

'A parfit historical romance!'
Romantic Historical Reviews

STELLA RILEY



THE

PARFIT KNIGHT

ROCKLIFFE BOOK ONE

***THE
PARFIT
KNIGHT***

A Georgian Romance

Stella Riley

The Parfit Knight
Stella Riley
Smashwords Edition
Copyright 2012 Stella Riley

Discover other titles by Stella Riley at Smashwords.com

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Cover Portrait
Gerard Cornelis van Riebeeck
Mattheus Verheyden 1770

PROLOGUE

Surrey 1762

The day was hot and the sky a vast, uncharted ocean of blue. Beneath it only the brook seemed awake while, quiescently tranquil and lulled by the sun, the rest of the world spun languid dreams or was shrouded in sleep. Curving down from the quiet post-road, the lane was a dappled haven of hypnotically swaying foxgloves and the shimmering air was disturbed by nothing but the whispering murmur of leaves and the silver song of the water.

The child on the bank rolled lazily over to gaze into the clear, bubbling stream, so close that her shining fall of hair brushed its surface. A dragonfly hovered nearby and she lay very still, smiling as if it shared her joy in this very special day; for the dragonfly, the full sum of its brief existence and, for the child, her very last day in single figures.

Tomorrow she would be ten years old; and that was exciting, of course – birthdays always were – but it did seem that once you arrived in double figures you stayed there for a very long time. Even Great-Aunt Maria had not managed three yet and she was very old indeed. The girl gave a tiny gurgle of laughter as she tried to imagine herself with a skin like a wrinkled apple and a toothless grin. Then she felt a twinge of conscience for surely it was not at all funny for Auntie who had to be helped wherever she went and could not even read her own letters any more. Not that she seemed to mind it particularly – but perhaps that was something to do with having had so many adventures on account of somebody Uncle George disapprovingly called the ‘Old Pretender’; and that just went to prove that Auntie hadn’t always been an old woman. A fact that was as hard to believe as the other.

The sun beat down on her back through the leaf-green taffeta of her gown and she wondered idly where she had left her hat. She supposed that she ought to go and look for it since its loss would make the third in as many weeks and Mama would undoubtedly scold; but on such a lovely day a hat

seemed a matter of small importance and Mama never scolded for long. She closed her eyes and, laying her cheek on her arm, dabbled the fingers of her other hand in the cool water.

‘Rosie-rose is a lazy doze! Come *on*, you sluggard – or are you going to lie there all day?’

The taunting call shattered the afternoon’s peace and the girl’s eyes flew open. Then, without even glancing round, she closed them again and said, ‘Yes. Go away.’

There was a mocking laugh and the next instant her hat sailed over her head to land in the water with a splash.

‘Ugh!’ The girl leapt up in a flurry of laughter and damp taffeta as her lost hat floated serenely down-stream. ‘Just you wait, you beast! I’ll – ‘

‘Who’s waiting?’ teased the boy as he vanished into the trees on the far side of the lane. ‘If you want to catch me, you’ll have to run.’

It was unnecessary advice. Almost before the words were out, she had snatched up her skirts in both hands and was racing across the springy turf.

‘Faint-heart! But I’ll catch you – see if I don’t!’

Weaving his way into the heart of the copse, the boy heard her shout and, in the same moment, became aware that a gradual crescendo of distant sound was distant no longer. He stopped and swung round, struck by a sudden premonition.

‘No, Rose – wait!’

The girl neither answered nor checked her pace but darted up the lane, skirting the trees. It was silly of him, she decided, to think he could fool her so easily; a coach and travelling fast – but on the post-road, never this lane.

It was her last conscious thought as the team of blood chestnuts swept round the bend on top of her. There was a sensation of falling through aeons of painful, swirling blackness ... and then nothing.

