breath at the sight of him, for he was surely the most handsome man she had ever seen in her life! Not tall, but . . . a face like the statue of a young Greek god in one of her father's books. And he had a smile which would have melted anyone's heart—except her father's. He swept her a bow, which made her heart thump in her chest. Oh, he was all perfection, from his gleaming golden hair and smiling blue eyes to his neatly shod feet!

She twitched her skirt down over her bare legs and stood still in blushing confusion. Her hair had escaped from its knot and was spread over her shoulders, which further added to her embarrassment.

'My name is Robert Perriman.' He executed a perfect bow.

'Oh. Well, my name is Helen - Helen Merling.'

She received another bow. 'A perfect name for a beautiful wood nymph.'

He told her later that she had resembled a Madonna, with the sun shining down upon her rosy face and youthful figure. He told her many things over the next few weeks, and paid her compliments, which filled her starved soul with joy.

'Oh, sir! Please don't tell anyone you saw me here!' she begged that first time.

'My lips are sealed,' he promised gravely. 'But won't you tell me why you're so worried about being seen? Are you trespassing? Will the keeper lock you up if he catches you here?'

It took Helen a moment to realise he was teasing her. 'Oh!' She laughed at him. 'Oh, if that were the only problem, I should not mind that at all, for I know all the Squire's keepers.'

'Then what is your problem? Pray linger for a moment, nymph, and enlighten me!'

No one had ever addressed her as nymph before, let alone bowed to her like that. She was tempted, hesitated, lost.

'The problem is my parents, sir. My father is the parson of St Matthew's, in Dendleford. And he - he would not like me to be out alone in the woods. Nor would he like me to speak to a stranger.' As she spoke, she began to pin her hair up in frantic haste, realising she had been away from home far too long today.

'Ah, leave it down for a moment longer!' he begged. 'You have the most beautiful hair I've ever seen in my life!'

She blushed even more violently, but shook her head and continued to subdue the hair. 'I dare not. I must be on my way or I shall be late.'

But the thought that someone considered her hair beautiful filled her with wonder, for her father seemed to hate the bright chestnut colour and unruly curls. He often told her to 'tie that disgusting messy hair back', for it would pull out of its pins when she was doing the housework.

'May I walk with you for a while, then, fair maiden?'

Most of Robert Perriman's flowery speeches were culled from popular theatrical farces, but Helen had no idea that she was being seduced by second-hand words.

'Oh, no! Someone might see us.' The hair was now up, but she glanced down at her legs, wondering how she was to put on her stockings again.

'Shall I turn my back while you complete your toilette?' he asked gravely.

'Thank you, sir.' She was grateful to him for understanding her predicament. What a kind person he was! A true gentleman. So very unlike Mr Watermaine. Keeping one eye on him, she hastened to complete her toilette, but he didn't even attempt to peep.

'I - I'm ready now.' Hair pinned up, bonnet in place, basket in hand, yet she still hesitated to leave. 'I always get home before four when I go into Stowby market.'

At the road, he swept her a bow which had taken him weeks to perfect when he first left his father's butcher's shop and ran away to join a theatrical touring company as boy actor and general dogsbody. 'Perhaps we shall meet again,' he murmured in his softest voice, his eyes warm and his expression openly admiring.

'Oh, I do hope so!'

Helen walked home with stars in her eyes, but she was not so lost to reality as to forget to stop outside the village and check once again that her clothes bore no traces of the woods. Nor did she mention to her parents the encounter with a man who must, she realised when she thought about it in bed, be one of the travelling actors.

Robert walked home grinning. He had not found many willing maidens in Stowby, but this one was not only beautiful, she was stupidly naïve. Just made for a man like him. She should be grateful, really, that he was taking an interest in her. She would probably dream about him for the rest of her life.

'What have you been doing, Robert?' Roxanne asked that evening, as they were waiting to go on stage. 'You're looking particularly smug.'

'Never you mind, dear.'

'I hope you're not pursuing the milkmaids again.'

