



Her
Fatal
Touch

Marina Maxwell

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by

Marina Maxwell

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Cover image: *Lola Montes*, Friedrich Durck, c. 1845
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, Australia.

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction and should not be read as an interpretation of history. While the majority of the events related herein did happen and most of the characters really existed, Lola Montez (Eliza Gilbert) was notorious for fabricating the facts of her own life to suit herself. Many writers have embellished them further and I have continued with the tradition while, I trust, remaining true to her spirit. I fully acknowledge that I could not have written this work without the assistance of the extensive historical research and publications of many others who have gone before me and I thank them all, in particular those mentioned in the Authors Notes at the conclusion.

Excerpt from
Reminiscences in the Life of a Peripatetic Newsmen
(Anonymous, 1906, New York, private collection)

A blizzard of the most intense ferocity had been sweeping the East River on that morning in January, 1861 and our miserable company was already chilled to the marrow when we departed from Manhattan and embarked on the ferry to Brooklyn. Only the loyal and true were in attendance: less than a dozen souls all told.

I will admit to a certain relief that none of my fellow scribblers had as yet heard of the lady's demise and it was providential that I had received a private communication from a friend who was aware of my association with the deceased. Thus it was that our group gained little attention from the public, appearing much as any other mourners headed for Green-wood, pallid of countenance and swathed in black.

Some of my companions were previously known to me, such as the Buchanan couple and the fiery Democrat orator and preacher, the Reverend Francis Hawks, but I pondered over two young women with the badge of their profession all too clear in their sultry deportment and boldness of eye.

As we huddled for warmth around the brazier in the vessel's saloon, my contemplation caught the notice of the Reverend and he fixed me with a glare over the pages of a church tract. 'I trust that is not amusement I detect in your visage, Mr. D---?'

'Not at all, Reverend,' I hastened to reply, 'I am dwelling on the irony that her final journey is taking place in a raging snowstorm. She once told me she hated snow.'

'Understandable, when one's childhood is spent in sunnier climes.'

'She said snow always brought her bad luck.'

The Reverend was unmoved. 'I hardly think one could call dying in the Lord's grace bad luck, Mr. D---. And death knows no season. Just be grateful that she found salvation in time, and rejoice.'

I ventured a further observation. 'There aren't many here.'

'No, and it is exactly as she would have preferred,' he said, dismissing me in a curt fashion as he returned to his religious reading.

Thereupon, quite without warning, I was overwhelmed with intense waves of nostalgia for a distant time and place. I saw myself again a young man - enthusiastic and idealistic - and when all about me there were others similarly fired with ambition for change; when we all had belief in our dreams.

There I was, fighting my way through a crowd of other young men outside a hotel in W-----, each of us hoping to catch just one glimpse of the woman who single-handedly had dared to defy the notion that one country had the right of tyranny over another; that extraordinary woman who was unafraid to speak up for truth and freedom.

I recall holding my breath and being quite overcome as she swept out onto the balcony, her raven hair flowing across her shoulders, every curve of femininity emphasized in her velvet gown. Her laughter was sheer enchantment as she waved to us and flashed those glorious eyes of brilliant blue. As she proceeded to scatter bunches of violets across the crowd, each man of us scrambled one over the other to retrieve just a single petal. It was what took place on that very day that became the catalyst for my own change in fortune, and her actions and words played their part in encouraging me to seek liberty and a new life in America.

By the time the ferry reached the other shore, the light of these memories had faded and my mind returned to the present circumstance and awareness that ideals and dreams, alas, seem doomed for us all. I suffered the most bereft feelings.

The blizzard had eased somewhat by the time we completed the three mile carriage ride to Green-wood Cemetery -on that day, a bleak, frozen scene of white, marble and stark pines. I noticed that at least the plot chosen would have a pleasant aspect in summer, being on a slope with a view

of a lake.

As the plain pine box was lowered into the vacant pit, snowflakes fell over its surface and obscured its copper nameplate, while the Reverend's sonorous voice battled the wind with those timeless words:

'Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear sister here departed, we therefore commit her body to the ground ...'

I continued to be absorbed in my own melancholic musings. There were more paradoxes here than snow. Where were the kings or princes paying their last respects? The lords and prime ministers; the famous writers and musicians? Not one of the lovers, and not even one family member. But at least I was thankful there were none of her critics or detractors either.

As the good Reverend closed his prayer book, he stood with his bare head bowed for some minutes in silence while we freezing mourners shifted from foot to foot, willing him to hurry. At last he spoke again.

'Before we depart, I should like to share a few thoughts with you,' he said. 'In the course of my long years as a Christian minister, I do not think I ever met anyone with more regrets or bitter self-reproach than Eliza Gilbert. Many have said that she deliberately chose a life of infamy and public dishonor, and unfortunately, as history repeatedly buries the good with an individual and remembers only the evil, then her legacy to posterity will be such.

'However, each of you who has ventured here today will remember another woman. I ask that you never forget her. Never forget her generosity; her fight against all manner of injustices, and her unfailing courage. May she have at last found the peace she deserves.' He uttered a tremulous sigh. 'Farewell Eliza. Sleep well in the arms of the Lord.'

I was astonished to see that even this famously impassive individual fought against tears.

Knowing nothing of the woman being interred, the gravedigger was unmoved and impatient to cover the box. We left him to his work and returned to the waiting carriages where I gave pause and turned my face to the bitter skies.

I spoke inwardly to Eliza's spirit, now free of the shackles of this world. 'The snow today was unfortunate,' I told her, 'but as soon as spring breaks through, I promise I will bring you violets.'

In remembrance of this remarkable woman, my spring pilgrimage with violets has continued all the years since, until my own encroaching decrepitude now precludes me from doing so.

PART I

‘She has the evil eye and is sure to bring bad luck to any man who links his destiny with hers.’
(Attributed to Alexandre Dumas, père)

1.

The scattering of marigold petals bobbed gently and spiraled outwards across the oily brown surface of the Sacred River, seemingly waiting for some impetus or a special tide to carry them onwards.

Parvati removed the basket of ashes she had carried on her head and began to cast handfuls of its contents over the ring of flowers, her action accompanied by a half-wailed, half-whispered, incantation. As if in response to her prayers, an eddy formed and the flowers with their coating of ash swirled faster, and drifted downstream.

From her crouched position at the edge of the ghats the child watched her ayah’s actions with fascination. It was rare for her to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time. ‘Eliza - you’re the most damnably fidgety child on earth!’ was the kind of retort she usually had from Mama, which inevitably would be followed seconds later by a stinging slap, and the child would retaliate by pulling an agonized face, such as one she had seen carved on a temple wall, and emit a scream like a wounded peacock. Once, she had even stamped on her mother’s petite satin-shod foot. On that occasion, Mama was goaded to such fury that she had pulled her daughter’s hair so hard that a big chunk of it came out.

Whenever she had a fight with Mama, Eliza would always run away to Parvati, who neither slapped nor scolded, and was as calm and reassuring as the great river itself as it flowed past the outskirts of the Dinapore cantonment.

Thinking about her mother made Eliza squirm, distracting her from Parvati’s strange ritual. She switched her attention to the seething mass of people who crowded down to the river bank. The combination of wailing and jangling sounds, the vivid bold colors and the alternately disgusting and sweet smells of this wonderful place made her feel jumpy and excited inside, just the way she felt when her Papa kissed her cheek and sat her upon his knee, giving her little presents wrapped in delicate tissue paper. Here it was all so different from life in the barracks bungalow where she was dressed in tight clothes and expected to stay clean and well-behaved. Here people did all manner of things of which Mama would never approve.

Parvati tapped out the remnants of the basket, turned away from the river and made her way up the steps. A light coating of the white ash smeared the front of her green sari and highlighted the trace of tears on her cheeks. She stopped and frowned when she saw Eliza. ‘You should not be here, baba’ she said in rapid Hindi, ‘this is not your place.’

‘What were you doing?’

‘Your mother will be very angry.’ Parvati was unexpectedly rough as she tried to pull Eliza up by the arm.

The child refused to move. ‘I’m not going until you tell me what you were doing,’ she persisted with a pout.

Parvati tightened her face against the renewed flow of tears. ‘Sending my sister to her new life,’ she said.

Eliza looked about, baffled. ‘But where is she?’

‘She is dead.’ Parvati pulled harder at Eliza’s arm and forced her to her feet. She pushed her ahead up the ghat steps. ‘Now we must get home before you are missed and I lose my place as your ayah.’

As they climbed the steep steps Eliza passed other people going down to the river with baskets of marigolds and ashes. Most of them, too, looked sad. 'Are they also saying goodbye?' she asked.

Parvati waited until they had reached the top of the steps before she took a deep breath and answered. 'Yes. When people die we burn them.' She nodded to the area where several smoldering mounds were sending spirals of smoke into the air. 'We cast their ashes upon the Holy Ganga which carries them to their new lives.'

'Why do people die?'

Parvati's face softened and she bent down and cupped Eliza's chin. 'Because that is the way of all things, baba. We live, and we die, and we are reborn. Some of our lives are long and happy. Others short and full of tears, like that of my sister.'

'Will I be happy?'

'That I can not tell you. You are of the Angrezi - the English people. I do not know what makes them happy.'

'What made your sister die?'

'She was sick and it was decreed by Kali that her time was over. Now come quickly before your mother sends the watchman to look for you.' Parvati walked determinedly ahead, not bothering to look back to make sure the child was following her.

'I'm never going to die,' called the thin, high voice after her. 'I'm going to live for ever and ever and be beautiful and happy!'

Parvati usually had patience with the child but not today when she had said just said a bitter farewell to the remains of her precious sister. She resented the health of the Angrezi child who was just like her mother, willful and spoilt, like all the Angrezi women and children. She turned around. 'Yes, you will be beautiful, but the gods do not grant too many favors to one person. You can't have everything.'

Eliza recognized the change in Parvati who was the one person in her own small world she didn't want to be angry with her. The long black lashes dropped contritely over the bright blue eyes and she sniffed. 'I want to go home now,' she whispered.

Parvati reached out and took her hand. 'Come on, baba, if we hurry, you will be in time for tiffin.'

The ayah need not have worried about being late, for Mrs. Elizabeth, known to all as Betty, Gilbert had other more important things on her mind that lunchtime than her daughter's whereabouts.

Barely twenty, Betty was coming into her full bloom as a woman. Elfin, with a natural gracefulness and the compelling combination of dark auburn hair and green eyes, she was well aware of the effect she had on many of the men in the 44th Regiment stationed at the remote barrack town of Dinapore. She also had every intention of using her natural assets to full advantage and to improve her lot in life.

Although she had given instructions to her maids that she was not to be disturbed for tiffin as she had a headache, she had waited until the house was quiet before stripping off her morning dress and undergarments and expertly wrapping her body and head in a dull-colored sari. She then slipped out of the bungalow's side gate, making her way down to the overgrown ruins of a temple not far from the river. Little stirred around the cantonment in the hot middle of the day and it had proved to be an ideal time for assignations.

He was waiting for her in the shadow of a wall. 'Betty, my pet, I'm beside myself with worry. I thought you were never going to come.'