Plunging wildly back in the direction he had come, the boy emerged in time to see the horses being dragged to an abrupt standstill while a man jumped down from the inside of the still-moving chaise; and then his horrified gaze took in the crumpled leaf-green form at the roadside and he

felt suddenly sick. His legs refused to obey him so that, instead of running, he could only stumble across the intervening space, dumbly terrified of what he would find.

The gentleman from the chaise was before him. Heedless of silks and laces, he knelt in the dust, one hand seeking the child's pulse while his eyes anxiously scanned her still, white face. Then he laid her wrist gently down, the sun striking sparks from the emerald on his finger and looked up at the equally white-faced youth beside him.

'Your sister?'

The boy nodded, his eyes fixed on the girl and his brain obsessed by the foolish thought that there was no blood. She could almost have been asleep except that she was so pale. She didn't *look* hurt. It should have made him feel better but somehow it didn't.

'It's alright.' The gentleman saw the question in the frightened blue eyes and answered it. 'She's been very lucky, I think – but will be the better for seeing a doctor.'

Blinking back an unexpected rush of hot tears, the boy said baldly, 'Are you sure she's not dead?' And was ashamed of the tremor in his voice.

'Quite sure.' Younger than his powdered head made him appear, the gentleman tactfully affected not to notice the tremor.

Behind them, the coachman hovered, wringing his hands.

'I tried to swing over, sir,' he said unhappily. 'But there was no warning – her being round the bend as she was. No one'd have stood a chance of avoiding her; not at - - ' He stopped abruptly.

'Not at that pace,' finished his master with a sort of grim placidity. 'Yes, Pierce. I know.' He lifted the girl very carefully in his arms and directed a briefly reassuring smile at her brother. 'Which is nearer – your home or the doctor's house?'

'The – the doctor's. It's that way.'

But mere directions, it seemed were not what the gentleman wanted and, young though he was, he had the habit of command. Dazedly allowing him to take charge, the boy found himself perched on the box beside the coachman

while his sister lay on the seat within and he did not demur until they drew up outside the doctor's house and he was told to stay where he was.

'I don't want to leave her,' he said mutinously, preparing to descend.

'No. I daresay you don't,' agreed the gentleman with crisp amiability as he lifted the girl out of the coach. 'But your parents should be informed and Pierce will need you to guide him. Pray convey my compliments to your father and beg him to make use of my chaise.'

'My uncle,' the boy corrected automatically. Then, 'Sir, it's all very well but -- '

Already half-way to the door with his fragile burden, the gentleman turned with a swiftly controlled loss of patience.

'It's not very well if you persist in wasting time in pointless argument,' he said deliberately. 'There is nothing you can do except that which I've bidden you. Now go. And if your uncle requires my name, you may tell him that it is Ballantyne. Dominic Ballantyne.'

~ * * * ~

TWELVE YEARS LATER

IN 1774 . . .

*He never yet no vileyne ne sayde
In all his lyf unto no maner wight
He was a verray parfit gentil knight*

Geoffrey Chaucer

ONE

Although it contrived to appear very much as usual, the gaming-room of White's wore a faint air of disapprobation. Beginning as no more than a watchful glint in the eyes of some of the older members, it had gradually deepened to something approaching scorn and finally found expression in low-voiced murmurs of contempt.

'The stakes are up again. By God, I'd not have thought it of Amberley.' Colonel Harding stared balefully at the large table where a game of dice was in progress.

'Nor I,' replied Mr Cardew, following his gaze. 'But if a year in France has taught him nothing but how to pluck a pigeon, then he'd best have stayed there.'

Viscount Ansford adjusted the position of his elaborate wig and gave an irritating titter.

'Perhapth my lord thuffered ill-luck in Parith and theekth the meanth to mend hith fortuneth.'

Not for the first time, Jack Ingram wondered how it was that the decorative Viscount never failed to construct sentences filled with the one letter he was incapable of pronouncing. Annoyed, though not because of the lisp, he allowed his eyes to dwell appreciatively on his lordship's blue-powdered head and said sweetly, 'Utter nonsense.'

