

A Notorious Woman

Chapter 1

SOMEWHERE HIGH ON Trigoning Hill a vixen yapped at the frost; the year was turning. A chill breeze keened back and forth through the loose lights of the decaying window, like the drone of some ancient piper, playing to no one. A cold slab of moonlight lay across the threadbare carpet and climbed up the antique counterpane, where it came to gentle rest upon the sleeping form of the young woman. In the deep dark of the passageway beyond, a nervous hand strayed forward, touched the door, edged its opening wider, wider ... until a creaking of the hinge made it freeze.

The young woman stirred in her sleep, turned on her back, breathed easy again.

Raw eyes in the pitch-dark passage roamed greedily where the hands that now stayed the door and its jamb longed to follow. Such a pretty creature – in sleep so gentle ... such a shame, such a waste!

“Mr Visick! What ever are you doing?”

John Visick, lord of Wheal Venton mine, master of Lanfear House – and, indeed, lord and master of his questioner – put a finger to his lips, closed the door, this time without a squeak, and tiptoed toward her. His excitement, or the evidence of it, died in those few steps; it did not revive when he embraced her bony frame. “Mrs Visick, my dear, you will take a chill.”

“But what were you doing there?”

He steered her back toward the carpeted regions of the house, explaining as they went that he had thought he heard voices.

“Voices?”

“And laughter.”

“Laughter?”

He laughed, as if to show her what the word meant. “Is my speech so defective, my dear, that you must confirm my every word?”

“But how could there be laughter – at this hour?” The way he nudged her into their chamber and prodded her toward the bed was most disagreeable. “And in Johanna’s room of all places.”

“That was my thought, too, ma’am. My very thought.” He ran his hand down the washboard of her ribs, rested at the awkward protrusion of her hip, and shivered. “Fortunately it was just the wind. Must get some putty for those lights or they’ll drop out in the next

gale.” He kissed her on the neck. “You are cold, my dear. We both need a little warming.”

Theresa Visick lay back and sighed. “Be as quick as you can,” she begged. “How we shall survive tomorrow, I do not know.”

Their two heads lay side by side, a universe apart. She stared at the ceiling, conjuring one after another of the coming day’s disasters; he closed his eyes, buried his face in her pillow, and, such is the magic of desire, fleshed her bones with those young, supple, enticing curves that still called to him through the dark labyrinth of the house. Then he was quick, indeed.

In her chill little room that was not quite a servant’s garret and not quite “family,” either, Johanna slept on. Outside, in the now-waning moonlight, the vixen trotted over the hilltop to bark in some more likely parish.

Dawn awakened a different John Visick: he scrubbed off sin like the rime of sleep and clad himself in the bible black of righteousness. There was no giveaway gleam in his eyes as he muttered his solemn, everyday, “Morning, maid,” to Johanna. As always, she was first at the breakfast table – having already been about the house for her usual hour – plus, on this day of days, an extra one beside.

She glanced up briefly from the list she was compiling. “Good morning, Uncle John. I hope you slept well?”

The question merited its customary grunt as he settled behind his curtain of newsprint.

“The nights are certainly turning chill,” she added, at the same time writing: *7pm – Jessy to put the warming pan through Dr Moore’s sheets.*

“What? What? What’s that? Chill?” Mrs Visick, a bundle of frayed nerves and sleep-starved bones, came bustling into the breakfast room and flopped, already exhausted, into her chair. “How you can stuff yourself like that I don’t know,” she snapped at Johanna.

The young woman greeted her aunt and hoped she, too, had slept well.

“Sleep!” the woman echoed. Then, to the maidservant, “I can’t touch a thing. Just a piece of dry toast.”

“You’ll wither away, Mrs Visick,” her husband warned mechanically. “You’ll slip between the floorboards.”

When the maid brought the toast, her mistress said, as if complaining, “Perhaps I could manage a peach. A small peach?”

The maid nodded and left them; before the door was quite closed, her mistress added, “Bring two if they are *very* small.”

Johanna spread the last of her dole of marmalade and popped it in

her mouth. *Willie to see to Dr Moore's boots before he does the lamps*, she wrote.

"Well, here's a fine breakfast," Theresa Visick commented.

"Nothing but reading and writing all about me!"

