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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Death of Lyndon Wilder

## And the Consequences Thereof

Written by E. A. Dineley

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# LYNDON WILDER

and the

CONSEQUENCES THEREOF

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# PART I

*15 November 1813*
*Ridley*
*Wiltshire*

*My dear Papa,*

*As I write I hear your voice: 'Circumstances ought not to undermine the general cheerfulness of our spirits.' When the fox took the chickens, when the mice took the peas, when the pony was lame, thus spoke my dear papa, but I do believe we were allowed some initial period of grief at our childish woes. Do you miss me? Of course you do. Does Fanny take her medicine? Is there a letter from Bobby? Are the girls well?*

*Oh, Papa, this is a sad house, the saddest house I ever was in. My own misfortunes, so dire to me, are truly cast into insignificance. I dare say you will consider that as good a remedy as any. You were concerned they might not send to meet me, but they did. I was ashamed my trunk was so heavy, all those books, but a great, silent footman was in charge of me, it, the vehicle and the horse. I supposed him a groom but now I am here he can be*

*seen to stand in the passage dourly awaiting a bell to ring.*

*My domain is a small bedroom and a sitting room, nothing in them, one bed, two chairs, a print of the Duchess of Devonshire waving her arm over a baby, and a table, all rather dark, but then the whole house is dark for Lady Charles likes the shutters closed. She says the light intrudes, but really one must have light, though you will be relieved to hear I don't contradict. I keep the schoolroom cheerful with a good bright fire and no shutters. Should we exceed our allotted ration of coal, Miss Wilder and I pick up sticks. My pupil has never before picked up a stick, nor anything else. She is not accustomed to any sort of exercise and is quite a naughty, idle little thing, but I think she has much to try her. One way and another I find I rather like her. A child should not be encouraged to mope and dwell on misfortune. The same rules must, I believe, apply to your daughter,*

*Anna Arbuthnot*

*P.S. Now I hear your voice again as from the schoolroom, 'Describe accurately!' The bedroom has a washstand with plain white china; a wardrobe and a chest of drawers. There now, isn't that dull?*

The writing was of medium size, with a pronounced slant, even, but the upright strokes, long in comparison to the other, occasioned, from time to time, a certain unsatisfactory entanglement between one line and the next. The letter-writer laid down the pen on the tray beside the inkwell

and turned from where she sat at the table to look out of the window. There was the odd angle of the stable roof and much of the red-brick wall of the vegetable garden, and within those walls the neat squares and patches, cordoned apples and pears, glass houses, all to be seen from above through the grey rain. How much to say, to reveal to those at home, of this locked-in bereavement house, this shuttered, melancholy edifice, this unloved garden? Not too much, perhaps. Had she, as it was, said too much?

The letter was folded, sealed, and addressed to the Reverend Arbuthnot, West Staverton, Devonshire.

Lord Charles Wilder had acquired, rather than was born with, his name. His late father-in-law had stipulated the name Wilder should be synonymous with the Ridley property, which was to pass to a distant cousin if the stipulation was not agreed by whoever should marry his only child. Lord Charles was aggrieved at having to comply. He was the ninth and last son of a duke and he thought a duke's name good enough for any property, but being one of such a covey of younger sons, he was not in a position to do more than count his blessings. His wife was a pretty girl, about twelve years younger than himself, and he was thus relieved of the tedium of trading on his illustrious name and the influence of his father. Had he not made this fortunate marriage, he was aware he would have spent his life struggling to retain a series of minor government posts and in making ends meet.

Having sacrificed it, he nearly let the ducal name drop altogether, but it was retained on legal documents

pertaining to himself or his children as the useful appendage it was, and as a serviceable name for his eldest son.

Lord Charles was a thin old man now in his seventies who wandered up and down his house wondering, when he could put one sentient thought before another, why he was punished. No misdeed could merit so dire a punishment, and his misdeeds he considered minor and few. His was an uncomprehending sorrow, futile speculation to find logic or reason in tragedy, his Christian faith insufficient for sense to be made of the greater purpose to which the clergy made repeated but useless reference.

So there he was, bent over a stick, little more than a hapless ghost, going from one room to another in his own house, frantic to dispel images of that other ghost who, so loved, would never return. Occasionally he would enter the drawing room where his wife sat with all but one of the shutters closed, a small, tired fire in the grate. In the evening she would light a single candle but she needed no light because she gave herself no occupation. She would say, 'You had better sit down, Charles,' but without warmth or encouragement in her voice so he had little inclination to comply. His rational being would reflect on how the tragedy of their mutual bereavement might have drawn them closer together, but sorrow, contrarily, had driven them apart.

Lady Charles saw him as the old man he had become, his grey, silvery head, his veined hand gripping the head of the stick, for he would stand irresolute, yet fixed, in the single, broad shaft of light from the one unshuttered window.

