

I

LADY'S CHOICE

UNDER THE DIAMOND glare of a Jamaican summer sky, the shops and markets of Port Royal had been open since dawn. Mind you, not all of those who came to trade here came to do it honestly. This was a buccaneer's town, still in its extreme youth, cheerful with potential. Most of the gaudy wealth that flowed through the markets and the warehouses close at hand came from the ships of the King's enemies by way of English privateers. And those fine lads, whom the Dutch and Spaniards petulantly called pirates, sailed in and out secure in their letters of marque, for which license King Charles—God save him—took only a modest share.

By midmorning, the great market that was the center of a certain kind of social life churned busily, if ironically, in the shadow of Saint Paul's church. Folk of all colors and ages filled the red brick plaza, chattering in half a dozen languages, swirling eddies into cramped corners, and surging paths somehow through the center. At the cinnamon and salt-fragrant edge of the press, a small boy and his grandfather hawked peppery fish and rice in the shade of a striped awning, their skin as dark and shining as the fish was white and crisp.

As the day grew hotter and even Englishmen abandoned mercantile enthusiasm, trade fell into decline, and the boy's voice grew more strident as he shouted the virtues of the old man's specialty. All about them, just as earnest, other hawkers cried their wares to a crowd beginning to dive for the shade of their own verandahs. Good herbs or buttons, ribbons or a clean shave! Embroidered silk from India or cherries from the Japans. If it were to be had in the whole world, it could be had in Port Royal, but not at the height of noon.

The great bells of St. Paul's banged out twelve brazen beats. Merchants large and small began to think about shutting up against the mid-day heat, and made a last bawl for attention.

*Fine strawberries, picked this morning.
Last chance, ha'penny a pint! Ha'penny farthing for two!
Fresh fish for your dinner, none like 'em!
Two for one, milady! Two for one!*

And in the midst of all this, a youngish fellow idled obscure in a tide pool of shade, an island of serenity. At first glance, one might easily take him for a gentleman by the lace at his collar and the cut of his doublet. A less casual look would discover that the lace was largely shredded or absent, and the somewhat dated slashes of the russet jacket were not all put there by his tailor.

The hair that curled over his shoulders was in this light an indifferent shade of brown and, unfashionably, his own, topped by a loose-brimmed felt hat. Still, he held himself with languid grace, rather like a gentleman of leisure, and the rich touches of his costume would

serve to hide him in any company. Except for a decided sparkle in the hooded blue eyes, he seemed almost asleep, certainly indifferent to the busy passage of affairs about him.

St. Paul's clock ticked over another minute. Almost imperceptibly, the fellow straightened. On the horizon: a merchant of evident prosperity, given the volume of feathers on the crisp black hat, stalking behind a liveried African who elbowed a path through the thinning crowd, shouting to make way.

Coolly, Dick Prentiss judged his bearings, instinctively took wind and sun into account, and launched on an intersecting course.

"God save you, sir," he said as their paths collided. "Damm! Lord take me, sir, I do pray your pardon! So clumsy of me. Well no harm. A pleasant day to you. A very pleasant day!" Still chattering in the lightest, commonest way, he veered off and sailed back into the crowd.

The man snorted at the liberty, swore, and brought his walking stick whistling through the space Prentiss no longer occupied. Baffled, he wheezed, peering about myopically, then had to hurry to catch up with the servant who had pressed on without him. In fact, it would be at least twenty minutes before he would need his wallet, wonder whether he had remembered to bring it with him, and slap his servant for letting him leave it behind.

Long before that time, Prentiss was already crouched loose limbed in the lee of a mercer's silk-hung stall, counting his take. Luck, the faithless bitch, was with him this morning. Four gold sovereigns and a number of Spanish reals spilled silver into his hand. He turned over the shining pieces of eight, relishing the weight and feel of each against his palm; bit each one to test its metal; frowned when one of the silver pieces was mostly brass. That one he flung aside, largess for the feral children who infested the place. Shouts rose in treble delight out of the noise somewhere over his shoulder, briefly recalling his own peculiar childhood behind a crooked smile.