Betty threw herself into Patrick Craigie's arms. 'There was the dreariest morning tea with the Adjutant's wife,' she muttered between raining Patrick's face with passionate kisses. 'I was beginning to think she'd never leave. I'm sure she was expecting to be invited to stay for luncheon.'

Patrick chuckled as the sari slipped to the ground and Betty arched herself to full effect. Despite motherhood at the early age of fourteen, her body was virgin smooth and full-breasted. The young

lieutenant's breath caught. 'My God, Mrs. Gilbert, you're a damned fine filly.'

Her large green eyes fluttered. 'Well come on my big stallion, let's see how well you serve.'

They laughed as they sank back together on to the remnants of an altar to Shiva the Destroyer.

Parvati rarely used the path past the old temple as it was said to be infested with cobras, but her preoccupation with Eliza being late for tiffin made her throw caution to the wind. But it wasn't cobras that made her come to an abrupt standstill in the middle of the path as they approached the temple ruins. The sounds coming from beyond the broken wall were unmistakable - the grunts and gasps of a particularly lust-filled sexual encounter. To have continued on the path would have brought them face-to-face with the couple. Parvati glanced around and noticed that the grass surrounding the temple was almost waist-high. Any attempt to break through it would make a real encounter with a cobra highly likely.

'Why have we stopped?' asked Eliza brightly.

'Hush.' Parvati put her finger to her lip, and gripped Eliza's shoulder, but the child was too agile and swiftly squirmed her way out of the ayah's grasp, darting straight towards the wall. Before Parvati knew what was happening, and as fast as a monkey, the girl had clambered up the stones and peeped over the top.

Ensign Edward Gilbert did not particularly care for India, but he had only himself to blame for the circumstances that had led him there from his home in Ireland. He had just turned eighteen when he became a father, as much to his own as his family's consternation. That the saucy young milliner's assistant, Betty Oliver, was illegitimate, the daughter of an Irish Member of Parliament, didn't bother him but when he had made her pregnant when she was not quite fourteen, his own father, Sir Edwin Gilbert, had almost had apoplexy. Sir Edwin prided himself that the Gilberts were a family of gentlemen and had insisted Edward do the honorable thing. Eliza was born shortly after their marriage and, when she was only a few months old, Sir Edwin pulled strings to try and rid himself of the shame. Edward found himself packed off to India on the first available sailing and straight into the service of the British East India Company.

Despite the prospect of years of dreary duty in remote corners of Bengal, Edward was determined to make the best of his life in India. It had its compensations for, unlike his young wife, he had discovered there were great joys in being a parent. From the moment he first laid eyes on the tiny baby who was christened Eliza Rosanna, his life changed forever. She became the only reason that made life in the stinking and dangerous sub-continent worthwhile.

And so it was that he was in a desperate hurry to get back to his own bungalow when his patrol entered the Dinapore cantonment early in the evening after an exhausting week-long search for dacoits. As he dismounted from his horse and handed it to his syce, he saw his friend, Lieutenant Patrick Craigie, approaching him.

'Eddy, old chap - how about a drink in the mess before you get off home?'

Edward smiled half-heartedly. Normally he would have enjoyed a drink with Patrick but he had hoped to see his daughter before her ayah put her to bed and to show her the little elephant carving he had found to add to her collection of toy animals.

'I know you want to get off to that delightful wife of yours,' continued Patrick, 'but there's something I need to discuss with you first. It concerns your daughter.'

Alarm charged through Edward. 'Is she ... is there something wrong?'

'No, no, she's quite well,' said Patrick hastily, 'but we really need to do something about the way she is allowed to roam barefoot all over the place like a native, hardly speaking any English, chattering away in Hindi. God knows what kind of trouble she gets into. Why ... er ... only today I found her at the old ruins. Everyone knows the place is riddled with cobras.'

Edward frowned. 'In that case I must have serious words with Betty. The ayah must be at fault. I'll see that the woman is dismissed immediately.'

'It's time the child started school,' ventured Patrick, 'and I don't just mean those haphazard classes in reading and writing that the Adjutant's wife dabbles in. She'll have to be sent home.'

Home? Edward's heart sank as he realized what that meant. Sooner or later, almost all of the Company's children were sent back to England to be educated. The thought of half the world separating him from his darling Eliza for what would be many years made him feel quite ill. 'Perhaps she could go to that new school in Calcutta?' he said weakly.

'Don't be ridiculous, old chum. That's for the children of common box-wallahs. Not the sort of place for a child with her pedigree. She needs the education and refinement of a decent English school.'

Edward had never told Patrick that he was the son of a knight, so he assumed it was Betty who had been bragging about her aristocratic connections again. Although she was a bastard herself, she still liked to boast the Oliver family were descended from some Spanish grandee or the other.

Patrick persisted. 'Look, how about that drink? We can talk about it a bit more.'

'I've been in the saddle for days, Patrick, and quite frankly I'm buggered.'

'Very well - I understand old chum. Spot of polo later in the week perhaps?'

Edward smiled. 'Yes - grand idea.' He snapped his fingers for his servant to collect his gear and together they walked across the parade ground towards the Gilberts' bungalow.

Patrick remained where he was and watched the younger man. Betty had assured him she didn't sleep with her husband any more, but that didn't stop him suffering guilt and remorse. What had started out as nothing more than a mild flirtation had quickly blown into a highly passionate affair. Things were becoming decidedly complicated, especially now that their secret trysting place had been discovered by the ayah.

The child, of course, was too young to understand. It was bad enough that she had witnessed them Adam-and-Eve-ing it, but there had also been something highly disturbing in those astute blue eyes of hers as she had stared down at them from the rock wall. Like her mother, she was going to develop early and although she couldn't possibly have comprehended the implications of what she had seen, she was quite capable of letting the proverbial cat out of its bag in some manner. He had a promotion coming up and the new Adjutant was one of those modern men who was a stickler for the moral proprieties. It wouldn't do for him to be caught again with his pants down. Yes, it would be best if that smart little Miss Eliza Gilbert was packed off to school in England as soon as possible.

'Oh, Papa!' Eliza threw her arms around her father's neck and gave him a sweet childish kiss on the lips. 'I'm so glad you've come home.'

'And I'm glad to be back, my little precious.' Edward gently pinched her cheek as he sat on the edge of her bed and she squeaked with pleasure. 'Have you been behaving yourself?' he asked.

Innocent blue eyes blinked. 'Oh yes, Papa,' she said coyly.

'That's good.' He placed his hand over the pocket of his tunic. 'Now let's see if you can guess what I have for you?' It was part of the game they played every time he went away and came back with a little gift.

'Is it a big thing?'

He pretended to think. 'Well, usually it is very, very big. But this one is very, very small.'

Her hand reached out and rested on his chest, feeling the indentation on his pocket. 'The biggest thing I ever saw was an elephant,' she said seriously.

He laughed. 'And you're right. What a clever girl you are.'

The child beamed and Edward's heart swelled as he felt the little fingers explore the pocket and withdraw the tiny gift. He hadn't had time to wrap it up in tissue paper as he usually liked to do, but she didn't seem to notice as she studied the exquisitely-carved ivory animal, holding it up to the lamplight which made its huge ruby eyes glow. 'It's so pretty Papa. Is it a lucky elephant?'

He smiled as he placed an arm about her shoulder and kissed her lovingly on the top of her head. 'Of course it is,' he murmured. There was no need for her to know that a sepoy had found it among the belongings of one of the dead dacoits. Possibly the man had carried it as a charm. It hadn't brought him much luck, but Edward was not superstitious.

Eliza placed the elephant on her pillow and snuggled down into bed as Edward tucked in the blanket. 'Now it's time you were asleep.' He kissed her again and was about to stand up when she spoke again.

'Papa - will I look like Mama when I grow up?'

He studied her wide blue eyes, the delicately curved lips, a promise of high cheekbones set in alabaster skin and the tumble of jet black hair. She was going to be far more beautiful than her mother. 'No, I don't think so.'

She gave a slight pout of disappointment and pulled her hands out from under the blanket and cupped them over her chest. 'Will I be big and round here?'

Caught off-guard, he flushed, momentarily at a loss for words. 'Er ... yes, of course. All girls have bosoms when they grow up.'

'Will you kiss my bosoms, Papa?'

Edward balked at the obscene image she had unwittingly created. 'Good heavens, child, certainly not! Wherever did you get such an idea?'

She stared back at him with a frank expression that seemed devoid of its childish innocence. 'Is it nice to kiss bosoms?' she persisted.

He was increasingly confused and alarmed. How could she know about such intimate things? She must have witnessed some natives when wandering about with that damned ayah - he'd definitely have to get her fired ...

'I know that Mama likes it.'

There was a moment's heavy silence. Edward bit his lip as a grim realization dawned in his mind. He could hardly think straight. Oh, Betty - *No*.

'Never mind that now. You just go to sleep,' he said roughly, turning the lamp wick down.

'Night, Papa.' Eliza closed her eyes and snuggled into the pillow.

'Night, my precious.'

'All right, you bitch! Who is it this time?' Edward had never struck a woman in his life, but he was close to it now as he challenged Betty a few minutes later at her dressing table.

She tossed her loosened mane of auburn hair and glared at him in the mirror reflection with undisguised contempt. 'What are you talking about?'

'If you've been bringing men into my house and letting Eliza witness your sordid couplings ...'

'Don't be utterly ridiculous!'

'By Jesus, Betty ... Eliza has just told me ...' His voice broke.

'Told you *what*?'

He grabbed a handful of his wife's hair and held it in a lock. Their eyes met angrily in the mirror, 'If you don't tell me, I'll take a horsewhip to you, so help me.'

Betty winced. 'You wouldn't dare. Now, let go of me, you brute.'

'Not until I have the truth out of you.' He turned the fist of hair and Betty screamed.

'It was that ayah, Parvati,' she gasped. 'Lieutenant Craigie told me he came across the two of them yesterday at the old temple. The ayah was showing our innocent little baby those disgusting and loathsome carvings - you know, those ones of people tangled together doing all kinds of wicked things to each other. Men - women - even animals. Why, Lieutenant Craigie said Parvati even made Eliza touch them - and feel herself ...'

'Don't lie to me! Patrick would never have stood by and watched that kind of perversion for a minute. I just spoke to him and he never mentioned anything of the sort.'

'Perhaps he didn't want to worry you ...'

'I'd have been more worried about the bloody cobras,' said Edward coldly.

'Yes, well - the cobras, too.'

There was a moment's silence as Betty's hypnotic eyes captured his, his head full of the imagery of snakes twisting about those statues. Her expression softened as she glossed her lips with her tongue and she started to unravel the ribbons of her negligee. Edward's fingers slipped out of her

hair. She turned slightly and her hand reached for the inner curve of his thigh, rubbing against the saddle-sore muscles.

Despite himself and the loathing that had been steadily growing in his heart for this woman, he was becoming aroused. His breath caught. 'Don't do that, Betty.'

'Come on, Eddy,' she said silkily. 'You've been away for a whole week. You're not going to let the wild imaginings of a baby spoil our reunion now are you?'

He didn't believe one word of her story but for some sickening reason he found he wanted her all the more because of it.

'Are you still going to whip me, Eddy?' she asked with a cunning smile as her hand traveled upwards from his groin to his belt buckle.

'No, of course not,' he said huskily, 'but I damn well ought to.'

