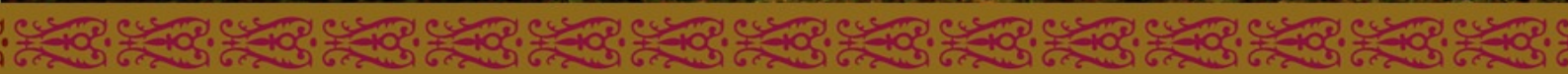


PHILIPPA GREGORY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL*
AND *BOLEYN INHERITANCE*



THE FAVORED CHILD



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*The Favored
Child*

A NOVEL



PHILIPPA GREGORY

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK

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Reading Group Guide

The Taming of the Queen Excerpt

About Philippa Gregory

Before there was anything, there was the dream. Before Richard, before I even knew the hills around Wideacre, the sweet rolling green downs which encircle and guard my home—there was the dream. As far back as I can remember, the dream is there. Was always there.

And it is not the dream of a child. It is not my dream. It belongs to someone else. But I do not know whose dream it is.

In the dream I am hurt—hurt and heartbroken with a pain that I hope has never been felt in real life. My feet are sore from walking far on stony cold ground, and they are wet with mud, Wideacre mud, and with blood from a hundred cuts from the sharp chalk and flint stones. I am stumbling in the midnight darkness through the woods near our house toward the river, the River Fenny, and I can hear the roar of its winter-deep waters, louder even than the howling and tossing of the wind in the treetops. It is too dark for me to see my way and I stumble in the blackness between the shattering blasts of lightning.

I could walk easier but for my burden. The only warm dry part about me is the little bundle of newborn baby which I am holding tight to my heart under my cape. I know that this baby is my responsibility. She is mine. She belongs to me; and yet I must destroy her. I must take her down to the river and hold that tiny body under the turbulent waters. Then I can let her go, and the little body in the white shawl will be rolled over and over by the rushing flood, away from my empty hands. I must let her go.

The roaring noise of water gets louder as I struggle down the muddy footpath, and then I catch my breath with fear when I see the river—broader than it has ever been before, buffeting the trunk of the trees high on the banks, for it has burst out of its course. The fallen tree across the river which we use as a bridge is gone, hidden by boiling depths of rushing water. I give a little cry, which I cannot even hear above the noise of the storm, for I do not now know how I am to get the baby into the river. And she must be drowned. I have to drown her. It is my duty as a Lacey.

This is too much for me, this fresh obstacle on top of my tears and the pain in my heart and the pain in my feet, and I start to struggle to wake. I cannot see how I can get this warm soft sleeping baby to the cold dashing river water, and yet I have to do it. I am stumbling forward, sobbing toward the river, which is boiling like a caldron in hell. But at the same time a part of my mind knows this is a dream—the dream which I always have. I struggle to be free of it, but it holds me. The baby is living its life in my mind. It is as if I have split into two people. One of them is a little girl struggling to wake from a nightmare, tossing in her bed in the little room and crying for her mama to come. And the other is this woman with a baby warm under her cloak and an utter determination to drown her like an inbred puppy in the cold waters of the river which rushes from the slopes of the downs and through Wideacre and away.



I am an old woman now. In my heart I am an old woman, tired, and ready for my death. But when I was a child, I was a girl on Wideacre. A girl who knew everything, and yet knew nothing. A girl who could see the past all around as she walked on the land—dimly, like firelit smoke. And could see the future in bright glimpses—like moonlight through storm-torn clouds. The unstoppable hinges of past and future molded my childhood like drips of water on a tortuous limestone stalactite that grows and grows into a strange racked shape, knowing nothing.

Oh! I know now. I have been a fool. I was a fool over and over in the years when I learned to be a woman. But I am no fool now. I had to shed the shell of lies and half-truths like a summertime adder coming out of a sloughed skin. I had to scrape the scales of lies off my very eyes so that I blinked in the strong light of the truth at last; and was a fool no more. In the end I was the only one that dared to face the truth. In the end I was quite alone. In the end there was only me. Only me and the land.

It is no ordinary land—that is our explanation and our excuse. This is Wideacre, set on the very chalk backbone of southern England, as beautiful and as rich as a garden, as the very first garden of Eden. The South Downs enclose the valley of the River Fenny like a cupped hand. High chalk downs, sweet with short-cropped grass and rare meadow flowers, dizzy in summer with tiny blue butterflies. These hills were my horizon. My little world was held inside them. At its center was the hall, Wideacre Hall. A smoke-blackened ruin at the head of the chalk-mud and flintstone drive tumbling down amid an overgrown rose garden where no one walks. In the old days the carriage would roll past the front door and down the drive, passing fertile fields, passing the little square sandstone Dower House, stopping at the great iron gates at the head of the drive for the lodgekeeper to swing them open for a tossed coin or a nod. To the left is the village of Acre—a lane lined with tradesmen's cottages, a whitewashed vicarage, a church with a pretty rounded spire; to the right is the lane which runs to the London road, meeting it at the corner where the stagecoach stopped on its way north to Midhurst and beyond.

I was born Julia Lacey in 1773, the daughter of the squire of Wideacre and his wife Catherine Havering of Havering Hall. I was their only child; there was no male heir. I was raised with my cousin Richard, the son of Beatrice, my father's sister. Those two—my papa and his sister—made my cousin and me joint heirs to Wideacre. They changed the entail on the estate so that we two could jointly inherit. We always knew that we were to run Wideacre together.

Those are the facts. But there is also the truth. The truth that Beatrice was desperate to own her brother's estate, that she lied and schemed and ruined the land and murdered—oh, yes, the Lacey have always been killers. She stopped at nothing to put herself in the squire's chair. She enclosed fields and shut footpaths, she raised rents and planted wheat everywhere to pay for her plans. She drove her husband half mad and stole his fortune. She dominated her brother in every way a woman can. And she outran her destiny for season after season until the village which had once adored her came against her with torches in their hands and a leader on a black horse riding before them.

They killed her.

They killed her. They burned down the house. They ruined the Lacey family. And they put

themselves outside the law forever.

~~My papa, the squire, died of a weak heart. Beatrice's husband, Dr. John MacAndrew, went away to India, swearing to repay her creditors. And then there were only the three of us left: my mama, my cousin Richard, and me in the square little box of the Dower's house, halfway down the drive from Wideacre Hall with the great trees of the Wideacre parkland leaning over the roof and pressing close to the windows. Three of us, two servants, and a whole world of ghosts.~~

I could name them all. I saw them all. Not very clearly. Not well enough to understand with my child's imagination. But at night when I was asleep, I sometimes heard a voice, a word, or an echo of a word. Or once, very clearly, the ripple of a joyous laugh. And once I had a dream so intense that I awoke, in a start of terror, my bedroom windows bright with the reflection of flames from a fire as big as a house, the fire which burned down Wideacre Hall, my house. And killed the squire, my papa. And left three survivors in this house: the three of us and a family of ghosts.

In real life there was my mama. Her face was heart-shaped, pale like a cream rose, her eyes pansy-brown. Her hair was fair when she was young but went gray—long aging streaks of dullness among the gold, as if her sorrow and her worry had laid fading fingers on her smooth head. She was widowed when I was only two years old, so I cannot remember her wearing any color other than purple or sage or black. I cannot remember the hall as anything but a ruin. When we were little children, she would revile the dull colors and swear she would marry a great merchant for his stock of pink shot silk. But as we grew and no merchant arrived, no geese laid golden eggs and no trees grew diamonds, she laughed no more about her old dark gowns, shiny at the seams and worn at the hems.