Thus they went from day to day, equal in their distress, but uncomprehending of each other, his a craving for

escape, for his mind to be distracted, for all thought or feeling to be silenced, obliterated; hers to dwell, to linger over and caress every image left. Lady Charles also harboured a destructive notion that her husband was to some extent to blame. Not being in possession of every fact, she made accusations that he was unable to refute. He was not clever at explanations, especially if explanations involved him in a sense of betrayal or in matters of which women need know nothing, especially if those very explanations were to exonerate himself. He wished neither to tell lies nor evade the truth, but his words sounded feeble in his own ears.

That dreary November day, Lord Charles's wanderings bringing him as usual to a halt in front of his wife, and she making the usual suggestion that he should sit, he said, unexpectedly, 'I should like to travel, to go away.'

He was, in the eyes of his wife, too old to travel. It would require retinues of servants and carriages. To Lady Charles travel meant abroad, to Paris, to Rome, but how could one travel when Napoleon Bonaparte was in possession of the continent and the British Isles at war with him? She saw her husband as progressing up and down England like a rat in the confines of a ditch.

As if she were placating a child, she said, 'You must think of the time of year.'

'So I must,' he agreed, 'and then there is the expense.'

'Ah, yes, the expense. I wonder why that is a particular problem at the minute.'

Lord Charles was in the long habit of never discussing monetary matters with his wife so she was unlikely ever to be enlightened. He muttered something incomprehensible about the increase in tax to pay for the war.

'And then,' Lady Charles continued, 'there is the estate.'

This he acknowledged. His agent had been dismissed after he had stepped into the shoes of a long-standing predecessor: he had not been satisfactory. Another must be found, and if there was one thing Lord Charles felt unable to contemplate, it was interviewing and decision-making. Had he not proved himself incompetent on the previous occasion? How was he to undertake such a thing in his new, almost deranged, state of mind?

He said, 'Thomas must return.'

'Thomas.' Lady Charles said the name as if it were new to her. She stood up and went to the window, turning her back on her husband. Her figure was as good as a girl's, her dress, black as befitted her state, swept in a long, elegant line from her bust to her little flat shoes. Her hair, once fair, now white but yet retaining cream, was piled on top of her head and fell back down in curls and ribbons, for her maid continued to prepare and present her mistress as if no catastrophe had occurred. Her face was small and wide, her nose straight, her cheekbones high and rounded, her eyes large and very blue.

She said, 'I doubt Thomas will wish to interrupt his career.'

Lord Charles said, 'It is his duty.'

'Would you have him resign his commission?'

'Why not? What need has he of it?' Having said this he regretted his answer, immediately foreseeing her reply.

'What need had Lyndon?'

'He would go.'

'You let him go.'

'Lyndon wasn't a child.'

This pointless discussion was oft repeated. Lady Charles leant her head on the window and wept. He knew she did so and that he could not comfort her, and by his purchase of Lyndon's commission he was to blame.

Lady Charles was in possession of vague Christian morals acquired through weekly attendance at church but never much studied; the clergyman was there to tell her what to think. She had supposed bereavement should make one a better person rather than a worse, forged, refined by adversity, steeled by the anguish of loss. Now she saw it made one a mass of chaotic and irrational impulses. She knew it was wrong to blame Lord Charles. Was she not his wife, his comfort in sickness and health? She was cheated that no other bereavement – the death, one after the other, of her excellent parents, she their prime concern, the sickening and subsequent death of a small daughter – had prepared her for this death. Now she endeavoured to turn her mind to Thomas, her youngest child and the second of her sons, but her mind barely functioned: Thomas, unseen for several years and then but briefly, had never had much of a place in it. She could think only of Lyndon, grappling with the incomprehensible truth that her charismatic, irresistible son, the most charming and adored, her golden boy, was dead, dead on a mountain pass somewhere in Spain or France, for the details were far from clear.

She said, with difficulty, her voice catching, 'Charles, they will have buried him?'

'Of course,' he replied. 'He will have been wrapped in his cloak and laid to rest at the instigation of his brother officers. Should there have been no clergyman, one will have read the prayers.'

'But you don't really know that.'

Lord Charles, who did not really know any such thing, hoped it was so.

His wife said, 'The letter made no mention of it. It spoke of fog and retreating in the dark, as if we might want to hear such things.'

'We are expected to want to know such things and, indeed, I prefer knowing them. Thomas will tell us the rest, I dare say.'

Lady Charles, distracted, said, 'Ah, so lonely, so bleak.'

Lord Charles could not bear to dwell on such pictures, of his son's wounded, lifeless body, the blood on the scarlet jacket, his sword still clasped in a dead hand. And what after that? Had death disfigured the loved countenance? He had died from a musket shot to the body, but there were questions, should they be asked, that would drive a man to madness.