Cheered by the jingle of bright wealth and children's laughter, Prentiss slipped the gold and silver glittering into his purse. Then out of nowhere, or perhaps from somewhere quite nearby, another sweeter sound and a fragrance sharp as violets touched some chord in his mind so that he turned up that odd grin, squinting into the noon glare. The battered leather bag nearly dropped through his fingers.

The face that took his breath away belonged to an angel wreathed in golden red curls, and dressed all in rose-colored silk and cascades of lace. She had stopped, just inches away, with the sun shimmering haloes out of that astonishing hair. Too young and much too charming, she braved the midday glare hatless, the strings of some feathered confection sliding through small, neat hands.

He tried, briefly, to shake her off. It was embarrassing, for gods sake. Just a girl. A damned pretty, probably light-minded, certainly rich red-haired child who (*bloody hell!*) could be nothing but trouble.

Damn.

He looked away, or meant to, but somehow she still filled the sky above him. With an involuntary squawk, he lost his balance, collapsed over his heels, and sat down hard on a rock. The booth shuddered and so did Prentiss.

With real concern, the girl turned her attention from the bright folders of silk and camlet to the clumsy fellow at her feet. He shrugged without apology as if he had meant to do that all along, and met green eyes round with alarm. She moved as if to say something, but modestly looked away, only to return moments later. Cocked head, quizzical look, unspoken query. was he all right? The ripple of well-made shoulders seemed to say yes, just in time to earn him a view of a superbly corseted back.

Entirely aware, he supposed, of the effect she already had on him, the girl added a decided toss to those curls as she returned to inspecting a clutch of velvets, while all he could do was shake his head and admire. Green eyes and red hair: a disastrous combination.

In a moment, though, he managed to find his feet, straighten his jacket, realize what a less than perfect picture he presented. He'd lost his less than perfect hat in the last engagement. He did need a shave and, honestly, a new suit of clothes. At his most practical, he should have been thinking how to turn this little sweetheart's interest to his advantage. Parts of his brain knew that. The others were not listening.

The girl looked his way again just slightly, peering under pale lashes to find him standing now, still watching, with the generous curve of his mouth crinkling up his eyes. This time she gasped and instantly turned away. But curiosity persisted, and eventually the sweet face creased into a reluctant grin.

Little by little he memorized her, front and back. The gown, the eyes, the shimmer of light across the translucent skin; the agreeable swell of her bosom where it blossomed pink above the smoothly corseted bodice. Now that he was standing, she seemed so small, hardly more than a child, but with a woman's slender hands that moved with sure grace as she examined the wares. What was it, he wondered, about a woman's hands that spoke to him so clearly?

Part of her hair was drawn away from her face, fancifully knotted at the crown of her head leaving a light fringe of ringlets to dance above the eyes (such eyes!) while the rest spiraled auburn over bare shoulders. A pale gold sash circled a tiny waist and dropped to a pair of frivolous tasseled ends. And those incredible eyes kept glancing up into his frankly merry stare.

He had to fight laughing out loud. Good God, who was this little cat? Who was she? And how in God's name had he missed her?

It couldn't last.

The fascination dissolved under an acid comment from the stout and stately woman at the girl's side. A governess? Some interfering in-law? Not (God forbid) her mother!

"Molly, my dear," the old party whined. "Pray attend, if you please. You must choose something or we shall go home empty handed! Now, look here! This color suits you well."

Molly! Hardly a name for a fine lady, he thought with delight. She'd have heard that before.

She had returned her attention to the counter. "Good lord, Aunt!" *Thank God.* "That makes me look jaundiced. It will never do."

Never? He knew better than to hang on every word, he thought as he raked his hair back from his face. Perhaps it did need a trim. Did she mean something else, something for him alone? Or was she just a child playing peek-a-boo? The laughing eyes that sought him again from under pale lashes gave no clue.

