

# Chapter One

Lord Edmund Debham allowed his weary mount to stop in front of an unprepossessing hedge tavern under an ancient sign depicting a black lion. The ivy dripping from the walls nearly obscured the light that glowed through smoke-grimed windows, indicating the presence of life inside.

Eyeing the structure cynically, Edmund dismounted, muttering, "As good a place as any to get my throat cut, old friend. I'll try to see you get your hay and oats before passing to my reward." He gave Storm a comforting pat.

Once inside the dark, smoky hall, Edmund felt no surprise at all that no one came to attend him. The shabby old building had held no false promises of bustling landlords and smiling, buxom maids. He moved toward the sounds of voices and faint light that emanated from the north side of the small dark entryway. Pushing through a rough-timbered door, he paused to survey the room out of habit rather than any pronounced desire for self-preservation.

A branch of candles on a small table gave the room what little light it possessed. Around the table sat four men, their attention totally absorbed by the cards in their hands.

Edmund's scrutiny did not reveal anyone else in the room, though he would not have given long odds that the farthest, darkest corners might not hold villains enough. He walked toward the table, wondering when he would be noticed. He wasn't. So he pulled out a nearby chair and sat down heavily, weariness pulling against him more strongly than his promise to Storm. The card game, which Edmund recognized as Brag, held the locals' attention with all the intensity of gentlemen in the priciest gaming hell in London. He studied the group, hoping to discover who might be the innkeeper.

Quickly identifying him by the stained apron he wore, Edmund scanned the others while awaiting the end of the hand. There was only one among them who might be called a gentleman. A youth with disheveled dark locks and a wild look in his blue eyes, his clothes set him apart from the innkeeper and the others, who looked to be farmers or laborers.

Suddenly the table exploded in exclamations as the innkeeper exposed three aces to take the small pile of change in the center of the table.

"Neat as a pin," the young gentleman declared. "Well done, Dutton, old friend." He clapped the innkeeper on the back. "Well, who's for another hand? Come along, I've plenty of blunt left!" He gestured to a pile of pence and shillings beside him, but the others at the table began to mumble and shake their heads.

"'Tis easy enough for you, young master," a tall, red-haired man grumbled. "You've just had yer quarter's allowance, and no chores to do come morning!"

"Just so," the oldest of the group agreed, knocking out the pipe he had been nursing. "Time I sought my bed."

"I've not had my quarter allowance," the young gentleman grouched. "Dutton here has had it. Most of it, at any rate."

"Nay, lad, I've barely touched 'ee." The innkeeper's north country accent seemed out of place in the middle of Buckinghamshire. He motioned to a roll of gold coins spilling from a leather purse by the young man's right hand. "Happen I'd take a good deal more nor yer blunt, but Miss Ormhill would grab me by the ear tomorrow, think on!" He scooped up his winnings and stood. At that moment he spotted Edmund at last. His surprise at seeing the silent stranger caused him to drop the handful of coins, which rolled and tumbled across the table and onto the stone floor.

"Be thee an apparition?" He stared hard, then shook his head. The others seated at the table, equally as startled, muttered among themselves and shifted backward uneasily, so that Edmund had the sensation that the room had suddenly tilted away from him.

"Not at all," he reassured them. "Only a tired, lost traveler hoping to find a warm meal and perhaps a friendly hand of cards before seeking his bed." Edmund looked hungrily at the golden pile by the young gentleman's hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. Edmund Debham." He held out his hand.

Standing hastily and leaning across the table to grasp Edmund's hand, the youth stammered, "You're . . . You're . . . No, don't tell me, I know. Ah, yes! Capt. Lord Edmund Debham. Daring Debham, you were known as after Badajoz. It is an honor to meet you, Lord Edmund. I'm Jason Ormhill."

"Not captain anymore. I've sold out," Edmund replied, shaking the eager hand held out to him.

The boy frowned a little. "Ah, yes. Once Boney was beat, the fun went out of it, I suppose. I'll bet you were glad to be in for the final kill, eh?"

Edmund winced at the memory of Waterloo. He had never loved soldiering, though he knew some who had. *The boy would be much more pleased with Harry Smith than with me*, he thought. "I would have been as satisfied if Napoléon had stayed put, I thank you!"

Jason looked puzzled, sure that any soldier must have loved every minute of glory in the recent battle. "What brings you to these dull environs?"

