

Chapter Three

As soon as Ben Queensman entered the sickroom in Lord Leicester's fashionable townhouse, he knew very well the lady was aware of his presence. Neither of them spoke a word, nor was there the slightest movement in the huge bed, but the very air they breathed seemed replete with some fiery energy. Though he could not see her face, he guessed she watched him standing, waiting, daring her to make the first move.

The air itself, while hot and full of strange currents, smelled surprisingly sweet. A large bouquet of purplish flowers—larkspur perhaps?—threatened to topple a delicate table, but they alone could not account for the scent. Indeed, it felt as if something of the outdoors entered the bedchamber with him, for Ben could sooner imagine himself in a field of barley than in the company of a dying girl. And, so imagining, he added conviction to the suspicion he had harbored since Raeborn told him of his beloved's ailment—he believed Lady Larkspur's illness to be nothing but artifice. The chambers of the sick and infirm were filled with all the odors of humanity and earthiness, but they never smelled like spring meadows.

And yet the family appeared utterly convinced of Lady Larkspur's decline. When he had arrived at the house ten minutes ago, all four sisters were standing in attendance, their faces full of worry and care. Behind them, Miss Janet Tavish sat huddled in a chair, barely able to meet his eyes. And Lord and Lady Leicester hurried into the hallway almost at once, too concerned to let a polite interval pass after they heard his knock at the door. These were not the signs of a masquerade, the object of which could only be to release Lady Larkspur from her betrothal to Lord Raeborn; rather, they were signs of genuine grief.

"Do you not wish to see her, sir?" Lady Leicester asked tentatively, presuming to give him a little push into the room. And then, in a soft voice, "It is all right, darling. It is only Mr. Queensman to offer us his opinion."

2 Lady Larkspur Declines / Sobel, Sharon

Ben glanced down at the worried mother and guessed she had been working out her anguish at the easel. A smudge of blue paint stained her cheek, making her look almost as young as her five daughters. During the few times they had met, he felt her aloofness from the rest of her family, but now he guessed her concern for Larkspur was serious enough to warrant her removing herself from her studio. Her place in the sickroom was certainly necessary just now; he could not presume to examine a young woman without her mother present.

"I will not hurt you, my lady," he said as he approached the bed. "Nor will I do anything to add to your present distress."

From the tumble of blankets a small white hand rose up and attempted to brush him away.

"At least she still lives," Lady Leicester murmured, and reached out blindly for the nearest chair. "I fear she may not have long."

Ben did not doubt he might allay such a fear, but he looked first to find the evidence to do so.

Slowly, noiselessly, he came closer to the large bed in the center of the room, dismissing his unbidden memories of fairy tales in which the prince dared awaken a sleeping beauty. A pity his own motives were so mercenary; he came not to rescue a maiden but to expose her. And, in any case, the princess was not his for the asking.

Ben pulled aside the gauzy white fabric arrayed around the canopy and gently pushed away the edge of a blanket obscuring Lady Larkspur's face. With her bright hair spread upon her pillow and a lace nightdress buttoned neatly to the neck, there was nothing of the customary dishabille of the fevered patient, nor any evidence of discomfort. She looked like nothing so much as a porcelain doll.

Suddenly her eyes shot open, very wide and far too clear.

"I do not believe we need your opinion, sir," she said. "The very fact of your presence adds greatly to my pain and distress."

"I am sorry to hear it, for it goes against my oath to aggravate your condition. If it alleviates your concern for my trespass, allow me to reassure you I am here on behalf

of my cousin Raeborn, who fears for your well-being.”

The bright eyes closed, a little too tightly.

“Please tell dear Lord Raeborn to give up all hope and abandon me. I will not hold him. Advise him to find happiness with another.”

Ben felt grateful her eyes were shut, for he could scarcely conceal his grin.

“He will not, my lady. He tells me he loves you dearly.”

She looked at him again, her eyes full of distrust and dislike.

“How could he say so? Your cousin does not know me at all!”

“Calm yourself, my lady. Such a display of vehemence could damage your already weakened heart,” Ben said soothingly, and chose not to add how it had already damaged her cunning performance. Before she could turn from him, he reached out to touch her forehead and was surprised to find it damp and clammy. He frowned.

Lady Larkspur displayed the wit to flutter her long eyelashes and seal her traitorous lips.

