



The Bridle Cull Vanishes

A Short Story by

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With little moonlight and only the glow of the vehicle's lamps to light the travelling carriage's way, many a driver would have preferred not to travel on such a dark night. But for the driver, Henry Rollins, who had such sharp eyes and a deft hand with the ribbons, such conditions were of no account.

Thanks to the skill of his carriage maker in London's Long Acre area, Lord Roderick Davenant slept comfortably inside the well-sprung vehicle. The velvet-upholstery cushioned him from any discomforts caused by obstructions that might be encountered on even such a well-made, well-used highway as the London-to-Brighton Road.

His lordship's slumber was the natural outcome of being kept long and late at the card table by His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales at that royal person's Marine Pavilion in Brighton. Although Davenant enjoyed a reputation for being a lucky gamester, Dame Fortune had abandoned him; not even his usual customary coolness and shrewdness at the tables had prevented him losing to the prince on this occasion. Not that Davenant minded losing; winning or losing had little effect on his equanimity of temper. What did irritate him—and everybody else for that matter - was the prince's constant crowing about his success. So Davenant was tired and in a bad mood when he set off for London, being only too happy to lie back in his carriage and let his tyger and personal groom Henry take the reins.

The crack of a pistol shot and the shout of "Stand and deliver!" abruptly ended his lordship's repose. The horses reared and the carriage swayed, waking Davenant and sending him tumbling to the vehicle's floor. Temporarily dazed, Davenant, for once bereft of his usual sang-froid, sat for several seconds on the floor of the still swaying carriage before righting himself. Regaining his seat at last, he let down a window and yelled, "Damn your eyes Henry! What the hell are you about? Why have we stopped?"

Still struggling to bring the horses under control, Henry gasped, "Cos a...bridle cull is pointin'...a barking iron...at me...an' the boys at...the back"—he said, referring to the two footmen—"has got their hands in the air, like. An' Monsewer Serryfin," he added, referring to Davenant's valet, Séraphin, who sat next to him on the box, " 'e wuz a-shakin' so much, 'e went fell off his seat!"

"You heard," croaked a deep voice. "Stand and deliver!"

"A highwayman?" Davenant remarked, more surprised than concerned. The depredations of highwaymen had been at their worst

during the previous century but in 1811, although highway robbery still occurred in some areas, it was not something known on the well-travelled London-Brighton road.

Having now recovered his usual composure, Davenant was at no great pains to put himself out for anyone—and certainly not for a highwayman. To deal with various circumstances in which he might find himself, such as the one in which he was now in, Davenant had instructed his staff in various stratagems to effectively deal with them. Accordingly, he took his time descending from the carriage: thus drawing the highwayman's attention from the footman at the rear of the vehicle to himself.

Outside, the air was cool and, coming from the pitch darkness of the carriage, Davenant squinted as his eyes adjusted themselves to the comparative lightness of the night and a fitful moon. Just beyond the circle of light cast by the carriage lamps, he could make out the shadowy mass of a clump of trees immediately behind horse and rider. For a minute or so the moon peeped out from behind a cloud, making visible the rider's thin shape. Taking his time, Davenant sauntered toward horse and rider, stopping only to raise from the ground his jabbering valet.

"Oh milor, milor! J'ai peur, j'ai peur! Nous sommes perdus!" (Oh my lord, my lord! I'm scared. I'm scared! We are lost!)

"Don't be a damned cry baby," Davenant snapped.

"Y...y...yer money or y...y...your life!" the highwayman croaked.

Davenant thrust his hands into the pockets of his caped coat and felt the reassuring form of his travel pistol concealed in one of the pockets. He strolled up to the highwayman.

"You will have to shoot me then, for my pockets are temporarily to let," he drawled, "His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, having relieved me of a considerable amount of blunt at cards but a few hours ago. With a twitch of his lips – the nearest he usually came to a smile – he said, "I could give you an IOU."

"Y...y...you must have something... of value," the highwayman said in a voice varying from deep to high, like a young lad whose voice was breaking. "Jewelry? A watch? Fobs?" the voice added in desperation.

Aware that one of his grooms had by now worked his way through the trees behind the highwayman, Davenant continued in the same lighthearted tone, "Jewelry! My dear fellow, are you unaware that no less an arbiter of fashion than Beau Brummell decrees that any jewelry is too much for a gentleman of fashion! I have but a gold cravat pin. You wouldn't wish to disrupt the set of my cravat by taking it, would you?"