Gripped by a moment of horrid doubt, the Viscount was too stricken to reply.

'Well, I hope so,' said Mr Cardew with blunt significance, 'but you can't deny that it don't look well. The play is devilish deep and Amberley has been accepting the boy's vowels for the last hour and more.'

Jack spared a brief glance for the youthful person of Robert Dacre, observing his flushed cheeks and the slight unsteadiness of the hand

engaged in writing yet another promissory note. His mouth tightened a little and he turned back to Mr Cardew with a sardonic smile.

‘It has perhaps escaped your notice that Mr Dacre’s presence at the table is solely due to his own rather heated insistence,’ he said evenly. ‘Amberley didn’t invite him.’

The Colonel snorted. ‘No – but he’s damned quick to take advantage. The boy’s little more than twenty – still green. And Amberley knows it!’

A look of distaste crossed Mr Ingram’s pleasant face as he rose unhurriedly from his seat and shook out the full skirts of his brocaded coat.

‘He also knows – as do we all – that this isn’t young Dacre’s first season. He’s been on the town a full two years and is therefore old enough to know better.’ He sketched a slight bow. ‘Your servant, gentlemen.’

Viscount Ansford watched him go with a distinct feeling of resentment.

‘No fineth,’ he said peevishly. ‘Doubtleth he and Amberley are prodigiouthly well-thuited.’

Apparently oblivious to the comment and feelings of animosity that his play was arousing in the conservative breasts of his fellow-members, the most noble Marquis of Amberley pushed a fresh pile of guineas to the stock already in front of him and called serenely for the next bet.

To the casual observer, he appeared much like any other gentleman in the room; a trifle more modish, perhaps – but in one so recently returned from Paris that was easily explained. No London tailor had fashioned that exquisitely-cut coat of moss-green velvet extravagantly laced with gold or designed the elegant floral vest that lay beneath it; and the folds of snowy lace that adorned both throat and wrist were the finest Mechlin.

Yet the quiet air of distinction that clung to the Marquis had little to do with his apparel. It was, perhaps, most obvious in his rejection of wig or powder, rouge and patches. Instead, he wore his own hair neatly but simply tied back in long ribands of black, against which it gleamed pale as silver-gilt in the candlelight; and, innocent of cosmetics, his face was lightly but undeniably tanned – as were the well-shaped tapering hands, half-hidden beneath their foaming ruffles. And there were other differences for the

discerning eye and ear accustomed to fashionable boredom – for no cynicism shadowed the grey-green eyes and no languid drawl marked the pleasant tones. Indeed, both eye and voice held more than a hint of lurking amusement and the firm-lipped mouth as much humour as resolution.

The Marquis of Amberley was rich, assured and thirty-four years old, with the reputation of being a law unto himself; and, in addition, he was possessed of a certain elusive charm which even his well-wishers were inclined to regard as frankly disastrous.

Just now, his careless dismissal of public opinion was causing his nearest well-wisher a good deal of disquiet and, from his position at the side of the room, the Honourable Jack Ingram stared irritably at his friend's face. As if aware of his scrutiny, the Marquis suddenly glanced across at him, laughter tugging at his mouth and brimming wickedly in his eyes. Then he lifted one brow in quizzical sympathy and restored his attention to the game. Jack relaxed; whatever else Amberley was, he was certainly not a fool.

'Why so thoughtful, my dear?' asked a soft, drawling voice from behind him. 'One would almost think you upset to see the bantling lose a few of his feathers.'

Jack turned to meet the Duke of Rockcliffe's mocking gaze.

'Hardly,' he said. 'Though I wish it was somebody else collecting them.'

'Ah yes.' The Duke raised his glass with characteristic languor and levelled it at Amberley. 'But you can't deny that it has a certain ... poetry. And he does it so well.'

