

## The Marriage Game

'The enormous room was ominously quiet but for the crackling of the fire in the grate and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner. Meg looked at the floor, her breath coming in short gasps as her mind raced. She knew what was coming. She glanced at Lady Jessop through her lowered lashes and felt her stern gaze. Meg's cheeks burned as the family ancestors gazed down from the walls with silent disapproval. Meg could find no words, she blushed even more and stared at the floor.

'Well girl?' demanded Lady Jessop. 'I'm waiting'.

Lady Jessop was a tall forbidding woman and everyone in the household was wary of her. Fortunately, she rarely ventured below stairs and most of the servants had little to do with her. They avoided her as much as they could and scuttled away whenever they heard her approaching.

Prior to this summons, Meg had only seen her from a distance, so her fear was tinged with curiosity. She was particularly interested to see whether she could spot any similarity between Lady Jessop and her daughter Eleanor, who was actually the cause of this confrontation, though Meg would never dream of saying so.

'There is nothing I can say to excuse myself your ladyship. I am sorry. I should never have interfered, but', she hesitated, 'but ... I didn't really have a choice your Ladyship and thought that what I did would be for the best'.

Lady Jessop's well corseted frame stiffened ominously. She raised her eyeglass and looked hard at Meg with flinty eyes. There was no warmth or kindness here and Meg shivered with the realisation that she would almost certainly be dismissed from her post and told to leave; to leave this house where despite the grandeur, everyone, apart from Lady Jessop had been so friendly, so welcoming; to leave this house where she had begun to feel so very much at home.

'I have absolutely no interest in your excuses girl. The fact that you read the letter is an unforgivable breach of the trust that my family has shown you. Therefore I have no alternative but to demand that you to leave my house immediately – and, she added with finality, 'without any references!'

Meg felt the tears welling. Unable to defend herself any further against this injustice without implicating Eleanor, she bobbed a curtsy, then turned quickly and ran to leave the room, but before she could turn the handle, the door was opened and James stood in the doorway. Trapped between mother and son – Meg stood rooted to the spot. She struggled to control her emotions, but James looked at her kindly and that alone was enough to break down her defences. The tears began to flow.

James came to her and gently raised her head in his hand. ‘Meg, answer me truthfully now, did you read the letter?’

‘Yes sir’, Meg said quietly through her tears, ‘but t’was only to save Miss Eleanor from the shame of it all. I only wanted to help her’.

‘Very well Meg, you may go now’ he said kindly, ‘go down to the kitchen and ask cook to give you a cup of tea. Wait for me there’.

Lady Jessop began to protest. ‘Mother, be quiet’, said James, ‘you have no idea what a favour Meg has done this family. Leave this to me’. He softened his tone as he turned to Meg. ‘Off you go now Meg, I will send for you shortly’.

‘But sir’, Meg whispered with more than a hint of guile, ‘Her ladyship told me to leave the house’.

‘Leave her ladyship to me Meg’, he said, ‘you will not be leaving this house today, or any time soon’.

Meg scuttled out of the room closing the door behind her, Lady Jessop’s protests following her faintly as she began to descend the great staircase towards the kitchen, her thoughts in turmoil.

She liked working at the Manor house, it was the best position she had ever had, but Lady Jessop had taken an instant dislike to her and had a nasty tongue and a temper to go with it. Meg knew that even though James might rein his mother in on this occasion, the battle was likely to rage for some time yet and she felt far from secure despite the assurances that James had offered.