And there was Richard. My cousin Richard. My dearest friend, my little tyrant, my best ally, my worst enemy, my fellow conspirator, my betrayer, my playmate, my rival, my betrothed. I cannot remember a time before I loved him. I cannot remember a time before I loved Wideacre. He was as much a part of me, of my childhood, as the downland and common land, as the tall trees of Wideacre woods. I never made a choice about loving him, I never made a choice about loving the land. I loved the land and boy because they were at the very heart of me. I could not imagine myself without my love for Richard. I could not imagine myself with any other home than Wideacre, with any other name than Lacey.

I was blessed in my loves. For Richard, my cousin, was the sweetest of boys, as dear to me as a brother, one of those special children who draw in love as easily as green grass growing. People would turn to smile at him in the streets of Chichester, smile at his light-footed stride, his mop of black curls, his startlingly bright blue eyes, and the radiance of his smile. And anyone who heard him sing would have loved him for that alone. He had one of those innocent boyish voices which could soar and soar higher than you can imagine anyone can sing, and the clear purity of each note could make me shiver like a breeze sighing out of the sky from heaven itself. I loved so much to hear him sing that I would volunteer for hours of pianoforte practice and for the discomfort of constant learning new pieces so that I could play while he sang.

He loved duets, but neither threats nor blandishments could make me hold a tune. "Listen, Julia. Listen!" he would cry at me, singing a note as pure as spring water, but I could not copy it. Instead I would strum the accompaniment as well as I was able, and sometimes in the evening Mama would hum the lower part while Richard's voice soared and filled the whole of the tiny parlor and drifted out of the half-open window to rival the birdsong in the twilight woods.

And then, when Richard was singing and the house was still, I could feel them. The ghosts who were always around us, as palpable as the evening mist filtering through the trees from the River

Fenny. They were always near, though only I could feel them, and only at certain times. But I knew they were always near, those two—Richard's mama, Beatrice, and my papa, the squire, who were partners in the flowering and destruction of the Laceys in the short years when they made and wrecked Wideacre.

And when Richard was singing and my hands were stumbling but picking out the tune and Mama dropped her sewing unnoticed in her lap to listen to that high sweet tone, I knew that they were waiting. Waiting almost like the three of us. For something to happen.

For something to happen on Wideacre again.



I was older by a year; but Richard was always bigger than me. I was the daughter of the squire and the only surviving Lacey; but Richard was a boy and the natural master. We were raised as country children, but we were not allowed into the village. We were isolated in threadbare gentility, hidden in the overgrown woods of the Wideacre parkland like a pair of enchanted children in a fairy tale, waiting for the magic to set us free.

Richard was the leader. It was he who ordered the games and devised the rules; it was I who offended against them. Then Richard would be angry with me and set himself up as judge, jury and executioner, and I would go white-faced and tearful to my mama and complain that Richard had been mean to me, gaining us both a reliably evenhanded punishment. We were often in trouble with my mama, for we were a bad team of petty sinners. Richard was often naughty—and I could not resist confession.

I once earned us a scolding from Mama, who had spotted my stained pinafore and taxed me with stealing bottled fruit from the larder. Richard would have brazened it out, blue eyes persuasive and wide, but I confessed at once, not only to the theft of the bottle of fruit, but also to stealing a pot of jam days before, which had not even been missed.

Richard said nothing as we left Mama's parlor, our eyes on the carpet, uncomfortably guilty. Richard said nothing all morning. But later that afternoon we were playing by the river and he was paddling in midstream when he suddenly said, "Hush!" and urgently beckoned me in beside him. He said there was a kingfisher's nest, but when I tucked my skirts up and paddled in alongside him I could not see it.

"There!" he said, pointing to the bank. "There!" But I could see nothing. As I turned, he took both my hands in a hard grip and his face changed from smiles to his darkest scowl. He pulled me closer to him and held me tight so I could not escape and hissed, "There are water snakes in the river, Julia, and they are sliding out of their holes to come for you."

He needed to do no more. The ripples in the river were at once the bow waves from the broad heads of brown water snakes. The touch of a piece of weed against my ankle was its wet body coiling around my bare foot. The splash of a piece of driftwood in the flow was a venomous dark-eyed snake slithering in the river toward me. Not until I was screaming with terror, my cheeks wet with tears and my wrists red from trying to pull away, would the little tyrant let me go, so that I could scramble for the bank and fling myself out of the water in a frenzy of fear.

And then, as if my tears were some cure for his rage, he forgave me. He took my handkerchief out of my pocket and dried my eyes. He put his arm around me and talked to me in a tender voice and petted me, and called me sweet little names. And finally, irresistibly, he sang for me my favorite folk songs about shepherds and farming and the land and crops growing ripely and easily, and

forgot to cry, I forgot my tears, I forgot my terror. I even forgot that Richard had been bullying me at all. I nuzzled my head into his neck and let him stroke my hair with his muddy hand, and I sat on his lap and listened to all the songs he could remember until he was tired of singing.

When we splashed home in the golden sunlight of the summer evening and Mama exclaimed at my dress, my pinafore, my hair all wet and muddy, I told her that I had fallen in the river and bore her reproaches without one murmur. For that I had my reward. Richard came to my bedroom late in the night when Mama was sitting downstairs trying to work by the light of only two candles. He came with his hands full of sweet things begged or stolen from Mrs. Gough, the cook. And he sat beside me on my bed and gave me the best, the very best, of his haul.

"I love you when you are good, Julia," he said, holding a cherry to my lips so I turned up my face like a questing lapdog.

"No," I said sadly as I spat out the cherry stone into his warm little palm. "You love me when I am bad. For lying to Mama is not good, but if I had told her about you and the water snakes, she would have had you whipped."

And Richard laughed carelessly, seeming much older than me, not a year younger.

"Shhh!" I said suddenly. I had heard a floorboard in the uncarpeted parlor creak and the scrap of her chair.

Richard gathered the remains of our feast in his hands and slid like a ghost in his nightgown toward the bedroom door. Mama came slowly, slowly up each step as if she were very tired, and Richard melted up the stairs to his attic bedroom at the top of the house. I saw the ribbon of light from Mama's nighttime candle widen as she pushed open my bedroom door. I had my eyes shut tight, but I could never deceive her.

"Oh, Julia," she said lovingly. "You will be so tired tomorrow if you don't go to sleep at the proper time."

I sat up in bed and stretched my arms to her for a goodnight hug. She smelled faintly of lilies and clean linen. There were lines around her brown eyes and I could tell by the weariness on her face that she had been worrying about money again. But she smiled tenderly at me and the love in her face made her beautiful. There might be a darn on her collar, and her dark dress might be shiny with wear, but just the smell of Mama and the way she walked told you she was Quality born and bred. I sniffed appreciatively and hugged her tight.

"Were you writing to Uncle John?" I asked as she pulled up my bedclothes and tucked them securely around me.

"Yes," she said.

"Did you tell him that Richard wants singing lessons?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, smiling, but I saw her eyes were grave.

"Do you think he will send the money?" I asked, my concern for Richard making me press her.

"I doubt it very much," she said levelly. "There are more important bills to pay first, Julia. There are the Lacey creditors to repay. And we have to save for Richard's schooling. There is not a lot of money to spare."

