The Unbearable Lightness of Scones

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Extract

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1. Love, Marriage and Other Surprises

The wedding took place underneath the Castle, beneath that towering, formidable rock, in a quiet church that was reached from King's Stables Road. Matthew and Elspeth Harmony had made their way there together, in a marked departure from the normal routine in which the groom arrives first, to be followed by the bride, but only after a carefully timed delay, enough to make the more anxious members of her family look furtively at their watches – and wonder.

Customs exist to be departed from, declared Matthew. He had pointedly declined to have a stag party with his friends but

had none the less asked to be included in the hen party that had been organised for Elspeth.

'Stag parties are dreadful,' he pronounced. 'Everybody has too much to drink and the groom is subjected to all sorts of insults. Left without his trousers by the side of the canal and so on. I've seen it.'

'Not always,' said Elspeth. 'But it's up to you, Matthew.'

She was pleased that he was revealing himself not to be the type to enjoy a raucous male-only party. But this did not mean that Matthew should be allowed to come to her hen party, which was to consist of a dinner at Howie's restaurant in Bruntsfield, a sober do by comparison with the Bacchanalian scenes which some groups of young women seemed to go in for.

No, new men might be new men, but they were still men, trapped in that role by simple biology. 'I'm sorry, Matthew,' she said. 'I don't think that it's a good idea at all. The whole point about a hen party is that it's just for women. If a man were there it would change everything. The conversation would be different, for a start.'

Matthew wondered what it was that women talked about on such occasions. 'Different in what way?' He did not intend to sound peevish, but he did.

'Just different,' said Elspeth airily. She looked at him with curiosity. 'You do realise, Matthew, that men and women talk about rather different things? You do realise that, don't you?'

Matthew thought of the conversations he had with his male friends. 'I don't know if there's all that much difference,' he said. 'I talk about the same things with my male and female friends. I don't make a distinction.'

'Well, I'm sorry,' said Elspeth. 'But the presence of a man would somehow interrupt the current. It's hard to say why, but it would.'

So the subject had been left there and Elspeth in due course enjoyed her hen party with seven of her close female friends, while Matthew went off by himself to the Cumberland Bar. There he met Angus Lordie sitting alone with his dog, Cyril.

'I suppose that this is a sort of stag party for me,' Matthew remarked to Angus.

Underneath the table, Cyril, who had long wrestled with

temptation to bite Matthew's ankles, suddenly leaned forward and licked them instead.

'There, you see,' said Angus. 'When a dog licks you, it confers a benediction. Cyril understands, you know. That's his way of saying that he's going to be sorry to lose you.'

'But he's not going to lose me,' protested Matthew. 'One doesn't completely disappear when one gets married.'

Angus looked at Matthew with his slightly rheumy eyes. 'Really? Well, we won't be seeing much of you here after the event.'

'We'll see,' said Matthew. He raised his glass of beer to his lips and looked at Angus. Angus was much older than he was and was unmarried, which meant either that there was some profound reason – lack of interest – or that he had been successful in evading commitment. Now, which of these was it?

'What about yourself, Angus?' Matthew asked. 'Have you ever thought of . . . tying the knot with anybody?'

Angus smiled. 'Nobody would have me, I fear. Nothing would give me greater pleasure, I suspect, but, well, I've never really got myself organised.'

'Of course, you'd need to find somebody capable of taking on Cyril,' said Matthew. 'And that wouldn't be easy.'

Angus shot Matthew an injured glance and Matthew immediately realised his tactlessness.

'Cyril is a slight problem,' said Angus. 'It's difficult being canine, you see. Lots of women turn their noses up at dogs. Particularly with Cyril being the sort of dog that he is. You know, a wandering eye and some unresolved personal freshness issues. But I wish people would see beyond that.'

Matthew nodded. Angus would be a task enough for any woman, and to add Cyril to the equation made it even more of a burden. 'What about Domenica?' he asked suddenly. 'I've always thought that you and she might make a good couple.'

Angus looked wistfully at the ceiling. 'I've thought that too,' he said. 'But I don't think there's much of a chance there. She can't abide Cyril, you see, and I can hardly get rid of him after all these years. His heart would break.'

'She'd get used to him,' said Matthew. 'And dogs don't last forever.'

