Mary couldn't come back to Misselthwaite Manor enamored of the London fashions, or with an enslaved admirer trailing after her (for Colin's friends had suddenly remembered to post him a letter this season, all of them mentioning what a delight Miss Lennox was), or even with one of those lap dogs that were all the rage among the city ladies (or so Colin's friends had told him in those letters).

No. Mary was still as contrary as ten years ago.

She brought a friend. A girl friend.

It was Colin's understanding that every girl in London could have forgiven Miss Sara Crewe's grace and beauty if she'd had the decency to be poor as well. But no, Miss Crewe's benefactor showered her - and, it was rumored, her companion from childhood - in lavish outfits and precious gifts. More than one of his school chums had (jokingly, they claimed) made reference to Miss
Crewe's dowry, and how every other miss in England was pea-green with envy at the sole mention of the lady.

*Of course* Mary had become her bosom friend, and when it had been time to return to the moor, she'd invited the other girl along.

Colin had the dreary feeling that, soon, all his friends would demand that he answer to their letter with news of his latest house guest.

* 

"And this is my cousin," Mary introduced him to the blue-eyed girl at her side. Then her smile widened and Colin braced himself. Indeed, Mary didn't fail to embarrass him soundly. "Isn't he handsome, Sara?"

Had they been alone, Colin would have scowled at his cousin, but he knew that she'd only laugh and admonish him for being too modest. Mary loved him, and so she reasoned that he needed someone to remind him that he wasn't only his father's heir, someone to poke fun at him and bring him back to earth when he started putting on airs (because some childhood habits he hadn't completely eliminated, she said).

Mary had gladly thrown herself into the role.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Crewe," Colin said, fixing his attention on the girl. Looking at Mary now would devolve into one of their spats, and the prettiest heiress in England was the last person he wanted to see him indulge in childish habits. "I trust you had a good trip?"

Miss Crewe nodded happily. "Mary made sure to keep me entertained," she said, giving the other girl a fond look.

Colin had to bite his tongue not to comment on the likelihood his cousin had talked her friend's ears off on the train ride. He still couldn't quite believe Medlock when she talked about the quiet girl that had arrived to the Manor all those years ago.

Miss Crewe seemed to hear what he wasn't saying, and her eyes danced with laughter in silent response. "I think I fell in love with the moor hours before we arrived!"

"Of course you did," Mary chirped in. "Who wouldn't?"

This was why Colin loved his cousin, contrary girl or not. "She's right, you know," he told Miss Crewe. "When you live here, it's impossible to imagine settling elsewhere."

Miss Crewe smiled. "In that case, I'm looking forward to this stay."

When she smiled, she was as beautiful as the reports had said.

As she was to stay at Misselthwaite Manor for at least three weeks, Colin rather hoped that was not all there was to the girl.

* 

"You must call me Sara," Miss Crewe told him three days into her visit, walking sedately next to him as Mary flitted around them, reacquainting herself with her beloved gardens. "I feel like I've known you for years, from all Mary has told me."

He raised an eyebrow. "In that case, I'm sure you can't wait to meet Diccon."
The few times he'd mentioned his best childhood friend to the ladies of society, they'd seemed curious enough until he mentioned Dickon's position - namely, as a farmer working a small piece of land that neighbored his father's property. Miss Crewe instead nodded eagerly, and then her cheeks blushed and she grinned a little. "Is it wrong if I confess that I'm more interested in his tamed animals?"

The other ladies hadn't even been interested in the man.

"Oh, he'll like that... Sara. He'll like that, indeed."

Colin woke up to chips of ice landing on his face.

Or, as he discovered seconds later, Mary's fingers poking him awake.

"You need a thicker shawl," he told his cousin, long used to her wandering into his rooms at odd hours.

In response, Mary stole one of his covers and wrapped herself in it before climbing onto the bed at his side. "So... do you like her?"

His brain was used to working overtime around his cousin, so it only took Colin a couple seconds to decipher her meaning. "Tell me you aren't playing matchmaker, Mary."

"Of course not!"

Colin arched an eyebrow.

"...Unless you like her."

"Mary!"

"Oh, she's wonderful; you can't say otherwise. And so nice! And she actually likes listening to my stories about India, because that's where her father went before he died, you see." It was funny to see Mary rave about someone who wasn't himself or Dickon. For so long, and despite all of his father's efforts to expose her to other people, Mary had been happy to make new acquaintances but never to truly take to any of them. "People kept saying that she was the catch of the century - and they're right! - and you, shut away all the way here. I had to give you a chance!"

