

Silk and Steel

Catherine King

Published by Sphere

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Sphere

Copyright © Catherine King 2007

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-84744-165-2

Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Chapter 1

1840

The vicar read quietly from his prayer book, his soft hand gently touching the chalk-white skin of the woman's forehead. He traced the shape of a cross and those slight movements signalled the end of life for Amelia Bowes.

Tears ran down the cheeks of her daughter Mariah as she grieved silently for her loss. While they had each other, their hardships in this house had been bearable, but how would she survive without her mother? How could she continue to live here without the only person in the world who loved her?

She could not call this house a home. A home was where she would have been welcome. But her father had regarded them both as his servants, and treated them no better than he did his labourers at the ironworks. England may have a woman on the throne, but men continued to do the ruling.

Mariah inhaled with a shudder as she tried to repress her sobs. During her mother's long and painful illness, she had not thought beyond caring for her. They had not been separated in all her nineteen years and she could not imagine a life without her.

She heard the front door slam and her body went rigid. She

knew who it was because she had sent the stable lad to the works for him. Her father's heavy boots thumped on the stairs making the treads creak and groan. The door to the bedchamber flew open and banged against the wall.

'She's gone then.'

Ezekiel Bowes stood in the middle of the sparsely furnished chamber in his working clothes. His face was streaked and sweaty and his once white neckerchief hung, stained and greasy, around his damp, dusty neck.

'It took her long enough,' he added.

His ruddy face, hot from the furnace, showed no emotion, but then it would not unless he was angry. Mariah and her mother always knew when Ezekiel had been crossed, but never when he was pleased. Happiness was not part of his life. Or theirs. Amelia's life had been an austere one as the wife of Ezekiel Bowes.

Mariah sat quietly by the bed and thought that her mother looked peaceful now – more so than she had for many years. The vicar drew a white sheet over the still, serene face and murmured words of condolence to Ezekiel. Mariah saw the discomfort in her father's face. Ezekiel Bowes was not a church-going man and this new vicar was taking more of an interest in him than the old one had.

She had sent for him against her father's wishes because it was what her mother had wanted. Ezekiel was angry to see him in his house, but Mariah guessed he would let it pass for the sake of appearances. Appearances mattered to Ezekiel, but only to the world outside this house.

'Aye, well. You can leave now, Vicar,' he replied, with a surly nod.

The vicar added a few kind words to Mariah and hurried away. Mariah understood his haste.

'I suppose you sent for him?'

'Mother wanted him here at the end. You cannot begrudge her that, surely?'

Ezekiel turned on Mariah. He was a dark, swarthy man, toughened by years of manual labour. His hair was beginning to turn grey but he was still thick set and strong, for he still worked at the furnace with his men.

‘I don’t begrudge her anything now,’ he said. ‘Just get her out of here and clean up this chamber. I want everything of hers gone from this house. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, Father.’

‘Get on with it, then!’

Mariah got to her feet and began to collect up the small comforts of nursing that had helped her mother through her last painful weeks. She knelt on the floor and piled the empty apothecary’s bottles and soiled linen on a square of old calico and tied it into a bundle. She felt her father’s domineering presence in the room and when she looked at him he was sneering at her mother’s shroud.

Mariah’s grief and anger rose against him. ‘She was a good wife to you,’ she cried.

‘What would you know about it?’

‘I know she was loyal to you, and you – you look as though you . . . hated her,’ she replied quietly.

‘Hated her? I married her, didn’t I? Aye, I did that. And with you growing in her belly.’

Mariah had not known this and was surprised but not shocked. Many a bride was wed with her first child already on the way. Indeed, any future husband would be pleased to know his betrothed was not barren. In a way, this knowledge cheered her and she remarked, ‘You must have loved her once, then?’

He began to laugh, a low growling chuckle rumbled in his throat, but his brown eyes were hard. ‘Is that what she told you?’

‘Well, no. She did not talk of her – her early life.’

Ezekiel shook his head as though he had lost patience with her. ‘Nigh on twenty years and she never told you.’

‘It isn’t a crime to be with child at the altar! Not if you loved each other—’

He let out a guffaw. ‘And I thought you two were close! Well, I’ll be damned! She never said!’

‘We *were* close,’ Mariah protested. ‘Especially as I grew older and—’ She choked on a sob. ‘When she became ill, she needed me.’