Angus shook his head. 'No prospect,' he said. 'But let's not talk about me and my problems. What about the wedding? I hear you've got Charlie Robertson to do it for you. I knew him when he was at the Canongate Kirk. He does a nice line in weddings, and Her Majesty used to enjoy his sermons, I gather, when she was in residence at Holyrood. She must have had to listen to an awful lot of wheezy lectures from various archbishops of Canterbury – it must have been so refreshing for her to get a good-going, no-nonsense sermon from somebody like Charlie. You know where you stand with the Church of Scotland, although as an Episcopalian, I must say there's a certain folksiness . . .'

'We're making certain changes,' said Matthew. 'We're walking up the aisle together. And we're having a reading from Kahlil Gibran. You know, *The Prophet*. There's a chapter there about love and commitment.'

Angus began to let out an involuntary groan, but stopped himself. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Yes. Kahlil Gibran. I see. And the honeymoon?'

Matthew leaned forward and whispered. 'I haven't told Elspeth. It's going to be a surprise. Australia!'

Angus looked into his glass. For some inexplicable reason, he felt a sense of foreboding, as if a sinister angel had passed overhead and briefly looked down upon them, as one of those lumbering heavy bombers, laden with high explosive, may spot a target below – a quiet lane with lovers popular, the innocent going about their business, a farmer driving a truck along a winding lane; irresistible temptations for a sinister angel.

2. By the Side of the Bridal Path

Inside the church, three hundred guests – and a handful of regular members of St Cuthbert's, entitled in that capacity to attend any

service – sat waiting for the ceremony to begin. Matthew had told Elspeth that she should invite as many friends as she wished. His father was paying for the wedding, and had imposed no limits; his own list, Matthew felt, was at risk of being embarrassingly small: a few old friends from school, his father and his new wife, a couple of distant cousins, Angus Lordie, Domenica Macdonald, Big Lou, James Holloway; that was about all.

Pat, Matthew's former girlfriend and occasional employee, had been invited too, and had accepted. Much to Matthew's relief it appeared that she bore no ill-will towards the woman who had supplanted her in Matthew's affections; and for her part, Elspeth, by nature, was not one to be jealous. Matthew had reassured her that although he had been serious about Pat, his seriousness had been a mistake; misplaced seriousness, as he described it. 'She was really more of a sister,' he said. 'I don't know why I . . .' he left the rest unsaid, and it was not referred to again. So many men might say 'I don't know why I . . .' when talking about the carnal, reflected Elspeth; all men might, in fact.

Elspeth had invited everyone in her address book and many who were not. All her colleagues from the Steiner School were there, her suspension having been formally rescinded after the evidence of the other children – prominent among them Tofu – that Olive's account of the incident in which the teacher had pinched her ear was at the very least confused, and more likely mendacious. But by the time her reputation was cleared she had already resigned, become engaged, and had decided not to go back to teaching.

As well as Elspeth's former colleagues, an invitation had been given to all the children in the class she had taught. They were to attend under the supervision of their new teacher, who had led them into the church as a group and taken them to the pews reserved for them up at the top on the left. Here they sat —Merlin, Pansy, Lakshmi, Tofu, Hiawatha and the rest, hair neatly combed, their legs swinging freely, not quite touching the floor, whispering to each other, awed by the solemnity of the occasion and the significance of what was about to happen to their beloved Miss Harmony.

'She'll probably have a baby in a couple of weeks,' said Olive knowingly. 'I hope it's a girl. It'll be a big tragedy if it's a boy.'

Tofu turned and sneered at her from the pew in front. 'Babies take time,' he said, adding, 'stupid.'

'What do you know about it?' hissed Olive. 'And anyway, no girl would ever marry you. Not in a hundred years.'

'You mean that nobody would ever marry you,' retorted Tofu. 'They'd take one look at you and be sick.'

'I'm going to marry Bertie,' said Olive smugly. 'He's already asked me. We're going to get married when we're twenty. It's all settled.'

Bertie, who was sitting a couple of places away from Olive, heard this remark and froze. 'No, Olive, I didn't say I would,' he protested. 'I didn't.'

Olive glared at him. 'You did!' she said. 'You promised! Don't think you can break your promises like that.' She snapped her fingers to demonstrate the speed of Bertie's broken promises, then looked at him and added, 'Especially in a church. God's really going to hate you, Bertie!'

