

The Blackstone Key

Rose Melikan

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Extract

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For Quentin, most of all

SPHERE

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The clock at Great St Mary's Church in Cambridge tolled the half hour on a grey, gloomy, October morning in the year 1795. The rain had stopped, but heavy clouds made further showers likely, while the wind streaming down from the north had a wintry bite. In short, it was the sort of morning that could easily have defeated scholarly enthusiasm and kept the shops on King's Parade dark for at least another hour. And yet traffic was brisk and included more than one gentleman's carriage, while at the Eagle, a prominent coaching inn, such was the noise from the crush of patrons that the bells of the University Church went unheard.

The door of the Eagle opened, unsuccessfully at first, for there was someone standing against it, and a young woman slipped inside. She was dressed in a travelling cloak and a black tricorne. In a less crowded establishment the tricorne might have excited interest. Everything else about its wearer suggested the economy of a woman in genteel poverty. Her cloak was worn and frayed along the bottom, and her boots had been re-soled, while her scarf had been knitted by inexpert fingers, one of which

peeked out of a hole in her glove. Against all of this the tricorne was a rebellion, for such a hat could not have been purchased for less than ten shillings. Moreover, when perched jauntily upon auburn curls, it conveyed an independence of spirit that had not yet been overwhelmed by circumstances. Amid the hubbub of the Eagle's parlour, however, none of this attracted much attention.

Only one man was aware of the newcomer's presence, and that was because he knew her. Dr Smithson Nichols was a Fellow of Trinity College, and usually he took notice of few facts apart from that one. The young woman in the doorway, however, looked remarkably like one of the teachers at the school in nearby St Ives where his sister, Miss Nichols, was also employed. Therefore he waved imperturbably in her direction and, as the man sitting beside him was smoking a particularly foul-smelling cigar, even made the effort to cross the room to speak to her.

'Ah, it is *Miss Finch*, is it not?' he intoned, upon reaching her side. 'Greetings and felicitations from the Alma Mater. I see that my dear sister does not accompany you, but I trust that all is well? Mrs Bunbury's academy remains unchallenged in the land as a temple to female learning?'

Mary Finch disliked Dr Nichols *and* his dear sister, but she was feeling sufficiently ill at ease to regard him with more friendliness than she would otherwise have done. She had little experience of a noisy public house, and Dr Nichols at least had the advantage of familiarity – even if he was a pompous windbag. 'Yes,' she replied, endeavouring to smile in appreciation of his witticism, 'We are all well, only . . . I am . . . making a journey.'

'A *journey*?' repeated Dr Nichols. He rolled the word around in his mouth, as if he did not quite like the taste of it. 'I see.'

There was no reason why Mary need offer an explanation to Dr Nichols, but there was something in his tone of voice that made her feel as if she ought to do so. Or perhaps she was anxious about the entire scheme and wished to justify herself. At any rate, she answered his unspoken question. 'Yes, to visit my uncle, Mr Edward Finch. He has an estate in Suffolk, and he has invited me to visit him. You may read all about it in Cary's *Atlas* – about his estate, I mean.'

Mary felt foolish as soon as the words were spoken, and the implication that he might be in the habit of perusing such a common publication made Dr Nichols frown. 'Indeed,' he replied, loftily. 'Most gratifying, I am sure, to know that the particulars of one's drainage are perused by readers of Cary's *Atlas*. Whomever they may be,' he added, after a slight pause.

'Yes, well . . .' Mary looked about her, thinking that Dr Nichols was even more unpleasant than his sister. He might be the . . . the *Duke* of Cambridge, the way he talked, whereas in fact he lived in his college rooms and very likely knew nothing whatsoever about drainage. And he would probably go straight back to Trinity and read all about her uncle's estate in Cary, for all his airs and graces.

Fortunately none of this indignation was perceptible in her next remark; at least it was not perceptible to Dr Nichols. 'How very crowded it is,' she observed. 'Do you know, is this usual?'