The old lady dragged on the girl's arm and sighed forcibly. "My dear, are you well? You seem distracted. It must be this perishing heat! We'll go."

"Not at all, Aunt Henrietta," Molly said tolerantly. "You forget, I was born in these islands. On Barbados, aye, but 'tis all one. I am quite comfortable."

But her relative was not to be gainsaid, and pressed on regardless. "And I shall be to blame when you faint from exhaustion, which is vulgar, or pop out in freckles, which is worse!"

The lady paused to shudder then rattled on, but Prentiss had already stopped listening and so, he thought, had Molly. True, red hair was not now well-thought of in the best society, as everyone certainly knew, and freckles might as well be the pox. Happily, Dick

Prentiss was not the best society and so was free to choose his fashions, like his women, as he would, and Molly seemed, to his further delight, not to care.

"Just a moment longer, please, Aunt!" Her eyes flickered to his over a shameless grin.

"No, it is time to go home, child! Come along."

Prentiss shook himself, sensing an opportunity about to be missed. Watching them—well, her—was fascinating, but it had gone on long enough. With this much information he should certainly be able to compose an opening remark, make contact, at least get her last name! His lips parted to speak.

"Hello," she said with a gracious tilt of her head. Mischievous light gleamed out of a face as open as a rose.

Caught quite off guard, he acknowledged the gesture from the shards of his composure.

"Lady!" And started to reach like a gentleman for her hand, but the Aunt intervened with an imperious rap to the knuckles.

"None of that! Come away this instant, you wicked child."

Molly squeaked with alarm. A grim hulk in strained violet satin, smelling of camphor, the old lady pinched her impossible niece's elbow between two vexed fingers, and forced her across the High Street as quickly as she could move. As their voices vanished into the ambient noise, Prentiss could just make out the last despairing quarrel:

"Molly September, I vow, I have no hope of making a lady of you! I do not know why I try."

"Nor do I, Auntie dear," sighed the sweet voice, fading. "Nor I." Pale rose and deep violet vanished into the thinning crowd.

"*Molly*," Dick said aloud with the slightest trace of a sigh. She had a voice, he thought, like all the bells of London ringing on an Easter morning. No, better, the chiming bells of the Mass at the elevation of the Host, and just as precious. Was that too much? Very well, perhaps. Still—

September? An uncommon name but one he knew. Different bells sounded, but for the present he could ignore them. Right now he only knew that she surely had the face of a cathedral saint, round and sweet with a rosebud mouth that wanted kissing, and a figure his hands ached to hold.

Prentiss shivered suddenly, blew a couple of deep breaths in a row, and combed long fingers through his lightly curling hair, teased up in the first breeze of the day. In a moment he'd be reciting poetry.

... a rapture of charms

At the thought of those joys I should meet in her arms.

And something ta da dum di dum something. Where had that come from? Never mind. He'd better get his concentration back or lose the rest of the day, and that would never do. A single gull screamed overhead.

The market crowd abruptly refocused in front of him, this time with a friend in the middle of it, and just the one he needed.

"Jimmy!" He flung up a hand and shouted over the din. "Here!"

Jimmy Fitts crossed over, artfully dodging the rumbling carts and carriages of Market Street. "So?"

Prentiss's oldest friend was tall, though not so tall as Dick, and forever lanky where Dick was neatly muscled. Never handsome, still he had his own kind of decent looks, marred by the scars of a long ago small pox. Though he might never win the girls Prentiss went after, he seldom slept alone.

"So, indeed!" Dick pressed one of his fresh-caught shillings into his friend's hand, and threw a comradely arm about his shoulder.

"What's this for?" Fitts asked doubtfully.

Steering into the crowds where they would not be overheard, Prentiss said, "You look to me like a man what wants employment."