'Practice makes perfect, in fact,' snapped Jack sarcastically. 'You have only to add that both Amberley and Paris are expensive and you'll have said what everyone else is saying.'

'Unworthy, Jack.' His Grace lowered the glass to make a haughty, sweeping gesture. 'I never run with the herd, you know.'

Mr Ingram gave way to unwilling laughter.

'I do, of course.' He paused for a moment. 'Very well. If you don't believe Amberley is fleecing young Dacre in an attempt to recoup his fortunes – what do you think he's up to?'

‘The same as you,’ replied his Grace, lazily amused. ‘He believes himself – mistakenly, in my view – to be teaching the boy a useful and well-deserved lesson. And the Honourable Robert, of course, joined the table for much the same reason.’ He produced an enamelled snuff-box and offered it. ‘Aurora, by Ravenet of Battersea. Quite pretty, don’t you think? Though not, perhaps, best suited for evening use.’ He sighed. ‘How vexing. More an afternoon box, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Jack, used to and undeceived by this by-play.

‘Yes,’ repeated Rockliffe with a faint smile. ‘Now ... where was I? Ah yes. Friend Robert, you must be aware, has neither forgotten nor forgiven Amberley for succeeding where he failed with the so-delectable Fanny. One cannot but see his point. But his dreams of retribution – so melodramatic! – have gone sadly awry; for instead of breaking Amberley’s bank, I’d estimate him to have lost some three thousand guineas.’

‘Hell!’ said Jack, startled. ‘As much as that?’

‘Oh – easily. Experience, as they say, is never bought cheaply.’ The Duke turned to go and then looked back to say blandly, ‘Amusing, isn’t it?’

The Honourable Robert Dacre did not think so. And neither, if his expression was any true guide, did the tall young gentleman in blue who stood behind him, one hand resting on the back of his chair. Robert had left sobriety behind him and with it any clear idea of his losses. Only one resolve remained and that grew stronger with every bottle – a fact which was beginning to dawn on his watching companion. The blue-coated gentleman cast a dubious glance at the Marquis, unknown to him before this evening, and encountered a look which made him suddenly very angry. The fellow knew; he knew he had only to pass the bank to another for Robert to stop playing – had known it all along and yet done nothing.

His fingers closed hard on his friend’s shoulder and he said urgently, ‘For God’s sake, Bob – come away. Haven’t you lost enough?’

Robert shrugged the hand off and over-bright brown eyes swivelled to meet worried blue ones. ‘No. No, damn it. I haven’t,’ he replied thickly. ‘But you don’t have to stay, Ver. Quite ca ... cap ... I can manage without you.’

Captain Lord Philip Vernon, late of His Majesty's army, had more than one reason to doubt this but nothing in his four-month experience of London society had taught him what might be done to alter the situation. He was, however, familiar enough with Mr Dacre to be fairly sure that the morrow would see him seeking a loan to cover tonight's losses; and he was also uneasily aware that his betrothed might well expect him to come to her brother's assistance.

Philip was not, as yet, very well-acquainted with his future bride. The match had been hatched between her father and his uncle; and when Uncle George had died, forcing him to resign his commission and take his place as head of the family, Philip had decided that he could do worse than follow the old gentleman's wishes and offer for Isabel Dacre. But Uncle George, he thought grimly, could never have foreseen the possibility of Robert who – though pleasant enough in the ordinary way – was wildly extravagant and bidding fair to become a hardened gamester. Not that Robert's excesses were any excuse for the Marquis, whose honour should recoil from the thought of winning large sums from a foolish boy.

Help was at hand and from an unexpected source. Even as Lord Philip debated the wisdom of appealing to Amberley's better nature, always supposing that he had one, the matter was taken out of his hands by a tall and rakishly elegant gentleman in purple who strolled to the Marquis's side to gaze down at him out of mocking dark eyes.

Making a deep, flourishing bow, he said, 'My lord Marquis – your most obedient servant!'

Grey-green eyes laughed back at him as Amberley rose to respond in kind.

