Lovereading.co.uk

Wedlock

How Georgian Britain's Worst Husband Met His Match

Wendy Moore

Published by Phoenix

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

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

1

An Affair of Honour

London, 13 January 1777

Settling down to read his newspaper by the candlelight illuminating the dining room of the Adelphi Tavern, John Hull anticipated a quiet evening. Having opened five years earlier, as an integral part of the vast riverside development designed by the Adam brothers, the Adelphi Tavern and Coffee House had established a reputation for its fine dinners and genteel company. Many an office worker like Hull, a clerk at the Government's Salt Office, sought refuge from the clamour of the nearby Strand in the tavern's first-floor dining room with its elegant ceiling panels depicting Pan and Bacchus in pastel shades. On a Monday evening in January, with the day's work behind him, Hull could expect to read his journal undisturbed.

At first, when he heard the two loud bangs, at about 7 p.m., Hull assumed they were caused by a door slamming downstairs. A few minutes later, there was no mistaking the sound of clashing swords.[1] Throwing aside his newspaper, Hull ran down the stairs and tried to open the door to the ground-floor parlour. Finding it locked, and growing increasingly alarmed at the violent clatter from within, he shouted for waiters to help him force the door. Finally bursting into the room, Hull could dimly make out two figures fencing furiously in the dark. Reckless as to his own safety, the clerk grabbed the sword arm of the nearest man, thrust himself between the two duellists and insisted that they lay down their swords. Even so, it was several more minutes before he could persuade the first swordsman to yield his weapon.

It was not a moment too soon. The man who had reluctantly surrendered his sword now fell swooning to the floor and, in the light of

candles brought by servants, a large bloodstain could be seen seeping across his waistcoat. A cursory examination by Hull convinced him that the man was gravely injured. 'I think there were three wounds in his right breast, and one upon his sword arm,' he would later attest. The second duellist, although less seriously wounded, was bleeding from a gash to his thigh. With no time to be lost, servants were despatched to summon medical aid. They returned with a physician, named John Scott, who ran a dispensary from his house nearby, and a surgeon, one Jessé Foot, who lived in a neighbouring street. Both concurred with Hull's amateur opinion, agreeing that the collapsed man had suffered a serious stab wound where his opponent's sword had run through his chest from right to left – presumably on account of the fencers standing sideways on – as well as a smaller cut to his abdomen and a scratch on his sword arm. Dishevelled and deathly pale, his shirt and waistcoat opened to bare his chest, the patient sprawled in a chair as the medical men tried to revive him with smelling salts, water and wine, and to staunch the bleeding by applying a poultice. Whatever benefit the pair may have bestowed by this eminently sensible first aid was almost certainly reversed when they cut open a vein in their patient's arm to let blood, the customary treatment for almost every ailment. Unsurprisingly, given the weakening effect of this further loss of blood, no sooner had the swordsman revived than he fainted twice more. It was with some justification, therefore, that the two medics pronounced their patient's injuries might well prove fatal. The discovery of two discarded pistols, still warm from having been fired, suggested that the outcome could easily have been even more decisive. With his life declared to be hanging by a thread, the fading duellist now urged his erstwhile adversary to flee the tavern – taking pains to insist that he had acquitted himself honourably – and even offered his own carriage for the getaway.

This was sound advice, for duels of honour had been repeatedly condemned or banned since the custom had first been imported from continental Europe to Britain in the early seventeenth century. Anyone participating in such a trial of combat risked being charged with murder, and subsequently hanged, should their opponent die, while those who took the role of seconds, whose job was to ensure fair play, could be charged as accomplices to murder. Yet such legal deterrents had done little to discourage reckless gallants bent on settling a dispute

of honour. Far from declining under threat of prosecution, duelling had not only endured but flourished spectacularly in the eighteenth century. During the reign of George III, from 1760 to 1820, no fewer than 172 duels would be fought in which 69 men died and 96 were wounded. When Lord Byron, great-uncle of the poet, killed his cousin William Chaworth in a petty argument about poaching in 1765, the baron was charged with manslaughter and only escaped the death sentence by virtue of his status as a peer. The gradual replacement of swords by pistols in the later eighteenth century inevitably put the participants at greater risk of fatal injury, assuming that these frequently inaccurate firearms hit their mark. John Wilkes, the radical politician, only survived a duel in 1763 because his assailant's bullet was deflected by a coat button. As the fashion for settling scores by combat grew, so the perverse rules of etiquette surrounding duelling had become more convoluted to the extent that rule books, such as the *Twenty-six Commandments* published in Ireland in 1777, were produced in an attempt to guide combatants through the ritualistic maze.