This conversation was interrupted by the organist, who began to play a Bach prelude. Although the congregation was unaware of their presence, Matthew and Elspeth had already arrived and were sitting with Charlie Robertson in the chapel at the back of the church, a small, tucked-away room on the walls of which the names of the fallen were inscribed in lead, equal in death, with no distinction of rank, just men. Matthew, feeling awkward, gazed at the lists of names and thought: they were my age, or younger. Some were seventeen or eighteen, and were only in France or wherever it was for a week or two, days in some cases, before they died in that landscape of explosion and whistling metal. They didn't have a chance, and now here am I, whose life has been so easy, reading about them and their sacrifice.

It was as if Charlie Robertson had read Matthew's thoughts. 'We've been very fortunate, haven't we?' he said. 'Being born at the time we were.'

Matthew glanced at Elspeth. He reached for her hand.

'On a more cheerful note,' said Charlie. 'Did you know that it was in this chapel that Agatha Christie got married?'

Matthew showed his surprise. 'I would have thought that she would have been married in a sleepy little English village somewhere,' he said. 'In one of those places with an extraordinarily high murder rate.'

Charlie laughed. 'I see what you mean,' he said. 'But no. She got married here in Edinburgh. To her archaeologist husband. She said that an archaeologist was an ideal husband as the older the wife became the more interested he would be in her.'

Matthew smiled. It was difficult to imagine Agatha Christie as being young; some people were remembered as how they became, rather than how they were; it was something to with names, he thought. Agatha was not a young name. 'But didn't she run away?'

'That was earlier,' said Elspeth, who knew something about Agatha Christie. 'Her first, dashing husband fell in love with somebody else. So she disappeared, and was eventually found staying at a hotel in Harrogate.'

Charlie Robertson looked at his watch. 'Well,' he said. 'We should be thinking of starting. Are you two ready?'

Matthew rose to his feet. Their conversation, innocent enough, had nevertheless made him think. In getting married, he realised, he was giving a hostage to fortune. By taking Elspeth into his life, the chances that the world would hurt him were doubled. She might leave him; she might run away, like Agatha Christie. There was so much that could go wrong in life if you took on somebody else, and then there were children and all the worries and anxiety they brought. There were so many reasons, he thought, for remaining single.

He looked at Elspeth, who was adjusting the veil she had pinned to her hair. I don't want to hurt you, thought Matthew; that's the last thing I want. But should I really go through with this? Is it wise?

Suddenly, though, there was the sound of bells, and Matthew found himself outside the church, with Elspeth beside him, arm linked in arm. There were people in the churchyard – people whom he did not recognise, but who were smiling at him. One woman, a visitor, had a small disposable camera, which she raised and pointed at them. Matthew smiled for the camera automatically, although he felt dazed. He turned to Elspeth, who was looking behind her now; the children had emerged from the front door and were jostling one another for her attention. She bent down and placed a kiss on the forehead of one of them, a small boy in a curious, rainbow-coloured coat. Matthew saw the boy's sandals, one of those little details one notices, and smiled again; he was proud of Elspeth. He was proud.

There were other guests now, stepping out into the light. The late afternoon sun was blocked from the church by the towering bulk of the Caledonian Hotel over the road, but it reached the Castle now, up above them, touching the walls with gold; and the sky was so empty, just blue. Somewhere behind them, a train moved through Princes Street Gardens, a clattering sound, and there were pigeons in the air, a sudden burst of them. The children pressed around Elspeth; Matthew found himself beside Gordon, his father, bekilted like Matthew himself. This unites us, he thought, father and son; this shared garb, this same tartan; and he reached out and took his father's hand in a handshake that became a semi-embrace and then reverted to a handshake.

'Well,' said Gordon, 'that's that then. You've done it, Matt. Well done, son.'

Matthew looked at his father. The little paternal speech, so apparently trite, seemed just right, so pre-ordained, just like the words he himself had uttered in the church, although he could hardly remember what he had said. Presumably he had done all that was expected of him, as Charlie had smiled throughout and had not corrected him. And what else could his father say? That he was relieved that Matthew had at last done something decisive? That he hoped that at least he would get marriage right, even if he had

never got anything right with all the businesses he had been set up in? The gallery, though, was not a failure, and he wondered if his father knew that. But this was not the time.