"Bring your household accounts, my dear," her husband advised jovially. "Then we shall complete the academy." He smiled at his niece (his *wife's* niece, actually, as he often reminded himself) to see her smile in return.

But Johanna was too long in this house to be drawn in like that. Her smile was ambiguous enough for her aunt to read into it: *How little these men understand!* The older woman, however, was in no mood to be patronized. "Speaking of the accounts ..." she said to Johanna.

"We have been rather busy on other things," her niece reminded her.

"You needn't speak as if the entire burden of it has fallen to you," Mrs Visick responded. "I've had my share."

Johanna smiled inwardly. Her aunt's "share" had consisted of one, single question: What shall Selina wear for the visit of Dr Anthony Moore? Even her uncle, though he knew full well the importance of this occasion, had been forced to joke about it in the end. "The Corn Laws are repealed," he said, "and ruin faces the countryside. America takes up arms against Mexico. In India, our army is decimating the Sikhs. The Irish potato crop is set to fail yet again. The world groans under matters of great moment, yet what is it frets our sleep and wears our nerves to a ravelling? *What shall Selina wear?* Great gods and little fishes!"

The basic decision had been easy enough: Selina would wear the dress her mother had worn to such good effect in 1823 (for had it not led almost directly to her marriage in 1825 and the birth of Selina herself in 1826?). It was of a fine cream-coloured wool woven with a pink silk stripe and printed in a dainty floral pattern of yellow, red, green, blue, and a purple that had faded rather pleasantly, as if it had known the way midcentury taste would go.

The impossibly difficult question had been: How to alter it? Should it be left plain or should a flounce be added? Two dresses in the last *Ladies Journal* had sported a flounce about eight inches above the pavement-sweeping hem. It was a question of fashion, and no one down here, at the far end of England, was quite, quite sure what fashion, at present, decreed.

But fashion was not all. There was also a question concerning the front of the bodice. Should the point of it be stitched down? The answer reached beyond *la mode* into realms of morality, for, if the bodice were left free, it would suggest (to a person of discrimination)

that Selina possessed a watch of her own – that being where the fob pocket was usually concealed. And, if matters proceeded toward a satisfactory climax, Dr Moore might offer the girl a chaste embrace – and thus discover its absence. Might he not then think her somewhat dishonest – pretending to possess that which she lacked? And might he not consider it symptomatic of a deeper fault within her?

Questions fashionable, questions moral – and also questions practical. For example, if the sleeves were made detachable, she could wear that lovely mantle of shot silk and taffeta with black net gloves for calling, while for evening she could wear the long silk shawl with matching sleeves. Then it would be a dress for all occasions. But might dear Dr Moore consider that to reveal a somewhat cheeseparing character? Or would he applaud their common sense and thrift?

The arguments had worn Mrs Visick to a frazzle – which she considered her “fair share” of the burden of Dr Moore’s visit.

Next to arrive at the breakfast table was Terence Visick, the oldest of Johanna’s cousins. In fact, at twenty-six he was three years her senior; but he behaved as if she were still the sad little orphan whom fate had wished upon this household more than ten years ago.

“*Bonjour, ma chère cousine!*” he cried. “Any kipper today?”

“*Bonjour, chère cousin.* Fresh herring,” she told him.

“Good egg!”

All dishes were “good egg!” to Terence – except, oddly enough, egg itself, in any of its forms.

As the only son, and heir to half the Visick-Trahearne partnership in the Wheal Venton mines, he put in a grudging two days a week at the office and spent the rest of the time repairing his status as a gentleman. Today he was off to fish a private reach in the Pendarves estate.

“Who’s going to rouse the belle of the ball?” he asked cheerily.

“Rouse?” his mother asked.

The two youngest of the family, Deirdre and Ethna, eighteen and sixteen respectively, tried to slip unnoticed into their places. Their father lowered his paper until his eyes just met theirs. “Are you sitting comfortably?” he asked in an ominous tone.

“Thank you, Papa,” came the terrified replies.

“Bottoms not cold?”

“No, Papa.” They almost fell over each other to assure him.

“Because I can warm them for you.”

“We’re sorry, Papa ...”

“It’s Selina, you see. She won’t get up.”

“Ah!” Terence said. “Say what you will about us Visicks – you can’t fault us on our sense of loyalty!” He winked at Johanna.