The following morning, and clutching the new present from her father in her hand, Eliza patiently allowed Kala, another elderly ayah employed in the Gilbert household, to bathe and dress her. Normally, she would have had a tantrum if anyone other than Parvati tended to her, but whenever Papa was within earshot Eliza made the conscious effort to behave herself.

However, when she asked Kala where Parvati was, the toothless old woman just wobbled her head and pretended not to understand Eliza's perfectly good Hindi. Eliza was on the verge of giving the old woman a kick, but she heard the sound of her father's voice in the garden outside her window. Parvati was instantly forgotten. Leaving Kala with hairbrush in hand, she fled.

Edward and Betty were having a leisurely breakfast outdoors on the lawns under a jacaranda tree as Eliza came flying through the veranda doors her black hair streaming behind her.

Edward's face lit up with joy. 'And how's my little sweetheart today?' He picked her up and she squealed with pleasure. He whirled her around until they both fell down giddy on to the lawn. As they lay on the grass panting and laughing, Eliza opened her palm. 'Look, Papa - I've got him with me.' The ruby eyes of the elephant sparkled like flames in the morning sun.

'What's that you have, dear?' called Betty from her seat in the shade.

'Go and show your mother,' said Edward.

Eliza obeyed, albeit reluctantly. Betty took the elephant and inspected it with interest. She raised her head to Edward. 'These look like real rubies. It might be quite valuable. Where did you get it?'

He shrugged. 'Does it matter? It's just a trinket for Eliza.'

'Really, Eddy, I do wish you wouldn't give the child this sort of thing. She's bound to lose it, or one of the servants will take a fancy to it. Why can't you give her proper toys? A doll would be more suitable.'

Eliza tried not to scowl. 'I promise I won't lose it, Mama,' she said meekly.

Edward came up behind her, retrieved the elephant from Betty and put it back into Eliza's hands. He closed her fingers over it and gave her a conspiratorial wink that his wife couldn't fail to have noticed. 'Eliza doesn't care for dolls,' he said with undisguised sarcasm. 'As her mother, I thought you would have noticed.'

Betty sniffed and gave an impatient flourish. 'I haven't time for such tiresome trivialities.' She folded her napkin and snapped her fingers for the hovering servants to clear away the breakfast table. 'I must go inside and choose my wardrobe. I've a frightfully busy day ahead. Lieutenant Craigie has promised to give me archery lessons, and after that I've morning tea at church, and lunch at the residence. And don't forget - we're going punting on the river with the Colonel and his wife later this afternoon.'

Edward's fingers tightened on Eliza's shoulders as his wife walked away without another glance at their daughter. 'Well, my sweet, it looks as though you've got your Papa all to yourself or at least until this afternoon. What do you think we should do?'

Eliza spun around, that pleasurable feeling that being with her father gave her welling up inside her. 'Oh, Papa. Can we go riding?'

'Now that's a good idea.' With a chuckle he picked her up, placed her on his shoulders and

pretended to be a horse, neighing and galloping. Eliza hung on to his hair and gave out shrieks of pleasure. 'Papa! You're so silly - I want to ride a real horse!'

He halted. 'Oh, I see,' he said gravely. He reached up to let her down but Eliza dug her heels into his ribs.

'I've a frightfully busy day ahead,' she said in an imitation of her mother's voice. 'I must go inside and choose my wardrobe.'

'Yes, memsahib,' said Edward, trying not to laugh openly at his daughter's accurate mimicry as he trotted along the lawn, depositing Eliza on the bungalow step. She gave him a kiss on the cheek before she ran inside to find Parvati to help her change into her riding clothes.

But Parvati was still nowhere to be found, only old Kala, sitting on her haunches in a corner half asleep. Eliza turned and rushed back to the stables where her father was ordering the syces to ready her pony. 'Parvati's lost,' she blurted. 'I can't find her anywhere.'

Edward's face turned solemn. He bent over, rested his hands on his knees and looked directly into Eliza's worried blue eyes. 'She's not lost,' he explained quietly, 'but she's had to go away for a while. Kala will look after you now.'

Eliza stared at him for a moment with the edges of her mouth turned downwards. 'But I want Parvati. I hate Kala. She's stupid.'

'Now, now, Eliza.'

'Mama was angry with her wasn't she? She sent her away because we saw Mama and Uncle Patrick playing that silly game?'

Edward swallowed hard. He struggled with his daughter's simple words which finally confirmed his suspicions. He was distraught that this time Betty had picked on Patrick, the man he had thought to be his one real friend. It was not Betty's insatiable infidelities that bothered him, but that she had tainted the innocence of her own child. Consumed with waves of anger and sadness, he looked into his daughter's trusting eyes and tried to disguise his anguish. He took her hand. 'Come on, sweetheart. If you don't like Kala, perhaps it's time you learned to dress yourself any way. And I promise you I'll see if I can bring Parvati back soon.'

It took her a long time struggling to don the neat little riding habit and boots while her father watched and offered suggestions. Kala remained in a corner of the bedroom pretending to ignore the process but she couldn't hide the disapproval on her face both at Eliza's fumbled attempts to do something for herself for a change, not to mention the highly irregular presence of an Angrezi male in a female domain. Although at one stage Eliza buttoned up her boots on the wrong feet, at last the task was completed and she felt extremely proud of herself. Her one last action before accompanying her father to the stables was to pocket the ivory elephant. She intended to keep it with her always.

Even at her tender age, Eliza was already showing all the signs of being a natural horsewoman and she followed her father's instructions without complaint, learning to handle her pony with confidence. Together, they took a couple of hours to ride around the perimeter of the cantonment and along the river bank, returning via the ruined temple. Of the events that had taken place there the day before, Eliza said nothing as they cantered past the broken erotic friezes and Edward also kept his eyes averted from them.

The usual mundane morning activities followed, Edward sitting at his desk to attend to accounts and correspondence, while Eliza kept him company, playing with her jeweled elephant on the floor at his feet. After lunch she went compliantly with Kala for her afternoon nap. She only pretended to sleep, however, and when she saw Kala dozing in her usual crouched position, she silently slipped off her bed and made her way out of the bedroom bare-footed.

The bungalow was quiet with the heavy indolence of a hot Indian afternoon. Everyone was asleep, including Papa, who was sprawled out in a hammock on the veranda. Eliza stood at the foot of the hammock for a few minutes and studied her father as he lightly snored, before returning indoors and making her way to her parents' bedroom.

Mama had been away all day, but the room still smelled of her eau-de-cologne. Eliza opened the wardrobe doors and ran her fingers through the dresses, loving the sensations in her fingers of the various fabrics - delicate muslins and gauzes, crisp cottons and slippery silks. She popped her small feet into a pair of satin dancing pumps and pattered slowly towards the full-length mirror in the corner of the room.

Using the novelty of her newly-acquired skill with the mystery of clothes, she stripped off her shift and pantalets and stood naked in front of the mirror. Cautiously, she ran her hands over her thin flat chest and along the bony ridges of her hips. She was disappointed for she felt nothing. She had so wanted to feel whatever it was that had made Mama look so happy with Uncle Patrick - until she spied her watching them, that is, when she had turned into a veritable tigress.

She tried again, feeling her own skin in sensuous fingertip circles the way she had seen Uncle Patrick touch Mama. She frowned. Again there was nothing but a slight tickle. Perhaps it didn't work when you did it yourself.

A sound made her jump around. A shadowy figure stood in the doorway. For a long moment the pair stared at each other. 'You are far too young yet to know the delights of the body,' murmured Parvati with a smile. 'They will come when the time is right.'

Eliza ran forward and threw herself into the woman's arms, breathing in the exotic warm muskiness that meant far more to her than her mother's rancid eau-de-cologne. 'Papa was right. You've come back to me,' she cried faintly in Hindi.

'Hush. Your parents must not know I am here.' Parvati wrapped the child in her sari and rocked her to and fro in a loving hold for a few minutes. 'I cannot stay, baba,' she said. 'I came only to say farewell'

The child's smile faded. 'But why?'

'You are growing up. Soon you will no longer need an ayah like me.'

Eliza stared up at her in dismay. 'Take me with you.'

Parvati shook her head. 'We Hindus are but the servants of the Angrezi. Such a thing can never be.' Her soft brown eyes studied Eliza's wide blue ones closely as she touched her in the middle of her forehead. 'There is the mark of the goddess Lakshmi upon you and you have been born to great beauty and fortune. I will think of you always and pray you use your gifts wisely.'

Parvati then gathered up Eliza's strewn clothes. 'I see that you have learned how to dress for yourself, but I shall do it for you one last time.'

Her eyes brimming with tears, Eliza allowed Parvati to pull up her pantalets and as she reached her arms into the air for the shift to be pulled over her head, the little elephant fell out of a handkerchief pocket. Parvati picked it up. She frowned as she turned it over in her hands. 'Where did you get this?'

'Papa gave it to me. Isn't he beautiful?'

But the ayah seemed to recoil from it, a trace of horror in her eyes. She dropped it back on the floor. 'Get rid of it. It will bring you bad luck.'

'No!' Eliza scrambled to retrieve the precious object, clutched it to her chest and pouted at Parvati. 'It is my special present. My Papa would never give me a bad thing.'

Parvati made as if to speak further before seeming to think better of it. 'Ah, yes. Perhaps I was mistaken. It is a beautiful gift given with love and I can see that it makes you happy.' She stroked Eliza's cheek. 'Farewell, sweet baba. May your journey through life pass without too much pain.'

Like a feather disappearing into wind, she was gone.

2.

Punting in the late afternoon among the reedy shallows of the river was a popular pastime among the military social set in which the Gilberts revolved. Although the Ganges always emitted a wide

range of smells, many of them unpleasant, just being on the water gave the illusion of coolness and some relief from the endless days of shimmering heat, and brought a touch of nostalgia for an England half the world away.

An Indian punt-wallah did the work with a long pole while Betty, in fashionable white and green spotted muslin and wearing broad-brimmed straw hat trimmed with grosgrain ribbon, lay back in the flat-bottomed boat, fanning herself and sipping on a sherbet. Edward sat upright opposite her, gazing out across the flat expanse of river, his body in a state of numbness after his third gin toddy in five minutes.

‘Drink one more of those and you’ll be in no fit state for dinner,’ Betty muttered.

Edward grimaced. ‘That sounds like a good idea,’ he said, pouring a fourth cup from his flask.

‘What’s the matter with you? I do wish you wouldn’t behave this way. The Colonel and Mrs. Innes have been very friendly and shown great interest in our affairs and is this how you intend to repay them - being drunk and surly at their dinner party?’

Edward’s eyes turned to his wife, not troubling to disguise the darkness of his mood. ‘I would have thought as a cuckolded husband I’m entitled to be surly? I’m sure even your snobbish friends would agree with me on that.’

Betty gave a caustic laugh and shook her head. ‘There you go again, inventing things. There’s no doubting where Eliza gets her imagination from.’

He responded with a silent glare.

She fanned herself again. ‘Aren’t you interested in a promotion? Do you really want to be a lowly ensign for the rest of your days? Don’t you ever want to get out of this horrid little backwater? People like Colonel Innes and his wife can help us.’

‘Of course I want a promotion,’ he barked, ‘but in own way, in my own time, and on my own merit, not because I know how to utter platitudes and fawn over officers’ wives at a dinner table.’