Indeed there was not. Mrs. Gough and Stride worked for love, loyalty and a pittance paid monthly in arrears. The food on the table was game from the Havering estate or fish from the Fenny; the vegetables were grown in the kitchen garden, the fruit came from my Grandmother's Havering at Havering Hall. And wine was a rare luxury. My dresses were hand-me-downs from more distant Havering cousins, and Richard's shirt collars were turned and turned and turned again until there was neither shirt nor collar left. Mama would accept clothes and food from her mama, not

Grandma Havering. But she never applied to her for money. She was too proud. And anyway, the Havering estate, our nearest neighbor, was derelict through neglect itself. My mama's stepfather Lord Havering, was not an attentive master of the land.

"Go to sleep, Julia," Mama said softly, taking up her candle and going to the door.

"Good night," I said, and obediently shut my eyes. But I lay half wakeful, listening as the house settled for the night. I heard Mama's footsteps in her room and the creak of her bed as she sprang up quickly, for the floorboards were icy to bare feet; the nighttime noises of Stride bolting the back door, checking the front door—as if there were anything to steal!—and then his heavy tread up the back stairs to his bedroom at the top of the house.

Then the outside noises: a trailing creeper tapping at a window-pane, the distant call of a barn owl flying low across a dark field and away in the woods the abrupt bark of a dog fox. I imagined myself high as the owl, flying over the sleeping fields, seeing below me the huddle of cottages that is Acre village, with no lights showing, like a pirate ship in a restless sea, seeing the breast of the common behind the village with the sandy white tracks luminous in the darkness and a herd of deer silent as deep-sea fish, winding across it. Then, if I were an owl, I would fly to the west wall of the hall at Wideacre, which is the only one left standing. If I were an owl I would fly to the gable head of the house where the proud roof timbers once rested, where it is scorched and blackened by the fire that burned out the Laceys, that wrecked the house and the family. I would sit there and look with round wide eyes at the desolate fields and the woods growing wild and call, "Whoo! Whooo! Whooo!" for the waste and the folly and the loss of the land.

I knew, even then, that there is a balance of needs on a land like ours. The masters take so much, the men take so much, and they both keep the poor. The land has its rights too: even fields must have rest. My Aunt Beatrice was once the greatest farmer for miles around, but somehow, and no one would ever tell me quite how, it all went bad. When my Aunt Beatrice died and my papa died in the same night, the night of the fire, the Laceys were already ruined.

After that day nothing went right on Wideacre: not in the village, where they were as dirty as the gypsies and as poor, and not for the Laceys. Mama and I were the only survivors of the great Lacey family, and we went in darned gowns and had no carriage. Worse than that for Mama, we had no power. Oh, I don't mean in the way that many landowners have power. I don't think she would even have missed the power to order men as if they were all servants. But when things were wrong in the village, she had no power to intervene. No one could help Acre now it was in the hands of the Poor Law authorities. Not even Dr. Pearce, who came riding up the drive with his fat bay cob actually sweating at the neck and withers one hot day in summer when I was ten. He asked to see Mama urgently and came into the parlor on Stride's heels. I was seated by the open window, trying to get some air while I transposed a score Richard wanted to sing. Richard was idly fingering chords on the pianoforte. Mama was darning.

"Forgive this intrusion, Lady Lacey," Dr. Pearce said, his breath coming in pants from his hurried ride. "There are dreadful doings in Acre. They are taking the children."

"What?" Mama said. She cast one fearful glance toward the window, and I shrank too, afraid like a child—of being "taken," whatever that meant.

Dr. Pearce stripped off his riding gloves, and then, uselessly, put them back on again. "It's the parish overseer from Chichester," he said, half stammering in his haste. "He has an order from some manufacturing gentlemen in the north. They want able-bodied pauper children for apprenticeships."

Mama nodded.

Dr. Pearce pulled his glove off one hand. "It is a slavery!" he exclaimed. "Lady Lacey, they are

taking them without consent! Any child whose parents cannot support them can be taken. That is a
of Acre, for none of them are in regular work. They have a great carriage and they are going through
Acre and taking the pick of the healthiest, largest children. They had chosen three when I came here
to you."

I looked up at my mama's face. She had risen to stand by the empty hearth. Her face was so
white she looked sallow in the bright summer light. "Why did you come to me?" she asked, her
voice low.

Dr. Pearce pulled off his other glove and slapped the pair in his hand. "I thought you would
know what to do!" he said. "I thought you would stop them!"

Mama made a slow gesture with one stiff hand, which took in the bare parlor, the chipped table
the old pianoforte and the single rug before the fire. "I am a woman of neither means nor influence,"
she said slowly.

"You are the squire's widow!" Dr. Pearce exclaimed.

Mama grimaced. "And you are the parson," she said bitterly. "But neither of us is able to stop
what is happening down there."

"Your father? Lord Havering?" Dr. Pearce suggested.

Mama sat down in her chair again. "He says it is a village of outlaws," she said. "He would not lift
a hand if the whole village were to be moved. Besides, he believes in these new factories. He has
invested in them."

Dr. Pearce slumped down into a chair without invitation and rolled his gloves into a tight ball.
"We do nothing?" he asked helplessly.

My mama lifted her work to the light and started again to sew. "I can do nothing to stop this," she
said. "Is it being done legally?"

"Legally, yes!" Dr. Pearce said. "But morally?"

"Then I can do nothing," Mama said again. "Perhaps you could ensure that the parents have the
addresses of where the children are sent? So that they can bring them home when times improve."

"When times improve," Dr. Pearce repeated. He got to his feet.

Mama looked up at him. Her face was stony, but her eyes were filled with tears. "When times
improve," she said.

He took her hand and bowed over it as though she were a great lady receiving a courtier. "I'll go
back, then," he said. "The mood in the village is going to be very ugly. But I'll do what I can."

"Will they listen to you?" Mama asked.

Dr. Pearce pulled his gloves on, and for the first time that day he smiled his sweet helpless smile.
"I doubt it," he said wryly. "They have never done so before. But I will do what I can."

He was right in thinking there was little he could do. The quicker parents had hidden the
children as soon as the carriage had come into the village. In the end only six children were taken
taken away to work in the mills in the north. The roundsman said that they would serve a proper
apprenticeship and be able to send home good wages. They would have an education and a religious
upbringing. They would probably be home in a few years, a credit to their parents and to the
employers. Acre heard that out in silence, and let the children go.

My grandmother took us to Chichester cathedral in her carriage every Sunday for a month.
Mama did not want to go to Acre church. But then Dr. Pearce wrote her a note to say that there was
no cause for concern in Acre, we could come and go quite safely. It was as it had been before.

Only I noticed that it was not as it had been before.

The children who sometimes used to come and peep through our front gate came no more. The

girls who would bob a curtsy to Mama as we went down the aisle from church no longer looked at her or grinned impertinently at me. The whole village became as quiet as if every child had been stolen away by some malevolent Pied Piper. And every child learned to run like the wind up to the common and hide if they saw a strange coach come down the lane.

There were only six children lost, but it was not as it had been before.

It stayed hot all that summer. Hot, and quiet. Mama was ill with headaches and weariness; she trusted us to go no further than the common and the Wideacre estate and let us roam. Not for the first time I asked her where the money had gone, and why the hall had been burned, and why she, who was all powerful in my little world—could do nothing in the wider world of Acre and Chichester. And not for the first time her face took on that frozen look which both Richard and I had learned to dread, and she said softly, “Not now, darling. I will explain it all to you when you are old enough to understand it. But I will not tell you now.”