"Dull! Well, young varmint, I'd give you what for, for that one, if I weren't so filled with ennui myself." The gnarled old man winked at the room at large and stood, startling Edmund by revealing what he had not noticed before, a clerical collar. "Perhaps you'd best not play him, Jason. Looks like one of those London Cap'n Sharps, come to fleece you."

Edmund winced, but the youngster rushed to his defense. "Never say so, Uncle. Lord Edmund is an honorable man. Quoted in the dispatches more than once."

"That's a high honor, given how stingy Wellington is with praise. I'm Milton Ormhill, vicar of Saint Stephens here in Flintridge." The older man held out his hand.

A twinge of guilt smote Edmund. He had kept himself in funds during the long years with Wellington by his skill at cards and his hard head for liquor. He was, indeed, an honest player, but an extremely able one. *Am I really contemplating taking this youngster's blunt?* But the thought of some coins for a bed rather than joining Storm in the stable tempted him too much. *Won't clean him out, though. Just a few hands.*

Dutton, the innkeeper, grinned. "Aye, well, whatever ye do, no drinking, young squire. No telling what might happen, else." General laughter greeted this admonishment which Edmund thought very good advice for the youth. Dutton scooped up what remained of his coins. The red-haired man had been gathering up what lay on the floor while this exchange was going on, and distributed them to their rightful owner before leaving.

"I hope your prohibition of drink does not extend to me." Edmund reached into his vest pocket, prepared to withdraw one of his last three coins. "I could use a good dose of the heavy wet. And my horse could use some attention, too, if you have a stable lad."

"Aye, no fear, m'lord. My boy'll see to him right well. And the first drink is on me, m'lord, for one as has served us so well against them Frenchies. I've naught to lay before you but soup and a joint of mutton, though."

Under the warm regard of the landlord and the youth, Edmund felt the ice that encased his heart melt a little. He took the offered brandy and saluted them both, then downed it. "Join us at cards," he invited the innkeeper.

"Mayhap I will." Mr. Dutton nodded. "Just let me roust out my son to look after tha steed." He went to the door and set up a shout that produced a sleepy lad of perhaps fourteen to care for Storm.

Their first few hands showed the innkeeper to be an intelligent but cautious player. Young Ormhill's playing was adequate but uninspired. Edmund experienced luck along with his skill, and won. *Enough*, he decided. *I've blunt now to last me a few days.* Though his winnings would perhaps only stave off the inevitable, something about starving to death repelled him. He even allowed himself a tiny bit of optimism: Perhaps he could find some honest way to earn a living before this money ran out.

"Well, gentlemen, it is late. I am sure you have had enough cards for the evening." He started to gather the small pile of coins.

But both men loudly protested. The evening was young, and he had to give them a chance to get even. Edmund's conscience submitted. *If they insist, after all . . .* He swiftly parted both landlord and youth from some more of their blunt.

The landlord looked at him shrewdly as he dropped his cards at last. "Ye're a fine hand, m'lord. Cannily done, think on." Something of malice flashed in his eyes. "I'm no match for 'ee, in skill nor pocket, so I'll bid 'ee good night."

"Cannily done indeed!" Young Ormhill scowled sulkily. "Luck, that's what it was. I can beat him. You know, Dutton."

"Aye, happen you could." Dutton nodded. "Play on, then. I'll have a pipe and watch 'ee for a while." He went to his cabinet and brought out several full bottles of brandy. "Doubtless ye'll be wanting some refreshments." He poured Ormhill a drink and watched with satisfaction as the lad tossed it back.

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Puzzled at this change in behavior from his previous protective admonition that the boy shouldn't drink, Edmund stood. "Better quit now. I've a wish for my bed."

"Come, Lord Edmund," Ormhill protested. "Think I can't see you're trying to protect me? Very much obliged to you! I'm not the green 'un you think me, though."

Edmund frowned. "Bantling, you need a lesson. But I've a kindness for you and would not teach it."

"Pah! Arrogance, not kindness, m'lord." Ormhill stood up, anger flushing his features. "High and mighty Lord Edmund, famous war hero, and now you fancy yourself a London beau, too proud to play deep with the provincials." He dropped a second heavy leather purse onto the table. "I've plenty of blunt, and the skill to take yours, too, if you're man enough to accept my challenge."

Teaching the young cub that lesson suddenly seemed more attractive to Edmund. His nerves still raw from his brother's last tongue-lashing as he had expelled him forever from the family, he had no stomach for insult from another quarter.