Silently, he ran his fingers down her lovely face, feeling the firm, smooth skin under the layer of moisture, and her admirable bone structure. With his other hand, he pulled away the layers of blankets to examine the rest of her, and she promptly crossed her hands over the bodice of her nightdress. And there, just where her wrists met, he saw several drops of water staining the fine cloth.

Ben bit down on his lip as he looked beyond the bed to a basin of water on a nearby table. A linen cloth hung at its edge, its drippings threatening the fine veneer of the wood.

How excellent her deception! But how much more convincing she would have been if she had bothered to douse her entire body in water just before his arrival.

“She does not seem to have a great fever,” he said, turning to her mother, but Lady Larkspur had something to say about that.

“I am very warm,” she insisted.

“Perhaps you would feel a good deal better if you did not have the weight of ten blankets upon you,” he retorted, and threw half of them off the bed.

“I will surely die without them,” she insisted, and moved quickly to recover them.

But Ben was even quicker, and caught her around the waist before she could reach them. Her body pressed against his, and when she turned breathlessly to look at him, her sweetly scented hair fluttered across his face. Through her thin nightdress he could feel the beating of her heart, sure and strong, and the soft uncorseted roundness of her breasts.

In the course of his professional life, he had necessarily developed an intimate knowledge of the female anatomy, but he did not recall ever having so unprofessional a response to it. Surely, if he had believed her truly ill, he would never have had such a reaction. And since she was already promised to his cousin, his unruly desires must be suppressed.

He attempted to mask his confusion before she could even guess at it. Still holding her, he reached with his free hand to his leather bag and withdrew his most useful of instruments. Affixing one end to his ear—an awkward business, since he still held the lady upright—he pressed the other against her back. She wiggled, an act for which she surely was not aware of the consequences on his state of mind. And body.

Her heart, somewhat accelerated in pace, showed no signs of quitting her anytime soon.

“I can hardly breathe,” she gasped, and tried to pull away.

Here might have been the one symptom of truth, for his own tight grasp of her put pressure on her diaphragm, and their awkward proximity might very well leave her breathless. Gently, and regretfully, he pressed her back down against the pillows and covered her with the undermost, thinnest, blanket.

“Is that better?” he asked as he put back his instrument.

“No,” she insisted. “I do not feel better at all.”

He deliberately fussed with the clasp on his case and glanced towards her mother before he spoke. Lady Leicester, apparently unconcerned with the proprieties in the case, dozed in her cushioned chair.

“I am surprised to hear it, my lady. For I cannot find anything at all wrong with you,” he said softly.

Lark glowered at him from her nest of pillows and narrowed her eyes.

“Then you must be a very poor physician, if you cannot discover the cause of my malaise!” she cried out.

He raised his brows.

“And you, my lady, must be a very poor patient if you cannot invent symptoms convincing enough to prove me wrong!”

“I invent nothing! I have been ill since the evening of my sister’s ball, barely able to leave my bed. My . . . my limbs are quite weak and my thinking in complete disarray . . .”

“And yet you appear very clear and lucid just now.”

She paused and glanced towards her mother. Ben admired her tenacity, for he guessed her scheme was entirely of her own working and would have little support if he chose to challenge her in front of the others. It would be easy to defeat her, and thus bless her marriage to Raeborn.

But for reasons he did not care to examine too closely, he preferred not to do so. Not yet.

Lady Larkspur cleared her throat. “It comes and goes, I am told. I doubt I will remember anything of this interview an hour from now,” she said with a deep sigh.

“A pity,” Ben answered, “for I believe it will remain fixed in my memory for many years to come.”

“And why might it be so? What interest do you retain in this affair?”

“Why, none at all, except for a professional one, and a sense of some obligation to a relation.”

“We are scarcely related at all, sir.”

“So you have told me at least as many times as we have met. I am often admired for my keen intellect, and therefore I assure you your words have been completely understood. But you misunderstand me. I did not refer to our own tenuous connection, but rather to the stronger one I share with Raeborn. He and I have not enjoyed many occasions on which to meet, but my present business in London—and his concerns—have brought us together for a common purpose.” Ben’s own convictions strengthened as he spoke, and he added, “He is not a bad person, my lady.”

Lady Larkspur looked at him with patent distrust.

"I am sure he is a perfect gentleman. I hope he will not be shattered when you tell him I am not the woman for him, for I am incapable of becoming a wife."