Gordon leaned forward and whispered into his son's ear. 'When you walked up the aisle together, you know, I thought by the look on your face . . . I thought that you were having second thoughts! I was mighty worried!'

Matthew's smile was fixed. 'Me? Second thoughts?'

'Well, obviously not,' said Gordon. He glanced at Elspeth, who was surrounded by a group of women in elaborate hats who were having their photograph taken with her. 'You'll remember those people we knew in Kilmacolm? Well, she called it off at the very last moment, you know, and everybody had to traipse back to the hotel. It was over in Largs. And then she changed her mind and they sneaked into the register office two weeks later and did it. You were too young to know about it.'

Matthew listened to his father's story patiently, but he was really thinking of what his father had said about his expression as he had made his way up the aisle. Had it been that obvious? If it had, then he wondered if anybody else had noticed it. Of course nobody looked at the bridegroom; all eyes would have been on the bride, as was always the case at weddings.

His father was, of course, right. As he walked behind Charlie Robertson, he had been thinking of the consequences that would ensue if he were to decide not to go ahead with the wedding. It would be heartless in the extreme to let the bride down before the altar, but presumably that had been done before, on the very brink of the exchange of vows. And perhaps there were circumstances in which it would be the right thing to do – not an act of selfishness, or cowardice, but an act intended to prevent the other person from making the mistake of marrying somebody whose heart was not in it.

Well, he had not done it, and they had gone ahead with the ceremony. And now, he thought, I'm married! He looked down at his hand and turned the ring around on his finger. How strange it felt; how grown-up.

He glanced at Elspeth. She had moved away from the women in hats, and the children, and was talking to an elderly man wearing a soft brown hat and a pair of large sunglasses. That, he thought, was the Uncle Harald of whom she had spoken, her half-Norwegian uncle who had moved to Portugal with his friend of thirty years, a man who wrote books on china. The friend had drowned when their yacht had been swept onto rocks. Harald had remained in Portugal, alone. How many of us lead lives of quiet desperation, thought Matthew; we hope to be saved by one person, one thing; we convince ourselves that one thing can last.

Harald was making a point to Elspeth and reached out to touch her on the arm. Matthew heard what he was saying to her. 'I do so like weddings,' he said. 'I've always liked them.'

And Matthew thought: until a very short time ago, you could have been only a spectator. And now it's too late.

The car that was due to take them to the reception had turned round and was now pointing back up the driveway of the church. The chauffeur, wearing a smart black uniform and peaked cap, had opened one of the passenger doors and was standing by it. Matthew caught Elspeth's eye, and she nodded. She whispered something to Uncle Harald, and then came over to join Matthew. They climbed into the car.

As they turned out into King's Stables Road, the chauffeur turned to them and said, 'A busy day for me. I did an airport

collection first thing and then I did a chap I used to know at the pub.'

'He got married?' asked Matthew.

'Yes,' said the chauffeur. 'A dreadful mistake.'

There was silence in the back of the car.

Matthew smiled. 'Do you mean it's a mistake to get married, or your friend made a mistake in his choice?'

'Both,' said the chauffeur.

Elspeth laughed. 'Very funny,' she said.

'No, I'm serious,' said the chauffeur.

4. Answers to the East Lothian Question

The reception was held in two large marquees pitched in Moray Place Gardens. After his own wedding to Janice, a second marriage that his son had found difficult to accept at first but to which he had eventually become resigned, Gordon had moved to a house in Gullane. This is pronounced Gillan, on the basis of the Gaelic etymology of the word, a matter which divides the population of the East of Scotland into warring factions every bit as much as heresies divided the population of early Christian Europe. Those early heresies had led to bloodshed, and so had the issue of the correct pronunciation of Gullane (which is, as has been said above, Gillan). In late 1973 a fight had broken out in the neighbouring town of North Berwick when a passing motorist had stepped out of his car and, innocent of the controversy, had asked the way to Gullane, giving the u an i value. The response of the person asked had been to punch the motorist squarely in the face, breaking his nose and a small bone below the right eye. The motorist had then hit his assailant with a golf club that he had extracted from the back of his car.