He was about to turn and leave the room, muffling a pained half-sentence, when his wife spoke again.

'You have been in the Pyrenees, Charles.'

'When I was young. The uppermost parts are barren and rocky but the views . . . very splendid, of course. There were woods.'

What he remembered were the vultures soaring out from the cliff edges, scores of them, cutting great arcs in dazzling skies. Momentarily he put his hands to his head, stick and all, before hobbling to the door.

Lady Charles said, 'He died doing his duty. He died a hero.'

Lord Charles did not hear her. They had both said and thought this but it was more of a comfort to Lady Charles

than to her husband. He had no image of heroes, while Lady Charles knew that her pride in Lyndon prevented her spiralling down into some even darker abyss.

Lord Charles ordered his horse for no purpose beyond that of giving himself occupation. As he had not ridden for several months, the demand was received with astonishment and dismay: the master preferred a sprightly thoroughbred over any other more suited to his years. The unsuitable creature was brought to the front door, induced to cavort in the direction of the lower steps and forcibly held still so that the old man could mount.

Once in the saddle, slippery smooth, Lord Charles remembered he was not young but also that should he have an accident it would be of little consequence. At the same time, his affairs being in great disorder, he wondered how he could view so calmly an accidental departure, without his conscience crying out to him as to the difficulties he would leave for his wife, who had never been required to attend practical matters. A groom followed him to open and shut the gates and, he supposed, to bear him home should an accident occur, but the hard, polished leather, unforgiving, was a comfort to him, as was the tangling mass of the double reins, through sheer familiarity.

The drive twisted across the park. The day was overcast, a fine, pale mist, through which he marked where the oaks had stood, felled to pay for Lyndon's commission in a regiment not of Lyndon's choice. There had been no vacancy, or even time, to make him once more an officer in the Guards and it was agreed the extra expense was

prohibitive. It need have been but a temporary measure, a stepping stone. Lyndon was an optimist: he assumed cash would become available and vacancies arise. The oaks should have been replaced with saplings for the benefit of another generation, but this Lord Charles had failed to do.

Everything he had done to improve Ridley had been done for Lyndon and Lyndon's sons, but Lyndon had died without sons. An estate – the land, the people who relied on it for their roof, their bread and butter – was worth maintaining for its own sake. It was his duty, his privilege, to maintain Ridley, yet he did not do it. Even prior to Lyndon's death he had allowed his attention to wander, to see the necessity for things to be done, yet not do them, as if the grim future was already directing him. This he viewed as strange now that he had had ample time to reflect on it: a son on active service was just as subject to death and disease as the son of another: a shower of grape or a musket ball, the climate indiscriminately unfit for all. Lady Charles had talked, without cease, of the danger in allowing him to go, but Lyndon had always been lucky, his life charmed.

As Lord Charles left the drive he caught a glimpse of Mrs Kingston's carriage turning in at the lodge. He was glad to think his wife was to have a visitor, though not one likely to distract her to any great degree; one that would, at the least, assist her in passing the afternoon until the hour to dine offered further distraction. After that, the long dark hours of evening and the distant prospect of bed could be disturbed only by the thirty minutes or so in which Lottie's grandmother might read her a story.

The mismanagement of the estate he put down to a combination of his age and to a shortage of income. He was aware of the reasons for that shortage but he did not examine them. He required a regulated plan of retrenchment, but such things took effort and energy. He had expressed a desire to travel but he had meant that they should live abroad because it was cheaper: one could let one's house and live in Rome or some other place like that. His mind was a pre-war mind, it had temporally discounted Napoleon, but now he thought how a young man could still move about, dodge armies, get to places. He, though, was too old for such antics, especially with a wife and a young child to consider; he thought Lady Charles still reluctant to allow Lottie to go to her aunt. He had a momentary vision of foreign inns, travelling carriages, servants, luggage, bandits, mountain passes, postillions with whom he shared no common language, lame horses, detached wheels – why, the list was endless. At his age it was out of the question. Even the considering of it tired him out. In what way could he escape?

He peered at the countryside through the light drizzle, hardly conscious of the horse sidling, rattling its bit, his elderly bones accustomed to the sensations. There were little dark wooded fields; a clear stream; a sweep of downland; some water meadows with willows knotted in exposed winter bareness; farms tucked into hollows: such was the bulk of Ridley's five thousand acres. It was not at all a bad place, but his heart was not in it. Perhaps, he thought, he yearned for the stately expanses that had nurtured his youth: his father's vast estates. He had had the half-formed intention of handing Ridley over to Lyndon,

on his expected return from the Peninsula, to manage as best he could. He had believed that campaigning would leave his son a deal more prepared to settle down, remarry and live at home, perhaps with a seat in Parliament, though that would generate considerable further expense. Both Lord and Lady Charles had thought Lyndon quite prepared to marry the pretty, widowed Mrs Kingston, but his sudden precipitation into the army, an inferior regiment and a subordinate rank, had not made that an immediate option.