"You seemed perfectly competent a week or so ago when you expected to marry Mr. Floor," Ben said and lifted her hand from the blanket. It felt warm and dry.

She tried to pull away. "You have pained me all the more to remind me of his perfidy! Please do not do so again!" Since he would not release her hand, she chose to turn her face away. "And his name is Mr. Moore."

"Forgive my error. Perhaps it is due to the low estimation in which I now hold the man for the damage he has done to you."

A muffled sound came from the pillows, and Ben realized she was trying to stifle a laugh. It was the first time she had exhibited anything other than scorn in his company, and he marveled at his unexpected ability to produce such a response.

"But he is best forgotten, even if forgiveness will not come easily," Ben continued quickly. "Your present state of grief will pass, and your recovery will be complete. Raeborn assures me he will wait."

Ben knew he tested her, purposely inciting her to reveal the true state of affairs. He realized he wanted nothing so much as her admission of playacting her illness, and gambled that his consoling, conciliatory tone would achieve it.

"He must not sacrifice himself for nought," she sighed melodramatically.

"You are too modest, my lady. I would not consider winning your hand in marriage to be of little consequence. The rewards would be very great."

"So is my pain! Please leave me, Mr. Queensman, for I fear there is nothing you can do, for all your reputed skills!"

So rarely had a patient dismissed him, he felt unprepared for the flicker of anger it produced. The lady would not have Raeborn, but she would not have him either. And so it cut at his pride.

"But I did not say I could do nothing, my lady. I could find nothing wrong, but physicians rarely concede their own powerlessness." Still holding her, he unbuttoned her nightdress at the wrist with his free hand, and pushed up her sleeve. "It is an age-old cure I propose, one guaranteed to release the fever. It would be a pity to scar your flesh, but you give me no alternative."

She sat up at once, and pulled her arm away with a strength unusual in a woman, let alone one on her deathbed. Ben had the grace to look surprised, though he had managed to get the very response he desired.

“I will not be bled!” Lady Larkspur hissed at him. “I remember what the butchers who called themselves physicians did to my grandmother, and I will not be so violated! You call yourself a doctor, sir, but if you do what you propose, your services would be better employed at the charnel house!”

“Lark! Dear girl, you are returned to us!” Lady Leicester cried from her chair, and rushed to the bed. “Mr. Queens-man, we are forever indebted to you for the restoration of our daughter, for she seems entirely back in spirit. Whatever did you do to enact a cure so quickly?”

I threatened her with real physical pain, Ben thought ruefully, knowing how unworthy it was of him to have done it. Instead, he said nothing, merely watching his artful patient being gathered into her mother’s arms. Over Lady Leicester’s soft shoulder, Lady Larkspur scowled at him.

“It is an experimental treatment, rarely used, madam. It jolts the patient into an excited state and rids her body of ill humors.”

“Dare we hope its effects are permanent? Is my daughter’s progress assured? I am eager to give the family the good news, sir. Her father will be forever grateful.”

As the lady spoke, her recalcitrant daughter started to slip from her arms like sand through a sieve. Her eyes closed, and she made little gasping noises, as if she were deprived of air to breathe. Lady Leicester set her down gently on the pillows and turned to Ben, her expression distraught.

If the damned girl does not die of her own willfulness, someone ought to hasten her progress, he thought angrily. To subject her caring family to such torture seemed unforgivable.

“What has happened, sir? We cannot lose her, for we love her so.” Lady Leicester lifted a paint-stained hand to her forehead. “What shall we tell Lord Raeborn?”

On the other hand, to force a young girl to marry an aged man who cared for her only as an investment for the future was unforgivable in its own way.

"My lady," he began slowly, "we must tell Lord Raeborn and your family that she is not yet recovered."

From the pillow, the bright eyes flickered.

But Lady Leicester demanded his attention. "Is there any hope for it? What must we do? Please understand, Mr. Queensman, our family will spare no expense for her recovery. And your generous cousin made a similar offer, though there is no reason. We are quite able to manage, of course."

"I am sure Raeborn did not doubt your ability but only meant to ensure your willingness. Perhaps he also intended to confirm his own interests in the case, which he tells me are considerable," Ben said diplomatically. Indeed, if Raeborn made such an offer, it appeared his interests were greater than even Ben imagined. The old man had never been known for his open hand.