This unseemly incident had resulted in the appearance of both parties in Haddington Sheriff Court, where they were charged with

assault and breach of the peace. In the course of his judgement, the sheriff, an erudite man, had commented on the *casus belli*, pointing out that arguments over place names were inevitable, but that they should never deteriorate into physical violence. That was a perfectly normal thing for a sheriff to say when dealing with immoderate behaviour, but he went further.

'The place name Gullane,' he pronounced, 'is, as we all know, shrouded in obscurity, and indeed controversy, as this unfortunate incident reminds us. The name comes from the Gaelic word *gollan*, meaning a small loch, or possibly from another Gaelic word, meaning the shoulder of a hill. If the derivation is from *gollan* then, in one view, the pronunciation should be o rather than u or i. However, it is likely, in my view, that if indeed the name comes from *gollan* then, for the sake of clarity, popular usage would have sought to differentiate the place name from the geographical feature word (small loch), and this differentiation would most naturally have been gill – rather than gull – the former being easier on the tongue. I myself have never doubted that the correct pronunciation is Gillan rather than Gullane. There are many reasons for this, one of which I have already animadverted to, but a particularly persuasive reason is that that is the way I have heard it pronounced by the Lord Lyon, Sir Thomas Innes of Learny, GCVO, WS. If there is a greater authority on names in Scotland, then let him step forward.' None did.

This is the only time that a Scottish court has ruled on the matter. Some have pointed out, of course, that the sheriff's remarks were *obiter*, and therefore not binding, but, in the absence of any more authoritative ruling, others have argued that we must accept ourselves as being bound by what was said in Haddington Sheriff Court. It may be, they say, that the Court of Session itself will rule on the matter – and indeed that would be helpful – but until the court does, those who have insisted on a u value should have the good grace to recognise that they are wrong.

When Matthew's father had moved to Gullane, he had discovered that the pronunciation of the town's name appeared to be determined by the side of an economic and social fault-line on

which one dwelled. Those who lived in the large houses on the hill, great villas favoured by the Edinburgh haute-bourgeoisie, would never have said anything but Gillan, while those who lived on the other side of the High Street would choke rather than use that pronunciation.

Gordon considered the matter to be one of extreme unimportance. He had no time for such pettiness and for the verbal signals by which people set out to demonstrate that they belonged to this or that segment of society. What did it matter if one said table napkin or serviette? It mattered not at all, not in the slightest, although the correct word, of course, is napkin. But everybody knows what is meant by serviette, and that is the important thing, rather than the issue of getting it right and saying napkin.

Although they spent much of their time in their house in Gullane, Gordon and Janice kept a flat in Moray Place, which they used when they had something on at night and when it would have been tiresome or inconvenient to drive out to East Lothian.

This flat was on the north side, looking out over the Dean Valley towards the Firth of Forth and the hills of Fife, a city view of incomparable beauty; or, if comparisons were to be attempted, they would have to be with the views enjoyed by those with the good fortune to live on the Grand Canal in Venice or Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.

Gordon was not sure how far Janice appreciated the aesthetic pleasure of living in the classical New Town; she was not one to spend much time in the admiration of beauty, and when they had inspected the flat before buying it he had noticed her indifferent expression when he had first commented on the astragals. She had been more interested in the kitchen and in what would be required to bring it up to a satisfactory standard.

'Everything must go,' she said. 'We'll have to get rid of everything and start from scratch.'

'Everything?' Gordon had been surprised. Had she not noticed the lovely old Belfast sink? Had she not appreciated the ancient meat safe, half recessed into the wall? Janice had been adamant, though, and in due course men came round to take everything out.

'An awful pity,' said one of the men. 'This good stuff. This lovely old sink.'

Gordon had looked away, ashamed. I've married beneath me, he suddenly thought. It was an odd thought, the sort of thought that people now would never admit to thinking. And yet there were occasions on which people married beneath them – not in social terms – but in terms of intelligence or sensitivity. Why deny that such unions took place?

And this dispiriting judgement was later to be confirmed, when Janice had dropped a hint about a present for her forthcoming birthday. Had he heard correctly? Had she really said: 'I'd love something like that picture of the people dancing on the beach. You know the one I mean?'