'And yours, my lord Duke!' Then, raising one eyebrow, he said pleasantly, 'Well, Rock? You interrupt the game, you know.'

'Indeed,' drawled Rockcliffe, flicking an invisible speck from one deep, braided cuff. 'Indeed. That was my intention.'

Somehow – and Philip was not at all sure how he did it – the Duke was commanding everyone's attention. Gradually, the room's companionable chatter faded and died until every man there had his eyes fixed on the two

facing each other across the Hazard table. And, as Philip watched, he was struck by a strange sense of likeness between them. Something that had nothing to do with parity of height or age but was more a similarity of type; of affinity in experience and character. Then he shrugged the ridiculous notion aside. The Duke was languid and smooth-spoken with, apparently, some sense of honour; and at least his hair was conventionally powdered.

Amberley, it appeared, was waiting with unabated good-humour for his Grace to continue – and eventually he did so.

‘I’ve a mind, if you will permit me, to try a throw for your bank.’

If the atmosphere had been tense before, it was now positively electric. Philip glanced down at Robert and perceived from his glazed expression that he no longer had any clear idea of what was happening.

The Marquis spread eloquent hands and smiled.

‘For myself, I have no objection. But perhaps these gentlemen ... ?’ It was a courteous appeal to the table and, one by one, as if some master-puppeteer had pulled their strings, each signified his consent. All that is, except Robert – who was fast coming to resemble a glassy-eyed effigy.

Like all moments of eagerly anticipated crisis, it was over in a flash, leaving the company silent and faintly dissatisfied. And the one man amongst them who ought, by rights, to show some disappointment or shame, apparently felt neither.

‘Behold, your Grace,’ announced Amberley, with what Philip privately considered inappropriate levity, ‘the bank is yours.’

Amusement lurked in Rockcliffe’s eyes.

‘Behold also,’ he returned suavely, ‘that Mr Dacre has fallen asleep.’

As he glanced quickly down to see that it was, alas, all too true, Philip heard the Marquis give a tiny choke of laughter and say unsteadily, ‘*Pique, repique* and *capot* – and let that be a lesson to you!’

This made no sense whatsoever to Philip. He’d have liked to thank Rockcliffe for his intervention which, though it had turned out to be unnecessary, he was convinced had been well-meant; but his acquaintance with the Duke was almost non-existent and he therefore had no idea of how

such an overture would be received, so he gave a faint sigh and turned his attention to the tedious task of getting Robert home.

He was in the vestibule, engaged in keeping his future brother-in-law upright against the wall whilst waiting for the porter to summon a chair when he heard a now-familiar voice say lightly, 'Shades of Milo and his ass. Do you need any help?'

It was the last straw and Philip, his patience tried to the limit, cast the Marquis a look of blazing scorn. 'Thank you, no. I think you've left it a little late, don't you?'

Amberley met the angry blue gaze sympathetically.

'You would naturally assume so. Have I quite spoilt your evening?'

'Oh no! I *enjoy* watching a boy being fleeced by a hardened gamester nearly twice his age,' snapped Philip. 'But that's beside the point. I don't know if you make a habit of this sort of thing, but –'

'No, indeed. How should you?' enquired the Marquis cheerfully. 'Forgive me but I'm afraid I really have no intention of explaining myself to you – nor do I have the remotest interest in your opinion of my character.' He smiled suddenly. 'Permit me to point out that Mr Dacre is slipping.'

Philip stifled an oath, caught swiftly at Robert's coat and jerked him upright. When he turned round again it was to find that Mr Ingram had appeared and was regarding them with mild anxiety.

The Marquis strolled unhurriedly to the door, pausing to cast a knowledgeable eye over Robert before addressing himself once more to Philip.

'When your friend has recovered what little sense God gave him, I should be obliged if you will tell him to wait on me before noon the day after tomorrow. Without fail.'

