The Colonel's Portrait
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Summary

John Graves Simcoe returns to England after the events on board the Bonetta. In the house of his godfather, where he is invited to stay and convalescence, he meets Elizabeth Gwillim, his godfather's ward. As the two eventually grow closer and more and more stories about his past life in America start to emerge, Elizabeth must find the answer to two questions: Who is John Graves Simcoe? And who is he to her?
Notes

A little thing I wanted to post for a long time. Enjoy!
Hope: who with smiling and commanding air

Hast thrown thine eaglet to the sky,
And bid him soar with steadfast eye,
To claim Jove's thunder, and to bear
His high behests with forward wing;
And thou, bright Fancy; powerful to fling

Thy radiant eyebeams thro' the depths of space,
And there, with keest energy, to trace
Whatever cold oblivion, with her veil,
Dark mental night, malignant, would conceal,
Receive me, hallowed pair; and bid my rhyme
Disclose the secrets of revolving time.

[...]
has not harmed him.

-And *Mercy*. Woodhull could have finished him then and there- it would probably have cost his own life as well, but the slight possibility had existed. This specific case might have been more driven by the instinct for self-preservation of a certain individual, the chance however to kill him had been there and Woodhull had not shot. And there was Hewlett. Hewlett, who had earned the right to kill him after many years of struggle for power, for Setauket and the love of a woman.

He could still die. Aboard the ship, medical supplies were even scarcer than they had been at Yorktown and even if he was weak, he was not deaf and could very well listen into the hushed conversations of those tending to him. According to the quack who claimed to be a qualified doctor and his aide, he is likely to perish soon and it is nothing short of a miracle he has survived the transport so far. Perhaps it would be for the best. To die.

There is no cause to indulge himself in false hope, his injuries are grave. If, that is *if*, he survives, he might have to adjust to the life of an invalid, a cripple. His legs, his lungs, the gunshot wound, the possibilities are endless- at this point, being shackled to a life in bed and in pain is a reality he must learn to embrace, should he survive long enough to reach England.

But what is worse than the physical pain, which they try to dull with what little milk of the poppy they can spare for him, is what is inside his head. All these years, his ultimate goal had been winning the war, *côûte que côûte*. Now that the war is lost, the nagging question what the war has cost haunts him. He has lost his Rangers, his health, his command. Invalided to England, he will no longer be who he was for eleven years.

Men have lost their lives on both sides, warriors or not. Armies shot at each other, that’s what they are supposed to do. But what part did he play? Killed, murdered, planned to murder, left a trail of burned Long Island barns and fields. And for what in the end?

Back then, he had had a goal in doing what he did. His actions had been justifiable, war requires warriors like him. The war is over now, the warrior dead, or close to death and all that is left are the memories of the things he has done, witnessed, heard or heard of, things that have been done and cannot be undone.

A new order had arrived and changed the world. An order in which each man must find his place. What will his be, now that he is no longer a warrior?

It feels as if John Graves Simcoe is dead. Whoever the man whose body he inhabits is, he doesn’t know. Trapped within the physical limits of the weakened body his mind does no longer recognise and tortured by constant pain from his various injuries, he wonders if it has been worth it. How life would have been had he stayed in Oxford. He lets go of the thought- he is never going to find out now, anyway.

At times, he feels like the ship he travels on: adrift within the vast expanse of the ocean and no land in sight, no fix point for orientation on the blue horizon. The waves are the only company he has, their rocking soothing and oddly consoling.

Nobody ever pays him a visit- why would the sailors care for him anyway and the doctor and his aide are busy enough tending to all the other wounded officers and of his fellow patients, those who are in a better condition shun him, be it because they suppose someone so gravely ill as him must rest or because they fear the blood-drenched man who had shouted“Wrong way!” at the Battle of Monmouth.

He is alone, the times someone comes to feed him some stale broth with a wooden spoon and the
doctor’s visits the only contact he has to any other human beings. He is not used to being lonely, or should he rather say alone; in camp or barracks with his men around him, in the busy streets of York City and even in Setauket, he was never alone, or at least there was always a constant audible reminder of human life around him.

Now, he lies in bed, unable to do anything else and attempts to embrace the silence and the perpetual twilight that surrounds him. Perhaps this is what being buried feels like. No, if this indeed is an actual representation of being buried, he would prefer to be buried at sea, among the waves that seem to have become the only true companions on his journey.

That would make it two consecutive generations of Simcoes dying at sea. Would his father, buried somewhere off the Canadian coastline, be proud of him?

He is not dead yet. Yet.

-Was Hewlett’s show of mercy so merciful after all? In his darkest hours, he wishes the man would have done the deed instead of condemning him to languishing on board of this vessel.

He survives. Just. When the ship reaches English shores, they help him up, dress him almost like a doll in the only decent set of civilian clothing he owns and help him down the gangway. Upon his insistence, they let him walk, though still supported by one man on either side of him; perhaps the old warrior is not entirely dead yet. It hurts so much, the pain (and the sunlight that he has not seen for weeks) almost blinds his eyes. Taking into account that his left leg is still very much broken and not fully healed yet, leaving the ship on foot might not have been a good idea after all, at least from a surgeon’s point of view.

For him on the other hand, this reckless show of hurt pride and vanity, as that doctor he will thankfully never see again would probably classify it, means so much more. He is alive.

**Hembury Fort House, Devon.**

“When is John arriving again, Samuel? I have been a little forgetful of late”, Margaret Graves enquired conversationally over dinner.

“Friday, I think, if everything runs on time”, her husband replied, helping himself to another load of potatoes.

“Do you remember John, Elizabeth?”, he asked, this time to his ward sitting across the table from him.

“I’m afraid not. I was eight when he left for America, Uncle Samuel. I think it might even have been the only time we met- very tall, red hair? But that’s about everything I seem to recall.”

“Ah, no matter. So you’ll get to know him.” He smiled amiably, patting the back of her hand as was his habit when he was in a good mood and talking to his foster daughter.

Indeed, she had no more precise memory of Admiral Samuel Graves’ godson than the vague sketch of an unusually tall youth with red hair.

He wrote letters quite frequently, this much she knew, to both her aunt and uncle.
Although the man bearing the name John Graves Simcoe was a stranger to her, the epistolist was not.

From helping Uncle Samuel read John Graves Simcoe’s handwriting when the writer’s determined scrawl was too hard to decipher for the aged Admiral’s decreasing eyesight, his hand had become almost as familiar to her as her own, as had his style of writing, eloquent even when recounting the order of certain regiments in a battle or enumerating long lists of provisions, artillery pieces or men dead and captured.

It was a curious thing; she felt as if she had known him for years and at the same time, she had never even seen his face, let alone talked to him.

All she knew about him were impersonal, faceless facts; he was Uncle Samuel’s godson, he had commanded a unit called the Queen’s Rangers and had lately been invalided back to England after the Battle of Yorktown where he had suffered terrible injuries that would nearly have cost his life if he had been a little less lucky.

Uncle Samuel, overjoyed to hear his godson had defied death yet worried for his health, had invited the former commander of the Queen’s Rangers to stay with them for convalescence, he was family, after all.

The term “family” was a curious thing to Elizabeth; meeting the three of them on the street, Aunt Margaret, Uncle Samuel and herself, nobody would look twice, thinking father, mother and daughter walked down the street. In reality, Elizabeth was Margaret Graves’ niece whom the latter had taken into her home after both her parents had died fairly quickly when she was but an infant; she had never known either of them. Uncle Samuel became the latest addition when Aunt Margaret had married him in Elizabeth’s seventh year. He had told her to call him Uncle Samuel then, a name that had survived her childhood into the present day, at least when the family was among themselves.

And now, a new addition was to come into the family.

She didn’t quite know what to make of him, this familiar stranger. Judging from the letters her aunt and uncle received every now and then and the responses they sent him, they were quite fond of him, almost in the way they were fond of her although be it a little more formal, but that might well be due to their way of communication, as letters always were more formal than talk.

It was not that she was jealous- jealous of a wounded man she had never met, who was her uncle’s godson as much as she was her aunt’s goddaughter and foster child- what puzzled her the most was that her family seemed to coexist in two different spheres; in one, there was a family portrait hanging on the walls of the dining room with her aunt and uncle and a red-haired young man with unfamiliar features in it, in the other, the young man was substituted for an image of herself, standing next to Aunt Margaret in her best dress.

In reality, neither of these paintings existed, but the curious feeling mixed with a dash of curiosity remained.

Friday came earlier than expected and around noon, all three of them had gathered outside Hembury Fort House to greet Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe, hero of the American war and esteemed godson of Admiral Samuel Graves.

Uncle Samuel had been impatient for word of the coach approaching to arrive all day and had called Elizabeth and Aunt Margaret from their needlework when the indistinct sound of hoof beat announced the coming of the Colonel.
The coach came to a halt. For a long time, half a minute at the very least, nothing happened. Then, slowly, the door opened.

To Elizabeth, the scene had the air of a theatre play, the suspense rising and rising to impossible levels.

A man descended, or at least tried to- where most first impressions of people usually rely on the interpretation of appearances, hair- and eye colour, physique, dress or peculiar attributes, Elizabeth’s first impression or rather memory of the Colonel, as she came to realise much later, was a bundle of black clothes almost falling out of the carriage.

Attempting to step outside, he, weakened by injury and a strenuous voyage, had slipped on the little step between the carriage and the ground and lost his balance.

Her reaction had been to instinctively lunge forward and try to catch the considerably taller and heavier man.

Just in time, she caught him, if one could call it that, by leaning her entire bodyweight in to support their combined weight, steadying him.

“Take my hand”, she smiled, already boldly taking his, trying to make him comfortable in what was undoubtedly a somewhat embarrassing situation for a military man like him, although of course it needn’t be, for he was still ill and convalescence the reason he was visiting.

“I am fine, thank you, I can descend on my own”, a cold, cuttingly sharp and curiously high voice answered, a voice that stood awkwardly against the background of his striking physique, as she came to notice now that the situation permitted her a good look of the visitor:

He was tall, the hair was the colour of blazing copper, in that her childhood memory had not deceived her, but how could she not have remembered these eyes? Blue, too blue, but not of a warm hue, like the cloudless summer skies or a field of cornflowers, no- cold, pale ice stared at her, head bowed to look her in the face. Light brown met pale blue for a second before Simcoe extricated his hand from hers in a manner that bordered on uncouth and rough.

“As you wish”, Elizabeth replied without batting an eye, still smiling to keep up appearances, and bent down to the ground instead to hand Colonel Simcoe his walking cane. For many gentlemen, these things were merely fashionable accessories but judging from his current state, their visitor was presently in need of his.

“As you wish”, ther voice replied pleasantly, much to his amazement. He let go of her hand, quite sudden and unsure what else to do- the entire situation was not to his liking.

It would perhaps have been wise to let her assist him. Leaning on his stick (retrieved by the same dark-haired aide), he manages to reach firm ground, this time without any accidents.

“John, come here!”, the booming voice of his godfather announces and pats him on the back like he is a stout horse, not a man painfully aware of his present physical weakness.

“Admiral”, he says, attempting a curt false smile. “How good to see you.”

“And you, dear boy, and you. Margaret you already know and this is Miss Elizabeth Gwillim, whom you might still remember, too. Now, let us go inside. You must be hungry and tired and our cook has prepared the best…”
Margaret greets him as well, though a lot gentler than his godfather, probably more mindful of his ailments. Miss Gwillim drops a half-earnest curtsy and nods.

Entering the house, it hits him like a wave how much time has passed since he last walked through these halls; a younger John Graves Simcoe, stronger, perhaps even more unafraid than the man he is today- and the dark haired lady? Elizabeth Gwillim, Margaret’s ward, the small child lying on her stomach on the drawing room floor amidst a sea of her drawings? He didn’t pay her much mind then, a little girl of eight. It is the only memory he has of her.

Walking a few steps ahead of him, he finds himself fixated on her head of dark hair.

When he had almost fallen and hurt himself she had surprised him with her alertness. And something else, something he cannot describe. The way she had taken his hand, so- so-

Both the poet and the soldier are lost for words.

Natural, kind.

There is no experience for him to liken it to. During the past few weeks, half-dead aboard a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean with a host of other wounded officers, nobody had cared much for him in any other sense than keeping him alive, which was an order, a duty the people charged with overseeing him had to fulfil.

There was no kindness in that, being manhandled by that doctor who kept babbling about his imminent demise and being fed and tended to by his clumsy assistant who, charged with drowning him in his bed with stale broth and even staler water, looked at him as if there was not a man lying on the bed but some impressively big dead spider or a similarly repulsive creature of the dark.

Lola he had paid for her kindness and Anna Strong- no more of her.

There was no kindness in remembering her to himself, either. What kindness is there in this world?

Coming to think of it, Miss Gwillim had only acted on her good breeding. Anybody ought to help their houseguest and seeing as Margaret Graves and the Admiral are already advanced in age, it naturally fell to Miss Gwillim to help him in his predicament.

Manners- no, not even that. A power play. Showing him who, in the years of his absence, has taken his place in his godfather’s household. She had used him to showcase her own strength and tactical thinking, a lioness marking her territory. He comes to dislike her while he thinks about her lighting fast reaction and the offer of her hand another time, a faint reminder of a considerably smaller, warm hand taking his still in the back of his mind.

John Graves Simcoe was not what she had expected. Judging from his letters and the fact that he and Uncle Samuel were close, she would have taken any bet their guest would be a younger version of him, kind, round eyes with a broad smile and easy laugh.

The new arrival was anything but. Pale, thin-lipped and narrow-eyed, he looks like a ghost in his slightly too large clothes, the apparent loss of weight another reminder of his illness.

He had been rather rude to her and for no good reason. In all honesty, she was somewhat disappointed and angry at his lack of manners. All she had wanted to do was help him.

Dinner that evening (Elizabeth had politely excused herself for the remainder of the afternoon to go
to her room and paint instead, this time, despite the time of year, a view of Hembury Fort House amongst the flaming hues of autumnal foliage) progressed without any awkward scenes. Uncle Samuel talked a lot, too much perhaps, for Colonel Simcoe’s liking. Who could blame him on this occasion, happy to see his godson again? The latter seemed less happy, although he tried hard to pretend to politeness.

He answered every question, but in a curt manner that could not be attributed to economy of speech and his voice, the doubtlessly most curious of his features aside from his unruly, blazing curls and unusual eye colour, displayed an odd pitch whenever he was not interested in answering, somewhere between simple annoyance and a serious threat.

Aunt Margaret’s proposal to retire to the drawing room was, as she noticed, not equally welcomed by everyone; while her desire to be with the glum-looking, vaguely sabre-rattling spectre was low, Uncle Samuel’s enthusiasm had forced her to accept. The Colonel looked equally uninterested in the affair as herself.

Another hour filled with talk of battles both naval and on land crept past. The fire did not provide any worthwhile entertainment and neither did the droplets of rain crashing against the window.

“Margret, will you play for us like you did for me when we courted? I was just telling John how you are still such an accomplished harpist.”

“Hardly”, Aunt Margaret replied with a loving glance to her husband, walking over to the imposing instrument in a corner of the room.

As she played, Uncle Samuel grew silent in admiration of his wife’s musical skill. The Colonel, relieved to have been provided with a chance to escape, took Aunt Margaret’s deserted armchair by the fireside, staring into the flames just as Elizabeth had done herself only minutes before.

In contrast to her however, he seemed not to look at them due to boredom- his steely stare softened considerably and for a moment, he looked almost like a… likeable man.

Perhaps this impression of Colonel Simcoe was supported by the soft backdrop of the harp. He is a curious man indeed, Elizabeth thought, studying the Colonel. Curious is the best word she was able to find to describe him.

The melody changes and the girl starts to- to laugh?

“What is so funny, Miss Gwillim, that you laugh all by yourself without sharing the source of this joy with us commoners?”

Looking up from the fireplace, he can see how she visibly holds back a loud laugh. Giving a suppressed snort instead, she answers him:

“Oh, I merely like this particular tune.”

The false innocence she wears on her face cannot fool him.

“What is it called, if I may be permitted to enquire?”
The false innocence in his voice does not fool her.

“It is an ancient Irish air called Tabhair dom do Lámh. Aunt Margaret purchased a collection of Scottish and Irish melodies lately and enjoys this tune in particular.”

She smiled at him most sweetly, or at least this is what she aims to look like.

“I am sorry, I forgot to bring my Gaelic phrasebook. Would you care to translate for me?”

“Tabhair-“ she stretched her arms, palms upturned, and pulled them closer to her body again,

“Dom-” she rested one hand on her chest-

“Do-” her index finger pointed at him now,

“Lámh.” She held her right hand up and pointed at it with the index finger of her left hand.

“Give Me Your Hand, Colonel. I must confess, my Irish is also intolerable. I am glad my aunt’s music book provides translations. Good night, sir.”

She turns away from him, saying goodnight to the Admiral and his wife. When she leaves the room, he is irritated to find his eyes following her to the door.

Chapter End Notes

"Tabhair dom do Lámh" or "Give Me Your Hand", was written in the early 17th century by the Irish harpist and composer Ruaidri Dáll Ó Catháin, maybe with a lady in mind. The tune, which does not have lyrics, is usually performed instrumentally although the Irish band "Wolfe Tones" have added some in the 20th century.

Let me know if you like it, don't like it if I should continue or not, your comments and critique are greatly appreciated!
The days following the Colonel’s arrival were peaceful; since she spent most of her time either taking her habitual long walks, painting or attending social events in Honiton, sometimes in the company of her aunt, interaction between her and the curious houseguest were reduced to a bare minimum, a “good morning” here and a “good night” there.

He was very reserved in his ways, she noted; even with Uncle Samuel, whom he had written such eloquent letters a conversation barely outlasted five minutes.

Uncle Samuel did his best to make him feel comfortable, make him feel at home, but the Colonel never seemed to notice; it was as if there was a wall of solid ice between him and the rest of the world, a wall too thick to be penetrated by the warmth of a word spoken with earnest compassion or the beauty of the late winter sunshine in the trees outside.

Perhaps this was where the colour of his eyes originated from, his irises merely being a looking-glass mirroring the solid coldness that shrouded him wherever he went.

He sat at the table, listening to everybody else’s conversations but said nothing; he stood at the window, sometimes for long periods of time, but seemed not at all interested in the beauty nature had decided to grace his eye with, his eyes ever-fixed on some point in the distance.

It was like living with a ghost— or was it Colonel Simcoe who lived with ghosts?

A cage. His body has become a cage. Although his miraculous recovery is progressing well, his left leg is still useless and his body weak.

Weak. Once, in a time that seems not just a few months but aeons ago, “weak” had been a synonym for all he despised; now, he has become one of them, the people he once looked down on.

He is without command, without health and, worst of all, without anything to do. The Admiral advises him constantly to take up a new hobby (as if he had had any idle pleasures to indulge in during the war to begin with)- the harpsichord, once bought for Miss Gwillim’s musical education but soon demoted to decoration purposes when it was discovered that her talents lay elsewhere, was looking for a new musician to press its keys.

"Or take up science; botany, geology and astronomy each have their several charms"- he is no Hewlett, not weak-

He is weak.

None of these new hobbies he is supposed to take interest in involves anything he knows or once excelled in; thus confronted with the insignificance of his former life in the face of this new world order Hewlett lectured him about aboard the Bonetta, the uselessness of his talents in civilian life, he wonders if he will ever wield a weapon again.
To fight is all he knows; all he is. Or rather was. Perhaps one day, he hopes, he will be ready to fight again, his wounds healed and his body back to its former strength, ready to fight an enemy he does not know yet. Perhaps France or once again, America- it is of little significance to him as long as he can join in the fray back in his uniform.

But presently, he cannot even ride a horse and is confined to the rooms of Hembury Fort House, forced to rest his leg in every room before progressing to the next.

In his former life, he would never have guessed he would die an old man, no on the contrary; being in the middle of a war, he had made his peace with dying on a field somewhere in America.

If he is to be truthful to himself, he has never expected to live to old age, though an accomplished warrior that he is (or was)- in a war, death is a reality for all involved and the fight for survival often cruel and gruesome, so while he had been ready to make his peace with meeting his fate during battle, this much slower end of living out the full of the years granted to him on earth does not sit easy with him. Dying in bed, even weaker than now, alone in a cold, dark room at the age of eighty-five scares him.

Around him, the Graves’ and their ward are making dinner-table conversation, as, he is sure, families are supposed to do. He never had that and cannot tell for certain.

Miss Gwillim, who is a little quieter today than usual, takes an apple from a bowl in the middle of the table for dessert and begins to eat it whole.

"Take a bite."

Seated directly opposite her, it is hard to look away as she takes her first bite.

"Take a bite."

Hewlett’s voice echoes in his head. He tries hard to concentrate on what the Admiral is saying now- as far as he can tell it is something about spring coming soon and the beauty of Hembury Fort House in among the blossoming trees, but it is Hewlett’s voice that wins the fight with reality and once again puts a knife to his throat, this time an invisible one, cold, determined steel against his skin.

Another bite. The apple in Miss Gwillim’s hand shrinks as does his composure. The sound of teeth ripping the apple apart transforms into the sound of musket fire, as the scenery before his eyes swirls, distorts, his vision as blurred as during his fever- he is at Blandford again. The fall, the crash of his own bones on a pile of bricks, the taste of blood, choking as more and more of the red liquid finds its way through his mouth onto the floor, choking on the apple Hewlett left him in his mouth with, choking on the sobs he had tried to suppress, the apple still in place, choking on the air of the dining room.

"Excuse me, Admiral. I feel slightly indisposed tonight. I would like to retire, if-“

“Go, John. I hope you feel better soon.”

Thus excused from the table by his godfather’s concerned-paternal voice, he leaves, as fast as his leg and cane allow, loosening his necktie with his free hand and attempting to take deep breaths to steady himself.

What has he become?
After the Colonel’s retreat to his room, Elizabeth also decided to call it an early night and went to bed soon after.

Sleep did not come easy; pained by the monthly visitor, the scourge of womankind, finding a comfortable sleeping position was virtually impossible. When she had enjoyed some shallow rest through the incessant pangs and cramps, she, once again awake and aware of the hopelessness of ever finding sleep, decided to walk around a little. Sometimes, moving helped ease the unpleasant cramps a little. Already out of bed anyway, she could go to the library and fetch herself a book to keep her company through the small hours of the morning.

She wrapped herself up in her dressing gown and pulled a knitted shawl tightly around her shoulders, for at night, when the fires of Hembury Fort House were dead and not even the ashes gleaming anymore, the house was considerably colder than by day. It must have been shortly before two in the early hours of the new day; the servants would not re-light the fires before later in the morning and so the little, impossibly brave flame of her nightlight was the only source of warmth and light on her way.

How quiet the house could be when everyone was asleep. Closing her eyes for a few seconds, she inhaled the cold night air and relished in the momentary peace preceding the busy daylight hours before progressing to her destination.

A sudden sound in the distance caused her to stop and listen.

Burglars?

An animal having found its way into the house god knows how?

No- it was a human voice, so much she could tell, but the voice was not talking as one would to an accomplice during a robbery (or so she figured, having read a novel about Dick Turpin). The sounds were irregular, no words, just sounds-

Someone cried.

The voice grew louder as she approached the library. Softly, she entered.

Underneath the window, dressed in a mulberry-coloured banyan sat the Colonel, his head leaned against the wall.

Moonlight illuminated his pale skin and copper head of hair, and there, on the face that usually showed only indifference or disdain to the outside world, tears ran, droplet by droplet down his cheeks before they fell onto his robe. One hand loosely held a volume that lay next to him on the ground; the other resided, quivering from the sobs, in his lap.

“Colonel?” She breathed cautiously.

Abruptly, he turned, his movements sharp and precise.

He looked up to her, his face not yet as composed as he would doubtlessly have hoped; hoped against hope that she had not heard his lonely sobs.

When their eyes met, she could not help but notice how his eyes seemed to bundle the moonlight, giving them an otherworldly silvery gleam. She would have marvelled at their fascinating colouring for longer, had not the expression of his eyes caught her attention rather than their colour: fear, hurt, a will to fight-
The Colonel reminded her of an injured animal on a hunt, cornered, knowing the end is nigh, but willing to fight for its life, however hopeless its cause.

-And at the same time so utterly human.

Slowly, she approached. He tried to rise, but couldn’t, his leg evidently betrayed him. So he remained seated, eyes widened and trying to re-arrange his face to pretend nothing had happened.

Elizabeth permitted herself to sit down next to him at a distance of a few inches.

“Colonel-“ she started again, but he was faster.

“Don’t tell anyone. They will-“

“Nobody will do anything. I promise.”

At the word "promise", he shrunk back somewhat, evidence of his mistrust.

“What reason would I have to tell anyone? Everyone cries.”

The expression on his face told her he did not believe her.

“We all do. I did. More than once. And not that long ago. Sometimes it just-“ she searched for the right word, “helps, I guess.”

Were he any other person, she would have put an arm around his shoulder or taken him into her arms for comfort, depending on the mutual familiarity and the situation, but this was John Graves Simcoe, cold and aloof at all times. Not knowing what else to do, she continued to talk.

“You don’t need to be ashamed. What is it that made you sad?”

“I would prefer not to talk about it.”

For a moment, they just sat there in silence on the library floor, caught in a moment of time that seemed endless to both of them.

The Colonel, his eyes downcast, his pale lashes glittering in the light of Elizabeth’s nightlight, sat there against the wall, shipwrecked, alone.

No, not alone. She was here after all. Despite his rudeness not long ago, she pitied him. What had shaped him to be the almost despicable person he could be she knew not, yet knowing he hid a human being underneath his frozen facial expressions and glacial voice was reassuring. It gave her hope, a hope she couldn’t quite place or explain.

Perhaps there was more to him once one brushed away the thick layer of snow and ice around him.

She would have given a lot to hear what drove him to play this game of pretend but considered it rude, especially given the state he presently was in.

At last, the Colonel spoke:

“Will you help me, Miss Gwillim?”

His hand outstretched, still shaking slightly, he was evidently asking for her to help him stand up. Carefully, gently, as if trying to touch a butterfly, she placed her hand in his. His hand was warm, warmer than she remembered and twice the size of hers. At the base of his wrist, Elizabeth could feel
his pulse beating.

When their fingers tightened around one another’s, it felt as if they had just sealed a pact.

With all her might, she pulled the Colonel to his feet, who groaned, flinching, and reached for his cane immediately.

“Thank you. And don’t tell anyone.”

He once again avoided her eyes, she noted.

“I won’t”, she vowed.

A smile flashed across his face, gingerly, cautious, softening his features momentarily. Had she blinked in this very second, she would not have witnessed it.

Side by side, they walked down the corridor until their ways parted at her door.

“Goodnight, Colonel.”

“Goodnight, Miss Gwillim.”

If she was not mistaken, there was a faint touch of spring in his wintry voice.

Chapter End Notes

Historically, Elizabeth's interests did include taking long walks and (as mentioned in the last chapter) landscape painting.

Dick Turpin: Infamous British highwayman from the first half of the eighteenth century whose deeds were eternalised in several publications, story and song.
He has not forgotten the night Miss Gwillim has found him beneath the window in the library. Knowing these incidents occur, when his mind crumbles like the poor defences of a besieged village and his body follows suit and all he can do is suffer through it, which is best done alone.

He can feel it coming long before it occurs, like the first gentle ripple somewhere out on the ocean before it grows slowly, yet gradually, into a storm tide with the might to destroy the nearest port with all its ships and stone fortifications.

What sets it off cannot always be predetermined and is thus hard to avoid; sometimes, the smallest thing reduces him to this state, it is beyond his control, a force he tends to liken to a storm surge, raw, powerful, primeval.

When the noises of people crying, shots whizzing past him or the cracking of teeth defiling an apple start to resound in his ears like the rolling of the mighty wave he likens his state to, he knows that in mere moments, the noise will overpower everything else, the feeble memory growing into a wave as tall as Westminster Abbey, sweeping him off his feet and dragging him deep down below the surface into realms of darkness not even the bravest deep sea creatures dare to roam.

Unwittingly, he takes a deep breath, mouth wide open as if to assure himself the air around him has not by magic of his vivid visions transformed into water.

It takes him several breaths, forcefully steadied and kept at regular intervals, for him to realise he is still in his bedroom in Hembury Fort House, not a thousand feet below the sea.

Yet this is where his mind presently dwells; an image forces the friendly, bright room aside and is replaced by more water; this time, he can see the sunlight dance on the surface above him. He tries to reach the sunlight, the air that its golden glimmer promises and pushes himself upwards, but he makes no progress at all while his lungs prick with the sting of a thousand needles and his head throbs with the pressure of the water surrounding him.

“John, help me, John, please!”

“I can’t Percy, the current is too strong- Mamma!”

“There you are my dear boy”, a familiar voice interrupts his thoughts and causes Percy to pause in his fight for survival and young John to quieten his screams for their mother.

“Why John, you look as if you’ve seen a ghost”, the Admiral remarks, knitting his brows and studying his face for too long.

“Anyway”, he brushes over the topic, probably sensing he is in no mood to talk about his innermost, “I thought I would come personally to tell you the doctor has arrived. Downstairs, my private sitting room. I settled him with a glass of whiskey and told him the patient would be with him right away.”
His godfather smiles at him and pats his shoulder.

With a stiff nod and the brief contortion of one corner of his mouth in an upward direction, he obliges the Admiral’s wishes, takes his cane and walks downstairs.

It feels glorious, not two weeks ago and he would not have permitted himself to classify his method of movement as anything remotely akin to walking. The wound in his side is healing and now his blasted leg has finally made some progress as well. The injury that has troubled him the most since his return to England and subsequent confinement to the house’s ottomans and chaise longues no longer sends bolts of sharp pain through his body whenever he tries to move.

It is still unreliable (he deliberately foregoes the usage of “weak” given its former connotation), tremulous from the long period of disuse and lack of exercise but, as the doctor confirms a few minutes later to him and a joyful Admiral (who, he thinks, will be very happy to rid himself of the burden of nursing an invalid has brought over his home once said burden’s physical form is mended to such a degree that he can be trusted to live on his own), his leg will make a full recovery if he proceeds carefully and continues to rest for another while with only moderate exercise such as short walks in close proximity to the house to reacquaint his leg to carrying the weight of his body again.

The word “moderation” slips his mind as soon as it has entered his ear and excuses himself as the Doctor and the Admiral try to make him drink a toast to his full recovery. It does not feel right to him, given his certainty that his godfather would rather be rid of him and the fact that while his body is healing, his soul – he would rather not think about it. The two men nod and then pour themselves a glass raised to his health anyway, their light-hearted laughter ringing in his ears as he retreats to the quiet refuge of his room.

In the Admiral’s study, a beautiful landscape came to life under the gentle strokes of Elizabeth’s pencil. She adored watching how her intuition guided her hand across the paper and created sun, earth, trees and water with precise lines.

There, in the quietness of the study, she could create a world that was entirely her own, even if she based her motifs in real life; the sky over Hembury Fort House would, once it was finished, be bluer, the trees more elegant in shape than in reality. Sometimes, one just needed some time to think, to immerse one’s self in a world of beauty and sunlit meadows and watch said beauty grow with every little blot of colour applied to the artwork. Painting was her way to retire from the world for a moment, to set all troubling thoughts aside to find new clarity through shaping an image of reality that was entirely her own.

Uncle Samuel was so friendly as to let her use his study for the advantageous natural light in the morning as long as she did not move any of his possessions or stain his correspondence with water or paint, for which she was eternally thankful; her own room only provided good conditions for painting and drawing in the late afternoon.

Focussed as she was on completing the groundwork for her watercolour, she did not pay the conversation in the adjoining room much mind; Uncle Samuel frequently received guests. Only as John Graves Simcoe’s voice joined the conversation, she finally looked up, abandoned her pencil and listened.

Since their encounter at night, the Colonel had been very quiet and reserved as usual, yet there no longer was disdain and animosity in the way he looked at her, which she took as a good sign.
Colonel Simcoe was most unlike everybody else she knew and she respected that, but a certain curiosity regarding why he chose to shroud himself in self-chosen mystery remained.

Apparently Doctor Enfield and Uncle Samuel were with him. Being a good dancer, tip-toeing to the door without making any noise was a feat easily achieved. Opening the door one inconspicuous crack wide, she glanced into the sitting room where the Colonel was seated on a chair with Uncle Samuel, one hand resting on his godson’s shoulder, behind him and the doctor kneeling beside the footstool on which the Colonel’s left leg lay outstretched.

Despite the good news, Simcoe looked uneasy, visibly biting his lower lip and his eyes focussed on the painting of some ancestor of the Graves-family with hair like a poodle and a lower lip even more impressive than that of a Habsburg across the room, avoiding Doctor Enfield’s eye.

And then, in this very second, it dawned on her that the Colonel resembled a stray cat: unpredictable in its ways, its scars physical reminders of its many fights and so unaccustomed to human touch it was unsure to trust its experience of constant rejection and hate and react with force or to put faith in its instincts and permit a warm, well-meaning hand to approach.

The Colonel left after having been given the joyous news that he was likely to walk again without a cane soon and the caution not to overexert himself while slowly taking up walking short distances again.

When he left the room, it was evident he clung on to his cane more out of habit than of need.

Perhaps his recovery would make him happier. Having seen him distraught and sobbing alone on the floor of the library had made her feel sorry for him, even if (or because?) she could not tell what demons plagued him.

It was only at dinner time that the family, now consisting of four members, congregated in its entirety with the Colonel usually living in hermit-like confinement in his room and her occupied most of the day with painting, taking long inspirational walks or visiting her friends in Honiton.

To Elizabeth’s surprise, said walks became the focus of Uncle Samuel’s interest that evening. He was not a man for long walks himself; he only ever participated a few times a year when Aunt Margaret demanded it of him. He considered horses and carriages (and of course ships) superior means of transportation and had until this very night championed the opinion that the gardens and parklands, however beautiful they might appear on a walk, looked more impressive still from the vantage point of a tall horse’s back.

“Elizabeth, dear, are you going on one of your terribly boring long walks tomorrow?”
“Yes, if the weather permits. Why are you asking? I was under the impression you disliked the idea of wandering more or less aimlessly through field and forest?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. But Doctor Enfield does not and he would like John to take up short walks as part of his recuperation process. Would he be allowed to join you, on doctor’s orders, that is?”

Could she refuse in front of both the Colonel and her aunt? It would seem unkind and rude, even though she would have liked to remain alone on her walks, the source of her artistic inspiration, the sole time she could think about all the things she did not permit herself to think about at any other time, except when painting perhaps.

“Yes, of course”, she smiled falsely, which Uncle Samuel did not seem to notice who immediately and with the greatest joy exclaimed “Splendid, Elizabeth. I knew I could count on you.”
She looked across the table to the Colonel. Their eyes met. His forehead wrinkled for an instant and his eyes lay enquiringly on hers.

“I would not want to keep Miss Gwillim-“

“Ah, nonsense. You two will make a splendid pair.”

Had Elizabeth not known in which specific context this quite clumsily phrased sentence was uttered, she would have dropped her spoon into her soup.

Obviously, Aunt Margaret’s understanding of the sentence was very similar, for she saw it necessary to intervene and petition for a chaperone.

Elizabeth could not bear to look at the Colonel in this moment.

“Admiral Graves, are you certain your ward and your godson should be permitted to walk on their own? It is unbeseeming for a young, unmarried woman to be alone in the company of an unmarried man.”

“My beloved Margaret, we are talking about a short stroll close to the house and the young lady and the young man in question are my niece and my godson, in both whom I put great trust.”

With that, the matter was decided. By the look on Aunt Margaret’s face she was not happy and would have liked to send her maid to accompany them at a distance, but Uncle Samuel’s word was, at least in this matter, law.

Elizabeth didn’t know how to feel about it, her unwillingness to share her hours of peaceful contemplation aside, being alone with Colonel Simcoe. They had never been alone together again after that night in the library and she feared he might still be embarrassed or worse, in a foul mood—after all, he had been condemned to his fate as much as she had been.

In the morning after breakfast (the Colonel had remained absent) Elizabeth, ready for a walk and dressed accordingly in a less restrictive dress and strong boots, knocked at the Colonel’s door. She felt obliged to at least offer walking with him after the conversation of the previous night.

Three short knocks. It felt strange, knocking itself almost felt as if she invaded his space—

And then, the door opened, and the Colonel, half-dressed, his banyan loosely draped around him, the collar of his shirt undone and his hair, uncombed and without the restriction of a bow, cascading onto his shoulders, appeared in the doorframe, visibly surprised.

“Miss Gwillim, I- I was awaiting the valet, not-“

“Not me? You weren’t at breakfast, Colonel, and I wanted to see if you were still interested in our walk.”

“I am sorry, I had forgotten about the time. I will be with you right away”, he replied as formally as his embarrassment for being caught in a state of such dishabille allows him and closes the door again.

As an artist herself, the distinct ink blotches on the Colonel’s right hand did not escape Elizabeth’s sharp eye. Wondering about the Colonel’s secret bent for the artistic, the valet passed her by with a stack of fresh clothes over his arm.
Twenty minutes later, the Colonel, now fully dressed (and most impeccably so, Elizabeth noted) and his hair restricted with a ribbon and hidden away under a tricorn descended the stairs to the entrance hall.

For the first time since his arrival, he had gone without his cane; his movements were mechanic and somewhat insecure, but given he had not been able to walk at all upon his arrival, his improvement was staggering.

“You look well, Colonel”, she said for lack of anything else to say.

He chooses not to answer to that statement, rude though it may be. He will not lie for politeness’ sake. Instead, he gives her what he perceives to be a smile to make it known to her that her words have found their addressee and heads to the door.

In silence, they walk side by side. To him, their silence is preferable to idle talk of nothing.

Together alone, each caught up in the dusty web of their own thoughts, they walk side by side.

It is peaceful; she does not make any attempt to make merry or force him into conversations he would rather not have and he, in turn, leaves her to herself, too.

The cool wind on his skin reminds him of days gone by, days spent on horseback riding at the front of his men and completing missions in enemy territory. His imprisonment is over, finally, he can walk again, breathe fresh air-

Carried away, he stumbles.

“Are you all right, Colonel?”

He must answer this time. Untruthfully, he replies with a yes.

He lied. Coming to the conclusion that he was not as well as he claimed to be and that his leg was the obvious reason, she beckoned him to sit on a nearby bench in the rose garden, which was still a mass of leafless grey. In June, the thin, grey-green stalks would heave under the weight of roses as big as her palm and even bigger.

For a moment, they continued their silence until Elizabeth braved herself to ask a question that had been on her mind all morning:

“If I may ask, Colonel, what have you done this morning prior to our walk? I noticed the ink-stains on your fingers. Did you write letters? Or do you draw?”

Her question surprises him. Clearly, she is curious- but when had last someone asked him a question like this? It may seem trivial, but his surprise is genuine.

“I write.” He glances down on his hands.

“What do you write? ‘I write’ does not sound like a man writing a letter or two, it sounds like what an author would say.”

He has already told her too much. She will mock him.
Uneasily, staring into the distance, he says to no one in particular “Poetry.”

“You are a poet?” She was aware how incredulous she must have sounded but caught herself quickly “recite something- that is, if the poet deems his work ripe for review.”

Not knowing which one to choose, he recites a few lines that come into his head spontaneously. All he remembers is that they were once written with Anna Strong in mind, a muse now reduced to nought but her name, which makes speaking these words of past hurt easier.

“… She shies away from his war-strained brow,
Fears the strike of his sabre and his bayonet’s blow
But if she would only care for to see
He is not the man she perceives him to be.
A steadfast stand on the battlefield
Does not mean a man’s hardened heart can never yield
To the soft kiss of a fair lady’s lips—“

No, no more. She will mock him. He does not even know why he had quoted these lines to her in the first place.

Genuine surprise manifests in Elizabeth. Of all things she would have thought the Colonel capable of, writing poetry was not among them.

“I take it you wanted to be a poet, not a soldier?”

She looks at him, her eyes locked onto his.

“I always wanted to be a soldier. My family are of military stock”, he replies plainly, but not without pride for his ancestors. Miss Gwillim looks almost disappointed.

“And the lady? I am sorry to sound curious, but who is she? To have somebody write poetry about you must be- flattering.”
“It is of no importance. I think I will leave you to your walk, Miss Gwillim, I shall not keep you shackled to me, even though the Admiral insisted.”

He rises and leaves for the house. He should not have told her any of this. Then why did he? He must take better care in the future. Or write better poetry that merits the review of a critic.

Chapter End Notes

Simcoe's memory: Historically, Simcoe had a younger brother called Percy (approximately two years his junior) who drowned aged ten, perhaps in the river Exe. As I couldn't find any document that outlines this tragic incident conclusively, for the sake of this story John Graves Simcoe was present when his brother died.

As I think I have stated before, Elizabeth's hobbies are in line with the interests of the historical Elizabeth Gwillim.

The poem was written by me and is none of historical Simcoe's.
25th February 1782. How he had dreaded this date for weeks. Today is the day he turns thirty, if he wants to or not. Thirty. It sounds so old, too old in his ears and he wonders how this new age will change him.

The addition of a new decade seems like the beginning of a new life, a new time, a new place he has yet to make sense of; a clean cut severing the last ties he has with his old life that was ended on a pile of brick stones aged twenty nine years and 236 days.

Suspended in limbo between life and death for the remaining 129 days between the John Graves Simcoe he once knew and the completion of his thirtieth year, having lived to see his birthday seems to be indicative of his definitive survival- though he has wondered at times during his convalescence if there might not still be room for Fate or God to change their decision and claim him, the ailing shadow of the man who so long ago left England’s shores as a boy of eighteen and was forged into a warrior on the battlefields of America to free him of a life he was not always sure he wanted to know.

Now that Fate’s grip on him has loosened and with his physical health restored to a point where he is able to get through his days without permanent assistance, the time has come to decide on his new place in this world.

Currently living off his godfather’s goodwill or endurance on grounds of a feeling of duty to his late father who had obligated the Admiral to assist his son in the hour of his need should he no longer be alive to do so himself, he starts to wish for a life of his own again. Only what it could be, he cannot envision.

He lacks the necessary university education to become a scholar or a scientist; he lacks the knowledge (and patience) to plant crops or raise animals to be a farmer and he lacks the fortune needed to simply settle down on a countryside estate and watch time trickle by for the rest of his life.

Thirty represents a host of decisions to him, decisions he feels he is not yet ready to make. It is not so much a time of celebration to him as one of worry and insecurity.

And to add to his predicament, the Admiral has ruled for a ball to be held in the evening to celebrate his godson’s slow transcendence into the realms of the old and aging.

Most of the guests being close friends of his, his wife’s and even his niece’s, their names mean nothing to him and he wonders why he should celebrate at all. He doesn’t need to if he doesn’t want to, it’s as simple as that. He isn’t the Admiral’s puppet or a child that can be pushed around on the fleeting whims of his parents, he is a free man, free to make his own decisions. In that, these damned Americans and their delusional view of democracy might even be right for once.

Taking a hearty bite of her breakfast, Elizabeth wondered why the Colonel was absent- it was his birthday after all.
Perhaps he quite simply didn’t enjoy being the centre of attention, she concluded, when he finally did descend from his room to join everyone (his *family*, as Uncle Samuel never tired of assuring him, though of late his once friendly invitation to consider himself as part of the Graves’ had grown into a desperate plea), it was only to formally excuse himself for the remainder of the day to do some light riding exercises in the stables that could hardly fill an entire day.

When he was out of earshot, Aunt Margaret, her face mirroring her last name, looked to Uncle Samuel.

“I am worried. He was not like this when he went away.”

“What do you expect? He was eighteen, Margaret, *eighteen*. Of course he has changed. We all do, we all leave a bit of ourselves in the war and bring a piece of it home in exchange for the piece we left behind. Don’t fret my dear, he will come to enjoy it once he has regained a healthy taste for civilised entertainment again- the first bite of which we are going to offer him tonight.”

Sadly, Uncle Samuel, as Elizabeth was soon to find out, was gravely mistaken.

In the evening, the house filled with countless members of the local families of repute and distinction while the guest of honour (who had, as it seemed, gone entirely without a meal, for he had also skipped tea and dinner) resided in an armchair in a room adjacent to the ballroom dressed in his regimentals, which still did not quite fit him again given the weight loss he had fallen victim to in the early days of his long illness and that, though his cheeks looked a little rounder than when he first arrived, was still visible in his features. Occasionally, he lifted a glass to his lips and took a miniature sip of whatever he was drinking, his index finger tapping impatiently against the glass entirely without rhythm.

The noises. It is the noises that make him want to run for fear of what his body is capable of if his mind is cast yet again into a bout of darkness from whence it cannot easily escape.

He needs *some* noise to feel alive, to know people are close, but the dimensions of the hell his godfather has organised without asking in his honour is of an altogether different nature. It is too loud, people talk, glasses clink, one or two break, laughter ensues after a bawdy joke shared among a group of men. There are too many people are around him. The dancers remind him of military drill. Colours flash in front of his mind’s eye and accompanied by the sound of artillery fire, men and women who had only seconds ago enjoyed the carefree atmosphere of Admiral Graves’ hospitality lie dead on the floor, bodies without limbs, some without faces, some mutilated so badly they are barely recognisable as human remains.

He blinks. The image fades; the sounds of Monmouth, Yorktown, Blandford and wherever else he has been stay with him. He tries to pay the sounds no attention, concentrate on the music he cannot hear over the sound of muskets being loaded, but whenever he tries, a voice demanding him to “take a bite” calls him to attention.

His nails digging into the armrests, he wishes for this torturous night to be over soon.

Dancing with a gentleman here and another there and supporting Aunt Margaret in her rule as
hostess, all she saw of the Colonel were the insignificantly small glimpses of a copper-coloured head, looking thoroughly disinterested in the worries and woes of Devon’s society, conversation and dance.

Nobody talked to him and he did not make an effort to talk to anybody else, either. It seemed that despite the heroism Uncle Samuel had sung of at the arrival of every letter from Colonel Simcoe during the war, in this closely-knit country community, his acceptance would not rely solely on the reiteration of his feats on the fields of America, but on his ability to converse pleasantly with Sir This-and-That, remark on the fine quality of the crops produced by Mr and Mrs So-and-So’s fields or enquire after Miss What-Was-Her-Name’s most recent stay in Bath.

In all fairness, Elizabeth could muster some compassion for the man who appeared to be a fish on dry land among the other guests. It had been the idea of her uncle to have a ball in his honour (perhaps knowing his niece enjoyed them, which might have led to the unfortunate conclusion that all people he classified as “young ones”, a category he counted his godson in, would naturally do so, too).

He did not seem like a man enjoying these society affairs at all, seated in an uneasy and stiff pose in his chair. Perhaps Uncle Samuel should simply have asked him before inviting half the county for the evening.

Her thoughts danced away from the Colonel again in perfect synchronisation with her feet in the arms of one of the countless gentlemen she had danced with already. A dress of emerald silk billowing around her with every turn in the choreography, Elizabeth could not have looked more different from her best friend, whose choice of a pretty dress in pale pink with lots of ribbons and bows made her look like a fairy tale princess, while Elizabeth, or so some flatterers said, resembled a queen in her bold appearance both sartorial and personal.

Despite her general liking for grand affairs like these, it was all friendly pretence on this particular day, for she longed for the night when the guests would return home and she and Mary Anne would be able to share, though doubtlessly tired, a few quiet moments to talk like they did when they were younger and Mary Anne had stayed more frequently with her and the Graves’.

On some nights, they would have talked and talked until the sun rose again in the east or read to each other in Spanish to practice their understanding of this foreign tongue and then, in the twilight of dawn, fallen asleep under profuse avowals of sisterly love, the sister Elizabeth never had.

They had been close ever since their first meeting; the more reserved, quieter Mary Anne and she, the more outgoing, self-assured one, seemed to complement each other in all aspects of life.

Looking around as inconspicuously as the situation did permit, Elizabeth found her closest confidante standing in the doorway, talking to Colonel Simcoe. Apparently, she, sensitive and mindful of others as she was, had taken pity on him.

The dance ended and Elizabeth excused herself from her partner, a handsome young man of twenty and heir to a rich wool merchant (Aunt Margaret would certainly approve) to get closer to the conversation between the curious Colonel and her best friend.

It wasn’t prying, strictly speaking; the rooms were open to anyone and who could blame her for looking for her best friend who had arrived only this afternoon to stay with the Graves’ for two days before she had to leave again due to family obligations?

Finally close enough to understand what was spoken between Mary Anne and the Colonel amidst the chatter and clinking of glasses, Elizabeth listened in anger as the reluctant guest of honour fought
her friend’s gentle attempts to start a conversation with hurtful unkindness:

“Leave me alone, Miss Burges. I did not ask for your company or your tiresome chatter nor shall I do so anytime soon. As for your impertinence to enquire after—”

She had heard enough.

“It’s all right, Mary Anne. Leave Colonel Simcoe to himself. Did I not warn you he doesn’t tolerate human company well?”

Mary Anne looked at her, and nodded, obviously hurt that someone she only wanted to be kind to had reacted to her in such an uncouth way.

“You did, but who would have known…?”

“I know. Wait for me in my room. It’s almost midnight anyway, I’ll join you soon. Colonel, a word”, she added frigidly, her voice for one moment even more threatening than the Colonel’s falsetto.

With a brisk tilt of her head in the vague direction of Uncle Samuel’s private sitting room, she beckoned, nay, ordered him to follow her.

To her surprise, he did.

As soon as the door had closed behind her, she could not restrain her anger any longer; an anger that had festered inside her for some time now like an inflamed wound, the burning flame of her ire kindled with every single worried look on her aunt and uncle’s face whenever the subject of John Graves Simcoe came up during conversations:

“I am sick of your… your ways. There was no reason for you to be uncouth to my friend. In fact, you endear yourself to no one with your grim frown and brooding disposition. My uncle is at loss with what else to do with you and my aunt frets about your melancholy. And to add to your list of insults committed, you have the gall to behave like an attention-seeking, spoilt, wayward child at a celebration held in your honour.”

He gasped. There was genuine confusion on his features now as if he had never before had an angry woman barely reaching his chin stand up to him.

“Miss Gwillim, I suggest you calm yourself. My words may have been rash and I apologise for the unfortunate wording of my statement. But I think we can agree one is entitled to a day of—” here he paused, visibly searching for the right way to phrase what he wanted to say next, “of darkness, which we do not choose and which simply overpowers us at times.”

He sounded oddly defensive, a side of Colonel Simcoe Elizabeth had not been aware of yet. A man who always attacked first, be it on the battlefield or in the polite circles of English society, he had never before cared to show any distinctive emotions when he spoke.

If this was his way of attempting to create a diversion from the actual topic of their conversation she could not be certain of; not that it worked.

“We all have our bad days, Colonel. This does however not mean that we can or should make others pay for what troubles us momentarily.”

“You speak of troubles?”, he enquired, laughing cynically, his voice high-pitched and only half-heartedly suppressing a snort, “You, Miss Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim, the wealthy heiress with half of England to her name, who has grown up in the privileged security of her uncle’s, the renowned Admiral Samuel Graves’ home with no greater worry than which dress to wear for dinner?”
He did not even try to be polite. His voice, a dagger forged of ice even when not trying to insult, cut her deeply, deeper than she was ready to admit.

“Is this your opinion of me?” she hissed, looking up at him in an attempt to show defiance. She would not surrender to him, ever.

“You consider me to be a prestigious prize at a fair, like everybody else? A pretty enough little thing in possession of a fortune that men like you cannot wait to take possession of and squander at a London gambling table?”

“I said no such-“

Satisfied, she observed how his lips tried to open to speak and his eyes grew round with alarmed surprise.

“You need not speak the words you intend to hurl in my face, Colonel, don’t even think a hasty apology could blind me. I am aware that being who I am I owe to my fortune. People do not cease to remind me of the fact they often find my purse prettier than my face and my coin more enticing than my wit. Believe me, I have had my fair share of being insulted thus, degraded to a piece of meat on the market.”

“I meant no-“

“Oh, you did. Or else you would not have been unkind to my friend, my aunt and uncle and to me. Perhaps you secretly enjoy your icy ways- whatever joy one can find in that.”

“I can assure you, I do no such thing”, he answered, anger manifesting itself in his voice in an even higher pitch. “You cannot know certain things, Miss Gwillim. You have never been to war. Things that, much like shadows, attach themselves to a man’s soul that cruelly outdo The Sorrows of Young Elizabeth.”

“We are all followed by ghosts, Colonel. Do you know where my considerable wealth”- she spits these words out like the bitter pips of an orange, “comes from? Men and women, among them both my parents, died, leaving me the sole heir to two families. Do you not think that at times my mind is made up to trade the money and lands I own for the privilege of knowing my parents, my father who died before I was born and my mother who did not see my grow up either if given the chance? A thought that leaves me with deepest shame, for all the ungratefulness it bears towards the Graves’ and their devoted foster care for a murderer who has as yet to be brought to account?”

These words, spoken in rage, hung heavily between them. At least Colonel Simcoe was silent for the moment.

His brows knitted in a way akin to a child faced with a concept he cannot comprehend. He asked slowly, stressing each syllable as if he were trying to pronounce a new word in a foreign language “A murderer?”

“I am a murderer. It is my birth that killed my mother. My birth robbed Aunt Margaret of her sister, my grandmother of her daughter and so many others of a good friend. I killed her-“

Never before had these words exited her mouth for fear to either seeing them dismissed as vaporous women’s babble or as the manifestation of some obfuscation of the mind that would either send her to Bedlam or to the gallows if taken the wrong way by the wrong people. Not even Mary Anne knew.

All of a sudden, she noticed how her voice had turned brittle like the ruins of some ancient roman
temple grinded by the millstones of time.

Now, the temple lay deserted, the secret broken, the deity dead among the shards of wax tablets inscribed with invocations to appease its nightmarish self.

She had no secret anymore. For nineteen years, or at least fifteen, starting when she had slowly grown from an ignorant toddler happy in anybody’s company who would offer her kindness and attention to a pensive young girl and first consciously realised what she had done, her secret had accompanied her everywhere, sometimes tucked away safely in a dark corner of her mind, sometimes the focus of her almost philosophical fights with and against herself.

Elizabeth felt empty. Devoid of something that had been a constant in her life and uneasy at the thought what new hurtful thing Colonel Simcoe would retort while at the same time being overwhelmed with the lightness her conscience told her to embrace, the first tears ran down her face in strong rivulets as the room around her started to spin violently.

She cries. Although the sight of a crying woman makes him uneasy for lack of knowledge what to do apart from what is described in literary texts, which might be poetic license for all he knows, the quick, analytic instinct of the warrior, not dead, but dormant, awakes and prompts him to move a step closer to her.

He has done this before; Anna Strong enters his mind, but he bans the rebel from his thoughts; she is long gone from him while Miss Gwillim, however ignorant of his predicament, is in need of consolation.

For a brief moment, he considers calling her aunt and uncle, this, however, would certainly disrupt the ball and raise more questions than answer the already existing ones.

No, the task falls to him.

While he still stands petrified and at loss what to do, the young woman’s body leans, or rather collapses, forward against his chest, her face buried in the fabric of his clean white waistcoat.

Her tears will probably stain it, but he does not care. It seems like a dam has broken and Miss Gwillim has been swept up by the water’s force without anything to cling on to ensure her survival.

Her face buried in his chest, he carefully puts an arm around her, gingerly at first to see if she objects his touch but to his surprise, she does not recoil or protest as he expects people to do whenever he draws near. On the contrary; her body seems to ease at the sensation of his arm around her and so he decides to make use of his other arm as well, drawing her even closer in the process.

“It is not your fault. You mustn’t burden yourself with taking the blame for Fate’s cruelty”, he chides softly.

When she does not show any reaction to his words he begins to rock her, an instinctive reaction he faintly recalls from a distant childhood memory of when he has last been held by somebody in a similar fashion and rests his cheek against the top of her head. He does not know why he does it, it is Miss Gwillim who is in need of consolation, but as soon as his face rests half-buried in her soft, chocolate-coloured hair, something inside him breaks, too.

Its final resistance breaks when her arms reach for him in reciprocation of his gesture, and an iceberg
that has long weighed heavily on his chest crumbles. It is not *gone*, it is merely broken into pieces amounting in their sum to its original weight, but where the fortification of ice and snow once stood, a part of him has been uncovered that he buried long since without any intention (or hope?) to ever bare to the world again.

In this moment, it becomes clear to him that it is not only the sobbing lady in his arms who has longed to be consoled for far too long.

A moment of epiphany sweeps over him as normally only the storm surges of his dark days do; raw and pure like an unpolished diamond, it does not drown him, but pushes him briefly closer to the surface, where golden sunlight still promises the fresh air and clarity of a bright day:

He thought he was consoling *her*, but as much as she presses her face into his waistcoat and clings on to him in a quivering embrace, he clings onto her, his arms steady and tightly keeping her close, like the piece of driftwood he has been waiting for so long while trying to survive out in the open waters of his mind.

As soon as this thought has fully penetrated to all levels of his consciousness, he can no longer hold himself back, either. A tear runs silently from his cheek into her hair where it disappears like a little pearl swept into an ocean of gracefully weltering kelp, a tear that has fallen not solely as he first assumes because he is sad, but- *but*—there are no words to describe the warmth and calm he feels deep within him.

Sensing how her knees shake, he slowly guides them both to the ground for fear Miss Gwillim’s legs might give away underneath her and she might take a fall.

Her head rested against his shoulder, they sit on the floor. Slowly, her sobs ebb into unsteady breaths interspersed with an occasional sigh until she quietens entirely, her arms still wrapped around him.

For lack of anything else to do, he continues to cradle her in his arms, clumsily as he has few previous experiences in this art form, stroking her back with one hand.

Lost in the moment for far too long, he comes to his senses when a sudden bout of rational thought returns to him. It is improper enough he consoles her in this fashion— a brother or other exceptionally close relation might be forgiven giving solace in the way he does— a stranger, as he still is to her, with no familial ties however, not. If the Admiral (or worse, his ever-vigilant wife) or one of the servants find them— he does not dare to think about it. They would accuse her of improprieties that have never been committed between them that would surely damage her reputation and have dire consequences for him as well.

Abruptly, his hand stops moving.

She looks up to him; the spell is broken.

Eyes swollen and red from crying find his face. He asks himself if she has no recollection of the past half an hour or so as she blinks at him in bedazzled confusion.

“*I’m sorry for- for what happened, Colonel.*”

"*There is nothing for you to be sorry for, I said things I should never have even thought. I apologise.*"

Has his voice ever sounded in quite this way before?

She wants to leave, the bashfulness in her voice almost manifesting physically in the room, but he is
quicker, placing his right hand on her forearm. He does not want her to leave, he realises the second as his hand touches the fabric of her dress once more.

“Stay, if you like.”

“I mean not to inconvenience you any further.”

“You don’t, Miss Gwillim, not at all. If you still require my comfort I am at your service, madam.”

It is odd how formal he unwittingly becomes now that words have re-entered a conversation that had previously been able to say everything without saying anything at all.

Miss Gwillim rises and he follows her example. There is not much room between them; he can still smell the faint scent of roses and lilacs that had been so much stronger when he held her not long before.

“Thank you.” She braves herself to smile, a smile that strikes him like the blow of a whetted cavalry sabre with its genuine gratefulness.

He would like to tell her that he must thank her, but as soon as his mouth opens to do so, he cannot bring himself to speak any words. What would he tell her anyway? That she has broken the spell of the darkness that follows him wherever he goes? She has not; yet the vivid sounds inside his head had gone silent unexpectedly when she had been in his arms and for one moment, with his head resting on the crown of her head, he had been able to see a faint strip of purplish morning light on the horizon.

If he had learned anything today it was that even Miss Gwillim, the happy, seemingly careless daughter of English summer roses on a sunny day in June, watercolour-stains on her sleeves and a cheery disposition so much like her foster father’s, was not always happy, either.

This discovery might seem trivial to others, but to him, it means the world.

Oddly affected by her tears, he prompts himself to speak before she leaves him to retire to her rooms, rejoin the ball or wherever else she is headed: “If you should ever require me-“ he catches himself quickly, “this again, I will gladly oblige you. Regardless of the cause, I shall not ask nor force you into telling me again, unintentionally or not. My much belated condolences,” he adds quickly in an attempt not to come across as entirely mannerless.

“Thank you. Although I maintain you ought to apologise to Miss Burges, I should perhaps have shown more restraint despite my disapproval of your behaviour- it was your birthday, and the occasion rather forced unto you by the Admiral.”

“It still is, according to the Admiral’s horologe, I have another ten minutes left.”

Ten minutes spent well can be a long time. Given the events of the evening, there are some things he would like to tell her.

“Will you grant me a wish? A birthday present?”

She hesitates, turning in the doorway.

“Stay. Please.”

Chapter End Notes
Originally, this chapter and the following one were supposed to be one chapter. Since this one is already quite long, I have decided to split the plot in two. The next chapter is (as of now) going to be called "Ten Minutes, Ten Years" and will (hopefully!) add some more complexity to our heroes.

A general remark: Mental health and mental health awareness as we know it did not exist in the 1700s, hence everyone’s lack of understanding for Simcoe. The repeated usage of the term “darkness” to describe his PTSD experiences derives from the poem I have quoted in the beginning of the very first chapter in which the historical Simcoe speaks of "dark mental night”. Another reference to his struggles with mental health can be found account of his time with the Queen's Rangers when Simcoe recounts the Siege of Yorktown, during which he was forced to stay in bed most of the time due to ill health (historically, he was of course not shot by Caleb Brewster and thrown over a railing at Blandford by Abraham Woodhull):

“The health of Lt. Col. Simcoe began now totally to fail under the incessant fatigues, both of body and mind, which for years he had undergone.”

(Simcoe, John Graves: A Journal of the Operations of the Queen's Rangers from the end of the year 1777 to the conclusion of the late American War, 1787, 178.)

The birthday countdown uses 19th October 1781, the end of the Siege of Yorktown, as a point of reference due to TURN’s slightly altered timeline that has Blandford (which took place on 25 April 1781) and Yorktown happen within, say, a couple of weeks of each other.

Mary Anne Burges (1763-1813) was Elizabeth Gwillim’s closest friend who helped raise her four eldest children while she was away in Canada from 1791-1796. The ball and Mary Anne’s attendance are poetic license on my part.

"The Sorrows of Young Elizabeth" is a pun on the title of the most famous literary work of the Sturm und Drang- genre by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe "Die Leiden des jungen Werther" (English: "The Sorrows of Young Werther"), first published in German in 1774, while an English translation followed in 1779.
An Unlikely Likeness

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little bit longer than the previous ones. I don't know if the other chapters will all be this long, but this part of the story needed to be packed into one chapter.
I have also ditched the preliminary chapter title for the one I'm using now.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Stay. Please.”

Elizabeth hesitated. Ten minutes of her time, of all things he could have asked for was what he wanted. Time, and time with her. Given that he had asked courteously, Elizabeth decided she would do him the favour and stay. Ten minutes wasn’t much- and yet they had the power to either fly by within seconds or drag on for hours. She was curious what ten minutes with the Colonel would be like.

Nodding, she returned to the room where only moments ago she had sat on the floor in the embrace of the thitherto most frigid and aloof person she had ever known. In that, he had proved her wrong.

This time, she beckoned him to the much more comfortable armchairs standing to face each other at the fireplace where she had watched him the other day when the doctor had pronounced him almost fully recovered.

Seated, Elizabeth no longer needed to crane her neck to look him in the face. Illuminated by the fire and with the quick and sharp eye of an artist, she followed each individual line, the slightly uneven nose, the jagged outline of what remained of his left ear, the soft groove of his philtrum, the shape of his eyes and the length of his almost translucent lashes that sparkled golden in the firelight.

Elizabeth, whose speciality were watercolours of landscapes ever since she had first held a brush, found herself curiously interested in producing a portrait of the Colonel. He was by no means conventionally handsome, not a beau or a fairy tale hero, but something in the composition in his features sparked her desire to attempt at least a rough sketch of him.

The eyes, she thought, would be particularly difficult to capture. Depending on the light, their arctic blue could treacherously change into anything between aquamarine and ash grey.

And if her attempts to get the colour right wouldn’t ruin the likeness in the first place, accurately capturing his stare, the profound expression of what she now felt was sadness and longing (though for what she could not tell) would be her undoing.

No, she decided, for a novice in the art of portraiture he was not a subject fit to start one’s studies with- she would likely not even be able to do the complexity of the shading in his unruly, yet rebelliously elegant curly hair justice.
Seated directly opposite her, almost like when they sit at the dinner table (where the Admiral had insisted he take the place facing Miss Gwillim to have “the whole family sitting together” at one end of the table), but much closer, he finds himself looking in her face for the first time.

Until this moment, he could not have described her properly, had he been asked what she looked like; apart from some vague and obvious remarks about the colour of her hair (dark) and her eyes (brown) or the fact that she is not exactly tall (on the contrary), her face was that of a stranger, never before had he cared to even take interest in her or what she looked like.

Miss Gwillim had been faceless to him, like all these people in the ballroom, people who didn’t matter, whom he didn’t care about and who would never care about him.

Tonight sees a change in that: Her nose is straight, her chin pointy, a little too pointy, perhaps. Her eyes are of a specific colour, not brown in the common sense of the word, not brown like the mud on the roads of a Long Island backwater town after heavy rainfalls and not dark enough to be considered black, in fact, they gleam a little bit like the embers in the fireplace, but that may be a trick of the light.

He is not sure what to call her; she is not handsome in the sense of the statues of Grecian goddesses or of a golden-haired renaissance Madonna with a serene face.

What does she look like, then, now that he has established what she cannot be likened to in order to achieve a description by means of drawing comparisons?

Shakespeare crosses his mind, yet the Bard only affirms his suspicions.

Her eyes are nothing like the sun, nor do her lips resemble corrals and there are roses, probably even in this very garden at Hembury Fort House when summer comes that easily outshine her when in full bloom in a few months’ time. And yet, she cannot be likened to anything or anybody.

Not that he didn’t try to find comparisons to better explain what he tries to say to himself: her eyes are not as round and doe-like as those of Anna Strong and lack the mysterious, mischievous glimmer of Lady Lola’s- but what does that mean?

Is it bad, good, right, wrong, tragic, flattering, to be likened to or like somebody in one or several aspects?

He cannot tell and dismisses this inner discourse with the realisation that he has no need to spend a second thought on the age-fleeting charms of any of these three women.

The first two he will never see again anyway and Miss Gwillim, rich, well-bred, and perhaps even pretty in the eyes of those able to judge on such matters, is likely to be married soon. Being an heiress of what is perceived the right age for families to rid themselves of responsibilities in the shape of daughters, she attracts potential suitors like the sheen of a candle does moths. He had observed it on this very night, she had danced with more men than he thought his godfather had invited; though it is likely the Admiral will give her away to his nephew Richard Graves whom he is rather fond of. It would be a match well made, he muses, at least for Richard. Richard Graves being his father’s second son, he will be left to fend for himself once his father’s estate and fortune passes to his elder brother, Thomas - with Miss Gwillim’s money however, he would be settled for a comfortable life at Hembury Fort House, which the Admiral, bound by familial ties and tradition, is likely to leave him
one day. Miss Gwillim, or the Young Mrs Graves as they would surely call her to distinguish her from her aunt, would at least be awarded the opportunity to remain at and manage a household she is already well-acquainted with.

Why does he even bother? If she is or isn’t beautiful (or to be wed) is of no concern to him.

“We have squandered two full minutes of your time, Colonel”, Miss Gwillim finally breaks the silence, “What is it you want to tell me?”

Words race through his head and align into sentences or rather half-sentences for none of them are finished or can be finished; whenever he tries to find the right word to string to the first three or four, it vanishes from his mind or cannot be found, his tongue becomes a lifeless slab of meat lying heavy in his mouth as if it were solid granite and the words and sentences, worms and serpents all of them, entangled with one another into a big ball of writhing, moving bodies make it impossible to find the start and coherent end of just one single sentence.

He cannot speak. There are so many things coming to the fore of his mind, demanding to be uttered, to be heard, to be acknowledged, but the words never come.

Later he decides it’s for the best. There is a chance he would distress or scandalise her with what is on his mind and it is not his objective to make her hurl hurtful insults at him for being a “brute” or whatever women of better breeding say to men they consider abominations of nature (the word “monster” echoes in his ears) or give her nightmares for weeks. Judging from his own experiences with them, he would never wish them on her.

So instead of explaining everything at length, which might have helped further her understanding of his situation, he says plainly, his eyes fixed on the flames in the fireplace and not her face as conversation etiquette requires, “The war is not easily forgotten.”

His eyes remind her of a child’s, shy, trying to remember what the nurse taught him is polite to say in the company of a dozen strange adults.

The Colonel seems lost. Lost in a world of ballroom dances and society outings he is not accustomed to. For him, she reasons, coming back to England, though English-born, must seem like coming to a strange land with strange customs after his long absence.

Although he was a good deal taller than her, even when seated, he looked small, vulnerable even as he stared wistfully into the flames.

Elizabeth had of course been interested in what he wanted to tell her, but accepted the fact that he was either hesitant to talk about the war or had changed his mind. Perhaps she would have been able to understand him better, his unpredictable ways, the night she had seen him crying to himself and the gentle kindness he had extended to her standing in such a strange contrast to the reclusive, harsh and downright rude behaviour he had exhibited on this very evening.

She would have liked to say something, but she did not know what to say in such a situation that would sound hopeful and tactful and decided not to say anything instead of risking a potential blunder.

And so, no more words were spoken as they both watched the flames dance in the fireplace, occasionally exchanging a glance, until the clock struck midnight and ended the Colonel’s birthday.
“It’s getting late, Colonel, and your time is up. I will re-join my aunt and uncle for the last dance, which I am sure is to be danced soon. Will you join me?”

Why did she invite him to share the last dance with her?

“I decline respectfully.”

The Colonel does not even try to come up with an excuse. Elizabeth nodded.

“Very well, Colonel. I bid you goodnight then.”

Her tears dried and a (though forced) smile on her face, she resumed her duties at her aunt’s side, introduced and made conversation until half an hour later, the last dance was announced.

Instead of the Colonel, she danced with Captain Braithwaite, a former subordinate and friend of her uncle’s who, similarly to Mary Anne, would be staying for a few days and whose wife had elected to remain at the card table, where she had been dealt a promising hand, which left her husband as partner-less as Elizabeth.

When the rooms were finally cleared of guests, the candles burnt down and Elizabeth able to retire to her room, she found Mary Anne already dressed for the night sprawled on her bed and dozing, her head resting on a book.

“Finally”, she murmured when Elizabeth quietly instructed her maid to be careful and double quick about peeling her out of her dress in order to, ironically, not wake the sleeping Mary Anne.

“You said you’d come an hour or so ago.”

“I did, I’m sorry. It’s our last evening, I know, but something came in my way.”

She was truly sorry to have made her friend feel abandoned.

“No matter”, Mary Anne yawned, now a little more awake than before, “You’re here now. Tell me, what did you talk with Colonel Simcoe?”

“I gave him a piece of my mind. He deserved that after he was so rude to you.”

She did. It was not a lie. But not the full truth either. Somehow, Elizabeth was hesitant to tell her best friend about everything that had happened. Mary Anne wouldn’t understand.

And how could she, when she didn’t even understand herself? And Colonel Simcoe probably didn’t understand, either.

This whole confusing evening was best left undisturbed to fade into memory where it could be recreated as a tableau, a reconstruction of what had actually happened, subtly altered to better suit the tastes of its beholder.

“Your aunt was quite displeased you were gone”, Mary Ann disrupts her train of thought.

“I imagine”, Elizabeth replied carefully.

“I’m not saying this because I-, I’m telling you this because I want you to know. To phrase it carefully, she was displeased both you and Colonel Simcoe went missing at the same time. She asked me where you had gone and I answered you had to take some fresh air, but she didn’t believe me.”
Lovely, loyal Mary Anne; and yet, the tone in which she said “but she didn’t believe me” indicated she was hesitant to voice that she agreed with Aunt Margaret to a certain extent.

“Mary Anne, I swear unto all that is holy to me—nothing of the kind you insinuate happened between me and the Colonel.”

The mere idea of any such thing sounded far-fetched and unlikely. She drew a deep breath, a break Mary Anne mistook for the end of her statement.

“You know, I wouldn’t either, even if he hadn’t been rude to me. After all the things I have heard about him…” she nodded meaningfully, expecting Elizabeth to understand.

True, she had heard vague things, snippets of conversations she had not been a part of, but none that she had paid attention to until now.

On this very night, a gentleman had referred to him as “rude”, a second had called him to be of a “vile temper” while a third, another naval man, said he was lucky to be employed in Navy services so the unenviable fate of having to serve under Simcoe would never befall him.

She had known all along he was no likeable man, likeable in the common sense at least, but Mary Anne’s words caused her to listen up.

“What do they say about him?”

“He was a—brute of a commander, to say the least. Most of the things I know have travelled through two or three hands before having been entrusted into mine, so do not count on the reliability of everything I say, yet judging by the sheer number of things I have heard, especially in consolation from other guests who witnessed his unkindness towards myself, there seems to be a grain of truth at the core of these rumours. They say he was violent, feared by civilians and military alike. An efficient commander, yet passion-driven and full of himself, the dread and hate of many a Long Islander.”

Mary Anne’s eyes met her best friend’s, unsure of what kind of reaction to prepare for.

“It was a war”, Elizabeth replied, “I am sure men died at his hand, I have no illusions. He was a soldier. He has done his duty for his country.”

The last part escapes her mouth mechanically, something Uncle Samuel always said with regards to his own service and that of others, too. She wanted this conversation to be over, partly due to her exhaustion and tiredness after a night of dancing that was futile ground to an intellectual discussion that demanded her full attention and partly because of having taken offense at the sheer notion she would forget all her good breeding to sneak away with a man who had barely exchanged a word with her prior to this night and also, she has to admit to herself, because she didn’t know what she should say with regards to the Colonel. She would not go so far as to defend him, but knowing the war still haunted him in whatever way this manifested in him, had made her more sympathetic to his person. She pitied him a little, but was not sure if pitying him, given the information Mary Anne had relayed to her, would be considered the right thing to do.

In case he was indeed responsible for having caused suffering, could this go hand in hand with having suffered, and suffering even, to this day?

“You are so quiet, Elizabeth”, a sleepy Mary Anne remarked.

“I’m just tired.”
They both fell asleep soon after, arm in arm like sisters, two sisters knowing the morning would separate them again for another month or so.

The loud noise of gunfire keeps him from sleeping. Screams. An apple cracking under the weight of determined teeth. It is the same over and over again, the same routine, the same old drill. Having talked, or tried to talk, to Miss Gwillim had been unwise.

He is back in the medical tent, his wounds, re-opened by a pair of inquisitive brown eyes, are paining him again despite having almost entirely physically healed. Inside him, they live on, hotly inflamed and burning whenever a bandage holding what crippled thing he has for a soul together is torn off with too little care.

He covers his ears, hoping to shut the noises out, but to no avail. They are inside him, even if they regularly fool him into thinking what he hears is happening around him.

Wide awake, he lies in his bed and watches the moon traverse the sky through the window. The sickle moon between the bare branches of the trees mocks him.

He rolls over to the other side of the bed and watches the darkness instead. If he doesn’t close his eyes, he can at least try to keep himself from seeing what he hears for some time.

Hours pass spent in this state until sleep overpowers him eventually at the first light of dawn.

He wakes with his arms wrapped around himself, his left hand resting on his right shoulder, his right arm around his torso. Not remembering his dream, he feels odd- as if something is missing, somewhere, here, with him, within him, in his arms, but he brushes it off as the after-effect of some unfathomable dream that he is not keen on trying to recall as a measure of self-protection from his own mind. It was likely a bad dream anyway.

Deliberately, he skips breakfast and wearily sends the valet tasked with assisting him to dress away for another two hours of restless sleep.

The hour of Mary-Anne’s departure had come after breakfast and a sad Elizabeth pulled her friend close in a heartfelt embrace that was reciprocated with equal fervour.

“We’ll meet again soon! You could visit us in Bath in the summer-“

“Or you could come and stay here-“

“Miss Burges?” The sudden interruption causes both of them to freeze in their embrace; the sound of a curiously high male voice came as a surprise to both of them.

“Colonel”, Mary Anne is the first to speak, her voice polite yet as cold as the colour of his eyes.

“I would like to apologise for my behaviour yesterday night. I was- unwell, but that is no excuse for offending you.”

The lugubrious figure dressed in black bowed his head.
“Do you accept my apology?”, he added somewhat insecurely, obviously unfamiliar with the protocol of apologising to someone.

“I accept.”

The way his forehead creased as Mary Anne’s voice softened somewhat, Elizabeth was certain the Colonel had trouble processing what had just happened, trying to understand something nobody had ever explained to him.

She did not get to give this situation any more thought, for now Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel joined the small group outside the house to say farewell and ensure Mary Anne would give their regards to her family.

The coach disappeared from view and Elizabeth ceased waving her friend goodbye. Hopefully, they would soon meet again and for longer. Until then, there were the Braithwaites, who had also brought their small child of about two years of age and nurse, to entertain for a day or so more and of course, the Colonel.

The Colonel- he looked so battered, sad even this morning. He had skipped breakfast again and looked gaunt, pale. Was he plagued by what he had done, she wondered, or was it what had been done to him or could there be a mix of both? She would never know.

The rest of the day progressed reasonably well- despite still wishing her best friend could have stayed for longer, Elizabeth found the Braithwaites good company and the Colonel was nowhere to be seen, which allowed Elizabeth some distraction from her philosophical musings over killing, dying, pain and being allowed to feel sorry for a human being despite obvious misgivings regarding his person.

In the evening, a pleasant dinner ensued, Uncle Samuel and Captain Braithwaite both being of good cheer and little Charlotte Braithwaite (a veritable ray of sunshine) had entertained and brightened the hearts of the ladies of the Graves household the entire afternoon until she had been sent to bed with her nurse to allow her parents to enjoy dinner in peace and quiet and grant the child enough sleep to be placid and pleasant on their journey the following day, meaning everyone (except for one person) was of good cheer that night.

“I would have left her and Nurse White at home, the perils of traveling, you know, but my wife insists she doesn’t want the child to be alone for too long”, Captain Braithwaite had informed them about their unusual arrangement that Elizabeth felt sympathetic to- if she would ever have children, she would not want them to be separated from their parents for long either, especially at such a young age.

Dinner was a cheery affair and except for the Colonel, everybody exchanged laughter, jokes and little anecdotes. Uncle Samuel told an amusing story about a drunken midshipman he had once sailed with who had, drunk as he was, scaled the rigging and hooted like an owl for two full hours. Eventually, the drunkard could be persuaded to make his way down again when he was assured by Uncle Samuel and several other crew members that he was at sea, not in a forest, and that none of them had ever seen an owl on a ship.

As the main course was served when everyone’s bellies were already stuffed with humorous tales from the “good old days at sea” as Captain Braithwaite phrased it, a little girl stepped into the room, all big, dark eyes and messy hair of the same colour. Despite the fact that her bedtime had passed hours ago, she seemed very much wide awake and downright curious. Her tiny feet stopped two yards from the table, eying the adults with shy interest.

“Charlotte dear, what are you doing up? Where is White, hm?” Mrs Braithwaite said softly to her
daughter. Delighted her mamma was talking to her, little Charlotte giggled “Bed!”, indicating that Mrs White, the woman charged with keeping an eye on the girl, was fast asleep.

Captain and Mrs Braithwaite looked a little embarrassed, but Aunt Margaret quickly eased the situation:

“Elizabeth was the same. Always quicker than any nurse we had and a good climber, too. What a sweet little cherub!”

With some newfound confidence thanks to her mother’s interaction which the toddler seemed to take as a sign that she was now a welcome table guest, she walked around the chairs to inspect the other members of the dinner party. Elizabeth shot a beaming smile at the little girl who reciprocated it instantly. Little Charlotte’s sweetness earned her everyone’s lenience with regard to her usual sleeping schedule and thus she continued to meander between her parents, Elizabeth, the Admiral and Aunt Margaret.

On a sudden whim, the little girl decided after some time that the tall brooding figure at the end of the table might be worth a visit. Smiling just as brightly at the Colonel as she had at everyone else, Charlotte walked up to his chair. With the unbridled and unbiased curiosity of infancy, she demanded his full attention, patting his knee with her small hands.

Colonel Simcoe, who absentmindedly pretended to at least follow the conversation but had failed abysmally at feigning interest, looked down to where the little girl stood eager to have his attention. He smiles, somewhat clumsily and gingerly at first for displays of any emotions that call for the distortion of the corners of one’s mouth in an upwards direction have been scarce for him over the past few months, maybe years even.

Initially, he thought the little girl would lose interest in him and leave again after some time, but she does not and so he gives in to her, hoping she will leave him be eventually if he obliges her wish. He picks her up in an effortless movement and settles her on his knee, one arm supporting her back to keep her from falling down.

Her mother, he comes to notice, stares at him in petrified disbelief that borders on an insult. Braithwaite had for a short time been deployed around New York. Perhaps he had heard about Lieutenant-Colonel Simcoe and prattled whatever slanders (or truths?) he had picked up on the streets of York City or elsewhere on to his wife, for judging by her face, she knows something at least.

Sure, he did kill men and was (is?) responsible for a host of other things he does not wish to think about presently, but firstly, he had done his duty to King and country (which is more than can be said about some of his fellow officers) and secondly, he is by no means hostile to small children.

In fact, though still weary from a sleepless night and annoyed by the tedious deliberate jocoseness of those he must dine with, he finds the little girl the most pleasant company of them all. He rocks the delighted infant on his knees first to the tune of the British Grenadiers and then to Lillibullero. He knows other songs as well, but he isn’t quite certain if the songs circulated and exchanged among rowdy drunk soldiers that might even be out of fashion now for all that he knows are the right thing to recite in the company of a young lady. She is quite charming, actually, giggling,
clapping her hands and begging for more.

The plates of the last course were removed and dessert brought in. Mrs Braithwaite rose in an attempt to try and seize the opportunity to take her daughter from the Colonel’s arms.

Clever tactician that he was though, he was quick to guess her intentions and wrapped his arms even more protectively around the child as if she were a treasure he was reluctant to part with.

“Thank you, I think Miss Charlotte and I are quite fine. I do not fancy any sweets anyway.”

And with that, he dismissed her almost like a servant, sending her back to her place next to her husband across the table from where she continued to eye him with an air of surprise and motherly concern as he continued to play with the happy little sprite on his knee, leaving the exquisite ice-cream untouched.

Elizabeth watched the spectacle with amused curiosity, knowing John Graves Simcoe was not the gentleman he fancied himself to be (especially with regards to the tales she had heard about his time in America and his initial treatment of Mary Anne), but he was by no means the unpredictable brute she had heard of either. It did reveal a new, oddly endearing side of him.

When they had finished for good and the company was about to part, the Colonel simply walked off to the drawing room, the little girl on his hip, followed closely by Mrs Braithwaite, who was originally supposed to join Aunt Margaret and Elizabeth in the ladies’ parlour.

To lessen the poor woman’s obvious concerns and to satisfy her own curiosity, Elizabeth gently touched her arm and said “I will go with them”. Her reassuring smile seemed to calm the woman’s nerves a bit, as she followed Aunt Margaret (who frowned but did not dare to say anything in front of her guest) while Captain Braithwaite and Uncle Samuel wanted to share another whiskey or two and recount the old glories of their Navy days.

She seated herself on the other end of the settee occupied by the Colonel and Charlotte. It was a small wonder how biddable and sweet the little girl was, obviously bewitched by a charm most adults did not recognise in him. Laughing, she time and again pulled at his unruly auburn curls in obvious wonderment and he endured the ordeal with a patience Elizabeth had never thought him to possess.

Surely a man who had, according to stories and hearsay, earned himself the reputation of the Scourge of Long Island would not act like this? Or would he?

“Why don’t you read to us, Miss Gwillim? It is grossly unjust to let me work all night while you sit idly by.”

Amused by his, at least by his standards, mellow undertone paired with the scene she enjoyed watching to no end, Elizabeth gave him a wry smile and went to fetch her copy of Histories, or Tales of Past Time from her room, eager to see how the situation would develop from there.

She had little else considered suitable for young ladies, this specific volume, both meant to entertain and to educate on the matter of morals, was a remainder of her own girlhood. The little girl would surely like it and a little education on the matter of morals would not go amiss on the Colonel either.

Halfway through the story of Riquet with the Tuft, she noticed the silence surrounding her.
It was too silent. Looking up from the page, she marvelled at the sight that greeted her.

The Colonel’s head had fallen to one side, resting on his shoulder. He was as fast asleep as the infant whose weary head rested trustingly on his broad chest.

She permitted herself a few moments to study the scene; the serenity and almost heart wrenching innocence of it tugged forcefully at her heartstrings.

There, not half a yard away from her, reclined the fierce warrior so many seemed to fear, his brow unspoiled by ferocity or ire, his features softened by sleep, the piercing orbs of icy blue that could freeze a lake solid in summertime sheltered behind long, pale eyelashes and rosy lids, the mouth so often twisted in pouting disdain slightly curled into the softest hint of a genuine smile and in his arms the child, so frail, so little against his imposing frame but well-protected in his arms.

Silently, Elizabeth slipped her shoes off to avoid any unnecessary noise and left the room without disturbing the two sleepers. Within less than a minute, she managed to search her room for a pencil and paper and hastened back to the drawing room for fear to return after either one both would wake up and spoil everything.

How quickly opinions could change- while last night, she would never have dared to attempt capturing the Colonel’s features, she could not let this prime opportunity pass.

To her infinite delight, both were still fast asleep when she returned. She was just adding the finishing touches to her quick, yet fairly accurate pencil study (in fact, she was proud of having managed to achieve some resemblance in his facial features), when the door behind her creaked softly and Aunt Margaret and Mrs Braithwaite entered.

Mrs Braithwaite turned as pale as the stucco ornaments on the ceiling and wanted to say something when Uncle Samuel and Captain Braithwaite joined the scene, probably to retrieve Charlotte or to say goodnight to Colonel Simcoe and her.

It was Uncle Samuel’s soft chuckle that wakened the elder of the two sleepers. Radiantly blue eyes opened in one swift motion, probably a remainder of military drill, a part of him still expecting night marching orders that required him to be in full possession of his mental capacities within seconds, and wandered from Aunt Margaret from his perspective on the far left of the small gathering to Captain Braithwaite on the far right.

Elizabeth quickly hid her pencil and paper behind her back.

“I was merely keeping an eye on her”, he comments what is not necessary to be commented coolly, “she sleeps now.”

With that, he rose, Charlotte in his arms, and passed her to her father who looked like the very embodiment of incredulousness from a comic print.

“Goodnight.”

He frowned, his face once again frozen to glacial disdain and left.

Elizabeth did not care to follow the hushed conversation that ensued (Colonel Simcoe being the central topic) and instead hurried to Uncle Samuel’s study, where she had the right equipment to finish her sketch. After twenty more minutes of improvement, it was almost perfect.

A sudden idea rose from the depths of her mind. This time, instead of taking up a pencil or a brush, she reached for quill and ink and began to write.
As he dislikes “family occasions” such as the previous night and social gatherings in general, he barely tolerated the Admiral’s family meals on ordinary days, but after two nights of visitors in the house, he is less keen than ever to join everyone at the table.

Having skipped breakfast the last day, he forces his feet to join them, hoping nobody will bring up the previous night to him. It is awkward enough as it is.

He finds the Braithwaites and Margaret Graves still missing, but thinks nothing of it as Miss Gwillim and the Admiral are already there and the others will surely follow soon. Charlotte will likely not join them but receive her breakfast individually in the company of her nurse.

Sitting down in his usual seat opposite Miss Gwillim, he notices how his plate stands at a slightly odd angle. To his surprise, when he reaches out to correct this careless eyesore, it becomes apparent that there is something underneath it.

Admiral Graves is presently occupied with a fried egg and Miss Gwillim seems busy cutting a thick slice of bread into smaller portions.

With a warrior’s skill and quickness, he reaches for the mystery object (a folded piece of paper) and hides it under the table, just like a note passed among schoolboys.

Unfolding the thick, cream-coloured paper, he stares in disbelief at the page: A striking likeness of his sleeping self, little Charlotte in his arms, and underneath a few lines reading:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Oh why must you, cold Winter King,} \\
\text{Whose heart lies buried deep in snow} \\
\text{Deny the warmth of gentle spring} \\
\text{When all the world (unbeknownst to you!)} \\
\text{Can spy the quivering thing below?}
\end{align*}
\]

The only accomplished artist he knows of under this roof is Miss Gwillim, though he has never heard of her skills as a poetess until now. His eyes dart to her immediately.

It is apparent she has watched him all the time and cutting the bread had been only a ruse to lure him into a sense of false security, because she smiles broadly at him, bats her eyelids and returns to her breakfast with a complacent smirk on her lips.

Chapter End Notes

Next time (probably): How Elizabeth got the idea to write a poem (and why she wrote it
at all), Simcoe's reaction and Aunt Margaret's suspicions as well as a surprise for one of the characters...

The sonnet I quoted from is Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare and probably one of his most famous ones.

The Braithwaite: Captain Braithwaite is modelled on John Simcoe, father of John Graves, who served as captain under Admiral Graves with whom he became friends. Later, Samuel Graves would become godfather of John Simcoe's eldest (surviving) son, who received the middle name Graves in honour of his godfather.

British Grenadiers/ Lillibullero: Well, the first one was an obvious choice. :) The second one is another famous march which comes with an armada of varieties in spelling.

"Histories, or Tales of Past Time" is the 1729 translation of Charles Perrault's "Histoires ou contes du temps passé" or "Les Contes de ma Mère l'Oye" ("Mother Goose Tales"), a collection of fairy tales by Perrault, among them "Riquet with the Tuft":

A prince (Riquet with the Tuft, an epithet he was given thanks to the unruly patch of hair on his head) is born ugly and misshapen but a fairy godmother predicts his future and grants him a special gift: despite his lack of looks, he will become a very wise man. When he meets the lady of his heart, his wisdom will transfer to her, too. A few years later, the queen of a neighbouring realm expects twins. The younger girl is (like Riquet) ugly, but witty and intelligent, while the older is beautiful but downright fatuous (though good-hearted). The same fairy leaves a gift for her, too: She'll be able to give some of her beauty to the man she loves. To shorten the story: The two meet, fall in love and in the end it's open to the reader to interpret if it's love that eradicated their respective shortcomings or if it was the fairy's magic.

The little poem is (as always if not indicated otherwise) mine.
Over the course of breakfast, he keeps eying her— with little success, for, he finds, she eyes him too which prevents any clandestine observations from being made.

Why did she do this? Why had she taken the pains to make a sketch of him and even added a few lines of poetry?

According to his experience, people tend to prepare more elaborate schemes as soon as they have a personal stake or objective in a matter. Having suspected her of not wanting him in the house, competition for the role of son or daughter to the Graves’ which she had grown accustomed to fill in his absence, it is his first instinct to suspect her of base motives, showing him at his weakest, at a strategic disadvantage, asleep, when even the bravest soldier can be overpowered, thus threatening him, but a voice inside him tells him to look a second time.

He unfolds the paper (now that the Braithwaites and Margaret Graves have joined the table, nobody pays him much attention) and takes a closer look.

If she wanted to harm or threaten him, she had had much more opportune moments to choose from. The night she had found him crying for example: with his body still weak and barely able to walk, she could have done almost anything to him and given it had been night-time, she would not have needed to fear any witnesses. Not that anyone in this household would have suspected her anyway.

No, it does not seem as if her intentions are malicious.

But what, if they are not malicious, are they? What motive could Miss Gwillim have to be kind to him?

He has not been pleasant company to her or anyone since his arrival, partly due to his very own struggles with the deep, dark ocean in his mind that has followed him across an actual ocean to England and partly— well, because of what nature and society have made of him. He has been born a warrior; after all, he is the first and only surviving child of his parents. There had been two brothers before him, but none survived past infancy and Percy, two years his junior—

“John, help me, John, please!”

Will it ever go away?

Realising he is allowing the dark waves to wash over him again, he forces himself back to the breakfast table in his godfather’s house.

-And to Miss Gwillim. Maybe it is charity that drove her to extend kindness to him. Women like her, rich, independent in their finances, tend to engage in parish charity and make their names by donating to the sick and starving of the community.

Was he just another pauper or one-legged veteran to her, fed and clothed with some cheap compassion for someone she considered inferior to herself?

No. Instead of only having given something, she had taken from him too: the night of his birthday when she had, after their horrid argument, lain in his arms, crying, having confided her worst
accusation against herself in him, he had consoled her. He had held her in his embrace and waited until her desperate sobs had stilled, used his physical presence in such a way that she felt no longer alone – and while she had taken his comforting embrace, she had again had given something to him in return, a peace and warmth he had not felt for a long time.

It is more complicated than tossing a coin to a beggar, theirs is a complex circle of give and take.

It is not malice, he decides and looks up at Miss Gwillim, trying yet again to extract some more telling information from her face. His plan misfires more badly than any Brown Bess he has ever seen, because she looks at him at the same time and their eyes meet, her gaze catches his and for one moment of indiscernible length, hazel and blue intertwine. It is not something he has done very often before and, finding it uncomfortable and fearing Miss Gwillim might misinterpret his intentions, he casts his eyes down to his plate and begins to pick around in his food with his fork without the intention of brining any of it to his mouth.

After quickly glimpsing to the left and right of him to make sure no one is looking, he folds Miss Gwillim’s drawing and puts it in the pocket of his coat.

Throughout the tedious ordeal of sitting at the same table with the same people as the night before and their talk of old news (he is aware that if it weren’t for his presence at the table, they would likely gossip about him, given the events of the previous night, but with him present, all they can do is talk about less interesting, less new things), he is tempted to reach for it again and scolds himself every time his hand absent-mindedly ventures dangerously close to his pocket. Miss Gwillim’s present is meant for his eyes only; he will not have it sullied by the curious glances of the Admiral, his wife, or the Braithwaites.

In the following days, the Colonel elected to join Elizabeth on her walks and she, though surprised after their not exactly successful first attempt, accepted.

Their walks were characterised by their mutual silence which was sometimes interspersed with episodes of surprisingly pleasant conversation and on a few occasions, one of their brief exchanges even managed to put a surprisingly heartfelt smile on his face.

One such incident occurred when Elizabeth recounted the Braithwaites’ departure: Little Charlotte, sitting on her nurse’s hip, had reached out for the Colonel, arms outstretched, and demanded one last parting embrace, which he provided with the same gentle affection he had displayed the night before, prompting her parents (and the Graves’) to stare in the most entertaining interpretations of the most pristine disbelief once more.

“You have no idea what you started, Colonel”, Elizabeth laughed, his reserved hint of a smile inspiring her to ease away from her usually very stiff and well-considered speech and demeanour in his presence and emboldening her to jest, “You have enchanted the young Miss Braithwaite. When she grows up, her first point of reference for a proper gentleman will be you and all other beaus will be fated to shatter against this iron-cast ideal of the dashing Colonel Simcoe she met as a child.”

She giggled, savouring the well-preserved memory of the surprised company once more, followed suit by the mental image of a young girl hitting an overzealous suitor with her fan.

Colonel Simcoe looked at her with a serious expression on his face. Had she gone too far?
I should have known he would take it the wrong way, Elizabeth chided herself for her bold venture into less formal territory, fearing his response would be of the unkind sort.

“You are mistaken, Miss Gwillim”, he said in a cool, composed tone, “She will not remember ‘Colonel Simcoe’. I told her to call me John.”

When she laughed once more, taken aback by his sense of humour, he gave her another, bolder smile than before, visibly satisfied his joke had worked so splendidly.

“If you don’t mind me paying you this compliment, I think you looked a lot more natural that evening playing with her than her own nursemaid.”

“Thank you.”

“How come you have such a way with children? It seems not to be a quality of yours many people have, prior to that night, known of.”

“Indeed not. I was a soldier, Miss Gwillim, a profession that requires other abilities. My reputation was not built on rocking infants on my knee.”

Although he had not answered her question in full, Elizabeth let go of this topic, sensing he was reluctant to talk about anything related to his days in active service.

After having seen him crying to himself, she was certain some aspects of his past still troubled him greatly and she would not want to rub salt into a wound she did not even know existed, wherefore she diverted the conversation towards the weather and the frustrating resilience of winter against spring.

The walks, he finds, are doing him good. His leg seems better than ever before and being able to walk longer distances every day makes him confident he will be healthy (enough) to re-enter the military again. He is still the commander of the Queen’s Rangers.

America, and he, a trained warrior and tactician, does not indulge in illusions, is as good as lost. Even the prime minister believes so. Washington’s victory at Yorktown, which he can barely recall having witnessed through episodes of almost delirious fever, pain and bodily weakness that had made opening his eyes an exercise that commanded all his willpower, seems to have ended the war, even if no peace treaty is signed yet.

He does not like to think about the war, given that all he has done and suffered, and caused in suffering has been in vain.

He needs something to do, he realises, another cause to fight for, another objective to work towards to, another victory wherever else it might take him. Why? He doesn’t know. Fighting is what he has done since his late teenage years and he has been very good at it.

If nothing else, it will distract him from his thoughts, from the depths of his mind and the frequent storm surges that wash over him at night.

He will go to London and appeal to his superiors there to give him something to do. They must have
something for him to do. He is almost entirely recovered and keen on aiding Britannia’s cause wherever he is needed. If he is lucky, he might even secure a future for the remaining Rangers in some other regiment or find them a new station, perhaps in Canada. It pains him not to know with certainty that the men who had been willing to follow him into battle and possibly die under his command are provided for adequately.

He will go first thing in the morning, he decides, filled with anticipation.

He will no longer outwear the Graves’ hospitality. By now, he is certain, they will be happy to be rid of him. With him gone, they can finally enjoy their happy parties and get-togethers with other families like them again. They have no need for him, and they cannot understand. Not even his godfather who has also fought in the war.

Maybe the Admiral, he comes to realise, has no need to dwell in the past of his days at sea because he had always known he would find a future in England upon his return. His wife, their ward, whom he knows is almost like a daughter to him, a home in the country, while he was and is all alone.

There was no one waiting for him, no one he was looking forward to meet again upon his return. While his godfather had known he would return to a future, the only thing he had had was the present, the fight, the moment to live in. With that gone from him, he is adrift in a world he does not fit in and eager to find his place again.

London, tomorrow. Perhaps, if Mars looks kindly upon him, he will return to Honiton with the good news of a new life in his old world.

“Damn it. Damn it, damn it, fu-“

Cursing had not been part of Elizabeth’s broad and faceted education, but sometimes, when the desperation of a hopeless situation called for it, the vocalisation of a (string of) more or less creatively chosen profanities provided her with a welcome outlet for her anger.

“Language!” her aunt’s voice reprimanded her from afar. Elizabeth barely noticed. She had spent the best of the morning crawling through the house on her knees and hands patting the floor, especially the carpets, in search for a lost earring.

Despite the assistance of her maid Susan, who had enlisted the help of her uncle’s valet as well, their search had been fruitless.

How and where she might have lost it she could not fathom. She had still worn it at breakfast, so much was certain, and she had not gone on a walk yet, so it had to be in the house.

After searching her room from top to bottom, she had spread her search to the public areas of the house, but had found nothing so far.

Elizabeth was certain she was on the verge of insanity. How could it be gone? Just like that, as if it had disappeared from the surface of the world altogether? It couldn’t be lost. It could only be in the house. So where was it? She had even searched the rooms she hadn’t been in.

If she had wanted to, Elizabeth could have replaced the lost item by buying a new pair of earrings
immediately. She was wealthy enough to buy a new pair without having to worry about her finances and could even have chosen ones that were far more splendid and costly than the one she had lost, but she had been raised to be moderate and considerate in her expenses and earrings were not a necessity of life.

Every now and then, she did spend a little more money than was necessary on something she liked, be it jewellery, books or supplies for her artistic pursuits, but replacing something that was likely hidden in plain sight not two feet away from her was definitively an unnecessary expense.

Besides, she had adored this particular pair for their versatility; the stones, small amethysts, had fit many of her gowns and were ideal in their modest size and cut for daytime attire.

Immersed in her search with an iron will to eventually be successful (when that would be she had no way of estimating, perhaps around her birthday in September or maybe Christmas) she barely noticed a pair of boots intruding her current search area.

“What are you doing down there, if I may ask?”

“Colonel”, she greeted him, rising to her feet, “I have lost an earring and cannot find it.”

She made a gesture with her hand towards her left ear where the remaining earring dangled alone in wait for its partner.

“I am sorry to hear that. I would gladly join you searching, but I have come to bid you farewell. I am about to travel to London on matters of business with the army and am not likely to return before Saturday. In fact, my carriage waits for me as we speak.”

“You- you will leave us?”, she asked with an air of disbelief.

“Only for a few days - for now. It was a rather impulsive decision. If my plea to my superiors will prove successful, I might soon be in active service again”, he informed her, obviously expecting or at least eagerly awaiting to be allowed to join the fray once more.

“Then I must wish you luck. Travel safe”, she said, forcing herself to smile as he took his leave from her with a deep and elegant bow.

Her precise wording does not escape him. She must wish him luck. Does she feel obliged by societal norms to wish a parting traveller luck in his endeavours or does she not approve of his wish to fight again?

The expression of false happiness that could not even rudimentarily cover her concerned features remains with him for the rest of his journey. Somehow, the idea that she might like to see him again and perhaps even fears for his safety (although he does not know why she should or what cause she has to do so), is heart-warming.

The hint of an amused smile conquers his lips when he recalls her cursing to herself while searching for the lost earring. He had heard, discussing some trifle or other with his godfather in the adjoining room without knowing what had caused her to do so. And she had said things before her aunt had come close enough to overhear and subsequently scold her that would even have made a sailor blush.
Sailors might, coming to think of it, even be the source of her creative vocabulary, being the Admiral’s ward she has likely visited the harbour or even one of his ships where such words were exchanged far more frequently than in the ladies’ parlour at Hembury Fort House.

He would never have thought her capable of such profanities, well-mannered and level-headed as she usually presents herself. She doubtlessly is all of these things, but it is… refreshing? Interesting? Fascinating? To see that beneath the good breeding and spotless attire, Miss Gwillim hides a side to her person he had not yet known of let alone suspected she might possess.

Somehow, he finds himself feeling sorry for her because of the time she had spent searching her lost possession to no avail. A plan ripens in him and, contented with himself, he turns his attention to Catullus again who has resided in his lap for the past hour, begging for his attention while he had spent the time thinking of his departure from the house (and Miss Gwillim).

London, a few days later.

“These”, he hears himself say and the man behind the counter of the shop holds the objects of his choice up for him for better examination. He is at loss what to do, he has never bought items like these before and especially not for someone else. As far as he knows, ladies’ tastes vary and some argued not every variation of gemstones, pearls, corral, gold, silver and whatnot suits every woman’s hair, eyes or complexion.

The visit to the small jeweller’s shop he had spotted by chance was a welcome distraction to the frustratingly uncooperative ways of his superiors.

*No, not now, no, recuperate a little longer, no, not America, no, the Queen’s Rangers are not a priority for us at present, no, no, no.*

The last three days had been exhausting and frustrating.

He will not return to Hembury Fort House in triumph and regimentals. Presently, it does not seem likely he will be fighting again very soon.

They had told him to reconsider his decisions, retire into politics or a civilian lifestyle in the country (exactly the fate he was trying to escape) while the army was occupied with more pressing matters in the wake of Yorktown than one single only half-recovered colonel with overzealous objectives, a record of court-martial and an inexplicable liking for bloodshed. That was what they had told him, spineless quill-pushing clerks dressed up in uniforms making a mockery of every man fighting in a coat of the same colour.

The worst of the lot had been Clinton, who had been to the Colonies himself and who should have known of his zeal and usefulness. Had he not forged the Queen’s Rangers into a proper fighting unit? Had he not braved the enemy forces at Monmouth when the rest of the army had retreated, tail between their legs?

“Enjoy your convalescence. Indulge a hobby. Find a wife. I heard Jonathan Cooke married some actress from the New York stage and brought her back to Surrey-“

Having emptied his glass of sherry, he had left General Clinton as quickly as possible. He simply could not bear the forlornness of his fight for a new post being dismissed by one of the man’s faux-paternal pats on the arm.

If he would have wanted that, he could have stayed at Hembury Fort House and spent time with his
At the thought of his godfather, he had remembered Miss Gwillim and his sudden idea from the carriage ride to London and gone chasing after something other than a new uniform for a change, which had led him to his present predicament.

He could tell the man to put them aside for him and he could return after a quick stroll to Covent Garden with a dark-haired little thing to see if his choice would suit Miss Gwillim.

No, he decides, he does not wish to sully his present by hiring a girl to put them on before they adorn her and besides, not all dark hair and eyes look the same and since he already has established he has never seen a woman quite like her before, her eyes nothing like the sun and all, he will have to rely on his own judgement.

Having worn the same clothing every day for eleven years (with minor changes regarding his rank insignia and the change of colour of his coat in '77), he has never been one for objects of vanity and fine clothing. Military life, if spent in active service and not among the cowards hiding behind their desks in Philadelphia or elsewhere, has no use for silks and satins, let alone jewels.

-And, although at the age of thirty he is somewhat embarrassed to admit it, he has never picked anything for a woman, not even a cheap trinket. Besides, he doesn’t even know Miss Gwillim well enough to consider himself a connoisseur of her taste. Will she like them? In his mind at least, they suited her very well, perhaps with the green dress she wore at the unfortunate birthday celebrations or the hat with powder blue ribbons she had procured from a hat maker in Bath of late, but then, what does he know about the latest fashions and a lady’s tastes?

After an hour browsing the small jeweller’s shop, everything looks the same to him; a sea of glitter and flitter sparkling in different colours. How could anyone tell all these stones, settings and cuts apart?

He looks at his pick once again and subconsciously makes a movement to hold them up to his own face in front of the looking-glass on the wall to at least see how they would be worn but then remembers that even if he were a woman, he would not be able to wear them. At this thought, his hand mechanically adjusts his tricorn a little more to the left of his head.

“I’ll take these”, he says lightly, this time more decidedly, and orders the bill to be sent to Lieutenant-Colonel Simcoe, presently of Hembury Fort House, Honiton, Devon, but in the disguise of a tailor’s bill for a plain black men’s suit. He does not want all the world to know about his expenses, especially not when Samuel and Margaret Graves, both curious by nature, might take an interest in them. A tailor’s receipt would not stir much interest, a jeweller’s bill would. The money he spends is his own. He doesn’t need his godfather or his wife to lecture him on his expenses like a schoolboy spending a month’s allowance on cheap ale and sweets. It occurs to him in this moment that he has not even asked the price of these ornaments.

“With respect, sir, I don’t know what fabric your tailor uses for ‘a plain black men’s suit’, but I can assure you, it would be worth a mere fraction of your purchase. I take it then they are a present, if I may be so bold to make an assumption, for a woman?”, the jeweller interrupts his thoughts.

Clearly, the man has seen it all and his choice of words (“woman”, not “wife” or “fiancée”) and the conspiratorial tone of his voice makes it clear what he thinks.

The fashionable men of London doubtlessly showered their mistresses with fineries and they, most of them wed for dynastic and/or monetary reasons, would likely not want their wives to find out about their unreasonable spending habits that were likely financed by the unenviable woman’s dowry.
“No”, he answers quickly and with a warning undertone he remembers using quite frequently during his days in America to inform the man of the insult he has committed against him, “I am unwed and the recipient is not my mistress.”

“My apologies, sir”, the shopkeeper answers, his voice revealing that he does not quite believe his customer and that he is not the slightest bit alarmed at the sight of the obviously disgruntled tall man with piercing blue eyes in front of him, even going so far as to trust his customer with his back as he turns to carefully box and wrap his purchases.

“A splendid choice. The lady of your heart will surely be more than pleasantly surprised to receive such a gift!”

He nods, sensing some secret satisfaction his purchase has received praise (even if he knows it’s just a cheap trick by the jeweller to make him return soon to buy or commission more pieces) and leaves.

As he puts the small parcel into his pocket on his way out, he realises he hasn’t even asked for the price and contrary to his own expectations, it does not bother him.

To Elizabeth’s great vexation, the earring remained nowhere to be found. All servants were instructed to look out for the missing item, but after a few days it was presumed “lost at sea”, as Uncle Samuel called it, with no realistic chance of ever finding it again and Elizabeth, eager to distract herself from her anger with herself and the fact that Mary Anne, despite having promised to do so had not written yet, turned to occupying Uncle Samuel’s study for artistic purposes. Painting soothed her and often, she could lose herself for a brief period of time in the pieces she produced, wandering in among the blossoming gardens or ice-covered winter landscapes.

Looking up from her current work, a view of Dunkeswell Abbey in the fog after some sketches she had made last week, she suddenly found herself listening to the noises (or lack thereof) in the house.

Aunt Margaret was somewhere upstairs doing some needlework and Uncle Samuel was, evicted from his study, probably in the library, reading or taking a tour of the estate, as he had proclaimed he would do at breakfast this morning.

With the Colonel’s departure, it had grown very quiet, Elizabeth noticed. Not that the Colonel had ever been a loud, boisterous or particularly engaging person who could fill a room with laughter and joviality upon entering it, but something was missing, in its own less obvious, quiet way, starting with the empty place across the table during meals.

She packed her painting utensils up for the day and decided to take a walk, alone now that Colonel Simcoe was in London.

Curious how only weeks ago she had objected to his company and now she had grown so utterly used to him she found the lack of his tall frame at her side odd.

The air was crisp and cool, wintry still despite March, the first month of spring, having arrived a few days ago. Elizabeth longed for the warmth of spring and the possibility to set her easel up in the open and painting from nature again.

Although she could not wait for delicate blossoms to turn the greyish brown of the bare trees into a splendorous forest of pink and white, the day had its own merits, despite the persistent cold and grey sky.
On her way back to the house after an extended and exhausting stroll along the boundaries of the Graves-property, Elizabeth allowed herself a short rest in the Greek Folly, a pavilion once constructed by her uncle in the style of a Greek temple with pillars and statues of gods and goddesses in the flowerbeds around it.

During summertime, she often went there to read in peace, or brought paper and pencil to pass a few quiet hours sketching whatever came to her mind.

Resting her head against one of the pillars, she sat there, listening to the wind in the trees and the occasional croak of a crow flying across the sky.

Days like these were beautiful in a very particular way, she thought, a dark beauty, an alluring magic that waited to be discovered hidden somewhere beneath the rich, sinuous shapes of the clouds varying in colour from light grey to almost black and the bare trees that looked strange and yet familiar with their spidery limbs dancing in the wind.

Lost in a brief moment in time, the crow-disturbed peace of the garden and the foreboding clouds on the horizon, Elizabeth’s head lolled to one side, not even noticing she had been ambushed and overpowered by sleep.

She sits in the garden outside the house, an easel in front of her and paints. The peonies announce the transcendence of spring into summer and the sun’s rays are warm and even penetrate the large parasol that shields her skin from being scorched. She makes good progress, the flowers do come out exceptionally well, perhaps even more beautiful than the ones blossoming in front of her.

To achieve only the very best results, she washes the pale pink she needed for the peonies out of her brush before using it again to add some more green to the scenery.

Dipping the brush into the small cup, she realises the water needs changing. Sighing, she rises from her chair- suddenly, someone jostles her and the contents of the cup spill across the front of her dress over her lap and abdomen.

“Excuse me, Miss Gwillim, I did not mean to-“

It is the Colonel who has bumped into her, his head buried in a book. He looks up from his reading and down to her. His eyes, widened in horror and shock stare at her dress.

She asks him what is wrong, not once, nor twice, repeatedly, but his tongue is tied and his face pales disconcertingly.

When she finally looks down her front, there is crimson where the mud-coloured water should be.

Blood. She is bleeding heavily, but there is no obvious wound. Yet the lower half of her torso down to her thighs is sticky with fresh, warm blood that starts to run down the full length of her white gown, a cruel flower in full bloom, spreading its petals across her, claiming her, devouring her.

She falls to the dark green grass in shock and watches herself fall from nearby. She looks at herself, lying on the ground, just lying there in shock and watching the blood colour more and more of her gown.

The Colonel still stands there, almost as pale as her bleeding self in the grass, petrified.

She realises he wears his regimentals, forest green, black and white complimenting his auburn hair
that burns in the sunlight of such a bright day.

He approaches her, his movements mechanical as an automaton’s and kneels down at her side. A large, quivering hand comes to rest on her cheek, turning her face to him, their eyes meet, both their faces more chiselled stone than features of muscle and flesh.

His hand is warm against her cold cheek. It is a comforting feeling until a droplet of warmth runs down the side of her cheek into her open hair that has draped itself around her head in a wild reinterpretation of a halo, more a crown of dark sunbeams than the demure little round of light on top of a saint’s head.

Eyes that have almost closed with weary exhaustion open once more in the same moment the Colonel pulls his hand away. His palm is wet with the same violent crimson as her dress. Horrified, he turns both his palms upwards to inspect them- they are both bloody.

The blood stains the volume he has abandoned in the grass, stains his boots, his uniform as he tries in vain to wipe his hands clean, drips from the sheath of the bayonet secured on his baldric, droplet by droplet- she cannot hold on any longer.

Tired eyes close slowly, still fixed on the man kneeling next to her-

“Miss Gwillim, are you all right?”

Elizabeth’s eyes flew open and found themselves staring into Colonel Simcoe’s face.

For one moment, she thought she was still dreaming until his voice called her back into reality. She blinked, slowly realising she must have fallen asleep when she noted the Colonel was not wearing his regimental green but his usual unassuming black civilian attire.

Her senses returning, she became aware of the late-winter air on her exposed face and the cold that had crept through her skirts and cloak and had settled in her bones.

“Colonel…?” she asked, still blinking against the brightness of the light and trying to comprehend what had just happened.

“You must have fallen asleep”, he commented the obvious, studying her face with interest. “I have come to escort you back to the house myself.”

He smiles somewhat insecurely and his voice sounds a little different, a little higher than usual. -Should she thank him for extending this gracious favour to her? There was no need for the haughtiness he kept displaying especially when in company. He didn’t need a high horse to look down on people. When would he come to realise 6’3” were already tall enough to do so without necessarily offending anyone?

“Is something the matter?” the Colonel added when he didn’t receive an answer right away. Elizabeth noticed how his voice darkened. Like a predator catching the faint scent of his prey, his eyes narrowed and scanned the surroundings while one hand quickly and mechanically reached for the air close to his left hip, expecting to find the bayonet or sabre he no longer carried.

“No”, she answered quickly while snippets of her dream still floated in front of her mind’s eye before waning into nothingness. Even though she could not remember the dream later, a peculiar feeling remained. It had been summer and the Colonel had been there, too, but what happened she couldn’t
Brushing the last drowsy remainders of sleep and dream aside, she tried to steer the conversation away from herself.

“How come you have returned early? We did not expect you back until Saturday.”

The Colonel ceased to study their surroundings and turned back to her.

“Since my business did not come to fruition as I had hoped, I saw no reason to stay longer than necessary”, he replied vaguely, obviously a little discontented with the outcome.

Why was he so keen on fighting again? She had thought about this several times in his absence.

Was he foolhardy or did his life not matter to him? It was sad to think someone would consider his own life not worth preserving and one could only tempt fate so many times. Uncle Samuel would be stricken with grief if his godson perished and even Aunt Margaret would shed a tear for the man she had observed growing from a fifteen-year-old boy into a man.

-And she didn’t want anything to happen to him either, she realised with the sensation of a torrid thread coiling up in her belly when she thought of him, his face once more as sunken and gaunt as on his arrival, smudged with dirt and blood, the ice of his eyes freezing forever on the nothingness of the battlefield they could no longer behold.

Shivering more from the image her vivid imagination tormented her with than the actual cold of a cloudy day in early March, she rose and stretched her cold, stiffened muscles.

“You are cold”, her companion observed. “We should make for the house right away.”

Silently, they walked side by side. Other gentlemen might have offered her their arm, but not the Colonel.

His cheeks slightly flushed from the cold, he busied his restless fingers with an item in the pocket of his coat.

It was odd to see him like this, almost more private even than when she had inadvertently surprised him in the morning while changing his wardrobe.

“Your family have already looked for you”, the Colonel remarked quite suddenly, leaning a little closer so she could understand him more clearly as the wind seemed to gain some force and started to whistle through the branches of the nearby trees.

Elizabeth couldn’t help but reply “but they are your family, too.” He always had been like a nephew to Uncle Samuel, just like Richard and Thomas Graves, his brother’s sons.

She, having come into the Graves’ family with her aunt’s marriage to Uncle Samuel, could not tell how or if the Colonel and Uncle Samuel had previously been close, but judging from her uncle’s joyous reaction whenever he had received a letter from the Colonies bearing his godson’s handwriting, he considered him as much a part of the family as he did her and if one were to establish an order of precedence, he would come first, having been acquainted with Uncle Samuel for much longer than she was.

“How with respect, Miss Gwillim, my family are dead.”

How could he say such a terrible thing without any obvious emotions in his voice? No hurt, no
sadness, no anger that those he considered his loved ones were gone from him?

“Don’t say such a thing. You have your godfather and my aunt who have gladly taken you into their home, just like me.”

“Your aunt is your relation by blood, your mother’s sister. I have none of the sort. My father, an only child, died at sea when I was seven, my brother left this world when I was twelve and my mother perished while I was away fighting in the colonies. You may understand now why I regard the name my eminent godfather lent to me at the baptismal font more as a baneful omen come true rather than associating it with the fond memory of the family he has doubtlessly become for you.”

Not quite understanding what he was aiming at, Elizabeth looked at him inquiringly.

“Graves”, he says simply, his eyes avoiding hers.

“Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe, do you know which name was given to me?”

Now it was his turn to look at her in confusion.

“My name is Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim. While your name was given to you in happier days with no intention it should ever bear the particular meaning you ascribe to it, my name was chosen in the honour of the mother and father I would never come to know. You know about my mother already”, she closed abruptly, remembering the night not long ago when she had told him about her part in her mother’s death and he had comforted her without batting an eyelid. How kind he could be when he wanted to.

They came to a halt within a short distance to the house.

“I apologise. Not long ago I vowed I would never force you to talk about-“

Visibly lost for words, he dropped his gaze and offered her his hand in a gesture of formal apology.

Elizabeth took it without hesitation; it was she who had decided to talk about her own unfortunate moniker after all.

“There is no need, Colonel. It was I who decided to tell you about my middle name after all.”

At her touch, his hand quivered a little as if he were prepared to pull it back, as if he hadn’t considered the possibility she would indeed take it at all. Their fingers closing around each other, the tense muscles in his hand and arm relaxed, almost as if his hand melted into hers like liquefied sealing wax.

Too late he realises they have been watched. A blue gown disappears from one of the first floor windows. Margaret Graves, ever-vigilant, has watched the scene.

He has only offered his hand to Miss Gwillim as an act of apology, there is no shame or compromising lewdness in that.

Not with Miss Gwillim, no. She is not- He does not-
-All he has done is offered her his hand and she has taken it, no more and no less.

He scolds himself for not having been more vigilant and blames it on the fact that his warrior’s instincts are no longer as practiced as they were mere months ago.

Lieutenant-Colonel Simcoe of the Queen’s Rangers (though his old rank presently remains with him) would never have allowed his men such a gross mistake as has happened to him just now.

A man as clumsy and thoughtless as himself would have received ten lashes with the cat o’ nine tails. At least, perhaps even more depending on the magnitude of his ire.

The deterioration of his abilities, of his nature almost (for he has always considered the soldier’s craft his natural calling) scares him somewhat. Is he slowly descending into the realms of fat, idle country squires and lesser nobility living out their days in the rolling hills and meadows of Devon?

He will go to London again, and again, and again if he has to. They must find something for him now that he has recovered to a certain degree. The leg still causes him pain at times and he has not yet attempted any longer journeys on horseback, but that can be arranged for.

Margaret Graves would certainly approve.

Suddenly, he finds his godfather’s wife quite easy to wipe off his mind when a small wooden object in his pocket reminds him of why he has initially tried to find Miss Gwillim.

Perhaps that’s a small success to weigh against being defeated by the not inconspicuous Mrs Graves—he has ranged the parklands and found her—though discovering the whereabouts of a (sleeping) lady is by no means the same as hunting for Robert Rogers at night in the woods of Long Island or keeping an eye on traitorous individuals in Setauket. Still, it feels good. He has found her, though the question whether Miss Gwillim or finding her is the reason for this rather strange feeling of ease around the normally tense and clenched area in his chest he cannot tell and does not contemplate, as in the same moment the Admiral appears in one of the windows and waves at them in a gesture of welcome.

Quickly, he lets go of her hand, even though he is certain his godfather’s eyes are no longer good enough to see him holding Miss Gwillim’s hand.

Why has he clung on to it for so long in the first place? And why did she not let go? It was to his knowledge not customary to hold on to someone’s hand for so long.

With a nod, he beckons Miss Gwillim to walk on in order to join her family inside. It has grown cold anyway, and there is something he would like to do before dinner.

Aunt Margaret already awaited them as they entered the entrance hall and by her concerned facial expression Elizabeth was quick to tell that she had not quite shaken the winter cold out of her bones yet.

Her aunt walked towards her, put her hands firmly on her shoulders and held her at arm’s length to inspect her.

“Elizabeth, are you unwell?”
Aunt Margaret’s right hand loosened her tight grip on her shoulder and came to rest first on her forehead, then her right cheek and lastly her left in a motherly ritual.

“No, you are not feverish”, Margaret Graves muttered more to herself than to her niece.

“You are not feeling ill?”

“No, why should I? I fell asleep in the Greek pavilion, that’s all. I don’t know why or how it happened, sleep must have overwhelmed me, but the Colonel found me, said you were looking for me already and walked me back to the house. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Is this truly what happened? Tell me the truth Elizabeth.” And in a lower voice she continued “If he has done anything-“, letting her eyes wander to the Colonel, whose face darkened immediately.

A pair of arctic blue eyes narrowed dangerously and fixated Aunt Margaret without even blinking and the twitch of a muscle that pulled his right upper lip upwards for an instant, which reminded Elizabeth of a growling hound about to bare his teeth, were testimony to his ardent reprobation of the accusations his godfather’s wife had hinted at. It cost him considerable restraint to remain a quiet bystander, so much was certain.

“Mrs Graves”, he pressed through clenched teeth, his voice a low hissing sound, “I am a gentleman; as you should know.”

The latter part of the sentence sounded more offended than anything else and slowly, his facial muscles started to relax again- if one could call it that for he never truly looked at ease, except, as Elizabeth had come to find out not long ago, when he slept.

“It was a silly thing to do and entirely my own fault. I am cold, that’s all.”

There was no need to illustrate her claim because her ice-cold hands spoke volumes and Aunt Margaret, satisfied with the evidence brought before her, thankfully ended her interrogation by sending her to her room to change into something dry and warm and defiantly returning the Colonel’s unblinking stare before breaking away and going back to her needlework.

In her room, Elizabeth granted herself a few minutes to slide beneath the covers in her shift when the maid was away fetching a few dresses for her to choose from. Rubbing her arms in order to warm them, she yet again wondered what change had befallen the Colonel of late.

London seemed to have suited him well. Surely a man like him could not be content forever in the confines of Hembury Fort House with only his elderly godfather, his wife and their ward for company. But then he was not one for merriment and jocose celebration either. Perhaps London had offered him a chance to pursue his intellectual interests. He was a poet after all and vibrant, buzzing London would likely have stirred his poetic senses and added a palette of new colours to his imagination.

Susan, her maid, returned with three dresses for her to pick from. Normally, she had a specific garment in mind she sent her maid to go and get for her but half-hiding beneath the coverlet of her bed and still not entirely warm, she had told Susan to pick a small selection for her from which she would choose one.

Diligent and quick-witted as Susan was, she had even sent for a hot chocolate to be brought to Elizabeth’s room even before Elizabeth herself had thought of taking a hot beverage to warm her from the inside.

Sipping the deliciously hot and sweet concoction that had arrived almost at the same time as Susan
had returned, she watched from her bed as Susan held the first dress up for her to inspect.

“I don’t think I like yellow right now. What else do you have for me?”

“Rose-coloured and burgundy?” She held up the two dresses one after the other.

“Burgundy”, Elizabeth decided and rose from the bed to let Susan dress her.

Having fixed her hair as good as was possible without doing it completely anew, she joined them in the drawing room, from where she heard the sound of chatter. Her aunt, uncle and the Colonel sat there, talking.

Or, to be more precise, Uncle Samuel and the Colonel talked; Aunt Margaret sat beside her husband on the elegant settee and eyed the Colonel with unwavering vigilance.

“Oh, Elizabeth”, her uncle greeted her with his usual broad smile on his face, “there you are. I have heard all about your adventure today.”