Ezekiel eyes glittered at her angrily. ‘She needed *me*.’ He spat out the words and his large frame towered over Mariah as she knelt by the bed.

‘But you shunned her! You – you turned her away from your bedchamber, from your life, and treated her like a servant! What kind of marriage was that?’

‘*Enough!*’ Ezekiel shouted, closing in on her. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about! Don’t you ever say things like that again! Do you hear me?’

Mariah’s hazel eyes widened. He was standing right next to her and she could smell hot coal and metal on his leather boots and breeches. Anger radiated from him like the heat from his furnace.

‘Stop this hatred of her, Father! Stop it! She’s dead now.’

This seemed to calm him. But for how long? Mariah wondered.

‘What did she tell you?’ Ezekiel asked.

‘Not much. Only that you always took care of her and that whatever you did to us, to remember that underneath it all you kept your promise.’ Mariah gathered up her bundle and rose. ‘As I said, you must have cared for her once. And she did try to be a good wife to you.’

‘What else did she say?’ he demanded.

‘About what?’ Mariah was a full-grown woman now and not frightened of him as she had been as a little girl. If her father had something to say to her, it was best out in the open.

‘About you!’ he barked. ‘Look at you. Carrot hair, white skin and freckles. Not dark like the rest of us.’

What was he getting at? Her brother Henry was like his father with brown hair and eyes. Her mother's hair had had a coppery hue when she had been younger and a skin like her own that freckled in the summer sun and reddened if she did not keep it covered. 'I have my mother's hazel eyes,' she muttered.

He leaned forward and his eyes looked directly into hers. 'Oh aye, you're *her* lass all right. Same stubborn way with you. But you're not *mine*!'

Mariah's jaw dropped, her eyes rounded and she swayed. 'Y-you mean you are not my father?' She did not believe it! Her mother had lain with another man and carried his child. 'Did you know this when you married her?' she whispered.

'Of course I knew!'

'She never told me,' Mariah murmured. 'Not about this. Who is he, then? If you are not my father, who is my real father?'

Ezekiel sneered at her again. 'Don't go getting any fancy ideas. Your precious mother disgraced herself and her family with some coal miner who got killed in a pit fall. And there was pretty little Amelia, left with no one to wed and a scandal on the way.'

'You knew about this and you married her?' Mariah thought it had been uncharacteristically generous on her father's part. There must have been some kindness in him all those years ago, although she had never seen much evidence of it in her lifetime. 'Then I was right, you must have loved her once.'

He did not answer but Mariah noticed his head shaking very slightly. Perhaps he had acted hastily and had regretted it ever since? Perhaps this was why he had spent most of his time at his ironworks, preferring to join his men for the heavy labouring in the yard?

'I never loved her,' he sneered. 'Not *her*.'

Mariah blinked as his face contorted to a sadness she had not seen before. 'Then why . . . why *did* you marry her?' she asked.

He appeared to recover quickly. There was no grief after all;

no sense of loss for her mother. He raised his voice, filling the stuffy bedchamber with his venom. ‘Do you think I did it for nowt!’

Mariah tensed again. Her father was using the language of his earlier, younger years, language he usually kept for his men at the works. This was a warning sign that he was really angry, frustrated with his furnace or his suppliers, or simply with himself. She thought he was not a man at ease with himself and the successful ironmaster he had become.

‘They paid me ter marry ’er! So long as I took ’er away and never went back to ’em for owt else!’ he yelled. ‘Paid me well, an’ all. They were tailors, you know. Her family were all tailors in the North Riding. Doing all right for theirsenns, and her ma ’ad an uncle who was building cottages for a mine owner. How do yer think I got set up here wi’ me own furnace, when I were on’y a labourer in a quarry and a forge?’

Mariah felt herself go cold all over. ‘You married her for money?’ she whispered. ‘They paid you to take her – and me – away?’

‘Aye. That’s what folk with means do with their wayward daughters.’

Mariah found it hard to imagine her mother as wayward. She had been a warm and loving parent to her, and had more than made up for her father’s coldness towards them both. She must have been in love with Mariah’s real father. Perhaps they were planning to marry when he was killed?

‘Mother never spoke of her own folk. She told me she had no kin.’

‘Aye, she would say that. They wanted nowt more to do with her, so she turned her back on them an’ all. It suited me too.’

‘But surely they will wish to know of her passing?’