"Of course. He assures us he has admired Larkspur from afar for many years and is prepared to treat her kindly." The good mother's voice faltered over the last few words.

"I am sure of it. And yet . . ." Ben hesitated, wondering how to phrase his question without sounding like a medieval herbalist. "Is there any talk of love?"

"Love?" Lady Leicester was justifiably amused. "Why, Mr. Queensman, you are more of a romantic than I would credit you! How can there be such a thing, when Lark and Raeborn have scarcely met? And remember, she only recently gave her heart to another."

"That is precisely the problem. My lady, your daughter is lovesick, for she has been dealt a blow to her heart by one who disappointed her most severely. Raeborn's current declaration eases nothing, but may only add to her burden."

"I see," Lady Leicester said, though clearly she did not. "Do you propose we marry them hastily, so she may come to love your cousin? Would that do?"

Ben was not prepared for the lady's decisiveness.

"I believe such matters take some time."

The lady's smile broadened. "Mr. Queensman, if I may be a bit impertinent, have you ever been in love yourself?"

He had nothing to lose by telling her the truth, or at least most of it. For he could hardly reveal that her recalcitrant daughter was the only lady he had ever met who managed to ignite certain unbidden sparks in the solid timber of his sensibility.

“I have had little time in my life to engage in such sport, my lady. I have studied hard and have used my knowledge more energetically than most physicians. As you may know, I operate a small hospital for the poor in Brighton. It requires a good deal of me, and I have yet to meet a woman anxious for such a rival.”

Lady Leicester patted his hand with motherly comfort. “I am sure there is such a lady, Mr. Queensman. She will not be the sort of spoiled young chit you are likely to find in fashionable circles, but a woman of developed character. Perhaps someone who has been ill herself, and will think on your patients with compassion.”

“I will not give up hope, then.”

“But what do you propose to do?”

Ben felt at a loss to defend himself, for unlike Raeborn, he imagined no set path to finding a wife. And, no matter her kindness, he did not intend to explain such things to Lady Leicester.

When he did not answer, she added helpfully, “With my daughter, sir. If it is only love that can cure her, how may we hasten its arrival?”

“Ah, yes,” Ben said gratefully. “Love may very well do the trick, but it is not the only solution I propose. Lady Larkspur must be distracted from her extreme distress and would do well with a change of scenery. Remaining here in bed, receiving only family members and doing little to alleviate boredom cannot be beneficial to her health. I prescribe a change of scenery.”

He left the bedside to approach the shrouded window and drew the heavy velvet aside. It was a glorious day, the sort that would tempt him to leave his hospital and walk upon the beach if he were in Brighton. The window clasp moved easily between his fingers, making him suspect it had been used often, and recently. He opened the pane, welcoming in the sweet air of the garden below.

“Should we bring her outside? I thought it myself, sir! For I have ever been an advocate of a daily walk and outdoor endeavor. I believe my daughters have been healthier for it . . . until Lark took ill.”

Ben turned and smiled encouragingly. "I thought it myself, my lady, for it is unusual to see a family of five natural beauties. And so we shall return Lady Larkspur to her sisters' excellent company. But I think a turn in the park insufficient to produce the sort of cure we desire in this case. I should like to remove your daughter from London and bring her to the seaside."

Lady Leicester frowned. "We once summered in Margate, when the girls were very little. It is no longer fashionable, but I suppose we might rent a cottage near the beach."

"It sounds perfectly delightful, but I rather thought she might do better in a sanatorium."

"Goodness! That seems very severe! Are they not reserved for the very ill or the very old?"

"Indeed they are, my lady. But are we not talking about your daughter's life? She will be in excellent company."

"And are there such things in Margate?"

Ben took a deep breath. "There are not. But I am thinking of a very fine destination farther south, where the king's own physician has established a respite. Mr. Knighton attracts only the finest patients."

"In Dover? Or Eastbourne, perhaps?"

"Not quite. In Brighton, in the very shadow of the king's new Pavilion," Ben explained. "And there is yet another advantage, of course. It is very close to my own home, so I will be available to look in on Lady Larkspur from time to time."

From beneath the cover on the bed, the lady Larkspur aroused herself sufficiently from her stupor to cry out a hearty protest.

"It is the worst of all possible occurrences," Lark complained for the hundredth time, pulling at the flowers on her bonnet.