"Very well, then." He sat back down and poured himself a generous dose of brandy, a nod to keeping the contest even against the young man. "Dutton, you are witness to his willingness—nay, eagerness—to play me."

"Oh, aye, m'lord, and of yers to play him. And may the best man win." So saying, he gave young Ormhill another wink and poured a second helping of brandy into his glass.

*Odd, Edmund thought. He warns the boy against drinking, then fills his glass. Have to keep my eye on that one. Could be some mischief afoot.* He started to protest further drinking by his opponent, but saw from Ormhill's outthrust jaw that no advice of his would be welcome.

*A lamb for the fleecing. Such a disagreeable lamb, though.* Edmund smiled grimly, gathered in the cards, and began shuffling them.

At first Edmund steadily raked in the winnings. He did not offer to quit again, though. Young Ormhill had a determined set to his jaw and an apparently bottomless pocket. As he watched the coins pile up beside his elbow, Edmund recalled how, when he had quit his brother's house for the last time, his old nurse had run out to hug him once more, weeping. She had taken his hands in hers, kissed them, and said, "The Lord will provide." He wondered if that strict Scots presbyter would consider a game of chance eligible to be counted as the Lord's provision for him. Perhaps it was, for neither he nor anyone else had made another.

Ormhill partook several times of the brandy bottle, each time urging the same on his opponent. Edmund shrugged and accepted, warning him, "If you think to get me drunk and have the advantage of me, think again. I am notorious for my head for liquor."

"No such thing," Ormhill protested indignantly. "Improve your game. Improves mine. More I drink, better I play. True, ain't it, Dutton?"

The tavern owner pointed the pipe at Edmund. "'S God's truth, my lord, and an honest boy for warning you."

Edmund only smiled at the ludicrous thought that this stripling, who grew drunker by the minute, could manage to both outdrink and outplay him. "I'm much obliged, Mr. Ormhill, for your confession in the interest of fair play." The sarcasm in his voice made no impression, though.

Ormhill's temper had improved after winning the last round. He waved his hand expansively. "Fair play, that's right. Gotta have fair play." He splashed another measure of brandy in both their glasses.

Ormhill won the next hand, too, clearly a fluke, as he looked bleary-eyed and his hands were unsteady as he shuffled the cards. Brag required concentration and the ability to calculate the odds of various card combinations. It also required control of facial expressions so the opponent would not guess the strength of one's hand. Edmund decided that one reason he had misjudged the last few times had been that the boy's drunkenness gave him a vacuous countenance in which it was impossible to read anything. *I'll play more cautiously, he thought, for the lad does have the devil's own luck. But it can't last, nor can he concentrate as he needs to do.*

Edmund confidently made his bet, and watched with surprise as the youngster played a brilliant hand and swept up another goodly portion of what he had previously lost. He pushed the brandy glass aside when Ormhill filled it once again, and concentrated hard on his play. Still, Ormhill trounced him and again had recourse to the brandy.

"I think we are about even now," Edmund suggested.

"Nonshense. You only wish to quit because I am w-winning."

"A while ago you said I only wanted to quit because I was winning."

"Tell you what." Ormhill turned in his chair, nearly falling out of it in the process. "We'll play 'til one o'clock. Tha's 'nuther hour. Finish the hand we're on then, and stop, no matter who's ahead."

*Another hour. If he continues to win at this rate I'll be cleaned out by then. But how can he, with such massive amounts of brandy in him?* Reluctantly, Edmund nodded. "One o'clock. Not one second after."

Ornhill leaned over and offered his hand on the deal, nearly oversetting the sturdy, battered old table in the process.

Long before one, Edmund pushed the last of his pile of coins over to Ornhill's side of the table. "That's it," he said. "Except for a coin for our host to cover my horse's stabling, I'm out of blunt. 'Fraid our game must end."

"N-n-no," Ornhill said, waving an unsteady hand in front of Edmund's nose. "One o'clock. 'S-what we said. Shook on it. Didn't we, Dutton?"

Dutton nodded silently from his chair.

"But I have naught to wager," Edmund insisted.

"Take your vowels. Look, your luck must change soon. Don' give up now."

Edmund put his head between his hands. "My vowels are worthless, Ornhill. I'm cleaned out."

"Be glad to wait until your next quarter's—"

"I have no allowance," Edmund could not help but shout, and his sense of desperation, renewed by this reversal at cards, made his voice crack. "No income. Nothing. You see before you a prodigal son who came home and was told he wasn't good enough to sup with his brother's hogs."

