

A Woman Possessed

Chapter 1

THE CARRIAGE ROCKED SLIGHTLY when Laura stepped in and a little more heavily when Giles followed her; there was even a suspicion of a leathery creak. Giles made a mental note to have word with Hinks about it. “Nip trouble in the bud was his motto.”

“Blanche is such a funny little creature,” Laura said. “I wonder if she knows it. D’you remember that ghastly children’s book I picked up on the penny stall last month?”

“*The Intelligent Child’s Guide to Pestering its Parents to Death?*” Giles asked.

Laura laughed. “Yes. She’s reading it avidly. And she remembers it, too. She can’t remember where she left her socks in the garden this morning but she can remember that Australia was once called van Diemen’s Land – though she hasn’t the faintest notion where it is, of course. She really is a most extraordinary child for a six year old.”

“She’s a case for benign neglect, I feel. Why is Hinks taking us along Clodgy Lane?”

“Because they’re digging holes all the way up Meneage Street.”

“Again?”

“The gas people, this time,” she told him. “I’ve forgotten whose turn it is next. The telephones, probably. We had electricity and water in the spring, didn’t we? If the telephone men could manage to rupture the water pipes, they could keep it going until Christmas – and then it would be time for next year’s round to start all over again. Actually I had a brain-wave about that. Why don’t you get up at the next council meeting and propose selling off the entire street? The four undertakings could buy it between them. Then you could wall off the two ends and they could dig away all year to their hearts’ content. And the council could lay new streets for people along the backs of the shops.”

Giles grunted.

Am I talking too much? she wondered. It was nervousness, of course, because of the ball at Liston House. Because it was being given by Mr and Mrs Troy. She was more nervous on Mrs Troy’s behalf than for herself. In fact, had this been any other ball, given by any other of Helston’s leading hostesses, Laura would not have felt the slightest qualm; she’d be looking forward to meeting all her friends, dancing the hours away, setting the world to rights ...

and all the other things one did at such affairs. But a ball given by Mrs Troy – the first since all the scandals and the two-year-long round-the-world voyage she and Troy undertook in the wake of them – was quite another thing.

“You realize we may be the only guests there?” she remarked.

“You said that before,” he told her.

“It’s still true. I couldn’t actually name a single one of our friends who told me they are positively accepting the invitation. That’s why it didn’t say RSVP. Elizabeth Troy must *love* the suspense!”

They arrived at the turnpike and had to yield to a string of carriages from both the Wendron and Falmouth roads. “There’s your answer,” Giles commented. “And we’re among the *early* birds! They’ll have to open the market square to park us all.”

“I suppose everyone’s fascinated by her sheer effrontery.”

He chuckled. “But *we* aren’t, of course – perish the thought!”

“Well, you have to admit, it is brave to the point of recklessness. Not just buying Liston House from the Kittos but throwing it open in the very first week for a grand summer ball. That takes some nerve – when you think of all the muck that came out during her divorce.”

He made a dubious face. “I thought it was a very quiet divorce, as these things go. If anything, the general sympathy was with her, not him. He’s a cad. Always was. And everyone knew it. The only job that man was ever fitted for was member of parliament. I never understood why she married him in the first place.”

“Oh, but he’s such a very handsome cad!” Laura grinned.

“You mean the ladies were all on his side?” If it was true, he’d forgotten it; he leaned forward with interest.

“But of course we were,” she replied. “Not just because he’s handsome, mind. It was mainly because of *her* history. I mean, what was she to start with? A nurse! Her father sold insurance or something. Then to marry poor Bill Troy and have him die on their wedding day and then to inherit the entire Pallas estate. It’s hardly calculated to endear her to the rest the town, is it!”

He shrugged. “Certainly not to the grand ladies who actually run it! It took them generations to go from rags to where they are now.” He grinned provocatively at her. “You and me included!”

“And then there was all that gossip about her and Courtenay Rodda ...”

“Tittle tattle!” he scoffed.

“They were actually seen *in flagrante delicto* on the rocks at Trequean Zawn. And you’ve only got to look at Trevanion and Zelah to see they’re Courtenay Rodda’s and not David Troy’s.”

“The man’s a cad,” Giles repeated. “Troy, I mean. Not Rodda. Well, actually, they both are – but Courtenay Rodda’s rather a jolly sort of cad.”

“And anyway, those were the grounds for her divorce from David Troy – her admitted adultery. You can’t get away from that.”

He shook his head. His glance conveyed that he thought she was being tendentiously naïve. “The *real* grounds for that divorce – even if they never emerged in court – were, one, the marriage was a disaster and ought never to have happened in the first place. Two, he refused to consummate it – or, rather, to continue marital relations with her after their honeymoon – although he went at it like a stoat with her maid – whatsername? Oenone Beckerleg? That girl who used to live up by the church.”

“It’s Oenone Troy, now!” Laura put in.

“Quite. But Elizabeth Troy – quite nobly, in my view – agreed to make no mention of all that in court. She agreed to take all the blame and admit to adultery – just to preserve his official reputation so that he could go on sitting in parliament. No cross-petition at all. Don’t you call that noble?”