Jimmy, the less whimsical of the two, allowed a knowing chuckle and added, "All right, what's 'er name?"

"What's that?" Prentiss stopped in apparent dismay, suddenly confusing the flow of traffic behind him. Three men and a flower seller collapsed into each other, swearing. "I haven't so much as mentioned..."

"God's death, man, how long have I known you?"

Prentiss shook his head, sighed "Much too long," and walked on, choosing the most direct course to his point after all. "Tell me this, then. What d'ye know about a red-headed wench called Molly September? Sixteen, maybe. From Barbados."

Jimmy nodded thoughtfully. "Any kin to Rafe September, the pilot?"

Prentiss shrugged, teased again by the thought. Jimmy went on, "Old FitzRobert, the King's Comptroller? Y'know Rafe wedded his sister, but she died I think, a bit after he did. There was a lass, aye. You mind him talking of her? They sent her away somewhere. France, I think. Catholics."

They had known Rafe September as well as anyone, maybe better, but the man had kept his family to himself.

Dick smiled at the ready gossip. Of Jimmy's many talents, his most natural was gathering information. He knew everybody and everything of value in Port Royal, where to find them, and how to retrieve them. Did you wish to rob a certain house? In exchange for a share, he would examine it for you, determine the easiest entrance, draw the maps, and seduce the chambermaid if required. He knew by Christian name every household servant in town.

"Come on, man, think. Might Rafe's little lass be a woman grown by now, and home from school?"

It was Jimmy's turn to laugh, caught up in his comrade's eccentric enthusiasm. He scratched thoughtfully at his beard, thinking of hot water and a razor.

"Aye, that's as may be. Might be as much as sixteen, seventeen say. Educated, I expect. Refined. Rich, by all accounts, and much too good for the likes of you, my lad. If it's her."

"If it's her. Look you, I want to know for sure. Who she is, where she is, anything else of interest. You know I'll make it worth your while. It's been a lucky day."

Jimmy only shook his head and tossed the one silver coin. Ten shillings today, that made. It would do.

"For you, the special rates apply. But God's Blood, Prentiss! Rafe's little girl?"

They each looked away and shrugged the thought aside. "You'll be at the Saracen's Head tonight?" said Jimmy.

"Where else?"

"Where else indeed. I find you with Alice again, I'll break yer arm!" Jimmy Fitts punched him in the shoulder by way of punctuation then thrust both thumbs into his belt and strolled away whistling.

The warm scent of summer roses hung rich and still in the late sunshine, thickening the air over the garden where, in the shade of her uncle's big brick house, Molly September sat to receive the daily lecture in deportment. No matter how disordered her life might have been before, it had certainly become predictably tedious in the months since arriving in

Jamaica. A carefree island childhood and three wild years in Paris must, she supposed, be paid for, and this was to be the coin. Not enough to lose both parents one after the other. She would be plagued by busy relatives until she joined them.

An hour or two of horizontal relief from contact with the vulgar masses had restored milady aunt, so that when she came down to the small but pleasant garden, Henrietta was quite prepared to deliver her unchanging message. And gently reared, no matter milady's view, Molly did just manage to struggle through the meal without argument. To be fair, she did it without speaking at all, which was half the trick.

The sermon came in two parts, more or less identical, one at the close of each course. The second began as soon as the dinner things had been cleared in favor of the chocolate pot and sweet biscuits, and the silent serving maids gone away. Even the opening words had not changed, as if repetition would stand in for sound reasoning.

"I simply cannot imagine what you thought you were about," said Lady FitzRobert. "My word! Speaking to ruffians in the public street!"

"You had rather I spoke to him in private?" Molly answered, barely suppressing a giggle while she avoided the basilisk glare. The perfect shoulders lifted in a graceful shrug as she raised her glass. "Honestly, *ma tante*. We spent the whole morning in the market and accomplished nothing except to exhaust your poor feet. And all you can remember is that I had two words with an attractive scoundrel."