Without elaborating on the topic, as her uncle undoubtedly would have wished, Elizabeth took a seat on the other end of the settee occupied by the Colonel, not unlike the other night when he had fallen asleep with young Charlotte Braithwaite in his arms, to face her aunt and uncle.

She had barely sat down when the Colonel rose and ordered a servant to enter. The man carried two parcels which he handed to him.

“From London”, he commented, his eyes strangely a-glimmer and his mouth once again contorted into what he perhaps thought was a smile, as he handed the first parcel to his godfather who opened it instantly to find a heavy volume about the evolution of naval battle techniques from Antiquity to the present day beneath the layers of brown wrapping paper.

“My dear boy, you shouldn’t have… Thank you, John, what a splendid addition to my library.”

Visibly contented with Uncle Samuel’s reaction, who immediately began leafing through the book, he handed the second, considerably lighter, parcel to Aunt Margaret who, one eyebrow raised slightly higher than the other, was surprised to have been gifted some expensive writing paper bearing her initials.

“Because you wrote such friendly letters to me when I was away.”

Clearly, their discord in the entrance hall was not yet forgotten for the Colonel’s voice bore a trace of hurt pride and Aunt Margaret, though genuinely surprised and smiling pleasantly, never took her eyes off the Colonel.

“Miss Gwillim”, he said, his voice suddenly a half-octave higher than before, “for you”.

From the depths of his pockets he pulled a small wooden box and placed it in her hand.

It was a very distinctive kind of wooden box, as Elizabeth well knew. Why would he-?

Her fingers shaking, she opened the box to find a pair of pearl earrings in it, two pearls on each side, a small, round pearl with a big, teardrop-shaped specimen suspended underneath.

Elizabeth was speechless.

“So you like them?” he asked, and if she had previously thought his voice could not rise any higher, she had been mistaken.
“I happened to stumble across them and knowing you were in such distress due to the loss of your earring a few days previously, I thought you might like them.”

He gestured dismissively towards the earrings in her hand.

“They are beyond beautiful, I don’t know what to say” was all she manged say, but the glistening of his eyes told her the answer elated him.

His face belied his mouth: there was no way he had found these earrings by chance, they had been chosen with care and, it dawned on her, been his sole objective all the time. The small presents he had given to her aunt and uncle looked hastily bought by comparison, a sloppy alibi.

But why? What reason had he to gift her something, anything at all?

“I merely wanted to ease your anger”, he answered as if he had read her mind.

“Margaret, would you come with me to my study? I just remembered I wanted to show you an important, ah, document regarding the- the management of the household staff”, she heard her uncle say in a portentous tone, rising and pulling his wife up at the same time.

Aunt Margaret shot her husband a glance Elizabeth was quick to interpret as annoyance paired with a warning that she would play along for the moment, but that she would not put up with any more of his antics in the future before leaving the room and letting the door fall closed with a demonstrative loud sound illustrating her disapproval only too well.

“They’re pearls”, she heard herself say, once more alone with the Colonel, rather for being at loss what else she could say than anything else.

“Do you not like pearls? Have I-”

“No, I was just thinking of-“ his face studied hers with great interest, “it is nothing. Just superstition.”

He continued to look at her, this time disappointment and concern had taken the place of his soft smile.

“Some people say pearls represent tears. Especially brides avoid them, necklaces of pearls in particular, because it is said that every pearl stands for a tear shed in her marriage. But it is all just old wives’ tales,” she shrugged, cursing herself for having started with this topic.

His features, she observed, changed from concern and disappointment for having chosen a social blunder of a present to an unreadable, mysterious expression.

“Then let these pearls represent the tears that have been shed between us and wear them as monuments to new Happiness on the grave of Sadness.”

The Colonel reached for her left hand which still held the two precious objects in her palm and decidedly closed her fingers around them with his much larger hand.

His face bowed down to look her in the eyes and now considerably closer to her, they were mere inches away from each other, the warmth of his skin almost tangible on her cheek.

The moment passed as suddenly as it has come, for he straightened to his full height again and turned his head away to the window, probably thinking he would give the impression to have mistakenly spotted something unusual outside before turning back to her, this time standing at thrice the distance from before.
“I forgot, I must speak with the Admiral on a pressing matter”, he says abruptly, his tongue speaking against his will and he excuses himself and leaves her there, her thanks following him down the hallway to his room.

What has happened to him? “Monuments to new Happiness on the grave of Sadness”- what third-rate anthology of amateur poetry has he plucked that from?

Is this not what he had wanted to achieve, her smile, her incredulousness when she opened the box and the soft shimmer of colour on her cheeks when he had closed her hand around his present-

It is. It is exactly what he has striven for.

On the one hand, this thought causes him great pride, on the other, it does not. He should not have put her in such a compromising situation in front of her foster parents, what was he thinking, especially keeping Margaret Graves in mind, who had accused him of most abominable and condemnable deeds against her niece only shortly before.

The second inattentiveness in one day.

No wonder the army had no more use for him, with such dull senses he is not likely to survive long on any battlefield.

But is it really the army he cares about in this very moment? He can feel the outline of a folded piece of paper in his pocket and traces it through the fabric.

He is hesitant to answer this question to himself, fearing both possible answers.

Night-time came as sweet relief for Elizabeth, finally she had an opportunity to be for herself and think.

At dinner, in the presence of her aunt, whose sharp eyes kept alternating between the Colonel and herself, she had not even dared to look across the table to where he sat and instead limited her communication to pleasant talk with her uncle and tactically turning her head to the side so that the Colonel could, if he looked up from his food in the right moment, see which earrings she had donned.

The beautiful pearls, now back in their box, stood on her dressing table across the room, where she could see them from her bed.

The Colonel was an enigma, his ways unpredictable, and yet more recently, he had shown an entirely different side to him than the reserved and cuttingly rude man who had arrived at the house, barely able to walk on his own and emaciated so much his clothes did not fit him anymore.

To her own surprise, his absence had revealed to her that she had come to grow used to him and as far as she could tell, the feeling was mutual.
What feeling?

Before she could answer herself, sleep overwhelmed Elizabeth for the second time this day and denied her the answer to her question by shrouding her in its all-devouring void.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading! Some notes for today include:

Some quotes from the show.

All places named in this chapter exist in real life and Dunkeswell Abbey was a frequent motif of Elizabeth's work.

Covent Garden was in Georgian times London's most well-known red light district.

Follies are buildings that were built as garden ornaments. They could serve a practical purpose, but first and foremost, they were supposed to please the viewer's eye. I don't know if any such structure exists or existed at Hembury Fort House, but it would not be unlikely since follies were en vogue in the 18th century.

The superstition that pearls bring bad luck to brides or more generally symbolise tears is fairly common; another one would be that pearls must never be given as a present because that brings bad luck to the recipient. In what way this may or may not show again in the story remains to be seen...
A Dream Come True

Chapter Notes

A big thank you and a round of applause go to @tvsn for her amazing drawing of Elizabeth which coincided with this update. If you want to see her beautiful art, follow the link below:

https://simcoemics.tumblr.com/post/165756004809/this-is-a-quick-sketch-of-elizabeth-gwillim#notes

As always, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is blood all over her body, blood everywhere-

Elizabeth awoke, panting. It was just a dream, a dream, nothing more. The realisation that her vivid nightmare, despite its frightening life-likeness, was just the fabrication of her own mind calmed her somewhat.

Where blood had coloured her dress red seconds ago, her nightshirt was sticky with perspiration and clung unpleasantly to her body. Sighing, she rose and walked across the room to her drawer, yanking the nightshirt over her head as she walked, embracing the nightly chilliness on her bare skin that would on other nights have encouraged her to wrap herself even tighter in her bedclothes.

On a night like this, there was no need for a taper to be lit; the moon was bright and full, brighter and fuller even maybe than the sun on a ghastly day.

Quickly slipping into a clean, dry nightshirt, she poured some water into her washbasin and dipped the washcloth into it before wiping the small pearls of sweat that had accumulated on her forehead during her nightmare away.

Thus refreshed, she sat down on the edge of her bed. Sleep would not come easy for the coming hours and so she decided to pay the library a nightly visit once more. Maybe she would find some rest in the early hours of dawn in one of the comfortable armchairs, lulled back to sleep by a soothing story of days gone by or the wondrous descriptions of lands she had never been to.

Protected from the cold she slowly started to feel again by her dressing gown, she lighted her taper in the still smouldering embers of the fireplace and descended to the library.

On her way downstairs, she could not help but force herself to remember the dream, the nightmare. If she was not much mistaken, it was in some way related to the Colonel, or at least he had been present in it- and had she not dreamed something similar this afternoon when she had fallen asleep in the Greek Pavilion?

It was all so very confusing. Why did her uncle’s godson penetrate her dreams, and such an ungodly dream at that? And, even more interestingly, why did he give her expensive gifts? He had never before shown any signs of affection for her.

-What if it had grown?
Affections could, contrary what romantic novels propagated, grow over time. Not all people fell in love at the first sight—how could they? How could one love a person without knowing anything about them, their preferences and dislikes, dispositions and opinions? After all, a dashing fellow could hide a mean temper behind his handsome face and a porcelain-skinned lady with rosebud-lips and golden ringlets in abundance did not necessarily possess a witty, clever soul or vice versa.

There was so much more about a person to love than their outward beauty—how could people fall in love at first sight?

She would hate to have to accuse herself one day of such shallow, fleeting love, if it could be called that.

But then, Elizabeth forced herself to remember the names of boys she and Mary Anne had sometimes, in younger years, confidentially whispered into each other’s ears, giggling secretively—had she ever truly been in love? Perhaps she had, but she would not have defined love then as she did now.

Opinions changed as age progressed; she would never have gone so far as to consider herself wise with age or a philosopher, yet it was evident she was not the young girl she had been at fourteen, which led her to a question almost as important as the first:

If the Colonel’s affection for her had grown, be it in a romantic sense (she barely dared to even let this thought cross her mind) or as a sister, she added quickly, for they were both godchildren to the Graves’, had hers, too?

Could they have?

They had, she found, almost embarrassed at the thought of it.

When he had been away, she had missed him. Not that she had pined for him, waiting every day at the gate for his return like the love-struck maidens in song and story, but she had caught herself time and again glancing over the table during mealtimes to his vacated seat, half-expecting to find him sitting there, or by her side on her walks.

So was it simply that she had grown used to him?

No, there was more; she liked his company.

When she remembered the embrace he had given her on the night of his birthday, trying to comfort her, Elizabeth shuddered despite the temperature in the house being more agreeable at night it had been on some merciless nights in mid-winter, a shudder that tingled down her spine and left a curious warmth behind within her.

And then she remembered the man she had heard he was. Cold, brutal, almost a Shakespearian villain, a man with little regard for anything or anybody.

She knew he could be many things, among them downright rude, cold and distanced, but an evil man some likened to some sort of demon?

He was no demon.

He was human, perhaps more human than even he himself knew or allowed to show.

Having heard the many attributes others had called him, Elizabeth wondered if part of the enigma that was John Graves Simcoe was not very simply explained by the fact that at one point, the Colonel had given up, defeated and let people call him things and had decided to adapt himself to the
reputation he had been assigned, rather than gone to great lengths to prove it wrong.

In the library, she lit some lights with her nightlight and pushed one of the armchairs closer to the gleaming embers of the fireplace. In the absence of a servant, she put two more logs into the fireplace, hoping the fire would restart and provide her with some light and warmth.

Thus prepared, Elizabeth inspected the non-naval section, in which among more many scientific publications about botany, astronomy, law and even medicine (her uncle was interested in almost everything and had often lectured her in younger years how a healthy interest in as many things as possible shaped not only the character, but also the mind) some novels were kept.

Tonight, she needed something to distract herself with, not some Latin treatise on the properties of electricity.

_Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World_, came into her view and she took the third volume with her to the fireside. Having read the novel several times, she was already familiar with its content- but this was exactly what she had been looking for. No suspense, no surprises, only a story she could enjoy and lose herself in for the remainder of the night.

Elizabeth wanted to delve deeply into the trials and tribulations of Evelina and (this was the reason why she had picked the third volume over the other two) read how at last true love and friendship would win over falseness and deceit when Evelina and Lord Orville eventually would reunite and be happy.

Would she ever find a Lord Orville who would love her for what she was? In the story, Orville loved Evelina despite her lack of social standing, money and the social blunders she committed regularly.

Could the contrary happen, too? That one day, a gentleman would fall in love with her and love her for what she was, not for what she owned?

Aunt Margaret always cautioned her not to marry in order to stay in charge of her fortune for life, rather than to give it up through marriage to a husband. Was it worth it, the money, but being forever alone?

No, she would not be alone, she had her friends and why should a woman’s life be restricted to marrying, fulfilled by a ring on her finger and a battalion of children a-dangling on her skirts?

She would be twenty in a few months. No longer was she a girl under her aunt’s governance and tutelage, she was a young woman now, with a mind of her own.

What did she want from life, blessed with riches, an, though not beautiful in the classical sense, agreeable enough face, influential connections and a good education?

Elizabeth didn’t know. Somehow, with this realisation, life had come to a watershed for her: she could naturally not return to the innocent, ignorant pleasures of childhood she had left behind a long time ago, yet she was not a respected or respectable woman either for at her age, although nobody would threaten to send her to bed without dinner for having behaved improperly anymore, in the company of married women, she was treated like an outsider to some exclusive secret only a select few had knowledge of.

In limbo between both states, she could, would have to decide who she wanted to be. It was terrifying to think that she was in charge of her own future, that, despite her aunt’s and uncle’s opinions on the matter, she would have to make a choice for herself without having any experiences to draw on.
And on the other hand, it felt exciting to have the freedom to choose. Other girls, no women, her age did not have the luxury of choice she had. They were forced to marry or to work, none of which she would ever have to do.

She was free, and yet she was not and then again, she was.

Maybe, Elizabeth thought, this was part of her predicament. Being free also meant she was free in her errors, what if she would make all the wrong choices?

At least her life would not be decided tonight, so why should she bother herself with several days’ worth of worries within one night? A night troubled by a gruesome nightmare even.

Shuddering at the memory of her skirts soaked in blood and the Colonel (why had he been in her dream?) standing over her, she turned her attention to the book.

Knowing already how Evelina’s romantic odyssey would end, she embraced the ballrooms of Miss Evelina Anville and Lord Orville to drown the images of blood and death in the vibrant colours of women in splendorous evening attire, glittering jewels and the feeling of a reverent kiss on the back of the hand by a dashing gentleman.

The book, Elizabeth mused, had a good ending with Evelina becoming the wife of Lord Orville and the two living happily ever after.

Whatever she would decide to do one day and whatever the last chapter of her story would one day read in hopefully many years to come (it was curious how stories always tended to end at the wedding, not at the grave, as they did in real life), for the moment it was enough to be happy for Evelina.

Sighing, he paces through the room like a restless animal in a cage. The small desk beneath the window is a-gleam with the second candle for this night.

His godfather, once he finds out in what extravagant manner he raids his candle supplies, is likely to scold him, but tonight, he does not care.

He wants to be happy and from time to time, he is- yet there is also another feeling inside him, one he reluctantly likens to bashfulness, and an uncertain, undying ache in his intestines he cannot explain.

Miss Gwillim’s face dances before his eyes. Her expression of surprise and incredulousness when he had given her his present (and of course, it hasn’t escaped him she had worn them to dinner).

It is time for him to show some respect and honesty to himself: he is not impartial to her.

In fact, it was she who initiated their acquaintance, who treated him with respectful distance and quiet understanding when others would have insulted, scoffed or spit at him.

-She doesn’t know about America, a deceitful voice in his brain taunts him.

Would she want to be with a man they called a beast, a demon, a monster?

Miss Gwillim deserves better. She is kind, patient, good-hearted and spirited while he struggles to characterise himself in any other words than those he has heard others say about him and none of
these words that have etched themselves into his brain paint a flattering picture of him.

He is violent, brutal, fear-inspiring, murderous, angry, arrogant, dangerous, vicious, repugnant.

What else is he? A poet, he comes to think, but quickly dismisses the thought. Having read his own scribblings, he can hardly allow himself to think of his own name in the same instant as those of Shakespeare, Milton or even a modern Goethe.

A failed poet then, perhaps. Violent, brutal, fear-inspiring, murderous, angry, arrogant, dangerous, vicious, repugnant and a failed poet.

Anything else?

Sad.

He is sad.

It has taken him months to acknowledge this, but the war has left scars on his soul as well as his body.

Somehow, he finds himself in a storm at sea, tossing his emotions left and right and threatening to drown him from within while he attempts to maintain his usual calm countenance.

The war calls him, he needs to fight again, to have a purpose- but the sound of thundering cannons and men crying out in excruciating pain follow him to sleep and even perturb him in broad daylight.

And then, there is something, no, somebody else. It is Her.

Miss Gwillim, he reluctantly forces his lips to whisper lowly, oddly ashamed her name passes his lips without there being any obvious reason (such as to greet her) for it.

From all he can gather, she does not dislike him, but he is wary of relying on his observations. Far too deep has a woman in the past struck a blow to his heart to allow him to quickly embark on a new fancy, likely only a product of his bored subconscious that yearns for night-marches and ambushes and seeks for diversion in everything it can find.

Yet is not the fact that he thinks about his heart in connection to Her enough to prove he is- the verb does not come easily to his mind, in love with her?

His face buried in his hands, he sits down on the edge of the bed. It is so complicated, too complicated for his taste.

She is kind to him, yes, but that could all be common curtesy.

Once upon a time, he prided himself with being able to spot a lie on a man’s face, to read his emotions. What there is to read on Miss Gwillim’s face, he cannot tell. Admittedly, he is always quite distracted by her eyes when she talks to him and thus rather averts her gaze than to alarm her with his unblinking stare he has in the past been either mocked or feared for.

Writing. Writing might help to order his thoughts. Not on the paper, where line after line tends to flow freely, no, in the mind that, drained of the emotional swamp, shall finally be able to face the realities of fact once more.

Life’s a passing travesty,
A masquerade for all to see,

In which we all partake and dance,

Men and women take their chance,

Disguised in what flesh they once received,

From their Lord and Maker- some cruelly deceived,

In shape and form and shapeless face-

Their minds disguised beneath nature’s ill grace.

Although my features might not please,

(Red hair is seldomly beheld with ease,)

Two eyes that oft intimidate,

A sullen mouth by twist of fate,

A crooked nose and pallid skin

Do not reveal the Man Within.

They call me brute and Machiavell,

But what’s beneath they cannot tell,

The soldier in his proud green frock,

Quick with both bayonet and his flintlock,

Doth love like every other man-

Perhaps even more than other men can.

The masks we are provided ne’er reflect who we are,

The soldier a poet, the dark-haired lady a brightly shining star-

Life is a masquerade that we attend until death,

Say, will you tear off my mask, beloved Elizabeth?

He would tear the page out and burn it. It was not particularly good and the liberties he had taken with regard to Miss Gwillim-
Telling himself that crossing out the word *beloved* made the feelings this sentence implied null and void (he had only added it anyway to make the last line sound good with regards to poetical conventions), he shuts his small leather-bound notebook and stares out of the window into the darkness.

Not even this dull pastime makes him tired and wanting for his bed- in fact, he feels more alive in this very night than he has in a long time.

He has tried to sleep, but lying wide awake in bed on top of the covers, ready to get up again had not helped- on the contrary, it had only brought America to the fore of his mind again and when the pattern on the canopy faintly illuminated by moonlight had changed into bloody, exhilarating, terrifying, familiar sceneries he had come to accept as the demons that haunted him whenever he needed them least (funny how even a demon can be haunted by his fellow creatures) he had ended his feeble attempt and decided to pass the time in other ways instead.

And so, he had risen, not knowing how to spend the night exactly, or how to busy himself, for he finds himself slow and inattentive and has to concentrate heavily while writing, which is new to him.

Normally, the words spill out of him onto the page, things he leaves unsaid in the company of others, things nobody knows about him, but today, they don’t come as easily and in some cases, they don’t come at all.

He wants to read. A story that is not his own may just divert him enough to overpower his senses in a surprise ambush and lull him to sleep.

The library is his obvious choice. Although he keeps a number of books in his own room, he feels the need to read something else, something new. Even one of these cheap fashionable novels (which he is certain his godfather secretly enjoys, but does not necessarily keep on display) would do.

A soft glimmer of light escaping from underneath the heavy door confuses him. Perhaps the Admiral is still awake. As far as he remembers, his godfather has never been an excessive night-worker, preferring to get his business done by day, but whether this had changed in the years of his absence he cannot tell- and neither can he tell if it is Margaret Graves or, God help him, Miss Gwillim.

After all, for all that he knows, she too sometimes frequents the library at night.

Careful, with the wary and alert senses of a warrior, he opens the door a minuscule crack wide.

Someone, likely hidden behind the back of the tall armchair, has rekindled the fire.

He opens the door a little wider.

Without any warning, a deceitful groan escapes the hinges and announces him to the person inside.

Hiding is not an option, because there are no hideouts anywhere close to him and besides, the form of a tall man with curly red hair that is even visible in the moonlight speeding down the corridor would not point towards some never previously encountered ghost or spirit but directly to the sole inhabitant of Hembury Fort House fitting this description.

Somewhat embarrassed, he enters, trying to hide the fact that he has stood at the door for a little too long and decides it will be best to pretend he has never loitered in the door, trying to discern who is inside.

The person by the fireside emerges from behind the armchair, her face as surprised as his.
His worst fear has come true: it is Miss Gwillim, who will now doubtlessly think he has meant to spy on her.

He is no spy. He despises spies.

“What brings you here in the middle of the night, Colonel?” she asks.

“I think I could ask you the same question”, he retorts and instantly scolds himself for his rash and likely rude answer.

Elizabeth had instinctively jumped to her feet at the sound of the door creaking and instantly regretted her decision. The cool night air crept up her feet to her legs and gradually all over the rest of her body. No longer heated by the hellish fires of a bad dream, the house around her has grown cold.

In her hurry, she had forgone putting on her slippers and stood bare-footed in front of her surprise visitor.

He too did not look comfortable, but for very different reasons. After the afternoon’s surprise and his sudden escape and now meeting again under such coincidental circumstances, he must be as perplexed as she.

“I think I could ask you the same question”, he answered her surprised question but added quickly, “I hope you are well?”

Intrigued, she remarked upon the change in his tone, how his voice had risen almost an entire octave on the last syllable and how his left index finger restlessly drummed against his thigh.

“Thank you, I had a bad dream, that’s all.”

She tried to smile the gruesome image away and with it the irony of the situation that may have sprung directly from the pages of a new Drury Lane play; after all, the Colonel, despite his own relative helplessness in her dream, had played a not inconsiderable part in it.

Or rather, an image of him had, the real Colonel Simcoe, the man of flesh and blood standing before her, was not to blame for her vivid imagination.

“Oh”, his brows knitted with concern, “then may I enquire if you feel better? Is there anything you need?”

“Nothing, I am fine.”

A pair of curiously blue eyes, silver in the moonlight rested unblinkingly on her face as if hungry to study her features at her every word and did so slightly longer than what would have been perceived as polite.

“You are cold.”

He looked at her bare feet.

“By all means sit, it was not my intention to make you rise. May I?”

The Colonel’s right hand gestured to the second armchair and upon her nod, pulled it closer to the
fireside- and closer to her.

He pushes the armchair not opposite to hers, but close. Not directly next to hers, but at a strategic angle from which he can see her face- and she his.

Conventional field tactics will not help him much, he realises, not on this field.

He realises he has not picked a book for himself to read. Getting up and finding himself an alibi volume would certainly look odd, now that he is already seated. He lets his eyes wander and spots the volume in Miss Gwillim’s lap. Silently thanking the heavens for his rescue, he seizes the opportunity to begin a conversation:

“What are you reading, if I may be permitted the curiosity?”

“Evelina. I don’t think you know it.”

“Indeed, I do not- tell me, is it any good?”

“It is the story of a young woman of humble means who falls in love with a lord, told through letters. In the end, they are happy and marry, yet their way to the altar is lined with treacherous surprises, but, love prevails.”

She smiles at him, somewhat insecure as far as he can tell, probably thinking the story is not of his liking and in wait for the dismissive answer she expects him to give.

“But is it any good? Do you like it?”

“I do.”

To her infinite surprise, he did not seem put off by the romantic nature of the novel. Would she have had to hazard a guess, she would have considered him a reader of Gibbon’s The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, or Walpole’s Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third, both works closely associated with politics and military leaders- and perhaps the odd volume of ancient poetry, for inspirational purposes.

Nodding, not knowing what to say, she tried to concentrate on the pages but the irksome numbness in her toes kept her from thoroughly enjoying her read.

Now that the Colonel was here with her, she did not allow herself to break protocol by pulling her feet up onto the seat and warming them with her body and hoped against hope that at some point eventually the feeling would dissipate in her distractedness from reality by purposefully losing herself in Evelina’s story.

“You are still cold”, a voice broke through the lines written by Evelina to Reverend Mr Villars and before she could comprehend what was happening around her, a tall figure stood next to her.

Blinking against the darkness she had grown somewhat unused to due to the relatively bright reflection of the firelight on the cream-coloured pages, Elizabeth saw that the Colonel had risen from
his chair and was offering her the banyan he had been wearing over his shirt, stockings and breeches.

“I can’t possibly accept. You must mind your own health, and it is quite cold.”

“Nonsense”, he almost beamed, measured against his usually restricted range of facial expressions
and spread the garment like a blanket over her.

Her smile is all he has striven for. It is chilly, but he does not mind the cold that starts to penetrate his
shirt. He has had worse and in addition to this, the bubbling feeling that starts to build up in his
abdomen warms him from the inside out.

While he still contemplates how many glasses of his godfather’s good sherry he has had after his less
than graceful exit from the sitting room that could explain such a feeling, he notices how Miss
Gwillim eases; tense shoulders relax against the upholstered back of her armchair and her cold feet
slip swiftly beneath his banyan and close to her body.

Mirroring her, he too abandons his habitual soldierly bolt upright posture and tries to sit at ease as he
has seen lifelong civilians do.

His banyan, her blanket, was still warm when he enwrapped her in it and instantly worked wonders
on her cold limbs.

There was something else about the unlikely blanket she had received she could not name; this
feeling however, was one of utter comfortableness.

Trying to keep focussed on the book, her senses betrayed her and turned to the colour of the fabric
(mulberry with a few tiny tell-tale ink smudges on the cuffs and a few carless blots here and there)
and its omnipresent scent she couldn’t help but notice.

It reminded her of a forest after heavy rain, a slight hint of the scented soap the laundresses use, ink,
paper and another component that is unrecognisable to her, yet not unpleasant at all.

Elizabeth felt the urge to put it on properly, but caught herself in time.


Sighing, she closed the book, a finger between the pages marking for the moment where she had
exited the story and glanced at the Colonel.

He watched the flames, or at least pretended to; for his eyes darted left and right in short intervals
(especially to the left, she remarked) and thus it was no wonder he caught her studying his face in no
time.

Caught, she lowered her eyes, which he misinterpreted as tiredness.

“Are you tired? Do you wish me to read to you?”

His voice sounds insecure, as if he suspects her to say no in the cruelest fashion.

On the contrary, the idea, as odd and unexpected as his company, intrigues her.
“Why not? We could take turns. You read one letter, I read the next.”

Hands outstretched, she handed him the book, leant back, and closed her eyes. It was not an act of instant relaxation (which, she had to admit to herself, came quickly at the sound of his voice reading to her), but insecurity, for she was uncertain where else but the Colonel to look to. She did not want to stare, not necessarily because every small child knew staring was rude, but because it felt wrong, odd—yet it was her desire to do so.

The first letter is read and Miss Gwillim’s eyes open, her hands ready to receive the book in order to read the next.

As their fingers touch for the fraction of a second when the volume passes to her, he shivers, and it is not the cold.

It was the Colonel’s time to read once more and Elizabeth slowly begun to feel somewhat sleepy. Originally, readying herself for some more hours of sleep had been her objective, but in her present company, she had no desire to fall asleep anytime soon.

Despite all her efforts however, her mind slipped her control for a few moments and eyes formerly closed to avoid staring closed in earnest.

It was not a state of sleep or dream, it was a state best described as limbo, her mind fixed onto the Colonel’s voice and creating an imaginary scenery for the words he read her head, which swallowed Elizabeth whole.

“… I revere you. I esteem and admire you above all human beings. You are the friend to whom my soul is attached as to its better half. You are the most amiable, the most perfect of women. And you are dearer to me than language has the power of telling.“

Lord Orville, tall, auburn-haired and with pleading eyes of a magnificent blue hue knelt before her.

“Lord Orville”, she breathed and then, finding the name sounded wrong on her lips—

She must have given her imagination too much room to work its devious magic. Scolding herself, her eyelids fluttered and reopened.

As she did so, the Colonel fell silent.

“You must wish to return to your room. I shall not keep you.”

He rose, quickly slamming the book shut without marking the page.

“No”, she answered quickly, jumping to her feet a second time, “I am quite comfortable here.”
Quite was the word usually incorporated in speech to lessen the magnitude of one’s words. In all honesty, quite did not nearly express her feelings as she handed him his banyan simply to busy her hands and watched with eyes she would later come to describe as hungry as he put it back on in one elegant movement.

Still close, she observed the moonlight dance on his hair and throw intriguing shadows on his face.

Such intriguing features, eyes that could freeze and set ablaze within seconds, depending on his mood, the sensual line of his mouth and that was only his appearance. His kindness that manifested either in schoolboy-ish bashfulness or the curiously out of place generosity of an emperor, his silent understanding and gentlemanly (well, at least as far as she was concerned) behaviour-

A bolt of electricity rushed through her veins, realising she could hear his heart beat, so close were they.

At this level of proximity, Elizabeth realised the indescribable scent she had come to notice in his robe was his own. For some reason, this realisation only accelerated her own heartbeat, especially when she noted they had been standing too close for far too long.

His head slightly bowed down to her, their eyes locked, unblinking and the feeling of electricity scorching her insides rose from the short pang of a singular bolt to a persistent sensation of gradually rising intensity.

Overcome by a powerful wave that weakened her knees with a mixture of emotions she had never encountered before, Elizabeth took a deep breath.

What would, what could happen in this very moment would be her doing, in part at least and matched what she knew should not be done, at least according to the strict boundaries of etiquette she had been raised in.

But now, nothing of this mattered anymore, at least for the time being before the morning would break through the windows and wake the household.

Every fibre of her being tingled with excitement and nervousness, urging her mind to let instinct take over, to do what her brain forbade her to even think about.

An inner force that needed no explaining and that could not be fooled by her conscious mind, reason or ashamed thoughts took hold of her body when she drew a step closer to him, her neck craning upwards.

Her lips brushed his, gingerly, testing, almost innocently and lingered for the fraction of a moment, savouring the feeling of the soft, gentle pressure of his lips against hers.

It felt like comets colliding, two impossible celestial bodies breaking away from their age-old path due to a force beyond their control-

With the sudden, burning realisation what she had done, she pulled away, her eyes fixed on John Simcoe’s face.

She had expected him to be cold and dismissive, knowing he was, despite his recent change in behaviour, not usually fond of close human proximity, a boundary she had doubtlessly overstepped, but when she studied his face, there was nothing of the sort visible in his features.

Why had she been so rash and reckless?
His eyes remained closed for a few seconds before he opened them again slowly, as if he had just woken from deep slumber.

Blue eyes gazed at her from beneath pale eyelashes. His eyes told her more than his mouth ever had and for one moment, it seemed as if the words contained in their blue depths wanted to pour out of his mouth, like ice melting, but instead of talking, the unimaginable happened.

A ragged breath escapes him, testimony to his surprise. Never would he have thought—dared to think—she might like him, too.

Like?

Is this what liking someone is like?

He is astonished at the look she gives him—does she expect him to be angry because she, at all times mindful of rules and propriety, has overstepped a mark some might call common decency? He has no use for society’s silly little rules anyway. To hell with all that—

And then he realises with his heart shaking from a jolt of unbridled elation that everything and everybody else can go to hell as long as her face is before him and slowly wraps his arm around the small of her back to bring her close to him, as close as close can be. Every bit of air between them is unnecessary he finds, knowing the closer she is to him the more the doubts that this is just a fanciful dream that will wither in the morning will subside.

She is real, and she has kissed him—now he shall kiss her, affirm her in her bold guess and hopefully do the same to her senses her testing brush of lips has done to him.

With great care his lips part hers and he is surprised at her response; while they are both careful and still somewhat insecure, their bodies yet unaccustomed to one another, he is certain he has never felt the same before.

All memories of women he has kissed and how he has kissed them fade from his mind, their names, faces washed away by a new tide, and he is John again, a shy boy of fifteen with lanky limbs reading Catullus’ *Carmina* for the first time with the aid of a Latin dictionary, mindful not to be caught by his classmates and agitated by the sensual pleasures the ancient roman’s words promised and that he had no knowledge of.

It is almost the same now; Elizabeth’s lips promise so much more than he has ever felt— it is no empty kiss that comes as the fulfilment of an obligation of sorts, either bound by promise or by money, it is passion, no, it goes beyond that, it is love.

He loves her.

He loves her, and he will not stop kissing her until the sun rises. For now, it is just the two of them, the moon and the wind rustling lowly through the curtains of some window in the corridor.

He wants to tell her all this and more, confess his sins to her, speak the words no human being living or dead has ever heard, but he finds himself conflicted if he should tell her everything that is on his mind and articulate volumes worth of his love in poetry and prose to give her a rough understanding of what he feels, which he fears cannot be expressed satisfactorily in words, or if he should simply continue to kiss her.
Opting for the latter, he feels how a tender hand comes to rest on his cheek, slowly tracing his jawline and exploring new territory with great curiosity. His decision was right. There would be time enough for everything else later, tomorrow, next week, on Judgement Day.

-I love her.

Chapter End Notes

Phew. That was quite hard to write. Let me know if you enjoyed it, I find romance much more difficult to write than the usual suffering, misery and sadness you all bravely endured while reading this story so far, so I am always glad to receive constructive criticism and suggestions!

Now, the notes:

"Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World" was written by Fanny Burney and first published in three volumes in 1778, first anonymously, but her authorship was soon revealed. In essence, the story can be summed up by what Elizabeth said in the story. There is also an interlude in London, some inferior relations, secrets and tons of social blunders. Of course, all ends well and Evelina and Orville live happily ever after. The quote is from the letter in which Evelina tells her quasi-father Reverend Villars of her engagement to Orville.

"Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third" by Horace Walpole was published in 1768 and is one of the first works in defence of Richard III, England's notorious archvillain-king popularised by Shakespeare.

"The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" by Edward Gibbon was published in six volumes from 1776 to 1789. It is until this day quite well-known as a landmark in the historical development of History as a scholarly discipline, especially because of Gibbon's fairly novel approach of using primary sources and his attempt at objectivity.
They did not stop kissing for a long time. Or perhaps it had only been seconds, Elizabeth didn’t know, but time had dragged on so sweetly it could have been years and she would not have cared.

She didn’t want to let go, separate their lips or the close embrace he held her in and that she tried to mirror with her much shorter arms around his much more sizeable body; she wanted to continue feeling his warmth on her skin that stirred such a strange feeling in her, one of both adventure and comforting homeliness- yes, her feelings for the Colonel had grown, much more so than she would have thought or ever admitted to herself previously.

At last, breathing demanded them to part from each other and panting, Elizabeth’s eyes found the Colonel’s. She wanted to say something but did not find the words to express what she felt, this confusing mixture of joy, anxiousness, insecurity and boldness.

All she knew was she wanted to be close to him.

Her life of privilege, of fineries and social engagements paled beside the simple, and yet so much more complex joy of two pairs of lips, tongues, faces meeting in this particular manner.

To her confusion, he withdrew from her embrace.

“We ought not- We should not-“

“I know. And yet, I wish… I was in your embrace once more.”

Her words of a hitherto unknown boldness that startles herself ignite a strange fire in his eyes. It is not a flame about to devour and scorch to the ground, it is the soft fire in a fireplace in winter one awaits so dearly when coming home from the snow outside.

“Like so?” he asked, suddenly insecure that his intuition has been conquered by thought and somewhat clumsily wrapped his arms around her back once more.

She felt his strong, muscular body against her skin and relished in the feeling of his arms holding her close.

It feels good, holding her, while she tries her best to encompass him in her embrace, better than anything he has done before and yet so new and odd.
It was exciting, somewhat terrifying and yet so natural he could barely describe it.

He feels as if the shape of her body compliments his in all aspects, as if she is the missing piece reassembling his shattered soul, both physically and spiritually for as long as she is close to him.

He closes his eyes as he holds her tight, his face half-covered by her hair that falls to her waist in soft waves, the remnants of the opulent coiffure she had worn in the day.

When has he last held someone in such a manner? When has he last offered a person so much of himself, let down his guard for someone to enter his heart?

While this is all true, he corrects himself instantly: When has last someone, a fellow human being offered so much of themselves to him? When has last someone considered him worthy of affection?

It is then he realises how much he has longed for a moment such as this.

Having been alone for the entirety of his voyage to England, forced to lie still for several weeks in a cabin that reeked of death and sickness, he had had a great deal of time to think and to feel.

Every emotion he had been able to suppress while diverted by battles, managing his troops and catching spies, has finally come to the fore and he realises he is alone.

Now that he can feel Elizabeth close to him, he does no longer feel so. In this very instant, he is, for the first time in longer than he will ever admit to, not alone.

Not being alone is the most beautiful feeling he can imagine- especially because this feeling has come to him in its rarest and most precious form- love.

Love for the woman who has never treated him with disdain, whose poetry and drawing he unfolds every other hour to marvel at the image of him with the sleeping child, how she sees him, wondering if he can ever be the man in the drawing- for her.

Is this love?

A kiss at night in the library, both parties in an indecent state of dishabille? It sounds more like the plot of one of these French novels with very *French* themes, doesn’t it?

-Too good to be true, almost, and a little bit to be ashamed of, as well.

This is for certain nothing one can speak of in company once the sun has risen; all that has happened must stay hidden in the folds of night’s all-encompassing cloak.

Yes, it is love.

Never has he felt like this before- she cares for him, not because he pays her or because she uses him to further her own agenda; though what exactly she sees in him beyond the coloured pencil drawing, he cannot tell.

He is not the gentleman a lady like her should be courted by, he is neither handsome in the eyes of society nor has he any profitable talents or business, or future indeed and though his fortune is respectable, it is insignificant to hers according to the hearsay he has overheard at the ball, uttered by eager, matronly mammas into the ears of their sons, urging them to dance with Miss Gwillim, as if a single dance could win anyone’s heart.

-But can a single kiss?
Perhaps not, but they are at their third embrace, he keeps count of that, which indicates Miss Gwillim does not oppose furthering their closer, more personal acquaintance- but enough thought. Why is he thinking so much about holding her when she is in his arms right now?

He returns to the moment, forgetting everything else around them.

For a long time, Elizabeth relished in the warmth of John Simcoe’s body against her own. It was a curious thing- compared to him, she was almost tiny. Truth be told, she had never been tall, on the contrary- had it not been for her fortune and her artistic talent, people would certainly have mocked her and in younger years, the words “imp” and “faerie” had fallen often enough with regard to her.

While especially as a child, she had wished to be taller, in this moment, she approved of the difference in their height and considered her place, her head resting against his chest, most agreeable.

What curious things she noticed- as an artist, she had come to learn it’s not always the big picture, but the little details that effectively sell the tale. Just like the addition of a shadow, some clouds or indication of movement in the breeze-flowing grass could make a landscape come to life, it was the little details of this moment she was to remember for eternity.

The feeling of his hands, still calloused from years of fighting, yet oddly gentle on her back, fingers spread as if he wanted to take hold of as much of her as possible to hold on to this moment, the muscularity of his arms that even long sickness had not been able to weaken into obscurity pressing against her and the somewhat accelerated heaving and lowering of his chest.

Through his shirt, she was certain she could feel and see tendrils of copper hair, a little darker than his unruly mane.

Blushing at the thought that this particular observation (and the sudden curiosity that had befallen her with it), she let go.

There was something oddly forbidden about it all, something she could not quite describe. Elizabeth was far from naïve, she knew the excitement and longing setting her insides ablaze had been stirred by her tall, blue-eyed counterpart and yet, she felt suddenly insecure, being a novice to the intensity of what she felt and the thoughts that accompanied it.

All her knowledge in matters of love, chaste and not-quite-so-chaste, were rooted in literature and art aside from some hushed conversations she had overheard here and there in the ladies’ sitting rooms at other houses: of course she had seen artworks depicting satyrs and nymphs or, less illicit, lovers devouring each other with fiery eyes, but to imagine-

Maybe it was her upbringing that did not encourage any behaviour between man and woman that was deemed unbecoming, maybe it was her own nervousness, maybe it was both; and from all she could tell from his face, from which the glacial mask had molten to reveal a surprisingly insecure, yet passionate and caring man underneath, he was just as nervous as she.

“Let us go to bed”, she proposed, scolding herself in the next moment how indecently ambiguous that must have sounded and added quickly, “to our rooms, I mean, before the morning comes and someone sees us.”

He nodded, a little sad and perhaps disenchanted.
In mutual silence, he walked her to her room. Elizabeth was astonished how he treaded the stairs and partially loose, creaky floorboards without making a sound, which was astonishing for someone of his build. At the door, the moment of parting came.

“Goodnight, Colonel”, she breathed with a shy smile on her lips, not knowing what else to say.

“Please. You may call me by my Christian name, if you fancy it.”

Even in the half-darkness that indicated dawn was nigh she could see the contractions of his jaw and the widened stare of his eyes that were testimony of his insecurity, as if he was not accustomed to have people call him by the name he had received at the baptismal font.

“All if you call me Elizabeth, John”, she answered. It was as sad as it was almost endearing to watch his face assume an incredulous look, somewhere between someone not believing good fortune has come their way and hurt, pain even. Why these emotions stirred in him when all she had done was use the name he had had thirty years to use and become accustomed to, she could not tell. It appeared he had not let anybody venture close enough to him to use his Christian name in a long time.

What a sad thought, to lead a solitary existence, all alone in a crowd for years. This realisation made her want to embrace him once more (coupled with a less noble yearning that deemed any excuse to seek the Colonel –John’s- proximity valid and good).

“But we can only call each other that in private”, she added sternly, thinking of her aunt and the latter’s suspicions when John had found her alone in the garden. The thought that her aunt could jump to hasty conclusions and act upon them formed a lump in Elizabeth’s throat.

“Of course. Mrs Graves is not particularly fond of me and rather protective of you”, he smiled mirthlessly, wryly, “she would never let the beast-”

“You are no beast and I no prisoner in your castle. As for my aunt, neither of us should upset her. I cannot say why she dislikes you, but I am greatly indebted to her for all the good things she has done to me.”

He nodded, prompting her to continue:

“But I like you.”

He can tell his eyes must have lit up like a torch in the night and scolds himself for being such a fool, staring at her like a mindless buffoon.

Elizabeth looks divine even in the crepuscular corridor in a world tinted black and blue by the colour-devouring night.

He has been graced by an angel’s kiss and now this angel is smiling at him, telling him she likes him and- it is entirely too much to bear.

Before they part, he must kiss her one last time.
Tentative lips planted a chaste, shy kiss on her cheek.

Speaking in military terms, it was a surprise attack, yet a welcome one.

Their brush may have been feather-light, but she can feel the pulsating force, the rush of blood and racing heartbeat in this kiss nevertheless and a wild natural energy takes possession of her body.

The kiss faded as suddenly as it had come and Elizabeth watched on as he took his leave from her and walked away, into the darkness of the corridor before she carefully closed the door to her room behind her without a noise, mindful of possible eavesdroppers in the form of gossipy maids up and about early in the day to rekindle the fires.

She was no longer tired and no longer cold. In fact, she forewent her bedding and lay without cover on her bed, observing the waning moon through the window.

How could she sleep now that she had tasted a kiss, no two, such closeness of a rare quality for the first time?

Whatever she had heard about Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe, there was another element to him, one no one knew about.

Why did he hide this side of himself from the world- and why had he decided to show it to her of all people?

Confused, she fell asleep, her right hand trailing the kiss goodnight she had been gifted with her fingertips.

In the morning, she ordered Susan to dress her in a gown with a gay flower-pattern and ribbons. For some reason, she found herself especially conscious of her appearance that day and had the girl rearrange her hair several times until she was satisfied. Just before she left the room, she turned around on her heel, and donned the pearl earrings before going downstairs.

At breakfast, she made the surprising discovery the Colonel, John, had been up and about already and taken a stroll half the way down to Dunkeswell. He had not told her, or anyone for that matter voluntarily, but Uncle Samuel, inquisitive and jovial as always, had asked after taking notice of his walking-attire.

They maintained the usual uneasy silence well, Elizabeth thought; he only spoke when asked a question and she pretended to chat carelessly with her aunt and uncle when in truth, she struggled to even catch half of what they said, still bedazzled by the events of the previous night. In between a forkful of this and a bite of that, Elizabeth caught herself glancing across the table to John time and again- and in turn, caught him, who seemed to follow a similar strategy.

“Elizabeth? Elizabeth? Where are your thoughts today, child?”, Aunt Margaret admonished her. It was only then Elizabeth realised she had been addressed several times by her aunt and had left the latter without a reply.

Where her thoughts were she did not want to relay to her, nor would it help to maintain the family peace. For that was what they were, a family. An odd little conglomerate of people who by way of fate and fortune found themselves gathered around the same table: First, Elizabeth had passed into her aunt’s care after the death of both her parents. Her paternal aunts and grandparents from both
sides of the family helped to care for her as well, but it was Margaret who assumed to her deceased sister’s duty of raising the daughter she had left behind to fend for herself in this world. When Elizabeth was seven years old, she had first come to Hembury Fort House when Aunt Margaret had, after meeting Uncle Samuel on a visit to Bath, married him and relocated herself and her niece to his Devon estate.

She had always liked the house and the beautiful landscape it was surrounded by, and loved her aunt’s husband, whom she, when the family were in private, called her uncle; they were a right proper little family, mother, father and daughter.

About one or two years after the wedding, Elizabeth could not quite recall, a boy on the verge of manhood had entered the house on a visit. She had seen him for the first time at the wedding, a very tall boy in his late teens who looked oddly respect-infusing and grave with his serious mien and his wig that seemed to have the same colour as his eye lashes and brows.

He had not worn a uniform, as far as she could recall, but a plain dark suit with a colourful waistcoat that he had probably not chosen by himself (his mother had been there, too) and spent most of the evening awkwardly sitting next to his mother at the table. But when some of the other guests had taken pity on him and engaged him in a conversation, he had talked and talked about ancient romans and Greeks and what not. He did not participate in the dance and neither did she; having been sent upstairs to bed in the care of her nurse, she had been able to convince the women to be lenient and let her watch the ball in the evening through the keyhole. Elizabeth had watched her happy aunt dancing with her husband of a few hours.

They were neither young nor particularly good-looking, but to Elizabeth, it was their joyful faces that made them so and she had stood and stared in awe as they and their guests moved around the room in elegant choreographies she would have to ask her dancing master to teach to her.

Completely and utterly enthralled by the dance, she had completely forgotten that doors could be opened; the handle was used and Elizabeth could do nothing except to jump quickly behind the opening door, hoping it would hide her.

Since she was small and very quiet, the young spy remained unseen; not that the person leaving the room would or could have cared. It was the tall boy, breathing heavily with what sounded like the last remnants of a terrible cough, striving for fresh air. As she watched him make his way to the door, she realised how thin he was, his limbs spidery and his face pale, like a ghost.

A year later, she had met him again. Not that she had paid him much mind after the wedding with her new home to explore and the sudden change of her situation that was so new and interesting to her. Suddenly, she had an aunt and an uncle, which was as close to having a mamma and papa it got.

The boy had returned in a uniform, a proper soldier with his tricorn and scarlet coat. The wig (which he sometimes took off when he thought nobody was watching, revealing a close-cropped mass of bristly copper) seemed to be the same and she had thought that he looked quite handsome in his attire, just as the soldiers in the bawdy songs the washerwoman sometimes sang were supposed to look like.

Apart from this observation, she had not bothered to think about him at all, deeply immersed in her drawings and would almost have forgotten to bid him goodbye at the end of his two-day visit had not Aunt Margret plucked her from her desk, taken the pencil out of her hand and made her go.

Eleven years passed before they met again, all communication in between was reduced to letters addressed to her Aunt and Uncle, which she, as time progressed, started to read aloud for the aging Admiral whose eyesight was declining.
His godson, Uncle Samuel had informed her proudly the frequent epistolist was, was a “brave young fellow” fighting for King and Country in the Colonies.

Curious how she had never thought of him much despite the letters and even more curious how this man had, eleven years later, fallen into her world from a carriage.

The brokenly alive thing, a bundle of ill-fitting black clothes containing the remnants of a proud officer beaten not by the Americans but by his wounds- she had had compassion for him, but would never have believed that it would come to this.

And where to, from here?

She wiped her thoughts off her mind and faced her aunt.

“I am sorry, Aunt. I was just wondering when Mary-Anne would write to me again? Surely, her family business cannot keep her so occupied she is unable to write a letter? Or are her family withholding pen and ink from her?”

She smiled, though not in honesty, but Aunt Margaret seemed not to notice.

On the other side of the table, John Simcoe hardly fared better, though of him such behaviour was expected.

Slowly, the Graves’ had given up on their quest of reforming him or making him more sociable and apart from Uncle Samuel, who still, for the sake of good manners or moved by pity, asked him a question or attempted to include him in a conversation at times, left him to his own devices for most of the day.

After breakfast (her aunt and uncle had repaired to the study together while Elizabeth headed in the opposite direction to her room) a hand on her arm had suddenly beckoned her to stop.

“Miss Gwillim, there is a question I must ask you”, John Simcoe’s voice breathed lowly and agitatedly into her ear, “did I meet you in the library last night, or did I dream?”

His imploring honesty almost made her laugh, how could he believe it had all been nothing but a dream?

“I can assure you, Colonel, it was not”, she whispered back. The relief and astonishment on his face proved too much for her and she could not suppress a stifled giggle before her countenance grew serious again. It hadn't been a dream- why was it then that it felt like one?

Two weeks pass. They never talk much, but when they meet, a passing gesture is exchanged, fingers entwining en passant on the staircase for a short moment when one party is upward, the other downward-bound, a longing gaze shot across the table when Margaret Graves is occupied cutting her meat and the Admiral looking out of the window, commenting that spring has finally come, shoulders brushing past each other when they meet in the corridor.

They don’t kiss or come as close as they did that evening in the library and he knows it is partly because they both feel Margaret Graves breathing down their neck with her spies (servants) everywhere and partly because neither of them knows what is to happen next. The way things are seems agreeable to both of them, and yet, deep inside, he knows their situation must one day change,
either to wither and die as a passing flirtation or to grow into something else.

To him, she is no divertissement, no amusing fancy to busy his mind with. His head is abuzz with lines of poetry he has yet to write down and even his episodes of darkness seem to attack him somewhat less frequently.

Is this what happiness is? No, it can’t be happiness, for he is constantly anxious, thinking of what she thinks of him or when they shall meet again, but at the same time, there is a warmth spreading through his body, an untameable energy he has not felt since he last had a purpose in life.

He needs to talk to her, so much is for certain, to know if she too feels this unhappy happiness and to ascertain what this feeling means. He has been in love before, but not like this; Anna Strong had refused him and made his courtship a fox hunt and Lola is no point of reference either.

It is on a fine morning, the first one of its kind this year that he observes some commotion near the stables from his window and sees Elizabeth, dressed in riding attire, ready to mount her horse.

In the past weeks, he has put longer rides off, fearing his leg may fail him, but on this day, he does not heed his fears. His concerns are not so much about the gradually returned strength in his leg, which he is sure he can rely upon even if he cannot stretch and use it yet to its full capacity, it is more profound than that; if something might go wrong or if his leg gives him pain in the saddle, he will have proven himself unfit for military service, for what army on this earth needs a colonel who falls off his horse?

He sends a servant downstairs and hopes his message will get to her in time.

“Miss Gwillim!” Elizabeth turned, ready to mount. The man slowed his pace as she turned to him. Giving the groom the command to hold the horse for a little longer, she asked the servant what urgent news he had for her.

“Colonel Simcoe asks if he can join you”, the says between two heavy breaths, indicating he had hurried to deliver his message.

Her heart bolted like a yearling at full run. Originally, she had planned to spend some time on her own, to think (among other things, about John Simcoe), yet this development is a welcome one.

On two or three other occasions when she had gone riding by herself (her aunt thought she was taking the groom with her, for safety and propriety, but he was no problem a little bribe from the coffers of the Gwillim-inheritance couldn’t fix), she had in fact considered to ask John to join her but had shied away from doing so for not wanting to hurt his feelings since he had avoided riding apart from a few half-hearted attempts in the stable yard due to his leg—until this day.

“Tell him I would be glad to enjoy his company.”

She gave orders for a second horse to be saddled and wondered if the flush in her cheeks was owed to the cool morning air or to the thought of John joining her.
He makes his way downstairs as quickly as possible. He almost falls stumbles on his way, missing one step on the staircase and manages to catch himself just in time. His bad leg twitches a little in protest, but that does not matter, he cannot let Elizabeth wait.

“Where to so early, my boy?”, a voice booms at him from upstairs and resounds throughout the house.

“Riding”, he says plainly, hoping to shake his godfather off as quickly as possible.

“Isn’t Elizabeth bound for the stables as well?”, he asks, leant casually against the upstairs bannister in his dressing gown that does not exactly accentuate his belly favourably.

“Yes”, he answers quickly, hoping the nosy old man will leave him alone.

“So you’re going together? Give her my best, and enjoy your hack.”

Smiling, the Admiral dismisses him.

“Go, you’ll not want to let her wait. She gets impatient quickly, our Elizabeth, when it’s not about her paintings”, he chuckles and flashes his godson another of his benevolent smiles.

“Thank you.” He gives him a stiff, soldierly nod and progresses on his way downstairs, relieved to have been let go.

It took her unexpected partner some fifteen minutes by her estimation to make his way to her. He was dressed not in his usual set of black, but in a green riding-jacket that went favourably with his complexion and reminded her of his uniform. All in all however, he looked more civilian than ever before, and it suited him.

“Miss Gwillim”, he bowed and she curtseyed, the perfect imitations of mere acquaintances.

“May I assist you mounting?”

“You may.”

His strong hands heaved her up onto the horse and burnt through the fabric of her skirts on her skin.

As a seasoned rider, she had no difficulties whatsoever to find the stirrup with her foot by herself, on this day however she elected to wait if he would- she could not hide a content grin when he indeed lifted her foot into the stirrup and his fingers lingered a little longer than strictly necessary around her ankle.

He too needed some help mounting, his leg still not having reacquired its full range of movement and had to ask for a mounting block to be brought, which evidently vexed and embarrassed him.

“There is no need to be embarrassed, Colonel”, she commented upon seeing the slight hint of redness on his cheeks as he was assisted onto the back of his dapple grey steed by the groom, at which he looked at her, somewhat relieved she did not think less of him for not (yet) being able to mount his horse all by himself (swinging it across the back of the animal was a movement he would likely have to practice) again, but still embarrassed.
They rode in silence down the road, through the adjoining fields and into the forest.

When they had left the house far enough behind them Elizabeth spoke.

“Nobody around”, she looked to her left and right, “I wish to talk to you, John.”

Given the fortunate opportunity of being alone in the woods, where she could speak freely, Elizabeth was determined to seize it and put it to good use.

“What about?”

“Two weeks ago.”

Elizabeth inhaled deeply. She had thought about this moment for long and had known it would come but now that it had arrived, she did not know what to say, or better, how to say it.

“Have I wronged you?”, he asked, concern widening the two icy orbs in his face.

“Not at all. On the contrary. It was very nice.”

She bashfully lowered her gaze to the reins in her gloved hands. What else could she say? How could she say it differently?

“I think so, too.”

In this moment, she realised they had stopped in the middle of the road.

With only the softest pressure of his thighs, for he did not use his hands, he navigated his mount closer to her until the horses, both thankfully very patient and tame animals that tolerated each other well, were no more than a few inches apart.

“Miss Gwillim, Elizabeth, may I kiss you?”

Yes. Yes, she wants it just as much as he does, perhaps even more. In soft, forbidden phantasies, she had longed for this moment and feared it in equal measure, for it would cement something that could have been dismissed as an errant eruption of fickle passions into a relationship beyond the realms of amusing coquetries but when the moment came, she embraced it fully.

“Gladly.”

Why does she laugh at him? Has it not been to her satisfaction?

“What is the matter?”

At the sight of his obvious confusion, she helpfully points out he has taken off his tricorn before kissing her and that she thinks it was a rather odd thing to do, given the quaint manners and propriety the gesture implied were unimportant out there, in the forest.

He cannot help but join her laughter, though his sounds still more insecure and restrained than hers. He has quite simply not had much reason to erupt with joy throughout the past months or even years
and lacks practice. Thus, he is painfully conscious his face, the oddly strained distorted grimace he supposes to be a smile but that other people do not necessarily recognise as such.

They ride on a little further, until Elizabeth beckons him to halt.

“If we want to be back at Hembury Fort House in time for breakfast, I propose we turn around. We can of course shorten the journey somewhat. I propose a race.”

Her eyes are strangely a-glimmer, teasing him, coaxing him into agreeing with her. He has not galloped at full speed in a while, but can he say no now, to her?

“I shall give you no mercy”, he replies, at which she retorts “I hope so. It is terribly dull to be granted a victory only for being a lady.”

The tone of her voice indicates that this has happened before.

“Rest assured, your treatment on this field of battle shall be rough. Should you win, the victory will not be an easy one.”

“On the count of three then, Colonel. One, two-three!”

She klicks with her tongue faster than he can dig his heels into the sides of his horse and sets off with a head start of approximately two horse’s lengths.

Uneasily, he presses his left leg to the saddle, not yet feeling entirely comfortable racing through the fields on the edge of the forest, hoping Hembury Fort House to come into view soon.

The reckless man he has kept a splinter of inside him is elated, the speed, the countryside flying by to his left and right and a few yards ahead of him, the back of a red redingote on a chestnut horse.

She is lighter than him and is thus at an advantage, but he will try to win anyway.

His initial fear slips off his shoulders like a coat or hat being swept away by the wind blowing in his face and he urges the dapple grey to go faster.

-It happens within seconds; there is nothing he can do except to watch on in horror.

Within one unexpected split second, the world ends.

Elizabeth, who is about one length ahead of him, laughs and turns, looking out for him while simultaneously spurning her horse to even greater speed when the unthinkable happens: the horse’s foreleg gets caught in a molehill or a rabbit’s burrow or the like, loses its footing and causes its rider to fall, hitting the ground headfirst.

For one second, time seems to freeze; Elizabeth is suspended in the air as he watches, petrified at first, a cry of terror and surprise escaping her mouth, before the world starts turning again and he digs his heels in the mare’s side, slipping out of the still moving beast’s saddle, stumbling, and rushes over to Elizabeth who has met the ground with a bone-chilling thud.

Luckily, the animal did not fall on top of her as he has seen wounded horses in the field do, crushing the men on top of them with their heavy bodies. The animal, unhurt he supposes judging from the fact it is standing on all for legs again, is of no concern to him, all he can think about is Elizabeth.

She lies on the ground, her limbs sprawled and does not seem to take notice of him. Her eyes are closed; luckily, she is breathing shallowly.
He calls her name, frantically, once, twice, shakes her by the shoulders before he gathers her up in his arms and starts to run, realising he cannot reach her in whatever state she is in, leaving the horses behind- how would he mount, with his leg not yet permitting him to do so alone and how would he transport her? He can see the house, they are not too far away, but it is still a distance to cover on foot.

She is heavier than she looks and he not at the cusp of his physical powers, but for her sake, he has to make it to the house post-haste and runs as fast as he can even if his sides admonish him with a stinging pain, trying to convince him to stop.

Twice he has to halt and draw breath before he can continue on, Elizabeth in his arms, and the second time, he would almost have lost consciousness himself, but a look at her face calls him to attention. He has to be fast. She needs help.

“Help” is the last word that escapes him before he collapses on the lawn in front of the house, his voice high-pitched and not even remotely reminiscent of the cool sneer belonging to Colonel Simcoe.

Perhaps it is the first time in eighteen years that he has used this word. Given the situation however, he utters it without thinking twice.

It does not take long before a servant arrives and disappears back into the house, shocked, shouting agitatedly on the way in.

“Elizabeth, can you hear me? Elizabeth, Please!”

She does not respond to her name that leaves his mouth with the last air left in his lungs. His leg hurts, too, overexerted, this however is the least concern he has.

For her recovery, he would gladly trade the full use of his left leg, he tries to reason with anybody who will hear him, the roman deities who have inspired many a poem, God in Heaven and about everything and anything else with powers to complete such a trade.

She mustn’t die. She mustn’t die.

What if she dies?

It is all his fault. He should never have agreed to this.

With clumsy fingers, he undoes the ribbon holding her hat in place and tosses it aside. It is ruined anyway and besides, once she gets better she will likely not want to wear it for the unpleasant memories that have attached themselves to it from this moment forward.

Ridding himself of his riding gloves, he gently touches her head, trying to detect injuries. The right side of her face feels hot and is swollen; the swelling extends to the side of her head, where he, no expert in the field, cannot tell how bad or extensive her injury is because it treacherously hides underneath her hair.

Hopefully, a flowering bruise is all damage that has been done to her, though he doubts this. Riding accidents can come with a plethora of injuries everywhere in the body and although her limbs don’t seem to be broken, her inner organs could easily be damaged.

He still holds her in his arms when he allows himself to touch her torso, trying to detect any broken ribs or unnatural swellings caused by blood from a severed organ pooling beneath her skin, but he forgets that this is not as easily done with women as it is with men, for her stays keep her skin and everything underneath it in a strict shape and besides, he cannot simply touch her like this, even if he
needs to know if she is injured. He will have to wait until Margaret or one of the female servants arrive.

In this moment, he does not even dread Margaret Graves’ arrival, he wishes for it. To be sure, she will be frightened, furious and probably gut him with a knitting needle as soon as she is given the chance, but he needs her help now.

He does not know how grave Elizabeth’s injuries are, he cannot help her and it is his fault. It should be him lying there, unconscious and likely in pain, not her. She is young, she has done no wrong in this world and worst of all, he loves her terribly.

If she doesn’t survive, he won’t either.

“Stay with me, do you hear me? You must wake up. Eliza, please!”

In this moment, the servant returns with the Admiral and Margaret following behind him. He has never seen his godfather and aunt-by-marriage of sorts like this: Margaret, who never loses her cold hauteur, especially not in front of him, has gathered her skirts at almost her knee and runs towards him, shock and deepest trepidation disfiguring her usually marble-esque features, with the Admiral following behind, panting and shouting his ward’s name.

Margaret lets herself fall onto the grass next to him, disregarding the fact that the lush grass is likely to leave permanent stains on the delicate fabric of her dress and talks frantically to the unconscious Elizabeth and tries to push him aside.

But he won’t let go of her. Never.

“Budge, John Simcoe, she is my niece, I raised her like my own daughter and now she’s going to die-“

“Hush, Margaret, hush”, the Admiral tries to calm his wife, whose hands are now all over Elizabeth’s face, but Margaret does not want any consolation.

“It is his fault, your ungodly godson!” she exclaims and points with a most unrefined index finger at him.

“You should never have let them-“

“It was an accident, Margaret, you cannot blame-“

“You allowed them to ride together, unattended, Samuel Graves, you did! I always told you I didn’t want John Simcoe around her, it would never have had to come to this had you heeded my advice!”

Now they are both at fault and the secret he has long suspected is out. Margaret dislikes him.

“Let’s get her inside”, the Admiral orders bleakly, visibly hurt by his wife’s words and wondering if she may be right.

It is he who carries her inside, much to Margaret’s displeasure, and gently puts her on the bed in her room. She looks like the carved effigy of a medieval princess, except for the blossoming bruising that causes her cheek and right eye to swell unnaturally.

“Out. Both of you!” Margaret shouts, pushing him with all her might away from Elizabeth, whose hand he still holds, if only to do something, anything at all, hoping perhaps that in whatever realm she presently dwells in, she might feel his presence.
The fact that Margaret can see this open acknowledgement of his feelings for her niece is of no concern to him. Shall the old bat think what she will, this is about Elizabeth, not her.

He is forced to let go if he does not want to battle Margaret.

Instead of her husband and his godson, who both decide to wait outside in the corridor, thunderstruck and in fear for Elizabeth’s life, she calls for a maid to help her remove her niece’s riding attire.

The doctor arrives not much later, goes inside, stays there for a while and returns.

He can hear the doctor and Margaret conversing inside and tries to make out what is being said, which is not easy, for the door remains closed for the duration of the doctor’s visit.

It is the same man who had treated him, not entirely useless and a trusted by the Admiral. Hopefully, he can help her.

A hand wrinkled with age comes to rest on his shoulder.

“It wasn’t your fault, whatever Margaret says. She is upset.”

“Thank you.”

He cannot say it isn’t his fault, for he could have said no and prevented the race from happening, but he feels oddly touched his godfather is thinking of him in this moment when he is clearly worried for his niece’s survival.

The Admiral has known him all his life, and so, in this moment of raw fear and helplessness, it is comforting to know that the man closest to a father figure in his boyhood is by his side, how odd this realisation at first seems to him.

An eternity and a half later in which the two men don’t exchange another word, each caught up in their thoughts, the sound of a chair scraping across the floor and someone walking across the room are audible.

“How is she?” He asks immediately as the doctor’s head appears in the doorframe.

“Two ribs seem to be partially fractured and she has sustained a head injury. Only time will tell how the latter is going to develop, even if the cranium does not seem to be broken; presently, I cannot say much, though it does concern me that she has not regained consciousness so far.”

“Recourse?”

“Prayer. That’s all there is now- if you’d like me to send for the vicar-“

“Don’t.”

He looks at his godfather, who nods. “Thank you, Enfield. We appreciate your help.”

Doctor Enfield gives the Admiral a sad smile and leaves.

With the doctor gone, the only obstacle left between him and Elizabeth is the unspeakable Margaret Graves who is ready to defend her niece from him like a lioness her cub.

As soon as he re-enters, the air freezes over with cold animosity.
“Graves”, she comments on his entering, leaving it open to her husband outside who is listening in whom of the two men she is presently displeased with, “leave.”

“No.”

He does not snarl, he does not threaten. The little word escapes him without malice in his voice, all there is in it is utmost defiance.

“I am not going to leave her.”

For a moment, it looks as if Margaret wants to retort in an uncouth fashion, but when her eyes wander to the pale figure in the bed, she swallows her insult, sits down on her chair and restricts her attacks to eyeing him with displeasure as he takes the doctor’s vacated chair on the other side of the bed and Elizabeth’s fine-boned hand that rests motionlessly on top of the covers.

Again, Margaret looks at him as if he were a vile creature the maidservants had neglected to clean away from a dark and dusty corner of the house, but he chooses to ignore her- may the old crone fume silently for the rest of the day, he is not playing pretend any longer. The game of lies has never been his anyway, his tactics lie in the open field, which he has hereby stepped onto.

He intuitively knows Elizabeth would have done the same, would have cared for him were the roles reversed, which comforts him a little.

She is so pale, her features unmoving. Is she still alive?

His long fingers curl around her wrist, trying to find the pulse there.

Yes, thankfully, she is.

From the depths of history he had so enjoyed studying as a boy, the name Mary of Burgundy creeps onto his lips and lingers there like the foul taste of a spoilt dish.

He bites the inside of his lower lip at the thought of the duchess’ name as if speaking her name is a curse capable of summoning the Evil and ill tidings to the house and more specifically, to Elizabeth.

In the dying days of the fifteenth century, Mary, orphaned heiress to the Duke of Burgundy who was killed by the French during the Battle of Nancy, assumed her father’s title, which she, in French opinion, had no right to, Burgundy being a fiefdom of the Valois kings that could by French law only be passed on in a line of direct male succession, married the son of the Holy Roman emperor, Maximilian, Archduke of Austria.

She was a rich heiress, spirited, cultivated and beautiful, he a skilled warrior and soldier with no money and no looks, being a Habsburg, but a name and titles- and critically, the Holy Roman Empire being the bitterest foe of France, by marrying him she might be able to secure her father’s inheritance for herself and her heirs.

It was by no means a love match, the young duchess and the archduke had never even met before they were joined in holy matrimony, but soon, affections between the two most politcally appealing parties on the marriage market grew and in no time, it was apparent to all at the Burgundian court that Maximilian and Mary were passionately in love.

Their young love, alas, did not last long- aged twenty-five and pregnant with her third child, Mary, who loved to ride and hunt, fell off her horse in an accident nobody could have seen coming and died a few days later from her injuries, leaving Maximilian and their two small children desperate and alone in a cold world.

Both Margarets, he has to concede, loved their foster daughters and he respects Margaret Graves’
sentiments towards him. His own mother would have, were she still alive, done everything for him and likely would have blamed such a terrible accident, had it happened to him, on someone else as well (just as she had one day, in agony after Percy’s death shouted at him for not having paid attention enough, but had retracted her words spoken with her brain clouded by the loss of a son and apologised and he had swallowed the apology with a lump in his throat, knowing she had not meant what she said but had taken her words to heart nevertheless).

She is no more, though, died while he was away, in considerable pain until her last breath as letters from the Admiral and Margaret among others had informed him, so much so that he, his grief at first hearing the news of her death aside, was grateful her suffering had ended.

Taking this into account, he is happy for Elizabeth that Margaret, who has been like a mother to her, loves her and can be there, at her bedside, comforting her should she so require once she awakes.

God knows what he would have given for his mother sitting beside his sickbed on board the ships that first brought him to New York and then to England.

At the thought of his mother, the village of his birth springs to his mind, a blurred jumble of childhood memories, his father, a boy smaller than him but with the same head of unruly reddish hair, laughing, and his mother sitting cross-legged on the floor of the nursery and playing with her sons to ease the parting pain and distract the two teary-eyed little boys from their father’s departure to re-join his ship and the war in Canada.

And then there had been the castle ruin he had visited it from time to time with his father-Fotheringhay, the place were Margaret of York and so many of her siblings had been born.

If the geographical relation of the houses of York and Simcoe allows for any familiarity to be assumed between him and the long-dead dowager duchess, he hopes she can see him sitting beside Elizabeth’s bed as Maximilian once did at Mary’s and prays that she, or any spirit, ghost or angel looks down on the scene and feels pity, petitioning for divine intervention on behalf of Elizabeth at the celestial throne.

She is not even twenty-five and as of the day, how cruel would Fate be to take her from this world so prematurely.

-And he has not yet said the words to her he wanted to say, but could not, betrayed by his own tongue.

She has been kind and considerate to him in the particularly dark days soon after his return to England, now it is his time to do his duty and be the sentry at her bed.

He watches the shadows of the furniture grow longer as the day progresses; still holding her hand, he has not moved an inch, a tin soldier of flesh and blood.

At nine in the evening, the Admiral enters, urging both him and his wife to come and eat something. He refuses. Margaret leaves, though not due to her husband’s attempt at persuasion, but because he almost drags her out of the room, assuring her that she will be of no help to her niece if she faints from hunger and thirst- him, however, the elderly man does not even address, perhaps knowing that he has no possibility to remove him from her bedside, even if he wanted to. He is, despite his rather joyful and jovial nature, a practical and thoughtful man, a man of soldierly qualities. His godfather knows inciting a fight at Elizabeth’s sickbed will not do anyone any good, knows which battles are worth fighting.

He respects him deeply for that.
Hours pass. He still doesn’t move, nor does Elizabeth: what if they are both dead? Is she dead? Is he dead?

His head lolls to one side and he falls asleep; back are the yelps of pain, the cannons, the musket fire and the whinnying of dying horses, gutted by enemy bayonets or riddled with bullets, causing their riders, also wounded, to fall off and be crushed to death underneath the heavy carcasses. Next to him, the impact of a cannon ball shatters the earth and kills several men. The blast and the dying men’s screams, some of which who are still alive enough to witness how an arm or leg has been torn off their body only to die slowly of blood loss, wake him.

Drowsily, he can hear two voices at the door whispering lowly. He keeps his eyes closed, pretending to sleep.

“I told you so.”

“He cares for her deeply, it seems.”

“So would a host of other men. She is pretty, young and wealthy-“

“You know as well as I this is not what the present situation is about. Elizabeth has had an accident and you cannot blame John for it. The boy is shaken enough as it is.”

“The ‘boy’, you say? Heavens, Samuel Graves, he is a grown man! If anything, he is a butcher-boy, from all that I have heard and no acquaintance our nice should be exposed to for much longer.”

A sigh.

“There are just as many rumours about me and my mismanagement of the North American Station as there are about John’s… temperament. I would not give too much on second hand tales, Margaret. Men in positions of power always have ill-wishers. Let them sleep now. I am sure we can talk to him in the morning.”

“If Elizabeth doesn’t survive this night-“

Margaret’s bitterness and ire against him have been washed away by tears.

“I don’t want her to… She mustn’t- my sister- so young- she can’t die-“

“Hush, Meg”, the Admiral says softly and the rustling of fabric indicates that he comforts his wife by stroking her back. “Everything will be all right, I promise you.”

Though judging from the sound of his voice, he is certain his godfather is lying. He too is worried for Elizabeth, more so than he is willing to admit, mainly for his wife’s sake, to give her hope.

Is Admiral Graves cruel or kind? Before he can answer the question, he drifts off again, not even caring that his leg has fallen asleep and his whole body aches from the unpleasant experience of being seated on an uncomfortable chair for an entire day.

Her head hurt. Everything hurt. Her face burnt. It was as if a thousand tiny needles pricked through her skull and tormented her brain, the pain was almost unbearable.
She could hear herself groan. Her mouth was dry.

Slowly, the world around her started to reassemble. It was dark outside, had she been asleep for long? Why in the first place had she woken in the middle of the night and why did her head hurt?

As her senses returned gradually and attuned to their surroundings as best as her obviously weakened constitution permitted, she could make out the somewhat blurry outline of a tall figure sitting next to the bed who, yes, there could be no mistake, held her hand.

Experimentally, she moved her hand a little. The black shadow in the chair, who had been asleep, was awake within seconds, as if she had not attempted to test the possibility of moving her fingers, but had emptied a bucket of cold water over his head. This even sounded like a pleasant thing to her, icy water being poured over *her* head, which would likely drown the pain.

“Elizabeth?”

It is John’s voice. Slowly, she started to remember the moments leading up to her fall.

“Elizabeth, can you hear me?”

She nods faintly.

“Can I do anything for you?”

“Water.”

There is a jug and a glass the Admiral has sent up for him in the afternoon, still untouched. He fills the glass to give her to drink.

Weakly, she reaches for it, her hands shaking and somewhat wooden in their movements. With one hand, he steadies her head, with the other, her hand.

Elizabeth drinks a little and lets her body go slack to lie down once more. She is very tired, he can tell, and the fact that she has winced involuntarily when he had accidentally raised his voice above a whisper indicated her head hurt.

For lack of anything else, he loosens his necktie and drenches it in the jug, squeezing the superfluous amount of water out of it before arranging it to cover the bruised half of her face and head.

She inhales sharply at the contact with the wet fabric before she relaxes somewhat.

Weeks and weeks in a field hospital and on board the *Bonetta* have taught him things. Not that he considers himself a doctor, no, but he knows that patients don’t like to be alone when they’re in pain. He for sure had not liked it at all; in fact, he had, when nobody else was listening, begged for either salvation from his pain in sweet death or for his mother, as so many other men around him had done too, some of whom had survived, others not.

“I want to sleep”, she declares, already half-gone again, her eyes closed.

“I am here.”
He caresses the hand he holds to reinforce his words. As her fingers squeeze his, not very forcefully and certainly not with the vital energy of a healthy person, but most definitively in response to his words, he dares to hope.

Chapter End Notes

Beauty and the Beast: the story as we know it was first published by a French author in 1740 and then re-adapted in 1756, so it doesn't seem too outlandish that both Elizabeth and John have maybe come into contact with it in some shape or form.

The Graves-Gwillim-Simcoe family history is, as far as the dates and constellations go historically accurate but of course the visit of eighteen-year-old John shortly before his departure to America and the wedding of Ms Margaret Spinckes and Admiral Samuel Graves are artistic license. John, by the way, looks sickly because he has just recovered from an episode of severe illness that had forced him to abandon his studies the previous year.

Redingote: a fashionable jacket or coat of a woman's riding ensemble in the 18th century. Elizabeth's riding habit is red because in my mind, the colour suits her well and because riding outfits were often modelled on male fashion, sometimes to the extent that they imitated uniforms (a famous example is the portrait of Seymour Fleming, Lady Worsley). Elizabeth's clearly took some inspiration from the British uniforms of the day, but it is not strictly a uniform replica like Seymour Fleming's.

Elizabeth and John were accomplished riders. As far as my knowledge of riding goes, most people who ride frequently have had an accident of sorts at least once in their lives in which they fall or are thrown off. Some are lucky and escape unharmed, others aren't. The incident in the story is purely fictional and in case Elizabeth ever had a riding accident, it has not been recorded anywhere to my knowledge.

Mary of Burgundy's tragic fate is a historical coincidence I could not resist including. She broke her back falling from her horse when the animal tripped on a hunt and died a few weeks later on 27th of March 1482 of her injuries. By now, we are somewhere in early- to mid-March 1782 in the story, so it fit perfectly.

This chapter has been named in her and her husband's memory. Maximilian's epithet was "The Last Knight" so "The Last Knight's Battle" is, with regard to what happened in this chapter a pretty obvious choice.

When somewhat later Mrs Simcoe is said to have played with her sons on the floor, I took this detail from Emperor Maximilian's third wife Bianca Sforza (who he lamented never could replace Mary and whom he treated, to put it mildly, rather unkindly), who the Wikipedia article states played on the floor with her step-children (Mary's and Maximilian's children), which was frowned upon by court. I could not undertake any greater research to confirm this, but I liked the idea of returning to the late mediaeval theme a second time through her and thus tying the Simcoes even more tightly to Margaret of York and her continental (no pun intended) family.

The bit about Fotheringhay and Cotterstock, the village where the (anti-)hero of this story was born, is accurate by the way, although we have of course no way of knowing if Simcoe ever visited the castle ruin with his dad. I have devoted the Simcoe- House of York connection an entire mini-fic, if Shakesperian villains, mediaeval kings, monsters and warriors are your thing.
By the way, read up on all of the historical figures mentioned, I can only recommend it!

What a rough ride and so many notes. I hope you enjoyed it anyway. :)
Then Gently Take Him in Your Arms

Chapter Summary

Simcoe is a terrible poet, a not-so-terrible nurse and the not-so-well Elizabeth gets better. Samuel Graves smiles as much as his wife frowns, and mostly at the same things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Elizabeth sleeps soundly. He regularly assures himself of the steadiness of her pulse throughout the night. It is his duty to safeguard her, pick up on even the slightest change in her condition and respond accordingly.

Not once does he fall asleep or even shuts his eyes longer than for the duration of one of his few blinks; that does not mean he isn’t tired, but he is a soldier, this is a mission and he must not fall asleep.

When sleep almost comes to overpower him, he starts to recite poetry in his head.

In ancient Ireland, or so an indignant O’Shaughnessy had declared by the campfire after having been cut short from singing a song in the language of the Irish, a true warrior of the Fianna, an ancient band of elite warriors of maybe a thousand years or more gone by, had to know twelve books of poetry by heart.

Even the strongest man, athletic and muscular, could not become one of them if he couldn’t recite twelve books of poetry.

Despite having no other connection to this place across the Irish Sea than the fact that his godfather hailed from the county of Londonderry and occasionally displayed an odd lilt and hard, rolling r-s when he was sufficiently inebriated after two or three glasses of wine (one would think years at sea drinking rum would make a man less susceptible to the effects of alcohol), he had liked that idea. And even if the Irish were not as refined these days, their ancestors in mythical times even before the Romans came to England must have been respectable warriors.

Going by what was commonly said about the correlation between having hair in a hue of red and the likelihood of belonging to certain nationalities, he would have made a splendid addition. Twelve books are nothing.

He starts with some Milton, but is bored soon; following shortly after are sonnets by Petrarch in translation by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey:

Now that the heavens and the earth and the wind are silent, and sleep reins in the beasts and the birds, Night drives her starry car about, and in its bed the sea lies without a wave,

I am awake, I think, I burn, I weep; and she who destroys me is alway before me, to my sweet pain:
war is my state, full of sorrow and suffering, and only thinking of her do I have any peace.

Thus from one clear living fountain alone spring the sweet and the bitter on which I feed; one hand alone heals me and pierces me.

And that my suffering may not reach an end, a thousand times a day I die and a thousand am born, so distant am I from health.

The latter was followed by some Shakespeare, a little Ovid, until he comes to Catullus, who has first introduced him to the joys of poetry, of poetry of the heart to be precise.

Da mi basia mille, he thinks as he watches over her, deinde centum, dein mille altera, dein secunda centum, deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.

As the dawn illumines her features with the first twilight-gleams of a new day, he is certain beyond doubt that she will survive, that the worst lies behind them. “Vivamus mea Elizabeth”, he murmurs lowly into her ear and asks himself again how he can be so sure- he simply is, an instinct, a voice deep within him says so.

At eight in the morning his godfather enters and announces there will be a changing of the guard and he and Margaret will take over his duties now.

“Don’t overexert yourself my boy, you’re barely on the mend” the old admiral tells him.

He shrugs but is painfully aware of his own drowsiness and the fact that his left leg has fallen asleep and tortures him with a thousand needle-pricks.

Trying to move it a little in order to position it differently does not have the desired effect and rather accentuates the leg’s unpractised stiffness and the pain it causes him, which does not escape his godfather.

“Enfield comes to see Elizabeth in the afternoon, I’ll have him have a look at you, too.”

He wants to say something, but the Admiral, who has known him since his boyhood days notices and cuts him short before he can even draw breath.

Samuel Graves might be the only one who has ever dared to patronise him thus, impose his will on him and has lived to tell the tale.

After all, the Admiral is the only family he has left, and he is certain the older man, who knows nothing about America except perhaps for some gossip, which he knows Samuel Graves does not pay attention to, still regards him as the little boy of seven who threatened to wage fierce war against anyone who would make him finish his peas.

To avoid any discord (Margaret is already sufficiently bothersome on her own) he nods, trying to remember from his childhood memories how convincingly feigned obedience looks like.

Margaret gives him a sour look and instantly, he knows why: before he goes, he has dared to apply a clean rag to Elizabeth’s face for the last time.
But, which can likely be attributed to the presence of the Admiral, she keeps her actions against him restricted to shooting him thin-lipped glances.

“Now go and rest a little, John”, his godfather puts his hand on his shoulder like a father probably would as he says this, “I promise we will take good care of her.” At this, Margaret’s face darkens even more, if this is possible- when before, her face could have turned milk sour upon seeing him, now it had probably acquired the capabilities of a basilisk.

She is, and he is absolutely certain of that, displeased with the Admiral’s phrasing.

The Admiral seems to understand as opposed to his wife that he cares deeply for Elizabeth and does not oppose it. This may only be a small consolation, but it is hopeful to know that in this fight, he has an ally or at least a diplomatic envoy who can at times rein his wife’s tirades in a little.

He leaves, sensing it is important to the Graves’ to have some time with Elizabeth also.

In his room, he rids himself of the clothes he has worn for the entire last day and folds them as best as his weary mind allows for a servant to pick up for cleaning.

The cool morning air flying into the room on the balmy wings of spring feels good on his skin. For lack of a bath, he pours the contents of his washbasin over his head and takes a moment to anticipate the feeling of water running down his body in little brooks and rivers before he fills the basin once more with the rest of the jug that had stood next to it and washes himself more methodically before he heads to bed.

Originally, he had planned to call the manservant to shave him and find some clean night-attire, but he is too tired for that and simply crawls underneath the covers, curled up with his arms wrapped around his torso and tries not to think of anything that gives him bad dreams. He falls asleep instantly.

Elizabeth awoke.

“She’s waking up, look Samuel, she’s waking up!”, her aunt’s voice whispers excitedly.

“Aunt?” Her voice was not a strong as usual and heavy with sleep. Her head still hurt badly, her right eye, which she could barely open, throbbed and her ribs also radiated a dull pain.

-Apart from that, she was happy to be alive.

The voice of her aunt came from the same direction as John’s had, sometime in the night when she had been half-awake for a short while.

“Where is John?”

Her aunt’s features hardened, she could even tell that with only one good eye and Uncle Samuel warningly put his hand on her aunt’s shoulder in this special gesture that meant to communicate her to abandon the thought or urge to say what was presently on her mind. He had done it too often in the past for Elizabeth not to notice.
“I sent him off to bed. He was with you day and night, didn’t sleep once our John to watch over you.”

Apart from her concern for his own health for having done this, a feeling that was in no shape or form related to the pain she endured nestled in her breast and from there, radiated like the light of a singular, strong flame throughout her body.

Of course, she would have done the same for him (although she was certain she would never be able to move his lifeless form, but that would not stop her from trying, of course).

Her aunt and uncle asked her if she craved anything food (no), something to drink (yes) and informed her that Doctor Enfield would come to the house to examine her injuries.

When she had been served a cool glass of water and something stronger to soothe the pain, she excused herself for being so rude as to ask her benefactors to leave her in preparation of the afternoon doctor’s visit, before which she needed some more rest.

Shifting from her back to her body’s good, unhurt side for variation, she fell asleep, wishing John would be with her and hold her hand again. He wouldn’t even need to talk or do anything at all; his mere physical presence would be enough. His broad frame and physical strength evoked associations of protection, but also of war-like strength. His expressive eyes could do more than just glare coldly across a table, they could warm as well.

A knock on the door calls him to attention. It is the valet who lays out a clean suit of black for him and gives him an odd stare, having found him undressed, unshaven and with damp hair asleep in the early afternoon.

Should the man think whatever he wanted as long as he kept his mouth shut and besides, he must have heard about the accident as well.

“Admiral Graves sends me. Doctor Enfield is here to see you, sir.” Quickly, he is being helped into his clothes and sent to Elizabeth’s room to his surprise.

As soon as his footsteps are audible in the hallway, Enfield’s head appears in the door before the door opens wider to allow Margaret to leave the room.

“This was my husband’s idea, not mine”, she snarls even before he can discern what the ominous idea might be.

Inside the room, he takes his place in the chair at the head of the bed, closest to Elizabeth, and complies with the doctor’s demands to move his leg in a specific fashion in several different exercises.

At times, he flinches.

His leg, and he knows that for certain, has suffered from yesterday’s exertions and hurts.
When Enfield, this bloody provincial horse-doctor, feels the area where his leg has been broken too roughly, his hand furls into a fist, fingernails digging into his palm in order to control the sharp jolts of pain and make them invisible for his tormenter.

The next time Enfield almost injures him even more than he already is, his nails almost break the skin of his palm in his silent struggle for command over his body and emotions and he thinks he must finally give in- suddenly, a small hand with delicate fingers forces itself into his, makes him uncurl the fist and squeeze her hand tightly instead.

Their fingers intertwine instinctively, which does not escape the doctor, for he raises an eyebrow before alternating his glances between him, their joined hands and Elizabeth.

“It’s not as bad as it may feel”, Doctor Enfield says in his usual calm, sober tone.

Once more the pain becomes a sting sharp as his old bayonet and when it does, Elizabeth’s fingers tighten around his and her thumb strokes the back of his hand.

“It’s going to hurt a little for the coming two or three weeks, in which I strongly advise you, Colonel, to take up the stick again in order to relieve your leg of carrying your weight somewhat and grant it rest. You must also refrain from taking long walks, riding or any kind of physical exercise. –Which is a small price to pay given you have very likely saved Miss Gwillim’s life.”

The man smiles at the two of them with an expression he cannot quite decipher, takes his leave with the faintest hint of a bow that always seems a little insincere and leaves to tell the Admiral and his wife about the state of Hembury Fort House’s two patients.

As soon as Enfield has left them to themselves, his first question is what the doctor has said to her.

“I will survive and, if lucky, not live in permanent pain. The headaches will remain with me for some days and my ribs and face will take somewhat longer to heal.”

She tried to smile at him reassuringly, but smiling hurt her face, tugging unpleasantly at the swollen areas where the skin seemed to cover her flesh more tightly than in other places.

John is back at her side.

“Are you in much pain?”

His question sounded like something a child would ask.

“My head throbs, but that is all presently. Doctor Enfield gave me something to help with it.”

“Is there something I can do for you?”

“If you would close the curtains, please?” He leapt from his chair in a quick fashion Doctor Enfield would disapprove of, did as he was bid and in addition to this, adjusted the blanket to cover her to the shoulders as he stood.

*It is not the same,* she mused, the care and comfort of her aunt and uncle and that of John Graves Simcoe.
The fierce military man she had heard of was considerate and eager to do even the littlest things for her. Curtains, cold washcloths and pulling the blanket back in place however were insignificant to her as long as he was close by.

Him sitting by her side was all she needed.

With this realisation, she fell asleep once more.

She sleeps again. As soon as he is certain she will not notice his absence, he rises from the chair and walks as quickly to his room (without the cane, he needs to be fast) and walks directly to the upmost drawer in the small writing desk near the window.

The drawer, which can only be opened with a key only he has, contains the possessions he prizess the most. No riches or valuables await him as he turns the key; a lock of hair, wrapped in a lace-trimmed handkerchief that has been cut from his mother's head by the Graves' as a memento to give to him when she died while he was an ocean away, a small wooden box containing a family heirloom he has not made use of, a letter (or what remains of it), Elizabeth's drawing and a small wooden figure.

It is a toy, once made for a little boy called John by his father as a parting gift to ease the farewell that would reveal itself as their last. It is a lion, a proud, strong creature with a surprisingly friendly face. When it was new, the colours in which it had been painted had shone brightly, all yellow and gold, with expressive black eyes and what looked like a lion-smile.

Now, the colours have faded, the paint chipped away in places, but John, who has grown into a man, still loves this little piece of wood as dearly as on the day he received it. He feels almost silly to admit it to himself, but Lion had been with him overseas, tucked away and hidden from view, but always with him in his traveling chest; and he only had one other thing from the man who had gifted him Lion.

He remembers the day when the letter had come, a piece of paper, with a dictation of Captain Simcoe, R. N.'s farewells to his family on it.

His mother had thrown it into the fireplace after reading it, sobbing, as she had tried to erase all traces of her husband from her life after his death, but he had retrieved it before it was entirely burnt and memorised it.

*My dear Katherine,*

*It pains me beyond words to part with you without a proper farewell, but I am afraid it must be so. I trust my wife completely and entirely, she has no need of my council, for she is prudent, wise, virtuous and a loving mother to our sons. My faith in you, dearest Katherine, and in our sons, is strong. Bid them adieu for me and assure them of their father's love.*

*I am yours &ct.*

*your loving husband,*
He had clutched Lion tightly to his chest, even with his fingers burnt from having reached into the flames to retrieve the letter, and wept quietly for no one to see or hear.

From this day on, this piece of inanimate, painted wood has been his most precious possession. It has brought him good fortune, he thinks, he has survived America to be graced with Elizabeth's countenance, which has illuminated his crepuscular world beyond imagination.

With firm resolve, he takes Lion from the drawer and closes it. After 23 years in his care, it is time for Lion to be of comfort to someone else. A pang in his heart saddens him at this farewell, but he is convinced all parties involved will benefit from these new arrangements.

When he returns to Elizabeth's room, she is asleep.

He sits down in his chair beside the bed and allows himself to say his goodbyes to Lion. He strokes the battle-worn animal over the head for the last time before he slips it into Elizabeth's hand.

Perhaps it is silly of him and she will laugh once she is awake again, but he hopes Lion will protect and comfort her as he has him, a seven-year-old boy whose world had been shattered to pieces, a sickly young man who had to expect death by the same illness that had befallen his father and lastly the warrior, and perhaps somewhat of a wounded lion himself, who at times had felt as if his last memory of humanity had been stored in this wooden likeness of a wild beast.

She stirs somewhat in her sleep and her fingers tighten around Lion.

*Wherever she is now, protect her,* he instructs Lion in his thoughts, hoping he will tear bad dreams and ill rest to shreds like a poorly equipped roman gladiator.

Around eight in the evening, she was back among the living once more, only to realise something was different from when she had fallen asleep.

A foreign object in her hands, to be precise.

Creasing her forehead, she lifted the piece of wood up and closer to her eyes.

It was a toy lion, old and battered, its paint falling off, revealing layers of slightly different yellows and golds underneath the latest layer of painted lion fur.

John looked at her, studying her face with the unblinking glance she had so many a time observed on him.

“This is Lion”, he informed her, “he was mine.” “Was?” she enquired, not knowing what he wanted to say.

“He is yours now. Lion has kept ill luck away from me on countless occasions. I received him as a
boy from my father, before he went to sea for the last time, and had him with me ever since. I was severely ill at sixteen and survived, captured by the rebels in America and released, stabbed and shot and thrown over a bannister, but I always survived. Have him to speed up your recovery.”

She did not know what to say. Lion seemed to be too precious to give away, a memory of his father and according to him his protector during the war.

The toy obviously meant a lot to him, which moved her greatly- he wanted to gift her something of such great value to him, something so intimate and personal.

“I cannot possibly accept your present.” “Why not?”

John looked at her with a mixture of surprise and sadness.

“Lion means so much to you, I could not possibly-“ “But I want you to have him.”

An idea crossed Elizabeth’s mind.

“You know, what need do I have of a lion? I have you here.”

It was a joy to behold how his face contracted and changed as her words slowly found the way to his brain.

“Is this what you really think about me?” “Yes.”

He leant over the bed, supporting his hand on the mattress to give her a kiss on the forehead. His kiss was like a feather, careful not to hurt her bruised face.

In a sudden bout of boldness, Elizabeth, without thinking much, declared:

“My lips are not bruised either, you know.” Perhaps it was the medicine Doctor Enfield had given her that had as brought on this sudden boldness, maybe her brain was still shaken and confused, but in either case, the result could not be grumbled about: John once more bent over her and kissed her lips, still careful and not as unhinged as they had done before, but just as sweetly.

She had been a little untruthful, as every muscle in her face somehow seemed connected to the bruised side, the kiss too had impractically affected it, hurt a little, but the magic of this close connection of two people soothed everything and made her forget about her sickbed for a moment.

A lock of his hair that had obviously escaped his hastily-done braid teased her jawline and increased the explosion she had felt in her chest earlier.

If anything aided her recovery, it was not Lion, it was his owner who now had taken her hands in his to deck them in kisses, too.

Had not her ribcage protested against any movement, she would have liked to pull him down to her, only to be even closer to him.

“How come you are such a diligent nurse?”

It genuinely interested her. As far as her knowledge went, he had always been a soldier, a profession more associated with killing than with healing.

“I can imagine how you must feel.” His voice, Elizabeth noticed with a puzzled shudder, had gone cold, impersonal and sounded like it had in the early days of their acquaintance when they had gone about their day avoiding each other.
And yet, there was a hint of distant pain, a memory of past hurt, in it, too.

“I was critically injured at the Battle of Blandford”, he continued, his eyes fixing the wall as if it were draped with a tapestry depicting said battle.

“I was shot by my enemies and pushed over a railing in an old building on the site of the battle. This is where I broke my leg. My lungs were punctured, I lost so much blood they thought I must be devoid of it before they could bring me to the medical tent- but I survived. The wound, in my side—“ (his fingers absent-mindedly traced the area of his abdomen now safely covered by fabric where the ball had lodged in his flesh) “became inflamed and my blood tainted. I almost died, two times. Once in the medical tent, once on board the ship taking me back to New York City and even throughout my passage back to England I was assured every day that I would not see the next morning. I was told to get my affairs in order and then left for myself, to vegetate and die alone. The worse my injuries grew, the more I even longed for it.”

Although his eyes were still unblinkingly fixed on the wall, the soft twitching of the corners of his mouth and the strained furrowing of his brows revealed to her that his supposedly calm tone was untrue.

It still affected him greatly. And who would be cold enough to simply live past such an ordeal, no living creature, human or beast could walk away from such an experience unchanged.

Lastly, he added: “And I don’t want you to be alone.”

What could she tell him? That she felt sorry? What good would that do? Should she say anything at all?

Elizabeth did not want to give the impression that she pitied him, or that pity was the reason why she wanted his company.

“You’re not alone either, not now.” It was the best she could manage as an impromptu response to his horrid tale and felt her heart bleed for him.

As a soldier, he would likely have expected injury or even death; but not in this fashion, not wasting away for weeks in bed after a lost battle with no hope of recovery.

What luck he had defied the odds. If he had not and died, she would never have met him.

A letter would have been delivered to her uncle and he informed of his demise and they would all have gone into a period of mourning with a mass read for the save passage into heaven for the soul of John Graves Simcoe and all she would ever have known of him would have been memories of his two visits to Hembury Fort House in his youth, a pale, sickly young man with spindly limbs and a serious mien, a stranger.

But he was here and alive, and even if he was still troubled by the events of the previous autumn, he was alive and here now- surely there had to be some hope in this thought.

Elizabeth reaches upwards for his face with both hands, disregarding the fact that it is obviously quite unpleasant for her to do that, given her ribs, which are as Elizabeth had told him, black and blue
beneath her nightshirt.

Her fingertips force his face into submission and he turns meekly under her guidance so that her eyes meet his.

How sincerely these hazel depths shine at him, like rare gemstones they glitter with pearls of affection pooling in their corners, even the swollen one- he cannot bear her tears nor the fact that she is ready to let herself be affected by his tale, in which he has not been entirely truthful to her regarding the circumstances of his ordeals: he has not mentioned Hewlett and the poisoned history they share and he has not told her about his relationship with Woodhull and his associates either.

She would probably despise him if he told her that, even if he, in his eyes at the time, has only done what was right, fought for his King and Country with all he had, with all it took.

-And yet they, he had still lost.

Why does she even like him? What is likeable about him, what makes him worthy of her attention? She caresses his unshaven cheek and tries to grin, looking up at him with one eye open, the other half-closed from the swelling surrounding it and grins, for lack of any other word that could describe her attempt to look amused and avoiding to cause herself more pain at the same time by distorting her facial muscles too much at the novelty of the feeling.

His heart races, distracted from its regular beat by Elizabeth, who is alive and seems to be better already.

Perhaps Enfield is not so bad after all. He may not be well-versed in matters of broken legs, but he seems quite knowledgeable in the field of riding injuries.

Upon seeing that sitting up in this fashion strains her, he can persuade her to lie down to rest although it is evident that she is as good a patient as he is, unwilling and easily frustrated with her current state.

“You must rest”, he chastises her, “it has been but a day and you are not well yet.”

“Indeed, I am not.”

John was right. She hid most of her discomfort from him in order to not worry him any further. To think he had fretted by her bedside in despair only to see her well again- he should not have, even if she yearned for him to be at her side and could tell the feeling was mutual.

“If only I hadn’t insisted we-“

“No, I should have taken better care-“

“John, you are not at fault. How could any of us have known there was a hole in the ground covered by grass? It could have happened to anybody else coming this way on foot or on horseback just as easily. Nothing could have been done.”

Trying to persuade John, she had doubtlessly put too much strength in her endeavour, for as soon as
she finished her impassioned speech, she felt the desire to sleep once more.

In the very moment she considered closing her eyes again, a servant entered with a tray of food which would at other times have smelt delicious to her but which she did not desire in her current state.

She knew however that taking a bite would award her greater strength to battle her injuries and so she opted for a few forkfuls of vegetables and had another few morsels of the meat John had offered to cut for her.

"Say, when have you last eaten?"

"I don’t know. I’m a soldier, I am used to supper-less days in the field."

Granted, he was always extremely pale, which could partially be attributed to the fairness of skin that was inherent to all who were born with hair the colour of fire, but she detected, worried, a certain waness in his features that had nothing to do with the latter, which called the hollow-cheeked ghost back to her mind she had a few months ago helped out of the carriage at his arrival.

"Eat."

With steely resolve, she pushed the remainders of her food, which amounted to an almost full plate, to him and watched as he slowly brought a forkful to his mouth.

He looked up from the plate to her, trying to detect if he met with her approval, at which she praised him, sensing praise was an effective method to coax John Graves Simcoe into complying with almost anything.

The following days he spent almost completely with her, oftentimes reading to her as soon as her head felt better and ached less frequently and even stayed with her during Doctor Enfield’s visits, or at least for most of them, for as soon as the Doctor came to examine her bruised and partially fractured ribs, he lowered his head and left the room as inconspicuously as was possible for a man of more than six feet with a shock of auburn curls on his head, his cheeks indicating a blush that stood out markedly against his otherwise pale features.

"She flinched when you touched her, I saw that. I would advise you to be more careful."

He is well aware of the fact that he towers over Enfield, who is not exactly a Hewlett, but still significantly shorter than him. It’s no different from what he has done in Setauket- the threatening tone of his voice, a viper's hiss seconds before the attack and his respect-infusing physique are universally understood.

Without thinking, his fingers find the knife he has used to cut Elizabeth’s lunch that still lies on the
empty plate in his hand and begins to toy with it.

"Certainly, Colonel", Enfield replies matter-of-fact-ly, but his body language betrays his evident unease.

With a last frigid glare, he pushes the plate into the astonished Enfield's hands. "You can give that to one of the servants on your way out."

He shuts the door in the surprised man's face.

"John... Be kind to Doctor Enfield. He does his best."

"But he hurt you!"

A fatigued sigh escapes her.

"How should he examine my face if he cannot touch it? He is a doctor, he knows what he is doing and he is certainly not a private you can order around in this tone."

*And this man knows that he loves you and wants to protect you from further harm and pain,* he adds in his thoughts but bites his lips and nods obediently in order to not upset the patient.

Sometimes, Elizabeth wondered how any human being with a respectable upbringing could behave in such an unrefined and uncouth manner as John did at times.

It was a mystery to her, for toward her he was a perfect gentleman (if one omitted the fact that perfect gentlemen probably weren’t allowed to kiss young unmarried women alone in the woods but then, she did not qualify as a well-mannered lady either for having accepted with gladness and longed for such an event).

Certainly, a man educated at Eton and Oxford as he had told her ought to know better- or had the war made him so, unable to put the uniform aside that still seemed to clothe him in his mind at least?

“You cannot snarl and growl at the doctor- or anybody else.”

“But-“

“Remember Mary Anne? You were so utterly rude to her when all she meant was to be kind to you.”

At this moment, she was unable to read in his features. His eyes hinted at a certain consternation mixed with outrage, probably at the fact that she had dared to call him rude and something else, a *wildness* she called it for lack of any better description.

“You are no longer in the field. Not everyone who does not do your bidding or opposes your opinion is an enemy. It is time you came home for good.”
It is time you came home for good. He thinks he knows what Elizabeth is on about, what she means to tell him. That he still cannot let go, that he is still entrapped in his old ways of field and camp.

From the bottom of his heart, he wants to oblige her, as he would oblige her every wish without thinking, for she is has command over his heart, but there are impediments to this particular endeavour.

The nightmares that still haunt him or overwhelm him in seemingly unrelated moments; when a servant lets fall a piece of cutlery causing a loud metallic clank, the laugh of a group of men passing by- seemingly insignificant things he cannot foresee or avoid.

He tries to fight it with rigour, but he feels alone, overpowered by the forces of his mind that reduce him to a trembling mass of bone and flesh on several occasions each week.

He is weak, and it is not his leg.

“I didn’t mean to-“

“You didn’t.”

Whenever he takes her hand, he feels somewhat better, so he does. Elizabeth’s soft smile (for now that her face is slowly turning from bright purple to a set of hues of yellow and green, she can smile again, much to his relief and delight) is all he needs to be happy.

And so, he goes and plucks flowers for her, the first ones of the year, which vexes Margaret for due to his bad leg, he shall not (and for that matter, cannot) stray too far from the house, the first snowdrops, liverleaves, daffodils and violets of the year are his to pluck, not hers to behold from the warm safety of the drawing room window and in regular fashion presented to Elizabeth, who chides him for plucking them, but bringing the flowers to her face and smelling them, he can tell she is delighted to partake somewhat in the awakening of spring she is forced to miss this year.

She tells him that she would like to be out in the first rays of the sun and paint, but is not yet well enough to do so and so, he brings even more flowers and small branches with little green leaves which she can draw from her bed into her sketchbook.

Sometimes, he hides a poem written in miniscule letters onto a small slip of paper in the chalice of a daffodil, waiting for her to find it.

A COUNTRY-SCENE IN SPRING

Cold Winter’s court abandoned lies, fled are all his courtiers,

To worship Spring and sweetly sing the songs of ancient warriors.

Among the hills so bright and gay now freed from bitter snow

The flowers bloom in many hues and wake each maid and beau.
From farmyard and from village square they flock and throng at dances

And ale and beer to eager ears promise dalliances.

But nowhere would, I a wand’ring man, prefer to be but here,

In Devon’s hills, with balmy air, among the hare and deer,

Where quietly lie the meadows bright with flowers fair and plenty,

The witnesses of joys to come who triumphed o’er ice’s tyranny.

For neither man nor womankind I e’er anticipated,

As to pass by all their joyfulness since youth I have been fated.

T’is there I chanced to meet someone, a faery she must be,

For gracious was her way to speak and when she addressed me,

Her every word an incantation weaved that caught me in its net

And thus enchanted I followed her without any regret.

Her nut-brown hair and hazel eyes that shine like precious stone,

Have lured me from my lonesome path and I’m no more alone.

She is the sun in early morn, the moon in th’ evening sky-

And no longer do I know how once I lived without her nearby.

Dear Sun, dear Moon, shine bright your rays down on me-

For in the dark without your light your face I cannot see.

It was he who made her recovery a much more enjoyable affair than she had thought it would be and although she was still discontent being shut up in her bedroom for most of the day even with Aunt Margaret, Uncle Samuel and some friends from Honiton coming to visit her regularly, the closed-off world of her bedroom door became a wondrous place of dreams at the same time.

They had both adopted certain ways and routines around each other in the two weeks they spent in her room together trying to elude her aunt’s frowns and her uncle’s knowing smiles likewise whenever they entered and found them laughing together or even him reading to her while she rested in bed with her eyes closed.

It felt as if they were intruders, not meant to see what they had now seen countless of times, which puzzled her- had she not lived with her aunt for all her life and with Uncle Samuel for longer than a dozen years? Was not, if anybody, John Simcoe the intruder?

No, he wasn’t, he had no home of his own, which was sad, but he had his godfather, her uncle, who
was his family of sorts, though not related by blood and she would not have a home either had her aunt not taken care of her almost a full score years ago.

Feeling somewhat better, she had persuaded John to carry her downstairs to the lady’s sitting room for a change of scenery— from there, she could overlook another part of the surrounding landscape from a comfortable couch that her aunt usually reserved for herself, but had relinquished to her now to aid her recovery.

She had asked him about his leg, of course, but he had assured her he was fine and that before any of the servants (who were all significantly slighter in build than he was) had to do it, he would.

It had almost shocked her how exhilarating it felt being swept up in his arms; the last time it had happened, she had been unconscious and woken much later in a sea of pain.

His hand gently pushed between the mattress and her thighs and lifted her up, the other hand around her back while she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself even closer to him, to support herself.

In these moments, she felt the strangest sort of bolt in her belly, almost like the first time they had kissed, only stronger.

When Margaret had spied them the first time, she had screeched and pointed out every violation of propriety they had both committed until she had rolled her eyes and asked her aunt if she’d rather have her walk or be dropped by someone who could not carry her for as long as John could and informed her that the sound of her screeching voice hurt her head.

John had only looked at her and with a much too contented-looking grin carried her off in the opposite direction.

Never before had she dared to disrespect her aunt and doing it for the first time had been strange, terrifying almost, for now she had shown ingratitude for the woman who had selflessly raised her.

They had reconciled, aunt and niece, and Elizabeth had explained everything calmly to her and that she would never want to disrespect or hurt her in any way but that she was grateful for John and his attention, and that he made her feel considerably better.

“It’s spring”, Aunt Margaret had commented, “The time the lambs run mad”, and not said another word about it.

Not knowing what to make of her aunt’s comment that could be interpreted in several ways, not all of which were of a friendly, compassionate, or at least understanding nature, she reached for a magazine on the nearby table. John had forgotten it there earlier when he had sat there with her and read while she had drawn the view from the window but had been called to the study by Uncle Samuel who apparently needed (or simply wanted) to speak to him.

The *London Magazine*, or as it was also called, the *Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer*, printed all sorts of articles, from bawdy stories to essays on science, letters to the editor and amateur poetry.

Uncle Samuel sometimes bought it as well but usually kept the contents of said publication that were not meant for the ears of ladies to himself.

John, she knew read it predominantly because the Lectures in Modern History interested him greatly—or that was what he had told her.

Indeed, she found the edge of the page bearing the third side of the history-lecture creased;
apparently this was where he had left off and wanted to resume reading once Uncle Samuel would release him.

Somewhat bored alone and a little curious as well, she flicked through the magazine. Reports on Parliament, a longer story, a shorter story, letters to the editor on the genuine nature of Ossian or if Macpherson was a fraud and had not only translated, but written most of the supposedly old Scotch tales himself and some poetry were among the wild mix of articles the magazine offered.

To a YOUNG LADY on the return of her Lover from America.

Harriet prepare! thy captain’s come:

Thy captain’s come from far;
Without the noise of fife or drum,
Or pageantry of war.

His courage he hath well aprov’d,
In distant climes ‘twas shown:
Now for the sake of her he loved,
He’d show it in his own.

The trumpet for the lute he’ll quit;
For some such couch the plain;
And boldly his loved Harriet meet
In Venus’s campaign.

Full many a wound he got in war,
Full many a toil endur’d,
Besides that little fatal scar
That must by you be cur’d.

Then gently take him in your arms
And he’ll be over true;
Tho’ fond of war and fierce alarms

He’d sooner fight with you.

He’d fight- but sure to be o’ercome,

Opposed to such a foe;

And never murmur at his doom

When you have laid him low.

Blushing, she closed the magazine and placed it exactly as she had found it and thanked the Heavens no one had found her mid-read.

Now this was a novelty. Never before had she read such a thing and thought- well, what she had thought, remembering their first kiss and the many that had followed it, a thousand, then a hundred, then another thousand and hundred again as she had read, his big, calloused hands lifting her up into his arms, where she could recline for the much too short journey to wherever in the house she fancied to go, her head leaning against his shoulder, his smile when she had discovered the poem he had written for her-

There was no point in denying it any longer or writing it off under any other denomination that indicated fondness for a person in the most impersonal or diplomatic manner:

She was in love, in love with John Simcoe.

-and what happened in the poem had not seemed as abhorrent to her as it should have, being unwed.

As she permitted the word to cross her mind the first time, she wanted to cry out in elation and unbridled joy and swallow her thoughts in fear and shamefulness at the same time.

She was in love.

Oh, how wonderful these words sounded and how terrible at the same time, how strange, how new, how exciting and terrifying.

She was in love.

Closing her eyes for no more than a few seconds, suddenly footsteps approached behind her in a familiar pattern of clip-clop on the wooden floorboards.

“Why are you smiling?”, a familiar voice asked.

“It is just the sun shining too brightly”, she lied most unconvincingly, at which her unexpected company retorted “then let me offer you some shade”, at which he bowed down to her and truly shielded her face from the rays of the radiant spring sun with his head, kissing her.

Only much later Elizabeth, her brain fully occupied with the situation in which she was currently engaged in, asked herself if not a second pair of footsteps had approached and dismissed it for the time being, until definitive proof of it emerged much later.
-But for the moment, she was happy and John evidently was, too.

Chapter End Notes

The Fianna were a band of elite warriors made up by men from the nobility and often feature in Irish mythology. Their most well-known commander was Fionn mac Cumhaill, who, among other things, slew a dragon and burnt his finger on the Salmon of Knowledge roasting over a fire, awarding him all the wisdom of the world combined whenever he stuck his thumb in his mouth. This is also one of the, in my opinion cooler explanations for wisdom teeth, which apparently grow where Fionn's thumb touched the inside of his mouth.

Admiral Samuel Graves' family came from the area of today's Northern Ireland and he may have been born there, where exactly, I did not find, so I had to choose between six counties to put the family in, which means my chances that my guess, Co. Londonderry, is right, are at 16.66%, which is not that bad. ;) If Samuel Graves really had a slight accent especially when drunk is lost to history and rooted in my imagination entirely.

The first poem: translation of Petrach's "Rima 134" by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547).

"Da mi basia mille", "Vivamus mea Elizabeth [Lesbia]" etc.: Poem no. 2, the well-known "Catullus 5". It is alluded to in Elizabeth's point of view towards the end as well, this time in English.

Simcoe's childhood story and the farewell-letter are a product of my imagination.

Regarding the daffodils, I thought if a big bumble-bee fits in, a thin piece of paper rolled and with writing on both sides might as well. If there are any botanists reading this, please enlighten me in case I'm wrong on this.

The third poem (the terrible one) is one by me in Simcoe's name and is about as good as the poems by his historical counterpart. It is in part connected to the fourth poem used in this story, printed in the actual March issue of the "London Magazine" and perhaps unsurprisingly, anonymously. The magazine existed from 1731 to 1922.

As far as my research went, the 18th century issues are digitised and available online for free. Other than bawdy poetry, parliament reports and lectures on history, I have come across pretty awesome (and dangerous) sounding experiments with electricity and swords (in the same experiment!) and a lot of other amusing things.

Macpherson did write large quantities of his "Ossian" himself, inspired by Irish and Scottish mythology.

Back to the poems: in the poetry section of the 1782 March issue, there are two poems which can both be sung to the tune of "The Girl I Left Behind Me", which I think featured on "TURN" once, too. One of them oh so coincidentally is "To a YOUNG
LADY on the return of her Lover from America."

Other popular lyrics that are sung to the same melody include "Waxie's Dargle", "The Rare Old Mountain Dew" and "An Spailpín Fánach", which you might have heard at your local Irish pub.

Now, the poem written by me (Simcoe in the story) can be sung to the same melody, which indicates he has read the poems in the magazine already, especially of course the one that made Elizabeth blush and well, was much like Elizabeth very much inspired by the captain and his Harriet... ;)

The chapter title is also lifted from this poem.

And last but not least, a big thank-you goes to Maryassassina for loving and encouraging me to include Lion, who originally was the side-product of a predominantly whimsical comment about what Simcoe must have been like as a child and would perhaps never have featured.
Now Margaret's Curse Is Fall'n Upon Our Heads

Chapter Summary

Our protagonists become somewhat imprudent, Aunt Margaret has a devious plan and Doctor Enfield tries to do the right thing.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: family fights, period-typical views of gender and sex, faking injuries and an almost-proposal.

He doesn't like this situation much, standing there, arms outstretched with the tailor fussing about and taking measurements - and never before has he had company other than the tailor with him, too.

Elizabeth is busy looking through the samples of fabric the man has brought and makes a little noise now and then, sometimes a hum of approval or a sigh of disappointment.

When the measuring tape is slung around his waist, he feels her glance on him, which leads him to the supposition that she- no, she is too polite to do such a thing, staring in general.

"As for the fabric, sir...?"

"The usual black."

"If you don't mind me saying", Elizabeth suddenly joins their conversation, "I think you ought to wear something other than black. Dark greens and purplish reds like mulberry or burgundy should suit your fair complexion splendidly. Here-" 

She takes a sample, rises from the couch and walks over to him in elegant and determined strides that tell anyone who looks at her she is on a mission.

Elizabeth holds the sample against his chest, looks up to his face and then back down again.

"Perfect."

He keeps watching her with great curiosity as she busily circles him, who is even taller than her now standing on the wooden block in the middle of the room.

The tailor agrees with her and seems to consider her an expert in the matter of male garments, for he talks to her with a serious face and nods a lot.

As the two talk, he barely listens, for Elizabeth keeps distracting him. She had started gingerly at first, and then grown bolder when she had noticed he agreed with her treatment.

Pretending to specify the exact fit of the jacket, she touches his shoulder, runs her fingers across the
breadth of his back asking the tailor if the amount of fabric estimated by him could ever suffice a man
of such a striking build and tortures him with a brush of her fingertips just above his waist when she
gives a lecture on the length of his waistcoat or whatever else she is talking about now.

It is a game, he knows that. And she knows he enjoys it to no end.

Suddenly, the boring and uncomfortable affair of commissioning new clothes has become rather
enjoyable.

"Have you come to a decision, sir?"

He shrugs, realising he has not paid attention to what was said at all.

"I am quite d'accord with Miss Gwillim's opinions and trust in her judgement."

He ends up buying two new jackets and three waistcoats as well as some other trifles, neckties and
the like, everything Elizabeth has said. If she likes it, he likes it, too.

And somehow, though he does not care much for his accoutrement as long as everything is clean and
the cuffs and collar of his shirt starched and ironed, the idea to wear Elizabeth's choice in front of
everyone makes him feel like a proud peacock showing his impressive wheel of feathers.

He needed new clothes fairly pressingly and upon realising that his old jackets slowly showed traces
of threadbare-ness around the cuffs and elbows, he had called for the local tailor.

Purely by chance, Elizabeth had overheard, coming from the library, how he had ordered a servant to
send a message to the tailor the previous evening and she had insisted on keeping him company.

Now that she is better and able to walk again, she makes use of her renewed strength and only this
morning before breakfast, they had taken a stroll together in the early spring sun, not very far, her
body pressed closely to his seeking for shelter from the still icy morning-air.

Even just thinking about her makes his heart jump with wild delight.

Elizabeth was more than happy. Never would she have thought he would leave the important
decision what to wear to her- but he had done. She felt touched and honoured- it was such an
intimate, personal thing to do.

She hoped his new wardrobe would arrive in a timely fashion for she was already most excited to see
them, how the cuts would fit him and the colours flatter him. He would look splendid, and she could
perhaps choose her outfits to match his on occasion.

Today was a good day; she had taken up walking again three days ago and felt as healthy as her state
permitted; Uncle Samuel had left the house on horseback after breakfast to go on important business
with some tenants and John was by her side, which was the best thing of all, for that left only Aunt
Margaret with them in the house and she had retired after breakfast with a headache.

“To see you well again, Elizabeth, it is—“ he paused in search for the right words, “the greatest gift on
this earth and more than I deserve.”
Moved by his words, Elizabeth replied “And to see you well again after you’ve come here is the greatest gift I have ever been given and I thank the Lord for it every day.”

“Your side is healing well? I have observed you wear your stays fairly loosely, do your ribs still hurt?”

Elizabeth was surprised how attentively he followed her convalescence and especially so at the fact that he took notice of her garments. Most men did not care much about a woman’s clothes, a friend who was already married had told her once, as long as they could be taken off quickly.

“A little. I must pay attention when touching the affected area and I should not run or it feels as if my lungs would break the ribs again. Other than that, I can sit up and walk, which is a great improvement I think.”

Her former nurse looked at her with concern.

“Then has our little walk this morning been too strenuous for you? You should have said-“

“No, it wasn’t, not at all. The air and the sun did me great good.”

“We could have rested or I could have carried you back to the house-“

“Of that, I must say, I am greatly in favour.” She smiled knowingly and savoured John’s moment of confusion.

“What?”

“Being carried around by you, I mean. It probably was the most agreeable part of it all.”

John’s face took a concerned expression.

“You know I would carry you everywhere, were it your wish, but there are other parties living under this roof who would not like me to do it past the point of your definite convalescence when we shall lack a justification for it. I would hate to churn up needless strife with your aunt.”

Aunt Margaret began to take up a steadily growing part of their conversations to Elizabeth’s great vexation. She was aware of her aunt’s well-meaning and protectiveness, but at the same time she also harboured an irrational dislike against John. It became increasingly harder for her to navigate between the two, love them both in the respective ways.

“We must find a new reason to do so then- oh!”

With great theatricality, Elizabeth pretended to take one step toward John but, just as she put her right foot forward to put her weight on and pull the left one close behind, she stumbled so she would strategically land in his arms.

“Lying in bed has weakened my ankles considerably, I might hurt myself if I don't pay enough attention.”

He guided her to the nearby couch, supporting her weight like he would to get a wounded comrade away from danger in the field, sat her down, knelt before the piece of furniture and sternly ordered her to extend her foot to him.

Coquettishly, she pushed her foot forward from under the layers of petticoats and placed it in his waiting hand.
The shoe was removed with great care, as if he truly were anxious to hurt her and circled her ankle with his thumb in slow, rubbing movements.

His touch felt divine and Elizabeth congratulated herself for having chosen a pair of her prettiest stockings this morning with some delicate floral embroidery on the side of her thigh and pretty garters with pink ribbons.

“I find your ankle not swollen”, he commented his ministrations, one eyebrow raised in amusement and began to trail his fingers lightly upwards to her knee, stopping at the garter, and back down again.

“Your leg seems well to me”, he said, never breaking eye contact with her, “I think you are quite-“

“JOHN GRAVES SIMCOE! ELIZABETH!”

Never before had the halls of Hembury Fort House been shattered thus.

Aunt Margaret who was evidently better than in the morning, stormed into the room and looked down on both of them, who had frozen into the shocked impersonations of porcelain figurines, caught in the act.

“What are you doing? Have you no shame? I’ve watched you quite a while now. Seducing my niece in my own house at every given opportunity! And you Elizabeth, I’d have expected better of you. I didn’t raise you to fall in the arms of the next best-“

“Margaret.” John rose to his full height, facing her aunt.

“Is that all, Simcoe?”

Margaret Graves seemed not in the slightest afraid of him. In earlier days, Aunt Margaret had referred to him as “John” and always been civil to him, perhaps only for her uncle’s sake, but she had been polite, friendly even, trying to make him comfortable.

The longer however he had stayed in the house, their relationship had tensed considerably.

“I didn’t hurt her. I never could.”

“How peculiar, then pray tell me, how and why was my niece injured in the first place?”

Even from her place on the couch Elizabeth could see how John’s countenance shifted from angry and trying to intimidate to an underlying layer of indignation and a strange softness, vulnerability even.

Before he could say anything else, Elizabeth jumped up as she could not stand how her aunt and John seemed to talk over her head.

“John did not cause my fall. I decided to go riding that day and he joined me. I proposed a race. It was an accident. It could just as easily have been you or Uncle Samuel in my stead.”

She is a lioness. Elizabeth’s eyes darken dangerously as she confidently walks up to him and
Margaret to stand closely by his side opposite the woman who has raised her.

“At least *that* guilt we can clear him of”, Margaret retorts aridly, fixating her niece with her deadly stares.

“Would you please explain?”, Elizabeth asks with a patience he admires her for.

“Apart from what he has done over yonder in America, I know what I’ve seen. How far has it gone?” “Mrs Graves, you are being rather rude to your nice, who is obviously distresssed. I suggest an apology is in order”, he snaps, not wanting Elizabeth to be compromised by such a question.

He can feel how uncomfortable she is, shifting from one leg to the other, but she bravely keeps her face a mask of calmness while searching for a suitable reply.

“Then you tell me, Simcoe. Go on.”

It is not that he has never thought about *it*, alone in his chamber on a sleepless night when lying awake after hours of torturous dreams to torture himself with something different for variation: he would carry her to bed in his arms and then she would kiss him, ardently, and he would respond and caress her until her body would grow slack under his untiring hands and mouth until she would breathe his name in breathless gasps of air onto his skin and-

Margaret is insofar right that he has had certain thoughts, scenes in his head in which Elizabeth features, but that does not mean he seeks to share her bed in reality.

He would not. He could not. She is no Lady Lola, she is the woman he loves and adores and whom he would never endanger in any way.

For now, their kisses and little gestures, hands brushing in the corridor, Elizabeth playing with strands of his hair when nobody is looking, is all they have and it is enough.

It is beyond shameful that Margaret thinks he is a concupiscent lecher who solely wishes to be close to Elizabeth to bully her into sleeping with him, and he is even more appalled that she compromises her niece in front of him. As if *that* would be all there is to love.

“None of the indecencies you insinuate have occurred between Elizabeth and myself. Upon my honour-”

“Your *honour*”, she is basically laughing in his face, “that you have won in the war? That you have never had in the first place? There is no honour in what you did. Your past has not been erased by crossing the waters back to England.”

Enough was enough for Elizabeth, who threw herself between the warring factions for fear of the day ending even worse than it was already.

There was no other explanation to be given than that she and John had been happy, had been flirtatious and enjoyed it, but she had never lain with him, God no, even if she admittedly enjoyed his close physical proximity whenever she could and had, in forbidden phantasies experimenting with different scenarios wondered what it would be like.
“I’ve twisted my ankle, John was only—“

The lie was limping worse than she ever could pretend to and she knew that. It was however her only idea at the moment.