Lord Charles had had such faith in his son's abilities that he was sure he could have managed a regiment with the minimum of instruction, but the days were gone when regiments could be purchased for the asking, even supposing Lyndon's family had been able to afford such a thing. In his careless, infrequent letters home, full of affection for his parents and Ridley, humour, anecdote and adventure amidst the stark discomforts of life with the army. Lyndon had expressed impatience and humiliation that the officers immediately superior to him were boys. He had died a lieutenant and it was of little compensation that he had been the most senior on the regimental list, and therefore next for promotion. Had not Thomas, four or five years younger, already got a majority in the Royal Horse Artillery? Lyndon had been only too aware of that. As a very young man he had been a subaltern in the Guards, but he had sold out when he became engaged to be married. Had he stayed his rank would, by now, have been quite superior.

The groom, riding behind his master, said tentatively, 'It's very wet, m'lord, and getting fearful dark.'

Lord Charles, who had been about to turn for home, contemplated another three fields, but capitulation seemed the more comfortable option. In the distance he saw a knot of Lyndon's horses, standing with their backs to the rain. Why were they not sold? Why indeed. His own horse bounced forward on finding itself facing home; he slipped in the wet saddle, the wet reins slid through his fingers, but he retained his seat.

He passed in front of the house, rode round to the stables, dismounted and walked stiffly to the back door. His valet met him, dressing-gown to hand, anxious to divest him of his wet coat and boots: even Lyndon had not been allowed to traipse through the house in dirty boots. A chair was placed at the bottom of the back stairs for the convenience of all, but there was now only Lord Charles to use it.

Somewhere upstairs a door opened. He could hear Miss Arbuthnot giving Lottie her singing lesson. Miss Arbuthnot sang,'"Under the greenwood tree, Who loves to lie with me? . . ."' A few lines later she broke off to say, 'You can sing this on your own, but I will sing it the once. "Come hither, come hither, come hither . . ."'

Lottie's thin little voice cheerfully echoed the words.

Miss Arbuthnot said, 'There, did I not say you could do it?'

In the drawing room the candles were lit. Mrs Kingston had departed. Lady Charles had out her workbox. It contained a dull assortment of petticoats and shifts to be distributed among the poor. The work had once given her

satisfaction but now it was sluggishly performed, though she supposed her needle hemmed and seamed at much its usual rate.

Mrs Kingston had said to her, picking up a garment to admire the neatness of the handiwork, 'Why not indulge yourself at this difficult time with something more distracting, a pretty thing for Lottie when she is out of mourning?'

Lady Charles had looked at her companion and wondered that a woman whom she had believed almost engaged to her son, whose sense of loss might be considered equal to her own, could make such a remark, but Mrs Kingston had then bowed her head and added, in stifled tones, 'But, my dear Lady Charles, I do understand how it might seem impossible.'

'It is impossible,' Lady Charles had replied. 'It would seem a frivolity. Besides, Lottie must understand her situation.'

Mrs Kingston had departed shortly after, leaving Lady Charles to consider, charitably enough, her guest. With her plump figure, her pretty face, her brown hair, she seemed too young to be a widow, with a little boy barely older than Lottie. It had been assumed Lyndon was on the point of making her an offer, and Mrs Kingston had assumed it herself, as she had frequently hinted, but as far as anyone knew there had been no actual engagement. Lady Charles understood Mrs Kingston would have liked to wear mourning for Lieutenant Lyndon Wilder as his betrothed but she had to make do with silvery greys and pale mauves, which certainly suited her. It was a sort of half-mourning that indicated nothing much, either bereaved or forsaken

or neither. Lady Charles thought herself fond of her. She now considered questionable the relationship, had it existed, between her son and the sweet-natured widow, for Lyndon had always liked to be amused, and she was not particularly amusing; but then the poor girl he had married had never seemed amusing either, in the brief period they had known her. Mrs Kingston, though, remained the one person who could remotely enter into the extremes of Lady Charles's grief. As important, perhaps more so, Mrs Kingston appeared to understand the significance of that death as the death of a soldier, one who had died a hero, his image perfect, his death glorious.