"Attractive! A savage like that, attractive! You haven't enough young men fluttering about you already but you must pick them up in the street. I do not know where these shameless ideas of yours come from."

"Shameless? Good lord, Aunt, it's not as if I asked him home to supper."

"Faith, I think you would have done!"

Molly felt her anger rise and fought it back. This way lay madness and fruitless argument, and worse still, Henrietta was right. The rogue might very well be charming, but after that? Romance was for poetry. She could not permit herself to imagine anything after that.

"Peace, Aunt, please!" she said after a thoughtful, she hoped penitent, sort of pause. "It is a thing of naught. Pass the cakes, please."

There was to be no release. Everything she did was wrong.

"A large appetite is unbecoming in a lady of quality."

"Then I am a lady of no quality, I suppose." Molly dusted crumbs from the folds of her crisp afternoon gown, pale blue silk ribboned with daffodil. The gesture, done properly, showed off the rich wine-colored lining of the sleeves. "Simply hopeless. Perhaps you should turn me out into the streets with the likes of that 'savage', as you call him."

"Molly!" Henrietta spoke with a vigor she usually reserved for recalcitrant servants. Clearly this was not going quite as she had intended.

"No truly!" Molly brightened with reckless mischief. In for a penny. "Don't you think I would make a handsome gypsy?" She avoided a wistful sigh. "Or perhaps I should go to sea. Would your friend Captain Benning take on a cabin boy? I know, I shall buy a drum, and go for a soldier. Colonel Rhetford must need another drummer boy."

"Enough!" Already pale with displeasure, two sharp lines creased the aged brow between the eyes. "Molly September, I will not listen to such talk!"

"Oh Aunt!" Summoning up apology as sweet as she dared, Molly put a conciliatory hand to the old lady's satin-cased arm and hurriedly changed wicked smiles for something like contrition. Even an honest priest would have forgiven her. "Dearest, you know I am only teasing, surely."

Aunt Henrietta allowed herself to be placated somewhat.

"As we both know, it isn't a cabin boy Captain Benning is after. I suppose you have no interest in being the captain's lady—*Lady* Benning, if you please."

Molly tossed her much-admired curls, knowing how the afternoon light would flame in her gaudy hair. Knowing, too, how the hoydenish gesture would infuriate her Aunt, and how she would regret it, she did it twice.

"I don't much care for your Captain Benning," she said with a shudder. More sincere than she realized, she added, "He has been through two wives already. That should be enough for any man."

"Do not be vulgar."

"But it is true," Molly pouted, crumbling biscuits in her long fingers. "They say he beat them, and I'll never stand for that, no matter how rich he is, or how handsome." And he was handsome, in a dark, uncomfortable sort of way, which made it worse. "He makes my flesh crawl."

Then against her better judgment she grinned, catlike, as a new thought crossed her mind and came out of her mouth. "His Ensign, however..."

"You wicked girl! George Alcott is a puppy! A boy! And of no family at all! What sort of match is that?"

"Why, no match at all, my dear. And that is the point. My mother always said ..."

"No more!" Henrietta rose with a dramatic clatter of silver and china, quite serious, not to be defied. "Your mother had so little care for her name as to bring up a child with pirates and Frenchmen. If you persist in this attitude, you shall never be a lady of any kind, and I shall never see you married at all. Never! And then, my girl, what then!" Poor old thing, tears stained the pleated folds around her eyes for frustration and social, even moral, outrage.

"But I do not want to be married!" Molly slapped the napkin angrily to the table, clattering the chocolate pot and forks and glasses.

Henrietta blanched under her talcum. Surely every girl wanted to be married! Indeed, a girl with a fortune must be married. The very thought made her dizzy. "Now you will tell me you wish to become a nun, I suppose."

"Hardly that." Something unfortunately like a sneer wrinkled the fine features. "Oh Aunt! I've just come home and all you can think of is getting rid of me!"