Yet for all the legal prohibition, the deadly game had not only grown in popularity but was also widely tolerated. During George III's long reign only eighteen cases were ever brought to trial; just seven participants were found guilty of manslaughter and three of murder, and only two suffered execution. This lax approach by authority was scarcely surprising, given that during the same period duels were fought by two prime ministers – William Petty Shelburne and William Pitt the Younger – and a leader of the opposition, Charles James Fox. Public opinion largely condoned the practice too. The pre-eminent literary figure Samuel Johnson argued that a gentleman who was challenged to a duel could legitimately fight in self-defence.[2] Indeed, most members of the aristocracy and gentry firmly believed that once a challenge had been laid down, a gentleman was honour-bound to accept. Yet despite the very real risk that he might swing on the gallows at Tyburn on account of the condition of his opponent, the second duellist in the Adelphi Tavern declined the offer of escape. Certainly, the wound to his thigh meant that he was in little shape to run. Moreover, he was too well known to hide for long.

As the parlour filled with friends and onlookers, including the two seconds belatedly arriving on the scene, many recognised the fashionably attired figure of the apparent victor of the contest as the Rev-

erend Henry Bate.[3] Although attempted murder was hardly compatible with his vows to the Church, the 31-year-old parson had already established something of a reputation for bravado. Educated at Oxford, although he left without taking a degree, Bate had initially joined the army where he acquired valuable skills in combat. But he promptly swapped his military uniform for a clerical gown when his father died and the young Bate succeeded to his living as rector of North Fambridge in Essex. Before long he had added the curacy of Hendon, a sleepy hamlet north of London, to his ecclesiastical duties. Comfortably well-off but socially ambitious, Bate's impeccably groomed figure was a more familiar sight in the coffee-houses and theatres of London than in the pulpits of his village churches. Indeed, it was for his literary, rather than his religious, works that Bate was famed.

Friendly with David Garrick, the playwright and theatre manager, Bate had written several farces and comic operas which had met with moderate acclaim. He employed his pen to much greater effect, however, as editor of the *Morning Post*. Set up as a rival to the *Morning Chronicle* in 1772, the *Post* had helped transform the face of the press with its lively, pugnacious style, in sharp contrast to the dull and pompous approach of its competitors. Since his appointment as editor two years previously, Bate had consolidated his journal's reputation for fearlessly exposing scandal in public and private life, boosting circulation as a result. Taking full advantage of the recent hard-won freedom for journalists to report debates in Parliament, the *Post* took equal liberties in revealing details of the intrigues and excesses of Georgian society's rich and famous, the so-called *bon ton*. Although strategically placed dashes obscured the names of the miscreants, the identities of well-known celebrities of their day, such as Lord D—re and Lady J—sey, were easily guessed by their friends and enemies over the breakfast table.

At a time when the importance of the press in defending a constitutional democracy was rapidly becoming recognised, as well as its potential for abusing that freedom, Bate stood out as the most notorious editor of all. Flamboyant and dominéering – some would say bullying – Bate had recently seen off a facsimile rival of the *Post* in characteristic style, by leading a noisy procession of drummers and trumpeters marching through Piccadilly. Horace Walpole, the remorseless gossip,

was appalled at the scene which he watched from his window and described in full to a friend. 'A solemn and expensive masquerade exhibited by a clergyman in defence of daily scandal against women of the first rank, in the midst of a civil war!' he blustered.[4] Samuel Johnson, as a fellow hack, at least gave Bate credit for his 'courage' as a journalist, if not for his merit, when pressed by his friend and biographer James Boswell. This was something of a back-handed compliment, however, since as Johnson explained: 'We have more respect for a man who robs boldly on the highway, than for a fellow who jumps out of a ditch, and knocks you down behind your back.'[5]

Acclaimed then, if not universally admired, as a vigorous defender of press freedom, Bate had also established a reputation for his physical combative skills. A well-publicised disagreement some four years previously at Vauxhall, the popular pleasure gardens on the south of the Thames, had left nobody in doubt of his courage. Leaping to the defence of an actress friend who was being taunted by four uncouth revellers, Bate had accepted a challenge by one of the party to a duel the following day. When the challenger slyly substituted a professional boxer of Herculean proportions, Bate gamely stripped to the waist and squared up. Although much the smaller of the two pugilists, the parson proceeded to pummel the boxer into submission within fifteen minutes, mashing his face 'into a jelly' without suffering a single significant blow himself. The episode, which was naturally reported fully in the *Morning Post*, earned Bate the nickname 'the Fighting Parson'. Having established his credentials both for bravery and combat skills, the Reverend Bate was plainly not a man to pick an argument with. Oddly this had not deterred his opponent at the Adelphi.