Perhaps surprisingly, this question caused Dr Nichols to unbend slightly. He liked being asked his opinion – he gave it freely, whether or not it had been requested, but he preferred to be asked. 'No, indeed,' he explained, 'today's unpleasant crush is the result of a horse race.'

'A horse race?' Mary cried. 'Here? I mean, in Cambridge?'

‘No, no, at Newmarket. The contest has long been anticipated, so I am told, in consequence of which anyone with either an equine interest or a desire to rid himself of a large sum of money – which includes a very large proportion of the populace – is hurrying to that locality by any means possible.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Mary, ‘then I suppose that it may be difficult to book a place on the coach.’

‘Nearly impossible, I should say. But *you* can have no interest in witnessing such a gross spectacle, surely. I would certainly not recommend it.’

‘Well, I *might* be interested,’ countered Mary, if only because she did not want to accept any recommendation from him, ‘but I must go to Newmarket regardless. It is on the way to Suffolk, you see.’

‘Ah, yes, to be sure.’ Dr Nichols had forgotten about Suffolk, or, rather, he had not listened very carefully in the first place. ‘Well, this is not the day to travel to Newmarket,’ he decreed. ‘I would advise putting off the journey until tomorrow, or next week.’

Mary recalled her employer’s less than enthusiastic response to the proposed leave of absence. If Mary were to return now it would be ever so much more difficult to get away a second time, and it would look so . . . weak to acknowledge oneself defeated by the first obstacle. ‘It would not be quite convenient to put off my departure,’ she replied, with as much coolness as she could muster.

Dr Nichols seemed to recall that Miss Finch was a somewhat headstrong young woman – she would undoubtedly please herself whatever prudence (in the person of Dr Nichols) might suggest. He merely shrugged his shoulders, therefore, to acknowledge his helplessness in the face of her shortcomings, and observed that she had better try to book her place.

‘Yes, I had better,’ she agreed, and, drawing herself up, she edged forward into a gap in the crowd without waiting for a reply. Dr Nichols considered this highly ill mannered, especially as it prevented him from offering a final admonition against young women travelling alone in public coaches. Instead, he pursed his lips and said, ‘Good morning,’ to the place she had just vacated and took his leave.

Mary threaded her way into the taproom and finally reached the bar, where the landlord confirmed Dr Nichols’ prediction: all the places on the Ipswich coach were already booked, at least as far as Newmarket. Then a group of men in long riding coats pressed forward, competing with Mary for the landlord’s attention, and her further conversation with him was conducted in a series of shouts.

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed, as a large man pushed past her.

‘Should’ve booked earlier,’ bawled the innkeeper. He served up three foaming tankards and mopped the bar where one had overflowed. ‘All right, I heard you – two pints of the Old Reliable.’

‘Yes, but what shall I do *now*? When is the next coach?’

‘Day after tomorrow!’

‘What? I beg your pardon!’ This time she pushed back. ‘Is there nothing else?’

The landlord wiped his hands and consulted his booking register, running down the page with his finger. ‘Sorry, miss, I can’t see – no, I tell a lie. I’ve the one seat left on the Norwich diligence.’

‘But I wish to go to *Ipswich*!’ Mary reminded him as a man leaned over her shoulder to collect his drink. She steadied herself against the bar, and her hands came away sticky from spilled beer. Why was everyone in such a state, jostling and calling out? Some of the men behind her seemed almost angry, and the race was still some hours away.

‘The diligence’ll beat the coach to Newmarket. Wait a minute now, sir; I’m dealing with the young lady. You can change there, miss, and carry on to Ipswich!’

‘Well, I suppose I must do that. I trust there will be places *after* Newmarket?’

‘Bound to be,’ agreed the landlord. ‘It’s only this race has brought the crowds. Hi, Bill! Here’s the last for the True Blue! Tell Jeb that all’s secure! Better make your way to the yard as soon as you can, miss. Jeb Miller’s that particular about setting off to time.’

