

## Lydia's Lives

### Chapter Seven

#### Lydia's Memoirs – 1814 (ii)

The war was over! But this was also a year full of unusual personal events and my friend Han Warren suggested that I should give 1814 an animal name from the Chinese zodiac – *The Year of the Horse* or *The Year of the Bird*. She was referring to the incidents of the horse and parrot that fell down in a drunken stupor – not together, of course, for parrots and horses are not designed by nature to be drinking partners.

Perhaps *The Year of the Grape* would be more appropriate, for I also had a remarkable – one might say explosive – personal introduction to the effects of champagne and its use as a weapon in the war of the sexes.

The wrath of grapes was, after all, a common link for the parrot, the horse – and me! The parrot recovered, and so did I – although my penance for my over-indulgence was a savage headache. I hope the parrot's head was clearer than mine the next morning!

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My sisters Lizzie and Jane have servants for every room and every occasion. Money, not unexpectedly, had never been in plentiful supply since my marriage to Wickham – so servants were not usually part of *our* regular domestic arrangements. But this year saw additions to our household for we were fortunate to secure the 'services' of three somewhat unusual people. At no cost to ourselves!

Two were more guests than servants – for their board and lodging costs came not from the Wickham exchequer; they were in a way pensioners of Lt Denny and Katie.

None could stay with us permanently, for as a military family we were often on the move, and there were times when our cramped quarters had room sufficient only for Wickham and me. At such times the three were given temporary billets through the kindness of Mrs Calhoun. Less frequently, and for shorter periods of time, they found refuge with my Mamma and Papa.

The first newcomers to my household came in an unexpected manner. It was suggested that at no cost to myself I could acquire a housekeeper and a footman – suitably named as he only had one leg.

They were not expected to be very active – if ever at all – in view of their physical limitations and ages – between them they had only three legs and three eyes. Cynthia, who is Katie's great-grandmother, has one eye she was born with, the other made of glass. She has been known to use her eye – the one made of glass – as a missile.

Her *young* lover, Captain Herbie Pook, (he claims this is his baptismal name) had the misfortune to lose a leg at sea and must get by hop, hop, hopping around the world on a wooden peg leg and supported by a crutch. He claims he lost the limb at

Trafalgar in the service of Lord Nelson. If he *was* at Trafalgar he must have been – by far – the oldest man to see action in both the English and French fleets!

Cynthia is 97, she *says*. Others believe she has followed the example of many older women anxious to present a younger face to the gentlemen and has celebrated more birthdays than she lays public claim to; one or two put the mark at above 100.

Captain Pook ('my young lover' her usual mode of introduction) was a mere 74, and as fiercely protective of his paramour as she was of him. It was their passionate attachment for each other that had led them so often into encounters with tavern owners and the constables.

In the fashion of all lovebirds the pair rarely fall out of sorts in their own relationships – but are quick in their response to anyone who threatens the wellbeing of either of them.

Cynthia, such a tiny, birdlike woman, skin as dark and glossy as a gypsy's, bright, snapping black eyes – one given to her by Nature, the other, most skilfully fashioned by an artisan.

When enraged and engaged in physical combat she often pops the eye from its socket and stows it for safe keeping in her reticule or slips it into the captain's pocket. As for the captain, his tactic is to unscrew his peg leg, and use it as a club – most effectively, so Katie said.

Matters came to a head one night when the pair reacted to insults – real or imagined – as they sat drinking in a London tavern. Hostilities began when a tippler by chance kicked the captain's pet bulldog as it lay sleeping by his chair. The animal, appropriately named Nelson, for it too only had one eye, was normally of a placid temperament, for when not eating it spent most of its life sleeping. But the feel of a large steel shod boot hammering its ribs swiftly awakened the beast – and it responded in the manner for which the breed is noted. It seized the nearest alien ankle, gave a fierce shake of its jaws, then let go and crawled under the table where it promptly went back to sleep.