His voice suddenly trenchant, he added, “Oh by the by, I also have in my coat pocket a pistol that is now pointed at you.”

Despite the poor light, Davenant saw that at this latter statement, the highwayman’s pistols quivered as if the hands holding them found them too heavy. Or was it that their owner was shaking with fright? His head cocked to one side, Davenant frowned. Was it just his imagination, or a trick of the lamplight? The highwayman’s shadow appeared slender – one might say youthful – not what one expected of a seasoned criminal. A young lad fallen on hard times, perhaps? An inexperienced bridle cull newly out on the high toby? Or could he by chance be a...? Davenant shook his head. No. A preposterous thought! He must be still half asleep. The highwayman was not . . . could not be a woman! Whoever heard of a woman highway robber?

“Drop your pistols!” Davenant ordered, “Although it would grieve me, and my tailor even more so, I could easily shoot you—or your horse—through the stuff of my coat. I warn you, I am a crack shot!”

“Oh no! Please don’t shoot Rainbow!” the highwayman wailed.

“Do as his lordship says and no one gets hurt,” said one of the grooms, who by now stood behind the highwayman with a pistol pointed at him.

One after the other, with soft thuds, the pistols fell from the highwayman’s hands on to the soft turf. Then he slowly dismounted to stand, a small figure with downcast head, shivering with fright, before Davenant.

“That’s better,” said Davenant sternly. “Now my coat will not suffer a fate worse than death, although *you* will undoubtedly suffer that, or at least transportation, when I hand you over to the magistrates.”

At this, the highwayman, instead of giving any of the many abusive rejoinders common to those of that craft, burst into tears.

Davenant stared at the sobbing, woeful figure, a far cry from the romantic notions of a dashing highwaymen contained in novels and the romantic fantasies of young ladies. But the bridle cull’s head was hung low, and in the darkness all that Davenant could make out of it was the hat surmounting it.

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed, removing the obstructing headpiece. “A tricorn! Who the devil wears those nowadays?”

He received his answer when, as the hat came away, he felt rather than saw in the darkness, a cascade of soft, silky curls under his hand. No man wore his hair that long now! It remained for Henry, who had joined Davenant after handing the carriage reins to the other groom, to

verify the figure's identity: he struck a tinderbox. The sparse light was just enough for him and Davenant to see the miscreant's face,

"Newgate seize me!" said Henry. "It's a girl!"

"Well, well," murmured an amused Davenant, "'twas as I suspected after all – a young lady. And pray whom do I have the honour of addressing? Miss...?"

"M...M... Minerva...Minerva L...L...Long...Longstreet."

"Minerva! The Roman goddess of wisdom? Permit me to say that your name belies your present behavior, Miss Longstreet. Holding up a carriage on the highway displays an acute lack of sagacity. Oh, pray forgive me! I forget my manners. Permit me to introduce myself: Lord Roderick Davenant." He inclined his head. "Your servant."

Miss Longstreet continued to snivel.

"Come dry your eyes," he said offering her a handkerchief he took from his coat pocket. "I will not hand you over to the magistrates—at least not yet—until I discover the reason for your present behaviour. Henry! Spirits to revive Miss Longstreet. My flask! Give Séraphin some, too. He still shakes, I fear."

"That's Frenchies for you," Henry scoffed, as he handed Davenant's brandy flask to the girl. "No bottom."

Tasting brandy for the first time in her young life, one swallow was all it took to set Miss Longstreet coughing and spluttering.

Davenant motioned Henry and the others away. "Let us sit in my carriage; it's warm..."

"Oh no," gasped Miss Longstreet. "Aunt Lucretia says 'tis the height of folly for a young lady to be alone in a darkened carriage with a man. Something quite dreadful might befall her..." She paused for a moment, before adding naively, "Although I confess I don't know what that could be."

Davenant's lips twitched. How would the girl's aunt react if she knew of the reputation of the person her niece was with at the moment?

"Quite so," he said politely. "I apologise, although I assure you my intentions are honourable," which, he acknowledged to himself, was an uncommon state affairs. "Let us sit on those tree stumps I perceive over there, and you can explain to me why you have taken to the high toby."

"High toby?"

"Highway robbery."

Miss Longstreet's fear turned to self-righteous indignation at the implication she was a common felon. "I haven't really done that!"

“But what else was that scene you enacted but a few short minutes ago, if it wasn’t highway robbery? A charade?”

Miss Longstreet was even more indignant. “Well, I didn’t steal anything from you!”