“‘John’ it is now? And at dinner, you’re going to call him ‘Colonel’ again, am I correct? Your charade is up. And if your ankle is so badly hurt, we should call Doctor Enfield, shouldn’t we? He’ll assure us of the state of your foot.”

With a last cruel smile, she shouted for one of the servants to make the coach ready and bring Enfield here post haste.

“And until he’s here, you’ll go to your rooms, both of you.”

Nothing else was to be done than to obey the furious Aunt Margaret. Without Uncle Samuel in the house, there was no one who could probably influence or calm her in any way.

With a great gap between them, they walked back to their respective rooms. Once the seething Margaret was out of earshot and Elizabeth at her door, John lingered for a moment and said in his sincerest voice:

“I did not wish this to happen.”

“Neither did I”, Elizabeth smiled mirthlessly.

“But now, that your aunt knows and that she has asked these questions- we should- we have to think about-“ “The future?”

“The future”, he repeated.

“Our future.” “Oh.”

Elizabeth didn’t know what to say. Had he said “our future”? Was this a proposal? Did he say this only to save her honour in case of any rumours? After all, by now all the servants in the house would know about the major argument that had broken out between the lady of the house and the Colonel and they would certainly not remain quiet.

Was he asking her because the situation had essentially forced him to? Did he consider it an obligation? “I meant to say-“ he broke off, sighed agitatedly and continued: “Elizabeth, I love you. That is all I truly meant to say.”

With his eyes downcast, he awaited her response, ready to be rebuked. His shoulders tensed, his right index finger beat an incessant non-rhythm against the side of his breeches and he trembled softly as if he were suppressing a sob.

Never before had she been so moved in her life before, so utterly convinced of someone else’s words. He loved her.

“And I love you, John.”

He raised his head.

“You do?”

“I do. In fact, I’ve never felt like that before- when I’m with you, I’m soaring through the air and even on the darkest days, everything is bright because I know I will see you, and I don’t eat or sleep
much but I’m neither hungry nor tired- I am confused and yet I know that all I want is to be with you.”

The words had left her mouth before Elizabeth had even been able to comprehend their meaning.

John did indeed sob, two tears running down his face, and embraced her, held her close and kissed the crown of her head.

“My Eliza”, he murmured into her hair, and she responded with a “my John”, whispered into his shoulder.

Whatever would happen tonight when her uncle would return and in the more immediate future when she was to be examined by Enfield as a punishment for- for being in love, she did not care about.

What could they do? Lock her in her room and keep John in solitary confinement in his as well?

Marry her next week to someone like Richard Graves, who would gladly have had her promise her hand to him much earlier (but she had more than once rejected the advances her uncle’s other godson had made her and openly shown him her dislike of his person), most likely due to the money he would obtain by marrying her?

Or send her away, to Uncle Samuel’s relatives in Ireland, or to her Gwillim- or Spinckes- relations in Northamptonshire, far enough away?

They couldn’t do that. She was a woman, not a child and in command over her own fortunes, both luck and money.

She wouldn’t let them. All she wanted was to be with John and the family to reconcile. Nothing culpable had ever happened between her and John, they were quite simply in love!

Naturally, her thoughts turned to Aunt Margaret’s vague insinuations. She knew most about his past from Mary Anne’s tales on the night of his birthday and never given it a thought again. He had been there for her in her crisis, cared for her and never been anything less than gentle, respectful and loving- she could not comprehend how this man, whom she loved so dearly, should be the monster her aunt seemed to see in him.

He certainly was no monster. What he had done, she could not say, and would have to ask him about sometime, but his love for her outshone everything in this world, everything.

Sitting on her bed, she re-arranged the curls somewhat again that had fallen out of her coiffure when John had rested his head against her. At least this way, her hands were busied and she could try and keep her thoughts off the impending doom that was about to strike her with force.

An hour later, Enfield arrived and Elizabeth was escorted to the main sitting room by a servant. 

*Like a convict*, she thought darkly.

Aunt Margaret and Doctor Enfield and to her surprise, John, who seemed to have come with a similar escort were already waiting for her.

“Sit, child, and tell the good Doctor where it hurts”, Margaret chimed almost too excitedly.

“My right ankle”, Elizabeth tried to say without sounding insincere and adjusted he face into a grimace of mild pain.
“Here?”

Enfield had knelt down, just like John not long ago, and felt along her ankle with his quick, deft fingers.

“Hm. Can you move the foot normally?” “No, it hurts a little when I walk and when I try to stretch it.”

“I see”, Enfield said in an almost introverted, solemn voice, “this is a most peculiar case.” Elizabeth’s heart sank.

“Mrs Graves, I will be honest with you: Your niece needs rest and must not undertake great journeys on foot in the coming days, for if she does, she is in danger of losing her foot. It is a most devious thing, this specific type of sprain. She shall be treated with a salve I will leave for you three times daily and not overexert herself walking or standing up for the coming week. I will come a second time then and examine her again.”

Aunt Margaret looked as if someone had shoved a whole raw lemon into her mouth.

Elizabeth was not sure if she should laugh or play the distressed patient.

“Please, allow me a moment with Miss Gwillim alone? I need to caution her regarding the side-effects.”

John nodded obediently and left the room, followed by a much more reluctant Aunt Margaret.

Something about his intonation of the word “side—effects” did not please Elizabeth at all, anxiously, she awaited what the doctor had to say who, once the door was closed, rose from the floor and sat down on the couch next to her.

At first, the plain rudeness of his actions struck her, but then she remembered this man had just saved her face and decided to overlook this transgression.

His voice was not as booming as before and not oozing its usual distant, cold efficiency.

What he had to tell her was only meant for her ears, she realised quickly.

“Make sure to appear limping somewhat in the following days, Miss Gwillim. We would not want you to be found out.” Enfield winked at her with one dark-brown eye.

“Thank you, how can I ever-“ “There is no need for that. The servant who took me here told me the tale on the way. I stand in no opposition to young lovers, whoever they may be.”

At the latter part of the sentence, his voice trailed off and his eyes turned to the direction John had disappeared to before he returned to the conversation at hand.

“I must however caution you. Take it as the advice not of a doctor, but that of a friend who has seen his share of this world.”

And in a lower tone he continued, “My personal opposition to your aunt’s methods does not mean I disagree with her entirely. The Colonel seems taken with you indeed, but are you clear of his intentions for you?”

“His intentions?”, Elizabeth echoed incredulously.

“Is he courting you? Has he initiated any closer acquaintance or asked you to engage in-“
“No. John is kind and most considerate. We have never- Your insinuations, Doctor, are horrifying.” Enfield sighed and looked at her with sadness and concern in his features.

“Men are fleeting and impatient creatures, Miss Gwillim, and very persuasive at times. All I ask of you to be on your guard and remain steadfast. You would not be the first young woman of good repute taken by scarlet fever.” “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I would hate being called to the house for a delivery in nine months’ time”, he replied bluntly, “when Colonel Simcoe is likely off to another field, given he is almost fully recovered, in a foreign land where he might fall or leave you and the babe behind without returning.”

“This is quite enough, Doctor Enfield. Your opinion of Colonel Simcoe is none of my concern, but I assure you, he is not the kind to-“

She blushed excessively thinking about what she wanted to say and to her shame, the thought did not fill her with dread or disgust, but with bashful curiosity.

At the same time however, Enfield’s words affected her even if she did not want to hear them.

How could everyone presume with a nonchalant arrogance they had command over her decisions, her life?

The Admiral had returned a mere half-hour after Enfield left and was immediately assaulted by a long, enraged tirade about his godson, this lazy ne’er do well who was trying to seduce Elizabeth for her money and their niece, whom she did not recognise anymore and who had shocked her with her brazen rudeness, which likely was a product of “this unsavoury character”’s bad influence.

Margaret had fought bitterly to make her husband do something about it, sent him away or talk to Elizabeth like a stern father (or foster father) should and encourage her to find another outlet for her newfound passionate nature.

His godfather had done nothing of the sort and sighed dismissively before he had retired to his study and called for him to come.

Obediently, he had listened what the older man had to say.

“You know Margaret. Her dislike for you, on whatever else she may blame it, is solely rooted in your affection for Elizabeth. You must understand her, she’s her sister’s girl- the poor woman died not a day after she was born and Elizabeth was entrusted into Margaret’s care. She loves the girl like her own daughter and I do so, too- and you like my son.”

He smiles at him before he continues, “it is only natural that my wife, whom we both know to be susceptible to her passions, cares deeply for Elizabeth- and then there is also the question of her fortune to consider.”

It was always about the money, wasn’t it?

“I know you since you were a boy, John. Margaret has misconstrued the affection you have for my niece all along. I trust there is mutuality to your… courtship?”
Has he said courtship? In this moment, his heart had raced.

“Yes. I love her. And she loves me.” For him, it is hard to speak of such emotions, especially with the man who has been appointed by his late father to assist his son in life in his stead.

The old Admiral had nodded slowly.

“I do not oppose this arrangement. In fact, I am much in favour of this development. Elizabeth is a young woman and it was just a question of time until she would develop an interest in male company. To think of the penniless gamblers of Bath or London she could have met on her travels- I am much in favour of you.”

“Do you propose-“

“My dear boy, not yet. All in due time. You have known Elizabeth for a few months now, give it some more.”

“I was not asking that-“

“So you don’t want to marry her?”

“I have not asked her for her hand, if that is what you mean.”

“And don’t. Not yet. We would not want to rush something as important as this. It is about the happiness about the two young people I have come to consider my own children, whom I wish to be happy. Get to know each other for a little longer and- for the love of God, do not-“

“I understand, sir.”

It had not been pleasant at all to discuss such matters with his godfather.

“You’re no monk, John”, the Admiral had sighed, “and Elizabeth is young and –adventurous. Don’t.” The fire in the older man’s eyes had told him that he meant what he said.

“I never considered it before, Admiral.”

“And yet my wife found you and Elizabeth in a compromising pose.”

“Yes. We have been- reckless, but neither of us would have initiated anything grossly-“ “If you truly love Elizabeth as much as I can tell she loves you, you have my blessing. Ask her for her hand in a few months’ time and I shall take care of Margaret. She will be livid at first, but she will submit to these developments once she realises she cannot do any more than rage. Agreed?”

They had shaken hands solemnly and it had felt wrong. He should have asked Elizabeth first.

In this moment, a timid knock disrupts his thoughts.

“Enter.”

Elizabeth stands in the door quickly looking left and right, and then closes it.

“I’ve eluded my captors”, she grinned.

“I must ask you something.” “What is it?”

“The Admiral has talked to me. About us. He has nothing against us being together.”
“I thought as much. Uncle Samuel likes you.”

“He proposed we should- that I should- that I should not yet-“

“Hush, John”, she says and draws nearer, placing her finger on his lips, “it doesn’t matter. Not now. I love you, that’s all that’s important.”

“I love you too”; he replies and kisses her deeply.

They are alone in his room.

“We mustn’t be so obvious in the company of your aunt”, he finally says, pulling his lips from hers.

“Indeed not. If Enfield hadn’t saved us out of pity after hearing the talk from the servants, I don’t know what we could have done. What do you propose we do, Colonel?” She raised an eyebrow.

“For now continue to be in love?”

“That sounds like a splendid idea.”

They kiss another thousand and then another hundred times before Elizabeth lets go of his hand and says, winking, “I better go now. Before we have to call Doctor Enfield again to rescue us.”

She winks, and reminds him of Margaret’s surprised face when Enfield had declared Elizabeth unfit to walk and they hold each other in their arms, laughing quietly.

Everything, all doubts, all warnings were swept cleanly off her mind as long as John was with her, the unpleasant conversations of the afternoon forgotten.

Knowing someone would look for her (likely her aunt) sooner or later, she bid him adieu and was just about to leave, the door already open when he said loudly “Miss Gwillim, how careless of you. Wandering through the house? You must mind your health. Has Doctor Enfield not told you to rest? I have seen men lose a foot in the field and I can tell you, an amputation is not a pleasant sight, nor does it do the unfortunate soul affected by it any good.”

With that, he swept her up in his arms and carried her back to her room, passing a still seething Aunt Margaret on the staircase.

“What, Mrs Graves? I act upon doctor’s orders.”

His saintly smile and saccharine tone almost made Elizabeth laugh and she had to hide her face in John’s waistcoat to prevent her aunt from seeing her enjoy the situation.

“You shouldn’t antagonise your hosts”, Elizabeth scolded him amusedly when her aunt was out of earshot.

“And your captors”, he added, and still laughing quietly, he carried her to her room where he promptly offered his services to her, applying the salve Doctor Enfield had prescribed.

If anything, Elizabeth thought contentedly as John massaged the cool, pleasantly herbal-smelling
cream into her completely and entirely healthy ankle, her aunt’s plan had backfired so terribly she had achieved the exact opposite.

One could only hope Aunt Margaret’s ire would gradually subside soon to enable peace negotiations between her and John.

But Elizabeth had confidence and instead of provoking a headache brought on by excessive pondering, she decided to enjoy the far more than pleasant feeling of John’s hands.

The world could wait.

Chapter End Notes

The title is a line borrowed from Shakespeare's "Richard III", Grey, act III, scene III and originally refers to Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI.

Sending her to Ireland: an allusion to "Jane Eyre", in which Jane is tricked into thinking she will assume a new position in Ireland and have to leave Mr Rochester.

Apparently Admiral Graves introduced Elizabeth to one of his nephews (I am not sure if the first name was Richard or Thomas, I'm terribly sorry), who later became heir to Hembury Fort House hoping the two might like each other and could envision getting married.
It turned out that Elizabeth and Richard did not like each other at all and it is said that he later avoided her at social gatherings, because apparently, Elizabeth could be fairly terrifying when rebuking an unwanted suitor.

The scene Margaret takes issue with is so "scandalous" in her eyes because of the ladies' undergarments of the day which consisted of only a shift. So a man kneeling before a lady seated on the sofa with his hand disappearing beneath her skirts... I don't have to tell you what this looks like.

"Scarlet fever" doesn't mean the actual disease but was a term to describe young women falling for British soldiers in the days when the uniforms were still red.

A special thank you goes to Sarah_von_Krolock whose comment gave me the idea for this chapter. Thank you!
The Colonel Returns

Chapter Summary

Elizabeth and John continue to be in love, a masquerade promises some distraction from day-to-day life and Margaret hatches a disastrous new plot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They have visited him again. A surprise ambush in the night has left him utterly defenceless against the pictures that have forced themselves onto his mind, pictures he would rather forget.

At first, there is Percy, waving him to come closer to the riverside, asking him to come and play. As in every dream, he follows the little boy, auburn-haired like him, telling him to listen to his older brother, to come back, it is an order.

But Percy never does. He always runs to the river and falls in. And whenever he comes to the part where Percy falls in, he finds he is no longer John standing on the riverbank, he is Percy and he is drowning.

He can barely breathe, his lungs filled with the smoke of a million muskets, trying to move in a sea of red, the bodies of men in British uniforms around him, more and more falling by the minute, balls, shrapnel and enemy blades lodging in their bodies, a wave of blue overpowering them.

They’re at an advantage, charging down a hill from which they level their cannons directly at the enemy and strike British soldiers with every cannonball.

He fights, kills at least nine men who try to attack him from all sides, buried waist-high in bodies.

He gores them, stabs them, shoots them with ease even if he knows he cannot, he will not win.

He will die before the night falls, eventually too tired to fight. At the moment however, he is still to enraged to feel tired, to relent to the persistent onslaught of his enemies and so he keeps fighting, for there is nothing else he can do, twists and turns, cuts and shoots, and then repeats the same routine over and over.

And over and over until he spots a white shape in the distance.

At first, he thinks it must be a French soldier, but it is not- the figure is too small and delicately-built to be a soldier, the accoutrements too billowing to be a uniform and the figure’s hair dances in the blood-heavy wind.

The figure in white draws closer and he can see it is a woman: her dark hair contrasts her pale complexion and white dress. She is no ghost, she is real, for in between two stabs with his bayonet he can see her feet and the hem of her dress, which indicate she cannot have been floating in the air, for both her bare feet and the lower part of her dress are soaked in the blood of dead soldiers.

When she is close to him, close to the mob of men he tries to fight off, he can see her face clearly:
What is she doing here?

All he knows now is that he no longer fights for himself or rather against the senselessness of dying before extinguishing as many enemies as possible, he fights for her.

He must protect her.

His lungs explode, his arms grow heavier and he knows he is weary; his movements don’t come as quickly anymore and his enemies close in on him.

She nears the group of fighting men, apparently the French and American soldiers closing in on him don’t notice, and extends her hand.

Guided by instinct, nay, yearning, he reaches out for her when suddenly, he feels the blade between his ribs: it doesn’t hurt, not at first, for there is only surprise; his outstretched arm has left his right side unprotected and given one of the men he has thought he had stabbed lethally enough to seize his last chance before dying himself to take him to hell, too.

Roaring in pain, he pulls the serrated blade from the wound, pulling out more flesh and tissue than he would have thought.

Then, the pain sets in alongside the realisation that the amount of blood on his uniform is abnormal in the extreme.

Beneath him, his legs give way, and he is swept into the sea of corpses and those only moments away from becoming one; the bodies close in on him, suffocate him and despite the blood loss and the pain, he keeps his arm outstretched, but she doesn’t come closer. She just stands there and reaches out for him, looking on with a face still as marble as he drowns. But can marble cry?

A single teardrop on her cheek is the last thing he sees before he cannot breathe anymore and gasping for air, his dream comes to an end and he awakes.

Most of the dream is instantly familiar to him, Percy, the battle, and all their devious intricacies and cruel vividness.

It is as if there is a set of different letters in his head and his imagination is a typesetter who assembles the elements differently every night; he should get used to it, but he does not. It is always terrifying.

Only She has never been there before, which he does not know what to make of.

When he comes to and remembers who he is, where he is and what he is doing there, he finds himself covered in cold perspiration with his hair sticking unpleasantly to his forehead and the back of his neck, shivering from the cold of the room and the intensity of the dream.

He can still hear the shots and cries of dying men and smell the blood and musket fire.

Outside, the world lies still shrouded in darkness; the morning has not yet come. No bird is awake to keep him company, no sunray announces the coming of a new day.

He is alone, cold and terrified, although he does not like to think about it.

If only She were here with him- the thought comes to him intuitively, for he knows She is the only one who would be able to give him peace now. Whenever he is with Her, he feels better, he does not think about anybody or anything else, they exist together alone in a crowded world of afternoon tea and watchful relatives and no musket ball, dying foe or apple has ever perturbed him in Her
company.

That was until now. For as he now slowly comes to realise, the figure in the dream was Elizabeth.

What did she do there? And, worst of all, why could he not save her? What happened to her after he woke up? Did the enemies catch her and do God knows what a pack of battle-lusty soldiers do to a young woman? The thought that he could not help her, even in a dream, troubles him greatly.

*I will and I must protect her, always,* he thinks, scared something might happen to her when it is not in a dream of his and with firm resolve makes this promise to himself, putting his hand on the bible that has been in the room when he moved in and had until then been buried underneath a pile of books beside his bed.

In the face of the Lord, he gives his warrior’s word to protect and serve only Her, his sun who illumines the dreary darkness that shrouds him and lights his way.

Although they only know each other for a few months now, he has never loved anybody as he does her.

It hurts and it soothes, caresses and strikes him with force, this tender, cruel beast called love.

Speaking of beasts, he longs for a bath in order to wash the sweat of his nightmare away which is bitterly necessary if he doesn’t want to appear like a beast in front of the Graves’ and Elizabeth.

Slowly, the darkness outside his window grows lighter and when it is finally light enough to assume the servants are already up (he would not want someone to lose sleep because of him), he calls for a bath to be prepared.

Preparing his bath is a time-consuming affair; large quantities of water need to be heated, the tub to be brought in and filled.

When at last everything is ready, he is no longer certain if he craves a bath.

The water makes him uneasy. Deep inside, he knows his uneasiness is irrational, for the tub is neither deep nor dangerous, but nevertheless his hands grip the sides as he settles himself in the water with almost frantic ferocity.

Feeling the bottom of the tub underneath him settles his emotions somewhat and so, emboldens him for the second step.

Slowly, he slides his feet down until they meet the end of the tub and folds his knees, following the direction of his feet and thus pulling him step by step into the water until only his knees, neck and head are still exposed to the air.

Now, the final step awaits him.

It must be done, he feels unclean with his hair clinging to his neck and face in salty strands and besides, he will not be defeated by a dream, a nightmare.

He is stronger than that.

He will defeat his adversary, he is not weak, he is a warrior.

With his hands still holding on to the tub in a vice-like grip, he forces his head underwater.

Even if this particular body of water poses no threat to him, a grown man, being shallow, warm and
clear, he instantly falls into a panic but still forces himself to remain beneath the surface. He must not lose this battle.

But the dream is too fresh on his mind still.

His mouth opens automatically and he involuntarily inhales a large mouthful of water.

In his state of panic, he does not realise he is still in a bathtub in a room in a house far away from the war, in his head, the war has come to him and it is real.

Once more, images flash past his eyes as he still forces himself not to resurface again just yet, seeing dead bodies, gored, bloody, dead civilians, women and children among them, feels being shot, stabbed and tastes not soap, but an apple in his mouth and lastly, opening his eyes, he is certain Elizabeth, dressed in white is standing on the shore of the river, looking into the water just where he drifts by.

Eventually, his survival instincts rescue him and pull his head from the water.

Gasping and coughing, his lungs rid themselves of the water they have come to host involuntarily. His breathing comes raggedly and with fear, interspersed with whimpering that escape him much louder than he thought they would and it is not long before the droplets of water on his face come not solely from the water in the bathtub.

Suddenly, a feeling of coldness overcomes him. Trying to keep what little warmth is left in him contained in his body, he wraps his arms around his knees and pulls them close but to no avail.

Like a new born child ripped from his mother’s womb he is alone in a cold world, naked, vulnerable and afraid.

There is nobody here to hold him or lull him to sleep, to guide him and take care of him in a world he no longer understands, that is not his.

The war had been his home for almost half his life, he had excelled in all things martial and made his name, a fierce warrior who would not shrink back in the face of peril.

Now the war is over (at least for him) and he seems to be afraid of the very thing that once was his home.

Who is he? Is he still John Graves Simcoe?

He releases a yelp of helplessness and despair, more that of an animal than a human when the silence around him is disrupted by a low, yet determined knock on the door.

“Yes”, John’s voice told her to enter.

Knowing he was an early riser, Elizabeth had thought to profit from this circumstance (her aunt in particular preferred sleeping a little longer than most people and Uncle Samuel too had, now that he seemed to have reached the age when he would likely never return to active duty become a man fond of the later hours of the morning) and see if anything could be done to have the quiet morning hours
She had slept well and soundly and woken with her spirits raised by the thought that the new morning meant the night of separation for her and the man she loved was through.

Much too light-footedly for someone supposedly injured at the ankle, she had made her way to John’s room with an unbridled spring in her step.

The tone of his voice however prompted her to pause; he sounded so sharp, unusually high-pitched and generally odd.

“John, are you well?” No answer came. Instead, she heard the sound of water lapping against the sides of a tub and the aggressive ripple of water falling off a human body.

“I shall leave you now if-“

“No-“

Before she could even think about what exactly was happening, John had opened the door and stood before her, wet and only covered in his mulberry-coloured banyan clinging tightly to his form.

At other times, she would have looked away, somewhat ashamed, but concern kept her from doing so.

“Are you well?”, she repeated her question.

With a stiff, sharp nod of his head, he beckoned her inside and closed the door behind them. Once the door was closed, John began to speak in a low voice, as if he still feared someone might overhear them.

“No.”

Such a little word, so universal and yet so meaningful in this moment. Elizabeth’s heart stung, bleeding for the bleeding heart facing her.

“What is the matter? Can I help you?”

“No one can, as a matter of fact. It is just that I-“ He broke off and sighed.

“I dream. I have bad dreams.”

“About the war?”

“Sometimes.”

How she looks at him with her eyes widened with concern, overflowing with the same unbounding love he has for her.

He cannot tell her about this new dream, about her in it, for fear of frightening her and he cannot talk about the other details of his dream either for different reasons.
Whenever he tries to force descriptions of what he sees in his nightly tribulations in his head, be it to Elizabeth (he has as of now tried to tell her about the war for the second time and failed twice) or to his own image in a looking-glass, he finds that he cannot. He cannot, however much he would like to.

“You are safe now, you’re here”, she tries to soothe him, takes his hands in hers to make him realise this is no dream, this is reality, and they are really in his room together.

He looked at her, a crooked smile on his face. It was the only smile he had, apparently years on the battlefield made a man forget the flirtatious smirks of the ballroom-beaus, which she had learned to interpret from observation: a lot could be said about the mood and present state of mind of John Graves Simcoe from analysing his eyes, their colour, and the state of his eyebrows.

Presently, the latter were furrowed, and his eyes seemed darkened with whatever cloud hovered over his soul. The circles under his eyes were accentuated by his naturally pale skin and made him look like a ghost.

“You need to rest, John.”

“For the dream to return? I don’t want that.”

“Look, Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel are still asleep, it is no more than eight in the morning, they always sleep late. Rest another hour or two.”

“No.”

“Are you that afraid?”

“Yes.”

For the first time since they had met, John sounded genuinely afraid.

“What if I stay with you?”

“You cannot.”

Yes, strictly speaking, she could not and she should not. But as long as her aunt was still snoring (for she imagined Margaret did that and it made her smile) in her own bed, who would ever be the wiser?

As the episode with Doctor Enfield had proven, the servants had been loyal enough to him to relay the story of the latest developments at Hembury Fort House to him and why would they not show her, the quasi-daughter of the house, the same loyalty?

“I can.”

And without minding his continued protests, she sat on the edge of his bed, picking a book from the dresser (his room was an entire second library, she noted) and flipped it open at a random page.

“I’ll be here. You told me it’s being alone that troubles you. You are not alone now, I’m here. Sleep a while and I will wake you in time for breakfast.”
“Elizabeth— I am— not dressed sufficiently, nor should an unmarried woman find herself in the company of—”

“A man, worse still, unmarried, too, alone in his room and he dressed in nothing but his robe? I fear we have already transgressed all of these rules.”

“And in his bed”, he added insecurely, his cheeks gaining a rosy touch.

“Please, John. There is enough room for both of us and propriety to sprawl her weary limbs between us. This aside, I am quite small and don’t require much room anyway.”

He stands in front of the bed for another moment or two, not knowing what to do. He knows it would soothe him, having her close, being with her, but he would never ruin her reputation nor did he want to endanger her should his dreams, and the violent outbursts his brain could not control that sometimes accompanied it, return.

On the other hand, Elizabeth had spoken the truth: her presence, the presence of the Sun in a dreary grey sky, would help him gain some rest.

Slipping beneath the covers with stiff limbs (and clutching the front of his robe in order not to involuntarily display a sight to her she certainly would not want to see) he climbs into bed and pulls the covers up to his neck before turning the other way and closing his eyes.

Now that she is here, he might as well try.

It did not take five full minutes until he was asleep.

Careful not to wake him, she inched closer to the sleeping John and leant over him.

Presently he looked peaceful, as peaceful as some time ago when she had found him asleep with little Charlotte Braithwaite.

Smiling contently, Elizabeth returned to her reading where she laid, close to John; it was a thin volume of Latin poetry.

Her own Latin was not as good as it could have been, always having been a more eager disciple of the modern languages, but it sufficed to grasp the gist of what was being said.

He must have loved his Lesbia very much, Catullus.

By the third poem, she too was overcome by a pleasant sleepiness. The books slipped out of her hand and before she even had time to realise what was happening, Elizabeth was asleep again, too.

When she awoke, Elizabeth needed several moments to compose herself and arrange her thoughts—where was she? Why was she lying in bed under a blanket in broad daylight?
In the end, it was the scent of her surroundings that reminded her where she was: the bedding she reclined in smelled not like her flowery perfumes, it smelled like John.

“Good morning”, the latter chimed merrily.

It was as if the early morning hours had only been a bad dream.

“I thought you were watching over me”, he teased her.

“I was- for some time”, came her defensive reply.

“So I see”, he said, one eyebrow raised, tucking his shirttails into his breeches, and moved on to fasten the buttons of his waistcoat.

“Uncle Samuel always says the surest way to guarantee one’s men are rested for battle in the morning is not to confine them to barracks or their cabins if you’re on a ship, let them go on sentry duty. So you see, I merely proved the rule.”

“If all our men in the war, Lieutenant Gwillim-“ He swallowed whatever he wanted to say. By way of his carelessly-chosen words, all merriment was instantly drained from the air and both reminded of the morn.

“Never mind, Elizabeth”, John finally said while slipping into his coat.

She did mind, of course, for she loved him with all her heart and loathed to see him in distress.

Seeing her fretting for him made him sit by her side at the edge of her bed and he took her in his arms and allowed her to rest against his shoulder.

“Do not worry for me.”

“But I do.”

“Then I must beg you not to.”

“Then you beg in vain, because I love you.”

“And I beg you because I love you, too.”

Elizabeth was not sure who was comforting whom, which arm supported which back, but it did not matter anyway since they were together and nothing mattered to her in these moments.

After a long while of silent caresses, John rose, taking her by the hand to urge her come with him.

“We must leave and show our faces to stand the scrutiny of your aunt”, he said, emphasising the last two words with more than just a hint of disdain.

“Wait.”

Elizabeth had chanced to spy the state of her not yet coiffured hair in the small mirror on the wall.

“With my hair like this, she will assume the worst, even if I just slept on it and not with someone. Do you have a brush about you?”

He nodded and brought his brush, which had evidently not seen his unruly curls today yet, either.
Normally her maid Susan would see to her coiffure and comb her hair every morning. It was not that Elizabeth could not do it herself, but she was accustomed to having her hair brushed and her hair was quite long, which did not exactly ease brushing it alone.

John, who had handed her the brush, watched for a few moments before he took the brush from her hands and ordered her to turn around and sit on the bed.

Gently, the brush weaved through her hair and when she had expected his large hands and fingers more skilled raising the iron spear of war than to act the maid to tug at strands or make the entangled mess on her head even worse, he did not.

Careful fingertips adjusted her head by softly tipping against her jaw and she complied; it was thrilling to know she could not see him, only feel his warmth for he was standing so close to her while he brushed her hair.

When he was done, he parted the cascade of her nut-brown hair and began to braid it down her back.

“What do you think?” He made her stand by the mirror and handed her a smaller glass to hold to the back of her head so she could see what he had created.

A French braid balanced between her shoulder blades, even and smooth, tied off with one of his black ribbons.

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“Sometimes as a boy I assisted my mother. It’s not hard with a little practice.”

“I will wear it all day. That is until tonight, I will have to do my hair a little differently then- you haven’t forgotten?”

Of course he has forgotten. Social gatherings are the sort of things he prefers to forget.

“The masquerade?”

“Yes, the masquerade.”

“My leg-“ It still pains him sometimes, this much is true, not now, however, but it seems like a good excuse to him not to be too enthusiastic about dancing and being confined to a room with many people.

Apparently Elizabeth is not too convinced either, for she lifts an eyebrow and tells him “pshaw, you walked very well the last days, better than I do presently with my sprained ankle.”

“Then why don’t we stay home together as invalids?”, he asked and buried his face in her shoulder.

“You know full well my aunt would never let us, not even with the servants present.” “Sadly.”

“Yes, but the dance will be nice, too. I haven’t had the possibility to dance in the last weeks and have missed a few social engagements I should have liked to participate in. You will see, it will be enjoyable! I shall introduce you to my friends and we’ll have a splendid evening- as long as you behave better than on your birthday.”
Her optimism warmed his heart, but he knows he could never imitate the effortless grace Elizabeth sported in society. He had watched her on his birthday, dancing, greeting guests, complimenting a lady on her dress and congratulating a gentleman to his new business; he never could be like her, he would always appear out of place among the crowds, a crudely-carved human effigy made of ice affected by a constant unknowingness what to say or do.

And besides, he would be busy keeping an eye on her.

“You must promise me not to overexert yourself. And if you do, I’ll warn you in time. I’ll keep watch.”

“If you do it only half as well as I did this morning, I am sure I will be completely and utterly fine.”

She grins at him and he feels unbridled joy rise within him whenever she looks at him like that.

“But you are right”, she added in a more serious tone, “I am not well enough just yet to dance all night as I would like. I promise I will be careful.”

“Now then, we would not like to overuse your ankle before you even danced.”

“I think I know what you suggest and I am greatly in favour of it.”

Although it is a strenuous exercise (because although Elizabeth is neither particularly tall or heavy he has not yet regained all his strength of days gone by and she is not entirely weightless), he enjoys carrying her around.

She is close to him, nestled in his arms and although it awards him the feeling of being her knight, her protector, it is she who is giving him the strength to be that.

“And what are you dressing up as?”

This is a good and valid question. He has thought of attending without a guise.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I know exactly what we’ll do”, Elizabeth smiles slyly up at him with her hands around his neck.

The use of the pronoun “we” startles and elates him at the same time.

Aunt Margaret was not particularly happy to see the two of them enter the room together, but clearly could not find any fault with them for she had implored John to let her down just outside the door—being carried to the table would have made for a much too dramatic entrance that might have jeopardised with her plans to dance in the evening.

“I see your ankle is better”, her aunt remarked dryly between two bites of poached egg, “a miracle healing just in time for tonight.”

“The week’s almost over and I promise I will be careful. Since it is I who might lose a foot, let me be the judge of my own fortune.”
“I would not worry so much about your foot, rather about your footing, before you fall and sprain your other ankle in the arms of the next gentleman.”

“Margaret.”

Uncle Samuel’s fork fell clattering onto the plate.

“Samuel.”

He looked in his wife’s eyes, saw her defiance and sighed.

“Leave them be, neither of them has wronged you.”

With a frigid glare that did not mean anything good, she returned to her food, which she almost impaled with her fork.

After breakfast, Elizabeth excused herself to her rooms and, as soon as she had left her aunt far enough behind for her to overhear, instructed John to come to her room.

“What are we doing, if Margaret finds us alone-“

“What a pack of nonsense. She knows already and besides, we will not be alone.”

Elizabeth laughed at the look on his face.

“We will be joined by the contents of Hembury Ford House’s attic. Originally, I had planned to wear a dress I bought for the last season and decorate it to masquerade as Madame de Pompadour, but I had a change of heart. I want us to wear matching costumes.”

“Anthony and Cleopatra? Romeo and Juliet?”

“Much too sad for my taste. Let us see what this house can offer.”

Two servants brought a number of dusty, heavy chests to her room, one after the other.

With almost child-like enthusiasm, Elizabeth set to the task at hand and rummaged through each and every one of them, laughed as she pulled old garments out and held them to her front to see what she would look like in them and occasionally bestowed him with one as well.

“These are positively ancient!”

She giggled as she found a suit the colour of violets with ridiculously wide cuffs and an embroidered silver waistcoat.

“I did not know the Admiral’s tastes have been so exotic in the past”, John commented, his brows carefully furrowed as if he knew what was coming.

“Uncle Samuel was young once, too. As was my aunt, apparently.”

With that, she pulled a brightly yellow dress out of one of the chests that must have belonged to her aunt at some point. It had intricate golden details of embroidery around the neckline and down her front, little leaves and flowers all, and the most voluminous sleeves she had ever seen.

She had known before that her aunt was an unconventional woman but in her late forties with the beauty of youth waning, she did probably no longer care to dress flamboyantly and besides, the fashion of the day tended towards lighter colours that did not bite the eye.
After another hour of parading in an old uniform coat that must have belonged to her uncle ("Captain Gwillim, I do not object to the present view"), and having forced John into the purple sartorial nightmare, Elizabeth had made her decision.

“I know what we will do”, she announced, still in the persona of Captain Gwillim. “You shall be the Moon and I the Sun. You can wear one of your dark suits with the silver waistcoat and I will wear this dress.”

“Should it not be the other way around, in ancient mythology the sun is always male whereas the moon is female. If we are aiming for convinciness and accuracy—“

It was amusing how much he had developed a sudden interest and even competitiveness in the matter, Elizabeth noted.

“John, this is not about accuracy, it is about fun, enjoyment, making merry- and if you seek for validation of your costume, I can tell you that in German die Sonne is female whereas der Mond is male. Now, will you be my Moon?”

“Your aunt will be displeased”, John answered.

“Oh, I should hope so, for she shall not be the centre of attention tonight.”

“My pretty, witty Eliza”, he smiled, pulled her close and kissed her longingly.

“But now, dear Moon, you must leave me- night has not yet come and I and Susan still have work to do.”

She showed him two masks, plain white and black which she had procured several weeks ago when she had first got word of the event.

Back then it had been her intention to have at least some mask for John as well so he would not be able to shrink away from attending by saying he didn’t have one.

Once the Moon had left her to herself, she called for the servants to take the chests away and instead sent for her maid, Susan, who was to aid her decorate the masks with pieces of thread and fabric that accumulated in every household over time.

John’s she embroidered with tiny stars of silver thread of which she had found several strands, likely having been meticulously unstitched from a previous garment, in the basket her parsimonious aunt reserved for such cases while Susan’s quick hands managed to add some touches of yellow from a different fabric than the dress to her own mask.

They had to work diligently and quickly to be ready in time for the evening, but succeeded.

When the time to dress up came, Elizabeth ordered Susan to help her into the old dress. Part of the old-fashioned-ness of the dress fascinated her as she twirled in front of looking-glass several times, laughing and imagining she was a princess of days gone by, just as she had done as a little girl.

The Sun accentuated her dress (which fitted remarkably well, even if her aunt was slightly taller than she was) with gold jewellery, more than she would normally wear and some pieces of it quite old and ornate heirlooms, but tonight, she was not Elizabeth Gwillim, she was the Sun.

In the hallway, her aunt and uncle were already waiting for her and for John, who was nowhere to be seen.
Uncle Samuel looked very pleased with himself in the guise of himself, as did Margaret, whose dress and mask did not reveal any particular costume, but showed that she had made an effort.

“La Reine Soleil”, her uncle boomed, “You look wonderful, my dear.”

With fatherly pride, he adjusted one of the tall ostrich feathers in her hair and held her at arm’s length to better inspect her attire.

“Why, I do remember this dress! I could not say who of you looks more splendid in it. I am no fool and shall not be a Paris.”

Flattered thus, Aunt Margaret struggled to remain stern. Even a smile, genuine and warm, crept unto her lips and she beamed at her husband.

Despite her rather difficult nature that could test even the most patient, it was evident that her aunt and uncle shared something- old love perhaps, or at least a liking of one another. Elizabeth had never known for certain but, assured by the fact that they seemed to care about one another and treated each other with respect on most occasions, she had never investigated this matter any further.

At last, John came.

All in all, it was not the most astonishing or *nouveau* costume, if it could even be called one; but knowing he was not one for putting much thought to his dress as long as everything was cleaned and starched, it was a vast improvement.

The silver reflected the colour of his eyes, which seemed to glow like the moonlight already and as he fastened his mask under a flood of thanks for her considerateness and having done this for him, she was more than convinced he would be the most splendidly masqueraded man she could meet at the ball.

“The Moon! My boy, how wonderful of you to come as well”, Uncle Samuel boomed cordially.

“The King of Night and the Queen of Day, how fitting!”

-Her aunt obviously did not share her husband’s enthusiasm. While she had complimented Elizabeth’s dress, she looked rather taken aback and thin-lipped when she came to realise she and John had dressed to match each other. Elizabeth did not care, however. Tonight, she would beam brightly at the moon, who would illumine her face with his silver rays.

In the coach, they sit opposite one another, he and his godfather on one, Elizabeth and Margaret on the other side.

It is difficult beyond imagination not to look at her and she must feel the same for she, in the company of her watchful aunt, only does so when the latter is talking to her husband or adjusting her dress.

When they finally arrive (the drive has not been long as the hosts for the evening live close by, but still too long because this separation from Elizabeth, being able to see her but not being allowed to even hold her hand, has proven more than Indian torture to him), it is he who descends first, helping
his elderly godfather, then Margaret, who eyes him suspiciously as if he were planning to let her drop and break her neck, and lastly, Elizabeth out of the carriage.

“Tur- Tav-“

“Tabhair dom do lámh?” she laughingly completed what he had failed to pronounce.

He wanted to say it in the original Irish in order to impress her, but at the sight of her face, he forgets everything.

“Yes, give me your hand.”

Several months ago, he would not have thought it would ever come to this when Elizabeth had helped him out of the carriage with his broken leg still aching.

His leg is no longer broken and heals well; and while it sometimes pains him, he can walk again and even his mind, also broken, is soothed by the face of the Sun, his Eliza, who loves him, who is probably the first to do so and the only one he ever truly did.

Forgotten are the tribulations of his dream in the morning, forgotten Margaret’s sour-faced looks, forgotten the people around him as they enter their host’s house who stare at Elizabeth, whispering if the gentleman at her side is “that odious colonel” who was so “rude” and “unsavoury” at the past ball at the Graves’ in February, she is the only one he sees.

At last, as they give their thanks and greetings to the hosts, Elizabeth ventures away from him to dance; she loves dancing and he will not keep her from it. Not being a good dancer himself, he shall leave this activity to men who will not ruin her shoes and retires to the adjoining room with his godfather, where some of the older men who look as if they had been with the army in High Germany who are sitting together at a table, probably exchanging their tales of glories gone by.

The Admiral is soon engrossed in a game of whist, and so he finds himself without company. He takes a glass from a tray of refreshments offered to him by a servant and pushes an empty chair into a strategic position facing the door connecting the ballroom with the sitting-room.

The door is open and so he can observe the dancers and those standing by, watching them; he spies Margaret, who seems to be lost in a conversation with a gentleman younger than her wearing a suit of green and a mask that is connected to a pair of roe antlers sitting on his head while Elizabeth dances, one dance after the other with changing partners.

If only he could be flattering, a good dancer and please well, then Margaret would perhaps not object to him so much and Elizabeth and he could live in peace.

He turns to the window and watches as outside the real moon shines through the clouds.

If only he could walk with Elizabeth in the night air now. They wouldn’t need any light, for she would light him the way.

Half-lost in his thoughts and half-composing a poem in his head praising Elizabeth, he sees her dancing with the antler-gentleman, if it could be called that- for she tries very hard to keep him as far away from her as possible and as the choreography of the dance allows, while he tries to achieve the exact opposite. He keeps pestering her for the following dance as well.

Rising from his vantage point, he walks over into the busily crowded ballroom. Over the murmur of a thousand conversations, he is unable to hear what is being said between them, Elizabeth’s face however leaves no doubt they are not exchanging pleasantries.
In vain he tries to make herself known to her, who is too busy trying to keep the brazen-faced blockhead away from her.

At the end of the tune, she storms out of the room and into the hallway and the brazen-headed blockhead follows her.

He makes an attempt to go after them, but a young lady, sufficiently drunk and urged by a circle of her friends trying to act innocently attempts to lure him into a conversation and will not take no for an answer when he tries to excuse himself.

All ladies of her party are much disappointed when he, after what feels like an eternity, is finally able to free himself of her presence and takes his leave.

“So handsome, but also so rude”, the half-slurred words of the mellow damsel follow him into the hallway, where a servant is busy cleaning the mess one proud Admiral of the Narrow Seas has made.

Where could she have gone? Finding Elizabeth is his utmost priority.

He dashes out by the front door and takes up speed almost running around the house to see if she and her pursuer have gone to the garden.

If he has bothered her in any way or worse, done unspeakable things to her, he will die. He will first make him a capon, and then impale him on his ridiculous antlers.

To his relief, he can hear two voices, one male, one female in the distance. He slows his steps and listens, not wanting to interrupt in case it is not Elizabeth and her pursuer, but another gentleman and his lady engaging in some private business.

“…How often have I told you that I have no desire to see your face? Leave me alone, once and for all.”

“Elizabeth, please! Don’t speak ill of me, I know you don’t mean it.”

“I don’t mean it”? Will you still say that after our little talk, I wonder?”

The voice doubtlessly belongs to Elizabeth and she is angry.

“Why so enraged? Did you not miss me?”

“I find I rather miss your absence”, she spits back.

Now, he is close enough to see them, somewhat hidden behind a fountain in the garden with Elizabeth standing with her back against it and the antlered gentleman only inches away from her.

“I hope to convince you of the exact opposite, Eliza, and yes, I do mean it. We are alone and can speak freely.”

“Is that so? Then let me speak freely: I despise you, Richard Graves. I am well aware that my money makes me ten times as handsome as I would be without it and I know men like you would do everything to lay their hands on my fortune. It is rather easy- you’d only need to stand next to me in church, ravish me the same night for the first and the last time, and my fortune would be yours by law. They say the war is lost- which means you are going on half-pay soon. Who better than an heiress, your godfather’s ward, to remedy this sudden loss of financial means? I can see right through you. And don’t call me Eliza”, she hissed.
“Ah, but your dear Simcoe is any different? Who would have thought Elizabeth Gwillim dreams of being screwed by a penniless invalid of ill repute? Tell me, which one of his legs is broken?”

“Is that any of your concern? In fact, John treats me with utmost respect and would never stoop so low as to follow a woman around and lay siege to her. Let me go, Graves.”

“Don’t be such a shrew; we are alone, there is no need to act thusly, no need to pretend. You can be frank with me, I know the truth already.”

“What is that ominous truth you speak of?”

“That you think fondly of me?”

At that, she gives a hyena’s laugh, high-pitched and hysterical.

And suddenly, he understands.

_Margaret._ Vile, conniving Margaret. She has made this sorry excuse of a man believe Elizabeth likes him better than the despicable Colonel Simcoe and encouraged him to try his luck, hoping he might indeed charm Elizabeth and make her forget about him when she spoke to the faun, Richard Graves, not an hour earlier in the ballroom.

“Whoever told you that was either drunk or deluded. Now let me leave or-“ The faun puts a finger across his lips.

“Hush now, teach not thy lips such scorn, for they were made for kissing, lady, not for such contempt.” His hands come close to Elizabeth’s hips, as if he wants to hold her in place and the horned face leans forward. He has seen more than enough. He storms toward them in the same moment Elizabeth’s hand strikes the lecher’s face.

The latter cries out in pain and surprise, while Elizabeth frees herself, looking at him with terror in her eyes when he reaches for the antler-man’s jacket and grabs him by the lapels.

“Good evening, Graves,” he says as calmly and politely as he can.

“Good evening, _Graves_”, Richard Graves responds.

Until this night, they had only been passing acquaintances. Richard Graves was the Admiral’s other godson, the son of his brother. They had met on one or two occasions and he has heard about him in America when they were both stationed there, Richard Graves with the Navy, he with the Army.

They had fought on the same side then. Now, they are foes.

“Beautiful sky tonight”, he comments conversationally, looking up to the cloud-covered heavens above, “a shame if its beauty were marred by _tragedy._” Graves rolls his eyes.

“Save yourself your thespianism.”

“You will find me perfectly serious”, he says, his voice high-pitched with anger, yet controlled.

Graves is shorter than he is and visibly uneasy.

“I want to hear you apologise to Miss Gwillim before I am through with you.”

“An apology? What for? So it is true? You and she-“
“This is quite enough. Apologise immediately.”

Richard Graves only looks at him with contempt and then spits him in the face while kicking against his left shin, hard, trying to take him by surprise.

A wine-heavy stream of saliva flows down his face and his leg (the injured one, which his adversary has kicked) cries for retribution. Graves should not have done that.

From one moment to the other, it is as if something inside him snaps; the shackles he has donned himself break and all that he knows, he is, is reduced to his rage.

This man has almost forced himself on Elizabeth, slandered her, he has been rude to him and now-

He pushes the other man to the ground, kicking him blindly wherever he can and enjoys the gratifying pained groans and pleas to stop Graves, writhing on the ground, makes, before he too lets himself fall to his knees next to Graves in order to give this despicable knave’s face some special attention with his fists. It is a pity he does not have his bayonet anywhere near.

“John! JOHN, STOP!”

Eliza.

How could he have forgotten about her?

He stands up, his limbs stiff. His knuckles are red with some blood from Graves’ certainly broken nose, which he tries to wipe off on his breeches without her noticing.

It is not a sight for a lady, this.

“John, what have you done?”

He never meant to harm or endanger her, never meant her to see this side of him.

He tries to extend a hand to her, but she recoils from his touch.

He would like to tell her everything he knows, that it was Margaret who has set Graves to her heels, that he only wanted to protect her- but she will not believe him anyway, not after what she has witnessed.

He is the beast everyone fears and knows it.

Perhaps it is for the best if Elizabeth knows too, so she can save herself from him.

The terror etched into her features makes him long for being stabbed through the heart with his own bayonet.

She did not know what to think. There was Graves, foul Richard Graves, dancing with her, she had tried to escape him and he had said horrible things and almost kissed her against her will, and then suddenly, John had been there too and beaten Graves, badly.
What they did with him, she didn’t know, all she had done was to inform the hosts about someone lying in the garden.

She had run back to the house and searched for her uncle, begging him to go home, she would explain why on the way.

He knew about her dislike of his other godson, whom he liked, too, but was not particularly close with, and had accepted when she had turned down Graves’ advances for the first time approximately two years ago.

What would he say?

Having seen her crying, her hair dishevelled from running, he had taken her in his arms and led her away from the ball into an adjoining private room and cleaned up her tears.

It had made her feel like a child again, which had proven oddly comforting.

Slumped against the rotund body of her uncle, she cried freely and begged him to go home.

“What is wrong, little dove?”

Uncle Samuel hadn’t called her that since she was twelve, she realised.

Hesitantly, she had mastered her breathing once more and told him of what had happened.

He bade her to wait for him, he would look for Aunt Margaret and then take them both home instantly without losing another word about John.

Her aunt took her in her embrace, having been informed by her uncle about the fracas in the garden and tried to be of comfort to her, too.

As they made their way to the carriage after an overhastened farewell to their hosts, she could spy John, the Colonel, his head bowed to the ground, his mask in his hand, waiting by the carriage.

How he had known, or if he had waited for them, lurked in the shadows like a highwayman to be on time for their departure, she did not know and she had no desire to be with him in this moment.

She would never have thought he could be- *that*. His eyes had gleamed strangely in the moonlight and he had given her the impression he enjoyed inflicting pain.

Yes, she had slapped Richard Graves, but this had been an act of self-defence, whereas John had kicked and hit Richard, who had not even fought back anymore and only tried to shield his body with his arms and legs so often she had feared he would kill him.

The same hands that had caressed her had almost killed a man in front of her, had she not begged him to stop.

So the rumours were true. He was bloodthirsty, dangerous and relished in cruelty.

“John Graves Simcoe.”

Never had she heard Uncle Samuel’s voice so devoid of emotion.

“Inside.”

Silently, the four of them mounted the carriage and drove home. This time, Aunt Margaret sat
opposite the Colonel while she faced her uncle, who patted her hand throughout the duration of their drive to Hembury Fort House.

Safely back at home, she stormed to her room, shut the door behind her and tore the feathers out of her hair.

The dress looked old and downright dowdy on her, her side hurt from running and her shoes were ruined by a dozen dancing partners.

Undressing alone without the help of a maid always was strenuous and took very long, but she did not wish for any company, not even Susan. She tore the pins from her coiffure and ripped the dress off her back, unlaced her stays and lastly, mercifully, slipped into her waiting nightshirt.

She was alone, and she wanted to be. She had to think.

He had scared her, not the act itself, she had seen brawls before, but the eagerness and the sheer glee in his eyes that never blinked and gave him the look of a rabid dog.

He liked to inflict pain on others. He probably enjoyed killing as well, for he doubtlessly almost had, if had she not stepped in.

Could she have been thus blinded by infatuation?

Was this where his bad dreams came from, the last defiant struggle of his humanity against his violent nature?

At long last, she fell asleep, only to relive the ordeal of the evening once more.

Two hours after midnight, a knock at her door wakened her and made her sit bolt upright in her bed.

“Elizabeth?”

It was the Colonel's voice.

Chapter End Notes

Nine men: apart from being able to recite twelve books of poetry, members of the Fianna, who were mentioned in the previous chapter, were also required to be able to defend themselves against nine attackers without being injured or killed.

Both Simcoes are said to have been early risers; for the sake of the story, the Graves' are not.

In 1781/82, starting around the British defeat at Yorktown, the public (and some politicians) in Britain started to realise the Americans might actually win rather sooner than later.

"Raising the iron spear of war": I've borrowed the phrase from Simcoe's valentine to Sarah "Sally" Townsend, where one line reads:
"To raise the iron Spear of War, victim of Grief and deep Despair”.

“I would not worry so much about your foot, rather about your footing, before you fall
and sprain your other ankle in the arms of the next gentleman—": Samuel Graves is so upset by his wife's comment because the phrase "she sprained her ankle" was at the time used as a euphemism for a girl or woman having fallen pregnant (outside of wedlock).

Madame de Pompadour is certainly a more daring and glamorous costume. The childhood nickname of Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, marquise de Pompadour, duchesse de Menars, court favourite and mistress of Louis XV of France (1721-1764) was Reinette. ;)

Die Sonne/ der Mond: Elizabeth was well-versed in several languages and is said to have been fluent in German and English as well as having studied Spanish together with Mary Anne.

"La Reine Soleil" means "The Sun Queen" and is a play on "Le Roi Soleil", Louis XIV of France.

"More than Indian torture": Simcoe is said to have said he would "die by more than Indian torture" to bring the US back under British rule.

"High Germany": A term apparently once used to refer to the part of Germany between the river Danube and the Alps. There is a song called "High Germany" as well, which tells the story of a soldier going to war during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714). Of course, the old men at the table are not that old, Simcoe is merely exaggerating.

Brazen-faced: here: shameless, impudent.

Mellow: almost drunk.

Admiral of the Narrow Seas: Someone who is so drunk they empty the contents of their bowels into the lap of the person sitting opposite them.

Capon: here: a eunuch.

Half-pay: when the army wasn't engaged in active combat, officers received only half of what they would earn in wartime.

"Teach not thy lips such scorn, for they were made for kissing, lady, not for such contempt.": Shakespeare, Richard III, act I, scene II, Richard to Lady Anne.

‘Beautiful sky tonight’: Don't ask me which episode, but I think it must have been season 2, episode 4.
The Man She Loved

Chapter Summary

Nobody really knows what to think anymore.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long absence, life was getting in the way quite a bit.

To everyone I still owe a review of their latest installments, please don't be cross, I haven't forgotten any of you and your gorgeous fics but I was very busy lately and will get to it post-haste!

Warning for this chapter: one scene gets fairly dark and mentions suicide (contemplated only).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Elizabeth?”

His voice was soft, gentle, nothing like the acidic hiss that had accompanied his ill-treatment of Richard Graves.

What should she do? Should she open? What would happen if she did, or didn’t? Would he kick the door in and come inside regardless?

Elizabeth felt terrible, her mind confused.

Mere hours ago she had been convinced she was in love with Colonel Simcoe- and now? Could she still love him? Could she love him regardless of his transgressions, could she love someone capable of what he had done?

“Elizabeth?”, came his low call a second time.

Guided by instinct, not thought, she rose and walked over to the door without making a sound and leant against the door.

She imagined he did the same, pressing his form against the cold wood trying to convince himself it was her and not the barrier that separated them.

The hard, unyielding wood could not, however hard she tried to pretend, feel like him, like his strong, muscular and yet surprisingly soft and warm body which despite the staggering difference in size, fit hers perfectly, almost as if he had been moulded by their Lord and Maker with her in mind- or vice versa.

She could not bring herself to answer, too fresh were the memories of his face animated by reckless ire, hatred and the disgusting pleasure he had drawn from inflicting pain on Richard Graves.
A sigh- a sound of hurt, defeat.

The little sound he had made was then followed by a much more unusual noise- something scraping against the floor, making its way through the narrow gap between the floorboards and the door.

A letter, folded and sealed.

Another minute passed until finally, slouching footsteps indicated the Colonel’s retreat.

As soon as his footsteps had faded, she picked the bundle of narrowly inscribed paper up and took it with her to her bed.

With trembling fingers, she broke the seal and unfolded the paper, which she recognised as the same Uncle Samuel kept for his personal use in his study (from whence the Colonel, perhaps not unsurprisingly considering he was one for worse crimes, must have stolen it), covered in narrow lines of agitated handwriting.

Only a few months ago, she had regularly read letters in the same hand to her Uncle when his own eyes, weary and unprecise with age, could no longer see well enough to do it himself.

She had tried to paint an imaginary portrait of this Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe, godson of Admiral Samuel Graves, then; had imagined him (probably more influenced by her personal opinions on male beauty forged by conversations with friends and her observations on gentlemen compiled at countless social engagements than the few real memories of his youthful self she could recall) a tall (though not as tall as he was in reality, but then, everyone was tall in comparison to her) man in a scarlet uniform, his countenance handsome in the conventional sense with a smiling mouth that, though retaining the adventurous bravado of the heroic soldier around the corners, invited the beholder with friendly encouragement to involve him in a conversation, eyes of dark blue, like the body of a dragonfly, a well-shaped straight nose and dark hair (for she had not been sure if the memory of once having seen him briefly without his wig when he had visited the house so many years ago had deceived her with regards to his hair colour, and thus simply ascribed a hue to him she found appealing) that would only reveal itself in close-cropped stubbles once he removed the powdered wig which suited him so splendidly.

The voice of the Colonel had, whenever his words had exited her mouth in a dramatic reading of his accounts to her uncle, sounded in her head like silk, but raspy like the smoke from a fire made with wood not quite yet dry enough for burning, depending on the tone and nature of the thing he wrote and the rigidness of the stroke of his quill on the paper.

His manners were elegant of course and he enjoyed sharing his abundant wit in company.

Oh how had he deceived her, the Colonel, with his eloquent letters, painted a picture of a man he was not and tricked her into believing it was him; the colours were all wrong, for where there should have been dark greys, blacks, greens and browns (like a sad winter landscape), he had used the brightest hues of red, blue and purple.

But then, who was she to judge? Said letters had never been hers to read in the first place and he had certainly not written to her uncle thinking the little Miss Gwillim, the ward he had only met a few times before his departure when she had been a child, might read his accounts of battles past or how he was faring. He had likely not given her a thought before his return to Hembury Fort House. The Colonel had not deceived her, she had deceived herself, first by letting her imagination draw a man in her mind she had never met before and then by having allowed herself to fall in the arms of a stranger just returned from war in whom she, for some inexplicable reason, had seen something she had believed others overlooked when they branded him a murdering savage.
The taper she had lit did not give her nearly enough light to read comfortably and it was under strain that her eyes focussed, but a voice inside her urged her not to let the letter remain unread until morning.

Elizabeth,

I do not have the words to tell you all I ever wished to say to you, fearing you may take me for a fool or a reckless dreamer.

Now that I can and must no longer do so, let me be brief in my effectuations: My love for you knows no bounds and as you might expect, it is not without terrible tribulation of the soul that these lines exit my mind through my hand and find their way to you carried in the hands of a rueful messenger.

Although I know I am not worthy of you, your love and trust and know I will never enjoy either of them again, allow me to speak to you, in this manner, one last time.

Burn this after reading, it is for your eyes only and it must be feared and expected that your hon. aunt might obtain this letter by one means or the other and I am of the opinion that she would use it against you.

It was she who set G. at your heels; I found out by chance, which I relay to you as a piece of information to keep in mind, seeing as she poses as your benefactress and is your closest kin, not to better my situation in this affair, for I know I cannot be forgiven.

I will leave for Exeter in the coming days and from there continue to London. Seeing as my health is restored to a certain degree, I shall seek for a post once more and depart for India, Canada, Haiti or wherever my rank will take me as soon as possible. You shall not be bothered with letters; nor the Admiral and Mrs Graves, seeing as it was she who laid the trap for me and Admiral Graves’ disappointment and anger will not be remedied by words written on paper.

It is with a heavy heart that I will leave this house, which in younger years I left behind without a second glance, for my love for you is true and shall not wither.

Allow me to thank you for the time you gave to me, the gift of your smile which shall warm me around the cold campfires of far distant lands.

You were the first and the only person to ever bestow upon me such trust, closeness- all of which I betrayed with my unbridled, savage nature.

You must promise me, pardon the impetuous demand that underlies what truly is a plea, to love and give your heart to a worthier candidate, one whose temper is mellow and his mien ablaze with merriness, one who is not a rabid beast that ought to have been put out of the misery of its existence for the benefit and safety of those around me long ago.

I am no good man and have done great wrong in this world, some of the kind you had to witness and most which I at the time did not recognise as such.

I cannot bear to make you unhappy, which I doubtlessly would, and you deserve all the happiness there is in this sorry excuse of a world we live in.

My thoughts shall be with you with every sunrise, my prayers, though I have in the past not proven a devout man, be for you only.
In my life, I have hated and loved, but never experienced a feeling stronger than the love in my heart I have for you, and I wish to thank you for having gifted me with your tenderness and patience when I could not muster enough strength to have the will to live on by myself.

Please accept my words written on brittle paper; would I could speak them to you in person, but I am too cowardly to do so and would only stumble over my own tongue.

JGS

It hurt, and then it didn’t and then it hurt again. Regardless of what he had done, he was still a human being (or at least he had been introduced to her as such) and to hear someone value his life, himself so little made Elizabeth wonder how broken Colonel Simcoe was beneath the smooth surface of his immaculately shaven face and the gentle sweetness he had shown to her ever since the night of his birthday.

And that he loved her- he had said that he loved her, and always would.

What could she do?

Her heart, she had to admit, did still beat faster when she thought of the countless kisses and caresses they had shared, when she thought of him nursing her during her time of bed rest following her accident and the hand that had travelled up her calf to her knee that day Aunt Margaret had found them out.

How could she still- she had seen what he was capable of. What was there to love about a man like him who rejoiced in torture?

Elizabeth set the letter aside and put the candle out, staring into the dark void of the night, not knowing if to wish him near or far away from her.

She has not opened the door. On the one hand, he understands; she must be very angry with him- no, not angry, she is afraid.

He has hoped she would open and maybe he could have spoken with her but realistically, he has had no hopes any reconciliation between them will ever be possible, hence the letter.

He must go. He has made her fear him, as all other people do already.

-Is she afraid that if she opens the door, he will do the same to her or worse still, force her to-

No. No, he could never- But then, how could she know, after having seen him doing-

Elizabeth will never love him again. He has forfeited her trust and her love in having acted in the way he did; now, in retrospect, he realises prying this odious waste of blood and organs away from Elizabeth would have sufficed, given he would have stayed with her, and other measures could surely have been taken against Graves from there, but in this moment, seeing him attempting to force himself on her, his anger had taken control of his body and all he wanted to do was hurt, inflict pain on this worthless-
It is he who is worthless, he realises. Once, in the colonies, his talents for stern coldness were useful, required even, dealing with the likes of Brewster and Woodhull. But here, where war has never scorched the soil, it is out of place.

When once he had worn the term “murdering savage” as a badge of honour, for it proved his ruthlessness and effectiveness, it now disgusts him. Not for having killed, no, he still is of the firm belief that he has done right in many cases (though not all, as he has come to realise recently), but for having taken a certain pride in André thinking of him as such.

He doesn’t want to be a murdering savage, not anymore.

He wants to be a lover, or someone at least who loves, and who can be loved back.

Nobody will ever love the likes of him. Nobody will ever love him again.

It is for the best if he leaves soon.

In his mind, having hurt Elizabeth thus is worse than anything else he has ever been responsible for combined. No rebel he killed, no man he threatened, no torture he has administered, no barn he has burned, nothing.

Having shredded her heart with his demonic claws is the worst thing he has ever done. He has destroyed the only thing that was dear to him, her heart, the only heart that has ever beaten faster with joy at the sight of him.

How he despises himself.

He curls himself up into a ball, trying to find solace in his own embrace, which he then can pretend to be Eliza’s-

He mustn’t do that. He must get used to being alone again, a solitary, rabid dog roaming the countryside.

In the morning, he will have to face the Admiral and the triumphant Mrs Graves. Already, he can see her gloating face floating before him in the darkness.

She has won, has got now what she wanted, Elizabeth hates him, he will leave and never know happiness again.

Thinking about her, the kisses that were all he ever craved and never enough at the same time, her body, so exquisitely sculpted and warm pressed closely against his own form, her hands caressing him or simply holding his he wants to cry, he quietly yelps with pain of the internal kind that does not leave visible traces on the outside as the almost dead dog inside him tells him to do.

Is it possible to die of an excess of love in the heart? If so, he will pass from this world to the next within the hour; what no musket ball, no enemy bayonet has achieved, the cold sting of reality, this cold world in which he finds himself all alone, has.

Dying might not be his worst option. At least then he shall have peace for all eternity, will be relieved of the burden of his life and fade into the nothingness of eternal darkness and into history and in a few years’ time when no one will even remember his name anymore, which will become a meaningless arrangement of letters, found somewhere in an old file or on an accidentally preserved letter to his former superiors, begging them for a new command.

As the thought of leaving this world forever becomes increasingly appealing, he reaches for the spot
underneath his bed in which he has hidden a very special object.

He pulls out a leather sheath containing his old bayonet and relieves the sharp item of its cover.

The blade is sharp and the metal polished; he still regularly cleans it, a habit from the old days.

Bringing the serrated blade to rest against his wrist, then against the side of his neck, he almost wants to laugh at how easy it would be, how easy it *is*, to go without returning. One decisive, precise, movement of his hand and it would be done, and he has done it so often with others, it would be so, so easy.

His hand clutches the handle tightly and holds the blade against the sensitive skin of his neck. The way things look, he’ll finish what Hewlett, this pseudo-humanist weakling could not bring himself to do.

The metal feels cool, soothing, consoling almost against his burning skin but also makes him shiver.

John Graves Simcoe will not see the dawn. He will die in dignity, never having been subdued by an enemy- except for love. Nobody could conquer him in life- save for himself.

They will bury him outside the church grounds if it becomes known that he has taken his own life, but given that his death has been preceded by illness and injury, they are likely to cover it up and tell everyone he succumbed to a complication from one of his wounds sustained in the war and save themselves the gossip that would ensue would the town of Honiton find out how he actually died.

Nobody will attend his funeral anyway (the Graves’ could even pay it from his money since he has no need for it any more), even if it is held on church ground. He is not going to be missed. Margaret will likely lament the loss of a set of bedsheets to the stains created by his blood more than his death.

The Admiral might be sorry for him, but he still has a spare he can pretend to be a father to, Miss Gwillim, Elizabeth.

Lord, he is pathetic. Die at his own hand? What crime is more odious than that? And to leave his godfather with the responsibility for his corpse- no, he shall not do that. It cannot be done. Besides, he is a warrior and never again he elects, shall such a moment of base weakness overcome him.

He will stay for the coming day, quietly make his arrangements, and leave, as he has contemplated before in his letter to Elizabeth. He shall leave at night, when all is calm and quiet without a farewell. It is best this way.

Her love is the most beautiful, most precious thing he has ever been allowed to have, the rarest and most pristine diamond this world has ever seen, and he shall forever cherish this memory of his half-hour of heaven.

But he has proven unworthy of it in the past months, wherefore he must leave and try to make his luck, or anything akin to it, far away from Her.

Late in the morning, uncharacteristically late by her standards, Elizabeth woke to Susan’s low sing-song that accompanied the curtains being pulled apart, causing the room to be flooded with
unwanted daylight.

“As I went a-walking one morning in May,
I met a young couple so fondly did stray,
And one was a young maid, so sweet and so fair,
And the other was a soldier and a brave grenadier.
And they kissed so sweet and comforting-

Oh, good morning, Miss Gwillim”, she interrupted her song and hurried to bring the tray she had brought with her and deposited on a table nearby to offer Elizabeth her morning refreshment.

Upon sensing her mistress was not well (Elizabeth knew her face, though only half-awake, would give her away, swollen from tears and her eyes lined with ill rest), Susan knelt down by her bedside to bring them both to eyelevel with one another and, quite dramatically, took her hand.

Susan, though diligent and most skilled in her needlework, had never quite managed to adhere to the standards of politeness Aunt Margaret expected of her servants and had spoken out of her place on several occasions and addressed dame and dairy maid alike in the same cheery, pleasant tone.

While her behaviour was by no means befitting her station and she could consider herself lucky she had been awarded a place in such a respectable household mostly due to Uncle Samuel’s generosity (a brother, a lad of nineteen at the time, had served under Uncle Samuel and not returned home from sea, at which he had, out of his great charitability that exceeded that of most other men of his station, taken the third daughter of the family into his service), Elizabeth found herself rather lax with her at most times, for she had a weak spot of sorts for the girl who was barely much older than herself- a few months, perhaps, but not more.

Perhaps it was that closeness in age that prompted her to be lenient with Susan, for would they have become acquainted to one another under other circumstances, they might have become friends, had they not been born into vastly different families.

She had a weak spot for Susan and often overlooked her transgressions, which was of course not how one ought to lead a household or govern one’s servants, but most of Susan’s blunders remained unseen as she had been appointed as Elizabeth’s personal maid, making it unlikely anybody else ever witnessed her libertine speech.

Her servant’s face darkened from her usual cheeriness to concern.

“’S everything all right, Miss?” Elizabeth chose not to answer (for was it not obvious already?) and took a sip of her hot chocolate instead.

It tasted grey and sad, as was the general colour of this morning: the flowerbeds beneath her window, not fully in bloom yet, looked as sad as the fog-drenched forest in the distance smelt and the solitude of her covers felt.

At breakfast, a silent (and sad also) affair, the Colonel was missing without having notified anyone as to his present whereabouts, prompting Aunt Margaret to say that perhaps, the Colonel had finally
decided to depart for good, which was not a bad thing at all, for he had been quite a nuisance and how she would be relieved to be finally able to use the best guest-bedroom, which he had occupied, again, hoping she could invite some of her old Herefordshire friends soon while both Elizabeth and Uncle Samuel stared down onto their plates, not knowing what to say to Margaret’s insensitive belabouring of the matter or even what to feel, uncertain if Margaret Graves or John Graves Simcoe was the one they should presently be angry about.

They had not commented on Margaret’s words at all, knowing it was futile to discuss delicate matters with her and when she, seemingly oblivious to the feelings of her niece and husband, had risen (maybe she had gone to ascertain herself of the Colonel’s departure) and left the two of them to their own devices, both she and Uncle Samuel exhaled audibly with relief.

Suddenly, Elizabeth recalled the letter once more the Colonel had written her:

*It was she who set G. at your heels; I found out by chance, which I relay to you as-

How much truth was there to his statement? Had he only written this in his cowardice in order to pin the blame on someone else?

Whatever he had tried to achieve by including this piece of information, which she could not verify was true or not, he had acted the way he had, he and he alone. John Graves Simcoe had almost killed a man, not Margaret Graves.

Assuming he was right and her aunt had told Graves a little story, an entirely fictional fabrication in which Elizabeth thought fondly of the latter in order to set up some sort of encounter in which she and Graves would come to meet each other, become acquainted and she hopefully infatuated with him so she would eventually choose the latter above the Colonel, he still had had no need to almost kill Graves.

Besides, it all sounded somewhat constructed and terribly like the plot of a novel. Aunt Margaret did not hold him in high favour (though she had done, in days before he had come to the house and become acquainted to her in a way her aunt whole-heartedly opposed) and did not like him at all anymore after having heard certain allegations that he was a brutal, murdering savage of a man (which had proven true), but why would she hurt her own kin’s feelings?

Aunt Margaret had raised her, had always been there for her and, though strict and very rigid in the enforcement of her governance over the household and especially her young ward, she had never wanted anything under her care, it was she who had given her a small family even and raised her, when she could have passed the responsibility for a babe barely a day old to another relative- but she hadn’t.

Why would she hurt her own niece, to whom she had basically dedicated her life almost twenty years ago?

It was all too much for Elizabeth to make sense of, for she saw none in any of the things that had happened.

Quietly, she slipped from the room, brushing Uncle Samuel’s shoulder in a gesture of compassion as he appeared to be caught in a similar predicament trying to make sense of his godson and at the same time his wife (though if Colonel Simcoe had informed him about Aunt Margaret alleged deceit she could not say) and spent the remainder of the day in her room, making grey pencil sketches of imaginary landscapes on the Italian coast, wishing she could be there, in lands she never saw, south of the immortal Alps by the Mediterranean, where nobody knew her and she knew nobody, sitting in the cool shade of an olive grove, thinking about everything and nothing at all, alone.
Was the Colonel serious? Had he decided to leave them?

At the one hand, she could not care less for a man like him, who found enjoyment in torturing others and took his vital energy from hatred, but at the same time, she could not forget the tenderness he had shown her, the things he had whispered into her ear, the kisses that had taken her breath away, remembered his hands on her body, gentle and careful not to scare or to hurt.

John Simcoe had nursed her with the greatest care possible and put his own needs behind hers, had barely slept or eaten while he had kept watch over her.

How could two different men inhabit the same body? She loved John, and loved him still as she had to admit reluctantly to herself, but she felt nought but cold disdain for Colonel Simcoe.

He had made his choice. He had decided to be Colonel Simcoe, the colonial devil, the Scourge of Long Island, the mad dog and whatever else she had heard others call him and sold John out to his lesser instincts.

-Or had he? After all, he had come to her defence. He had wanted to save her- yet he would not have needed to go to such ends to rescue her even if she had to admit she had been thankful for his intervention, for she had not been certain if Graves would have stopped at forcing a kiss onto her lips in an attempt to convince her of the trueness of his feelings for her, even after she had struck him.

Still, they could have brought Richard Graves to account without almost killing the man. While she hated Graves with a passion since she had first been introduced to him about four years ago, there was a difference in quietly wishing he would develop a very painful rash obessing his loins, causing certain parts of him to shrivel and whither and standing by as the same man was almost killed in front of her own eyes, his face bloody, his eyes pleading with fear for his life when his mouth could no longer do the same in coherent speech was something altogether different.

It was all so complicated. She didn’t want to see Colonel Simcoe’s face ever again. And yet she wanted to feel his embrace, lose herself in his strong arms, while he rested his cheek on the crown of her head and softly murmured sweet words of adoration into her ear.

And she felt very, very wrong for thinking that.

Why had life to be this complicated? Why did she love him still, why did she love him at all, why, of all people, Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe?

The forest is silent that morning, not even a bird or other woodland animal disturbs the noises his boots make on the path littered with autumn leaves the molten snow has again brought into view a few weeks ago.

Grey fog hangs heavy between the trees; if an attacker, a beggarly soul searching for an unsuspecting target or a professional outlaw, robber, highwayman, wanted to ambush him, their chances were quite to their advantage.

Not that he cares much; what point is there even in his life, he has lost his Rangers, his superiors will not let him return to active service and the only person he has ever cared for since the death of his mother is best off without him.
Seated on the ground beneath an old, tall tree in the damp foliage of the past year, he has thought about things.

He will leave in the night, silently, pack everything he needs himself in order to avoid talk, and disappear into the night, walk to the next hamlet where a horse or carriage can be rented or purchased and then continue to Exeter, from where he will continue to London.

London, the city of sin, of merriment and failed existences, wretches like him who had left their homes in the country to better their station in life in the city they had dreamt of as having streets paved with gold.

He knows London is quite ugly far away from the stately townhouses of the high and mighty and it is only thanks to his guerdon he shall not have to dwell among them.

A man of modest means, he will be able to afford his own lodgings, perhaps employ a servant, and try to live out his remaining days in peace.

It is not the future he had envisioned in America when he had still lived for the glories and spoils the war had promised and it is not the future he has secretly come to hope for in his bedroom at Hembury Fort House after spending his days with Elizabeth Gwillim either, but at least, it is a future.

Her face haunts him constantly. He thinks of Her, the smell of Her hair when he buried his face in it, the lines of Her jaw that meet in Her quite endearingly pointy chin, the way Her lips seem to fit his perfectly, the softness of Her perfect, cream-coloured skin and the striking colour of Her mesmerising, characterful eyes, sometimes green, sometimes brown, sometimes in between, depending on the light.

Never until his dying day will he forget Her.

But now, his life will move on, will transform and change.

He also spares a thought on his godfather. Never in his life has he wanted to upset the old man, the Admiral has always been friendly to him and he is sad it has come to this, but it has to be.

Perhaps in a few weeks’ time, he will find the words and the courage to write to him, to explain what he has done and why. Maybe he will tell him about his conniving wife’s tricks then as well, for if ever a devil posing as a human walked this earth, it is Margaret Graves.

How she has managed to hide her cloven hooves and horns from view for so long is beyond him.

But what does that matter.

Nothing at all.

Whatever curses he hopes will befall Margaret Graves and make her miserable will not help him.

He has forfeited his only chance of happiness in life, and it was he who had kicked and punched another man, not Mrs Graves.

Although she is still not without fault, she could not have known Richard Graves would lay siege to Elizabeth in the way one would to an enemy fort.

And if this woman, or whatever she is besides, horned or not, has any redeeming quality, it is the love she bears for her niece. Even if it shows in unfounded jealousy and the fear to lose Elizabeth to him, she has love in her heart, which makes her-
What right does he have to judge in matters of character?

None at all.

The only thing left for him to say in this matter is that he hopes she will bestow Elizabeth with a lot of her maternal love in the wake of his departure to make her forget him quickly.

Not that she will want to remember him anyway.

Her face had been enough to tell him she hates him now.

He shall never see her again.

What will his new life, which is about to start in the night, bring? He does not know yet. He shall not return until well after nightfall to collect the bare necessities and then disappear forever from the lives of the Graves-family and their ward, Ms Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim, the woman who for a brief moment had illumined his life, like the sun breaking through the clouds for a moment before disappearing again on a cloudy day.

Weary eyes spot weary stars and a weary moon above,

The morning conquers red and bloody

Night’s maudlin thoughts of lost (lost!) love.

Now stream and sea are all a-glimmer,

The meadow dyed a bright green hue

In the clear skies sea-birds shimmer

And I have lost my love so true.

Pale as moonlight, earthen-dark eyes

I prayed to this effigy

Hands turned to the velvet skies

Her love was my eternity.

But when the last day of Forever

Withered at Apollo’s hand,

Dawn sends me on a new endeavour

Night’s musket wounds to dress and mend.
From all Elizabeth had heard, the Colonel had still left his belongings in the house, but had not been seen by anybody since six o’clock in the morning, when he had left without provisions and dressed in his walking-attire.

Uncle Samuel, like herself caught between the two images of the Colonel they had come to know each in their own way, grew more and more concerned by the minute and not even Aunt Margaret could feign being of good cheer anymore, for slowly it was suspected that either he had fallen victim to a robbery (though these cases were rare in the area, who knew where he had wandered), had an accident and hurt himself in such a way that he could not find his way back to the house without assistance (or worse still, Elizabeth realised with dread welling up in her heart, he could be- no, she mustn’t think such a thing) or had, for whatever reason, lain to himself.

None of these things were said out loud and yet everyone in the house from the lowest servant to the Admiral himself shared the same list of possible scenarios, one more dreadful than the other.

Not knowing where he was, what fate had befallen him, the house had slowly quieted; Elizabeth however was still awake and dressed. She had sent Susan away and remained seated at her desk, drawing in the piteous light of a singular candle.

As a child, Aunt Margaret and her changing governesses had always forbidden her to do that, claiming she would damage her eyes if she would resume reading or drawing in the dark with so little light for too long.

She didn’t really do anything; she just sat there, staring into the void, into the candle’s flame or onto the paper in front of her where the twentieth drawing of some place or other, fictional or real, had come to life.

It calmed her to concentrate on the work her fingers did, when she could bring herself to draw for a few minutes before her mind shifted to the Colonel and the events of the past twenty-four hours again, to consciously follow the lines her artistic skill made her hand translate onto paper; at least then, though a certain uneasiness always remained with her, she could forget everything for a short while, Hembury Fort House, Aunt Margaret, even the Colonel.

Yawning, she stretched her weary body, still seated at her desk. God, she had forgotten how tired she was, given she had not had enough rest the previous night and engaged her mind in much energy-sapping contemplation all day.

As she was considering to go to bed (which she in her present situation defined as managing to drag herself over to her bed and simply fall onto it, for her eyelids were very heavy already), she heard the sound of boots very far away and very quietly, likely downstairs, careful, as if someone was skulking through the house at night, intent not to make any noise.

Her first thought was naturally of a burglar or other criminal, but, no; she knew these footsteps, had heard them many a time when they had entered her room and she had already slept, weary from the effects of her injuries and the medicine that had been prescribed as a remedy; that was no intruder.

Her body had momentarily forgotten it ever needed any sleep, and awake as can be, Elizabeth rose, leaving her own shoes behind (she would teach him a lesson in sneaking around the house without being heard, she told herself, oddly anticipating his face when he would discover he had not been as sly and inconspicuous as he thought). John Graves Simcoe, 6’3” tall, with flaming hair and heavy
boots that could wake the dead if he chose to walk across a cemetery in them, was not a man made for clandestineness and secrecy.

Grabbing the candlestick, she waited until the familiar footsteps had ascended the staircase, walked through the corridor and passed her room by, where they had stopped for a second, before the man making the noise had dragged his body on his way again with evident reluctance.

So he had returned to fetch his things to go and leave for Exeter as he had informed her in the letter. All day she had wondered if there was anything to it, if she should tell Uncle Samuel about the letter, but had in the end not done it, for it had clearly borne the instruction to burn it after reading and had been for her eyes only.

Additionally, she would have found herself quite at loss how to explain some of its contents to her uncle, who, though having already deducted they had held each other in mutually high regard, could not know it had been more than the first, gentle interest of two people becoming acquainted for the first time.

There had been more, they had been in love until the previous night had shattered it-

Which was the reason why she had made the decision to see him off- they had shared too much to leave without another word, and Colonel Simcoe could prove he was no coward by admitting his crimes in front of her and tell her what he had written in the letter in person.

Did she really want that?

Her mind felt empty, uncertain, hovering in a state of limbo, luckily, her body knew what it had to do and without making a noise except for the low rustle of her skirts, she descended the staircase without a noise and slipped into the darkness of the hall, hiding the light of the candle behind an adjoining door.

She was angry, disappointed, sad-

Someone would be quite surprised to find himself in an ambush.

“Coward.”

He spins upon his heel, drops his luggage with a thud that makes him wonder if the old people upstairs have heard it and are awake now too, as he hears a painfully familiar voice behind him.

“Leaving like a thief in the night. Is this the best you can do?” Elizabeth’s left hand is firmly connected to her hip while the right holds a candle, making her elbow stick out in such a fashion that her otherwise rather small frame now bars him from slipping past her, barring him from reaching the door.

In fact, she resembles her aunt very much in this moment, making him wonder if all the women on the maternal side of her family look or looked like this, stern, determined and a little bit frightening, even if their bodily size should mean they are no match for him.

The huntress has him cornered.
“For God’s sake, Simcoe, you’re writing me a farewell letter that must make anyone worried and attempt to exit the stage of your crimes unseen?“

Her eyes glitter defiantly in the light of her candle.

He doesn’t know what to say to her, what would be wrong and what right- he does not wish to speak the wrong words this time, for obviously his letter has backfired most horribly-

*Smack.*

He hears the noise before he feels the pain. A hand has struck his right cheek, like schoolmasters sometimes do with unruly boys.

“Are you deaf and mute? Answer me!”

Dumbfounded that she has struck him, his loss for words persists. Blood rushes to his cheek and will likely leave a mark there in a short while.

“I have nothing to say.”

It is the truth, what good would it do to lie to her, invent a sorry tale for her to digest and take pity on him?

Although the possible outcome, namely that she will take him in her arms and love him again, sounds tempting, he cannot lie to her. He will not. He is a warrior, with all the beastly savagery that term entails with regards to his person and a warrior values truth. Spies and traitors, Woodhulls and Hewletts, tell lies, but not a warrior, though a monstrosity of a warrior, does not.

And what could he say for himself anyway?

He has been justified in his anger for Graves and his concern for Elizabeth’s welfare, but knows that he could have saved her from his uncalled for attempts to seduce her without beating the man half to death, though it is what he deserves.

He is ashamed Elizabeth had to see him like this, had to witness the beating. It is no sight for a lady.

“Nothing?”, Elizabeth repeats and puts the candle down on the staircase to allow her other hand to join her hips, making it even more impossible than before to pass her by without using force, which he could never do.

Although they communicate in an agitated whisper, the lowest they can manage in order not to wake the household staff or the Graves’, in his head, he hears her shouting at him.

“Just answer me one question: who are you?”

She did not have any time to think about what she wanted to say to him, there were so many things floating through her head she wished she could ask him all at once, but human speech permitted her to ask only one thing at a time and this question seemed by far the most important one to her.

The Colonel looked at her, not quite understanding what she meant by her question.

“Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe, Queen’s Rangers. Born on-“

“No. Who *are* you?”
“I don’t think I can follow you.”

The icy depths of his eyes pierce hers, unblinking and somewhat unsettling, as if she had caught him in an attempt to stare right through her own eyes into her soul, trying to discern what she was trying to get at.

“I have heard so much about ‘Colonel Simcoe’, the murdering savage, the devil incarnate, the brute, the- God knows how many descriptions such as these I have heard used as synonyms for your name. They say you were a bad man, brutal, horrid in the extreme in your days in America. You didn’t know mercy and relished in violence. And yet- I came to know a kind man, gentle, careful, considerate and loving-” the last word does not leave her lips without considerable effort and willpower, “a man whom I would have- who are you?”

“I cannot say.”

Again, he speaks the truth.

He has always considered himself a gentleman, though one bound by his obligations as a soldier and a warrior, which sometimes contrasted sharply with the common behaviour one expected of a man of said distinction, of late however, he is no longer certain about that.

A gentleman would not have let a lady watch him almost killing another man. A gentleman might have challenged the insulter of his lady’s virtue to a duel to settle the affair in a fashion befitting men of their standing, but he has acted grossly different, with the instinctive rage of a bandog let loose, not the composed, analytical mind of a man of education and manners.

Never before has he cared about what others have to say about his abilities as a leader, a military man; he has been at war and war requires men like him.

But this is not war any longer.

There are no rebels here for him to hunt and bring to justice, here, he is just a man, a weak, broken image of a man, still not fully recovered from his injuries (though he has learnt to manage and hide the pain from view, especially from Elizabeth, who would have fretted for him in days not long gone by had she known) and savage like a rabid dog, biting the hand that tried to offer him kindness.

And yet, he still is at war. The war has followed him back across the ocean, regularly haunts him, sometimes with sceneries he has seen in reality, sometimes with deceptively realistic images his mind produces; sometimes, in these dreams, it is he whose blood drenches the ground of some battlefield or other and, more often of late, he can see his hands steeped in blood that is not his.

The war goes on within him, every day, every night, in his dreams and recollections of the not too distant past and within his soul.

Elizabeth is right to ask who he is.

He has tried to be a lover, the lute his companion to sing songs in praise of his fair lady, but has failed.
He has taken up the bayonet (though in this case, only symbolically) again and acted as he would have only months ago in America, at war, and thus failed within English civilian society.

If anything, he is a ghost, a shell of his former self, still bound to this place by the power of longing for something that had been denied to him in this world so far and would, could never be his.

“You wrote that you love me. If you truly do, answer me.

How could he ever deny her anything? He already does his best, but it is not enough and will never be. He has tried to protect her, the only result being that he must leave her and his sole living family connections of sorts tonight.

“I don’t know myself any more than you do. The changes in my life- the loss of my command, my injuries and my rushed return to the shores I did not see more since my youth- have left myself in doubt. I was a warrior once. What I am now, I cannot say. All I did at the masquerade I did for you.”

“I did not ask you to kill a man in my name!”, she hisses back, “I have no liking for Richard Graves at all and I don’t care that he is heir presumptive to this house and the estate and have always found him repulsive and a dull conversationalist, but never would I have wanted to kill him! Or anybody to do it for me!”

“He was about to hurt you.”

“Graves attempted to kiss me and I struck him. Do not think I would have let him walk away from his misdeeds unpunished. I was grateful you must have been looking for me and intervened, but that- what you did- he was laying on the ground, begging for mercy-“

The horror on her features hurts more than any pain he has ever endured. There is no way he can make amends for what he did. She despises him now.

It is not so much that he regrets what he has done to Graves, who deserved every bit of what he has given him, but Elizabeth’s reaction to it that proves he has done great wrong, that he has acted out of place.

He looked at her in silence. His eyes were sad, sadder than she had ever seen them, and his hands clutched his tricorn, which he had taken off his head at the sight of her, his fingers beating a quivering rhythm against the black fabric.

This man, his shoulders slumped, a dry leaf caught in his hair and his breeches and stockings bearing brownish marks indicative of sitting or kneeling on the ground outside, his face one of sincere penitence and regret, looked nothing like the man who had done such terrible things to another human being.
Was this the same man whose beastliness she witnessed a day ago? He looked like John, the man she had fallen in love with, but could she vouch for the fact that it truly was him, not some fiendish eldritch creature sent in his stead, the same that had taken his place in America and made his name for him?

If only the supernatural and mysterious could be blamed. If so, she could walk over to him, close the distance between them and take him in her arms. She couldn’t do that now, even if her heart yearned for him. What she had seen still troubled her even if the love in her heart had not been extinguished by the utter savagery she had watched him administer to Richard Graves.

“Elizabeth, I cannot say- what I can say is- I love you. That is all I know, all I mean to say. Now I must leave.”

He looks her in the eyes one last time before he turns toward the door, gently pushing her aside with the brush of one hand, but Elizabeth firmly stands her ground and straightens her back as if she has any chance to ever reach any higher than his shoulder.

“Do you think you can leave, leave me, just like that? You wrote that you love me, you even said it to me now, for the first time. Has it ever occurred to you that I love you, too?”

She has been angry only a second ago and now she tells him this?

“If I wouldn’t love you, I would never have been affected by what you did. I love you, John, with all my heart, but I don’t think there can be a future for us- in any way- if you cannot master whatever possessed you that night.”

It is decided then. She wants him to go.

His head hanging low, he slings his bundle (he has paid a servant for his silence who will send him the remainders of his belongings to a London address he has provided the man with) over his shoulder and reaches over Elizabeth’s shoulder to open the door.

“Wait. Did I say you could leave?”

He looks up from his mud-splattered boots to her face.

“You said-“

“Yes, I said that. But that doesn’t give you the right to leave now, in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye to my uncle and thanking him for his hospitality. If you want to leave, you will go in the morning and say your farewells like a gentleman.”

“So you want me to-“

“I never said I wanted you to leave. That was your decision.”

“Do you want me to leave?”
That question she could not answer him right away. Yes, he could go without ever showing his peculiar face around these parts ever again, and no, he could not leave, not ever.

“‘Yes. And no.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“It does. I want you to leave because I have no love for a man who cannot master his temper and who is, as I have heard, prone to violent outbursts of the vilest kind and I wish you would stay because I cannot banish the memories of our time together from my head.”

“If I were to leave-“

“I would never try to find you.”

“And if I were to stay? What would you do?”

“I would not hinder you.”

“Am I indifferent to you?”

“What did I just tell you?”

He falls to his knees, prompted by instinct to do so and reaches for her hand, his head bowed in penitent reverence.

She does not recoil from him.

Chapter End Notes

I love cliffhangers. Now, for the notes:

Simcoe's opinion of Hewlett: In my universe, Simcoe has not "changed" due to Hewlett bravely torturing him when he was at his physically weakest and putting an apple in his mouth. I was never convinced that this short interaction could have turned Simcoe into a different person, especially given I am doubtful how much of it a very ill, very feverish Simcoe would have remembered of the ordeal- he might even have chalked it off as a weird fever-dream. While in this story he remembers it happening, it is not the main reason he slowly changes bit by bit; as you will have noticed, his relationship with Elizabeth is key to him rethinking who he is, who he was and who he wants to be. I just think love is a more plausible motive to try and change for another person than an apple.

"The Nightingale", "The Bold Grenadier" or "One Morning in May" is a folk song that can be dated back to the late 17th or early 18th century with many names and variations of it in existence today. Because it is the version I like best, I have chosen the lyrics as sung by the late Luke Kelly of The Dubliners. In this version of the song, the couple spend some time together by the waterside, the soldier plays a song on his violin but in the end, he informs his lover he will be going to
India for seven years. When the maiden asks him if he will marry her, he reveals to her that he is already married to a woman in his own country.

Susan is an entirely fictional character and her backstory involving Admiral Graves is also the fruit of my imagination.

Elizabeth's pencil sketches: If you want to see what I was thinking of in that scene, you can see one of her works here: http://francistowne.ac.uk/collection/list-of-works/moonlit-coastal-view/search/keywords:gwillim/page/1

This is no pencil sketch, but it is from around the right time (1783, so a few months into her marriage, though curiously she signed her work still as "Eliza Gwillim") and I could imagine her drawing studies for a similar landscape like this one.

"(...) imaginary landscapes on the Italian coast, wishing she could be there, in lands she never saw, south of the immortal Alps by the Mediterranean (...)": this line is an allusion to Emily Dickinson's (1830-1886) poem "In Lands I Never Saw- They Say"

In lands I never saw—they say
Immortal Alps look down—
Whose Bonnets touch the firmament—
Whose Sandals touch the town—

Meek at whose everlasting feet
A Myriad Daisy play—
Which, Sir, are you and which am I
Upon an August day?

It is said that Elizabeth and Richard Graves were not friendly in real life either. I have taken liberties with history here and although their relationship remained strained throughout their lives (they even became neighbours of sorts when Richard inherited Hembury Fort House and the Simcoes lived nearby at Wolford Lodge), nothing of the sort I describe ever happened in reality as far as my research revealed. Apparently, Admiral Graves thought his quasi-foster daughter and his nephew would make a handsome (and wealthy) couple and hoped they would develop a liking for another. Elizabeth and Richard however could not stand each other at all and Richard went on to avoid her whenever he could because she (at the time a girl in her mid- to late teens and hardly more than 5 foot tall) had been very vocal in her dislike of him on one or two occasions. She basically frightened him into leaving her alone. Nothing came of Admiral Graves' hopes who didn't press either Elizabeth or his nephew to further their acquaintance and Margaret Graves' opinion on the matter is lost to history, although I would suspect she would rather have seen her niece marry the heir to Hembury Fort House than a sickly, invalided Colonel with no prospective inheritance or any other noteworthy financial assets of his own.

Simcoe's latest poem has been written by me.
Together, Not Alone

Chapter Summary

Simcoe and Elizabeth have a few things to say and work through together.

Chapter Notes

A few warnings for today: period-typical attitudes to love, marriage, sex, money and politics, awkward memories of the 18th-century version of "The Talk" (spoiler: Margaret isn't good at it) and mentions of death, especially death in childbirth.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Never in his life has he knelt before someone. He has bowed to people when his manners or their station required this rather empty gesture, which could so easily twisted into a scalding mockery, but never has he willingly subordinated himself to another person before, with the exception of- well, that had only been a game.

Never has he done it sincerely, because he means what this gesture expresses.

He is hers, all hers and she may do with him as she pleases.

If his Queen decides to punish him, orders him to fall into his own sword or swings it against him herself, he will do as she says remain on his knees at her feet unmoving, head reverently bowed and accept his fate with the same gladness and compliance as if she had asked him to rise again.

The hand that reached out for her was not that of a cold-hearted murderer- it reminded her in its desperateness of that belonging to a child deprived of the most basic kindness, eager to find some consolation in something so simple as feeling another’s touch.

Once more she asked herself, as she had on several occasions in the past, what had been done to the Colonel, in America and before, that made him so, so hungry for the simplest human interactions and yet so destructive of everything that would initiate any closer acquaintance with anyone that would permit such small intimacies, nothings, being exchanged.

Luckily, her aunts and grandparents and other more extended relations had cared for her and had, while ensuring she had received a thorough and refining education, also showered her with more affection than she had later learned others had experienced during their childhood; she had not wanted a thing, had had pretty dresses, dolls and warm smiles a-plenty.

He knelt before her, the Colonel, his head bowed as if he were a misguided knight brought to justice by his queen in an ancient fairy tale.
Never before had someone done something as peculiar as this in her presence.

She looked down on him kneeling there, head bowed and still holding on to her hand.

She could pull away. And she probably should.

And yet, she did not.

*It must be terribly painful for him to kneel there,* she thought, for she was certain he was not as well as he often pretended to be and sometimes did not hide his ailments half as well as he thought when he bit his lip to suppress any more visible expression of pain after having somehow misused his left leg or, during their walks, clutching his chest when he thought she wouldn’t notice, testimony to the fact he wasn’t fully recovered yet, even if he liked to pretend he was.

His body was still more broken than he would admit, but what of his soul? His pose indicated it was even more destroyed than the body housing it, wishing for her to forgive him, yearning for the same love she had found in him and craved in a very similar manner not long ago, even if she told herself not to.

The Colonel’s unexpected show of reverence did not blind her eyes to who he was and what he had done. In her mind, the picture of Richard Graves, writhing on the ground and pleading for mercy, had not faded.

A few seconds passed, both of them unmoving, like centuries; what should she do? Should she tell him to rise and give him absolution for his many sins, of which she has only witnessed one and whose magnitude she could not ascertain, giving in to her body that yearned for its chosen preferred counterpart, or should the mind trump the heart and prompt her to pull her hand away, send him to his room and order him to be gone forever after breakfast?

What was she to do?

If she allowed him to stand before her again, would she make the same mistake as the tragically vain Lady Anne in Shakespeare’s play, who gives in to the pretty words and grand gestures of the tyrant Richard, flattered by his words of love?

For Richard of Gloucester’s argument was eerily similar to the Colonel’s: had he not persuaded Lady Anne, formerly Princess of Wales, whose husband he had stabbed in an angry mood at Tewkesbury, by claiming he had murdered, killed, committed savageries in her name only, that all he did, no matter how terrible, he had done for her?

But love could never justify cruelty she found and besides, what reason could the Colonel have to crave her absolution above anyone else’s, why did he prefer her to all other people?

-For her money, just like Lady Anne.

Had he “loved” her for her fortune all along? On the day when she had first bled, she recalled it was a day in mid-May when she had been fourteen years old, her aunt, after the bed had been cleaned and the lower half of her body enwrapped in clean rags, Aunt Margaret had taken her aside, sat on the now blood stain-less bed beside her and told her the most important things a woman needed to know.

“You are a woman now, Elizabeth”, she had announced (as if it hadn’t been evident already from the red flower that had blossomed on her bedding and nightshirt when she had woken that morning) in a sombre, ceremonial tone, “you know what this-” she had gestured to the laundry basket containing the maculated sheets and nightshirt the maid had put down in order to be able to open the door
without help before leaving, “means?”

Of course she had nodded, painfully aware that any other reaction than a firm “yes” would be quite childish, and she wasn’t a child anymore now. Truth be told, she did not know everything she suspected her aunt was hinting at, but had some idea of what this all, their talk, the blood, meant, mostly from chatter she had caught somewhere, half-listened in conversations between some of the servant girls or circles of lowly-murmuring female guests when they had thought no one was listening.

“I might now bear children, Aunt”, she had answered just like a schoolgirl who has been asked by her mistress to repeat some French vocabulary in front of the class.

Her aunt had nodded with great (almost dramatic) gravitas and continued the cross-examination:

“And whom does a woman bear children?”

“Her husband, of course.”

This conversation had surely not been the most pleasant she had ever had with Aunt Margaret, and Elizabeth had blushed horribly at her aunt’s reminder that virtue and honour stood every woman in good stead and adorned her even more than a beautiful dress or jewellery could.

As if she had ever shown any interest in male company that could be classified as unseemly; she sat at the same table as her uncle’s friends and supped with them, politely answered any questions when spoken to as she had been raised to do by Aunt Margaret and the governess she had once had and spoke to men of lesser degree, servants and shopkeepers when required; Aunt Margaret could not find any fault with that, could she?

“Some women don’t bear children at all. I did not, for I married past the age nature has assigned to me in order to preserve my life.”

When she had given her aunt a puzzled look (never before had she put much, or any mind at all to her aunt’s comparatively late marriage, if the mothers of her friends and women she had seen in Honiton were anything to go by), her aunt had put a motherly arm around her shoulder and spoken of the fateful day of her birth once more, as she had done on several occasions in the past, wistfully, and never without a tear in her eye. She had loved her sister, the older Elizabeth, very much, Elizabeth had figured, Aunt Margaret had loved her mother, the older sister whose child she had raised, a lot.

“Your mother would not have needed to die, had she not married at all”, the older woman went on, totally oblivious to the fact that in Elizabeth’s ears, her tale sounded like an accusation against her person; she had not killed her mother on purpose, she had been an innocent babe and at birth, as one heard, so many things could go dreadfully wrong for which the child could not be blamed.

“Do you want that?”, Aunt Margaret had closed her recollections of blood, unbearable pain and holding her dying sister’s hand as the latter demanded to see her daughter, no more than a few hours old, one last time.

“No Aunt, I should not like that”, Elizabeth had answered truthfully.

She could never imagine being in such pain as Aunt Margaret had described her mother’s or dying at all, especially with the knowledge that the child, her child, would grow up without her to see it happen, that she would never know her child or the upstanding gentleman or well-bred lady the little screeching bundle would one day become.
In a short and silent prayer to the heavens, she expressed her hope her mother and father, who had fallen on some battlefield in Germany without ever having learned of her existence in life, were watching over her now and always.

All this talk of death and dying in childbirth aside, there were a few other things related to the topic of child-bearing she was not too certain about— for one, how could a babe, though smaller than a grown person or an older child, fit inside a woman’s belly? And, more importantly, how was it possible for the body to expel such a comparatively large thing from its narrow confines?

Or, more cryptically still, how did the child come to be inside a woman’s body? Again, she was only in possession of carefully-stored half-truths and had no real knowledge how it was supposed to work, but judging from her limited knowledge of what was supposed to happen at the time, it so far hadn’t sounded like something she wished to participate in.

“Save yourself an early, miserable death then and remain unwed. Your fortune will sustain you comfortably and for as long as your uncle or I are alive, none shall banish you from this house. You have no need of a husband to support you, your money and lands make you self-reliant in your own right. You can be happy and independent thanks to your inheritance.”

Elizabeth had expected it would come to this. The question had only been how long it would take her aunt to get to this vexatious topic.

Aunt Margaret was fond of all things that could be measured and compared and loved it best when she was in possession of something larger in quantity or size than a similar something owned by somebody else; she could delight in having more costly cutlery than Mrs So-and-So and smirk over the look on Lady This-and-That’s face upon discovering Aunt Margaret’s garden windows were more plentiful in number and bigger than the ones at Some-Place Park.

In the same vein, her aunt could not support it at all if she had the lesser of the two compared items and could be discontented for days over such a matter.

Thus Elizabeth’s fortune had always been a favourite topic her aunt enjoyed belabouring in the extreme.

The Spinckes’ fortune was not inconsiderable either and neither Aunt Margaret nor her mother had ever experienced hunger, starvation or any other discomfort, but it paled in comparison to the combined wealth her parents had left Elizabeth at their respective deaths.

It sounded not bad, the life her aunt sketched in rough pencil strokes of the tongue for her, but Elizabeth wasn’t really sure if she wanted that; did not all girls want to marry? When she had been much younger, she had enjoyed reading fairy tales and somehow, all princesses or heroines always fell in love with a handsome gentleman or better even, a prince, whom they married to live happily together forever.

Despite her young age, Elizabeth could not help but remark upon the hypocrisy that, while petitioning her niece to sleep alone all of her life, Aunt Margaret was most definitively wed to Uncle Samuel.

Uncle Samuel could not exactly be called a fairy tale-prince (he was too old for that and not really handsome enough), but Aunt Margaret had married him.

“Why have you married Uncle Samuel, then?”, she had dared to ask her aunt.

Upon hearing this question, Margaret paused a while, making it look as if she was searching for the
correct thing to say, before she began: “I liked him, I think. I was no more at the age to become a mother and, although I had money, my assets were far less than yours, and made me uncertain of my future. Your uncle, who was widowed, liked me, wanted a companion, I suppose. I gave control over my inheritance to him in exchange for a safe future, to live to old age without having to economise too drastically. I would not have consented to it had I known your uncle to be a sloth, drinker or gambler”, she added quickly, as if she had to justify her actions in front of Elizabeth.

“And this”, Aunt Margaret had gone on, “is another important reason why you best keep control of what is yours. I am no jurist and cannot be, but upon the marriage, what is the bride’s becomes her husband’s and she is his as much as her dowry is. How many do you think have been ruined, driven into desperation by uncaring husbands drinking or gambling away their wives’ money, leaving them destitute? Beware of flatterers and pretty words, child, to the likes of them, young women like you look like a new-born lamb does to a hungry wolf.”

Before this day, she had never really cared about her money, the riches she supposedly was mistress over and what reason would she have had to do so?

It seemed very conceptual, not really something one could well imagine, what “much money” meant. It was not like saying “two horses” or “five knitting-needles” and a picture conjured itself up in the mind.

Soon enough however, she, older and less naïve in her beliefs regarding men and money, had grown to heed her aunt’s words, stored them in her heart.

Life was not a fairy tale, and women in far worse states than Aunt Margaret married for the supposed safety and security a husband provided and some of them were disappointed and driven into poverty due to the carelessness of the men who had been supposed to take care of them.

In addition to this, as she and with her, her friends, grew older, most of her friends of those who did marry or for whom such an enterprise was considered, did not marry for some ideal of love, for having found a man they wanted to be with forever, they were wed by their parents to a gentleman of their choosing.

Life was no game, and certainly not a lazy, amorous sport, especially not for women eligible for marriage.

No, women like her were the prize for others to win in the game.

“Why are you doing this?”

“What do you mean?” His voice still is low, soft, vulnerable even.

“Why do you want me so badly? Is it my money? You wouldn’t be the first. Just be honest with me, that is all I ask.”

How she even managed to retain composure, she did not know.

The truth was, she had really fallen in love with him, even if she hadn’t liked him much at all in the beginning and had until this day believed the feelings that had slowly developed over time were mutual.

If he wanted her money (and the way things looked, he would soon be on half-pay), she wanted to know, all she craved was his honesty, nothing more, even if it might hurt.
“I don’t want you”, he answers, indignation in his voice and watches as her eyes widen with shock.

He shouldn’t have said that, she has misinterpreted it, but he catches himself quickly, “I love you. Wanting is an expression best reserved for-“

“Then let me ask you differently: do you 'love' me or my fortune?”

“You.”

The answer comes quickly, he doesn’t need to think about it after all, and is already spoken before her question is even entirely faded from the tension-charged air between them.

He presses her hand a little harder, still mindful to be gentle and not hurt her with his much bigger, calloused fingers to reinforce his words.

He knows she is rich, far richer than he will ever be, but what does that matter to him when he loves her? Love does not discriminate between rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, witty and stupid, it simply comes to bloom, like an impossible little flower in the stony crevice of a hostile wall or the rocky wasteland of a mountain, is an expression of the beauty of the soul that conquers great adversity.

With her, he would sleep on the beaten earth floor of a pauper’s makeshift shed if it had to be.

With her, he would walk all day from town to town, village to village, on shoes with the soles worn out mending pots and pans for no more than a pittance.

It is understandable however, because he is sure there are men, Benedict Arnolds, who marry the same way they shoot wild animals: for sport and trophies.

A most despicable practice in his mind, for though it is often a rather worldly business, there should at least be a mutual understanding of both partners what sharing their lives from this point on means, minimising their mutual unhappiness.

But he doesn’t want Eliza to be unhappy, never. If she says now that he makes her unhappy, or would make her unhappy one day, he will leave for good.

“I love you.”

He repeated his vow of love to her and Elizabeth could not help to feel affected by it. It seemed genuine to her, his tears, standing in his eyes, waiting to roll down his cheeks if only he’d let them, his stiff pose still kneeling in front of her-

Even if he did, the issue of his brutal treatment of a fellow human being remained.

How could he have been- She didn’t know what to think anymore.

On the one hand, she was still cautious she might have overlooked something, that he had been lying to her after all, but her instincts did not tell her so.

He meant what he said.
“I love you, too”, she heard the words pass her lips without even having thought of saying anything aloud at all.

John looked in her face and slowly, carefully, rises from the floor.

“You do?”

“I do”, she breathed, bracing herself to say what she wanted, nay had to say next, “but you must make a promise.”

“A promise?”

“Yes. You must swear it, upon all you hold dear.”

Solemnly, for lack of a bible to put his hand on close by, he held his right hand up into the air, as sometimes ancient roman senators did in illustrations and, prepared to do as she said, confirmed to her that he was ready to do as she had told him.

“You must promise me to never do such a thing again.”

Seemingly without thinking, John lowered his right hand and lifted his left at the same time, holding them up, outstretched at the same level, as if he awaited an inspection for cleanliness, staring at them, before he let them fall to his sides to limply dangle there on his arms like useless appendages of his body, not designed for any special purpose.

Before he answered her, another few moments passed in silence.

“I cannot.” He hung his head.

“I cannot promise I will not do this again for I fear what you have witnessed is my true nature, the monster, all that I am, all that I ever was.”

It is true. He is a monster. She has a right to know this, that he doesn’t deserve to be loved by her, that she must not spend a tear or another moment of her life on him.

This promise he cannot make, for rage, efficiency in battle, a fierce will to win and cold-bloodedness have indeed been his defining abilities for the past twelve years of his life, and is not this the reason why he still does not feel half as at home in England than he has in any odd little village during the war?

All he can give her is his honesty, and this is not nearly enough, not even a fraction of what she deserves.

He does not trust himself, his opinion of his own person so low he cannot assure her he will not do it again.

With a sting in her heart, she noticed how much he seemed to despise himself. Nobody should have to feel like this, nobody should have to hate themselves.
And yet, is not his hatred of himself a sign of penitence, regret, the wish for himself to be different, change? A beast, a monster as he described himself, was mindless, did not care about its deeds, a wild animal knew no pity or regret; the Colonel did.

“Maybe you can promise me something else?” Her own voice trembled, not knowing why for it was not she who was to be held accountable here, and watched as the Colonel, standing only inches away from her, braved himself to look her in the eyes to thus disclose his innermost feelings, displayed in the clear, blue depths of his irises, to her.

Hurt, fear, pain, regret - and love. So much of it she thought it would flood her heart with the primal power of a storm surge and drown her in his kisses any moment.

Yes, she still loved him too, wished for him to be close to her, at all times.

For the moment however, she had to remain alert, let herself be governed by reason and order the heart to take a step behind his more serious sister.

“Can you promise me that you will try, then? To- not- to not-“

He knows exactly what she wants to say. He is not to let the darkness wash over him that takes hold of his soul sometimes, causes him to have these dreams he does not want to think about presently and makes it so in his mind as if he was back on some foreign battlefield, causing him to forget where he is, who he is, lost in a moment of pain or rage, sometimes both.

“I promise.”

Elizabeth’s face, still that of someone in torment (why would she feel torment in this moment? She has done no wrong) lightens somewhat and she draws a step closer to him.

“Then kiss me, John.”

Crouching down somewhat for he is a good deal taller than she is, he rests his forehead against hers in a gesture akin to submission.

“Yes.”

He kisses her, holding her hands in his. It is a gentle, careful kiss, not passion but patience and promise. A promise never to leave her again, to love her and to aspire to be the man she sees in him.

He knows a leopard cannot change his spots and he cannot change who he is, his past that shaped him, but he will try, give all he can to make her happy.

She is his day, his life, and has been ever since he has known her, if he is honest to himself. When first she caught him as he fell a few months ago, she had cast a spell upon him that bound him tightly to her.

She lets herself fall into his arms and hums as their kisses grow more sensual, passionate, and steadies her body against the bannister of the staircase behind her as his mouth trails down to the sensitive little spot of skin just below her ear, along her jawline before it finds her neck where he buries his face in her skin.
“John.”

How come she is even more beautiful with her eyes closed like this, breathless with the silent promises his kisses make, of more, of things they mustn’t consider doing, lest he wants to add cad and lecher to the list of insults used to describe him. No, he will not debauch her nor give in to the somewhat lewd phantasy his mind creates, under no circumstances, even if the thought of her, in his bed, close to him, tightly wrapped in his embrace with her face buried in his chest, blankets dawn tightly around them, wars with his steely resolve to be a gentleman for her.

“Never let me go again.”

“I won’t.”

“You are not evil. You are lost. There is so much good in you, if you want it to be.”

It is no use holding back; the tears are stronger than he is and force themselves past his eyelids.

Under suppressed whimpers (sounding just like the wounded beast he knows he is, even if she loves him regardless), he allows Elizabeth to hold him, half-sunken to her level as his knees grow weak.

She is so strong, stronger than he will ever be, and brave, so brave.

Weak as he is, it doesn’t bother him at the moment, for he is safe with her, however right or wrong about him she is.

A few minutes pass in silence, spent holding each other close when Elizabeth says: “Now get up and get back to bed. The world can wait until dawn.” He nods and escorts her to her room before he, just about to proceed to his own quarters, is held back by a small hand on his forearm.

Biting her lip, she visibly wants to say something, although the words don’t seem to cross her lips easily.

“It is night, everybody else is asleep”, she summarises their situation- why?

“It is.” “Nobody will remark upon your absence from your room until seven in the morning.”

“Elizabeth-” “Hush. Come inside.” He knows he should not, but his legs are decided before his mind is.

Inside, she closes the door and smiles at him.

She draws him into her embrace, but he cannot fully give himself in to the feeling. No. If Margaret Graves finds out, she will scalp him and disown Elizabeth. No. He cannot do this, even if he would like it very much.

“Stay, tonight.”

“This is-“

“No, no. I am not asking you to- I was not talking about that- just stay. With me.”

“I could sleep on the carpet in front of your bed, if-“

“John, no, of course not. Come into bed with me.”

Her chest heaves from agitation and he has to muster all his mental forces to restrain his body’s natural reaction to her invitation. A mental image of Edmund Hewlett’s grotesque features (especially
the imitation of stern respectability the little wigged major had given in the early days in Setauket) usually achieves the objective.

“I want you close to me, hold me. Is this too much to ask?”

Well, given that they are basically engaged already, judging by the conversation he has had with the Admiral recently, what harm could be there in joining her? It is not right, and he will likely regret it, but he longs too much for her proximity.

She asks him to help her with her dress. Given that he, although he has of course never worn one himself, suspects these things are quite uncomfortable to rest or sleep in, he maintains that it is not a sight he ought to see and forces his gaze not to rest on his hands but on her face, or when she is turned around, to inspect her coiffure.

His hands were so gentle, so careful with her and it did not escape Elizabeth that his eyes never observed his deftly-working hands (how often had he done this before?), as if he considered it improper to see her like this even after she had basically invited him to see her like this.

For reasons of time (and a bout of bashful modesty she has had at the last minute) she decides that removing her dress and loosening her stays will have to do.

In her petticoats, she sat down in front of the mirror, as she would were Susan here to assist her and tells him to remove the pins from her hair.

John did so with extreme care and it took quite long for, as compared to Susan, he did not know where the little things were located, cleverly hidden from view and had probably never undone someone’s coiffure.

But these things could be learned.

When she is safely slipped beneath the covers and her form hidden from his view, he relieves himself of his necktie, coat and waistcoat, leaving them both in their smallclothes.

Awkwardly, he heaves his long limbs into bed next to her on top of the covers. Sighing with her eyes rolling skyward, she takes notice of him having not placed himself under the covers with her.

He mustn’t.

Her hand creeps over to him and takes his.

“Will you hold me, please?”

Breathing heavily, he inches closer to her, still leaving a little room between them. Elizabeth however rolls into his outstretched arm, giving him a defiant look.
“I don’t care about other people. We know we do no wrong. And besides, what Wrong is there in loving?”

“There can be. Sometimes.”

His hesitant answer and his sudden change of tone to what she knew was a defensive pitch, indicated he had more to say on the matter. Her curiosity inflamed by his cryptic answer, she prodded deeper:

“Care to explain?”

If only it were so easy to explain. He has once been prepared to murder for love. He has watched Margaret Shippen-Arnold and her declared adversary, the New York actress Philomena Cheer (whose less glamorous birth name was Hanham) spin webs of intrigues fighting over the legacy of a hanged man.

He has set himself at the heels of a woman he was in love with and pursued her with fervour, perhaps even a little too much of it.

“I have no experience in requited affection”, he starts, somewhat embarrassed to confess this to her, that he, the battle-hardened soldier prepared to give his enemies every inch of cold, hard steel with an not unimpressive reputation in York City’s Holy Ground (Lady Lola had been as pleased with his skills as he with hers) has never had a true sweetheart.

There hadn’t been girl before his departure, and how could there have been? His time at university had been spent reading poetry and passing his examinations while occasionally indulging in the services of a few ladies of easy virtue who spent the evenings dwelling in the cheap drinking establishments he frequented. Then he had been bed-ridden for a year and had without even having fully recovered, gone to join the army.

There had simply been no time for love.

And despite knowing what love could, should be like (most of this knowledge, or rather imaginary construct derived from his voracious appetite for literature of all kind), he hadn’t noticed it was missing in his life until he had met Anna.

Of course, he knew the love of parents (motherly love especially, Heaven rest her soul), the distant love (courtesy) that comes with having blood relations or a godfather for that matter, but none of these kinds of love had burned as fiercely in his breast as the love for the dark-haired, doe-eyed nymph of Setauket had in days gone by.

It was not the passion of his younger years, sated in the backyard of some tavern or secretly, alone, in the close confines of his quarters in Oxford, mindful to make no noise to hide his doings from the other students, it was an altogether different thing.

He had wanted to be close to Anna at all times, spent as much time with her as possible (sometimes
watching her do her work in the tavern had been enough) and extended every proper courtesy to her he could give.

And while the inhabitants of this sorry backwater town, led by their magistrate, whose son (what had she ever seen in this sorry cabbage farmer, this miscreation of a patriot miscreant?) she had been most intimate friends with, had treated her like dirt, at a time when even Hewlett, the ever-blind fool who had considered himself wedded to his duty and his amateur dabbling in science (although, as he had heard on his trip to London a while ago, there was talk about that German fellow whom Hewlett had loved even more than Bucephalus, or rather his sister, and her suitor- could it be? No. Hewlett was too painfully embarrassing for that.) had not treated her, wife of a convicted seditionist, kindly, he had leapt to her defence, only to be rewarded with betrayal and cold refusal.

For she had used him, the cunning Mrs Strong, had crushed his heart under the heel of her dainty shoe.

What did Woodhull have he hadn’t? Why did she fall for Hewlett, why had she settled with weaklings and nuisances when she could have had a warrior who would have been ready to lay the world at her feet?

Why did she treat him so cruelly, send him away, toy with his feelings as if it were nothing? Granted, his advances had not been the most cunning and perhaps a little obtrusive at times, now that he thinks of it, but he had loved her. It was not his fault she hadn’t understood that, or so he had thought at the time while she kept pushing him away, however sweet he tried to be to her. No wonder he had resorted to different methods and set aside the lute to sing her praises to take up arms. As in politics, in love too arms are employed as soon as diplomacy fails.

Granted, he had been quite sure Woodhull would miss him, but there had been a chance he would receive a wound in her name. A pity he had never gotten the chance to aim his shot at Woodhull on this day at the millpond.

He had risked his men and his own life while setting the trap for Hewlett. Had killed men and been stabbed himself in the process.

He would have died for her, and what had she done? Offered him her body in exchange for retrieving Hewlett from rebel captivity (which, incidentally, he had orchestrated in order to rid himself (and Anna) of this infuriating wight). Not that he wouldn’t have fantasised about taking Anna to bed with him, in fact he had done so more than once, but have her against her own will as dutiful fulfilment of a bargain? He would never treat a lady thus.

Her insults had stung his heart for quite a while (“I do not love you and I never will”, “you are not half the man he is”) and it was shortly after Hewlett’s unfortunate return that he had gone rather off her and besides his relocation to York City had provided him with Lola as a welcome distraction.

Elizabeth is so different than Anna. She is not cold and calculating, a conniving hypocrite, she is a lady of refined manners and good breeding with a heart made of solid gold, cheeks like roses, eyes that burn like a bonfire and wits so sharp as his old bayonet.

What shall he tell her? Will she not find him despicable once she knows the truth?

“I have loved”, he continues, “with fervour. But she did not love me back. However hard I tried, she did not love me. I tried to win her with my every fibre, and yet she refused.”
The look on his face was endearing and heart-breaking at the same time. It was also quite curious how a man like him had never had someone else in his life before.

Not that she liked the thought of him with another woman very much (not at all) but surely, there must have been a betrothed, fiancée or simply beloved in his thirty years on this earth? Not to speak of certain other ladies who warmed a man’s bed on a lonely night in exchange for coin. She didn’t like this particular thought either and blushed slightly at the thought of John with such a woman (though not for the same reasons she tried to make herself believe she did), but things like that were common knowledge.

But were all these instances of two people of different sexes entering unions of sorts directly connected to loving someone as well?

No, she found, and felt saddened by the loneliness that had seeped through his words.

What did these things matter anyway? She loved him, and he was her first true love just like she was his.

“Why, I am glad.”

“Why would you be?”

“Because you would never have come here then.”

She gives him a little, tired smile and turns around in his arms, her back firmly against his chest.

Much as he would like to enjoy the feeling, he dares not to and moves away a little to at least maintain some feeble semblance of propriety; her low, inaudible muttering that sounds not at all content with his decision indicates that she has long passed this point.

Her voice sounds sleepy. To be quite honest, he is not half as awake as he pretends to be, either. The day has exerted them both, and much as his poetic soul would like to assign this fact to their day of separation, both lonely without the other, she probably sitting in her room by the window, passing her time drawing, tending a flame of hope in her heart that he will walk into view while he has sat on the forest floor, thinking of her with his eyes closed, wishing they could be together once more.

They will not talk about everything they should, or have to, right now. For the moment however, this is not important, there will be another day tomorrow.

Is she asleep already? It is quite hard to tell. He could sit up and bend over her of course, but if she really is asleep, his sudden movement might wake her, and he doesn’t want that.

Thus he remains in his current pose, caught in one of the many conundrums he finds his soul in.

She has made moving away from her without waking her almost impossible too, because one of her hands rests on the arm that holds her, has decided to do so quite without his conscious decision, enwrapping her sculpture-like figure around the middle, the perfect position to draw her closer to him
without any great effort.

It would be so easy, and without a doubt the most divine thing to come this close to her, but he mustn’t, he must resist the temptation and maintain what little distance there is left between them. They are being improper enough already and in case somebody finds them and he is to answer for his crimes, perhaps this will give him an argument to plead for an execution by firing squad, not hanging.

Besides, he has almost embarrassed himself in front of her already when she had taken off her dress and loosened her stays with his assistance. Only the thought of Hewlett had saved him from making a fool of himself- he doesn’t want her to think he is a vile, lust-driven creature whose perverse fantasies cause him to court a young woman in order to eventually debauch her.

He certainly doesn’t think of her in this way, although sometimes he imagines how sweet it would be if they could be together without any inhibitions, Elizabeth laying in his arms, her body hungrily, hotly pressed against his with no stays or petticoats between them, her lips flushed red from his kisses, her eyes half-closed in the lazy haze of contentment that comes after what he is sure could be between them, if they decided to- no.

It is vile even to think such a thing.

And they would have to be married first.

Not that it needs a ring on a lady’s finger to do that, but Eliza is a goddess and he will treat her as one.

Marriage. Since the Admiral has mentioned it, he cannot quite get the thought out of his head.

They could be together, forever and ever, and very soon at that because the old man has already assured him of his blessing and has offered to take care of the ever-nuisance Margaret Graves.

But will the Admiral still hold to his promise? Truth be told, he wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t; after all, he too had opposed what he had done with Graves. Even worse, Graves is his other godson and a blood relation even, his brother’s younger son, which certainly won’t improve his position.

Never will he entrust Elizabeth’s hand into that of a butcher like him.

But he has made a promise, and promises couldn’t be broken so easily. They had shaken hands on it, hadn’t they?

First thing in the morning, he will seek his godfather out, apologise for what he has done and ask him the most important question of them all.

He is still not particularly sorry for having administered a beating to Richard Graves, who had deserved every punch and kick, he is sorry for having shocked Elizabeth and he even feels some sadness inside him, very faintly, that admonishes him such things must not be done in civilian England; he is not at war where such things, especially from the leader of the infamous Queen’s Rangers, were to be expected, but he doesn’t want to have the ill repute of a tavern-brawler, he doesn’t want to be feared, he doesn’t want people to think he is a mindless brute.

Not that he wants to be friends with all the world, but it would be quite nice to be passed on the road to Honiton not only with an afeard sounding “good day”, but with a curt smile as well.

Without Elizabeth and the taste of, no for life she has given him, he would never have noticed such things but thanks to her, he knows now he is lonely, perhaps alone even when she is not with him.
She is everything and so much more than he has ever deserved.

He doesn’t deserve her love, for she still loves him, doesn’t she? Otherwise, she wouldn’t want him near her, right? She would have sent him away if she wouldn’t love him, isn’t it so?