The ankle belonged to a passing sailor. His screams were like a trumpet call to battle and fists, feet (foot, in the captain's case), club and bottles quickly did enormous damage to the ancient lovers' opponents, which bothered the tavern keeper not at all. The wrecking of *his* property was a different matter – and upset him greatly.

The dishevelled lovers, reunited with artificial eyes and legs, were taken in by constables – and as the remnants of their poor fortunes had been squandered on payment of reparations to numerous inn keepers for previous depredations their purses were almost empty.

A most serious situation – and one that could have become even worse if Katie and Lt Denny had not answered an appeal for help and rescued them from the lock-up.

Katie and Denny were unable to provide a permanent refuge for the errant couple – Denny was under orders to sail to the West Indies to play his part in England's war with America and Katie was to travel with him. So it was that they asked me to take

in the elderly Juliet and her Romeo – and Denny, aware of our financial circumstances, made arrangements with his bankers for regular payments to cover the costs.

They brought the newcomers to my household to see me, bid them and me farewell and left me to examine my two ‘servants’. Both were smoking tobacco stained white clay pipes.

The captain grinned, then winked at me.

Cynthia took my hand, looked up at me, her eyes twinkling, hinting of mischief. ‘You, dear, are like my dear great-granddaughter – brimming with passion – so full of vigour! You know why I retain my youthful looks and vitality?’ she asked, her voice as soft and cooing as a dove’s (although I was to learn later it was a voice that could put a drunken grenadier to shame in volume and coarseness at times of stress).

‘I have no idea,’ I said, somewhat startled by her question.

She chuckled, and then sighed as though momentarily absorbed in memories of long ago. ‘Regular, passionate encounters with a man – if possible *every morning* – a marvellous way to start the day – followed by a glass of gin.’ She patted my arm. ‘I sense my dedication to the finer things of life arouses a strong echo within you.’

I laughed. ‘All my senses tell me that most husbands will not be so obliging – or even if they have freedom to daily humour their wives – they’ll not be long capable of doing so’

Cynthia giggled. ‘I have always found there is more than one way to catch a cat! I have had more lovers than husbands! That is how it is done, my dear.’

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The other occasional member of my household is Mad Meg.

Mad Meg is a giant of a girl – a full head taller than a guardsman. Nature has treated her poorly. She has been given a large towering but shapely figure – topped by an elongated face with a long chin. In repose she resembles a mournful horse.

She earned her sobriquet of ‘Mad’ after a party of French lancers on a skirmishing operation had accidentally blundered into her lines of washing and sent them fluttering into the mud. The enraged girl had seized a tent pole and used it to poleaxe both rider and horse to the ground. The rest of the lancers fled in terror.

How she came to be with the British in France, I know not. At the time she had two trades – one as laundress, the other giving comfort to the troops – for a little consideration. Despite her physical drawbacks, whenever men were in funds long lines were to be seen queuing at the entrance of her quarters.

She finally married – they were an odd couple. She was wed to a tiny pioneer corporal, in height little more than a dwarf, who was overheard to say just after the wedding that Meg had promised to mend her ways and stick to laundry – but if she didn’t he’d knock her to the ground! There was much speculation among the soldiery as to how many ammunition boxes he’d need to stand on in order to chastise his bride. It was assumed that the corporal’s abilities in this direction were never called upon –

for they seemed a most devoted couple until tragedy struck: Meg lost her corporal in battle and a new-born baby to a virulent fever.

She was taken into Mrs Calhoun's household as a maid. This was done out of kindness, for Mrs Calhoun had no need for more servants at her town and country properties or when accompanying the major on his travels. And so Mrs Calhoun pays her wages but from time to time 'loans' her to me as a general maid when Wickham and I are in settled quarters.

There can be no deep friendship between such a low-born woman as Meg and myself, but I am most fond of her – as I know she is of me. She is most loyal and protective – although I find her great height hovering close behind at times unsettling.

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On the day I first made the acquaintance of champagne I learned something of the explosive qualities of the wine that is the lubricant of preference at royal and aristocratic gatherings. Explosive in more ways than one.