“You certainly meant to.”

“I...” Miss Longstreet began.

“Never mind,” Davenant said, impatient. “Begin at the beginning. Your age?”

“F...f...fifteen -- but I’ll be sixteen in a month,” she added quickly.

“Fifteen! Good God!” exclaimed Davenant, just for once losing some of his self-possession. “Why a chit like you should be still in the schoolroom, not gallivanting alone along the King’s Highway at dead of night! Do your parents know what you are about?”

“My mama and papa are dead. I live with my Aunt Lucretia.”

Judging by her speech and demeanor, Davenant concluded she was a gently-reared young woman and not a member of the criminal underworld. But why had she turned to highway robbery?

“Ah, you are alone in the world. Forced to earn your bread by whatever means you can?” said Davenant. There were few ways for a lonely girl to make a living. Perhaps highway robbery was preferable to prostitution, more often than not the usual fate for a homeless, hungry girl.

Miss Longstreet had sufficiently lost her fear of Davenant to retort with a toss of her head, “Indeed, I am not alone in the world! Why, I have dozens and dozens of relations. And I don’t have to earn my bread: I am an heiress!” She cocked her head to one side in thought before adding, “Now I come to think on it, all my relations are very rich.”

“An excellent state of affairs. My felicitations!” Davenant said in wry amusement. “Then why the devil resort to highway robbery?”

“I haven’t resorted to highway robbery!” she said indignantly. Then in almost a whisper added, “I...I...I did it so that I could obtain enough money to go to London.”

“To go to London! Of all the foolhardy, hazardous, perilous...” Davenant began, his voice like ice. He sighed and shook his head. In a quieter but still cold tone, he went on, “Do you not realise that your little escapade could have resulted in you kicking the clouds from the hangman’s noose outside Newgate Prison, or, at the very least, being transported for life to Norfolk Island, never to see your family again?”

Miss Longstreet hung her head.

Davenant raised her chin with his hand. “Well?”

“Oh,” she murmured, “I di...di...didn’t know, it...it...it is not like that in books. It’s always so romantic; the highwayman doesn’t g...g...get caught. I thought I had been very clever about everything. I took the pistols that belonged to my aunt’s late husband from their case in the library and...and this coat and breeches my uncle wore when a boy I found in an old trunk in an attic,” she said. “And in any case, if I had robbed you, I would have paid you back...I swear it! I just wanted to obtain enough money for me to be able to travel to London to live with my uncle.”

“No, indeed life is not as described in novels,” he remarked, drily. “I advise you stop reading them. Your uncle, who is he? Why do you want to go to London to see him? And surely, your aunt has carriages and horses enough you could travel there in style, with a maid to chaperone you. As an heiress with so many wealthy relatives, what need is there for you to steal from others?”

“My uncle is Sir John Prendergast. He is both my trustee and guardian.”

“Prendergast? I know him. Raises thoroughbreds. I have bought some from him. A reliable, sensible individual.”

“Oh, yes indeed, he is, and I love him dearly,” Miss Longstreet said with enthusiasm. “But he doesn’t know what has been happening here.”

“Here?”

“Aunt Lucretia’s house’s although it belongs to uncle. Back there, in the trees. Uncle would be very angry if he knew.”

“Mm,” Davenant murmured. “The plot thickens. Continue. You have my undivided attention,” he assured her.

Miss Longstreet took a deep breath. “Aunt Lucretia and Uncle John are but half brother and sister. She was my grandfather’s daughter by his second wife. She was twice widowed and has no children, but she has a nephew, Ambrose, her first husband’s nephew, on whom she dotes. You follow me?”

“Er...I think so,” said Davenant, somewhat bemused by the complexities of Miss Longstreet’s family tree.

“When my parents died, it was decided that I, being a girl, should be raised by my aunt, rather than my widowed uncle, who lives alone in London.”

She paused and sighed. “Living with Aunt Lucretia has been very unpleasant, particularly in the last few years. She keeps me confined to the estate and does not let me mix with people of my own age, for fear I may fall victim to a fortune hunter. My only freedom is to ride my horse,

Rainbow, around the estate, but even then a groom, who has strict instructions not to let me go any further, accompanies me. Aunt Lucretia, whom I own I often defy, punishes me for perceived misdemeanours, even when I have done nothing. She says it is all for my own good as she wants me to make a good marriage. And for that I must learn to be biddable and obedient in order to attract the right sort of husband. I have put up with it for the most part because I knew I wouldn't have to stay with her forever. In two years' time, I will have my coming out in London, and go and stay with my uncle. She sighed, and then said slowly, "But I fear my aunt doesn't wish that to happen. I believe she wants me to marry long before then—without my guardian's permission."