And with that Richard and I were content. We had only the casual curiosity of children. Having seen the hall in ruins and the land idle all our lives, we could hardly imagine a time when it had been whole any more than we could imagine a time when we were not there. Left to ourselves for that hot summer, we walked, and lazed, and dreamed, and played, and talked.

“I wish I were a Lacey,” Richard said to me as we lay sprawled in the bracken of the common, looking up at a blue sky rippled with white clouds.

“Why?” I asked, as idle as he. I had a grass stalk between my thumbs and I was blowing and blowing, producing the most painful shrieks from it.

“To be a Lacey of Wideacre,” he said. “To be known as the owner of Wideacre. To have been landowners for so many years that no one could challenge you . . .”

I dropped my grass stalk and rolled over beside him, my head butting companionably against his skinny chest. “When we are married, you can take my name,” I offered. “Then you’ll be a Lacey, you like.”

“Yes,” he said, pleased. “And we can rebuild the hall and make it all just as it was. And I shall be the squire as my mama wanted me to be.”

I nodded. “Let’s go to the hall on our way home,” I said.

I pulled Richard to his feet and we went in single file down the narrow sandy path that leads to the back of Wideacre woods from the common. There were gaps all around the smooth perimeter of the park wall, and rabbits, deer and foxes and the two of us could pass freely from common land to parkland, as if there were no ownership of land or game at all.

The poachers from Acre could go where they wished. Bellings, the man who used to be the gamekeeper, was as bad as any of them. But they avoided the ruined hall. It was a place still owned exclusively by the Laceys. I went there, and Richard, but apart from us the roofless half-wall echoed only to the sound of the Lacey ghosts.

“Let’s be Saracens,” said Richard with the abruptness of a child, and we both broke stick swords from the hazel bushes and held them before us. Richard made a quick gesture and we dropped our bellies in a well-practiced dive as we sighted the house. Wriggling like worms, we came through the overgrown kitchen garden—meadowsweet and gypsy’s lace as tall as a jungle and brambles every-where—and then Richard gave the order to charge and we thundered around the back of the stable block and tumbled into the yard with a triumphant shout.

The grass was thick between the cobbles, the pump rusted with its handle up, the water stagnated in the trough beneath the spout.

“Lacey squires,” Richard said, changing the game and offering me his arm with a courtly bow.

swept him a curtsy, holding my mud-stained muslin dress wide, and came up with a simper to take his arm. We processed, heads high, around to the front of the house, playacting the people we should have been.

“Damned good run with that fox!” Richard said.

“Damned good,” I echoed, as daring as he.

And then we faced the house and ceased the play to look up at it. The house stared blankly at us, its honey-yellow sandstone color streaked and black with the smoke of that long-ago fire. A buddleia plant, like a plume on a hat, grew from the crumbling wall near the top of the house. When the wooden floors and beams were burned, they crashed down, and the east wall, over the rose garden, collapsed. The façade of the house was still holding, but people came in secret and quarried away at it for the stone. It stared like a sightless giant over the nettles and rose-bay willow-herb in the rose garden and over the paddock, all dry and self-seeded. The great front door was gone, either burned out or stolen for the wood. And the terrace, where Mama had taught me to walk, was chipped; and the cracks between the stones sprouted groundsel and dandelions.

That was our legacy. The ruin, a ledgerful of debts and a handful of fields which we could neither rent nor farm. The Wideacre woods were still ours, but Uncle John would not sell the timber yet. We still owned a few farms. But the tenants were dilatory with the rent and Mama could not force them to pay. All we owned, all that we were certain of, was the smoke-smudged ruin and the ground beneath our feet where we stood in the weed-strewn garden.

And it gave me such joy!

From babyhood, I think, I loved this place. Whatever else might happen in my life, I knew I must wake every morning to see that high forehead of the downs and to smell the heather and the bracken on the common. When my feet were on Wideacre earth, I knew who I was. When my face was turned to that sweet salt-stained wind from the south, I feared nothing. And when I put my hand on one of our great gray-barked beech trees or put my cheek to the turf, I could feel the pulse of Wideacre, feel the great secret heart of the land beating in time with mine.

Then I looked at the sun dipping down toward the common and realized we were late for dinner again. We trotted side by side down the drive at the steady pace we had learned almost in infancy. Richard might be skinny as a poor boy and I might be tall “and narrer as a broom handle,” as Mrs. Gough would say disapprovingly, but we could run like poacher’s dogs; and we loped for home without needing to stop once to catch our breaths. With a wary eye on the parlor window, we ran around to the back of the house to the garden and tumbled in the back door to find the kitchen scorched from the heat of the oven and Mrs. Gough hot and cross.

“Late again, you two,” she said, her arms akimbo, floured to the elbows. “Mr. Stride is just about to announce dinner and here you two are looking like a pair of paupers.”

I sidled past her like a stable cat, anxious to get to my room and change before dinner. But Richard could always rely on his charm.

“Oh, Mrs. Gough, Mrs. Gough,” he said winningly, and slid his little arm halfway around her broad waist. “We forgot the time and I was so looking forward to your pheasant pie! Don’t tell me it will spoil if Stride waits just a few minutes until we are dressed for dinner.”

“Waits long enough for you to change so you can pretend to your mama you’ve been home all the while,” Mrs. Gough said as she bridled.

Richard gleamed at her. “Yes,” he said candidly. “You wouldn’t get me into trouble, would you Mrs. Gough?”

“Be off with you,” she said, giving him a little push toward the door, her smiles all for him. “Be o

with you, Master Richard, and try and get a comb through that mop of black curls of yours. You look like a scarecrow. I can keep dinner hot for ten minutes without it spoiling, so you be quick both of you."

We did not need telling twice and were up the stairs, washed and changed and down in the parlour seconds before Stride came to announce dinner.

Mrs. Gough was always easy on Richard. He could charm her with one upturned roguish smile. He was the boy of the household. It was natural for him to be indulged. But Richard was more than that: he was the only hope for the Laceys, the only hope for the Wideacre estate. He and I were joint heirs of the ruin, but it was on Richard that all the hopes rested. We were as poor as tenants, but Richard must be educated and prepared for the future he would have when his papa came home. And then, however long it took, Richard would rebuild the great house of Wideacre, take the great Wideacre estate back in hand, and there would be money in Acre and work for the men and the women, and it would be paradise regained for this little corner of Sussex. And Richard would marry me.

Mama was against our childish betrothal. She never told us why it could not be; we were just aware—in that simple way of children—that she did not like the idea, that she did not like to hear us speak of it. And in the simple way of children, we did not challenge her judgment or lie to her. We just kept our promise and our plans to ourselves.

She explained only once, when I was seven and we were still allowed to bathe together before the fire in the great wooden tub Stride carried up from the kitchen. Mama had left us to play and, when she came back, I was in my white nightdress with a white towel on my head and a curtain ring on my finger. Richard, naked with a small towel twisted on his head like a turban, was playing the bridegroom.

Mama had laughed when she had seen us—Richard's brown limbs gleaming in the firelight and my little face so grave. But when she had heard we were playing at weddings, she had frowned.