She had sworn in three languages to be good, but this was too much. It was always too much, and hopeless besides. "You must realize I've just finished mourning my mother! I'm not yet eighteen. You can't ask it of me."

Passion choked off the words. She wanted desperately not to cry, not to beg, but especially not to be married. At least not now, and certainly not to that monster Benning.

Lady FitzRobert was unmoved.

"You are a stupid, stupid girl," she said coldly. "No one asked me whether I wished to marry. Roger was no hero out of romance. But I relied on my family's good care for me, and I," she stressed, "have been grateful. You are quite finished with mourning and quite old enough to be wed. Your mother, God save her, was no older than you."

Now Molly's head snapped up, her whole body trembling.

"You may not speak to me of her," she snarled. "She had the life she wanted, in spite of all of you. And she was happy! We all were! Shall I be more afraid of you than she was?"

"Your mother chose to abandon a perfectly good match for a shameless liaison with that pirate."

"Rafe was no pirate!" Molly shrieked till the servants filled the windows. "Never say that!"

"A pirate," the older woman pronounced. "And in the end, it killed her."

"No!"

But Henrietta was far more offended than threatened by the fury of a slim young girl with clenched fists. In glacial dignity, she said, "In my house, my girl, I shall say what I please. But since you cannot speak sensibly, we shall say nothing more. Nothing, you understand?"

Knowing she had failed to keep her temper or the peace, Molly nodded, trying not to grind her teeth. Henrietta was not finished.

"You have completely ruined the day for both of us with your insolent humors. Your Uncle Roger will have more to say to you, I am quite sure. And when Sir Simon Benning offers for you, I expect you to be agreeable."

Fear nudged anger aside. "You mean he would force me?" Molly whispered.

"You will be expected to be agreeable," Henrietta said again and brushed crumbs from her gown. Rising, she made a stately way toward the house while servants rushed to wait on her. She had made her final statement.

Molly's despair drove her to the ground in a lake of blue and daffodil sighs. Tears at least had not betrayed her, but it hardly mattered. No one cared. No one in the world.

Streets away, the tavern called the Saracen's Head crouched in a perpetual murk, the air stale with layers of tobacco smoke and the bitter odors of sweat mixed with watered wine and ha'penny ale. The heavy sweet tang of rum swagged from the high roof beams and walked on its own across the spongy planks under foot, as present as truth.

As the day faded without cooling, the room grew almost foggy as twenty years of spilled punch breathed out of the floor. Its one virtue was that, being walled in grey stone and half buried in the sandy earth, it stayed almost cool compared with the sun-baked world outside.

So it was now, in the long dim space between sunset and summer night, when discreet business could be carried on away from the rattle of the city streets and before the inn filled up with the evening's custom. There would be noise in plenty later on: wheezing music from a concertina and bawdy singing, raucous and off-key but enthusiastic. Just now, it was nearly empty.

Dick Prentiss, having had such an interesting day, had decided to start his drinking early. Now he slouched comfortably on a wooden trestle, his long legs stretched out to prop his feet on a stool, his back to the wall. Sandy bits of stone and mortar bored patterns through his jacket and shirt, but his attention was principally taken up with watching dust motes swim through the lambent golden light slanting in from the doorway at the top of the steps, too bright to look at square on. One hand nestled the warm bowl of a clay pipe filled with good up-country tobacco: an indulgence, but what the hell. The other rested lightly around a jack of rum, his second and nearly empty.

The rich stink of tarred leather mixed pleasantly in his nose with the sharp sweetness of liquor and leaf. Equally pleasant thoughts twisted a good-natured smile across his face and into the cornflower eyes. Odd bits of poetry still staggered through his head, but he no longer cared. It had been a very good day.

Prentiss blew into the air to watch dust swirl through the light.

A very good day indeed. He had made enough to cover his room and his bar tab, and still have a good bit left over. Perhaps a new jacket. Crimson, maybe. At least a new shirt, with all the lace intact. Certainly a new hat. And aye, there was that red-haired lass to consider.