‘Why? As far as they are concerned, she is already dead. They were glad to see the back of her, let me tell you.’ Ezekiel grimaced at the body of his late wife. ‘And so am I.’

Mariah held her head in her hands. She knew her father

could be unkind but to be this cruel to her mother's memory was too much for her to bear.

She cried out in anguish. 'She was your *wife*!'

'She was a whore with a bastard!' he retaliated. 'But she got me a share in the ironworks. That was the deal.'

'How can you be so disrespectful to the mother of your own child!'

'Aye. She bore me a son, all right. I'll give her that. He is all that matters to me.'

Mariah stood rigidly in front of him at the foot of the bed that cradled her mother's dead body. 'You *never* cared anything for her, did you? Never!'

'No.'

'Or me!'

'Even less for you! Some pit worker's bastard! I don't want you in my house reminding me of that!'

'What do you mean?'

'It's clear enough, i'n't it? Now your mother's gone, there's no need for you to stay here.'

'But you cannot turn me out! I have nowhere to go!'

'You look all right, don't you? That carrot hair is not to everybody's taste, but you haven't got boss eyes or black teeth. Or a limp. And if you're like yer ma' you'll fall for a babby straight off to keep you out of mischief.'

Mariah was horrified. 'What on earth are you suggesting?'

'I am not suggesting, I am telling you. And if you value your mother's reputation you will do as you are told.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that if you do not obey me, I'll disown you for the bastard you are!'

'B-but people would think my mother was . . .'

'A whore? Aye, they would. So you'll do as I say and get yourself wed. And look sharp about it.'

'Be reasonable. I do not have a suitor.'

'I can find you one, don't you fret. A widower will do. One

who won't be needing no dowry to have a bit o' young flesh in his bed of a night.'

'You cannot do that to me!'

His reply was slow and deliberate. 'I am your father, and until you are twenty-one I can do what I like with you and don't you forget it. Aye, I can find you a husband easy enough. And you'll marry him, by God. Before midsummer, or you'll be out on the streets selling yoursenn like your mother did afore you.'

'That is not true! How can you be so cruel? My mother would never have done such a thing.'

'How do you know she didn't? How do I know she wasn't at it here? She was never wanting for a new gown. Neither were you and *I* never paid for 'em. Where did they come from, I wonder?'

'What do you think she did all day while you were at work? Why do you think she kept the morning room for herself? You were never interested in anything she did!'

'Why should I want to know what women do with their time?'

'Why indeed,' Mariah responded wearily. 'All you are concerned about is your precious furnace.'

'You listen 'ere to me, Mariah Bowes, and listen well to what I'm saying, because I mean it. I gave you my name, didn't I? You should be grateful for that alone. But while you carry that name, you make sure everyone in this town knows what a good husband I was to yer ma, and what a proper father I am to you. Did I send you out to service as soon as you were old enough? No. The both o' you had a roof over your head and food on the table.'

'We were your *servants*!'

It was then he hit her. He raised his right arm and brought the back of his hand hard across her face, sending her reeling. She grasped the iron bedstead to stop herself falling and stumbled over the silent, cooling body of her darling mother. It was

then she realised the full extent of Ezekiel Bowes' hatred for his wife and herself.

'I was a good husband and father and don't you forget it!' he retaliated loudly. 'As far as this town knows, we were – are – a decent family! If ever I hear any different from you – or from anybody in the Riding – I'll tell them what a whore your mother was and expose you for the bastard you are!'

His dark eyes were angry and his hands were clenched into fists as he continued to shout. 'And if your husband turns you out because o' that, it'll be your own doing. You'll be on the streets then, because I'll not have you back here. D'yer hear me? Never. Things are going to be different around here with yer ma and you out o' the road.'

Chapter 2

Ezekiel watched the coffin as it was lowered into the ground. It's over at last, he thought, and soon the daughter will be gone too, away from my house and that part of my life will be dead and buried for ever. He was a widower now, respectable, with a profitable business and an educated son to be proud of.

He had friends at the Freemason's lodge and they had turned out for him today, in their best black and polished boots. He was glad of that. The church service had been an ordeal for him but he felt stronger with his friends around him. Their wives and daughters were waiting for them in their own homes, the best place for womenfolk at times like these. None of them knew of his early life, and now his wife had gone and the bastard was on her way too, he could erase all those memories from his mind, push them away for ever deep down into the dark recesses of his past.