"There are good reasons why you two cannot marry," she had said solemnly. "In very old families, in very noble families such as the Laceys, there is too much marrying, cousin with cousin. You are too young to understand now, and I shall explain more when you are older. But there are some sorts of Lacey behavior which could do with diluting—with new blood. The Lacey passion for the land has not always been a happy one. Both Harry and Beatrice loved this land very dearly. But their judgment was not always sound. Your Uncle John and I have agreed that you two should never marry. Do not play at getting married, and do not think of it. It is better that you both marry outside the Lacey family. You will marry people who do not have Lacey blood, and Lacey weakness."

We had nodded at that, and ceased our game to please her. Richard climbed into her lap and demanded kisses and cuddles as he was dried. "And dry my special mark," he commanded, and Mama took the towel and softly patted the little circular scar at his throat. "And tell me the story about it," he said, snuggling into her lap. I wrapped the warm towel around my skinny little body and sat at my mama's feet and put my head against her knees. Richard's bare feet kicked me gently away, matching the rhythm of Mama's voice.

"It was when you were a little tiny one, newborn," she said softly, using the same words as always. "Your papa and I were with Dr. Pearce at the vicarage. It was during the hard times in Acre, and your papa and the vicar and I were trying to find some way to feed the people. You and your mama, Beatrice, was driving you in the sunshine. You were held by your nurse. Suddenly your mama saw that you had swallowed the bell off your little silver rattle!"

“Yes!” Richard said, his face intent.

~~“As fast as she could, she drove toward the village to find your papa! And your mama was a very good horsewoman. She certainly drove fast!”~~

“Yes,” Richard said. We both knew this story as well as my mama.

“She snatched you up and ran into the vicar’s parlor. And there, on the desk, your papa took a sharp knife and cut open your little throat, and took my crochet hook and pulled out the bell so that you could breathe!”

Richard and I sighed with satisfaction at the end of the story. But my mama was not looking at us. She was looking over Richard’s mop of damp curls into the red embers of the fire as if she could see the vicar’s parlor in the red caverns of the logs, and the man with steady hands who had the courage to cut open a baby’s throat to save his life. “It was the most wonderful thing I had ever seen,” she said. “Even more of a miracle than birth—in a way.”

“And did you feed the poor?” I asked.

The closed look came over her face at once, and I could have bitten off my tongue in vexation if I had not having interrupted her when she was, so rarely, telling us of how things had been.

“No,” she said slowly. “Not very well. It was a hard year for Acre that year.”

“And was that the year of the riot and the fire?” I pressed her. “Because they were poor?”

“Yes,” she said shortly. “But that was all long ago, and besides, you two should be getting ready for bed.”

“I don’t care about the bad past,” Richard said, butting his head into her shoulder. “Will you tell me about the day I was born?”

“In bed I will,” Mama said firmly, and pulled his nightgown over his head. “But I’ll put Julia in bed first.”

I smiled at her. I loved Richard so well I did not even have to make an effort to put him first. “I’ll wait,” I said.

My love for him served us all well. It kept the peace in that cramped little household. I watched his love for my mama, and hers for him, and I never worried if she had a preference. Her love warmed us both equally; she could have had ten children and we would all have felt equally precious. I don’t think I was envious for any moment in our childhood up till the time when he was eleven and started lessons with Dr. Pearce in his well-stocked library. I had asked Mama if I could go too, and when she said there was not enough money to teach us both, I remember that I scowled.

“It is not possible, Julia,” she said. “I know how much you love learning, and indeed, my dear, you are so bright and clever that I wish I had learned Latin so that I could have helped you to teach yourself. But it is just an amusement for ladies. For gentlemen, for Richard, it is essential.”

“He doesn’t even want an education, Mama! All he wants is a music master and to be taught how to sing!” I started, but the sight of her frown silenced me.

“All the more credit to him for being prepared to go,” she said gently. “And if he is prepared to go over his work with you in the evening, you may well learn a lot that way. But you must not tease him to teach you, Julia. John is sending money from his salary for Richard’s education, not for yours.”

In the event I did very well. Richard was generous with his homework and shared it with me. When he came home with his books—old primers once used by Dr. Pearce—he let me stand at his elbow in respectful silence while he tried to puzzle out the verbs and declensions.

“What a bother it is,” he would say impatiently and push the book toward me. “Here, Julia, see if you can make head or tail of this. I have to translate it somehow and I cannot make out what they’re saying.”

Trembling with excitement, I would take the book and turn to the back for the translated words and scribble them down in any order.

“Here, let me see,” Richard would say, repossessing his goods with brutal suddenness. “I think I know what to do now.” And then he would complete the sentence in triumph and we would beam at each other with mutual congratulation.

Mama was glad to see us content, to see the different treatment of us so well resolved. She tried very hard to treat us fairly, to treat us alike. But she could not help favoring Richard, because he needed so much more. He took the best cuts of meat and the largest helpings, because he was growing so fast and was always hungry. He had new clothes; Mama could always cut down and turn her gowns for me, but she could not tailor jackets, so Richard’s clothes were made new. He had new boots more often as he grew quicker, and then he had proper schooling. If I had loved him any less, if I had not tried to be as good as a sister to him, I think I would have envied him. But I only ever begrudged him one thing for more than a moment, the only thing he ever had which I desired which I could not help desiring: Scheherazade.

She was Richard’s horse—the horse we had both been promised off and on since we were children by my Grandpapa Havering, that feckless charming rogue who breezed into the country half a dozen times a year on a repairing lease from London. On one of his visits, in June, when I was twelve and Richard eleven, he finally got around to honoring his promise. I first learned of it when he sent a message to my mama. She opened it in the parlor while I sat at her feet, my head leaning against her knees, idly gazing out of the window at the tossing trees which crowd so close around our little house, waiting for Richard to come home from his lessons. Mama broke the seal of the note and then paused.

“What is that singing?” she asked Stride.

He cleared his throat, embarrassed. “It’s Master Richard,” he said. “He came in by the kitchen door, and Mrs. Gough stopped him and asked him for a song. She loves to hear him sing.”

Mama nodded and listened in silence. The clear pure arc of sound swept unstoppably through the house. Richard was singing an Italian song—one he had despaired of teaching me to play aright—but I had guessed at an English version of the words for him, and he was singing them. His high sweet voice had a more tremulous tone than usual:

“If there is ever a favorite—then let it be me,” came the chorus. And then more quietly, more entreatingly to the cruel gods who are never just to needy mortals: “If there is ever a favorite—oh, let it be me!”

Stride, Mama and I were as still as statues until the last echo of the last note had died, then Stride recollected the dinner table not yet laid and left the room, closing the door behind him.

“It is a great gift,” Mama said. “Richard is fortunate.”

“Does Uncle John realize how good Richard is?” I asked. “If he really understood, surely he would find the money from somewhere for Richard to have a music master?”

Mama shook her head and spread out the note on her knee. “Music is a luxury we cannot afford my darling. Richard has to enter the university and obtain the degree he will need to make his way in the world. That must come before the polishing of an amateur gift.”

“If he could give concerts, he could earn enough money so that Uncle John could come home,” I said stoutly.

Mama smiled. “If everyone was as readily pleased as you and I and Mrs. Gough, we would be wealthy in no time,” she said. “But Richard would need a long training before he could give a concert. And neither his papa nor I would wish it. Singing in the parlor is one thing, Julia, but not

gentleman would ever go on a stage.”

I paused. I wanted to pursue the matter further. “He could sing in church,” I suggested. “He could train with a choir.”