Betty’s eyes flashed. ‘I simply can’t believe how insufferable you’ve become lately. I’d just as soon go without you any way. You’ll only embarrass me.’

‘Embarrass *you*? How do you think *I’m* going to feel, sitting at the same table with Patrick - the man who I thought was my best friend - and knowing that the two of you have been playing me for a fool?’

Betty rolled her eyes, snapped her fingers at the Indian punt-wallah and signaled to him to return to the nearby shore.

‘God damn you, woman, don’t you ignore me!’ His eyes ablaze, Edward lunged forward, shaking Betty by the shoulders. ‘How you can continue to deny it? Eliza saw the two of you. She even mentioned Patrick’s name!’

Betty screeched. ‘Everyone knows the child’s an incorrigible liar - and take your hands off me!’ She pushed at Edward and he fell backwards. Bottles and drink glasses fell and shattered as the punt wobbled precariously, and the wallah cried out a warning.

‘Why should she lie?’ Edward spat back from his sprawled position. ‘She’s only an innocent baby. She saw the two of you, and so did the ayah. No wonder you were in such a hurry to send Parvati away. As soon as we get back, I’ll find her and get the truth out of her.’

Betty’s face flared pink in the reflection of the setting sun. ‘You would believe a Hindu woman’s word over mine?’

‘Yes,’ he answered coldly. ‘That Hindu woman has been more of a mother to our daughter than you ever were. She knows you for the whore that you are!’

Betty scrambled up, wielded her fan and struck Edward across the face. The punt wobbled dangerously again, and this time he fell sideways, overbalancing and falling into the water with a resounding splash.

The wallah gabbled excitedly while Edward flailed about for a few seconds. ‘Hold the bloody thing steady!’ he yelled at the wallah while taking in several large mouthfuls of water before he managed to find a grip on the side of the punt and hauled himself back on board.

Meanwhile, Betty’s anger had abruptly turned to sarcastic mirth, and she clapped. ‘Oh, Eddy,

what a sight you are. Serves you right.'

By now, several other couples in punts had drifted in to see what all the fuss was about. Edward didn't fail to see the bemused expressions on their faces. Patrick Craigie, who had been in the same punt as Colonel and Mrs. Innes, sent Edward a querying glance but Edward deliberately ignored him. Humiliated and dejected, he seriously doubted whether he could ever talk to his friend again.

An hour after his return to the bungalow, Edward felt sick and shivery. Even if he had wanted to change his mind about the dinner, he now had a genuine reason to not feel up to going so Betty went alone.

After saying a quick goodnight to Eliza and, with an intense griping in his guts, Edward Gilbert took to his bed. Six hours later, the garrison doctor was called out urgently and it was confirmed he had contracted some form of cholera.

'But why can't I see Papa?' Eliza wailed for the umpteenth time to her mother.

'Because the doctor doesn't want you to get sick too,' said Betty crossly.

'I don't care, I want to see my Papa!' Eliza flung herself at her mother, pounding her small fists into the woman's chest.

Betty reacted with a slap across the tear-stained face. 'Get off me you horrid child. It's because of you that he's sick,' she said savagely. 'You, and those wicked lies you told him about me.'

Eliza was too scared and confused to ask what her mother meant. All she knew was that her adored Papa was very sick, the doctor said he had to be quarantined and that there were two servants outside the bedroom door to make sure she didn't go in. Frightened and unhappy, she ran out of the house and fell down on to the lawn where only yesterday they had played at horses, and wept.

She did not see Patrick Craigie approach her until she felt his shadow block out the sun. He knelt down beside her and placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. 'Eliza ...'

'Go 'way,' she blubbered.

'Eliza, I've just been to see your Papa. He has a message for you.'

She sniffed back her tears and sat up slowly, watching him suspiciously through reddened eyes. 'Why are *you* allowed to see him? Why can't I?'

Patrick swallowed. 'Because he knows he would want to hold you, and he mustn't do that because you'll get sick too. It is better this way. He says to tell you that soon he will be going away ...'

'Where is he going?'

His mustache twitched and his eyes were also moist with un-shed tears. 'Far away ...' His throat was thick.

'Is he going to die?'

Patrick avoided her huge blue eyes and clenched his fists as he tried to control the shake in his shoulders. 'Yes, I'm afraid so,' he finally whispered.

Eliza stared at him mutely.

Patrick struggled again with his grief. And, worse, the shame he felt. 'Your Papa said that you must be brave and, although he knows it will be hard for you, you must do as your Mama says, but remember that he loves you very much, and always will. He will go to his great rest much with less sorrow if he knows he has left you happy.'

Eliza fumbled in her apron pocket for her elephant. She took it out and turned it over in her hands, ruby eyes winking in the sunlight. She looked up again at Patrick with a solemn face. 'Tell Papa I will be brave and try and do what he says.'

Patrick struggled with a smile. 'You're a good girl, Eliza.'

'No, I'm not,' she cried, 'I'm only good for my Papa. For everyone else I'm wicked!' She charged off in the direction of the ruined temple. Patrick did not go after her.

It was another hot and dusty Indian day when they buried Ensign Edward Gilbert beneath the

peepul trees in the cemetery at the edge of the maidan.

One hand clutching her elephant, the other a posy of wilting flowers she had picked herself, Eliza stood beside her mother. She felt very much alone, but she did not cry. Over the last two days she had cried all her tears and there was nothing left, except a strange empty hollow somewhere in her middle where the warm glow of her father used to be.

Mama had said children shouldn't attend funerals, but Patrick Craigie had persuaded her that her daughter should not be deprived of the chance to say goodbye to her father properly.

The frightening hole in the ground yawned black as the box was lowered into it, and Eliza quickly averted her eyes towards the distant wisps of smoke threading their way skywards from the cremations near the river ghats. She did not like the thought of her father trapped in a box in the dark ground when he ought to be floating free to a new life across the river and held safely in a wreath of marigold flowers.

As the service came to an end and the sepoys shoveled the first sods of earth across the coffin, Patrick Craigie's arm went around her narrow shoulders. 'Come child, nothing can be gained by staying here,' he murmured. Without protest, she let him lead her away from the graveside without much thought as to where they were going.

Mama, making strange snuffling noises from beneath a black veil, leaned on the arm of Colonel Innes. 'Oh, dear me, what can I do?' she whined, 'I can't possibly go back to that bungalow.'

'Of course not, my dear,' said the Colonel reassuringly. 'You will come and stay with my wife and I until you are ready to face the world again.'

Mama seemed to falter and she gripped the masculine arm anew, leaning her full weight upon it. 'You are so kind, sir,' she sniffed, 'to go to such trouble for the widow of a lowly ensign.'

He patted her hand. 'Think nothing of it, m'dear,' he said gruffly. 'Your husband asked Lieutenant Craigie to take care of you and young Eliza, but there are the proprieties to be observed, y'know. You couldn't possibly stay in the barrack quarters alone. Please be assured we are more than happy to accommodate you and that sweet child of yours.'

Betty gave a loud sigh and fluttered like a black crow with damaged wings. Patrick left Eliza's side and rushed to hers, catching her in his arms just before she collapsed to the ground.

In the fuss that followed, no-one noticed Eliza slipping away to the river. She stood on the ghats and, murmuring some of the Hindu words she had heard Parvati use, she cast the small bouquet of wilted flowers on to the flowing waters of the eternal Holy Ganga.

Betty Gilbert mourned for less than the respectable minimum period of six months. No sooner had Patrick Craigie been promoted to Captain, than they were married and on their way to a northern hill station for their honeymoon. Eliza was left behind at the Colonel's house, with only old Kala to attend to her personal needs.

But for Eliza, it was the exquisite first taste of complete freedom, Mrs. Innes not being used to children and rarely conscious of her whereabouts. Kala was as slow as ever in keeping up with her ward, so Eliza roamed the precincts of the town like a gypsy.

She took to going without shoes every day, discarding any other clothes that restricted her movement, and also her wide-brimmed hat even on the hottest days. Her skin tanned rapidly and, save for her vivid blue eyes, it would have been easy to mistake her for an Indian child.

She would wander into the stables and chatter to the syces in fluent Indian dialect one minute, the next, continue in English conversation with the soldiers, complete with Cockney idioms that made them laugh. Soon, she became a familiar sight around the cantonment, seated on a horse in front of a soldier, naked brown legs swinging happily, or riding in a military cart singing snatches of bawdy barrack songs at the top of her voice. Unbeknownst to the Colonel and his wife, the wild step-child of Captain Craigie was fast becoming the pet of the ordinary soldiers of the garrison and none of them thought her behavior odd. It was inevitable that such freedom could not last.

One afternoon, when most of the garrison was dozing as usual, Eliza was at one of her favorite haunts; a small shallow pool of green water hidden away from the rest of the garden by hibiscus

bushes. There she stripped off all her clothes and slipped into the pool, where she lay back, splashing and laughing to herself. She loved the sensation of the cool water on her nakedness and it was the happiest she had felt since Papa died.

‘Eliza? Am I seeing things - or is that really you?’

At the sound of the sudden male voice, Eliza sat up abruptly and looked around. Standing near the bushes and with arms crossed over his red tunic, stood Patrick Craigie, a deep frown on his face.

‘I’m just swimming,’ she said.

‘So it would appear. Where on earth is your ayah?’

Eliza shrugged her tanned shoulders. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I want you out of there. Now. Get yourself dressed and I’ll wait for you the other side of the hedge.’ He turned his back and strode off.

Eliza felt disappointment that it seemed as if Patrick and her mother had returned but she reluctantly did as she was told and a few minutes later she stood before Mama and her step-father on bungalow veranda.

Although her mother had been away for more than a month, she made no attempt to embrace her child. Instead, she fanned herself rapidly as she always did when she was trying to contain her anger. ‘What did you think you were playing at, you little fool?’ she said. ‘Don’t you know that there are snakes and God knows what other creepie-crawlies in cesspools like that?’

‘The syces say snakes and creepie-crawlies won’t ever bite you if they see you’re not frightened.’ The bright blue eyes challenged her mother. ‘And I’m not frightened.’

‘The syces? Lord, have you been hanging around the stables with those Indians again?’ Betty gave her husband a sharp glance. ‘Patrick, what do you suppose this child has been up to? No shoes. And look at her skin, would you? She’s as brown as an Untouchable. If people see her looking like that, goodness knows what kind of nasty rumors about her parentage will do the rounds.’

Unsure of what her mother was talking about, Eliza squirmed, even though she was well aware that the fidgets usually provoked her mother to greater anger but she felt she was safe from her when Patrick was around. She knew he cared about her and would never harm her physically.

Patrick sighed, and paced up and down the veranda for a few minutes before turning to Betty. ‘I told Eddy shortly before he died that he ought to start thinking of Eliza’s future. She can’t stay here indefinitely and it looks as if I’m due to be posted to Meerut. It’s time she was educated.’

Betty scoffed. ‘She’s incredibly stubborn. I doubt that anyone could teach her a thing. What she needs is a good whipping.’

Patrick glanced back at the small barefooted figure standing before them. Tightly clenched fists at her side, her chin raised in defiance she showed no fear of her mother and for that he had to admit his admiration. ‘There’ll be no whippings in my household, Betty,’ he said firmly, ‘but it’s about time we looked at some other discipline. This young miss is about ready to be sent Home.’