He lifted his head and looked into Ornhill's uncomprehending eyes. "I've naught but my horse and tack and the clothes on my back."

After a thoughtful silence: "Rather fancy that vest," Ornhill offered. He picked up the brandy bottle in front of him and drained it. "Stake it 'gainst a guinea?"

Insanity, desperation, exhaustion, all overwhelmed Edmund. *Why not? Lose the clothes off my back, then my horse and tack, and I can walk naked until I am taken up by the law and fulfill my destiny as predicted by my brother.*

To his brandy-befuddled, exhausted mind this seemed suddenly a very good idea. He opened the last bottle and poured each of them a generous measure. Even his hard head felt muzzy. The cards swam before his eyes. But young Ornhill actually swayed in his chair. *Surely, surely, he can't play a decent hand now,* Edmund thought desperately.

He soon knew better. As the clock ticked inexorably nearer to one o'clock, his young opponent piled up vowels for his shirt, coat, and riding breeches. Much merriment accompanied the loss of his undergarments, though the joke was less appreciated by Edmund than by Jason and the landlord.

Eager to bring the evening to its disastrous conclusion, Edmund then wagered his tack. He lost his saddle and bridle, and his beloved Storm soon followed.

"You. . . you'll treat him well," Edmund demanded. "Carried me from one end of the peninsula to the other. Saved my life more than once, too."

"I'll re-rev . . . worship him." Ornhill nodded. His head rested on one hand; his cards almost dangled in the other. But he played brilliantly. At 12:45 A.M. Edmund had nothing more to wager.

"And that's an end to it," he groaned, as Ornhill prepared to play another hand. "I'll strip and be off."

Ornhill stared. "Wha'zat mean?"

"Just what I said." He stood and started to take off his coat.

"Wait a minute." Ornhill seemed to focus clearly on him for the first time in an hour. "You don' mean ye're really and truly done in?"

"Rolled up, horse and foot."

"What . . . what will you do?"

"Take a long, refreshing walk toward London."

"Can't do that! Scandalize the county!"

"Aye, it would and all," Dutton chimed in, yawning. "Get taken up by the bailiffs."

" 'Sides," Ornhill drawled, "catch cold."

"In late July?" Edmund laughed as he started on the buttons of his vest.

Horrified, Jason urged him, "Come on. Mus' have sompthin' . . ."

"I've nothing left but myself."

Ornhill stared at him hard, then slid back in his chair. "Dutton?"

"Sir?"

"Wh-wha's a man worth?"

Dutton rubbed at his stubby chin. "Well, now, that depends, young sir. If'n he's a common laborer, sixpence a day. If'n he's a shepherd, or . . ."

"But what if he's a lord?"

"Shouldna think he'd be worth a thing, begging yer pardon, m'lord, if he has neither land nor blunt nor prospects."

"Bah! Lord Edmund on the marriage mart'd be worth a fortune."

Edmund shook his head. "Penniless and without prospects? Nonsense."

"Hmmm. Still, a cit looking to hook up to a noble family?"

"Rich cits didn't get that way by being stupid. My family has completely cast me aside, so marriage to me would not pave the way into the *ton*. I'm broke. I haven't the least notion of how to earn an honest dollar except with a sword, and I've done with war. Price me at common labor, if you will, and we'll play one more hand."

"Couldn't do that. Wouldn't seem right."

"If I lose, you'll have to employ me, right? Better than dying of starvation, as I would if taken up by the law for indecent exposure, for there's none to pay for my keep in jail." Hope reentered Edmund's fuddled brain. If the young chub took this bet, he would win a way of sustaining life even if he lost. Of course, he had friends who would help him, but charity appealed to him even less than the other alternatives.

Stumped, Ormhill sat, chin in hands, considering Edmund as if he hadn't really seen him before. Finally he leaned back in his chair and snapped his fingers, or attempted to. Lack of coordination deprived the gesture of its sound.

"No. Not as a laborer. If I win, you'll marry m'sister."

"What? You can't seriously want someone like me to marry your sister!"

"Do! I' fact, you're perfect."

In spite of himself, Edmund felt a jolt of hope. *Doubtless some property comes with her. Something wrong with her, of course, but I'm in no position to be choosy.*

"Wan' anyone to marry her. Can't marry 'less she's wed to a lord. Right, Dutton?"

" 'S truth, young sir."

"Mine is only a courtesy title, you know." Edmund's brief hope began to fade.

"Don' matter. Jus' so she marries a lord. Tha's all it says."