Mrs Kingston's brother was on active service in the Peninsula, a further link between them, his letters quoted, his every utterance repeated. At another time Lady Charles might have found this tedious, but now she was hungry to hear of the privations and exigencies that made up the life of a junior officer in a regiment of the line. As Captain Houghton's letters were unfolded and further scrutinized on his sister's pale silken lap, Lady Charles was wondering, Was it thus for Lyndon, the fording of rivers, the night marches, the lack of rations, the baggage trains, the camp followers, the bivouacs, the fleas? Surely he had had the wherewithal to provide himself with sufficient sustenance and a decent bed. Her imagination conjured bands playing, young men clad in scarlet, the regimental colours gaily tugging in the breeze, officers on English thoroughbreds parading up and down. Yes, yes, Mrs Kingston thought this also warfare, but there were, too, fevers, dysentery, mules, and uniforms so gone to rags as to be unrecognizable.

Alone, Lady Charles rose from her chair and made her

way upstairs. It would soon be time to change for dinner but she had a few minutes to enter Lyndon's rooms. They were as he had left them and so they were kept, but she had not allowed the clock to be wound since they had received news of his death.

Miss Wilder was nine years old. She had large blue eyes, a round face, and abundant golden-blonde hair that would have hung to her waist in fat ringlets had not Miss Arbuthnot tied it up with a very ordinary piece of green ribbon.

'I may not wear the ribbon because I am in mourning,' Lottie had said.

'You must ask your grandmother for a length of black,' Miss Arbuthnot had replied. 'The green will answer just for now.' She thought quite so much hair, though pretty, an inconvenience.

'I don't like my hair tied back,' Lottie said, though that was not quite true: she enjoyed the novelty.

Miss Arbuthnot was thinking about the concept of mourning while she put out the lesson books. Did Miss Wilder's little black gown have a profound effect, as a constant reminder of grief, on the child? She thought not. There was no evidence she gave her father a single thought, unless in the presence of her grandmother, but Miss Arbuthnot wished to make no assumption. It was not easy to puzzle out what went on in the head of her pupil. She knew herself what it was to lose a parent, but the circumstances could not be compared. Miss Wilder had not seen her father for at least three years and she had never known

her mother. Miss Arbuthnot had cautiously enquired of the housekeeper if there was no picture of the late Mrs Lyndon Wilder that her daughter might have some idea of the woman who had borne her, but it had seemed as though she had passed through Ridley like some pleasing but inconsequential wraith, no one prepared to describe her appearance. She had been pretty, it was certain, for otherwise the late Mr Wilder would not have married her.

Lottie, coldly eyeing her books, played what had been hitherto a trump card in the war with governesses. She said, 'I don't wish to do any lessons just now.'

'How unfortunate,' Miss Arbuthnot replied, 'for it is exactly the hour your grandmother allotted for you to begin.'

'Today I shan't.'

'I shall have to teach Augusta instead.' Miss Arbuthnot waved her hand in the direction of a large china doll propped on innumerable cushions so her china chin might rest on the table. 'I'm sure her spellings aren't learnt. Now, Augusta, be a good girl and open your book. She is rather clumsy, isn't she? I dare say you will have to help her.'

Lottie said, 'I don't believe Augusta can hold her pen.'

'Dear me, isn't she backward? It is just as well you can help her, or I should have to get cross and it rarely does any good. If she works hard until eleven o'clock she shall practise her drawing. I believe Augusta to be fond of drawing.'

Lottie wondered about submitting. Just for now she thought she would and accordingly reached for her spelling book, but then all the horrid squiggles and circles that made up words danced before her eyes: she knew she

would never understand them. A tear or two ran down her cheek.

Miss Arbuthnot came round the table and put an arm round her. She said, 'Dearest, it's nothing to cry about. We will start at the very beginning. Here is an A, large and small. We will put a little line under each one so we learn what they look like. You draw the lines. A is for Augusta. I must write her name down so she shall recognize it. She has a large A at the beginning and a small one at the end. What a useful girl she is.'

How was it Miss Wilder had reached the age of nine with only the haziest idea of the alphabet?

'When we have finished, you shall draw a picture of Augusta and we will write her name underneath. You shall do the As and I shall do the other letters.'

Miss Arbuthnot wrote to her father.

*My dearest Papa,*

*Here I am thinking as much as anyone might who has, for the very first time, taken employment. I have been accustomed to running a house, albeit a modest one, let alone the managing of my sisters, though I doubt always with the best results, which may have given me a false sense of my capabilities. Either way I am not accustomed to subservience, except to yourself. Fortunately I am left to my own devices in the schoolroom, for Lady Charles Wilder does not visit us. I say fortunately, but then I think it unfortunate,*

*for interest should be taken. I can sense your growling at me here, both for criticizing my employer and therefore my benefactor and for making insufficient allowance for their sad circumstances.*

*I call my pupil Miss Wilder when I should much prefer to call her Lottie, for she is just a little girl of nine years old, spoilt and neglected all in the same breath. Perhaps Miss Charlotte would be acceptable. Today she cried a little over her spellings and then all formalities must be dropped.*