A relative newcomer to London society, the defeated duellist was seemingly a stranger to everyone in the tiny parlour with the exception of his opponent and his tardy second. Although he was now sprawled in a chair under the ministrations of his medical attendants, it was plain that the man was uncommonly tall by eighteenth-century standards and slenderly built. The surgeon Foot, meeting him for the first time, would later estimate his height at more than five feet ten inches – a commanding five inches above the average Georgian.[6] Despite a prominent hooked nose, his face was strikingly handsome, with small, piercing eyes under thick dark eyebrows and thin but sensuous lips. His obvious authority and bearing betrayed his rank as an officer in

the King's Army, while his softly spoken brogue revealed his Anglo-Irish descent. And for all his life-threatening injuries, he exuded a charisma that held the entire room in thrall. His name was gleaned by the gathered party as Captain Andrew Robinson Stoney. And it was he, it now emerged, who had provoked the duel.

With the identity of the duellists established, details of the circumstances leading to their fateful meeting quickly unfolded and were subsequently confirmed in a report of events agreed between the combatants for the press.[7] In providing this statement, attributing neither guilt nor blame, the duellists were complying with contemporary rules of duelling conduct. But as their version of events made plain, most of the circumstances surrounding the Adelphi duel had flouted all the accepted principles of duelling behaviour. Meeting at night rather than in the cold light of day (traditionally at dawn), staging their duel inside a busy city venue rather than a remote location outdoors, and fighting without their seconds (who should have been present to promote reconciliation), were all strictly contrary to the rules. Yet the pretext for their fight to the death was entirely typical of duels which had been conducted since medieval knights had first engaged in the lists. The honour of a woman, it emerged, was at the crux of the dispute.

In the perverse code of honour which governed duelling, any form of insult to a woman was to be regarded by a man whose protection she enjoyed as the gravest possible outrage. According to the *Twenty-six Commandments*, for example, such an insult should be treated as 'by one degree a greater offence than if given to the gentleman personally'. So while women were by convention almost always absent from duels, shielded from the horror of bloodshed and gore, their reputation or wellbeing was frequently at the very core of the ritual. Indeed, for some women, it might be said, the prospect of being fought over by two hot-blooded rivals could be quite intoxicating to the extent that duels were sometimes encouraged even if their consequences were later regretted.

There was no doubt, in the case of the duel at the Adelphi, that the reputation of the woman in question had been grossly impugned. Since early December 1776, readers of Bate's *Morning Post* had read with mounting interest reports of the amorous exploits of the Countess of Strathmore. Despite having only recently shed her widow's mourning costume, the young countess had been spotted in her carriage riding

through St James's Park engaged in a passionate argument with Captain Stoney, the *Post* had revealed.[8] Fuelling his readers' titillation and moral outrage, the newspaper's anonymous correspondent had speculated on whether the wealthy widow would bestow her favours on the Irish soldier or on a rival suitor, a Scottish entrepreneur called George Gray who had recently brought home a small fortune from India. Even more scandalously, the *Post* suggested, the countess might find herself in the 'arms of her F—n', a thinly disguised reference to her own footman. Less than two weeks later, readers spluttered into their morning coffee as the *Post* divulged that the countess had broken with her 'long-favoured-paramour' – presumably Gray – then announced the following morning that she was planning to elope with him abroad. The New Year brought no reprieve as the newspaper's revelations continued apace.

If the upstanding readers of the *Post* were in any doubt as to the impropriety of the countess's conduct, this was briskly swept aside by a concurrent series of articles, in the form of a curious exchange of letters, which alternately condemned and defended her behaviour. Written under a variety of pseudonyms, one side accused the countess of betraying the memory of her late husband, the Earl of Strathmore, whose death she was said to have greeted with 'cold indifference', and of forsaking her five young children, in her blatant exploits with her various suitors. Whether or not the countess, in exasperation at the intrusion of the press into her private affairs, had then provoked the duel to defend her honour was a matter of conjecture. One member of her household in London's fashionable Grosvenor Square would later claim that the countess had declared that 'the man who would call upon the Editor of that Paper, and revenge her cause upon him, should have both her hand and her heart'.[9] Certainly, by the middle of January 1777, the Irish army officer Stoney had taken it upon himself to act – in Bate's words – as the 'Countess of Strathmore's champion'.