"How so?"

"Well, just recently Ambrose came to stay with us, and it is now quite obvious to me that the good marriage she has in mind is with him!"

She shuddered, pulling her cloak closer about her. "He is much too old for me and so, so, so loathsome! Aunt is always telling me that I must behave with propriety at all times, yet she devises ways for me to be alone with him unchaperoned! He tries to take my hand under the table at mealtimes, and he is forever smiling at me in a way that frightens me. He often comes up behind me and pinches my bare arm so hard, that it hurts. When I complain to my aunt, she says it is just the friendly gesture of one cousin to another. But he isn't my cousin! A...a...and what is more he seems to enjoy hurting me!

"The worst was last week. I...I...I woke up late one night and found him in my bedroom! I screamed and my maid came running and so did my aunt. Ambrose apologised and said it was a mistake: that he lost his way to his room. But he wore only his nightshirt and cap and carried a candle, so he must have just come from his room, which is in another part of the house. Aunt said I was a silly goose to make such ado; that I had nothing to fear from him."

Out of breath from emotion, she stopped.

"Indeed, I would say you have everything to fear from Ambrose. Finding him in your room like that, your aunt should have sent him packing," said Davenant, who although he had been in many women's bedrooms, had never gone to them uninvited—but then he had not lacked for invitations. "You believe he is trying to compromise you in some way so that you will have no choice but to marry him, or be ruined? Or that he and your aunt will force you to elope with him to Gretna Green?"

She nodded.

“Why does he want to marry a fifteen year-old girl? Is it that his pockets are to let, and he wants to get his hands on your fortune? And why does your aunt collude with him in this?”

She shuddered again. “He...he...seems...to...to...like me,” she said in a small voice. “And he isn’t poor, just greedy. I think aunt is helping him because they are very close. The house doesn’t belong to my aunt, but to my uncle, who makes her a very good allowance to care for me. I think she expects that if Ambrose marries me, he will share some of my fortune with her for helping him to do so. They talk and whisper about things I don’t understand, but from the way they laugh so vulgarly at such matters, I...I...I am sure they are speaking about things that are...are...quite improper,” she finished lamely.

She peered at Davenant in the darkness. “Ambrose always boasts about his high connections in town. Perhaps you know him: the Honourable Ambrose Claverhouse?”

Unseen by her, Davenant’s jaw tightened and his eyes hardened, “Yes,” he said quietly, “although not acquainted with him, I know of him.” A dissolute, aging fop with a reputation far worse than his own, Claverhouse had been blackballed from more than one club, so that most of his gaming was done in the more disreputable ‘hells’ about St. James. There were whispers that he was an opium user with a sexual preference for sadistic acts—acts that resulted in serious injury and, in one instance, even death—with poor young women about St. Giles with no recourse against him. No wonder Claverhouse found young Miss Longstreet desirable in more ways than one. But there was an added attraction: she was not poor; when she came of age, she would acquire a fortune. If Claverhouse coerced her into marriage now, he could enjoy his sadistic pleasure with her until she attained her majority and her money, which would become his. God knows what would happen to her after that!

“And your uncle knows nothing of this?” said Davenant. “Why have you not written and informed him what is going on? Does he not visit you? Surely he would take you away from there, if he knew.”

“Oh I have tried to write to him often, but Aunt Lucretia always checks the post before it leaves the house, so I can never send him a letter of my own volition. She stands over me and tells me what to write – always glowing accounts of my life with her, and my lessons. He does not visit very often, because he is very busy. And when he does visit, he

doesn't stay long, because he doesn't like my aunt; and she never leaves me alone with him, so I have no chance to speak to him privately."

"Lessons? You have a governess then? Can she not write to your uncle?"

Miss Longstreet sniffed scornfully. "Miss Witchard—I call her The Witch—is quite useless and knows nothing. I think that is why aunt hired her. To maintain her hold over me, aunt wants me to remain ignorant. I think Miss Witchard is terrified of my aunt and very much under her thumb."

"Is there no one else who can help you?"

"My maid Rosalie is devoted, but she is not very clever, and I would not want her to get into trouble with aunt and lose her place. Jim, one of the grooms, is kind and friendly, and would help me if he could, but I would not want him to risk his position, either. He is the sole support of a widowed mother. So you see there is no one to help me," she finished lamely."