He met the childish bold blue stare. ‘Now you get to your room. And you are not to go roaming about the grounds again without your ayah. Is that understood?’

Eliza gave a nod, turned and ran into the house.

‘She won’t listen to you, you know. You’re far too soft with her,’ said Betty crossly.

Patrick remained firm, remembering own stern Scottish childhood with its overuse of corporal punishment. ‘I might order soldiers flogged every day,’ he said, ‘but beating such a young child rarely accomplishes anything. She’s an intelligent girl with a healthy curiosity about life. Until such time as we can organize her voyage, I will supervise her lessons personally.’

‘I’d like to see you try,’ sneered Betty.

But Patrick Craigie did meet with some success when he discovered Eliza’s highly-attuned ear for voices. Languages had been his own personal forté at school and, since being in the army, he had broadened his skills beyond the usual French and Latin to include a smattering of Spanish and German.

To his complete surprise, Eliza eagerly accepted his tutoring, although she was never to fully accept him as a father. He was sure that in her mind he was always linked in some way to what she

had seen that day in the ruined temple and somehow she knew that event had precipitated her father's death. And she would never call him Papa, only Uncle Patrick. It created a distance between them which was never to be breached, but it did make for a better teacher-student relationship.

Eliza's natural inquisitiveness about many things found fulfillment and when the rudimentary lessons in languages or the arts became tedious, she learned things from Patrick Craigie normally well outside of the sphere of a female child - how to load, shoot and strip a pistol, how to ride bareback and astride, and the best way to handle a whip. At last, when she had reached the tender age of six, Patrick announced that he could do no more for her education and that Eliza Gilbert was ready to leave India for Home.

Eliza didn't understand what was meant by that kind of Home. Although it sounded and was spelled the same way as a home, which meant the bungalow in which they lived, when adults like Mama and Uncle Patrick spoke about it, it seemed to acquire a mysterious meaning which usually brought a mist to their eyes. So when the day finally dawned and Eliza was told she was to leave Dinapore because she was going Home, she became very frightened.

Patrick found her sitting in her favorite spot among the hibiscus bushes near the green pool. At first he said nothing, and just sat on a rock beside her until her tears dried a little.

'Do you remember when your father died and you promised to be brave?' he asked softly.

She gave a silent nod.

'Well, going Home is the same sort of thing. Your Mama and I have been posted to a place far away from here and we can't take you with us, but you won't be alone. You will have Kala with you, of course, and Colonel and Mrs. Innes will also be going on leave at the same time and so you will all have a jolly time on board the ship. After that my sister will take you to Scotland where you will live with my father and my aunt and go to a school with lots of other children.'

She turned to look at him, a faint trace of interest in her eyes. 'Scotland? Where Queen Mary came from?'

Patrick smiled. As a proud Scot, he had enjoyed reading her a child's version of the high drama of the tragic Queen of Scots and it had been one of her favorite tales. 'Yes. You will see castles and lochs and glens. You will learn far more than I have been able to teach you.'

Eliza was temporarily placated with this knowledge, until it came time to board the budgerow which was to take her down-river to Calcutta and she saw boxes and trunks full of her things being loaded on board. The only precious belonging not packed away was the jeweled elephant and she gripped it fiercely as her mother and step-father marched her on board the boat with Kala.

Miss Bridget Riley, a niece of one of the officers who was returning to Calcutta after a brief visit, was to be her official chaperone until Eliza could be put into the care of the Innes family who were now in Calcutta. Eliza took one look at the prim Miss Riley and disliked her immediately, but that was the least of her worries. For the first time she realized the enormity of what was happening to her.

Home meant going far away! Far away from the syces and the soldiers, the horses, the river ghats, the temple, the green pool and the gardens she knew so well. Far away from the warm memories of her Papa and Parvati.

'*No! I won't go!*' She let out an enormous scream, pushed past her mother and bolted towards the gangplank.

Her mother was left floundering in astonishment, but Patrick raced after her and caught her in his arms before she could reach the shore. As she continued to scream, he carried her back on board, taking the full brunt of her kicks. Patrick lowered her on to the deck holding her tightly against his legs while Betty ranted.

'What a wicked child you are to embarrass us so. I'll be glad to get rid of you, you ungrateful little wretch!'

'Have a little pity, Betty,' countered Patrick. 'You won't see her again for years.'

'I don't care, She's been nothing but an irredeemable, obstinate nuisance from the day she was

born.’ Betty gathered her skirts about her, and without a backward glance at her child, marched down the gangplank.

Eliza stopped wriggling and Patrick bent down. He cupped the tear-stained face in his hand. ‘Mama was angry, but she didn’t mean to say what she did.’

‘I hate her.’

‘Of course you don’t. She’s your Mama ...’

‘And I hate you too!’

In that instant as he stared into moist blue eyes showing a maturity and depth of wisdom at odds with extreme wilfulness, he was sure that the Hindus were right about reincarnation. Some souls were destined to live many lives and endure many torments before they found true and lasting peace and he sensed that Eliza was already set on some unstoppable and tumultuous course through life. All he could do was send a swift prayer for mercy to whatever divine held this soul’s destiny.

‘I’m sorry you feel you hate me,’ he hurried on, ‘as I thought we had become friends. I will write to you as often as I can and tell you everything you want to know about India. In the meantime, you will learn many wonderful things and make new friends.’ He gave her a perfunctory kiss on the forehead, stood up, dusted off his tunic and marched away.

In the meantime, the straight-backed Miss Bridget Riley had been observing the family farewell at a discreet distance. It didn’t take her more than a few seconds to reach the conclusion that the child was utterly undisciplined and the mother hardly much better. When she had been asked to chaperone a lone child on her way to Calcutta, she had thought it a simple enough duty, but after seeing the display put on by Eliza Gilbert, she could see she would be set a challenge. It was not that Bridget Riley was nervous at such a prospect: rather the reverse. If it hadn’t been for years of caring for ailing parents, she would have joined the Carmelites as a young girl, and still intended to do so now that her parents were dead and she could return to Ireland. Bridget took her Catholic religious and moral duties very seriously indeed and any opportunity to reform any wayward character filled her with a kind of excitement. She waited until the budgerow had cast off before drawing the still sniffing Eliza to her side.

‘Do you know the Ten Commandments, child? Do you know it’s very wrong not to obey them?’

When Eliza ignored her, Bridget’s hand closed around the child’s upper arm and she squeezed tightly. ‘It is rude to ignore your elders, child.’

Eliza winced and glanced up warily.

‘I asked you a question. Do you know the Ten Commandments?’

Eliza blinked a few times but still failed to answer.

Bridget tutted. ‘Have you had any religious education at all, child?’

‘I went to Sunday School ... sometimes.’

‘Ah.’ Bridget eased her grip of Eliza’s arm. ‘Protestant. Not the true church.’

‘I don’t remember much.’

‘But we will have to teach you, won’t we? I think we will start with learning about honoring thy father and mother and what happens to naughty little girls who do not.’

Eliza thought the journey to Calcutta would never end although in fact it took less than a week. Rarely had she been afraid of any adult, but being confined with Bridget Riley in a small vessel soon changed that. Every day as the vessel made its leisurely progress down the sacred river, Miss Riley would force her to sit under the deck awning and listen to what happened to people who did not live a righteous life. Good girls went to a wonderful place called Heaven and bad girls to a horrid place called Hell, which was infinitely more terrifying than anything conjured up by the aspect of Home. Knowing very well that she was a bad girl, fire and demons began to fill Eliza’s dreams at night and she became afraid of going to bed lest she be spirited away to that awful place in her sleep. Once she dared to ask Bridget whether Kala, who was always good, would be rewarded with Heaven, and Bridget had scoffed derisively.

‘Of course not, child. Your ayah is a heathen and she will go to Hell. There is no Heaven for

heathens unless they reject their pagan beliefs and accept Christ.’

This only served to confuse Eliza even more, and when she asked Kala if she was afraid of Hell, the ayah shrugged and smiled. ‘There is no Hell and no Heaven, just many turns of the wheel.’

Eliza did not attempt to pass this idea on to Miss Riley, who did not approve of her speaking Hindustani or communicating with servants on anything apart from one’s basic needs. Instead Eliza continued to suffer the torment in unhappy silence until at last the budgerow emerged out of the Ganges Delta, sailed past the crocodile and tiger-infested marshy jungles of the Sunderbans, entered the Hoogly estuary and sailed up to Calcutta.

For the first time since leaving Dinapore, Eliza’s spirits rose as she laid eyes on the bustling metropolis of the British East India Company with its spread of tropical gardens, grand white villas fronted by sweeping lawns, palatial business houses, bustling streets, and the battlements of Fort William rising above a forest of masts of ships from every corner of the globe.

As their small vessel jostled for space near the Strand Ghat, Eliza leaned on the rail and eagerly studied this new and exciting world. She was oblivious to its notorious smells, unlike Miss Riley who gasped as she saw a partially-burnt corpse nudge against the bow of the boat. She held a handkerchief well-laced with lavender water to her nose. ‘This place is an abomination,’ she muttered, before rushing away to be discreetly sick while Eliza enjoyed a moment of wicked glee.

On being informed of their arrival, Mrs. Innes herself came in a palanquin to collect Eliza. Fortunately, Miss Riley had another address to go to and she parted from her charge with the admonition to remember what she had been taught and what was awaiting her if she did not heed the teachings of God.

Mrs. Innes, the likeable woman whom Eliza remembered from Dinapore, took her hand. Together they watched the still-complaining Miss Riley being carried away in her own palanquin. ‘You poor child, I had no idea you were being inflicted with that wretched creature as your chaperone.’

‘I don’t want to go to Heaven if the people there are like her,’ said Eliza.

Mrs. Innes smiled. ‘I wouldn’t pay too much attention to what she says, dear. It would be best to just forget all about her.’

All the same, it was to be a long time before Miss Riley’s threats completely faded from little Eliza Gilbert’s conscious mind.

As their sailing to England had been delayed several days, Colonel and Mrs. Innes were staying as guests of Major General Sir Jasper and Lady Nicholls, who lived in one of the magnificent villas Eliza had seen from the river but which, on closer inspection, wasn’t quite as white as it had seemed. Its portico and pillars were covered with the green and black stain of years of heavy monsoon rains and most of its windows were shuttered with bamboo blinds to keep out the never-ending glare. Still, once inside, Eliza was overawed by its luxury. The Colonel’s house at Dinapore was nothing compared to this. She stared up in wonder at the huge chandeliers and equally large red-gilt punkahs that moved endlessly to create a cooling breeze. She couldn’t resist removing her shoes to see what cool marble felt like on the soles of her feet. Eliza was surprised when Lady Nicholls didn’t seem to mind. She even allowed her to roam about the house and touch whatever she liked whether it was the velvet drapery or smooth bronze sculptures of women holding flower pots.

Later, at tiffin, Eliza met Fanny, daughter of Lady Nicholls, who was also going Home. A few years older than Eliza, she was plain with light eyes and mud-brown hair, but there was a spirited air about her. ‘Why do you have so many curls?’ was her first question. ‘And your skin’s awfully brown. Are you a chi-chi?’