The smile deepened as she crossed his mind for the hundredth time. A fine-looking wench indeed. And well fixed. And ill content. Perfect for his usual habit. The smile wrinkled into a sudden frown.

On the other hand, this time could be different. What if she wasn't just some pretty pouting miss waiting for a husband? He turned the odd notion over a few times.

If she is Rafe's daughter, he thought, she might well be more than a match for you. What then, my lad? Going to fall in love, I suppose.

He snorted derisively, and slapped the rum down with a bang and swore aloud. "Ha! Not bloody likely."

He was shaking his head with disgust when a wiry, athletic silhouette appeared in the doorway. It paused, letting eyes adjust to the change in light, then noisily joggled the wooden planks down to the floor, and resolved into Jimmy Fitts.

Dick called lightly, without raising his voice. "Jimmy!" His friend's head snapped about, seeking the sound while still accommodating the dark. "Here."

"I suppose you're drinking?"

"I suppose you're breathing? Driscoll, y' poxy ape! Some rum over here for Goodman News! I was just thinking about you, my lad."

"There's a surprise." A second leathern jack hit the table with a slosh. Fitts took a long, slow pull at it, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and gasped. "Christ! That's terrible stuff!"

"And the girl?" A silver shilling slid across the much-polished trestle. Even friends require to be paid for good service.

"All right. King's Lane. The prettiest piece you've looked at for a long time. Not like that last. The house, I mean, not the wench."

"Never mind the house. The girl, man. The girl!"

"Anxious, are we?" Jimmy took another swig, then leaned in on confidential elbows. "Red hair, right?"

Dick wanted to object, to define the color more particularly as red-gold, or golden red, and add something about the quality of her smile. He settled for a nod.

"The fat old party is Lady FitzRobert, and the uncle is Sir Roger, like I thought. King's Comptroller, whatever that is."

"He handles the money. (Who *taught* you?) Get on with it!"

Jimmy just shrugged. "So ye're not interested. Belike someone else may be. Aye, the girl is Rafe's Molly all right. Born and bred on Barbados. Not exactly the model of Colonial society, but a very pretty fortune from her mother, plus whatever Rafe left. You ever meet the mother?"

"Never."

"Nor I, but the servants all say the girl's a terror, just like her. So they're blithe t' marry her off." He stopped, sipping meditatively at his drink. His eyes seemed to wander off idly.

"Are you going to tell me what I need to know," Dick growled. "Or am I going to..."

"What? Do me damage? The sharp fella that's going to tell you how to get near her? You mean me?"

Prentiss glared, but made no further move, except to signal for another drink.

"That's better," Jimmy said. "King's Lane. House is called 'The Arbours'. Second floor. South corner. White curtains. Most of the servants are at the other end of the house."

"Can I get to her without going through the house?"

"I can. You're out of shape. Too much easy livin'!"

"Oh, I'll manage. I've been landlocked for a year and more—God! Two years! Can it be two? But some things you don't forget."

"That long, aye." Jimmy nodded with secret understanding. "Try three years, if you please. Remind me, Prentiss. Is it my turn to rescue you, or t'other way round?" Dick only stared, owl-eyed. "Well, never mind. She's yours for the taking, though I'd have a care. They've got a ball on tonight. That means officers, even the Governor maybe. You'll want to wait, unless you've got something to wear while chatting with Lord Vaughn."

Fitts could only wonder at the extraordinary speed with which Prentiss departed the tavern, and shake his head. Then Alice came down the stairs to wait tables and ply her evening's trade. Swiftly, he moved to get in an early bid, all other thoughts aside.

Molly did love parties, she truly did. Especially when they were thrown in her honor. But not when her future was seen to depend on it and a betrothal was meant to be the outcome.

No matter how she complained, she could not escape being presented to the farce that was Colonial society, certainly not when it was in her uncle's house.