Because he loves her terribly, very, very much.

Before the unfortunate incident, he hadn’t even known there could be so much feeling in the little place to the left beneath his ribs; he hadn’t known it was possible to love another person so much.

And he wants to make her as happy as she makes him.

He must ask the Admiral first thing in the morning to renew his promise and he will do whatever it takes to disperse the old man’s doubts, go on his knees, beg, make any promise in return he wishes, bring him the Golden Fleece or the horn of a Unicorn, slay a dragon if this was what it would take.

- There is, even if his godfather is going to say yes, one issue remaining however: does Eliza want that, too?

Shortly before the masquerade, he would have been more confident to say she might consider his proposal, if he were to make one, now, he is uncertain.

She still likes him and seeks to be near him, but is this enough? Is it enough for a lifetime, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years together or will she regret marrying him, assuming she would say yes, within a matter of days?

He wouldn’t marry himself if he were her. For once, he and Margaret Graves agree on something.

If, in the unlikely case the Admiral will forgive him, he is going to ask her, will she take him, will she love him forever and always, or will she laugh in his face and ask how in the world he had drawn the conclusion that she ever wanted such a thing?

She has enough money and connections to never even have to consider any proposal, marry for security as other women have to do, nor are there any parents in her back urging her to marry to uphold a family name.

So why should she want to marry at all if her life is very comfortable as it is, and above all, why, of all men available (and she could have many, he knows that, and many whose looks are more agreeable to the eye and whose fortunes would match well with her own) would she consider the proposal of an invalided colonel with more scars than anything else?

But she has said she loves him.

Even if she does, he comes to think, that doesn’t mean she will want to marry him. This world is not governed by love; there are more important concerns to be taken into account than the fickle flutters of hearts, even if they aren’t so fickle after all.

She is very intelligent, prudent and knows her way around society. She won’t marry him if she has any doubts, even if she considers a love match (hypothetically speaking), and she has doubts about him, he knows that, since having witnessed his treatment of Richard Graves’ despicable visage.

In a way, he has wounded her, smarted her heart, made a hole in it that must heal before he can even consider asking her.

Knowing how long it took him to be able to walk and breathe again without any greater pain, the
recovery, the healing of her heart will take time.

In the meantime, he will care for her, as he has done when her ribs were broken and her face swollen, he will tend to the invisible injury best as he can, try his best to be a man she can trust, to be the man she sees in him or has seen in him prior to that fateful incident.

It will take time, more than just a simple wait until tomorrow or next Sunday.

He cannot say how long it will take, but that doesn’t matter.

He will wait.

When Elizabeth awoke, John was still sleeping. She needed another moment or two to realise where she was and what had happened the previous night when she noticed that she was in her bed, but not alone; a much larger, very warm body lay pressed firmly against her back.

In the night, she must (perhaps due to the warmth of her bedfellow) have rid herself of her blanket, for it lay crumpled on the floor on her side of the bed, as far as she could see without being able to move much, for the person in bed with her was laying on her hair, the tip of his nose brushing the nape of her neck, his breath, weirdly calming and not unpleasant at all, caressing her in regular, feather-light strokes.

So far, she had been accustomed to share a bed with some of her few female friends, Mary Anne the most, and they had done so for years without inhibition, shared the space sisterly and fallen asleep resting on the other’s shoulder or holding hands, but this experience was entirely different.

He didn’t smell of Mary-Anne’s apple-scented perfume or the herbs her mother always put in her luggage when she travelled to repel moths, he smelled like the forest, moss wet with rain and dry leaves mixing with the faintest hint of a sharp-smelling cologne and himself.

She had noticed it before, in the banyan he had handed her to shield her from the cold on the night they had shared their first kiss, this wasn’t like the pungent odour of someone who had gone unwashed for long, she simply liked him, the distinctive scent of him that could only be described metaphorically.

Lazily, comfortable as she was, she watched the sun rise through the heavy curtains, her back still turned to the familiar stranger in her bed, John.

He was still asleep for all she could tell and she didn’t want to move half an inch, fearing she might wake him.

The arm enwrapping her around the middle pressed her back tightly against his chest and his hand rested on her stomach, the comfortable warmth and light pressure giving her a sense of being protected and adventure at the same time.

With a strange feeling in her gut and slowly more awake than before, she noticed how his body had moulded to fit hers, his own following the shape hers had bent into.

Elizabeth felt the firmness of his thigh pressing against the back of her own, and remarked upon the
knee that had come to nestle in the back of hers, due to their difference in height and the length of their bones pushing somewhat in between them, nudging them apart a little to accommodate his.

What a shame they would have to rise in order to allow John to creep back into his bed before her Aunt and Uncle would wake, busying the household with making breakfast and readying the house for the day ahead of them.

But not just yet. Just another moment.

Briefly, losing herself in the last instant of lingering she had granted herself, Elizabeth felt this was what life should be like. They’d have to do that again, but the next time, she would take precautions and braid her hair, or, given his skilled fingers, let him do it again, so he wouldn’t trap it under his head again- 

Next time?

Yes, it had been wonderful, waking up like this, but she could not forget what had preceded their argument and this night.

Her heart and her body rejoiced, but could her mind also?

She couldn’t simply pretend she hadn’t seen him do such a terrible thing. It was a part of their history now, among all the beautiful things, his tenderness when she had been confined to bed, the sweetness she had enjoyed beholding when he had played with little Charlotte and allowed the infant to fall asleep on his broad chest, all the kisses, embraces and strokes of his hands- the same hands that had almost killed, and had killed, in the past.

What had happened in the war did not bother her too much, she found, for he had been a soldier, like Uncle Samuel, who had explained to her very early on that each man had to do his duty for his country. From all she had heard and read, she found the rebels a rather unruly, ungrateful lot, who were perfectly democratic in their speech and manners and would simply not accept the natural order of things, of the empire, and were unwilling to submit to their superiors.

It was a shame to think that so many young, British men had died on the fields over yonder, that it even looked like the rebels would win; the world, as her Aunt Liz, her father’s sister had written to her lately, was changing, a new order arriving, whether one liked it or not.

Talk in London, from whence her Aunt had written, visiting a friend there, had it the Colonists planned to be independent, as their leader, this George Washington, had professed and that it was only a matter of time for de facto the Empire had lost most of its North American dominions in the battle of Yorktown.

She had heard John and her uncle speak of said battle once, she remembered, John had been there, but had not fought, because he had been too ill already, his body broken and his blood tainted.

One day, she would ask him what happened, not merely out of curiosity, but to understand—

understand him.

How could he be a man of such extremes? Tender like the wings of a butterfly, easily hurt when spoken to in the wrong way, and as rough and destructive as the wild, primal forces of a storm surge at the same time?

She hated what he had done to Richard, but she also loved him still.

The night before, he had said there was Wrong in loving, so, was she wrong in loving him?
But while she found she could forgive him, maybe even fully some day, given he would stay true to his promise, she could not forget, and perhaps never would.

Elizabeth tensed somewhat in his embrace, pried his arm away from her middle at which he made a most discontented little sound, and rose, walking over to the other side of the bed to wake him.

How peaceful he looked, his face framed by his impossibly soft, fascinating curls, his mien innocent, relaxed.

He was at peace, evidently but now, at the coming of a new day, she had to wake him, to join the fight again- not against some colonial enemy, but for, against, and with himself.

Chapter End Notes

How I love using Shakespeare's "Richard III". Shakespeare did take many liberties, but the statement of the quite unsavoury main character in the first act that he is going to marry Anne for financial gain is not wholly unfounded: Anne Neville and her older sister Isabel (who was married to George, Duke of Clarence, the middle brother between Edmund IV and the soon-to-be Richard III) stood to inherit half of their deceased father's estate. Guess who married the then widowed Anne and got into a fight about his bride's inheritance with his brother? Richard however didn't kill Anne's first husband in reality and evidence suggests that judged by the standards of the period, their marriage was far from the worst.

The exact cause of death of Elizabeth's father is unknown, as is his gravesite, but it is recorded he died in Germany. Within the realms of this story at least, he died in one of the battles of the Seven Years' War there.

To clarify, Elizabeth is not (just) being extremely flirtatious by enlisting her swain's help in removing her outer layers of clothing. A woman of her social standing wore clothing that practically couldn't be put on or taken off without the help of at least one other person.

Asking the Admiral for Elizabeth's hand is not just important for Simcoe because he is a somewhat romantic traditionalist who wants to do things properly, but because she is legally a minor (under the age of 21) and requires parental permission to marry. I am no lawyer and not an expert in the field of 18th century English marriage laws, even if I have done a little research, so in case you do more than I do, please comment! I would assume that the place of the parents is in Elizabeth's case occupied by Admiral and Mrs Graves, who could veto any marriage intentions her niece might have. This is why Simcoe needs the Admiral to renew his promise to allow him to ask Elizabeth for her hand and that in case she accepts, he is going to take care of his wife, who doesn't like Simcoe and would go to great lengths to be rid of him.

Margaret's opposition to Elizabeth getting married to Simcoe will be the focal point of a later chapter, in which Simcoe, who would almost have become a lawyer had he not decided to terminate his studies to join the army, has to figure out a few particularities and legal loopholes in order to rule out any intervention of sorts (orchestrated) by Margaret, because neither he or Elizabeth trust she will, once the Admiral has talked her
into expressing her consent, restrain herself to quiet sulking.

...Because who isn't excited about 18th century marriage laws?

Since there are (or will be) several Elizabths in this story, for the sake of reader-friendliness and telling them apart, Elizabeth's aunt Elizabeth Gwillim has been given a nickname she historically probably didn't use. Since it sounded odd to only have one of the two sisters of Elizabeth's father to be addressed by their niece using a nickname and there is going to be another Henrietta Maria as well, she has been given a nickname, too.

Both Simcoes were monarchists and viewed democracy as some sort of weird, misguided folly of people who should better mind their allotted place in life, which was only aggravated by John's experiences in America and later the French Revolution. "Perfectly democratic" is a term used as a de facto insult in Elizabeth's diary by the way.

...what will happen next? Well, Aunt Margaret hasn't been brought to account yet and do the two really think nobody ever notices them?
General Gwillim draws up a plan of action in which a battle must be lost for the war to be won, though what "won" means she does not (dare to) specify, Uncle Samuel gets a promotion, Aunt Margaret receives an interesting present from her husband and Simcoe drowns his doubts about his financial situation in an extensive (and expensive) London shopping spree, as one does.

Warning: recollections of period-typical parenting methods including corporal punishment.

On a lighter note, another warning: this chapter is quite long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“John, get up, John. It is past the hour you must leave.”

What a sweet voice wakes him. It is his Eliza who breathes these words of tender concern for their joined fate, for it is joined now, will ever anybody find out about this, her warm breath on the side of his face, caressing his mangled half-ear and making it feel whole again.

Groaning with displeasure, he slowly wakes and blinks into the half-daylight that makes its way through the curtains.

He sits up on the edge of the bed, gripping for his waistcoat and coat he has draped over a chair the previous night to prevent them from creasing and, still sitting, puts them on again. He liked it much better when instead of some fabric, Eliza had warmed him. Although he cannot remember any of it since he’s been asleep, he is certain he knows now what sharing this most vulnerable and intimate aspect of life, sleep, with her is like.

“Now, what are we to do?”

She stands before him and cocks her head. It is such a charming sight.

“About what?” Still not quite battle-ready again, he has to ask.

“My aunt, your godfather, and Richard Graves of course.” He groans somewhat unwillingly, he has liked it better when they had simply rejoiced in the feeling of being close to each other rather than talking of such tedious business as that.

Tedious? No, difficult. A heavy, difficult task lies ahead of him he realises.

“You know, My aunt, my uncle- you haven’t promised them anything. They don’t even know we have struck an agreement and will still be quite angry with you for your treatment of Richard
“Let us not forget it was Margaret who brought this on”, he adds bitterly, his upper lip twitching upwards for a moment like that of a bandog about to growl.

“If this is true-“

“It is.”

He nods vigorously and keeps his eyes fixed on hers in order to underline the verity of his statement.

“Then we must be cautious around her.”

Caution sounds not at all like what he would like to do, at the very minimum, he would like to give her a piece of his mind. Sometimes, he questions why his godfather, who could surely have had many other women younger, prettier and of a more agreeable personality than Margaret Spinckes had picked the latter.

She had been a, to put it diplomatically, a wilting flower already and even brought a ward with her, a child that was neither hers nor his and yet, he had married her and taken the girlchild as his own and raised her with a father’s love the little orphan would certainly have lacked otherwise.

From that perspective, he realises with great reluctance, he must even be thankful for his godfather’s terrible taste in women. Had he not married the unspeakable now-Mrs Graves, the second of her name, he would never have met Elizabeth.

Still, he detests the old woman, even if he understands she doesn’t wish Elizabeth any harm. She wants to keep her niece for herself, that is what she is doing, and is reluctant to part with her, whom she probably keeps in the same regard as a time-consuming and difficult sewing project that takes long to complete.

One day, he vows, the day will come when he is going to get the better of Margaret Graves. He will wait and bide his time until the glorious day he will expose her for what she is, a conniving, jealous, possessive old bat who does not wish anybody in this world a good thing who isn’t her gracious self.

For the moment however, a quarrel with her would be unwise if he wants to remain at Elizabeth’s side. They could always elope of course, but that would be very scandalous and not at all befitting either of them. He has no liking for society scandals and even much less for being the centre of one himself. And, most importantly, Eliza deserves better than a hurried nightly carriage ride through the country to Gretna Green.

“John, do you understand?”

His stern darling looks at him, her eyes digging straight into his heart and soul. “Yes”, he says, the reluctance and slight disappointment heavy on his voice.

She sighs.

“Good. We cannot have any new scandal. You must talk to them, of course. And to Richard Graves and apologise.”

“Apologise? It was he who-“

“You will apologise, I understand why you do not like it at all but it must be done. Write a letter first, seek his apology and ask if you can come and visit him in person to formalise and finalise your intentions and settle the strife between you two. I shall write to him also and tell him I never wish to see him again but, if it must be so and it cannot be avoided, for we are family after all, he must treat
me with distanced respect. If he does not, I shall find means and measures to bring him to account, which I will refrain presently from doing for his rough treatment at your hands and because I know the source from whence the rumour that set him on came. He should be grateful I will not expose his ill-treatment of me to Devon society, even if I would much like to do so, and comply.”

“He should be brought to account properly”, John said darkly while fixing a point in the nondescript distance and beat a drumming rhythm against his thigh, a gesture indicative of him either being nervous or in the midst of a thought as she had come to know.

“Yes”, Elizabeth answered, “but a victory over Richard Graves would only win one battle, but cause us to lose the war. Do you know what I mean?” He shook his head.

“No, indeed I do not.” The words “battle”, “victory” and “war” had the desired effect: John’s eyes had a strange glimmer in them, a certain fighting spirit eager for the next challenge. If she could sell him her plan as a mission of the highest importance and if Richard Graves, her aunt and uncle would play along the way she intended them to, all would be well soon.

Somehow, Elizabeth had to admit to herself, planning her every strategic move, excited her in the way that playing chess did. She wanted to win not only the battle, but the war and sometimes one had to sacrifice one’s knight to put the enemy into check mate.

“So”, she elaborated, “much as I would love to see Graves shunned by everyone for treating me badly and perhaps even legally prosecuted, in case that is possible, it would not help us much, would it? For if I rose up in arms against him, he, knowing of us to some extent, would turn against you and make accusations and perhaps drag you before a court of law, in which you are bound to lose should he manage to present his evidence in a way that lays all the blame on your shoulders alone. By handling Richard quietly and offering an apology on your part and a discreet settlement of the matter on mine, we are not turning him against us. In fact, we have him firmly in our grip. Because he can hardly refuse your apology and will be relieved I do not seek to make my mistreatment at his hands public in any shape or form, be it through word of mouth or an attempt to make him face a judge, he will remain silent as well and our past history shall dissipate into cold formality whenever we meet. Richard Graves is no stupid man, or at least loves himself more than anybody else and will protect his precious person from everything. His sense of self-preservation will advise him from ever speaking out about the beating you gave him or, in fact, about knowing that we are in love, which might not be helpful to our cause at all, would it become known by others and God knows what he would distort his talk of us only to discredit both you and me, making it so that we cannot be seen together or forcing one of us to leave.”

The plan was ugly and she knew it, even if it excited her to have proven such a cool analytic and strategist.

In a just world, John and Richard would both be punished for their respective misdeeds, but this world wasn’t just and she knew that battles had to be picked and when picked, had to be won.

“I still hate what you did to him”, she added slowly, avoiding his eyes. The memory of him looking at the pleading Richard Graves on the ground with satisfaction and anticipation in his eyes as he continued to kick and hit the man on the ground who was pleading for mercy would not leave her, they were still fresh on her mind.

“I know.”

He hung his head.

“The wrongs one person does don’t make wronging that person right.”
“I swear I will keep true to my promise.”

John did not even try to find excuses for his behaviour. She pressed his hand firmly and ordered him to stand up, to which he complied. Pulling the chair to her much too tiny desk back, she invited him to sit and under her guidance, a letter to the Admiral’s other godson was penned.

“It will be good to have physical evidence of your ruefulness when you shall meet Uncle Samuel and my Aunt at breakfast again.”

“I will talk to the Admiral as well,” he added, evidently eager to prove to her that he was more than willing to fulfil the promise he had given her.

“Splendid. Uncle Samuel values open talk, but that you probably know already.”

In another life, she must have been a general- her tactics exceed that of many men he has seen commanding other men in the field.

He would gladly serve under her command for the rest of his life.

Elizabeth’s quick mind would make up for any disadvantages, pathetic barricades, wet powder or facing an onslaught by an outnumbering enemy.

He imagines her less a Welsh-English Joan of Arc and more of a female Henry V- had she been the king, or rather queen more than three hundred years ago, Shakespeare’s play about her would have been much shorter, for she would have defeated the French outright without silly, childish interruptions by getting angry about being sent tennis balls or taking more than a month to lay siege to the town of Harfleur, she would have accomplished the feats the well-loved king was so often lauded for in a much shorter amount of time and would have made an even greater and much wiser monarch.

He will gladly play the Fluellen to her Henry, even if he lacks the accent, but she is Welsh, he knows, at least from her father’s side of her family, so perhaps she can teach him.

He can tell Margaret Graves is displeased at the sight of him when he shows himself to the family again.

She ignores him outright, as does Elizabeth, only the Admiral nods briskly to acknowledge his presence.

Elizabeth has instructed him not to make it obvious that they have already spoken and, to a degree, reconciled, a masquerade she upholds with great skill by never even looking at him and, seemingly without hunger, pushing some of her food around the plate with an absent-minded expression on her face.

In turn, he must not look at her, which is very hard to do because she is the only one he ever wants to look at, his light, his Sun, but he restrains himself best as he can and concentrates on the colour of his breeches, eyes downcast.
Margaret Graves looks as if she wants to comment on his sudden disappearance and just as unexpected reappearance to his relief however, no words come, probably because he finds she lacks the wit to make a slight that is both clever, insulting and amusing. She talks like she wields a broadsword, imprecisely swinging and hacking at her perceived enemy, hoping she will strike.

His fencing masters at school had always advised against such techniques, he recalls.

Much as he would like to in turn comment on that, he keeps to himself, for Elizabeth’s sake.

Their future happiness depends on his talk with the Admiral, which is to follow this farce of a breakfast.

The food is taken silently by all parties, no one seems in the mood to talk or maybe it is his presence that prevents them from doing so, he doesn’t know for certain.

When his godfather rises, he takes his chance.

“Admiral?”

Frowning, the old man turns to him.

“What is it?”

It is clear he is not in the mood to speak with him, but it must be done.

“Can I ask you for a word? In private?”

When he hears a rustle of skirts approaching slowly, he feels compelled to add the latter half of his question. Margaret has no business listening in on what he has to say and secondly, he likes the thought that she will be fuming inwardly because she is not allowed to participate in this.

“Hm”, the old man grunts somewhat displeased and beckons him to follow him to his study.

He follows the older and much slower man at a respectful distance, wondering on his way prolonged by the elderly Admiral walking before him, how this is going to end.

In the study, his godfather seats himself behind his desk, so as to face him seating, which he interprets as an invitation to take the chair opposite him that is clearly meant for visitors.

Clearing his throat in an unmistakeable manner, he is ordered to remain standing. He lets go of the back of the chair and stands straight, like a soldier ready for inspection.

“Now, what is it, John?”

Throughout the years, he has seldom experienced his godfather in a foul mood; when there had been trouble at school, they had first informed his mother, who had then taken measures as she had seen fit before the story was relayed to the Graves’ (then still his godfather and his much less capricious first wife) as a second-hand tale.

Once, the Admiral has upbraided him as he has never before or ever since experienced; he had been eight and his brother six and enjoyed the role of the elder (and thus commanding) sibling to no end.

Percy was very different from him, always happy, pleasant and beloved by all, which, in the honesty of retrospectivity, had made him a little jealous of his younger brother.

Besides, Saint Percy wasn’t half as saintly as everyone said at all; he had mocked him in the morning
when he had found him still asleep in his bed in the room they shared hugging Lion close and called him a "little baby".

Their mother had taken them to visit the Admiral for a few days and he had used the opportunity that had presented itself to him to use the power of the older and stronger (and to his mind, cleverer), by playing a trick on Percy in retribution for his words.

He had dared him to walk into the woods to where the ancient fort is, built a thousand or more years ago, alone for a bet.

At first, Percy had been reluctant to go, but the choice of either going or being branded a "little baby" for life had made him go. He would wait here for him, he had told his brother, and pretended to settle down in the grass at the edge of the wood.

Meanwhile, as soon as Percy had disappeared among the shadows of the trees, he had taken a secret path he had discovered the other day that shortened the way to the eerie fort with its tall, imposing trees considerably and hidden there, laying in wait for Percy to arrive.

Contrary to his expectations, Percy had not run to tell mother and really pretended to bravery. The uneasy-looking boy looked around, having reached his goal, and was about to turn back when he had begun to rustle with some dry leaves.

"Who is there?", the tentative voice of his brother had asked, eager to hide the fear that had audibly taken hold of him.

"It is I", he had, barely able to suppress laughter for he would never have thought this would really work, stated ominously, his voice disguised to sound deeper than the already unusually bright, clear voice he had had then and that somehow never went away, even when in teenage years, the other boys around him seemed not only to grow into men, but sound like men as well.

"Who are you?", came Percy’s afraid squeak, looking in his direction without detecting his hidey hole.

"I am the mighty Ridiculus, Lord of this place, and my favourite dish are naughty little boys who invade my kingdom without invitation!" At that, Percy had run as fast as his short legs would carry him while he, chuckling lowly to himself in congratulation for having played such a great trick, had brushed his clothes clean and gone on his way back to where Percy expected him.

-But Percy hadn’t returned to their meeting point, he had gone to hide and cry into Mother’s skirts and of course the adults had seen his stratagem and punished him.

The first Mrs Graves had said he probably was such an unruly boy because he lacked the strict hand of a father to guide him and pitied Mother for having to put up with such a “nasty, sullen, downright despicable little urchin” one “if one wouldn’t know better for the family resemblance indicates otherwise, would take for a foul faery changeling the country folk like to speak of so often”.

His godfather had even in younger years been a very quiet, level-headed man, but on this occasion, he had seen him raging for the first time, his voice loud as he had, not unlike now, made him stand in his study and face punishment for his misdeeds.

In a sermon that made weekly church attendances seem pleasant and short, he had been asked what he had thought, why he would treat his younger brother, who was looking up to him, like this, that he as the elder had to be a role-model for his younger sibling and instead of endangering him by sending him off alone into the forest (which had been declared off-limits for both boys in the past) he
was supposed to play nice things with him.

Soon, the Admiral had turned to all more or less deadly or venial sins he had ever committed and scolded him for his loose mouth at school, his lack of respect for his betters, especially his teachers and his mother, his already sufficiently belaboured ill-treatment of his brother and his general insolence and disregard of rules, regulations and common courtesy. He had gone on by asking if he didn’t know how sad he was making his Mamma, who had deserved better than him and who had always done everything to raise him a gentleman and if his father would be proud if he could see him?

He had tried to remain calm and not aggravate his own position, but when his father was mentioned he couldn’t bear it any longer. Until then, he had not heard anything new; it seemed to be a truth universally acknowledged that he was no pretty, likeable child, hearing somebody talk about his father in this manner however was a very different matter.

At the time, he had only been dead a year and the loss had still stung like on the first day when the letter came to tell Mother of Father’s death.

“Don’t talk about Papa! You have no right to, he is my Papa and he is looking down on me from Heaven!”, he had clarified his position, his voice shrill and shouting, horrified at the thought, which his godfather’s statement insinuated, that his father was no more around in any way at all.

Speaking up and ordering an Admiral around, an angered one at that, had not been wise; his godfather had risen, given him a cuff around the ear and sent him to his room, saying that if he continued in his wickedness, he would one day end up in the mines of Cornwall, for that was were wicked children were sent to work, never to return home to repent their misdeeds until the end of their lives.

Crying in a rather undignified manner, he had run for the room that had been allotted to him and his brother, where he had taken Lion from his place underneath his pillow and continued sobbing until there had been no more tears left and he had at long last fallen asleep from exhaustion.

The incident seemed to have provoked ruefulness on both parts; the next morning, his godfather had taken him aside and spoken to him in a quiet patient tone and told him to be a good boy in the future and that he regretted having brought up his father’s death.

He had nodded obediently and expressed regret for having frightened his brother so- the little one had had nightmares the whole night, even after he had been told it had been his brother who frightened him, and his anguished cries had woken him several times.

Upon swearing he wouldn’t do something like that again, the Admiral had ruffled his hair- he had flinched, prepared to draw away, expecting to be struck again as it had happened the previous night and so often at school before, but the hand had come to rest on the crown of his head and gently brushed through his unruly hair that simply could not be subdued.

The Admiral had noticed, for he had looked remorseful, knowing why his godson had come to fear his touch. He had turned his face away from him so all his eight-year-old self could see had been the enormous mass of white hair that was his wig to collect himself before he turned back to him and told him to run along, visibly shaken.

The old man, then not as old as he was now, more than twenty years ago, had never struck, nor had he ever raised his voice against him again. Instead, he had tried to teach him the lessons he considered necessary with patience and gentleness, and after the school birchings, being shouted at at a regular basis for some lesser, some graver misdeeds (nothing really terrible- some involvements in
fights, mostly after some other boys, feeling stronger in a group, teased him for his voice or being 
red-haired and once, he had set a teacher’s wig ablaze with a magnifying glass because he bore a 
grudge against this man and also a little bit because he wanted to see if it would work at all, and then 
there had been his minor role in the student rebellion at Eton in 1768, but apart from that, nothing 
else, really), he had found he preferred following his godfather’s command rather than anybody else.

Their relationship had been tense for a while, especially during the raucous years in every boy’s life, 
but the old man had never given him the feeling he was no longer welcome or that he wanted to be 
rid of him- on the contrary, he had even sent him two crates of books when he had been ill and 
confined to bed for almost a whole year and come to Exeter to visit him on several occasions.

When he had joined the army, he had told him how proud he was and that his father was proud of 
him, too.

During his time in America, he had written him letters, even his second wife Margaret, Elizabeth 
Sedgwick Graves had passed away a year before he finished school, had written to him. They had 
also informed him of his mother’s death and composed long lines of consoling words for him.

Deep inside him, he had been grateful they had attempted to be at his side from afar when these dark 
news had made his dark days in the Colonies even darker, but the pain, the sheer pain of his wounds, 
his broken heart, his rage, his hatred of Woodhull, of Tallmadge, of Brewster, of Hewlett, of Rogers, 
of Washington, of everybody else and the loss of his mother had amalgamated into a deadly, grey, 
tempest-toss’d river that had threatened to drown him just like the river Exe had Percy only four 
years after the incident at Hembury Fort House.

Nothing had mattered to him then and he had focused on diversions, Culper, winning the war, 
making Anna Strong feel his love and make reciprocate it.

In truth, he had been empty for a long time, which he had only come to realise alone on board the 
Bonetta.

For the first time now, his life has true meaning with Elizabeth in it, she is all he needs and he doesn’t 
want to lose her.

If only he could be a wayward eight-year-old again, get his ears boxed and shouted at and then 
everything would be alright within the next few hours. Sadly, the world does not work in this way, 
no more, and he must face his deeds like the man he is. He is not afraid of speaking to the Admiral or 
any possible punishments that either Graves or his godfather might devise for him, he is no coward 
after all, he is afeard that the result of his talk with the Admiral will force him to leave Elizabeth 
forever.

What if he hates him now, what if he will tell him to leave and never to come back, that he is not half 
the man his nephew Richard is and that Elizabeth will be very happy with him once the two are 
wedded?

His mind is reeling with the worst scenarios painted in the most vivid colours.

At eight, he never would have thought so, but he does rather miss being slapped presently and 
wishes that would be it, his godfather would yell at him what he has been thinking, smack, and then 
it would be over.

But he isn’t eight now, he is thirty and he knows his godfather wouldn’t strike a one-eared invalid.

“I wish to talk to you about the ball”, he begins cautiously, “I have done wrong.”
“Wrong?”, the older man echoes, “you have almost killed my nephew. All these years, John Graves Simcoe, I did my best to raise you like my own son, but I tell you, I didn’t raise you to become a mindless savage!”

Twenty-two years later, the Admiral raises his voice in his presence again, his fist slamming on the desk to mark his resolve. His words smart, this however, must not distract him.

Swallowing the pain, an exercise he is very familiar with by now, he answers “I have”, his voice low, pausing to allow himself to carefully select the words he is going to say next, “and it was not right. I have written to him and asked him in my letter to accept my apology, which I intend to formalise by means of a personal meeting, as soon as possible.”

The old man eyes him incredulously, but still angry.

“You have what?” “I apologised.”

“Good. Still, I cannot believe you did- your mother, your father and I- where did we go so wrong with you, John?”

He shakes his head, almost as if he pities him, a wild beast at a traveling fair no one dares to approach for fear it might bite but looking so destitute one cannot help but feel for the poor creature, but not enough to do anything about its situation.

That is what he is to most people, a creature, a low creature unfit to sit at their table, talk to them or even be in the same room with them.

“It is not your fault, you were always kind to me.”

He would like to elaborate, speak about the war, after all the Admiral is a veteran too and might understand, but his tongue is tied and he cannot speak, would like to find out if it is normal that one wants an adversary dead, wants to know if he too has dreams that terrify him, wants to know if he is really as despicable as they say.

The warm, brown eyes of his godfather study his ice-cold, unappealingly blue ones intently.

“I have heard what happened from Elizabeth”, he begins, “my nephew’s behaviour towards her was impetuous, and I shall take it upon me to inform him that he too has to apologise, to her, that is if he wants to remain my nephew, and that I do not consider him suitable to court her. As for you and your part in this merry ménage à trois, why? The boy I knew as John Graves Simcoe was not like this. Some schoolyard brawls, yes, but to almost kill a man? Had it not been for Elizabeth’s intervention—”

“To me, it looked as if he was about to hurt her”, he defends himself.

“She told me she was already free of his grip when you struck him.”

“He kicked me first. And he spit at me.”

“John”, the old man sighs, “why? I find you drive me to blackest despair. You argue like a child who has been given the strength of a grown man, a dangerous combination. You cannot continue like this. You cannot continue to almost-beat men to death. Tell me, what will happen when Elizabeth will not be there to stop you?”

“But he forced his face unto hers to kiss her!” His cheeks glow red with embarrassment to mention the words “kiss” and “Elizabeth” in the same sentence in front of the Admiral, knowing how sweet
these kisses taste when freely gifted to him in a quiet moment safely hidden from view somewhere behind a bookcase or door.

“I told you: I am as angry and disappointed in Richard as I am in you, and yet, I find myself hosting an almost-murderer under my roof!”

“I am not a monster.”

At least Elizabeth told him he isn’t. The words tremble as they exit his mouth, his head and shoulders hanging, the soldier’s proud pose having melted to the broken bow of a long-time prisoner- which he is to some degree, his mind trapped within this body, on this earth.

“Look at me.” He does as he is told.

“I know you since you were a boy. You are not here to argue about Richard Graves. Tell me, why are you here?”

“Judging from your words, you know already.”

“Yes, and still, I want to hear it from you, in your own words.”

“Elizabeth.”

All the air in his body leaves at once as her name is spoken. The Admiral nods.

“I thought so. You know that in the present situation, I cannot keep to my promise?”

That was to be expected and yet, it hurts. A spontaneous trip to Scotland in the dead of the night starts to sound more and more appealing to him.

He nods, not knowing what to say.

“I love her”, he says at last, busying his restless fingers with the cuff of his shirt.

“I know. But you must understand my considerations as well- what if you do the same to her in an angry haze as you have done to Richard? She is delicately built, a defenceless woman- not built as robustly as my nephew.”

“Are you insinuating I would hurt her?”

Slowly, anger starts to well up in him. He could never hurt her.

“I cannot tell. I don’t think I know you anymore, John.”

Shaking his head, the old man looks away from him.

“We love each other, you know. Yesterday night- she was very angry with me but she stopped me from leaving in the dead of the night and made me stay and made me promise something important to her.”

This his godfather doesn’t know yet, for he faces him again, a pensive crease between his eyes, and orders him to continue.

“She asked me to never do such a thing again as I did with your nephew and I could not. But when she asked me if I would try, I promised without hesitation.”
The old man appears to be thinking. After a long, torturous silence, he answers:

“And how was that agreement struck? Have you sworn upon a bible or anything that is sacred to you, anything that might convince me the words you speak a true?”

“No. I- We- she asked me to kiss her.”

His cheeks are burning and it must be visible to the Admiral, which he finds somewhat embarrassing.

The Admiral sighs, burying his head in his hands.

“So she still loves you.”

“Yes, although she communicated to me she is not content with what I did, either.”

“Previously I thought we would have a summer wedding, for they are the most pleasant. As things are, I will not consent to a marriage until I am sufficiently assured of your behaviour and your character.”

“I understand, sir.”

“I tell you what: come with me to London, I must be there on the eighth for my promotion and see to your life, arrange meetings with connexions and put your affairs into order. We will stay at my house and we can continue to talk there. Presently, I oppose a marriage, this is all for now.”

“Two weeks?” Elizabeth asked, somewhat taken aback. She had heard Uncle Samuel would go, but why would John have to leave for so long?

Not long ago, she had thought she’d lost him forever, to Darkness, to some English country road, never to see him again, never to hold the man she loved in her arms more, and now he was to leave her for two weeks?

He had relayed to her the tale of their talk and Elizabeth was not surprised he was still angry with John, but had invited him to accompany him to London, where he would stay for two weeks.

In theory, Aunt Margaret and she had been invited too, but her aunt maintained the frequent changes in weather gave her terrible migraines, which the fresh Devon air was better to soothe than the thick, polluted air of town.

To her joy, Mary Anne had written and informed her she would come to stay for two or three days on her way to visit her Somerville relations near Tauton. At least this was a consolation, she would not be alone with Aunt Margaret and her numerous caprices that intensified whenever she was (or pretended to be, the boundaries were as far as Elizabeth interpreted it, rather fluent) for a while.

Shortly before Uncle Samuel and John were about to travel to London, the afternoon before they were set to depart, he called upon her to join him on a walk.

This was unusual, for he, advanced in age, lacked the stamina for such extensive exertions in the countryside as was her wont and secondly, he had never liked journeys on foot, and be they ever so short, at all.
She had set her watercolours aside and called for Susan to dress her suitably.

Supporting him by the arm not holding a stick, they walked a little away from the house to the Greek folly where Uncle Samuel, quite exhausted, sat down, and patted the space next to him, ordering her to sit.

“I promise I will keep our talk between us two only”, he started, causing Elizabeth to wonder uneasily what he might want to talk about.

“You only have to answer me one question: do you love John?”

Frightened and shocked to be asked such a straightforward question, she looks at him.

“How-“ “He told me. Is it true?”

“It is. I love him.”

These words did not come easy, yet it felt good to hear them spoken.

“Even after what he did to Richard?”

“I do. Richard’s behaviour was grossly wrong, too. John is no beast, he doesn’t want to be terrible and he has promised-“

“I know. He was a very sensitive little boy, especially after his father died, wrote poetry and imagined his own stories. A little unruly and wild perhaps at times, as little boys are, but not profoundly nasty or otherwise unpleasant. Sometimes, he’d go to the library and spent the days talking to himself, immersed in his own little stories. The man who has returned from the Colonies however, you know, I think it is still within him, but buried beneath all this-“ he spat the following part of the sentence out like the unwanted stone of a plum, “unbridled savagery.”

“His heart does not exactly show itself at the first glance, does it?”

“Well spoken, my dear. You speak of his heart- you claim to know it, then?”

“To some degree?”, she answers cautiously.

“Then continue to come to know it, him, if that is your wish when we return. It is your choice. Do not feel obligated to like him or care for him because you pity him in some way-“

“I don’t, uncle.”

“You have two weeks now to think, to order your thoughts. Neither I nor John will make you-pressure you into a life you don’t wish to have. If you choose to follow the path your aunt considers best, do it. It is your choice, and I shall not hinder you. All I ask is that you thoroughly interrogate your heart.”

With these cryptic words, he left the topic and asked her if she wanted anything from London and what she planned to do in their absence.

Deep inside her, Elizabeth could not help but feel that Uncle Samuel’s questions had sounded like he- like John and she- by God, there had never been any talk of something like it before- marriage.

Even if he hasn’t said the word, the questions were quite indicative.

Had John voiced such a desire when he had spoken to him? In that event, he hadn’t told her. All he
had said was that Uncle Samuel was still angry with him and did not hold him in high favour at present.

She would have liked to ask him but Aunt Margaret's terrible headaches had demanded her presence by her side, and as her aunt had called for her in the evening to sit by her bedside and keep her company, there had been no opportunity to speak with him alone for his departure.

Two weeks, fourteen days, 336 hours, each of them sixty minutes long and each minutes was subdivided by another sixty long seconds. At least Mary Anne would keep her company for a few days and would hopefully divert her somewhat from the troublesome nature of the past week.

London, twelve days later.

“What is all that stuff you have bought? One would think we have doubled our weight and must now travel at half-speed.”

The old man is joking, that is for certain, but his interest in the additional baggage is genuine.

“I have procured certain things while in town”, he replies cryptically, not knowing how to best tell his godfather of the presents he wants to give to Eliza- almost two weeks of separation are entirely too much and he is willing to make up for the lost time as best as he can.

“What could it be? As far as I know you have been unsuccessful obtaining a new command or the permanent position of a lieutenant-colonel within the army. Since you are not preparing for another voyage what-“

“Very well.”

He cuts the Admiral off. The things he has just addressed hit a sore spot inside him. They still don’t want him back, and nobody is willing to help him in any way. The war in America is lost, he has no illusions about that, much as it hurts, especially considering his role in it all and the personal sacrifices he has made toward the greater good, and all those he has sacrificed- all in vain, it seems.

Whatever legacy he has hoped to build has crumbled under the hooves of Washington’s stallion and worse, still, under the dirty, greedy hands of colonists like Brewster and Woodhull, who seem to have subdued men like him, warriors, battle-hardened men ready to give their lives for a cause-

And now, what for?

While trying to win the favour of anyone who would listen to him at the war office and among his former superiors, he has made the discovery that apparently, nobody has use for him anywhere; he has even spoken to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, because he knows how important it is to know mighty men and there were rumours that the man had the capabilities to become Prime Minister one day, and in that event, one would like to count him as a friendly acquaintance, who might perhaps one day be helpful.

Sadly, the man lived up to his family name, for apparently, he had heard from someone of “Colonel Simcoe” and recited his own so-called “misdeeds” back to him before excusing himself to dance with his wife.
To his shock, he had discovered it was true what they said about the Earl of Shelburne’s opinions: upon bold enquiry when he had sensed they would never come to like each other anyway, he had affirmed that yes, he did indeed support a complete withdrawal of British troops from the Colonies after the Battle of Saratoga.

Naturally, they had parted on as unfriendly terms as a society engagement allowed.

He doesn’t do this for himself any longer, or not entirely at least- while he still thinks it might do him good to do what he has done almost all his life once more, the one thing he has ever excelled in, there is now a certain fear in his heart at the thought of being sent away as well, a fear of never returning again that conjures up a pair of hazel eyes before his mind’s eye.

If he shall be granted this boon, this most divine of divine gifts, the hand of Eliza in marriage one day, he must be able to provide for her.

At least his godfather seems to be pleased with him and his efforts, for their relationship had warmed somewhat again over the course of two weeks spent together, which he counts as a partial success.

As long as there is no formal peace agreement, the war de facto goes on, and for that time at least, he can be expected to be paid his full guerdon, which is not the most impressive of them all to be sure, especially because his rank has not been made permanent within the British Army.

Come peace, he will be on half-pay, reducing his financial means drastically. He still has his mother’s not insignificant yet also not impressive inheritance, but that will not be enough to live on forever.

Yes, they could live off Eliza’s riches comfortably for the rest of their days if they spent it wisely, but does he want that? Even if it isn’t true, he will not give the Old Bat, as he secretly calls Mrs Graves, the opportunity to claim he has married her niece for her inheritance only.

No, he loves her, and that is the reason he wants to share his life with her and in turn, wants to be a part of hers, if she so wishes.

The Gwillim money and lands are of no great interest to him, or have not been when he came to know her.

Now that secretly, his mind revolves around a possible future with her (although he will remain firm in his resolve and will not ask her The Question until she is ready to answer it), he cannot deny it will be of advantage to them, especially if he is not to be granted another mission in active service and full pay, the which he tries to prevent from happening by securing himself a place in active service once more, and the permanency of his rank within the regular troops.

How ironic that his wish to be able to provide for his wife without living off her fortune completely must come with inevitable separation and danger for his own life.

Before, he has not given his own mortality much thought and whenever he has been in situations in which his life was in grave danger, he had accepted his fate under his all-governing resolve of not leaving this world without a last stand, however forlorn it will be, for he shall not die subdued.

That has changed now.

He will, if faced by the Grim Reaper, still fight with every fibre of his being and attempt to defy the odds or at least die a man making his fate, not bowing to the whims of others, even Death’s, but, as he has come to interpret the recent change in his ever-recurring dream of death in battle that has come to feature a figure in a white dress he identifies as Eliza, it is not how he wishes to die anymore.
Mortality had been nothing to him so far, men around him died almost every day, either because they were enemies and he killed them without a second thought, they fell in battle, later succumbed to their wounds or died of an illness or sheer exhaustion when supplies were scarce and the weather rough on campaign.

But while Eliza’s love has made him aware of his own life, or rather mortality, she is the one who gives him life, too and with her, just thinking of her, he feels invincible.

He smiles to himself, thinking of her face when she will discover what he has brought for her from London.

Perhaps it would be wise to spend his comparatively modest means on more sensible things, but he has, sauntering the streets (at least that is what he tried to convince himself he was doing) perchance espied the prettiest little hat with ostrich feathers, flowers that looked like peonies to him, but could be anything judging from his non-existent interest in botany (at least the shopkeeper had praised his keen eye when he asked what flowers they were, and that he had identified them as peonies due to their fullness and rosy colours) and ribbons the colour of the leaves of birch trees in spring.

He had to have it.

“I have bought a few things I thought Elizabeth would like from London, as I take it, she has not been to town in a while.”

“'A few things'? My dear boy, it seems you have bought half the town for her!”, the old man exclaims, half-shocked, half-laughing.

“If you don’t mind me saying John, would it not be wiser to-“

“I love her. And I will bring her as many gifts as I like.”

The cutting tone of his voice warns the older man not to talk of such matters again. Now it is his godfather’s turn to sigh “very well” and direct the conversation away from his niece, which he does not.

The old man chuckles a little and, leaning toward him from the opposite bench, pats him on the shoulder in a fatherly manner.

He looks out of the window and watches as the landscape flies past. In his mind, they are already back at Hembury Fort House, which they are set to reach tomorrow, where he can finally rejoice in the sight of his Eliza, for whom he has longed for the entirety of his time in London, wishes her kiss would save him from the sheer madness of only being able to think of her already, wishes her form would fill the emptiness of his arms, wishes to hear her voice.

Only one more day, it cannot be that difficult to wait for a little longer, he tries to tell himself and fails miserably.

However fast the horses run, they will never match the speed of his heart, which has already raced to Devon on the wings of a phoenix burning with the fire that resides within his heart.
The weather had been fine this past week (the first week had been rather rainy and due to the condition of the roads, Mary Anne had to her delight stayed a little longer than she had originally intended) and Elizabeth had considered it a most lucky coincidence, for it allowed her to sketch out in the open, either in company of one of the servants or a friend or acquaintance from Honiton and take extensive walks on the petal-strewn ground as the trees were in bloom.

While she enjoyed herself on these tours and treasured the time she spent with her friends, there was something missing. She was accustomed to the absence of Uncle Samuel, who had been away to America for some time and even Aunt Margaret had left her with the Gwillims in order to join him there, it was somebody else whose absence she had felt quite vexingly in her heart.

She kept count of the days he was away and wondered if he did the same, of course he did, it would be very much like him to do so, even if she was a little disappointed he hadn’t written her in two weeks and the only “kind regards”, so-phrased because it was clear her aunt would see the letter, too were sent from him to her via Uncle Samuel, who had written to them to tell them that they were well.

The morning of Saturday did not promise anything out of the ordinary; judging from some of Susan’s usual idle prattle, she was not the only one whose thoughts were somewhere else, or rather with someone else, entirely; one of the maidservants had broken a vase Grandmother Spinckes, heaven rest her soul, had given Aunt Margaret for her wedding which Susan, and apparently other members of the household staff, considered to be the product of an absentmindedness rooted in an infatuation with a young apprentice carpenter from Honiton, which she implored Elizabeth not to relay to her Aunt, for fear she would disapprove and chase the unfortunate creature out of the house in disgrace.

She would do no such thing; while she greatly disapproved herself of any unbeseeming acquaintances one, especially a young woman and even more so, a young woman lacking money and social standing could make, she did not see it as her business to intervene with her aunt’s household, nor would she like the role of the figurative executioner of the misguided servant girl.

Besides, there were other things on her mind or more correctly, things which she tried to paint over with other things and ideas- the light was wonderful today and she should like to go to Dunkeswell Abbey, where the shadows made by the golden spring sun falling upon the rough-cut shape of the ruin, would certainly make a splendid scene to sketch.

Or, she could use the fair weather to go riding, she had not done so in the last few days and would enjoy galloping into the forest and perhaps leap across a fallen tree or two.

Of this, she could not talk to Aunt Margaret for she still thought of the accident often (and Elizabeth did so, too, for sometimes, her ribs did admonish her still) and fretted now whenever she took to the saddle, even if this had been the only accident she had ever had, and she had survived, and John wasn’t with her, so she would not race anyone (which didn’t mean of course she wouldn’t attempt to find a stretch of pathway or road suitable for galloping). Still, none of these arguments could satisfy her and it had been quite some work to talk sweetly to her and assure her that with one of the manservants as her rearguard, nothing terrible would happen.

In the end, her aunt had relented but still viewed her with concern whenever she went riding.

But in the end, everything, from attending church service to visiting friends was one big diversion from what she was really thinking about.

Almost two weeks could be such a long time; to her it seemed, each day had forty-eight hours at least and that time had the same flow velocity as honey.
“Miss Gwillim, Miss Gwillim, come quick, Miss!”

Susan was always so easily excitable, which was the reason why Elizabeth did not react with utmost urgency; the servant might simply have spied something outside she wanted her Mistress to see, as had happened before, in which cases the situation that had at first been treated with utmost urgency soon had revealed itself as nothing more than the amusing sight of two squirrels hopping across the lawn and fighting over a nut.

“What is it, Susan? Is it Mrs Graves?”

That was the other possibility. Either a nonsensical, amusing little divertissement, or Aunt Margaret, who was not young in age, had come to harm in some way.

The thought of her aunt having injured herself or that her headaches, which she had so far not taken very seriously, knowing that sometimes, though she did not doubt these headaches occurred from time to time, her aunt would use (or rather abuse) her affliction to further her own ends, sent her to her feet. What if this time it was something serious?

“No, not Mrs Graves, a carriage has arrived! It must be the Admiral and the Colonel, if you wish to greet them.”

Susan had certainly tarried on her way from the kitchen to chat with one of her fellow servants somewhere and thus had overheard the coach arriving, which was in this case a blessing.

With great speed, she had crossed the room and ran out into the corridor, taking two steps of the staircase at a time, which was, given her size and the width of her steps, not something she would usually consider (lest she should ever like to break her neck), but two steps at a time, she reasoned, would mean it would take half the time to descend.

In her elation, she had almost lost a shoe and tripped over it grabbing for the bannister for support in the last moment, but still continued to fly down the staircase after retrieving it in a haste and hurry that did not befit her station, but which she presently could not contain within herself, for she was simply too happy to see him again and thought that every second of separation more than they had already endured was most unnecessary.

The rest of the house was quickly left behind her and indeed, she was outside, and there was a carriage and it was no dream, there was John, helping her uncle to descend.

“John!”, she exclaimed, running toward him, never reducing her speed.

“Elizabeth!”, he greeted her and, bowing down a little to her, caught her in his arms, her own slinging themselves hungrily around his back.

In their mutual elation, he lifted her up in his embrace, probably forgetting the considerable difference in height between them, causing her feet to leave the ground momentarily before he set her back down again.

They did not kiss, however, for they knew while since the episode that had seen Doctor Enfield being called to the house on a mock-call when Aunt Margaret had caught them together the entire house knew they loved each other, kissing in public was still out of the question. Shows of greater affection than they had already permitted themselves were reserved to private moments without her Aunt and Uncle or the servants to see, for whom one had to set an example in virtue and conduct.

Remembering they were not alone, she, though unwillingly, parted from John’s embrace and went to her uncle to greet him. The old Admiral, now admiral of the white even, smiled at her simply and
beckoned them all to go inside, he fancied some tea.

Almost quietly (Elizabeth would not have noticed had not an emission akin to clearing one’s throat have informed her when she had flown into John’s arms) Aunt Margaret, likely alerted by Susan’s cries had joined the scene.

Her thin-lipped facial expression informed everybody that she had not liked what she had seen at all, but Elizabeth did not care, no; a slight hint of glee made itself known to her, which she, somewhat ashamed of such lesser emotions, banished to the back of her head, even if she knew (or had at least heard) what her aunt was capable of, that she opposed John to such a degree she had let Richard Graves loose on her.

And even if she had, it had been not her intention that he should assault her in any way; while her actions were misguided and extreme, she had not acted with malicious intent; in her mind, John was a terrible monster, a fortune-hunter and probably many things more, anything but the man she had come to love.

Not long ago, she too had found out about his darker side, of which Aunt Margaret and Mary Anne had sometimes spoken and taken it as a manifestation of most condensed, hellish evil in his soul. Evil he was not, by no means.

He was more complex than that, there was more to him if one only cared to look deeper, the intimidating exterior of icy blue eyes, auburn curls that glowed like an angry fire in the sun and his sheer height and muscular frame were inhabited by a soul that craved tenderness, patience and was willing in return to practise the same.

The war was still raging on within him, the old ways that had almost half of his life governed his routine would not cease their firm grip of him easily, but he was trying.

He had promised her to try.

Back inside, tea was served in the sitting room that now looked somewhat emptier that the broken vase was no longer in its place, at which Elizabeth had to smile a little, for, even if it had been a present of her grandmother, she had never liked the thing and it had probably only been awarded such a prominent display because it had been quite costly, which was a circumstance Aunt Margaret had loved to point out to every guest she had forced to sit in the chair directly facing the blasted thing.

Aunt Margaret’s magpie-ish appetite for expensive dainties was however soon sated when, as the servants began to unload the carriage and produced a small crate, which Uncle Samuel entrusted into his wife’s hands and which she opened with barely repressed almost child-like curiosity.

Carefully enwrapped in layers of paper and stuffed into the crate with wood shavings to prevent the, well, thing, for lack of a better (polite) description from indenting or worse, breaking, Aunt Margaret revealed the monstrosity within.

It was a monkey made of porcelain, just about seven inches tall and dressed like a gentleman in a coat, shirt, breeches, necktie and wig with a scroll of papers in one paw while extending the other arm as if pointing at someone, its face caught in a grimace of agitation with its orange eyes wide, fangs bared and tongue sticking out as if the thing was shouting orders at someone.

Where Uncle Samuel had managed to find something as positively ugly as that Elizabeth did not even want to know.
Soon, he had explained it was one of a larger set of figurines, all monkeys dressed like little humans forming an orchestra complete with all sorts of instruments imaginable and singers.

Aunt Margaret, who collected porcelain figurines (Elizabeth did not like half of them), was instantly taken with the thing and thanked her husband with more cordiality than was customary for her, who even blushed a little at her brisk embrace and smiled contentedly as Aunt Margaret placed it on the mantelpiece where not long ago Grandmother Spinckes’ vase had stood.

Deep inside, Elizabeth could not help but feel disappointment that the vase was gone and secretly hoped that the love-struck maid’s clumsiness could be relied upon.

While she was still marvelling at the seven inch source of nightmares, a box, round, was set before her and was prompted to open it by John, who had obviously, following his godfather’s example, brought her a gift from London.

Eagerly, he watched her, blinking even less than usual as she opened the box to find a pretty hat in it, adorned with ribbons, feathers and silk flowers.

“Oh John, you shouldn’t have-“

“But I did.”

He gave her one of his half-smiles, which he had so far only shown in earnest when they had been alone and it warmed her heart to see how happy it makes him to see her unboxing a gift he had procured for her.

“I picked it”, he added proudly, again prompting Aunt Margaret to snort half-audibly as if she disapproved of the hat. It was very pretty in her opinion and Elizabeth reasoned not the hat itself posed a problem, rather the person who had gifted it her.

She thanked him formally, as she had been taught by Ms Smith, her governess, many years ago. Although she sensed Uncle Samuel might permit it or at least look the other way, she knew her Aunt would make a scene were she to do as much as kiss John on the cheek.

And so, they politely remained seated opposite one another until tea was officially ended and John feigned needing to go and see if his things had been unpacked.

Knowing Aunt Margaret was not deaf and dumb, Elizabeth, having taken note of his facial expression, followed him a few minutes later, figuring he would be waiting for her on top of the staircase, which she eagerly counted on the clock that did not allow its rhythm to be disrupted by the shock of its new monkey neighbour.

His clever, clever Eliza has understood and taking her hand, he leads her to his room, where he has brought the other things he has bought for her, a few books he thinks she might like, publications about art mainly, some dainties, candied violets, the first of the year as he has been told, among them and a roll of fabric in a colour similar to the ribbons on the hat for her to make use of as she sees fit.

It has all been terribly expensive, but he does not mind- after the earrings, he is not shocked by prices anymore and besides, he feels the need to show her just how much he loves her and does not think
simply saying it is enough.

He wants to show his love for her as ostentatiously as his means permit, make her, who is a goddess, feel like one, and give her everything she needs or doesn’t need, simply to make her happy. Seeing her face illumined with surprise when she lifted the box’s lid is enough and he is done for, thinking he must die with love and adoration.

“John, you must not spoil me so”, she pouts in half-earnest, visibly flattered he is making her such gifts but also still his prudent, wise Eliza who knows money should not be spent on idle pleasures alone.

“Hush, my love, it is done now”, he says and, taking a candied violet between his fingers, brings it to her lips and playfully nudges against them.

“Eat”, he commands, endeavouring to stop her only half-earnest admonishments in this way.

She did not take note of the violet’s taste as she swallowed it, trying not to cough as her throat had gone dry within instants. He had called her “my love”, something he had never done before, she realised.

My love.

It sounded exciting, but also terrifying and did that mean she truly belonged to him now, that she was no more Eliza Gwillim, but did now in some way belong to John Graves Simcoe, especially bearing the peculiar talk she had had with Uncle Samuel in mind?

She could not deny she liked it. There was something very romantic to being called that, someone regarding one’s person as the embodiment of this feeling that no writer in the history of literature described the same and yet all of their accounts sounded similar; and yet, what did ‘my love’ entail?

Was he not her love, too, and had they not used the pronoun ‘my’ as prefix to each other’s names a while ago? Or was it the little word he had used itself? That slowly, their talk of love that had begun so swiftly and unexpectedly grew more frequent, that now he was brave enough to tell her that in his mind, the shapeless sensation had taken her form?

To belong to someone was like being a moveable possession, that was how Aunt Margaret had described marriage, or at least marriage at its worst, which was somewhat hypocritical of her, for her own marriage was arguably a happy one, for Uncle Samuel treated her kindly, listened to her and endured her ill humours with utmost stoicism- she had never asked and as a child influenced by fairy tales assumed it must be so, but to her, the example of her aunt and uncle had been what love was like- acceptance and gentle, almost shy shows of affection, like Uncle Samuel patting her aunt’s hand clumsily when he talked to her or putting his arm around her shoulder when they took a walk every now and then or even a repressed, bashful kiss on the cheek when her uncle thought she would not see.

But was there love between the Graves’?

They liked each other a lot, but there was a difference between liking and loving. She loved John and perhaps this was the most difficult thing about this conundrum.
She loved him so much that she was naturally afeard to make the wrong decision, take the wrong step. Now, with talk of marriage all but in the air (or at least it had been two weeks ago), so many things remain unsaid.

They’ll have to marry. She has been granted the luxury of enough money to choose whomever she pleases to marry, prince or pauper, so why ought she not marry John?

They cannot become lovers, not under the roof of her aunt and uncle, and if she is honest to herself, she would not want to share John with anybody else, a wife he might wed to keep up appearances while secretly, he would take her on carriage rides or visit her in her own house under the guise of night.

It is the only, the proper way. Two weeks away from him have been too much for her, she had thought of him every day.

There is a lot of improvement to be done with regards to his proper manners and his temper, but these things could be changed, couldn’t they?

After all, he would have her to help him.

“What, are you lost in thoughts now? Is it because your aunt-“

“It’s not Aunt Margaret.”

“What is it then? Have I done something wrong? Don’t you like violets?”

“I do like them, but I like you even more.”

“Good”, he smiled at her and kissed her, hungrily and with more fervour than he ever had before.

Under different circumstances, she would have enjoyed it, the thrill of it, but in this very moment, she could not, for with the knowledge of the decision she had arrived upon weighing heavily on her mind, there was so much to think about, so much to consider.

He would have to ask her one day, wouldn’t he? Was it allowed for women to ask a man’s hand? It certainly was not customary.

“Enough thinking.”

John drew her closer in his arms and, tired of it all, Aunt Margaret's persistent headaches, Uncle Samuel’s questions and John’s long absence, she tried to relax as he held her close, his head buried in her hair.

“I’ve missed you so much.”

Struck with a sudden bout of genius, she answered:

“I missed you too, my love.”

He did not object, on the contrary, he seemed to like it very much.

Chapter End Notes
Simcoe's "missing months": I have tried to find out what exactly Simcoe did do between February and December 1782 but due to the fact that my means of research are limited to books and online material, and have (sadly!) no access to most of the correspondence and personal letters, I could not conclusively say what he did and where he spent his time. Since this story builds up on a strongly fictionalised character with a strongly fictionalised storyline anyway, I have decided that within this fic, Simcoe will continue to live at Hembury Fort House and travel to London (on him spending time in London all my sources seem to agree) every now and then to seek promotion, get back into active service and have the Rangers made a regular regiment.

Admiral Graves was promoted to admiral of the white on 8th April 1782. I couldn't find anything on how the exact pomp and circumstance for such a promotion went about which is why I only gloss over the event very briefly in Simcoe's POV and tie it together with his London voyages but would be interested to know more; so if you, dear reader, are a naval history enthusiast or -historian, please leave a comment! Admiral Graves owned a house in London, this I did not make up.

The Earl of Shelburne: William Petty, 1st Marquess of Lansdowne and Earl of Shelburne (1737–1805), went on to become Prime Minister the same year in July and remained in office until the following year. He had a great share in securing the Treaty of Paris with the brand-new US and, as stated in the story, opposed British military presence in what was then still the Colonies after Saratoga. He was said to have been a little difficult, hence it seems likely he would have clashed with Simcoe. The pun Simcoe makes is of course on his family name, Petty, as in the adjective. Today, his legacy mainly consists of having had things named after him, especially in his native city Dublin. Several streets, a DART (railway) station, a famous hotel and (knowing some readers will appreciate this) a football club and the good old Lansdowne Road Stadium (torn down and replaced by the Aviva Stadium) bear his name.

This time, I have for you another one of Shakespeare's history plays for variation. It's Henry V, whom you all probably know, depending on your age and interests, from the film versions of the play either with Kenneth Branagh as Henry in the 80s or Tom Hiddleston a few years ago. Henry V was born in Monmouth, Wales and the Gwillim family, as their surname suggests, had strong Welsh roots and lived in the border region between England and Wales. Elizabeth could apparently at least understand some Welsh (she attended mass in Welsh sometimes, and often travelled through Wales) but there is no surviving evidence she could speak it herself. Simcoe plays with the iconic "for I am Welsh, you know"-line from Shakespeare's play, spoken by Henry after the battle of Agincourt to his Welsh soldier Fluellen.

The Siege of Harfleur raged on from 18th August 1415 to 22nd September 1415-ending exactly on Elizabeth's birthday 347 years before she was born.

The monkey orchestra exists. I couldn't make something like that up. The 1700s saw a lot of kitschy porcelain figurines but of course, only the most extravagant would do for Aunt Margaret. Produced by Meissen porcelain manufactory since the 1750s until this day and often copied by others, the bandmaster, the figurine Margaret is given by her doting husband, is currently on sale by Meissen for 3056 Euro (shipping not included), or at today's exchange rate, approximately 3792.16 USD or 2703 Pounds in case any of you want the authentic Aunt Margaret experience for your living room. Just look up "Meissen Affenkapelle Kapellmeister" and you will see this glorious piece of porcelain. Actually, I must confess, I have fallen in love with it.
According to their official website, Madame the Pompadour was among the first to order a whole set when the figurines first went on sale.
As the following week progressed, Elizabeth was much enjoying the renewed company of the man she had secretly, and blushing, begun to call her “beloved” in her head—never in the open or, God forbid, in front of anybody else of course, but his long absence from her side and their joy of being reunited had something with her deep inside.

She had known she loved Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe for a while now and if she was honest to herself, had ever since meeting him felt an odd attraction towards this curious man that could have, had he not revealed himself to love her back, remained nothing but the curious fascination of a few idle days before she would have moved on to pursue her artistic and scholarly interests again, but had instead transformed into the most beautiful feeling on earth.

Aunt Margaret was not very pleasant to anyone these days; naturally, her disdain for John had even intensified after their carelessness upon first meeting again after two entirely too long weeks and she seldom spoke to him. For Uncle Samuel, she reserved a quiet wrath of a different sort; knowing he cared for her deeply and even enjoyed her company (as long as she did not give free rein to her capriciousness), she had, after voicing her displeasure about him not punishing John for his ill-treatment of Richard Graves, decided on treating him with a frowning silence that extended to all fields of social interaction.

In all seriousness, what could Uncle Samuel have done? The business between his godsons was not his, he had had no part in their quarrel and only come to know of it due to her decision to tell him in need of comfort after viewing what John had done to his de facto namesake.

John wasn’t a small child who could be sent to bed without dinner or confined to his room for a week, he was a grown man and master of his decisions, be they good or bad.

Although Uncle Samuel retained a certain authority over him given the fact that he had, as he had told her in days before John had come to the house after she had read another one of his letters to him, become a second father to him after his own father’s death when John still had been very little, and as the head of this household could make law as he pleased, he had no legal authority over him, nor could he order him around like the sailors he had been so used to command.

All he could do was voice his displeasure and subsequent approval of the fact that John had decided
(he didn’t need to know this had been her idea) to apologise to Graves.

The matter had been cleared within the first three days of John’s arrival: a letter had already been waiting for him (with great foresight, he had ordered his letters, should he receive any, to be given to her only and without making their existence known to the lady of the house), saying in essence that Graves agreed to their terms, lined with some vague threats what he would do should something of the sort ever happen again, which seemed ridiculous to Elizabeth given that John had already proven he could deal with his attacks almost single-handedly and with disastrous results.

John had taken the pains to visit him and he had, according to his narrative, begrudgingly shaken hands with him and vowed that he had no interest in courting Miss Gwillim anyway.

In John’s narrative, he had riposted that this was a very wise decision and that, as had already been outlined to him in a letter, the latter did not have much interest to see him again very soon, either. He had apparently left the still somewhat beaten-looking Graves with a friendly warning among “cousins” (both being the godsons of the same man and having known each other since their youth made them some sort of relation, though not by blood, did it not?) never to trust in anything uttered by their godfather’s wife ever again without sufficient knowledge that whatever piece of information she was trying to entrust him with was true.

Elizabeth had scarcely believed their encounter had ended on a truce that was bound to last perhaps even forever if neither she nor John would ever have to spend more time in the same room as him again, her beloved however had assured her that, in case she did not believe him, she could ask the manservant he had taken with him as a second- after all, one could never know and he had borne witness to Graves’ weasel-ish nature before.

On her part, Elizabeth did not like to think about the incident anymore at all; she banished it to the back of her mind most of the time, for it was done now, harm had been done already, but, as the apparently almost healed faint greenish-yellow blots on Graves’ face indicated, healing.

She loved John, although she could not approve of his misdeed and hoped he would never do such a thing again.

Currently, it did not look like she would ever have to worry about any such thing at all, for John tried to present himself to his best, his clothing impeccable, his manners polished, his mien having undergone an improvement from a persistent frown to a somewhat more neutral expression whenever he was in company and a more inviting way of presenting himself to others that was, though not cordial, friendly enough to feel comfortable making conversation with him and every now and then, when there were visitors, some of her aunt’s friends spending the afternoon with them or some of her own from Honiton, he did his best to act like the gentleman she suspected he had always fancied himself to be.

He did well, given his previous ill-mannered, cold demeanour and Elizabeth could not help but suspect it had to do with her or rather, Uncle Samuel.

Even if John had not relayed too much information about his talk with him to her, her uncle, she reasoned, must have said something that must have had such a profound effect on him that it had made him consider changing his ways.

Had they talked about marriage? It was customary to ask the bride’s father for permission, but Uncle Samuel was not her father nor did he hold any authority over her save his rules for his house, which she obeyed because he was taking care for her, even if nominally, it was Aunt Margaret who would, until late September next year, be the guardian of her person and fortune.
The way things were, Aunt Margaret would not let her marry ever, even if she lay dying and this were to be her dying wish.

Just like her uncle and John, her aunt subjected her to much silent frowning and occasional commentary on youthful fatuity and fancifulness.

She’d never say yes.

If Elizabeth was to be honest to herself, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to marry at all. She wanted to be with John and that only seemed to be achievable by means of marriage.

Presently, whenever they wanted to be to themselves they had to find a moment of inattentiveness or count on Uncle Samuel’s leniency who had in the past days saved them twice from Aunt Margaret’s temper by claiming he hadn’t seen either of them when he had- once, he had walked into the library where they had presently considered themselves safe from unwanted observers thinking Uncle Samuel was with Aunt Margaret in the drawing room and he had found them kissing ardently, her back against a bookcase and John’s hand in her hair, and a second time, he had talked to her walking down the staircase when she had previously announced to her Aunt she would go upstairs to her room to read.

On both occasions, they had been away for too long, her aunt had noticed and naturally posed questions. In both cases, Uncle Samuel had come to their rescue, although he had admonished them for such "indecencies" when he had found them kissing and ordered them to at least retain some basic decency in his presence. His sigh that had accompanied the chastisement however indicated he had, while displeased, accepted the sight before him, knowing he could not watch over them at all times.

She still thought John posed a threat to her, or rather, her intactness, though that should not bother her, should it? After all, she didn’t want her ever to marry anyway and with her money, she could one day support herself and a child, if it had to be.

-Not that she wanted that, being shunned by society or would ever agree to engage in- well, whatever it took to get pregnant, a concept she had only come into contact with by having caught snippets of conversations and, in some more detail, her secretly procured copy of Fanny Hill she kept under her bed and that only Susan knew of (in case she needed an accomplice to hide it for her, one could never know after all).

Still, even if she never planned to violate the rules of society thus, why did it matter to her aunt? She had her own life, why meddle in her niece’s?

People would talk, sure, and she wouldn’t quite like that and neither would her aunt, because it would be happening in her home, under her roof and she would probably fear her niece’s misconduct would reflect badly upon her- she had raised her, after all.

That might be it.

That and the story of her birth, her mother’s death.

As if her fate had been made at her mother’s death to one day die like her. Who could tell? While her mother’s death had given her many a sleepless night and food for thought, she had come to the conclusion that fate was not hereditary. If she were to die one day in childbirth, God forbid, it would be her fate and no one else’s.

In any case, Aunt Margaret did everything to keep her and John in a state of constant vigilance and
out of each other’s arms- Elizabeth also harboured the suspicion that regarding her (and John’s) whereabouts, some servants were tasked to directly report to her aunt, who had always fancied herself somewhat of a chief intelligencer for always keeping up with the usual happenings of Honiton and the other country houses; who had fought with his wife, what lady had ordered a new gown and whose footman had to be chased from the estate in disgrace for stealing some jewellery (the most exciting event of 1778, if she remembered correctly).

Sometimes, when she had particularly liked a story, she would go on retelling it at every gathering of more than two people and was known to tell the same story twice, for in her scandal-lustiness, she kept forgetting to whom she had already relayed the tale.

She also kept an eager eye on her servants, the same Elizabeth suspected were supposed to keep an eye on her, and sometimes lurked, sometimes openly oversaw they did their work to her liking, be it simply sweeping the staircase or cleaning the windows.

With her breathing down their necks, meeting in semi-secret became increasingly difficult and sometimes, Elizabeth found herself wondering why they even went to such lengths to conceal their meetings at all, given everyone in the house seemed already to know anyway that they were in love.

If they were married, they could do whatever they pleased, set up their own home far away from Aunt Margaret and her spies and do as they pleased.

Aunt Margaret would have no authority over her, could not make her do anything or forbid her to do things- John could. As her husband, he could tell her to do things, just like Aunt Margaret could now. Was it any better to be ordered around by one or the other? John loved her, but her aunt, though in a different way, loved her, too.

She knew that; beneath layers of unpleasantness, harsh comments, general bone-dry sarcasm and a certain bent for violent mood swings, her aunt loved her like her own daughter.

Just as John was no monster, Aunt Margaret wasn’t, either, although presently, she made reciprocating her love and care not exactly easier, no; there were times Elizabeth wished for the freedom of leaving Hembury Fort House and doing as she pleased- perhaps in another seventeen months, she could. Although even then it would look odd for her to move away from her aging aunt and uncle, for whom she, the closest living relative, would one day be expected to provide care and company.

Why did matters have to be so complicated? All she ever wanted was to be left in peace and be with John, who felt the same about her, and there was only one logical way to be able to do so, even if it still terrified her to some degree, was marriage.

It would have to be done, somehow- there was still opposition, after all.

If Aunt Margaret did not give her consent, they would have to wait until late September the following year to marry when she would come of age, but that seemed more like aeons to her.

She didn’t want to wait for John, besides, who knew where he would be in a year and a half’s time? He had recovered fairly quickly once he had regained the use of his left leg and although he sometimes, after a particularly long walk, still limped a little or was out of breath, he was otherwise in good health.

In a year’s time, he could be gone from her again, wherever his service to the crown took him, and
she would be alone, left behind here to wait for him to return- and what if he wouldn’t return, if he would fall on some foreign battlefield or succumb to a tropical illness in faraway India?

They would never have truly been each other’s, only in secret and she wouldn’t even be able to mourn him properly as a wife, only as a distant acquaintance.

John should never leave- hadn’t he been gone for very long already, twelve years? Wasn’t that enough for a lifetime already?

On the other hand, she could name at least two people who wished to see him gone, Aunt Margaret and Mary Anne.

The latter understandably didn’t like him personally after he had been so rude to her, but she was not at all supportive of her designs for the future.

As her best and closest friend, she had entrusted Mary Anne with her feelings after the latter had remarked how often within the few days she had spent at Hembury Fort House she had spoken of “the Colonel”.

“’The Colonel and I went riding’? Eliza, don’t tell me-“

“What?” “You… You like Colonel Simcoe.”

Mary Anne made a face as if she’d just taken a bite of a raw lemon.

She’d blushed- an answer way more telling than any words she could have uttered.

“He? Now, really, that man? The rude and ungentlemanly houseguest your uncle took in for pity? I am very glad he presently doesn't loom over us and dwells in London.”

“Don’t talk about him like that. You just don’t know him, that’s all.”

“Yes, and I don’t think I want to”, Mary Anne had replied, her face sporting an expression of deepest concern, “I always had hopes in your good judgement.”

“You sound like my aunt.”

“Well, perhaps Mrs Graves is right! I don’t think I want to be anywhere near John Graves Simcoe either!”

“But what if I want to?”

“Elizabeth, I cannot tell if you’re playing a trick on me or if you are telling me you are serious-“

“I am serious. John is very kind.-“

Her best friend gasped for breath and had almost let her biscuit fall onto the quilt of Elizabeth's bed, to where they usually repaired for long conversations. At the last second, she steadied herself and took a deep breath.

“’John’? So you-“

Elizabeth had lowered her voice somewhat to ensure they could not be overheard and leant across the plate of biscuits between them over to her and clarified what Mary Anne seemed to be dreading.

“You mustn’t tell anyone. We’re- we’re in love.”
“No.”

“No!”

With shock and concern fighting for precedence on her features, Mary Anne paused, probably to digest this new piece of information before she continued, visibly shaken and somewhat outraged:

“You didn’t tell me.”

“Of course not! See, I didn’t want to put it in a letter, what if someone else reads it- by accident or with malicious intent? I couldn’t risk us being found out. I had to wait to tell you in person.”

Imploringly, she put a hand on Mary Anne’s forearm who, at the touch, gave her a look somewhere between shock, concern, contempt and horror.

“You know what we said, don’t you?”

“Mary, you were fourteen and I fifteen”, Elizabeth sighed, though with a certain wistfulness in her voice.

It had been easier times five years ago, more careless, and Mary Anne had spent almost the entire summer at Hembury Fort House and later, they had all travelled to Bath together to take advantage of the positive effects of the waters for which the town was so renowned and meet her family there.

They’d spent their days in utter carelessness, had gone riding together, passed the afternoons in the shades of the tall trees in the garden, painting from nature together or simply, lazily, in Elizabeth’s room when the days grew too unbearably hot, reading alone or to each other and, something that had probably influenced them the most for the years to come, studied Spanish together. Before, Elizabeth had tried to teach Mary Anne some of her German, but Mary had lost interest quickly, complaining it wasn’t fair because Elizabeth was already fluent and she struggled so terribly with the three different varieties of “the” this language knew (not to speak of the horror that were the cases), which made no sense at all- whoever had decided an apple was male but an orange female had not been in the right mind to be sure.

Eventually, bored to be effectively forced to stay inside by the heat, they had decided their new pastime had to be one both of them were not yet familiar with and so, after some debating and considerations, decided to learn Spanish with the aid of a dictionary and a few novels they could procure with relative ease.

They had ended their summer by making a pact: in all solemnity, by candle light late one evening and pricking their finger with a needle and letting their small wounds touch, they had sworn to be sisters for all time and never to have anybody else than the other- which included never to marry or love anyone more than their dearest friend.

Elizabeth remembered this part very specifically; there was no one else they needed, just each other and perhaps a good book or two.

-And she still craved Mary Anne’s friendship just as much as she had back then, but things had changed; she loved Mary Anne and she loved John, but differently. He could never be a substitute for Mary Anne nor could Mary Anne in turn become what John was to her. Why did things have to be so difficult?
“Mary, please. I love you, you’re my best friend. Why else would I tell you?”

“You didn’t write to me as often as you did before”, Mary Anne remarked accusatorily in response.

“I’m sorry.”

“He really takes up quite a lot of your mind, doesn’t he?”

“We’re in love. That’s how it is, I suppose, loving someone the way John and I love each other.”

With the grave nod of a doctor who has just been informed about symptoms that would lead to a scientifically interesting diagnosis, her best friend prodded further:

“And how long are you in love exactly? It can’t be long-“

“Two months, perhaps?”

“-of which you said he was three weeks in total away in London.“

Doubtful grey eyes pierced Elizabeth’s.

“Does that mean anything? I think I always have- this must sound very odd, but to some extent, I’ve always- well, not really liked him, that’s what I thought, not in the beginning at least, but there was something, I was attracted to Colonel Simcoe. And when we got to know each other, it was just there.”

She shook her head apologetically for not being able to explain her situation any more precisely.

“The Colonel is a very kind man, Mary Anne, he cares for me deeply- and I do the same for him.”

“Do you miss him now?”, Mary Anne demanded to know, her eyes squinting a little in a suppressed expression of dislike for John.

“I do”, Elizabeth answered truthfully, “I always do when he is not near.”

She lowered her eyes, realising how this last statement might have struck her best friend, even if it had not been her intention to inflict emotional pain on Mary Anne.

“But you’re here, and I’ve longed to see you again since February. Come, let’s go and see if-“

“Eliza, I’m not a child. You cannot fool me, I’ve known you for so long. If he is in love with you and you are in love with him, then you must have considered-“

“Marriage”, Elizabeth completed the sentence, “well, I have. I didn’t tell John, the Colonel, I mean, about it yet, but I think this is what we shall have to do in order to remain together.”

“And are you certain he would marry you? And why do you want to marry at all? Think about it, Eliza, he will get all your money and all you will do is bear children and look pretty when he requires you to accompany him somewhere.”

“Love is not like that. Marriage might be, I give you that. When two partners don’t love each other, yes. But we love each other terribly. It isn’t about my wealth or-“

“You know very well it is. As long as you are Miss Eliza Gwillim of Hembury Fort House, heiress to a lot of money and half of the south-west of this country, it will be, always, no matter whom you marry or not, be it Richard Graves, my brother James, a farmer’s son, or your uncle’s stable boy.”
Mary Anne had a point, one she had always considered herself, even if she denied it, for money seemed so tiring and most unromantic a matter to consider in this affair of the heart.

John had never given her cause to believe he liked her for being an heiress, and when she had mentioned he might like her solely for her wealth in a fit of rage, he had grown pale and genuinely desperate to prove the opposite to her.

She would have to speak to him about everything- and why hadn’t he asked her for her hand yet? Perhaps she was just fretting too much, it was as Mary Anne had said, they had only known each other for a very short while- was he not certain in his affections for her yet? No, John’s love for her was evident, just as she loved him with the greatest possible affection and care.

Maybe because it was considered improper to ask for a lady’s hand after such a short time- or maybe, because her aunt had played a part in it, her aunt who could theoretically forbid her to marry.

Or at least, she could do so at the present moment- in a little more than a year’s time, she would gain control over her fortune on her twenty-first birthday, and why not double the celebrations to a birthday and a wedding? Aunt Margaret would be very, very displeased, but it would be no longer her right or duty to act on her behalf.

She would be able to do as she pleased for less than a day exactly, she would become a wife the day she legally became a woman.

What should she do? She loved John, she loved him more than anybody else, never had there be such feeling beating against her ribs, never had the sheer sound of someone’s name elated her as hearing John’s did, or the thought of his lips, the promise of a kiss-

But why marry? Did they not already share their lives without being wed? They spent their days together, or at least as much of them as they could, they ate at the same table and slept under the same roof.

It wasn’t the real thing, but it came close.

No. One day, John would likely leave again, either to join active service once more or to do whatever other occupation he would take up (his funds, she knew, where not as lavish as hers) and she would have to stay here. He couldn’t leave ever again, not without her.

Only one thing sprung to her mind as she closed her rather uncomfortable recapitulations of her best friend’s reaction to the news of her and John; instead of seeking the advice of people who were not even willing to try and assume her perspective, she would have to talk to John directly- and thanks to the book Mary Anne had brought and which they had started reading together (they had, even though they were both quite fast, only managed to get through the first volume); well, one was reading while the other painted and when, after an hour or so eyes and mouth had tired, they had switched. It was a pleasant way to pass afternoons and in this case had even given her a very useful idea.

These might be the most pleasant days of his life. Never has life been so full of brightness, of dazzling sunlight and he doesn’t think about the warmth of spring standing in full bloom in the garden, the orchard and the general landscape of Devon.
Apple blossoms and lilacs are pretty, yes, but nature’s greatest creation, the epitome of beauty, wit and charm is by his side, his Eliza who loves him ardently and bestows him with many fevered kisses that remind him in their intensity more of a hot summer’s day than of the sometimes still quite chilly spring air.

As April slowly wanes, the days grow warmer, almost like early summer. Abroad, although in a rather similar climate, he had missed this particular kind of spring, the lighting when the sun rises in the Blackdown Hills, the smell of wet earth and the sea which only in this particular place smells like this, like his childhood, like days gone by and days to come.

The weather, particularly warm, perhaps a gift sent by nature to make up for the long winter, opens new possibilities to them; with his leg almost restored to its full former health (at least he likes to believe that), their strolls grow longer and longer, farther away from the house and well out of sight; sometimes, like in his schoolboy-days, he goes to the kitchens and, in exchange for a small financial encouragement to the cook not to tell Mrs Graves, is given some pastries or other small morsels of food, leftover cake or the like, which he later offers to Eliza when they take a break and sit on a fallen tree in the forest or on the ground in a meadow.

Due to these walks, he now owns two coats with light grass-stains on them, for he has offered them to Eliza to sit on in order to protect her dress (and both of them from the interpretation her the Old Bat might come up with upon finding such stains on her clothing).

It does not matter; clothes can be bought, these moments with Elizabeth alone however cannot be weighed in gold or riches.

Smiling, he thinks of Eliza and his hand, before busily scribbling another letter to London, comes to a halt.

Although they very both enjoy spending time in the open together, there is the most endearing little problem (which had previously not even crossed his mind) that now, with him much better and able to walk at his habitual speed again, she has trouble to keep up with him; sometimes, he forgets how much smaller she is and how much shorter in turn her strides are so oftentimes, she will run a few steps to stay abreast with him, then chide him (lovingly) for running away from her, to which he replies that running away from her is the last thing he would do in this world and then slows his steps, trying to keep in mind she, with her much shorter legs and burdened additionally by a parasol, cannot keep his natural walking pace as effortlessly as he.

She is not cross with him, though; she finds it funny, she has told him and sometimes jests about their difference in height, asking him to give her his hand in order to assist her climbing on a tree stump, so she can gain some height and reduce the inches dividing them and look him directly in the eyes as they kiss without one having to stand on the tips of her toes and the other to crouch downwards.

Not that he minds, but it is wonderful to lean his forehead against hers, draw her close and linger in this pose for some seconds; if the world were to be reduced to this one moment in time, it would be so much richer than it presently is.

Waking from his fond recollections, he finds his hand has lingered on the paper too long; where the tip of his quill had resided, a sizeable ink blotch has spread and ruined the letter. Drat.

Crumpling the paper and starting anew, he calls himself to order, there will be enough time with Elizabeth in the afternoon, after tea when Mrs Graves usually finds herself some distraction by ordering some poor servant girl around to help her clean and rearrange her collection of porcelain figurines (the Admiral’s horrid present has, as he can tell by her system of arranging them on display around the house become her present favourite, which makes him wonder if his godfather’s taste has
become as peculiar as his wife’s or if he simply has come to know this woman rather well over the years).

Probably the latter; while the Admiral is no romantic hero from a novel, he is a good husband to his wife, a gentleman even when she behaves like a spoilt child, which she does most of the time- do old women become like spoilt children at some point in their lives again, collecting dolls and making everyone suffer from fits of ill temper when they cannot have their way?

It likely is a peculiarity of Mrs Graves, whom he has come to define as his chief enemy in this place.

The situation is of course not very pleasant, least of all for Elizabeth, who of course feels some duty and loyalty, perhaps even fondness for the old woman who has raised her, but he is unwilling to accept or even think she has any place in their lives.

In his set of principles, which are few, yet strong ones, he believes in the freedom of choice, that everybody should make their fate as they see it fit, not constrained by the guiding hand, be it cruel or kind, of another person and under whichever circumstances.

She is not a fanciful child making wild demands for presents, Elizabeth is prudent, wise, learned and above all, the woman he loves for all of these reasons and more, and so often she has displayed her superiority to him in matters of tactics (at least in the social circles of this country) and her skill to talk well and pleasantly- she is so much more civil and gracious than the brat in the hide of an old woman she calls her aunt and who, by twist of fate, still has power over her until she legally comes of age at twenty-one.

Oh the irony of fate that Margaret, whose childish intrigues and wrong accusations have almost caused him to lose Elizabeth, can decide in her name, who is so much more level-headed and reasonable than she is. In a just world, Margaret would have to do what Elizabeth says, and then he could encourage Elizabeth to send the Old Bat across the ocean to America, for, he is certain, this woman could single-handedly make Washington give the Colonies back simply by sitting down for tea with him and threatening to stay for dinner also, which she might reconsider in case she is given a suitable parting gift- truth be told, he would give her everything, money, land, a kingdom, if that would make her disappear to the other end of the world for good.

Rage overcomes him, almost of the same quality he has known in the Colonies when he was still fighting, elicited by the mental image of the face of the woman he despises most.

The moment this realisation comes upon him, he feels ashamed, for not too long ago she had manipulated him, had made him do a terrible thing (though this part had not been her intention, though the temporary result had been) that would almost have cost him Elizabeth. He shall not make the same mistake a second time, after all, he (still) is an officer, a man of reason, learning and tactics. On the day he is outmanoeuvred by the Old Bat, he shall drown himself in a vat of sherry- he has no particular fondness for malmsey wine, but considers this mode of death in keeping with his family’s more or less recent history and his personal tastes. He’d rather drown in his favourite drink than while looking Hewlett or Woodhull (or Margaret Graves, for that matter) in the eye, while the latter pulls a gun on him or stabs him to death with a clothing pin.

Finally, after long moments of distraction, in which his thoughts have wandered long, winded paths through the length and breadth of his mind, he has the letter ready.

Perhaps he shall have more luck this time, even if he doubts it. At least he has tried, he does not sit idly by and waits for an opportunity or chance to come his way and ambush it, like a highwayman does unsuspecting travellers, he tries to make his fate, to shape his own life, to banish the shapeless shadow he has been mere months ago to the past, to be the man Elizabeth deserves.
He has promised her an extensive walk in the afternoon- in the morning, they had found themselves incapable to do so as Mrs Graves had received unexpected visitors, a lady and her daughter from Dunkeswell, “friends” as she called them, which had forced Elizabeth into playing the dutiful daughter of the house, sitting with the guests and talking pleasantly about whimsicalities and nothings that likely did not even interest her.

Soon, soon he would be with her once more, it could not be long anymore and yet, every minute without her, he finds, takes on the duration of sixty.

Finally, the hour comes at which he is allowed to descend and meet her in the hall and greet her formally, as is proper.

They have devised a system to keep the Old Bat as happy as she could be given the knowledge that her niece went on long strolls with her beloved, a man she disliked.

Firstly, he is not to touch her at all in the house, unless common courtesy demands it, as for example in the event of assisting her mounting a horse or entering a carriage. Secondly, the correct form of referring to the respective other is “Miss Gwillim” and “the Colonel” or “Colonel Simcoe”. “Elizabeth” and “John” are reserved exclusively for moments when they are all alone.

Thirdly, they walk at a distance of a few steps between them, with Elizabeth holding her parasol in the hand closest to him, until they reach a certain point at the end of the formal gardens from which they are quite sure neither the Admiral nor the Old Bat can spy them anymore from the house.

It is torture, the sweetest, most terrible kind of torture, to only be allowed to walk with her and not to slip his hand in hers or otherwise draw a physical connection between them when he knows it comes naturally to both of them, being together like this.

On this day, they have elected to walk across some meadows to seek out a special beauty spot on a hill Elizabeth considers particularly picturesque; although he listens to her when she points out the beauty of a particular place to him and marvels at the colours of a singular cloud, he has no mind for such things, the only thing he craves is her, the centre of his world, his Eliza and his aim is to savour every minute they are granted in private, to simply be in sweet unity for a while.

They have decided to make Elizabeth’s hill the end of their journey and sit on the ground beneath a tree on the blanket he has brought in order to keep their clothes clean.

Elizabeth reads her new novel, and he just sits and watches her, sometimes pulling a strand of hair from her face that the mild spring breeze blows into her face.

It is beautiful; they don’t need to talk as long as they’re together, it doesn’t matter what happens around them, or if any words are being said, they don’t need to talk at all to be happy. It is more than enough that they’re together.

Suddenly, Elizabeth laughs, giggles loudly.

“Listen to this: …since his death, which, by depriving her of her last relation, made her heiress to an estate of 3000 pounds per annum; with no other restriction than that of annexing her name, if she married, to the disposal of her hand and her riches. She has 10,000 pounds more, inherited from her parents, but she can only inherit her uncle’s money if the man she marries takes her name. ”

Puzzled, he looks at her, rolling a daisy he has plucked from the grass between his fingers. Why does this scene stand out to her in such a way that she feels compelled to read it to him? He knows she likes Frances Burney’s works (he still remembers the night, oh glorious night, he has read Evelina
with her and afterwards they shared their first kiss) but personally, he does not care much for literature of that sort, novels about society, about all the things he does not enjoy.

Uncertain which reaction she craves from him (though likely not his present confusion) he cocks his head and gives her a questioning look.

“I just thought- imagine John, if- John Graves Gwillim sounds not too terrible.”

His heart jolts like a wounded cavalry horse. What has she said? Has she really hinted at- It is he who should ask her, not the other way around.

She smiles at him, her mouth wide and her eyes a-glimmer with the specs of light falling through the foliage above them.

He can barely comprehend this has happened. Has Eliza proposed to him? Well, if he is to take her name then it must be her to make a proposal, he figures, and, still not quite sure what to say or think, meets her eyes.

“I was teasing you, John, that is all”, she says, still smiling, but her eyes give a hint of disappointment away. He has not reacted as he should have.

“Do you wish to marry me, Eliza?” There. The question was out.

Elizabeth puts the book down, not bothering to mark the page, and inches somewhat closer to him.

“You know we cannot go on like this forever, stealing away together under my aunt’s scrutinising glances. I just like being with you a lot.”

She doesn’t say anything else, just leans her head against his shoulder and closes her eyes.

Wrapping his arm around her, as he always does, he silently stares into the distance.

Why is he such a fool? He should have asked her the minute he first kissed her. Although, before that, she has kissed him first.

It is infuriating, really; he is always too shy, too afraid to make the first step, fearing she will reject him, even if his heart knows this fear is unfounded; she is not like Anna Strong or any other woman he has ever met; she loves him, and he loves her.

He should have asked her the night they first kissed, he really should have, for then, his godfather hadn’t yet forbidden him to ask her the same question she has just tried to ask him without saying the words and redacted his promise to sweet-talk his wife into letting Eliza marry.

If one person on this earth has any influence over Margaret Graves, it is her husband. Outwardly, she may pretend to the role of the mannerly lady whose great charity manifests in the shape of her young niece, whom she raised as her own child and who rules the household (and her husband) with an iron grip, but within her, she hides another side, a weaker side. In other people, this aspect of personality might be called “tender” or “kind-hearted”, depending on the person, but when it comes to Margaret Graves, he has long ceased to think in any other terms of her than an enemy, whose sore spots, weaknesses, he must identify. She does the same with him, too.

This less rude, imposing side he has come to see (or rather hear, as his eyes had been closed at the time) when Elizabeth lay abed the first night after her terrible accident and she, alongside her husband, had come to look after her and had cried into the Admiral’s shoulder, a human being, weak, in need of love as anybody else.
Now that he is still unwilling to help him and to aggravate their position he has not dared to approach the Admiral again on matters of marriage, they cannot marry. Not now, not in the near future, even if it would make Eliza very happy.

Scotland. They could still travel to Scotland, get it over with and return.

That however wouldn’t be right, and he doesn’t want to marry her like this. She deserves a feast, a ceremony, everything, and presently, he cannot give her that.

“We cannot marry, Eliza.”

“What do you mean, we cannot-?” Horrified in the extreme, two brown spheres look at him, widened in shock.

“It is not as you may think- the Admiral proposed I should ask for your hand a long while ago with the promise he would speak to Mrs Graves on our behalf, but redacted said promise when- you know”, he, with a painful twitch in his mouth tried to circumvent having to speak about the Graves-matter once more, “and forbade me to ask you any time soon until he finds himself assured of my generally good character.”

With her eyes downcast, not knowing what to feel, Elizabeth's arms tightened around John.

On the one hand, she wanted to feel elated even her uncle had thought of it, on the other, the redaction of the promise to intervene on their behalf and petition Aunt Margaret to give her consent to a marriage painted their situation in the darkest colours.

Her plan had worked in a way; now she knew what she needed to know.

At least, they still had this, being alone and sitting somewhere together.

An awkward silence hangs between them as they sit in silence, staring into the distance, both pretending to admire the landscape in order to evade having to say something that might, given the present situation, not so much console as smart the other.

They simply exist, alone, together, here on the hilltop in this very moment.

As he glances across the landscape, the fields, a farmhouse in the distance, the lush greens and the blossoms on the trees in their light shades of cream, white and rose, a sudden realisation strikes him.

“Perhaps it is good the way it is”, he reasons aloud, prompting Eliza to look up to him.

“How could you possibly mean that?”
“In all our time together, which has not been long, have we ever spoken of- of ourselves, of families, of friends, of foes, things we have a preference for or dislike? Opinions- I want you to know the man you wish to marry one day, that is if you still want me after-“

John was right. They truly never had talked about anything really important except of course their avowals of love. For them, all that had mattered had been being together blissfully basking in the other’s smile.

“Besides, come to think of it, my love: it is a means to further cement our allegiance, strengthening our ties before you are allowed to wed on your own accord. If you still-“

“Oh John stop it now. Have I ever given you the feeling I would ever rebuke you? Now, that we have shared so much of our time, our lives, already? I sometimes fear you forget that I love you.” “I never do. Only you deserve-“

“Let me decide what I deserve, especially since that might be my last decision.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know when a woman marries, all her property and her right to make her own fate pass into her husband’s hands? I love you, and marrying will be the only way to be with you so I would willingly subject myself to-“

He can barely believe what his love is saying. He does not see her like this, a financial asset, as they have discussed before. In truth it vexes him that he Much as she tells him to let go of the argument that she is deserving of so much more than an invalided colonel with a troubled past, she ought to give her worrying about her money and lands a rest, at least as far as he is concerned.

“It is true before the law and yet, I could not, I would not, I would never touch your money without your approval.”

“It will be your money then.”

“It will be mine by law, but yours in my eyes and that makes quite a difference. “

“I will be yours by law, too.”

“You will always be yourself, and are mine as much as I am yours. What need the law concern us? We make the rules by which we shall want to live, and I do not intend to treat you as I have seen wives being treated by their husbands, men less kind than the Admiral. Have I ever told you of Mrs Shippen-Arnold? She was the Pride of Philadelphia, the most beautiful daughter of its wealthiest patron, but wed against her will, ensnared in her own net of intrigues, she was forced to marry General Benedict Arnold, the infamous traitor. He used her money to further his own ends, to immortalise his supposed glory and treated her horribly. She was not a kind woman herself, no one one would pity instantly, but no person, man or woman, should be subject to any other person than their king.”

“Is this what you believe in?”
“I do. What of you?”

Yes, what did she believe in? Elizabeth could not say; so far, her life had not been about convictions or personal decisions of great importance; nothing beyond whether to spend the coming summer in Bath or London.

Not many people except for Mary Anne and a few likeminded close friends had cared for her opinions other than on works of art or literature before, certainly not politics or philosophy, and while she had on occasion let her opinions show in a dinner-table debate with her Aunt and Uncle, they had never asked her directly.

“In- I don’t know. I believe in an order of things. That God causes things to happen for a reason. There is reason in all His doings, we must only find and make use of it.”

Hewlett has once spoken of there no being any order to this world. The little, embittered wight is wrong. There is, and he can see it now that the words have been spoken by her: he hadn’t seen any reason in his life, only pain and torment, until he met her. Had he never been wounded, never returned to England to convalesce, he would not have met her. Perhaps instead of being gravely wounded, he would have died on another field, in another skirmish and would never have been allowed to find his heaven in her arms after the dark, cloudy night-valley of pain and fear he has left behind him.

It is a good, though careful answer, as if she is not yet sure what to say or not say, fearful of putting him off by voicing a like or dislike of something she fears he might see differently.

“I wish to know more about you, Elizabeth.”

The sentence might sound odd to her and come somewhat abrupt in her ears, but he is willing to explain in case she asks why.

“What do you want to know, John?”, she asks him, her lips endearingly half-parted and her forehead slightly creased.

“Everything. Start in the beginning, that might be easiest.”

Somewhat bemused, she begins to relay her tale to him; of some things he already knew, her liking for artistry, the tragic demise of both her parents in a very short time, her having been raised by her aunt (and to his surprise, a host of other relatives with whom she had lived from time to time before taking up residence at the Fort) and of her best friend, whom he had come to know under rather unfortunate circumstances.

There are many details he hadn’t known about her, for example that she has a small scar on her left knee from having attempted to climbing a tree with low-hanging branches to get a better view of a
landscape she wanted to paint on a tour of the Welsh countryside with her Gwillim-aunts aged twelve, but had ultimately lost her footing when her petticoats had proven troublesome and injured her knee.

“I cried terribly because it hurt and my whole knee was raw for some time and bled a little. The scar I still have, though I have given up climbing trees.”

She smiles wistfully, reconciled with the past that once, when it had been the present, had felt less pleasant to her.

“Here—” She takes his hand, boldly, and slides it up below her petticoats to her left knee, where a small patch of skin indeed feels a little rougher than the exquisite soft smoothness around it.

Even though she has acted so boldly, the boldness is mere pretence; a glance at her neck reveals faint red blotches of nervousness, which even her fichu, whether worn for modesty or due to the slight wintry chillness that still inhabits some shadowy corners the young spring sun cannot yet reach he cannot tell, has no way of hiding.

“Elizabeth, you need not—”

“Hush, John.”

Once more, she leant her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. It was terribly thrilling to feel him so close to her as they only had done once before (she had learned, never again in the house with her aunt near) to have his hands touch her skin in this manner, his thumb trailing over the scar and slowly caressing the entirety of her knee, never above, never below with light, stroking touches.

He had asked her to relay the story of her life to him in order to know her better—deep inside her, she felt that nobody had ever known her like he did, that it did not matter if he were familiar with her every childhood memory or the name of her first pony (Arabella), his knowledge of her exceeded the knowledge that in centuries to come, historians might compile of her, dates and years denoting milestones on the journey of life, John knew her differently in a more natural way than cold compilations of numbers could ever express.

He knew her from within, he knew her heart, knew how to give her a feeling of utmost contentment and safety solely by sitting by her side, knew how she liked to be kissed. This knowledge transcended everything he could ever learn about her and yet, she only wanted him to think well of her, and thus had omitted less flattering details, such as a terrible fight with Mary Anne at sixteen, from her tale.

“Your turn”, she heard herself say, a little curious what he had to tell about himself.

Hesitantly, clearing his throat and drumming nervously against his thigh with his unoccupied hand, he began to speak of himself, his life.
It is only natural she should want him to repay her in coin with the story of his own life. Although he has seen it coming, the moment hits him unprepared; he does his best to be truthful, to not spare her too many things (after all getting to know each other was the entire point of this exercise) and to talk about those he does not like to talk about.

Percy’s name falls from his lips with great trouble, but when she only looks up at him, tears pooling in the mesmerising hazel depths of her eyes, a dam is broken and the words flow freely.

He speaks about the war, for the first time, and even if not everything he has done he feels comfortable telling her, he does not paint a more flattering picture of himself in those things he does tell her about. He was (is?) a warrior and an officer in His Majesty’s army and has done what he had to do. He has led his men into battle and shown the foe no mercy.

But he has not always been right in his doings, as he has come to realise, and, ashamedly, does not even spare her the murder of Bucephalus which he deemed necessary at the time. He hadn’t liked killing the animal, but it had to be done to catch the rebels who had maltreated him.

Elizabeth frowns at him with disgust and recoils a little. His heart sinks at her reaction, it had to be expected however. She would never do or condone such a thing.

“That is very cruel and a most despicable thing to do.”

“It was”, he affirms, his eyes downcast, “but- imagine yourself with your wrists bound to the rafters of a dark cellar room above your head, you cannot even feel your hands anymore and your shoulders ache, you have been beaten and your head is weary and then someone puts a pistol to your head-“

He has to stop there. She knows enough now, he must not frighten her so with tales of days gone by and he cannot go on.

“I wanted to catch them, suffer the same rough treatment they had given me and hold them accountable for their treason.”

“Did you?”

“One of them, in the end. He lived.”

“Did you- did it satisfy you?”

Her curious stare indicates to him she understands exactly what he means by his vague words and penetrates his soul.

“No.”

It is the truth. Whatever he has done to Brewster had only felt good in the moment, not after Cooke had snatched him away to trade one traitor for another one and his father. An emptiness had taken hold of him- for while it had been quite gratifying to hear Brewster scream in pain, what good had it done him? The memories of his captivity would never go away. He still had the ball in his flesh as a
constant reminder of being shot and dragged into the Patriots’ lair. Nothing but scorn has he given them, for, so he had thought, if he had to die, he would not go meekly to the block, the noose or whatever other method they had devised for him. He would be unpleasant, truculent, defiant and make himself a nuisance, partly in order to die fighting best as his situation allowed and partly because he somehow had hoped they would end him more quickly if they found him bothersome and for one moment, feeling the cold metal of the barrel against his head, he had been ready to die, in a state of passiveness, submission to fate and powerlessness in which he had accepted what they were going to do, that they would hurt him one last time.

-And then Scott had intervened, made them cut him loose and let him live.

He is back in that cell again. He feels his left leg protest in pain, the sticky trail of warmth running down his chin from his split lip and the throbbing of his black eye. His arms hurt and life means nothing in this moment. Then, he is in another room, similar to the first one, but he is no longer the recipient of rough ill-treatment, he is the distributor of pain and suffering, enjoying it, hating himself for it a little, but liking it too much to stop, to see the man suffer who had made him suffer and who had found so much joy in threatening to kill him.

Subconsciously, he draws his hand away from Elizabeth’s knee, almost as if he could sully her pure skin with the despicable filth of his memories.

His hand trembles, he realises, and swiftly moves it under his thigh, as if to keep it warm even if the air is still very agreeable in order to hide his weakness from Elizabeth. Good God, she must hate him now, and for good reason- he knows she hates the bestial side of him, the darkness of the human soul which seems to have found its physical manifestation in his form, but if she wishes to marry him, she must know these things.

John started to shiver all over his body as if struck with a bout of ague, which he suppressed quickly.

She hated to hear such things of course, but he had made a promise, and she was not going to shy away from it and break her end of taking him as he was as long as he kept true to never do such a thing again.

It frightened her to hear such things about him, such vile, terrible things that somewhat affirmed her aunt’s and Mary Anne’s opinion of him, but this was the past and he had been at war, which she knew had left him with scars that did not show on the skin like the one adorning her left knee but were borne on the soul instead.

Yes, he had done great wrong and she did not fancy to hear any more of it but did not the punishment of memory suffice? Was he not punished enough for his misdeeds to have to live with them and suffer with the shame of afterthought at what he had done?

One day perhaps it would get better. If one only was sorry enough, God would grant repentance, she had been taught since she had been a little girl.

And John seemed to repent.

An old song her nurse had sung came to her mind:
Sinne is the cause of great sorrow and care,

But God by repentance his vengeance doth spare.

She would be by his side, whatever the cost. John had done very, very terrible things which she could not understand, but, whoever he had been, he was no longer. Or still was, but had become reformed to some extent; and was willing to reform his person even more, to become a better man than he had been.

There was so much love in his heart, so much tenderness, which she assumed had remained pent up for years with no one to share even the slightest sliver of it. Long nursed pain had found a release in his physical wounds and in his dreams and on the day she had found him crying on the library floor; what joyless existence must that be, have been? If there was hate in him, which she did not doubt, not after what he had told her, there also was love. And where there is love, there is hope.

She loved him still, even if she did not like his past at all.

They had made a pact, he had promised never to become such a terrible person again and she was certain he would not.

The man who had told her the stories of America, the war there, was not the same one as the man sitting beside her, trembling slightly.

Her heart bled thinking he had become so after the accumulation of misfortunes in his life; seeing his brother drown, his father, who had never come home, his mother, who had died while he was away and the things he had seen on the various battlefields he had fought on.

One day, they would leave all this behind. The past, Hembury Fort House, her aunt and uncle, perhaps England even. They could go away together.

Silently, she took note of John’s head slowly coming to seek support by her shoulder, like a puppet with its strings cut.

Still without saying a word, she guided him downwards, to allow his head to rest in her lap. John let her do as she pleased with him, meek and obedient like a gentle, very big dog almost, eager to please and receive affection in return.

Sometimes she wondered how loveless, how desperately alone he must have been to feel so needful of her touch, and be it only a slight stroke of her thumb across the back of his hand.

Careful not to disturb his coiffure (if one could call his wild head of proud indomitable curls held by what could at most be called the attempt of a braid that) too much, she stroked his head, brushing his hair out of his face and tracing the tender, jagged ruins of his left ear. Now that she knew how he had lost it, she was more than glad it had only been his ear and not his life that this Robert Rogers had taken from him.

His hair was wonderfully soft, glowing in the colours of an autumnal forest in the slowly fading daylight- she could have spent a year and a day touching and watching it reflect the sunlight.

A droplet of salt stained his cheek, which she could not resist to kiss away.

At that, he lifted himself up into a sitting position again and finally rose, offering her his hand.

“It is getting late. We must return.”
“We must”, she said quite needlessly for lack of knowing what else to say.

John knelt down again and folded the blanket. As he stood before her once more, it was evident his mind was perturbed by a question he was hesitant to ask.

“Do you still want me?”, he asked, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

“What a silly question. I love you.”

“Then- you would still consider to marry me?”

She hesitates and he recalls the beginning of their conversation about marriage and life in general. Years of having been told the only thing any man could ever want of her was her money had evidently left their marks.

“Yes.”

“You know we cannot marry, not yet, not now.”

“Perhaps if you convince Uncle Samuel-“

“Your Aunt despises me, and she will not say yes.”

“But I do.”

Through the horrid feeling left behind in the aftermath of his recollections of the war, he has to laugh, a ray of sunlight breaking through the clouds.

“I haven’t even asked you yet.”

“Then ask me. If you go away again before I come into my own next September, I want to know that we are-“ he ends the sentence for her “inseparable. Nobody shall come between us, not even your aunt.”

She glances fearfully at him.

“But what if you die on some field and you won’t return-“

“I will always return to you.”

“You know Aunt Margaret will not support living with a ghost in the house, especially not yours, you would do better not to die”, she remarks dryly but adds quickly, “And I imagine ghosts cannot kiss.”

Bringing his arms around her and drawing her close, he asks “like this?”, as their lips touch and he kisses her with endurance and careful passion, mindful to find the perfect balance between making her yearn for another kiss and not leaving any tell-tale marks the Old Bat might detect.

“Like this”, she replies, audibly contented with his efforts.
He pulls away from her and holds her at an arm’s length before he lets go of her entirely, searches her eyes and genuflects before her in the grass.

“Miss Gwillim, Elizabeth, as I cannot ask you for your hand, let me offer you mine instead; I vouch to be yours for all time, to wait until the opportunity arises and the law or your guardian permits. I swear to protect and worship you, to share your joy and your grief and care for you. More I cannot offer you. I would offer you my heart as well, but you have it already.”

John looked up at her, anxiously awaiting her answer, at which she received him, her arms outstretched and pulled him up until he towered over her once more.

“Yes, John, I do want that very badly.”

“And your money?”, he asked.

“I don’t know. I love you more than anything.”

“You will never want anything, and what is yours now will always be. No law shall change that for me. If you have doubts you need not say-“

“No”, she replied, cutting him off, even if it was a not the full truth. She wanted to be with him more than she cared for the money or the lands that had attached themselves to her name at the most unfortunate deaths of her parents, but still, some insecurity regarding this matter remained.

“We have time”, he said almost consolingly and bent down to pluck a daisy in the grass and parted its stem in two with a fingernail.

The technique, used in days gone by by her nurse to make pretty little wreaths or necklaces for her when she had demanded it, was familiar to her, what John was doing however she could not ascertain.

He brought the head of the daisy through the hole he had created to make a dainty ring.

“Give me your hand.”

She extended her hand to him and allowed him to slip the daisy on her wedding finger.

“There. Now we are wed.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Before your eyes and mine, we are, and more I do not care about.”

With hungry, all-devouring love on her lips, she reached up to bring his head closer to hers, to kiss once more before they had to head back to the house, lest they wanted to return in the dark, which would cause them both trouble, especially if her aunt- oh to hell with Aunt Margaret. What did she know of love?

With a curious mixture of delight, joy, elation, happiness and giddiness, she kept up running alongside John until they reached the house in the last moments of dusk with her aunt and uncle already waiting for them.
With a half-hearted account of a fictional wrong route they had taken, she excused herself to go to her room, barely being able to hide a broad grin as she walked past her aunt, her left hand hidden beneath her sleeve, the daisy invisible to Margaret Graves' sharp eyes.

Chapter End Notes

"Fanny Hill or Memoirs of A Woman of Pleasure" by John Cleland (1709-1789) was first published in 1748. It's a famous erotic novel about a young country girl stricken by ill luck who comes to London and is tricked into working in a brothel. Suffice to say that nothing is left to the imagination.

Mary Anne and Elizabeth did learn Spanish together. Sometimes, even well into their adult lives, they would write each other letters in Spanish.

Drowning in a vat of drink of one's choice: as a history enthusiast, Simcoe has likely heard of the death of George Plantagenet, 1st Duke of Clarence (1449-1478), who was charged with treason against his brother King Edward IV, who, as some show of mercy, is said to have allowed his brother to choose his mode of death. Clarence is said to have chosen to be drowned in malmsey wine.

First name terms vs honours, styles and titles: this part is rooted in history. The documents we still have of the Simcoes are primarily letters and Elizabeth's diary, in which both partners usually refer to another by the polite way of addressing another. It has to be kept in mind however that Elizabeth wrote her diary possibly contemplating to publish it one day and letters were commonly passed around among friends and family in a day where Facebook announcements were not yet an option. While they officially referred to another in these terms, we have no way of knowing what they were like when nobody was watching and it seems only logical that a couple in love for 24 years would use first-name terms when alone.

Fanny Burney's (1752-1840) novel "Cecilia" was first published in 1782. For the purpose of this story and because I could not find a more exact publication date, it was already on sale by late April that year. Cecilia is a 20-year-old orphan who has inherited some money from her parents and comes within reach of even more at her uncle's death, but there is a catch: in order to get the money, she must marry a man who will take her surname. Ultimately that doesn't work out (thanks to the relatives of the groom) but another relative wills a small fortune to Cecilia later on. Elizabeth has yet to read that part.

The money Elizabeth brought into the marriage seems never to have been an issue between them historically in that Simcoe didn't take up sudden excessive spending habits upon marrying Elizabeth and they still had a lot of money later in life with nine children, a lavish lifestyle and a big estate to finance. It seems that he managed her inheritance wisely, which he later entrusted back into her hands in his will, from what I can gather from books and her will, which mentions something of the sort.

Elizabeth having fallen from a tree aged twelve is a purely fictional incident, however, I have been inspired by her Canadian diary, in which she mentions throwing herself off a horse when she thought it had broken through the ice on a lake, her love for horse-jumping, having fallen through a trap door, climbing around Niagara Falls and her
toddler criticising her coach driving style (rough) among other things. Thanks to these incidents, it didn't seem far off to me to portray her as an adventurous child.

"Sinne is the cause... etc.": chorus of an old English ballad telling the Biblical story of the prophet Jonas called "Unto the Prophet Jonas I Read".

The chapter title is an allusion to the very first- from Elizabeth's "Give Me Your Hand" to John's "Take My Hand".

Much as I would love to be able to write pure, unadulterated fluff, I fear John and Eliza's tribulations are far from over. They haven't really talked everything through, and then there also is Margaret, who has not yet given up...
With the arrival of May, the warm weather has come to stay with the sun glazing the Blackdown Hills in an almost summery light and bonny white clouds lazily chequer the sky like a flock of sheep escaped from their shepherd.

Of late, he has not yet had news from London and considers to make another voyage there soon in order to make what has formerly been a demand but he now recognises is more of a plight once more in person.

They simply will not listen to him. It is most frustrating. Has he not been quite effective, have not the Rangers earned much admiration when he had transformed them from the vagabond rabble he had taken on as Rogers’ legacy and moulded them into a proper fighting unit?

How many other men could have achieved this, what other officer could have achieved the same results? Not Hewlett, who is weak and would have found himself buried within a shallow grave somewhere in the woods within a week had he been assigned to this post, not André, who would certainly have refused to go anywhere were he would not be able to cultivate the acquaintance of a dozen willing women of varying repute in a system of precedence that makes the late Louis XV of France’s schedule of female company seem empty by comparison, not old, fat and slow Cooke who had not contributed to the war at all and instead, not unlike Arnold, had used his uniform to shove money into his own pockets.

They do not treat him correctly and he is almost out of things to do- for what more than writing letters and appealing to his superiors in person can he do?

There is another thing however he would like to do. On one of their rides, they have passed by a pond, very picturesquely situated. It is warm out, and there is something he wants to try, has to try.

Being with Eliza has made him more unafraid, braver, and made the darkness around him light up with the sunshine of her smile and the fire in her eyes whenever she looks at him.

Not too long ago, he had found himself weeping in a bathtub and let her hold him afterwards, barely dressed and shaking still, for comfort.

If he wants to be a proper husband to her, he must be stronger, he cannot let such weakness govern him.

How can he protect and care for her otherwise if he is weak and afraid to confront his nightmares? Yes, especially those. If he cannot confront a nightmare, how can he confront a very real danger?

-But pushing it away to the back of his mind, letting Percy sit there and bide his time to ambush him whenever he is confronted with a nightmare of or a veritable body of water has done him no good so far.

She must never see him like that again, and if he can break the curse, she won’t and he will be happier, too.

The little pond is perfect for what he is about to do.
Rising with the darkness, which always seems darkest in the hour just before the dawn, he saddles a horse (he has years of practice doing that in the dark and only leading it to the mounting block is a little difficult) and rides out to where he knows the pond is.

With the night slowly yielding to the first specs of daylight and a few early blackbirds greeting the new day melodiously for company, he finally reaches his destination in the blood-red and golden gleam of the rising sun.

So early in the day, the air is still cool, just right when fully dressed; this exercise however demands his clothes to be left behind on the shore.

Carefully, he relieves himself of his clothes and lays them out on the grass to keep them from creasing, feeling oddly watched by the big, innocent eyes of the sturdy brown mare who seems to eye him curiously, wondering what foolish thing her rider is getting up to. He should have secured her at a tree further away, but now it’s too late for that now anyway and luckily, horses are discreet by nature.

On his bare skin, the morning air feels a lot colder than expected, but he is not one to shrink away from a task he has set himself.

Step by step, he comes closer to the water’s edge until first his toes, then his feet, then his lower legs are submerged in the positively icy water.

He walks on, can slowly hear the screams in his ears grow louder, hear Percy’s dying pleas, hear cannon fire, feel how the air is knocked out of his lungs as his body hits the ground, his lungs are punctured and several bones destroyed, gasping for air but not being granted it instantly.

But he walks on, pausing in between steps to acclimatise, to allow the water around him to still.

It is a rather anticlimactic experience for, as he has to find out, the water is not deep enough to take in much more of his body than up to his elbows and he can still stand safely. Or perhaps this is good, he doesn’t know.

There is only one thing left to do now, he decides, trembling. It has to be, he has to do it. He submerges his head for a moment, only long enough to get positively wet, and then rises again, his mouth greedily taking in the sweet-scented air alive with the smell of spring flowers.

The water hasn’t swallowed him, no cold, dead little boy’s hand has pulled him downward into a black, bottomless abyss below.

He has won. Not the war, but a battle. It does not feel pleasant, but he has won, and triumph’s sweet taste dulls the memories he has tried to flush out of his body.

Even if he hasn’t succeeded in doing so (he even doubts this is possible), he has proven to himself he is still a warrior. He has fought, and won.

Thinking about it, it is a baptism of sorts; a re-baptism welcoming him back as a warrior and at the same time, initiating him into something new, a new life, in which one day his name might mean something else than it presently does to most who aren’t his Eliza, something yet to come, yet to discover.

Shivering with the cold and chastising himself for not having waited a few weeks more to do such a foolish thing, he lets the air dry him somewhat, lying in the grass and pretending he is not lying naked in the grass and freezing cold before he dresses again and is set on riding home.
Although he had planned his journey meticulously with enough time to do the thing, dress as well as was possible without a groom, return, pay the stable boy some money to take care of the horse and keep his mouth shut, sneak back to his room, wash, change and repair to the library before breakfast pretending he has never been away, he hasn’t thought of how he is going to mount his horse again. 

There is no rock or tree stump he could use nearby.

He must try it the ordinary way.

Putting his foot in the stirrup, he pulls himself up, as he has done so many times before.

His leg answers with a protesting stinging pain which reminds him in equal measure of the fact that he is not fully healed yet and of the far more serious problem that he is out of practice and has become unused to mounting a horse in this manner.

Two little victories in one morning and the prospect of Eliza, his wife’s, face awaiting him soon make him dig the heels into the horse’s sides, urging her to run faster, and drinks in the triumph and longing for his beloved that are setting in.

“Morning, Miss Gwillim”, Susan’s busy routinely-timed chant woke her up as the curtains were torn open in one merciless movement, leaving the room to flood with bright light.

The maid was answered by a sleepy groan and the sound of a body rolling to the other side of the bed, away from the light.

“You all right, Miss?”, her voice vexed Elizabeth’s ears a second time, this time with a concerned undertone.

“Hm-hm.”

“Sleepy today?”

“Somewhat.”

Slowly, Elizabeth mastered to sit up in bed and even to yank her feet over the edge, floor-ward-bound.

Susan helped her into her dressing gown and seated her, as usual, down in front of the looking-glass in order to brush her hair.

Between two very tangled strands, she paused:

“Is it the Colonel?”

“I have no idea what you’re on about, Susan”, Elizabeth replied, not knowing where this question was supposed to lead.

Susan could be very inquisitive for one paid to listen and obey orders.

The girl, whose unruly reddish-blonde mane escaped from underneath her cap, quickly avoided her
eyes in the mirror and said, “oh, I had just guessed, forgive me, Miss Gwillim.”

“Guessed what?”

“I mean, you don’t need to fool me, Miss, I’m not Mrs Graves-“ Elizabeth could barely believe her own ears.

“Are you insinuating that I-“

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

The girl winked.

“If you are attempting to tell me you have the suspicion I were embarking on an amorous relationship with Colonel Simcoe, then you are much mistaken. Besides, it’s none of your business. Do not repeat such vile calumny again, or I will have to relay your speaking out of place to the Admiral and Mrs Graves.”

Like her aunt, Elizabeth was very able when it came to frighten and intimidate.

“So it’s not true then.”

The girl was testing her patience.

“What?”

“That you and the Colonel- forgive me, I speak out of my place again.”

With that, the girl returned to brushing her hair.

“Where did you hear that?”

The brush stopped abruptly halfway down her back.

“Everyone says so. The cook, whom Colonel Simcoe always relieves of leftover dainties, the gardeners, the scullery maids- Jeanie swears she’s seen the Colonel leaving your room half-dressed in the morning and such a while ago. It’s no secret”, she added defensively.

“By God Susan I have not-“ Taken aback, a violent blush caused Eliza’s face and ears to burn.

After a short while studying her closely, Susan spoke again:

“No, I don’t think so. You’re blushing even thinking about it.”

She giggled again, as if she knew something Elizabeth didn’t, were the keeper of a secret that was unknown to Elizabeth.

“Then you might be interested in what I saw by the pond two days ago”, Susan whispered, put the brush down and walked over to the side of the chair, kneeling down a bit and supporting her arms on the armrests of Elizabeth’s chair so she could talk more easily to the seated young woman.

“Spit it out, then. I fear whatever you have to tell me you will tell me with or without my consent”, came Elizabeth’s defeated sigh and she leant back against the chair, waiting to hear what Susan had to say.

She ought to have reprimanded Susan yet again for assuming such familiarity between them, but
given she was more curious than she was willing to let on or would not befit her station, she did not
tell the girl off.

“I saw the Colonel, swimming in the pond. Au naturel, as the French say.” She laughed lowly and
eagerly expected Elizabeth’s answer with mischievously sparkling eyes.

“Don’t you want to know?”

“Know what?”

“What I’ve seen of course, Miss.” Her mouth answered before her brain could even think about this
indecent offer properly.

“Go on, then.”

“He’s very tall, looks even taller like that, standing in the pond with the figure of a roman god like
the statues in the Greek Folly, with exquisite calves and muscular, he is so muscular! Everything
about him is shapely in the extreme, from his arms to his rear, and his chest is covered in hair the
same colour as the curls on his head, very manly, I tell you.”

The image was too surreal to produce for Elizabeth’s mind.

“You don’t want to ask the most important question?”

Rising an eyebrow slowly in order to regain at least some of her dignity, Elizabeth retorted “and
which, pray, would that be?” “About his- his thing, of course.”

As she spoke these words, Susan leant closer to Elizabeth and reduced her voice to a whisper.
Her blush intensified.

“I fear you will tell me regardless if I wish to hear about it or not.”

“It is most pleasant to behold, as stone-carved as the rest of his body and most impressive, awe- and
fear-inspiring at the same time and of such dimensions as-“

“Enough!”

Elizabeth yelped too quickly, too loudly.

“What were you doing there anyway? I was under the impression Admiral Graves would pay you to
wait on me, not to take leisurely country walks?”

“I wasn’t following him, Miss. It just happened that my William and I- we went somewhere else after
I spotted the Colonel.”

So that was the reason.

“You are aware that my aunt would see you thrown out in disgrace, were she to find out?”

Susan bit her lips and inspected the patterned carpet. Did she really think she were to go to her aunt
and tell her?

“Make sure she does not find out and remain careful.”

Visibly relieved, Susan’s tense body loosened at the realisation her lack of morals would not prove
her undoing.

“Thank you, Miss Gwillim.”

“No need, I assure you. There is one thing however you could help me with. I need a pair of faithful
eyes and ears around the house. I need to know when my aunt will be busy, so I can arrange to meet
the Colonel. As you know she is terribly against us.”

Susan’s face lit up like a pagan funeral pyre.

“’Course, Miss! And if there’s things you want to know some time…”

Her voice trailed off and she winked yet again before she rose to her feet and returned to the task she
had abandoned.

Suddenly a servant again, she continued mechanically, as if their conversation never had happened:
“Do you wish to wear a high roll today or do you prefer something else, Miss Gwillim?”

For the rest of the day, she was somewhat distracted by the information she had been entrusted by
Susan and that left her with a pool of indescribable excitement in her stomach, burning and prickling,
comfortably uncomfortable.

So that was the reason he had looked somewhat tired the day before yesterday and why his hair had
been wet that morning. He must have washed, for he didn’t smell of the pond, which especially in
summer reeked terribly of fish.

It was part of a true marriage, wasn’t it? She’d read about it in books, heard people talk- would she
want to-?

The thought of John as Susan, who doubtlessly knew comparison, had described and even praised
him would not leave her mind. She was curious, very much so and somehow, these feelings stirred
within her at the mere thought of him, coming out of the water like a god from an ancient tale or a
Celtic warrior king with his hair blazing in the sun vexed her mind and caused her to be unable to
concentrate.

They were married, and she was certain she would never marry another if she could not have John,
so why not take the risk coming with it?

Not all women always fell pregnant, this much she knew. Besides, they were wed now and wasn’t
this an integral part of marriage? And even if she were to get pregnant, much as she would hate to be
the centre of a scandal, could such a change of her condition not be used as leverage to force her aunt
to consent to a marriage, to spare not only her niece, but herself and her husband, too, the shame of a
babe born to an unmarried mother, would not a child born out of wedlock illustrate to everyone else
how thoroughly Aunt Margaret had failed in raising her niece? That was not a pleasant thought at all,
to be shunned by friends for whom she would not be adequate company any longer, but- well, what-

She couldn’t ask anyone, there was no one she could talk to in these matters confidentially.

On a second thought, Elizabeth considered speaking to Doctor Enfield, but although he was a loyal
soul who certainly did not wish her ill, she could not tell if he would, informed of such interests,
report if not to her aunt whom he never took quite seriously she found, to her uncle.