Mary dug her purse out of her cloak pocket and managed to open it, half expecting that someone would seize it before she could extract the fare, and flung her money down on the bar. Then she struggled back through the crowd to the courtyard, where she encountered an even greater tumult. Conveyances of all kinds were being readied for departure. Saddle horses, whose owners had stepped inside for refreshment before continuing to Newmarket, were being walked up and down to keep them warm. The blast of a horn announced the arrival of the London mail coach. Its four steaming horses stood trembling and tossing their heads, while the coachman demanded instant service in recognition of his valuable cargo. ‘The Mail! Make way, the Mail! Horses off!’

‘Where’s your luggage, miss?’ asked Bill, a husky, fair-haired boy.

‘I have no idea,’ Mary admitted, and she looked about her anxiously. ‘When I arrived one of the other boys – with a leather apron – said I could leave my bag with him.’

‘Don’t you worry, miss,’ said Bill, cheerily, ‘you did quite right. What sort of bag is it? A leather grip?’

‘Yes, with two handles. One is loose – well, broken.’

‘I’ll see you aboard and then I’ll fetch it for you.’

‘Thank you very much.’

‘That’s all right, miss,’ smiled Bill. He did not often get the chance to serve such a pretty young lady, and that green feather in her hat just matched her eyes. ‘My word, what a day, eh, miss? How’d you like to be the cause of all this?’

‘I do not think it a very likely possibility,’ Mary laughed. She still felt as if she had been caught up in a rather alarming melee, but she was beginning to see the funny side of it. The Eagle was like an anthill that had been disturbed – it appeared chaotic, but everyone seemed to know his business. She must simply trust that they would send her on her way, and in the right direction.

‘Well, all this is Lord Seymour’s doing,’ Bill continued. ‘They say the colonel’s been trying to match Swiftsure against the Arabian Prince for months, but Lord Seymour weren’t having none. They only came to terms on Monday, and look at the punters! Mind yer step, miss; the yard’s in a right old state today.’

Bill steered her toward a neat blue carriage, whose side panel proclaimed itself: *The True Blue. Cambridge. Newmarket. Thetford. Norwich.* A team of glossy black horses stood between the shafts. ‘Here you are, miss. This young lady’s yer fourth, Jeb,’ he announced, nodding to the great-coated figure striding up and down beside the vehicle.

The coachman touched his hat to Mary. ‘Will you step aboard, miss? We’re ready to start.’

Mary climbed inside, glanced at her three male companions, and slid into the remaining vacant place. Her bag was secured, and then the coach swayed as Jeb Miller ascended to his perch. Almost immediately the servant holding the horses’ heads called, ‘Horses on!’ to which Jeb answered, ‘Let ’em go!’ The servant stood aside, and the coachman urged his team forward.

Then they were turning into the King's Parade, and she was on her way. *On her way* – what a thrilling expression! *On her way* and not *back to school*. And yet, as she settled into her seat Mary's thoughts turned inexorably to the life she was leaving behind – perhaps forever – and that possibility caused her a pang of distress. She had been three years at Mrs Bunbury's school, and three years was a long time when one was only twenty years of age. The routine of the school, such as it was, she knew by heart: morning and evening prayers led by Mrs Bunbury; lessons – some interesting, some tedious, most indifferent; meals, with the inevitable jam roly-poly for dessert and never enough milk for tea; church on Sunday mornings, and the long Sunday afternoons spent in some 'useful' occupation such as darning one's stockings.

Mary mentally checked off the several components of a typical week at Mrs Bunbury's and smiled ruefully to herself. How could she possibly feel homesick for such a place? There was nothing the least bit exciting about it, and no one interesting ever came to visit. The most that could be expected was some news about Dr Nichols, triumphantly relayed by his dear sister. It was not all bad, of course, and Mary would miss her colleagues – well, some of them – very much.