'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .' the vicar droned on.

He was anxious for it to be finished. Churchmen made him uncomfortable, and this one, this new vicar, more so than most. He had never known the old vicar very well and he did not want to know this one either. In Ezekiel's book, God was

unforgiving. God had made him a sinner and God had made him suffer. For the rest of his life he would suffer.

His face contorted with the hurt of remembering as he stood by the graveside. He saw the vicar looking at him. What did he know? he demanded silently. What did he know of growing up at the beck and call of his betters? Uneasily, he wondered where this new vicar came from and hoped it was not the North Riding.

‘Father?’

A hand took his arm. It was Henry. My, what a fine gentleman he had become, dressed in a new black coat and tall hat. His heart swelled with pride when he looked at him. Henry was his salvation. A fine boy, his son from his own seed, schooled and confident, moving among the straggle of mourners, taking charge.

There was sherry wine and shortened biscuits laid out in the dining room at home. Ezekiel was cheered by the thought of going back to his works as soon as this was over. He knew who he was when he was there. He was the gaffer and the men deferred to him. He could have taken greater advantage of them but he did not. He was no longer the troublemaker of his younger years, he was a changed man. A family man. Respectable. He would wear his black armband for the required length of time. Henry would advise him.

Ezekiel managed a weak smile for the vicar before moving away, thankful this necessary show was over. There was old man Smith from the ironmongers in town. A widower like himself. Well, no, not quite like himself. He had a big family of growing lads and lasses. But they were a handful for him and it was rumoured he was looking for a wife. His shop was prospering and he had a bob or two from rents as well, so he’d make any lass a good husband.

‘Mr Smith,’ he called. ‘Mr Smith, a word with you, if you please, sir.’

★ ★ ★

‘Do you know about Father’s plans, Henry?’

‘Of course, I do, Mariah. I am his son and heir. Father and I corresponded regularly when I was at school. The ironworks and this house are my future.’ Henry sighed. ‘It is a pity the house is so close to the works, for it is well proportioned and ideal for receiving callers.’

‘It was very convenient for Father in the early days. I remember when Mother used to cook dinner for his labourers and feed them all in the kitchen. I helped her with the washing-up and cleaning,’

‘I did not know we used to have *labourers* in our kitchen.’

‘No. You were away at school for most of the time.’

Mariah had served her father and brother their breakfast in the dining room. When Ezekiel left for the works, instead of returning to the kitchen, she drew out a chair opposite Henry and sat down.

‘Tell me about Father’s plans, Henry.’

Henry had come home from school for his mother’s funeral. At eighteen, he had worn new black clothes for the occasion but now he displayed only a black armband on his finely tailored coat. It was a fashionable maroon colour, made of good Yorkshire wool, Mariah noticed, and he wore pomade on his dark hair.

He sighed again. ‘Mariah, I have already said that you do not need to concern yourself with these matters.’ He frowned and pursed his lips. ‘And do remove your apron if you wish to join me at the table.’

Mariah ignored his request and watched him dispassionately as he picked an invisible speck of dust from his sleeve. He had grown into a handsome young man, with the dark hair and eyes of his father but without his swarthyness. Henry had inherited the smooth-textured skin of their mother. A feature he shared with her, except he had more warmth in his skin colouring and, of course, no freckles.

She felt plain and dowdy beside him. She had no money of her own and had sewn her mourning dress herself, from some

black stuff already in her mother's workroom. She covered it with a large white pinafore most of the time as the cloth had been cheap and already showed signs of wear.

'But Father's plans do concern me, Henry,' she persisted, 'this is my home.'

'Not for much longer, I hear.' He measured out a small smile. 'Father has told me you will marry soon and become part of another family. That will be convenient for all of us. I know you are not a Bowes, and I no longer think of you as a sister.'

This was a shock for Mariah. Henry had grown apart from her in his years away at school and she no longer recognised him as her little brother.

'But I am your sister, Henry!' she protested. 'Your mother was my mother, too!'

'She was not a Bowes and never a part of Father's affairs.' He shrugged. 'She had no real claim to our family name. As Father's wife she was given it as a privilege.'

'Family name? What family name? Father was an ordinary labourer before he came to the South Riding.'

'If you take my advice, you will not let him hear you say that. He means to be a well-respected ironmaster in this town.'