A short silence followed, which was broken when she suddenly blurted, "Now I have told you all, you will not hand me over to the magistrates will you?"

"No," Davenant assured her. "In light of what you say, I will overlook your interruption of my journey. And do not concern yourself about my servants. Henry is the sole of discretion about my business, and my grooms will do as they are told. In any case, they have not seen you because of the darkness, and even I have only glimpsed you. But now what am I to do with you?"

"You could take me to London with you? That is where you are going, is it not? I promise I would be no trouble."

Davenant did not at first reply. Despite Miss Longstreet's sad plight, he could not help but be amused by situation. He, with his less than sterling reputation, was again being asked to play knight-errant to a damsel in distress. He had done it before, coming to the aid of a well-known whore (see my novel *A Jacketing Concern*) and now he had been asked again: this time by a schoolgirl highwayman! Miss Longstreet was truly desperate, and, although she had showed great courage and foresight in her efforts to escape from her aunt and Ambrose, she was, for all that, a naïve young girl in need of help and support.

But he could not take her to London with him. Spending just one night unchaperoned with a man, even though only travelling together, would condemn her to social ruin, particularly as the man involved was

himself. Why, if that happened and it became known, he could find himself having to do the honourable thing

“I do not wish to sound impolite b...b... but I don’t want to marry you,” she, said when he explained matters to her.

“Nor I you,” he said, “er...charming as you are,” he added, not wishing to appear ungallant. “So, for the time being, you must return to your aunt’s house, until your uncle can be informed of the situation and arrange your removal from there.”

She reached out and clutched his arm. “Please don’t make me go back!” she pleaded. “What might happen to me in the meantime before uncle comes? “

“Your uncle will not be long in coming,” he assured her. “We are more than half-way to London, so that when he receives the letter you are going to write him, it will be only a few hours before he arrives at your aunt’s house. He will come straight way I am sure.”

“Oh yes. But a letter? I have not pen and paper.”

“Ah, but I have. A portable writing desk and stationery are among the amenities of my travelling carriage. You will write the letter, and then, when I reach The Blue Boar inn, in the village near here, I will engage a courier to take it straight to London. Your uncle will know only that it came from you, not me. Your reputation will in no way suffer through association with me.”

She nodded agreement, and he sensed the tension leave her. “But when I return to my aunt’s, what then?”

“Until your uncle comes, you’ll insist on your maid sleeping in your room, and you bolt the door from inside. You will do your best to avoid Ambrose. And you will tell your friendly groom that if your aunt and Ambrose try to drag you off to Gretna Green between now and when your uncle arrives, he is to ride post haste to me at The Blue Boar and I will give chase. My horses are the best and I have relays posted along the Great North Road. I would have no trouble overtaking Ambrose. In the meantime, I will remain at the inn until you are safely in your uncle’s hands, which, I am sure, will be no later than tomorrow.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” Miss Longstreet cried, flinging her arms around Davenant and burying her head against the capes of his great coat. “I’m so glad it was your carriage I stopped,” came her muffled voice.

Concerned about Miss Longstreet’s soggy despoliation of his tailor’s craftsmanship, Davenant rose and helped her to her feet. “It is not advisable to stay too long in the night air,” he said. “My valet will

retrieve my writing desk and light a lamp in the carriage for you to write by. When you have finished, I will escort you to your aunt's house. I will then go at once to the inn to dispatch your letter. Will you be able to return to the house without being seen? A secret passage, perhaps?'

"No passage," she said, giggling at this suggestion, "but I left unlocked a small side door that is hardly ever used." She yawned loudly and rubbed her eyes. "I think, in spite of everything, I will be glad to go back. I'm so very tired."

His fingers skillfully setting his cravat in a perfect Davenant Drape—his own inimitable creation—at only his second attempt that morning, Lord Davenant pondered his nighttime adventure.

After Miss Longstreet had written the letter to her uncle, he escorted her the half mile or so through the trees to her aunt's house, one arm propping up his sleepy charge, his other hand leading her horse by its bridle. As they neared their destination, she shook herself from her lethargy and stopped near a clump of bushes, where she had left the cloths she had tied over her horses' hooves, to muffle their passage over the stable yard's cobbles so no one would hear her departure. Too exhausted to do it herself, she asked Davenant to cover the horses' hooves for the return trip.

At the stables' outer wall, he handed back her two pistols, having removed the remaining ball from one of them.