*I cannot puzzle out, Papa, what I have heard you preach from the pulpit, that one should not aspire to better oneself but to be content with making the very best of the situation into which we have been placed. My aspirations, under this philosophy, must be to become the best governess in the world, and hence governess to the little princesses we hope Princess Charlotte will produce, and I am sure I could put some arithmetic into the head of a little prince or two, because it has occurred to me their infant brains might not be different from those of Miss Wilder and my little sisters. It is a pleasure you are rather far off so I cannot hear you growl at me. Another thing, how can all of our great aristocracy have had ancestors as great and grand as themselves? They bettered themselves and got away with it. You will, not for the first time, accuse me of Jacobin leanings, a rebel at heart, but was not my dear mother a rebel, giving up her religion and thereby her family in order to marry you?*

*A governess is such a betwixt and between thing. The housekeeper occasionally invites me, out of*

*kindness, to take tea in her room. She is a person of such grandeur, we are not sure who is condescending to whom. We discuss the weather. There is a butler who ably manages everyday affairs. His name is Slimmer but I make sure to call him Mr. Slimmer, for reasons of diplomacy. I find his character to be of the slippy-slidy sort. There are two parlour maids, Lady Charles's maid, Lord Charles's valet and an indefinite number of other souls, indoors and out, let alone those attached to the kitchen, which area I am not expected to penetrate. Oh, for the past glories of knowing where one stood. Of Lord and Lady Charles Wilder I see virtually nothing. I send my charge downstairs after dinner, wearing the little black gown with the lace on, in oppose to the ones without, and she is returned to me one hour later. I am the fourth governess to try my hand at her education. I do what you advise: devote my attention to the needs of the child. I graciously accept the position I have been fortunate in obtaining.*

*I wish it did not separate me from all that I most dearly love. Should you have a letter from Bobby, I need not tell you how much I should appreciate you enclosing it to me, could you bear to part with it,*

*Ever your affectionate daughter,*

*Anna Arbuthnot*

Mrs Kingston paid a morning visit to Lady Charles. The shutters were put back, for one could not expect a visitor to

sit in the dark. The drawing room looked over an expanse of lawn with nothing very much planted. Beyond that was a small hill and a wood. Striped curtains framed the view. The room itself was elegant but bare, furnished with the necessities but nothing else, formal rather than comfortable. Lady Charles disliked the clutter of everyday life.

She said, 'I appreciate your calling again so soon, Mrs Kingston. I am poor company, but you are kind.'

Mrs Kingston sighed. She wished to make a point but was unable to decide how it should be put. Eventually she said, lowering her gaze, 'Could you but know how well I understand, and indeed venture to share, your affliction.'

Lady Charles wondered, for the hundredth time, whether Lyndon had intended to marry Mrs Kingston. She said, obliquely, 'A soldier's life is very exacting.'

'Yes, of course, and what I have to say particularly bears on that. I have told you how my brother, Captain Houghton, has suffered intermittently from the fever ever since he was at Walcheren. Now they are sending him home. I had his letter this morning. I am afraid his health must be a great deal worse than he has ever previously admitted. It makes me very nervous. I almost don't look forward to his coming, to see him so reduced, but I pray rest and care will put him right. His regiment may have been positioned not so very far from that of poor Lieutenant Wilder's. He might be able to tell us more of the circumstances of his death. Of course I have asked him in my letters, but my brother never has been one for actually reading letters and answering what is in them. He fires off a salvo on the horrid place he is in and asks if I can pay his bill at the tailor.'

Lady Charles drew in her breath. She felt a constriction

in her chest. Mrs Kingston seemed to speak of Lyndon's death as if it were any death; the words, although spoken earnestly, seemed to trip off her tongue like any others, even ending on a note of frivolity. She took a long minute to compose herself while Mrs Kingston anxiously proffered her a glass of wine, saying, 'I spoke too hastily, I said too much at once, but I so wish Henry to give you consolation. Lieutenant Wilder died a soldier, he gave his life, but Henry will know the circumstances, the nature of his valour.'

At length Lady Charles stood up and went slowly to her desk, withdrawing, from among many, a letter. She said, 'I'm afraid, Mrs Kingston, you will find me a weak woman. Why can't I display the courage of my darling boy? He would be ashamed of me. "Mother," I hear him say, "I died for England. Be brave, have courage. My death is glorious." This is the letter we received from his colonel. Perhaps you, of all people, have a right to read it . . .' Here she hesitated, distracted from what she had meant to say by so direct a reference to Mrs Kingston's undisclosed relationship to her son. Eventually she continued, 'You may as well read it. I find it curiously unsatisfactory.'

Mrs Kingston smoothed the letter flat on her lilac lap. It was dated 31 July 1813, and had been written from some little village in the Pyrenees whose name she had no idea how to pronounce.