Mariah thought he probably already was. As a young man he had invested his wife's generous dowry in a rundown furnace, repaired the crumbling brickwork and taken on men to labour alongside him. To give her father his due he had worked hard, but he could have done none of it without marrying Amelia.

She said firmly, 'It was my mother's money that bought him the ironworks!'

'No, Mariah. I think you will find that is not true. Women, generally, do not have money of their own. However,' he pronounced casually, 'your mother's father may have given her a dowry.'

Your mother? Mariah thought, not 'my mother' or even 'our mother'. She said pointedly, 'She was your mother, too.'

'Yes,' he sighed. 'Though Father did not wish me to be

influenced by her. That is why he was so anxious for me to go away to be educated, and why he encouraged me to spend my time with young gentlemen from school, away from here.'

Well, thought Mariah angrily, go back to your expensive school and snobbish friends! She asked calmly, 'Then why have you chosen to stay at home now?'

'I would have thought that was obvious. Your mother is dead and soon you will be gone too. Father and I have plans. I shall not go to university, but become a partner in the ironworks when I am twenty-one.'

Mariah despaired. She had thought Henry might be her ally against Ezekiel's wishes in this matter. Her childhood memories were of austerity mixed with occasional cheer, but she and Henry had been friends as children playing in the attic or the garden. And she remembered how sad she had felt when Henry went first to a local day school and then, at eight years old, further afield as a boarding pupil.

He had visited them rarely since then and, when he did, had little time for her or her mother. Mariah had put his aloofness down to his new schooling. Mother said he was going to be a proper gentleman when he grew up. She had wondered at the time why Henry, who was a whole year younger than she was, went for lessons before her, and had asked innocently, 'When shall I go to school, Mother?'

'Heavens, my dear,' her mother had told her, 'Mr Bowes will not pay for you to go to school. You must stay at home with me and look after the house. I shall teach you how to cook and clean and sew. You do not need to go to school for that. I learned from my mother and you will learn from me.'

But her mother could not read or write so Mariah went to Sunday school and learned her letters and read Bible stories there. Mariah had often wondered why her mother spoke so little of her own mother. She presumed she had died young and so did not ask. Now that Amelia was dead it was too late and she wished she had questioned her more. All Mariah had

now was a likeness of her that she had kept in her workroom. It was a drawing, well executed by a travelling artist who had visited the beast market, mounted in an old silver frame. The features were recognisable as her mother's and, indeed, a little like her own. It was all she had of her past now; her mother had said she must have it when she was gone.

Mariah shook her head slightly at Henry's lack of sentiment for his own mother. His father and his schooling had taken him away from both of them. Henry pushed back his chair and his napkin fell to the floor. He did not pick it up but wandered over to the windows where tall glass doors led into the garden. He fingered the material of the curtains and looked at the walls.

'Between the two of you,' he remarked, 'you have neglected this house. Look at it! Dingy and unfashionable! What were you thinking of, letting it get into this state?'

Mariah had realised by now that her brother was not interested in replies to his questions. He did not want to hear about five years of illness and nursing and the small matter of her father's refusal to pay for paint or wallpaper, or even new fabric for window curtains. Father's usual response had been that all his profits were invested in raw iron for the furnace. Mariah thought this must have been true because Henry was right, the ironworks flourished while the house was run down.

It was a nice house to live in, though, and Mariah liked it. Situated, as it was, on the town side of the ironworks, it was convenient for the High Street and the market square at the top of the hill, and had enough garden around it to grow fruit and vegetables. There was a carriage house, too, where Father kept his haulage cart and heavy horses for transporting the bars of steel his furnace produced. Father had his own horse, too, a large spirited beast that Henry also rode.

The stable lad, who slept next to the hayloft over the tack room, looked after the garden as well, so they always had fresh greens and such like in the kitchen. But for years her father

would not employ a housemaid and it was a large house to clean without a servant. Built of local stone, it stood four square to the roadway, with a large front door and wide entrance hall. They had a drawing room, dining room, morning room and a large kitchen with a roomy scullery at the back. Upstairs were four good bedchambers with two attics above them.

When her mother was well, they were able to keep down the dust from the coal fires, wax the floorboards and furniture and cook meals between them. But when she became ill, Mariah could not manage the house and nurse her mother. Reluctantly, her father had agreed to occasional help in the form of Emma, a ten-year-old girl from down by the canal on the other side of the ironworks. She was a willing and cheerful child, but not used to a large house, and Mariah had to teach her many things before she could become a real help.