It was coincidence that on the day I first experienced the joyful, eruptive bubbly taste of champagne I also witnessed an explosion of a different sort – at a demonstration of a carriage propelled by a mobile steam engine in Hyde Park.

Mrs Calhoun and the major had been invited to spend the day with Sir Leigh Carstairs and his wife Lady Maude. They were all very close friends and when I accompanied Mrs Calhoun to a tea party given by Lady Maude I soon became on friendly terms with Sir Leigh's lady even though she was considerably older than myself. And so Mr Wickham and I were invited to join a picnic lunch in Hyde Park with the Calhouns and the Carstairs to be followed by dinner at the Carstairs' home at Covent Garden. We were to be joined at the park by Han and her husband – Mr Warren having a business interest in the demonstration.

When we boarded the two open carriages that were to act as platforms to observe the entertainment at the park the weather was very fine and the outlook for a great day was promising.

We were not to observe the steam engine at work merely for the sake of novelty – there was a more serious purpose. Major Calhoun, Sir Leigh and Mr Warren had been approached by a London business group and were considering investing money in the manufacture of steam engines.

When I mentioned this to Wickham he sneered, 'There is no money to be made in such machines – they are only of use in pumping water from mines. If *I* had money to invest it would be in horseflesh – there is always a demand for good horseflesh.'

I made no comment at the time for I had no money to invest in machines or horseflesh – but what thoughts I did have were not fit to be publicly expressed by a loyal and dutiful wife.

The weather remained fine, the engine had not arrived, and so we had an enjoyable thirty minutes or so concentrating on the contents of the luncheon hampers prepared

for us by the servants. There were no surprises in the food – cold chicken, ham, ox tongue, pork pies – but the wine was a revelation! Champagne! A bubbly, happy drink designed, so said Sir Leigh Carstairs as he filled our glasses, to send the heaviest of spirits floating skywards. It certainly lifted mine and after a glass or two it was not just my spirits that were lifted – my feet seemed impelled to tap in time to a tune in my head and it was with some effort that I restrained myself from bursting into song.

Hundreds had gathered in the park to watch the demonstration, most standing and lying on the grass, others in a variety of carriages, but all eating and drinking. Many, whether or not they were in wine, were not able to restrain themselves so well as I – and whiled away the time of waiting by bursting into songs. Some were most ribald.

The steam engine finally arrived on a large flat cart on six wheels drawn by six pairs of horses. It was followed by an open top carriage. Sir Leigh explained what would happen. ‘The engine is different from those used for pumping work in mines. A system of wheels and pulleys is designed to pull a carriage riding on rails – although today we are using wooden planks. It’s the invention of an ironworks engineer in Sunderland.’

The preparations were made, the engine was fired up, the planks laid, a cable stretched between the engine and the carriage, a whistle was blown, the crowds cheered, the ladies waved their parasols. Then amid a cloud of steam and another blast on the whistle the cable tightened as it went round a spinning wheel and, after a group of reluctant soldiers got on board, the carriage began to move forward.

The horses, tethered near the engine reared and whinnied startled by the noise. ‘Oh, I do hope the horses are safe!’ Lady Carstairs cried out.

‘They will soon settle down,’ said Wickham.

He was wrong, for almost immediately afterwards as the carriage reached the half way mark the chug chug sound of the engine suddenly ceased, there was a loud roar, and the engine was enveloped in smoke and flames.

Lady Carstairs screamed to Wickham, ‘Save the horses! Save the horses!’

Wickham leaped to his feet, towering over Lady Carstairs. ‘Of course, dear lady, of course,’ he said. He then jumped from the carriage, stood swaying as though gathering his thoughts, then ambled away from the carriage and away from the scene of the explosion in the direction of the approaching soldiers.

‘You are going in the wrong direction!’ screamed Lady Carstairs. Wickham waved a hand as though acknowledging her call. I said nothing but was aware Wickham *knew* he was heading in the *right* direction.