She glanced out of the window and watched the autumn countryside roll past her. It was rather dull, if she was honest with herself. The ground was flat, and the rain had beaten the leaves from the trees so that they stood stark and bare. If only the sun would shine it might still have been a cheerful morning, but instead the world seemed an unrelieved palate of grey and muddy brown. If viewed from her bedroom window, the scene would have excited little interest – but, of course, she could have seen nothing of this from *any* window in Mrs Bunbury's

academy. This view, the diligence, her fellow passengers, even the hurly-burly of the Eagle were all new, and that made all the difference. No pupil, escaping the toils of the schoolroom at the end of term, could have felt a keener sense of freedom.

The journey to Newmarket was a largely silent one. Mary had never made conversation with a group of strange men, and she was at a loss how to begin. Her companions knew very well what they wanted to discuss, but felt unable to do so in her presence. They were three middle-aged townsmen who, in a moment of rebellion against the everyday tyranny of home and shop, had decided to attend the big race. Horseracing, they all felt, while capital sport and well worth the sacrifice of a day's wages, was not a fitting subject for a young lady's ears. Thus, only the occasional topical reference was possible, while amusing comments about what one's wife would say about today's adventure were left unuttered.

The remarks of their coachman did occasionally pierce the silence inside the vehicle. He expressed himself in a very forthright manner, and with little toleration for anyone impeding his progress. Nor did he seem much concerned whether there were any young ladies within earshot, although, as it happened, he had rightly judged the situation. Although she could not see the obstructions that provoked his ire, Mary found herself sympathising with

him. *He* did not stand for any nonsense from lazy carters or self-important gentlemen who thought they could drive ‘and didn’t know one end of a horse from t’other’. What were they doing on the road, in any event, when other people had very important business, and did not wish to be delayed by such foolery?

‘Get out of the bloody road, would you?’

Mary wished that she could tell someone to get out of the bloody road – Dr Nichols, or even Mrs Bunbury, sometimes. *No*, she frowned, *not ‘bloody’ – that would be cursing. ‘Abominable’, perhaps. ‘Get out of the abominable road!’ That was almost as good.*

The abominable road certainly grew increasingly congested as they approached Newmarket, and Mary began thinking about her connection. What if she missed it, or what if there were no places on the Suffolk coach, despite what the landlord of the Eagle had said? She imagined herself carrying her bag through the deserted streets of Newmarket, all of whose inhabitants had abandoned their homes and businesses to watch Swiftsure and Arabian Prince.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said, taking in her three companions with one glance, ‘but could any of you tell me the name of the inn where we shall stop in Newmarket? I must change to a Suffolk coach, you see.’

Her words were greeted with amazement; she might have been proposing a journey to the moon. ‘Suffolk, miss?’ cried one of the men. He had a prominent Adam’s apple, and now it worked up and down. ‘Why that’s where them Frenchies are! They’ll have your head straight off, they will.’

Mary stared back at him in shocked silence, while his companions ridiculed him as a darned fool; of course the French weren’t in Suffolk – what a thing to say to a

young lady, frightening her and all. He ought to be ashamed of himself. They might come any day, of course, with Suffolk being so much closer to France from a geographical point of view. It was a dangerous place; that was for certain, what with the war and all. Was she sure she wanted to go there?

They looked as if they were going to suggest some alternative destination, but when Mary confirmed her intentions, heads were shaken and lips were pursed, and no further warnings were given. (It was the same when a customer insisted on serge when a good quality felt would have done quite as well for half the price. If they were that set on serge, it was better not to argue about it.) In fact, Mary was far less confident than she sounded. Was her journey really so very perilous? She did not know very much about the war, apart from the fact that it had all come about because the French had put their king to death – and that itself was an extremely grisly notion. If Frenchmen of that sort were about to invade, the prospect of a seat on the Suffolk coach was even worse than no seat at all!