In addition to this, although technically a question a man versed in matters anatomical and biological
ought to be able to answer, he was a man.
Was such a question not better posed to a fellow woman?

A re-reading of certain critical scenes in *Fanny Hill* had not helped her much either and if anything, made her even more insecure and nervous.

Shutting the book, she called: “Susan?”

They have been away all day on a social outing, everyone, he included. At his return in the early evening, he would have hoped to find a letter waiting for him as the mail coach certainly must have passed them at this day and time, but there is nothing for him there, only a letter from Miss Burges to Elizabeth and some letters from friends addressed to the Graves’.

Momentarily, he sweeps the frustration off his mind and instead, focusses on much more pleasant things; he is wed now, wed to his Eliza, even if to anyone who is not them, it might sound like a silly little game children play.

It isn’t of course, to him it is as good and valid as if they had joined their hands in church, but they must mind the world around them.

He is not to ask her hand in marriage, which they have cleverly circumvented, and until the Admiral can be persuaded to talk with his wife and advise her to allow her ward to marry, they must pretend to obedience and submission to the rules issued by the Graves’.

It is somewhat frustrating, really, but he takes joy from the fact that they don’t know what he knows, that Eliza has pressed the daisy-ring in the back of a book to preserve it and showers him with adoration when they are not looking.

In order to speed the process up, he has taken to work against his natural dislike of company and idle pretence, and even remains with the family when they have visitors or when they are visiting; earlier in the day, Elizabeth, his godfather and the Old Bat had been invited to take tea with a family from Honiton, who had, doubtlessly out of courtesy, also extended an invitation to him.

Margaret had of course assumed (as he would doubtlessly have done only weeks or months ago) he would remain home (Elizabeth was of course to accompany them, especially given her reasoning she would otherwise be alone in the house with him), but he had surprised her by joining them.

“Why, I thought it rude to dismiss an invitation”, he had chirped in such a pleasant tone Eliza’s elbow had found its way between his ribs (she even had to lift it somewhat to strike him adequately) in order to communicate to him to be somewhat less friendly in order to avoid suspicion as to his sudden change of personality, which doubtlessly would raise the Graves’ eyebrows and make them question his motifs as to what could have brought this sudden pleasantry on.

Their hosts had, probably having been told many a story about him, at first left him be and settled him, to his and Elizabeth’s great enjoyment, opposite her, and begun to talk to the Old Bat and the Admiral, before enquiring after his love, who had smiled serenely and told them about some pretty watercolours she had made and how she thought their plans of a trip to Bath was formidable, especially in such fair weather, when the coast would be at its most becoming.

She bestrode the stage of society like a seasoned actress and played the part of the careless little
heiress perfectly when in truth, she was a woman with a strong mind and equally strong convictions secretly wed to one of the most unsavoury characters by popular opinion in the British Army.

After a while of listening only, they were surprised he had, even before they could get to the part where they would ask him one or two shallow questions to uphold the pretence he was part of the gathering or pity because he was not (the line between those states was always thin and hard to spot), enquired after the three children at play in the garden under the supervision of a nurse, little sprites between the ages four and seven, and the couple (one considerably younger woman and her considerably older husband) had looked as if he were Beelzebub, asking for permission to take them to hell with him to roast and devour.

He had made merry for a while longer, asked questions, how the estates in Lincolnshire were doing, if the mother-in-law’s ague, which she had caught during an extended stay in India with her husband two decades ago and now kept returning was better after a sudden bout not long ago and how their nephew, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, was faring.

Slowly, they had eased into his questions which had even to himself sounded like something of an interrogation, and reciprocated his behaviour.

In the end, it must have been quite effective and they had eventually found him agreeable enough, it seemed, for the husband had shaken hands with him very friendly and invited them all, his person included, back.

His cunning wife has relayed all this information to him and if he has learned one thing in America, then it was of the importance possessing critical information on others.

Intelligence is vital in war, not necessarily during battle when each man fights for himself as much as for his country, but in preparation of it and afterwards, he sees that now.

Spies are still despicable to him, lesser in their state of being, but this isn’t spying, it is commonly known information he could have gathered himself had he taken an interest in his surroundings and the acquaintances of the Graves-family earlier and beyond all questioning, his goal is the noblest of all: Eliza.

With fondness he recalls sitting there, watching Eliza smile and wink at him when nobody was looking and watching her watch the children at play in the garden.

At one point when the Admiral and the gentleman of the house had been engrossed in a discussion of tedious affairs pertaining the management of a country estate to which Margaret Graves frequently added her own uncalled for commentary, Elizabeth had asked the lady to show her the garden where the children were still at play.

He had watched her walking, when, the two women had not yet gotten far beyond the rectangular green the children played on, the eldest one and the only girl had somewhat overestimated her next younger sibling’s capability to catch a fairly high ball, which had flown right over his head, just out of his reach and upon touching the ground again, rolled onto the terrace adjoining the drawing room.

“Leave it to me”, he had smiled, somewhat amusedly noting the nurse running with one hand holding her mob cap in place to retrieve the ball before it could roll any further away and lazily taken it up, walking past the somewhat irritated woman and had, carefully, tossed the ball to the little boy closest to him and encouraged him to toss it back; after a few seconds of initial uncertainty, the children had made him part of their game and the nurse, mother, and Elizabeth had joined them as onlookers to their sport and cheered the children’s party, who had silently come to a new understanding of their game and formed some sort of battle formation around him designed to throw
the ball from one to the other without letting him catch it.

He could have done so easily, but watching their little faces light up when he seemingly was just a second too late reaching for the round object, he thought it cruel to deprive them of this amusement; they would have to learn hardship early enough, the two boys like him on the battlefield one day perhaps and the little girl, like her mother who seemed to exceed Elizabeth in age by no more than five years, auctioned off to the highest bidding gentleman, even if he was, like their host, around the age of the Old Bat.

On a mere whim, he had broken their rules and, his eyes finding Elizabeth, thrown the ball to her, who, though unsuspecting, had caught it reflexively and somewhat woodenly handed it to one of the boys who came running to her, begging her to give the precious object of his desire to him.

Perhaps she had been simply surprised or was unaccustomed to such games; she had had no brothers or sisters and playfellows her age (and station) had been scarce, maybe she simply did not know these games, which was a little sad, for he remembered enjoying similar pursuits (though a little rougher and of a nature one would not permit to a young girl in wildness) as a child a lot.

As good luck would have it, the little girl, feeling outnumbered, had tugged at her skirts and asked her to play with them, taking the ball away from her little brother and handing it back to Elizabeth.

The mother and nurse had dissuaded her from doing so, fearing for her dress and what the people would say if it were to became known they had their guests minding their children, but she had dismissed their protests with a wave of a hand and elected to join them as long as the game would not become too rough.

She was visibly unused to it, after a few rounds however, her waxen features and visible concentration had molten somewhat more and she was visibly more at ease, laughing as she threw the ball in such a manner it passed too low for him to catch it with ease and low enough for the little girl to catch it.

“Yes, Miss Gwillim!” the little one had exclaimed triumphantly and passed the ball on to her brother who in turn had taunted “you can’t win, John, we’re three and we have Miss Gwillim!”

He would never want to win against Miss Gwillim anyway, but this he had not relayed to the children and, after continuing in their game for a while longer (and knowing everyone was watching them) he had bid the children to play on on their own, for he was exhausted now and so was Miss Gwillim and if something were to happen to her, the Admiral would be very angry with him and make him walk the plank, and he didn’t want to be devoured by a sea monster with twelve tentacles and as tall as the tower of Exeter Cathedral just yet.

Very appropriately, he had offered her his arm and walked her back inside. They’d stared at them, of course, but not for walking together, more for the little spectacle they had offered.

Elizabeth had only smiled and said she would not have wanted to displease the children before returning to converse with her aunt, uncle and their hosts.

The image of her smiling, for a moment so free and without a care in the world and returning an embrace given to her by little Georgianna, floated before his mind’s eye.
“What are you thinking about, John?”

“You, of course.” Elizabeth could not suppress a snort.

“Why do you think about me when I am here?”

“This afternoon”, he expanded, “I thought it was quite nice.”

“I think so, too.”

In the evening, Aunt Margaret had declared herself unfit to dine and retreated to bed saying the day, the rakish little boys screeching and the incessant prattle of their hosts had made her ill, for her constitution was generally delicate and such brawling noisiness had only aggravated her proneness to violent headaches, by which she found herself plagued.

Uncle Samuel had with concern called for Doctor Enfield, who had reassured him Aunt Margaret was in no danger and would be well again soon. Before he had left, he had (out of Uncle Samuel’s earshot) half-audibly whispered “the usual” in her direction and raised an eyebrow, meaning her aunt was quite fine and not to be worried about- it had probably vexed her more that her new dress had not been adequately marvelled at on their outing and that she had not been the centre of attention when she had complained about the price of food and the cook’s supposed inability to prepare it to her taste, which had prompted her apparent headaches.

Uncle Samuel had taken to bed soon after, too; he was not the youngest anymore. She and John had “gone to bed”, too and, feeling relatively safe for most of the servants had been dismissed for the night, met in the library.

With the door closed and the keyhole covered at John’s insistence, they could not be observed from the outside and speaking in a low voice prevented a spy to understand too much.

Technically, she had broken her own rules, but such rare moments had to be made use of and, well, perhaps- she gazed to the settee her uncle had ordered to be brought into the room a week before John had moved in in preparation for his coming, for he, concerned for his godson who had been reported to be barely able to walk or breathe with ease, had thought it might be beneficial for him to be given a place to rest in a room he knew John had loved and spent much time in from childhood on.

It certainly would accommodate two.

“Not judging you, Miss”, Susan had said a while earlier when she had called for her to help her re-arrange her hair after dinner, “but you know I know nothing if Mrs Graves gets wind of this.”

Susan had not required to be asked much and had freely imparted her wisdom on her. Apparently, the want to have her hair re-arranged somewhat in the evening and watching her apply some perfume had given her intentions away.

“On my head be it”, she had answered the servant girl in her usual self-assured tone even if she hadn’t felt like it.

She wanted to be with John and she loved him more than she could say and, well, she could not deny her own curiosity.

Susan had been able to enlighten her a little more, though still had remained cryptic and very sketch-like in her effectuations, which had not helped much. Apparently the deed became, like dancing, drawing or any other sport, more enjoyable with practice and time and was not always satisfactory at
the first try.

Not all first riding lessons were crowned with success, some fell off at their first attempt or were sore after their first long ride and could feel the muscles in their legs ache. When she had asked Susan whether this was a good analogy in order to understand the matter better, the latter had nodded, said “more perfect than you realise in its effects and the exercise” and laughed a little before wishing her luck and told her she needn’t be nervous, the Colonel sure would know what to do and vowed not to speak of their conversation to anyone, living or dead.

With John at last seated on the settee and her beside him, her head leant against his shoulder as he read aloud to her from some book she would later not remember, she, certain he must hear her heart beat, seized the opportunity.

There is no greater bliss than having his darling near. Her curls let down for the night, yet still very cleverly arranged, frame her face most advantageously and her cream-coloured dress with a delightful flower pattern on it suits her perfectly. She looks like the personification of spring, a woman more beautiful than any other he has ever seen, her rosy cheek resting on his shoulder.

Wanting to fetch another book, he intends to rise, his love however shifts her position so that she lies across him, effectively immobilising him.

Eliza gives him a quick smile before ten darling little fingers tug at his necktie and undo it with speed and skill.

Her body pressed firmly against his, she seeks for even more of his attention as she draws him into a long and very demanding kiss, forcing him to look up from her hands at his neck and, a little clumsily perhaps, places his hand at her hip.

“Elizabeth-“, he exhales, realising what she is insinuating, and summons his mental powers in one place, focussed on the goal of not allowing his body to respond to the present situation.

Thinking of either one of Margaret’s endless dinner-table tirades about how in this present day one can’t even find a reliable scullery maid in the length and breadth of the country or of the little major’s face, this wretched wight who could have extinguished him but (now, luckily) he did not.

With steely resolve, he withdraws his hand.

“What is the matter with you?”, his darling, the sudden seductress, asks, cocking her head charmingly to the side and eyeing him with curious orbs of hazel.

She is playing a coquettish game, that much he can tell, but the goal of her design is unclear to him and, being a gentleman, he could never agree to- would he not? His mental resolve is fleeting. His dear is so prettily draped across him, pressed snugly against him like a content cat and lavishes him with kisses and little, most vexatious caresses.

If this is her wish, why deny her? Does he not want it also, has he not dreamt of how sweet a union of two minds and bodies made to worship and be worshipped by one another would be?

No, he must remain steadfast.
Were ever word of this to reach the Old Bat, Margaret would summarily execute him and fury that she is, might actually this once succeed in overpowering him and select the most painful mode of death she can think of and knowing her black witch’s heart, her imagination is very likely just as colourful if not more so as that of Vlad III of Walachia, called Țepeș, the Impaler.

And, much worse, only God knows what she would do to Elizabeth.

It cannot be.

His mind is willing to commit to this order, but his flesh is weak, or in this context, ironically strengthened and in anticipation of what might still come, what will not come.

She will be the death of him, Eliza is bound to render him insane, insane with love from which he must perish in some foolhardy design to prove his love to her, fighting a dragon (he has yet to meet her Welsh aunts, he comes to realise but gains from some reassurance from the thought that he has dealt with her English aunt so far and none can, to his mind, be worse than Margaret Graves) or an entire army, or simply in her arms- no, no, no.

It is decided, they must not. With one quick, well-timed grip, he takes her hands in one of his much larger ones and removes them to her sides.

“Elizabeth, do you know what you’re-“

“I do. And I did not think it was customary for husbands to- to not want to-“

Now he must answer her, and he shall do it truthfully. With his eyes downcast and his face somewhat lowered so as to hide the slight girlish blush on his cheeks he has always hated but comes natural to a person of his particularly fair complexion, he slowly starts to speak:

“You don’t know-“

“I know the consequences full well”, she cuts him off, her voice a perfect imitation of her aunt’s when the latter is at her most self-assured, “but, as you said, we are wed.”

“Not in front of the law, alas. Not yet. Otherwise…”

He allows his voice to trail off as he places a kiss on her temple and then proceeds to create a trail of kisses down to the nape of her neck- only very light ones, for in this place, the skin is tender and bruises easily.

She leans into his gentle kisses and hums in agreement. To his relief, she has understood, without him having to voice his desire for her, the completion of their union of flesh and mind, which he still thinks is a rather rude thing to do and that such words are not meant for the ears of a lady.

“We’re alone, you know.”

“It is not that.”

“What is it then? Do not tell me you wouldn’t like to- or that you have grown to care about-“

“I do care. I care about you, very much. No one else matters to me, which is why I must refuse.”

“Do you mean-“

“I mean that if we want to be wed in the eyes of God and Men, we cannot do this. It is customary for the bride to- to be untouched, and if your aunt were to find out-“
Elizabeth snorted.

“Are you telling me you are afraid of my aunt?”

She could barely believe she had to ask him that, a man of muscular build and easily over six foot in height.

“We cannot, Elizabeth. You- are a lady.”

His face was almost child-like in its expression of inconceivability.

“Does impropriety concern you? I love you and I want to know- I am not afraid of anything.”

“So I see”, he commented, not without a note of admiration in his voice at her words.

How can there be so much stubborn resolve in such a little person? When God chose to make Eliza Gwillim, he must have thought that within her lifetime, men would allow women to join them on the battlefield, for it is clear he has destined her to be a soldier, brave and unafraid.

Not half the men he has commanded and even fewer officers he has known are only half as brave she is.

“I- I have been thinking about it for a while”, she confesses in a whisper as if there was somebody near who could overhear them even if there is not, her cheeks gaining colour with every word, “I love you and, well, since we are married before each other’s eyes-“

“You wish to know of such things as-“ his blush is intensifying, he can tell. By now, his face must have taken the colour of his hair.

“Hm-hm.”

“And you will. I promise.”

“How can you promise me if you don’t know if we will ever be properly wed?”

“I am sure we will be.”

John’s eyes were at their most honest, imploring her to believe him.

“Have I not done well today?”
“You have been a perfect gentleman.”

“You know, the Admiral, he also forbade me to even think about-“

“Uncle Samuel really-?”

“Yes”, he answered quickly, blushing.

“A while ago when he was still willing to petition to your aunt on our behalf. He said you were ‘adventurous’, which I can only agree upon.”

She bestowed him with a lopsided smile, lifted herself off him and sat back against the cushions.

“You see”, he started after a long while of staring quietly at the fire, each of them lost in their own thoughts, “we shall do this properly. I do not wish to force you to do anything-“ his frown, his upper lip twitching like a growling dog’s for a second made it clear to her how serious he was about this, “and you need not think you have to do anything because it- because you think this is what married people do, or have to do.”

“I am well aware unmarried people can engage in the same sport and you didn’t force me”, she riposted, perhaps a little drily.

“And I love you.”

“That is not the point”, John said, his eyes locking with hers, “we have time. I have sworn to devote my life to none but you. I shall be yours for all eternity; there is no need to rush, to do anything within the moment.”

“But what if you- if you have to leave soon, with the army again, go somewhere to the other end of the world and don’t come back?”

At hearing her fearful question, he gave a joyless laugh, which confused her until he clarified “it doesn’t look like it, rest assured. It seems I must remain here for another while. My letters were not answered.”

Silence hangs between them as they continue to stare into the flames of the dying fire until all of a sudden, Elizabeth asked “what are we going to do with eternity?”

“I don’t know. What would you like to do with it?”

“Be with you”, she answers.

“Yes, but what shall we do?”, he replies, partly because he himself does not know what to do with their future yet.

“A house. We will need a house to live in.”

“What kind of house? A medieval castle inhabited by the ghosts of its misfortunate former owners? A shack somewhere on the Yorkshire moors?”
“I think a house like this will do perfectly well.”

She makes a gesture with her hand to the room around them.

“How many rooms?”


“And I thought you were the expert in such matters, raised by the infamous Margaret Graves, Devon’s leading lady.”

At the mention of her aunt, she rolls her eyes skywards and grins mischievously before answering him.

“Let us count then: we need a study, a kitchen- do servants’ quarters count, at least two rooms for guests to stay in case Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel come to visit and have had a disagreement again, a drawing room and a drawing room for actual drawing, a library, a bedroom-“

At this, she blinks, remembering where their conversation had gone before. Sensing her uneasiness, he replies “Exactly. Much more comfortable than a settee in Admiral Graves’ library, don’t you think?” and kisses her, ensuring she knows he is not opposed to sharing her bed when the time is ripe.

They will certainly be very happy together and she can have five drawing rooms for drawing if she fancies them.

“I think we will need a nursery too, then”, she continues a little insecurely, visibly not sure how he is going to react.

“Indeed, a good thought. How many?”

“How many what?”; she asked quite dumbly and scolded herself for her slowness of thought when John clarified what should have already been clear “children, of course.”

“One? Two? Three? How many would you like?”

“However many we are going to have is fine with me. Just not- it would be nice if it were at least two.”

This sounded oddly specific in Elizabeth’s ears, wherefore she asked “why at least two? Do you want both, a daughter and a son or-“

“So they’re not alone and always have someone to play”, he answered simply and in an uncharacteristically sentimental tone that did not quite fit his curious voice, which always had a somewhat cutting edge to it and never sounded quite serious if one did not know him well.

“I was quite sad when Percy died. Our house seemed so empty and I was alone.”

John stared past her into the fire, the memories she could not see etched into his features, the small creases around his eyes and the bitter downturn of his mouth.
“I was an only child, and I was quite happy”, she tried to console him.

“Don’t you have a sister, too, and do you not miss her sometimes?”

Mary Anne, she had told him about Mary Anne, she realised, the night they had “married”.

“Would you not have liked her with you for longer than a few visits each year?”

“Yes. But- that’s not really like having siblings, is it? We chose to be sisters. You don’t always like them, Mary Anne told me.”

“Perhaps not. But while you don’t always like them, you always love them.”

It was evident these words were hard for him to speak, the memory of his little brother seemed to weigh heavily on his soul at times still.

He wiped the wistfulness off his face with a few blinks of his eyes and looked at her again, this time with a quite cheery expression on his face.

“And would it not be nice to have two pretty little girls just like their mamma and a boy or two just like-”

“No, certainly not”, Elizabeth exclaimed, “a child only half as willful as you apparently have been, judging from your tales-“

She laughs and he tries to remember what he has told her about his childhood the other day. The thing about the wig and the rebellion of 1768 spring to mind.

“You were a rebel before you became a soldier”, she is helpful to point out, “a fiery-haired arsonist and insurrectionist must be the dread of every family.”

“Two of my sort and your aunt will never come to visit again.”

At least to him, this sounds like a favourable state of living. “Two of your sort and there is no house to visit left standing anymore, I fear.”

They laugh quietly together and he grants her this slight; she is right, he has rebelled, but is it not the right of a man to stand up for himself when wronged?

There is a difference of course between what he has done and the rebels in America, who lived under a just system of law and order and chose anarchy instead while in the case of 1768, Dr Foster had not cared for his students and someone had to stand up for themselves.

The headmaster had been a terrible tyrant who had not recognised the rights of his students, who had then in turn committed to the glorious work of leaving the school for the night and drinking their fill in a local tavern when they had had enough for good. Although the sixth formers had had the greatest part in it all, some boys from the fifth form, he at the very helm, had joined them as well. They must have made the landlord very happy that night, and the very obliging daughter of the house, a few years his senior had told him she liked gingers and-
Well, the birching they’d received had been worth the night they had bought with it and Foster had resigned in the end, but he hadn’t benefitted from that because he had gone to Oxford.

They continued to make up a future, to build a life, something that was not so very different from playing with her dolls when she had been little.

When John mentioned children, she did not once think of her mother or was afraid at the mere thought of delivery, they were immersed in a game of play-pretend where they were the masters, where the universe was at the mercy of their fingertips and where the most wondrous things could happen.

They would grow very old together, ninety and a hundred respectively at least, travel to Italy for an extended trip to make pencil studies of the countryside there and live in their house with their children, a cat and two dogs.

It was not serious, which was the point of it, they continued to make little jests and jokes and coloured in the life they were going to have with the colours of their minds, like a sketch filled in with watercolours.

-Which sparked the question, what would they have of these delights they envisioned to share? And, more importantly, when?

Chapter End Notes

Louis XV of France was well-known for his many mistresses, the most famous of them probably being Jeanne-Antoinette “Reinette” Poisson, dame Le Normant d’Étiolles, marquise de Pompadour, duchesse de Menars, more famously known as Madame de Pompadour.

The drawing room and the drawing room: knowing some of my readers are German, I included this play on words. Watch originally anglophone period dramas dubbed in German and you will be amazed at how many call the drawing room "Zeichenzimmer" (literally room to draw in) instead of anything like "Salon" or the modern "Wohnzimmer", which would at least denote the right purpose the room is used for. I don't know who translates these, but it's apparently only one person who is unfamiliar with drawing rooms.

The Eton rebellion of 1768: A student rebellion in which boys of the sixth form rebelled against the staff and rather unpopular headmaster Dr Foster. The boys had taken issue, as I understand it, with the decision to strip them of the disciplinary authority they were allowed to exercise over younger students who left the school grounds without permission.

So obviously a protest was in order which led its participants to a local tavern where the sixth form, joined by boys from the fifth and fourth form, spent the night out drinking before returning to the school in the morning and were subsequently punished.
In how far Simcoe was involved is lost to history, there are however documents pointing to an active involvement and to him not having been there at the time. For the sake of this story, he has been an active participant.

Simcoe's political opinions were far more complex than what we saw of his patriotism and strong belief in the British monarchy on "TURN" and revolved around the concept of "law, order, authority", which in his eyes, the American rebels who effectively had decided on anarchy as opposed to the good, lawful political system Britain provided failed to recognise.
A Quite Eventful Day

Chapter Summary

Samuel unmasks a sherry-thief, Aunt Margaret, Elizabeth and John get in an argument and Susan draws a very, very, wrong conclusion.

Chapter Notes

Hello there, I am back! Sorry for the long absence, here is a long chapter to compensate for it. To those of you who also write stories on this site and have updated in the last week and a half, I am sorry if I have not yet left a comment or only very recently- I was extremely busy and will do so post-haste. That means immediately. ;)

I've also heard rumours in the TURN-fandom that Samuel Roukin is aware there is Simcoe-related fanfiction. I'm not one to give great credence to rumours and hearsay, but in the very unlikely case you are reading this, thank you for your captivating interpretation of Simcoe; without you, we wouldn't be here today, creating and reviewing some awesome works of prose.

Now, without further ado, on to the story! Warning for today: excessive end notes

An hour after midnight, Elizabeth excuses herself from his side to go to bed. She has been in a state of oscillating between this world and the otherworld of dreams for a good while now; it is only prudent of her to gain some more serious rest than falling asleep sitting upright or curled up in order to fit her entire body onto the settee, her head resting on his thigh.

At first, when their conversation had slowed down a little and she had ceased responding to him, he had not yet said anything but simply stopped talking and substituted words for slowly, languidly stroking her back or hair; gentle, very light touches that would not wake her. For surely, if she fell asleep next to him, nay on top of him even, she doubtlessly must deem it agreeable to do so and making her happy is his priority and quite oddly gives him a lot of joy, too.

After more than an hour however, it was about time for his love to head to bed. He too was feeling tired, though not as tired as she visibly was, and would soon drift off into the land of dreams, hopefully a pleasant one.

Of late his nightmares have not plagued him as frequently anymore. It must be Eliza who repels them, the beacon of light guiding him through the most tempestuous of waters of his mind and smoothing them to gently rocking waves that cradle him to sleep.

Only three or four times in the past week has he had anything akin to the inexplicable fits he had been prone to so frequently only months ago; twice in his dreams, one time it was the recurring dream of the battle with Eliza in a white dress watching him being stabbed while distracted by her presence, the other time it was some vague, though very vivid, phantasy of drowning amidst waves
of water and smoke. On the same day, he’d bolted when one of the servants must have dropped a heavy tool or the like, causing a loud, shattering noise and two days ago, the faraway whinnying of some horses recalled to him the anguished creatures he had seen on battlefields in America, poor, injured things, some of them undoubtedly in very bad pain, their large, innocent eyes wide with fear. These images are wiped away not with ease, but more lightly than before; not forgotten, but made momentarily unimportant when they are eclipsed by much sweeter thoughts.


“Hm?”

She had made the most discontented little sound imaginable and looked up at him with her eyes speaking volumes of how he has displeased her by waking her from her sleep-

Eliza had looked up at him, squinted a little and had been about to make herself comfortable again and closed her eyes, but he had refused her.

“No, my love. You shall not fall asleep here. May I escort you to your room?”

“You mayn’t”, came her mumbled reply, her voice a little hoarse from sleep and positively malcontent with being woken up, “if we’d be seen… and I don’t think there are continentals hiding in the corridor to ambush me.”

She had seen reason of course, smiled at him as best as the state of half-sleep she was in allowed, smoothened the creases out of her dressing-gown, kissed him goodnight and went on her way.

Without her, the peace and serenity was gone from him, like the steadily waning warmth of a dying fire, the which he observed for a while longer, toying with the book he still held in his hands, thinking.

Lost in his thoughts and thoroughly unprepared for keeping watch, he did not remark upon the door opening at first and then turned his head sharply as his warriors’ senses returned to him.

“Admiral”, he greeted the figure in the doorway with great surprise, rising from his seat as manners dictated. The old man had already dressed for bed; the hem of his nightshirt just escaped his navy blue banyan where it ended. It was probably as close to wearing his uniform again on a daily basis as it came for him; on his head, his wig sat a little lopsided, as if it had been first removed and later put on again without care.

“John, still up at this hour?” At first, he wanted to retort to this question and clarify to his godfather that he was no more “Infant Graves” who could be sent to bed at will, but caught himself at the last moment, seeing the Admiral’s eyes flicker benevolently in the firelight.

Apparently he was jesting or had at least spoken in good humour.

“I shall not wish to disturb you”, he replied instead, gave the old man a stiff nod and headed for the door, but was instantly called back:

“Now, now, my boy. Now that you’re already here, why don’t you sit with me a while, keep me company? Margaret is troubled by headaches and I thought it best to give her the quiet and solitude she asked for.”

In all frankness, he did not like that prospect at all; he would have preferred to be left in solitude for the rest of the night, thinking of Eliza, of how he could build their future, make plans and overthrow
them as quickly as he had made them, however angering his godfather and straining his patience was not an option either, lest he would like to be evicted from Hembury Fort House and separated from Eliza. Besides, the old man was not all bad.

The Admiral, who had already seated himself in one of the two armchairs by the fireplace, made a motion to rise again, but, sensing what the older man intended to do, he motioned him to stay seated and walked over to a small table beside the door, where a carafe containing an amber-coloured liquid and two glasses resided.

He poured them each a glass of sherry, musing for a moment that this set of carafe and glasses had probably shaped his taste for this particular liquor when he had sometimes helped himself to a glass or two as a lad (only in such quantities as would not be noticed) before carefully balancing two now filled glasses across the room, where he was instructed to place them on a small, round table, a rickety thing, which the Admiral had rather unceremoniously cleared of a stack of books by putting them on the floor.

The older man waited for him to sit down and, when he was certain he was comfortable, lifted his glass in a toast.

“To your health, John.”

“And to yours, sir”, he returned the curtesy, musing why in the world a man close on seventy would wish a man less than half his age “good health”, has he not healed up well and is it not the Admiral who every now and then complains about the ailments of advanced age? The old man broke the solemnity of the moment by addressing him once more.

“Look at you. When you arrived here a few months ago, I was fearing you would not live through this, or would remain a cripple, you could barely walk, always kept to yourself, too- I wish you to know it makes me happy to see you so much improved, both in your appearance and state of mind.”

“However you say, sir.”

The Admiral makes a dismissive gesture with his glass-free hand.

“Leave that be, my boy. I think it is time you called me by the name my parents, Heaven rest them, gave me. You’re not my midshipman after all, you are a friend, as your father was to me.”

While still pondering what he has done (or not done) to Admiral Graves to merit the title “friend”, he cannot help but stumble over the mentioning of his father. He doesn’t like to think about the man who died twenty-three years ago and he does not like interpreting what his godfather might mean by his words- his brows furrow involuntarily and his lips tighten. -Has he now reached the right age or rank to be considered a spare for his father, a stand-in, an effigy? They, the Admiral, his mother and some other friends and distant relations, had no idea how he had felt when after his father’s death, they had suddenly begun to call him John when before he had gone by his middle name to avoid confusion. Nobody can ever take the place of his father, not even he himself. He doesn’t like the idea the Admiral may be trying to.

“You know, John, you could never hide your true feelings well. You couldn’t even lie convincingly when I asked you where my sherry had gone when you were a boy.”

Momentarily confused, he asks: “Why did you”- but is cut off by his godfather: “Now really, John? I might complain about my poor eyesight now, but some fifteen years ago, it was still quite sharp. And as to why I did not reprimand you? Youth must be allowed some foolishness, wouldn’t you agree?”
“I know not”, he replies in all honesty, “I have never thought about it, although-“ he pauses, partly for dramatic effect and partly to buy himself time to find the right words. “You do not seem to apply this principle when it comes to your niece.”

Doubtlessly, this is a bold and perhaps even rude thing to say, to a fellow officer and his godfather, but a part of him awaiting the retort with anticipation. The old man looks at him, warm brown eyes holding his gaze for a moment before he raises an eyebrow, saying “It is true then what they say about you, that you are an attack dog, is it? Though I think I can elude your bite, or, as you are bipedal, the flurry of your blade with ease by reminding you that the responsibility for the welfare of my niece lies with my wife.”

With an air of bellicosity he has so often observed in Elizabeth, his wife-in-secret, the old man seems to await his reply with eagerness. They’re fencing, one of them pursuing a defensive, the other an offensive tactic. While he would like to strike, and strike soon, the Admiral plays a game of time, feeling very comfortable defending himself, waiting for his opponent to bare his side to him or make a mistake.

“But surely as her husband, you exercise certain powers, or at least some influence over her?”

A perhaps somewhat dirty trick, to grab a man, an officer, by his manhood, but most effective. Can the Admiral deny his house and home, as all of Devon must certainly know, is governed by Margaret Graves? No, he cannot. He would not have thought the fight would be over so soon. There, the insult has smarted; the Admiral’s features darken, however lighten once more seconds later, like the sun temporarily obscured by a cloud on a windy day.

“John-“ suddenly, the old man sounds a lot less like an amiable gentleman-friend and more like the man who scolded him for refusing to eat his peas at dinner some two decades or more ago.

“You are your own worst enemy John, as you always have been. I did not even need to do or say anything, you defeated yourself in our little dance of wits rather splendidly. Your cause was lost from the very beginning for you practically declared yourself a folly Elizabeth indulges in a little too passionately and then went on to say a man must exercise power over his wife as he masters his hounds or horse, and some men certainly do, but neither I nor my wife hold with them. I would never encourage my wife to entrust Elizabeth’s hand in that of a man of such convictions.”

“I do not-“ he attempts to protest but a hand is held up to signal him to stop speaking.

“I know what you mean to say, and I know that you revere my niece. But still, you must admit defeat in this dispute.”

Begrudgingly, he nods, a stiff, mechanic little gesture.

“Stubborn in the extreme and reluctant to admit defeat as ever. When you were a boy and fighting with your brother, I was convinced you would have, had you fought about whether the earth was flat or round and had you taken the position of it being flat, defended your position relentlessly.”

In that, his godfather might be right; he is a warrior after all. Having to hear Percy’s name again leaves a dull throbbing pain within him, almost the same as when the Admiral mentioned his father.

What is this night to be, a torturous reminder of all he has lost, and in the case of Elizabeth, perhaps never to have?

Eyes of icy blue meet brown ones, much rounder in shape and very kind-looking.

“I apologise, John, I did not know it still-“
"It’s all right", he tries to cut the old man off with an evident lie, but his voice does not sound as intimidatingly as he would have expected or liked; his voice sounds flat, brittle, hurt.

"Evidently, it is not. After all these years?"

Another glance substitutes a verbal answer. He lowers his head.

"It was I who did it."

"Nonsense, you make it sound as if you pushed him in! He fell in and drowned. It was a tragic accident, you have nothing to blame yourself for."

"I should have paid better attention."

"You were a child of twelve and he two years your junior. No boy that age listens to any command without resisting first, especially not that of an older sibling, and here I speak from my own experience. Do you think I did what Thomas and Richard dictated me? I resisted their tyranny with all my might."

Evidently, the old man wishes to console him, but he cannot be consoled, never.

A wave crashes over his head, pulling him down to the indefinite depths in which Percy and his father dwell.

Suddenly, the room feels much too hot, too narrow despite its generous size and he must loosen his necktie (which he had bound provisionally again after Elizabeth had undone it earlier in the evening) to be able to breathe.

He had thought this was _over_ after what he’d done at the pond— with two heavy breaths which he hopes have gone unnoticed by his godfather, he steadies himself, even if the taste of his own blood and the fear of choking on it still lie heavy on his tongue. With passing bitterness he remarks upon the irony of how the memories of his several past tribulations seem to _bleed_ one into the other seamlessly.

Quivering slightly, he brings the glass to his lips in hopes the Admiral’s expensive sherry can wash the taste of Blandford away.

-Of course, the Admiral has noticed, for he leans forward, groaning a little from the aches age has given him, and puts his right hand upon his left at rest on his thigh. He feels somewhat like a little boy again, consoled perhaps for having lost a favourite marble or at the death of a beloved pet.

"I know how you feel, John. You might not believe me, but I can see it in your eyes. Which battle is it? Your very first, your last when you were wounded?" “Blandford presently, sir”, he answers quietly, fixating a spot in the air just above the Admiral’s shoulder.

"I told you to stop that. Have you heard of Cartagena?"

Of course he had. A terrible defeat at the hands of the Spanish in the Caribbean, many men dead either due to sickness or killed in battle.

"It is almost amusing, thinking of it now, that I served alongside the brother of the man you and I fought in America."

"I don’t quite understand-" he quickly swallows the “sir” at the end of the sentence and looks at the older man, relieved he does not need to talk about what perturbs him, but is instead invited to let his
mind follow another man’s tale.

“Lawrence Washington, the great general’s—” he makes a face when he mentions Washington, the Washington he has faced in battle, “older brother, served as captain in Gooch’s Regiment. It was a time when those born of British descent on the American continent still fought alongside us, not against us."

What irony indeed.

“Did you know him?”

If he is truthful to himself, he is a little curious to know more about the man he has fought against, whose soldiers he has killed, who the people were that had shaped this arrogant colonist.

“No. I served under my uncle, then Captain Thomas Graves, later admiral, on board the Norfolk, he was with Admiral Vernon on the Princess Caroline. I believe he even named his estate after Vernon-to think his younger brother, the insurrectionist-in-chief, holds his court in a house named after a British admiral—”

His godfather chuckles a little, but mirthlessly, for they both know they have lost the war.

“If you want some more irony to add to this bitter travesty, I take it the older Washington died the year you were born”, the Admiral continues, “if that doesn’t mean something.”

He pats his shoulder, attempting to make him smile, or in fact elicit any emotion from him other than pensive passiveness.

As the older man, a seasoned commander and strategist, appears to realise his words do not help, he changes his approach.

“I still think of Cartagena sometimes”, the Admiral says, his voice soft, vulnerable even, “it was the first time I saw action of such a scale. It was terrible.”

There is no need to describe his experiences more elaborately, he can rest assured his younger counterpart understands.

“I wept”, he declares without any shame in his voice, “and I was ashamed of it. Then I saw my uncle weep, too, at the loss of so many lives, and I was no longer ashamed. Ten thousand men dead.”

The old man shakes his head, causing his wig to sit even more lopsidedly on his head than it had before. He doesn’t mind, nor does it detract from the Admiral’s tale by making him look somewhat ridiculous, no; on the contrary, it adds to the air of a battle-hardened, and perhaps also –weary warrior of old.

“You see? You are not alone. We men who serve our country make sacrifices so others don’t have to. Bear it as a badge of honour, a sign of the distinction with which you served.”

“Distinction?” he blurts out, interrupting his godfather.

“Yes, my boy, distinction. I have heard the tales they tell about you over yonder, I was there, too for a while, you know.”

“You are the first to call it that, sir. I fear you mock me.”

The Admiral had before told him he was able to detect his every mood from his face regardless
whether he tries to hide his true feelings or not, but this time, he does not even make an effort to disguise his anger. He does not like being mocked, especially not by an elderly admiral who had been pressed to resign his post as commander of the North American Station for inefficiency and never held any command ever since.

“Mock you? Think on it. Who am I to mock you? Have I not felt the contempt of my brother officers myself, do I not know the smart of rejection by those who served alongside me? I have no design to mock you, nor am I in the place to do so. Of what I heard you did in America, and I cannot claim to know all, especially not after my departure in ’76, but I trust that what you did you did with your service to King and Country in mind.”

“I did. Mostly.”

“Mostly?” Samuel Graves echoes, “what do you mean by it?”

“I was in a feud with a fellow officer”, he replies simply, not willing to relay the complete saga of his stand against Hewlett to his godfather.

“Pshaw. Things like this happen, at war and in times of peace.”

-Yes, but probably those involved in it do not usually stage the abduction and death of the man they hate to win the other man’s sweetheart. This particular piece of information he won’t relay to his godfather. He doesn’t need to know about Anna, it suffices that Elizabeth knows some aspects of the story. Perhaps his godfather would hate him if he knew, so he remains silent.

“If ever you would like to talk about America, you have my ear. It would be for the benefit of you-and Elizabeth.”

He still is a clever strategist, he has to give the old man that. As Elizabeth’s name falls, he is suddenly more alert than ever.

“I did not have anybody after Cartagena whom I felt I could talk to. Later I had Elizabeth, my first wife, and then Margaret, who even kept me company in America for a while. Patrolling the coast is not the same as engaging directly in action and does certainly not involve that much bloodshed; yet it certainly was comforting to know I was not alone.”

“Elizabeth knows, too”, he answers, “she asked me similar things a while ago.” Samuel Graves empties his glass.

“She does love you, doesn’t she? ‘Warts and all’?”

At the last part of his question, he raises his right eyebrow in an almost comical fashion.

“She knows of my shortcomings and does not pay them any mind, if that is what you mean.”

“So you agree you are ill-suited as a husband for her?”

His face and his voice harden again.

“Agree with whom?”

“My wife, of course.”

“We love each other.”

“So I saw”, the Admiral answers him, “and you looked quite indecent as I found you right here, in
this room, up against the wall like a Portsmouth harlot and a drunken sailor. I trust you upheld your promise?"

“You need not fear for your niece”, he tries to persuade him, a little indignant at the thought his godfather still vaguely supposes he might seduce Elizabeth.

“But I do. And so does my wife. It is hard to see a young person grow up so quickly.”

His eyes reveal he speaks from experience.

“You both were the same age when I came to care for you; both seven at the time. More for Elizabeth, as she lived within my home, her home now, too, but I have come to think of it as a sign. Perhaps it is destiny that I was to marry her aunt and to have a share in both your lives. And one day, I hope, when I have found sufficient assurance you will not repeat such deplorable behaviour as you displayed toward my nephew, I should be glad to see the two of you wed.”

A small tear trickles down his round cheek, following the lines of his wrinkles.

Actually, he feels somewhat moved by his godfather’s words.

“I have gotten a little sentimental with age, forgive me”, the latter smiles at him, wiping the errant tear away with the back of his hand. “But think about it, not with the heart, but the brain also: you love each other, which is a good starting-point, and you will have her money. Elizabeth is very rich in her own right, endowed with the fortunes of two families which over the years have accumulated in her bank account. If you manage it wisely, the two of you will never be hungry and live well. You could use some of her fortune to invest in whatever it is you plan to do with your life, now that you are better, lay the foundations for your future. It will be a good match, the military name of Simcoe coupled with the Gwillim-money. Besides, I had hoped my niece would select a husband I would have some influence over”, he slights him with a dry comment, though in jest, referring to an earlier point in their conversation.

“You certainly have, sir”, he answers almost meekly, mindful to admit defeat if only to add to the impression the Admiral wants to see of him in order to aid his speedy promotion to official suitor along a little.

“It is getting late.”

The Admiral bids him goodnight, electing to try and sleep once more next to his sickly wife, who hopefully is now far enough gone into the land of dreams to not notice him coming back to bed.

“And, John? Do tell my niece the next time you see her to sneak a little more carefully around the house at night, she made some dreadful noise in the upstairs corridor. One would almost have woken up”, he says on his way out, leaving him alone in front of the dying fire.

“Good mornin’ Miss G., how was your night?”, Susan chirped, her energetic excitement barely concealed. Such rudeness in the early morning- dealing with the giddy creature would cost her her last reserves of composedness, Elizabeth mused, half-awake, blinking into the bright morning light.

Susan fetched a little tray she had set down provisionally on the dresser to have her hands free for
drawing the curtains apart and opening the windows and now returned with it, a most peculiar swing in her skirts and a much too wide smile on her face.

Putting it on the nightstand with a carelessness that made the cup shake and Elizabeth fear the maid would spill it or break the fine china, Susan pulled a chair close by reaching back with one of her feet and nonchalantly dragging it across the floor with her foot. When she deemed it in the right position a few inches from the bed and facing Elizabeth, she let herself fall onto it without grace or ceremony and exhaled audibly.

“That feels good, sitting. Now tell me, did you sleep well? How was it?”

Not quite awake yet, Elizabeth tried to discern what could be the meaning of Susan’s words, but then she remembered, prompting colour to rise in her morning-pale face.

“We didn’t.”

If only to do anything to bridge the awkward silence, she took up the cup of hot chocolate and took a careful sip, for it had not cooled sufficiently yet.

“What?”, Susan asked much too loudly for the ears of someone less than ten minutes awake with a voice that sounded as if John had done her personally wrong.

“The Colonel thinks we ought to embark on a proper courtship once my aunt can be persuaded… He wants to marry me first as he thinks everything else would be improper.”

Susan made a little derogatorily-sounding noise as if she disagreed with him.

“Tell me when’s love improper? If God didn’t want men and women to love each other, he hadn’t made them this way. It’s people who come up with rules and such. Certainly, the matter’s different when you get pregnant by’t, but that’s something you can take measures against. They sell things in London, they say-”

“Susan, this is quite enough. The Colonel refused, and I don’t know what to think about it.”

Even though she was most reluctant to talk about such delicate matters as what she had intended to do with John, Susan seemed to be the only person who was not minding any propriety when it came to the act of sharing one’s bed with a man and talked about it freely without inhibition.

"P’haps he's right", Susan said thoughtfully after having granted herself a few instants of silent contemplation.

"Why would you say that?"

"Why wouldn't I?", the girl quite insolently asked back, "might be best for both of us on second thought. I won't lose my station for being a co-conspirator and you won't be sent off to the devil knows where in disgrace while your colonel must leave, too and gets himself shot on some foreign battlefield. Sounds good to me, Miss. Your time'll come."

And with that, the girl lifted herself off the chair she had pulled close and began laying out Elizabeth's dressing gown for her.

They proceeded in their morning routine in silence; when however Susan helped her into today's choice of dress (stripes of light blue and white), she began to speak again: "He shan't wait long, I bet a month's wages-"
"Careful now, Susan. You know how we think of gambling in this house."

"Of course, Miss Gwillim. I just meant to say- look at you- you're very pretty."

The girl’s freckled cheeks blushed in a hearty, rosy hue, prompting her to lower her head.

Mechanically, Elizabeth did as she was told and looked at her reflection in the mirror, and a small woman with long dark hair, hazel eyes and a much too pointy chin stared back at her intently. Surely, a great beauty did not have hair that had to be tamed for considerable amounts of time to look pleasing enough or eyes like hers of a muddy brownish-green colour and a chin like that.

A beauty as she knew only too well from art was a woman of stature with captivating eyes in a striking hue of either black or blue (no woman she had ever read about or seen in a painting described as a beauty ever had eyes like hers, somewhere between light brown and green, perhaps because it was a colour that eluded any poetical description; while “blue as the seas of the Caribbean glittering in the sun” and “black as night’s dark star-speckled velvet” sounded beautiful and pleasing, the only comparisons her eye-colour permitted were mud or young moss, depending on the lighting.) full, round lips and preferably golden ringlets.

From a rational point of view of course, she knew all this was a pack of nonsense and that most women did not look like heroines from novels or roman goddesses in paintings, but it made her think nevertheless.

She had never considered herself particularly handsome, and although John had called her “beautiful” and several other such adjectives before, she had never quite paid it any attention, for she had believed it was what one said to one’s beloved, nay wife and that he loved her for other things, not necessarily her appearance, which was entirely too petite for his tall, imposing frame, as if intended to be the exact opposite of him.

Moved, she smiled insecurely in Susan’s direction and thanked her, now blushing just like her maid.

Only much later it occurred to her that she ought to have reprimanded Susan for speaking so freely without invitation to do so, as she should have done countless times before and had on occasion, yet could not help to feel a distinct warmth in her chest thinking about Susan’s words.

Her chin did not look so terribly pointy any more, she found as she gave her image a second glance, adjusted her pearl earrings and joined her aunt, uncle and of course John, downstairs.

In the afternoon, John invited her to walk with him, a book tucked under his arm as he nonchalantly invaded Aunt Margaret’s dominion of her “private” sitting room, which consisted of several pieces of furniture designed for being sat on, a table currently occupied by an artfully-draped embroidery frame leaning against a bowl of fruit, a few paintings of English country landscapes on the wall and a rather untasteful conglomerate of porcelain figurines.

When she had been a little girl, Elizabeth had counted them during boring tea-conversations she had been made to attend or when she had received a rare scolding for offenses such as staining a new dress while painting. There were little persons in scenes of romanticised country life that had not much if anything at all to do with the reality Elizabeth knew from sometimes passing some genuine figure of rural life by on a walk or hack, animals, preferably wild beasts, the more exotic, the better, fruit baskets and anything else under the sun imaginable.

John’s figure certainly stood out against the room with its brightly yellow walls that seemed to breathe her aunt’s presence even when the latter was absent, and in a most pleasant way.
She was however alone with this thought; Aunt Margaret looked up from her embroidery (a much simpler pattern than the frame she used for decoration), frowning as if she had bitten into an apple and found it containing a worm.

“John Simcoe”, she greeted him with a voice heavy with feigned disinterest, as if she were a queen and he a lowly solicitant whose plea she was about to reject.

Of course, Aunt Margaret was in truth very much interested in John’s sudden appearance, for it was clear to anybody with eyes and ears that he had come to her little kingdom to ask for her niece’s hand (at present only to hold it chastely while walking, at least chastely enough), something she disapproved of greatly still.

“Margaret”, he chirped in his unmistakeable voice, a cold smile on his face that was undoubtedly supposed to look cheery but was about as genuine as the painted smirks of Aunt Margaret’s porcelain dolls and just as reassuring.

In younger years, Elizabeth had felt a certain uneasiness looking at some of them with their broad, artificial grins, unmoving and in their expression as cold as the material they were made of.

“May I ask Miss Gwillim if she would like to take a walk with me? It is quite warm out, and one ought to make use of the fair weather as long as it chooses to stay with us”, he continued his undoubtedly rehearsed speech in a syrupy tone which might have qualified as an attempt at politeness if John had not been such a poor actor whose true feelings were always easily detected in his countenance or voice, meaning to Elizabeth (and thus to Margaret, too) the slightly mocking undertone he more or less tried to conceal was audible in every word he spoke.

Without even looking up from her needlework in order to clarify the hierarchy of the household to the unwanted visitor, Aunt Margaret replied:

“As you see, we are presently busy. I do not think today is suitable. Or, for that matter, any day.”

John needed a moment to come up with a retort.

“But why, you do mistake my person all this while! Upon my life, she finds, although you cannot, myself to be a marv’lous proper man.“ The tone of his already rather curious voice rose two octaves at the very least as he spoke, an unblinking glimmer in his eyes that revealed his contempt for her aunt and his intention to best her in the battle they were fighting right now.

“Spare me your enthusiasm for the Bard. As for your enthusiasm for my niece, I see your stratagem, John Simcoe. I am not deaf and dumb and my niece-“

“Shall come to no harm unless taking a walk holds more dangers than I am presently aware of. You certainly will not deny your niece the ability to set one foot before the other?”

He raised an eyebrow, at which Elizabeth feared Aunt Margaret’s carefully arranged coiffure would dissolve first into individual ringlets which in turn would then transform into snakes and her bone-chilling stare gain the power to petrify John.

John however looked on, a cool smirk on his lips and a look in his eyes that betrayed his inner agitation.

Between him and Margaret, a fierce battle was waged and the only thing they seemed to agree upon was that they disagreed on who was the dragon and who Saint George in this scenario, which meant they were also in accordance about the fact that she was a maid in need to be rescued by either of them.
“Aunt Margaret, John, this is quite enough.”

Both turned to her, a little confused.

“Will neither of you grant me a word in this, too?”

Sheepishly, John lowered his head like a loyal dog scolded by his master for chasing the chickens across the farmyard.

Aunt Margaret however held her gaze defiantly and with the authority she considered having over her as per the law which named her as her guardian until the age of twenty-one.

“It is my duty to act in your best interest and it is my duty, too, to protect you from any danger threatening your well-being. All that I do I do in your best interest, which you ought know and be grateful for.”

“I am grateful you care for me”, Elizabeth started diplomatically, knowing Aunt Margaret’s brain was impervious to words she did not like to hear, which meant any criticism had to be given to her very carefully and was best hidden in a dish more easily digestible for her sensible stomach than direct criticism, but was cut off:

“If you are as grateful as you say, you will obey me. I said no.”

“I say yes.”

He watches on with an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach as he becomes unimportant to the general discussion unfolding before his eyes between aunt and niece, in which he only personifies a larger conflict raging between them.

She is not even twenty yet and thus still subject to her aunt’s rule, who controls her money and her lands in her stead until she enters her twenty-first year.

There is no reason to believe Margaret mismanages her fortune or secretly sells off portions of the Gwillim-lands to put the profits in her pocket, she has taken Eliza into her home and raised her, given her the family she would otherwise not have had, but he finds it outrageous Margaret presumes she could dictate-

Has he not done the same? Had he not fought over her, too? He and Margaret have behaved like two dogs fighting over a fat marrow bone. It wasn’t right.

After a brief, energetic exchange of fiery words, some of them accusations on both sides, Elizabeth set her embroidery aside and bid them both goodbye, walking past them without looking either of them in the face.

As soon as she has left the room, he glares at the Old Bat to make sure she knows what he thinks of her before he too leaves.

At first he considers going directly after Elizabeth to seek her out, but on his way to her room, where
he supposes she is most likely to dwell, he stops himself.

No; he shan’t. It is his goal to show her he is better than Margaret and so, he leaves her to herself and spends the afternoon alone, reading, if it could be called that, for his thoughts revolve around Elizabeth with longing adoration and yet, he must keep distance, causing him to turn the page only twice without any word set before his eyes having penetrated his mind.

How is he to live in such a state, like Tantalus, standing in the water yet never able to quench his thirst and fruit hanging over his head but never allowed to taste them, forever suffering hunger and thirst?

At this thought, he must wipe a whole new string of associations off his mind, thoughts of the previous night. Only too gladly would he have obliged her and given her what she had wanted, shown her how his love for her transcends chaste adoration, how he loves her in her entirety, her body and her soul alike, his heavenly Queen, who has given him life again, his beacon, his everything.

The other day, he has come to think of how long or rather short he knows her and come to count only a few months, of which they had passed some time in mutual dislike, and of which he had spent some two or three weeks in London. How can it be possible to love someone like that so much so quickly?

The answer to his question comes to him rather quickly; whenever she slips her hand in his or the other way around, he cannot help but notice that their hands appear to have been moulded to fit each other’s perfectly even if at first, such a thing might seem impossible to an onlooker’s eye for his are much larger than hers. This must surely be a deliberate design of nature and cannot be passed off as a mere coincidence.

And what does it matter they have not known or courted for months, years even perhaps, as other couples do or have done?

In his new philosophy, which adds the perspective of the lover to that of the warrior, he has come to the conclusion that there is a twin for each heart residing in the breast of another person and once one finds this soulmate, the person whose heart complements one’s own, there cannot be anything else but bliss between those two persons and to Nature, who has shaped his and Eliza’s hearts, and Fate, who has brought them together, earthly time is insignificant; to him, it feels as if he has known her for an eternity anyway.

Dark clouds gather at the horizon of his thoughts. An eternity is not long enough to know her, it seems, for he should have realised earlier Eliza would disapprove of his argument with her aunt and his attempt to beat the latter with her own weapons. Eliza deserves better than being treated so.

Hopefully, Margaret will one day see reason; but until then, what shall he do? Two hours later, he is done staring at the same page of *Romeo and Juliet* without reading one bit of it.

Patience has never been his strong point, though he knows he can be tenacious when required, but with his Eliza so close, there is no need to prolong his own suffering and hers, for he knows he has smarted her, and pine after her when one knock at her door could resolve—no, he cannot even do that.

Lately, she has become even more cautious and ruled that neither of them must be seen at the other’s door, for they might be seen and the scene cause any onlooker passing by purely by happenstance to draw all the wrong conclusions.
Although this was before the previous night and her resolve to lie with him, he is uncertain whether breaching this rule after the unfortunate developments of the afternoon would be wise.

This is not the time for blunt force, it is the time for tactics. Gladly, he has a mind for such things, though most people, in the army and civil society alike, would never associate his name with anything but rawness and violence.

Now, what shall he do, what can he do? How is he to pass her a message- Miss Susan. He cannot choose but laugh that it took him a few instants to come to this most natural of conclusions. The Nurse’s daughter must act the go-between for the Old Bat (oh how splendidly his special moniker for his godfather’s wife rhymes with Lady Capulet!) will not suspect her of anything to do with him.

His spirits enlivened by his design, he puts the book back onto the shelf and searches the house for the maid. Perhaps she is with Eliza presently; in that case, he shall have to wait until she runs an errand for her mistress.

Hembury Fort House’s servant’s quarters, the kitchen and other rooms where the household work was done, were known to him still from his boyhood days in which he had run through the house uninhibited and “explored” even the darkest corners of the house.

In the kitchen the cook and her helpmeet who he regularly relieves of leftover sweets and cake, greet him with astonishment; although they have grown accustomed to the sight of him and have lost their initial reserved caution when they first had laid eyes on him, they tell him how strange it is to see him at this hour. When he asks them of the possible whereabouts of Miss Susan, both chuckle and make him swear (the cook, a matronly woman with her hands steeped in flour pats his arm conspiratorially, not paying his new jacket any mind, much to his dismay) not to tell Mrs Graves, but Susan has absconded again, as she is wont to do, apparently- she is, though diligent when in the mind to complete a task, often prone to shirking her duties (the cook and her helper suspect a sweetheart) and running off to godknowswhere, only to return hours later in even livelier spirits than she is already to be found in on most days.

He thanks the two women and makes his way to the garden path that is least visible from the house. If one wants to dis- and reappear unseen, one has to use this side of the house, for there are only few windows and a couple of trees obscure the view. Of course, Eliza and he only know this too well.

Trying to beat the flour out of his coat, he waits. It might be hours until Miss Susan crosses his path, but he is certain she will come.

Constant vigilance. Alertness. Silence. For half an hour, he is the commanding officer of a unit of provincial forces lying in wait for the enemy again, alert at every creaking branch and twittering bird until, he is right, Susan comes.

She is singing in a low voice, chirping melodiously as the blackbirds in the spring-green foliage above her head:

…How would you like to be married to a soldier?

  Kitty lie over close to the wall

  What would you do if you married a soldier?

  What would I do only follow his gun
What would you do if he died on the ocean?

What would I do only marry again

The praties all-

She stops mid-song as he steps from behind his tree into her path.

“Right on time, Miss Susan. It is getting quite late”, he tries to say airily, managing a smile.

Miss Susan stares back at him with initial shock, which suddenly melts to an altogether different facial expression he cannot make sense of.

“Colonel”, she breathes, her lungs exhaling the last bit of surprise with the word, “you have waited here for me?”

Glimmering eyes of blue-grey look up at him expectantly. She is in quite a state, he realises, her apron pinned carelessly to the front of her dress, her shoes bearing traces of the outdoors beyond the gardens and her cap does not sit straight on top of her red and blonde crown. The cook was right, then.

“As a matter of fact, I have”, he answers her politely, still smiling (people seem to like smiles, he has come to observe) at her, impatient to send her on her way.

She bats her eyelids (why?), looks him over without inhibition (her eyes rest on certain unmentionable areas a little too long for his taste) and takes a step closer to him until he is able to count the pale freckles on her nose. Knowing his own body’s reaction to sunlight, they would doubtlessly darken would she spend more time in the outdoors; as she is employed in a respectable household however and in the prestigious position to wait on a lady, her freckles do not have many opportunities to become more prominent.

Although a good deal smaller than he is, she is taller than Elizabeth and, as he comes to realise seconds later, less reserved in her ways, which might be due to her country upbringing.

“And what would be the purpose of that?”

She cocks her head and with an air of girlish nonchalance elevates her right hand to his chest, allowing her fingers to trail down his front, stopping precariously close to-

“Miss Susan!”

Taken aback by her forwardness, he takes a step backwards, a little frustrated at the way his much-resented voice sounds as he says her name, even higher than usual and most unmanly, more like that of a scandalised maiden aunt at hearing a bawdy joke exchanged between her youthful nephews than a colonel accustomed to ordering his men around on the battlefield.

Why does she look almost crestfallen now?

“They won’t see us here, you can be certain of that, at this time of day Miss Gwillim usually-“ In this very moment, a searing thought seems to penetrate her mind, for she gulps visibly, blushes and lowers her gaze, perhaps a little ashamed, perhaps with the realisation that he has sook her out to speak to her mistress on his behalf, not for her sake. And where did she get this thought from anyway? Had she, as he had done as a boy, secretly tasted too much of the Admiral’s sherry?
“You must help me, Miss Susan, yes?”

“Yes”, she affirms, still unable to look him in the face again, an exercise she had before performed without any inhibition.

“Go to Miss Gwillim and tell her that I must see her. After dinner for a quick stroll in the rose garden.”

She nods, vows to pass on the message and lifts her skirts, falling into a hasty trot as if to bring a hundred miles between him and her within the hour.

“Miss Gwillim!”

Susan destroyed the fickle peace of her room with her most unbeseeming loud exclamation.

Totally surprised, she would almost have knocked the glass over which she employed to cleanse her brushes but caught it just in time with her left hand before any of the already quite muddy-coloured water could spoil the picture she was working on, designed after a sketch she had made around Dunkeswell Abbey a few weeks ago.

“Yes, what is it?” Knitting her brows in ire, she stared at her maid, whose attire bordered on an insult to any respectable and longanimous mistress and whose cheeks were the same colour as the dress-uniform of an army officer.

Trying to catch her breath, Susan inhaled deeply several times before she managed to speak:

“The Colonel requests… he wants to see you… after dinner, the rose garden.”

“Be seated.”

As a reward of sorts for the speedy delivery of her message, she granted Susan to take a seat on a chair close by the door to allow her re-collect her strength.

“When you have regained some of your breath again, I wish you to put yourself back into an orderly state and go to the Colonel. You are to tell him I accept.”

Susan, unable to say much, nodded obediently.

Of course Elizabeth was no fool and put two and two together; the dirt on Susan’s shoes and the crumpled state of her dress revealed she had not been exclusively running during the past two hours, in which she had bid the girl to leave her to herself, for after the confrontation with her aunt and John, she had craved solitude.

She was thankful both Aunt Margaret and John had respected that and neither of them had come to her door with either accusations or excuses.

Aunt Margaret likely had stormed into Uncle Samuel’s study, disrupted whatever else he was doing, and relayed to him her version of events, colourfully embellished by grand gestures with both her hands and her shrill, angry voice. He would doubtlessly console her (for some reason, he was the only one who could; no one else had the same effect on her aunt, which Elizabeth took as proof of
the curious form of caring and kindness that existed between her aunt and uncle) and make her sit down to collect herself and in the evening, he would take her aside and tell her to be kind to her aunt, who had raised her and who only had the best intentions. Uncle Samuel was no disciplinarian, had told her even how he did not think much of officers who flogged their men regularly, for it was an un-Christian thing to do in his eyes and did himself only resort to making use of the cat o’ nine tails as a means of last resort, and only with great hesitation, and so would (and in the past always had) let her off with a stern talking-to, and that would be it.

Aunt Margaret, she mused, she would do well to avoid in the coming days until her attention had shifted from holding a grudge against her niece to incorrectly folded linen or inexplicably ill-polished silverware or, even better still, some gossip overheard in church or entrusted to her by one of her “friends”.

Eventually, her temper would cool and she would either forget or demand an apology, which she would offer, knowing it was the easiest way to appease her.

At dinner, Aunt Margaret sat thin-lipped in her seat across the table from Elizabeth and appeared to be trying to either kill or severely wound her with her stare which she was certain as she kept observing her aunt from the corner of her eyes, was as sharp as ten daggers.

Uncle Samuel was visibly exhausted and for a moment, Elizabeth felt sorry for him, but ceased to do so as he professed that he was of his wife’s opinion and did not support such rudeness in his house and demanded respect of her, both for him and her aunt.

“Yes uncle. I agree I spoke in the heat of the moment, but allow me to beg the favour of you to consider my perspective in this moment; neither party seemed to consider me in their dispute, which so centrally revolved around my person- I did not know what else to do or say, you must surely understand.”

“I do”, he responded, “in part. Your motif may be just, but this does not make your speech so. I thought we had invested in the best teachers for you and brought you up to behave respectably. Besides, must I remind you your aunt is your legal guardian? John will know it, too, from the army, one obeys one’s superior officers.”

“Says the admiral”, she couldn’t help but mutter under her breath. Uncle Samuel had heard, though and answered calmly, “I was a lieutenant once, too, as you are, so to speak, now within this household.”

It was better not to do or say anything else, lest she would like to churn up more needless strife. Throughout their conversation, she had attempted to secretly catch John’s eye, but he had done his utmost to pretend to be invisible, which was a ludicrous notion, given he was over six feet tall and sported a head of gleaming copper.

The rest of the meal was spent in silence and all parties tried their best not to offend the other in any way; when the table was cleared, she, thinking it unwise to embark on a clandestine meeting after such table talk, rushed after her uncle and asked whether, given it was still light outside, she might be permitted a short stroll to the rose garden close to the house in John’s company.

Aunt Margaret visibly wanted to protest, but her husband was faster and took her hand, pressing it, as he always did when he tried to shield her from speaking before weighing the consequences. The two exchanged a glance as only old couples could, laying volumes worth of words within the instant between two blinks and reading them in the other’s eyes in the same amount of time.

“Yes”, her aunt answered, her voice audibly strained as if it pained her to speak this little word,
giving Uncle Samuel a stern look, who then added “but only until dark.”

“Thank you”, she curtseyed and motioned for John to follow her at a respectable distance.

Once out of the house and out of earshot of Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel, she stopped and turned around to him: “We must talk.”

“We must”, he nodded, “let me begin. I wish to apologise for inciting a war between you and your aunt and for my ignorance this afternoon. I beg for your forgiveness.”

“It’s all right now”, she says, but he can tell it isn’t. He is her husband, at least in secret, he knows when his wife is being untruthful.

“It isn’t.”

“I wish you would simply have asked me, both of you.”

“I cannot be held responsible for your aunt”, he retorts defensively.

“No, but you should have taken the moral high ground. I would have liked to walk with you very much, yet we must mind my aunt, without whose permission we can never be together-“

“It was you who shouted at her”, he points out, a little hurt she tries to hold him responsible for everything.

“Yes, because otherwise neither of you would have listened! I am tired of this all, and positively sick of the pack of nonsense that is the petty feud between you and my aunt.”

“It is she-“

“And you, Saint John, did nothing to add to the situation? You provoked her the minute you entered through the door, think on it”, she closes.

Her beautiful mouth has receded to a thin, tight-lipped line and her eyes glow like a firestorm.

There is nothing he would like so much as to hold her now, to kiss her and to set their dispute aside.

“May I offer you my sincerest apologies?”

“You may.”

For a while, they walk in silence. Timidly, he slips his hand into hers and to his great relief, she takes it.

“How did Aunt Margaret come to resent you?”, Eliza asks after a long while in which only a solitary blackbird had taken advantage of the empty canvas of the clear, silent evening air. “She wrote letters to you in America and seemed concerned for you.”

“I don’t know”, he replies truthfully, “she wishes to protect you and has likely heard what is being said about me. When last she saw me, I was eighteen. I am not eighteen anymore,” he replies cautiously, knowing his answer implies more than he dares to say directly.
“I used to read your letters, you know”, she says, which takes him somewhat aback.

“You did?”, he asked in order to ascertain he had heard correctly.

“I did. You know the Admiral’s eyes have grown worse with age. He’d give them to me to read them to him and sometimes, I also read those addressed to my aunt, though far more infrequently.”

“And did you like them?”

“Yes, I did. They were always very kind.”

He looked her in the eyes, surprise and honest concern animating his features: “And what did you think of me?”

“I thought you a very kind man.”

It is the truth. The man from the letters she had come to know over the past few years had been a kind person, whose lively and at times even entertaining style of writing made the recipient look forward to the next letter, or bundle of letters from America, a man whose determined scrawl on paper told stories of great perils and dangers, who had the power to animate dry ink and make it, as if by magic, transform into the scenery he was describing.

“Do you still think that?”

For one moment, she hesitated.

“To me, you are. But I have seen you being rude and unkind, too.”

As if he were a doctor conducting a most serious experiment in an attempt to save the patient’s life, he nodded gravely and asked:

“Who do you like better, me or him?”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Me, or the man in the letters?”

She answers without hesitation.

“Why, you of course!”

He would not have expected that.

“How can you love me better than him?”
“Is it not you who wrote the letters?”

“I did write them, but it never felt so.”

“I don’t think I can follow you.”

And so he explains. He has always taken great care what to write home, especially at eighteen or nineteen when first he came to America, for the first time so far away from home, to compose his letters with great consideration to assure his mother, who had then still been alive, and later the Admiral and his wife, who had then not yet resented, but pitied him for being a sickly half-orphan, of his wellbeing.

Sometimes, writing things down has helped him deal with the things he, young and impressionable, had seen in the field and when he had grown older and indifferent to the horrors around him and more and more ambitious to better his station in the army, he had continued to write cheerful letters to Hembury Fort House partly because the Admiral had always genuinely cared for him and partly because since his mother’s death, there hadn’t been anyone to send a letter to.

His love listens with a sincere and solemn mien, stroking his hand as he tells her how sometimes, ordering his thoughts on a piece of paper, then folding, sealing and sending it away had helped him to rid himself of events that would otherwise have engraved themselves upon his mind, how sometimes receiving a letter in return speaking of unimportant trifles, such as the renovations the Admiral had ordered to be made in the stables of the House or his niece’s latest-

“Uncle Samuel told you of me?”

“Sometimes. He loves you very much and always spoke of you with great pride.”

“Say, did you like me?”

“I could not say. I never cared much-“ he breaks off and hangs his head in shame. Had he only known one day he would face this question, he would have learned every letter by his godfather by heart.

Naturally Elizabeth looks a little disappointed, that however can’t be helped.

“How could I ever know that one day we would meet and you would- you were a child when I left for America, and I myself had barely outgrown boyhood.”

John was right. For the first time, she became thoroughly conscious of the ten years that separated them. Did it matter? At present, it did not, for she loved him with all her heart as he was, her John, on days of darkness and days of light.

But to think when she had last seen him before his return, she had been but eight and he eighteen- she looked up into his face to study it and found tiny wrinkles around his eyes where she had none and although his features were still young (and most handsome in her opinion), he evidently was not as young as she was anymore. His scar where once there had been a left ear only added to the air of warlike masculinity and battle-hardened vigour that no boy or young man her age could exhibit and which suited him so well.

“What does it matter”, she closed the topic with a dismissive gesture of her hand, “we needn’t worry
about the past. All I recall of you from these days is a sickly-looking youth in a powdered wig on my aunt’s wedding day. How could I have known I would meet him again years later and he would become the most handsome man in England?”

“Of late, you are not the only one to-“

He has spoken his admittedly quite confused thought out loud, why is he so foolish? He can certainly not-

“To what?”

Her interest piqued, she looks at him intently. Oh Eliza! Is she jealous now? She needn’t be, for he has dismissed Miss Susan’s bold advances and although she certainly is a pretty girl and of a coquettishness that likely entices many men, she is not Eliza, no dark beauty whose eyes hold the mysteries of the universe, no graceful queen with a voice that soothes his hunger and thirst whenever she speaks and hands that steady a trembling man and offer comfort and love- no woman, in fact, can be like her, will ever be like her.

“To think me handsome”, he continues cautiously, “your maid, Miss Susan, when I waited for her in the garden to meet her and make her my messenger, she tried to approach me in a way I would never-“

Such rudeness cannot leave his lips in front of his dear.

“Dear God, Susan”, Elizabeth half-snorted, half huffed in anger. She understood only too well, better than John at this moment.

“There is a secret you must know, which she told me, and which pertains to you”, she lowered her voice, “Susan saw you by the pond and went to me afterwards, detailing what she saw- of you.”

Both of them blushed, John, due to his fair colouring more violently than she with evident embarrassment and she for knowing something she was not supposed to.

“She was quite impressed by your- by your physique and compared you to a roman statue.”

Elizabeth could not look him in the eyes after having told him this.

“A blemished statue, if at all”, John pointed out to her, avoiding her gaze, “with marks and scars all over.”

She reached up to his left ear, which he usually made an effort to hide behind his unruly hair and exposed it to her gaze by brushing a strand of copper away. He flinched a little, as if he was contemplating to pull away in an instinctive motion, but remained still.

“And all the more beautiful for it”, she whispered, gently tracing the jagged line of his scar with an index finger.

He did not like to talk about his supposed shortcomings, under which he listed his ear also, and so Elizabeth (for the moment) suppressed the urge to ask how he had come to lose it, but figured it must
have been some battle or skirmish or other. To think the bullet, had it hit him less than an inch more
to the right, could have been fatal- no, she did not dare to think about it.

“Now stop mourning your ear. If you must do anything presently, count to me the ways in which
you will not upset my aunt in the future. I thought I had been clear in the past about convincing her
of your gentlemanly qualities. I wish to avoid days such as this past one in the future.”

He assures her he shall bridle his temper, even if he secretly holds the firm belief that the Old Bat
should learn to exercise some self-restraint in her effectuations as well, but he can hardly say so to
Elizabeth for he knows she is not at fault, it is he who has wronged her and because she seems to
consider him the more reasonable of the two parties, which flatters him.

His ear tingles still with her touch, even if she has long removed her hand; coming to think of it, she
is the first and only person to touch him there, the first and only whom he has permitted to feel the
scarred tissue. Not even the doctor who had been sent for the night it had been shot off (and who had
tried to sow his ear back on, which Richard Woodhull had preserved in a glass of whiskey for the
time being, but had failed) had not been allowed to do anything more than look at it and assist him
putting on his bandaging himself.

“No John, the sun is well below the horizon already. We must make haste if we are to be back by
the house before night has fallen”, his secret, darling little wife says and self-assuredly takes his hand
to lead him back to the house.

The windows are still illumined to some degree; in the Admiral’s study, he can espy two dark
silhouettes standing out like shadows against the light. The Admiral and his terrible wife appear to be
arguing, from all he can tell by their gestures and he is certain he can guess what about.

This afternoon, he has been foolish to upset Margaret and has brought Elizabeth in quite an
uncomfortable situation between her aunt and him- he hasn’t thought about it before, gradually
however, he comes to understand that for Elizabeth, Margaret Graves is not an enemy she strives to
best, to subdue, as he views her, to Eliza, her aunt is a friend or ally.

Speaking in terms of the American War, Margaret Graves is Eliza’s Marquis de La Fayette in some
respects, in others, she fancies herself the Commander in Chief.

However much he is angered by the old woman’s conduct and her protectiveness of Elizabeth,
which he is certain is in part rooted in jealousy as much as motherly caution and protectiveness, he
must restrain himself. He supposes he will have to charm her, if she is to become akin to something
like a mother-in-law (which she basically is already, given he has pledged himself to Eliza).

He is not in possession of a fortune to impress and persuade her with; likewise, he owns no land and
wields no political power; all he has are his rank (which has as yet still to be made permanent in the
regular army), his dubious reputation and his wits, which he shall employ to charm the snake who is
trying to evict him and Eliza from the garden of Eden, or rather, Hembury Fort House.

Chapter End Notes
John vs. Graves: The idea to make the distinction between Capt. John Simcoe and his son John Graves by calling the younger Simcoe by his middle name as long as his father was alive came to me through a letter by Samuel Graves to John Simcoe, in which he calls John Graves, then a few months old if I recall correctly, "Infant Graves".

The Graves-family: I tried to do some genealogical research into the Graves' but couldn't find much, sadly. All I can reconstruct from the few things I do know (namely that he has several nephews who share his surname and some of whom are cousins) is that Samuel Graves must have had several brothers. Everything I wrote about his childhood is therefore fictional, though based on and inspired by the little information I had. Fun fact: in case there are any historians among you, at some point, a member of the Graves-family married a close relative of Leopold von Ranke, who is sometimes credited with being one of the founding fathers of history as a modern scholarly discipline.

By the way, don't get confused, for generations all men born into the family either were called "Richard" or "Thomas".

Samuel Graves served in the Battle of Cartagena de Indias (March-May 1741) on his uncle's ship. For Britain, trying to capture Spain's ports in the Caribbean, Cartagena was a complete desaster and ended with some 9,500-11,500 men losing their lives either due to epidemics or in battle. There is to my knowledge no account by him about his experiences at Cartagena, so his words in the story are mine.

What Samuel says about Mount Vernon and the Washingtons however is true, and a curious piece of history I didn't know before doing some research for this story. He was unsuccessful as commander of the North American station (which was not really his fault, he was basically tasked to patrol the entire length of the coastline from Canada to the Carolinas so to speak and didn't have the men nor the ships to do it properly) and was pressed to resign his post in 1776. For some time, Margaret kept him company in America and from what I read, sometimes had John Graves Simcoe over for dinner.

"Warts and all": According to an anecdote, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) is said to have instructed the painter working on his portrait to paint him "warts and all", meaning he wanted to be portrayed as he looked like and did not want any unflattering details of his face omitted for aesthetic reasons. Whether he really said it is unknown; a phrase similar to "warts and all" in connection to Cromwell appears for the first time in Horace Walpole's "Anecdotes of Painting in England, with some account of the principal artists" (1764).

"(...) you do mistake my person all this while" etc.: Shakespeare, of course. Richard III., Act I, scene II. In the original, the "you"s are "I"s, which I changed to fit the quote into the story.

Susan: In "Romeo and Juliet", Juliet's nurse had a daughter called Susan who died young. Here, in the absence of a nurse but having a Susan at hand, Simcoe makes the connection between the servant in the play and the servant at hand. He calls Margaret a "Lady Capulet" because he sees himself cast as Romeo (such a humble man!) but I would be careful with that, because Lady Capulet's character is much more complex than acting solely as opposition to the young lovers.

The song Susan sings is "The Frost Is All Over". If you want to listen to it in its entirety,
I would suggest the versions by Planxty or The Chieftains, which are my personal favourites.

Samuel Graves' stance on corporal punishment was inspired by a statement by Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood (1748-1810): “(...) I cannot for the life of me, comprehend the religion of an Officer, who prays all one day, and flogs his men all the next. (...)”

The dychotomy of "letter-Simcoe" and "real-Simcoe" occurred to me when I was reading a letter addressed to his mother from campaign. He really knows how to entertain, what to write to make people (even centuries later) smile, but reading between the lines, it becomes clear how poor the conditions in the British camp are, that he hasn't slept in almost a week and how shocked he was to see six men lose their legs when they were hit by a cannon ball.

No idea if it really works (I'm no doctor), but I've heard it's possible to preserve severed body parts (coincidentally, the story I remember being told years ago is one of an ear lost in a car accident near a pub, where the injured person managed to walk for help, resulting in the publican coming with them and putting the severed ear in a glass of grog) in hard liquor for a short while, such as transport to the hospital to sow them back on. While I don't know if it works and am rather doubtful of it, it sounds like something one might have done in the 18th century.

The spelling of the Marquis' name is intentional and in accordance with how Simcoe spelt it in his diary.
Author's Announcement

I'm terribly sorry to have lured you here under the false pretence of a new chapter and I will delete this message again soon, but I have an announcement to make:

Next Saturday evening, I will be reading from "The Colonel's Portrait" (which in the long view I plan and hope to remodel and rewrite into an original novel based entirely on the historical John Graves Simcoe) alongside two other authors (who write very different genres, it's going to be an exciting evening) at a salon-kind of event in Berlin, Germany. Knowing surprisingly many of my readers are German-based, if you are interested in attending, comment on this until 09:00 CET on Monday and I will get in touch. It's a little short notice, I know. Sorry about that.

The other authors produce works in German as far as I know, whereas I write in English and will be reading in English, too. The hosts have asked me if I could envision doing a brief Q&A, too, so if you want to question me thoroughly (I am a horrible spy and will tell you everything you want to know), this is your chance.

I don't think that many people (if anyone at all) will be interested, but I could offer five places (order of comments determines order of precedence). Although the event is for free, the hosts like to keep a select circle and would like to know in advance how many people will be attending. As a guest however, I can bring several invitees of my own.

So if you happen to be in Berlin next Saturday and have nothing better to do at 8:00 pm (doubtful, there's Tagesschau on), feel free to message me.

While I'm at it, please allow me to take the opportunity to say thank you to everyone who has ever clicked, commented on or kudos-ed this story. You all are awesome and keep me writing. Thank you!
The Battle of Hembury Fort

Chapter Summary

Margaret and Samuel Graves are fighting, John and Elizabeth enjoy each other's company and Susan reveals her secret talent.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Sorry for not updating as frequently as I did before, but at the moment, life is getting quite busy, so my updates will probably continue to be slow. Anyways, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

And to all the lovely people whom I still owe reviews, I'll be back later, I promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When they had returned from their stroll outside, they found the house alive- livelier than any house should be at this hour without guests staying the evening.

The voices of Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel resounded in every room and corridor, Margaret’s high-pitched hisses countering the Admiral’s battle-proven bellow that could wake a soundly-snoring crew of at least four hundred and fifty, or at least Elizabeth thought so.

This however made it easy for her to listen into the conversation she was certain was not meant for her ears; together with John, she loitered for a few moments before the half-closed door to Uncle Samuel’s study (finding them had been easy as they only had to follow their voices) to hear what was going on.

They had been quite puzzled to return inside and not to be greeted by Aunt Margaret’s critical glances that were first thrown at John in an expression of greatest disapproval and then roved the length and breadth of Elizabeth’s body, attempting to detect anything indicative of misbecoming behaviour, the crumpled hem of a dress, some dry leaves caught in a no longer perfect coiffure or freshly blossoming love bites at the neck- not that she had ever found any supposed evidence supporting her suspicions, they always were extremely careful and John had the strictest instructions (under pains of never being kissed again) not to apply so much pressure as would leave marks when expressing his tenderness.

Not being greeted by their usual chaperone, they had already supposed something out of the ordinary had occurred in their absence and thus, not without concern, followed the distinct muffled sounds of a heated conversation that had greeted them alongside Aunt Margaret’s absence. Eavesdropping was nothing one should enjoy or, worse still, practice as a sport, but when her and John’s names had fallen several times, she had forgone her inhibitions to do something that rude and unbefitting of her station and had decided to listen in for a few moments, to see, or rather hear, what was the matter.

The general disagreement between Admiral and Mrs Graves appeared to be centred around her, or rather, as they politely called it, her “deepening acquaintance” with John.
Aunt Margaret maintained she, as her niece’s legal guardian until the age of twenty-one would exercise the powers given to her by the law to prevent “the girl” from making any decisions she would rather sooner than later come to regret whereas Uncle Samuel told her to quit the “stuff and nonsense”, for he could, although he too had had a few inhibitions not too long ago when the unfortunate incident at the ball had severely tarnished John’s gentlemanly reputation, not see why a union between the two young people he had been by God’s Grace been allowed to watch and grow from little children into an “upright, honourable and renowned officer” and a “pretty, vivacious and above all intelligent young lady” should be prohibited at all costs.

He could not see what better thing could have come their way; her money would come to good use in her husband’s hands, who was not as rich as her but adored her with all his heart- would she prefer her nice fell prey to some ordinary cad turned fortune hunter? And even more splendidly, they seemed to be genuinely in love. How many young women of Elizabeth’s age did not enjoy the same privilege, to choose a man they loved?

Aunt Margaret had only spat back that Elizabeth did not need a husband to spend her money, and what “good use” of the aforementioned financial assets would be or entail should be for Elizabeth to decide from her twenty-first birthday onward.

She argued that Elizabeth was still so very young and as easily impressionable as all young women her age were, and a military beau was the fashion of the day, just as certain hats, patterns and shoes were.

When Colonel Simcoe would fall out of fashion and favour, all he would be could be summarised as a “terrible bore” standing ins stark contrast to her vivacious, young niece, and at that could take headship of her and any supposed children, should Elizabeth be luckier than her mother, something Aunt Margaret maintained even in front of Uncle Samuel should not be tested.

“That is quite enough, Margaret”, Uncle Samuel had interrupted her sharply, “I forbid you to speak in such a manner of my niece and my godson.”

“You forbid me?”

Elizabeth thought she could hear how her aunt straightened her back to make use of her full height, which would still not be enough to tower over Uncle Samuel, who though somewhat shorter than John, was a man of a certain height and posture.

“I forbid you. As your husband.”

This was new to Elizabeth’s ears. From all she had found out over the years and heard from both parties in younger years was that Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel had met one summer in Bath and liked each other- as friends.

When their friendship had deepened, Uncle Samuel, then a widower of two years, had proposed marriage and her aunt had accepted with gladness- past child-bearing age, she had deemed it safe to marry.

They had been friends. Uncle Samuel had not regarded Aunt Margaret as yet another matronly maiden aunt or an aging fortune-huntress gone to Bath for her next adventure, he had married her because he thought her a good companion. Why could she then, who knew of her husband that he
had liked her before he had known she had a pretty dowry, assume John would marry for such lowly reasons as money?

Granted, it had been her concern once, too, having been raised by Aunt Margaret, but she trusted John completely and entirely. He loved her, and she loved him, quite terribly so and had no reason to doubt his motives, after all, they had talked about all that.

As the mutual accusations and fierce exchanges of words fired in every direction grew even louder and more passionate than before, John tugged at her arm.

“Let us leave.”

Eliza needn’t hear this slander of her person, being reduced to a possession of her aunt's, and the rude things the latter says about him, that however does not smart him; he has heard worse accusations made against his person, worse insults and suffered more pain for it.

It makes him quite ashamed only listening to the opinions exchanged, that the Old Bat thinks so lowly of him she assumes he only could desire Elizabeth for quick coin and even quicker satisfaction of his carnal urges. If he wanted that, he would have sought company while in London; Covent Garden is teeming with ladies most accomplished in the art of pleasurable temporary companionship, some of them true masters of their profession, he has heard, but this is not the point, he did not, for none of them, even the prettier, more expensive ones, could give him the gift his Eliza gives him every day: love.

No other woman can compare to her and he finds he has not had an eye for any other member of the sex since having come to know her, the pirate-queen who has captured his heart and pressed him into serving her, only her. O what sweet bonds tie him to her! Eliza’s love is all he wants, has he not told her before that he would not adore her any less were they both not people of quality but poorer than the poorest soul, sleeping in hedgerows under the stars?

With her, there cannot be unhappiness, for she has the magic power to illumine the darkness, both of the night and of the mind, and he strives to repay her as best as he can, tho’ he fears all he has to give of himself can never be enough.

Of all the treasures in the world, she is the greatest, far exceeding the countless coffers full of money she inherited.

She should not hear such slanders as the wagging tongue of her aunt produces, has heard enough already; and what she has heard will make her sad and perturb her enough already.

“No”, his love defies him in a soft whisper.

“But Eliza-“

Perhaps his voice has risen above a low whisper at expressing the desperate insistence he laid on the second word of his utterance, perhaps one of the two inside has had an inkling they were being overheard for longer, in any case, the stream of heated arguments and accusations suddenly flows into a dead, windless sea of silence.

However they may have achieved this, they have found them out, eavesdropping like young children a little too interested and equally ill-bred. Retreat is the only possibility.
Dreading that every second the door could open and Margaret Graves shower them both with an unpleasant tirade of admonishments, or the Admiral, who has against all expectations, not lost his bite in age yet, they steal away as silently as possible.

At a safe distance, his beloved, his wife-in-secret who has walked before him all the way, turns to face him with a grave mien.

“I am tired of all this, John.”

A sad smile of compassion expressing he feels the very same is all he presently knows to give her. A small gesture like that however will not suffice her, he can tell from the look in her eyes.

Bending down to her, he whispers into her ear, so as to prevent any eavesdroppers, for this house is composed of spies of all ages it appears, from catching his words.

“We could leave.”

Scotland, the continent, it doesn’t matter to him. Perhaps not America as long as it can be avoided, though.

“Oh John.”

His love sounds as if this “John” she is talking about is a young boy who has just told his nurse a quite adventurous tale explaining why he has torn his new jacket while playing.

“You know it is not that simple.”

“We could go to Scotland, be wed at Gretna Green and return, or go to Ireland, where no-one shall know us. Dublin is a fine town in summer, I enjoyed it much when stationed there in my youth. It is not London, but-“

She shrugs and steps away from him when he tries to reach for her arm.

“You know just as well as me this is foolish, John. And with Uncle Samuel’s relations everywhere, I suppose ridding ourselves of the familial ties you want to sever will not be easy.”

“Then what do you propose?”

“I don’t know.”

They reached his room, the one furthest away from the study. She followed him in, after all, everybody seemed to know already and, if someone, a servant or her aunt, came to make an accusation against the both of them making vague claims about what must have happened between them alone, then so be it.

A dark part of her soul even hoped for such an accusation. If Aunt Margaret were to believe she had given herself to John, and she would play her part well enough to suggest their supposed union has resulted in a pregnancy, she would have to yield, if only to save herself and Uncle Samuel from shame-

She broke her thought off there, somewhat ashamed of herself for having thought about something like this, for having harboured such a base design.
John embraced her from behind and she let him do it, angling her head so it would rest comfortably against his shoulder (or however high up the crown of her head reached). Her beloved, the man she had already promised herself to not long ago in secret, guided them both towards the bed where they sat down in silence.

Elizabeth would have much liked to lie back and experience the comforting embrace she and John had shared not long ago, the night she had found him attempting to leave Hembury Fort House and had ordered him to stay.

How sweet would it be to be held by him again in this manner, her back against his firm chest, the only time she enjoyed feeling small, which she did all too often, seeing as she was indeed an unusually small person; when in her childhood, hopes had been high she would “grow eventually”, at nineteen and three quarters, she had long given up on that hope to make room for quiet resentment of everybody who took her for being younger than she actually was or called her a “pretty little thing”, a “fairy” or a “doll”, as strangers who did not know her sometimes did. They would not have dared to had they known who she was, of course.

In John’s embrace however, nothing of that ever crossed her mind, nor did it cross his. Never did he initiate talk of their starkly contrasting physiques, only answered when she made a comment that was meant to tease him in a most loving way, mostly when they were out walking and he, still not quite accustomed to the civilian saunter one employed on leisurely walks, fell into a quick march and was over the hills and far away before she could so much as call for him to stop and wait for her.

She disliked how people looked at her, the small, delicate woman who stood to come into control of a large fortune, soon, a porcelain doll added to someone’s collection- or rather a doll in someone’s collection who was not willing to part with her, she thought gloomily, only to dismiss this notion entirely, for she was no doll, and did not belong to Aunt Margaret, nor did she belong to John or any other man who had attempted to win her favour at dances and gatherings.

It was her free will to be with John, for better, or for worse, but others took it upon themselves to speak in her name without asking her opinion.

For a moment, she even felt sympathy for the rebels who had taken John prisoner and almost his life, too- did not she too strive for the freedom to choose her own fate?

But then, those people were colonists, farmers and small tradesmen all who did not know of or understand the matters of politics discussed in London, nor had they ever thought beyond the uninviting plains and forests of the Colonies. They even made apothecaries generals- how a man of comparatively low birth could rise to such rank eluded her. However, it was a most peculiar time to be alive, in which many a Jack stood the chance to become a gentleman, whereas many a gentle person was made a Jack.

She was no rebel, did not want to sever her ties to her aunt and uncle forever, all she wanted was to be with John, which was constantly denied to her; spend time in his company without having to check the corners of the corridor for prying eyes or waiting for a kiss until they were far enough away from the house, lie in his arms as she had once before, feel safe and secure in the arms of her personal Coeus, encompassed in his strong arms and his face buried in the crook of her neck, kissing the skin there softly.

What could be done? What else could she do, what could John do? Had he not proven himself a respectable gentleman, had they not done the utmost not to upset her aunt and convince her of their love?
They continue to sit there in complete silence for a while longer. Some time ago, the arm with which he supports himself on the bed has fallen asleep and he knows he must move into another position soon to relieve it of his weight, this is not as easily done as it is said however, for he does not want to force Eliza to get up from her place leaning against him.

Only seconds later, he has to admit he has made a gross error and misjudged his powers greatly: his arm gives away and causes him, startled, to fall backwards.

Elizabeth, who has managed to keep herself upright, cracks a lopsided smile at seeing him at such an unsoldierly disadvantage. At least, his little fall has been good for something; she smiles, momentarily diverted.

She bows down to him and kisses his lips, held in place by her body leaning over his.

Lying there, the odd realisation comes to him that for the first time, he is looking up to her- and he can’t say he dislikes it, not at all. If anything, he enjoys it a little too much.

Yet again he has to force himself to think of Hewlett (especially lying on his back certain things are hard to hide), this time recalling how much joy it appeared to have brought the latter to torture him on board the *Bonetta*; and not in the ordinary sense he has enjoyed bringing pain to those deserving of it.

O, he should have known earlier. Quite frankly, he had already had his doubts when Hewlett had gagged him personally (as if not one of his minions could have done that), but had dismissed it- until Hewlett had a second time done exactly that and held a knife to his throat to boot. One would have thought the mannerly major who (pretended to?) be in love with the same woman he had once felt attracted to (perhaps a crude ploy to gain his attention?) would harbour such less well-mannered interests, in gentlemen at that?

From the twisted private fantasies of Edmund Hewlett, which he really should not think too much about lest he wants to give himself nightmares of a certain frog-faced man, he is called back to the present by a celestial beauty, who has now come to rest her head on his chest. Their legs are still dangling over the edge of the bed, their present position is not the most comfortable one, but he would gladly stay like this for all eternity, stroking Elizabeth’s back and making her close her eyes with contentment.

-And they can have that for all eternity, if only they manage to charm the old snake in the garden of Hembury Fort House.

If there is one profession he is unsuited for, it would be diplomacy, the art needed when trying to make a trade agreement with the head of state of a foreign country or, much more difficult, attempting to survive tea presided over by an elderly lady considering the world at her disposal. Eliza has told him often enough how Margaret is easily provoked and yet, he has managed to cause the elderly dragon to bare her fangs to him on countless occasions, and not always on purpose.

As the daylight fades completely, his beloved rises. She hasn’t spoken to him in the past half-hour or so, lost in thoughts. He can only guess at what these thoughts are about, but assumes it is about what they have heard.

Remembering Margaret’s hurtful words, his heart bleeds compassion and love for her; the Old Bat
should never have said these things and Elizabeth should never have had to hear them, for now doubtlessly, disturbing pictures have formed in her mind and perturb her with the scenery the sharp words of her aunt have cut into her mind.

He cannot leave her alone like that, her mind put under strain by mental images that are not her own and the uncomfortable knowledge of the house being divided in its opinions pertaining her, each side fighting over her like two drunk privates over a half-empty jug of ale.

Letting her leave on her own is the hardest part and he can only do it because he knows that within the next hour, when she has had time to take down her hair and lose her gown, he will knock at her door again. With a pretend-kiss goodnight he sends her on her way, looking sad and tired. Hopefully, he will be able to remedy that quickly.

Susan, who had come to help her with her attire, wore a concerned facial expression as she went about her duties. Elizabeth watched her in the mirror, as the maid’s deft hands undid buttons and laces, sometimes interspersed with a look upwards to her mistress.

“I know what’s been going on”, Susan tried carefully, knowing she spoke (as was her incorrigible habit) without having been asked to and also knowing the topic was generally not one meant for her ears.

Anyhow, the whole house had to know already, Elizabeth figured, they had shouted so loudly everyone would know by now, from the gardener to the scullery maids.

“They’ve had a fight, about you and the Colonel, and Mrs Graves said a few horrible things.“ Susan stopped there, visibly keeping herself from saying something she thought would distress Elizabeth even more.

“It’s not right, that. The Admiral told her, too, but she won’t budge, says she’s the one to decide what’s best for you.”

“I know. I heard quite a portion of it myself. Thank you, Susan.”

“You know, you could always run away. I could lie in your bed so it would look like you’re sleeping and by the time they discover it’s me, you and the Colonel are halfway to Scotland, and there’s no way the Admiral will ever be able to catch up with you. He’s old and all that“.

A stern look from Elizabeth, softened somewhat by some involuntary amusement that had crept to the corners of her mouth silenced Susan’s elaborate effectuations.

The maid’s mind was too romantic and if Elizabeth hadn’t known better, she would have guessed Susan consumed too many novels.

“I shall do no such thing. Hardly ever does good come from such extreme actions, though I am quite moved by your loyalty. Such foolishness will not do either of us any good, Susan. Think of Mrs Graves’ ire once she would discover you in my bed, you would be chased away in disgrace. We cannot wish that to happen.”

“Still, Miss Gwillim, if there’s anything I can do, all you need to do is tell me what it is. Get the
Colonel, hire a coach, my William’s friends with—“

“I think I will be fine for tonight, you are dismissed.”

Susan curtseyed and closed the door quietly with one last glance back at her, giving her a little smile that was meant to raise her spirits. Elizabeth sometimes wondered if Susan took pity on her, even though it would be more natural if the situation were reversed, for she was the heiress who was raised to know she occupied a certain position in the world and had more money at her disposal in this very moment than Susan would ever have in a lifetime. One thing Susan had but that Elizabeth would never have or come to know was to have a family, a mother, father, brothers and sisters, which caused her to suspect Susan thought her terribly lonely, even if this was not the case, for she had never known it any differently and had been happy as a little girl and never wanted anything.

Lying awake in her bed, Elizabeth shifted from one side to the other, unable to sleep or find rest. She already dreaded the morning, the glares exchanged over an unusually quiet breakfast table, nobody speaking and she and John in the midst of it all, the unintentional eye of the storm.

Rest she should though, because such a situation always required every ounce of mental presence and quick-wittedness.

She had barely closed her eyes when her door opened softly— at first, she had supposed Susan had left something behind she wanted to retrieve, but, to her great surprise, the figure was probably twice as tall and broad as Susan and wore a mulberry-coloured banyan over a ruffled shirt that framed the strong column of his neck rather favourably.

“What are you doing here, John? You know they—“

“I was concerned for you. You did not look well, not after what was being said.”

Quickly, she made room for him to sit down next to her on the bed; just as the first time, it took him a few moments to accept the idea but eventually, he did.

“How did you get here unseen?”, she wanted to know.

“I planned on coming to see if you were well”, he starts his tale, “but even before I could set off from my room, a certain young lady knocked—“

“Susan?”

It is quite charming to watch even in the darkness of the room how Elizabeth sits up in bed and suddenly seems to be considerably more awake than before.

“Yes, Miss Susan. She assured me she had, after attending to you, ensured the Admiral and the Old-Margaret are safely out of the way and wished to tell me that I could go and visit you unseen.”

Instead of commenting on her maid’s intelligence work (although he deeply despises spies, Miss Susan has proven quite useful, he must admit), she asks “what did you call my aunt?”
A slight blush rises in his cheeks and he is thankful for the darkness surrounding them. Luckily, the moonlight, though bright, is not bright enough to reveal such little details.

“Old Bat”, he confesses timidly, ready to be reproached on grounds of rudeness. Instead, and much to his surprise, a snort ruptures the quietness of Eliza’s bedroom, followed by a stifled giggle.

“Quite fitting, though I would strongly advise you against letting her hear that”, she laughs and, more at ease than before, reaches up to him with both hands and locks her fingers at the back of his neck, pulling him down to her.

He still has not forgotten the conversation they have had recently and thought they had mutually decided it would be best to wait and not to rush such matters, for reasons of propriety and readiness to commit to doing the deed, but quickly realises this is not what Elizabeth wants. In order not to crease it, he slips out of his banyan and hangs it over a nearby chair.

As he lets her do with his body as she pleases, she motions him to make himself comfortable on the bed and lying next to her (perhaps still somewhat awkwardly, for this is entirely new for both of them after only having allowed themselves such physical closeness once) she inches closer to him and he instinctively wraps his arms around her, for she is his, but he is also hers, and she has made clear she would like to be held presently. And who is he to deny his Queen such a base request?

Tonight, the rules of the conflict have changed. The little rebellion has turned into a very real war. What a cruel déjà-vu. They need no longer care about propriety, not after all the rude and hurtful things Margaret Graves has said, and if she were to come in now and scream bloody murder at the sight of her niece sleepily resting in his arms, he has no doubts anymore he would simply smirk at her and tell her to leave. The time to fight has come; why did they not load their muskets and ready their bayonets earlier? Was he too battle-weary after the war to prove himself in yet another fight?

He has deserted a lady in distress, his own Eliza at that, it is shameful. Instead of putting on a display of submissive meekness in Margaret’s presence (well, most of the time), he should have confronted her.

He does not deserve her love, never will. How a heavenly angel like Elizabeth could have decided to debase her eyes on him is beyond his understanding.

Curl up close to him and with one arm thrown across his chest to ensure he cannot move away, it is not, as she doubtlessly supposes, he who offers her shelter and a feeling of security, or if he truly does, which he cannot quite believe as in his life so far, trust is not something others have often shown him, he too feels oddly safe, held in a tight embrace with her body so close to his, their heartbeats attuning to one another in a deliciously slow, drowsy drumbeat.

Alas, the drums start to quicken from the lazy thumping of heartbeat to the agitated rat-a-ta-tat just before battle. The drumrolls are joined by fifes playing a marching tune and shots start whizzing past his ear. The soldiers to the left and right of him, faceless uniforms, march in perfect time, their boots making the earth beneath them shake, but to his surprise, they don’t make the characteristic noise of determined steps on beaten ground, all he hears is the sound of someone biting a sizeable piece from an apple.

A river lies ahead of them but it is red, not clear and blue or muddy brown, and the men before him walk into it without even so much as batting an eyelid and the men behind him press on- there is no way to escape. The water is blood, he can smell it, feel it, warm and smelling of iron the river tries to take him. Frantically, his head turns left and right as he sinks deeper into the flood of red until, trying to face forward, he is a soldier after all, he can see the small figure dressed in white on the river bank ahead of him. She reaches out for him, as she has done in other dreams, too; this time however, she
speaks to him, calls his name-

“John. John, please, wake up.”

A dream, just a dream, probably brought on by the terrible events of the past day. As he opens his eyes, he finds himself lying in bed, it must be morning by now, Eliza with him. She is kneeling over him, shaking him by his shoulder with one hand while the other lies buried in his hair, stroking his head.

Upon noticing his eyes had finally opened, she looks at him with concern.

“You’ve been mumbling in your sleep and stirred quite a bit. Have you had a bad dream?”

“Yes.”

She does not ask more, does not want to know anything else; instead, she kisses his forehead and continues to caress him.

After a while, a little eternity, she begins to talk again.

“I am sick of it all. It was never my intention to incite a— a war between my aunt and your godfather, all I ever wanted was to be with you— and however much they fight each other or my aunt tries to convince me that I should forsake you, I will not. If anything, such words only forge my determination.”

How beautifully expressed and how true.

Shivering a little for the night has been somewhat cool, she slides back beneath the blanket close to him. Her body eagerly seeks for contact with his, pressing against him as if to manifest her words in her expression of her love for him, that nothing can separate them, for, he is certain, not even a sheet of the thinnest paper would have been able to fit between their bodies. They are made for each other, he can feel it, and she feels it, too.

“This is a bed, you know.”

He knows instantly what she refers to, their talk the other day. What a sweet thought, with her, now, holding her as she—

“If we were to— would you only do it to— to best your aunt, or in a ploy to force her to consent to marry me to avoid scandal?”

These words, whispered in an agitated tone, leave his mouth not without considerable worry. It is not easily said, that, and although he knows he could have said it in a more direct manner, he didn’t, she understands what he means.

“No. I want you. They can still send me away if my aunt has her way, to my paternal aunts at Whitchurch, or to some relations of Uncle Samuel in Ulster or Dublin, or, if my aunt convinces my uncle that you are the root of her perceived evil, you could be evicted. I want you, all of you, now. That they can never take away from us, whatever might still happen. It would be at least a year before we could meet again if we were to be separated now and God knows what could happen during that time. If this is the only time we have together, we must not squander it.”

There is no vengefulness in Elizabeth’s eyes, only the same desperation he feels, too, to be with her, to be close to her for all times. Her breathing grows heavier as she kisses him and wraps one of her legs around his hip, pulling him even closer to her.
Although the voice of Reason within him cries not to, he cannot help but respond to her fierce kiss and lets Nature have her way with him, kissing her back with equal fervour as he rolls her onto her back, his hands greedily mapping her body.

The feeling of John’s broad, strong frame on top of her, touching her as he had never before elicited a sort of excitement in Elizabeth she could not liken to any other experience.

Aware how a certain part of John was pressing down on her midsection, though constricted still by the fabric of his breeches, felt quite different from before, she briefly called back to her mind everything Susan had told her about what was to happen, but dismissed these thoughts as quickly as they had come to her. There was no need to make herself more anxious of what was to come, she would see for herself soon enough.

Her body eagerly responded to John’s hands and she, too, could tell he liked how her fingers danced across his, though still clothed, chest and back.

Emboldened by the blanket covering both of them, which somehow soothed feelings of awkwardness and nervousness at being engaged in this particular sport for the first time, she mustered the courage to tug at his shirt and reach beneath it, touching the taut, muscular skin of his belly and chest that was covered in hair, through which she experimentally ran her fingers; the feeling was odd, but oddly pleasurable and John seemed to like it, too.

A curious feeling mixed of anticipation, insecurity and desire as she had never felt before pooled in her gut and made her needful of more, more of John's hands stroking her breasts, more of his little noises when he liked something she had done to him, more of everything.

“I love you”, he panted between two hot, impassioned kisses and all she could do was to answer the same-

“JESUSMARYCHRIST!”

A third voice had joined their confessions of love.

John froze mid-kiss.

Being somewhat quicker to grasp what was happening, Elizabeth pushed him off her, which, given he was stunned by surprise was surprisingly easily achieved and he thudded next to her onto the mattress like a felled oak tree.

Susan stood in the room, her usual morning-tray of hot chocolate in hand. Some of it had spilt onto the saucer, yet Susan was to be admired for not having accidentally let go of the cup and tray entirely, which would have resulted in the spillage of its entire contents onto the floor and the carpet and most likely broken the china, too.

“I’m terribly sorry, I didn’t think- I thought the Colonel’d be gone by morning-“

With a complexion almost as fair as John’s, she blushed as easily as he; in fact, the two of them
seemed to be engaged in a contest of who could take the most colour; at present, it was impossible to
tell who of the two appeared more ashamed and Elizabeth silently thanked the Lord that only her
ears and cheeks appeared to be glowing like a roaring campfire.

As the stupor of surprise started to wear off, she was quick to jump out of bed, righting her nightshirt
that had come precariously close to exposing her left breast and smoothing it down until it would
cover the length of her body again after having ridden up to her knees before.

John too, once he appeared to have regained some sense, rose and wrapped his towering figure in his
banyan.

“I shall not keep you then, Miss Gwillim, Miss Susan”, he chimed, bowing in their general direction
as he spoke, pretending (but failing miserably) Susan had come in and disrupted them discussing
Plato- which their general state of dishabille, John’s hair, standing at all angles and the situation they
had been caught in belied.

Once he reached the door, John turned around to add, still blushing violently: “not a word.”

Susan only winked and nodded knowingly with a smirking “of course, Colonel”, on her lips as she
worked to make Elizabeth comfortable in bed to take her morning chocolate.

Elizabeth didn’t know what to say to Susan or even if she should be angry with her, after all, she had
come in and disrupted them in a most critical moment- but then, it was not her fault, for they should
have realised it was already later in the morning than they had initially thought and forgone such
doings until- yes, until when?

In any case, Susan had done no wrong. The only thing Elizabeth was afraid of was that her maid
could report to Aunt Margaret, especially since she had not too long ago made it abundantly clear she
would, were she to come into the perilous situation of having to fear for her position in the
household, tell the Old Bat, as John called her, the truth.

“’m sorry for interrupting, Miss”, came a timid voice from the other end of the room, where Susan
made careful, very careful work of brushing creases out of Elizabeth’s morning robe with her hands.

“It is not your fault the Colonel and I forgot the time”, she answered the maidservant in a tone she
hoped sounded cool and neutral enough to shrug this all off as nothing- for if she was being true to
herself, she was quite embarrassed by having been found in such a compromising pose.

They did not talk about it again, or about anything at all for the time it took for Elizabeth to empty
her chocolate, which was on ordinary days Susan’s hour of idle prattle. When she rose from the bed
however, Susan’s eyes fell to the bedding, inspecting the linen carefully before her eyes came to rest
inquisitively on Elizabeth.

She could tell Susan was enduring physical pain restraining herself from asking the question that was
on her mind.

“So-“ before Susan could finish her question, Elizabeth clarified quickly: “no. You entered before-“
and then broke off, unwilling and somewhat embarrassed to talk about such matters as these.

“I’m terribly sorry, Miss.”

Susan almost made it sound as if she were delivering condolences at the death of a beloved relative.

“Don’t be. But I must ask you to keep what you saw secret.”
One could at least try to keep matters secret. Susan nodded, dimples showing in her cheeks as she smiled reassuringly.

He is somewhat embarrassed to face his love over breakfast, which is an odd affair to say the least; the tension between the Admiral and his wife is tangible, both avoiding to look at or talk to each other, whereas he and Eliza can’t look at each other either, still flustered after this morning’s events.

How sweet the few tender moments had been, her kisses, her skin, the softness of her body. She is a goddess.

Two hearts beat inside his chest; one wants to strangle Miss Susan for her combined offences of lascivious flirtation and entering at the wrong moment and the other is simply happy it has not been Margaret who has entered her niece’s room, for he is certain she would enter unattended, would she harbour a concrete suspicion Eliza were to entertain male company at night.

“There was a commotion this morning”, Margaret’s cuttingly cool voice disrupts his thoughts, “someone loudly uttering a blasphemous profanity that echoed throughout the house.”

His godfather looks at his wife with undisguised disinterest before his eyes return to his plate, but the Old Bat keeps babbling on.

“It was quite loud. I wonder why that might have been?”

Margaret’s eyes find those of each person present at the table, as if she could read anything from them, and perhaps such a thing was possible- he too has the gift to know when a man is lying to him. It would not be completely outlandish to suspect Margaret, or a number of other persons for that matter, might have it too, though they might not quite be as accomplished as he is.

Elizabeth gives her a brief look before she, much like her uncle, finds her fork again whereas he holds the old woman’s stare with calculated unblinking insolence.

Dissatisfied, she must abort her plans now to find a culprit, correct?

“I wonder if it was one of the servants. The voice sounded quite like Susan to my ear, which makes me wonder why you, Elizabeth haven’t heard anything.”

“I sleep very soundly, Aunt”, his loves replies with no obvious hint of agitation in her voice. Her fingers however, appear to twist and intertwine under the table.

“Hm. I shall ask her then.”

Miss Susan was promptly called for.

What could he do? What was to say? If the girl would confess everything she had seen now to Margaret Graves, both he and Elizabeth would be in terrible turmoil. They can still deny everything. He will say Susan’s words are vile calumny and intended as personal revenge against him for having rejected her untoward advances. Who would have thought the girl would sink so lowly as to pull her mistress into the dirt with her, to besmirch her honour thus?
Never before has he thought about sacrificing a woman to a cause, or generally, use a woman in any way, but if it is for the safety and wellbeing of his beloved, he will do anything, however deplorable it may seem.

Miss Susan looks somewhat uneasy as she stands there, facing Margaret with her hands clasped in front of her clean, white apron. Even her hair today looks respectable, tied back underneath a clean cap.

“You called for me, Mrs Graves?”

“Indeed, I did. Can you tell me anything about the commotion early in the morning? I think I heard a voice crying blasphemous things, a voice sounding just like yours.”

The maidservant bites her lip, the epitomical picture of guilt.

“It was me, Mrs Graves, I beg your pardon.”

Margaret, chief-inquisitor, nods vigorously for Miss Susan to continue.

“I- I didn’t want to alarm anybody. There was a rat, in the corridor.”

“A rat?” the Old Bat echoes incredulously.

“Yes”, Miss Susan affirms, her eyes now widened to the size of dinner plates, “a rat. And a large one at that.”

She holds her hands up to give the measurement of the supposed beast by the distance between her palms.

“You mean to describe a cat to me, don’t you, girl? Has perhaps one of the stable cats-“

“No, I assure you, it was a rat. I would know Mrs Graves, I’ve grown up in the country.”

Margaret, he muses, has grown up in the country, too, but there is a difference between the sometimes bare-footed children he has seen both at home and abroad helping their parents with the harvest or polite little ladies being taken for a walk on a well-trodden path between their Papa’s fields by a nurse.

“You- you mean with the tail included, then?”

To his great amusement, the Old Bat sounds confused and more than a little unsettled.

“No, I swear that’s only the body! Such a beast I’ve never seen the likes of. And its eyes! They were big and orange and glowing and glaring at me, and there was me all alone and what else could I do but shriek in despair for God to save me from this monster?”

It is evident Susan enjoys her part a little too much, having been given the grand stage and doubtlessly rejoicing in secret at the fact that her dull days of following orders are enlivened by secret-keeping and intrigue, but Margaret believes her. Even the Admiral’s face now sports a somewhat disconcerted look.

“Is this true, Susan?”

“It is, Admiral Graves! Would I have reason to lie to you, I who have every reason to be indebted to you and your family?”
Charming. She plays the old man like a tavern-fiddle, knowing very likely he has a weak spot for young people; just like his niece, the little orphaned stranger he had taken in, and him, to whom he has tried to be a father after the death of his own, she is a subject of his want to do good. From what he has heard from Eliza, she was taken into service when Susan’s elder brother was killed aboard one of the Admiral’s ships.

It is a tableau worthy of a comical Hogarth-print that unfolds before him: there stands the little servant girl gesturing to enliven her grand stage-debut and looking on, the respectable gentleman and his wife are enthralled in her tale, woven into the little spider’s net like two gullible flies.

Admiral Graves clears his throat, says something about buying traps and commends Susan for her bravery ‘facing the enemy’. The latter walks off to attend to her duties again with a spring in her step, the order to report any further sightings of the beast post-haste and a sixpence dispensed by the Admiral to generously alleviate her shock.

After this little episode of Drury Lane talent wasted in service, the meal progresses as it has begun-silently. He does not dare to speak to Eliza, for the Old Bat, disgruntled, might take it badly. She seems to agree with him, for she too does not say a word and leaves almost instantly when her elders are finished.

Two more days continued in the same manner; fighting ensued, interspersed with momentary ceasefires when a visitor or a salesman visited the house. Elizabeth longed for some quiet time to spend with John alone, but their last, well, whatever one called that sort of thing, had made her careful beyond measure.

So, they did not see or meet too often, and only after asking one of the warring factions for permission to do so. The house felt too narrow, too confined, cage-like, even with its gardens, long country walks and visits to Honiton, Exeter, or the prospect of going to London or visiting Mary Anne and her Somerville-relations not too far away in Somerset- suffocation under its roof seemed imminent, and yet, there was nothing she could do about it.

On one of their authorised walks, they had talked about the somewhat embarrassing events of that night and come to the conclusion it should not be attempted again in the near future in such proximity to Aunt Margaret, although they both, despite the dissatisfactory end to something that had begun so sweetly, could laugh heartily about brave Susan’s play-acting and Elizabeth had secretly rewarded her with one of her skirts that had fallen out of fashion.

In the evening, Elizabeth had retired to her room after renewed agitation had shook the house a few hours before.

And this time, as fighting had grown ugly over dinner, and this time, both she and John had had enough of it.

“Will you not let me speak for myself? It is my life that is being discussed here.”

While Aunt Margaret had told her to hold her tongue, Uncle Samuel had told his wife the same, saying her niece was a young woman, not a wayward child, and what did one year more or less matter, he found her an amiable companion and a person of intellect who should be free to speak on
behalf of herself in this matter.

With as cool and reasonable speech as she could, she presented her arguments, but was interrupted by her aunt, whose ever-repetitive arguments did no good; if anything, they made her even more determined, just because.

She had heard it all before. She was too young in general, too young to die in particular and John (which she did not say directly in his face, but made ample insinuations in this direction) only wanted her for her money and to secure his family line.

This in turn had enraged John, whom she had feared would throw himself at Aunt Margaret and strangle her with his bare hands, so angry was he, but all he did was cross the room to her side in two strides and grab her hand tightly, a little too tightly, as if he feared if he would loosen his grip, it would become physically possible for someone to separate them.

“I love Elizabeth.”

His voice was barely more than a repressed hissing-sound that spoke volumes of how much restraint it cost him to stand by and hear the accusations being made against him by Aunt Margaret.

For a moment, the warring factions did not say a word and Elizabeth seized it boldly by reaching for John’s lapels, forcing him to bow down to her.

The kiss that followed, not unlike their first one, felt unprecedented in its urgency and passion. Shyly, they let go of another, knowing they had had an audience (which had been the point of it).

“How dare you!”

“Belay that, Margaret! Elizabeth, John, leave us, please. And I would be much obliged if you would retire to your respective quarters”, Uncle Samuel had said.

Alone in her room, there was not much that could occupy her mind; even Susan would have been good company, but the latter had taken ill with a cold and, on Elizabeth’s insistence, had retired to bed herself after aiding her with her gown.

Alone in her bed, she wished John to be with her, not necessarily to sleep with her in the sense the world took this phrase to mean, but in the literal sense, if he were simply by her side, if she could hold him in her arms and watch him as the moon would trace his face with delicate shadows and illumine his fiery curls.

When she awoke, heavy rainfall had overnight washed the air clean and crisp and, to everyone’s surprise, had also affected the conflict inside Hembury Fort House.

Aunt Margaret, though still visibly disgruntled, tried to act merry and even felt up to looking at Uncle Samuel again when he spoke instead of gracing him with ignorance.

Something about this was not quite alright. By afternoon, Aunt Margaret had not complained about her headaches, the weather or the servants all day and seemed to be of an almost cheery disposition and cheerfulness being not a mood she was to be found in often, especially after the heavy exchanges of fire in the last days, Elizabeth could not help but wonder (and fret) what had brought on her sudden mellow humour.

Had she devised a ploy to be rid of John?

“Sit, dear”, her aunt commanded and made room next to herself on the settee she usually occupied
alone, forcing Uncle Samuel and herself to sit opposite her.

John had gone out alone, to Exeter, to conduct some business as he had said, which had left her alone with her uncle and aunt.

Gingerly, as if she expected a foul trick, Elizabeth carefully lowered herself down onto the upholstery.

As she did so, Aunt Margaret, having sent the serving girl away, poured each of them a cup of tea and dropped five tea spoons of sugar in hers and a well-dosed drop of milk in Elizabeth’s, who was quite amazed her aunt knew exactly how much milk she liked.

Aunt Margaret never poured tea herself, usually she would, if not in the company of a servant, rely upon Uncle Samuel to perform this duty for her, who had become quite skilled in this art and despite his rather large frame and generally less than favourable reflexes, did his work with a grace and elegance acquired over long years of training.

“These cups, they were a present by your uncle to me when you broke one of my favourite set age eight”, Aunt Margaret said, “I bear no grudge against you”, she added, “you were but a child.”

Elizabeth remembered the incident only too well. Her aunt had been “disappointed” a word which in her vocabulary translated to “furious” and “at present best avoided” in everyone else’s, but Elizabeth was not granted any time to contrive an arid remark to express her sentiments on the topic and was at the same time dry enough to be lost on her aunt who, despite exercising a similar regimen of dry commentary was positively impervious to it when a similar treatment was bestowed upon her, continued in her narrative:

“My, how time flies- you would not break a cup today, you are not like the daughters of Mr and Mrs Grimstock, the girls might have arms and legs enough between them to pass as members of the human race, but have you seen them- no deportment at all and so clumsy! I am quite pleased with you, Elizabeth. A refined young lady you have become, a flower about to blossom.”

While there was undoubtedly more than enough flattery in her words to hint at a hidden agenda, Aunt Margaret’s smile was genuine when she called her “a flower about to blossom”.

“Beauty, wit, artistic talent- God has given you so many assets, some minor defects such as your height aside, which can be remedied to some degree with suitable coiffures, hats and heeled shoes, I must wonder you have proven such an ill judge of character of late and seek the company of John Simcoe.”

There it was, of course. Elizabeth had suspected something along these exact lines all along. Uncle Samuel too looked less than impressed with his wife’s attempt at diplomacy.

“Please Aunt, let us not argue, for as you know, our opinions pertaining the Colonel differ rather starkly and I would not wish to fall out with you for no reason”, she tried to smooth the waves stirred up by her aunt (and recalling the deliberate provocation her kiss had delivered last night), but her aunt’s unrelenting and quite stormy character was not deterred from continuing in her designs that easily:

“Of all men in the county, nay in England, you must set your eyes on a one-eared veteran soldier with a volatile temper and no charms to his person?”

That was quite a subjective opinion, Elizabeth thought to herself. First of all, he was not any one-eared veteran soldier with a volatile temper and no charms to his person, he was her one-eared
veteran soldier with a volatile temper and no charms to his person, which meant she did not care in the slightest about such descriptions of him given uncalled for by others, least of all people Margaret Graves, who would do well to do to afford her own person a higher measure of introspection, for then she would find quite many of the flaws she accused others of in herself.

“The Colonel is a gentleman, though one with many flaws, that I admit. But is it not a woman’s hand that smooths a man’s wrinkled brow, soothes his ire and quietly reforms him without his knowledge?”

Such sentiment resounded with her aunt, who nodded, but had of course to bring forth a demur to her niece’s statement to strengthen her own position:

“Some men are quite horrid to domesticate, and one ought always assess if they’re worth the trouble. If he has a fortune to his name or is of noble stock and can show titles and honours in return, one might consider him. Perhaps even if he is handsome, if this is a quality one searches for in a man. But Colonel Simcoe, as you must surely agree with me, falls in none of these categories.”

Uncle Samuel quietly shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose.

She took a sip from her already somewhat cooled tea and watched Elizabeth expectantly over the rim of her cup.

“Lies not beauty in the eye of the beholder?”, Elizabeth riposted and did not even try to take her eyes away from the horrid, nightmare-ish porcelain monkey on the mantelpiece.

“You have an artist’s eye, child, you surely must see the deformities he calls his features? His mouth is too thin to look pleasant (or speak pleasantly for that matter it appears to me) his nose is unsightly in its considerable longitude and shape, he misses an ear, his eyes are of no natural colour and seem to penetrate the soul quite unpleasantly with his unblinking gazes and above all, he is ginger.”

The amount of almost scandalised-sounding stress her aunt was laying into the last word of her speech caused Elizabeth to suppress a snort. Apparently, from all of John’s great many faults she could choose from, she had chosen to dislike him most for and build her argument against him on his hair colour.

“As an artist”, Elizabeth could not help but say, “I must inform you that you are mistaken: his hair is auburn, not ginger.”

Glancing quickly to the side, where the large frame of her uncle occupied the better part of the sofa, she could detect a certain amusement in his features as he followed the discussion between his wife and niece.

“That is all the same to me, it is dreadfully red and most unsightly. If you exert such influence over him as you claim, can you not advise him to don a wig? It would help if at least he appeared somewhat tamed and domesticated, even if the outward appearance does not in all cases reflect the character”, her aunt opined, gesturing dangerously with her tea cup in hand and making Elizabeth wonder how it was possible she had not spilled anything yet.

“I like it”, she answered plainly, “it is quite unique in both colour and texture.”

“Unique?”, Margaret echoed, quickly swallowing a mouthful of tea, “there were two of the sort once. He had a younger brother, poor thing, who was drowned aged ten. A better-behaved little creature from all I have been told, eager to please well and be a good child unto his poor mother, unlike his wildling elder brother, but endowed with the same unsightly head of hair. He looks
remarkably like his mother in that respect, and where one might be willing to see some exotic charm in a woman, it is hard to do the same in a man with the same misfortunate head of hair. At least for a woman it is possible to arrange her hair fashionably or cover it with a tasteful hat or cap and thus turn it into an asset, a show of taste, rather than a deficiency, the same option is however not open to a man."

“Next you are going to relay to me some superstitions and old wives’ tales regarding people with red hair, I assume?”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

“I am not interested in silly superstitions. However, one must think practically.”

Whatever this meant, Elizabeth was sure she would disagree.

“If you must marry, must it be a man of such inferior looks? You see, his condition has proven hereditary and you would surely not want your offspring to look like- like some savage Celt better fit to feature in ‘Ossian’ than to dwell in polite society. Think of what the people would say if I were to be seen with them-”

She couldn’t help herself any longer, Elizabeth laughed, involuntarily snorting some tea onto her saucer in a most unrefined manner.

“So you have planned ahead already? Does that mean you give your permission at last? Have you seen reason?” “He hasn’t asked for your hand yet”, her aunt replied darkly and with an undertone that revealed she had not made her last stand quite yet.

“He hasn’t asked for your hand yet”, what a ‘pack of nonsense’, as his Eliza would say. With his good ear pressed against the door, he listens intently. His business in Exeter completed, he had returned post-haste to be informed ‘the Family’ had retired to a private sitting room to talk. He had instantly known what this would be about and his suspicions were confirmed.

Ha, they are wed already, in secret, and that is as good as being formally engaged to him.

And whatever Margaret may say and whatever his believes regarding the dishonourable nature of intelligence work- he still has a secret weapon, secret information she does not know he possesses. It is not the gentlemanly way to settle a dispute, but quite effective. And in the name of love, a warrior must fight, whatever his means. And he has not yet heard that the rules of gentlemanly warfare apply to angry house-dragons.

His fingers occupied with something hidden in the depths of his pocket, he makes his way to his room to change and make himself presentable- he would not want Margaret to accuse him of being a sloppy dresser on top of the mountain of charges he has accrued before her court.