“And you’re not too old to thrash, sir,” his father growled at him.

“Who is these days,” the youth answered amiably. “If you’re looking for a bottom to warm, pater, Selina’s probably expecting you upstairs. Anyway – she’s refusing to get up.” He engulfed a huge spoon of thick, claggy porridge.

Mr Visick rose hastily, but his wife was ahead of him. “Leave this to me Mr Visick, my dear,” she said firmly.

Their eyes met; he yielded after a struggle. “With every confidence, ma’am. I shall return shortly before one o’clock.” He departed for the mine office in Helston.

Mrs Visick turned to her son. “Now, why is she refusing to get up?”

“Cold water,” he advised.

“I’ll give her cold water! Your father’s not the only one who can sting her bottom.” She turned to Johanna. “I don’t suppose you know anything of this?”

Johanna thought she did, but not in terms her aunt might understand.

“Then I shall sting her bottom,” Mrs Visick repeated and went in search of key to the cupboard where her husband always kept a large stock of fresh withies.

“Let me talk to her, Aunt?” her niece begged as she followed her out. “Please?”

“You!” The woman was scornful but she offered no actual resistance.

Selina had locked her door against the world but she had forgotten there was another way in from the old nursery; that second door was actually in a curtained alcove where hung all her petticoats and chemises. The key to this alternative entrance was discovered after one or two attempts, which alerted Selina to the invasion. As a result, when Johanna pulled open the door, gritting her teeth against its complaining hinges, she found her cousin, still in her nightdress, busy trying to wedge a chair under its handle.

“That wouldn’t have worked, anyway,” she said. “It opens outwards.”

Selina burst into tears and rushed back to her bed; but, Johanna noticed, she peeped out furtively to see whether her mother and the birch were at hand.

Johanna pulled up a chair and sat beside her cousin. While she waited she looked about her. The contrast with her own bedroom could hardly have been greater; not that it bothered her much. Sometimes, in the depth of winter, when the wind howled around Lanfear and fought its way in through every crack and cranny, she envied Selina this spacious chamber with its sheltered aspect and evening fire. But on a late-summer’s morning, like today’s, it seemed

uncomfortably large and unwelcoming. All in all she preferred her own smaller and much simpler room – “luxurious for a governess, but far too good for a servant,” as Mr Visick had commented when nursery days were done and the room became available for life’s semi-fortunates.

Selina stirred at last; snivelling up an ocean of salt she croaked, “Thank heavens it’s only you. I couldn’t bear any of the others. Oh, Jo, you are lucky!”

“And then there were two,” Johanna replied.

“I don’t see how anyone could say that of me. I think I must be the most miserable girl alive.”

Johanna waited.

“I mean,” Selina went on, “you’ll never be married, never have to go through all this.”

“All what? What is so terrible?”

“All ... everything. It’s not just today, you know. Today’s only a tiny bit of it. It’s just ... everything.”

Johanna was at a loss. Like the rest of the family she had assumed this was some minor tantrum that a few well-chosen words might cure; but now it began to sound serious. “Everything?” she echoed. “It must start somewhere. Tell me where it begins.”

“In the cradle, I suppose.” Selina closed her eyes, turned on her side and curled herself up in a tight little ball. “Oh, I wish I could lie here like this for ever and ever. It begins the moment they say congratulations, it’s a dear little baby girl. Or it begins when we start learning our Accomplishments. It begins when we go to the County Ball and let half Cornwall’s eligible manhood push us around the floor – trying us out. How do we converse? Is our breath sweet? Our rosebud cheeks – how did we get them? It begins when we are yoked to ...” She ran out of breath. “Oh,” she concluded, “it begins, it begins, it begins, but it never ends.”

“But it’s always been like that,” Johanna said. “How could it be otherwise? And after all” – she brightened, remembering the comfort she had half-prepared while forcing her entrance – “Dr Moore did ask you for *two* dances.”

“Oh hush about that!”

“No other girl was so favoured.”

“Stop it, stop it!”

“Not Desirée Curwen, not Felicity Beckerleg, not even Bathsheba Strike – and everyone said they’d be the queens of the ball.”

Selina vanished beneath her sheets and screamed.