"It?"

"M' father's will. Says Livvy must marry a lord."

"She must be an antidote, if you think I am a perfect candidate for her husband."

A crack of laughter from the landlord seemed to confirm this thought.

"Well, wouldn't say that." Ormhill rubbed his mouth, seemingly at a loss for words.

Edmund ruminated. "Never mind. I'm in no position to be choosy. If she has a decent dowry, I'll take her. Couldn't support her otherwise."

Jason scratched his nose. "Mus' be honest. She has, and then she hasn't. Has a tidy little farm of her own. But her husband can't sell it, and if I decide he's mistreating her, I get it. M' father's will tied it up right and tight. Husband can use th' income to feed and clothe the family. Can't nalannate . . . nailienate . . ."

"Alienate. As in sell it, or wager it away?"

"Tha's it. Not even the income."

*A tidy little farm!* Warmth crept into Edmund's voice. "I don't care about that. Or about her being an antidote. A place to live. Land! You've offered me a glimpse of heaven. I don't even want to win this hand." He started to sit down.

Ormhill stared. "Gotta wanna win," he wailed. "Notta real bet, otherwise."

"That's true." Hopes dashed once again, Edmund recommenced removing his clothes. His hands seemed all thumbs, and he knew he had seldom been this foxed before.

Ormhill studied the by-now tall stack of coins sitting by his elbow, with the pile of hastily scrawled vowels on top of them. Abruptly, with the loose-limbed gesture of inebriation, he swept the whole into the center of the table.

"M'stake, Lord Edmund. 'S at enough?"

"I have to be honest, Ormhill. I've always dreamt of being a country gentleman. Land to manage—heaven! Even though I'd have an antidote for a wife. Don't know but what I'd prefer the farm to the money." He managed to peel off the vest.

Desperately, Ormhill tried to invigorate his opponent. "Did I say she's a managing female?"

"But not a shrew," Dutton interjected. "Can't say Miss Livvy is a shrew."

"No, not a shrew, but she likes to get her own way, you see. Wouldn't want you to manage her land—manages it herself. And, uh . . ." Ormhill looked desperate. "And . . . and . . ." His face lit up. "She's a bluestocking," he announced triumphantly.

Edmund eyed the pile, calculating. He had little wish to marry a learned female, and even less a managing one, if any other option were open to him.

"I'll make it worth your while," Ormhill declared. "I'll give you my vowel for another thousand. Plus your clothes 'n' horse'n' all."

*Over a thousand pounds.* It seemed a fortune set against his bleak future. It would be an honest bet, then, for he would certainly rather have that sum than Ormhill's sister.

"Done!" Edmund sat down, pulling his jacket loosely around his shoulders, and took up the cards to shuffle. "One hand. Winner takes all."

Ornhill offered him a drink, and when he shook it off, tipped up the brandy bottle and drank deeply. He dealt the cards just as the clock struck one. Edmund examined his hand through bleary eyes. He had two kings and a jack, but no brags to use as wild cards. Everything depended upon what cards the boy had received.

Dutton watched avidly as Ornhill studied his cards. Edmund knew the innkeeper could tell this story over many a bottle in years to come. When the two men laid down their hands, it was bleary-eyed, loose-jointed, half-unconscious Ornhill who emerged the victor.

"Tha's it, then!" Grinning hugely, he stood up, swaying dangerously before finding his balance. "At last, I've got a lord for Livvy!"



## Chapter Two

After a celebratory glass of brandy, Ormhill insisted on taking his winnings, including Edmund, home with him. Storm was turfed out of his meager stall, and Edmund struggled to mount the bay stallion, very much the worse for all the brandy he had drunk.

Ormhill, even more well-to-go, had difficulty controlling his showy, restive black gelding, whose white stockings flashed as he half reared and jibbed against the ill-balanced load and inept handling of the reins. "Whoa, Moonstar. Hold still, won't you," Ormhill beseeched the beast as he struggled against gravity. It took a strong push by the hostler to get him firmly in the saddle. Once seated, the young man gave his animal its head. Home was sufficient enticement for the black to set a spanking pace down a dusty country lane. Under the light of a nearly full moon Edmund had no difficulty keeping his new owner in sight. His head ached too much to ponder his status as "winnings." He had one thought and one only—to find a warm bed and sleep for at least a year.