She had tried, long in advance, to persuade them out of it, but both Roger and Henrietta were adamant. Even as she was dressing, she rehearsed the conversations as if they were lines from a comedy. All it lacked were fancy dress and Morris dancers.

The Time: A fortnight ago

The Scene: A dining parlor

Aunt Henrietta (scolding):

I will not let you be so foolish. We have tolerated these whims of yours for long enough. Your future must be seen to. Should Sir Simon fail to ask for you, you must be properly introduced elsewhere.

Molly (haughty):

Am I a prize mare to be auctioned to the highest bidder?"

Aunt Henrietta (adamant):

Not another vulgar word, my girl. Invitations have been delivered. Barring earthquake or hurricane, there will be a ball in your honor—and you will be honored."

Molly (contrite):

Very well, Aunt. (aside) But I shall plan my escape!

Finis

And though the melodrama made her smile now, the curtain had certainly rung down on that scene. Henrietta would not be swayed. Roger would not discuss it. That was that.

Molly strove for the days thereafter to behave, to throw neither a temper nor a hairbrush, to stay indoors and avoid the sun for the sake of her complexion. To submit to a few restorative lessons with a cadaverous Italian dancing master. (She tipped him an extra crown each visit, in the interests of his health.) To be, in short, all she was expected to be.

Her relatives were quietly pleased at their success, with the exception of the little business in the market this morning, and the disaster over lunch.

So now she stood before the looking glass one last time after dismissing the maid. The sounds of guests arriving, of carriages rattling to a stop, disgorging their occupants, then rattling on; of laughter and the tinkling of glasses and silver floated up from the house below.

Warmly predictable, two parlors and the dining room would be a vast collection of merchants, dealers, and officers and their wives and daughters and earnest young friends, each taking stock of the other and examining the gracious if slightly vulgar home for new acquisitions, and routinely assessing the investment. Already the cackle of someone's costly girlfriend shrilled above the growing murmur.

Molly's eyes narrowed critically as she skipped a few *spezzati* and a turn to watch the textures of the grass green damask (out of China, courtesy of Capt. Manley's *Dove*) flutter like starlings through the lamplight (beeswax from Venezuela by way of the *Bonaventure*).

The front edges of the mantua caught up at the sides with clusters of saffron ribbon (diverted from the Archbishop of Mexico) revealed a petticoat of rich crimson satin deeply embroidered (souvenir of the Manila treasure fleet).

Cream-colored Flemish lace spilled above pale elbows, exposing pearl bracelets which (thanks to Capt. York) matched the strand at her throat.

Her mother's clustered emeralds, part of the prize of Panama, gleamed darkly in her frizzed and ringletted hair.

Well, it would just do, she thought. A small smile slipped across her lips. She wondered what Armand would think, if he were here. Would Eugénie's darkly handsome brother approve of all her liberated finery, the spoils of war? She thought he might, even though Port Royal was not quite Paris. He would catch her and tease her in the hallway, caressing, and whispering of delight, and she would deny him yet again. But she would take his breath away. Yes, he would approve.

A prick of tears started into her eyes, but she fought it away. Armand was not here, nor likely to be. Paris was thousands of orphaned miles away, and the old life gone forever. No more innocence, no more games, no more secrets.

She squared her perfect shoulders and put all of them out of her mind. Eugénie and Armand were dead to her, and she to them. This dreadful business was now, and the best must be made of it, whatever that was.

Well then, she would put on her most sophisticated face and be charming as only she knew how. She would dazzle them all. Just over her shoulder, her mother's portrait, grave and lovely, seemed to agree.

A fan of tortoiseshell and fine Spanish lace—of course— fluttered into her hand as she took her place at the top of the staircase. Voices pattered into a modest hush, then, to a music of sighs and delighted murmurs, she stepped lightly down into the blaze of extravagant candlelight. The houses of Maracaibo must be a ruin of darkness.