Not surprisingly, given the vindictive nature of the articles attacking both the countess and himself, Stoney had initially written to Bate demanding to know the identity of the writers. Somewhat more surprisingly, Bate had responded by insisting he did not know. In truth, this was not unlikely. The lurid interest in the sexual misdemeanours of Georgian celebrities had spawned a highly organised industry in gossip-mongering. Certain newspapers even provided secret post boxes

so that anyone with salacious information could deposit their claims directly with the printers without being identified. The printers were then conveniently unable to reveal the identity of the writers, while newspaper editors frequently had neither sight nor supervision of such material prior to publication. Although publishing such inflammatory accusations, without the least effort to check their veracity, raised the serious prospect of being sued for libel, publishers often considered that the boost in their circulation figures justified that risk.

Bate's protestations of ignorance, coupled with his profuse apologies, did little to mollify Stoney, however, who took the somewhat progressive view that an editor should take responsibility for the material published in his newspaper. Bate had therefore little option but to agree to a meeting with the irate soldier which took place, according to their record of events, on the evening of Friday 10 January in the Turk's Head Coffee-house in the Strand. Here, in the convivial atmosphere of the fuggy coffee-house, Bate had managed to convince Stoney that he had been innocent of any involvement in the attacks and further promised to ensure that no more insults would appear. And so when Stoney opened the *Post* the following morning to read yet further revelations about the countess's love life he was apoplectic. The latest article, which reported that 'the Countess of Grosvenor-Square, is frequently made happy by the visits (tho' at different periods) of the bonny, tho' *almost expended Scot*, and the Irish widower', seemed almost calculated to incense him. Immediately, Stoney dashed off a further letter to Bate demanding his right 'to vindicate the dignity of a Gentleman' by seeking satisfaction in the traditional manner. He concluded by naming an old army friend, Captain Perkins Magra, as his second who would arrange events.

Still Bate blustered and prevaricated. In the flurry of letters that flew back and forth across the city that weekend, all faithfully reproduced in the jointly agreed record, accusations and counter-accusations grew more and more heated. When finally he was denounced as a 'coward and a scoundrel', Bate had little alternative but to accept Stoney's challenge. On Monday 13 January, therefore, Bate had consulted his own ex-army buddy, the rather dubious Captain John Donellan, who had recently been dismissed from service in India and had taken up a post as master of ceremonies at the Pantheon assembly rooms in Oxford Street. Already accused of various financial irregularities while serving

with the East India Company, Donellan would eventually be hanged for poisoning his wife's brother to get his hands on her family's riches.[10] Agreeing to stand as Bate's second, Donellan had lent the parson his sword which Bate hid under his great-coat. That afternoon Bate had sent Stoney a final letter, which ended resignedly: 'I find myself compelled to go so far armed, in the event at least, as to be able to defend myself, and since nothing can move you from your sanguinary purposes – as you seemed resolved, that either my life or my gown shall be the sacrifice of your groundless revenge – in the name of God pursue it!'

Having dined out on Monday afternoon, Bate had set off apprehensively just after 6 p.m. to walk the dimly lit streets to his home, one of the new Adelphi houses in Robert Street, his friend's sword held ready beneath his coat. Turning off the bustling Strand into Adam Street, he was passing the doorway of the Adelphi Tavern when the towering figure of Stoney loomed towards him, seized him by the shoulder and forced him inside. Still protesting that he did not wish to fight, the 'Fighting Parson' had reluctantly accompanied the Irishman into the ground-floor parlour where Stoney once more demanded he reveal the names of the writers of the offending articles. On Bate's insistence that he did not know, the soldier had declared: 'Then, Sir, you must give me immediate satisfaction!'