When the soldiers ran by him he fell in behind and followed them, though by no means quick enough to quite catch up with the rear ranks. Indeed, the closer they came to the scene of the incident the slower became his pace. But he made up for this by the increasing volume of his exhortations to the men: ‘Hurry lads! Hurry lads! Save the horses!’ So that he could give clearer directions he stopped following the

soldiers to the area of danger – like many a cautious general – and shouted: ‘Quick lads! Get the horses away!’

Lady Carstairs, who was somewhat short-sighted, but had acute hearing, assumed Wickham was now leading the troops from the front rather than the rear. She turned to me and said, ‘What a brave fellow! Your husband is such a brave fellow!’

I had my own thoughts on that subject, but merely said, ‘You are not alone in saying so.’

We all alighted from the carriages and Lady Carstairs, who was in a much agitated state, attempted to run after Wickham and the soldiers. ‘I must help them,’ she shouted. But at that moment we saw that the soldiers had freed the frantic horses from their tethering posts and were leading them to safety. Sir Leigh seized her arm and said, ‘Stay here, my dear, stay here. You will only get in the way. They are quite safe now.’

Han chuckled, then whispered to me, ‘It is said that the lady is far fonder of her furry and feathered friends than she is of her husband. Especially horses.’

From somewhere men had arrived with buckets and carried water from a nearby pond, and then an insurance company crew had arrived with a hand pump and were soon spraying water on to the steaming wreckage of the engine.

On the way home to Covent Garden Wickham, muttered, ‘I *said* horseflesh is a better investment.’

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Upon our return to the Carstairs home we were offered facilities for refreshing ourselves, most welcome after the earlier contretemps at the park. Then it was time for conversation – and a drink or two – in the drawing room before dinner.

The sharp pop as Sir Leigh opened a bottle of champagne – for it was again that royal wine that was on offer – was a signal for the Carstairs, Mrs Calhoun, Wickham and myself to toast each other’s health; to the success of steam engines; victory for the Army and Navy in all their battles, finally long life to Sheba. This last toast from Lady Carstairs.

‘Who is Sheba? I asked.

Lady Carstairs, who was somewhat flushed from the wine and had sunk down on to the chaise longue like a long floppy sack waved a casual arm in the direction of a large covered cage standing in one corner on a high slender pedestal. ‘Poor Sheba! All covered up, shunned, kept out of the party! She most certainly should join in!’

With that she staggered to her feet, tottered to the cage, swept away the cover – and there in the great gilded cage on one of two swings sat a large parrot of brilliant colours – scarlets, yellows, greens. As the cover dropped to the floor the parrot gave a great screech.

Smiling broadly, Lady Carstairs waved her glass of champagne towards the cage (though careful not to spill its contents) ‘This is Sheba!’ she said, introducing us to the bird, which it soon became obvious she held in almost as high a regard as horses. (Her

husband later confided he thought her love of Sheba would have exceeded her fondness for horses – if it were possible to saddle and ride a parrot!)

The parrot, its high crest riding up and down like a conductor's baton, swayed from side to side, lifting each claw from the perch in time as though dancing to a tune only it could hear.

Then the bird began a loud series of repetitious sounds – 'Choc-taw, choc-taw'.  
'Does she speak?' I asked.

Lady Carstairs cried, 'She *is* speaking! She *is* speaking!'  
'It doesn't sound so,' I said.

'I assure you, she *is* speaking,' cried Lady Carstairs. 'We were told by the shopkeeper who sold us the bird that 'Choc-taw' is an African dialect meaning "Mamma." She is always calling me "Mamma" She knows I am her Mamma.'

Sir Leigh winked at me and murmured, 'It must also mean "Papa" because she repeatedly addresses me as Choc-taw.' He grinned. 'This will amuse you. Sheba is – as far as we can ascertain – not a girl parrot: she's a boy!'

Lady Carstairs swallowed her champagne and sobbed, 'It is true, it is true. It is most unfortunate!'

'How did this occur?' I asked.

Lady Carstairs said, 'It was that dreadful man who sold us Sheba. He assured us that she was a girl parrot.'

Sir Leigh murmured to me, 'Hardly a *girl* – the wretch was most insistent that the bird is at least 100 years old.'

'How do you know the bird is *not* a girl?' I asked.