Miss Janet Tavish braced herself against the leather cushions of their small prison while the carriage took a sharp turn. The ride already exceeded the endurance of her patience, and she thought anything preferable to once again reiterating their awkward circumstances.

"I thought the worst circumstance was to be married to Lord Raeborn," she murmured wearily. "Or that you would die."

Lark loosened a silk flower and sent it flying against the window. "There was never any danger of it, as well you know! But who can say what vapors I shall breathe in this cursed sanatorium! I may well die from exposure to others!"

"If you do, you will at least be rewarded in your last moment by knowing it was all for the evasion of a hateful marriage. I have not anything near your excuse, Lark."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"As your companion, I will be exposed to the same illnesses. If I take ill and die, I will gain nothing."

Lark pursed her lips, in the way she did when she tried to be coaxing. It was a look Janet knew too well. "Is not our friendship worth anything? I shall put up a monument to your memory and cherish you always."

"It is a great consolation," Janet grumbled.

"And does not this journey provide others?" Lark continued. "If not for the fact I am supposed to be dying, it might be a delightful holiday."

"My dear girl, I think you fail to consider the severity of our purpose."

Lark fell back against the cushions and looked unhappily out the window. She could already see the sea and sniff the salt in the cool air. Within an hour they should arrive at Mr. Knighton's sanatorium.

"I do not," she said sadly. "If only fortune had smiled on me and persuaded Lord Raeborn to look elsewhere for a wife. If only my father had relented and allowed me to recover myself in due course. If only that insufferable doctor had minded his own business—"

"Mr. Queensman? I do not think anyone else considers him offensive. In fact—"

"I do not wish to hear it, Janet! Why he is universally adored by my traitorous family is beyond my comprehension. And why they should trust him over anyone else is absurd. He does nothing to warrant it."

"Perhaps not, though his attendance to Lord Southard in America must warrant some respect. And have you not considered his purpose in bringing you to Brighton?"

“His purpose? It can only be to torment me further.”

“Unless it is to grant you time during which Raeborn might reconsider his suit or offer his admiration elsewhere.”

“You forget he is aligned with that odious gentleman and seeks to further his cause.”

“But he has no reason to do so, since the success of Raeborn’s marriage might deprive him of an inheritance.”

Lark sighed, having worked herself into this corner before. And yet she could think of no other reason for Mr. Queensman’s insistence on bringing her to Brighton but to allow her an escape from a marriage to his cousin.

“I might manage to drown in the sea,” she mused aloud.

“You are so able a swimmer, no one would believe it,” Janet reminded her.

“But the sea is hardly the pond at Leicester Park! There are waves and currents and all sorts of beastly creatures lurking about.”

“I am sure there are, but we will have the protection of a bathing machine and a dipper if we venture out to swim. Lily told me Martha Gunn herself is employed at Knighton’s, having been recently persuaded to leave her position at Margate. She is reported to be very diligent.”

“And dips her customers only in the safest waves? I think I should resent her intrusion.”

“Most certainly, if you wish to drown. Mrs. Gunn will surely not allow it.”

Lark was preparing a suitable retort when a shaft of bright light broke through the glass of their window. She squinted at the view and promptly forgot her discontent.

“Oh, Janet, just look at it! And here we shall spend the next months? It is heaven compared to the city!”

Indeed, the grandeur of the sea stretched out before them. The day was so clear Lark imagined she could see the cliffs of a distant shore. The blue water, dotted with the occasional fishing boat, looked calm and peaceful, harboring none of the dangers of which Lark professed great concern. Gulls flew gracefully about, several showing the courage to come very close to their moving carriage.

“You look a little too healthy, my dear,” Janet reminded her.

“Have no fear, for I have sufficient time to compose myself properly,” Lark said with confidence. After all, in recent weeks, she had become very expert at it.

“Perhaps not. Do you not think those turrets are the towers of the Royal Pavilion? I have read they resemble nothing so much as turnips, and yonder bulbs certainly match the description.”

Lark followed Janet’s gaze out the opposite window to what likely was the building popularly called the King’s Folly, built at great cost, and still not completed. There were many who considered it an architectural nightmare. Lark rather thought it looked a sultan’s dream.

“We are very close to our destination,” Lark whispered, the great burden of her role restored to her. The last several hours, in no one’s company but Janet’s, she had allowed herself to imagine them young girls on holiday, with no cares but to keep their faces out of the sun and dress warmly enough for the chill of the evening. But her life was not destined to be so simple and pleasurable, for she now faced a whole new audience who needed to be convinced of her failing health.