Her mouth watering at the sight of so much food spread over the vast table, Eliza didn’t attempt a reply.

‘Really, Fanny, I could think of a more polite start to a conversation,’ reprimanded her mother gently. ‘And I doubt Eliza knows what a chi-chi is.’

‘I do,’ she said without hesitation.

‘What is it then?’ Fanny made a face across the table.

‘It’s a person who’s half Indian and half English.’

Fanny sniffed. ‘So? Are you one?’

‘Of course she isn’t,’ interrupted Mrs. Innes. ‘Eliza’s father is Captain Patrick Craigie. He’s Scots. And your mother is Irish. Isn’t that right dear?’ She looked enquiringly at Eliza.

Eliza thought of her real father, lying in that horrid darkness in the cemetery under the peepul trees at the edge of the maidan, and felt tears prickle at her eyes. She couldn’t remember what he looked like any more but no matter, Captain Craigie would never be her father. And Mama, who hated her. Who had always hated her ...

‘My real mother is a Spanish princess,’ she blurted.

Mrs. Innes’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Oh? Now that’s most interesting. I could have sworn she was Irish.’

‘She pretends to be Irish,’ said Eliza without flinching. ‘It’s sort of secret - about her being a princess.’

‘Ah, I see.’ Mrs. Innes tried not to smile.

But Fanny’s eyes openly declared skepticism. ‘I don’t believe you. I think you’re a liar.’

‘Fanny, dear, you’ve gone quite far enough,’ said Lady Nicholls trying to keep a straight face. ‘If Eliza says her mother is a Spanish princess, we must not be so rude to dispute it in such a fashion.’

Eliza caught the unmistakable looks of mirth passing between everyone else at the table and a sudden wave of unhappiness welled up from deep within her. She kicked back her chair and knocked over her glass in the process. ‘I’m not a liar!’ she wailed, before turning and fleeing from the dining room and into the marble hall.

One of the servants set out to retrieve her but Lady Nicholls stopped him. ‘Just let the child be,’ she ordered.

Fanny just laughed. ‘Oh, Mama. Surely you don’t believe her?’

Lady Nicholls shook her head. ‘She’s just a scared little girl, Fanny, with a head full of dreams and no idea of where she is going. But she certainly has an imperious air about her and that was a definite show of Spanish temper if I ever saw one.’

Half-an-hour later Fanny found Eliza slumped on a stone seat by an ornamental fishpond in the garden, her cheeks still showing traces of copious tears. Fanny sat down beside her.

‘I’m sorry I called you a liar. It’s just that I never met anyone with a princess for a mother.’ Her eyes were now warm. ‘If it’s a secret, I promise I won’t tell anyone.’

Eliza lifted her head cautiously. ‘Are you scared about going Home?’

Fanny shook her head. ‘I think it will be exciting. I can hardly wait. What about you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘When we get to London, you’ll have to come and stay with me at my grandfather’s house. We’ll have such fun.’

Some of Eliza’s fears started to slip away. Home - whatever it proved to be - no longer held quite the same dread, and for the first time in her life she knew she had found a friend.

3.

Eliza knelt on the window seat and leaned as far as she dared over the sill, gazing down at the bustling summer throng of Piccadilly beneath her. In its own way, it was even more noisy and crowded than Calcutta or some of the other exotic ports their ship had called at on the long voyage, but its smells were not as easy to identify, although dominated by horse dung. Everyone seemed to be in a great hurry and there was much pushing, shoving and cursing as pedestrians battled their way through congested pavements and dodged around wagons, hackneys, gigs and carriages.

So this was Home. She felt silly to think she had been frightened of it, and she longed to rush out

into the street and be a part of the bustle.

Fanny plumped herself down on to the window seat next to her. 'Isn't Home wonderful?' she said, echoing her own thoughts. 'It's such a shame you're not going to be staying with us for long.'

'Will Scotland be like this?'

'I have no idea. It's not that far away. I suppose so.'

'It's strange though.'

'What?'

'Look at the gharis - the carriages. The ghari-wallahs are all white men. And where are the syces and ayahs?'

'Mama told me there are no Indians to do that kind of work here, Eliza. Most of the carriage drivers and the servants are white people like ourselves.'

Eliza's mouth dropped open. 'But don't they get tired?'

Fanny frowned. 'I suppose it never gets hot in England like it does in India. People probably don't feel like sleeping much during the day.'

Eliza turned her gaze back to the street, longing to be part of this invigorating scene; to be one of those beautiful ladies dressed in fashionable red-and-white striped satin. To have her hair dressed in tight ringlets and to wear a wide-brimmed bonnet with curly ostrich feathers and yards and yards of flowing ribbon. To stroll along the pavement with a smart soldier in a military uniform on her arm, and a pug-dog on a leash. Or to ride in an open carriage with a crest on the doors, twirling a parasol and nodding as the elegant gentlemen in their smart frock coats tipped their top hats to her.

Later, when the girls sat down for tea, Eliza couldn't help but stare at the fair-faced butler and maids who supervised their meal. It was going to take some time to get used to the idea of white people doing the work she had always expected to be done by dusky-skinned Indians.

Kala, too, found this situation most peculiar and worrying. She had already risked losing caste for making the long journey over water, but now she sensed as if her sole purpose and duty in life would also be taken away from her. As she brushed Eliza's hair and made her ready for bed that night, she was continually muttering to herself. 'This is a strange land. Your father and mother did not tell me what am I to do here.'

'You will have to stay with me until we get to Scotland,' said Eliza, scowling. 'Then you will have to go back to Dinapore.'

Although a long time had passed since she had last seen Parvati, Eliza had never forgotten her. While Kala had tended to her intimate personal needs adequately, she had been too easy to dupe and she wouldn't miss the stupid old woman in the least.

'Ayee. But who will care for you and wash you, and put you to bed?' exclaimed Kala.

'I'm sure my grandfather has someone who will do those things,' said Eliza, who was now looking forward to the novelty of having a white-skinned maid to order around.

The following day Mrs. Catherine Rae, Patrick Craigie's sister, who had traveled down from Scotland, came to collect her. Eliza was taken to meet her in the drawing room. Although the woman attempted to be friendly, Eliza detected Aunt Catherine's disapproval as she studied the funny little girl from India. Eliza began to wish she wasn't going to Scotland at all and that she could stay with Fanny.

Aunt Catherine's eyes held even more distaste when she realized Kala was expected to accompany them. Patrick hadn't bothered to inform the family that the child came with her own personal servant. They couldn't very well just abandon the old woman, so a ticket had to be bought for her to travel as well.

The packet boat to Aberdeen was far more uncomfortable than the ship from Calcutta had been. It smelt of coal smoke and rancid fish, and rolled around like a cork. Kala was utterly horrified at the quantities of beef pies, greasy sausages and alcoholic beverages that was consumed. Unlike the voyage to Home, which had carried enough Indian servants for her vegetable diet to be catered for, here there were few foods that were familiar or allowed to a strict Hindu. To let even one morsel pass her lips would ruin her caste forever. Neither Eliza nor her Aunt Catherine were aware that

Kala had quietly begun to starve.

As the packet plowed its way north through choppy waves, the pleasant summery weather of London was gradually left behind. By the time they were off the Scottish coast it was also cold and drizzling. Catherine was further astonished to find that Eliza seemed to have been dispatched Home with little thought as to her needs and she had not been properly outfitted at all, with no warm clothes in her luggage and only a solitary silk coat that protected her a little although the child's teeth chattered constantly. No-one bothered with Kala. In her flimsy sari she continued to suffer in shocked silence, and prayed to her ancient gods for deliverance.

Each day seemed to be the same. A savage wind blew off the North Sea and battered itself against the sandstone ridges of Montrose, making every window pane in Holly House rattle and every chimney a funnel of frigid air. Eliza had experienced being cold only a few times in her short life, but nothing had prepared her for this never-ending bone-numbing chill, and she struggled to maintain her sullen stare at the dour-faced Provost John Craigie and his spinster sister as she stood in the library in her silk coat and dress and shivered.

Miss Margaret, a thin woman with sharp-featured face and rheumy eyes, sat poker-rigid on one of the room's high-backed chairs. She reminded Eliza of Miss Bridget Riley, whose terrifying tales of Hell still came to haunt her dreams. 'And what seems to be the matter now, missy? Ever since you set foot in this house you've done nothing but complain.'

'I'm cold. My bedroom's cold. Kala is cold.'

Miss Margaret's eyes bulged. 'Cold? Pshaw! This is September, girl. Winter is at least three months away.'

Provost Craigie, irritated at being disturbed from his books yet again, frowned over his spectacles. 'From the quantity of luggage with which you arrived, lass, I canna believe there was neither coat nor jerkin provided.'

'My mother forgot it was cold at Home,' said Eliza.

'So it would seem. She must have a frightful memory. Besides, this is Scotland, not England.'

'Scotland. England. Who cares. It's all the same. I hate this place. I want to go home!' Eliza stamped her foot for added effect, but on the carpet it made no sound.

Miss Margaret's lips tightened until they disappeared into a button. 'Never in all my born days, have I witnessed such rudeness in a child, nor can I imagine what sort of household Patrick acquired for himself when he married that widow woman.'

Provost Craigie sighed and slammed his journal shut. 'Eliza Gilbert, I can no longer permit you to speak to your elders in such a fashion. It is time you learned some respect and a little humility.'

'I'm just cold ...'

'You will return to your room and you will write out "I am sinful" one hundred times.'

Eliza blinked rapidly. 'I will not,' she said forcefully. 'I haven't done anything wrong.'

Provost Craigie's white whiskers seemed to fluff out like an angry cat's tail. His hands clenched into fists. 'Are you daring to argue with *me*? You're an ungrateful wretch of a child and if you don't do as I say this minute, I will lay the birch rod to you!'

The bright blue eyes blazed. 'Go on then. Hit me. I dare you.'

'Why you little whipper-snitch ...'

But Eliza was far too quick for the old man as he lunged at her. She poked her tongue out as far as it could reach and wagged her fingers at the elderly pair before she turned and fled from the room.

The cold forgotten, she ran up the stairs two at a time and rushed into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. She rested against it for a moment, enjoying the heat created by her own temper and the race up the stairs.

From her huddled position in the corner, Kala looked up at her with her soft pained eyes. 'Oh, my child. What have you done now?' she asked in soft Hindustani.

'Come on, Kala, get my things together. We're going to run away.'

‘But where shall we go, child?’

Eliza pouted for a moment. ‘I don’t know. We’ll find a ghari to take us back to London and Fanny. Now don’t just sit there like a stone. Get packing before I lay a birch rod to you.’

Kala’s bones seemed to creak audibly as she struggled to her feet. Sluggishly, she began gathering up some of Eliza’s clothes before swaying and slumping to the floor in a dead faint. Eliza frowned at her. With her foot she prodded the old woman. ‘Kala? What’s the matter with you? Get up this instant.’ But there was no answer.

Eliza sighed with annoyance. Well, she didn’t need Kala to help her escape. The woman was too slow anyway. She collected together a few trinkets and put them into a small cedar chest, not forgetting the elephant with the ruby eyes, and a few coins. Eliza had learned that you needed money to buy food. She closed the box and tucked it under her arm and went to the window. She jiggled with the tight latch for a few moments, but she could see it was a long way to the ground and it was the enclosed rear garden of the house. There would be no escape that way. She returned to the bedroom door and as she opened it, was dismayed to find Margaret Craigie standing on the landing, hands on hips.