Colin tried not to smile. It would only encourage her. "I'm not shut away. I'm just-"

"Not interested in all the fuss," she completed the sentence, giving a little and most unladylike roll of her eyes. "You're just like Uncle, Colin! But even he had to travel to meet my mother's sister. You are planning to marry one day, aren't you? I can't be the lady of the house forever!"

"I'd think you would like that."

Unexpectedly, Mary blushed. As if that wasn't enough, his fearless cousin refused to meet his gaze. "But not forever," she told him, her voice much lower than before.

Colin let out a laugh. "So that's it? Found someone you like?" At last! he didn't say, because that would only prompt her to educate him on all the reasons marriage didn't need to be a woman's priority anymore. "Can't bear to be away from him, cousin?"

Her blush brightened, but Mary had recovered enough to hit his knee with her heel. "Can't bear to
leave you alone here, cousin," she corrected, then she took his hand and gripped it hard. "I didn't
ask Sara to come along just because of what people said, you know. I talked to her for hours,
Colin, and I even made friends with Becky" - from what Miss Crewe had told him, this Becky
was as close to her as Dickon was to him, perhaps even closer as they'd known each other since
they were seven years old - "and she told me that Sara has a gift for storytelling, and she does!
Can't you see? She's perfect for this place." Her next words were a whisper. "I bet she'd find the
garden, if she knew it existed, even without us showing her the way."

Now that was the epitome of high praise, coming from Mary.

"What do you want me to do?" Colin relented. He told himself he did it because Mary didn't
know the meaning of defeat; she'd keep barging in and wheedling until she got her wish. It wasn't
as if Miss Crewe - Sara, he remembered - was disagreeable company.

"Give her a chance," Mary said.

"And have you thought, what if she doesn't like me?"

Mary shook her head, her eyes full of belief. "You're a prince among princes," she reminded him,
"the most powerful rajah of this land." She broke into a little laugh at her own indulgence into
their childhood games, but then continued in earnestness. "You are a great guy. If Sara doesn't see
it, then she's not as smart as I thought."

It was endearing, that she'd put his dubious charms over her friend's intelligence. "I thought she
was your best friend."

She gave him a disbelieving look. "I do like her," she told him, "but I didn't bring her here
because she's my best friend. I became friends with her because I knew the two of you would be
good together!"

Oh, Mary. But he hadn't been able to talk sense into her when they'd been ten (and she'd been
right to drag him from his sick room, anyway), so he didn't try. Besides, Colin thought, what if she
were right again?? "Just promise me that, if it doesn't work out, you won't bring more friends to
meet me."

"I promise," Mary said.

"That was too easy," Colin said, peering at her.

His cousin grinned. "If it doesn't work out with Sara," she explained, "then bringing any other will
be a waste of our time. They're all so very boring!"

"And if I want a boring bride?"

She kicked whichever part of his anatomy was closest to her foot. It happened to be his shin.
"You don't!"

He didn't.

But that didn't mean he'd fall in love with Miss Crewe just because his interfering cousin was
recommending her.

*  *

He fell in love anyway.
As a child, he had been a prisoner of his fears.
As a child, she had been imprisoned in a more mundane way, but she still understood how it felt to wish to be free.

"Do you believe in magic, Sara?"

Her father had loved her, but he’d still left and never returned.
His father did return, but they’d already lost too much time to be what they could have been.

"There’s a part of the garden you haven’t seen yet."
"Indeed? But we must have walked every path!"
"It’s... a secret."

Her best friend would never be fully accepted into their social circles.
Dickon had never even entertained that thought.

"Hasn’t Mary told you about it?"
"She only mentioned there was more to this place than met the eye. What was she talking about?"
"Find it, and I’ll tell you a story."

She had been called a Princess, once upon a time. He had called himself a prince, and his friends had indulged him.
Now they both laughed at the silliness of children, but agreed that the other was special indeed.

"So what’s my story," Sara asked, stepping through the secret door into a world of roses and spring.
Colin turned to watch her, and he smiled.

Colin’s friends sent back congratulations to his news, and a few teased him for the brilliancy of his plan. Colin shook his head at their short-sightedness. "It was all Mary, you know," he confessed
to Sara. "She led you here, straight to me."

Sara laughed. "Oh, believe me. Once she started talking about this handsome, all too serious cousin of hers, I was happy to be led."

The End
31/10/14

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