The Old Bat will see soon enough she cannot win. There might still be some powder and smoke she is using to try and scare her enemy, but she has long run out of ammunition. Her cannons and muskets are without shot and, circled from three sides, she will have to relent soon.

Smirking to himself, he thinks of his dear, of the kiss she will give him when he makes his return
known to her. Perhaps, if they are both bold enough, they should let Margaret watch again. It would do her good to get accustomed to the sight rather sooner than later.

Chapter End Notes

Gretta Green: A village in Dumfriesshire just across the border between Scotland and England and a popular wedding destination in the past for runaway couples. Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act (1753) stipulated that, if a minor (a minor being a person less than 21 years of age) wanted to marry, parental consent was needed, otherwise, parents could veto the union. As the law only applied to England and Wales, many English and Welsh couples where one or both parties were below the age of 21 and could not obtain the blessing of their parents or guardians travelled to Scotland to be married there as under Scottish law, virtually everyone could conduct a marriage ceremony as long as two witnesses were present and no parental consent was needed even for minors to tie the knot. Gretna Green was often a strategic choice, as it is just across the border and very near to the main stage coach route linking Edinburgh and London. Traditionally, it is said that most marriages were conducted at the blacksmith's anvil.

Dublin: Simcoe was stationed in Dublin in his teens sometime before he came to the US. However, it would be a bad choice as there would have been a number of Graves', extended relations of Samuel Graves in the area. Some Graves-gravestones still stand there today.

Jack/gentleman: an allusion to a scene in Shakespeare's "Richard III", act I, scene III.

Coeus: also Koios, one of the twelve titans, usually associated with intellectual pursuits. Elizabeth of course makes a pun on the bodily dimensions and the name of her beloved when calling him by that name.

Susan's plan to let Elizabeth escape is based on Simcoe's prison break plan from his days in captivity. Another man who was imprisoned with him offered to lie in his bed while he and another prisoner would escape with a forged key with the obvious objective that nobody would notice his absence until he had gained a sizeable headstart. The plan failed, though, as the forged key broke in the lock.
Intrigue No More, Just Love

Chapter Notes

I would like to thank Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and Louise (1743-1823), Caroline (1763-1847) and Charlotte von Lengefeld (1766-1826) for being able to finish this chapter- nothing could be more inspiring than walking through an 18th century home, sitting down to rest by the piano and pretentiously muse about one's own attempt at writing- contrary to Louise Miller and her Major however, luckily, Elizabeth Gwillim and her Colonel will overcome the opposition of their family- and even in this chapter! You may have noticed I named this chapter in allusion to Schiller's (already alluded to above) famous play "Intrigue and Love" (1784).

I'm quite sure Schiller would have told me off for it (at least his bust is looking on with a scrutinising glance as I type this), but let ye be warned, in terms of 18th century writers, this chapter will also deliver a dose of John Cleland, if you know what I mean. Ok, so while I don't think this story requires a general update in rating, this chapter does.

That being said, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Although his step is sprightly thinking of his dear, his leg is malcontent having been used so unsparingly on his wild, unbridled ride to Hembury Fort House (the thought of his Eliza made him urge the horse to even greater speed, wishing the miles between them to decrease by the second) and he cannot deny it is prickling and aching now that he is in his room, having rather hobbled to his bed like a cripple on crutches, where he allows himself a moment’s rest to recuperate.

He should be happy, he knows; he is lucky to have survived America after all that happened to him and returned at all, and returned to find no cold, empty rented quarters his home but Admiral Graves’ house, where, the Old Bat aside, his godfather has received him with open arms and, above all, where he first met the wonderful, divine Miss Elizabeth Gwillim, who adores him for whatever reason her in all other aspects of life so rational mind has inflamed her heart with passion for him, him of all men.

With his leg vexing him so, his thoughts turn gloomy despite the sweet promise of seeing his Eliza again a little later.

He should be happy about having survived and should be even happier he has recuperated to such a degree within half a year; he can walk without assistance, ride and perform all other forms of physical exercise without being reminded of the rib that has ripped his lung or the broken leg he suffered this past October at Blandford, however he is not as yet restored to his full physical powers of which he not too long ago prided himself. In his days with the Rangers, he could go days without food or sleep, walk, ride for days, all of which he is incapable of doing now to the same extent he has done before.

But what is worst, in his mind at least, is that his invalidity is only the peak of the iceberg of unsuitability for becoming a groom within the year, a phantasy he has occupied his mind with the entire ride from town and for which he has made plans that will greatly please his love.
O Eliza! What does she see in him, why would she love him better than those younger, unbroken men that have offered her companionship for life?

Some of them might even have had titles or money, neither of which he can offer her. If love were gold, she would be the richest woman in England, nay, in all the world, yet immaterial as it is, she must take him by his word when he assures her she is dearer to him than all the world combined, than everything she can think of and that he would pluck the stars from the starry heavens for her, if it were her wish (it would also be quite amusing to do so because certain frog-faced gentlemen would retreat from their oh-so-scientific stargazing in utter confusion, wondering where the stars have gone he has stolen to offer at his darling’s feet in veneration of her).

Apart from being by no means a desired or desirable match for any young woman, what will come of his injuries? Will she, would she officially promise her lifelong companionship to him, become a nurse rather than a wife? Who knows, will he still be able to walk in ten years’ time, or will Eliza have to nurse a bedbound invalid then, unable to give her the marital joy and heartfelt friendship she deserves? By then, she, so young today, will still be young then and no man can wish his wife to become a carer, a maid-servant to attend to an old man in bed, disgruntled with age and dissatisfied with a life about to end in the near future cast into the shadowy obscurity of half-pay, half-paid bills and pain only to be dulled by strong medicine, his only light in the darkness?

He cannot wish Eliza to commit to a life with him, and yet it is his greatest wish, and hers, too. All his life, he has adhered to strong principles and a regimen of self-discipline, which quickly forgotten however as soon as Elizabeth Gwillim is involved.

In the beginning, he had felt entombed at Hembury Fort House, buried alive in the coffin-cosiness of its rooms, the grey, empty flowerbeds of winter reminiscent of a grave freshly earthed up.

When Elizabeth entered his life however, or rather, he allowed her into the crypt of his former life, she has made everything so beautiful. At her hand, the grey weather of winter had faded into spring, flowers like hopeful little suns sprung from the ground, worshipping the sun with their resplendent beauty and birdsong assuring his ear he is not buried deep, but alive, living and breathing, resurrected from the Orcus by his personal Goddess whose kiss tastes sweeter than ambrosia.

And for some silly reason he cannot fathom, she loves him, too, loves him without inhibition or doubt, loves him with his missing ear and frankly unappealing face, the red hair that has never pleased any beholder and the eyes that lack any natural colour; there is no reason for her to love him and yet she does.

If he succeeds and against his better judgement he shall brave himself to ask formally for her hand despite knowing she deserves better than him, they can be happy forever and whatever may come to him, he shall strive to make her the happiest woman in the world. He shall not rush downstairs now to greet her, he will take his time and be the most polite man in the length and breadth of England. He will talk to Margaret, then to his godfather (for even though it is Margaret who can decide upon Elizabeth’s fortune, it is traditional to ask the father of the bride for his consent) and, if all goes well, before the next day, she will be his fiancée.

His fiancée.

What a beautiful thought that they may soon join their hands in church; from what he has overheard of the conversation between Elizabeth and the Old Bat, it sounds as if she is slowly retreating, sensing she can only be defeated by the ardent love between them.

He shall talk to Margaret tonight. Tonight.
-His thoughts are disrupted by hushed voices in the corridor, one of them which he would recognise anywhere.

*Eliza.*

She mustn’t find him so, lost in thoughts and utterly nervous at the mere idea of formalising the love they have pledged alone on the hilltop not long ago and must not know of what he is going to do at all.

So far, they have agreed upon marrying, which logically does mean one party must propose to the other and since she is not of legal age to marry without her guardian’s consent, and it is commonly regarded as proper the man must take to the knee, this task falls to him and he must ask Margaret for her niece’s hand.

This is all well and good, but he is fearful that although her resistance appears to be crumbling, she may say no and remain unwilling to place Eliza’s hand in his.

It would only worry Eliza to know he shall speak with the Old Bat and make her fretful, wherefore he has decided against informing her about finally asking for her hand in all formality.

With this thought in mind, he quickly leans back leisurely against the cushions and grabs the book resting on his nightstand, some third-rate novel he has taken from the library, and flips it open at a random page, pretending to read when (he is barely ready arranging himself) the awaited knock at the door prompts him to call his visitor in.

To his surprise, the head appearing in the gap between door and doorframe is not his Eliza’s, instead a pair of roguish blue eyes gleams at him and, turning around again, Miss Susan calls too loudly to be clandestine, lost in the thrill of aiding and abetting such an illicit act as helping two lovers to meet in private:

“’S all right, Miss G., you can go in!”

With a wink at him, she is gone and now, Elizabeth steps into the room, beautiful as ever. She radiates light wherever she goes and her incomprehensibly soft rosebud lips smile at him, inviting a thousand kisses and a hundred more.

“John, you are back”, she exclaims joyously and walks over to the bed. “Susan told me she had heard- Why haven’t you come to greet us?”

A divine kiss is shared as she bends down to him, planting her lips on his. When they are done and allow each other find air, he, with a heavy heart, answers her.

“My leg. I needed to rest a while. It appears it has not healed as much as I’d like it to.” True, his leg is not yet recovered, but it is not so broken as he pretends in front of her. Eliza sits down at the edge of the bed and inspects his left leg, exploring it with her hands trying to detect irregularities where it once was broken.

Much he would love to tell her it’s all right, his leg not hurt so badly, but that would make him a liar and reveal his surprise, which he is not inclined to do.

It is the hardest thing, lying to her, and for a moment he wonders how other people he has known, one Abraham Woodhull in particular, manage to tell falsities so often and without inhibition.

He doesn’t have a conscience, the false weasel, for he could lie to his wife quite fine without, or so it appeared to him, ever feeling remorse or shame at doing so. Rather, Weasel Woodhull had used his
ignoble talent for lies against his poor, long-suffering wife whose duty it appeared he considered done after she had given him a son and heir, at which he returned (if he ever stopped, that is) to see his childhood sweetheart in private for reasons that did not require being guessed at.

Watching Eliza attempting to console him makes his heart bleed, for tho’ it does vex him a little, his leg does not hurt him in such a way he pretends to in front of his love, whose brow furrows and who climbs up to the head of the bed to console him with her embrace and assurances that he is the bravest warrior under the sun, making him promise he shall see Doctor Enfield in the coming days.

After what had almost transpired between them, they are grown uninhibited when it comes to being with each other and even if there always is the risk of being caught and they shall not do what evidently both of them longed for quite desperately as long as the Old Bat and her minions are near, they delight in holding each other close, spending some time in the other’s embrace before they will have to get up eventually.

She is careful not to inconvenience his leg and admonishes him for having ridden back so speedily; she had no intention to leave and would have greeted him with as much delight tomorrow as she did today.

He tries to lose himself in her embrace, the angelic face pressed against his chest, but he cannot. He has lied to her, and if his plan misfires, he shall have lied to her in vain.

Mechanically, his hand roams across her back, lost in thoughts until Eliza calls him back to order: “Are you re-reading it?” She has reached for the book he has discarded on the coverlet and flips through its pages. Not knowing what she might be on about, he asks her why, to which she only replies: “You left the book open at page twenty-three, but it appears you marked page one hundred and seventy-six with a piece of paper.”

Drat. Secrets and lies never were his metier, he prefers the open field of battle to dark secrecy.

“Yes”, he answers quickly, at which his dear only laughs, gazes at him adoringly and calls him a “curious man”.

They remain together for a few moments more, but this is all they grant to themselves, for either they will (and not long ago, they have done so) succumb to the electrifying presence of the other again, which, given the Old Bat is near and Miss Susan knows of their whereabouts would be most inadvisable.

So they talk, and he pretends he hasn’t heard the conversation Elizabeth relays to him yet, shaking his head at her aunt’s effectuations and opinions.

“John, what’s wrong?”, Elizabeth asked, concerned. Although he was here with her, held her as he always did when they were alone, she could not help but feel something was wrong.

In his every action, even in their conversation, he appeared to be absent, his thoughts engaged elsewhere. Had he received bad news in town? Was it his leg? Had she done or said anything he had taken the wrong way? If so, she would like to know, so any misunderstanding could be cleared
before it could develop into a festering wound of the soul.

“Nothing”, he answered curtly, his voice too high-pitched to speak the truth.

“I know you, you’re a bad liar.”

Trying to read what was on his mind from his eyes, she settled herself above him, who still lay down on the bed, pinning him there with her forearms on his chest on which she supported herself, looking down at him.

They did not blink (did they ever? The only times he closed his eyes were for sleeping and when kissing her) but reciprocated her gaze with the impermeable darkness of two deep wells whose bottoms could not be seen.

“Now”, he chirped all of a sudden, sitting up so quickly and with so much energetic force she would almost have fallen over steadying herself, “up you get. I fear I have missed tea, but I should not want to be home without announcing my return to the Graves’, which would be very rude!” Shaking his head in an almost theatrical manner as if he could not believe such rudeness could ever exist, he made for the door in a brisk step that did not quite match his complaints about his leg.

But then, perhaps he was only trying to put on a show of invulnerability for her? Not being able to tell, Elizabeth decided to retreat for the moment and make it look like she had been sitting in Uncle Samuel’s study all the time, trying to compose a letter to Mary Anne.

-She really should do that, writing to her best friend, who had to feel neglected by now, after not having received the speedy reply she had come to anticipate after years of exchanging letters with Elizabeth.

In the past weeks, she realised, she had been very slow replying, if at all; lost in the haze of the tumultuous events of the last week in particular, she had not given her much thought, given that she had spent her time dreading to lose John any second at a wink of Aunt Margaret’s hand.

Luckily, it had not come to this and judging from the past conversation, she was not as terribly opposed to them being together as she had been before, perhaps Uncle Samuel had gradually mollified her-

Her eyes fell to the still empty paper on the desk. What should she write to Mary Anne to soothe the latter’s justified concern and likely feeling of personal injury, too, for having been neglected so?

**Dear Mary Anne,**

*I am very sorry for the delayed reply, in recent time, my aunt and uncle have been shredding each other to pieces, the topic of their argument being my future. You would be certain to side with La Dama Duende for once, as she opposes my wish to marry John with fervour and thinks either he must have sweet-talked me into the affair it all, or that I am trying to put on a display of stubbornness intended to enrage her, testing her authority...*

Hardly could such a letter be penned without her best friend suffering a heart-attack and taking the next post-coach for Honiton in order to convince her of Aunt Margaret’s arguments and to wish her strength in these tumultuous times at the same time.
Dear Mary Anne,

I hope this letter finds you as well as it finds me...

“John Simcoe”, Margaret Graves greets him coolly, not knowing (for when she was wed to the Admiral, his father had been long dead) she addresses him by a dead man’s name, which is even fitting; should he be refused, he is certain his heart is bound to snap in two and it will be Old Queen Margaret who shall be arrested for his murder.

“Mrs Graves”, he bows reverently in her direction, deep and elegant, before he turns to his godfather, who rather informally draws him into an embrace and pats his back as if he were a stout cart-horse.

“You need not treat me like an impressionable damsel falling for flatterers like you”, the old woman comments, her lips thin.

The two old people were still seated beside each other when he found them, the Admiral’s hand resting on his wife’s. Apparently they had come to a state of near-reconciliation, a common understanding of peace.

Even in Margaret’s eyes, at least when she is looking at her husband, he can spot a hint of relief they are not shouting at each other anymore.

Of course he does not take her for a damsel, and certainly not an impressionable one. If her words however are supposed to hint at this is what she takes Elizabeth for due to having fallen in love with him, he feels offended in his love’s stead and would vows to avenge her if only the enemy weren’t her own aunt and guardian.

His godfather, seated once more next to his wife, sighs softly, earning himself one of her icy glances.

“I am here to speak with you.”

He nods in Margaret’s very general direction.

“What business would you have with me?”

“Why, I thought what I want to talk to you about would be obvious. And do not call her a business.”

Suddenly, the room is so quiet, he thinks he can hear the wind rustle the leaves of the trees outside.

“Mrs Graves, I am aware of our personal discord, but you must not let personal sentiment come in the way of your niece’s happiness”, he brings out shakily, a sentence he has practiced over and over in his head on his ride home.

“My niece’s happiness that will profit you considerably. You bring her presents now, which must be impressing to any young woman, but as soon as you are wed to her, said presents, should you not cease to lay them at her feet like a cat does dead birds, will be paid from her own money- a fine business-scheme indeed.”

The vile old witch. If one of them is a schemer, it is her, has she forgotten what she did to Elizabeth? About Richard Graves? He has prepared a very pretty speech, but the script is all abandoned now as the warrior inside him cries for retribution at being accused of such lowly intentions.

“I wonder if you are the right person to judge matters of character, Margaret”, he starts, well aware
the malevolence in his eyes will make him look fearsome, his sibilants sounding like a snake slithering across the floor, “pray tell, what happened at the ball, the one where Elizabeth was almost attacked by Richard Graves?”

Smirking, he savours the effect he is having on the Old Bat, who goes white as a sheet. Her husband, so often oblivious or perhaps even afeard of her temperament, does not know yet. The better for him, actually.

“I saw you talking to Richard Graves at the dance, before he went after Elizabeth. I know it was you. While it was not your intent for her to come to any harm, you plotted for her to be interested in him—still, it was you who put Elizabeth in grave danger, all to be rid of me.”

Margaret first gasps for air, then looks to her husband before she turns to him. The Admiral looks shocked, though not surprised.

“You almost killed her in that race!”, she exclaims, “Of course I do not want- I could not know he would-“

She trembles, not with tears, but with anger. Anger directed against him and Richard Graves alike.

“Margaret”, the Admiral attempts to intervene, his voice soft and tentative, “quiet. Enough has happened so far. John is not at fault, her fall was a proven accident. However, my nephew’s ill-treatment of Elizabeth—“ he shakes his head in disbelieving disappointment.

“I love her”, he decides to give his best argument, “and by showing you were willing to give her to Richard Graves, who, as far as I know, does not possess any greater personal finances than his rank and fatherly allowances do grant him, you make clear you are not generally opposed to the idea of your niece marrying.”

“Yes”, Margaret countered, “if she must— but Richard is heir to my husband and shall have Hembury Fort House when—“ here, she stumbles over her words, glancing to her husband with a concerned expression in her eyes, “when The Inevitable comes, which sounded like a great advantage to me. She could remain here, in the house of her youth with a husband she knows for some time.”

“…and dislikes”, the Admiral adds.

“She does not dislike me. I swear to protect and honour your niece with my body and soul, which I shall commit to her entirely and lay my life at her feet.”

Nodding, Margaret continues, “A pretty speech, yet it is well-known one cannot live on love alone and since you cannot offer anything other than your love, it must be feared you care for her fortune, too; perhaps even more than for her.”

The day will come when the Old Bat will learn to fear him, and he would much like to jump up and get to her now, frighten her like those erring colonials and making it abundantly clear that he is not to be insulted so.

“By my honour, I would love her all the same were she a miser. I did not know when I discovered my feelings for her she stands to inherit a fortune, the which I shall protect, too.”

“Seize, you mean.”

“I am well aware her money should pass into my hands by the law when we are wed, which does not mean I approve or think it right- Elizabeth will have free reign over what is hers, be consulted in all matters of expenses, which on my part are modest and few. I do not gamble, nor do I drink
excessively or spend my money in Covent Garden when in London. In America, I have at times survived on foraging, you will thus find me quite frugal.”

Margaret frowns.

“You do not plan to steal turnips to survive, I hope? I would not want my niece’s name tarnished.”

“Margaret”, the Admiral interjects loudly and with a theatrically long sigh, “does that mean you consent? Are your fears quenched?”

The way he says these things indicates they have talked about having this conversation before.

“Yes”, she hisses through gritted teeth, a wounded tigress on retreat, but soon ready to strike again.

“I am glad about your change of mind”, he smiles, though he would like to weep and laugh at the same time now, out of sheer joy and happiness- but Margaret is here, and his godfather shall not think him weak, especially not when he is soon to protect his niece.

“On one condition.”

Ah, there it is. What else can the Old Bat want? His other ear? His right hand? His left eye? -He would gladly give all three of them in exchange for Elizabeth’s hand and the promise he will never hear from her again.

“Elizabeth must be twenty when you marry, meaning it cannot be done before her birthday at the end of September”, she explains, all business-like. “Understood, Simcoe?” Nodding gravely, he looks directly at Margaret:

“So can I consider us affianced then, at least?”

“You must ask her about that, don’t you? If it is her wish?”

What a pack of nonsense, he knows already. She has married him in secret, in their own little ceremony already, the wind, the trees and the animals of the Blackdown Hills as witnesses.

-Which Margaret shall never hear about, of course.

“Susan! You almost scared me to death”, Elizabeth exclaimed, realising she felt she was not used to Susan making a quiet entry when at most times, she could be heard approaching from afar.

“M sorry, Miss. I was sent to get you by the Admiral.”

What could Uncle Samuel want?

“Do you know why?”

Tilting her head this way and that with unease, Susan shrugged, “no.”

Obviously, she was not telling the truth as the colour in her cheeks rose to a lively blush.
“Is it serious?”, she prodded further, fearing there might have been a death in the family, perhaps one of her paternal aunts at Whitchurch or one of Uncle Samuel’s relations with whom she was acquainted.

“Depends on how you view it, Miss”, Susan answered cryptically before urging her to come and follow, for her Uncle would be waiting.

To her shock, she did not find Uncle Samuel alone; in the sitting room, there were both John and Aunt Margaret present, too, the latter’s facial expression utterly unreadable while John’s fingers drummed against the side of his thigh at great speed.

What could all this mean?

But before she could form any further thoughts, John rose from his chair. The entirety of his body was trembling slightly, as if greatly agitated, perturbed perhaps by some ill tidings that she had yet to come to know about? Was he to be sent back to duty, leaving for foreign shores the next day?

Still shaking, he searched for her eyes and, as their gazes locked, did not let her go, leaving her transfixed.

This is the most important moment of his life. She is his everything, the sun in his day, the moon in his night sky and without her, he is utterly lost, she is the one he loves, and no other could ever be like her, his Queen, whom he wants to gift the world and himself by getting onto his knee in front of her.

Luckily, he manages without accident and looks up to her, who must now know what is happening.

“Miss Gwillim, would you consider to marry me?”

With her aunt and uncle present, he is hesitant to declare his intentions more informally, which is why he opts for the correct address of his beloved.

It is propriety they want, and they shall have it as long as Elizabeth and he can have each other.

There is surprise in her eyes, shock almost that this is happening, and happening in front of her aunt and uncle, but it is wiped away in the next second by a radiant smile.

When her lips part to say “I accept- with gladness”, there is no doubt left in him this is not a nightmare, not a dream, this is reality and it is sweeter than anything he could ever have imagined.

His love, his fiancée holds her hands out to him to help him up, concerned for his injured leg, which he could not care less for in this moment.

Before he knows what either of them is doing, she is in his arms and off the floor, and they twirl around, laughing, tears of joy staining their faces, of which it is hard to tell the fountain of their origin anymore when their faces meet, their foreheads leaning against each other.

As beautiful as the moment is, it cannot last. Margaret is still with them and even the Admiral is not entirely in favour of viewing them so intimately, wherefore they reluctantly let go of each other and
stand somewhat apart to await the closing speech of one of their elders.

“Is it true, Aunt? That I can be with John? You have changed your mind?”, Eliza wishes to know, her face glowing with joy.

“I consented under the condition you will not wed before turning twenty. You will still be young enough then, and besides, we must not hurry the matter of your marriage. Such a festivity requires to be planned properly- unless one makes a Gretna Green marriage of course or has other reasons to be quick about it. One would not want to put on a display of scandal”, she closes.

His love nods.

“It is not long anymore anyway; I think we shall manage. Am I right, Colonel?”

“Miss Gwillim-“ (in his mind, her name already resounds as Mrs Simcoe) “for you, I would wait a thousand years.”

The Old Bat makes a face as if she’d taken a bite of a raw onion- or perhaps found a maggot in her dish of cabbage.

“Do we have your blessing, Aunt?”

She had to ask- despite Aunt Margaret’s at times insufferable behaviour, she respected and loved her.

“You have, child”, she answered without ado, though Elizabeth was certain that while she tried to be happy for her, Aunt Margaret was not happy at all with it, personally.

“You be happy with him.”

Uncle Samuel, at sensing the continued frostiness between his wife and his godson, intervened by coming forth to congratulate them both.

“My girl”, he held her at arm’s length and in a shaky voice told her, “I am very happy for you”, before he continued on to John. The two men shared a brief embrace before Uncle Samuel looked up at his godson with tears in his eyes.

“Make her happy, my boy, do you hear that?”

“Nothing would make me happier, Admiral.”

“I told you to stop that. Now that we are to be a proper family-“

A proper family. It sounds idyllic in his ears, even if Margaret Graves is part of it. At least for now, the Old Bat seems to have made an offer of peace by finally relenting and he is intent to honour it as long as she does, too. The family peace is important.

“Now off you go, you two”, Samuel booms, attempting to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye without anyone noticing, “you do certainly do not need old people to celebrate your happiness- go
out a while and talk about the things you don't wish us to hear.”

Of course, it did not go as quickly as Uncle Samuel had said- the horses needed to be saddled first and her attire changed.

When however they finally headed out, neither of them could hold back any longer; far enough away from the house, they let their horses fall into a swift gallop and race, their noses in the wind, laughing out loud.

It was the first time she had heard John laugh so freely, so happily and it made her happy, too.

“Are you happy, Mr Gwillim?”, she asked, laughing now, too, and he replied “yes” to their little joke which no one else could share with them. The day was not particularly beautiful, the clouds grey and the colours thus dreary, but around them, everything glowed and radiated with light.

They have raced through the landscape for quite a while when a summer thunderstorm takes them by surprise and within minutes, they are both wet to the bone, Elizabeth’s pretty hat with feathers ruined.

She digs her heels into her horse’s side, urges him to go on, go faster, toward the edge of the forest, where they hope to find shelter.

A forest is not the most advisable place to be should lightning strike, but, taking the likeliness of being struck by lightning and the size of the forest into account, they should be safe, he figures.

Eliza, though initially disgruntled, starts to find enjoyment in the unkind weather, tilts her head to the sky and laughs, turning to him to see if he shares her sentiment of taking joy from even the most unlikely scenarios.

The wind is picking up over the fields, blowing thick raindrops into their faces and now, he figures, not even Eliza can find joy in this anymore, for it is entirely unpleasant to be so deprived of sight.

“John”, she calls out to him, her voice raised to make herself known above the splatter of raindrops, the whizzing of the wind and the occasional sound of thunder, “there is a barn a half-mile or so from here if we follow the treeline, we can find it.”

This statement, more a question to him if he is willing to undertake another rainy ride through the painful field, sounds like the most prudent thing to do. Wet they are already, and if the prolonging of their ordeal means a much more pleasant outcome, so be it.

The horses thunder on, their hooves splashing wet dirt up his boots and her dress as they ride side by side, unwilling to lose sight of each other.

Knowing what happened in spring, he is thoroughly afraid for her, his senses heightened to their
surroundings, to every stone, root or molehill he can possibly espy. In this moment, he is not her fiancé; he is back in the field and this is a mission.

Everything else around him becomes irrelevant but the objective to escort Elizabeth safely to the barn.

Finally, they arrive.

The place is not big, but, as Elizabeth assures him, the tenant has renewed the roof only last year and it can be expected they will be reasonably dry and she is right.

Inside, it smells like fresh hay, of which he feeds some to the two dripping wet horses bound to a post who are visibly thankful for the refreshment after their strenuous journey.

Inspecting the barn for other things they may find useful (a skilled soldier knows how to forage with success), he finds two old horse rugs with a few holes chewed into them by moths or mice. They are far from what his Queen deserves, but better than nothing. He could light a fire; but no, no fire in here. He of all people knows best how easily a barn, and everything trapped within it, can burn.

Blinking in an attempt to shoo the images of burnt Long Island barns away, his eyes find his love, who has tossed her hat aside and rids herself of her riding gloves. She is trying to amass hay in such a way it will make a comfortable enough seat, but wet as they are, sitting directly in the hay is a bad idea as the dry stalks will cling to their clothes, which is more of a nuisance than sitting down would do them good.

“Here, allow me.”

He makes them both a nest of hay, fetching armfuls and then evening it out until it is to his satisfaction, before he spreads one of the blankets over it.

His love looks at him with so much love in her eyes and he feels like the great, celebrated war hero he never was at seeing her look at him like that, praising him with a kiss on the cheek for wanting to make her comfortable under such less than favourable circumstances.

To his great surprise however, she does not lie down immediately but undoes her redingote and, as well as possible, lays it out to dry.

“I shall not return to fall ill and die before my wedding-day”, Elizabeth commented dryly at John’s alarmed face as after the redingote, she undid her shoes and garters to let her stockings follow.

In order to demonstrate to him the necessity to be rid of the wet garments, she held one of her stockings up and wrung it out.

“See? It is better to be rid of it all than to die of a severe cold or worse still, pneumonia. You had better do the same.”

She could see the insecurity on his face as he slowly peeled his clammy coat off his shoulders. Quite frankly, her heart raced, too; after all, he had seen her so very undressed only once before, but she bravely fought the conflicting feelings of odd anticipation and bashfulness and instead asked him to
help her with her stays, which she was not accustomed to remove on her own—usually, she had Susan to do it for her.

His fingers, so warm despite being positively drenched, trembled as he undid the lacing.

Left only in her shift, which was also far from dry, but which she was unwilling to remove for reasons of propriety, Elizabeth smiled up at him before walking over to the comparatively inviting-looking bed of horse rugs, pulling the second one over her body as she allowed her body to relax laying back in the hay.

Eliza stands before him now, a vision, a statue carved of the finest Italian marble with her shift clinging on to her body and her disordered hair having freed itself from her coiffure, flowing onto her shoulders now in a manner that looks artistic and intentional.

She would be just as clothed if she were wearing nothing, he comes to think when he looks at her, the shift hugging her body so tightly in its wet embrace it leaves nothing to the imagination from the shapeliness of her breasts, her nipples erect from the cold, to the shadow-like triangle flanked on either side by a most shapely calf—scolding himself for ogling so, he looks away. Even though they are now officially promised to another, he has no right to gawk at her like that, especially when exposed in such a manner.

Safely tucked beneath the second blanket, in comfort so far from her bed at the Fort and yet so very adventurous in its rough wildness, Elizabeth watched as John, too, gingerly unclothed himself until only shirt and breeches remained, which he kept on before sliding beneath the horse rug with her.

It reeked of horse, which, on the animal itself, was not a foul smell, but certainly did not belong in the category of preferred scents to perfume one’s bedding with. Anyway, it kept them warm and although not entirely dry, John’s protective embrace was unparalleled to anything else, utterly sweet and comforting, doubtlessly warmer than any blanket.

They must have lain still, without even talking there for quite a while when thunder struck, growling loudly above them. As a child, she had been afeard of it, but in later years, fear had made way for curiosity, how lighting struck and thunder was made, and was thus banished by scientific curiosity.

Just as the thunder above them struck, Johns arm around her tensed so hard it was almost painful, pressing her back against him, a suppressed noise escaping his lips.
It is embarrassing every time she sees him in such a state of weakness. Although she has seen him coping badly with a nightmare before and knows his countenance tear-stained, too, he is uncomfortable that she should ever see him like this.

He wants to be strong for her, the warrior, the knight she deserves but instead, however hard he tries, he is reduced to naught but a coward.

The thunder makes him involuntarily think of the battlefield, of cannons tearing through ranks of men- he recalls one instance, in which he had watched six men all lose their legs to one cannonball. None of them survived, some dying where they had fallen on the field, others dying later, crippled shells of the proud soldiers they had been, in the field hospital.

Whatever he has told Woodhull about the trained soldier’s calmness in battle, it is not entirely true. Yes, he can block the vivid images of blood and death from permeating his mind, but only for so long. He can fight without thinking, without realising what he is doing, his movements practiced and effective, a human weapon destined to kill.

It is only afterwards these images come back, haunting him, perhaps carried by the vengeance of the souls he has extinguished.

War needs men like him, and men like him need war; it is on the field his life had found meaning and he had proven himself an able commander and a good soldier- until his zealousness one day got the better of him and took control, making him the monster everyone had come to fear.

He sees that now.

He doesn’t want to be feared, not by all, at least. And similarly, he doesn’t want anybody to fear for him.

Eliza holds him steady around the chest, where he places his hand over hers, holding it.

Even through the clammy cold of her shift, she warms him more than he can say and feels oddly soothed by the consoling words she coos into his ear.

“You are very brave. It’s almost over. My brave, brave Colonel-“

Although it should be the other way around, she protects him, and despite being quite frankly undersized for any army duty, she guards him better than his entire regiment of Rangers could have. With her, he feels safe.

He eases under her touch and allows his body to mould into hers, seeking her touch, her body, needful of her and her only.

Time passes and the thunder and lightning, which they only see as momentary flashes of bright light through the gaps between the wooden boards of the barn door cease.

All that is left is the violent rainfall and the smell of wet horses.

After a while, he turns to her, because he must see his saviour’s face, behold her countenance to find new life in this eternal fountain of joy and love.

His beloved, nay his fiancée, takes his face in her hand and kisses his forehead, praising his bravery, saying she could not want any other man, for there is none like him, so handsome, so loving and so fearless as he.
“I am not fearless”, he counters, despising his person for this ostentatious display of weakness, “you have witnessed it just now.”

“John”, she says admonishingly, visibly not interested in hearing him enumerate the reasons why he is not as brave or good a man as she sees him, “you must view everything in perspective. You have bravely fought battles- not everyone could do that. Compared to what you achieved, fought undaunted by death and risking your own life for your country, what weighs heavier? That or your uneasiness in the face of a thunderstorm?”

How does she do it? Witch that she is, she works magic on him to replace the tempest-tossed struggles of his soul with a feeling of warmth radiating from his heart throughout his body. The greatest witchcraft however resides in her lips and, kissing his, makes him feel entirely at ease again and at least for the moment, banishes his shameful fear and the memories of his days in America to the darkest, furthest corner of his mind, where they can keep Percy and his father company.

For now, it is only the two of them, huddled close together under an old horse rug in a bed he made for them (of which he is oddly proud, almost as if he had presented her with a palace).

With their heads resting against each other, the drumbeat of the rain on the roof and the ground outside transforms into a sweet, soothing melody.

If he could choose, this rainfall need never to end if that means they can stay like this forever.

Next to him, Eliza stretches like a cat and inches even closer to him.

-It is a kiss she demands, one very long, very enduring kiss that causes him to lose himself in his passion, eager to make her feel even more, to best her in her efforts and leave her breathless.

Their kiss continues for a short, very delightful while with neither of them thinking of anything at all. Only the other matters, the rest of the world can wait behind the veil of the rain outside that separates them from the dreary reality inhabited by the Old Bat and the Admiral.

Beneath the blanket, their bodies have grown very hot, he observes with a shiver of embarrassment running down his spine and suddenly becomes acutely aware of his hand on Eliza’s waist and her bare knees knocking against his thighs.

He wants to pull away immediately, but all she says is “no”.

“No?”, he repeats incredulously. What does she mean by “no”? She can hardly want to-

“We’re utterly alone here. My aunt, Susan, they’re far away-“

“You want to-“ he blushes violently, he can tell. There are things he has never talked about outside a rather different business-relationship with one Miss Lola of York City, and she had certainly not been anything like his love, and quite experienced in all sorts of depraved arts to boot.

She nods and as she does so, he can tell her cheeks have reddened as well.

Suddenly, he is very nervous.

Firstly, what if Elizabeth wouldn’t like it, wouldn’t like him? His love for her is unconditional and until now, expressing their love solely through soft kisses in the security of some grove or meadow where Margaret Graves could not find them and inert caresses that had grown bolder over the course of a few months had been all they’d had, so naturally, he is eager to please her, in every sense of the word.
There had been other women, of course (who had found him a rather skilled bedfellow), but none like Elizabeth Gwillim, soon to be Elizabeth Simcoe, as he proudly reminds himself. None had he grown to respect and love for who she was in the way he loves Elizabeth, not the pert butcher’s daughter that had initiated an inebriated sixteen-year-old John Graves Simcoe into manhood against the back door of one of the school buildings during the tumultuous term of 1768 (she said she liked warriors and he, drunk on the sweet taste of victory after his first battle and what had felt like an entire keg of ale, had been impressed), nor a certain Lady who wasn’t a real lady at all. Granted, he had in what seemed like a past life, harboured a gentle flame in his heart for Lola, the most illustrious woman he had come to meet on the American continent, but she had been a conquest by coin, not by the labours of love.

He cannot comprehend how someone as beautiful, both of mind and body, as his Eliza could debase her eyes on someone like him. Why would a goddess, who doubtlessly had all of Olympus lying at her feet, give her heart to a misshapen mortal? She could, as he has experienced himself, take her pick among men but she had chosen him, an invalid with questionable looks and an even more questionable past.

And why would she want him to lie with her, scars, warts and all?

Is not his body too big for hers? Will he not crush her under his weight? She means everything to him and he wants to do everything to make her happy.

But will he make her happy? It will surely hurt on her part and he doesn’t want to be the reason for that.

He loves and desires her, wishes nothing more in this moment than to feel her legs wrapped around his hips, but his love for her weighs heavier than the want to feel her flesh pressed against his and so, he remains anxious, though he tries hard not to show it.

John was nervous, too. They could wait, but waiting would only prolong the agony of not knowing, of not taking the ultimate step to be with him, Elizabeth reasoned.

They started very slowly, gently, kissing each other and letting their hands roam a little more boldly with every passing second.

Careful, as if she were made of porcelain, mindful still of the injuries she had sustained a few months ago and that might still pain her, even if she bravely denies any such thing whenever he asks her, he takes her in his arms and for the first time, allows his hands to trace the outline of her body.

There is no need to hurry; the day (and following it, the night) is long and he is entirely hers and will remain so for the rest of their lives.

Although he can already feel desire and lust washing over him and the throbbing between his legs
rises to almost uncomfortable levels, this is to be hers, hers entirely and even if he knows they will not be able to do it without some uneasy discomfort on her part, he endeavours to make it an experience she shall wish to remember rather than wish to forget.

“May I?” He asked, demanding permission to remove the blanket. From all she knew, they wouldn’t need it and, this she could tell from experience, his body was much warmer than some fabric anyway.

His fingers sent shivers across her skin, burning hot and cold, just like his eyes. The shift separating his hands from her skin was too much and yet, she couldn’t quite bring herself to remove it- after all, she had never been exposed like this before.

Without thinking, her hands moved to his shoulder blades, marvelling at the muscles moving beneath his skin.

He inhaled deeply, relishing her touch.

Thus emboldened, his hand came to reach for the hem of her shift, which had crept halfway up her thighs, but in the last second, he paused.

“I won’t do anything you don’t like”, he said, fixing her eyes with unblinking honesty. “You must tell me what is agreeable to you and what is not.” “Continue”, was all she answered, still uneasy for not knowing what to do and curious at the same time.

His hands slipped easily beneath the thin white fabric and travelled up the sides of her body, taking the shift with them. In order to assist him, she sat up and lifted her arms. When his hands reached her breasts, his thumbs trailed lightly from the undersides up and across her nipples, causing them to harden with jolts of hitherto unprecedented anticipation under the novelty of his caress, leaving her wishing he would apply more pressure to increase the feeling he had stirred deep within her.

Seconds later, her shift was gone. John paused, content with his work, and took the sight of her unclothed body in.

“You are beautiful, Elizabeth”, he breathed, admiring her, while she felt less and less uneasy with every passing second. It was oddly thrilling, to know he admired her body in its natural state.

“Now you.”

With interest, she helped him out of his remaining garments and allowed her hands to roam his chest and abdomen. He hissed lowly, which she took as a sign of his approval when her fingers combed with explorative curiosity through the hair on his chest.

Susan had not lied nor exaggerated in her description of him; he was very handsome and imposing, a veritable titan. His body was so fundamentally different from hers, broader in built, hairier, more muscular. He had countless freckles on his shoulders, and to her shock, a number of scars, shimmering like silver beneath the reddish hair of his upper body, likely grown out to such an extent to conceal the great many injuries he had suffered at least to himself- and to her.

While she felt more and more confident letting her hands explore his torso, she had not yet dared to
As she finally braved herself, another wave of tension mounted in her. She had been familiarised, briefly, with the rough execution of the act that was to follow by Susan who had advised her to lie back, open her legs and relax her body, as it would ease the initial smart.

But how was her body ever to accommodate him? Or rather this particular part of him, which seemed disproportionate in its already hardened state, viewed against her much smaller frame?

Her body tensed.

“We needn’t to, if you don’t feel comfortable. We could wait.”

On the one hand, she was somewhat afraid, yes, on the other, she was still curious. She shook her head. Courage.

“No, I want to do it.”

“Are you certain? You know I will not do anything against your will.”

“I am nervous.”

“Do you trust me?” “Completely.” It was no lie; after all they had gone through together, she was prepared to trust him with her life.

“Let me show you.”

Gently, he took her by the shoulders and beckoned her to simply lie down. Bending over her, he kissed her, easing her step by step into this new situation by usage of the old and familiar.

While resting his arms on either side of her shoulders, he did not lower himself fully down onto her, obviously with the intention not to crush her body with his much larger frame. Instead, his upper body acted as a warm blanket almost, covering hers.

Like this, she felt sheltered to some extent, soothed by the familiar physical closeness that had come to exist between them almost instantly as they had fallen in love, but which in this moment manifested for the first time in this entirely new, different manner, adding a hitherto unfelt excitement at the conscious realisation how the brush of his, well there was no other word for it, fur (although she lacked any possibility or method of comparison, she could not imagine all men were like John in this respect) against her breasts was more than agreeable, prompting her subconsciously to push herself up a little as much as the soft hay allowed, seeking even greater closeness, even more feeling.

Soon, when he deemed her sufficiently acclimated to the situation, John grew bolder, his hands roaming her body as if he wanted to make certain she was indeed a human being of flesh and blood, here in this moment with him, and not some fiendish creation of a dream.

His every touch came with a thrill that seemed to ignite a fiery tension inside her that threatened to consume her; he started gingerly, lightly trailing his fingers from her neck downwards to her breasts, across her belly and along her thighs before he kissed her, her neck, her collarbones and lastly, her breasts in such a delicious fashion it made her close her eyes for a moment and exhale sharply.

She could feel how she grew less tense under his incessant caresses and how her hands chose to explore his body once more, this time finding the two firm twin-globes of his behind.

It was wildly exhilarating to know that what she had previously only read about in novels (there was
a secret copy of *Fanny Hill* under her bed after all) was now becoming reality and despite her nervousness, she had secretly dreamed of this moment, of discovering what it would be like, curious from the odd feeling in her gut whenever she was close to John, being with him, and now, to finally have it, to share this moment with him- she could not put into words how she felt, happy, anxious, insecure, bold, free, finally liberated from the shackles of watchful guardians- in this moment, she felt everything.

She was a conqueror, an explorer, a fighter, a queen and the world was hers.

His fingers danced across her skin and elicited feeling in places she would never have considered it possible- how could the brush of a finger along her side almost render her insane, how could a kiss to her hipbone stir a wave of excitement within her?

John’s heavy-lidded eyes revealed he too was quite fine with the current situation, watching her, his breath hitching and soft moans escaping him whenever she grew bold enough to explore a new part of him, encouraging her in what she was doing.

This was probably the most interesting and strangely exciting thing of them all, not only could he elicit emotions from her, she could do the same to him, with him too, causing her to grow less inhibited until curiosity took the upper hand and banished shamefulness and insecurity to the corners of her mind farthest away from her conscious.

They were still there, but no longer as nagging, as present as before.

When at last, John reached the area she had bashfully dreaded and at the same time impatiently awaited him to touch, carefully parting her thighs with one gentle, yet steady hand, the torturous feeling of longing exhilaration intensified thousand fold. Never had she thought it would be like this.

In between his careful ministrations, which were accompanied by her involuntary exclamations of joyed surprise, he kept looking to her, searching for her approbation to continue and move forward, deeper in his exploration of her, which though all new to her was utterly thrilling. His gentle carefulness endeared him even more to her- not all men were as gentle and considerate as he was, she had heard.

Unexpectedly, he ceased his caresses and withdrew his fingers entirely, which was disappointing almost- she yearned for him to keep bestowing her with these delicious movements of his hands in a place that had only been known to herself before, to give this feeling to her that seemed to have brought her running to the edge of a cliff, promising her the power of flight once she would step over the edge, but had stopped her right in front of it.

Breathing heavily, whether with anticipation or nervousness she could not tell, John positioned himself between her knees, restricting her movements in such a manner she could not close her legs any longer and thus causing her to feel oddly exposed by it even if before, she had not given this any thought when he had touched her there.

“What will follow-“

“Do it, John, write the poem about it later.”

She didn’t know where she took the presence of mind from to reply so boldly and not without wit, for, as she once again realised the critical moment had come, her knees, still safely in John’s large, warm hands, felt rather wobbly.

What if some of the stories she had heard were true after all? About it hurting much, the blood- what
if, against all expectations, she would be the first woman where it wouldn’t fit-

With a last look to her seeking her approval, he pushed inside her, very slowly.

Indeed, there was a sharp stinging sensation that could not have been further from the breath-taking pleasantness of mere moments before.

Holding on to him, her arms wrapped around his back in an embrace that now lacked all the feeble pretend-barriers to love like clothes and so-called propriety (for what could be improper about love?), her hands tightened their grip as John’s sizeable instrument tore her maidenhead, trying to cope with the moment of unpreparedness (there was, as she noted now, a difference in hearing a description of matters and being involved in them one’s self), her nails digging into his flesh, which he seemed not to mind in the least.

Elizabeth shallowly drew breath through her teeth, forbidding herself to cry out, reminding herself that until then, it had been very nice and she had known the inevitable would come before and that it was nobody’s fault nature had played such a cruel trick on the female body that the first intrusion should be marred by discomfort.

Stabbed by love’s weapon for the first time and fighting with the different feelings of discomfort, wonderment, curiosity and uncertainty that overcame her, John carefully pried her hands from his back and made them lie on either side of her head instead, where his fingers interlaced with hers, offering steady reassurance.

The feeling of their union was unpleasant at first, even as the sting slowly did not hurt so much anymore, odd and new, as if her insides were being stretched to their utmost capacity.

“Are you hurt? Is it very painful?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

It was not the truth, but she did not want to upset him and somehow did not want him to stop, wanted to know what more there was to it all. “Do you think I may move?”

“Yes.”

Slowly, he began to move within her, drawing in and out at a careful pace, taking his time, and hers, until she slowly felt her body’s opposition to this new exercise waning, at least somewhat; muscles that had before constricted and fought the love-struck intruder slowly calmed somewhat and eased, submitting to the lover’s assault she bore with the fortitude of a heroine.

Her lover noticed her painful unease and brought his mouth to her quivering lips trying to let no sound of her discomfort escape in an attempt to kiss everything unpleasant away and in between times, praised her bravery and composedness while he remained within her, having stilled again at sensing her continued pain, for several moments more.

“Are you well?”

“Quite alright.”

She bit her lip as once more her fiancé drew back and subsequently ascended deeply within her, though slowly, as the stinging soreness started to fade to some secondary thought made momentarily irrelevant by completely contrary feelings that began to stir within her as her clever, clever fiancé chose to bestow her with fevered kisses once more, which he seemed to administer to her under the resolve to worship every inch of her while he continued in his efforts, never ceasing to keep a steady
rhythm.

It certainly was an odd thought at such a moment, one that in novels always was one of most exquisite bliss and contentment, to think of such rational, worldly things, but she couldn’t help but notice how jarring the difference was between John’s greatly annoying tendency to drum against any surface with his index finger and completely without any rhythmical merit while now, he timed his renewed movements perfectly, more precisely than the costliest clock.

His long, wonderfully gentle fingers left her right hand and found the soft little mount of flesh between her thighs instead and teased her with unbearably slow circles and languid strokes.

“Good?”, John panted, sounding more exhausted than before, watching her with hungry eyes from above, watching as her eyes clenched shut momentarily with a renewed thrust that was accompanied by the most intimate caress of a long, skilful and unrelenting finger.

“Maddening”, she answered and pressed his left hand that was still holding hers, for “good” she could not say; too fresh was the smart the tearing of her maidenhead had produced, too real still the blunt, somewhat uncomfortable pressure John’s, as per Susan’s intelligence, considerable girth was causing her and yet, it was not all terrible; never before had she experienced how such different emotions as pain and pleasure could mix and create something new, something so exciting as this.

John gave her a mischievous smile as he continued to watch what effects he was having on her and watched her chest rise and fall in quick succession as her heartbeat accelerated and set a new pace for her lungs when his lips fell to her chest, teasing her breasts in such a fashion she felt set alight by bouts of electric charges.

While her body was unused to what was happening and had tried to fight John at first, the clever manipulations of his fingers and mouth tried to make up for the throbbing smart he was responsible for until it seemed to become secondary, almost unimportant as her body grew hot and thinking unnecessary and her intuition, guided by nature, seemed to take over control.

Her knees rode further up to receive the blows better and her free hand came to grip John’s hair firmly, as if he were a branch reaching into a fast-flowing stream and the only method to rescue her from drowning, drowning in this feeling, desperately clinging on to him.

The storm surge inside her was growing more urgent and every bit of contact between their bodies elicited needful cries of *it*, until finally, he, his ministrations having intensified in pressure and friction, everything felt as if this was what it all was ever meant to be, everything felt divine and shivering, her muscles from head to toe flexing without her commanding them to do so, her eyelids shut tightly as a most raw, primal noise escaped her throat.

Elizabeth thought she would have to die in this moment as the storm surge in her abdomen seemed to gain force, leaving her quite unable to retain control over her body. John still kept true to his rhythm as she writhed and moaned below him, which she later thought must have been quite odd and unbeseeming, but in the moment had felt so right, such a natural thing to do.

Hot and cold the feeling washed over her and John did not think of stopping what he did to her, drawing the sensation out, making her wish it would end, for it was entirely too much, and yet never to end at all, to be able to remain in this moment for eternity, savour this feeling of combusting from the inside while the world around her collapsed.

Spurned by her completion, John followed soon after, apologising for what he was going to do, that it would be but a moment. His thrusts came more erratic and a little harder now, not as sensual and almost agreeable as they had felt towards the end, causing some of the smarting to return.
When he reached the blissful climax of supposedly marital interaction in one last sharp blow, his head collapsed against her shoulder, her name on his lips, fire on her burning flesh, suspended somewhere between pain and passion, fear and boldness, torture and joy.

As his movements stilled, he, his face as flushed as hers, judging from the blood she felt pumping through her head, carefully lifted himself off her and drawing her into his arms, lay down next to Elizabeth.

“Did you… Did you like it?”, he asked, insecure, blushing like a schoolboy who has been caught reading a bawdy broadsheet by his mother.

“I did. It hurts a little, but that’s going to go away, Susan said.”

He nodded gravely, his mouth betraying him with a suppressed twitch when she uttered the word “hurts”. He did not want to hurt her.

“It cannot be helped, they say at first, it always stings a little and the soreness goes away after a day or two”, she assured him, sounding perhaps a little braver and more versed in this matter than she actually was and laid her head across his chest.

“You must teach me what you like, Elizabeth. We are to spend our lives together, it would only be beneficial if I knew what makes you- I want you to like it, too.”

“We are going to have a lifetime for that, John”, she said and snuggled close to him.

Lazily, she circled his abdomen with one finger, tracing the scarred tissue of old wounds and thanked the Lord that every stab, every ball had failed to undo him and that He had preserved John for her.

“Are you well?”

“Mhm”, she tries to assure him, but given the somewhat crouched position of her body, he is not entirely certain and although he would simply like to doze off in the lazy bliss of the moment, his heart gradually slowing after the moment of ecstatic joy, of Heaven found in Eliza’s arms, the guilt he feels when he looks at Eliza keeps him from doing so.

Clearly, they both wanted this, and nothing more than this, as they have made clear to each other before, but, given Margaret’s condition is Eliza be wed after her twentieth birthday, which is still some three months almost away, what if-

He should not have granted himself pleasure like this, he should have withdrawn to ensure there will not be a child, but he simply couldn’t, the moment was too divine, Eliza with him, her fingernails digging little crescent moons into his back was too much to bear.

Without a doubt, she reads the concern on his face, for her dark eyes study his features with brows knitted together.

“It’s unlikely, the first time, or so I was told.”

“I am sorry, I should have-“
“Hush.”

She gives him a smile and buries her face in his chest.

“All is well, John.”

All was not entirely well, the divineness of the moment was somewhat marred by the sweatiness of their bodies and the uncomfortable stickiness between her legs as well as the dull throbbing and aching in areas of her body she had hitherto not known could experience feeling of any kind.

But John held her firmly in his arms and they were finally together, and she his intended, which was worth so much more than everything else and let her forget about the discomfort she had experienced before, which she had known about beforehand and for which she had prepared herself.

She allowed herself to remain in this moment for a while, relishing in John’s body so close to hers, so warm and protective against the chilly day.

At last however, knowing they would never leave if they would not soon get up and seeing as the rain had, as the lack of noise indicated, reduced to a drizzle, she proposed to go home- one would certainly be missed already and both her aunt and his godfather would be worried due to the thunderstorm.

With a protesting little noise, John let her get up and out of his arms, following her. Their clothes had not dried, they had been too wet, and the mere thought of riding home in them gave her renewed fears of falling ill.

When she rose from the blanket, a dark stain greeted her where she had lain and she could not help but shiver a little- they’d really done it. She felt a little sore and figured that in the coming one or two days, she might refrain from strenuous activities such as riding to make it go away entirely, something Susan had recommended her.

Her fiancé had noticed too- with a somewhat guilty-looking mien, he folded both blankets, hid them underneath a wooden box of some sort and handed her a handkerchief to clean herself of any remaining blood which she then did, feeling a little awkward wiping the residual blood and other fluids away.

“Burn it”, John suggested, “we should not provide Mrs Graves with any evidence.”

Aunt Margaret would lose her mind were she to know what had happened between her and John despite having eventually consented to letting them marry.

To some extent, Elizabeth felt somewhat guilty for betraying her aunt and her upbringing so, but she could not have waited any longer. She loved John so much and she knew he felt the same- they were drawn to each other and neither could imagine being without the other anymore, as they had quite obviously been fated, made for another.

Even before, it had been unbearable to resist John’s kisses and embraces at home at the Fort for fear her aunt could find them, they had to take every opportunity they had to express their love in the way that came naturally to both of them.
John helped her back into her clothes, lacing her in and attending to her almost as skilfully as Susan before dressing himself.

At last, he heaved her unto her horse and after a somewhat uncomfortable ride, made so by her recent encounter with the man she loved and the cold inhabiting her wet clothing, they reached the house, where Aunt Margaret was already waiting for them, positively worried.

It was a blessing she could blame the quite disordered state that she was in on the thunderstorm, which had pulled the curls that had to be burnt into her hair each morning and flattened them out again and had crumpled her riding ensemble.

“Child”, Aunt Margaret had chided with genuine concern upon seeing her drenched and leaving a trail of water behind her wherever she went, “change and go to bed- one must fear you will either freeze or drown in your clothes! I’ll have Susan bring you a few morsels and some tea to enliven your spirits.”

There was nothing to be said against that, though Uncle Samuel lowly offered his own commentary afterwards, saying that he had been wet from head to toe more than once in his career as a naval officer and had lived to the age of seventy-two so far and that certainly, a little English rain could not be lethal to an English Rose- on the contrary, She may find her constitution strengthened by’t, refreshing her blossoming countenance.

Parting with all three of them (John too had opted for ridding himself of his wet attire, in order not to antagonise Aunt Margaret by staining her Axminster carpets wherever he went), she went upstairs, where Susan, called by her aunt, was already waiting for her.

Getting rid of the stiff, cold garments felt wonderful and Susan did her best to be quick about it. She had just come to undo her stays, when the maid’s fingers suddenly stopped.

“I didn’t lace that”, she stated flatly.

Elizabeth did not know what to say. Should she tell Susan?

The latter however was quicker and before Elizabeth could do so much as try and think of a sensible strategy to employ, the question was out.

“Did you and the Colonel-?”

“We found shelter from the torrential rainfall.”

“Oh, Miss!”, she positively squealed, looking like a child promised sweets or a visit to the Honiton play house, “is he-“

“He was most gentle and loving”, Elizabeth interjected, “though I fear I must recover from it somewhat before one can think of a renewed attempt.”

At that, she pulled the handkerchief from the pocket of her redingote and committed it to the flames in the fireplace.

Despite being damp, it burned rather quickly, smoke and hissing-sounds rising from the firewood.

Silently, both she and her maid watched as it burned and Elizabeth could not help but feel a little like a witch from a story casting a spell, though this was nonsense of course.
Still watching the flames, she asked Susan to fetch her a novel and some hot chocolate, absent-mindedly staring into the fireplace, musing what she would write to Mary Anne now.

Chapter End Notes

La Dama Duende: Like all teenage-besties, Elizabeth and Mary Anne had secret nicknames for people and called Margaret Graves “La Dama Duende”, which apparently was Elizabeth’s creation. “Duende” in Spanish denotes different forms of haunting, possible meanings being, when used as a noun (here are my personal favourites from a well-known online-dictionary): goblin, ghost, gnome, imp and a few more. If “The Goblin Lady” ever found out about her niece’s nickname for her is lost to history. Thanks to one of Mary Anne’s letters later in life, in which she recalls the old days, we at least know about the nickname itself.

Mr Gwillim: an allusion to a scene (in chapter 15, I believe), where Elizabeth, insinuating she would like to be wed to Simcoe, reads from Fanny Burney's novel "Cecilia", in which the heroine, a wealthy heiress, can only gain access to her deceased uncle’s fortune if she fulfils the condition named in his will- she must marry a man who takes on her surname.

Wet clothes: When Elizabeth gets rid of her wet clothes, it reads somewhat like plot-convenient exhibitionism, however, Elizabeth had a lifelong fear of getting ill from wearing wet clothes, which she often recorded. While in most cases she could write proudly that she did not get ill (she usually was, from what I could gather, not completely drenched like she was here in the story), once she contracted what sounds like the flu from having gotten wet sleeves on her way from church- on her first day out after several weeks of not leaving her sick husband’s bedside to care for him (who inconceivably sported similar symptoms).

Edit: I forgot to mention it before, but the incident with the soldiers losing their legs was inspired by an actual event Simcoe witnessed fairly shortly after coming to the Colonies for the first time at twenty-four. Having witnessed this appears to have had a profound impact on him as he wrote both to his mother and to Margaret Graves about it (back in the day when he was not laying his eyes on her niece yet, the two were on good terms- so good actually, he addressed his mother and Margaret Graves in the same way in his letters).
At night, Elizabeth lay awake, thinking. A part of her scolded herself for being so reckless and a hussy and a trollop for forgoing her education and her better knowledge to give herself to a man, any man, before marriage.

How many young women had thus been robbed of their station, their reputation, everything, just for letting their love go one step too far? And when the men left them later, bored perhaps after having gotten what they wanted, nobody persecuted them while the woman’s life and perhaps, if a child had come into existence through the ex-marital congress, even her health were left in tatters.

But John wasn’t like that.

_That’s what they all think before_- he truly wasn’t and her heart knew it, but her head, her rational mind told her otherwise. Every possibility had to be expected and examined and she would have to live with the consequences of what she had done, one or the other way.

Sighing, she rolled to one side and pressed her cheek into the cushion, her arms wrapping around her own body in a pretend-embrace that could never match the way how nice it felt whenever John held her.

John. If only he were here now, to kiss her doubts away, he would smother them instantly and make her forget everything, she knew it. Feathers and fine bedlinen were soft and a place many less fortunate than her would love to lay down their head on, but in that moment, she would have given everything to exchange it for the horse rug and hay of the barn and John’s inconceivably warm body to shelter her from the cold and rain.

At first, it had felt quite awkward and odd to be so utterly exposed to him, but the touch of his skin on hers and the divine feeling it elicited had made her understand why it was much sweeter this way than fully dressed just lifting one’s skirts.

She would like to do it again, sometime. Susan had told her it would get better over time once her body had adjusted to his, and then it would be nothing but pure bliss. Besides, she wanted simply be with him afterwards, their arms holding each other in a close embrace.

Alas, they would have to wait. While she considered it unlikely she had become pregnant from her first time, doing it more often increased the possibility, which they, with no wedding-date fixed yet, could not risk.

Almost everyone knew a tale or two of a woman who had given birth to a fine, fully-developed child some three or four months prematurely and she would not be one of them.

She should sleep now, she really should, and pulled her blanket close around her, trying to imagine it was John keeping her warm while pulling up her knees somewhat to lie in a position that would be favourable to her still somewhat sore body.

When Susan, cheery as always, perhaps even cheerier now, given the intelligence she had been entrusted the previous night, woke her in the morning, Elizabeth felt as if she had not rested at all.

“Pardon me for saying this Miss, but you look like you’ve continued throughout the night”, she
commented between combing two strands of hair.

“Certainly not, Susan”, Elizabeth replied sharply. While she was thankful for Susan’s advice, things she could not have asked anybody else, as always Susan managed to speak above her station.

“I didn’t think so”, Susan replied apologetically, lowering her gaze, “it’s just you look so tired Mrs Graves will likely remark on it.”

“Then do something about it- fetch me some rouge.”

Susan did as she was told and with the help of some cosmetic enhancements, Elizabeth’s face looked quite refreshed and presentable.

Groaning, he wakes in the morning: he has had the sweetest dream. Eliza was with him, just as God had made her, and lying in his bed beside him, allowing his gaze to roam the two exquisite twin-hillocks of her breasts, each one perfectly shaped to fit his hand, to the plain of her belly and down to the downy bed of dark curls, hiding from view the critical centre of pleasure.

They will need to do it again a few times to adjust fully to one another, find out each other’s likes and dislikes, but even so, there has not been any more divine feeling as to this date than laying with her, watching her reach the precipice of pleasure as he reached his own and observe her through this moment of most sensual delight until her body went slack, utterly exerted and spent below his.

The sweetness of their wonderful afternoon spent together in the hay is still with him- and to his embarrassment, it is showing beneath the blanket.

Should he not have more pressing concerns than primal lust?

In order to conceal his shame from himself, he rolls over to the side and grants himself a few more moments in bed. He needs to think and the morning is quite early still; the valet will not come for another half-hour or so, he estimates by the amount of morning light in the room. When in the woods, looking for Culper, he hadn’t had any watch or clock to check the time either- nor a valet to dress him for that matter.

One has to be self-sufficient and work hard in his line of occupation and work hard, even harder now: now that he is to marry Elizabeth, he must do and prepare for so many things- an idle invalid may be a suitable object for a passing fancy, but not for a husband.

A husband must offer his wife a home, a station in life and some money, nothing of which he could boast himself of having.

In his head, he already coordinates travels to London and Exeter to arrange everything; he must make his case regarding his rank in the army again, at which opportunity, he shall also argue on behalf of his men for the Rangers to be made a permanent regiment of the establishment, from which his men, or those that are left, shall profit from, especially financially.

One does not forget loyalty, especially in times of war.
Loyalty- when before his own loyalty had been defined by his pledge to care for his men, make certain they have provisions and exercise discipline in order to make them reliable, efficient fighters, it is now split in two, one half staying with the Queen’s Rangers, the other belonging to Eliza.

It is his duty to do everything for his men as they have shown their loyalty so bravely in the field and loyalty can only be rewarded in coin. So if there is anything left he can do after months of pleading and appealing to unwilling superiors who have receded to their country retreats to lick their wounds at the side of their wives or mistresses and drown their shameful defeat in the finest wines and spirits, he will attempt it.

At the same time, he will do everything he can to set up a life Eliza will be pleased with once they are wed. There are no illusions to be had, it will be her money that will pay for everything, a circumstance that is unavoidable, giving his own modest means, but one he does not like at all. A husband should be able to provide for his wife and not squander her money, money she has bitterly paid with the absence of both her parents during her childhood. Although she had never known either of them for her father had been killed in action before her birth and her mother perished only hours after giving birth to her daughter, he cannot help but think she has dearly missed out on something, has lived with a loss she does not know she suffered. When it had been told to him aged seven that his father would never return, he had left behind a large, festering wound in his heart and the same had happened when his mother had died after suffering from an illness she had tried to conceal from him in her letters (but failed) of which it has been related to him it had proven so grave, death had eventually come as a merciful release to her martyrdom- and he hadn’t even been there to comfort her. In fact, when the news of her death reached him, she was likely interred already, buried without him even near.

Suppressing a tear of great emotion when he thinks of her, the woman he recalls her being when he was young, red-haired like himself, but with a set of delicate, beautiful features, sharp wits and an agreeable temper that made people forget the physical defect of her unfashionable hair colour, she holds him close and (for in this fabrication of his mind, he appears to be quite young again) kisses his forehead, praising him for the wise choice he has made in proposing to Elizabeth and expressing her joy at the prospect of grandchildren to come- she who has lost three of her four sons prematurely would doubtlessly be a most loving, gentle grandmamma to the armies of little sprites he and Eliza are having in his dream, little girls and boys looking just as pretty as their mamma.

How terrible she shall never meet her; she would have liked his fiancé, he has no doubt about it.

Rising to a sitting position, he wipes the images before his mind’s eye away with a shrug; his mother, his father and Elizabeth’s parents shall not come back from the dead, and there is no reason to be unhappy over something that cannot be undone, he tells himself in admonishment of his melancholy. Besides, pertaining the second half of the images his imagination has drawn up, in order for there to be any children, they would need a house to accommodate them all, funds to pay for their food, clothing, schooling and toys and first of all- they need to be wed. Well, being married is not the essential key for a child to come into existence but he would not like to cast public ridicule on Elizabeth more than she is already going to suffer from for marrying a lowly lieutenant-colonel who misses an ear, is ginger, has no money or looks or anything else a young lady of good birth could want when she could easily have had a nobleman or at least someone who could add to her fortune rather than detract from it.

But while he may not be a sensible choice of husband, he loves her, more than most prospective suitors whose advances she has rebuked could have done. Her money doesn’t interest him, he would be just as happy living a plain, very modest life as long as they would be happily together, he loves her for the person she is, the light in his darkness, the guiding sun to follow during the course of his day.
And therefore, only the best will do for her. He shall ride for Honiton before breakfast and return in time for nine o’clock- Margaret, who is soon to become his mother-in-law of sorts and certainly fills this role very well already, must not find any more fault in him than she already does.

Spurned by his plans, his morning drowsiness has vanished and invigorated by the thought of his beloved and the future they will have soon, he sits down at the desk by the window and hastily pens postulations, enquiries, and the like to the military officials in London. Another letter goes to Exeter, to an old friend from childhood days (whose knowledge of his military exploit and the reputation he has gained are rather limited to what could be read of battle reports in British papers) to recommend to him an agent in order to look for property in the area.

Although the act in itself already implies the intention of settling down as a married man, he does not mention it. Eliza must be asked first if she wants their engagement to be made public and how; he does not have many people to reveal this new development to, whereas she has friends and at least a little family whom she must certainly want to know and to invite to their wedding as soon as a date is fixed- two paternal aunts in the Wye valley at Whitchurch, the place she was born and a few more distant relations whose names he has forgotten, cousins of cousins or the like.

A knock at the door announces the manservant to him, whom he is quick to dismiss; after years in the field, he finds it much easier to dress by himself than to have help.

Ready, he leaves to make haste and post his letters and be back in time to return for breakfast with a little time in between to change into something not morning-dew wet and smelling faintly of horse. The Old Bat shall be impressed with him and, more importantly, Eliza may find kissing him more agreeable.

Before breakfast, Elizabeth had sat down to draw a little, but had soon found herself writing her name onto a piece of scrap paper she was using to make rough sketches on.

Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim it said between the outline of a mountain and several attempts at realistic-looking tree branches.

Elizabeth paused to look at the greyish-black lines of her handwriting, tried to examine it without bias, as if she were a scientist some two hundred years or so later who had just found this sheet of paper with her name on it without knowing who she was, tried to imagine herself a stranger to herself.

How strange to imagine that soon, she would not be Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim anymore; at that, she absent-mindedly traced the neat, labyrinthine line of her surname with her index finger, smudging it in the process.

“Gwillim”, she said half-audibly to herself, savouring the sound in her ear like one would taste a glass of wine with the mouth.

“Simcoe”, she tried then, the taste of the word as foreign on her tongue as it sounded to her ear.

“Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe.”
She could still barely believe that at long last, Aunt Margaret had been persuaded and given in, given her consent to their marriage, could still barely believe that she would be wed to John forever and always, that they would be granted happiness together.

Excitement rose within her abdomen, excitement and uncertainty, insecurity even. This was new to her, she would move out of the Fort, would have her own household and be responsible for everything – would she manage as well as Aunt Margaret, whose sitting room was always spotlessly cleaned and whose servants (Susan, whom Uncle Samuel had brought into the home as an act of charity aside) were obedient and diligent?

Could she do it right? Certainly, she had enjoyed a thorough education in the art of keeping a house by her aunt, but would that be enough? Would John be disappointed in her if she could not meet the standards of Hembury Fort House?

“No”, she could hear her aunt’s voice answer her question instantly, “one might do one’s husband a favour by keeping one’s house well, but first and foremost, one does it for one’s self, one’s own reputation. If he happens to like it, he can consider himself lucky to have married a woman of both taste and skill.”

Her aunt was right, such thoughts of submitting herself fully to a husband’s will were unappealing to her and one should never regard cleanliness as a duty performed for someone else, but as a personal necessity.

And to be sure John was not like that, coming home and demanding things while making offhanded comments on stains on the carpet or the tea not having been served yet.

Although Aunt Margaret’s words were encouraging, she could not make much sense of the woman who had raised her; while Margaret often and excessively railed against the submission men commanded of their wives, the injustice of the law to make what should legally belong to the wife her husband’s property upon marriage and would have thought it wise for her nice never to marry at all, she (though having waited for the time she was not able to bear children anymore) had married and given up what was hers to Uncle Samuel.

Perhaps the two had been a love match, too? She could not say, a question she had often asked herself. Maybe their days of being very much in love were just over or maybe all love grew less obvious to third parties with age.

All love? No that couldn’t be, she loved John so much and he loved her in equal measure that she could hardly believe such a thing possible.

She would love him to the end of time and could be assured she was loved for eternity, too.

Warmth spread through her abdomen and put a little smile on her lips as she set her pencil to the page again. This time, she paired her Christian name with John’s surname, which did not flow as elegantly and practiced from her wrist as did the name she was carrying from birth, but once she had finished, she could not deny Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe looked very nice on paper.

And as Mrs Simcoe, nobody would dare to challenge her whenever she and John decided to spend time together.

Before joining everyone for breakfast at nine, she disposed of the paper by folding it and putting it in the back of her copy of *Fanny Hill*, which was then put back where she kept it beneath her bed, for she sensed Aunt Margaret would not take anything she might read as too great an enthusiasm for her upcoming marriage well and one had to keep her happy, both out of respect for the good she had
done her and in order to secure her continuous consent.

On her way downstairs, she paused for a moment on the staircase. The house was quiet, except for distant muffled hints of a conversation and the busy footsteps of servants carrying the breakfast in downstairs.

For twelve years, she had considered Hembury Fort House her home. She had come here aged seven, and although she had oftentimes divided her time between her grandmother and paternal aunts as well as the Graves’ with long spells of time spent with Mary Anne or in London or sometimes Bath, she had grown fond of this house and come to think of it as her home.

In the near future, she would leave it, her room, the gardens, the drawing room filled with Aunt Margaret’s greatest (terrible) treasures for a future with John and then-

“Good morning, Miss Gwillim”, a voice whispered into her ear and a kiss was planted on her cheek.

“John!”, she exclaimed half-audibly, asking herself how in the world this terribly tall, heavy and red-haired man could have managed to sneak up behind her.

“Have I disrupted your thoughts?”, he asked.

“No, not really”, she assured him and became gradually more aware of the faint smell of horse clinging on to him he tried to mask with a bold amount of cologne.

“Have you been out already?”, she thus enquired, interested where he could have been headed alone and so early in the morning.

“I have”, he affirmed cheerily, “sent some letters to London in order to make preparations for my future wife.”

His adoring glances warmed her heart more than words could tell, as did the fact that he was intent on caring for her to the best of his abilities. Not that she needed to be looked after or tended to and she had agreed to marry him as he presently was, a Colonel in the militia and did not care for him to be made a full Colonel in the army (though of course they would likely find good use for his increase in pay, which however had never been a consideration for her throughout their courtship), but the fact that he was intent on building her a comfortable life and cared for her deeply even deepened her love and adoration for him.

“Come now, we are surely being missed already” Elizabeth encouraged him, sensing neither her aunt nor her uncle would like it if they were late for breakfast, which might imply they had spent time together alone beforehand and well, although it had already happened, one could not want the old persons to guess at or suspect such a thing.

Uncle Samuel was in good spirits and asked when he could announce the good news of the happy couple to his friends and relations.

John questioningly glanced over the table to her. They were one day engaged and not even her best friend, the wonderful, sweet Mary Anne, had been relayed this piece of most recent intelligence yet.

“I don’t know”, John finally answered his godfather somewhat taken aback, “Elizabeth and I have not discussed it yet.”

“Well, there is no point in keeping it secret if your intentions for my niece are true”, Aunt Margaret remarked dryly with an ugly accentuation on the word if.
"They are", John, who saw himself attacked by her once again shot back with a saccharine smile that bared his teeth in a way that would not have looked out of place on a predator ready to swallow his prey, “but I find we ought not to rush things. Rushing a marriage, which you, given you will not let Elizabeth marry before her twentieth birthday, fully support, always invites all sorts of untoward speculations and looks rather ugly, wouldn’t you agree?”

Margaret turned from pale to purplish-red in a matter of seconds. She was evidently unable to deny her husband’s godson had seen through her game and was playing it just as adeptly as she did.

“Very well”, she huffed in an attempt to regain her countenance, “then tell us when you feel ready. But do not expect us tolerating you living under this roof in sin for the coming months!”

“Margaret”, Uncle Samuel tried to intervene soothingly and patted her hand clumsily, “let the young people enjoy one day where they have themselves for themselves and themselves alone. As soon as they will announce it, everyone will want to come and see them in order to express congratulations and the like. My godson is not the most, how to put it, partial to social gatherings and my niece desires to have her fiancé for herself first. I am sure they have a lot to discuss. Give them time, which they have, given they cannot be married before the end of September anyway.”

Although her facial expression still conveyed she was not happy at all, Aunt Margaret seemed to see the argument Uncle Samuel was making and reduced her reaction to it to a brisk nod.

After breakfast, which had concluded rather silently despite even John making occasional efforts to appease Aunt Margaret, they receded together to the drawing room.

For the first time, they could go there openly, together without meeting resistance and even sitting on the same sofa was no longer a strict taboo, given of course they remained on its separate ends and did not draw too close. Holding hands was permissible now, even though Elizabeth saw to it they would not do it in front of Aunt Margaret, who was still intent on reinforcing a stricter measure of pre-marital decorum than Uncle Samuel, who a few hours later took them by surprise as he had done a while earlier. This time, he luckily had not walked in on a scene of fervent kissing, but merely found her leaning against John, who held a book in one hand and had the other slung around her while reading aloud to her.

“Don’t let Margaret see you”, he advised in a tone that conveyed his own slight disapproval at finding them in such a comparatively intimate pose but did not make any motion to stop them.

As Uncle Samuel went on his way, carefully closing the door so they could not be seen from the adjoining room, John put down the book and chuckled lowly.

"It is quite amusing to see him, a man twice married, so, a little offended by the mere thought one day we might do more than touch reclining fully dressed on a sofa in his home, which he sees implied in our posture."

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment before she answered "And yet, it has already been done" and looked away, finding it somewhat difficult to put what had happened in the hay the previous day into words.

She is right of course and to some extent, the old people are not entirely wrong in their suspicions of
impropriety but at the same time, what can be said against spending time together, both parties fully
clothed in the public rooms of a house inhabited by the most watchful guardian under the sun and her
diligent minions? One would be mad to even try and do more than exchange a chaste kiss on the
cheek or forehead (certainly not the mouth) while seated in the drawing room of Hembury Fort
House.

But then, he is mad, madly in love with his Eliza, so perhaps watchful Margaret and the somewhat
disapproving Admiral do have a point.

Returning to the present moment, his concern shifts back to his love, whose cheek and chest have
gained a lively rosy hue. For the first time he notices that she does not wear a fichu in his presence
anymore, thus presenting to him a most delectable sight reminding him of the previous day, when he
had held the twin treasures buried beneath way too many layers of her dress and undergarments in
his hands and admired them in their natural beauty.

"Don't blush", he whispers into her ear, "there is no need to. Are you well today?", he adds with
concern, knowing that at least initially, she had been subjected to Eve's Curse and suffered quite a
bit.

"I am well, a little sore perhaps, but nothing worse", she whispers back into his good ear, to which
he nods and turns his head, kissing her cheek and praising his brave warrior queen, who goes on to
assure him that she had liked it a lot, too.

"I love you and always will, with my, heart, my soul and my body."

Eliza appears to like this prospect very much and instead of anything else, she huddles even closer to
him, inviting him to caress her, to which he naturally cannot say no.

They remain like that for some time and he wonders if it will always be like this, the two of them
together and promptly imagines them in fifty years' time (that would be 1832 then), an old Eliza and
an even older image of himself with ashy grey hair enjoying such intimate closeness, he still holding
on to her with gouty hands and the wrinkles of her face accentuating her smile while she gives
herself fully over to his embrace.

And yet again, all caution is thrown to the wind; shall the old ones see them. It doesn’t matter; after
all, they should know only too well what happens when a man and a woman are very much in love-
had they not met after cultivating an extended friendship in Bath? Although they may never have
been more than that, friends, whose decision to marry may have arisen from practical reasons on both
sides, they certainly are not strangers to physicality and the hot, burning sensation that is love and
consumes everything, one's heart and one’s mind in spurts of flame.

Eliza almost purrs, a contented tigress, indulging in what his hands are doing with her eyes closed.

It truly is a shame there are so many layers between his hands and her skin but even through her
shift, stays and dress, he can feel her nipples harden when his caresses grow more indecent and his
hands roam her chest.

"I think we can do it again when I’m better”, his dearest comments a little awkwardly, still not quite
accustomed to talking about such things- but then, until Lady Lola, he hadn’t been, either. At last,
she adds, “We’ll have to wait until we have set a date for the wedding because, you know if I- if
there would be a- it would mean a lot of trouble. But I would like to.”

He nods understandingly. Of course they have to be careful. If she were to fall pregnant before the
wedding, it would mean a lot of trouble and woe for her; and while he would not be impartial to a
little Simcoe (in fact, he would much hope there will be one someday) this is not something one should rush. On the contrary, they should speak about such matters first rather than simply commit to them. And since he cannot trust himself to withdraw before any danger arises and even this precaution might not always be as effective as anticipated, it is (though torturous) necessary and prudent to wait a while until they know the date of the wedding.

“I understand— it is prudent to wait. But you know, I would like it, too” he answers quickly, playing with a strand of her immaculately curled hair now and indulging in the sensual delight of smelling her perfume, burying his face in the softness of her hair.

“John, don’t— if my coiffure is disordered, my aunt will believe the worst!”, she chides him and he, seeing the reason within her argument, stops. 

At last, she sighs. “I cannot wait for us to come into our own when we do not need to take heed of anybody else’s sentiments anymore.”

By the look on her face, her eyes focussed on a point in the distance, he can tell she is not presently at the Fort, but in a dream-home, watches imaginary likenesses of themselves inhabiting a beautiful castle on a cloud in which the Old Bat is welcome as a visitor for tea once a week at most. Well, the for tea once a week-bit is his personal addition to Eliza’s dream-fabrication, but he knows what she means.

“We will need our own home”, he speaks the words, another point they haven’t settled yet.

“We will need so many things”, his wonderful fiancée answers him with a hint of overwhelmed nervousness in her tone.

She has spoken exactly what he feels, too, and on which motion he has ridden for Honiton in the morning for although they have now Margaret Graves’ consent to be wed, nothing else is fixed yet. In the present state of things, they will sleep in the meadows from the day after their wedding.

“We need us”, he says in an attempt to reassure her, to which she replies “we do. But we also need a plan.”

Suddenly, all sultry laziness has left as if someone had opened a window to air the room. All business-like, she sits up straight, rights her hair somewhat and calls upon a servant to fetch her writing utensils.

When said items are brought to her, the hand that had before reached so eagerly for the pen now pauses hesitantly on the paper.

“Where do we start?”, she inquires a little overwhelmed, and he does not really know either.

The next hour or so they spend talking, assessing their present situation and how it can be improved until their marriage.

They form an understanding that they shall look out for a house to rent until they can find a suitable property in the area, for neither of them is intent to move away. Devonshire is a beautiful place, Eliza’s childhood home and his, too, though his childhood lies in the far more distant past as compared to hers and was overshadowed by the deaths of two people he still sometimes misses today. However it had been here he had been allowed to spend a few careless hours, to marvel at nature’s beauty or borrow his godfather’s horse (against his mother’s will, whom they never had told) to ride to Hembury Fort, the ancient roman structure eponymous to the house or simply to lie in the lush, green grass and read a volume of his favourite poetry in summertime.
In the course of their talk, old memories are exchanged; Eliza speaks of her coming to the Fort for the first time, which she recalls as clearly as if it had been only yesterday, to which he can only answer that he does not recall when he treaded these hallowed halls for the first time, but that he clearly remembers being quite young and looking forward to visits whenever his mother would allow him and the first Mrs Graves, who had been so different from the Old Bat and whose most annoying quirk had been her dog Bijou, a terrible, spoilt creature that used to growl at him whenever he so much as looked at the supposedly domesticated beast the wrong way or crossed his path in the hallway, where this example of canine disobedience arched his back just like a cat’s, causing its white fur to stand up at the back of his neck, growlingly flashed an internecine stare in his direction and then was gone, probably off to hide under Elizabeth Graves’ skirts, where he would plot his next destructive move in his war against his chosen arch nemesis. He had always wondered what had moved the thing to hold him a rancorous enemy, especially because Bijou was positively tiny whereas he had already in his boyhood shown the first signs of the striking stature he came to have as an adult.

Nevertheless, he had felt a little bad for the beastly creature after the first Mrs Graves’ death when he had seen the once diabolic thing, grief in his beady black eyes as he had begun to comprehend his mistress had deserted him in this world. The dog, his eyes as watery as those of the man carrying him, had huddled closely against the Admiral’s chest, whose clothing likely still bore a faint smell of his former mistress when the newly bereft widower had handed the devil in disguise over to a friend of the deceased, who had cared for Bijou for the rest of his days, which had helped the Admiral, who was not inclined towards small dogs and feared he could not care for the animal as his late wife had done, a lot.

Eliza laughs at his tales of Bijou and teases him saying that perhaps she should adopt a little dog, too, solely as an experiment to see if it is a general issue small dogs have with him or if it was just this one specimen.

What he doesn’t say is that he has a theory; it is the smallness of stature coupled with a cloying sense of self-importance cultivated by his spoiling mistress that had made Bijou dislike him and, as he has come to know, it is not an issue restricted to canines. People are like that, too, small men, Brewsters, Woodhulls and Hewletts in particular. Was it not Plautus who wrote that Man is a wolf to another man? Homo homini lupus- or rather *catellus*.

His Eliza however is no *catella*, and if anybody calls her that, he will end them in a very painful manner fit for a Roman arena.

Their talk soon returns to the original purpose of their meeting, leaving behind long-romanticised memories of their childhoods and so, he finds himself once more ashamed and afraid. How should he address the topic they must talk about the most? They may have agreed earlier that he will not regard her money as his, ever, but she will have to shoulder the greatest part of their most immediate expenses.

As there never is a good opportunity to address somewhat sensitive topics, he might just as well get it over with.

“You know that whatever we will buy will be financed from your money mostly?”, he asks quietly while inspecting his shoe buckles. Not that there is much to inspect, alas- they are immaculately shiny, unblemished and absolutely spotless. It’s no miracle, he has shined them himself. Military precision be damned.

“I do”, comes her reply. She looks at him with a serious mien.

“You are not particularly affluent, so I figured it would be like this”, she continues bravely, sensing
this is an exasperating topic neither of them likes to talk about but that will be essential to their married life, “I can imagine worse projects to invest in than our future.”

“Of course, I will see to it that we shall make use of your money advantageously, invest wisely to rather increase your fortune than to diminish it. Besides, I have writ to London about the promotion they owe me, which will also aid us, I hope.”

She had known all the while it would be her money that would buy them mostly everything, at least in the beginning. John was not rich, nor even the tiniest bit wealthy; but she had known that from the beginning.

Many a wealthy man would wed her to join to immense fortunes to one and if she had wanted that, she could have secured herself such a suitor in London any time, her name and the hushed estimations of her combined wealth in money and lands would be enough to give her the pick among a row of eligible bachelors from old and new money alike.

But she didn’t want that, she wanted John, who loved her. Having grown up with the knowledge that she would one day come into control over large amounts of money, her aunt, governess and tutors had prepared her for the life of an independent, rational and prudent individual, but such knowledge also came with a sense of independence, which especially Aunt Margaret had always encouraged in her, to think for herself and act as she thought right.

She did not need John to provide for her and had chosen him solely for reasons of love. How many young women had the privilege to choose a man because they liked him, and nothing more?

Clearly, they would have to be wise and manage their estate and income well, which included her inheritance, she had however no doubts John would be a good husband in that respect. His vices, as she had come to know over the past months, were few; he did not drink, nor did he entertain often, he was not fond of following fashion and had only bought new clothes when his old suit of black had become worn and threadbare. He did not gamble or bet, either- how much more prudent a husband could one wish for?

In addition to this, his opinion that it was an injustice for a woman’s money and personal possessions to become her husband’s by law upon their marriage would protect her inheritance. John did not view her money as accessible to him, which it soon would be.

If one viewed the situation from an angle different than that of the old narrative of “bachelor of no means seduces wealthy heiress”, an allegation she was certain they would have to counter as soon as word of their engagement was out, the matter looked quite different: from her point of view, one could argue John was a luxury she indulged in keeping, a totally unnecessary and pointless luxury as her aunt would doubtlessly say.

Neither of these positions however was correct, they simply loved each other, and there was no more and no less to it.

“When can you expect answers from London?”, Elizabeth enquired in order to take her mind off the vexed topic of her inheritance.

“I thought I might travel there soon to reinforce my arguments”, John confessed in reply. “That is if you don’t need me here of course.”

She nodded slowly. It was good John had found renewed interest in life and reassuring he was planning for their future together. Whenever she thought back to the man she had first met who would stand by the window leaning on his stick and stare out into the distance for hours, her heart
still bled for him and the horrible torment he must have felt in his soul and that probably hadn’t left him fully yet.

“If you must”, Elizabeth managed between two kisses she gave him in order to show him what he would be missing during his stay in London.

“I must”, he replied in a similar fashion and drew her closer by snaking an arm around her, “but I will be back by your side as soon as I can.”

“I wonder if I should ask Mary Anne to stay at the Fort for a few days”, Elizabeth began slowly, gently. “She is my best friend and I wish her to know. Would you be comfortable if I told her? We need not announce our engagement just yet, I would simply want her to know. We are like sisters and it would feel wrong if I kept this news from her.”

She still had not even drafted the letter she had been intent on writing or even thought about a suitable reply and lastly come to the conclusion what she had to tell her best friend was better told in person than through a piece of paper that allowed for all kinds of misinterpretations where there shouldn’t be any.

Mary Anne Burges, of course. He fears she has not forgotten that social blunder at the ball yet and will not take the news lightly. From all he has heard about her from Eliza, she is not his greatest supporter and presently somewhat disappointed Elizabeth has not written to her as frequently over the last weeks as she used to.

“Very well. Tell her.”

“Only if you-“

“It’s quite alright. We can make the public announcement once I am returned, hopefully victorious, what do you think?”

She nods and shifts her attention back to him, abandoning their tedious talk of how to please people and whispers into his ear: “I miss you already.”

“I miss you, too”, he replies, not knowing where his own body ends and hers starts as they move against each other, locked in a passionate embrace that would leave no doubt to any onlooker about the secret intimate nature of their relationship were they discovered.

“Not here”, his dearest most perfect fiancée gasps as his kisses trail down her neck, though the appreciative hum she emits tells him that, tho’ Reason has once again won the battle, she is willing to surrender to their passion in a different location.

“Tonight. The Greek Folly at midnight”, she tells him, and the garden pavilion with its mythological statues is a place he could not have chosen better himself. It cannot be seen from the window of the Admiral and his wife’s bedroom and although the old man is often awake at night (as he has found out not too long ago), he does not venture outside the house. As long as they can avoid his godfather (his lady wife is a sound sleeper and wouldn’t wake up if her bed were placed in the middle of an
infantry charge, they need not fear her) and sneak outside throughout some back staircase intended for the servants’ usage, they can remain totally unseen.

“I’m looking forward to it”, the beautiful vixen smiles, leaving him in order to compose her letter to Miss Burges in her room. They wouldn’t meet again until evening as Eliza had promised the Old Bat to accompany her to Honiton, where they intended to buy new riding gloves for Elizabeth and stockings for both the Admiral and the Old Bat herself. She had already informed him not to expect her back too soon as they would likely join an acquaintance for tea and thus could take a while.

Very well, if she leaves him, he must somehow pass the time on his hands. Firstly, he must ask the Admiral for a favour, and then possibly another.

For this, he waits until aunt and niece have left the house and they are by themselves. The old man sits in a chair by the window in order to make use of the natural light falling in from outside, reading.

“What can I do for you, John?”, he asks and he grows more and more uncomfortable the closer his plight is to fall from his lips.

“Admiral-“

“It’s Samuel”, the old man disrupts his sentence (and thus his well-ordered thoughts) before tilting his head somewhat to signal to him he shall continue. Memories return to him of being a schoolboy, which was probably when he had last come to the Admiral with this exact petition.

“I wished to ask if you could lend me some money”, he manages to bring out.

His godfather looks at him and sighs.

“Have they not taught you Shakespeare at Eton? Neither a borrower nor a lender be, John. How much?”

Well, now the old man even looks at him as he did when he was a boy and had done something he deemed irrational or immoderate.

“Fifty pounds?”, he suggests timidly, knowing his voice is slipping into a pitch commonly associated with female sopranos or worse, Italian castrati. Once, in York City, a junior officer, likely drunk at the time, at a tavern they’d both been drinking at had made mockery of “this giant ginger lady with the prettiest voice since Mrs Sheridan”, having prompted him to teach the man a lesson. He survived, this at least was his understanding.

Presently occupied with loathing himself for a defect he had been allotted by the Lord at birth and cannot do anything about, his godfather catches him unawares.

“Forty. You’ll stay at my house there, which should reduce your living expenses and no drinking or whoring-“

“With respect, sir, I have no interest in any of these past-times, particularly not women”, he replies quite piqued and feeling more than a little insulted.

*It makes one wonder what he has come to expect of his other godson and nephews*, he thinks to himself, specifically with the feckless Richard Graves in mind.

“All well and good. I realise advancement in the army requires a little investment on the social stage, yet I must recommend you not to let my wife hear of this- you know her suspicions about you. I hope you’ll use the money well and it may come back to you three times. Use it wisely.”
Asking for money feels wrong, especially knowing he will spend it in society to entertain the undeserving men who do not reply to his letters and mellow them to his plights.

He must be successful, repay his godfather as quickly as possible and make a home for Eliza as soon as he comes back.

“One more thing—“

“Spit it out, John.”

“Can I use your study? The lighting is more advantageous there in the afternoon than in my room.”

Visibly relieved this is not another request for a material favour, the Admiral consents.

The money he has borrowed weighs heavy on his mind and he tries to wipe the thoughts of how he is ever going to pay it back should his mission fail. No, it cannot fail. It mustn’t.

Worrying will do him no good, he might as well stip. Now, first and foremost, he must do something else in preparation for the night—

As soon as she was returned from a rather tedious outing that had been less than exciting, Elizabeth retreated to her room and reached for pen and ink. Having sat in a drawing-room of an amiable elderly lady (though one whose taste in decoration matched Aunt Margaret) who had conversed much with Margaret and much less with her, probably because she still viewed her as the small child she had been introduced to her as many years ago, Elizabeth had realised with a painful sensation in her heart how much she missed her best friend, whom she had neglected somewhat in favour of spending every little morsel of her time with John.

Not that she would ever like to stop spending time with him, but Mary Anne was important to her, too, after all they had pledged to be sisters a few years in the past.

Once she had put the pen to the page, the letter to Mary Anne was written rather quickly, for it was not particularly informative beyond the invitation she extended to her, who was currently staying with her Somerville-relations at Fitzhead Court in Somerset not too far away from Devonshire and quite easy to reach via stage coach.

What would Mary Anne, who didn’t like John much, say? Would she be happy for her best friend? Mary Anne was the sister she had never had and therefore she valued her opinion greatly. Well, she would find out soon— for now, she was looking forward to the night.

Once more, seated alone in the quietness of her room, she spoke the name she would soon go by. Elizabeth Simcoe. Miss Gwillim would become Mrs Simcoe— because clearly, as she had suggested in a jest referencing a popular novel, John would not become Mr Gwillim.

Only thinking of it, of everyone seated in church dressed in their finest things and John standing beside her by the altar made her heart erupt with delight. Never having been a particularly accomplished singer, she felt compelled to belt out a lively song in the most undignified manner imaginable and dance through the room, but rather than following her instincts, she countered them and sat down on the bed, clasping her hands in her lap.
After all, one could not simply behave so wildly, probably alarming the entire house in the process—although one didn’t do certain other things either, such as sneaking out of the house on a balmy summer night or giving one’s self to one’s sweetheart before marriage.

Elizabeth knew that given her upbringing and the morals she had been taught and supported as part of the right and divine order of the world, she should condemn such behaviour and not engage in the things she had in the past days, yet could not find any remorse or shame in her heart.

What wrong could there be in loving? She loved John so much, and he loved her, too.

If she ever were to voice such an opinion, her aunt and uncle would call her young, naïve, inexperienced in the ways of the world and perhaps bedazzled by a uniform she had only once or twice seen on him.

They couldn’t understand. Nobody could, which was a pity because she would have liked Mary Anne to know what she felt but feared her best friend would, could never understand and to her, Elizabeth’s words would be naught but descriptions and never translate into feeling.

At last, after dinner, time was ripe to retire. Winking, both she and John, after staying another hour or two with Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel, making conversation, retired to bed. In bed, Elizabeth, having hidden her cloak underneath the covers, waited until the pocket watch she had bought on her last trip to London shewed almost twelve o’clock.

The witching hour was nigh and with the moon illumining the gardens in cold silver, she would not have been surprised to encounter fairies, spirits or other creatures supposedly native to the darkness on her way through the night.

The difficult bit had been sneaking out of the house through the back, but that was not a feat impossible to achieve. With the feet of a skilled dancer and elevated into realms of joy at the mere thought of John, she almost floated down the stairs, just as if she herself were one of the ghosts romantic minds might try to espy in the shadow of a billowing curtain in the moonlight.

As soon as she had grass beneath her feet, where her movements would not be given away by the treacherous crunch of walking on gravel, she ran, nay flew to the Greek Folly.

Her feet that had come to know every root and stone in her twelve years at the Fort were so naturally accustomed to the terrain that she had not taken a light with her, which might possibly have drawn attention to her. Like this however, she was basically invisible, just another little moth or bat flying through the night.

Just as she had expected, John was already there when she arrived and greeted her with the inviting gleam of a lantern.

When she saw him, her heart missed a beat; tiny shadows danced across his face, advantageously shaded the lines of his face, the curve of his lips and his hair shone bright like a beacon in the dull lamplight. Like her, he had foregone full dress and had appeared in his breeches and shirt only. One would never venture outside in such a state of dishabille, but the night was quite warm and besides, she wanted to feel him, not his clothes, wanted to feel his warm skin against hers and fall asleep against his strong chest.

“My love”, he greeted her with a broad smile she had only come to observe in him very lately, “come.”

He ushered her into the pavilion as if the small structure were a palace and bade her sit down. As she
did, John pulled a small back from a dark corner, a proud look on his face.

Inside were two pieces of somewhat crumbly cake they had had with their tea and a handful of strawberries wrapped in a handkerchief as well as a bottle of wine but no glasses.

“‘I plucked them myself’”, John said not without pride and showed her the strawberries he claimed had found somewhere- likely, they hadn’t been as wild as he claimed and the cook would miss them tomorrow, but she preferred them raw anyway, not made into jam or with whipped cream.

John proceeded to feed her with them, “a most delightful sight” as he called it and afterwards, they shared the bottle of wine he had brought (“Admiral Graves shall not miss it, I am sure”) without glasses.

With the starry heavens above and the wind rustling gently in the trees, the scene was far more picturesque than the pretend-simplicity of a hameau.

The night being quite agreeable, Elizabeth allowed her cloak to slip from her shoulders and leaned against John, who took her in his arms. Finally, she could feel him again, the animated marble of his flesh beneath his shirts and his gentle hands caressing her body.

They wouldn’t do it tonight, and yet, being there with him, together in this moment was just as intimate as anything they had done yesterday.

“You cannot leave in a thousand years”, she positively purred while turning somewhat to look up at John whose big, strong warrior-hands worked miracles on the muscles of her back. It was of course intended to be a jest, they would likely spend much more time apart during their marriage as he was a busy military man and she would like to maintain her lively contact with friends up and down the country, but presently, she found the idea of him not being by her side to spoil her so with his mere presence more than unappealing.

“I shall be returned before you will notice I am gone”, came his reply.

“Liar”, she shot back, “I miss you already.”

“Don’t you miss Miss Burges also?”, he questioned with a slight hint of jealousy in his voice that was only there if one knew it was as he continued working her into a state of utter relaxation by means of his hands.

“I am not going to marry Miss Burges”, she smiled before turning somewhat more serious, “it is true I miss her, but differently. It is not like with you- I love her, but not in the same way as I love you.”

“One can love people in many different forms”, John suggested. “The love of a father for his child or that of a woman for her secret lover are very different, and yet they have at the core the same sentiment. The most perfect love however” (at this, he paused meaningfully to add gravitas to the second part of the sentence soon to follow) “is ours.”

Having turned around to be able to draw his face down to her for kissing, they soon embarked on a prolonged exploration of each other’s bodies, intertwined like tendrils of ivy.

Letting go of each other to draw breath was the hardest thing she had done in her life and secretly, she longed to be alone with him (though not necessarily out in the open) again to make full use of such circumstances and glory in the sight of her copper-haired titan.

A while later, she sat upright whereas John lay outstretched on the bench, resting his head in her lap. She had long undone the ribbon fastening his braid and dispread his hair halo-like around his head,
through which she combed with utmost fascination.

Lying in this pose, his eyes closed and his hands folded over his abdomen, Elizabeth could not help but feel reminded of the tombs of medieval knights, imposing effigies of warriors laid to rest, so timeless and yet out of time in the churches they still lay in, having outlasted fires, revolts, religious upheaval and Time itself.

As if he could read her thoughts, John opened his much too blue eyes that even shone brightly in the darkness, almost as if they were two little lights in their own right and announced, “you think too much.”

“Do I?”

“I can tell. Allow me to distract you?”

Eliza looks at him, curious. It is not his best poem, but it is for her, and hopefully she will find some enjoyment in it even if it does not fit any genre the Old Bat would be happy to find among her niece’s books.

Eliza, upon the day of holy matrimony shall experience nought but extreme joy:

For when according to my wedded thoughts my strength I will employ-

To give Happiness to Her I love

In my embrace shall flutter the heart of my little turtledove.

When Diana’s crescent moon illumines dale and hill with silver light arcane,

Together we shall meet upon the pillow-plain,

Where her peaked twin-hillocks overlook the pastoral scene

And offer the Pleasure-Pilgrim’s eye a sight of beauty yet unseen:

A meadow made of chestnut hair and lips like petals grace the sight

Of him to whom such beauty is bared after the fading of daylight.

Two pools of water, dark and deep transfix with depth mysteriously profound,

And prompts Him who beholdens His image in their rounds

-No Narcissus- to drown himself within.

Oh Eliza! Most gracious lady, fairy-queene, celestial beauty, soon my wife:

To you I pledge allegiance eternal, to serve, your knight, for all my life.

And when from cold-dreary duty I return,

Sweetly adorning the domestic scene,
Shall my Eliza with true passion burn,

In tossed-torn sheets exhale with a smile serene

And ne’er forget her husband’s undying love.

Somewhat fearful, he looks up to her to discern what she thinks.

She has blushed and stifles a giggle when she tells him it is a good poem, but at the same time, “it is just as terrible as it is good” and asks, not without admiration, if he has made it up on the spot.

“No”, he has to admit, “I had to occupy myself with something while you left me behind at the Fort this afternoon.”

“Then you must have volumes of poetry for me when you come back from London”, she says, delight illumining her eyes. “I cannot wait to hear them.”

Somehow, just before the break of dawn, they manage to sneak back inside without being seen. It is a miracle, really and although he knows they shouldn’t do such things now, knowing also if it comes to light they have done more than just a little kissing behind a bookshelf in the library, they will be in great trouble, but love makes blind and foolish, which he, to his own alarm, could not care less about.

The following day, bitter-sweet parting came: Eliza accompanied him to Honiton, where she would collect some medicine to cure her aunt’s frequent migraines from Doctor Enfield and saw him off on the London stage coach.

He must leave her soon, and it hurts his heart, simultaneously however, he is eagerly awaiting London and the things he will finally get done, have his Rangers made a permanent Regiment within the Army and secure himself the rank as their lieutenant-colonel.

She has prepared him well for his journey, selected his clothes (a suit of grey with an embroidered waistcoat she had chosen in the first place- he’d never have commissioned such a thing on his own), which he wears as proudly as any uniform he has ever worn.

As if Eliza, herself a sartorial vision at all times, today wearing a charming hat with many feathers on it has read his thoughts, she stops him for some last words of goodbye right as he is already on the step between carriage and ground. He pauses and turns.

“Desertion. What a cowardly action”, she smirks at him in a slight imitation of his own voice, as if she were the commander and he some lowly foot soldier, and he cannot do anything but smile. Oh, she would have made a magnificent commander in the field. The likes of Clinton and Howe would bow to her.

Perhaps he should send her to London instead of him- or better still, she should accompany him.

Chapter End Notes

What Simcoe relays in terms of his family is largely true. While his mother’s character and letters are my addition, his father’s death still haunted him in later life and he was
indeed told his mother's death was merciful rather than a tragedy.

Red hair was indeed unfashionable in the 18th century.

There was a difference between holding a rank in a militia unit and holding a rank in a regiment of the regular troops. Basically, you only fill that position within the unit you command, not (necessarily) in the army. Of course, you don't get paid as well as your counterpart in an established regiment, either.

Hembury Fort is no Roman structure, but stems from the Iron Age. Simcoe though was always a big fan of classical antiquity and liked to see "the romans" in everything.

"Homo homini lupus" is a common saying plucked from a play called "Asinaria" by Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 254–184 BC) and often only cited in this abbreviated form. The entire thing says, to paraphrase, "man is a wolf to another man if they are not yet acquainted to another", the latter part of the sentence being the one that's often omitted.

Catellus/catella: Latin for little dog (male/female)

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be": Polonius to Laertes, Hamlet, act I, scene III.

Mrs Sheridan: Elizabeth Ann Linley (1754-1792), whose 264th birthday was yesterday. Wife of Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan and a famous beauty and opera singer (soprano), she also was politically active in the Whig party and in the Blue Stocking Society.

Simcoe did borrow money from his godfather, though the amount as specified in the story was made up by me. £40 was a lot of money in these days. Although it's always hard to say how much that would be today, I have worked with a few estimations and concluded that £40 in the 1780s could have been a whopping £8,000 to £12,000 in the 2010s. In comparison, Elizabeth could pay the £2,730 (between £546,000-£819,000 today, taxes not included) needed for the purchase of the Wolford estate out of her bank account. Please be careful when working with these estimations as they are nowhere near accurate, they are only there to offer a general perspective. If you want a more accurate understanding, try to work with contemporary numbers, bread prices and salaries are usually a good place to start.

On the topic of money, this illustrates rather well why Margaret was wary of Simcoe and why he was such an unlikely candidate to marry Elizabeth- he had no money of his own, making himself suspicious as only being after her fortune and no aristocratic title that could have made up for it.

Of course there were also other people who called him a gold-digger- Hannah Jarvis, a prominent member of Upper Canadian society mused he had married Elizabeth for her money only to find himself under "petticoat rule".

I don't think the poor governor suffered from a mean wife, much rather it appears the Simcoes had a comparatively modern relationship in which both partners stood at a, for the day and age, near-equal level, which also showed in their children, particularly their daughters: they received a thorough education and Elizabeth once wrote in a letter how she wished she had been as good at maths at a young age as one of her daughters, but that she hadn't received the necessary lessons. Simcoe is said to have proclaimed that he didn't mind only having daughters (the first son was born as their fifth child) he loved all his children just the same, offered to tutor Sophia himself during a Canadian winter and was generally a remarkably involved and affectionate father by the standards of the time. The girls also received pocket money with the intention to teach them to be self-
sufficient and manage their own money.

Simcoe appears to have held similar beliefs as his counterpart in the story. Rather than taking up excessive spending habits, he managed their finances, the estate and its revenues to their advantage for 24 years, sold a few books he wrote on the side and advanced in the army. In his will, he named Elizabeth his as his sole heiress, who took over a well-managed estate, which she continued to run successfully until her death 44 years later.

The terrible poem is mine, as always. However, the lines "(…) return/Sweetly adorning the domestic scene/Shall my Eliza with true passion burn" are borrowed from one of Simcoe's own poems written in 1791. Calling "his" Eliza a "Faerie Queene" may, apart from the poetical liberty of calling his 4'9" (1.52m) fiancée small as a fairy (by the way, historical! Simcoe is said to have been 6'0" (1.85m)), sound somewhat ironic given the eponymous poem by Edmund Spenser (1562-1599) treats themes such as the virtuousness of chaste love, which as we know, John and Elizabeth are far beyond already. Not that he notices the contradiction, though.
London is not beautiful at this time of year. It never is, actually; while it has its comforts and pastimes, the opera, plays, balls and of course Covent Garden to name but a few, it is no place he enjoys dwelling.

It is too loud, too noisy there, the stink of the streets and above all, the people. He has no taste for being among crowds all the time, even just hearing the noises of people passing by Admiral Graves’ London abode. He doesn’t use it often anymore, elderly and not very much inclined to life in London since the Admiralty blamed him alone for the supposed failure of guarding the American coast line, which had been a Sisyphean task all along, even more so when London had turned a blind eye to the Admiral’s true situation and lack of men and boats.

Elizabeth and the Old Bat use it quite frequently, he understands, to visit friends or shop for clothes and shoes in particular; while things of everyday use can be bought in Honiton, if one follows the latest fashions, one has to buy in London.

Lying on his back on the bed, he stares at the white stucco-ornamented ceiling. Tonight, he must entertain and there are military dignitaries to come. He does not want to.

Very well, he has his goals, the which he is desperately striving to achieve, and they cannot be lest he entertains.

And above all, he must do it for Elizabeth. It is her image imprinted on his mind that bids him rise in the morning, and so he does. It is she he sees during arduously long conversations when he tries to please by feigning interest and conjures up her form on the opposite side of the table, how she looks at him, dark curls framing the beloved face.

While he has not forgotten his men, those brave souls who survived Yorktown and remained Rangers even when he had advised them to leave and shed themselves of their uniform, separation has made Elizabeth the greater reason for his private campaign, her absence having amplified his desire to be with her, to just see her a thousand times.

Love is almost as terrible as hate in this respect and leaves the heart in torment, burning with painful longing- in his mind, he can feel the softness of her skin beneath his fingers and inhales her scent, part flowery perfume, part *Elizabeth*.

Their afternoon spent in each other’s arms at the barn does not leave his mind, either; never has he experienced such an excess of love and adoration while in the throes of passion, which had only made the moment diviner despite her cautious inexperience that was nothing like the practiced proceedings of Lady Lola.

But for now, for the day at least, he must call himself to order; he is a soldier still and in his capacity of colonel, must act in the interest of his men, whom he cannot simply abandon. Those who have shewed great loyalty at even greater personal risk must be duly rewarded.

Tonight, he shall invite some old brothers-in-arms of the late war, men of influence, men whose words are listened to.

Wrapped in his banyan, he seats himself at the desk in the Admiral’s London study and dips his pen
into the ink well.

Ready to attack the paper with words, he hesitates. The words he wants to write are addressed to Miss Elizabeth Gwillim currently at Hembury Fort House, Honiton, Devon; the words of a lover, not a soldier. He wants to write to her how he misses her, how he imagines her here in London with him, how he relives their encounter in the barn, can feel her trembling lips on his, her body inflamed by passion thrusting herself against his while her eyes are closed, lost in the moment of definite pleasure.

Pages could be filled in this manner and he would still not have exhausted his creativity, his mind a well of indefinite depth filled with ever new ways to laud her heart, her soul and her body.

And perhaps one day he might try and put them all to paper- not now however, alas, as he has good reason not to do so: he is certain the Old Bat cannot be trusted and would insist on reading any letter from him to her niece, which would, if consisting of elaborate praises of the latter’s person in poetic language, be more of an embarrassment to both Elizabeth and to him than anything else and the Lord in Heaven only knows the ways of Margaret Graves, whose reaction would be predictably unpredictable- and above all, were she to suspect anything regarding her niece had, as they call it ‘given herself to him’, there is no doubt in his mind she would she would fly to London by the next coach and strangle him.

Well, at least she could try. And she wouldn’t fly by coach, as one is inclined to say metaphorically, if she were to find written evidence of their intimacy, she would, transported by rage, turn into a real bat and fly all the way to London on the black wings of the night.

Perhaps he should contact someone at the Royal Society, some specialist in zoology who could tell him how fast and enduring horseshoe bat can fly and if such a little animal would be able to brave a flight from Honiton to London without falling dead from the air in consequence of exhaustion.

A horseshoe bat is really fitting, actually- a nose large and irritating enough to poke into other people’s affairs.

Shaking his head, he stares at the blank page before him. What he should, must do is prepare an argument to state his situation and formulate a clear-cut plight, but he finds himself too distracted to do so and in half a mind to drop the pen and return to bed or get dressed to take a walk, to find some fresh air that might enliven the sluggish river of his thoughts.

No, he must not.

If he gives in now, he shall never fill this blank page with words and then tonight, his performance shall be poor in the extreme, which will not help his men and not help Elizabeth.

If he wants to be successful, he has to conquer the melancholy bitterness of separation and must banish Eliza, at least temporarily, from his thoughts.

If the Rangers are to be made a permanent Regiment, he must constitute his argument with proof of their worthiness:

The Queen’s Rangers, formed by Robert Rogers, had under the same been scarcely better than a wild conglomerate of persons of the lowest sort, with most of them (save Akinbode perhaps, whose chances to find paid employment other than in such a ragtag and bobtail whatever the Queen’s Rangers were back then, certainly not a regiment or a unified fighting unit of any kind, must have been very few) coming from the dregs of society, criminals, murderers a few, he supposes, poachers, runaways fleeing the law and none of them keen on giving up their rogue nature.
Their fighting technique had been rustic to say the least, their weapons outdated and ineffective in open battle; what might have worked well ambushing unsuspecting travellers in the undergrowth of a forest, hatchets and whatever few antiquated hunting rifles they’d had with them, would have meant certain death in battle.

He had them clothed in green (as read woollen cloth had been temporarily unavailable) and later on had resisted when the coats should have been exchanged for red ones for the sake of concealment.

From the first day on, he had studied his newly assigned men and identified their strengths and weaknesses: their doubtlessly greatest strength was the surprise attack, the ambush nobody expected. The green coats made them virtually invisible among the foliage and hard to spot from afar. By the time their target, say, an unsuccessful rebel cabbage farmer, saw them coming, there would be no time to hide or flee.

He had trained them, made them a force to be reckoned with, taught them to fight with both musket and bayonet. Under his firm hand, these men had moulded into a proper fighting unit fit for a British Army battlefield and retained their unique ability of conducting effective surprise attacks.

He blinks, almost surprised to find himself in a room in London and not in the tiny space he’d had at his disposal in Setauket, the bedroom above the tavern.

As he was thinking, it was almost as if he had returned to days gone by. His fingers drum with impatient vigour against the desk. He wants to write, and he has a lot to say. These are his men, whom he had come to lead with pride and who had known his firmness and strictness did not tolerate uncalled for violence, especially not against civilians, women and children in particular.

They have behaved with more civility than others, among them British and rebel regiments alike and been efficient in their undertakings to boot.

The pride of the Colonel catches up with him and his spine straightens as he looks down onto the still empty paper and moves the pen across it for the first time. He will recall to them who have shewed him cold neglect that he is right in what he says and demands, and eventually, they shall, they must obey his wishes if his arguments are so tight and well-woven their pointed questions and barbed comments cannot make holes in it.

He can almost taste the cool sea breeze and the smell of the woods after a heavy rainfall again and before his eyes he sees his men, more orderly and better drilled than Wakefield’s piteous lot of regulars.

He finds himself back in Setauket, watches as people make way for him and his men to pass through. Abraham Woodhull hides behind the form of his father and Wakefield does his best to turn invisible (hardly possible in his red coat) by casting his eyes to the ground.

With indifference, he passes Anna Strong, the siren, by. His gaze hovers on her face for a moment. It is pretty, very enchanting even, with those doe-like dark eyes, full lips and red cheeks; there is even an air of rustic charm to her, the way she works, using her bare forearms to clean away sweat from her brow before serving another round at the tavern and the permanently undone head of hair that always suggests she has just risen from bed.

After all this time still, he knows why he has fallen in love with her, but said knowledge now strikes him as encyclopaedic, as if he had read a description of her in a book: he might be able to appreciate the description of her beauty, but it does not arrive at his heart- not anymore.

An independent judge of beauty, male or female, would likely be smitten with Anna’s beauty but it
does not touch him any longer. He thinks of another pair of brown eyes, hazel to be precise, less doe-like, but radiant with wit, a face less soft, with sharp, pointed features that award her an air of sagacity and inquisitiveness, skin like animate porcelain and dark hair that smells of flowers and feels like the costliest silk ribbons under his touch.

Eliza is the pinnacle of beauty, a miracle and she alone can be credited with bringing him back to life when he had been half dead, both inside and out.

O Eliza! There she is again, paying him a visit in his thoughts once more.

But now, she must leave him for a while.

His chest swelling with a colonel’s pride at recalling his regiment, he finds some energy inside him to continue setting the pen to paper and it is only two hours later that he stops, awkwardly wriggling his strained wrist.

The day after John left, Elizabeth awoke in the morning to find the insides of her thighs uncomfortably sticky.

What she saw, the redness on her nightshirt and between her legs, made her sigh with relief. Normally, no woman ever was glad when she bled, for it often meant being uncomfortable and suffering from stomach cramps, but nothing else could have made her feel at peace and as relieved as seeing her own blood staining her legs.

Although she’d ruled it unlikely, a nagging little voice in the back of her head had repeatedly asked what she’d do if she would discover she was with child.

For sure, both her aunt and uncle would be quite displeased, and the matter of her marriage to John likely sped up to conceal the child’s pre-nuptial conception, which would of course not deter people from talking, musing why their vows had been performed in such great haste when winter weddings were more fashionable.

But she needn’t worry now. Utterly relieved, she joined the Graves’ at breakfast to discuss her upcoming travels with them.

Finally, she would visit Mary Anne who presently was at Fitzhead Court in Somerset, staying with an aunt and uncle of her own.

It was decided she would go to Somerset since Mary Anne, though fond of the Admiral and the Fort, was always easily intimidated by Aunt Margaret, who still had the same effect on her as in younger years.

She would travel three days later by post coach and the last bit of the way, the Somervilles’ driver would await her and take her to the house, with Mary Anne probably waiting for her in the coach.

The week the two intended to spend together would be as their time together was always spent—there would be nights staying up late, lots of chatter, reading books to each other, sketching, extensive activities outdoors and maybe, if they both felt up to it, they would improve their Spanish together.
Like this, they had passed so many weeks in the past, since, Elizabeth couldn’t even remember definitively, since her thirteenth or fourteenth year. Although she was certain Mary Anne and she had not been introduced before their teenage years, it always felt to her as if they had known each other long before, their souls being so connected it often was as if they had been with each other all their lives.

Naturally, given their inexplicable closeness, Elizabeth felt remorseful for having neglected her best friend somewhat when in recent days, John and their engagement had taken up the better part of her mind but now, she would set things right and Mary Anne would be the first to be told of the engagement.

She would likely not be elated, Elizabeth mused while overseeing Susan packing her things, however, she would understand, wouldn’t she?

The journey itself was perfectly dull and uneventful; luckily, it had not rained in the past days and so the roads were agreeable enough.

Mary Anne had already eagerly awaited her and squealed with delight at the sight of her and Elizabeth, raised to be mindful of her decorum at all times, could not help but respond similarly at seeing her best friend again.

Before however they could lock each other in Mary Anne’s room and be for themselves, they endured supper with the Somervilles, who were very kind and expressed their joy at seeing Elizabeth again after a long time. News, trifles, were exchanged, mostly talk of neighbours or London until Mr Somerville, Mary Anne’s maternal uncle, declared he was well aware they were getting impatient to spend some time on their own after not seeing each other for quite a while and told them to be merry and spend the evening as they saw fit.

This opportunity was seized by both of them to disappear to Mary Anne’s room, where they immediately aided each other with their dresses (one would not want to get them crumpled), slipped into their dressing gowns, more comfortable for lounging in, and tossed themselves onto the large, comfortable bed and sighed with relief.

“You must tell me everything, Elizabeth”, Mary Anne ruled in the moment of carelessly letting herself fall backwards.

“So, what do you want me to tell you?”, Elizabeth smiled and leaned back against the cushions, crossing her arms behind her head.

Even though she was a little nervous, given she had vowed to herself she would not hold back and give Mary Anne all the answers her best friend might want to know and deserved, a certain thrill and anticipation accompanied the news she was about to relay- nights like these, where they would talk and read to each other until the early light of day were the best and today would at least in that respect be like any other of their vigils preceding this one- if Mary Anne would take the news well that was.

“Everything”, the other grinned, “all the gory details. Elizabeth, could you help me with this?”

Mary Anne, a mirror in one hand, motioned towards her head and Elizabeth understood. Crawling across the bed, she rose to her knees behind Mary Anne and pulled a few needles out of her coiffure, causing her friend’s dark hair to tumble over her shoulders. In colour, it was lighter than Elizabeth’s and the individual hairs not as thick, which despite sounding like a disadvantage at first however had the advantage that Mary Anne had it a lot easier when it came to curling her hair as compared to Elizabeth, whose coiffures would always unravel fairly quickly as her hair was insubordinate.
Another reason (apart from feigning height were there was none) to wear big hats.

With skilled fingers, Elizabeth combed through Mary Anne’s hair in order to make certain she had not forgotten any hairpin in it that might prick her at night and then asked her friend for a brush so she could part and smooth her hair evenly before stowing it away in a braid for the night.

“‘The gory details’, Elizabeth echoed while working on Mary Anne’s hair and looked over the latter’s shoulder so as to appear smiling to her in the mirror, “are you certain?’”

“Of course”, Mary Anne shot back immediately, even though Elizabeth was sure she would not if she knew what the at least partially gory details were (well, there had been some blood), which however formed a paradox in itself.

“Now then”, she began, “I am sure you will want to hear about John.”

“Mhm”, Mary Anne answered, this time a little less enthusiastic- she sounded almost cautious.

“We are very much in love and he is very good to me”, Elizabeth summed the situation up, “his kisses are sweet and he writes poetry for me.”

She could feel the tips of her ears glow as she thought about just how good John kissed, “and he loves me very much. He would do everything for me, even face Aunt Margaret.”

Luckily, Mary Anne couldn’t see that as she was facing forward, letting herself be combed.

Aunt Margaret, whose presence could easily intimidate those who did not know her, even worked her magic of intimidation of Mary Anne, who, when visiting the Fort, was always most correct in her doings and attempted to please the old woman in the tiniest aspects of her behaviour and speech, for she caused her to feel insecure and shrunken to the size of a little mouse- Aunt Margaret being the cat chasing her.

“Well, if he is as brave a man as one has heard he is, it is not much surprising he dares to face a woman, by decades his senior even”, Mary Anne countered, still not entirely convinced of John’s advantages.

Elizabeth sighed.

“Please, you are my best friend. If I cannot count on you, then on whom can I rely? You are like a sister to me.”

Mary Anne turned around to hug Elizabeth.

“And you mine. It is just- this is all so new, so fresh- and considering Simcoe’s reputation- you are my best friend and I only ever want the best for you.”

“Now, you”, Elizabeth chided softly, “face forward again, I need to finish this.”

In no time at all a long, even braid flowed down Mary Anne’s back between her shoulder blades.

“Your turn”, Mary Anne announced and they switched places, with Elizabeth now sitting down and Mary Anne kneeling behind her on the bed.

Silently, they finished their work before both decided it was time to crawl beneath the covers in order to make themselves comfortable for the long night to come.

Often, they would read during their nightly vigils, alone or to each other, but Elizabeth felt this time,
it was better to talk and so she sat up facing Mary Anne.

“I know there is something you don’t tell me, Elizabeth”, Mary Anne stated.

“I haven’t told you yet, but I will”, Elizabeth answered reassuringly. “It is not the easiest thing to
tell.”

“If it would be something terrible, you would have told me, wouldn’t you?”

Suddenly, Mary Anne’s eyes widened with concern and she reached for Elizabeth’s hand, gripping it
tightly.

“It’s nothing terrible, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to tell.”

Absent-mindedly, Elizabeth’s fingers reached for the candle on her nightstand, holding it with one
hand while she cut through the flame with one finger of the other without burning herself and
without letting the flame go out. Aunt Margaret had forbidden her such tricks very early on (not
knowing that sometimes it had been Uncle Samuel who had taught her them), and if she could see
her doing it in bed, where everything was potentially inflammable within seconds, she would be
subject to a lengthy scolding.

But she wasn’t here and her game not so dangerous anyway as long as she wouldn’t drop the candle.

“Stop that.”

Doing as Mary Anne bid her, she set the candle down again. Her nervous fingers so deprived of any
occupation, Elizabeth felt she could not hold back any longer.

“What I am going to tell you will change nothing and you must promise me to hear me out.”

“I promise”, Mary Anne answered slowly and carefully.

Elizabeth’s voice reduced to a trembling whisper: “John has asked for my hand.”

“What- no!”

“Yes”, she exhaled, remarking on how her face took a blissful expression only thinking about it all,

“he did!”

“And your aunt?”, Mary Anne wanted to know.

“She allows it. Under the condition that I must be twenty when we marry. She has no further
objections- anymore.”

Mary Anne’s mien was one of stone. Shrugging as if movement of the head would shake the words
into place within her cranium and make them understood thusly, she slowly started to speak.

“I don’t like him much.”

“Why, that is such a childish thing to say! You need not marry him, I shall-“

“But that is the point”, her best friend blurted out and now, once the cork appeared to have been
removed from the bottle, Mary Anne could barely hold the words in anymore.

“Have you forgotten we both said we will never marry?”
“We were younger then”, Elizabeth tried, but knew this was not an argument Mary Anne would consider valid.

“And does that matter?”

“It does!”, she defended her position, “I hadn’t loved like I love now then- maybe one day, you will know the joy I feel at present whenever I think of him. I never thought there could be such a thing, a feeling of such intensity, it is so different from the novels, Mary Anne.”

Mary Anne made a face.

“I don’t read that kind.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes in reply.

“Look, all I beg you is to give me your blessing. I cannot be wed knowing you don’t like it one bit. You are my best friend, and you are the first person to be told- John and I have decided to wait a while before announcing our engagement, but I told him outright I could not keep these news from you.”

“But… We won’t have this anymore”, Mary Anne argued and gestured around the room with her hand.

“Our vigils, you will have children and be occupied with your own household whereas I-“

“What a pack of nonsense, I will still be your friend, and will always be!”

“But then you’ll have someone else who shall want you with him in the night”, Mary Anne objected in a tone that revealed how little she liked to think what sleeping arrangements between husbands and wives might entail.

“It’s not so bad”, Elizabeth heard herself confess before she could stop herself. “It hurts a bit the first time, but after that, it’s enjoyable-“

“Eliza!”, Mary Anne squealed and immediately covered her mouth with her hand in shock and scandal.