Mariah knew Henry did not wish to know any of this and said, 'Well, if Father will open an account at the draper's in town, I'm sure I can make new curtains and—'

'Really, Mariah! What do you know of fashion for houses? You have never been anywhere grand enough to see what can be done.'

Henry began to pace about, looking up at the ceiling and turning to survey the whole room. His new leather boots squeaked on the floorboards. 'This furniture is too light,' he declared. 'I want mahogany from the East. And red velvet for the windows. Yes. Dark red, I think, with gold tassels. That is much more fitting for a gentleman's residence, don't you think?'

Mariah stayed silent. She recalled her mother telling her as a child, 'When Henry comes home from school he will be accepted in the very best circles, and so will his father.'

'And what about us?' Mariah had asked.

'Well, of course, we are part of this family so they must accept us as well. Perhaps Mr Bowes will give me an allowance to buy new dress material and ribbons.'

Perhaps not, Mariah had thought; he is happy for us to forage

for used and damaged garments at the market. To afford the clothes for their backs, Amelia Bowes sold surplus garden produce to buy straw bonnets that she trimmed with bits of lace and ribbons, and then re-sold or traded for lengths of cloth. If ever her mother caught sight of a fashionable traveller passing through the South Riding, every detail of her dress would be noted, memorised and sketched out on a slate as soon as she returned home, then her cupboards would be searched for remnants and trimmings to enhance their workaday gowns.

Henry brought her back to the present. 'I shall open up the drawing room,' he declared grandly, 'and have a carpet from Persia on the floorboards. And perhaps a pianoforte for soirées.'

Mariah wondered if her father knew the extent of Henry's dreams for his house and whether his one furnace was enough to make that kind of money. She found it difficult to keep the doubt out of her voice. 'Soirées? Gracious, Henry,' she said, 'this will mean a lot more work for me in the house.'

'But you will not be here! You will be married and caring for your own family.'

'Really? And who will look after you and Father if I leave?'

'Emma will,' Henry responded. 'She is fifteen now, is she not? I am sure she has learned everything she needs. She will know what to do.'

'You mean Emma will be your housekeeper?'

'As soon as you marry. Before if you wish.'

'And you, Henry? What will you do?'

'I shall assist my father in his business matters, of course. What else should I do?'

What else indeed? Mariah wondered how he would survive in the ironworks with his father. She could not imagine Henry working for Ezekiel, hot and sweaty in dirty, greasy clothes, labouring at a fiery furnace during smelting.

Henry went on, 'Father and I have been planning these changes for a year now. We have been impatient for your mother to die.'

Mariah felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. Even though her mother's passing had been a release from her constant pain and suffering, Mariah had never wished to hasten her death. Henry's offhand remark appalled her and her voice was strangled as she said, 'How can you be so – so harsh and unfeeling!'

'Do not be so melodramatic, Mariah. It is not becoming in a woman of our standing. We all knew your mother was dying. I hope you will not behave like this should my friends, the Fitzkeppels, choose to visit, or I shall have to ask you to stay in the kitchen.'

Mariah stared at him. 'You are friendly with the Fitzkeppels? I am surprised you would wish to invite them here in the first place. This is a very small house compared to Fitzkeppel Hall.'

'Perhaps we shall move somewhere more gracious,' Henry mused. 'Father's investment in the works is paying off well for him now. Soon he will not have to oversee the men at all. He will be spending all his time with other ironmasters and men of substance at the lodge in town. You do see, don't you, Mariah, that neither your mother nor yourself could be a part of our future here?'

No, I do not see, Mariah thought angrily. It was her mother's dowry that had made all this possible! And she had been thanked with a position no better than a housekeeper. What kind of life had that been for her! Her workroom had been her only respite from the drudgery of being Ezekiel Bowes' unpaid servant. It had been Mariah's haven as well.

'But that does not mean I have to marry! I can run the household for Father and keep on Mother's workroom. She taught me everything she knew about garment making—'

'I want that room for a study. We shall need somewhere to discuss business affairs when gentlemen call at the house.'

'But we have an empty bedchamber I could use!'