She alighted at the White Hart in Newmarket, therefore, in some trepidation, but her fears were soon put to rest. In the cosy parlour she received the reassuring information that the Ipswich coach was not fully booked and was expected shortly. Nor were there further worrying prognostications about imminent French invasions. Indeed, no one seemed to regard the journey as in any way ill-advised, and Mary observed their expressions closely, in case they were trying to conceal the danger in order to obtain her fare. She perceived no such ignoble intention, and the realisation that she could sensibly continue her journey flowed through her like a calming wave. Such was her relief that she recklessly ordered a muffin and a cup of tea.

As had been the case at the Eagle, the White Hart was bustling with patrons. Fortified by her muffin, her seat by the fire and her place on the coach, however, Mary viewed the comings and goings around her with equanimity. Everyone was talking about the day's great event, and she heard quite a lot about the two horses, their respective jockeys, and what would have been the outcome if a third animal, Blue Moon, were competing. A large, white-faced clock on the wall opposite informed her of the time. At a quarter past ten the landlord reported that the race traffic in Cambridge must have delayed the Ipswich coach. 'Never fear, miss,' he assured her, 'you'll be off by half past. This here is nothing. Why, we're often held up for hours when there's a full card.'

'Who do you think will win?' Mary ventured. The racing jargon had piqued her interest, although she did not know whether it was preferable to have 'an easy action' or 'a quick turn of foot'. Both appeared to be highly desirable attributes.

'Well, now,' considered the landlord, his head to one side, 'if I was a gambling man, which I ain't, I don't say I mightn't be tempted by Swiftsure. But on this ground, it's a brave man who bets agin Lord Seymour.'

'Is it true that Arabian Prince is much smaller than Swiftsure? It does not seem fair that he should have to race against a bigger horse – will he be given a head start?'

'Oh, no, miss,' said the landlord, smiling. 'But don't you worry. The Prince may be small, but he's game, don't you see? He's got bags of courage, and he hates losing. And then, of course, he carries less weight, and I've seen horses of his size over nine furlongs—'

But Mary was not interested in furlongs. Her heart warmed to the brave little horse that did not like to lose. 'Oh, I hope he wins,' she cried.

A sudden commotion brought the landlord's explanation to a close. 'I'm sure I do too, miss, but that'll be your coach, now, so quick as you can.' He hurried outside, and Mary followed him. In the courtyard they watched as a low-slung coach disgorged three men and a dog, while another eight men descended from the roof of the vehicle.

'That's the way to kill the horses, Sam,' observed the landlord, '*and* have the law down on you.'

The coachman shrugged his shoulders. 'Weren't me that let 'em on board. "I don't turn away extra fares," he says to me in Cambridge, and then tells me to go easy. Couldn't help but go easy, with all this crowd.'

'Well, there's just the one fare, this young lady, and see you don't damage *my* team on the Bury run.'

'You know I ain't no flogger,' complained the coachman. 'Suppose you quit jawing and hitch 'em on.'

Judging by the landlord's remarks and the number of persons who had left the coach, Mary expected that she would be travelling alone to Bury. She was very surprised, therefore, when she opened the door and discovered two prior occupants. The first was a large woman, dressed in an old-fashioned Mantua robe of grey satin, a fur tippet, and with a lace cap tied under her chin. She was so broad that at first Mary thought she must have been wearing a hoop, a fashion that some older ladies still favoured. Closer inspection, however, revealed that she needed no artificial enlargement. Opposite her was a small, prim-looking, elderly man in a suit of brown plush, and they both seemed to have suffered from the confined conditions of the journey from Cambridge. They introduced themselves as Mrs Oldworthy and Mr Treadgill, and while Mr Treadgill straightened his wig and adjusted his coat, Mrs Oldworthy informed Mary of what they had endured.

'Miss Finch, I do assure you it was unbelievable. The

crush inside this coach – I thought I must faint – and poor Mr Treadgill! Mr Treadgill has travelled in India. Didn't you say that this crush was worse than any you'd had in India?

'Oh yes, far worse.'

'I hope neither of you has been hurt,' said Mary, sympathetically. Mr Treadgill made a slight deprecatory gesture, while Mrs Oldworthy carried on in a strong, confident voice. There had been eight men on the roof, which anyone must agree was unsafe. An actual crash had been avoided by a succession of miracles. 'And there was that great monster in here, barking and slaving. I don't know how we weren't all bitten, he was that wild.'