"One thing more," he said before they parted, "to further ensure the protection of your reputation, if by any chance we meet in the future, you must not mention, or indicate in any way, that we have met before. Do I have your solemn promise?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I promise likewise."

The last he saw of her was the silhouette of her slight figure waving to him before she and her horse disappeared from view behind the stable wall.

At The Blue Boar, he had hired a courier immediately and sent him off with Miss Longstreet's letter, having impressed on him that he must not mention Davenant's name to the recipient. Then he bespoke a suite of rooms for himself, and lodgings for his servants and horses.

"*Formidable!*" murmured Séraphin, raising his palms upward in gesture of admiration as Davenant made the final adjustments to his cravat. "*Milor!* To achieve, such perfection after all the *terreur* of last night!"

“The only person terrified was you,” Davenant drawled.

A knock at the door prevented him from giving the set down he had been about to give Séraphin for his previously cowardly behavior.

Henry entered. “Big to-do out there in the yard, guv. A lady an’ a real sneaky lookin’ cove ’as just drove up in a carriage, along with another cove on horseback. Don’t like the look of it. Thinks its you they want.”

“They could at least have waited until I had had my breakfast,” said Davenant, with a final glance in the mirror. “I’ll see them in my private parlour.”

No sooner had he entered the parlour where breakfast was laid, than the room’s other door burst open and a distinguished-looking, silver-haired gentleman in riding clothes stormed in. “Where the devil is my...?” He stopped. “Davenant! You?” he cried, more shocked than surprised.

Davenant languidly raised his quizzing glass. “Good morning Prendergast,” he drawled. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

A large middle-aged woman in a purple, twilled silk pelisse with a matching bonnet lavishly adorned with silk bows and feathers accompanied him, her plump face and several chins lavishly powdered to conceal the depredations of age. She was, thought Davenant, one of those women who, although quite pretty in youth, run to fat through self-indulgence.

On hearing Davenant’s name she gasped in horror, “That rogue! I’ve heard about him. My poor little Minerva! Oh I cannot bear to think on it!” She clutched her throat and rolled her eyes. “Oh, oh! I feel a spasm about to happen!”

“Devil take it Lucretia!” said Prendergast. “Damn your spasms!” This admonition immediately cured the lady of her affliction.

“That’s him! That’s him!” the third visitor butted in. “That’s the man I saw with your niece last night, Sir John—very, very late last night!” he sneered.

Davenant raised his glass. This had to be Miss Longstreet’s ‘odious’ Ambrose and Henry’s ‘sneaky cove,’ descriptions he thought too charitable by half. Claverhouse was about forty, although the lines of dissipation in his face, which he, too, attempted to conceal with cosmetics, made him look older. Davenant could not forbear to wince at this fop’s ostentatious *toilette*. His cravat set in intricate folds of his own design, Claverhouse sported shirt points so high he could hardly move his neck, a waistcoat that would have eclipsed the Biblical Joseph’s coat

of many colours, pantaloons obviously padded to enhance spindly legs, and more than once Davenant caught the creak of corsets. But it was his eyes that made the biggest impression on Davenant: they had the look of a wild beast about to pounce on its prey.

Mindful of his promise to Miss Longstreet, Davenant feigned ignorance. “And whom do I have the honour of addressing?”

“The Honourable Ambrose Claverhouse,” said the fop, “and I have the honour to present my aunt Mrs. Lucretia Wentworth.”

Davenant bowed

“Damn these niceties!” Prendergast snapped. “Where’s my niece Minerva? Knowing you Davenant, in your bedroom, no doubt!”

Davenant affected puzzlement. “Search the bedroom by all means,” he said quietly. “You will find no one there but my valet. Er...why do you think I know anything about your niece? I’ve seen no one named Minerva since I arrived here last night,” which, thought Davenant, was true enough—well almost. Because of the darkness he had only glimpsed Minerva’s face.

“She’s vanished, damn you!” Prendergast raged. “Hasn’t been seen since Claverhouse saw her with a tall man near the stables...’bout three o’clock this morning. Got a letter from her last night by courier about the abusive behavior she has been subjected to by my sister and this blasted peacock,” he added, indicating Claverhouse. “When I arrived at my sister’s early this morning, what do I discover? Minerva—a fifteen-year-old girl has vanished! Her bed not slept in, her riding boots, her only clothes missing...and...and this...this nincompoop in residence,” he pointed at Claverhouse, “after I had expressly ordered my sister to sever all connection with him years ago.”