The road widened out into a well-kept boulevard, which in turn became a carriage roundabout in front of a handsomely proportioned Georgian mansion. Every window was dark, and no one came on Ormhill's hail to take their horses, so he rode Moonstar right up the short flight of stairs to the front door, which he slammed vigorously with his fist, roaring out, "Livvy, Livvy! Wake up. I've brought you a lord."

Edmond dismounted at the foot of the stairs and stumbled up them to catch at the gelding's bridle. "For God's sake, man, get down. You'll be in the hall with this animal next."

Unfortunate prophet! Edmund was thrown back as the door opened and Ormhill pressed his mount through it. The servant, an elderly man, jumped aside with surprising agility to avoid being run down. Ormhill halted at the foot of an elegant stairway in the center of the hall.

Once again he called, "Livvy, Livvy. Wake up."

Edmund followed him in and joined the elderly servant in trying to calm the prancing animal and entice its rider to dismount, when a woman appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Jason, for heaven's sake. What are you about?" The female figure at the top of the stairs was ominously substantial, and her voice just as ominously shrill. Edmond flinched. Even in his inebriated state he realized that a snug little farm might not be adequate compensation for having to marry a woman with such a carrying voice and nasty tone.

As soon as she saw Moonstar, she yelped, "Get that creature out of the hall!"

"Not till you see what I've brought. Look. I've brought a lord."

"What? Here? Who?" Though no less shrill, the tone of the woman's voice shifted to one of interest, and she began to descend the stairs with a heavy tread.

Edmund, one hand at Moonstar's bridle, the other soothingly stroking his muzzle, looked up, shame and embarrassment warring with curiosity to see just how distasteful Miss Ormhill might be.

As she came into view Edmund flinched. The woman was not only stout and shrill of voice, she was plain and by no means young. *Can this really be my bride-to-be?* he thought, becoming unpleasantly sober. *I can't say he didn't warn me, though I think he and the innkeeper erred in saying she wasn't shrewish.* Still, he acknowledged that Miss Ormhill might have some justification for her loud protests, with a horse stomping and snorting in the hall, while Ormhill yelled like a wild man.

Edmund briefly contemplated mounting Storm and fleeing the scene. He went so far as to cease trying to calm Ormhill's animal, turning instead to seek his own horse. He had not far to search.

Storm, whose warhorse disposition had served Edmund so well in battle, had followed his master up the stairs and into the hall, apparently concluding that if the other horse could enter this house, he could, too. When Miss Ormhill charged toward them, arms waving in shoeing motions, screaming at the top of her lungs, it must have seemed to

Storm that they were once again in battle, for his head snaked forward, his formidable teeth bared, and Edmund barely managed to grab the reins in time to save the woman from a nasty bite.

As might have been expected, this did not exactly soothe the stocky dame's temper. She began to scream, "Murder, murder, help!" She backed away so swiftly she tripped over her own feet and fell to the floor with a crash, which undid all the efforts of Jason, the elderly doorman, and three other servants to calm and control Moonstar. He reared onto his hind feet and began thrashing and pawing at the air, unseating Ormhill and completing Miss Ormhill's rout. She turned, clambered up the first few steps on her hands and knees, and then ascended them with astonishing rapidity given her bulk, yelling all the way.

Moonstar took two or three turns around the great hall, evading all attempts at capture. Storm gave a victory snort and allowed himself to be led outside. Edmund stood at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the handsome mansion, now alight and buzzing with activity, and spoke soothingly to his mount while his brain churned. Perhaps it would be easy to escape his fate. That woman, no matter how desperate she was for a husband, might reject him after this contretemps. He suspected he was grasping at straws, though.

Finally Moonstar emerged, a servant on each side of his head and one in the saddle. Trembling and prancing nervously, he allowed himself to be led away. Edmund followed, leading Storm. Flight would be dishonorable. A little too sober to believe he would escape Miss Ormhill's clutches, he turned his mind to practical matters such as bedding down his horse and then, upon returning to the house, inquiring about the well-being of Jason Ormhill, whom he had last seen hurtling backward through the air.

The hall was filled with servants, and they were gossiping loudly among themselves. When Edmund crossed the threshold, he heard hoarse whispers of "That's him. The one as is to marry our Miss Livvy." Comments, mostly favorable, on his face and figure ceased when he loudly addressed the room at large.

"Where is Mr. Ormhill? Is he injured?"

A tall, dignified older man stepped forward. "Just had the breath knocked out of him, my lord. Miss Ormhill says I am to take you to your room and valet you for the night. Will your servants and baggage be arriving tomorrow?"