Johanna eased down the counterpane. “Get up and let me brush out your hair. You’ll feel so much better for it.”

“How would *you* know?” Selina sneered.

“Well, even with my little mop I never feel right until I’ve taken out all its tangles.”

Selina thrashed like an eel on a line, turning herself over until she faced away from Johanna. “Damn you!” she said. “Damn everybody!”

“Selina!”

“You’re so *humble*. So *cheerful*, always. Why don’t you claw our eyes out? I know I would.”

“I’m sure I’m most grateful to my aunt and uncle. It would have been cruel to bring me up as one of you when I could never expect half your advantages.”

With slow deliberation, Selina turned to face her cousin. “You truly mean it, I think,” she said.

“I could certainly never expect the sort of match they are preparing for you.”

Wearily Selina closed her eyes and let her head fall back to the pillow. “I knew no one could understand it,” she said.

“I’ll try,” Johanna promised. “Get up and let me brush your hair and you tell me all about it.” She tugged gently at the sheet.

For a moment Selina resisted and then just lay there passively while Johanna pulled back all the bedding. She did not stir, however, until her cousin took up a feather from the mattress and began trying to push it into her ear; then she giggled and sought to bury her ear in her shoulder. “Ogre!” she cried.

“Ogress,” Johanna corrected.

“Schoolmarm!” Then, in one of her mercurial changes of mood, she became all at once serious. “That’s what you should be, you know. That’s what I’d do if I were you. I wouldn’t tolerate this house a day longer. I’d get a position as a teacher somewhere – in Normandy, perhaps. Or a governess in a nice family.”

Johanna nodded toward the dressing table.

Selina allowed herself to be guided across the room. “Why don’t you, Jo? Be a governess?”

Johanna’s smile, reflected in the looking glass, answered for her, saying she thought her cousin’s words the very height of fancy.

“I was never more earnest in my life,” the other protested. A crafty look crept into her eyes. “I know. Why don’t *you* make eyes at dear Dr Moore when he comes and bewitch him. And then they’ll be so angry they’ll turn you off from here.”

“And then?”

“And then I’ll come with you and we can both go and be governesses or teachers somewhere and never have to bother with ...” She caught sight of Johanna’s smile and her mood darkened at once.

“Give me that!” She snatched the brush away and began ruining all the good work in a hasty assault on her tangled locks. “You always win in the end, don’t you,” she said angrily.

Johanna just sat there patiently, holding out her hand, waiting for the brush to be returned – which it was, soon enough.

Selina became contrite again. “But wouldn’t it be sublime?” she asked. “We could just please ourselves.”

“And whoever employed us,” Johanna pointed out, resuming her brushing.

“Oh ... yes. That hadn’t struck me.” Selina grew thoughtful. “I suppose a husband is an employer of a kind,” she said at last.

“What would you like for breakfast?” Johanna thought it time to ask.

“Oh, how could you! I shan’t eat for a week.”

“Then, when you’re dressed, why don’t we go for a walk to the top of Trigoning Hill and spread our parasols and sit in the sunshine and pretend that one o’clock is years and years away?”

Selina clasped her cousin’s hand to her cheek. “Oh, I do so wish I had been a kinder person,” she said mournfully. “But I’m not, you see. And now I’m going to be found out.”

“You can tell me all about it when we’re on our walk. There!” Johanna extricated her hand. “It’s a glorious day and everything will look very different, I’m sure. I’ll send Rose to dress you, shall I? Will you unbolt the door if I do?”

She left the way she had come, via the old nursery.

“Well?” Mrs Visick snapped the moment she saw Johanna.

“She is still a little vaporous, Aunt Theresa. Her mood is fragile.”

“Fragile, indeed? I’ll teach her to have moods! What does a girl her age need to have moods for – and on such a day as this.”

“If I may suggest?”

“Well?”

“I believe that sunshine and fresh air and ...” Johanna tried to think of a kindly way of saying “escape from this house,” but could not. “I think if she and I took a brief constitutional to the top of Trigoning, she might return calm and refreshed.”

“On an empty stomach? I’ll wager she’ll eat no breakfast.”

“I’ll ask cook to make us some sandwiches.”

“Make *her* some sandwiches, you mean, surely.” Her aunt, annoyed at finding no harsher solution, and fearful of doing nothing, threw up her hands and flounced away. “On your head be it,” she added vaguely. “And don’t stay up there all morning.”