'Duns after you, my lord?' taunted Philip before he could stop himself.

The grey-green eyes surveyed him with resigned patience. Then, 'You would do well to acquire a little tolerance – and to recollect that you don't know me at all. This matter is between Mr Dacre and myself and your

interference in it does me no harm and you little credit. As for my message – try to accept that it's in Mr Dacre's best interest to do as I ask.'

No longer amused, the voice held a crisp authority uncannily like Philip's erstwhile senior officers. Uncomfortably aware that his anger had betrayed him into a gross lack of conduct – a fact which naturally did nothing to improve his temper – he put a rigid curb on his tongue and said coldly, 'I doubt we are likely to agree on that, sir. But you need have no fear. I'll see to it that Mr Dacre is made aware of your wishes.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' The ice melted and, after a second's shrewd appraisal, the Marquis asked abruptly, 'Hussars or Grenadiers?'

Philip's jaw dropped. 'G-grenadiers. I sold out.'

Amberley smiled. 'I see. You should try persuading Mr Dacre to sign up for a time. It would do him a great deal of good.' And with a slight, graceful bow he was gone, leaving Mr Ingram to follow helplessly in his wake while Lord Philip stared after them in complete bewilderment.

Strolling across Chesterfield Street in the direction of Berkeley Square, Jack caught up with the Marquis and began with the question that took rather ridiculous precedence over all others.

'How did you know he was an army man?'

'Impressed, Jack?'

'Very. I thought you left omniscience to Rockliffe.'

'And so I do,' came the laughing reply. 'No – I'm afraid it was merely something in his bearing. That and the severity of his tailoring. Do you know who he is?'

Mr Ingram shook his head. 'No. But I've spent very little time in town this winter. Rock could probably tell you.'

'Not a doubt of it.' Amberley paused and then said thoughtfully, 'A pleasant enough young fellow when he's off his high ropes, I should think – but I can't imagine what leads him to spend time with Robert Dacre. Apart from the fact that there must be five or six years between them, I can't imagine they've very much in common.'

‘No.’ Jack thought for a moment and then said, ‘I suppose you know what everyone was saying back there?’

‘Why, yes.’ Amusement rippled through the pleasant voice. ‘They think I lost my fortune in the wicked flesh-pots of Paris and have come home to repair it; that I’m a ravening wolf, preying on the innocent – a villainous fleecer of youths – a leader of lambs to the slaughter. And worse still, they’re not at all sure I’m not a Captain Sharp.’

‘Don’t be an idiot!’ snapped Jack, crossly. ‘No one thinks you cheated – though, if they did think it, you’d have no one to blame but yourself. It’s one thing not to care what’s said of you but quite another to deliberately create a false impression. There are times when I think you’re a candidate for Bedlam!’

The Marquis eyed him with mischievous concern.

‘Calm down, Jack – before you suffer an apoplexy. And you should know by now that I never deliberately create anything. I simply let things take their course.’

Grasping his arm, Mr Ingram pulled him to a halt.

‘Nick - how much does that young fool owe you?’

‘I’m afraid I wasn’t counting,’ replied Amberley, his attention plainly elsewhere. ‘If I promise not to run away, do you think you might cease mauling my favourite coat?’

‘Rock thinks it to be over three thousand,’ said Jack, letting go of the coat but not of his argument.

‘Does he? Well, well – he has been busy.’ This with a certain acidity. ‘And there I was thinking that he only interfered out of a desire to steal the stage.’

‘You know perfectly well that he did,’ came the dry response. ‘It’s a habit with him. He no more thinks you a flat-catcher than I do.’

‘I thank you both.’

‘Don’t mention it. I assume you’ve no intention of letting the boy pay you?’

The Marquis crossed northwards into Berkeley Street.

‘Do you? Now why should you think that?’ he asked sweetly.

‘Oh bloody hell!’ breathed Mr Ingram, disgust getting the better of him. ‘I wonder if you know just how infuriating you can be?’