My mama dropped her sewing in her lap, put her hand down to my head and turned my cheek so that I looked up and met her eyes. “Listen, Julia,” she said earnestly, “I love him dearly and so do you. But we should not let our affections blind us to nature. Richard has a lovely voice, but he plays at music as if it were a toy. He is skilled in drawing, but he takes it up and puts it down as a hobby. He is like his uncle, your own papa, who had many fine talents but lacked that greatest gift—concentration. Richard would never work and struggle and strive in the way that a great musician has to do. Richard likes things to be easy for him. Of the two of you, it is you who works hardest at music—you practice longer hours than he does so that you can accompany him. If Richard had the dedication of a true musician, he would sing all the time—not when it suits him.”

I scanned her face, considering what she had said, and hearing also an old judgment made years ago on my papa, the man who had liked to play at farming while his sister ran the land.

Then the door opened and Richard came in, his eyes bright blue and his cheeks rosy with the praise he had received in the kitchen. “Did you hear me singing even in here?” he asked. “Stride said you did. Yet the kitchen door and the baize door were tight shut. Fancy!”

“Yes, we did,” Mama said, and she smiled kindly at his bright face. “It was lovely singing by Richard. I should like to hear it again after dinner. But now go and wash your hands, my darling, while I read this note from Julia’s grandpapa.”

We went from the room together, and not until dinner did she tell us what the note said, and that it was the last thing we expected.

“I have had a note from Havering,” she said while Stride served the thin soup. “Lord Havering writes that he has a horse which might suit the two of you.”

Richard’s head jerked up from his plate, his eyes bright on her face. She smiled at him. “I said we would all go over tomorrow so that you could try its paces,” she said. “You may ride in your ordinary boots, Richard.”

“Oh, yes,” said Richard. “Oh, yes.”

“But we have no habit for you, Julia,” Mama said, turning to me. “I dare say you would have liked to learn, but I cannot see how to contrive it.”

“It is all right, Mama,” I said, my voice strained. “It doesn’t matter. Richard wants to ride so much more than I do. He can learn now, and perhaps I will learn later.”

I had a warm smile from my mama for that little piece of generosity, but Richard was too excited to notice it.

“Is it a mare or a gelding, Aunt Celia?” he asked. “Did Lord Havering say how old it is?”

“No.” My mother laughed. “I know no more than I have told you. You will have to wait until tomorrow. But I do know that my step-papa is a great judge of horses. I think you may be certain that it is a good animal.”

“Yes.” Richard nodded. “I’ll wager it’s a mare.”

“Perhaps,” Mama said, and nodded to Stride to clear the dishes. Then she turned to me and asked me what I had been doing in the afternoon while she had been writing her letters.

While I spoke, I could see Richard fidgeting like a cur with fleas, and all through dinner he could scarcely sit still. I was not at all surprised when he drew me aside while Mama went to take tea in the parlor and said, “Julia, I cannot wait until tomorrow. I have to go and see the horse now. Come with me! We can be back by suppertime.”

“Mama said . . .” I started.

“Mama said . . .” he echoed cruelly. “I am going; are you going to come too? Or stay at home?”

I went. It was a pattern I could not break, like a phrase of music which you hum even when you do not know you are singing. When Richard called to me, I went. I always went.

“We should tell Mama,” I said, hanging back. “She may ask for me.”

“Tell her what you like,” Richard said carelessly, shrugging on his jacket and heading for the door to the kitchen.

“Wait for me!” I said, but the door was already swinging and I only paused to catch up a shawl and run after him.

Stride was sitting at the kitchen table. He looked at Richard without approval. “Where do you think you’re going, Master Richard?” he asked. The remains of his dinner were before him, a half pint of beer beside the plate. Mrs. Gough had Mama’s tea tray laid and a kettle on the boil.

“We are taking the air,” Richard said grandly. “There is no need to open the door for us,” and he swept toward the door with as good an imitation of Grandpapa Havering’s arrogance as an eleven-year-old boy could manage.

I followed in his wake and peeped a look at Stride as I went. He shook his head reprovably at me, but he said nothing.

Outside, I forgot I had ever hesitated. The magic of the land caught me. I could feel it take me away; anyone watching my face could have seen it take me.

My mama once commissioned an artist—a poor traveling painter—to make a sketch of us when I was just seven and Richard was six years old. She wanted a parlor picture: the two of us seated on a blue velvet sofa in the drawing room of the Dower House, the only piece of respectable furniture in the only properly furnished room. I can imagine the picture she saw in her mind. The two little children wide-eyed and formal, seated side by side. And even at the age of seven, as a little girl, I should have liked to have pleased my mama by posing for a picture like that.

But the painter was a man with seeing eyes, and before he made his sketch, he asked Richard and me to show him a little of the estate. He walked with us in the woods of Wideacre and he saw how we could move as silently as deer under the trees so that the birds stayed in the branches even when we passed directly beneath them. And he felt that we trod the land as a living thing. And he sensed that Richard and the land and I belonged together in some unbreakable triangle of need and love and longing.

So he made his picture in the woods of Wideacre, and Mama had it framed and hung on the chimney breast of the Dower House drawing room. It showed me, just a little girl in a sprigged muslin dress tied with a blue sash, with my hat off and my hair tumbling down, seated beneath one of the great flowering chestnut trees of Wideacre. It was May and the tree was in bloom with thick candles of red flowers, and all around me were drifts of petals as scarlet as blood; the sunlight on my light brown hair turned it golden. My cousin Richard was standing behind me, looking down on me as I posed like a little hero, half an eye on the effect he was creating. But my eyes were hazy gray and I was looking out of the picture. Away, past the painter, out of the frame of the picture, out of the little world of childhood, away from the safety of our little home.

Richard stood like a small cavalier for the picture, because he had the knack of being what people desired. Mama wanted a formal picture, and there Richard was, behind me, one little fist on his hip, his shoulders squared. Unlike him, I looked fey and wild and dreamy in the picture, because I was seated under a blood-red chestnut tree. Wideacre brought out the wildness in me and I could not help myself.

I heard a humming in my head and I longed to be running free on the land. When I had to stay indoors with my sampler or read aloud to my mama, my book or my work would fall into my lap and I would rest my head against the cold glass of the window and look away. I looked away from my home, away from the little house, away from the penny-pinching shabby gentility and the worry from the false appearances and the cut-down gowns. I looked away to Wideacre. And I wished that I could own and run the land.

It distressed my mama. She saw it in me early on, and she tried with her love and her persevering gentle discipline to make me into a child in her own image. A child who could sit still, who could stand in clean clothes, who could sit in a small room without fretting for the smell of the South Down wind in her face.

She failed. When the ground was covered with the thin white of a hoarfrost, or when the spring winds were blowing, I could not stay indoors, I had to go. But the fine lines of worry around my mama's eyes made me pause. "I know you long to be out, Julia," she would say to me gently. "But young ladies cannot always do exactly as they wish. There is your sampler, which you have not touched this week, and some darning to be done as well. You may have a little walk this afternoon."

"It is not a walk that I want, Mama," I would reply, forced into words by the sound of birdsong so temptingly close in the woods outside the closed window. "I need to be out there, out on the land. The spring is here and I have hardly seen it this year. I have only been in the garden and the woods. But there is the common, and the downs. I have not seen the bracken coming out, nor the spring flowers on the downs." Then I would stop, for I saw her looking at me oddly as if she could not understand me, looking at me sadly as if my love for my home somehow distressed her.