Edmund considered confessing the truth: that he had neither servant nor baggage, except what occupied the carpetbag he had detached from behind Storm's saddle and now held in his hand. But the servants would know soon enough that he was penniless; he preferred for what remained of this one night to receive their respect and solicitous attention. So he ignored the questions, merely inclining his head.

"Lead on," he ordered. "I place myself in your competent hands."

Edmund fell asleep almost instantly, but as usual when he had imbibed too deeply, awoke two hours later and could only toss and turn, worrying about his situation. He had little hope that Miss Ormhill would reject him. She must surely be eager to wed, or young Ormhill would not have set up their wager in the first place. Edmund had always known he would have to marry late in life, when he had made enough of his estate to support a wife and family. He had hoped for a marriage based on the kind of love his parents had shared. His mother's bad choice in a second husband had deprived him of the estate, and he now had gambled away any chance of marrying for love and must face the consequences.

When the sky began to lighten, Edmund arose, dressed himself, and slipped quietly down the servants' stairs and through the kitchen. He begged a roll and some cheese of the surprised cook, who was already ordering about a small army of helpers busy at breakfast preparations. He consumed the roll on the way to the stable, where Storm greeted him eagerly. No grooms being about, Edmund fed him a measure of oats and some hay, filled his water bucket, and curried him as the animal ate.

The noise Edmund made in the process brought a sleepy stable boy to investigate. The lad stared at him in awe. "You be the lord wot our master won at cards!"

"The same," Edmund said, smiling grimly. A sudden thought gave him a glimmer of hope. "Tell me: the heavyset woman my horse almost bit. Is that Miss Ormhill?"

The boy nodded. "That be Miss Lavinia Ormhill."

Hope died. Jason had called his sister "Livvy," clearly a pet name for Lavinia.

"I am told she possesses a farm. Do you know where her land lies?"

The boy scratched his head. "Miss Ormhill's farm?" He looked about him unsurely.

"Surely *this* isn't Miss Ormhill's property." He had assumed that this fine Georgian mansion, with its sturdy stable and surrounding park, belonged to Jason Ormhill.

"Beaumont? No, 'tis the young squire's."

"Do you know where Miss Ormhill's land lies?"

Still looking puzzled, the boy gave sketchy directions, which, however, proved adequate. Edmund quickly found the public road again, turned left as directed, and proceeded up rising ground to the tiny village of Flintridge. At the

end of its one street he turned down a country lane that led to a dilapidated cottage surrounded by over-grazed pastures and neglected fields which obviously were set to deliver a minuscule crop.

This might have been thought to cast Edmund into the doldrums, but in fact it lifted his spirits. He could bring little enough to a marriage, but one thing he had to offer was a love of the land and an eagerness to learn all he could about managing it. Young Ormhill's estate manager clearly might be relied upon for good advice in that regard, for in the morning light the land belonging to his host had impressed him for its well-tended fields, fine livestock, and variety of woods. The boundary between it and Miss Ormhill's land was easy enough to spot. It was, quite simply, the difference between good husbandry and bad.

As he rode back to Beaumont, he remembered Ormhill saying his sister managed her farm herself. He'd have to have an understanding with her on that score before their marriage. There was no way he could sit on his hands and watch such potentially fine land go to rack and ruin.

The subject of his musings sat at the breakfast table when he returned. He checked at the door, and hardly knew whether to feel relief or further dismay, for she had a friendly, even eager look on her face, and in the morning light he could see that she was older than he had supposed, being well on the shady side of forty. *She must be young Ormhill's half sister*, he thought, *to be so much older*.

"Miss Ormhill," he said, bowing to her from the doorway.

"Lord Edmund. Come in, come in. Don't look as if I might eat you. I know last night's folly was Jason's doing. A naughty brat, to be sure, and apt to get up to anything when he is in his cups. Perhaps you may bring him into line, sir, if this marriage goes forward."

Edmund smiled vaguely and, after a moment's hesitation, went to the sideboard to fill his plate. When he approached the table, he took a place across from his prospective bride.

"You are in favor of the marriage, then? For I assure you, I would not be a party to anything that smacks of force."

"As if Jason would, or could, do that! Indeed, yes, I am in favor. I have heard of your reputation as a soldier, sir, and knew your father and mother. Good people. 'Tis a shame you could not have inherited instead of that stiff-rumped half brother of yours."