In readiness for another spasm, Lucretia threw up her hands in despair. “Oh my poor Minerva! Disappeared! No clothes! Naked! And after writing all those dreadful things. Untrue! Untrue!” she wailed. “I cared for her as if she were my own. I swear brother!”

“*Half*-brother—and that’s one half too many for me,” Prendergast shot back.

Aghast at this insult, Lucretia forgot her spasm.

Forced into the position of displaying no knowledge of Minerva, Davenant managed to confine his alarm at her disappearance to an imperceptible tightening of his hand on his quizzing glass. Vanished? Good Lord! He had seen her safely to the stables. What happened after that? Had Claverhouse seen them together, or was it some other man?

Or was Claverhouse lying about what he saw to cover up his kidnapping of the girl?

Claverhouse's eyes narrowed. "Yes when I went to her room at three o'clock I looked out the w..."

"You went to her room at three o'clock in the morning! Prendergast grabbed Claverhouse by his coat lapels. "Just as she wrote in her letter!" He raised his fist. "Why I've a good mind to..."

Davenant grasped the fist. "A fight will not help you find your niece," he said quietly.

Prendergast reluctantly retreated. With an indignant sniff, Claverhouse readjusted the set of his cravat.

"How can you be so sure you saw me with the girl?" Davenant asked. "It's very dark at three o'clock and there was hardly any moonlight last night.

"Well...I...er...well..." Claverhouse began.

"Yes?"

"When the butcher boy delivered the meat this morning, I overheard him saying that a tall, swell gentleman arrived late last night at The Blue Boar. Who else could it be but you?"

Davenant's lips twitched. "What you saw may have been a trick of the shadows," he reminded Claverhouse. "And besides many tall gentlemen travel the London-Brighton road at all hours of the day—and night." He looked at Prendergast. "I rest my case. But just to assure you I have nothing to do with the young lady's disappearance, by all mean's search my bedroom."

Claverhouse and Prendergast both moved toward the bedroom door, but Prendergast pushed the former aside. A few seconds later, he returned. "There's no one there but the valet," he announced.

"Oh we must find her! We must!" moaned Lucretia, wringing her hands.

"Yes, indeed we must, we must," said Claverhouse.

"Huh, as if you two cared," snarled Prendergast. "Why, I wonder she didn't leave of her own accord to get away from you both!"

"Without her clothes!" Lucretia shrieked.

Their genuine alarm convinced Davenant that neither the aunt nor her nephew had anything to do with the girl's disappearance. They were obviously very worried, though he was sure this was not for the girl's safety but for the possible loss to them of a rich prize. They must also fear that now their harsh treatment of her was known to others, they

would be suspect in the girl's disappearance, that and worse if the child was not found.

Seeing that the trio was about to indulge in recriminations, which he knew were a waste of time, Davenant intervened. "Permit me to say that I have had some experience in finding missing persons. In such cases, time is of the essence. I and my servants are entirely at your service Prendergast."

The anger went from Prendergast's face. "Yes, yes, you are right."

"Then I suggest we return to your house ma'am," Davenant said to Lucretia, "and search it and the stables thoroughly before widening the search."

"But we've already done that," moaned Lucretia. "Her unsaddled horse is in its stall. There is no clue as to what has happened here."

So Miss Longstreet had at least got as far as the stables and unsaddled her horse, but what had happened to her after that?

Aloud Davenant said, "I believe we should all return to the house. Fresh eyes may spot something that was overlooked in the emotion of the moment."

Prendergast, having ridden a great deal that morning, gladly accepted Davenant's offer of a seat in his carriage for the few miles ride to the house. Lucretia and Claverhouse took their own carriage. During the journey, Prendergast, full of remorse, chastised himself verbally for failing to take the interest he should have taken in his niece's welfare. Occupied with his horse breeding, he had believed, he told Davenant, that the upbringing of a young woman was better left to an older one. And then in the last year or so, after many years of widowhood, he had spent much time courting the widow who was soon to become his wife. "But I know that is not an excuse for neglecting Minerva," he said ruefully.

Arriving at the house, Davenant, left his carriage in care of one of Lucretia's grooms, while Lucretia, Claverhouse and Prendergast, conducted him and Henry, through the house. Davenant paid particular attention to Miss Prendergast's bedroom: everything there was exactly as Prendergast had described earlier.

The stables, as Davenant knew from last night, were some way from the house near an outer wall. Inside, it was just large enough to house the equine requirements of a middle-aged lady and her young charge, the estate's farm horses being stabled elsewhere. At one end of the building was an open loft to store hay, and it was almost beneath this that Miss Longstreet's horse was stabled.