‘Well, I *think* I do,’ murmured Amberley meekly.

‘I doubt it. I’ve known you for a dozen years or more and – ‘

‘As long as that?’

‘Yes. And you’ve never been any different. For – ‘

‘Really? Well, that’s a comfort.’

Jack was forced to smother a grin. ‘Who for?’ he retorted. And then, without waiting for a reply, ‘You know that I know you won’t take Dacre’s money – but for some lunatic reason you’d sooner bleed to death than admit it. Well? Correct me if I’m wrong!’

‘I wouldn’t dare,’ said Amberley amicably.

There was an explosive silence and then Mr Ingram said carefully, ‘I sometimes wonder why I put up with you.’

‘No you don’t.’ His lordship laughed. ‘It’s because I can give you the entrée to Richmond. Can you doubt it? And, by the way, I’ll be driving there tomorrow – if you care to come with me.’

This was obvious bait but none the less tempting for that and it was with very real regret that Jack recollected a previous engagement. Invitations to the Dowager Marchioness of Amberley’s charming retreat were all too rare and the Dowager herself [though anyone less like a dowager Jack had never met] rarely left it.

‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘I’m promised to Gilmore.’

They had reached Bruton Place and Mr Ingram’s lodgings. The Marquis turned to him with a teasing smile. ‘Just as well. I’ve really no ambition to acquire you as a step-father.’

Jack grinned back sheepishly. ‘Hardly! It’s just that she’s so ... so ... ‘

‘I know. And, like you, I’ve never met a woman who could hold a candle to her. So if and when I do, I’ll take the greatest care not to present the lady to you.’

‘Wise of you!’ laughed Jack. Then, ‘Are you staying in Richmond or shall I see you in the Club on Friday?’

‘Neither. I leave for Amberley when I’ve settled matters with young Dacre.’

Mr Ingram stared at him. ‘You’re mad! It’s January and there’s more snow on the way, if I’m any judge.’

‘I’m only going to Hertfordshire,’ the Marquis protested. ‘It’s not entirely beyond the realms of civilisation, you know – and I haven’t seen the place in over a year. My agent writes of a score of matters requiring my attention and, if I don’t go now, I doubt I’ll get there before the spring. Only four days back in London and already the tentacles of Society are beginning to close in on me.’

‘You may find they uncloset again fast enough after tonight,’ warned Jack, reverting to his original theme. ‘I know Robert Dacre is a spoilt and mannerless young cub sharply in need of a kicking but he already resents you more than is reasonable and, given the opportunity, I believe he’d be glad to do you a mischief.’

‘Don’t worry. He won’t be given the opportunity.’

‘Well, I hope not.’ Mr Ingram eyed his friend with resigned exasperation. ‘You’re not going to discuss it, are you?’

‘No. I rather hoped, you see,’ replied the Marquis with a hint of wistfulness, ‘that I didn’t need to.’

Jack was not proof against that tone.

‘Oh devil take you, Nick – you’re impossible. Go home to bed.’

Amberley laughed. ‘Is that a blessing or a curse? Either way, I feel I should sympathise with you.’

‘Cold comfort!’ Jack hesitated and then said, ‘By the way – what happened to Fanny? I take it you didn’t bring her back with you?’

His lordship turned back to survey him mockingly from the middle of the road.

‘No. I didn’t bring her back. I think, like you, she found my levity rather trying – especially when relating to such vital necessities of life as emerald tiaras and Mediterranean villas. At all events, she hurled a coffee-pot at my head one morning, favoured me with a sadly unflattering description of my person, my character and my ... er ... capabilities – and finished with a

graphic hypothesis on my genealogy. Then she ran off with a Genoese Count. A very *rich* Genoese Count, so I believe.'

'Oh dear,' said Jack. 'So what did you do?'

'The only thing possible,' replied Amberley gravely. 'I'm afraid that I laughed.'

~ * * * ~