

Two

Doves and Roses



As the family sat in the drawing room after their luncheon, the maid brought in the afternoon's mail on a silver tray and handed the letters to Jane's father. He looked over them and harrumphed before passing one heavy letter to Jane's mother.

Jane tried not to stare when Mrs. Ellsworth exclaimed at the address. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the weight of the paper, and the thick wax seal on the back. As Mrs. Ellsworth slid her penknife under the sealing wax, Jane kept her focus on the watercolour before her.

“The FitzCamerons are hosting a ball!”
Mrs. Ellsworth nearly dropped her penknife.

Her hands trembled, making the invitation rattle like a miniature thunderstorm.

Though the FitzCamerons were their closest neighbours, Lady FitzCameron was rarely in residence at Banbree Manor since her husband's death, preferring to spend her time in London with the ton. There had not been a ball at Banbree Manor since before Melody's coming out.

Melody dropped the fringe she had been crocheting, and ran across the drawing room with a squeal of delight.

Mr. Ellsworth shook his head. "I suppose young Livingston has arrived?"

Mrs. Ellsworth studied the letter without responding. "Oh! She barely gives us time enough for the modiste to make us new gowns."

Jane glanced at her father. Though she coveted a bolt of dove silk at Madame Beaulieu's Haberdashery, Mr. Ellsworth was constantly worried about funds. His face softened as he looked at Melody. "Well. I want my girls to shew well against young Miss FitzCameron."

"Charles, do not be silly." Mrs. Ellsworth put the letter down and glared at Jane's father. "Everyone knows that Miss FitzCameron uses glamour to enhance her appearance, though with the dowry she carries, most overlook it."

"Does she?" Like most men, Jane's father was nearly blind to glamour folds. Jane rather thought it was from lack of training than lack of a native ability, for he could do rudimentary warming spells when hunting.

“Yes,” Mrs. Ellsworth said. “Heavens, do you not recall how her teeth stuck out like a horse?”

“Oh. Yes. I thought perhaps she had outgrown it.”

Melody snorted. “La! If she had, then she wouldn’t faint all the time. If you watch at the ball, I am certain that she will faint. When she awakens, she will cover her mouth with her hand until she has the charm in place again.”

“But why does her mother allow it?” Mr. Ellsworth asked.

Jane put down her paintbrush. “I imagine that she turns a blind eye because she hopes her daughter will make a better match for it.”

“Neither of you do that, I hope.”

Jane picked up her paintbrush again, painfully aware that he looked at her, not at Melody. “I trust that it is apparent that I do not.”

As she laid brush to paint, dabbing at the blue with which she hoped to capture yesterday’s sky, her father blustered with a poor attempt at apology. “No, of course. Both of my girls are too sensible for such nonsense.”

“Sensible.” Jane guided the brush across the page, letting the paint bleed across the water. “Yes. We are sensible girls. Are we not, Melody?” Such was her bitterness that she could not contain that small jab at her sister’s moment of weakness from the day prior. At the paling in Melody’s cheeks, Jane instantly regretted her pettiness and tried to turn her words. “And so we should have no trouble in using our sensibility to convince you of the importance of new gowns for the ball.”

“Oh yes, Charles. They must have new gowns.” Mrs. Ellsworth rapped the table as if she could summon the modiste instantly.

Mr. Ellsworth laughed, belly quivering under his waistcoat, and the moment passed. “New gowns and a new thing for your hair.” He gestured loosely at his own thinning pate. “Whatever it is the young ladies are using to look becoming these days.”

“May we go now?” Melody danced on the carpet of the drawing room as if she were already at the ball dancing a cotillion with Mr. Dunkirk.

Jane shook her head to clear it of such thoughts and returned her attention to her watercolours. It was unjust of her to have so much petty bitterness toward Melody. Jane knew well that she was past what small bloom youth had provided her. She had resigned herself to life as a spinster; there were certainly less honourable ways to spend one’s declining years than attending to the comforts of one’s parents. Her best hope was to see Melody happily wed. Indeed, her own welfare could be said to depend on such a happening, for if Melody gained the sort of husband which she deserved, then after their parents’ passing he would welcome the spinster sister into the household like a good and true gentleman. Then Jane might have the pleasure of helping raise Melody’s children and they need not trouble with a governess. Indeed, that seemed her best and only course.

She washed her brush in the glass of water she kept on the side table for this purpose and smiled at Melody. “I

should like to go as well. I have been eying a bolt of silk at Madame Beaulieu's for some time now."

"Then you shall go and you shall take the carriage." Mr. Ellsworth leaned back in his chair, and Jane felt the weight of his love for them warming her.