Laura shrugged a tiny and reluctant concession. “She was rich enough not to have to bother about opinion. She just wanted to get rid of him. And it wasn’t *her* money, either. It was all left her by *Bill* Troy.”

Giles clamped tight his jaw; for a moment his lips vanished in a thin line. “It would be absurd for you and me to fall out, my dearest, over people as unimportant in our lives as the Troys. But I have to say I think you are being decidedly unfair to her. Bill Troy left her an estate that was bankrupt and run-down and on its last legs. I well recall a journey you and I made to Penzance once, when you pointed out that one could tell at a glance any farm belonging to the Pallas Estate, just from its general delapidation. But that all changed for the better after *she* assumed the management of it. *She* was the one who took it by the scruff of its neck and shook it back into some sort of life. Whatever profit she got out of its sale was the profit of her own labour.” He stopped and drew a deep breath to cool himself down.

“Anyway,” Laura went on, neither arguing the point nor conceding it (though she knew it was true), “what I was saying, if you recall, my precious, was that she was rich enough not to bother *what* people said or thought about her. And then – to pile cream upon pilchards – she goes and marries *Jimmy* Troy, who must be worth several millions by now.”

Giles laughed. “That’s what sticks in the gullets of the good ladies of Helston, isn’t it! This nobody-nurse whose father sold insurance ‘or something’ came down here and did what three generations of Troys had been incapable of doing with the Pallas estate. Then she took the profit she’d earned. And *then* she had the temerity to marry yet another wealthy Troy! I don’t think ‘several millions’ is correct, by the way; one million, perhaps. But that’s what you and Mesdames Knox and Curwen and Treloar and Scawen can’t abide – the fact that Elizabeth always lands on her feet.”

After a brief, frosty silence Laura said, “I think what we really can’t abide is the way the gentlemen of Helston are on a hair trigger to leap to her defence. A self-confessed adulteress who returns to the scene of her iniquity after an extravagant voyage around the world. And then, instead of lying low and living

modestly and earning back the respect of her equals, she immediately buys the most prominent house in town and invites several hundred people to a grand ball – as if she had something to celebrate!”

He smiled, with a superior sort of amusement that always annoyed her. “Perhaps she has,” he murmured.

“What?”

He waved toward the windows on either hand, where the view was hedged in by the sides of other carriages, all jostling their way round the corner into Church Street. “The fact that, loathing her as they do, they nonetheless come! Every man-jack of them – or woman-jill.”

She gave an angry toss of her head. “I wish we hadn’t come now.”

He laughed again. “And I’ll bet ours is not the only carriage in which *that* sentiment is being voiced – and at this very minute.”

After a silence, during which they began their descent of Church Street to a chorus of screeching brakes and coachmen’s curses, she said, in a voice deliberately reasonable, “I really don’t understand why the man-jacks, if you want to call them that – why they are so complacent about the fact of her adultery.”

He heaved himself across the carriage and sat facing her. Taking her gloved hands in his, he stared solemnly into her eyes and said, “Is that a vague warning of some kind?”

“No!” She pursed her lips in would-be annoyance – though really to suppress a smile. “Of course not. But adultery is the most poisonous and corrosive of all the social transgressions. It eats out the very heart of marriage, which is, in turn, the very heart of society.”

“Oh come!” he chided. “This is the twentieth century now, not eighteen fifty.”

Her wide, astonished eyes stared into his, finding no hint that he might be provoking her deliberately. “Giles?” she asked in a tone both questioning and alarmed.

He shrugged. “I can’t speak for society, but I can voice my own view – which is that I wouldn’t give much credit to a marriage that wasn’t robust enough to withstand one or two small brushes with this red-eyed demon of infidelity.”

“Giles!” Now it was pure alarm.

“What, my dear?” he asked with every appearance of surprise at her emotion.

“Are *you* giving *me* a vague warning of some kind?”

“Of course not!” His hands squeezed hers. “You are still the sun and moon to me. My life is still adorned by the stars you scatter. They light a world that, without you, would be nothing but darkness and despair. You are the first and last of all my wishes and desires.” He made a brief, comic face to show that he, too, was slightly embarrassed at this effusion. “That’s what I mean by robust.”

He did not repeat the sentiments that had accompanied his earlier use of that word, but they echoed in her mind nonetheless. His reaffirmation of his love was, naturally, comforting to her; but those echoes were less so. She would almost have preferred him to say that the slightest infidelity on her part would destroy everything he felt for her, and leave it shattered beyond all repair.

But the more she thought about it, the less could she explain why that would be more agreeable than his complaisance. He wanted her to feel free to love him in perfect freedom. Why could she not accept that? Why should she need the lash of his disapproval to keep her from straying – especially as she had not the slightest desire to “go astray”? She thought fleetingly of Maurice Petifer and realized it was the first time for months – for a whole year, perhaps. That proved it.

They turned into Cross Street, which meant they were only a few paces from the entrance to Liston House. She shrugged all uncomfortable thoughts aside and prepared herself for the immediate ordeal of exchanging greetings with their host and hostess. “We shall be cool,” she said.

“Cool,” he repeated.

“Formal, you know.”

“Formal.”

“Correct, I mean.”

“Correct.”

“Giles?”

“What, my angel?”

“If you don’t stop that, I’ll kick your shins!”