‘And where do you think you are going?’

Eliza stared at her sullenly.

‘You were told to write out a penance. For dawdling, you can make it five hundred times. “I am sinful” - and there will be no food or drink until you finish.’ Miss Margaret pushed her backwards into her bedroom and the cedar box slipped from Eliza’s grip and fell to the floor with a loud crash, scattering its contents, some of which landed on Kala, lying quite still.

Miss Margaret’s cold eyes rested on the ayah. ‘What’s the matter with her?’

Eliza shrugged as Miss Margaret held her breath as if Kala smelled. She tutted. ‘Such a nuisance. I can’t imagine what your step-father thought we would do with her. Wee Scots lasses don’t need their own maids. Besides, she scares the other servants. They don’t care for her heathen babbling. She must be removed.’

Eliza was thereupon forced to sit at the desk in the corner of her room and Miss Margaret placed several sheets of paper before her, a quill pen and ink. ‘You can write, I presume? Or is that something else the servants do for you in India?’

‘I can write,’ said Eliza, ‘but I don’t know how to spell “sinful”.’

Miss Margaret snatched the quill and wrote the first line in a precise copperplate script. Eliza stared at it. Most knowledge in her life thus far had been learned by listening and watching, certainly not by reading or rote writing. Patrick Craigie himself had been impatient with repetitive writing and spelling drills. Writing these words five hundred times, even if she could count that far, would be sheer torture. But she knew when she was beaten. Miss Margaret’s self-satisfied smile told her so.

A few minutes after Miss Craigie left, Provost Craigie’s coachman, an old soldier known as Jock, arrived to take Kala away. Eliza’s hand was already cramping after only the fifth line of writing and she took advantage of the interruption as Jock scooped up the frail body from the floor.

‘Where are you taking her?’

‘Och lass, canna ye nay see she’s a’ skin and bone? The master says she’s to bide a wee while with Cook till her strength returns. A good feeding of brose ’n broth and she’ll be as right as rain.’

‘She won’t eat it. She’s a Hindu.’

Jock merely grinned. ‘I never yet saw anyone turn against Cook’s broth.’

But Eliza never saw Kala again. With her mouth firmly shut against the brose and broth, the following day the ayah passed into a coma and her soul floated away.

Although she tried to pretend she didn’t care, Eliza swiftly came to realize that Kala had been her last link with everything that had been familiar. Now there was no-one to chatter away to in Hindustani, no-one to berate when her own life was miserable, no-one to understand her isolation and loneliness.

She tried to atone for her treatment of the ayah and the poor woman’s final indignity of burial in

an unmarked grave in a strange land by standing by the window and chanting towards the sea the few words she could remember of Parvati's funeral mantra. For her efforts, she received a severe reprimand from Miss Margaret who didn't want to know about Hindus, and cremation, and marigolds, and the sacred river. 'I warn you, child,' she had said, threatening Eliza with a stick. 'This is a Christian household. Don't me ever hear another word of that heathen mumbo-jumbo.'

Also on the day that Kala died, Eliza Gilbert was enrolled as a first year student in the Montrose Infants Sabbath School. She knew the moment she was led into the classroom that life held worse experiences than Bridget Riley or Miss Margaret Craigie.

With their thick Scottish brogues, their ruddy faces and gingery hair, the children seemed all the same. Not only did they look alike, but they talked and thought alike. Funny little Eliza Gilbert from India had nothing in common with them. They began by laughing at the way she spoke accented English with its lilting Hindustani overtones. Although some of the girls seemed envious of her unique dresses - how drab their gray worsted looked next to her emerald and scarlet silks - most of them poked fun at her inability to remember a single multiplication table, or how many dozen made a gross. She retaliated by flashing her eyes at them and letting fly with a few choice Spanish or French curses she had heard Uncle Patrick use when he was really angry.

'What a strange wee bird you are,' the perennially cheerful teacher would say. 'Fancy knowing French verbs and all about our dear Queen Mary, but not how to spell your own name.'

The other children would laugh and Eliza would tighten her eyes against the tears. She must never let them see her cry. Never! She had begun to hate being Eliza Gilbert. In those tormented minutes when she would stare at a blackboard covered with horrid little numbers, her father's face would form in her mind. 'Lola,' he would whisper. 'You must have courage. Be brave for me.' And she would take a deep breath, raise her head and straighten her shoulders and try once more to concentrate.

The day school was bad enough, but Sunday was worse again. Religion had had its place at Dinapore. When there was a padre available, everyone usually went to church, but if it was too hot or some other more interesting diversion such as an impromptu polo match or picnic occurred, no one thought the less of you if you decided to skip it. Here, there was nothing but the long, dreary trial of rigid Sunday observance. Two visits to the kirk in the morning and after an indigestible lunch of tough meat and tasteless vegetables, an afternoon of compulsory Bible reading, followed by a final evening visit to the kirk. The promised fires of damnation of the Craigies' Scottish Presbyterianism were every bit as dramatic as Bridget Riley's Catholic ones, but even they did not help to alleviate the crushing boredom of a Sunday at Holly House.

The days shortened and September gave way to an overcast October. The salty wind with its constant fishy odor from the North Sea intensified its invasion of the house's nooks and crannies. Eliza caught a cold, became feverish and was ordered to bed.

It was the middle of the morning and she lay and stared at the corner where Kala had slept briefly and wished she had been kinder to the old woman, although she knew instinctively that nothing would have saved her in the end. She also wished Fanny would write to her and tell her about the wonderful things they were doing in London, that city of which she had only had a tantalizing glimpse.

She wished many other things - that she had someone sweet like Mrs. Innes or Lady Nicholls to tuck her in at night and kiss her and read to her - or that she could have continued sole lessons with her step-father instead of that beastly school with its simpering teacher and those stupid red-cheeked children who didn't care about India, or know what it was like to swim naked in a green river pool surrounded by bright flowers and birds.

Eliza raised herself on her elbows and took a deep sniff. Her cold was getting better, which was unfortunate, as she would probably have to go back to school. Perhaps if she were really ill the Craigies would have to send her back to London. Oh, London! Even if it rained there, life couldn't be as dull and suffocating as this.

Eliza clambered out of the high iron-framed bed and drew back the curtains. The rain had set in

again, drifting over the gray stone town in shreds. For a few minutes, she imagined it was the monsoon, when it would rain for days at a time. She had loved the monsoon season, splashing about in the puddles, not minding in the least getting wet, for the rain was always warm against her skin.

Eliza had an idea and smiled to herself. She pulled the frilly night cap off her head and threw it on the floor and within seconds, had ripped off her night shift as well. She stood for a moment enjoying that special freedom of nakedness which she rarely experienced these days in a house where soap, water and nude bodies only seemed to make contact on very rare occasions.

She opened the bedroom door and tip-toed out on to the landing. There was no-one about. Her skin rose in bumps from the cold, but this time she was determined to ignore it. Setting her chin, she marched down the stairs.

The entrance hall was empty, but sounds were coming from the front room reserved for entertaining guests. The door was slightly ajar. She inched towards it and listened. Miss Margaret Craigie was speaking. Eliza didn't need to see her to know she was wearing her polite face and using her even more polite voice reserved for important visitors. 'My dear Lady Eddington, you are so kind. Speaking on behalf of the Committee, I must thank you for your generous assistance.'

'Think nothing of it, Miss Craigie. One has one's duty to assist children in need, as you well know, of course.'

Miss Craigie murmured something obsequious, and Eliza pushed the door open a little further until she could see through the crack. Several prim, well-dressed women were sitting in a formal circle, sipping daintily at tea. Eliza recognized them as Miss Craigie's Sabbath School Committee members, the most influential women in Montrose.

'Provost Craigie has intimated to me that little Miss Gilbert is a somewhat of a handful,' said the imperious-voiced Lady Eddington.

Miss Margaret winced and made her funny mouth. 'I've never known a child like her. Thank goodness, she's only my nephew's step-child. A true Craigie would never behave in such a fashion - it seems her mother has Spanish blood which might account for it.'

A titter ran around the circle of women.

'And since that awful servant woman who came with her died,' continued Miss Margaret, 'she has been simply frightful. Throws tantrums at the drop of a hat. Won't eat good plain food, or study her Bible. Complains about not being able to have a bath every day. Chatters away in some intelligible language and refuses to wear sensible clothes. To be honest, I'm close to my wits' end with her.'

'I have heard she is a disruptive influence in class, too,' ventured another woman. 'The other children are upset by her. They try to be nice, but she refuses to join in with their games or to be friends. The teacher is thinking of having words with Provost Craigie. She may need to be tutored privately.'

'The child doesn't deserve the expense of a private education,' retorted Miss Margaret. 'I hate to have to admit it, but I can't imagine her being good for anything ...'

Eliza pushed fully against the door and it opened wide with a loud creak. She was in full view of the Sabbath School Committee.

As each pair of eyes turned to her, she stepped back, placed her hands on her naked hips and waggled them provocatively at the women. She made a moaning sound in the back of her throat and rolled her eyes for added effect. It was a pretty good imitation of what she had seen her mother do with Patrick Craigie in the temple garden once long ago.

The resultant expressions on those faces were beyond description. Lady Eddington's spectacles fell off the end of her nose. Miss Margaret's cheeks turned a strange hue of purple. Another woman dropped her tea-cup. The rest stared, each with her mouth wide open.

Before anyone could move, Eliza gave a loud whooping yell, turned and raced to the front door. She fumbled with the big knob for a few seconds, before managing to fling it open. She rushed down to the garden gate and out into the street. The rain had stopped and the brief sunshine was sending mist up from the puddles. It was far too cold to be monsoon, but Eliza Gilbert wasn't going

to let that stop her now. She began dancing down the High Street. Dodging around pedestrians with their umbrellas, making faces through shop windows. Causing a carriage driver to draw suddenly on the reins. Whirling around, laughing and singing. Splashing in each puddle. Pulling more faces at the stunned spectators in the street.

She was Lola! And she was free!

The bushy eyebrows of Sir Jasper Nicholls knotted together in a frown as he studied the small defiant figure standing before him in his study. 'Well, Miss Eliza, it seems as if you caused quite a scandal in Montrose.'

'What's a scandal?'

She seemed so innocent standing there, with her wide blue eyes that he wondered if what the Craigies had reported to him could possibly be true.

'Dancing in the streets without a stitch of clothes on is a scandal. Provost Craigie and all the family were thoroughly embarrassed by you. What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?'

She gave a slight shrug. 'I don't know. I thought it was monsoon.'

Sir Jasper did not smile. 'Well, dancing in summer rain in India is all very well, but in a Scottish winter is quite a different matter. I understand you were suffering from a cold at the time. You're very lucky you didn't come down with phthisis.'

'Can I go home to India now?'

'You are at Home, you foolish child. You will have to stay with us for a while until we receive a reply from your step-father about your behavior and what is to be done with you.'

Eliza's face brightened. 'Is Fanny here?'

'No, she is away at boarding school. I have written and suggested to Captain Craigie that it might be best if you join her.'