In the sputtering light of candles, Stoney's valet brought in a case containing a pair of pistols which had been purchased that day from the shop of Robert Wogdon, London's most celebrated gunsmith.[11] From his premises in the Haymarket since the early 1770s, Wogdon had produced exquisitely crafted duelling pistols renowned for their lightness, speed and – above all – deadly accuracy. A duel being now unavoidable and the death of one or both duellists probable, both men sent word to summon their seconds. Stoney despatched his valet to locate Captain Magra, while Bate sent a hurried note to find his friend Donellan. When neither of these fellows had appeared after some considerable delay, and with Bate becoming increasingly anxious to escape, Stoney had abruptly locked the parlour door, stuffed the keyhole with paper and placed a screen in front of it. Opening the case of Wogdon's pistols he had ordered Bate to choose his weapon. When the parson refused first fire, Stoney immediately snatched up a pistol and took aim. But for all his military training, the proximity of his

target and the precision accuracy of Wogdon's guns, his bullet had merely pierced the parson's hat and smashed into the mirror behind, which shattered on impact. Returning fire, according to duelling procedure, Bate's aim was equally askew – or equally well judged – for his bullet apparently ripped through Stoney's coat and waistcoat without so much as grazing his opponent's skin.

Still thirsty for blood, Stoney had insisted that they now draw swords. Only when blood had been spilled, according to duelling law, could honour be said to have been satisfied. As Stoney charged towards him with his sword outstretched, Bate deflected the weapon and speared his opponent right through the chest, according to the agreed testimony. So fierce was the ensuing combat in the expiring candlelight that Bate's borrowed sword had been bent almost double, at which point Stoney had decently allowed him to straighten it. And although he was now bleeding profusely and severely weakened by his injuries, Stoney had insisted on continuing the fight in the dark until at length the door had burst open and Hull had tumbled into the room. Quickly taking in the scene dimly reflected in the broken mirror, Hull and the other rescuers were in little doubt that they had only just prevented a catastrophe.

Later publishing his own version of what he described as the 'late affair of honour' in *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Hull had declared his surprise, given the darkness of the room and the ferocity of the fencing, that 'one of the combatants were not absolutely killed on the spot'. It was a sentiment with which the two medical men, Foot and Scott, readily agreed. In a joint statement published in the same newspaper, in which they described their patients' injuries in detail, the pair attested that Stoney's chest wound had 'bled very considerably'. They concluded 'we have every reason to believe, that the rencontre must have determined *fatally*, had not the interposition of the gentlemen who broke into the room put an end to it'. Indeed, as Foot helped the ailing Stoney into his carriage and rode with him back to the officer's apartment at St James's Coffee House in nearby St James's Street, his professional concern was so great that he insisted on stopping en route in Pall Mall at the house of the celebrated surgeon Sir Caesar Hawkins for further medical assistance. One of the most popular surgeons in London, numbering George III among his patients, the elderly Hawkins visited Stoney in his rooms two hours later. Although

he did not personally examine the wounds, merely checking over the patient as he languished in bed, Hawkins would later add his own testimony as to the severity of the duellist's injuries. Four respectable witnesses, therefore, had all testified to the life-threatening nature of Stoney's wounds. It was scarcely surprising then, given the captain's plight, that the object of his reckless venture should visit her hero the very next day.

Steeped in the romantic literature of eighteenth-century Britain, few women could have failed to be moved by the actions of a handsome young captain who had leapt to defend their honour with the ultimate act of chivalry. Mary Eleanor Bowes, the 27-year-old Dowager Countess of Strathmore, was no exception. Indeed, as an accomplished writer of fashionably lyrical literature herself – her five-act tragic play, which itself featured a duel, had been well-received and her poems were admired by friends – there could be little doubt that the countess would respond to such a sacrifice with passion. And so, after sending her hero a gushing letter of gratitude the following morning, the anxious countess arrived at St James's Coffee House later that day to deliver her thanks in person.

Bustling into Stoney's apartment, the countess was understandably distressed at the sight of the stricken soldier who lay groaning in bed, his face 'deadly white'.[12] The surgeon, Jessé Foot, still faithfully tending his patient, was touched by the scene, which he later described. Wearing a loose, low-cut dress, which showed off her small figure and ample bust to best advantage, the countess rushed to comfort Stoney. Although her greatest asset, her luxuriant dark brown hair, was almost certainly hidden beneath the customary powdered grey wig, the young widow had lively, wide eyes in a pretty, fair-complexioned face with a determined chin. She appeared, recalled Foot, 'in very fine health' while her cheeks 'glowed with all the warmth of a gay widow'. Her rosy countenance heightened by her obvious agitation, the countess drew close as the soldier informed her that his injuries were mortal, a diagnosis swiftly confirmed by Foot. Apparently weakened by his lethal wounds, the Irishman delivered his news 'in a very low Tone of Voice', the countess would later recall, while he appeared to be 'in great Torture'.[13] Aghast to hear of her champion's impending demise, the countess seized the sword Stoney had used in his ordeal and insisted

on taking it home to place beneath her pillow. 'She seemed poor silly soul! as if she blessed the duel,' Foot later remarked, 'and blessed every body about it, for the sake of the precious prize the contest brought her.'[14] Such pity might have seemed rather misplaced, given the life of seamless extravagance the countess had enjoyed so far.