Lady Carstairs sobbed, 'We found out because Sheba seemed moody and we thought it would be nice to get her a companion. *That wretch* assured us that the second bird we brought home was a male.'

I sipped more champagne and giggled before I asked, 'Are we to assume *that* bird was not a male? And if not how did you find out?'

It was Sir Leigh who replied. 'We found out when the *male* – Solomon – laid an egg!'

'Solomon!' I exclaimed. Sir Leigh laughed. 'That's right. Solomon and Sheba!'

I pointed to the parrot in *his* cage. 'Why haven't you given the bird a more appropriate name – and what happened to mother and egg?'

Lady Carstairs replied. 'It would have been too confusing for poor Sheba to have learned to respond to a new name. As for "Solomon" and her egg I thought it indecent to keep them with poor Sheba. We gave them to our butler – and they are now at home in his pantry.'

All the time the bird kept up its constant croaking chorus of Choc-taw, Choc-taw.

Lady Carstairs held up her empty glass to her husband. 'Let us have another wine,' she said. Sir Leigh half filled her glass. 'More, please,' she said. 'Sheba likes a little

cake soaked in sherry – I wonder if she'll drink champagne as well.' She held the glass to the parrot's beak – it promptly began sipping.

'What a thirsty little boy you are!' she said. The bird ignored her and kept sipping – and so did we all, sitting silently watching our feathered drinking companion until Lady Carstairs took the glass away. 'That's enough,' she said, and swallowed what was left of the champagne.

Sheba screeched, slowly toppled from its perch, staggered around the floor of the cage then rolled over on its back – its legs sticking in the air. It looked like a feathered fowl on the dinner table – one plucked by a very inebriated or absented minded cook.

Lady Carstairs screamed, 'Poor Sheba! Poor Sheba is dead!' She began sobbing.

Sir Leigh hurried across the room to his wife and put his arm around her shoulders. 'Don't be silly, my dear. The bird is not dead – see, there is movement!'

And there *was*. Close scrutiny showed that although the body and legs remained rigid its claws contracted then opened, one after another, as though the unconscious bird was once again beating time to a silent melody.

'We must get medical help,' cried Lady Carstairs.

Sir Leigh said, 'The army animal school is nearby – we'll send the bird there. One of the horse doctors will be able to treat it. The butler can take it.' With that he rang for the butler, a stoop backed white-haired man so elderly in appearance he might well have first been a servant to the original Solomon. He carried a large silver salver, obviously in anticipation of receiving orders to bring new supplies of wine or to remove empty bottles.

But Sir Leigh's order was somewhat different in tone and content. 'Remove the parrot,' he said, 'and take it for medical treatment to the military veterinary hospital. Ask for the vet, Mr Tupper. He has treated my horses.'

Before Lady Carstairs could rouse herself the butler (his white gloved fingers seeming to show disdain for the task allotted them) had lifted the recumbent parrot by its legs and gently placed the bird on the gleaming salver and began moving towards the door. He was halted by a cry from Lady Carstairs, 'I must go with Sheba.'

Sir Leigh nudged Wickham, who had all during the encounter sat with his mouth hanging open, his mind apparently in a far distant place. 'I say, old boy, I'd be obliged if you would escort Lady Carstairs and the parrot to the hospital.'

'Glad to,' muttered Wickham, and after something of a struggle to get his legs untangled and in working order, he rose upright, bowed to everyone in the room and followed the butler, the parrot and Lady Carstairs out of the room. As they departed through the door, led by the parrot recumbent on the tray, its legs high in the air, the group made a stately procession. For some reason my thoughts turned to the Queen of Sheba in procession to the court of King Solomon.

As they left Sir Leigh called after them, 'Don't forget to ask for Tupper – a great man for dealing with dead drunk troopers, dead drunk parrots, and dead drunk horses.'



As they vanished I said to Sir Leigh, ‘There can be no such animal as a dead drunk horse!’

Sir Leigh laughed. ‘You are quite mistaken, young lady. Tupper nursed to health a horse that was almost more dead than drunk.’