*Dear Lord Charles,*

*It is my melancholy duty to inform you of the death of your son, Lieutenant Wilder, on the 25th of this*

*month. The French, under Marshal Soult, attacked our positions about the pass of Roncesvalles on that day and the fighting, in this mountainous terrain, four thousand feet above the sea, has been more or less continuous. I should like to be have been able to give you an exact account of his heroic death, but I can only say he died gallantly while leading forward the company to which he was attached, Captain Norton having been seriously wounded a short while earlier. I have questioned the men who were with him at the time, but the moment being late in the day, about 6 o'clock, and a fog coming down to add to the smoke from the powder, they were unable to give me any precise account and did not seem to agree among themselves. It is possible Mr Wilder was, in his ardour, a touch further ahead of his men than he might have been, and what with the nature of the ground, rocky and uneven, perhaps no clear picture can ever be drawn. Outnumbered by the enemy, General Cole, anxious for our position, though the pass was held, ordered our immediate retreat, which may have added to their confusion and clouded exact recollection. I can only assure you your son died in the cause of his duty and he will be most sincerely regretted by the regiment.*

*Mr Wilder left precise instructions, among his effects, that his brother should take charge of his possessions, should he fall in action. I therefore took upon myself the sad task of informing Major Wilder, by letter, of the mournful circumstances, though I believe he had already received such information as there*

*was. Major Wilder has an ever increasing reputation as a very steady and reliable officer, which must be to you a source of gratification amid your affliction. Should the lamented death of his brother necessitate his quitting the Royal Horse Artillery to return home, he will be of considerable loss to the service.*

Mrs Kingston stopped short of reading the polite but final salutations of the colonel because she could not decipher his signature. She said, 'Oh dear, it is of course exceedingly distressing, but why unsatisfactory? Is it not a beautiful letter, with so much reference to his duty and his gallantry?'

'The phrases he uses strike me as those he would use every time he is called upon to write such a letter.'

'I pity him for the letters he must write,' Mrs Kingston replied.

'He would prefer to tell me how many feet above sea level he was than the actual circumstances of my son's death.'

'They will, I am sure, have been just as confusing as the colonel says,' Mrs Kingston said, feeling herself on firmer ground. 'The smoke from the muskets and the artillery is so dense you can see only a few yards in each direction. That is how a battle is, Henry has told me. What with the fog coming down, I think it not surprising the men of his company were confused.'

'And then,' Lady Charles continued, as if Mrs Kingston had not spoken, 'why make reference to Thomas? Steady and reliable, damning with faint praise, obviously quite unable to think of anything more interesting to say of him, and so unkindly irrelevant to write in a letter telling us of Lyndon's death.'

'Oh dear, I think, in your distress, you malign the poor colonel, and I can assure you the praise, in military teams, he gives Major Wilder, is of the very highest, and truly ought to be of consolation to you. It is a compliment, even if it appears to us a little mundane. As for what he says of your elder son, he died gallantly, doing his duty. Those of us having the privilege to know his character would have expected nothing less.'

'You are right, you are right. I make too much of the smallest innuendo. The poor colonels must sit in their tents or in some dreadful hovel halfway up a mountain writing these letters half the day. We also had a letter from Thomas, not that it says anything of great moment, but you may as well read that too.'

Lady Charles again went to her desk.

Mrs Kingston said, 'Fancy he's a major now. Isn't he very young?'

'Not so very young, twenty-nine or so,' Lady Charles replied, with a small shrug. 'No, I believe he must be thirty. What is young in the theatre of war? It made it awkward for Lyndon, having a much younger brother so superior in rank, for they were five years apart, but he put the best face on it and was forever joking at Thomas's expense and at the expense of the Artillery.'

'Henry says the Artillery is quite a race apart,' Mrs Kingston said, Major Wilder's letter still folded in her hand.

'We didn't encourage Thomas to make such a choice, but he was clever in that sort of mathematical calculating way and he felt it the natural choice. We took him out of school and sent him to Woolwich as a lad of fourteen, or I

believe he was fourteen, and we have seen but little of him since. He was his sister Georgie's pet, so the small amount of leave he takes he tends to spend with her and her family. As for his letters, you may be sure they are taken up with technicalities and troop manoeuvres.'

Mrs Kingston proceeded to unfold the letter, now quite puzzled as to its likely nature. It was written from Pamplona on 27 July. She immediately saw the neat and orderly nature of the hand.