The only daughter of one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Georgian times, the northern coal magnate George Bowes, Mary Eleanor had become the richest heiress in Britain – some said Europe – at the age of eleven when her father died.[15] Having led a life of pleasure since her earliest years, she had continued to indulge her fine taste for expensive jewellery, lavish costumes and generous entertaining after her marriage to the Earl of Strathmore on her eighteenth birthday. And since the earl's premature death less than a year before, she had enjoyed more liberty than ever to pursue her extravagant lifestyle as well as her twin interests in science and the arts.

Educated to an unusually high standard by her doting father, Mary Eleanor had established a modest reputation for her literary efforts and was fluent in several languages. More significantly, she had won acclaim in the almost exclusively male-dominated world of science as a knowledgeable and accomplished botanist. Encouraged by senior figures in the Royal Society, she had stocked her extensive gardens and hothouses with exotic plants from around the globe and was even now planning to finance an expedition to bring back new species from southern Africa. According to Foot, not often given to praise, she was simply 'the most intelligent female botanist of the age'.[16]

If her stupendous fortune had brought her material pleasures and intellectual gifts, a life of unremitting flattery and indulgence had not helped the countess to develop a shrewd awareness of character. Beset by eager suitors and fawning admirers since her husband's death, the merry widow had enjoyed flirting and cavorting with little discrimination. Now that a respectable period of mourning for her first husband was coming to an end, however, she had turned her mind to finding a suitable new partner for herself and a dependable stepfather to her five young children. Having proved himself a faithful companion and an athletic lover for almost a year, George Gray seemed a reasonable choice. A rakish entrepreneur, in the mould of her beloved father, 39-year-old Gray had returned from India four years previously. A flamboyant man about town, friendly with James Boswell and the

playwright Samuel Foote, Gray shared her appetite for fine living and her love of literature. His unpopularity with her late husband's family, anxious to deter fortune hunters from squandering her children's inheritance, only made him more alluring. And so in a secret ceremony in St Paul's Cathedral six months previously, the countess had pledged to marry Gray – a commitment then regarded as legally binding.

The arrival in town that same summer of the charming and handsome Irish soldier, Andrew Robinson Stoney, had piqued Mary Eleanor's interest. Yet for all his passionate declarations, she had not been swayed from her commitment to her Scottish lover and plans for Gray and the countess to elope and marry abroad were well in hand by the beginning of 1777. Now that she saw her young Irish admirer lying close to death from his battle to defend her reputation, however, she found her emotions in turmoil. When Stoney begged her to grant him one final request before his impending death, she felt it would have been heartless to refuse.[17] Elated at the real-life drama in which she found herself, and reluctant to deny herself the tragically romantic ending which must surely unfold, Mary Eleanor agreed to her dying hero's request: to marry him before he expired. At a time when marriage was laughably easy to enter into but well nigh impossible to end, her decision may have seemed reckless. Yet what harm could possibly ensue from marrying a poor dying soldier who would shortly make her a widow again? She even commemorated the mournful occasion in verse.

Unmove'd Maria saw the splendid suite
Of rival captives sighing at her feet,
Till in her cause his sword young Stoney drew,
And to avenge, the gallant wooer flew!
Bravest among the brave! – and first to prove
By death! or conquests! who best knew to love![18]

But pale and faint the wounded lover lies,
While more than pity fills Maria's eyes!
In her soft breast, where passion long had strove,
Resistless sorrow fix'd the reign of love!
'Dear youth,' she cries, 'we meet no more to part!
Then take thy honour's due – my bleeding heart!'

Three days later, on 17 January 1777, Mary Eleanor Bowes, the Countess of Strathmore, married Andrew Robinson Stoney, in St James's Church, Piccadilly.[19] Borne to the church on a makeshift bed, Stoney made his vows at the altar doubled in pain. Mary Eleanor's footman, George Walker, and Stoney's friend and financial advisor, William Davis, were the witnesses. And it seemed to the small gathering watching the ceremony that it could only be a matter of days before the groom returned to the church – in a wooden casket. Convinced of her new husband's imminent demise, the countess felt no need to reveal to him two quite devastating secrets. And for her part, Mary Eleanor was about to discover some surprising facts about 'Captain' Stoney.