Edmund choked on his ham. "That would require displacing a good deal more than merely my brother, Miss Ormhill. I am—"

"I know. Fifth in line, after Heslington, his three sons, and your other brother. Doesn't matter, though, whether you succeed to the title. A courtesy title will be sufficient. Just so your wife can be addressed as 'my lady,' all will be right and tight. Lady Edmund will do nicely." She smiled at him before addressing herself once again to her breakfast.

Miss Ormhill's acceptance of her father's unreasonable requirement for her marriage astounded Edmund. It was as if she were speaking of someone else.

"There is one matter that we must discuss," he said.

"What is that, Lord Edmund?"

"The question of the management of your land."

"Of my land? What business is that of yours?"

Edmund grimaced. "Ormhill told me that you had been made quite independent, and I can live with that, but I must have the management of your land."

"Management?" Miss Ormhill sputtered indignantly. "Management of *my* land? Why, the nerve!"

"If you were managing it properly, I would say nothing. But the condition of that farm is a disgrace. To be sure, I am no expert, though I would like to be. I will consult young Ormhill's estate agent, for he clearly knows what is what. You would have been better served to have allowed him to manage your farm. I could not stand by and watch your fields deteriorate further. Nor should you want me to. After all, your prosperity will only be enhanced by better management."

"But—"

"It is all very well for a female to manage her household, and even to hold the purse strings, if need be, but I feel strongly that the management of your farm belongs in masculine hands. Specifically, in my hands. I must insist upon this point."

"As a condition of the marriage?" Miss Ormhill asked, her face wrinkled most unbecomingly with an irritated frown.

"Yes. You may well say I am not in a position to lay down conditions, but—"

"Well, you certainly are not in a position to lay down conditions to me, nor why you should wish to do so, I cannot tell. In point of fact, a man *is* managing my farm, but as you have observed, he makes very poor work of it. So if you require that as a condition of the marriage, I will agree."

"I do beg your pardon. I thought Jason said that you managed your farm."

"One, the other, or both of us is indeed confused, young man. But I wish to cooperate in any way necessary to further this marriage."

Edmund did not really know whether to be pleased or horrified by her acquiescence, but having received it, he had no further choice but to proceed. A man must, after all, pay his gaming debts.

"Well, then, Miss Ormhill, you may consider this an offer in form. Shall we publish the bans or obtain a license? I must warn you, I am quite penniless, so you must decide, as the fee for the license would have to come from your pocket."

Miss Ormhill half rose from her seat, her expression ominous. "What can you mean?"

"I expect Jason had little chance of explaining matters to you—none at all, I now recall, as he was too far gone to be coherent. You may wish to withdraw once you know I am quite penniless. I lost all I had to him, and then—"

"Don't, for God's sake, tell her that tale!" Jason Ormhill's alarmed voice rang out from the doorway to the dining room. "We must ease into this thing."

"I'm afraid it is too late. I have explained—"

"You've explained nothing." Miss Ormhill stamped her foot, making the table jump. "Will you please be so kind as to tell me why this . . . this . . . rake has just offered for me? For *me*! Demanded control of my land, which I thought sufficiently peculiar, and then offered marriage to me!"

"To you?" Jason turned on Edmund. "Now that is a cork-brained thing to do, Lord Edmund." Jason's expression became as thunderous as Miss Ormhill's. "Don't tell me you have been overcome with passion, for that won't fadge. As for getting control of her land, well, you shan't have it! As one of her trustees, I would never give it to a man who reneged on a bet."

"Reneged? Not I. But she is not competent to manage her land, nor to choose who will, if what I saw this morning is an example. Her trustees must acknowledge that."

"Explain instantly what is meant by this bet," Miss Ormhill demanded. "None of your roundaboutation, either, Nephew."

"Nephew? Thought you said she was your sister." Edmund began to feel he had landed in Bedlam. The way they were looking at him, the Ormhills thought him a candidate for the same place.

"Is this not Miss Ormhill?" he demanded.

Ignoring him, Jason continued trying to calm his aunt. "Listen to me." He launched into an abbreviated explanation of the events of the evening before. Edmund listened as closely as Miss Ormhill, hoping to find a clue to his own puzzlement. Jason got no further than Edmund's financial situation when he was interrupted.

Miss Ormhill looked ever more ominous. "Penniless, a gamester, cast off by his family? You think to bring such as that in here, just like that, and have him accepted?"

"No, that is why I didn't want him to tell you. Odds are ten to one you'll go straight to Olivia with it."

"Better odds than that!" the stout damsel declared, quitting her place and marching toward the door.