“I’ll set all the servants to their tasks before I go,” Johanna promised.

For two young women, nominally of the same family, they made an odd pair – the daughters of a rich squire and of a poor parson, one would have said who did not know them, for the Visicks were careful enough not to dress their poor niece as a servant. Their way to the summit of the hill led between hedges, burgeoning with life in the full vigour of late summer. Cow parsley, woodbine, coltsfoot, and yarrow spilled in flowery profusion from tenuous footholds in the earth between the hedging stones. The fields and hedgerow ended a quarter of the way up the western slope of Trigoning; from there on it was the haunt of ling and gorse and a dry, sedgy grass that was slippery underfoot. They spoke in disjointed trivialities, for the slope was too steep and their long dresses too cumbersome for sustained converse.

At last they gained the long ridge of the summit, or, rather, a shallow, sandy pit just beneath the brow on its sunward side. That cavity was Terence's sole contribution to the world of archaeology; he had abandoned it when it yielded up its entire treasure – a George III penny. They spread their parasols and sat awhile in silence, gazing out over the busy waters of the bay. The rare intimacy of their earlier conversation now seemed to elude them; each could feel the other straining for the words that might restore it.

"Fancy being a miner out there under all that water!" Selina shuddered. "I should dread every moment."

"Yes but I often envy the people on all those boats," Johanna confessed. "Always travelling. Always moving on. Even their arrivals are only temporary."

Selina agreed. "Never stuck anywhere for long." After a pause she added, as if it followed naturally from the advantages of the nautical life, "I wish it were midnight already and this day over and done with."

She looked nervously at Johanna, who merely shook her head in bewilderment.

"If someone asked you to marry him, Jo, what would you say?" Selina went on.

"It would depend who did the asking."

"Pick the nicest man you know. I'm not seeking to pry, but what would you say?"

Johanna laughed. "I'd say yes, of course."

"Without a qualm?"

"What about?"

"Well ... oh dear." Selina screwed up her eyes. "I mean ... d'you feel *ready*? D'you think you could manage it all? The house ... servants ... the *lord and master* – could you manage *him*? That's what frightens me. I wish we lived in the days when marriages were

properly arranged and there wasn't any nonsense about needing to be in love as well, don't you?"

Johanna looked at her in surprise. "But why?"

"So that I could call him *Mister* Ponsonby, or whatever his name was and he'd call me *Mrs* Ponsonby, and we'd say cold, cold things to each other at breakfast and snap at one another all through supper but in between we'd be perfectly free."

Johanna thought a moment and then said, "And after supper?"

"Have our own bedrooms," Selina said at once.

"But what would such a marriage be for?" Johanna objected.

"It would stop all this nonsense. No more suitors. No more yes-papa, no-papa, and please can I have? No more chaperones. No more being controlled by glances and coughs and shivers of the fan. Oh bliss!" She lay back among the ling and closed her eyes. Then she remembered Johanna's original question and added, "That's what it would be *for* – to escape! I wish there were some way of doing it without having to marry, that's all."

After a while Johanna said, "I wonder if men go through such torments."

"I shouldn't imagine so for a minute," Selina replied. "Who knows?"

"Have you never asked? What d'you talk about when you dance with them?"

Selina laughed. "Certainly nothing so interesting as that. One talks about the Four Safe Topics – the Season, the Music, the Charm of the host and hostess ..." She lapsed into moody silence.

"And the fourth?" Johanna prompted after a while.

Her cousin shrugged. "Actually, there's only one topic – Boredom. That's what one is *really* talking about." She gave a shrill, almost despairing laugh. "What a pair! Here's you would rather marry than anything, I suppose. And here's me would give all my prospects to anyone who could take them off me – simply not to have to walk back home and prepare myself to be meet and fitting in the eyes of the great and wonderful Dr Anthony Moore."

"Heavens, what can be so dreadful in him?"

"He'll want to ... touch me, and kiss me, and hold me in his arms ..." She shivered. "And I shall just be so maladroit and gauche. I know it. And he'll murmur at me and I shan't know what to reply. And he'll ask me things and even though I know the answer I'll forget it. I just *know* it's going to be awful."