Melody dashed across and wrapped her arms about his neck, kissing the bald spot on the top of his head. "Thank you, Papa." She danced out of the room, followed quickly by Mrs. Ellsworth, who rattled opinions about fashion and cut as if she were getting a new gown herself.

Rising more decorously, Jane took a moment to set her paints in order before following her mother and sister out of the room. When she turned, her father was regarding her with a curious tenderness. He held out his hand to her.

She crossed the room and took it, wondering at the softness in his gaze.

"Jane, will you humour an old man?"

"Of course, Papa."

"I should like to see you in something with roses." He squeezed her hand. "Will you do that for me?"

Her beloved dove silk vanished from her mind. How could she deny him such a simple request? "I will speak to Madame Beaulieu. I am certain sure she will have just the thing."

Roses. What made him think of that?

Always when Jane went into Dorchester she found herself instantly wearied by the bustle of people and carriages

as they went about their business. She could not help but wonder where they were all going, and what business pulled them out of their homes with such urgency.

There, she saw two boys who must be on their way to someone's home with a delivery. One carried a green-grocers box, full of lettuce, turnips, and early strawberries. The other, a cold-monger, worked folds to keep a chill over the box.

And there, the girl walking with the young man in a captain's uniform: was he her brother returned from the seas or a suitor hoping to win her heart? Indeed, the town seemed quite full of young men in uniform, their epaulets and decorations adding a brilliant sparkle to the streets. Jane scanned the crowd, wondering if any of the young men were Henry Livingston and if she would recognize him should she see him. Indeed, he might be the young captain she had seen walking with the girl; the man's hair had been dark enough.

The carriage pulled to a halt in front of Madame Beau-lieu's Haberdashery, and Jane alighted from the carriage with her mother and sister. Though Mrs. Ellsworth had no need of a new gown, she had contrived to convince Mr. Ellsworth that it was in their best interests for her to have one as well. After all, she said, would not their neighbours recognize the shabbiness of her own dress as an indication of their income? And to imply that their income was lower than it was would surely harm the chances of the girls at wedding. Almost, Jane had declined to accompany them at

that point, knowing that her own dress would be but a masquerade to delay the confirmation of her spinster status a while longer, but for all that, she was still a girl at heart and loved pretty things.

Madame Beaulieu's establishment was crowded with girls. From the chatter it seemed that Lady FitzCameron had invited every eligible maid from the surrounding countryside.

True to her promise to her father, Jane looked through the bolts of cloth for one with roses figured upon it and found but one, which seemed too garish for her features. The roses, worked in yellows and peaches, would only make her skin more sallow.

Jane's mother and sister finished their business with the modiste and excused themselves from the overcrowded shop while Jane, who had yet to reconcile herself to the yellow roses, continued to look at cloth in hope of finding a fabric which suited her.

In despair, she was about to chuse the yellow cloth when the modiste approached. "I thank you for your patience, Miss Ellsworth. How may I help you?"

Jane sighed and fingered the bolt of yellow roses. "My father has made a special request that I be dressed in roses. I throw myself on your mercy, for this is the only cloth with roses, and I fear I lack the complexion that it requires."

Madame Beaulieu stepped back and narrowed her eyes, raking them over Jane and seeming to take the measure of her soul as well as her figure. "The figured cloth won't do, but we may suggest roses by other means."

She led Jane across the shop to a bolt of palest pink. Picking up the cloth, she continued to the bolt of dove grey which Jane had so coveted. Laying the two cloths together to assess the colours, she nodded in satisfaction and then turned to Jane. “Something like this, I think.”

Her fingers danced in the air, pulling folds together in a small simulacrum of Jane. This tiny manikin wore Jane’s beloved dove silk, but with an open pelisse of the pink. A high waist with a sash of that same pale pink gave the illusion of height and slenderness to her figure. Softening Jane’s face, Madame Beaulieu had added a turban *à la Oriental* which cupped her hair with cunningly wrought silk roses. A simple shawl completed the picture with elegant grace. She caused the image to execute a graceful pirouette so that Jane could see how the garment moved. Jane breathed in wonder. She hardly dared hope that her own true form would look half so fetching. “I believe you have it, Madame Beaulieu.”

The modiste smiled and beckoned one of the shop girls. The girl trotted over and took over the folds from the modiste, moving the image to the back of the shop and leaving her mistress free to spend her energies in other designs. Although Madame Beaulieu could tie off the image and have it remain in place without effort, if she did, the shop would soon become crowded with manikins. A shop girl could be trusted to maintain the integrity of the folds while moving them to the back of the shop, where they could be tied off until it was time to make the dress. As the curtain to

the back parted, Jane caught a glimpse of other tiny manikins, as if the ball had already begun in miniature.