"I know," she would say gently and put her hand on my skinny shoulder. "I know that you love the land. But it is a wasted love, Julia. You would do better to love God and love those that love you. Loving land brings little pleasure and can bring much pain."

I would nod, and try to look obedient. I would lower my eyes so that she should not be hurt by my immediate contradiction of her good sense. I could no more help loving the land than I could help loving my cousin Richard. I could never be free of my love for them. I would never want to be free of my love for them.

But I knew that my mama was right about wasted love! When I saw the cornfields of Wideacre self-seeded and the meadowlands grown high since there was no stock to graze them and no haymaking, I knew then that a love for the land without money and good sense behind it was worthless love indeed. And when Richard tormented me to tears and back again, I felt that my love for him was wasted too, for it brought me more pain than pleasure.

But there was no other land but Wideacre.

And there was no one else but Richard.

So when Richard called me, I went. Even when I knew I should not. And he was so certain of this, so certain of my love for him, that he could trot down the drive without even troubling to look back, certain that he would hear my boots pattering along behind him.

It was a long way to Havering Hall, even going cross-country and splashing through the Fenny to the boundary of the two estates. When we arrived at the stables, breathless and sweating from our run, Lord Havering was looking over his horses before going in to his supper.

"Good Lord," he said in his rich voice, warm as port, thick as cigar smoke. "Look what the wind has blown our way, Dench."

The Havering chief groom looked over the half-door of the loose box and smiled to see us. "Come to see the new mare?" he asked Richard in his soft, deep Sussex drawl.

“Yes, if I may,” Richard said, beaming. You would have thought him a boy utterly incapable of disobedience. “Mama told me of her at dinner, Lord Havering, and I am ashamed to say I could not wait until tomorrow.”

My grandpapa chuckled indulgently at his favorite, Richard. “Bring her out,” he said to Dench and bent down to me. “And you? Little Miss Julia? Came in Richard’s shadow as usual, did you?”

I blushed and said nothing. I lacked Richard’s ease with adults. I wanted to explain that I too had come because I wanted to see the horse. I had wanted the hard steady run from one side of the estate to the other. And I wanted to tell my grandpapa that Richard was not to be blamed for my coming. But not one of these things did I say. I just shuffled my feet and looked silly, and kept my eyes down.

Dench brought the mare clattering on the cobbles out of her stable at the end of the row. She was a lovely animal, a rich russet chestnut with a mane and tail of a darker shade of unpolished copper. She had a white blaze down her nose and deep brown eyes. Dench had a firm hand on her head collar, but she stood gently beside him and looked at us.

Her eyes, as warm as melted chocolate, seemed to invite me to her side and, without waiting for Richard to approach her, I went straight past my grandfather, straight past Richard, and put my hand up to her.

She whickered softly as I came close and bent her head to nuzzle at my pocket. I had nothing for her, but Dench slipped me a handful of oats out of his own capacious breeches. Her lips on my flattened hand were discriminating, gentle, as if she were taking care not to nip my thin fingers. She reached up a shy hand and rubbed her behind the ears, where mares nuzzle their foals. She blew out of her nostrils at my touch and sniffed at the front of my dress. Without thinking what I was doing, I dropped my face down and sniffed rapturously at her damp oat-smelling breath, and blew gently back. It was love at first sight for me.

“Make haste, Richard, or you’ll lose your horse,” said Grandpapa, who had been watching me with appreciation. “Your cousin is there before you. You seem to have the Lacey magic with horses, m’dear,” he said genially. “Your Aunt Beatrice could charm a horse out of the field, and your papa was a grand rider too. And your grandpapa and I had some rides together which I still have nightmares about! Laceys have always been horse-mad.”

I stepped back and let Richard get to his horse. “What’s she called?” I asked, finding my voice for the first time since I was once.

“Scheherazade,” my grandpapa said in tones of deep disgust. “I call her Sally.”

“Scheherazade,” I whispered to myself. “A princess from the Arabian Nights.”

“She may have a touch of Arab in her,” my grandpapa said, mishearing my awed murmur. “Good hunting stock, though. I chose her myself from poor old Tiley’s sale. His daughter used to ride her so she’s used to novices.” And then, as the thought struck him, he said, “She’s used to a lady’s saddle, too! No reason why I should not teach you to ride at the same time as Richard, m’dear.”

“Julia doesn’t have a habit,” Richard said firmly. He was trying to offer Scheherazade a couple of green apples he had picked from the Wideacre orchard, holding them outstretched at the full length of his arm. Not close to the horse at all. “Julia’s mama would not let her ride without a habit.”

“No,” said my grandpapa. “Pity. Still, I expect we can find one for you if you’d like to try, missy.” Richard shot me a look. Just one look.

“No,” I said regretfully. “No, thank you, Grandpapa.”

I said nothing more. I had no quick excuse or explanation. But my grandpapa did not question my refusal. He raised a disdainful eyebrow at my rejection of his offer and went toward Richard.

and Richard's lovely horse, and held her head while Dench gave Richard a leg up onto her back.

"How's that?" Grandpapa shouted, and led Richard around the stable yard. Richard clung tight to the copper mane as Scheherazade minced over the cobbles.

"Wonderful!" Richard said, but his face was white.

We would have stayed for Richard's first lesson, but my grandpapa caught sight of the stable clock on Richard's second circuit of the yard.

"You mama will be after me," he said ruefully. "Dench, get out the little trap and take these two home. They shouldn't have come without permission in the first place. If they're out after dark, Cel will have me skinned alive."

Dench pulled Richard down without ceremony and took Scheherazade back to the stable. She trailed along behind, unwilling to see her go, and wanting to see her stable and smell the straw and the sweet grassy scent of hay.

"When will you learn then, Miss Julia?" Dench asked me, his brown eyes bright with curiosity. He had seen my face when she fed from my hand and how she had dipped her head for my caress.

"When Richard has learned," I said certainly. I knew Richard would claim the love of Scheherazade as his own, and I longed to see him ride her. But I knew also that if I did not challenge him and awaited my turn, there would be no one in the world more generous and thoughtful than Richard. We always shared our playthings, and if I was quick to return them and always gave Richard first turn, then we never quarreled. He would give me unending rides on Scheherazade providing we both knew that she was his horse.

Dench nodded and flung long reins and a bridle over the carriage horse in the stall next door. "Master Richard first, eh?" he said, shooting a look at me. "And you don't mind, Miss Julia?"

"Oh, no!" I said, and the smile I gave him was as clear as my thoughts. "I want to see Richard ride. I have been looking forward to it for months."

Dench said something under his breath, perhaps to the horse, and then led her out of the stable and backed her into the shafts of the trap in the carriage house. Richard and I sat either side of him on the little bench seat and my grandpapa waved his cigar in farewell.

"See you tomorrow," he said jovially. "And mind you make your apologies to your mama!"

We did not have to confess. Mama had guessed at once where we had gone and was sitting down to her supper in solitary splendor when the trap came trotting up to the garden gate in the dusk. Before her was a plate of toast and a little jar of potted meat, and she did not look up from buttering her toast when we crept into the dining room. "Your supper is in the kitchen," she said, her voice cool. "Children who run off like stable lads should eat in the kitchen."