‘How did the horse become drunk?’ I asked.

‘It was an accident,’ he said. ‘The horse’s owner left it tethered outside the officers’ mess. Someone left a large Benares brass bowl filled with a mixture of brandy and water near the horse. The mixture was intended for a party that night – the horse must have been thirsty, so it invited itself to the party, and swallowed a gallon or two.

‘It was fortunate Tupper was nearby – for by the time that horse had finished golloping down its party drink it was in a very poor state, draped over the tethering rail and exuding wind in all directions, farting and belching in a most distressing, alarming fashion. I do beg your pardon for the crudity!’

‘Whose horse was it?’ I asked.

‘The Duke of Wellington’s.’

‘What kind of medication did Tupper use?’ I asked.

‘For the horse – a strong purge. Huge quantities! Gallons of it!’

The vision of a bird bursting from a surfeit of purging fluids horrified me. ‘Surely that would kill a parrot!’ I cried.

‘Oh, he won’t be using such treatment for Sheba. For a dead drunk parrot he’ll prescribe the same medicine he gives a dead drunk trooper!’

‘And what is that?’ I asked.

‘A long sleep!’ he replied.

He then lifted an empty champagne bottle. ‘Shall we have another?’

‘Yes, please,’ I replied with some enthusiasm.

‘I say,’ said Sir Leigh, ‘would you care to see my wine cellar? It has a specially built storage area for my champagne.’

I agreed a visit to the cellar would be of interest. After a struggle to stand upright, because for some reason it was some considerable time before my legs obeyed me, I was finally able to get to my feet.

‘I’m surprised – with the difficulties of war – that you have such a ready store of champagne,’ I said. ‘How have you evaded Bonaparte and the King’s revenue men?’

He laughed, winked and tapped his nose with his finger.

An unusual day ended in an interesting manner with my first visit to a champagne cellar – a place as explosive in its nature as a fireworks factory.

*(Lydia’s diary – August 3, 1823)*

Had an enjoyable day at the races with other fortunate guests of a certain Royal Highness. Chilled champagne was among the many good things on offer to the guests

of HRH – and the champagne bottles were opened with the usual cannonade and shrieks of false alarm from some of the ladies.

I overheard HRH comment to one of the gentlemen that storage of champagne had most recently been made a much safer business as the result of an invention by a French wine maker. ‘Those little explosions one hears when a bottle is opened are a minor matter – they are the normal consequence of the wine being gaseous. But when there is violent fluctuation in temperatures in a place where large numbers of bottles are stored – then it was always a truly explosive, dangerous situation. It was not unknown for butlers to die – and for the occasional aristocratic gent to have his noble line cut off and come to an untimely end. As a result of the Frenchman’s invention the storage cellars are now much safer places!’

This reminded me of my visit to Sir Leigh Carstairs’ wine cellar some years ago. It began in a leisurely fashion – but came to an abrupt end. The cellar was guarded by an oak door so thick it would have been quite at home fronting one of His Majesty’s gaols. Walking into that cavernous ill-lit place I immediately began trembling, not out of fear, but from the shock of the chilled air that immediately surrounded me.

As we entered Sir Leigh pointed to a series of stone shelves on either side of the door, all of them piled high with blocks of ice. ‘They are there to keep the air at a stable temperature,’ he said. ‘I have two wine cellars – this one is for my champagne,’ he said.

I surveyed the seemingly unending rows and rows of dusty bottles lying on wooden shelving, I said, ‘You have enough here for every member of the Guards regiments in London to drink to His Majesty’s health!’

Sir Leigh laughed. ‘I should not want to do that – it would be treason! It would put the army out of action!’

Sir Leigh opened a bottle, poured drinks in glasses he’d brought with him, then pointed to a large wooden bunk seat half hidden behind some shelving. ‘Let us make ourselves comfortable over there,’ he said.

I notice then that Sir Leigh’s eyes were exceedingly bright – and I suspected that this was not due just to the wine he had imbibed. My suspicions were soon confirmed.