After she spoke with Madame Beaulieu briefly of the price and time of delivery, Jane moved to the door, only to find her way blocked as a gentleman entered the shop. For a moment, the light from the street rendered his identity a mystery, leaving only a man-shaped silhouette. Then he stepped fully into the shop and Jane saw that it was Mr. Dunkirk. He swept his hat off at once upon seeing her. His face brightened, unexpectedly. “Miss Ellsworth, this is good fortune.”

“How do you do, Mr. Dunkirk?”

“Very well, thank you, the more so because my sister has come for a visit.” Here he turned and beckoned a girl, surely no more than sixteen, with the same dark eyes and noble brow as her brother. “May I present Miss Elizabeth Dunkirk?”

As the girl bobbed a curtsy, Mr. Dunkirk continued, “Miss Ellsworth is our neighbour, Beth. She is a woman of uncommon taste.” He twisted his hat in his hand and looked deeply apologetic. “I do hope I might impose on you for some advice. Beth arrived only yesterday, and as we were not expecting the FitzCamerons to be so generous with their hospitality, I find myself tasked with the duty of outfitting my sister for the ball. Were we in Downsberry, my mother would handle this, but I do not feel equal to the task. Could you . . . ?” His voice trailed off, and most unaccountably, he flushed, as if embarrassed. “I am quite hopeless in such things. I may recognize a gown of exquisite

taste, but do not know the necessaries of a young woman's toilet."

"I would be delighted to help, Mr. Dunkirk." The shop grew almost unbearably warm. "Though, I must assure you that Madame Beaulieu is a modiste of excellent merit. Miss Dunkirk is in safe hands, you may be certain."

He nodded and looked somehow disappointed, so Jane continued, "But of course I shall be happy to share my own feeble opinions as well."

"Thank you." He gave a short bow. "I do not like to impose, but I would like for Beth's first ball to be all that it may."

"Her first ball?" Jane felt the enormity of the task all the more. "Is she not out yet?"

Mr. Dunkirk looked so grave for a moment that Jane quailed, wondering at her trespass. "No, Miss Ellsworth. This is to be her coming out. My mother has—" Here he broke off. "I beg your pardon. I do not wish to tire you with my family history."

"No. The apology is mine. I should not have been so indelicate in my question. It hardly matters if a girl is out or not. I abhor the custom myself, but . . . well, let us consider what dress might suit her, shall we?"

During all of this conversation, Miss Elizabeth Dunkirk stood behind her brother, listening with silent attention. Her dark eyes were serious beyond her years, sharing some of the reserve of her brother. On her, the high forehead, which seemed so representative of nobility in Mr. Dunkirk,

ended in the same glossy black mane, but curved in a more delicate manner, as if her thoughts were tempered by her femininity. Her bones were delicate and her skin as fair as the moon, with blue veins beating at her temples. There was about her an air of sadness, which left Jane most curious. And to be “not out” in a family of such consequence as the Dunkirks! It was most odd, but Jane would not pry for all the world by word or deed.

She offered Miss Dunkirk her arm and led her to a bolt of white lawn, the fabric most appropriate to a debutante. Then Jane suggested a deep green velvet which she thought might set off Miss Dunkirk’s hair to advantage. Jane tried to affect the graceful, easy carriage of her sister, but could scarcely be at ease, so conscious was she of Mr. Dunkirk’s presence. How had he come to have a good opinion of her taste? In the two years since Mr. Dunkirk had settled in the estate at Robinsford Abbey, she had never felt his notice of her to be beyond that of a neighbour, save for that one afternoon when she had been alone with him in their drawing room.

Jane held her breath as Miss Dunkirk fingered the rich cloth. When the girl agreed that it was very fine, some of the tension left Jane’s body. Between the two of them, they selected a lace which complemented the cloth as well. Jane found it much easier to imagine a dress for someone else than for herself. By the time Madame Beaulieu disengaged from her other customers to see to Miss Dunkirk, Jane had sketched out a plan for a gown which pleased the girl greatly.

Madame Beaulieu admired the ideas which Jane wove in

the air for her, and added her own touches to bring the whole together. Miss Dunkirk turned to her brother, her eyes asking the question to see if he approved.

At this tacit invitation, he stepped closer and bent to examine the design. He smiled. "I was quite right that meeting you was a stroke of good fortune, Miss Ellsworth. This is everything I had hoped."

His approbation brought a flush to Jane's cheeks, and she turned to his sister to hide her disconcertion. "I do hope, Miss Dunkirk, that you are pleased as well."

"Thank you, I am." The girl kept her eyes downturned, but a hint of a smile curved her cheek.

Before they parted company, Jane sought and received the Dunkirks' assurance that they would call at Long Park-mead so that they might have an opportunity to converse in more agreeable circumstances.