'We do not! That is to be my dressing room. A gentleman needs space for his wardrobe and toilette. Oh, and would you

move your things to one of the attic rooms forthwith? Father's new works supervisor will be sleeping in the bedchamber that you are using.'

'I did not know Father was taking on a supervisor.'

'Why should you? It is of no consequence to you. But I shall tell you this: he is one of the best iron workers in the Riding. Father wants him to live here, next to the works, so he can take full responsibility for the furnace. And then Father and I shall be free to spend our time mixing with the right sort of Riding people.'

'So – so – this – this new works supervisor can live here, but I cannot!'

'You must realise how important he will be to our success. He comes to us from the Fitzkeppel works and understands all the modern processes. He knows how to make the very best steel for the cutlers of Sheffield. We shall be rich, Mariah! If you are sensible and marry the man Father chooses for you, you will be able to visit us when we are grand and take Sunday tea in the drawing room.'

'And you, Henry? What will you do?'

Henry smiled. 'My education has not been wasted, Mariah: I shall help Father to become a gentleman. You will see how respectable we shall be now that I am home.'

'You are insufferable! You cannot order my life like this.'

'Of course I can. I do it on behalf of Father. You will move into the large attic. Emma will take the smaller one.'

'Emma? Emma is to live here in the small attic?'

'Of course. She may take over the running of the house immediately. Do not look at me like that. You will not be here much longer, for you will be marrying quite soon.'

Mariah swallowed hard and spoke slowly with an exaggerated patience, 'Henry, I am not yet betrothed to anyone.'

'Oh, but you will be! You must think of your future elsewhere now, Mariah. As a wife. Father is arranging a suitable husband for you.'

Suitable for whom? she wondered, but did not pursue the matter. 'I see. So when I marry, Emma will be living here with Father and you and – and – the new works supervisor? Henry, she is only fifteen, that is hardly respectable.'

'Mariah, do leave things like this to me. Father's new supervisor is Mr Thorpe, Emma's older brother. She can live here quite respectably if her brother is here, too.'

'And of course respectability is all that matters to Father! What will the ironmasters of the South Riding think if I refuse to marry his choice of husband, and he turns me out on the streets?'

'Do not be childish. Why should you not marry? I think you will find you will have no friends of consequence in the Riding if you disobey him.'

Mariah's anger turned to sarcasm. 'Well then, Henry, you must help me find a suitor. Do you know any gentleman I could meet? They, perhaps, will be a little young, but I am sure that, if you are acquainted with them, they will be men of means.'

Henry answered her seriously. 'Be reasonable. My friends have their sights set on much higher prizes than you. No one of any consequence will want to marry *you*. You have nothing from your mother to take to a marriage, and no proper education at all. Certainly no talent for music or singing. All you can do is cook and sew.'

'Thank you for explaining that so clearly to me. With such paltry talents where should I set my sights? A coal miner's wife, maybe?'

But the irony in Mariah's voice was lost on Henry and he replied airily, 'Well, you have all you need to be a collier's wife.'

'I am to be a coal miner's wife, then,' she responded angrily. 'Is that how you see me? Would you come and visit your half-sister in her pithead cottage when she is a coal miner's wife?'

'Well no, of course not. If you marry a collier, our lives will part for good when you leave this house. But coal mining is a good living for a man. Emma's father was a collier before he

got the – the – sickness that they get. I understand your own father was a pit man, too. You cannot set your expectations higher than that.’

‘My expectations! What do you know of my expectations? Perhaps I’ll marry Father’s new works supervisor! I imagine that, if he is coming to live here, he does not have a wife. Have you met him yet? Will he do for me?’

‘Do not be silly. You are, in reality, an orphan and you would do well to take your situation seriously. Now the funeral is over, you must clear the house of your mother’s things and leave.’

Mariah was beside herself with anger. ‘But who will have me? As you have so kindly pointed out, I have no dowry or talent.’

‘Oh, do not fret yourself so. Father knows of somebody for you. There’s a man at the lodge who lost his wife to the cholera. You might know him. He is an ironmonger with his own shop in the High Street. His trade is good and he already has grown children to help you in the house. He needs a strong, healthy woman like yourself to look after him in his old age. He would be a much better choice than a collier. He would do for you.’

‘No, he would not! I know who you mean and I’ve seen him around his lady customers. He’s a greasy old man and he makes my flesh creep. I shall not marry him and Father cannot make me!’