5. Almost a Perfect Summer Night

Elspeth Harmony's parents were both dead and so there had been nobody to object to Gordon's offer to pay for everything connected with the wedding, down to the last canapé. Of course the custom that the bride's parents should pay for the reception had changed, although it was still sometimes defended by the fathers of grooms. It was common enough now for the couple themselves to pay, thereby relieving the parents of all costs, and Matthew would certainly have been in a position to afford anything (he had, after all, four million pounds; rather more, in fact, as the market had been kind to him). But Gordon had been insistent and Matthew had not argued.

The rental of the marquees, of which there were two, was expensive enough in itself, costing over two thousand pounds – and that was before anybody had so much as sat down at the tables at which they were to be served the menu that Janice had arranged with the caterers. This was Menu E on a scale that progressed from Menu A – the you'll-have-had-your-tea menu, at six pounds per head (inclusive of half a glass of champagne per guest) – through Menus

B, C and D, to the higher glories of Menu E, described in the brochure as a meal of which passing angels might well feel envious. But it would have been unlikely that any passing angel would have guessed at the cost of what was seen below – fifty-eight pounds per head.

The caterer, a short, stout man, had recited the delights of Menu E to Janice when he came to visit her with his illustrated brochure and notebook.

'We shall start,' he intoned, 'with the parcel of oak-smoked salmon, with fresh crab, bound in a lemon and dill mayonnaise.' He paused, watching the effect. 'And then,' he continued, 'there will be a gazpacho, over the surface of which a fine amontillado sherry has been dribbled.'

Janice raised an eyebrow. 'Dribbled? Or drizzled?'

The caterer had laughed. 'Drizzled. Of course. Silly me. It's just when talking about such delicious things, one's inclined to . . .'

'Of course.'

'And then, a *trou normand*, followed by loin of Perthshire lamb with mushroom mousse, wrapped in . . .' again he paused for effect, 'puff pastry.'

'Delicious,' said Janice.

The caterer agreed. 'Indeed.' He raised a finger. 'And to pile Ossa upon Pelion, if you'll permit the allusion, biscuits and cheese, rounded off with strawberries, meringues glacés and clotted cream.'

Menu E was chosen, as were wines – champagne, a good Pouilly Fumé, and an equally good, but considerably more expensive, Brunello di Montalcino.

Then there was the music, which was provided by the Auld Reekie Scottish Dance Band under the leadership of David Todd, an accomplished musician who was also the nephew of that great man, the late Sir Thomas Broun Smith, author of the *Short Commentary on the Law of Scotland*. Dancing would take place in the second of the two marquees, with the band at one end, heroically making their way through 'Mhairi's Wedding' and the like, and the dancers at the other, flinging each other about with all the enthusiasm which Scottish country dance music engenders in

the normally sedate Scottish soul. Tribal memories, thought Matthew, as he watched the spectacle of the dancing that evening; distant tribal memories that were still there.

As Matthew surveyed the guests enjoying themselves, the reality of what he had done came home to him. It made him feel more adult than he had ever before felt. Now he was responsible for somebody else, and that somebody else, who was at that moment dancing a Gay Gordons with Angus Lordie, was responsible for him. He felt the ring on his finger, twisting it round and round – it was a strange feeling, a symbol of the profound thing that had happened to him.

Elspeth caught his eye from the dance floor and smiled. Angus Lordie nodded. And then they were swept away by the whirl of dancers. Matthew saw the children dancing too – he noticed Bertie with a rather bossy-looking little girl; Bertie seemed to be an unwilling partner and was grimacing, which made Matthew smile. What did little boys see in weddings? he wondered. The end of freedom? The end of fun? Or something simply inexplicable?

Matthew moved outside. The evening sky was still light and the air was unusually heavy for early June. He moved further away from the open sides of the marquee, from the light and sound that spilled out from within. There were days, he thought, which one was meant to remember in all their intensity; days such as this, his wedding day, which he should be able to bring back to mind years from now when the rest of this year would be forgotten. And yet he found that he could barely remember anything that had transpired within the church, and that even the journey from the church to the Moray Place Gardens, a journey of ten minutes at the most, seemed to have passed in a flash of . . . of what? Confusion? Elation?

He threw a glance back into the marquee. The band had started to play something slower now and the crowd of people on the dance floor had thinned. He should not stay out here, he decided; he should go back into the marquee and claim his bride.

He had reached the entrance to the tent when a figure came out – Elspeth's Uncle Harald, holding a glass of champagne in his hand.