Mr Treadgill explained in an undertone to Mary that the dog, a mild-mannered creature, might have fallen if he had been put on the roof. 'A dog is not a cat, you know. He cannot grip and hold, on account of having the wrong sort of toenails – for gripping, I mean.' He looked as if he were going to offer an anecdote about a dog, but Mrs Oldworthy cut him short.

'Well, they needn't think that I shan't complain,' she announced, 'toenails or no toenails. A regular scandal, that's what it was, and I shall have something to say about it, when we return to Cambridge. Mr Treadgill oughtn't to be made to endure such things.'

'I wish I had known of this race,' piped Mr Treadgill, 'I should have liked to see it. I once won twenty pounds at Epsom, you know, when I was home on leave.'

It transpired that Mr Treadgill had retired to Cambridge after a long career as the senior clerk of Ashton & Howell, a spice business operating under licence from the East India Company. He was making a visit to his sister accompanied by Mrs Oldworthy, his housekeeper. 'I'm a Suffolk man, you know,' he explained. 'My sister, Mrs Perry, lives

in Hadley. Mr Perry – he's dead now – was born in Sudbury, but my family has always lived in Hadley. Except myself, of course.'

Mary, in turn, explained something of her own situation, that she was a teacher of History and Drawing at Mrs Bunbury's school in St Ives – perhaps they had heard of it – and that she was on a visit to her uncle. Mr Treadgill did not know the school but thought education a very fine thing, and Mrs Oldworthy wondered why more people did not visit their uncles. It was a pleasure to them all to discover that they would share each other's company as far as Ipswich.

They reached Bury at about half past twelve. Owing to the rain, which had begun to fall shortly after they left Newmarket, and the coachman's desire to make up some of the time lost on the first leg of the journey, their stop was extremely brief. This was a disappointment for Mr Treadgill, who had been hoping to show Mary some of the chief attractions of Bury when they descended from the coach at Angel Hill. He contented himself with opening the windows on both sides of the coach and pointing with his stick, while Mrs Oldworthy consumed a mug of small beer. All too quickly that lady was shutting the windows again, and the fresh horses were being hitched on. Then they were away once more.

The sound of the rain and the motion of the coach, not to mention the small beer, soon sent Mrs Oldworthy to sleep. Mary and Mr Treadgill automatically lowered their voices, although this was quite unnecessary. Not only was Mrs Oldworthy immune to the sounds of those around her, she actually contributed more to the volume inside the coach than both of her companions.

'I wish you would tell me something of India,' Mary

urged. 'It must be very thrilling to live abroad, as you have done.'

Mr Treadgill had gone out to Fort St George as a young man, and had spent most of the next forty-five years inside the offices of Ashton & Howell. He endeavoured, however, to describe things that a young lady – a highly educated young lady – would find interesting. In fact he was not very skilful in this respect, but it hardly mattered. Each word created for Mary a vivid picture. As English rain streamed down the windows of the coach she walked through the bazaars, crowded with people selling everything from monkeys to emeralds, and rode on an elephant beside an Indian prince and princess – the latter dressed in gold silk and fragrant with exotic perfume. She heard the worshippers in a temple chanting to a strange god; some were offering gifts of fruit and incense, and from beyond there was the sound of marching feet and martial calls. She watched them stride past, the brave soldiers of the East India Company, who kept Madras safe from man-eating tigers and almost equally ferocious tribesmen.

'How terribly exciting it all sounds,' breathed Mary, shivering at the thought of tigers. 'What an adventure you have had, seeing all those things.'

'Of course, my life was really very dull, you know,' Mr Treadgill protested, 'spent mostly among the accounts. But occasionally great events may sweep up even mere bookkeepers such as myself. In the year '80, for instance – I suppose you never heard of a fellow called Haidar Ali here in England?'