*My dear Parents,*

*I write to you with the saddest heart imaginable for I can only surmise what a terrible blow this news will be to you. I cannot say whether you will hear from me or his colonel first, but Lyndon was killed defending the Roncesvalles pass on the 25th. I at first heard it and prayed it might not be true, that it would turn out he was a prisoner or wounded, under which latter circumstances I could have got leave to go to him.*

*There seems so little to say, I find it difficult to write. Would I knew more of the circumstances. The blow to you will be inestimable,*

*Your affectionate and obedient son,*

*T. Wilder RHA*

Mrs Kingston, for a moment contemplating what she considered to be a perfectly feeling letter, said cautiously, 'At such an exacting time, I am sure no one could know how to say the right thing.'

'There is no mention of his loss, only of ours.'

'Ah, yes, his only brother, it is true, but his thoughts are with you.'

'Just so,' Lady Charles replied, 'but think of the difficulty of his position.'

Mrs Kingston wondered what that might be. She said, 'Was he jealous of his brother? It is often so, I believe, but I am sure I loved my poor dear sister, though I thought her prettier than me. What brother could not be jealous of Mr Wilder?'

Lady Charles realized Mrs Kingston had not understood to what she referred, but rather than make further explanation, she merely replied, 'Jealous? I dare say he was, though Lyndon was good to him, having him his fag at school to protect him from the bullies, though he was not in the least use and never did as he was asked. He fought a duel when he was eight years old, he was such a belligerent and warlike little boy, but I don't suppose he wished for Lyndon's death.'

Mrs Kingston was distracted by the idea of such a duel and would have liked to enquire more, but Lady Charles gave her no opportunity, going on to speak of other things. Having further calls to make, Mrs Kingston soon left.

Lady Charles went to the window to watch the barouche going down the drive, wending its way through banks of rank, wet grass. The park was under-grazed, she knew not why, and the grasses bowed their heads in tangled hoops. Had Lyndon married Mrs Kingston before he went away, she might have borne him a son, a beautiful little Lyndon to be the idol of their hearts. Slowly she returned to her desk to replace the letters, those two letters that had killed

her, in their correct pigeonhole. She always kept letters. She could have reread all the letters her boy had sent, those from school describing cricket and bathing in the river; the tedium of lessons on sunny days; requests for plum puddings and game pies; requests for his own spaniel and a red tailcoat with fancy buttons to attend the dress ball of the harriers. Lyndon, his mother acknowledged, was always requesting things, suitable or otherwise. His next letters were from Oxford, where he had lived above his income, ignored his father's lectures, was happy, carefree, cheerful, vague, amusing and forever in scrapes from which it was necessary to rescue him; in fact, he was exactly as they had expected. Yes, Lady Charles had kept every one of Lyndon's letters: the pigeonholes, the little drawers of her desk, bulged with them. Among them she had placed, face down, for she feared to see it unprepared, his portrait miniature. At its back was a twist of his yellow-gold hair. Even now she did not turn it up. She knew its every detail, a second lieutenant in the Guards, the scarlet jacket, the blue facings, the gold, and Lyndon's face, not much more than a boy's.

Lady Charles thought of how, at that stage of his life, his career in the military had been so short. She wished he had not sold his uniform, that she had it now to smooth and fold in a cedarwood trunk. Whatever had induced him to join again, and his father only prepared to buy him a commission in an ordinary line regiment? Money was all that was ever considered. Even Thomas had written, though his letter was curious, exclaiming at the necessity of getting Lyndon back into the Guards. She knew the very words of his letter: 'The Guards always get the best

billets and the NCOs do all the work, give the orders, the officers not encouraged to speak to, let alone to know or to understand, the men, or that is how I see it.' Why had Thomas said that? Lyndon was as capable as the next man of giving an order. It was as Mrs Kingston had observed: Thomas was jealous of his brother for, though he had done very well for himself, it was inevitable that Lyndon would have overtaken and outshone him.

She returned to the window, the miniature in her hand. The few remaining leaves of the dreary shrubbery had been beaten off by the rain: there was nothing of autumn glory, of bronze or rust. It occurred to her that, had Lyndon remained in the Guards, he might never have been killed. It was not that he would have been exposed to less danger, but he would not have been in that exact spot, defending this unimaginable Roncesvalles Pass, in the fog, at the moment when he was struck. Logic told her he might have been killed in some other battle, for as Thomas, when wounded in the leg, had remarked to Georgie, whose letters from him were always more amusing than theirs, there was a lot of luck in staying alive. Thus Lyndon might still have been alive had they not stinted in the purchase of the commission, and in this she could not fail to blame her husband.

At length she turned the little painting face up. She wished her belief in Christianity, the afterlife, could furnish her with images of Lyndon on some celestial other plane, entered into everlasting bliss, but she could picture only bones, bones with the rags of uniform clinging in decay. She had used to think how boyish and innocent he appeared in his picture, how candid his blue eyes, but now he mocked her from his other world.

With a cry of renewed anguish, she hastened from the window and thrust the miniature back among the letters so carefully preserved in her desk.