Johanna tried to think of something comforting that would not also sound hopelessly anodyne.

"How do people kiss?" Selina asked. "D'you know anything about

it? No, I don't suppose you do. I don't know why I let you drag me up here at all."

It so happened that Johanna did, indeed, know quite a bit about the pastime of kissing. She had kissed cousin Terence, once, in an experimental moment. She had kissed young Isaak Meagor, off the farm below Lanfear, more than once. She had kissed Willie Kemp, the junior excise officer, while his superior was searching for smuggled brandy – quite recently, that was. And she had been kissed by the parson, the last but one; he had caressed her bosom, too – but that had been before the scandal between him and Mrs Bolsover. However, she wasn't about to reveal any of this to Selina. "I imagine," she said, "it's one of those things where you just know what to do when the moment comes."

"You would!" Selina gazed at her coldly. "What if Dr Moore should prefer you to me? He's rich enough not to let any thought of a dowry worry him unduly. Promise me you won't do anything to encourage it?"

Johanna shook her head pityingly. "Dear Selina, you'll worry yourself to no purpose, so that all your worst fears will come true. You'll *make* them come true. But you have nothing to fear, honestly."

"You see – you wriggle out of it. You won't promise."

"What? What is there to promise? That I shan't make eyes at Dr Moore? As if I would! When did you ever see me making eyes at anybody?"

"So why won't you promise?"

"Because it's so absurd. I mean, even to make such a promise would be like admitting its possibility. If you asked me to promise not to cast you down that mineshaft over there, I should also refuse – and for the same reason. It's just too absurd." After a pause, she said in a more conciliatory tone, "Would you like a sandwich now?"

The question galvanized Selina. She sat bolt upright and gave out a great cry of rage, which was also a cry of terror and of frustration. "You're no better than anyone!" she howled. The tears began to stream down her face. "I thought you might ... I mean, I hoped you of all people ... Oh God! Who can help me? Who can help me now?" And she rose to her feet and began to stumble off down the hillside.

Johanna scrambled up and set off after her. She was used to her cousin's mercurial changes of mood but even for her this was something out of the ordinary. Selina became aware she was being followed. She halted and spun around. "Don't you dare!" she yelled. "Just stay up here and be useless where it can't hurt anyone. If you come after me, I'll make you sorry you were ever born."

Still Johanna took a step toward her but it provoked only a fresh

paroxysm of rage. “I don’t want you,” she shrieked. “Can’t you get that into your thick skull? You are not wanted. You’ve never been wanted – anywhere! Why don’t you go and cast *yourself* down a mineshaft?”

And she turned and stormed away.

The peace that closed in around Johanna was only bliss. Time was when such an exchange would have plunged her into gloom for days; but now it was just water on an eider’s back. She turned and walked the few paces to the very crest of the hill, which, at over 600 feet, was the highest for several miles. From here you could actually see the geography of the far west of Cornwall, from the Atlantic on the northern coast, some eight miles off, to the Channel shore, a mile or two southwards. She stood there and turned a slow, full circle, breathing great drafts of the western breeze, fresh off three thousand miles of ocean. From here all human works and feelings were set in their true proportions.

The great tin mines whose belching chimneys described a mighty arc from Godolphin in the north, round through Wheal Vor, Pallas Consols, Carnmeal, and the legendary Wheal Fortune to the east, seemed mere toys. In their satanic workings they had maimed and broken generations of Cornishmen – and women, too, for most of the surface work was done by the bal maidens; but from here they seemed no more than playthings, scattered by a greedy and impatient child, careless of the landscape’s charm. The fields, too, were shrunk to a patchwork quilt, an incompetent creation designed by a horde of squabbling beginners. At various moments in history the run of the hedges and lanes must have made sense to *someone* but those reasons had long vanished, leaving nothing beyond a perverse but fertile confusion of arable, pasture, and croft. Here and there was the occasional intrusion of a remnant woodland covert where the gentry preserved their game.