Mary shook her head. 'We never heard of him at Mrs Bunbury's.'

Mr Treadgill gave a more or less accurate account of how the touchy relations between the East India Company

and the ruler of Mysore had broken down, resulting in the latter routing the Company's forces and laying siege to the city of Madras. There he had been resisted by the largely civilian defenders, among them the doughty senior clerk of Ashton & Howell. 'I don't imagine that I hit anyone with my musket, for my eyesight has never been very good, but I fired it several times with great vigour in the direction of the enemy.'

'I am sure you are too modest. But what happened?'

'We held out, much to our surprise – and theirs too, I daresay. And then the governor – Governor Hastings – sent Sir Eyre Coote to take charge of the situation. Well! Sir Eyre had fought the Pretender in '45; he wasn't going to stand for any nonsense from Haidar Ali! He soon had the fellow on the run, *and* the Frenchman he had with him.'

Mary thought it was wonderful, and that Mr Treadgill had been very brave, but he disputed the second point. 'I do not know that bravery had anything to do with it. There was simply nothing else to be done.'

'Well . . . perhaps. Still, it was a very great adventure.'

'Yes, I daresay it was.' Mr Treadgill smiled in recollection, and seeing it Mary admitted that she was having a sort of adventure herself, although nothing to compare with Haidar Ali. 'You see, I have never met my uncle before. In fact, until I received his letter, asking me to visit him, I never had any communication with him in my life.'

'My word,' gaped Mr Treadgill, 'and did you say – I beg your pardon – is he indeed your *only* relation?'

'Yes, my parents died three years ago of the influenza. That is why I came to Mrs Bunbury's.'

Mr Treadgill thought the situation extraordinary – not that anyone should die of the influenza but that close

relations should have had so little contact when there was not the excuse of a continent or more between them. 'But perhaps your uncle has been travelling, or engaged in some great work,' he suggested.

'Perhaps he has,' Mary agreed. Her left hand was in the pocket of her cloak, and she crossed her fingers, which undid most of the wickedness of a lie. Not that this *was* strictly a lie. 'In any event, his letter came as a very great surprise.'

'And you accepted the invitation straightaway? I mean, I know nothing of girls' schools, of course, but it occurs to me that . . . taking a leave of absence without due notice must have inconvenienced your employer.'

Mary started to say that if he *had* known anything of a girls' school the very idea of postponing an opportunity to escape would not have occurred to him, but she closed her lips against the words. He was frowning very slightly, and she gathered that such cavalier behaviour as hers was *not* how they had done things at Ashton & Howell. 'Oh, no,' she assured him, crossing her fingers a second time. 'It was not in the least inconvenient, and, naturally, I did not like to seem ungrateful to my uncle.'

'No, of course not.'

Mr Treadgill's expression had resumed its usual benignity, but the reality of the unpleasantness which had accompanied Mary's departure from the school was particularly vivid to her at that moment. She could feel herself blushing, and cast around for something to distract her memory. 'Some people say that the French are going to land in Suffolk. Do you think we shall be in serious danger?'

Mr Treadgill considered this. 'Well, I certainly hope not. We have the Navy between ourselves and France, and that is some comfort in these grave times. Captain

Carlisle, who came home with me on the *Queen Charlotte*, was a capital fellow. He said, "You may always rely upon the Navy, Mr Treadgill," and I trust that he was right. There has been some distressing news from the West Indies – about our forces there – but I trust this is just a brief setback, and the Navy will win through as it always has.'

Mary nodded, frowning. She knew nothing about the news from the West Indies, because Mrs Bunbury disapproved of newspapers, but agreed that the British Navy must always come out on top in the end. It soon emerged, however, that the threat was not only a foreign one. Hostile agencies were also at work in England. Mr Treadgill mentioned radicals – Englishmen so devoted to their ideas of democracy and liberty that they would surrender their country to the enemy for the sake of those theories – and smugglers, who cared not whether government consisted of the lawful king and Parliament or a crowd of murdering Frenchmen, so long as they could carry on trading with those same Frenchmen.