“Now I have told you everything. There are no secrets between us nor shall there ever be.”

“You have what? You know how dangerous that is?”

Mary Anne sounded a little bit like Aunt Margaret, Elizabeth thought, but decided to remain calm even if she was anxious for her closest friend’s eventual approval.

“I know”, she grudgingly affirmed, “but I love him and I wanted it very much. I was curious and he loves me.”

“If you are with child now-“

“Hush!”, Elizabeth interrupted her, “we cannot risk anyone hearing this conversation. If it were to be relayed to you uncle or your parents, I dare not think of what they would say, or leave you in my company ever again. We must not risk that. And I am not with child”, she then added in a much lower voice, “I started to bleed shortly before I travelled to meet you.”

A sigh of relief made abundantly clear what Mary Anne’s feelings on the matter were.

“You always were the braver of us two, but I would never have thought you’d be this reckless.”
“Love makes you so, I think.”

Mary Anne was right. She had been reckless, very much so, but all was well that ended well, correct?

Not that she would repeat it before they had at least set a day for the wedding.

“Are you sure he didn’t want just- well… ehm, that?”, Mary Anne wanted to know.

Elizabeth felt a faint smile creeping across her lips.

“No”, she shook her head, “because I proposed it. We were alone, in a barn, where we took shelter from heavy rainfall while out riding. He made us a bed of old blankets in the hay and then, upon my repeated reassurances that it was my wish, he took me in his embrace.”

Now, Mary Anne looked positively scandalised and her entire head took the colour of an overripe beetroot.

“I admire your bravery”, she brought herself to say at last, relieving the uncomfortable tension between them somewhat.

“Come on, it is hardly as brave as the time you stood up to Aunt Margaret”, Elizabeth pointed out, “John is sweet and loves me, and I feel utterly, how to put it, myself? When I am with him. But you, you stood up to her-”

“One time”, Mary Anne interrupted the heroic epos Elizabeth attempted to put into words but her lopsided, slightly mischievous smile gave away how she was still proud of her feat.

“You said to her ‘Mrs Graves, I do not wish to attend your card-party and neither does Elizabeth! It is high time for you to acknowledge our own position on this matter!’ and my aunt went red before she banished us both to my room for two days.”

Both laughed now, for the intended punishment had been quite the opposite to them. They’d been younger then, in days when Aunt Margaret still had assumed the part of a parent, acting instructive, guiding and ruling what they could and couldn’t do and had enjoyed themselves within her boundaries (and sometimes beyond them) for careless weeks spent together.

After that, they didn’t speak of John or of the engagement anymore and in a way, Elizabeth was grateful. Shortly before she fell asleep in the early hours of the morning next to Mary Anne after a whole night of talking and laughing, making up for lost time, her heart stung at the realisation that Mary Anne had been right in so far that there wouldn’t be nights such as this one in the future anymore; a married woman could not sleep in the bed of an unmarried one. What was permitted to girls and young women united by strong bonds of friendship would raise many an eyebrow and at worst, offer ill-wishers grounds for illicit speculations.

Wistful thoughts of past vigils crossed her mind, memories of their girlhood, which was to end soon. In a way, she didn’t want a thing to change, travelling about, spending long weeks with her best friend and being careless.

In a totally different way however, she had never been more ready to dare something new, to rise and embark on a journey into a new life, one she would share with someone else, someone whom only a few months ago would never have thought of twice, someone who had conquered her heart.

The conflicting emotions battling for precedence in her head, Elizabeth, distracted, was ambushed by sleep and did not rise until much later in the morning.
Judging from their empty plates, dinner has pleased well. The gathering of gentlemen is seated in the sitting room now, to where they have retired.

At dinner, he has given a lengthy speech about the accomplishments of the Rangers, rehearsed over the course of the day from his notes, and pointed out their strategic usefulness in many a situation on many a battlefield.

Several men dressed in scarlet had murmured in agreement, among them Francis, Lord Rawdon, a man endowed with more nose and eyebrows than most, quite impressively so.

He had led the Volunteers of Ireland into battle, who had soon taken their place behind the Queen’s Rangers as the second American Regiment.

Rawdon, from what he had heard, like him petitioned for the regular establishment of his Volunteers, but time hadn’t allowed him yet to ask how his own design had been faring.

Henry Clinton, for some time in town, had joined the evening, too and with his irritatingly warm smile approaches him, glass in one hand, and takes him aside for one moment while Rawdon, the centre of attention, describes a perilous near-escape during the War to their peers with what he supposes is the natural talent of his countrymen to tell a tale- not necessarily always true, but always impressive to listen to.

“You are looking well, John”, Clinton comments appraisingly. “We feared we would lose you after Blandford.”

“I suppose your fears have been unwarranted”, he replies and tries a smile of his own, knowing whatever his face contorts into doesn’t look like one- likely, it looks more like a threatening snarl.

“Indeed”, Clinton continues, making a point of it not to appear in any way affected by his show of dominance, because he is a general after all and won’t be intimidated by a mere colonel.

“Now, we both know why you’re here. I cannot make any promises, but one shall try. I am afraid your reputation will not aid the decision”, he informed him in the voice of a school master trying to reform an unwilling pupil.

“I see.”

What else can he do or say? If he punches the wall, he will affirm Clinton in his prejudices about his unhinged nature and he’ll also have to pay the Admiral for the damage, who will then reassess the engagement- 

“Is it the country air that has restored your health so impressively so soon?”, Clinton wants to know. “Or is it a lady?”

The old man sports the laddish grin of a man who remembers the roguishness of his younger years and pats him on the shoulder.

“It’s the curse of gingers that your face answers my question before you’ve opened your mouth”, Clinton is unhelpful to point out and for dramatic effect, pauses, taking a sip of Admiral Graves’ finest sherry.
“What’s her name? Is she pretty?”

“Eliza is very pretty”, he answers simply, “and so much more than that.”

Clinton looks disappointed and smugly affirmed in his guess at the same time. Likely, the old gossip monger would have enjoyed getting a surname, but he shall not give him one. They have not decided to make their engagement public yet and few people, the Graves’ aside, know of their intention to marry yet. He wouldn’t want to make Miss Gwillim’s involvement with a penniless invalid the talk of London before she has decided she is ready to announce it herself.

“That is the look of a man in love. I never thought we should see Colonel Simcoe courting a lady.”

Of course he knows what Clinton is implying, he has never been a particular favourite with the sex with his rather unfashionable looks and usually grave mien (and probably also because no man of sense would encourage his daughter to marry a colonel of the provincial forces), but he feels quite offended nonetheless.

It is not as if he is a leper or otherwise severely disfigured- very well, he is missing his left ear, but according to Eliza, it only adds to his air of bravery, and she, who is fashionable and well-received in London, must know best.

“I shall wish you luck then, John, both with your Rangers and the ominous Miss Eliza- or is it Lady Eliza?”

Clinton should have left the commanding of armies to others and instead should have relieved the dilettante André of his intelligence duties. With his pseudo-paternal air and well-meaning air, he could, in disguise, have extracted confessions from rebels while sitting at tea with them in their homes.

One fault of the Army in the late war had been the many ineffective officers in the wrong positions and Clinton had only just proved he was one of them.

Meanwhile, Rawdon has finished his tale and the congregation has split up into groups of two or three standing or sitting together.

He endures the evening, trying to look as lively and pleased by his guests’ presence as is possible for him and serves them as much alcohol as they like.

From the dignified air of dinner-time, nothing is left as the clock strikes midnight and the first members of their party decide to leave, either because they have wives awaiting them at home or because they want to procure more drink he is not willing to serve to them to prevent them from passing out on his (his godfather’s) carpet or because they want to find themselves an actress.

Having forbidden women of ill repute in the house (he is to be married after all and this is a house of respectable people, not André’s York City den of dubious morality) for evening entertainment, there are bound to be a few who are now longing to crown the evening with a quick toss and tumble.

Clinton leaves, too, telling him he has enjoyed the evening and he will see what he can do. The last to leave is Rawdon, who puts down his glass (after emptying it to the last drop) and looks at him.

“I’ve got a little surprise for you.”

Winking, the Irishman brushes past him to converse with a servant in the hallway before he returns with a parcel in his hands.
“Think you might like it.”

Careful, wary of the content even, he slowly unwraps the package, which appears to be fabric, soft but of a strong variety.

“Our colours”, he whispers, utterly surprised.

“Got it from a man called Spencer. He made enquiries after you but found you’d already been shipped to England from York City. I offered to take it with me and present it to you, alongside an account of his bravery.”

“How did he get it? Were not all flags captured?”

“You should ask your man Spencer that”, Rawdon replies, “as I understand it, Lieutenant Spencer perchance discovered the location where the ahem- American army kept a number of captured standards and by night, concealed by darkness, made entry, taking with him a number of standards of British regiments by wrapping them around his body, where he hid them under his clothes. The lieutenant was quite disappointed that he would have no chance to present his colonel with the colours of his regiment.”

Holding the Ranger’s colours in his hands while still in a continued state of surprise and disbelief, he can feel Rawdon’s eyes on him.

“Look at you, Simcoe. All smiles.”

Rawdon looks on like a parent watching their child unwrap a present, satisfied with the reaction he caused.

The man wouldn’t have needed to extend this kindness to him, especially since they had not known each other particularly well before.

To him, it’s still somewhat puzzling that people sometimes mean well, not wish him ill, but then he thinks of Eliza, who brightens the world and puts things into perspective: if such an extraordinary miracle as Eliza’s love can happen to him, why should not smaller, more mundane pieces of good luck or good persons cross his path?

“Would you care to share another drink?”

Rawdon accepts.

Fitzhead Court, Somerset, eight days later.

The day of her departure had come. She would return to the Fort, knowing John must have arrived the day prior and although she did not miss him too badly (maybe because her joy to be with her best friend had eclipsed many opportunities for thoughts of love-longing), the thought of seeing him again this evening made her impatient to be back already.

Before that however, she must say goodbye to Mary Anne, and she has never liked partings at all.

“Come here”, Mary Anne ordered and pulls her into a close embrace.
“You must write this time, you will, will you not?”

“I promise I will.”

Holding hands, they walked to the carriage. Elizabeth had already turned to climb in when Mary Anne called her back:

“I am happy you are happy.”

This was the best thing Elizabeth could have wished for. Over the past week, she had, after their initial discussion, attempted to keep John out of their conversations, knowing her best friend disliked the topic of her engagement; besides, there was no more to say than what she knew already.

“You must come and visit in the autumn, we must go sketching together when the leaves turn gold.”

“I’ll bring my pencils and best water colours”, Mary Anne answered, loud enough for her uncle and cousins who stand a little further away to hear them and then adds in a lower voice, “and I should be glad to meet him again- if he is as civil and friendly as you say he is.”

Transported by sisterly love, Elizabeth hugged Mary Anne more cordially than was strictly acceptable in front of a crowd of onlookers and only with tears of the sweet sorrow of parting in her eyes did she manage to finally say her goodbyes to the friend she was closest to.

This time, her journey was less agreeable and they were somewhat delayed due to heavy rainfall that slowed the coach down.

At last, in Honiton, where the public coach (at least not crowded) three hours later, she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Uncle Samuel’s coach waiting at the Dolphin Inn.

Alas, the man was nowhere to be seen and likely had retired inside to pass his time playing at cards and drinking ale.

“You there, boy”, she commanded the lad holding the horses reins, “get the coachman, one wishes to leave. Tell him Miss Gwillim has arrived.”

The lanky youth nodded and did as he was bid, though whilst looking curiously at her, who was dressed in good clothes and was more than a foot smaller than him, but had more sense than to say anything when she impatiently produced a coin from her pompadour.

“Must one do everything by one’s self”, she muttered and, too impatient to wait for the coachman to return, opened the door for herself to get inside and seated. She could watch her baggage from the window; with her name painted on her cases and being quite well-known in the town, she supposed she needed not fear for it- Honiton was hardly London.

It having grown somewhat dark already, the inside of the carriage struck her as pitch black, especially because the curtains were drawn shut. Another thing she remarked upon was how warm it was inside, almost as if there had been someone inside all along- and then, she realised what was the matter.

“John”, she positively squealed in excitement, causing a shadowy figure opposite her to jump up.

“Eliza!”, the somnolent voice of her fiancé exclaimed and drew the curtains aside.

“My dear, beloved Elizabeth.”
Before she could comprehend the scenery, he had drawn her to him, into his arms, where she rested her head against his chest, happy to have him back.

“Does my Aunt know you’re here?”, she wanted to know, sensing there was no way Aunt Margaret had consented to John sitting alone with her in the back of a carriage.

“Of course not”, he grinned, quite pleased with himself, “I am Lieutenant Colonel of the Queen’s Rangers. Clandestine operations are second nature to me.”

By now, the coachman had returned and loaded her belongings onto the back. Giving him the orders to leave, they set out for the Fort, with John by her side, the best welcome she could have wished for.

He was not interested in much talk and neither was she; seated in his lap almost, they spent their time together exchanging impassionate kisses while clinging on to the other as if they had been separated for a year, not a week.

At last, when they reached the Fort’s driveway, John re-seated himself opposite her to add an air of respectability to the situation- Aunt Margaret would be displeased enough already.

Predictably, her joy at seeing her niece again was somewhat marred by John’s little trick, but she did her best not to show it too openly, which was to her credit.

Uncle Samuel, who had always liked Mary Anne, asked her of news from Fitzhead and she was pleased to relay a few stories of visits, outings and general news of Mary Anne and her family to him while repressing the urge to devour the dinner in front of her instead of composedly taking it in small pieces.

After dinner, she and John were granted some privacy in the sitting room, a place intimate enough to allow for a private conversation while at the same time so public one had to expect someone entering at all times.

“I missed you terribly in London”, John sighed and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“I missed you, too”, she answered.

“I think I shall always miss you when you’re not near me”, he replied and once again emphasised his words by holding her close to him.

“And I think you will have to get used to it”, Elizabeth said, playfully poking his impossibly strong chest with her index finger when she arrived at the personal pronoun.

“What if I don’t?”, John asked, his voice heavy with passion and adoration.

Thinking he was play-acting to show her how much he had missed her, she rolled her eyes and tiptoeing, took his face in her hands.

“You will. You must travel and I shall travel, too. You must go to London and I have friends-“

“But you could accompany me always”, he interjected, sincerely confused by her words. “I should not like to leave you behind.”

Was John being serious? Irritated and somewhat annoyed by his bent for the dramatic which reminded her too much of Romeo and Juliet, she shook her head. When her eyes found his, she found them looking down to her, darker, inexplicably more dangerous, wild even, in their stare with his pupils taking up most of the icy blue.
“No, I shall not.”

“But you will be my wife.”

The way in which he spoke the words *my wife* angered her more than anything she’d ever heard coming from his mouth.

What has he done now? Has he not spoken true? She will be his wife, his companion for life and as such, he should be pleased to have her at his side always.

Yes, he sees how she might leave to visit a sickly elderly relation or the like at times, but there is no reason why they should be separated otherwise, had she not told him in the coach that she had missed him, too?

Maybe it is Miss Burges, who holds him in low esteem after their unfortunate altercation at his involuntary birthday celebration who has put such thoughts into her head because the selfish, wicked woman wants his Eliza for herself.

Instinctively, he has reached out for her, one hand resting on her shoulder. Elizabeth however does not appreciate the loving gesture. Her endearingly pointed chin is tilted far upwards now and her eyes meet his in defiance. They glitter with anger, no, *glitter* is the wrong verb- they *burn*, glow with the force of a thousand suns, ready to scorch him and reduce his body to a sorry heap of ashes.

“You have no power over me”, she says, almost calm, slowly, and with greater force than anybody could suspect such a little body to harbour.

He almost wishes she would shout at him, because that would be less unsettling than her display of composedness, even though he can see the anger underneath.

“I love you, and you know that. But I am not yours, never will be. Not like *this*.”

She pauses, then extricates her shoulder from his grip and just leaves the room without turning back.

“No”, he hears himself exclaim, “Elizabeth-“

But she does not want to hear him and simply continues on her way.

At last, she gives in to his pleading and turns sharply on her heel, glaring at him.

“You know, Aunt Margaret always told me not to shackle myself to a man intent to exercise power over me. Perhaps she was right.”

“What’s the matter, Miss?”, Susan asked when she saw her mistress shaken and demanding to be made ready for bed right away.

“John”, Elizabeth sniffed, uncaring if she was confessing matters of the heart to a servant, for at the
moment she was in need of someone who would listen and seeing as Susan and she already shared a secret, she was confident her maid would not spill another.

“What’s the Colonel done? Has he used force on you?”

Susan’s grip on the brush in her hand tightened, Elizabeth noticed.

“No. He is not like that. He- he loves me very much-” she started, but was faced with an immediate interjection from Susan, who abandoned her duties and pulled a footstool close whereas Elizabeth settled herself on the bed.

“Why, but that is wonderful, isn’t it?”

“No, it is not. Not in this way, at least- we spoke this night about our week apart and he is adamant I stay with him always as soon as we are married. I thought he was attempting to be romantic and exaggerated somewhat for greater effect, but soon I learned this was his genuine opinion. He dislikes the idea we should spend time apart, that I travel alone at times. Tell me, Susan, what else was I to say but tell him Mrs Graves might have spoken the truth when she warned me of men attempting to win governance over me?”

Thinking, Susan paused for one moment, chewing her lower lip in an unconscious move of silent contemplation.”

“I don’t think he understands. You know him better than I; he’s a lonely man. All his family are dead and he barely survived the war. You are the only person he loves and he’s afraid to lose you.”

“That doesn’t make it alright”, Elizabeth counted, to which Susan could only agree.

“It doesn’t, but maybe it gives you a starting point to reform him.”

“If such a thing can be done.”

Playing with a strand of her between her fingers, she was surprised at the doubtful tone in her voice.

“Of course it can. His love for you is stronger than anything-“

“Smother you at times, you mean.”

“If this be so, you need to tell him outright. If he truly loves you, and that he does, believe me, he’ll reform for your sake.”

“Thank you, Susan, you leave me with much food for thought tonight”, Elizabeth closed the conversation and receded to the privacy of her thoughts while Susan was busy undoing her dress.

In bed at night, she rolled over and over from left to right and back, hating John, loving him wishing him far away and here in bed with her at the same time.

What has he done wrong? Is she not as happy as she claims to be? Does she not love him? Dread manifests in his heart and renewed ire directed against Miss Burgess whom he has singled out as the source for Eliza’s much changed behaviour starts to boil in his guts.
He must know if she doesn’t love him, for then he shall leave forever- the Fort, perhaps England even. 

He longs to hold her, to hear her laugh even more now that they live under the same roof again than he did when they were separated.

Unable to sleep, he loses himself in dark imaginings of an Eliza-less life and concludes there is no drearier fate upon this earth than a life without his beloved.

When at last he falls asleep, his dreams are once more haunted by Eliza. This time, he is not marching among a band of fellow soldiers, he is with her alone, standing somewhere on a dreary field, the smell of powder and musket-mist hanging heavily in the air.

She wears the white dress of his last dream and walks, bare-footed by his side until they reach a lake, its waters clear and blue. Suddenly, he doesn’t know how it happens, Elizabeth is in the water and it is he who holds her down, watching her desperately kicking and waving her arms until no bubbles of air reach the surface anymore and she lies perfectly still, face down in the water that starts to change colour from blue to a vibrant red, like blood.

He calls her name but knows it’s too late and terror sets in. He didn’t want to kill her, no, no, no.

Around the lake, shots are fired as if in salute to a military dead and then, he is attacked from behind, forced onto his knees by several men.

A rifle is loaded and a voice behind his back tells him he is accused of the murder of his dearest, and that he must die.

“Yes, kill him!”, a female voice then calls from the lake, and it is Eliza, who doesn’t look like Eliza at all: her skin is grey, her cheeks sunken, her eyes of a milky white and there are weeds in her wet, tussled hair. The vengeful ghosts gives her command to execute him, he feels the cool steel of the rifle’s muzzle against his forehead as he recalls from that time in captivity, preparing himself for the inevitable, but no shot is fired.

Instead, he wakes up to find his sheets sweaty and his body unrested at five in the morning. He must speak with her.

Elizabeth spent her morning in much needed solitude improving some of the drawings she had made in Somerset with watercolours. There was calm and clarity in this task, peace even.

She had decided not to tell Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel about her fight with John, fearing their reactions would only make things more complicated than they already were.

It must have been shortly before nine o’clock when a knock at her door disturbed her peace. Thinking Susan had come to bother her with a trifle, she called the person at the door, to whom her back was turned, to enter without much thought.
“Elizabeth”, he starts, his heart pounding with the steady, yet accelerated rat-a-ta-tat of a regimental drummer announcing the imminent attack on the enemy, unsettlingly calm and deeply moving at the same time.

She rises, has likely awaited somebody else here and directs her eyes to his.

Her gaze meets his person with the force of an old claymore, even though she, judging by her sheer size, would never be able to wield one and cuts deeply into his heart- it has never been his wish to anger her.

Wounded, he sinks onto the chair by the table she occupied mere seconds ago. She does not like it to be looked down upon and seated, they are at a more equal level.

“I did not mean to offend you last night.”

His queen looks at him coolly.

“What I mean is that I- I love you, I cannot be without you. You mean everything to me.”

She could not say no. How could she not give in to temptation? John rose and with pleading eyes, his mouth quivering, moved towards her.

They were only an inch apart now, and Nature took over from Thought when their mouths met.

She shouldn’t allow this, she should tell him what she thought of his behaviour, should make him explain himself and apologise in a more lengthily fashion and deliver a harangue of her own.

But the kiss deepened, rough and forceful with greed, his as yet unshaven stubbles scraping against her skin.

How could something so wrong feel so right?

Stunned, she let him manhandle her as he pleased for a moment, running his hands across her body and relished his touch, feeling those large, impossibly warm hands where nobody else was allowed to touch her, but she soon regained her senses, initially robbed of them by their breath-taking kiss, again and set about to regain control of the proceedings and pressed her palms flat against his chest, pushing him away.

“How could something so wrong feel so right?”

As if he had been burnt, John instantly receded from her and stood at a yard’s distance.

Their eyes met, love, passion, pain, confusion, anger and regret mixing as both searched for words.
Queen’s Rangers: the story I have heard goes that red cloth wasn’t available and so the uniforms for the Rangers were made in green instead with Simcoe soon realising the accidental luck he’d had because the green would make the Rangers less visible in the countryside (I can’t recall where, alas, but I’ve seen pictures of a re-enactor demonstrating becoming almost “invisible” at a certain distance). He then petitioned to keep the green for its usefulness. So according to this story, Simcoe was the first person in the British Army to come up with the idea of camouflage, if only by happenstance. Simcoe’s arguments are taken from an actual letter he wrote to Evan Nepean, then Permanent Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, in 1783.

Mary Anne and Elizabeth: The two of them met in their early teens and became friends instantly. They enjoyed spending time together and “vigils”, we’d call them sleepovers today, were a favourite pastime. Basically, their goal was to stay up all night together having fun.

Mary Anne never wanted to marry and never did. One time, she was asked The Question by a suitor, but she declined and preferred to remain single. Apparently Simcoe talked to Mary Anne about the upcoming nuptials to reassure her he had no interest in taking Elizabeth away from her.

While Mary Anne comes across (at least to me) as just as bitingly witty as Elizabeth, she was said to have been a lot shier around people whereas her best friend had no qualms being the centre of attention.

Mary Anne and Margaret: Not an easy relationship, the way it looks like. The two had their disagreements, especially when both watched over the Simcoe children in the absence of their parents, and Margaret appears to have been obsessed with the idea that Mary Anne, who by choice remained single all her life, was having an illicit affair- why else would the unmarried Mary Anne want to be friends with the married Elizabeth if not for sex tips?

I mean, if you have elven kids from your husband, you more than likely know what you’re doing in the bedroom, but Mary Anne and Elizabeth were friends since their early teens, years before Elizabeth decided she had lost her heart to the one suitor her aunt didn’t like one bit.

… Anyway, Margaret simply couldn't let go of this idea and once launched a smear campaign against Mary Anne going around town claiming she was being friends with Elizabeth because Mary Anne had a secret crush on John.

Fitzhead Court still stands. If you want to have a look at what the house looks like today, put the name into your preferred search engine, there's a nice collage of pictures and description of the property by an estate agent somewhere.

Mary Anne standing up to Margaret is inspired by a letter from Eliza Jr. to her former governess speaking of how she and Charlotte are staying with their great-aunt and had managed to get out of two “detestable card parties.”

Eliza's and Charlotte's letters also reveal that Margaret did indeed read letters not intended for her eyes, prompting them to write and post their correspondence whenever their great-aunt wasn't at home.

The Ranger's colours: I've modified the tale of how the Ranger's colours ended up with Simcoe (and later in Canada for Samuel Roukin to take pictures with it) a little for the purposes of this story. As I wanted TURN!Simcoe to start making friends, I used the
colours as basis for the start of his friendship with Rawdon, whom the Simcoes likely named their eldest son after. The name, the bit about hiding the stolen items under his clothing and bringing his loot from Philadelphia to New York is part of the original story, but Rawdon was at no point involved.

General Sir Henry Clinton by the way married his Harriet in some haste as only six months later, their firstborn arrived. He certainly knows what a man in love looks like.

The (small) lake from the dream was inspired by the Fontaines Bleues at Saint-Dizant-du-Gua in the Saintonge (where else? ;))

Look them up, this is one of the most magical places I've ever been to. Local legend has it fairies meet at these radiantly blue pools shaded by old trees- but be wary of la Main rouge, the Red Hand, which rises from the water, offering unsuspecting passers-by a treasure. But be on your guard: as soon as someone climbs into the freezing water to recover the object, la Main rouge grabs them and pulls them into the deep, never to be seen again...
Hello there! I'm back with a new chapter after a long and very busy time. Just a few notes to preface this chapter with as the endnotes have a much too low (can we get double, pretty please? ;) ) character limit:

First of all, there is a little bit of E splashed into my T-rating.

Secondly, my endnotes will be a little different today. Instead of boring you with little titbits, I have singled out a larger issue from the Revolutionary War relevant to this chapter and discussed it a little. I am sure most of the things I have otherwise strewn into this chapter, like references to Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire and the novel "The Castle of Otranto" don't require extensive and boring endnotes by yours truly.

One thing I might mention however is Elizabeth's interesting attitude to politics: while she wrote in her diary that asking too many questions, even if one was interested in something "would look impertinent & be as bad as a woman talking politics" and there is almost no detailed entry mentioning Upper Canadian politics, she certainly was not un-political.

She kept the diary not only for herself, but to show it to those left behind in England as well; to some degree, her diary was a form of self-presentation, so we can debate if she might have sometimes written things she thought would raise other people's opinion of her and cultivate the image of the accomplished and polite Mrs Simcoe.

The Duc de Liancourt, a French nobleman travelling in Upper Canada described her as "bashful and speaks little; but she is a woman of sense, handsome and amiable, and fulfils all the duties of the mother and wife with the most scrupulous exactness. The performance of the latter she carries so far as to act the part of a private secretary to her husband."

In truth, she just avoided him because, in her own words he and his entourage appeared "perfectly democratic and dirty" with an additional "I dislike them all" added a week later.

It is hard to believe that someone who acted as secretary to her spouse (and thus would have seen his official correspondence; from one of his letters, we can gather that she read and copied important correspondence for him), uses the term "democratic" in a derogatory fashion and opposed voting rights for Catholics should not have had any interest in politics.

That being said, the first quote I used only speaks of "talking politics": as I've tried to show, she certainly had political opinions but did not talk about them, save for in letters and probably in the inner circle of her family. Evidently, she saw her position as a woman and wife in society to appear conforming to its conventions in order to uphold her social standing, but had a lot more to say in private. In fact, it appears the Simcoe women and their close friends were very lively debating the political issues of the day.

Edit: Sorry for initially forgetting the title. The sun in splendour was one of the badges used by kings Edward IV and Richard III. During the Wars of the Roses, at the Battle of Mortimer's Cross (1461) a parhelion occurred and Edward interpreted the appearance of three "suns" in the sky as a sign of victory, with each sun standing for one of the three York brothers, Edward himself, George and Richard. The battle, and ultimately the
throne was won (and later lost by his younger brother Richard), prompting Edward and later, Richard to take up the sun in splendour as his badge. Since the sun in all its burning splendour is a prominent feature in this chapter and Simcoe was born only a stone's throw from Fotheringhay Castle, the seat of the House of York and birthplace of Richard III (also famously the place where Mary, Queen of Scots was tried and executed), I thought it would make a good title. I might have mentioned this somewhere before, I'm not sure actually, but whenever I start talking about the middle ages, I won't stop... ^^

Now, without further ado, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Time itself seemed to stop, or at least pass more slowly, like honey dripping from a spoon as they continued to stare at each other, with neither party tearing their eyes off the other or daring to blink.

It was unpleasant to say the very least to remain standing with her head tilted back and rigidly upright in order to gain even the slightest bit of height in the face of John, who even when stooping in order to be closer to her, to whisper a witty comment into her ear or, as he enjoyed doing, look her in the eyes to marvel at them for their colour, which he called sherry-like, but with speckles of emerald, still remained terribly tall, towering over her.

Praising her eyes, he was of course flattering her excessively, who had studied her own likeness in the mirror often enough to know such was not the case; they were a very regular light brown.

Her regular light brown held the gaze of his icy blue and in their depths, she openly read the same feelings she was experiencing. There was anger, confusion, insecurity, but also love and passion.

Especially the latter embarrassed her and made her direct a sizeable portion of her ire against herself; she should not think about how it felt when her naked skin had touched his, the inexplicable warmth he emanated, the firmness of his muscles contrasted by the velvety tenderness of his skin and the soft roughness of the hair on his chest brushing against her breasts.

She should be angry- well, she was but apparently not sufficiently so to eclipse those other feelings swelling in her chest, urging to be let out.

A moment later, Elizabeth was unable to tell how it had transpired exactly, who had made the first step and who merely had followed; all she knew was that a second later, John had one arm wrapped around the small of her back and she had him by the shoulders, both attempting to amalgamate their bodies by drawing the other in closer.

His lips bowed down to hers (or had hers reached up to his?) and the next thing she knew was that his mouth was on hers. Her own parted only too willingly to allow them to deepen their kiss. This time, he kissed her with more care, and she allowed it, kissing him back with equal tenderness as he picked her up as if she weighted nothing at all and carried her over to the bed, where he laid her down and instantly, driven by the instinct of desire, she moved to accommodate him as he fell down on top of her.

Apparently she was a little heavier than he had let on, for she clearly heard his suppressed sigh of exhaustion before their lips connected once again and she buried her hand in his hair, keeping him just like this, holding him in place.
Whatever John was doing or saying, he was evidently not fully recovered yet, although she had no idea what John, fully recovered, was like as she had never known him any differently. The man she had come to know had used a cane and moved worse than Uncle Samuel, who was almost seventy, emitting pained groans with every step and spending his time reposing either in bed or seated somewhere he could rest his shattered leg after having used it ill, trying to walk under great pain.

The John she had, who rode, went on long walks and had added a little more weight to the skeleton-like appearance of earlier in the year looked well, better and stronger than most men in fact, which made it so incomprehensible he should one day have been even stronger, even more vital than he was today.

Elizabeth could not fight back a moan when John’s hands brushed over her breasts, threatening to set her skin ablaze through her clothing before moving to hike up her skirts, to which her instincts responded by moving her legs apart so as to make room there for him and facilitate his endeavour.

Suddenly, she became very aware of the hardness confined beneath John’s breeches pressed firmly against her, evidently seeking friction, which caused her insides to coil in anticipation and insecurity alike.

There was no doubt she wanted it, wanted it very much, wanted to learn more, explore John’s body as he would hers, but she couldn’t allow it.

Not for the obvious reasons and not because of what had just transpired as well.

“What’s the matter?”, John asked softly in response to her body growing tense and rigid below him and removed his hands from her entirely, using them to support himself against the bed on either side of her head instead.

“John, we can’t”, she announced right out, looking him in the eyes. “The danger of being discovered or me— you know.”

"That's not all, I can tell."

She shook her head best as her position allowed, acutely aware of her flushed skin and the fact that John’s much bigger, stronger body had her pinned to the bed.

He said nothing, but his eyes studied her features intently and he did not remove his weight from her.

John’s eyes, so blue and clear, allowed her to see right to the bottom of these iridescent wells; he was not very successful at veiling his true emotions, closing the curtains to his soul to others.

Others, Elizabeth was certain, would have shrunk from him, seeing him so, fearful the Colonel would administer to them the fierceness he was known for among the ranks and his fellow officers, she however did not- or rather, given her situation, wouldn't have done if she could have.

Firstly, she was almost immobilised by his body on top of her and there was no way she could ever best him physically. Steel by countless battles, the hardships of campaign and the unforgivingly harsh use he had made of his own person during the war, always participating personally in even the most dangerous and exhausting endeavours as she had heard, had made him strong and heavy with muscles whereas she was not only a woman and naturally inferior to him when it came to physical force, but also extremely small.

Secondly, she did not want to move nor felt it necessary. There was no fear inside her when she opened her mouth once more and captured John’s stare. She was not afraid of John, never would be. Although she had heard tales about the war, some from Mary Anne and some from Aunt Margaret,
who had accompanied Uncle Samuel to Boston when he had been made Commander of the North American Station in days when John had still been a welcome guest in her home and had even watched him administer violence to another man, she was not afraid.

Maybe, she mused, it was because she knew what he was capable of that she was not afraid of him. Tales of demons, witches or un-dead, as one heard particularly often from the eastern outskirts of the Emperor Joseph’s realm, were only terrifying to people because they had never seen what was presented to them in horrific stories. The uncertainty of not-knowing was the most powerful tool of terror.

To some, John had been a monster, or at least a very dark, threatening presence like the character of Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto*, which Mary Anne had read to her on one of their vigils and who delighted greatly in dark tales of murder, mystery and intrigue, which probably caused her to more readily see the creatures confined between book covers in the real world.

To her, he was not. He was gentle, kind and loving, but he was also the Colonel, a military man who had spent almost half of his life in service and who had seen and done things she did not even want to imagine.

At times in the past, when John’s letters had arrived in the days before they had known each other personally and she had read them to Uncle Samuel, they hadn’t been so cheerful and full of detailed descriptions of his latest exploits as she had come to expect.

There had been darker ones, too, very few but there had been, in which he had written about battles and rather than detailing the individual regiments and commanders, strength of forces and number of artillery pieces, he had spoken of the wounded, the cries of those nearing their end, dying horrific deaths in great pain, about horses whose guts had been cut open and the poor animals were stumbling over their own entails- Elizabeth had to blink the very vivid images those memories of John’s letters had brought on away.

She knew him better than anyone else, his good and bad sides, his horrors, his pain and his joy. She saw not in him either a monster or a glorious hero, she saw Lieutenant-Colonel John Graves Simcoe with his endearingly curious half-smile, indomitable auburn curls and strikingly blue eyes without trying to paint over the fearsome scar where others had a left ear, the countless wounds on his chest speaking of his time in active service or the strong, slightly calloused hands that had killed, more and less rightfully at times, as his ice-cold eyes watched on as the life was drained of another person, knowing that he had done it, had extinguished a life.

His soul was not as people made it out to be, namely correspondent to the fearsome, war-like appearance, towering height, muscular frame and crown of flames on his head, which always lend him an air of a certain wildness.

John was rather different, softer than all that, a man of great thought and intellect. A beast kills without conscience; and God knew John’s conscience was burdened with days past and, as he had relayed to her from time to time, some of his own deeds.

He was no pitiable victim, but he was no definitive villain either. He was John.

And she loved him just like this and so much she could not withhold the truth she needed to speak to him any longer.
“There is more.”

He can feel his stomach drop. What is she going to tell him? Has she found another, more handsome, worthier of her love while she was away in Somerset?

A cousin of Miss Burges perhaps, or a younger Somerville, or an older one, for they have connexions to the aristocracy, and truly, is not all what Elizabeth lacks in addition to her considerable wealth a title?

Next she is going to tell him is that she must break their engagement, and with it their secret marriage with a daisy ring off, for she has been introduced to a young Lord, who will one day inherit his father’s estates, is in good health and of an amiable disposition and pleasing physiognomy.

Who could want a comparatively old, worn colonel? He has been foolish to think a treasure like Elizabeth could ever be his to revere and adore. She is too beautiful, too witty and too rich to be ignored by fashionable society as a potential bride for their young, gentlemen sons and she naturally can have the pick of the cream of England’s nobility.

He has been a fool for ever assuming she could love a man like him. She has seen him at his worst, shrinking from such a trifle as a little thunder during a storm, there surely is nothing more ridiculous than that.

The new man at her side, he is bolder than him, more unafraid, a pillar she can lean against whereas he is a broken statue is in need of a pillar himself to support his crumbling form for the rest of his life.

“You, John”, she starts and all his worst fears are affirmed. He is a nuisance, living off his godfather’s estate, in his home and finances even, a mere parasite unable to support himself sufficiently. No woman can want that for her future. It was only a matter of time before Elizabeth would regain her senses and make a more sensible choice. It will end, now.

“I- I cannot tell you how much I love you-“ but, he starts the half-sentence that is bound to follow in his head. There always is a but.

“But you, you- I’m sure you do not mean to do so, but you suffocate me.”

At this, he becomes acutely aware of his position still on top of her, effectively immobilising Elizabeth against the mattress, but he does not move.

“Not like this, but with your ways. You promised me and my Aunt and the Admiral, so I heard from them, that you would never consider my money your own, even if the law shall make it so upon our wedding day. Please afford me the same consideration as my inheritance.”

“What do you mean by this?”, he asks, unsure whether to be confused, angry or if he should ask who the other man is. Maybe he could duel him- at least she is saying she loves him still, which gives him a little, though likely forlorn, hope.

“I mean that you must learn that you cannot keep my by your side like a pet monkey. I am yours, I pledged to be when I accepted your proposal, but not in the way of a dog, horse or slave.”

She makes a face at the last word that indicates her contempt for those who subdue other human beings against their will and claim to own them like chattel.

It is the most anti-Christian thing to do, claiming ownership of a fellow person, who at least by the
law of God is their equal in that said person possesses a soul and will one day ascend to heaven. Once, in another life, he had made Akinbode, a freed slave, his second in command. Why should Akinbode, superior to all those supposedly his betters on the sole supposed merit of their pale skin, be worth less than them, who had been cowardly and could not fight? A man’s worth in his mind, is determined by his abilities, in the case of a soldier his effectiveness in battle, his skills with the bayonet and musket, not where he hails from as long as his character is one of constancy and loyalty to the King.

Clearly, he has never thought of Elizabeth as his property, which is a most hurtful insinuation.

“Don’t look at me like that”, she chides him, “I beg you, John, be not angry. What I mean is that your love for me, your desire to have me close at all times, can prove overmuch at times. I do not know of all that has happened to you or why you cannot bear the thought of being away from me, but I shall not desert you. I will always return, even if I should travel to the edge of the world.”

“But I love you”, he objects, not quite able to make sense of what she says. Does she not love his attention? His presents, kisses, their more or less secret embraces?

“And I love you very much, but you must promise me you will honour my wishes and needs. Although, as you well know, marriage entails I shall entrust myself and everything I own into your hands, I need your words you will not treat me as other husbands do. There is a reason Aunt Margaret, if she would have her way, would never see me marry.”

“You want independence?”, he asks lamely. The word tastes extremely foul on his tongue, just like a freshly plucked apple.

“Yes, I suppose you could call it that.”

To his consternation, she snorts, almost laughing: “You look as if I were General Washington reciting the Declaration of Independence to you.”

“You certainly are not Washington”, he is quick to reply in a tone that by its pitch reveals he is somewhat offended but also eager to persuade her to take the insult she has made against herself back, “that dishonest insurrectionist has no mind for freedom of any kind. He plays at king himself and is, if anything, worse than any British administrator ever to serve in the Thirteen Colonies. At least the man holds true to his word, which is the only thing he can hold to his credit.

"You are- you are everything.”

Transported by the feeling of his heart exploding in his chest, he bows down to her to kiss her, but she rolls her head to the side, away from him.

“You must promise me, John.”

Her eyes look at him, expectant and pleading with him at the same time. Aware that he still keeps her restrained beneath him, he rolls over to one side, allowing her to sit up and awkwardly push her skirts down, smoothing them with dithery fingers.

He follows her example and sits up, too. Instead of advancing too quickly, he opts for taking her hands in his in a solemn gesture.

She still loves him, Eliza loves him. There is nothing he would not promise to her.

“I promise.”
“Do you mean the words you say?”

“I do. With all my heart.”

“Then show me”, she implores him and takes his face in her hands, angling it to her satisfaction so they are facing each other.

“Sometimes- I confess, I cannot always make sense of you. I know you love me, and I know that I love you, too, more than I have ever loved but-” she shakes her head and breaks eye contact with him. There is always a but. How he despises this ugly little word.

“I will have to learn”, she concluded her sentence and watched the expression on his features change from dread to surprise. “Just like you will have to learn to let me fly wherever my proverbial wings might take me.”

“As long as they take you back to me-“

“They shall. Just not always within the day.”

Gently, she placed a small kiss on his cheek. To her, it was the most wondrous thing to watch John whenever she touched him; he, who so often had the air of a statue, seemed to come to life under her touch and his remarkably pale cheeks took a rubicund colour, which made the stern, thin-lipped face of her fiancé look much younger than one might take him for and particularly delighted in viewing his eyelids close slowly as if he was still too shy to watch her in the moment of her lips touching his skin.

He hummed appreciatively as she stroked his cheek softly and appeared to allow himself to savour this moment, but his eyes opened again and found hers.

“I have never known any love such as yours and never loved like I love you. Death has been my constant companion throughout my life. A soldier must always expect his death, of course and I was willing to give my life for our cause, even if I was afeard of the act –dying- itself. That it might hurt terribly.”

This confession did not fall lightly from his lips and especially the last sentence appeared to cause him to feel shame, likely because it was expected of a soldier to meet death indifferently.

“And then I almost died”, he continued, “you saw me.”

Elizabeth nodded, thinking back to the hollow-cheeked shadow whose only constant companion had been his walking stick. The broken thing they had sent home in the place of the young man Uncle Samuel had parted ways with when he sailed home from Boston in ’76.

“And when-“ he gulped, visibly searching for words, “it was almost there, it was at Yorktown, I think, for I recall summoning my men. They gathered in my tent, around my bed, and I told them to flee. They had no other chance to survive this battle. Some had served with the Continental Army or some patriot provincial militia before and would have been shot if detected by the victors. So I sent them away, told them to leave. One moment they were all there and then they were gone.”
With his eyes moving left and right, Elizabeth guessed John was re-living those vivid moments that had burnt themselves into his memory.

“I was alone, and I would die.”

“You didn’t:” she attempted to intervene but was cut off by him.

“I did not know then. When I survived and came to the Fort, it was so unexpected that I did not know what to do with myself, the broken limbs and frail body I have come to accept as my lot; I saw no sense in my survival and almost wished Death had claimed me when he could have. But then there was you, and you ended the darkness.”

With a soft smile, his face moved closer to hers.

“Nothing in the world could ever be as dear to me as you. You called me back from the dead when I was nothing but the shell of a man. You gave me your love and I made the resolve to never lose you. Not like all the others.”

Prior to this moment, they had not talked much about family as they had both come to know early on, on John’s birthday in winter to be precise, that they had both suffered losses very early and did not like to speak about them.

Although she knew it was nonsense, at times she still accused herself for the death of her mother, even if she had had no active part in it and could have done nothing to save her—especially now that Aunt Margaret had begun to campaign against her engagement by trying to convince her of the virtues of being a spinster, which included never having to cross the purgatory of childbirth that could quickly send A Woman to the grave.

Of John’s family, all she knew came from Uncle Samuel, who had been friends with the late Captain John Simcoe, R.N. John had had three siblings, two who died before his birth and a younger brother who did not survive a tragic accident aged ten. His mother was dead, too.

Given these circumstances, she had never asked, never had felt the need to. It would only have made him sad, and she wanted him to be happy.

“You will not lose me, I promise.”

“Nobody can promise that”, he objected, but was diverted by her moving closer to him and bringing her forehead to rest against his.

“I can”, she smiled, which obviously confused him. The idea had come to her rather spontaneously and she wondered what John would say.

With a teasing smile that signalled him he would have to wait yet another few moments to find out, she rose and walked to her nightstand, from which she retrieved, hidden in the back of its drawer where she kept her most valuable keepsakes, an old, worn piece of wood and showed it to John.

“I have Lion. He will always protect me, you said so yourself.”

He laughed and a lot of the terrible tension between them ebbed away as if it had never existed but Elizabeth knew they had a long way ahead of them, to a routine of married life, to knowing the other inside and out that would require readdressing these dire topics in the future.

Her fiancé did his best to make his love for her felt and expressed it through all manners of kisses and caresses of more or less decent nature before she found herself once more beneath him, panting
almost because he had left her so breathless.

“Do not fret, we won’t- allow me to touch you.”

Nothing in the world can be compared to the feeling of Elizabeth, of actually holding her and, even betters still, employing his capacities in such a way she will profit from them.

Elizabeth nods with both anticipation and nervousness in her eyes.

In theory, Miss Susan could come in again, or the Old Bat, but he is past caring now and she appears to be so, too. Her hands are incredibly eager to take hold of him and he cannot help but hum appreciatively when she pulls him closer by his hair in order to kiss him very long and deeply while his hand finds its way beneath her skirts.

“Oh-“ surprised, she exhales audibly when his hand comes to rest on the soft bed of curls between her thighs. Gently, he begins to move his fingers more boldly, opening her to his gentle ministrations.

She is evidently in anticipation of what he is doing, for she gives a little, stifled moan she tries to silence by putting one of her hands over her mouth and, transported by the shocking wave of pleasure mounting in her writhes in the agonising period of heavenly torture that precedes the bliss of release.

Watching her like this, not the coolly amused, temperate Miss Gwillim, but utterly shameless, her face and chest flushed, her mouth half-open, her eyes closed and her flesh burning, wanting him, makes him aware of his own needs and desires he has vowed to himself shall be attended to later, in peace, where she needs not see it. He shall think back on these moments then in the solitude of his own quarters and find his own pleasure there.

His beloved raises a hand to his chest and he is for one moment surprised she wants him to stop, but, as she beckons him not to and instead asks him to continue and intensify his ministrations, he realises it is her wish to caress or hold on to him, too. She strokes down his front several times where much too many garments shield his skin from her touch, which is truly lamentable, almost infuriating even.

Even so, her touch burns itself through his clothes like fire and his dry, parched heart catches flame-not that it hadn’t burned before, but now, the bonfire within him has grown into a conflagration the size of all England and he, continuing in his work, can no longer think straight nor is he able to distinguish between her pleasure and his own- the world has turned upside down a second time, this time in the most beautiful sense possible. Nothing has ever felt better than Eliza’s by comparison rather small hands hungrily reaching up to him, making him hers in the most wonderful sense possible.

Diligently trying to find out what will render her insane with pleasure, what she likes best, it takes him a moment to realise the bold hand of delicate fingers that has tugged his shirt from his breeches and crept beneath the fabric, trailing down from his chest southwards, guided by a trail of hair running down the length of his front, before it reaches its apparent goal, stroking him tentatively.

Even through his breeches the sensation of her touch is too much already.

His head tilts back involuntarily, his eyes closed, groaning softly.
“Is it good?”

Eliza’s eyes search his, not ceasing her ministrations. She only applies the faintest of touches to him, rendering him insane, needful of more, but is not granted more than she is giving him- and must not be granted more, either.

“Yes”, he hisses, unable to say more or take his eyes off his fiancée.

Growing bolder, her hand moves to the buttons and undoes them, sliding her hand inside to touch him without any clothing between them.

When she touches him again, still within the confines of his breeches and blushing a little (though she has no need to do so at all, but he also figures this might look a little different from her perspective, who is touching him or any person for that matter like this for the first time), there is no barrier between them left.

There hadn’t been any need to ask, he is rock-hard already.

His self-restraint is giving way to the great power and witchcraft that lies in Eliza’s fingers and so, he lets himself fall onto the bed next to her, without relinquishing his task, of course.

Even if he would like to simply indulge in the sensation of Eliza stroking him, now applying more pressure as she grows bolder in her movements and experimentations as to what is going to have the greatest effect on him, he sits up and tells her to stop.

“Was it wrong?”, she asks hesitantly.

“Not at all”, he replies, his voice husky with arousal and desire, “but what of you?”

It is still quite early in their carnal knowledge of each other and it is she who has borne the hardest lot, in the figurative and the most literal sense, so far. Much as he is longing for completion, it would be shameful to let her go without and disappoint in his husbandly duties (for tho’ they are not quite married yet, this does not matter to him as he already considers himself just that), virile qualities and lover’s skills.

John’s hands palmed the front of her dress fiercely before they moved further down again where her upturned skirts told the tale of what has just transpired between them, or was still transpiring: her petticoats now shoved up to her belly, she lay quite exposed before him, which was utterly terrifying from a moral perspective; from that of a lover however, it was nothing short of exhilarating.

His dutiful hands returned to her and made her ache deep within, wanting it, wanting him, now.

As her thoughts on their experimentations were such that both participants should be granted release, she reached for his member once again, stroking him as she had before.

“Harder, please”, John pleaded with her and Elizabeth could feel his legs shake as she obliged. Somehow, everything was made even more exciting by the knowledge that John melted under her touches just as she did under his, that in this moment, it was indistinguishable where her body ended and his started, that no thinking was required and nothing mattered when they were together. They
Much as she did her best to give him pleasure, she was first to experience it, barely able to keep her hands working John’s hard length.

“Hush, Eliza”, he chided her when her mouth was intent on voicing the ecstatic bliss washing over her and only biting her lower lip kept her from doing so, which could easily have led to them being discovered by someone alarmed to hear a sharp cry from her room.

She might have tried to hide John under the bed, as one would expect of an admittedly somewhat scandalous heroine in a novel, and blamed her moment of shock (for why else would she emit a cry?) on Susan’s imaginary red-furred, cat-sized rat haunting the house again, but realistically, no one would believe her.

Luckily she was able to prevent herself from making any loud noises as John’s deft fingers continued to thrust and tease, causing her to rock her hips into them in intuitive attempts to increase the intensity of the experience even more.

Instead of allowing herself to recover from the recent ecstasy, Elizabeth returned her hands to John, whom she beckoned to lie back as it was his turn now.

His features distorted in the agonies of oncoming pleasure and his entire, very strong body arched up to complement the rhythm of her hands. Increasing the tightness of her grip and the speed of her movements, she could feel it wouldn’t take long, seconds at most, before John too received the same gift he had given her earlier when all of a sudden, John attempted to pry her hands away.

“Wait, no-“ he gasped, causing her to withdraw, sitting back on her knees, wondering what this was about.

With great haste, John reached into the pocket of the dark grey coat he was still wearing and pulled a handkerchief out, which he then proceeded to hold to the tip of his straining length while administering to himself a few urgent, almost brutal strokes with the fist of the other hand before at last, his muscles convulsed and exhaling an audible breath held in in order to suppress any more conspicuous emission of sound, went slack against the bed.

After a few moments of both trying to gather themselves and righting their attire to some degree, John tucked his handkerchief, now soiled, away, adding a somewhat ashamed “we must not leave any evidence” as he did. He would likely destroy it later as he had instructed her to do with the last; she must remember to give him a number as a wedding-gift, Elizabeth thought.

“Come here”, John called her back from her thoughts and awkwardly patted the mattress with his hand, beckoning her to lie down alongside him.

Without thinking, she did so and pressed her back into John’s chest, feeling the warmth of his body, his heartbeat and his gentle breath in the back of her neck as he held her like this mixing with the wonderful aftershock of pleasure.

The moment was perfect, pristine, pure; there was only love, nothing to say or think- and yet, she did.

Outside, the sun had broken free from the clouds and now sent a ray of light through her window directly onto the bed where they lay. The summer-sunshine felt warm, almost hot on her skin and Elizabeth asked herself if the sun in its present splendour, full of light and fire, provided an analogy for her and John: it was beautiful to look at, to admire and the caresses of its warm rays felt good on
her face, but only for a time— if too long exposed to the sun, one would not only suffer one’s skin to turn as tanned as that of a seaman, it would first turn a bright red and feel swollen and then peel; were she and John not just the same whenever they were together?

They burned brightly with love for the other and it was wonderful, but it could also turn into the exact opposite, as the previous evening had shown.

They were like fire, both of them and at the same time, they were fickle creatures of human flesh, not made for the flames and easily burnt.

In the following days, he tries his best to show his love he is the very model of a perfect intended. When she goes out to meet certain friends or acquaintances on her own or in the company of her aunt, he stays behind, and quite happily so, using her absences to compose enquiries why his letters have not been answered and if they have, why the answers he receives are never satisfactory or sits with the Admiral, who presently is in much anticipation to see how the recent change of Prime Minister will affect the country.

After the Marquess of Rockingham’s lamentable death in office, the Earl of Shelburne has ‘taken the rudder’ as his godfather phrases it, and tho’ a Whig, to the old man anybody is better than Lord North, whose government has played on him such cruel tricks.

It is the North Ministry and the Admiralty who destroyed his reputation, he says, and although he has been made an admiral of the white of late, the new rank cannot compensate for his loss of command.

They offered him Portsmouth four years ago, but Portsmouth is a town, not a ship and thus no place for a seaman. How he has managed on land for these past twelve years he doesn’t know.

The old man always was a seafaring man, a Tar of the finest sort and an honourable gentleman and would never have consented to the burning of Falmouth town.

What his subordinate, a certain Captain Mowat, has done, is not the work of the Admiral, who was an honourable warrior throughout his career of active service.

They, the government, the Admiralty and at last the public have turned on him based on false accusations and no-one would hear his defences.

Perhaps it is because he knows how being shunned by one’s brother officers and the plague mark of a ruined reputation feel like, the hushed conversations, the fingers pointed at one’s back, why he likes him still and has welcomed him into his home after the war.

Only that in his case, the things they tell about him are real, for the most part.

If only the British public, who have never left their little island, would understand the wickedness of these now so-called Americans, they would not have maltreated the Admiral and would have welcomed him as a hero. Granted, he has come to realise that not everything he did was always correct, that in his rage, he has done wrong on a number of counts but overall, he had had reason to punish those aiding and abetting Washington, as had the Admiral, whose only fault it was to issue command, pressed by his superiors to restore law and order to the coast, where whaleboat men and smugglers did their trade, to Captain Mowat of the HMS Canceaux to destroy property if belonging
Mowat had misinterpreted his orders, perhaps purposefully so, and set the entire town ablaze.

In his own time in America, he had burnt down a few barns, too, sometimes with livestock in them, but never someone’s homestead, not even the Seat of Evil, Whitehall, tho’ he would have liked to watch it burn very much- and would in that pleasure likely have found a likeminded spirit in Mrs Woodhull, who, as he had come to observe during his time there, liked the place and its inhabitants as much as he.

He understands why such drastic measures might be tempting, the feeling of power, of superiority, of justly administered punishment, but it is not right.

Only those who have wronged the King should have been punished, no innocent women and children, especially not the latter.

And to punish Admiral Graves for it was plain wrong.

He hopes the old man might find some peace in his retirement; certainly, he has spent time improving the house and grounds and his friends and acquaintances enjoy his company, but he shall never receive the laurels he deserves for the thankless task of securing the entire coastline of the North American Colonies from the north to the south with only a few and quite bad ships.

He was not at fault, the government was, the same institution that is now wronging him by withholding the duly deserved rank and recognition from him and his regiment.

It appears that those who serve Britain with the greatest zeal and diligence are punished the severest for it.

Of late however, he does not invest as much time in seeing justice being done as he has before, for he has been to London twice now without effect and each time only wasted money, some of it not even his, and time he would much rather have spent with Elizabeth, assuring her he only has the best intentions for her and only wants her to be happy.

She seems so, happy, that is.

They are presently seated with the old Admiral for tea, as his wife has taken to bed with one of her bad migraines and the old man, as opposed to his wife, grants them more liberties than she ever would.

It is his house, after all, and to him, who has known both of them since their childhood days, it must appear awkward and ridiculous to disallow them sitting next to each other and openly exchange adoring glances.

Viewing the old man taking his tea, he even has the suspicion his godfather delights in the sight presenting itself to him- as long as they do it here, in private at least.

His love looks charming as always, with the summer sun falling through the window behind her and giving her the glow of a halo around her head.

Contrary to what some people may say, it is the little moments one remembers best and in much greater detail: the thin strand of hair that has decided against staying in her coiffure and imperfectly falls to her shoulder; the floral pattern on her dress, the lace around the edges of her fichu, the soft curve of her upper lip, the exact but indescribable colour of her eyes- for a moment, time slows down to these observations before it accelerates again and he is thrown back into the moment of time his
living and breathing body inhabits:

“John?”

“Yes?”

A most familiar, angelic face looks at him with furrowed brows.

“Have you been thinking?”

“I have”, he replies and smiles back at her and his godfather, painfully aware the way his mouth curls into a supposed smile always looks quite insincere to others.

“I have been thinking, too.”

Eliza’s mien is very serious, which evidently the Admiral remarks upon, too.

“What about, dear?”, the old man asks and sets down his fork, a piece of cake still on it.

“Our engagement.”

Cold fear runs through him on this warm summer’s day. This is the end. She has made up her mind at last.

“Why do you look so fearful?”

With a side-glance to their elderly chaperone, she asks for permission to touch him and is given it.

Elizabeth turns to him and places one hand on his thigh, the other on his hand with the fingers drumming restlessly against the table.

Her touch stills them and makes them come to rest against the cool wood of the table top.

“John, do you think-“ she shakes her head and he is not sure if he is to read amusement, bemusement or anger in her features, perhaps it is all three to some degree.

“Are you truly afraid I could want to break our engagement off?”

“M-hm”, he mumbles sheepishly to his shoe buckles.

“Why John, why in the world would I?”

“Because you were displeased with me lately.”

She sighs and glances to her uncle, who cannot make sense of the situation as he does not know what transpired between them of late.

A trained officer, he is not easy to shock and prefers to watch before taking action, seeing how matters might develop, if the wind is favourable and the cannons loaded before firing and most importantly, how his subordinates might react.

He has learned from his time as Commander of the North American Station, that is for certain.

“I was, but why should I want to-“, her voice grows more high-pitched, obviously quite shocked he has thought so and her hands are shaking.

“Because I am no match a young lady should make and it is hardly believable you should have
chosen me over all other men."

“Pshaw.”

At last, his godfather chooses to join the fray with a snort-like sound.

“My niece has chosen you herself. If I had had my way some two or three years ago, she would be engaged to my nephew Richard now, which, coming to think of more recent events, it is a fortunate coincidence they were not well-matched, to put it mildly. It was my intention to have them married, but it was not hers and at last, so I always believed, her personal happiness had to weigh heavier than any designs I or her aunt hold. What good does it do an old man to ruin the life of a young person? This opinion at least I shared with her aunt regarding her upbringing. It is you who makes her happy.”

Elizabeth nods.

“I don’t know how you think of yourself, or of me for that matter, but you are wrong on every count. I could and do not wish for anybody else, John. I have half a mind to be insulted you think thus of me.”

Her fingers now come to life, stroking his hand insistently while she looks up to him with a smile on her lips.

Her face is not a happy one, though; the smile is strained, her eyes two deep hazel wells filled with words that pool there, unspoken.

An uncomfortable silence hangs over the table like a rain-heavy cloud, which seems so out of place on this splendid summer’s day.

Tangible in the air almost, it is the Admiral who acts first upon it and leaves them with a curious and somewhat concerned glance back at them, saying they need to speak among themselves and have a conversation he is no part of, leaving (quite uncharacteristic for the old man) half a slice of cake behind.

Almost as soon as the door is closed and they are alone, he realises how their bodies, yearning for their respective counterpart, draw closer without any of them consciously moving any closer.

“Eliza, I-“

“You think of me as a pretty thing, don’t you? A precious jewel one has to keep an eye on at all times, lest it be snatched away.”

Elizabeth’s voice is heavy with bitterness, causing dread to take hold of his throat, an invisible hand choking him until the only sounds he is able to produce come out in a high-pitched squeak, only one of the many defects on his personal list of shortcomings.

She mistakes the situation entirely, he would never think of her as a possession, not ever, it is very different.

“It is not so much what I think of you than what I think of myself”, he starts cautiously, speaking to his shoes again, “for you are utter perfection, the divine union of brilliance and beauty. You are a beacon, a ray of sunshine amidst the dreary sea of clouds, you have more warmth and live in you than any other person on this earth and to boot are wealthy and respected, whereas I- just look at me.”
To illustrate his words, his hands motion from his shoulders downwards, indicating she shall look at his person.

“What do you see?”

“I see you, John Graves Simcoe.”

“You know me well, Eliza, even you must by now have come to notice that I am not handsome, or rich or anything else favourable. Whereas you are beautiful, kind, you are-“

Eliza’s hand presses his more insistently than before.

“Stop.”

She rises from her chair and is now taller than him seated.

John loved her, loved her as boundlessly as she did him, but always added the thought that he was undeserving of her love, making them both out to be exact opposites of one another.

And while they possibly were, especially regarding their size and height, their hearts were unified in beating by to the same rhythm.

“I am a woman of flesh and blood and bone, not an idol to be prayed to and worshipped. And I don’t want to be.”

“But I revere you. I esteem and admire you above all human beings. You are the friend to whom my soul is attached as to its better half. You are the most amiable, the most perfect of women. And you are dearer to me than language has the power of telling.”

Amazed, she was rendered speechless for a moment by John’s quick-wittedness quoting from Evelina again, the same passage he had read to her the night they had first kissed. At last, after a short pause, she decided to mirror him:

“And I revere you. I esteem and admire you above all human beings. You are the friend to whom my soul is attached as to its better half. You are the most amiable, the most perfect of men. And you are dearer to me than language has the power of telling.”

John looked uneasy, not knowing what he should reply.

“See, it is just the same”, she thus continued, “we love each other equally badly and there is no difference. I love you because you are you- very kind, very handsome, thoughtful, intelligent and so much more- you wrong me by thinking I might love somebody else more than you, for I do not and your doubt does me injury.”

“It is not that I doubt you love me, it is that if you can love me so much, you, and it is your right to do so, can love someone, a better man, even more fervently. I would never blame you if you would bestow your heart on someone else, worthier than me.”

In this moment, John reminded her of what she had termed a “brokenly alive thing” when they had first met. Over the past few months, she had thought the shards of his soul had healed, but they were
only mended—the cracks still visible, the sealant still drying.

Part of his thinking originated in his past, in the image he had come to have of himself following the war, but it was so utterly wrong. She was as much a saint as he was the devil.

“No. I love you, and you only.”

She put her arms around him and pulled him into an embrace.


His head sunk against her chest when he finally allowed himself to believe in what she had just said.

“I am an ordinary woman who wants the same thing you do—to love, and to be loved.”

At that, John lifted his head. Quite obviously, he had caught the little reference to one of the poems she had once read in a book picked up from his nightstand and which she had been able to decipher despite her at best passable proficiency in the ancient tongue of the Romans.

“An ordinary woman”, he repeats, not quite believing it, while rising to wrap his arms around her, have her close to him.

“…With very ordinary desires”, Eliza managed to say before his lips were firmly connected to hers and talking impossible.

When at last they managed to let go and draw much needed breath (and get their hands off the other), Eliza took this opportunity to close their discussion:

“And I shall want such kisses always.”

Eliza still wants him. It is still unbelievable to him, but it is true.

“Wherefore we need to make our engagement public soon, before we become the talk of town.”

He has almost forgotten they must tell everybody else at one point, too, likely at a social gathering he is not very fond of.

The pictures of his birthday celebrations well up again from the depths of his brain, usually restricted to the same place where he keeps Percy and the things he's done and seen during the war locked up: he once more takes in the vista of the house overcrowded with no space to even turn around, the masses of people and most crucially, the feeling of dread the noises of so many people chattering, laughing and shouting all at once have given him, transmuted to the cries of dying men, wounded horses whinnying and the pictures of the war they have brought to life again before his mind’s eye.
“You are not in favour of it, are you?” she asked John, reaching for his visibly trembling hand.

“No”, he confessed, clarifying, “you know I do not tolerate large gatherings well.”

She knew; she recalled him in a state of terror that past February when Uncle Samuel had hoped John would socialise more if only he would be exposed to people. At the time, she had thought he was merely being rude and perhaps annoyed Uncle Samuel had invited guests he was not pleased with or the like, but she had been wrong; now she knew.

And yet, it had to be done. He was a royal officer who served his country, who held aspirations for his future career in the Army.

A man intent to leave his mark on the world needed to present himself, needed to be seen by the right people, to entertain and be entertaining.

Elizabeth had no illusions; she was the sort of woman men like him needed by their side, someone who would award him greater respectability through her person, birth, social connexions and money.

She had always known that if she would marry for love, she would have to be a cold politician also. Female involvement in politics was frowned upon, and those of her sex openly seen politicking regarded as vulgar, like the Duchess of Devonshire, yet Elizabeth was undeterred.

Having grown up in a household of strong opinions, she had been raised to be one, a politician, but without the vulgarity of openly proclaiming one’s allegiances and opinions in public.

One did not step onto the open stage, where one could easily become subjected to audience members throwing rotten produce or hurling verbal vulgarities at one’s person, one had to be very delicate and remain behind the curtain, from whence one could direct what happens on stage.

She could help John in his endeavour to win his promotion and financial security for his men also; their engagement would be a major social event in the western parts of England and Wales, talked about to be sure, and they would use it to their advantage.

Just as she could always rely on John to find a strongly-muscled shoulder to rest her head on, he could rely on her. Her shoulder was a lot smaller and doubtlessly less strong by comparison of their physiques, but she could make up for that with the strength of her love and determination.

“You will manage”, she replies, but not in an indifferent tone, her voice is soft and encouraging, sure of him. “I believe in you.”

“I suppose most guests will know what this gathering is about even before the Admiral will announce it”, he comments.

“Isn’t it always the case?”, she smiles back at him. She smiles, but he can see she is a little nervous also.

“We shall manage”, he presses her hand.

“No, we shan’t; it shall be a success and we shall do splendidly.”
Seeing her beam at him, he is inclined to believe it.

Chapter End Notes

Samuel Graves: the case of Samuel Graves is a tricky one. Simcoe (purposefully) misinterprets what happened and sides with his godfather, but let's dive into history:

As Commander of the North American Station, Graves could not meet the demands of his superiors in London; to give an example, his attempted crackdown on smuggling failed mainly because the local smugglers had much lighter boats which the Admiral, his ships being few and ill-suited for the task, could not pursue.

He was generally badly equipped and his duty patrolling the entirety of the coastline of all parts of North America belonging to the British Empire impossible.

Although technically, he was not at fault for not being granted more and better ships and men, he was blamed for being supposedly inefficient.

Falmouth was preceded by rebel activity in the general area, with British supply ships, among them the Margaretta (remember her from TURN?) being taken by rebels. It's easy to see where such a radical order, intent of finally making some impact, must have come from.

Here is an excerpt from the orders Graves gave to Mowatt:

"(…) And whereas I have caused the Symmetry Transport and Spitfire Sloop to be armed and fitted in the best manner the Situation of our Affairs would admit in order to proceed along the Coast, and lay waste burn and destroy such Seaport Towns as are accessible to his Majesty's Ships; (…) You are therefore hereby required and directed to take the Symmetry and Spitfire under your Command together with his Majesty's Schooner Halifax, and proceed with them as soon as possible to Cape Anne Harbour, that Town having fired in the month of August last upon his Majesty's Sloop Falcon, wounded her People and taken many Prisoners; you are to burn destroy and lay waste the said Town together with all Vessels and (…), to fall upon and destroy any other Towns or places within the Limits aforesaid, and all Vessels or Craft to seize and destroy. My Design is to chastize Marblehead, Salem, Newbury Port, Cape Anne Harbour, Portsmouth, Ipswich, Saco, Falmouth in Casco Bay, and particularly Mechias where the Margueritta was taken, the Officer commanding her killed, and the People made Prisoners, and where the Diligent Schooner was seized and the Officers and Crew carried Prisoners up the Country, (…) You are to bestow your whole attention to annoying the Rebels and the Security of your own Vessels; to observe in all your operations the strictest discipline, not to suffer plundering upon any Account, as I will make an Example of whoever shall presume to be guilty of it. Whenever you can distinguish the persons or property of those who have taken no part in the rebellion and have given proofs of their Attachment to the Constituti[on] by refusing to concur in the unwarrantable measures that have been adopted to subvert it, you are to protect and defend them to the utmost of your power."

The interesting bit is the end: while Graves is willing to burn down towns, he will not have his men plunder what remains and seeks to protect those innocent of being rebels - at least under the condition Mowat is able to distinguish them as loyalists, which is hard when bombarding a town from the water.

After the Burning Falmouth on 18 October 1775, Graves was criticised on both sides of the Atlantic and subsequently recalled to England. He never received command of a
ship again and turned down the offer of overseeing Portsmouth a few years later. According to friends, he felt unfairly treated and appealed to be court-martialled in order to prove he had done nothing wrong, but was never granted his wish.

As some measure of compensation and consolation, the Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty who supported Graves but had to give in to the mounting pressure from all sides, ordered all of the Admiral's nephews to be promoted. Graves lived out his days pretty much like he does in this story, living in his country mansion with his wife and niece (and godson).

Just as a side note as I've focussed heavily on his military life, his characterisation when at home is not entirely made up. He is thought to have been the more lenient party when it came to letting Elizabeth and John go off alone, appears to have loved being involved in the lives of the two nephews, godson and niece he particularly doted on and even his Northern Irish accent might not be far-fetched; in an American poem of the time, he is characterised as "tall" and "mumbling" (and brainless), which doubtlessly was either made up or an exaggeration. I read the "mumbling" bit as an exaggeration of an accent—since he was born and grew up in Northern Ireland as the fourth son of an Anglo-Irish family, it does not strike me as completely unlikely his speech retained a few characteristic features in later life.

As always, thank you so much for reading!
First of all, allow me to wish the happiest of birthdays to Maryassassina who shares her birthday with Eliza Simcoe, eldest daughter of John Graves and Elizabeth, who would be 235 today! I hope there are fewer candles on top of your cake in case you plan on blowing them out in one go. ;)

Attention folks: I’ve out-noted myself once again. Originally, I thought I post some of Samuel Graves' Naval Nepotism (in his own words no less) with the notes to use that sweet character limit to its full capacity but I hardly fit everything in I really wanted to comment on in, so if anyone is interested in Sam Graves' not-so-slick attempts at covering up the blatant favouritism he showed his brother's boys, tell me in the comments!

Now join our heroes in the days running up to the engagement-announcement party, which will take the shape of a ball and midnight supper- a form of partying we know Elizabeth engaged in thanks to her diaries.

“And- again!”

She hummed a little tune to which she now instructed John to dance a minuet in the entrance hall, where there was not much furniture to get in the way. He was not very fond of dancing; had never been, as he had informed her, and the War and resulting injuries had kept him from doing it for a very long while, so that she found herself faced with someone not very practiced and a little confused at what to do.

John’s talents were plenty, but dancing was not one of them. He stood too stiffly, rigidly to begin with and although she had known that in the short while between the present moment and the upcoming engagement celebrations, which would take the form of a ball and midnight supper, she would not have enough time to make him as graceful a dancer as the French King Louis XIV was said to have been, she would have hoped he would take easier to the steps, which she tried to explain to him by dancing the male part for him so he could see what he was supposed to be doing, holding her skirts up somewhat so he could study her feet executing the steps and by giving him a book explaining the art of the minuet in great detail.

But not even Tomlinson’s The art of dancing explained by reading and figures whereby the manner of performing the steps is made easy by a new and familiar method did the trick and he found himself rather confused by the pictorial additions to the book outlining the succession of steps to the reader.

Despite her patience being so tried without any great progress to be made note of over the entirety of one long afternoon, she could not help but smile at the endearing picture of this very tall and martial man who almost fell over his feet attached to ridiculously long legs. As terrifying and martial he looked to most people, his helpless clumsiness reminded her more of a sixteen-year-old at his first dance than an accomplished officer.
He had grown somewhat red in the face and was short of breath after more than an hour of successive more or less fruitless attempts, so Elizabeth proposed to cut the lesson short there for the day and bade him come to the drawing room to sit down there with her.

“I am quite done”, John tried to smile but the lack of air in his lungs concerned Elizabeth- why did she only notice it in this moment? Should she not have known earlier?

“You must know, my days spent with a dancing-master are long over and I have never excelled in this art.”

He looked somewhat disappointed, as if he had wished he could be a great dancer only for her; his zeal had certainly indicated so.

“It’s all right- I shall call us some refreshments”, she said and ordered for lemonade and biscuits to be brought to the drawing room, where they could sit and rest.

“Heavenly”, John commented upon having downed a glass without setting it down once, “but not as heavenly as you.”

Drawing her into his arm, she allowed herself to rest herself against his still heaving chest.

“I mustn’t wear you out so. You are not quite fully recovered yet-“

“Heavenly”, John commented upon having downed a glass without setting it down once, “but not as heavenly as you.”

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Drawing her into his arm, she allowed herself to rest herself against his still heaving chest.
John always had her of course, but she alone would not do. If he anticipated advancement be it in the army or in civilian life, he would have to fend for himself.

“You hate it all, the noises-“

“The clattering of cutlery or the sound porcelain makes when it is stacked carelessly or worse still, cracking, are the most horrible.”

“My John, my poor soldier”, she tried to coo in a comforting manner but sounded as if she was just as invisibly wounded as he, which in a way she was in that she felt compassionately for her dear, her fiancé whom she would never like to see suffering again after having borne witness to his recovery from the horrific injuries his body had suffered in the war.

She ran her fingers through his pleasantly thick and curly hair, causing the two of them to shift positions until it was she who now held John, who in turn had come to bury his face in the place where her neck and shoulder met.

“I am weak. I told you quite often-“

“And I told you quite often that I do not wish to hear any of it. It does you no good to think about it always, or to consider yourself unfortunate. You are a brave man and I will not hear another word about any of this.”

His Eliza is always so strong, or at least, she wants to be for him, which moves him greatly. She loves him so that she puts her own worries aside to try and cure his, even though he can see she is very nervous when only thinking of the engagement dance.

They will make it public then, which is a big leap to take together, and even if she does not battle the same demons as he, she strives for perfection.

“You are the most magnificent woman there is, and I am lucky to have you- and you must know that I shall never let you go again.”

To illustrate, he wraps his arm around her, holding her close like the treasure she is, trying to make her see that he will protect her from everything this bloody feast he is not too keen on himself might bring.

The invitations have long been sent out with some going out to people they have only invited for reasons of curtesy and because they could not simply be overlooked for their close connexions to the family; the least favourite name on the list was naturally Richard Graves', on whom he would keep a very special eye. The man would die quite horribly if he would only so much as look at Elizabeth in a fashion that could be deemed wrong in some shape or form. Cutlery, he knows from experience, can be lethal.

He would make him suffer greatly and if the lecherous swine would survive all that he has devised for him in his mind, it would be nothing short of a miracle.

“I shall be there and you need not fret-“ he starts but is overwhelmed by a hearty cough.
Shocked at hearing him cough so, Elizabeth rose to her feet and made room for John’s entire body to lie outstretched on the sofa.

He resisted her attempts to make him lie down quite ferociously, trying to restrain her arms in order to prevent them from being placed at his shoulders, which would have given her the opportunity to push him down with her entire body weight until her frustration won over.

A potent mix of anger directed against his foolish, manly pride and her own bodily weakness in contrast to his warrior’s form that was superior to her in strength flowed through her veins, causing her to stomp her right foot on the ground in what was a rather childish mannerism.

However, her somewhat ignoble show of emotion had an unforeseen, yet very welcome effect: startled at the display she had put on, John had stilled and was looking up to her standing before him with an expression of quizzical expectance on his face.

“You are unwell”, she stated the obvious, “now swallow your prideful attitude and rest. I will not marry a corpse or be widowed before I am even wed.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard in response to her words- apparently, she had struck the right cord. She felt a little bad for him as she watched him slowly obeying her, for as she had spoken, she had not thought of the horrors her future husband had gone through, had almost forgotten the broken heap of loose black clothes containing the remnants of a once proud man that had arrived at the Fort in the winter.

So long ago seemed this time of great darkness to her she had almost forgotten it had ever existed- the uneasy tension looming in the house that seemed to have emanated from the tall, dark figure lurking in the darkest corners, staring into the distance or spidery-thin, long white fingers going through the pages of a book and then the cold, high-pitched voice-

She shuddered only thinking of these times, of when John had still been a gloomy spectre called “Colonel Simcoe” to her.

John had been wounded and weak, both his body and mind had suffered greatly. The man he had become had made her forget about the past.

Hearing him cough suddenly reminded her of these dark days and she was fearful he might slip back into the darkness if his physical condition was to worsen again.

“Lie still”, she advised him and unbuckled his shoes, putting them on the ground- this she did not so much to help John as to keep them both out of trouble with Aunt Margaret, who would condemn them to eternal damnation were her upholstery to suffer.

John let her do so, but kept staring avoiding looking at her, which she considered to be quite childlike. Just as she was en route to admonishing him, she bit her tongue to contain the words she was intent on saying inside her; he was ill, his cough rattling, shaking his lungs up and she had probably played a part in letting it come to this in that she had forced him to dance with her when he should rather have rested.

“You are not at fault”, John startlingly appeared to be able to read her thoughts, “it is self-inflicted, I
think. I should have known- I was not very well these days, either- never mind”, he shrugged and hid his face in his handkerchief.

“You must see Enfield tomorrow”, Elizabeth tried to say in a tone that hopefully sounded as if she would leave him the choice of saying no and insistent enough to force him to agree immediately.

“No. I don’t need-“

Wishing to ease his present discomfort, she poured him a half-full glass of lemonade to minimise the possibility of him spilling it and handed it to him.

With his throat wetted, his coughing reduced until he lay back breathing normally against the cushions.

“Lie still”, Elizabeth instructed him a second time and put her ear to his chest as she had seen the doctor do. The rattling she was greeted with reminded her of the pulling ache she had felt when suffering from a severe bronchitis one winter as a child and it worried her.

“What do you think?”, John asked in a shaky voice, as if any diagnosis issued by her would be worth as much as a doctor’s.

“Perfect rest”, she answered him. “You need to lie low- why do you not tell anybody of your illness? I am to be your wife, and as such, I would like to be informed of your well-being, especially when you are suffering in silence- tell me, why are all men so religious? You all want to be martyrs, suffer in silence until it is too late, and all that can be said about you is that now, you have been rescued from your ordeal and sit at the Lord’s side for your patience-“

Furious, she brushed a few tears of anger away.

“I care for you, John. I love you.”

Her words seemed to penetrate his stubborn skull as he looked quite affected by her words and motioned her to come to his side.

Greedy hands immediately reached out for her when she stood close enough and pulled her downwards, on top of him.

On other occasions, being in a position like that would have roused a set of wholly different feelings and expectations, especially when she thought of what they’d done in the barn the other day, yet at present, she felt nought but concern and perhaps the slightest hint of consolation from being held close by the man she loved.

“I want to grow old with you”, she whispered. “I want to be in love with you every day, wake by your side and have you near me always.”

“And you will”, he affirmed, stroking her back. “We will be very old and grey, but I will love you just the same at seventy as I love you at twenty.”

“I’m not quite twenty yet”, she corrected him, “and that would be 1832 you’re talking about-“ she almost wanted to giggle, so inconceivably abstract was the concept to her as the future existence of the year 1832, which lay fifty years ahead of them shrouded in the mists of time.

“Then you must promise me to rest and not worry too much about anything. We will manage, and Aunt Margaret is there to assist us.”
In the coming days, his future wife revealed to him, he is not to exert himself—there shall be no riding, no long walks, no wild excursions of any sort. If he feels the need to walk, he can stay close to the house, recommended activities include writing, reading, and talking, all while being wrap’d up in his banyan every morning by his darling.

She explains to the Admiral and the Old Bat that she is concerned for his health and that he must be spared the preparations and she will, with the aid of her most august aunt, do what needs to be done.

The Old Bat is very enthusiastic about being in charge, but less so about what she supposes is a disguise for laziness on his part.

He is improving, the reason obviously being he is cared for by a veritable expert, a circumstance that sets his heart ablaze with passionate love for the woman who wishes to be his wife despite his shortcomings in so many aspects and frightens him in equal measure; for tho’ he is better, will his ill health return to haunt him as unexpectedly as it did this time? Will he be struck down the day after tomorrow or the day on which their party is set?

Will he collapse in a feverish fit on their wedding-day or fall asleep and never wake up again next to his Eliza, who will find him cold and stiff next to her in the morning?

He must know what is going on.

He hasn’t slept much in the past days and feels sickly. He tells himself it has to do with his nerves, that the big day and his fretting for perfection are taking a physical toll on him in addition to the common cold or whatever it is that causes him to feel poorly, as might be the dancing-lessons, but he is not quite certain.

So on a day Elizabeth is set on taking the coach and going into Exeter to do some shopping (even though she has already announced she would like to go to London again for it is the heart of fashion and taste and as the future Mrs Simcoe, she is keen to keep the reputation of Miss Gwillim, that she is a lady of Quality, Consequence and Taste) and taking her aunt with her, he leaves the Admiral to himself, who is busying himself with a matter concerning some escaped sheep of one of his tenants who went to graze on the land of another, who had come to complain to him in this matter to see it resolved and the damage done by the animals suitably recompensed, and rides to Honiton.

“Well, if you too must desert me”, the old man had said without letting his callers, the two agricultural fellows in question, out of his sight, “I thought we might sup together.”

“Oh, we might”, he had answered, if only to console his godfather whose voice betrayed disappointment.

“I think I shall not be long. My business is not very complicated.”

“I hope so. A Certain Lady” (he obviously cannot name her in front of the two men lest he wants the length and breadth of the county to know of their intention to marry before they have announced it themselves) “might be quite annoyed to find you exerting yourself so. Don’t do anything foolish will you?”

“Of course not. A Certain Lady would admonish me, and if there is one thing in the world that is
important to me, it is to please her well. It is our secret then?”

“It is.”

Having left his godfather with this non-explanation of what he would be doing, he rode out, feeling the balmy breeze on his skin and pulling his hat somewhat lower into his face so the sun wouldn’t hurt his eyes.

The ride was a beautiful one, the road well as it had not rained much in the past days and the warmth of the day pleasant, not too hot. He could smell the lush grass on the wind mixing with the salty aroma of the sea, which could not be seen but was close by enough to remind one of its presence in this manner.

The leaves in the trees rustled overhead, singing him a melody only those who also know the dead silence of a cold, unforgiving winter wood know to appreciate and all things considered, it could have been a wonderful day, had there not been a shadow on his soul that kept him from lying down in the grass by the roadside and penning a poem to his beloved or resting there with his eyes closed and dreaming of his Eliza, of her here with him, of how he would caress her, these perfect rosy lips giving him kisses, but he rode on, staring at the road ahead. Until the matter he had set out to resolve or at least clear up in some shape or form could not be resolved, he cannot rest easily.

He doesn’t want to be a sick man, not when he is about to be wed, but if he is and his feeling unwell recently means that he is an unsuitable husband, he must let Elizabeth know so she can make up her mind if she truly wants him- she should be a wife, a companion, not a nursemaid.

His legs shifting uneasily, he sits in the private home of Doctor Enfield, sipping some thin tea Enfield’s girl has prepared for him. She had recoiled at the sight of him, but caught herself, bobbing, and asked what she could do for him.

“Please, Miss, I require to see Doctor Enfield.”

His mellow, uncertain voice (and the pitch of it probably also), had startled her and she bade him sit down and wait as the doctor had been called to attend another patient a few streets away.

Alone with his thoughts, his mind forces terrible scenarios on him, vivid conversations of how Enfield is going to tell him he only has a few months, weeks, days, hours to live. That it will hurt badly and his illness is incurable, followed by the very real memories he has of being at death’s door, of weeks spent feverish and having to listen to the gloomy prospects of doctors who cared as much for he as they did for any other of the wounded on board the Bonetta, wishing the End to come and make it all go away, the pain, the discomfort, the terrible thoughts, everything. Next his thoughts turn to Eliza, whom he sees weeping at his bedside, unable to save him as he dies, and it is really the most terrible thing of all, thinking he might make her unhappy in any way, and his death would make her unhappy. She would still be young enough in a few years to be considered young and marriageable if she would refuse to wed anyone but him, as she has proclaimed to him, maybe she would change her mind after years in a cold, lonely bed after having come to know the bliss of having a friend (and bedfellow) to spend one’s life with, but for the moment she would be devastated. He must tell her she mustn’t go into full mourning should he-

“Colonel Simcoe”, a sudden voice calls him back to the present and instantly, out of mechanic habit, he rises to greet the Doctor.

“What can I do for you- is someone ill at the Fort?” he adds with concern in his voice.

He shakes his head.
“No, they are perfectly healthy, Admiral and Mrs Graves and Miss Gwillim also. I have come- it is I who needs your help.”

Enfield, who has seen it all, heard it all and as a country-doctor knows no shame or shyness (there are tales of him having been called to deliver a foal that had come into the world the wrong way around with his arms up to his shoulders inside the dam and not refusing to treat anyone regardless the delicate manner of their condition), raises an eyebrow- he has not been very kind to the Doctor in the past and made him feel superfluous and even threatened him with cutlery once.

“I seek your expert opinion”, he thus starts in an attempt to shew the man he does not think as ill of him as he thinks, on the contrary- he was scared, sad and anxious at the time they were first acquainted. If only half of what they say about him is true, namely that he is a wild dog, then it is true that an afeard, cornered animal bites even the gentlest and well-meaning hand extended to him.

“What is your trouble?”, Enfield wants to know and sets his bag on the table.

Upon being invited to speak about what perturbs him, he gives Enfield a full account of what ails him.

The man listens attentively, even when his sentences get muddled or he starts talking very quickly with nervousness, giving him the feeling of being heard.

Next, Enfield makes him remove his coat and waistcoat to press his ear against his chest, telling him when to in- and exhale.

“It is not the heart, it beats as it should”, Enfield reassures him.

“Inhale please.”

He does as he is bidden.

“And now, exhale. Very good. You can dress yourself again. Now, I will not plague you with uncertainty; your lungs are not functioning as they should in a man in flowering health. Were you injured in service? Did you take a ball to the lungs?”

“I- I was pushed- from a bannister, by a man-“

Never, ever will he give Woodhull the credit of calling him a soldier, a rebel, or even the lowest of all professions in war, a spy, for he was neither; he was just a coward.

His hands start to tremble even just remembering what had happened, the earth-shattering sound of his body crashing into the floor, the feeling of bones breaking.

Doctor Enfield notices and beckons him to sit down.

“I do not wish to trouble you, Colonel, but I must ask you these things to be able to help you.”

“I- there was blood coming from my mouth- I could barely breathe, my chest felt sore-“ as he forces these words across his lips, the terrible taste of iron returns to his mouth and it feels as if the rope that had once killed André is now wrapped around his throat, suffocating him.

“Easy, easy”, the Doctor tries to persuade him like a spooked horse, “have you any knowledge what might have caused the bleeding?”

“A broken rib, or several. It had eaten its way into my flesh I understand. I was not quite fully
conscious for days after.”

“Well, from all I can tell, it may have lodged itself into your lungs, which is the reason why it is reduced in its capacity, leaving you out of breath easily. The damage, I fear, is irreversible and all you can do is to adjust to it.”

He is being given a sad smile.

“There are worse injuries”, the man tries to console him upon realising his words do no good, “far worse injuries. You can live a perfectly ordinary life, provided you avoid excessive physical exertion, which should not be a problem being that you aren’t a farm labourer or some such, and always take care of your health, particularly of infections of the chest, colds, the flu and the like, especially since I recall that there is a propensity to that kind of thing in your family line.”

“It is”, he affirmed, “my father died of pneumonia and I only survived the same illness narrowly at sixteen.”

“You must avoid it at all costs then. Apart from this slight impairment, I pronounce you as healthy as I never thought I’d see you, viewed in contrast to the wretched state you arrived in this past winter.”

Clearly, Enfield is trying to cheer him up, but he cannot be happy, no- he must ask another question.

“And- my defect, does it, you know- does it impact my suitability for-“

“Service?”, Enfield concludes wrongly and closes the question. “If you want to know what I think, I think you ought to find yourself an occupation that does not require great physical strain and toil now that the war is as good as over-“

“It isn’t that”, he shakes his head, biting his lip.

“I would like to know if my defect affects my possible suitability as a candidate for marriage.”

Enfield raises his left eyebrow in a quizzically-bemused manner.

“Why should it?”

Even from a certain distance, he can read Enfield’s thoughts and deductions coming together in a matter of seconds.

“Are you planning to be wed?”

He has Enfield’s full attention now apparently.

They have said not to tell anyone, but the doctor doesn’t count, does he? Seeing as he has done it for her and that the man has sworn an oath to silence, he should be fairly certain his secret is safe with Enfield until the grand reveal in the coming week when everyone shall know officially.

“In fact, I am.”

A smile illumines the older man’s face and brings great warmth to his often analytical, sober eyes.

“Why, my congratulations. I hope you and Miss Gwillim shall be very happy.”

“How do you know-?”

Enfield snorts.
“Do you recall the day I rescued the two of you from Mrs Graves? Or the time you were half-threatening me with a knife and fork for only attempting to attend to Miss Gwillim’s injuries after her accident? Such unique closeness and intimacy as is between you and Miss Gwillim is hard to conceal.”

“How-?” he starts again and is again cut short.

“I was younger and in love once, too”, Enfield smiles wistfully with a bitter hint of past pain around the corners of his mouth. Evidently, Enfield doesn’t wish to speak of his own love, but it is over, that much he can tell.

“I wish you the greatest mutual happiness, although I never would have thought Miss Gwillim and you would be a match.”

“So you think I can do everything that is expected of a husband?”

He blushes beetroot-red as he asks this.

“I don’t know, can you?”, Enfield returns the question soberly.

“Yes, what I mean is- if my health is damaged, will I be able, by a doctor’s advice to-“

“I don’t see why not. As long and as much of it as you both feel comfortable with.”

“Thank you”, he finally says and presses Enfield’s hand with genuine gratefulness as he bids him adieu.

On his way back, sunshine has come to intermingle with the shadow on his soul; he might be ill and a cripple, but it could be worse and according to Enfield, who isn’t so bad at all, Eliza and he will be able to live out their days together in happiness.

-And perhaps, if it isn’t so bad after all, Enfield is mistaken about regaining command in the Army as well.

Returning from Exeter in the evening, she found John convalescing as she had ordered him to in the library.

Reclining in Uncle Samuel’s favourite armchair, he held a thin volume by the French writer Marivaux in his hands; she had no knowledge of how it had come into Uncle Samuel’s library, whose French was as far from fluency as she was from being a giant, but since he had a certain predilection for the out-of-the-ordinary, it should not have surprised her if he enjoyed a few lines of Marivaudage every now and then.

Even before she had entered the room, softly, so as not to startle him, John had apparently sensed her presence (could there be such closeness, such a strong intuitive connexion between two other people on this earth?) for he turned towards her and chimed:

“Ahh, you’ve returned. Read this:

Ce héros était plein de valeur dans les combats, mais d’une valeur aveugle, sujette à se souiller d’un
sang respectable, du sang d'un ennemi vaincu. Quand il récompensait un service ce n'était que l'action qu'il payait : il ne joignait pas à la récompense cette aimable façon de donner, qui fait précisément le salaire de celui qui a mérité qu'on lui donne : il était équitable de n'être pas également bon.

« Dès qu’il aima, ce ne fut plus le même homme : l'envie de devenir digne de celle qu'il aimait, fit disparaître tous ses défauts ; l'amour purifie sa valeur et sa fierté de cet excès qui les déshonorait toutes deux. Tout l'empire retentit bientôt du bruit de ses vertus. «“

“Are you trying to flatter me or your humble self, o my virtuous knight?”, she asked jocundly before bending over him without giving the reclining giant time to answer as she kissed him- he was so sweet to her always, even when he butchered the melodic French language in the worst of ways- had he read to the French at Yorktown in the same manner, they would have fled their field and their officers surrendered immediately.

John looked better, healthier than he had a few days ago; his pale cheeks glowed rosily and his breath exited the cavern of his chest without an accompanying rattling sound.

“Did you enjoy Exeter?”, he countered her question with one of his own when they had finished kissing.

“Quite. I did not get what I have in mind; I will have to look for suitable fabric and trimmings as I am in search of for a new robe in London. But my aunt and I spent quite a satisfactory day together; she made a great effort to be cheerful at all times and, I think, wished me to forget about it all for a moment.”

Aunt Margaret, who still did not like John very much, had nevertheless tried to alleviate her mind of any doubts or fretting regarding the festivities, joked, jested and done everything to make their trip enjoyable. To crown the day, she had added a length of beautiful silk ribbon to Elizabeth’s, tho’ few, purchases as a present.

“Tomorrow after breakfast, I have to speak to you and your beau. Make certain he is not busy pretending to languish conveniently right when I need him for once.”

“You do not believe he is truly ill, his health damaged from the campaign and the injuries he sustained therein?”

In John’s absence, Elizabeth felt responsible to defend him, even more so given she was to be his future wife. Aunt Margaret paused, evidently in search for the right way of phrasing her reply:

“To a certain extent, perhaps. But then I know Simcoe since his boyhood days, and better than you given you were not always at the Fort when he was, or when I accompanied your uncle to Boston and you stayed with the Gwillims at Whitchurch. A nasty, disobedient boy he was, which makes me doubtful he has outgrown the vices of his salad days entirely.”

“John is truly unwell”, she had countered her aunt’s opinion without challenging her. “He has been through a war-“

“Women always do, too. Think of the wives who see their husbands go to battle, in some cases saying their farewells unknowing they shall be widows soon; your own mother and the mother of
your fiancé among them. Think of the powder-monkeys on the Navy’s ships. Even we, tho’ the Lord spared us any greater suffering than being forced to spend time in Boston’s very limited respectable circles with Margaret Kemble Gage.”

To an extent, Aunt Margaret was correct: they had rolled bandages for the army together and sometimes with a circle of neighbours and friends, helped the soldiers fighting in the King’s name as best as it was possible for women and girls staying behind in England to do. It had felt like a duty she had accepted and fulfilled with pride, and her relations, especially of the Gwillim-side of the family, had told her her father would be very proud of her. As a descendant of a Colonel, aide-de-camp to the renown General Wolfe himself and the ward of an Admiral (who had risen to become the most senior naval officer in the Colonies no less), it felt to her a natural duty to do her bit, too.

“Then the mystery of my survival and subsequent convalescence has been solved”, John added when she relayed their conversation to him, an answer that confused her at first as she had expected John to voice unkind things about her aunt given the unflattering picture she had painted of his youthful self, but he seemed not to care.

“How? What do you mean?”

“My wounds must have been dressed with dressings prepared by you, or else they would ne’er have healed, as everyone expected. Have I not said it before? ‘Twas your witchcraft that mended me, and now I know my saviour saved me much earlier than I thought previously- it was your touch preserved in the bandages that held my flesh together when my body wasn’t able to, just as your arms hold me now.”

“My future husband should write romances”, she chuckled and with a glance across the room to the door assured herself they were alone for now so she could risk depriving her dearest, most beloved John of his breath in a manner of kissing that would certainly seem quite shockingly intimate to their elders. Into this kiss, she laid all her passion, all her hunger for him and all the emotion his words had stirred within her- she tried to employ her lips in such a fashion he would temporarily forget all the pain he ever suffered, all the horrors of his slow convalescence, for he deserved nought but the best care and required the greatest tenderness, contrary to the hardened, stone-cold way in which he presented himself to the world.

“Please promise me you will do as my aunt bids and meet with her tomorrow morning.”

John said nothing, but his face, easily readable even when he thought himself the most mysterious, gave away how he felt about following what was clearly an order, not an invitation.

“For you. And for you only”, he nodded and contorted his mouth in a peculiar way resembling the face a person makes when they find gristle in their serving of beef through having bitten on it.

The next morning, Elizabeth nervously joined her aunt and John in the parlour, her fingers fidgeting nervously with the sash tied around the waist and the white muslin flounce of her apron à la gouvernante. She liked her relatively new lévite of green with a pink skirt and lapels, the colours, the way they contrasted each other and looked unexpectedly splendid together- much like John and she, she realised. Uncle Samuel had retired to his study after breakfast, which had raised Elizabeth’s suspicion he was unaware the remaining members of his household were supposed to meet thereafter
in a near-conspiratorial manner without him.

“Now, to business”, Aunt Margaret announced herself when coming through the door, John following her at a short distance, “I wish to speak to you without my husband knowing anything.”

“Why?”, John asked with his brows knitting together. “This is a most curious circumstance, Mrs Graves.”

“It isn’t so much when an engagement needs to be celebrated to which, as I gather from the invitations, a number of military and naval dignitaries will come to the Fort whom my husband will not be pleased to see”, she explained. “and since it is my aim to have it all be a success, we must confer what shall be done.”

“We could make certain he is seated among family always, with either his sister, or a nephew by his side”, Elizabeth suggested.

“That won’t do”, her aunt replied bluntly, “you both know how he can be, especially when his pride is hurt as it was in 1776 when he was relieved of his command, a wound to his manly self-esteem that has begun to fester and which he will blame on any uniform-wearing gentleman loosely related to the War. He pouts.”

“I believe we can rely on you giving him a stern talking-to then”, John chimed sweetly like a whole set of clarions. “Your authority is unrivalled in this household, or so I have heard.”

That did it. There was no time, no space for rudeness of any kind, however tempting it might be for him to tease her aunt unnecessarily and perhaps even a little rightfully.

From where she was seated, her aunt would never see- swiftly and with great precision, a well-aimed kick, not very forcefully, but significant enough to convey her meaning, hit John’s right shin.

He drew air in sharply through his teeth in surprise, then turned to her, immediately putting two and two together.

“One must be thankful you have not entered the diplomatic service”, Aunt Margaret, remarked drily in response, a reply that could almost be classified as an olive branch, “inconveniently, this is just what I need of you to do: speak to him, from one gentleman-officer to another. I would do it myself or send Elizabeth, but I fear the perspective of a woman will not convince him as that of a fellow officer will.”

Margaret Graves’ wish must be done. Not because he has suddenly started to love her as one would have hoped one would come to love one’s future mother-in-law, but for Eliza, for their love- and for his godfather.

“Consider it done”, he nods, attempting to find a way in which to rub his quite uncomfortably stinging right shin without arousing the Old Bat’s suspicion (impossible) and rises, trying his best to appear sauntering leisurely out of the room as if he were the King Himself, all-powerful and holding the fate of the evening in his hand.

In truth, he is somewhat uncertain if his godfather will listen to him.
Quite surprisingly, the old man is nowhere to be found in the house, but giving up and waiting for the old man to return (at the latest in the afternoon, he reasons, at the prospect of cake) would have injured his pride and honour as a Queen’s Ranger.

So out he goes, taking the cane he still owns with him, wearing it tucked under one arm more as a fashionable addition to his outfit than a piece of medical equipment. If Eliza should find out he is going a-ranging, she might be discontent and fret over his doubtlessly recovered health and so, his walking aid is a mere ruse, a prop.

Admiral Graves is not in the garden, a gardener with a straw hat protecting his tanned face and head from the sun informs him, nor did anyone else pass him by while busy righting the flowerbeds to Mrs Graves’ specifications.

Curious, he next searches in the stables, where he finds the old man ready to mount his enormous horse, a tall, skewbald beast with a flowing mane, massive pasterns and enormous hooves- and totally unwilling to abide to his master’s will, thrashing his head about and refusing to go.

The amusing sight prompts him to remain where he is and seats himself on the mounting block to be more comfortable while watching this comical spectacle- it is beyond his expertise to tell who is the more bull-headed fellow; the horse or his godfather, who now makes use of his riding crop, but still cannot move his mount even half an inch.

“Blast that damned-“

Chuckling at the combined mulishness of horse and rider, he knows he can no longer keep his spectatorship a secret, rises and walks over to the horse, careful to approach him so the horse can see him and rubs the big beast’s nose.

The skewbald seems to like that and quietens down, demanding more of his attention and attempts to search his pockets for treats.

“And a good day to you, Admiral. ’He curses like a sailor’ is what they say, and if I wouldn’t know better-“

Mid-comment, he breaks off. He is of very good cheer indeed and knows the false saccharine sweetness in his voice, a relic from days gone by when he has particularly enjoyed testing the Admiral’s patience in his youth, is bound to make the latter’s patience wear thin like a poorly-inspected halyard- dangerous to the ship and its crew.

Seeing as he, not even a midshipman on the HMS Hembury Fort under the command of his somewhat disgruntled godfather does not want to endanger the entire operation, he refrains from any further commentary that might land him in hot water, or rather, cold water, as the Navy does not boil their petty criminals- usually, the good old seawater surrounding them suffices.

Besides, he is quite happy the cat o’ nine tails he has been threatened would bite his flesh if he wouldn’t quit his frequent insubordinations was never even shewn to him and remained what it had been, a vague threat he hadn’t taken too seriously anymore as he had grown older.

All in all, he had been struck once by his godfather, who had otherwise refrained from corporal punishment when he had realised expressing disappointment was a far more effective weapon.

Nevertheless, he wouldn’t count on his naval officer godfather to have been so lenient with his sailors.

“The blasted animal likes you”, his godfather replies seemingly unsurprised of his sudden
appearance, “capricious beast. Much like a certain other tall, indomitable individual. In the horse’s case, it must be the Spanish blood I was informed he had when I bought him and for which they gave him a Spanish name –Romero-‘ at this, the horse lifts his head attentively, “but I am more and more convinced the lilting scoundrel who sold him to me was just trying to conceal a stubborn Irish skull.“

“Such as your own?”, he suggests, looking up to the man in the saddle with one eyebrow lifted and a somewhat brazen smile on his face.

“Well said, my boy”, the Admiral snorts and looks amused. “And what have you come for?”

“To speak with you, of course.”

“Can’t it wait?”, the old man asks, “as you see, my Spanish steed and I-“

“It can’t.”

“Oh?”, is all the reply he gets before his godfather slips out of the saddle more elegantly he would have thought a man of his size able to and hands him the reins.

“You take him. Now, let us sit.”

Grunting, the old man takes the mounting block as his throne, sitting straight and regal upon it, whereas he is left standing, holding the now very sweet and placid Romero. So much for us.

“Well”, he begins slowly, thankful for the reins in his hand and the horse reminding him there is something on the other end of them he need to keep holding on to quite firmly- at least his fingers are busy, which keeps his nerves in check.

Oddly reassured by the equine head now resting on his shoulder and the thought of the woman he has dedicated his every heartbeat to, he starts to talk. The words pour out of him, sketch the bleak reality of the Admiral’s loss of command, the injustice done to him, then moves on to how the Admiral’s ongoing grudge might adversely affect the engagement festivities, if lived out.

All the while, the old man looks at him with a sour expression on his face, not unlike the one he recalls getting when he had been caught putting a live toad in his little brother’s bed.

“I don’t know if you, Elizabeth and my wife are planning a revolution of your own, but this is still my house”, the old man fumes and his gut drops ten feet deep in reaction to it. He has failed. -But why give up fighting just yet? Two hearts beat in his chest and after a few more seconds of more or less coherent considerations, the will to fight wins.

“Hear me out, I beg you”, he continues his plight, suddenly feeling dizzy again. Thankfully, he has the bloody stick with him to lean on- Romero’s head on his shoulder doesn’t make standing upright easier, he realises, but doesn’t have the heart to shoo the horse away- besides, there is something oddly comforting in the warm fur pressed against his cheek.

“You are a brave man, Sir. You held true to your convictions in a world of unprecedented harshness. We were both at war, Sir, and nobody knows better than myself the injury. I understand and partake in your feelings; God knows I have had my share of libel, colourful invectives, hurtful accusations and rumours spread to discredit me. But I must implore you to- to fight on our side, that of me and my future wife in this matter. In the future, I must take up a command again as I have sworn not to live off my wife’s fortune who deserves a husband she can pride herself with, not one she needs to be ashamed of. I shall need the connexions I aim to maintain by renewing old acquaintances one day
and I am certain with your kind hospitality, certain gentleman will recall me more favourably than without. You are a man of honour, Sir, and did not you teach me the art of diplomacy where one cannot fight with other weapons?”

-He needs to breathe, having spoken so much and so quickly has attack’d his lungs. As he takes in a few merciful gulps of air, his godfather looks at him, mustering his form from top to toe.

“Is this John Graves Simcoe standing before me? Diplomacy has never been a word I would have suspected in your vocabulary, John.”

Admiral Graves doesn’t sound too enraged, which is very good.

“And yet you still are a man for the field. Does Elizabeth know this is what you plan?”

“I assume so”, he nods, “she is aware she has promised her hand to a soldier.”

“A broken soldier”, the elderly man specifies, “whom nobody would even some three months ago have expected to ever walk again without assistance, let alone harbour the wish to fight again. You still use your stick at times and in the last days, tho’ I said nothing for I was of the opinion you shouldn’t be upset unnecessarily and Elizabeth was taking good care of you already. -There is something I must ask you, John”, the old man begins very carefully, “you- you don’t seem quite healthy.”

The older man’s glance fell to his leg, then moved upwards to scan his body in its entirety once again.

“Indeed, I am not. It is why I was in Honiton not very long ago”, he confesses without looking his godfather in the eye.

“Then what is it?”, the latter replies concernedly, leaning forward in his chair.

“The war. My injuries, they are quite permanent, it appears.”

“In what way?”

“On the outside, yes”, he explains, “but when I took the fall” (he is unwilling to go into any greater detail about what exactly happened after having relayed the story behind his injuries to his godfather before, especially after having so recently re-told it to Enfield), “my lung was injured by a broken rib.”

The older man makes a pained face that is supposed to be compassionate as his left hand moves inadvertently over his chest to where his lungs are situated beneath layers of flesh and ribs.

“My leg is well enough; it only pains me very infrequently, and only when overused. It is the other injury I have most trouble with.”

“In what way? And Enfield-“

“Is helpless”, he concludes, “modern medicine cannot restore my lungs to their former power. Particularly not, as I was informed, since there is an unfortunate predisposition to lung diseases running in the family.”

A big, meaty hand, soft from eight years of civilian life reaches out for his, like that of a father about to console his child- which to some extent, he is in the Admiral’s eyes. Sometimes, he asks himself if
not in secret, Admiral Graves must have been quite happy about his father’s death, for it enabled him
to assume the only rank he could not gain through promotion, it being that of a father. Bound to his
vows made in front of a church-crowd at the baptismal font of the infant bearing his name, the old
man had cared for him from the age of seven onwards with dutiful diligence and personal zeal.

Now, he looks quite sad, like a father must look like upon receiving dire news about his child.

“Oh my dear boy”, is all he says, “I am so terribly sorry.”

And then, after a few moment of uncomfortable silence filled thankfully by a diversion in the form of
a large horse nuzzling what is left of his left ear:

“And what about-“

“Elizabeth? My eligibility for marriage? I asked Enfield, he thinks I should do well, given I will not
seek out physical exertion through a renewed military posting”, he sums up the conversation he and
the doctor had had, but treads softly around the bit about his husbandly obligations.

“She will not be your nurse?”

“She won’t be.”

At this, the old man looks relieved.

“You wouldn’t permit her to marry me otherwise, I can tell”, is his reaction to the Admiral’s face,
which makes him sad to some degree for very complicated reasons.

“No.”

The old man shakes his head.

“I would. Elizabeth’s aunts and perhaps even I made certain she was raised to know who she is, that
a woman like her almost always can have her way, one way or the other. Doubtlessly I for my part
spoiled her; as did Margaret and her sisters-in-law. She wants you badly, and even if my wife and I
were to bar her from marrying you now, you can be certain that on her twenty-first birthday next
year, when she obtains majority in the eyes of the law, she would take all steps necessary for a
speedy marriage to you. And who would I be to break two hearts? I may not be the romantic hero
my niece sees in you, but I have a heart- and a brain. You love each other, and I have great trust in
you and your abilities to manage her affairs. While I would have wished for you to be healthy for
your own sake and for Elizabeth to find a young gentleman for whom she will not have to fret
constantly, it does not matter for the state of your love. She has chosen you, and she shall have you.
She knows you and cares for you and I hope you will always do the same for her.”

“I will”, he assures the Admiral and is quite thankful that Romero’s mane half-covers his face now,
hiding the emotions flooding his features.

“Come now, boy. We’ll return to the house, see what we can do. My sister, my nephews and
Elizabeth’s dearest friend will arrive soon (tomorrow is the grand day after all) let us see how we can
be of service to our ladies.”

Handing the large horse who has been so good to him to a groom, he follows the old man, his stick
tucked back underneath his arm.
The arrival of the first guests, those who were supposed to be accommodated at the Fort, was eagerly awaited by all parties and filled Elizabeth with mixed emotions: while she looked forward to Mary Anne’s coming, she, had not her pious upbringing forbidden her to do so, would have prayed for Richard to fall off his horse or be struck down with yellow fever or something equally serious, which would surely have prevented him from attending- on the other hand, his attendance, as much as his displeased her, might prove amusing- after all, she had proven him that she was amiable, pleasant and desirable and had found a husband worthy of her whereas he could not sport a bride.

His brother Thomas had always been kind to her and at thirty-five, no hot-headed young man. Thomas had, on the few occasions they had met, always treated her with kindness.

Mrs Knox, who was her uncle’s sister, she knew not very well; they had not met very often, chiefly because Mrs Knox and her husband had lived in Ireland for most of the time before moving to England, where Mr Knox had died a few years ago.

It had been agreed that Mrs Knox, coming from London, would travel together with her nephews Richard and Thomas, which made Elizabeth hopeful the old lady could be relied upon keeping her nephews, particularly the younger one, in check.

The Graves’-Knox carriage was the first to arrive and three almost identical faces mounted on different bodies greeted her with more or less honest well-wishes. Like all Graves’, they shared the same nose, brown eyes of exactly the same shape in every face and a noteworthy chin.

Thomas was the first to greet John with a firm handshake with Richard following his elder brother’s example only very reluctantly. Mrs Knox insisted on embracing Aunt Margaret, which the latter found startling but not being one to upset her guest, she obliged her with an air of grace that elevated her above the oddness of the situation.

“Samuel”, Mrs Knox exclaimed at seeing her brother, “my, we have not met in a long time!”

Uncle Samuel was visibly happy to see his sister, called her by her first name and allowed her to link arms as he led the party inside.

The following day, most of the other guests would arrive- Bridget Graves and her daughter Mary, Thomas’s wife and child, who had been staying with friends while he had gone to London on naval business, her Gwillim-aunts and a few other guests from further afield, mostly military men of John’s choosing and some of the local families who would arrive in the evening in time for the festivities.

Apparently, Elizabeth had been right about Mrs Knox and the influence she exerted over her nephews, Richard in particular: as long as she was near, Richard dared not misbehave- he almost appeared to be afraid of her in a reverential manner. Mrs Knox was tall for a woman, as Uncle Samuel was tall for a man and like him, quite rounded, but pleasantly so; her astonishing agility and quick wits made her an astonishing appearance for a woman well into her seventieth decade.

“A pretty little thing you are”, the older woman, said in a motherly tone, “we have not met in years, have we?”

“We haven’t”, Elizabeth smiled while graciously letting the insult she had suffered by being called a little thing lie.

“Among us women”, Mrs Knox’ voice dropped to a low, conspiratorial murmur, “he is a handsome
“He is”, Elizabeth answered. A curious feeling spread in her guts as the formidable sister of her uncle took her by the arm as she had him upon her arrival and pulled her into a window seat, letting herself fall next to Elizabeth and smiled. Of course, they had told what Uncle Samuel and Aunt Margaret had termed “the immediate family” about the reason for the occasion, but Mrs Knox’ tone and manner of speech somehow made Elizabeth uncertain of what she could want to tell her regarding John.

“A fine one. If I were your age-“ she winked. “But one must not dream and neither insinuate the illicit”, she went on, suddenly all business-like, “a better match than my nephew Richard.”

“You are aware of Richard-“

“My brother writes long letters. You can consider me perfectly informed of the affair. I am ashamed of his behaviour and appalled about your fiancé’s- to beat a man half to death- it does speak of his love for you, but we are both aware such an incident must not repeat itself.”

“Truly, it must not.”

Mrs Knox, Elizabeth thought, looked more like a commanding officer than her uncle, whose uniform coat, though likely fitting too loosely for her, would suit her splendidly.

“Then I tell you what: I will keep Richard in line and you will ensure Colonel Simcoe will not live up to the reputation that precedes him.”

“I have informed him before that I will not tolerate brutality.”

“Very good”, a grey head of hair that would still have looked strikingly dark for a woman more than sixty years old had it not been powdered in fashionable grey nodded eagerly.

“It is settled then. You know I wish you the greatest happiness? I truly do. Sam- Admiral Graves’ letters speak of great fondness for you.”

A warm smile spread Mrs Knox’ wide, somewhat thin lips.

“It is all well and good then. And don’t be nervous, dear girl. Do not give the appearance of a trembling little leaf in the wind tomorrow; it does not suit your aristocratic features.”

Equipped with the reassuring intelligence Mrs Knox would keep an eye on Richard and the oddly heart-warming advice and compliment she had offered alongside, Elizabeth had almost forgotten her nervousness when soon after, Mary Anne arrived, just in time to sup.

Her friend, dressed in plain grey travelling-accoutrements, initially was somewhat shy around the Graves’ and Mrs Knox, whom Mary Anne perceived, as she would later confide in Elizabeth, initially quite frightening, but after a while, she warmed to those she did not know easily and could be found entering a conversation with Thomas over religion, to which Elizabeth listened with great interest. Next to her, her fiancé tried to give the appearance of a man interested in a conversation although it was evident he tried to follow all two to three conversations going on at any given time without focussing on one properly.

Without saying a word, she slipped a hand below the table and grazed his thigh with her fingertips in a gesture of reassurance.

His head turned to her and he smiled; asking if he would be permitted to propose a toast to his dear,
beloved Elizabeth, whose unparalleled charms had taken his heart prisoner forever.

His motion was accepted with a hearty cheer from all sides, at which John turned once again to her and whispered to her how much he loved her.

At night, Elizabeth couldn’t sleep: all had been arranged so far, even a hairdresser would come to attend to the ladies of the Fort, flowers had been started to be arranged today and Susan had informed her already she had taken care everything was prepared on the sartorial side of the affair.

“Elizabeth, if you roll over one more time-“ Mary Anne complained at four in the morning for what could have been the hundredth time without exaggerating.

“I am sorry. I cannot sleep.”

“Then for the sake of our Lord and Saviour, try”, her best friend complained before falling back into a state of shallow slumber.

“M-hm”, Elizabeth replied and rolled herself over again so her back was facing Mary Anne, taking most of the blanket with her, still unable to find rest even when she tried to imagine John by her side, being snuggly fitted into the curve of his body, his broad chest pressing comfortably against her back and imagining the two of them in positions that were unutterable, wondering if, if she had spent the night with John, she would be asleep now, reassured by his presence and wearied out by certain acts of carnality she was almost blushing about only imagining herself in and that set fireworks alight in her breast.

Trying to think of something nice, as she had been taught as a child was a good way to lull one’s self to sleep, she indeed managed to secure a few hours of slumber before the day began.

His heart pumps faster, his brains are addled and he is even thankful for Margaret Graves and her eagerness to be in command of the festivities, for being able to watch her do things, dictating workmen and kitchenmaids ans the like. He wouldn’t know how ot even what to do but, as in every difficulty lies a lesson for life, he shall watch and learn from it.

Dawn is not long away. How he has longed for it, almost as he had in the bowels of the ship when he had been reassured every single day he would not live- and then, through the small window, had fallen the light of dawn, and he had survived.

He would survive this also, for in essence, it was a wonderful occasion, but a grand affair with so many things that could go wrong, too- social faux-pas’, everything.

Eliza deserves the best start into their married life, and all the world (the entire country at least) shall know the Graves’ and future-Simcoes are the best hosts whose entertainment is exceptional.

Eliza has decided he is to wear his uniform of colonel of the Queen’s Rangers today, which will add a political touch to the affair given he is still fighting for the recognition of his rank in the regular forces alongside that of his Rangers with pen and paper.

He has bathed the evening before, has made certain even his shoe-buckles are shined to perfection and cannot do more at the present moment.
Awaiting the morning and some diversion through their guests who are already here and those yet to come, he paces up and down, having thrown his banyan carelessly over his nightshirt.

The heart says to go to Elizabeth’s room, the head says no. The risk of being seen with so many people (and a few additional servants) present is too high and his plan downright reckless given Mary Anne Burges sleeps in Eliza’s bed. Miss Burges has through this sleeping arrangement become a sort of chaperone, which does nothing to endear her to him, on the contrary, although Miss Burges likely had no such motive when sharing her childhood friend’s bed as they had done since they had been young girls, she doesn’t belong there, a nasty fit of jealousy that isn’t placated by the fact that even if Eliza were alone, he would be unwise to seek her out now on the peril of her reputation and his own.

Consumed by the fires of love and desire, he watches as the morning grows brighter and each minute slowly dragging on for sixty long seconds brings him closer to his love.

Waking up in the morning to Mary Anne’s soft voice, Elizabeth could still feel last night’s weariness in her bones.

As was their wont (which would soon end, Elizabeth realised with a bout of sadness), they helped readying the other for the coming day, lacing stays and picking out ribbons and jewellery.

“You can have one of mine, if you like”, Elizabeth suggested and held out a ribbon of black velvet to Mary Anne, who had forgotten to bring one on which she could mount a stunning pendant her mother had lent her to wear around the neck in the evening.

“And you really want to marry him?”, Mary Anne asked curiously. “It all seems so- so hasty. And after what you told me in Somerset-“

“I am not pregnant.”

Stressing the last word with fervour, the angry plosive at its front caused some spittle to hit the mirror Elizabeth was holding in her hand while trying on a different earring in each ear in order to find out which ones to wear in the evening.

With a sigh, she unceremoniously wiped the mirror clean on her skirt.

“It is just what happens when your love for someone knows no bounds, when his sight pleases you so much you desire to be one with him, to have and to hold him-“

“You sound like a heroine in a novel”, Mary Anne observed, but this time tried to offer her best friend a smile. “To not have this anymore, it will be hard, but we will still be friends and- and I am happy you are happy.”

They embraced very tightly.

“You’ll always be welcome in our home. We can go and sketch and return in the evening, where John will be waiting- and supper.”

This time, Mary Anne was chuckling in earnest. “Does he know yet?”
"He will have to live with it- as long as he does not cook himself. He told me shocking things about the times he had to rely on foraging during the War, I should hate to be served raw cabbage with maggots in it and mouldy bread…”

Elizabeth wanted to make another amusing comment on the matter, but was halted when she heard a shy little knock on the door.

“Miss Gwillim?”

“Mary!”, Elizabeth exclaimed joyously and opened the door for the little girl to enter. Just like her, Mary Graves was the sole child of her parents, a pretty little thing taking into account her parentage; luckily, the characteristic Graves-features did not haunt her face- in fact, while there was a familiarity, she was one of the few exceptions bearing the name of Graves whose face displayed some individualism that went beyond the roundness of the cheeks attributable to a skilled cook and a lack of exercise.

“We have just come, Mama and I-“

The little girl settled herself on Elizabeth’s bed and prattled on and on about this and that. She let her. In fact, she was thankful for little Mary Graves’ talkativeness as it diverted her from the evening’s worries.

Mary Anne and she had barely added the final touches to their appearance when little Mary took both of them by the hand, evidently feeling all grown-up being allowed to keep them company and made them go downstairs, where they greeted Bridget Graves, the latest arrival. Mary next threw herself upon Uncle Samuel, who, unable to say no to a child, listened attentively to her account of the journey to the Fort and the prettiness of Elizabeth’s dress.

“Only the best for Miss Gwillim”, Uncle Samuel closed the topic and winked across the breakfast table to John, who gave a thin smile that betrayed his uncomfortableness. Elizabeth was worried for her fiancé, however such thoughts had to wait as breakfast was disrupted by the arrival of her aunts Henrietta and Elizabeth, her father’s sisters who had come from Bath.

Due to the lively family reunion, it was almost impossible to catch John alone for so much as a moment- Elizabeth was asked to join all conversations, speak of John and the like. As she was half the focus of the festivities, she obliged them, but could not rid herself of the hope of being alone with John for a while soon.

“Mrs Knox, Mrs Graves and Mrs Graves, might you permit me to borrow Miss Gwillim for a moment?”

Even before any of the ladies in question could answer, Mary Anne had led her away by the arm and guided her towards her uncle’s private sitting room.

“You need to speak with him, I could tell”, she summarised what she had done as John stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

“I’ll leave you now.”

Mary Anne’s skirts made a swishing sound so briskly did she turn on her heel and almost fled the scene.

“My poor Mary Anne, she needs some time to adjust to everything”, Elizabeth said sadly.
“As do the others.”

“You look unwell”, Elizabeth observed, scanning his appearance from top to toe- the substantial grey shadows below his eyes and his extreme paleness worried her.

“Are you ill again?”

“Haven’t slept”, came his curt and somewhat relieving answer, “you look a little pale, too. Come here.”

His darling follows his invitation express’d by opening his arms and leans against him, just as he leans against her, but she doesn’t know that. She gives him strength, but since this is or should be the husband’s duty, he doesn’t tell her- he’ll be strong for her, tonight and always.

At last, the evening came. When she was put into her attire for the evening (an anglaise, tho’ not new but made only this year, of fine silk with pink and white stripes- gaiety and youth were the things she wished to embody for her guests), nervousness started to rise in her guts for the first time. She had not been nervous or fretting all day, not even when she had gone downstairs and watched the servants set the table and bring flower arrangements, or when she had sat in the afternoon with Mrs Knox and talked with her about the coming evening, but when she felt Susan’s practiced hands tighten her stays, her chest tightened, too- in the metaphorical sense, Susan knew not to lace her in too tight.

Tonight, everyone would know- it was a liberating, as it should be, knowing that she would soon live with her husband and have a household of her own, but there was an uncertainty weighing against her joyful expectation she could not quite place or describe.

For the moment, she tried to calm herself and instead let them do with her as they were instructed, leaving very little for her to do except for the occasional order to be given or lifting an arm or tilting her head somewhat.

“Are we finished?”

“What do you think, Miss?”

The hairdresser hired for the occasion receded to allow her take a look at her reflection in the glass; it was perfect, as was her attire, for which a very content-looking Susan was responsible.

“They will all envy your beauty”, the girl said admiringly and moved closer to brush a little residual powder from her hair that had come to settle on her shoulders away.

“No-one more beautiful, truly”, the hairdresser added to Susan’s flattery before excusing himself to attend to Mary Anne and Aunt Margaret.
Elizabeth glanced at her image in the glass one last time—her dress, fashionable, but not scandalous, fell perfectly, “accentuating her natural assets”, as Aunt Margaret had called it. Her voluminous coiffure gave her non-existent height, as did her shoes, which were quite new and very prettily embroidered.

Her maquillage was very natural; she had done most of it herself as she did not trust anybody else with knowing what needed to be done, adding the illusion of pleasantly round cheeks that would hopefully distract from or hide her sharp nose and chin and applied some colour to her lips too, making them somewhat fuller than the thin line nature had bestowed her with.

To round her appearance off, she had added John’s first present to her collier-de-chien of several rows of pearls and wore the earrings he had given her with great pride.

From the outside at least, she was ready.

She sent Susan away, and Mary Anne, too, who was quite giddy of the prospect of being coiffured by a hairdresser of London fame (where Aunt Margaret had apprehended the poor man and how she had dragged him into the country she did not know) to be alone a few moments more.

Mary Anne predictably sulked somewhat, but did as she was bidden. Pacing up and down the room, nervous to succeed, nervous of the future despite looking forward to it, caught in a net of confusion, she found herself feeling helpless and alone—why?

There was one person who claimed to know her better than she ever would know herself—perhaps now was the time to test if there was any truth to it.

Reluctantly, she knocked at the door of her aunt’s boudoir. She hadn’t done it in a long while; it seemed like such a childish thing to do and even then, her governess had in most cases prevented her from doing so and told her a lady would not run and hide behind the skirts of somebody else, a lady, under the polished pretence of graciousness, accepts her fate and does her best to improve it, meeting whatever may come with determination to succeed in one’s endeavour and the most powerful tools given to a woman—her education and manners.

“Yes?”, her aunt’s voice acknowledged the person she couldn’t know was her niece outside and bade her come in.

Her aunt’s maid opened to let her in.