Johanna let the familiarity of it all reclaim her and bring its peace. Most of her days she lived from moment to moment, from room to room; it was easier so. But the spirit also needs that longer perspective, both of space and of time. Poor Selina! She always behaved as if two quite different girls were at war within her, one arrogantly certain of her maturity, the other a frightened child desperate for reassurance; each begged you to side with them and was resentful if you did not. If a real Selina existed at all, she was prisoner to both. People said, “She’ll be different when she grows up – she’ll soon settle.” But Johanna, who knew her better than anyone, having been the butt of her venom so often, now doubted it. Five years hence they’d probably be saying, “She’ll be different when she has her next

baby – that’ll soon settle her.”

Far off across the peninsula a hoot from a train on the Hayle Railway brought Johanna out of her reverie. Half past eleven. She ought to be going back to Lanfear, to supervise the preparations for the guest of guests. She folded Selina’s sandwiches back into their paper and placed the bundle in a rabbit hole – a gift to a fox or a piskey. Then she turned for home. The day was so fine, however, that she could not deny herself the pleasure of going the long road around, between Balwest and Greatwork and on by way of Trevithan. She picked her way down the hillside, singing, “As I went a-strolling one morning in May,” in her clear but uncertain soprano; and it seemed to her she had little enough to complain of. If she could honestly pity someone with as many advantages and prospects as Selina, then she must be among the most rather than the least fortunate of people.

At Trevithan she faced a choice of paths. The carriageway went around Lanfear, almost three fourths of a circle, approaching the house from the west; or there was a shorter bridleway across the fields that would bring her in through the kitchen garden, to the east of the house. It all depended on which pump they were using to fork out Greatwork; if it were the one on this side of the hill, the stream would be too high for her to cross. She had just decided to risk it when she heard a gig approaching down the lane behind her and a man’s voice crying, “Hoa there! Hoa-back sir!”

“Young lady?” he called, catching her half-way across the stile and unable to turn and face him. “Pardon my presumption, but if I go out of my way once more, they’ll think it worth their while to set up tolls at every junction. Pray tell me, does *any* road hereabouts lead to Lanfear House? I’m a stranger to this district, you see.”

Johanna froze. This young man could be none other than Dr Anthony Moore himself – almost two hours earlier than expected. How like a bachelor! But what could she do? If she directed him truly, he would arrive within five minutes and discover a house in turmoil. If she misdirected him, he would find her out soon enough and then how would she face him every day for the next two weeks?

“Young lady?” he prompted hesitantly.

“Pardon me, sir,” she explained. “My dress is caught in a bramble here. It will only take a moment.” She bent and pretended to fiddle with it, giving herself time to think.

“Are you by any chance Dr Moore?” she asked. “From Plymouth?”

“Why yes.” He gave a small, surprised laugh. “You know of me, then? Am I so close to my goal?”

“You are not expected until one o’clock,” she told him as she stood up and faced him at last.

Their eyes met. She saw a young man in his mid-twenties, dashing handsome, with wavy blond hair and a kindly eye. Selina was lucky, she thought – though the young man stirred nothing very deep within her.

What he saw, however, was something he would never forget – a young woman with the most hauntingly beautiful eyes he had ever encountered. The rest of her face was handsome enough but those eyes held him entranced. It was not love at first sight, for he was not so shallow as that. Indeed, in those first few moments he was so struck by her beauty, he almost forgot she was a person and so gazed at her more as one might examine a beautiful work of art.

“I live at Lanfear,” she explained. “I am Miss Visick’s cousin. My name is Johanna Rosewarne.”

His gaze fell as he recollected himself. “Ah. The truth is I thought I’d get no farther than Truro yesterday, Miss Rosewarne. In fact, the road was so good I pressed on to Helston. Will it matter, my turning up early?”

“Not if you have cures for heart attacks in your bag,” she told him.

“Oh. Like that?” He sighed, consulted his watch, and then looked vaguely about him. “How to kill two hours? Is there a good prospect from yonder hill? Has it a name?”

“Trigoning Hill, they call it.”

“I presume one may walk to its crest?”

“You could drive as far as Balwest Farm and leave your gig there. They’d bring it round this afternoon.”

“And are you bound for Lanfear House, Miss Rosewarne? May I not take you at least part-way there?”

Curiosity got the better of her. “If I may ride with you to Balwest, sir, that will then be my shortest way. I’ll accompany you to the hilltop and you’ll see the path I take to Lanfear.”

He jumped down to hand her up into the gig. “So be it.” And, smiling to himself, he gathered up the reins.