'In Hadley, where I come from, the smugglers were a terribly bad lot, and I daresay little has changed. When I was a lad, the gang was led by John Harvey. A killer, no doubt about it, and his word was law. No one dreamed of giving him away to the authorities, though the reward was big enough. Honest men went in fear of what would happen some dark night if they did not keep mum.' Mr Treadgill shook his head . . . 'Where did you say your uncle lives?'

'Near Lindham.'

'Ah well, you ask him about the "freetraders", Miss Finch.'

'*Mr Treadgill!*' exclaimed Mrs Oldworthy, suddenly waking up. 'Miss Finch ask her uncle about *smugglers* – why, I never

heard of such a thing. Have I been asleep? Whatever have you been talking about?’

‘Frenchmen,’ said Mary, ‘and radicals, and smugglers, and Mr Treadgill’s adventures in India.’

Mrs Oldworthy shivered. ‘I hope it hasn’t made your blood run cold, my dear; it would mine. I’m not saying aught about *all* foreigners, mind you. Mr Oldworthy knew a Welshman once as was perfectly respectable. But the more Mr Treadgill tells of the goings-on in India, the more I think they’re barely human over there. None of them Christian, of course, but praying to idols, the poor things, and up to all sorts of odd capers. Do you know, Miss Finch, Mr Treadgill’s house is so full of foreign gewgaws and trinkets that sometimes I think robbers will come to hear of them, and we shall all be murdered. There was a gentleman murdered on the Trumpington Road not six months ago. They say his head was fairly split open. And now these nasty Frenchmen are coming to England to set up their gee-o-teens and their liberty trees, and— My word, is this Stowmarket already?’

It was indeed Stowmarket. Mary half expected that Mr Treadgill would enlighten her on the various delights of the town while the horses were being changed, but he did not do so. Perhaps he felt that his recent observations had not, after all, been quite suitable, or perhaps he was simply no match for Mrs Oldworthy, rejuvenated by her nap and issuing orders to the landlord of the Rose. On the other hand, it may simply have been that Stowmarket on a cold, rainy October afternoon did not inspire eloquence. For whatever reason, therefore, the stop was not an interesting one, its only notable feature being that two different men opened the door to ask whether this was the coach to Bungay.

When they had set off again, Mrs Oldworthy announced

that it was time they had a meal. She produced a large dinner basket from under her seat, and she and Mr Treadgill pressed Mary to join them. As she had eaten nothing all day, apart from the muffin, the invitation was most welcome. Together they made a merry, and extremely fulsome, meal, the climax of which was Mrs Oldworthy's plum duff. 'We call it *plum* duff,' Mr Treadgill confided to Mary, 'but what makes it special is that it contains not merely plums, but also greengages, as well as medlars.'

Mrs Oldworthy acknowledged the compliment with a demure bow of her head. They mustn't expect too much, she warned, for of course it was cold and, lacking sauce, might even be judged dry.

'Never let us stand upon sauce or ceremony,' cried Mr Treadgill, holding out his napkin. 'And Miss Finch, can we tempt you?'

They could indeed. Mary took a tentative bite of the dark, slightly gooey slice, and then a second, more confident one. It *was* very good. Mr Treadgill pronounced it superior, even in its cold, unadorned state, to any ordinary duff served hot.

The remains of the dinner had only just been packed away again when the coach slowed to a stop. 'Hello,' said Mr Treadgill, who had been consulting his watch. 'It is coming on for four. He has certainly made up the time.'

'But we are not in Ipswich,' said Mary, and she looked out of the window. 'We are still on the road. I wonder why we have stopped.'

'Highwaymen,' gasped Mrs Oldworthy, clutching the dinner basket. 'Or the Gidding's burst its banks and flooded the road.'

'It is nothing to be excited about, I am sure,' Mr Treadgill assured them. He let down the window and called to their driver. 'Hello there! What is the trouble?'