There was nothing we could say. I curtsied low—a placatory gesture—and backed out of the dining room in silence. But Richard stepped forward and laid a single red rose, openly thieved from the Havering garden, beside her plate.

Her face softened at once. "Oh, Richard!" she said lovingly. "You are so naughty! Now go and eat your suppers and have your baths and go to bed or there will be no riding for you tomorrow, new horse or not!"

And then I let out a sigh of relief for I knew we were forgiven. I could sleep sound in my bed that night, since the two people I loved most dearly in the whole of the unsafe uncertain world were under the same roof as I, and neither of them was angry with me.

"You shall have a riding habit," Mama said softly to me when she kissed me good night. "I shall find an old gown of my sisters' at Havering Hall. Or I shall make you a new one."

"You shall learn to ride," Richard promised me on the stairs as we went up to bed, our candles

flames bobbing in the drafts which came up the stairwell and through the gaps in the ba
floorboards. ~~“As soon as I have learned, I shall teach you, dear little Julia.”~~

“Oh, thank you,” I said, and turned my face to him for his goodnight kiss. For once, instead of
token buss on the cheek, he kissed me tenderly on the lips.

“Good Julia,” he said sweetly, and I knew my refusal of lessons from my grandpapa had been
seen and was being rewarded. Plentifully rewarded; for I would rather have had Richard’s love than
anything else in the world.



Richard's long-awaited first riding lesson was tedious for my grandfather, humiliating for Richard and two long hours of agony for me. At first I could not understand what was wrong.

When Richard went to mount the horse in the stable yard in the warm end-of-summer sunlight, I saw that his face was so white that the freckles on his nose were as startling as spots in an illness. His eyes were brilliant blue with a sheen on them like polished crystal. I thought he was brittle with excitement at the prospect of his first proper ride on a horse of his own.

Scheherazade knew better. She would not stand still when he put his foot to the stirrup; she wheeled in a nervous circle, her hooves sliding on the cobbles. She pulled at the bit while Dench was holding the reins, trying to steady her. She threw up her head and snorted. Richard, one foot up in the stirrup, one foot on the ground, hopped around trying to get up.

Grandpapa gave an unsympathetic "Tsk!" under his breath and called to Dench, "Throw Master Richard up!"

Dench clapped two dirty hands under Richard's hopping leg and threw him up as if Richard were a sack of meal.

My grandpapa was mounted on his hunter, a beautiful dappled gray gelding which stood rock steady, like a statue of a horse in pale marble against the background of the green paddock and the rich whispering trees of the Havering-Wideacre woods.

"Remember her mouth is soft," Grandpapa told Richard. "Think of the reins like silk ribbon. You must not pull too hard or you will break them. Use them to remind her what you want, but don't pull. I said, 'Don't pull!'" he snapped as Scheherazade sidestepped nervously on the cobblestones and Richard jabbed at her mouth.

Dench put a hand out and held her above the bit without a word of prompting. I watched uncritically. I had never seen a novice rider before and I thought Richard looked as grand as a Sussex huntsman, as gallant as one of Arthur's knights. I watched him with eyes glowing with adoration. Richard on his own could do no ill in my eyes; Richard on Scheherazade was a demigod.

"Let's walk out into the paddock," said my grandpapa. There was an edge to his voice.

Dench led Richard out behind Grandpapa, his steady hand on the reins. He was talking to Scheherazade as they went past me, and I sensed that Scheherazade was anxious and felt uneasy. Richard on her back felt insecure. His touch on the reins fidgeted her.

I waited until they were some paces ahead of me before following. I did not want Scheherazade unsettled by footsteps behind her. It was Richard's first riding lesson and I wanted everything to be perfect for him.

But it was not. I sat on the ramshackle fence and watched my grandpapa riding his hunter around at a walk and at a trot in a steady assured loop and circle, and then calling to Richard to follow him.

But Scheherazade would not go. When Dench released her she threw up her head as if Richard's hands were heavy on the reins. When he squeezed her with his legs, she sidled, uneasy. When he touched, just touched, her flank with his whip, she backed infuriatingly, while Richard's pallor turned to a scarlet flush with his rising temper. But she would not do as she was bid.

My grandpapa reined in his hunter and called instructions to Richard. “Be gentle with her! Gentle hands! Don’t touch her mouth! Squeeze with your legs, but don’t pull her back! No! No! Not like that! Relax your hands, Richard! Sit down deeper in the saddle! Be more certain with her! Tell her what you want! Oh, hell and damnation!”

He jumped down from his hunter then and strode toward Richard and Scheherazade, tugging his own horse behind him. He tossed his own reins to Dench, who stood stoically, his face showing nothing. Grandpapa pulled Richard down from Scheherazade like an angry landowner taking a village child out of an apple tree, and, spry as a young man, swung himself into the saddle.

“Now, you listen here, Sally-me-girl,” he said, his voice suddenly tender and warm again. “I won’t have this.” And Scheherazade’s ears, which had been pointy and laid back, making her head a bony and ugly, suddenly swiveled around to face front again and her eyes glowed brown and stopped showing white rims.

“Now, Richard,” said Grandpapa, keeping his voice even. “Like I told you in the yard, if you pull on the reins, you mean ‘stop’ or ‘back.’” He lifted his hands a fraction and Scheherazade moved forward. He pulled his hands a shade back toward his body, and she stopped as soon as she felt the tension on the reins. He drew the reins toward him again and she placed one hoof behind the other as pretty as a dancer, and backed for three or four steps.

“If you squeeze her with your legs, that means ‘forward,’” Grandpapa said. He dropped his hands and invisibly tensed his muscles. At once Scheherazade flowed forward in a smooth elegant gait. She was as lovely as a fountain in sunlight. She rippled over the ground in a wave of copper. I clasped my hands under my chin and watched her. I ached with love for her. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life.

“But if you tell her to stop and go at once, then you will muddle her,” Grandpapa said, letting her walk the circle while he spoke. “She feels you telling her to stop, and she feels you telling her to go. That upsets her. You should always be clear with animals—with people too!” he said with a wry grin, taking his attention from her for a fraction of a moment. “She’s got a lovely pace,” he said. “She’s a sweet goer. But she needs gentleness. Sit down deep in the saddle so that she can feel you there. And tell her clearly what you want. She’ll do anything in the world for you if you treat her well.”

He brought Scheherazade up to a mincing halt beside Richard and swung himself down from the saddle. “Up you go, lad,” he said gently. “She knows her business. But you have to learn yours.”

He helped Richard into the saddle, and Richard got one foot into the stirrup, but he could not find the stirrup on the far side. He dug for it with his toe, trying to get his foot into the metal loop. Scheherazade at once sidestepped and bumped my grandpapa, who swore.

“Calm down!” he said to horse and rider. “You two will have to learn to calm down together. You are like a pair of violin strings wound too tight. What the hell’s the matter with your stirrups, Richard?”

“Nothing, sir,” Richard said; his voice was thin. It was the first thing I had heard him say since he had been mounted, and with a shock I realized his voice was strained and he sounded afraid. “I could not find it at first,” he said, “but I have it now.”

“Well, learn to find it without digging your toe into her,” Grandpapa said unsympathetically. “Don’t bother the animal. She needs to be gentled. Not kicked about.” He twitched the reins out of Dench’s hands and a look passed between them which I was too far away to read. Dench turned and came toward me, his face as expressive as a lump of chalk.

“Now,” said Grandpapa, back in his own saddle. “Ride toward me.”

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