And the renewal of one old association, who was not disposed to be generous in his feelings towards her.

“Goodness! Could this be Mr. Queensman himself?” Janet cried. Lark opened her eyes. She knew to expect the beast, but must he insist on showing up at the very gate of hell? “He is very solicitous and kind to greet us. It could not be his official place to do so.”

“Perhaps he owns no official place, relying entirely on his association with others. What do we know of him, after all?”

Janet smiled, and Lark bristled to see her so cheerful.

“Nothing, I suppose. And yet I can report he is very handsome and I doubt he relies on any padding in his costume. I believe what we see is genuinely Mr. Queensman. Such honesty speaks well for his demeanor in other things. Which is more than I can say for you, my dear friend.”

Lark leaned forward, preparing a riposte. But when the carriage jolted to a stop, she knew she could ill afford the time to put her companion in her place. Instead, she slumped back against the cushions and closed her eyes, just as the coachman opened the latch upon the door.

“Mr. Queensman! What a lovely surprise!” Janet cried, and the carriage shifted to one side.

“Miss Tavish, is it you?” came a deep voice, all too familiar. “Welcome to Brighton! It is most kind of you to accompany your friend on this journey, for the presence of one so close to her can only be beneficial to her health. I trust you had an uneventful journey?”

Janet sighed. “The roads were good, and nothing impeded our progress. But I fear my friend suffered greatly at every bump and turn on the road. She sleeps now, though fitfully.”

“I see,” Mr. Queensman drawled. He seemed so close that Lark could feel the warmth of his body. Even through closed lids, she sensed he blocked the sun from the doorway of the carriage as he helped Janet down the wooden steps. “I have made certain that her room is prepared for her and a wheeled chair is available. Unfortunately, the one Knighton offered did not meet my qualifications, and so I am having another delivered for her.”

“I am sure it is no problem, sir,” Janet said agreeably. Lark wished herself closer so she could pinch her. “In town, Lady Larkspur grew quite accustomed to one of the servants carrying her about.”

“I am glad of it,” Mr. Queensman said briefly, and suddenly Lark felt arms gathering her up and lifting her from the seat. She did not have to open her eyes to know who presumed to carry her in so ignoble and presumptuous a fashion.

In a moment, the sun fell upon her face, and she could hear the voices of the grooms as they set upon her array of trunks and carpetbags. The scent of the sea was strong and invigorating, and, closer, she thought she detected sandalwood and pine. She turned her head, rubbed her nose against worsted cloth and felt something hard beneath it.

“She looks somewhat better since I saw her last, Miss Tavish. Has her diet improved?”

Janet stammered some response, even though Lark had already tutored her with all the answers. Damn the man for having such an effect on them all, she thought angrily. Did he intend to thwart her every move?

She sighed noisily and waited for him to notice her. But he would not. He continued to talk to Janet and bark out orders to the servants as he propelled her into a building. Opening her eyes just a slit, she saw them enter a large, sunny room and proceed down a long corridor. Lowering her head, she also glanced upon the smooth, firm skin of Mr. Queensman’s jaw and a white starched collar.

“Where am I?” she dared to ask.

Janet’s face suddenly blotted out all else.

“Why, you must remember, Lady Lark. We are in Brighton, at Mr. Knighton’s sanatorium. It is a very elegant place, by the look of it.”

“And is this one of the servants?” Lark asked nastily.

She heard his laughter rumble from deep within his chest.

“I am your servant, my lady,” Mr. Queensman said, “and one already known to you. You will be happy to know you might avail yourself of my services for all of your stay in Brighton.”

“Why, Mr. . . .oh dear. I cannot recall your name. You are Raeborn’s nephew or cousin or some other relation, are you not?”

“It does not signify. But as I am your servant, you may call me Ben. It is my name, and owns the advantage of being very easy to remember.”

He paused just then, and with surprising grace pushed open a door. Lark blinked and took in the stark but clean appearance of the room assigned as her prison cell over the next months.

“It is a very common name, certainly,” she said, and yawned. “If I should ever have the occasion to use it, which I firmly doubt, I shall endeavor to remember it.”

“See that you do, my lady,” said Ben Queensman under his breath, and dropped her unceremoniously onto the bed.