As we sat on the bunk seat’s cushions, an unusual item of comfort for a wine cellar, Sir Leigh edged closer, put his free hand round my waist and murmured, ‘You are such a devilish attractive little lass.’ As his hand travelled upwards to encompass my bosom, largely bare and exposed to the freezing air, he added, ‘Not so little either!’

I am, as my friends well know, very fond of the gentlemen – and in some cases most passionately fond of them – particularly when I have had a glass or two of wine to warm the blood. But I objected to Sir Leigh’s ungallant approach – and his choice of amatory venue – for what female other than a Norse ice maiden would wish to engage in love making in such a frozen boudoir?

I tried to brush Sir Leigh’s arm away. ‘Thank you for the compliments,’ I said, ‘but I must really go now – I am perishing from the cold!’

He laughed, a most lewd sound. ‘I can soon change that!’

I surprised him by quickly rising and jerking myself free from his embrace, but in my confusion began running not to the door but into the interior of the cellar.

‘Tally ho!’ Sir Leigh yelled and began chasing me. As he closed in on me I delayed his progress by pulling down one set of shelves. As the bottles hit the stone floor there was a tremendous fusillade of corks flying and glass exploding in every direction.

I seized my chance and began running towards the door – but covered my rear further by pulling down another set of shelves and bottles. Again the explosions were most terrifying – but even more fearful was the rage I heard in Sir Leigh’s voice as he screamed over and over again: ‘My champagne! My champagne!’

I was able to get one quick glimpse of his face – it was then I had time to see a flying cork hit his nose and as the blood spurted from the injured organ his yelling ceased of necessity as he clutched a handkerchief to his face.

Upstairs I hurried to get my bag and cloak for I thought it wise not to linger too long in the house. I reached the hallway as the door opened and in came Lady Carstairs, followed by Wickham and bringing up the rear the butler carrying a bag whose hidden wriggling contents seemed to object, most violently, to its improvised carriage.

‘Sheba has made a rapid recovery!’ cried Lady Carstairs. ‘I think he is still somewhat bad tempered – due I suppose to a headache.’

Wickham grunted and held up a red inflamed thumb for my inspection. ‘That bird bit my thumb,’ he growled.

‘I’ve apologised for that,’ said Lady Carstairs, ‘Sheba is usually most gentle. We must settle him back in his cage – the sooner the better.’

She then observed I was prepared to leave. ‘Why are you leaving so soon?’ she asked. ‘We haven’t yet had our meal!’

‘You must excuse me – I am feeling ill. I must go home. The champagne was too much for me, I’m afraid.’ (*And for Sir Leigh, I thought.*)

‘Where is Sir Leigh?’ asked Lady Carstairs.

‘He offered to show me the wine cellar,’ I said, ‘but I was unable to stay because he had an accident – and he is now in a frightful temper because he knocked down shelves and destroyed a number of bottles of champagne. As well as inflicting a wound on his nose.’

Lady Carstairs immediately went into a state of the flutters, ‘I’m sorry I must leave you,’ she said, ‘I have to attend to Sir Leigh.’

‘I should wait for a while,’ I warned her, ‘he may be in a dangerous mood.’

‘I’ll take the butler with me,’ she said and trotted away calling ‘Sebastian! Sebastian!’

As I left the house with Wickham and sent him to a nearby hackney stand I wondered in what way an elderly butler could defend a lady from her murderous husband. That she survived I know because we became friends – and Sir Leigh and I

never mentioned our encounter in the wine cellar, although he did seem somewhat abashed when I once asked saucily whether the small scar he had acquired on his nose was a memento of a duel.

He grinned and said, 'I was thrown by a spirited filly.'

Some weeks later I received a gift from Sir Leigh – a £10 shares certificate making me part proprietor of a northern engine manufacturing company. With it was a brief note stating it was a souvenir of our visit to the unfortunate engine demonstration at Hyde Park. I have sometimes wondered why I was the only guest to be so honoured. I have not yet made my fortune from my investment in steam engines – but I have been advised to be patient – steam wagons are the coming thing I'm told and my £10 certificate could grow golden babies.

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