‘Fine bit o’ cattle, that,” Henry remarked.

“One of yours, Prendergast?” said Davenant.

Prendergast nodded.

Watched by Claverhouse, Lucretia and Prendergast, Davenant and Henry studied the stall. There was no evidence the horse had been ridden, so Miss Longstreet had obviously removed the saddle and blanket and the cloths used to muffle the sound of the hooves. But then what happened? Davenant wanted to know.

The answer was not long in coming.

Davenant’s nose twitched suddenly when a couple of stalks of straw fell on it. He raised a hand to brush them off, only to find even more straw falling down on him and the others.

They all looked up, their eyes widening in surprise.

Above them, peering down over the edge of the loft was the face of young girl, her tangled hair full of straw.

“Oh, Uncle John! You came! You came!” she cried.

“Thank God!” Prendergast sighed with relief. “But Minerva, what are you doing up there of all places?”

“Oh, I was going to run away to you in London last night, but then I changed my mind and wrote you a letter instead. When I put away Rainbow, I heard the stable cat mewing up in the loft. She was about to have babies. She had chosen the loft to have them in. I climbed the ladder to see, but when I reached the top, the ladder slipped and fell against the wall. I couldn’t get down, so I stayed with the cat while the kittens were born. Then I fell asleep up here, for I was so, so sleepy.” She held up a squeaking kitten and smiled. “Look, their eyes are not open yet.”

The impropriety of a fifteen-year old girl witnessing the rigours of birth should have been enough to send Aunt Lucretia into a spasm again, but it did not. Realising that all her plans for Minerva had come to naught, she felt only anger. “You wicked, wicked girl, frightening us all like that. And then to send that dreadful letter to your uncle after all I’ve done for you! Just wait ‘til I get you back at the house, girl! I’ll lock you in your room with nothing but bread and water for month!”

Prendergast glared at her. “She’s not staying with you. She’s going to London with me—today!” he roared. “You will have nothing more to do with her, d’ya hear!”

“But brother...”

“*Half*-brother!”

“...what will become of me. The house? My allowance?”

“You may keep them, ma’am, just so long as this fribble of a nephew of yours departs from it for good.”

By now Davenant and Henry had heaved the fallen ladder up against the loft, and Davenant was helping Miss Longstreet to descend.

“Inexpressibles! You hoyden,” wailed Lucretia aghast at the sight of Minerva’s rear end descending in her uncle’s old brown breeches. “I’m only, only too glad to have nothing more to do with you.”

And with that, she took her nephew’s arm and marched out of the barn.

“And good riddance,” said Prendergast before his niece threw herself into his arms.

Later that morning Davenant was waiting in the drawing room of the aunt’s house while Henry checked on the horses..

There was a knock at the door. Miss Longstreet poked her head around it and put a finger to her lips. “I know I shouldn’t be with you without a chaperone, but I had to see you before you left.”

She advanced toward him, an angelic figure at odds with her actions of last night, dressed in blue-sprigged muslin with a matching ribbon threaded through her golden brown curls and tied over her right eye in saucy bow.

He bowed and she bobbed a curtsy.

“Thank you so much for all that you did for me. I fear I put you to a great deal of unnecessary trouble.”

He raised a deprecatory hand. “I assure you I quite enjoyed our little adventure.”

She smiled, displaying two dimples. “I never thought everything would turn out so prodigiously well as it has done. Uncle John is taking me to London with him today. My maid is packing for me now. I am to stay at the house of his fiancée—I met her once and she is quite the most charming person—until they marry. Then we will all live together.” She clapped her hands, in delight. “Oh, and she has a daughter, so I will have a friend my own age, and may be more.”

“I must go now,” she said and held out her hand.

He took it in his and bent and kissed it.

She blushed and stared down at the back of her hand. “Oh my, that is the very first time a gentleman has kissed my hand!”

“I have no doubt I am but the first of legions of gentlemen, who, in the future, will be as honoured as I am to do so.”

Still blushing, she bobbed a quick curtsy and ran from the room.

The Bridle Cull Vanishes

Outside in the stable yard Davenant joined Henry and they watching a sullen Claverhouse drive off in his curricle.

“What now guv?”

“We’ll tarry just long enough for me to finish breakfast at The Blue Boar, then it’s off to London before I become entangled here with any more young schoolgirls with a predilection for highway robbery and kittens!”

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THE END