Remembering her upbringing, Elizabeth attempted to put on a cool façade and straightened her back as she walked towards Aunt Margaret, who was seated at her dressing table with the coiffeur standing behind her.

She, ever a formidable, awe-inspiring tigress, had already watched her niece approach in the reflexion of the glass before her and gave her a benevolent smile.

“My, what is it Elizabeth? Has something happened? Are the guests well?”

“No, nothing. And I trust the guests are well, too.”

A part of her just wanted to run to her aunt and hug her, pretend to be young again once more at an age where all so-perceived grand worries had been put to rest by Aunt Margaret, who in her ability to offer consolation or more often, wise words to ponder on, always had a way of persuading Elizabeth and soothed her uneasy mind.

Naturally, she couldn’t do that. Not at almost twenty.
"Leave us", her aunt dismissed the maid and coiffeur coolly and waited until the door had closed behind them.

Perhaps Aunt Margaret, who had raised her chiefly, could feel, sense or otherwise fathom her state of mind as mothers are said to be able to do with their children, for she rose from her seat and encompassed Elizabeth in her arms, careful not to smudge her own or Elizabeth’s maquillage or allow too much powder from their coiffures to fall onto their dresses.

“You are nervous, aren’t you?”

Elizabeth could only nod.

“I understand”, her aunt answered to her great surprise, “but you needn’t be. It is quite exciting to have so many people here, but have I not raised you to know how to manoeuvre such gatherings? I recall you behaving very prettily when we had Lord Sackville staying with us in London when you were but nine years old.”

Aunt Margaret’s voice was soft, more gentle and patient than usual.

Elizabeth wanted to say so many things, how and why she was so nervous, and yet found herself unable to do so.

“What do you love Simcoe?”

“I wish you would call him John”, Elizabeth replied. “He is to be your nephew, through marriage to me.”

“That is all well and good, but do you love him?”

Elizabeth loosened the embrace somewhat and lifted her chin off her aunt’s shoulder to stand and face her properly.

“Very much. More than words can tell.”

“Then there is nothing to be afraid of”, her aunt stated. “If people talk, amuse themselves at your expense due to, say, the striking difference in appearance between you and your fiancé, let them try their so-perceived comical genius. It would be far worse if he and you would not love each other, for that was the only reason I eventually consented to the union and would give rise to more serious rumours and witty remarks, far worse than making merry of you being so very tiny and him terrifyingly tall. We still have time, you know.”

The meaningful pause her aunt inserted at that moment made it abundantly clear to Elizabeth that, should her aunt detect any disagreement or dissonances between her and John, she had no qualms to call everything off momentarily.

“No, no-” Elizabeth decidedly shook her head, “it is just-”

“I know. You may sit.”

Queenly as always, her aunt sounded commanding even when such was not her intention; after almost twenty years of knowing her, Elizabeth knew how her words were intended to be taken.

Taking up the offer, she seated herself on the edge of her aunt’s bed. She had not done so in a very long time, she realised.
Aunt Margaret settled down beside her, gently so as to not crease either of their dresses and once again, put her arm around Elizabeth.

“When you had freshly hatched, and I held you for the first time after-“ her voice quivered upon evidently reliving her sister’s last moments and Elizabeth silently prayed she would be spared another recounting of the events of 22nd September 1762- she did not need her mother’s ghost to haunt her too, not when she had enough people of flesh and bone to be worried about.

“You were so tiny, light as a feather and without protection in the world, with both your parents dead, but you were strong. I took you under my wing in your mother’s stead and vowed to do what she would have done for you, had she lived. In my aerie, I made certain you never wanted a thing; the love of the parents your uncle and I tried to be for you, food and clothing and above all, instruction. I instructed my little eaglet how to spread her wings and let them flutter, spot prey, operate her claws and give the proud, awe-inspiring cry of a magnificent she-eagle that knows no master but herself. And how she has grown. The day comes when young birds must leave their nest and fly, which is the only thing the old birds cannot teach the young. The young must spread their wings and dare the jump themselves.”

Tightening her embrace, she went on:

“We are perched on the edge of the nest, you and I, and today, you will take your first flight. Although you might fear it, the independence, the knowledge that what you do is entirely your doing, you have no reason to be afraid. And you are not alone- your uncle and I and Simcoe will be there, too.”

“John”, Elizabeth corrected her aunt a second time.

Despite not being able to see her aunt’s face, Elizabeth was certain she could feel the older woman smile.

“Let us not quarrel over the trifle of your future husband’s name. You will enjoy yourself tonight, as you always do when out dancing. Be of good cheer, you have every reason to be- you are loved by your friends, who have come to see you, by your family and your fiancé. And now, you must excuse me- the little fellow who charges me a fortune for our hair needs to finish his work. It would not do to look ill-coiffured on my niece’s day.”

Flashes of colour rush past him and so, the battle begins. In the sea of living and breathing bodies accoutred very finely and in bright colours, he stands all alone.

He must breathe. There is air in this room, it cannot be that hard. Military uniforms and some families he only knows in passing have joined the group of family, made it big.

They are supposed to open the ball, his Eliza and he- will he still know all the steps?

It is all a blur, and will always remain, of the people’s cheers and the dance itself he remembers nothing. doesn’t even know how he got down the stairs and into this hell-pit in the first place, everything is reduced to a feeble memory save for Eliza’s sweet countenance throughout their dance, even when his feet had most likely ruined her shoes will stay with him.
When everyone claps once the musicians are silent, he knows they have done well and it gives him as well as her new confidence, he can tell: Eliza looks fresher, her cheeks rosy and asks him for a second dance, and he obliges his love later that evening when Money Musk is played, for country dances are easier than minuets.

The rest of the night, he spends watching Eliza twirl, twist and turn, dancing with Thomas Graves, some suitor of days gone by living in the area or even her uncle while he remains standing in the sidelines citing his leg and lungs.

-But he has not been idle: among the guests are such distinguished figures as Sir Henry Clinton and Rawdon, whom he likes well. Contrary to him, Rawdon dances, but Clinton doesn’t.

“My compliments. May you two have the happiest of marriages”, Clinton toasts him and moves closer so they can talk over the music in a low voice.

“She is handsome, she is rich, who would have thought the elusive nameless lady you spoke of would turn out to be quite so advantageous a match?”

“She is perfect in every way and would be just as perfect without her fortune”, he more or less openly corrects Clinton who beams at him still.

"Excuse my curiosity- how’re matters with Miss Gwillim? Since you obviously are no longer laying siege to her guardian, has the war moved to the southern theatre?"

Clinton, the vile old devil, grinned, doubtlessly in an attempt to steer their conversation away from such delicate topics like money. The General, he realises, is not wrong in his general assessment- which he would never confirm, of course.

"Sir, may I remind you that my involvement in the Virginia-campaign was minimal to say the least?"

Clinton looked first amused, then bemused before replying "Why, and I thought it was Burgoyne we called 'Gentleman Johnny'."

For a moment, he thought the man satisfied, but the suspicious glint in Clinton’s eyes told him otherwise. On his third glass of wine, not only had the colour of his face approximated to that of his uniform: as happened to most men when having consumed sufficient amounts of drink, his tongue had loosened considerably too, which made for an interesting combination with his usual air of benevolent paternalism.

Taking a sip of his own glass (still his first and growing rather warm the longer it stood on the table between them), he waited for the next attack.

“You almost had me”, Clinton said while wagging with an admonishing index finger to add theatrical merit to his performance, “but if I remember correctly the reason for your minimal involvement was your incapacitation?”

“It was”, he affirmed, not knowing what Clinton would do or say next.

“Going by this logic then your current not seeing action in the field is rooted in a similar cause?”

“I am no longer sick, if that is what you mean.”

“But perhaps your last spell of illness has left… the cannon unmanned?”

The old man chuckles at his own joke, something only fools and drunkards do.
“I can assure you, whatever you mean to insinuate that I am in perfect health and cannot claim to have suffered the lamentable loss of any ability of any kind as a result of my injuries obtained during the late war.”

“I’m sure Miss Eliza will be glad to hear that once the two of you advance from surveying the enemy into battle on the open plain. She will certainly want to inspect your heavy artillery…”

“Enough”, he snaps, smashing his glass onto the table like a gavel.

To his surprise, Clinton is utterly unimpressed.

“My, my, John. Ever the impulsive mad dog, are you? From one man to another it must be possible to jest, especially when one, like you, has waved the flag of surrender and is about to become a prisoner of love.”

Clinton’s warm smile confuses him.

“So embarrassed? I thought the Scourge of Long Island’s sensibilities were practically non-existent, if one believes the reports one received about you.”

“I am not sensible.”

Now, the old man chuckles even more than before. He has to remind himself not to use any physical force against Clinton, for he was old and stood no chance against him in a fistfight and besides, he’d never get his promotion that way.

“You are a man in love”, Clinton closed, “more vulnerable and assailable in your state than you ever were wounded in the field. And now, let us toast to the pretty Miss Eliza and her charms.”

Obligingly, he lifts his glass and even though he wants to be angry with Clinton, he does not have the rage in him to be. He has certainly given him food for thought.

Once the last guests had left after a light midnight supper which had been pleasant as everyone had already been in good spirits, Elizabeth realised for the first time how tired she actually was and had been for the entire day, having barely slept at all the night before.

Bone-weary and very content with how the evening had turned out, she allowed herself to sit down on the settee in Uncle Samuel’s private sitting room, where an hour ago the last brave souls (of whom only the immediate family consisting of John, Uncle Samuel and Aunt Margaret remained, the rest had left for bed or their accommodation elsewhere) had shared a parting glass of sherry, and smiled with weary contention when John followed her example, taking his place beside her.

“All went well”, he announced proudly in a voice that betrayed his tiredness. “And I love you more than words can tell.”

Under different circumstances, Elizabeth would have pointed out to him the hilarity of the rhyme he had unwittingly composed, but her strength to keep herself awake was fading and her body, having to decide on what to spend the last remnants of vital energy on, advised against talking.
All her body wanted was to find a comfortable position to fall asleep in and with her mind weary and barely able to keep her eyes open, her primal instinct won out.

Shuffling, now that everything was done very much uncaring if she creased her attire in the process or not, her instincts guided her to the warm, living person beside her, where his broad chest offered itself to her as a, ‘tho unusual, but very inviting cushion.

John’s heartbeat was slow and regular, very much at peace, prompting Elizabeth to look up to his face in order to detect if he was, as she guessed, asleep.

Indeed he was, which caused Elizabeth to feel a certain pride and smugness that she had held out longer than he.

As she made herself comfortable, a low, contented grunt was heard as John in turn, asleep already adjusted his position so he was leaning against her and able to sling an arm around her waist.

Being held in this manner felt incredibly nice-

Groaning softly, his eyes open just wide enough to make out the sizeable belly of his godfather in his field of vision, who evidently wishes him to wake up, even if he would be quite pleased just to sleep.

In reply to being awoken so rudely, he gives his godfather a frigid glare, which he hopes might achieve something but in truth doesn’t, and he knows it. The old man has never feared his wrath and the amusement the wrinkled face displays to all granted the gift of vision makes it clear he still sees the little boy in him whose fiercest battle would be waged against He Who Attempted to Make Him Eat Peas.

As his senses are slowly returning to the present moment, he realises with a hot, burning sensation of shock that he holds Eliza and rests his head on her side.

Almost as if he had been burnt, he sits up much too quickly for someone at the brink of a good, long sleep and folds his hands in his lap, as if this little gesture of propriety could annihilate the indecent tableau they must have presented in the memory of those watching on.

“I think your bed is where you will wish to find yourself in the morning”, his godfather comments his efforts, stressing the third word in the sentence with admonitory sternness.

He decides to leave this sabre-blows against his honour and that of his fiancée uncommented and instead looks down at the sleeping angel, asking permission to carry her upstairs, so while she will have to wake up eventually when Miss Susan will peel her out of her clothes, but not yet. It is always dangerous and very trying to walk great distances when half asleep, and he would do everything to safeguard his dear Eliza’s health- he will not permit her to trip on the staircase due to weariness.

“Permission granted”, is the soldierly reply he receives as he gently picks her up.

From the last time carrying her (tho’ at much greater speed with much greater urgency) he knows she’s quite heavy even if she does not look so, therefore he must take his time. Slowly, they make their way upstairs, where he must leave her at last.

Putting her down on the bed, she seems to wake from her slumber, opens her eyes, recognises him
and gives him a lopsided, weary smile before her eyes fall shut again. Under the watchful eyes of her aunt and his godfather, he leaves her with only a chaste kiss to the forehead, leaving the rest to Miss Susan, who will come and attend to her mistress soon.

Quite frankly not knowing what else to do, he bids Mrs Graves, who has tonight not proven his most rancorous enemy but a great and capable ally, goodnight.

"And to you, too, John."

In her room, Elizabeth could hear muffled voices talk outside her door. Still curious even when she was so weary and ready to sleep as she was if Susan would not come immediately to take care of her wardrobe, she tried to make out what was being said.

John bade goodnight to Aunt Margaret, friendly and kind in a manner she had never before heard him speak to her in and he thanked her no less, thanked her civilly for her aid. She was surprised—was there hope Aunt Margaret and John might be reconciled after all?

"And to you, too, John", she heard her aunt say—was she dreaming already? There was no sarcasm to be detected in Aunt Margaret's voice, she was talking to him as she did to her. No, she was not dreaming—Mary Anne next to her was, but she was awake still—or again. Elizabeth fell asleep with a smile on her face almost instantly, uncaring about her hair or dress and turned to her best friend who was already asleep, wishing she had heard, too.

Chapter End Notes

I used this chapter to set the scene for the future of the Simcoes regarding John's illness. Historically, the man was suffering from lung-related issues alongside his other illnesses and ailments very frequently with speculations going as far as he might have been asthmatic in later life. The injury his fictional counterpart suffered (I'm no doctor but coughing blood could well be related to having injured your lung) at Blandford will close the circle here. He just never was really healthy throughout his adult life, which impacted his life and the relationship he had with Elizabeth greatly.

"The art of dancing explained by reading and figures whereby the manner of performing the steps is made easy by a new and familiar method" by Kellom Tomlinson is a dancing manual for gentlemen in particular from the first half of the 18th century.

Pierre Carlet de Marivaux (1688-1763) was a French novelist and playwright who every few years indulged in publishing a periodical of some sort for a while. The quote I used is from the sixth issue (27th of April 1722) of the “Spectateur français” , coming from a translation of a Spanish story he published parts of. My translation might be a bit wonky, but I hope it captures the meaning:

“This hero was full of bravery in battle, but of a blind valour that was prone to sully itself with respectable blood, the blood of a vanquished foe. When he recompensed a service, he paid nothing but the act itself: he did not add to the recompense this amiable fashion of giving, which makes precisely the salary of him who earned being given to: he was just, but not good in equal measure. As soon as he loved, he was no longer the same man: the desire to become worthy of
She Whom He Loved made disappear all his defects; love purified his valour and his pride of this excess that dishonoured both. The entirety of the empire soon resounded with the sound of his virtues.”

French: to me it looks like Simcoe’s French was, contrary to his wife’s, not the best prior to taking up his post in Upper Canada but improved from there, most likely because he was exposed to and had to make conversation in French there more often than in England. It’s what I feel based on the diaries etc. I read, but as I cannot prove it definitively, let’s call it historically inspired artistic license.

According to Mary Beacock Fryer’s biography, Elizabeth and Margaret were involved in preparing bandages and dressings for army use during the war.

Powder monkeys: powder monkeys were persons employed on board of warships to ferry powder from the magazine to the artillery pieces. Usually, the magazine of warship in the time period this story is set in would have been situated below the waterline. Due to the very narrow and low spaces the powder had to be ferried through, powder monkeys had to be small in order to be quick and efficient (and also to minimise the risk of someone bumping their head and spilling the powder everywhere). Often, this job was done by young boys, but women are not unheard of, too. As the wife of an Admiral and very interested in women and the jobs they could do, I think Margaret would have been aware of female powder monkeys.

Margaret Kemble Gage: I have to thank the wonderful Tav for making me aware of this fact. Not only did General Gage and Admiral Graves dislike each other with every fibre of their being and thus did everything to make the other miserable (which inconveniently meant that the two most senior officers of HM’s forces on land and on the high seas didn’t cooperate when they really should have focussed on their common enemy), apparently their wives felt the same about another and disliked each other passionately. I need a fic about that.

Elizabeth’s lévite is based on a French fashion plate in possession of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, dated 1780. I chose it because it doesn’t look like the 18th century costumes you get to see in most period dramas with its apron and vibrant colours.

Olivia Knox was Samuel Graves’ sister, married to a gentleman called Henry Knox, but there isn’t any more I could find out about her without doing a research trip to Northern Ireland and digging through parish records, so her description relies entirely on my imagination.

The tune mentioned in the story, “Monymusk” (sometimes Money Musk, the name hails from an estate in Aberdeenshire), is a Scottish tune written by Daniel (sometimes Donald) Dow (1732–1783) in 1776, first published for circulation in 1780. BONUS: Elizabeth knew it: “Mon. June 4th [1792]—A splendid ball at the Chateau, but the heat was so great that I was very near fainting after having danced Money Musk and the Jupon rouge.”

Although this diary entry is from ten years later, it’s not out there to assume she might have known the tune in 1782- perhaps through Mary Anne and her Scottish family? - But this is artistic license.

Next up: the aftermath.
Soon

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I've had a few formatting issues, I hope the chapter reads nicely. I hope you enjoy the read (and the as usually excessive notes).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The late summer is a time of total happiness, and he basks in it like the flock of lazy hens they have just passed on their hack by the side of a small hamlet do in the sun.

They are being invited to the smaller and larger houses in the area, congratulations are given and eager mammas of young gentlemen whom they think superior to him are shoved forward with matronly panache to be kind to “our dear, best Miss Gwillim” in forlorn hopes she might reconsider.

Although he is most displeased seeing any gentleman trying to spark the spirit of flirtatiousness in the woman who is to be his wife, he is generous in letting these offenses slide; most are cream-faced milksops barely even twenty and acting out of fear of their mothers, who might perhaps still send them to bed with a whipping and no dinner if they are disobedient.

Elizabeth, his dearest darling, is ever adroit handling these vexatious persons with grace and civility, accepts an invitation here and returns a compliment there and on the way home, they often laugh about it all and assure each other of their undying love.

What had originally started as a little adventure when he had hid in the carriage collecting Elizabeth in Honiton a while ago, has become an honoured tradition: whenever they take the carriage, they leave seated opposite another and return in the same manner, but in between, they sit together perfectly comfortable in a close embrace with the little curtains drawn shut.

On this day however, they are free to do as they please, free of the burden of receiving callers or accepting invitations. There are so many of them because he is not very well known in the county; he had lived with his mother in Exeter until he had joined the 35th and gone abroad, but apart from Admiral Graves and a handful of the latter’s friends, he had not been particularly well-connected.

His Eliza on the other hand has grown up in the drawing-rooms of Devon since she was six or seven years old, is well-known and well-liked; her opinion is called for on matters of Taste and everything else frequently; when the topic turns political and it is clear there are views so differing in the room a horrible disagreement is imminent, she acts as reconciliatory force between both parties and makes both sides believe in having a point in what they say. Only afterwards when they are alone will she reveal her true opinion, say whose side she favoured and why, or indeed in the opposite case, why not.

Since his life has so far not been like this and he is slowly getting used to the thought of becoming a country squire for the time being, a married man who must select a home and ably provide for his wife, he watches his dearest, beloved Eliza intently, making notes in his head about specific persons or what to do and say.

She leads, and he follows.
When he senses their hosts are very amicable, approachable people or on close terms with the Graves’ and Eliza, he allows himself, based on his beloved’s behaviour, to smile more freely or even to every now and then reach for her hand and hold it to shew their love to all the world (and, more straightforwardly, because he simply adores to feel her close to him).

Now there is no need for any inhibitions- they are alone, he and the lady in the blue redingote with phantasy lace and epaulettes riding before him.

She looks every inch the Admiral’s ward with the gold of her mock-uniform glittering in the sun and her upright, graceful posture on the horse.

They have left the Fort in the early morning and have taken with them not much, except for a little money and what they wear on their bodies; he however has ordered Cook to work her charming magic and prepare a set of sandwiches for them, with cold meat and some with cheese, as well as some cake to pack for them. Although stealing is a hanging offense in the Navy, he has braved himself to take from his godfather’s cellar a good bottle of wine and slipped it into his saddle bag, which they shall share to wash down the bread and cold ham.

Eliza, he has come to know, is a most refined woman in every aspect of life, but she is also very practical and her approach to life not that of a little dress’d-up doll, as some people take her to be due to her upbringing, wealth and physical inferiority in comparison to most other women.

Presently, she lies in his arms on a blanket he has brought with him on the hard earthen ground and looks as happy as a queen on her throne. They have dined on his sandwiches (she has even allowed him to feed her, which has been a most delightful experience) and passed the bottle ‘round, as the rustics or common foot soldiers do.

At present, nothing is more beautiful, could ever be than that, lying together in the shadow of an old tree overlooking a small lake.

They fondle, touch a little, glory in being totally alone and watch the horses graze lazily nearby.

“It’s not long anymore and we can have this every day”, Eliza murmurs into his chest and stretches like a cat.

“December”, he answers and thinks with great joy and impatience of the day when they shall be wed. Over the last weeks, they have negotiated their wedding-day; it had been important to them it should be soon, but not too soon: they are in love as deeply as is humanly possible for two people to be in love, but they must not appear too hasty exchanging their vows, otherwise ugly rumours might take root they have a pre-marital pregnancy to conceal.

“This year still”, he had ruled when Margaret had proposed a day in February not long ago.

It had been important to him for a variety of reasons; he had almost died this year and come back to England a broken man without a life, without a purpose and without a healthy enough body to even walk more than a few steps without assistance.

He had wished for death, prayed for it often; perhaps, in his darkest moments even considered finishing it all himself when the pain from his wounds had become too great to be suffered any longer and he had lain in bed without consolation, without a gentle hand pressing his or a few kind words directed at him. His godfather had often tried to assume this role, but he had not liked that, despite the Admiral’s honest efforts; seeing him sitting by his bedside or seating himself with him in the library had despite the kindness of the gesture always sparked the wish in him that the old man should go and leave him be.
The old man is as good as his father, judged by the fact he has taken his role as godparent very seriously and has acted in that capacity since his father’s death twenty-three years ago. And yet, he does not like it at all when the old man pities him. There had been some odd, indescribable consolation in the old man’s words and actions towards him, but he could never fully give himself to them, lose himself in the kindness offered, for he was still a gentleman of thirty years and it would hardly be proper to weep and sob into his godfather’s shoulder.

He has been raised a gentleman, and although he speculates that Samuel Graves would not mind the informality of comforting a crying man, least of all him, years and years of a formal education fiercely discourage such behaviour.

It is different with Elizabeth: with her, he does not feel the need to pretend. In her presence he is at ease and at peace. When he is sad, he can be open with her and when something terrifies him for reasons rooted in his past, such as certain loud noises he cannot support hearing at all or a vivid night-terror that has plagued him, he can turn to her whenever these things leave him quite shaken-up.

She is his Saviour, without her, he might not have survived the dark days freshly off the ship. Without having known he loves her then, he had seen in her something special, a brightness, a hopeful beam of light that had pierced the dark, hollow emptiness of his heart and warmed him from within. She is his Sun, his Day, and his World and he will strive to do everything to make her happy.

To be wed in 1782 still, it signifies to him something very special; the end to his ordeal, the beginning of a new age.

Over the last few weeks he has, in accordance with his future wife, begun to seek a suitable home for them, until a permanent arrangement can be struck for naturally, they must move out of the Fort and have their own household once they are married.

Eliza speaks about having a big house to themselves, and he agrees with that, it should be bigger than the Fort, because once they are married, he is certain they will rather sooner than later have every reason to have enough rooms for nurses and governesses.

They can barely keep their hands off another once they are alone now, wherefore it is hard to imagine for him they will not be blessed with a little one or a couple more once they are wed. He would like to have that, a family, a proper one- but then, he must be thankful to the Lord for having given Eliza to him, and what in the world could he ask more for? He is done demanding, she loves him, and he will love her forever regardless if there will be no children at all or a dozen.

And if there be none, he consoles himself, they shall simply do the same the Admiral does and informally adopt someone else’s children; little Mary Graves, he has observed, looks as if she will be the new child the old man contemplates taking under his wing now that Elizabeth is grown.

He was the first, then Eliza, now Mary. It is a little sad to see him, who has so many feckless nephews, all childless, yet perhaps this is all part of God’s divine plan, for had he not given a home and care to him and later to the woman who shall soon be his wife when they were orphaned?

Mary Graves’ parents are both alive and well, but she lives close at Woodbine Hill and enjoys visiting.

It had been little Mary, too, who had asked him, her mouth very unladylike filled with apple pie, when exactly their wedding-day would be. They hadn’t properly discussed it yet and told her so, to which suddenly, Margaret Graves, his one-time sworn enemy whom he still regards with more of a hint of mistrust, announces they will be wed on the 30th of December.
“This year, did you not say so?”, she had asked him when Eliza and he had approached her afterwards. “I had a letter this morning from Curate Roskilly, who offered me several dates on which he would be willing to perform a marriage ceremony in Dunkeswell, some in the new year already. I figured I would accept on your behalf- after all, we cannot pick an earlier date until you have applied for a marriage licence and the notarial side of your romance is settled. Don’t look at me like that, Elizabeth- love is all well and good, but who knows how long it lasts- perhaps you will be one day very thankful that I made you settle everything in advance.”

There it was again, her fortune. He had tried hard not to say something foul and rude to Margaret- after all, she is an overprotective mother to Elizabeth and overprotective for a reason- she is all the family (of blood, at least) the old lady has, a few other old madams aside, and, as he had been told by his godfather in a confidential conversation, Margaret had never quite overcome the day of Elizabeth’s birth when she lost her sister of the same name, the mother after whom his bride was named. It is only natural she tries to protect her of everything, the world, the merest whiff of a danger- and a husband.

For the sake of the family peace and not to turn the woman who will be, as he has realised with shock, his quasi-mother-in-law into a monster-in-law, he thus prefers to say nothing whenever she becomes insulting and instead clenches his fist in his pocket and later on takes his anger out in the fresh air or when riding, urging the Admiral’s skewbald beast go faster and faster in order to bring miles between him and the Fort to be alone in the hills for a while, where his soul quietens. When he is at peace again, he returns home, where his dear is waiting for him and he is happy.

All is as it should be.

In the meantime, Eliza has vacated her spot by his side and risen to her feet, discarding her stockings where she lay (worn with very pretty garters, of which he wonders whether the delicate little ruffles and fetching embroidery were meant to be seen by him) and walks barefooted to the water’s edge.

Seeing the water ripple around her feet makes him a tad uneasy- after all, he has seen his brother drown in the Exe in a spot they had deemed safe to play in when he was a boy, but since Eliza goes not in more than knee-deep, holding up her petticoats, he figures he ought to be at ease.

Watching her so happy is the most beautiful thing there is. She tilts her head back laughing and uses her free hand to splash water in his direction, trying to coax him in, too with the promise of a kiss and the cooling boon of the relatively frigid water.

He does not like the water much, so does not go in, but comes to receive her so she does not need to walk back across the ground and dirty her feet.

Carrying her back to the blanket, she, bold lioness that she is, leans upwards to kiss him. Naturally, he does not deny his bride this wish and whispers once they manage to separate their mouths again: “happy birthday, my love” into her ear.

Spending the day with John alone had been her one true wish. In previous years and when she had been younger, Elizabeth had longed for material things, books, watercolours, sketching paper, a pretty new hat or dress- but with summer slowly fading into autumn, she wished to spend her birthday, that has brought to life again memories of midsummer, in a state of carefree enjoyment with
the man she loved.

There would be enough celebrations later on; much as she resented it, it is pertinent they would soon be pressed to make their way back to the Fort to change, for in Honiton that same night, some friends had arranged an assembly in her honour and invited other friends from far and near. Instead of the usual eighteen couples of a Honiton assembly, there might be close to thirty, not counting those who would not dance but only observe.

John however had no mind to leave just yet and instead sneaked a hand beneath her skirt to add to the day, as he called it, a very special birthday gift.

The fear of getting caught was minimal, though excitingly existent- nobody in the right mind goes out on a hot day like this and they were far enough away from the Fort not to be immediately recognised by some tenants or passing townspeople.

Leaning with her back against his strong chest, she melted like ice would in the day’s golden sunshine to his wicked caresses.

“I want you to be with me, now”, she moaned lowly, her body ablaze with desire.

“We have to wait”, he sighed, regretting as much as she that they would not be able to do what both of them longed for. “But it’s not long now- and then…”

John left a dramatic pause that was more comical than dramatic before he growled into her ear: “…I do not think I will let you out of bed for quite a while.”

Elizabeth wanted to give him a smart reply, but such was impossible- he had timed his words with the orgasm he had brought on and made her suffer through the infinite pleasure entirely even when she thought her body ought not to be able to be so breathless so long.

Afterwards, they remained in the cool shade of the tree a few minutes longer until her shaking limbs had recuperated somewhat and mounted the horses again to return home.

Home- soon, she realised as she clicked her tongue to signal her mare to fall into a soft canter, that in three months’ time, the Fort would not be home anymore. It had been, from when she had been seven years old until now, despite having remained somewhat unsettled in that she still often came to stay with the Gwillims, or in London, or with friends. And yet, she regarded Hembury Fort House as her home due to Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel, who had striven to give her the family she had never had.

She did not have parents, but she had the most caring aunt and uncle one could wish for and it would make her a little sad to leave them despite looking forward to having her own home, of which she would be mistress, with John, where no one could tell her what to do, frown at her for spending time with John or the like.

The dance in the evening, to which they arrived just in time after getting dressed in haste, was very agreeable; many friends had come and the congratulations were often twofold, combining those for her twentieth birthday with those regarding her engagement.

John, the ever-looming presence behind her, fared better than ever before and even could be moved to join her in three dances- he would have done a fourth, but she had forbidden him any more than three, knowing his leg was, though outwardly healed, still a little weak and needed special care for having been broken in several places and he had already been on a horseback excursion and carried her a few yards on that day.
To the tune of (doubtlessly selected by a friend on purpose) *I Have A Wife Of My Own*, he struggled on, battling in the next round through *The Duchess of Grafton* and *The Foxhunter's Jig* before she told him to rest (which was also in the interest of her shoes).

By the end of the evening, she had danced without resting even once and with flushed cheeks returned to John’s side.

“My dear”, he murmured into her ear and left a small kiss with the words when he was certain nobody was watching, “I trust you enjoyed yourself?”

“Excessively”, she answered, motioning for a servant with a tray to bring her a glass- she was quite exhausted, and the room was very hot indeed.

As the end of the evening slowly approached, to their surprise (and very likely persuaded by a few glasses of wine) Uncle Samuel quite formally asked Aunt Margaret for a dance, something he would usually not do as he was quite old and not very elegant in his movements, but he led her with surprising zeal and effort through *The Sailor's Dance*, which Elizabeth suspected had been a strategical choice.

Clapping and suppressing any loud emissions of amusement at seeing the two dance, they watched on as Admiral and Mrs Graves performed admirably. Aunt Margaret had danced a few times that evening before, but to see Uncle Samuel do so and of his own accord was quite unusual and bore testimony to how delighted he was.

The clock gave evidence to the fact that midnight had long passed when they finally returned from Honiton to the Fort, all four of them happy but a little tired.

The next morning, John’s careless attire indicated he had sent away the valet and dressed himself- a bad decision indeed, for he had buttoned his waistcoat incorrectly and a small, yet visible stretch of hair to the right of his chin left her in no doubt he had attempted to shave himself.

She, at all times in matters of taste and sartorial elegance her own fiercest critic, had not cared much about her accoutrements either and had donned a pretty petticoat, jumps and her manteau-de-lit for joining the family at breakfast. It hardly mattered; Uncle Samuel and Aunt Margaret had seen her so countless of times and when before their engagement propriety had dictated a certain amount of formality in dress and distance between John and her, they were engaged to be wed now and John would soon enough see her in even greater undress anyway.

Before going downstairs, she had sat and in quiet solitude and let her pencil roam across acres of white paper and filled it with grey lines to be coloured later on. Next, she had drawn up a list of things she would need to be packed and given the inventory to Susan, who was to make certain she would have everything she needed.

The following day, they would all four go to London, where they would shop for items a bride needed; new clothes (Uncle Samuel had made the magnanimous promise to pay for a dress, saying it was a personal gift to her to be viewed independently from what would be purchased as wedding-gifts and pieces of her dowry) and John would apply once more to his superiors in his attempt to have his Rangers made a permanent regiment, and have his colonelcy made permanent within the British establishment, too.

On the coach ride, Elizabeth viewed it as torture almost to be seated with her aunt, while John and her uncle sat facing them for in this manner, it was impossible for them to secretly touch, or do anything else deemed inappropriate by their elders.
The evenings of the following two weeks were usually spent together, often in company, whereas in the day, their ways tended to part. John was often with someone from the army, or out at Strawberry Hill socialising with the right persons to lend him an ear whereas she and aunt Margaret, sometimes accompanied by friends, went up and down through London for the right sorts of lace, of fabric, millinery and the like.

“Night gowns. You will need new night gowns”, Amelia Johnson, a friend from the city, pointed out when Elizabeth found herself standing in the middle of the dressmaker’s shop, finding herself a little overwhelmed- not so much by the selection as by the idea that she would need all this because she was soon to be married.

“I speak of experience- think of it like- well, think of it like a sumptuous velvet curtain in the theatre that has to be lifted in the spirit of suspense before the action progresses.”

Mary Anne, who was presently in London also with her siblings and parents, frowned.

Elizabeth nodded, trying her best to act the part of the virtuous country-girl when in truth, she was quite familiar with the matters Amelia Johnson spoke about and knew only too well how much delight there was to be found in undressing.

“Thin, and not too functional”, Amelia opined on the perfect night-attire for new brides, “its function lies entirely in its appearance and the ease with which it is discarded of.”

“I thought of thin gauze and some lace trimmings, and bows, perhaps”, Elizabeth weighed in, not too intent on the role of the Country Miss any more.

London might be the centre of debauchery, but she knew enough to understand what John and perhaps all men, liked.

“Splendid”, the other woman, a good deal taller than she but tolerably friendly nonetheless, clapped in her hands, pulling out a yard of the thinnest gauze and holding her hand below it to see how sheer it was.

“You could read a book through that”, she murmured with approval.

Mrs and Miss Rush, the seamstresses, were only too happy to deprive Uncle Samuel (who had, left them somewhat red-faced to their own devices when he had heard which items were to be purchased) and Elizabeth’s pockets of a great deal of money.

The seamstresses would be in charge of Elizabeth’s daily wear, now commissioned to sew for her three new attires in their workshop, but the main dress she would need could not be purchased there. She liked the Rushes, mother and daughter, who could be relied upon to cut make the pieces just as shewn to them from example, a fashion plate or mere explanation, but a wedding dress was something different entirely.

She wanted it to be grand, very stately, and very pretty, too.

With the help of the Parisian dressmaker Monsieur Perrin, she was certain to obtain just the effect she would have wished for.

He had been sent a note in advance of their coming, and had been quite prepared for a flock of ladies dressed in the most fashionable headgear and dresses of vibrant colours signalling they were very conscious of the ever-changing fashions.

“The bride, I presume”, the man approached her with a flourishing bow. By the manner in which his
eyes moved across her body, she could tell he was already measuring her in his mind, which she disliked in the extreme for it was clear to her he had probably made note of her shortness.

“Did you have anything special in mind?”

“I wish it to be quite astonishing. I do not think it should be pure white, as that colour does not suit my fair complexion and dark hair at all.”

“How much“Yes, the Parisian tried to ask with at least the false pretence of discretion, at which Elizabeth simply waved her hand.

“What I like best will be paid for”, she cut him off in a tone betraying her annoyance and was supported by Aunt Margaret’s stiff nod.

The bride’s parents would pay for the dress as was custom and since she had none, their place would be filled in absentia by her aunt and uncle.

Uncle Samuel would likely faint at the bill they would amass, but then he had known she was not going to marry on the cheap. Was it not every bride’s wish to look perfect on her wedding-day? And if she should be required to add some of her own money to pay the bill, so be it.

Aunt Margaret had begun examining the fabrics he had in store; there were quite a few ones she liked, but she liked the shiny cream silk with tiny golden floral elements on it best. Simple, yet sumptuous, she would not need to stoop to the low vulgarity of adding too many accessories to the dress only to showcase her wealth.

The dress would have full sleeves it was agreed, according to the latest fashions and since she was to be wed in December, it had the practical application of not leaving her freezing in church.

The neckline, she ruled, would have two rows of little pleats for ornamentation and her skirt was to be plain with the back cut à l’anglaise, but leaving a little bit of train to trail behind her.

As her measurements were being taken and the ladies of her party left to watch or wait for her to be done, Mary Anne requested a pencil and paper, which she was soon brought by one of the women in the employ of Monsieur, a Frenchwoman like him, and set to work immediately.

Naturally she had given her dress more than a passing thought before, had sketched it herself, but since she was not very good at drawing people, it had never worked quite as she would have liked it.

Mary Anne however had always been a good at sketching likenesses and this was what she did then; tho’ it was only what her friend called “a rough sketch”, it was beautifully done and took Elizabeth by surprise: Mary Anne had drawn her, in her dress as it had been described to the dress-maker, and it looked beautiful. Elizabeth therefore immediately and with a heavy heart decided to leave it with the dress-maker, so he could see what she liked, and how it was supposed to look.

“Thank you”, she said and embraced her friend with great gratitude, “you know I could not do this without your support.”

Mary Anne, despite visibly being flattered, did not look convinced. “You would, as we all know. Elizabeth, you have been raised to be sure of your own importance and to make your own decisions. You have always been headstrong ever since I know you. If there is a woman who knows her own mind, it is you, and you have fallen in love with John Simcoe. You would marry him if you had to fight all of General Washington’s men at once in order to be able to do so and you would not tire until you’d see his ring on your finger.”
She smiled back feebly at her friend and took the latter’s hand. Mary Anne’s hand bore a few greyish-black smudges from sketching, but she did not mind in the least when she closed her own around hers.

“You are my dearest, my best friend, without you I would be half myself at best. You always know what I think without asking and will give me your honest opinion without flattering me. It would never cross my mind not to ask your opinion.”

“And my opinion you received, but we both know full well in the end, no opinion save your own is of consequence- as, in this matter at least, it should be. Wherever in your happiness lies, you must pursue it.”

They had bent their heads over the brocaded fabric she had picked for her dress and examined it closely as if to spot flaws in its quality, a thread pulled or a poorly-woven golden ornament in it, when in truth they quite simply avoided looking at another.

“All I ask of you is that you and John try to be friends. He is a kind man, but you see, when you first met him, he was very, very badly-“

Due to their very public surroundings, Elizabeth broke the conversation off there and postponed it to the evening when John, being invited by someone of consequence to dine, was not expected before the early morning hours.

Mary Anne had fortunately obtained her father’s permission to stay for the night in Westminster with them, to hold one of their old and well-beloved vigils.

“Pooh”, Elizabeth exclaimed dramatically and let herself fall onto the bed with the same overly dramatic zeal and merit of an actress fainting in a comedy, “I am tired!”

“So am I”, Mary Anne replied and crawled beneath the blanket. “When your aunt told your uncle at dinner how much money was spent on your wardrobe- and let us not forget you will need other things, too!”

“John keeps telling me we should not fret, we would get more presents of the useful sort for our wedding than we could ever wish to have and tries to persuade me not to buy too much for my dowry- he says that all he ever wanted is me, but since we have my money and his pay, he thinks we ought rather to wait and pick what we both like.”

“Have you found a place to live yet?”, Mary Anne wanted to know.

“John has been looking into the matter, and once we are returned to Devonshire, we will start reviewing a set of properties”, Elizabeth explained, and pick the one we like best.”

“But- what if he would be sent to India, or Canada, or somewhere similarly far distant?”

“Then I would follow”, Elizabeth answered the question in a statement that was half a question itself.

“What else would I do?”

“I would miss you”, Mary Anne murmured.

Mary Anne, Elizabeth thought, was her best friend and she loved her with all her heart, but sometimes, she was just childish. One would do what one would have to in order to avoid spousal separation, and altho’ she would dislike leaving Mary Anne behind, she would, if she had to- it would likely not be forever anyways, and one could write letters.
“I would miss you, too”, Elizabeth answered and meant it. “But you can always stay with us, or the Graves’.”

“I wouldn’t stay with them without you there”, Mary Anne frowned. “I don’t think I can face La Dama Duende without you.”

In order not to conclude the evening with too much seriousness, Elizabeth allowed the conversation to stray to some memories of the past, their girlhood days and laugh freely. Mary Anne, she knew, would eventually accept her marriage, and perhaps might learn to embrace John as her friend also.

“Good morning to you”, an angelic voice calls out to him- it is her, come to accompany him downstairs for breakfast. He would have risen at six, as is his wont, and then perhaps worked on his papers, but instead decided to sleep. The last night had been spent quite interestingly indeed.

“How well?”

“Like the dead”, he replies, “as one usually can after an evening of drinking wine.”

Eliza looks at him, stunned: “I thought you did not drink- in the sense that you don’t drink yourself stupid”, she observes with her pretty eyebrows furrowing.

“I had the choice between claret and- and women,” he scowls, “I preferred the former.”

“Good choice”, she smirks playfully up at him, prompting him to reach out for her and pull her into a tight embrace.

“There is only one woman I want, and that is you.”

Feeling her so close to him is Heaven; contrary to what he has told her, he has not slept particularly well; the redness of claret had transformed into the redness of blood in his dreams, and taken him back to the War. In his dream, he has been incarcerated again, felt the cold muzzle of a pistol against his head only for the scenery to change when the trigger was released and instead of the mercifulness of death, he had to experience the field again, the horrific sights of mutilated bodies, the dead and dying appearing more vivid, more alive to him than the living before he was saved by the confusing sensation of falling to what must be his death- only to wake from the impact of having fallen indeed, but not over a bannister pushed by the Weakling Weasel Woodhull, who could not even fight like a proper man. He had fallen out of his bed and woken to the quietude of the house at five in the morning, an hour before his usual rousing-time and climbed back into bed in hopes to gain another hour of sleep, an endeavour that had proven futile; instead, he had passed the time shivering beneath the bedclothes despite it being quite warm already even in the morning.

The cold hardness of the floor is replaced by the warmth and light Eliza exudes and makes him feel better.

She does not say so, but he knows she knows he has tried to shield her from the truth of his bad night, for she caresses him comfortably and tells him that he is safe with her now.

Sometimes, he still feels inadequate, unfit to give her the life she deserves, and this is one instance of such a moment.
Sadly, the agreement struck with the Admiral regarding their personal closeness in his houses is that they are free to do what they please (nothing that could be viewed as scandalous behaviour of course) as long as the doors remain open, their behaviour will not cause embarrassment to any guests and it is in the day.

He has taken them both aside shortly after the engagement and laid out these rules to them; to him it is important they have some privacy to get used and accustomed to each other more deeply, to have time to talk and prefigure the life they want to build from the 30th of December on, but at the same time adamant they retain a certain amount of propriety.

If only he could shut the door now and do as he would like, lie down with her on the bed for a while- just holding her, and she could hold him, too, and they would just doze off and awake refreshed in an hour or so.

“My poor husband- do you think we can join them downstairs, or would you have me bring something up for you and tell them you’re unwell?”

“I would like to go downstairs”, he answers her, though like might have been a generous euphemism.

“Good”, Eliza nods, “I need you to do something for me.”

His immediate reply needs no forethought: “Everything, my darling wife.”

Tho’ they are not quite married yet, they already enjoy the game of calling each other husband and wife- it is a delightful pastime for the novelty of these joyous appellations makes his heart bounce uncontrollably with loving elation, and it is the same for her, too; he can read it in her rosy cheeks.

“My request concerns Mary Anne”, she explains the situation to him, sitting down on the edge of the bed, prompting him to follow suit, “could you speak with her? She has reservations regarding our marriage and since she is my best friend, I would like to assuage her worries, only she does not believe me- she thinks we will move away and she will never see me again, and worse possibly, though she does not tell me, that you will steal me away from her, and that I will abandon her once we are married. She is my best friend and has always fretted much, too much and I don’t think she is doing so with ill intent.”

Very well. He can try, but he doubts Miss Burges will like him any better for trying to convince her he will not rob her of her best friend. He really won’t, it is not his intention as it is Elizabeth’s business who she is friends with, not his, but Miss Burges, whom he believes is just very jealous, appears not to comprehend that a husband cannot replace her best friend.

In a sense, he is her best friend as they share everything and can always trust one another, yet there is a difference between that and Elizabeth’s friendship with Mary Anne Burges. Theirs is a different kind of love, sisterly almost, as (so he has heard from Elizabeth) Miss Burges’ three siblings are all significantly older than she whereas Elizabeth is only one year her senior and they have been friends for most of their teenage years.

“I suppose I can try”, he says, “but you will be with me, won’t you?”

“Of course I will”, she assures him and squeezes his hand. “I will be there for both of you.”

Following the brief and somewhat tense conversation, they rise from the bed in unison; it never ceases to amaze him how their thoughts appear to be connected, which makes him love her even more, for it proves further that he has met his soulmate, that they were made for each other, which is
the most wonderful thought there is, and so amazing- to think he was born to make someone very happy and that ten years later, said person was born with the purpose to make him as happy as he can make her, and that they met in so banal a way, through his godfather, who has a soft spot for them both and yet, they had only met in passing once or twice when she was still very young and he a teenage boy ready to join his regiment, it goes beyond his comprehension.

They breakfast with the family, Admiral and Mrs Graves, who is embarking on a lecture on posture as Miss Burges makes the mistake to (at least in the Old Bat’s eyes) stoop too much while eating, which is not only unsightly, but unhealthy as well.

Her husband tries to brush her admonishment off by pretending to ignore it and instead asks Miss Burges for her plans for the coming weeks, and whether she would not like to come and stay with them a week before the wedding, which makes Margaret quite angry, he can tell- her face reddens with anger contained, a volcano ready to erupt, and to his joy (his grudge against the woman has lessened, but might never fully go away), the only thing the Admiral does is to pat her hand with his as if caressing his beloved wife in a manner suitable in the somewhat informal environment.

The Old Bat has a glint in her eye that unmistakeably communicates to her husband she is not done, that now the reason for her anger has shifted onto him and he will pay for it. He only stares back at her, a very similar ferociousness in his eyes and he could swear, seeing his godfather and his wife so, they actually enjoy it.

So far he has believed in harmony being the key to happiness with one’s beloved, special person, these two contradict his philosophical musings in the extreme: quite embarrassed, he even must look away as he cannot bear watching them any longer.

There is far more intimacy in the daggers these two shoot at each other with their eyes than in anything he and Eliza could possibly do behind a locked door. A part of him has even gone so far to assume his godfather and Mrs Graves have a mutual predilection for discord and cabal that extends to the bedchamber, images he neither wants or needs in his head.

“My dear Mrs Graves”, his godfather says in a calmly with his native accent coming through in a voice that borders on condescendence. The old man needs not wait for a reply: “Samuel Graves”, the Old Bat coos saccharinely, stressing the sibilant hiss of the first letter of his name and elongating the a to thrice its normal length.

Both parties continue to glare at each other in a manner that makes him certain their quarrel will be resolved in private and if it ends as he predicts, they better not settle their scores with Margaret’s delicate porcelain-collection near.

A quick, inconspicuous glance at Elizabeth and Miss Burges tells him their thoughts have taken a similar direction; Elizabeth makes a point of very, very slowly drinking tiny droplets from her cup in order to make the beverage within last longer, Miss Burges nervously looked to the side, appearing to attempt to hypnotise a cloud visible through the window behind his darling.

Luckily, they indeed do retire to settle whatever pretext they have found now to stoke the flame of their romance, if it can be called that, or do whatever else they do all day, while Elizabeth waits for the breakfast to be taken away and remains seated.

Miss Burges as usual follows her example, making him suspect she wishes to have the conversation that needs to be had now.

Elizabeth begins with taking a hand of each of them before she speaks.
“My dear Mary Anne, I think John has something important to tell you.”

Given this prompt, he immediately sits up a little straighter in his chair, a very soldierly reaction to being addressed he realises, and says:

“Miss Burges, my fiancée has brought it to my attention that you have certain reservations regarding our marriage. I assure you, I will not take her away from you or any of her friends, or have any intention to be the cause of discord between my fiancée and her closest friend.”

With a mixture of uneasy expectation and insecurity at not knowing what the reaction of the young woman opposite him will be pooling in his gut, he tries to read her face what she is feeling. In order to be able to do that, he has to look at a person intently, which might cause them to feel uneasy at being stared at, he realises, wherefore he soon lowers his eyes to his folded hands on the table and counts the freckles on the back of his left hand instead in order to keep his mind occupied and from concocting scenarios of how this talk could go wrong.

He does not like to have conversations he does not like, they make him feel cornered, held prisoner against his will. And God knows he cannot support being held prisoner at all, not again.

As far as he can tell, Miss Burges is somewhat affronted Elizabeth has shared her private concerns, likely imparted to her under the belief whatever is said between them stays between them only. She gives Elizabeth an unmistakable look to communicate what he has evidently interpreted correctly; feeling betrayed, she makes a face as if smelling a foul odour and still keeps her eyes on Elizabeth, apparently intent on making her angry disappointment felt.

“Mary, you see, John is only trying to be kind, and I told him with your best interests at heart”, his darling tries to soothe her best friend’s furrowed brow, which he realises will be of no use.

Of course Mary Anne Burges is wrong to assume Elizabeth belongs to her; she is free in her decisions and can choose whom she wishes to see or not. He will not interfere with that- he has grown to realise how important it is to have friends, not only people who are afeard by one’s presence. He is not as sociable as Elizabeth, but he tries to be kind to strangers on most occasions.

He has not been very nice to Miss Burges in the past, so her reservations regarding him cannot be soothed so easily.

When he has arrived at 54 freckles and finally gives up because he is fairly certain he has counted some twice, he, through what he would like to call a stroke of military genius, arrives at a plan of how to attack the enemy in this battle: Miss Burges’ fortifications are strong, some basic kindness and the charms he knows enthral Elizabeth and have in the past melted even the Lady Lola’s heart to some degree will not break them. His troops are few, too few for a real siege and his position weak.

Perhaps he could try and transform his disadvantage into an advantage:

“I know I have not given you reason to like me in the past, but I assure you, I do not harbour any ill feelings toward you. I value my future wife more than my own life and what makes her unhappy is the cause of my own unhappiness. As it would make her unhappy to see you unhappy, this would make me unhappy, too and therefore it is paramount to me we ought to be friends as well, for the benefit of our shared happiness.”

Quite satisfied with his words, he leans back somewhat and watches Miss Burges, ready for her next move. She can’t really argue with what he has said, can she? He has exploited what she must hold against him, namely his previously rather unfortunate acquaintance with her and his love for Elizabeth and turned it against her.
“Your past unkindness to me does not indicate you truly mean what you say”, she replies with caution and contempt in her voice, thus implicitly accusing him of dishonesty.

“John was- is”, he notices how these words fall heavy from her lips, “not quite well”, his love intervenes.

At this point, he decides to stop listening, because listening to what she says is much too painful. His beloved is more understanding of what affects him than most people, but nobody who has not seen what he has seen and done what he has done can comprehend what he felt- still feels at times, least of all probably a little Miss who grew up sheltered from the true ills of the world.

“…But he has been nothing but sweet and loving with me.”

Just how sweet and loving would probably shock the prim and proper Miss Burges, he adds in his thoughts without saying anything as he has the suspicion it would not aid his cause. Instead, he moves his hands to lie in his lap for an evident reason that had made itself known to him when he had viewed the most delectable, delightful image of Elizabeth in a fit of passion before his mind’s eye.

“But what of us?”, Miss Burges counters with a shrill tone in her voice he thinks might be fear. “You will move away, and what if Colonel Simcoe will be appointed to a post abroad-”

“We intend to make our home in Devonshire”, he cuts her off before she can talk herself into a hysterical trance, “in fact, I have been going about reviewing suitable houses prior to our journey to London. In the coming weeks, Elizabeth and I will choose which one to rent. We will not go away, not anytime soon, I beg you consider the political situation with Shelburne quite newly appointed Prime Minister after Rockingham’s death and the War still going on in the so-called States from which I have returned invalided. It is unlikely any significant appointments will be given out any time soon. Besides, my health, my leg and lungs in particular will bar me from accepting any foreign appointments in the near future.”

Miss Burges lowers her head and informs him that she is sorry, and he even believes her, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t remark upon the relief she feels also.

“We are not going anywhere”, Elizabeth smiles, “and you are always welcome to stay with us, or at the Fort-”

“No, I am not going there without you”, Miss Burges shakes her head in unconcealed horror, “not with Mrs Graves being there.”

The fervent refusal to stay at the Fort alone due to Margaret Graves, who obviously intimidates her, amuses him a little for he finds it rather childish but then he knows that woman and what she is capable of and can only agree with her that a young woman without the protection Elizabeth can offer her due to being Margaret’s niece and the odd love there is between them despite the Old Bat’s frequent capriciousness is ill advised to spend time with her, unless she has an inexplicable craving for her person being scrutinised, have her supposed faults pointed out to her and her morals called into question.

“Then don’t stay there”, Elizabeth says, her voice still soft and patient, “but you must visit us in our new house and stay for a while.”

“I am sure I will, but-“

“There is no but”, he tries to say in the gentlest voice he can muster, knowing he does this for
Elizabeth, whose conscience will be much lighter knowing his best friend and he will get along, “I would be glad to receive you.”

Well, *glad* is an embellishment of tolerating, or accepting she will visit, but if it makes Miss Burges happy to be given an invitation by him directly and it assures her of his good intentions for Elizabeth, it is what had to be said.

A brief silence that is only filled by his right index finger tapping impatiently against his thigh ensues, awkward and uncomfortable for all parties.

“What do you promise?”, Miss Burges at last asks into the silence and directs her eyes at her best friend.

The young woman’s eyes are widened as she speaks, always to Elizabeth, never to him.

“I promise. We promise.”

Elizabeth in turn turns to him, sitting by her side and reaches her hand across the table to take Mary Anne Burges’ to join them in a sort of hand-shaking ceremony that involves all three of them to touch hands in one pile.

He obliges, putting his hand topmost on the tiny, delicate fingers of his beloved and swears that by the graves of his mother and father, he will always hold their friendship sacred and never come between them, that it has never been his intention and never will be.

Elizabeth’s smile indicates contention with the mock-ceremony, Miss Burges’ face a certain remainder of uncertainty, prompting him to rise and walk over to her side to restate his vow.

The only thing able to appease her, he senses, is Time, when she will see for herself that while Elizabeth and he will live together and any nightly vigils will only involve him and his wife for very different reasons than learning Spanish or reading terrible novels, he will not prevent them from going to London together or spending time in their new domicile, riding, going to sketch somewhere, whatever pleases them and wherever Fancy takes them.

For the moment, he contents himself with the newly agreed upon truce and invites both ladies to some coffee house presently favoured by the bon ton for tea and cake, of which he eats little, but is delighted to see Elizabeth indulge in. Even Miss Burges appears to be somewhat happy and even makes him chuckle with a comment about the Old Bat, at which she gives him a curious glance and he can only clarify that he is, like her, often receiving a similarly harsh treatment at her hand.

This seems to spark a certain mutuality, a feeling of being comrades-in-arms at least tho’ they might not serve in the same regiment. He always had respect for warriors, regardless of their origin or goals, and to this he holds true still. Quite surprisingly, the afternoon proves more agreeable than he would have guessed.

They stayed for another few days in London before they travelled back to Devonshire; by the time they went, Elizabeth was somewhat relieved, tho’ she had enjoyed the shops, theatres and other various divertissements she had visited while there. The food tasted foul there, not as fresh as it did at home and to expose one’s self to the city air for prolonged periods of time was unhealthy.
She longed for the rural idyll of Devonshire, the picturesque vista of Dunkeswell Abbey in the sunshine and endless strolls with John through the Blackdown Hills.

The things she had ordered in London would be sent to her, shoes, a new hat, a few trifles such as new gloves etc. among them.

She was very proud of even having persuaded John to invest in a few items of clothing, for she was quite done with his attire that more often than not looked like mourning or half-mourning than the dress of a reasonably young gentleman about to marry.

His extremely fair complexion coupled with the unique hue of his eyes and the striking auburn locks she enjoyed so much to comb and touch did not allow him the vast range of colours to pick from that was open to her, whose dark hair and slight blush only prevented her from wearing certain yellows and orange, so she was happy to have been able to find the material for a fine suit in a very dark green and another one in a very dark burgundy that would look very fine on him without making him appear like a gloomy spectre and yet retained the unostentatious sobriety of his previous garments, most of them black. But a new bridegroom couldn’t really wear black, and she thought the new colours would add a healthier air to his person as they made his extreme paleness appear favourable.

He had been quite pleased with his purchases when she had informed him she liked what they had picked for him and that he would look perfect in them.

For their roving through the countryside, he still wears the old black, mainly because they can get dirty now and he need not have a care to preserve them. They do not quite fit him anymore anyway and look quite worn from the seams having been taken in when he had just freshly come from the war and had thinned to an appalling degree as she now realised that she knew what John Graves Simcoe looked like in health, and then let out again when his slowly improving state had again added to the mass of flesh and muscles enveloping his bones.

As soon as they had returned from the capital, they had taken up their habitual walks and hacks again to make the most of the early autumn days that slowly superseded a long and warm summer that had not wanted to leave until well after Elizabeth’s birthday in late September.

The first leaves turned red and gold, which would have a pretty effect on the forest in about a week’s time, but secretly thought to herself that no autumn-red tree’s hues could match the colour of John’s hair.

Nobody, nothing could compare to him and as the thought formulated in her head, a warm glow began to radiate from her belly through the entirety of her body from head to toe.

John was wonderful, loving, kind, and what luck to be with him alone in the fields, trekking through the countryside, something she had missed very much in London.

On this occasion early in October, they were not quite alone, but joined by a visitor from nearby Woodbine Hill, wherefore they could not make their journey too long: little Mary accompanied them. The visit had been one of necessity as her parents, her cousin-in-law Thomas Graves and his wife, had been invited to a wedding in Cheshire and had not wanted to take her there with them.

Instead of leaving her at home with her governess, they had, as Mary had proudly proclaimed, offered her, provided her great-uncle was willing, to stay at the Fort for the week at most they would be gone, for she had been a very good pupil of late and her recent achievements were worthy of a reward.
Uncle Samuel had naturally been delighted, but he was not quite as young anymore as he had been ten years earlier when she had been little or another ten even when John had been Mary’s age and so John and she had offered to take the girl with them on occasion, in order to offer her a change of scenery and keep Aunt Margaret’s porcelain safe from the inquisitive and clumsy hands of a child.

Mary, on her short legs (even in comparison to her own) ran ahead of John, who carried a length of rope (where he had gotten it and how eluded her knowledge—she had noticed he had an uncanny ability to procure objects with a swiftness akin to conjuring them up from thin air) over his shoulder and a plane piece of wood in his hand and she followed last, a sketchbook and set of pencils tucked under her left arm.

“Come on, Colonel Simcoe, we are nearly there!”, the excited child exclaimed and accelerated her speed which in turn prompted John to follow her in an even brisker walk than before and thus caused her to run in order to keep up with the latter.

Thanks to her agility and love of outdoor pursuits, her lungs were not easily fatigued and so she managed to keep up with the excited Mary, whose own speed was likely fuelled by her excitement alone, and John, whose steps were twice one of hers.

John had promised Mary to build a swing, as he had done as a little boy when he had not been at school and visiting with his mother and brother over the weekend or on holidays.

A suitable tree was easily found; big enough, but not so big John could not reach the vertical limb of the tree without a ladder, he made quick work of the toy he had promised Mary over dinner two nights before.

Her parents probably should not know their daughter would do such dangerous things (what if she fell and hurt herself?), but then, Uncle Samuel had permitted it by not saying no without saying yes expressly either and she was the daughter of a naval family, which made it likely her father, cousins and great-uncle had climbed much greater heights scaling the masts and riggings of mighty warships than a swing.

Under loud exclamations of joy, Mary barely waited until John was done testing the safety of the knots he had tied and sat down by jumping up a little in order to reach the wooden board.

From her vantage point a few yards away seated on John’s coat, which he had removed when he had begun to cut the rope into two equal portions with a pen knife ill-suited for the task at hand because he had been hot underneath it, she watched as John ensured the child was seated securely before he pulled her back by the ropes and released her in order to give the swing some initial momentum. He then proceeded to push her a few times until he deemed her flying high enough, Mary however, lost in the glorious sensation of almost flying paid no heed to his well-meant admonishments not to go too high and soon was almost at the same height as the tree branch on which the swing was secured when she reached the highest point though leaning back and rowing through the air with her legs.

John was quickly assured Mary would not come to harm if he would not stand by her at all times and walked over to her, seating himself beside her.

Out of habit, she leaned herself against him while watching Mary call out to them that she could see the sea in the distance (which Elizabeth doubted, but did not say so as to not disappoint the elated child).

Mary’s hair would be disorderly to say the least, when they would eventually come home however, she would be content and look like a content child as well, her brown hair a mess, her cheeks rosy and her eyes glimmering with the aftereffects of an afternoon spent in joyful play.
Every now and then, she looked up at John, whose face could not have looked more content would he hold in his hand a letter from London granting him all his wishes at once; seeing him so reminded her that often the simplest joys were the most profound and for him there was evidently a lot of joy to be had in watching Mary on her new swing.

It made her wonder, they had never talked about it before, but John without a doubt liked children. Would they have some, in the near future even perhaps, or would they be childless as Uncle Samuel and his first wife?

For the moment, she brushed the thought of children aside- it seemed so far in the distant future anyway, even though their wedding day was less than three months away and from then on, they would enjoy marital cohabitation whenever they would fancy it and thus increase the possibility of her getting pregnant- as Mary, evidently quite exhausted, let herself fall onto her backside rather unceremoniously next to Elizabeth.

“Now you! Come, won’t you try it?”, the girl asked her expectantly in a tone that made it more than abundantly clear she would be disappointed to receive a negative answer.

“Oh please Miss Gwillim”, John added to Mary’s question, his voice sounding as stickily sweet as a candied apple tasted. “Pretty, pretty please, Miss Gwillim?”

“If you insist”, she rose with a lopsided smile on her face. Complying would make the little girl happy, give John something to laugh at and if she was quite honest to herself, she had it not only to make others happy, she had wondered how high one could fly on this swing privately all the while when Mary had used it.

Her gentlemanly fiancé facilitated her the phase of gaining enough momentum in order to swing higher and higher in the same manner as he had assisted Mary before he let her go and watched on as she experienced the same elation and joy she had seen on Mary’s face.

The wind was in her hair and face and the fast back wakened her wish to fly, truly fly like a bird up, up, ever-higher towards the sky.

All her life she had been accustomed to looking up at people, now, she was looking down on them, at least for a few moments when the swing reached its peak each time.

An intense mixture of freedom, joy and unbridled elation seemed to have taken over her body, replaced her blood with a prickling sensation, her spirits as high as the tree above her.

Elizabeth continued to swing for a short while when her legs started to tire a little and she decided, reluctantly, to slow down.

Realising what she had in mind Mary Graves, intrepid and forward as only children can be called out to her: “jump!

Under no circumstances would she-

“Yes, jump- do not worry, I shall catch you.

Mary’s red-haired chief accomplice rose and stepped forward maintaining a distance between himself and the swing to prevent accidental collisions and opened his arms for her.

In a fit of foolhardy bravery supported by her intuitive trust in John she pushed herself out of the seat and flew towards the waiting arms of her almost-husband.
Gravity and speed however make for a dangerous mixture and John had evidently underestimated the force of impact she would have once she would land in his arms, for he fell over and she half on top of him. In fact, as her bruised knee would later reveal, she had not landed entirely on top of him, only her upper body had.

In the moment they impacted the ground, she did not feel her knee revolting against the rough treatment it received, nor did she in the initial moment fret for John’s health— it was so silly, she had to laugh loudly.

John laughed too, rubbing his rump as he rose and all three of them, Mary included, laughed even more when it was ascertained nobody had come to harm.

“Not a word to Great-Aunt Margaret”, Elizabeth told Mary, who nodded and winked.

“I know you and Colonel Simcoe are not allowed to be so wild together, but I shall keep your secret.”

Such pompous and grown-up words coming from such a little person made Elizabeth only smile more.

“Thank you very much, Mary. I know our secret is safe with you.”

“It is.”

Without another word on the matter of secrecy, Mary slipped her tiny hand into John’s as they walked back home to the Fort and with the other reached out for Elizabeth. She obliged and was certain would Mary Anne, who had a talent for drawing not only landscapes but people too, would be here, she would sketch them walking down the hill, one of them on either side of Mary and bearing facial expressions that unmistakably communicated they had, for the moment at least, not a care in the world.

Chapter End Notes

The wedding date: I’ve asked myself a couple of times now if the date is somehow significant or symbolic. As the sources are silent on this matter, I suggest within the context of the story that it is important to them to marry in 1782, the year they fell in love in order to mark the beginning of a new era for them as a couple and for John, who had returned ill and under significant psychological strain after returning from the war in the colonies and whose life has basically turned upside down and changed for the better with Elizabeth by his side. Margaret’s pettiness then comes into play to set the wedding date as late in the year as possible.

The outdoors: both Elizabeth and John loved the outdoors. From Elizabeth’s letters, we know the two sometimes disappeared for days, travelling on their own on horseback, preferably to very thinly populated areas where they usually slept wherever they could find even the humblest accommodation sharing a bed in the house of a local they met by chance and in one instance, though Elizabeth doesn’t say so explicitly, it sounds as if
they just slept somewhere by the roadside out in the open. Mud, rain and dining on stolen mutton rather added to her adventure-lust than deterred her from travelling. From her Canadian diary, I was inspired by her catching crayfish in pools of water on the beach when I wrote this scene.

Ballroom dancing: all the tunes mentioned in the story exist and existed in 1782, making it possible they might have been played at a social event attended by Elizabeth and John. For your reading and listening pleasure, I have only selected tunes you can either find easy notation or YouTube videos for without having to do much research.

Smoking: smoking was often practiced among gentlemen (women were discouraged to smoke and the practice itself seen as unladylike). To smoke long, white clay pipes were used. The historical Simcoe was not averse to nicotine (having nine kids IS stressful, I imagine)- if you look closely at his 1791 portrait and tilt your screen a little, you’ll see the faint outline of what’s most likely a snuffbox hidden underneath his coat.

Mary Anne: a situation similar to the one I made up must really have happened (a big thanks to Mary Beacock Fryer for her detailed description of what was said!). Mary Anne was not happy about Elizabeth getting married- which is to some extent understandable; Elizabeth was closer to Mary Anne age-wise than her own siblings, they had before spent as much time together as they could, Mary Anne had become a well-liked visitor at the Fort (at least by Samuel it seems), they threw sleepover-parties and dressed alike. Elizabeth took her best friend’s concerns seriously and probably made John talk to Mary Anne to assure her he was by no means going to replace her as Elizabeth’s best friend, Elizabeth and he would not move far away but were actually looking for a suitable home in Devon and invited her to stay with them in their future new home at all times as well as assuring her she was likewise always welcome at Hembury Fort House.

John and Mary Anne both received a less than civil treatment from Margaret at times. Mary Anne and John ended up getting along nicely and became friends and eventually, Mary Anne even grew a proverbial spine as far as Margaret was concerned. While the Simcoes were in Canada and after she had stormed out of Wolford Lodge in a huff (after stealing furniture and harassing the three other ladies overseeing the children), Margaret settled in Bath, to where she sometimes summoned Mary Anne, likely to have someone to complain to. Her hobbies included talking badly about John, which sometimes led to a rant about Elizabeth or how they allowed their children to be neglected in their absence and styling herself the victim of their absence. She loved to foresee her own (imminent, obviously) death and wanted to be pitied because she would never see Elizabeth and John again (logic, eh?). She also more than enjoyed picking on Mary Anne, who must have had the patience of a saint to put up with this woman. She disliked Mary Anne’s bachelorette-lifestyle, trying to question her on illicit affairs she was supposedly having, because for what other reason than advice on sex would she, an unmarried woman, be friends with Elizabeth, a married one (this almost implies Margaret thought about her niece’s and nephew-in-law’s doubtlessly active sex life as 11 kids and no affairs attest to enough to make this claim… Ew.)? Linked to her idea that Mary Anne was sleeping around was the rumour she tried to spread that Mary Anne was only being friends with Elizabeth because she wanted to steal John from her (so she could use the advice she got from Elizabeth to seduce John, presumably?). Brave Mary Anne started not to take Margaret too seriously anymore and could always rely on Elizabeth, who had her back.
Together, Apart, United

Chapter Notes

Hello there!

...for all ye who need something to pass the time with now that "Game of Thrones" is over (and all of you who never got into it, too), here's a little something! ;)

And if you need some more, might I direct you to this masterpiece by the wonderful tvsn: "Die Entführung aus dem Schützenfest" (the name of course being a play on Mozart's opera "Die Entführung aus dem Serail") features 18th century favourites in a modern setting. When Hanger, Simcoe, Rawdon, Fergusson and Tarleton make the possibly fateful decision to attend a public festival in Germany- sure with this crew, what could go wrong?
I can only highly recommend this wonderful read to you!

https://archiveofourown.org/works/18872251/chapters/44793778

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Bills, bills, bills”, Uncle Samuel muttered under his breath as he opened a letter he tried to sweeten with a piece of pastry as he digested it.

“Pshaw”, Aunt Margaret replied, putting down her tea cup hard enough to make the porcelain clink, “you always knew Elizabeth wouldn’t marry on the cheap.”

He sighed, put the paper down and looked up- and apparently only then realised at the table with him and his wife sat the two people going to be married also.

Quickly, he covered the bill with one of his large hands and reached across the table with the other to pat Elizabeth’s fingertips, which was as far as he could reach.

“Don’t worry, it will all be taken care of”, he said and smiled, but looked more like he was suffering from a crippling toothache.

“If it pains you so much to pay for your own niece’s wedding, we will say it was payed for by my money. I brought enough into this marriage to outfit ten girls for their wedding-day thrice over.” Aunt Margaret was right; her own estate was not inconsiderable, or had been prior to her marriage, when it had been passed into Uncle Samuel’s possession.

“It doesn’t pain me-“

“Then don’t complain”, her aunt cut him off sharply in a tone that warned the Commander-in-Chief of Plymouth not to speak up again.

“Besides, had you not endorsed them Mr Graves, Elizabeth would with her obvious intent to marry, have found someone wealthier and overall better than your godson, perhaps she could even be a countess or duchess, but you had to-“

Although Aunt Margaret was trying very hard to be pleasant, well, as pleasant as she could be when
she did not have her way, whenever the wedding was brought up, she was still not in favour of John and would occasionally show it.

John, who never breakfasted very much (very likely a habit from his days in America), slumped back in his chair momentarily for the duration of Aunt Margaret’s little tirade directed at her husband, tilted his head back and rolled his eyes until only the whites were visible.

“Margaret”, he intervened, not knowing he would only make it worse- or was he trying to vex her on purpose? The cutting little edge in his voice and the sharpness of his tone did suggest as much, “is it not enough for you that your niece has chosen me for love? Perhaps you do not speak from experience, but to love someone is a very beautiful thing, and naturally one should want to be with one’s beloved always. But if so cold a heart as yours could ever be melted, I am not certain. In fact, I am angry with myself every day that I did not speak up when I had the chance that day in June 1769.”

Her aunt had just wanted to throw something equally unsavoury at John, for by telling her he should have objected to her marriage when he could have he had dared to venture excessively personal, but Uncle Samuel had had enough. With a voice usually reserved for the quarterdeck, he bellowed “belay that Mrs Graves! And you too, Graves!” and both, though having flinched with surprise when he had shouted, did not even throw a glance at the enraged master of the house but proceeded to glare at each other from across the table with John demonstratively reaching for her hand as he did, as if he wanted to make sure she would always remain by his side, and not change camp into her aunt’s.

In reality however, Elizabeth felt she sided most with Uncle Samuel in this situation, who had calmed again and ordered a servant to fetch him more coffee, which he would take in private in his gentlemen’s sitting room.

“Elizabeth, child- you come with me. A word”, the old man instructed (before grumbling, loud enough to be heard by all but in a lower voice that was meant to suggest it was a private thought accidentally expressed aloud “the only one sane in this house”), and rose from his chair with great effort put on him by the weight of his body and the years on his back.

Obediently, she followed, but not before throwing her aunt and fiancé a dark look. John immediately cast his eyes to the table only to raise them again and shook his head as if he wanted to tell her that displeasing her was never his intention, but that Aunt Margaret had provoked him. The latter stared at her with a blank facial expression and grim, unblinking eyes that informed her the last word in this discussion had not been spoken yet.

Turning her back to them, she took a few quick steps to catch up with her uncle, and offered him her arm to walk on.

He looked thankful accepting it and leaned on her a little, even though he tried to make it look like he was simply doing this as he had in the old days, walking with her just like when she had been a child. She did not say a thing and hoped he could perhaps be persuaded to use his stick more often, even though his pride often dissuaded him from doing so.

“It is childish of them both, but I will talk to your aunt again, you need not worry”, he tried to soothe her in a lower voice as he patted the space on the sofa next to him for her to sit down, “and you must speak sternly with your fiancé about not upsetting on purpose the woman who will become as close to a mother-in-law as he is going to have.”

Elizabeth sighed. “They are not easy persons, both of them.”
“But then would you love any other, have him any other way?”, her uncle asked in a tone she had never heard before in his voice, somewhat tremulous and accompanied by a strange mien.

“No”, she shook her head- there could never be any other but John, not for her. She had warded off attempts on her fortune and in a handful of cases her own person, in the past, and when she had met John she would never have thought she would fall in love with him of all people on this earth. It was almost like in a novel, where the heroine must first dislike the hero to see his true self and then grow to love him, but sometimes, the most unbelievable things could become reality.

“See?” Uncle Samuel had raised a grey eyebrow and was smiling at her, a faint, confidential smile that indicated to her she was never to tell anyone what had just transpired- least of all her aunt.

He wouldn’t have her any other way, either, but knowing her and her love of conquest, triumph and subduing people to her will that would have caused many a medieval king to shiver in fear, he would not grant her this victory.

“As for the money”, he added after wetting his mouth with a sip of coffee, “don’t be afraid. I simply was unaware a lady needed five new petticoats, and ten shifts, all embroidered.”

Elizabeth, not knowing what to say, shrugged: “I was advised by my aunt, who said we ought to invest in a wardrobe suitable for a married woman.”

“You need not defend yourself, dear child. It is your wedding, and you shall have it the prettiest we can make it.”

His dark eyes filled with tears as he spoke and the thin line of his mouth trembled. Without a doubt he felt ungentlemanly for such an open display of being moved and therefore reached into his pocket and fumbled until he had found a handkerchief with which he dabbed the corners of his eyes.

“You must excuse an old man for being so childish, it is just so very happy an event, and yet so melancholy- all grown up now, both of you- it is hard to watch children grow up so quickly.”

“But we’ll always be here”, Elizabeth tried to comfort him and took a rather large and meaty wrinkled hand in both of hers, “we want to make our home not far from you and Aunt Margret, and live nearby. And perhaps, you will have grandnieces and –nephews then.”

No longer could he pretend not to be moved in the extreme, he was crying, and just like when she had been a child, Elizabeth felt the need to embrace him and did so, wondering when it had been the last time she had done that in times when such behaviour had still been permissible to a very young Elizabeth and buried her face in his shoulder.

“Now you go and tell Young Graves he cannot speak to his future aunt-by-marriage like that. He won’t listen to me anymore”, he tried to chuckle and she obliged, feeling somewhat guilty for obliging his order and leaving him behind on his own.

“You cannot let her provoke you so, it is what she does best and enjoys most.”

A perfect, tiny figure is posing in front of him like an angry general and scolds him. He does not like it, but listens, for there is no other way out.
He wants Eliza to be happy, but sometimes, true to his nature dictating to fight back when he knows he is being overpowered, or a skirmish might be avoided, he attacks. And the Old Bat had it coming, has it coming still in fact, and one day, she will face consequences for being so rude and intolerable—at the very latest when she, hypocritical wench that she is, will be surprised to find out that instead of heaven, hell is awaiting her.

Wishing to avert any serious dispute with his beloved, he asks: “how can you live with that?”, curious if not perhaps Elizabeth has in the past occasionally stepped over her aunt’s lines.

“I don’t know- you get used to her, I suppose and I know her all my life. Aunt Margaret is not a bad person, she means well, but- it is her greatest flaw to think she is the Sovereign Lady of All Things.”

She gives him a stern look warning him to be good in her presence the next time regardless of what the Old Bat might come up with and then motions him to walk on, for it is November and quite cold.

The tip of her nose and cheeks have taken a ruddy colour, as he is sure have his own, and still she insists on walking on.

How there can be so much strength in so small a person surprises him anew each day. She is made for this, he realises, watching her battle on against the frigid wind without complaining—most ladies wouldn’t go out in this weather, and the same goes for most gentlemen, but his Eliza seems perfectly happy walking on and on, further away from the Fort with every step— or is she running away?

Has he become too much to bear? Has the discord between him and her aunt disgruntled her so much?

“Wait”, he beckons her, and she stops immediately a few steps ahead of him on the path, then turns.

“What is it, John? Are you tired? Is it your leg?”

Indeed, his leg does not like the cold much as a persistent twinge running through the entirety of his thigh bone at irregular intervals tells him, and he tries his best not to cough too often with the wintry air biting his lungs like a thousand little invisible fighting dogs, but that is nothing she must worry about. He is a soldier, and soldiers do not complain, they go on.

“It’s not that”, he is thus quick to reply, “I was wondering if you are running away.”

“What do you mean?”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows furrow, and she approaches him, head tilted upwards to study his countenance better.

“Do you want to get away from all that? The Fort, your aunt- me perhaps?”

Her mien tells him this has never consciously occurred to her, yet the sudden seriousness following what appears to have been a revelation to her affirms his guess.

“Maybe. Not from you, though.”

Within the hazel of her eyes, he can see the world in its most fascinating colours, radiant, bright. She wants to be with him, to be alone and in peace, a feeling he whole-heartedly shares. He hopes she sees the same in his.

“That does not absolve you from being civil to my aunt.”
“I will try”, he promises, knowing promising her he will never be uncivil to her again would be a lie, one that would either come to light tomorrow or in twenty years- but there will be another day he will be very angry with Margaret Graves, he knows that.

“Let us go home.”

The walk home is silent, but pleasurable in that he holds her gloved hands for the entirety of the way back and before the house comes into view behind a row of hedges and trees, she bids him stop to kiss him very deeply.

“A month”, she whispers in what remains of his left ear, and he can only murmur “m-hm” in agreement, for he is too invested in kissing her to take the time to stop and speak before continuing.

A month. Four weeks, so much to do still and things to pack, arrange- it is rather overwhelming.

Elizabeth and he have picked out a house not far from Honiton, not far from the Fort indeed, to rent for the time being, which they will inhabit after the honeymoon.

They have begun seeking for staff, and interviewed a few persons already; there shall be a cook, a groom for the stable and two stable boys, and however many staff for the house Eliza deems necessary. He wouldn’t know of such things, but if there is one aspect of his future aunt-in-law he admires is her adroit ways in society. Nobody would ever question her and she is au fait, as they say, when it comes to such matters. She has taught her niece well, and Elizabeth will make a prudent choice.

He is to have a valet, for a real gentleman needs one, and they will live quite modestly, tho’ grand enough to entertain and receive visitors.

It is their plan to build a house of their own, a place designed to suit their needs and desires perfectly (he is thinking of 365 bedchambers with different amenities, one for each day of the year) and shall rent until such a structure can be erected.

During the last month, he has made enquiries, and found a trustworthy agent whom he has paid to keep an eye out for suitable properties for sale in the vicinity.

How fast the world turns- a year ago at the same time, he had longed to be dead, had prayed even for his wounds to take a turn for the even worse and kill him before he was strong enough to lay a hand onto himself and thus save him some suffering. He never had followed through with his plan, partly because he had lacked the proper tools to do it in a clean and dignified enough way, partly because whenever he had thought about it- he couldn’t. In the end, even if he’d had a sharp knife or a loaded pistol, he couldn’t have done it.

-And now he knows why. God has had other plans for him; to be happy, and to make someone else happy in return. Never in a hundred years will he understand why she has picked him, but he couldn’t be happier taking long walks with her in the snow, sitting by the fire at the Fort or interviewing prospective staff in Margaret Graves’ porcelain-adorned sitting room.

He might not be a good soldier anymore with his bones aching and being out of breath so very soon all the time, but he is still a living human being and not quite as worth- and purposeless as he had thought lying in a cot on a ship loaded to the brim with Yorktown’s sick and dying officers when it had dawned on him that very likely, he would never fight again as he had all the war long, perhaps not even walk without a cane.

The latter has luckily proven a mere fear, but he is incapacitated to some degree, as his bloody leg
protesting the cold reminds him. However, the trade of an unpleasantness in the leg for the love of his life seems a good one, and the price rather small when Elizabeth means more than the world to him and for her, he would gladly give his life without a second thought.

Offering her his arm, they walk back to the house and warm before a roaring fire with hot beverages and biscuits.

The Admiral and his terrible wife have joined them again, and it is now discussed how the Fort will be decorated; there will be Christmas roses, ivy and other evergreen shrubbery found in winter on the tables and decorating the staircase. He nods to that, not really caring about any of it; what matters to him are the things he settles not in the drawing-room, but in his godfather’s study, the legalities of a marriage that have to be worked out.

A pretty ceremony followed by a beautiful feast is a fine thing to be sure, but first, the issue of her worldly possessions and the licence must be settled.

The lawyer he has employed to take care of these things is almost done, but he has been thinking. There is one thing he would like to speak with Elizabeth about.

“Elizabeth, I must speak with you”, he informs her and when the Old Bat rises far too eagerly in order to join them as a chaperone, he adds quickly “alone. The matter is none of your concern.”

“It is because as of now, she is still my ward.”

“Margaret”, her husband winces as if in physical pain, “let them go”, and holds her back by the arm.

They lock themselves in her room, which might look suspicious but is the only way the Old Bat cannot send a servant girl in under false pretences to bring or fetch something or conveniently do some dusting right in this moment.

She would have made a better spymaster than André, that is for certain.

“The lawyer is almost finished settling your-“ he pauses, swallowing hard before speaking the word, “wealth on me”, he informs her, getting right to the point and despising the sound of it. For him, the fact that it is Elizabeth’s money, and the lands that he will soon hold are, or at least should be, hers weighs heavy on his shoulders; but such is the law, and to the law, everyone must bend.

Elizabeth has chosen love over the security of a self-supported life and the control of her wealth, and he does not want her to regret it.

“It is yours, you know, everything, but will be mine by the law- which I don’t think is right but cannot change. You know that the only role I dare to think of myself in in relation to the property you will add to our household is as that of a steward. I have decided it would be good to invest some of it wisely, but not without your consent. We should rather add to than take away from it, don’t you think?”

“Yes, John, but I don’t see why this warrants a discussion now-“

“I just wanted to make certain you are aware of what you have agreed to. We can still break everything off, you know, if you should change you mind-“

She rolls her eyes at him, sighing: “We have had the very same discussion countless times. Never. And you know that.”

He still is not fully convinced his darling can so simply agree to signing over into his possession her
money and lands— it is not right. In his set of beliefs, which he has found often to counter the common sense of his peers and the opinion of the more or less educated masses, each person is entitled to what is theirs, their life and their personal effects. There is no such thing as ownership over a person in his mind and according to Somersett’s Case of 1772.

To marry is necessary to preserve Elizabeth’s reputation and what little remains of his own; were it possible, they might very likely never marry.

But alas, they cannot forever stay at the Fort under the guise of simply being the near-children of the Graves’ or live in sin on their own, set up house somewhere and live as man and wife without being so.

And they can’t change the law either; therefore, they must rely on arrangements between themselves to ensure their vision of love and friendship in married life can be upheld. He has not chosen a wife (a disgusting phrase in itself, for it evokes the disconcerting parallelism of selecting a mare at a horse-fair) for reasons of needing a helpmeet, for her monetary value or being too tight with his purse-strings to pay for the pleasures of the flesh, he had fallen in love with her when he least expected it.

Sharp-bladed tongues have wagged about his “catch” of an “heiress”, citing Elizabeth’s age and the impressionability of young women whenever they see a gentleman with plenty of lace on his uniform, but such is not the case—rank-wise, it would be very surprising if any woman would fall for a major—well, he is a brevet lieutenant colonel but that’s not worth much.

Elizabeth has loved him when he had been at his most repulsive, ugly inside and out; to him, she is a miracle, and he will do everything to make her happy and to never regret her decision.

“Then are you happy? You are content with me, and the preparations? We must still inform our witnesses of their luck.”

“Well, I suppose my aunt knows already, given it is for some reason necessary that her signature is worth more than mine”, Elizabeth commented, somewhat offended by the fact her 20 years should pale in comparison to her aunt’s fifty-five in a decision involving her own person.

“I need a witness, too. And who better than my godfather to keep your aunt in check and ensure she signs her name where she is supposed to?”

Quite evidently, he is joking— a little at least, for he genuinely wants the old man to be his witness. After all, Samuel Graves has not only given him the name by which he had been referred to all his childhood, he had helped his mother after his father’s death rearing him and Percy and even assisted him in plights to his superiors during the war.

He owes a lot to this man, his current happiness included.

Elizabeth approves: “That is a nice thing to do. I am sure he will be delighted.”

“…And I would be delighted if you would kiss me now, wife, because I think I must perish if I must look longer at those pretty lips without being allowed to touch them.”

A laughing Elizabeth obliges his plight and whispers into his ear: “I cannot wait for when we’re married.”
“Good, for I feel the same”, he smiled, that wicked, boyish, teeth-baring grin telling her he was up to no good all along and reached around her to pull her close.

Invited by her confession of passion, he toyed with the edges of her fichu, pinned in place too firmly to undo it right away, he managed to slip a naughty, explorative finger under it wherever he could to touch the skin of her décolletage.

Laughing heartily, there was no holding back- “but my silly husband, we have had time alone when we walked.”

“Not where it is warm. And where there is a bed-“

“Not today, John. I don’t want to confirm my aunt’s suspicions so easily. …And as I found out, having a bed is not strictly necessary to perform this operation you speak of.”

Despite his disappointment as they will not be sharing the delights of the flesh they are in theory prohibited to exchange, he looked happy and proposed to her to just sit together and rest a while.

John’s amusement at hearing her speak so frankly about the day she gave herself to him was evident and he agreed that there were many ways, depraved and wicked in the most unimaginable ways, to find pleasure together and that, if she were willing of course, they should explore each and every one of them.

“I have read the books”, Elizabeth answered, not wishing him to believe she had been a prude virgin, an ignorant country-damsel like Miss Frances Hill before she had known him- well, half of it was true, she had been a virgin up until that day in July, but certainly not a prude.

“What books?”, John asked, blushing.

“Oh, the common ones” (it was her time to grin wickedly now), “famous titles no guardian would like to find in her ward’s room.”

“My wicked, wicked wife.”

John’s voice grew darker and more lustful than before as he murmured these words into her neck while lovingly nuzzling the skin there, light enough not to leave marks, of course.

“We could do it again, if you would like to. And even if, you know- it is one month. Nobody will see anything.”

With unease, Elizabeth freed herself from John’s caresses, the hands roaming her front and the evening-stubbly chin buried in the crook of her neck.

“No. Aunt Margaret-“

“You should hear yourself- Aunt Margaret here, Aunt Margaret there, Aunt Margaret everywhere, one could think you are married to her-“

“Stop that. You are being hurtful. There’s something else, too.”

Having risen to her feet, she stood before him, smaller than her, if only for a bit, when seated. As soon as she was certain she had his full attention, she explained: “I will under no circumstances alienate the woman who loved me like my own mother, without whom I would never have met Uncle Samuel, even you, John Graves Simcoe. I would not enjoy us fucking under her nose with the
scullery maid or whoever else she has sent to spy on us having an ear pressed against the door and hearing everything. And then…”

Elizabeth could tell John was quite shocked at hearing her use such coarse language for the first time (and there was plenty more where that came from- only because one usually chose not to swear, one could still know the words and think them in one’s head and insult in private, for one’s own personal gratification only) but only nodded.

“What else?”, he asked after a short pause that felt like a decade, his voice all brittle agitation.

“We have never thought of it, having a child, at least we never spoke about it before.”

“Oh.”
Yes, of course- men could always envision how nice it would be having children, but according to everything she had heard and knew from her aunt, the woman’s part in this scheme was the harder one.

John wouldn’t have to carry a second person inside his belly for almost a year. John wouldn’t have to give birth to it under great pain without any possibility of remedying the pain.

Yes, she would like very much to have him with her, in her even, their skin touching everywhere and letting herself fall in his arms and abandon all reasonable thoughts as he would make her scream and speechless with delight, but not here, not now, not until certain things would have been discussed.

Suddenly, she felt very silly for having so airily mentioned potential grandnieces and –nephews to Uncle Samuel this morning.

“Well, I would be very happy to be a father- one day, whenever- if ever it should come to it. I would not be unhappy living like the Graves’ either, of course, but- you know.”

-Elizabeth didn’t know whether she felt the same way about herself.

A part of her knew the assumption that she should perish in childbirth for the sole reason that her mother had was a pack of nonsense, but the thought did not leave her mind, and still, even if it was not a hereditary curse or problem of the body, there were other ways bringing a child into this world could go fatally wrong for both mother and child.

She wanted John, desired him, but as they would soon take to bed together for the rest of their lives, she wanted this matter addressed and discussed.

“And you?”, he added after a short pause somewhat anxiously.

If it was Eliza’s wish, he would not touch and remain celibate for her, and love her in every other capacity in which Man is capable of loving still, but this is only half of the point- the other is that she is afraid, worried.

There is plenty of reason to be, he has heard, but his mother has given birth to four children, and lived every time- even when the two older brothers he had never known and little Percy hadn’t.
She shouldn’t have to be. He wants her to be happy, free of any care in the last weeks leading up to the wedding, knowing he might not be at the Fort for Christmas and intent on spending time with her as long as she is there.

Rawdon has mentioned the possibility of spending Christmas in London with many influential men of the Army present, too, at the Christmas celebrations hosted by the latter’s uncle, the Earl of Huntingdon.

He can hardly say no, especially since he has unfinished business in London; his Rangers are on his mind, still.

His beloved will have a last Christmas with the Graves’, like the ones in her girlhood she sometimes told him of, of grand dinners and his godfather’s almost child-like delight being the one handing out presents while he is off fighting- this time luckily it is just London, and she need not fear he will come home injured, unless a chandelier falls from the ceiling and hits him or some such similarly silly and unexpected misfortune might befall him.

-At least such an end would be an amusing one and his ghost could enter the realms of the dead with the contenting knowledge that his Eliza cannot be too melancholy about his loss, for his perishing should provide too amusing a story not to share with her friends.

But as far as he can tell, he is still alive, even if the love he feels for her at times is so all-consuming he must think his heart is burning with actual flames ignited by a love so strong it has never been felt by Man before, and as long as he lives, his Eliza shall always be happy and safe.

“If you are scared of getting with child I- we- won’t do it again, not like this, at least.”

An angry desire akin to the bloodlust he has known during his days of soldiering tells him that he is a fool to agree to such a thing, his heart and mind however remain firmly set on making such a vow if it would make her happy. It would certainly be nothing like he would have imagined, but there being such an excess of love between them, they could surely find a satisfactory arrangement and array of things to do on long Saturday mornings or cold winter nights.

“No.”

“Then what would you propose?”

“I don’t know”, she almost whispers, “I want you, badly. But then, I am not without doubts I might- and I want to grow old with you, John.”

He holds her now, having risen to take her in his arms and guiding her to the bed, where they come to lie down next to another, perfectly chaste in all ways and manners except for the fact they are as yet unmarried and lying on the same bed. But there are worse things, and presently, he could not care less about a scolding.

Eliza presses her face into his chest and he lets her, hoping she is comfortable and not tormenting herself with thoughts of the future.

“Enfield”, she suddenly says, rising into a pose supported by her elbows. “I must speak to him. He is a doctor, he must know such things-“

To his knowledge, having a baby is a women’s affair usually, tho’ it is increasingly customary to include a learned physician, but Enfield is a reliable man, true to his word and the Hippocratic oath and knows his darling since she was young. Besides, they can hardly ask one of the midwives of Honiton, if they were seen at their residences for a private call, such behaviour would invite rumours.
“I will go with you, you need not worry. We’ll take the open carriage, it will be a pleasant excursion, and you will be glad we went, because I will invite you to the playhouse afterward, if you are so inclined.”

Without a word, she smiles at him and clings on closer to his form by means of wrapping her arms around him.

With kisses and talk of pleasant things, he tries to make dark thoughts and worries go away, Elizabeth’s and his own alike.

After breakfast around 10 o’clock, John called for the park phaeton to be made ready, not the most ideal mode for travelling a certain distance due to lack of comfort and the weather, but certainly, it was more picturesque than sitting shut up in the Landau.

With a blanket tossed over her legs to prevent her from catching a cold, it was despite the serious nature of their excursion a rather delightful morning, and they took turns driving the carriage, even though she was not very accustomed to it as usually, she preferred to ride and when longer distances needed to be travelled, there is the stage coach or Uncle Samuel’s own to use.

They had debated rather heatedly whether one could simply impose on another person by turning up on their doorstep uninvited with her holding the view that doing so was not very courteous and might embarrass the visited party as the visitor might barge into a home not yet cleaned, or the unwitting host not fully dressed yet, whereas John thought as a doctor, Enfield knew he had to expect being called on at odd hours, most of the time without a previous note or call as accidents, illness and Death Himself do not send notes of their coming in advance either and therefore deserved no sympathy.

His startled housekeeper’s face, a stout woman with a broad local accent about the same age as her employer, left no doubt she was in the right, not John.

“I am sorry, the doctor is not quite ready yet, he’s in his study, I’ll go right away-“

The housekeeper hurried to the office in a step so quick it made Elizabeth worry for the welfare of the woman’s primly-ironed linen cap and returned equally quickly, telling them to follow her.

Doctor Enfield’s study was a small, seemingly disorganised space in which books no longer fitting into the assigned spaces lining the walls were stacked on the floor, and his wig hung limply and woefully abandoned from the fragmental arm of a roman statue attached to an equally fragmental muscular male torso, likely a piece he kept for ornamental reasons but did not fit the smallness of the room.

He looked startlingly younger without this attribute of his trade, which he sometimes forwent for a more generally genteel one with only two curls on each side and a modest queue, and the almost black hair with barely any silver in them growing on his own head.

“Miss Gwillim, Colonel. By all means, sit”, the Doctor offered them, then realising he did not wear his wig (but apparently uncaring he was receiving them in shirt sleeves with his coat reclining on the back of his chair), reached for it and put it on as they made themselves as comfortable as they could—as if the wig would change the counsel she hoped to get from him.
The chairs were rather Spartan, apparently the personal taste of the Doctor matched her observation that his house was not very artfully furnished, but comfortable enough for a bachelor. Perhaps it was not a Personal Taste at all, only a manifestation of the Lack of someone of taste, namely an accomplished wife, she couldn’t say.

“Now, to business- I hardly believe you have graced me with a social call. What have you come about?”, Enfield asked, all business-like. “Together, so short before the wedding- have I expressed my congratulations in person before?, well, then.”

He congratulated her very cordially before he extended his hand to shake hands with John in a somewhat too jovial fashion that was made to stand out even more by his lack of dress, but the firmness in the grip of both men’s hands revealed that the doctor could, despite being well past forty, match the soldier’s firm shake.

“It is about-” before she could finish the sentence, John had blushed so terribly his face rivalled his hair.

“It is about married life”, Elizabeth sighed, sensing this conversation would not see many contributions from her fiancé who whispered about all the wicked things he wanted to do to her but could not acknowledge the fact he was not as innocent as the Virgin Mary in front of a doctor, whose Hippocratic Oath bound him to silence about anything he was consulted over.

“You want me to advise you on- on marital cohabitation?”, Enfield asked, his mien changing from perplexed to bemused, than to amused.

“Miss Gwillim, there is no need to worry. Colonel Simcoe doubtlessly will know what to do come the wedding night.”

His intonation having risen toward the end of the sentence, it was not so much a statement as it was a question aimed at John, whose cheeks looked as if he had a very serious case of scarlet fever, and not of the kind her aunt had accused her of suffering from for having chosen John for a husband.

“He does”, Elizabeth answered quickly and only then noted how stupid a mistake she had made.

Enfield proceeded to let his eyes briefly wander between her and John who made a point of avoiding Enfield’s eyes and looked more like a guilty puppy-dog discovered while chewing on his master’s slippers than a gentleman.

Enfield sighed. “Oh, I see. Then Miss Gwillim, I suppose, is the one who needs me.”

He looked sad.

“You know such matters are best thought through before one goes to bed together, and cannot really be remedied after. If you want me to- to destroy it- I cannot do that.”

“No- no I am not- I am not with child. That is the whole point, I think.”

Confusion took hold of the doctor’s features when he then proceeded to say that he didn’t quite understand.

“The Colonel and I love each other very deeply” (to this John could at least muster a nod), “and we shall be very happy to be married- but there are questions that need to be asked.”

“Then why don’t you ask them? Shall I ask for tea? I am sure everything can be discussed more satisfactorily over a fresh cup of sweet, India-grown delight”, he smiled and rung for the housekeeper, whose heavy, yet diligent steps drew audibly nearer with every second.
“I would rather have a hot chocolate, please”, Elizabeth interjected and almost immediately silently cursed herself for being such a child as to ask for her preferred drink.

Her request was acknowledged with a nod and reflected in the orders given to the servant woman, who was out of sight again almost as quickly as she had entered.

“Colonel”, the Doctor addressed John in a loud voice usually used to speak to the very old and hard of hearing, who had risen and started to examine Enfield’s small personal library, “I think I would like to speak with Miss Gwillim alone a bit, if you don’t mind. Delicate questions are usually best answered without a private retinue present. Dubbs will bring your tea to the drawing room, where I trust you will find much enjoyment in Pope’s translation of the Iliad.”

With remarkable exactness, Enfield blindly reached for a book from a shelf behind him and put it in John’s hand.

“Here. Now leave us, please.”

Frowning, John did as he was bidden, but only grudgingly, glaring at Doctor Enfield as if wanting him to know that he would defile him would only so much as one of the feathers in her hat be only the slightest bit askew when he re-entered.

As soon as John was gone and chocolate and tea brought in, Enfield moved across the desk to her and into the chair recently vacated by her fiancé. He seated himself a little further apart from her as John had but still close enough to talk to her in a more confidential manner.

“You can be open with me, Miss Gwillim. I am bound by oath to remain silent.”

A faint smile crept onto Elizabeth’s lips and she felt momentarily a little easier before the weight of her question reminded her of why she was visiting.

“It is- the Colonel and I, once wed, we would enjoy married life very much we think- but there is a reason we are somewhat hesitant in our joy, it being that sharing a bed between man and wife often results in the begetting of offspring.”

Pausing, she took a sip of her hot chocolate, which was indeed very well-made, not too bitter and not too sweet. She gulped –not from her chocolate- before she continued: “You must know that I live with the Graves’ because I am an orphan. My father died on campaign before my birth and my mother- she did not survive giving life to me.”

“I see”, Enfield interrupted her monologue and smiled at her the sad smile that is always put on when wishing to display sympathy in one’s mien.

“You are not here because the Colonel and you desire me to explain to you the execution of connubial intimacies- though such intimacies are only in the rarest cases restricted to married couples only-“ the way in which he gave her a knowing glance over the rim of his cup told her he had already guessed John and she were not and had not been as chaste with another as Aunt Margaret would have wished, “you want to know if by enjoying the embrace of your future husband, you must dread the same fate as your mother.”

One of Enfield’s best qualities and worst flaws combined was his directness.

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“Yes.”

“If you wish to hear my honest answer, yes, you must. But no more or less than any other woman. You are young and in good health- much more than can be said for your mother, who was almost forty if I remember what Mrs Graves told me once correctly and thus too old for a firstborn when she
had you. You stand as good a chance as any other young, healthy female to bear equally healthy children and bring them into the world without any harm being done to mother or child. As far as I know, misfortune is not inherited.”

“Are you certain?”

“Nobody can ever be, it’s like racing or faro- not a certain game, but there are discernible odds, which I would strongly suggest are in your favour.”

He rose, motioning her to do the same and asked permission to examine her, to which she agreed.

Kneeling down before her, he held up her outer petticoats, until he was at her shift ad reach up to feel her hips.

Where John’s hands had elicited excitement and desire, Enfield’s touch was professional with no lewd implications whatsoever, swift and efficient.

“You are, if I may say so, a small person, but your built is well-proportioned and your pelvis wide enough for a child to pass through, if my estimations are worth anything- I am sure a trained midwife might be able to tell you with more certainty, but I see why you could hardly be known to associate with one now, prior to the wedding.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Might I invite you? To the wedding? Isn’t it said that one wedding often begets another? We might find you a lady of good sense matching yours, as any woman must be happy to find a gentleman such as you”, she quipped, now suddenly very relieved.

“I must decline, Miss Gwillim- not the offer itself, and I will gladly be in attendance, but the part with the wife.

I don’t think I should be happy having a wife, as not all men –and women, too, no doubt- are made for marriage.”

Enfield smiled amiably. “I think we should call for the Colonel, shouldn’t we? To tell him there is nothing to worry about.”

The news are very good, and Elizabeth somewhat more at peace; his poor dear has worried too much, as had he- but he still does. A bit. He always worries for her; she is the one thing, the one person in his life dearest to him. He has known love before; the love of parents, the almost fatherly warmth his godfather had extended to “Young Graves”, the very physical love of Miss Lola, who liked it a lot, too- but to be loved like this, like Eliza loves him is a different thing, precious, singular and he would never have expected to be loved like this, never thought himself loveable by someone who would not see loving him as a duty bound by blood, a religious oath made in front of his parents or some silver until his Eliza reassembled the shattered pieces of his broken world.

The rest of the day, he makes merry, they walk a bit in Honiton, peek through a few shop windows and stop to talk with some acquaintances; as the play house does not offer anything worth viewing in Elizabeth’s opinion, they decide to take a walk before they return to Enfield, where their carriage is waiting with Enfield’s lad in the yard.
On their way back to the Fort, they make merry and laugh, both knowing that tho’ they are somewhat appeased, the fear will never go away entirely- still, they shall not, will not, let Fear govern their lives, and so, they kiss and laugh and make silly promises for the future, knowing they will be separated soon, almost as if they are both trying to save up the other’s affection inside them, store it for the two weeks they shall not see each other.

A few days later, on the eve of his departure, the Admiral decides to invite the Old Bat to dine with him alone- a trick, no doubt, to allow him and Elizabeth the same, and not necessarily a gesture of husbandly affection alone, tho’ for some reason, the old man really seems to harbour some sort of tender thoughts in his heart for that ghastly woman.

“Must you go?” Elizabeth complains. She has not eaten much, he realises, but then, he has not, either.

“I must. For my Rangers. For us. But I will be back in time to be wed.”

“I hope so, I would not want to have a ceremony per procurationem with Richard Graves standing in for you”, she teases him and makes it known she wants a kiss, which she gets.

The table is abandoned quickly as they prefer to sit together and talk a while before they shall be separated.

“Is your gown ready?”, he teases her, oddly anticipating the fabric he knows he will be happy to get off her as soon as they are alone.

“Almost”, she grins, “but I will not tell you a word about it. It has arrived a few days ago and has since been kept under lock and key by Aunt Margaret- not even Uncle has seen it. Alterations, if necessary, will be made while you are away, of course, so it will be certain you will be the last to see it.”

She is torturously desirable when looking up at him like this, her eyes full of mischief and her ruby lips slightly parted from smiling. Elizabeth steals his heart anew each day without making any effort- is she aware of what she does to him?

Not much more is said before all parties head to bed. They kiss and fondle a little, but not too excessively, and then part for the night.

He really hates London quite badly.

Saying goodbye was the hardest part, and Elizabeth unsure if she could ever perfect the art of biding adieu without feeling a stinging pain in her chest as she watched John leave in Uncle Samuel’s carriage that would bring him to the stagecoach in Honiton.

Like she imagined a good wife should, she had righted his collar before he went and assured herself he had enough warm clothes with him- after all, tho’ he did not like to hear it, John’s health was damaged and needed to be preserved as much as possible. To expose his lungs to the frigid air with his chest not sufficiently covered in warming fabrics might cause pneumonia, or at the very least a bad cold, both of which could cause much pain and suffering. But now he had her to think of these things for him.
Going back in after John’s carriage had disappeared out of sight, Aunt Margaret made a rather unkindly sharp commentary about this being the elusory calm before a battle and called Elizabeth to her side in order to discuss the seating arrangements with her.

If Aunt Margaret, not in favour of marriages overall and this particular one most especially, had one redeeming quality for all her ranting and raging, it was the seemingly effortless ability to engage with even the finest details of a grand design without forgetting the overall scheme; she had planned most of the wedding, with Elizabeth’s approbation, of course, as John was not very particular about anything save for the fact that they should lawfully wake up in the same bed in the morning as husband and wife.

Over the following days, preparations started to accelerate; a day after John’s departure, her dress was fitted for the last time and Mrs Knox arrived as the first guest in time for Christmas, but had elected to stay with the Thomas Graves’ at Woodbine Hill in order not to disturb any preparations.

With Christmas a week before the wedding, the servants were indeed very busy, as was the rest of the household- when she had thought parting had been the hardest thing and wondered how she would survive without seeing John for the coming two weeks, she could no longer fathom how she had arrived at this thought- there was too much to do, too much to decide for her to have any time for excessive pining.

A few days into the first week, a letter arrived from London saying not much about the state of affairs, the content being rather more focussed on praising her qualities and John’s longing to see her.

All things considered, the week before Christmas passed like a blurred memory of days long gone, or a night of dancing where too many alcoholic refreshments had been had.

Nothing in particular stood out and she was oddly calm in all she did, even when Susan brought her a glass to inspect her wedding attire when it was fitted; she found herself to look pretty in it, turned once or twice to inspect the back and had the jewellery brought in she had decided to wear, a beautiful set owned by Aunt Margaret, who had shown it to her saying “I supposed it would look pretty on you when I went through my jewellery to see what I have that might look well on someone so small and delicate as you.”

Knowing Aunt Margaret did not mean to insult even when she did, Elizabeth was amazed when her aunt motioned her over, so she could fix the necklace at the back of her neck. It was a pretty piece of gold and diamonds, costly no doubt, with matching earrings consisting of a flower of diamonds with its leaves sprawling to either side like the ends of a bow crowning a teardrop-shaped element.

Where other mothers or aunts would have stood in awe, or professed loudly under tears how beauteous their child looked in her wedding-attire, Aunt Margaret looked her over contentedly, said not a word before rounding her and inspecting her from all sides, before she gave her final approval in one single word: “Stunning.”

In the mirror, Elizabeth could see her smile.

Christmas Day 1782.

“…eh, Simcoe?” someone, possibly Rawdon (or either one of his eyebrows- he finds himself rather
captivated by their sheer size and agility of movement on the man’s face; it is almost disconcerting to watch them, but a better pastime than engaging in conversations he does not want to be a part of) addresses him to coax from him some sort of approval of some very likely lewd or bawdy joke.

“Yes”, he nods briskly before turning his head again to his plate and the food upon it. He is not very hungry today; in fact, the obscene amount of food and drink make him wonder if there are any cows and pigs left in and around London. The meat tastes not as good as it does at the Fort; blander, you can tell the veal he has opted for did not know the beauty of an open landscape, only the stink and dirt of London.

Pushing about half a potato before he remembers his mother’s words never to play with the food on his plate, he decides to cease eating; the loudness of the room and the already mellow company are quite frankly not to his liking.

There have been a few interesting conversations, brief, but none very long; generally, he is left alone by most guests, as he is accustomed to already. Some who have heard of his engagement or know his Eliza en passant congratulate him on his “catch” (if anything she caught him, but specifying this would take too long to explain to an audience intent on hearing quick tales of mirth and unbounding frolicking.

After dinner, the ladies present retire, whereas the gentlemen decide to spent the festivities honouring the Birth of the Lord’s Son drinking and laughing.

Some temptation to follow suit, forget his melancholy and have a few drinks too many creeps into his heart, and being honest with himself, he envies those who can be so merry, for he is not. He is separated from Elizabeth, and shall only return in a few days; each day without her seems a whole decade long in comparison to those he spends with her, that pass within the blink of an eye; it sounds rather trite, but it is the truth.

Six days and they shall be married. Six bloody long decades for him to suffer through.

Young love, they say, is always like that, those who believe in the true fondness between him and Elizabeth as opposed to the not insubstantial portion of people thinking he has secured for himself a living by wooing an heiress.

They shall believe whatever they please, he does not care anymore. Eliza and he love each other, nothing else counts in this world.

“Why, so melancholy on such a merry night”, a familiar voice comments and to his surprise (he must really pay more attention to his surroundings again, as he did on campaign), Clinton stands next to him, a glass of claret in hand.

He leaves his former commander’s words without an answer or remark, acknowledges his presence with a stiff nod and an ever so brief smile of curtesy instead and then turns to the game of pool again; the men playing are not very good at it, and he could have beaten any of them, he realises to his disappointment, feeling oddly deprived of what he had anticipated as a near-battle.

“Harriet used to enjoy setting up the Christmas festivities”, the older man smiles wistfully, letting his gaze sweep across the room.

-He had never bothered to feign any interest in his superiors’ private lives, wherefore the sudden invitation into Sir Henry Clinton’s and the intimate confession hidden in the past tense employed when speaking about whom he supposes to have been the General’s wife touches him.
Clinton notices the look on his face and reads it rightly; sometimes, he is half-willing to believe Eliza is right when she says she can read his mind from his features, wondering if he truly is so obvious.

“It has been ten years”, Clinton dismisses the condolences he has read on his face, “you miss your Miss Gwillim, don’t you?”

“I do, in fact.”

“Then why are you not with her on Christmas?”, he asks, knowing full well why he is here and not at the Fort.

“I thought that would be rather obvious”, he manages to say without getting too angry, but as he hears himself speak, it is evident from the pitch of his voice he has failed. “My men, and my colonelcy-“

Clinton raises an eyebrow, amused almost.

“You have fought rather persistently, for the men of your militia-“

“Provincial forces, not militia”, he hisses angrily, having expected better from Clinton.

“Happy Christmas, John”, is all a chuckling Clinton offers in reply and hands him a letter that is somewhat crumpled from having been concealed in the inside pocket of a coat, sealed with red tape.

In complete haste, the wax is broken and the paper unfolded-

“My congratulations, Lieutenant Colonel Simcoe. The Queen’s Rangers are now no longer militia or provincial forces. A regular establishment in the army, a proper regiment. And you their proper colonel. That should do for an heiress, should it not?”

“I believe it should”, he replies, quite overwhelmed his wish has finally been granted, thinking of his men who will now be given what they deserve for their service and of Eliza, who will be proud for him. He must write to her and tell her as soon as possible, because she is the first he wants to share the news with.

But for now- well, perhaps he can try to be merry. Eliza would approve, and hopefully, she is, too.

He calls over a servant, relieves him of the burden of a glass and toasts to the General.

“To you, Simcoe, and your bride.”

-To his bride.

Mrs Knox and the Thomas Graves’ have come to spend Christmas Day at the Fort; a service was attended at St Nicholas in Dunkeswell, a feast had been had, and presents given.

That year, they had decided to keep the celebrations small and simple, as the wedding demanded everyone’s attention, but which had not kept Uncle Samuel from inviting at least some dear ones.

Touched, Elizabeth watched Uncle Samuel’s eyes glow with almost child-like delight as Mary was
presented with a new doll and an assortment of ribbons. The ten-year-old would have jumped with joy had not her upbringing taught her better, wherefore she suppressed the natural reaction and instead curtseyed very prettily, giving thanks to the adults for her Christmas gift.

The sweets and dainties Cook had prepared were almost gone the second the plate had been set on the table, with Mary and Uncle Samuel being the two most frequently seen with a delicious delight in hand.

When she had been Mary’s age, she had been not much different, Elizabeth realised, nibbling on a pastry with jam filling. It was only her second, with everyone, the raiding-party consisting of her uncle and second cousin by marriage, foremost of all, having had more.

The nearer the day crept, the quieter, but equally agitated she grew. Even Susan had noticed in the morning and as was her wont offered her unsolicited opinion on matters that did not concern her- or did, in some way at least, as she would accompany her to her new home. Her aunt would not have use for a second ladies’ maid, and did not trust Susan very much for her repeatedly having been found idling or completing her tasks too carelessly on several occasions in the past.

One Sunday, Susan had sealed her fate when Aunt Margaret had caught her yawning in church- that had done it, and the only reason her employment had not been discontinued was the patronage Uncle Samuel exerted over the girl, whom he had proposed to have trained as a ladies’ maid for her so she might have some company roughly her age supported by Elizabeth’s own wish to keep her. For some reason, she had grown oddly fond of her.

“Miss, you needn’t worry. It’s exciting, but you’ll like being married! You will be mistress of your own house and have the Colonel with you always.”

A thin and quickly-fading smile that was more a twitch of the corners of her mouth was Elizabeth’s only reply to a topic she did not know how to discuss, and with whom; if she would, she would certainly not do so with a servant.

Still, Susan’s attempts to amuse her and take her mind off the wedding preparations continued as the week progressed and Christmas came. She prattled on about the new house, and how well Elizabeth would manage things and often compared her to her aunt in ways that bordered on flattery on her part and slanderous tongue-wagging wherever her aunt was concerned.

Her own house. It wasn’t very big, about the size of the Fort, but had everything they would need for the time being.

They had visited a number, some as far as Exeter, and decided on the one they liked best. What they had searched for was a house preferably situated in the country and close to the Graves’.

Although John would never say it, he held his godfather in a regard of great filial piety and loved the Admiral as well as he did the memory of his own father.

-And she had grown up at the Fort when she had not been with her grandmother at Aldwinkle or with the Gwillims, a place that had grown very dear to her due to its natural beauty and of course her aunt and uncle, who had always treated her like their own child.

They will visit, often, the Fort, Woodbine Hill, but it shan’t be the same. She had always known a life of changing homes between London, Aldwinkle, Whitchurch and the Fort, it was then she realised for the first time how much she had grown attached to this place, and the couple inhabiting it.
It all happened so fast—less than a year ago, she had met John for the first time, the weak, pallid effigy of a man he had been and they had simply fallen in love soon after. She would leave her home for him, make a new one for the two of them, with him— it was all too much to comprehend at once, how fast the world would sometimes turn for some people.

Rather unexpectedly, Mrs Thomas Graves and Uncle Samuel’s sister fell into the chorus of a popular song and soon, everyone of their small company had joined in, regardless of their musical talent, with greatly detracted from the artistic merit of the display, but added in equal measure to the General Merriment of all present.

Even Elizabeth, whose mind was lost in its own thoughts, could not help but quietly sing along.

At last, and after an over-repetition of the final chorus, the song ended and Mary made her way over to her, her new doll that was decked out in fineries fit for a duchess, in her arm.

“Where’s John?”, the child wanted to know.

“In London.”

“But he must come home soon, because you will be married”, she explained with great importance in her voice to Elizabeth, “and when the spring comes, we can go to the swing again.”

“I fear that won’t be so easy”, Elizabeth tried to explain carefully. “We won’t live here anymore.”

The little girl looked very disappointed—not so much because they would move away, but because these altered circumstances would take from her the opportunity of using the swing John had built in the autumn. For a moment, Elizabeth wished she could be as young as Mary again and live in a world not governed by politicians and personal obligations, one that was exactly as big as the distance between Woodbine Hill and Hembury Fort House was long, and where the worst thing that could happen was not buildings swings in the wood anymore.

“But you can come and visit. I am sure Admiral Graves, our Uncle, would be very happy.”

“I am sure he will be.”

“And Mrs Graves, too.”

For a moment, prompted by the most minuscule of elbow-nudges from Mary who despite her years seemed to understand human nature exceptionally well (or at least understood the nature of the marriage between her great-uncle and -aunt better than anyone would have guessed), Elizabeth watched quietly as her aunt and uncle, believing they were currently not under the scrutinising eyes of Society, allowed their hands to join, sitting beside each other on the sofa in a rare and most startlingly intimate display of unity.

On the mantelpiece sat a new porcelain abomination, from the looks of it a female companion for the horrid monkey Uncle Samuel had procured in London.

Uncle Samuel’s cheeks were ruddy from the several glasses of sherry he had had and Aunt Margaret’s eyes had changed from their usual ferocity to a more gentle expression. Elizabeth was not very knowledgeable when it came to their vie privée, and had never thought on it much, but the tenderness between them was moving— and a little bit amusing, given the two of them so often shouted, fought and disapproved of another; perhaps it was their elixir of happiness, to pretend to be discontent with another, to coax and tease in the meanest fashion when in truth, their fondness for another was genuine. They believed they were fire and water, night and day, when in truth they were more like thunder and lightning, two equal forces that accompany another and belong together.
Mary didn’t say a word when she smiled at Elizabeth, a pristine, innocent smile so full of words of wisdom that remained unsaid of the sort only children can muster in reaction to the tableau of *Admiral and Mrs Graves For Once In Pleasant Agreement* before she sat down at the foot of the armchair in which her mother was seated to play with her new doll.

Bridget, feeling her child so close by her side, slid a hand from the armrest down to her daughter’s head, caressed it, and then righted the new ribbon the little girl had begged her to tie into her coiffure earlier.

Watching Uncle Samuel and Aunt Margaret, and alternatively the Thomas Graves’, who were not quite as affectionate with another among company, she thought of John, wished him by her side.

She could not quite decide what to feel, she realised- whether to pine for John with an all-consuming fervency or to continue in her anxious knowledge that her girlhood days, the life at the Fort she had come to love in more than a decade of living there at least part of the year, later permanently, perhaps even Christmases like this, were the stuff of the past.

“Dear Elizabeth”, Mrs Knox, dressed in a widow’s black, addressed her with the furrowed brow of someone not content with what she saw, “why so thoughtful?”

Obediently, she made her way over to the older woman who had excused herself from the conversation between her nephew and his wife and moved to the window to see through the darkness, the garden clothed in a darkness that was lightened by the snow that absorbed it, and took a pretty hue of blue before it would turn to the pink and gold of a winter sunrise in the morning, and then to its own white colour during the day.

“I-“, she began, but the older woman motioned her not to speak, and instead put her hands to her upper arms as if she were a child being taught a valuable lesson.

“All brides are nervous before their wedding-day”, she informed her, “To know your life will change from one day to the other, it is exciting, perhaps a little frightening even for the speed and suddenness with which one’s life transforms in one day. I was. Your aunt was. Bridget was. But you must not let that govern you now. You are blessed with the Love of Our Lord, who will always guide you in all things; but you are also blessed with the Love of your Colonel- not all of us married for Love”, she added and nodded knowingly. “Where there is love, there cannot be evil or wrong, and all will be well- it might take time, but it will be. And you are twice loved. -Thrice.”

With a rather gout-plagued finger, she pointed at her brother and sister-in-law, the former who promptly, as if having eyes in the back of his head, turned warily to look at her with an instinct that could only exist between siblings who had grown up together.

Mrs Knox gave her older brother a blank look, as if she had been caught in a trick she wanted to play and attempted to conceal it, to which Uncle Samuel only shrugged as if still having the notion that at sixty-nine, being a few years Mrs Knox’ senior still counted as much as it had in their childhood days and accounted for him being more grown-up and reasonable than she, who was evidently attempting at mischief.

Elizabeth could not help but suppress an amused giggle.

"There."

Mrs Knox looked very contented with her reaction and continued on a change of topic: "My dear, will you shew us some of your more recent sketches?"
Obliging her, Elizabeth called for a servant to fetch her sketchbook, and showed a few wintry scenes to the company.

Perhaps life as it currently was was like a rough sketch that wanted more detail; beautiful, but lacking something, maybe being coloured with watercolours or the addition of a few details. And perhaps, marrying John was not the attempt at starting a wholly new picture on a new sheet of paper, but the addition of something, someone, wonderously beautiful to an extant one.

While this thought pacified her mind at least for the rest of the evening, the artist's fear of the execution of the addtion to her picture not turning out as well as it looked in her imagination could not be quenched entirely, even with her heart fluttering like a swarm of starlings in an orchard whenever she thought of John in London, that suddenly seemed not a mere hundred and sixty, but ten thousand miles away that he was there and she was not.

Chapter End Notes

“belay that Mrs Graves! And you too, Graves!”: As a child, Simcoe was referred to by his middle name, perhaps to avoid confusion with his father John Simcoe. Samuel called his godson “Infant Graves” as a baby, a moniker that has an almost “mini-me” like ring to it that suggests he immediately embraced the idea of being a reserve parent to his best friend’s kid. Here, poor old Sam is just fed up with the antics of both his wife and his godson- calling him to order like he would have a young Simcoe by usage of his—most ungentlemanly, of course—childhood moniker.

In the 18th century, the stereotype for doctors included a very poofy, full-bottomed wig that was so closely associated with the profession as the stethoscope dangling around the neck and scrubs of today.

Christmas 1782: I have allowed myself some artistic license here- Simcoe was in London mere days before the wedding, but what he did over the holidays is anyone’s guess. The year before, 1781, he was invited by Rawdon to attend a Christmas dinner hosted by his maternal uncle, the Earl of Huntingdon. In the story, where Simcoe and Rawdon only met fairly recently, it happens a year later.

Somerset v Steward (1772) was a court ruling pf the King’s Bench under its Lord Chief Justice William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield, that found slavery did not comply with the common law of England and Wales. As my notes section is nowhere near big enough to discuss the case in its entirety as it deserves, allow me to point you to looking into it further if you are so interested.

Initialised by a slave called James Somerset and supported by a number of well-known abolitionists, the ruling set a legal precedent in the history of the anti-slavery movement, though it did not end British participation in the slave trade or the keeping of slaves by British individuals.

Perhaps Lord Mansfield had a personal interest in the ruling to some extent- his grandniece, whom he had raised and who lived at his residence at Kenwood House, was the famous Dido Elizabeth Belle, daughter of his nephew and an enslaved woman of colour.

Per procurationem: marriage by proxy, with either one or even both parties absent and represented by others. Usually only practiced among the uppermost echelons of the
aristocracy, most notably the Viennese court with Marie Antoinette being one of the most prominent examples.

Food and drink: apparently it was possible to taste a difference in food, e.g. dairy products and meat, produced in the countryside or in London.

TURN was severely incorrect when it came to Simcoe’s rank- he didn’t magically rise from captain to lieutenant colonel overnight. In fact, he was MAJOR Simcoe for the best part of the time TURN was set in- with the addition of a brevet lieutenant colonelcy.

Brevet ranks can very basically be explained as the military equivalent to curtesy titles- i.e. except of conveying a sense of reward for the person who got it, it was fairly meaningless as there is no command attached to it and the brevetted is not entitled to receive the next higher pay grade his brevet rank would suggest.

So if I get this right (and it took me a while to work out- if you know better, please enlighten me in the comments!), Simcoe was de facto a major until 25th December 1782, six days before his wedding, when the Queen’s Rangers were incorporated in the official establishment of the army, meaning better pay and pensions for the men and coming with Simcoe being made a regular lieutenant colonel. As far as I oversee things, he became “The Colonel” to everyone who knew him as soon as he was brevetted, with his nickname thus technically preceding his (full) colonelcy.

Simcoe was in London when it happened on Christmas Day, but where he was or how he was informed is not recorded. For the sake of a good story and Clinton’s surprisingly paternal approach to Simcoe on TURN instead of disliking the self-proclaimed “beast” like everybody else, he hands him the letter personally.

Historically, Simcoe and Clinton exchanged letters frequently as both felt they had been wrongly blamed for things, mistreated and overlooked in the aftermath of the war and found comfort in their mutuality.

When Elizabeth tells ten-year-old Mary she is welcome to visit, there’s some foreshadowing right there- in ten years' time, Mary, then in her twenties, will sometimes go and stay with the Simcoe-girls while their parents are away in Canada. Mary and Elizabeth stayed lifelong friends and their friendship persisted, perhaps ever so firmly, when everybody else around them who had been a companion in younger years died. Mary never married and inherited Woodbine Hill from her father and his second wife, dying a decade after Elizabeth in 1860.

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