He didn't deign to reply. Milkmaids or fine ladies, they were all much alike in bed. Made to serve a man's needs.

He was waiting for her in the woods the following week, and for several weeks thereafter. He called her his water nymph and he made her laugh. She lived for those meetings. Suddenly there was something beautiful in her life.

The afternoon Robert first kissed Helen, she was upset about something, and he was trying to comfort her. When the kiss led on to other intimacies, she did not at first understand what he was trying to do and it was a moment before she realised that he had bared her breasts.

'Oh, Robert, you mustn't!' she protested, then gasped as his hands caressed her. And those hands were so delicately sensitive to her needs that before she knew what was happening, she was clinging to him, gasping and writhing in ecstasy. She had not believed such exquisite pleasure existed. Surely, surely something so marvellous could not be wrong?

And as he continued to murmur endearments and assure her that this was the way all men and women showed their love to one another, that he loved her so much, so very much, she somehow could not protest again. No one had ever used the word "love" to her before. No one had ever held her, cuddled her, whispered such sweet things to her.

Afterwards, when it was over, he kissed her again and begged her pardon. 'I should not have taken advantage of you, my little love.'

But she did not, could not regret anything. If Robert loved her, then they would no doubt get married one day soon.

*She had at last found a way to escape Mr Wintermaine!*

She floated home on a cloud of ecstasy.

Robert was thoughtful as he tramped back into Stowby. It got actors a bad name to seduce young virgins, and she had been so willing that he had not expected her to be untouched. If what he had done became known, the company might not be invited back here - or anywhere else—again.

No! Surely it could not matter that much. Her father was only a country parson. He would

have no power to do anything to harm the company. And the chit was damned pretty—in spite of that dreadful brown rag she always wore—as well as very accommodating. Besides, the damage was done now, so he didn't see why he should stop enjoying himself. He grinned as he walked along. She was a very responsive young woman, for all her inexperience. She had enjoyed it, too.

When he got back to his lodgings, the feeling of pleasure faded and he began to frown. He was not looking forward to the evening's performance. He had had several quarrels lately with his leading lady. Roxanne didn't like anyone else to get applause and she had even dared to criticise his acting skills. Since she had joined the company, having bought a half share in it, things had been rather awkward at times. Maybe he should look for another position. But not yet. He intended to enjoy the rest of this season in Stowby very much indeed.

The weather conspired to allow the two lovers to meet several times more, for every Thursday but one was fine and the woods deserted of all but them. Each time they met, Robert made love to Helen—though it was the kisses and cuddles she craved most. No one, not even her mother or father, had ever cuddled her before and she found herself dreaming of the way Robert held her close, waking with a warm feeling in her belly, absolutely longing for their next meeting.

And he loved her. He said it so often. Mr Wintermaine had never even hinted at feeling any affection for her. She was so glad she was going to marry Robert instead.

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When Helen returned home from market one day in early September, the bubble of joy burst—abruptly. The maid was waiting for her on the kitchen doorstep. 'You're late. And your father wishes to see you. Immediately. In his study. You're in trouble again, miss.'

Mary's words shocked Helen rigid. It had been a long time since she had received a formal summons like this. 'What have I done?' she whispered, desperately trying to think.

'Don't you know?' When the girl did not move, Mary clicked her tongue in annoyance and gave her a push towards the study. The maid didn't want to get in trouble with the master for not

delivering messages quickly enough. He was in a foul mood today and taking it out on everyone else, as usual. He had made the mistress cry twice in the past hour. That poor lass was for it.

Helen tiptoed along the corridor and raised one trembling hand to knock on the door of her father's sanctum, a room she only visited for the purpose of dusting it - or when she was in serious trouble.

She was so desperately afraid that she nearly turned and ran away then, for suddenly she guessed what had happened. They must have found out about Robert. It could only be that. They would be infuriated. But she couldn't marry Mr Wintermaine now. Robert had brought her the only happiness she had ever known and she would not allow it to be taken from her. She would not.

She took a deep breath and knocked.