Eliza didn't quite follow all of what he was telling, but one thing she did know was that was she would never have to go back to Montrose. She had learned the most important lesson of her life: you could get whatever you wanted if you really, really tried. All it took was determination and imagination - and the courage to carry it out.

Eliza smiled sweetly at Sir Jasper, not failing to notice that he seemed to be disconcerted by her. She briefly wondered how he would react if she took all her clothes off right this minute. Such an action seemed to produce remarkable reactions in grown-ups. One of these days she planned to find out exactly why.

4.

There wasn't an aspect of life in Bath on which Miss Barbara Aldridge didn't profess expert knowledge. Her father had been a devotee of the famous Beau Nash, who had made the city into the Mecca of good manners and grace, and her father, Mr. Aldridge, had made sure his daughters followed the Beau's dictates.

Apart from being well-educated in the classics, history, music and art, she was also an authority on the finer points of manners and the little tit-bits that made up good etiquette. She always kept abreast of what was in fashion, and what was out, and on whose company to cultivate, and whose to avoid. She was a fountain of knowledge on items as varied as the exact measurements and quality of paper needed for a calling card, or how low a lady's décolletage could dare to go when dining at dinner with a peer of the realm, or what time of day one should never be seen without a hat, or wear anything red; and what wine one should drink with pheasant, and when it was decidedly vulgar to drink tea. In short, Barbara Aldridge was a walking compendium of what every young lady who aspired to a distinguished society marriage ought to know.

When her father died, leaving her a large house on Camden Place, a considerable debt and three

unmarried sisters, there was no alternative but to use what she knew to its best advantage. While the Bath of Beau Nash had started to fade into a more prosaic present, there was still a demand for well turned-out young brides.

In the years since the Aldridge Academy had been established, never had Barbara Aldridge been obliged to expel a girl for misbehavior. To have done so would have been seen as a failure, and to lose face in Bath was a fate worse than death. Besides, the Aldridge sisters couldn't afford to lose even one paying girl, not with the exorbitant expenses in running an establishment in Camden Place.

While there had been times when Barbara Aldridge could have quite cheerfully wrung the necks of some girls, she had never been defeated by one. Every girl was guaranteed to graduate with flying colors and always found a suitable husband within the upper ranks of society.

When Sir Jasper Nicholls had come to her about the Academy taking on a friend of his youngest daughter, Fanny, a Miss Eliza Gilbert, the step-daughter of one of his best officers, she had not hesitated. Sir Jasper was a highly-respected soldier who had already successfully put several other daughters through the Academy and he was one of the few parents to pay his bills promptly.

However, she hadn't reckoned with the havoc Eliza Gilbert would play. The moment she had seen the pert young miss alight from Sir Jasper's barouche and those audacious sapphire eyes meet hers from beneath a deceptively innocent pink bonnet, her instincts told her she was taking on trouble.

Right from the start, Eliza seemed to have formed the idea that rules were made to be broken. In the beginning it had been minor infringements. On the days when it was decreed the girls should speak only French, Eliza would chatter away in Spanish or some heathen gibberish she had learned in India, or she would sing loudly in drawing class, and draw when she was supposed to be singing. Her talent for mimicry made anyone with an odd way of speaking or walking her constant victim.

As the years went by and she grew older, she had taken to arguing and trying to shock her tutors on subjects as diverse as what could possibly be the usefulness of learning Latin if one were destined to live in Bengal, or why women shouldn't wear cosmetics, dye their hair, or bathe naked in the Avon if they felt like it. What made it worse was that she knew Eliza Gilbert was a gifted and intelligent girl who could master anything if she only put her mind to it. Her needlework was surprisingly meticulous and her gift for languages prodigious, although her musical ability wavered between bouts of brilliance and downright sloppiness. All Barbara Aldridge could do was grit her teeth and dream of the day when Eliza Gilbert would graduate.

Antoine Morel paused for a few minutes outside the front door to the Aldridge Academy in an effort to control his thoughts. A nervous flutter had trapped itself somewhere inside his belly at the thought of seeing her again. Finally, he took a deep breath, tucked the folder containing his music sheets beneath his arm and turned the bell. It jangled loudly but he still had to wait another nerved-racked minute before Mildred Aldridge appeared. He didn't know exactly how many of them there were, as all the Aldridge women looked the same to him, like delicate fading flowers scented with unrequited dreams, only they had to be much sturdier than they appeared. Running a school for girls was not for the faint-hearted.

'Good morning, Monsieur, aren't you a little late today?'

Antoine forced a smile as the door swung open as he removed his chimney pot hat and stepped under the portico into the front hall. 'Apologies, Miss Aldridge, but I was unfortunately delayed,' he lied. There was no need for her to know he had become a victim of nerves. He followed the tiny woman across the hallway and up the stairs to the music room.

'I am afraid there is only one pupil for you this afternoon,' she said as she opened the door. 'Nearly all of the Academy is afflicted with this epidemic of influenza.'

'I can quite easily defer until next week ...'

'No, no. You are here now, and from what I have heard of her efforts, Miss Gilbert needs all the practice she can get if she is ever to make any impression in a drawing room recital.'

As he stepped into the room and saw the slender figure illuminated in the open window, the nervous flutter turned into the drum of excitement. Fancy - he would be quite alone with her!

‘With my sisters ill, I am urgently needed elsewhere,’ said Mildred. She shook a warning finger at him. ‘I know I can rely on you to observe the proprieties. Naturally, I will ask that you leave the door ajar.’

‘Why, of course, Miss Aldridge.’ Antoine bowed and the woman pursed her lips for a second before she hurried out of the room.

‘Bonjour, Monsieur.’ Eliza turned and dipped with a light curtsy.

‘Good day, Mademoiselle.’

Struggling with a rush of panic, Antoine couldn’t look at her directly. He walked to the piano, rested his folio on the top and fumbled through his sheets, not really knowing what he was doing, wondering how he was going to get through the next hour without making an ass of himself.

‘I’m about the only person not at death’s door with influenza. I have an iron constitution, or so Miss Mildred says,’ Eliza murmured as she slipped on to the piano stool. ‘She says anyone who survived a childhood in India will always be healthy.’

Antoine flicked through the sheets still not knowing what he was looking for, being acutely aware of the soft rustle of her skirt and his nostrils filling with that mysterious oriental scent he had come to associate with Eliza Gilbert. Academy girls were not permitted to wear perfumes, but each had a secret aroma of her own all the same. Most reminded him of the innocence of the countryside, fresh hay, flowers, the way all young girls should smell. But Eliza Gilbert was spicy and exotic and brought darker, forbidden images to his mind that stirred the blood.

Eliza noticed his distraction as her fingers spontaneously tinkled the keys. ‘I think we were practicing the Mozart sonata, Monsieur - or had you forgotten?’

‘Ah, yes - but of course. Here it is.’ As he flushed and smoothed the music sheet with trembling fingers, her arm brushed against his and it was a few seconds before she broke the contact - and left him tingling.

He set the metronome clicking and stood back behind the stool, crossing his arms over his chest as his eyes wandered over the glossy waves of her black hair, trying to glimpse the alabaster nape of her neck beneath the high collar. ‘Please begin.’

Eliza played and the notes filled the room, giving him a brief reprieve from the way his blood seemed to be pounding around his ears. She was a barely adequate musician and would never make a virtuoso.

‘Do you have a lover, Monsieur?’ Her voice was soft beneath the music and he had to lean forward.

‘Don’t speak while you are playing - what did you say?’

‘I asked if you have a lover. A mistress.’ Eliza pressed harder upon the keys but barely faulted in her tempo.

‘Mademoiselle - concentrate, if you please ...’

‘All the girls here simply adore you, Monsieur. Lots of them are dying to be your mistress, but you must know that. I guess it happens in every girls’ school with few male teachers. They’d probably be in love with you even if you were old and stooped.’ She abruptly stopped playing and spun on the stool, looking up at him. ‘But fortunately for us you are not.’ She smiled, her mouth parted slightly and the tip of her tongue ran along the edge of her perfect white teeth. Magnetic eyes gazed into his - deep blue pools rimmed with thick black lashes.

He felt tight and choked as if was beginning to drown. ‘Mademoiselle - I must p- protest at your improper ...’

Eliza spun the stool again and was on her feet before he realized it. Swiftly her hands locked behind his neck, her fingers embedded in his hair, and she drew his face to hers. ‘Kiss me, Monsieur - Antoine, darling. Just one kiss for me alone.’

He was too stunned to move and, as their mouths met, his body exploded with darts of fire. Reason left him as he crushed her to him, feeling through the clothing barriers the pressure of firm

young breasts against his chest, her well-curved hip hard against his rapidly blooming masculinity: savoring the smell, taste and feel of her which was even more thrilling than its promise. Just as his hand pressed upon her breast and his tongue began a wild exploration for hers, she broke away from him and sank back on to the stool.

‘Well, now,’ she murmured. ‘That was most interesting.’

Antoine’s senses reeling, he looked at her in amazement for a second before bending down beside her, his hand clutching her sleeve. ‘Interesting?’ he said breathlessly. ‘Is that all you can say? You cannot torment a man so and just leave it at that.’

Eliza studied the music and, gently removing his fingers from her arm, began to play again. ‘What would you have me do, Monsieur Antoine?’ she said in that voice that was more lilted than any Mozart sonata, ‘permit you to deflower me here on the floor of the music room? I hardly think the Misses Aldridge would approve.’ Soft laughter accompanied her rapid fingering.

Antoine continued to shake and stare at her in stunned amazement. ‘What kind of girl are you? To speak so plain, to even *know* of such things?’

‘Oh, I use my eyes and ears, Antoine. India tends to prepare one for life in a way that cannot be matched elsewhere.’

‘You mean that you have seen ...’

‘Yes, but I was merely a child at the time and did not really understand.’ She paused in the middle of a bar. She glanced back at him, her eyes dancing with blue flames. ‘I’m much older now,’ she continued in that sensuous voice, ‘I think it’s certainly time I learned about kisses.’

‘And so you would use me?’ His voice caught.

‘You are a most attractive man, Antoine, but I am hardly of a mind to elope with you.’ She picked up from where she left off, playing in a highly embellished fashion.

Antoine’s face was flushed and his heart pounded more than ever. ‘And what will become of me?’ he gasped. ‘Do you not know what you have done? For six months now I have looked forward to the hours in your company with great anticipation. Hardly a night has gone by when I have not dreamed of you - your delicate form - your beautiful face. Waiting for the fortuitous day such as this, when I should be alone in your company - wondering if I would dare to declare myself and my feelings for you.’

His outburst brought an abrupt end to her playing. He felt dizzy and slightly nauseous and drew out a handkerchief, wiping his face and covering it, praying that she couldn’t see his anguish. There was a full minute of silence broken only by the clicking of the metronome before a voice cut through the tension.

‘Is Miss Gilbert’s playing so bad, Monsieur, that you must weep?’

He quickly removed the handkerchief to see Mildred in the doorway. Her expression was bland and he hoped she hadn’t witnessed the passionate encounter. He managed a weak smile. ‘I have known her play better, Miss Aldridge, and I have also been of a better frame of mind for instruction myself. I think I may too be on the brink of acquiring this dreaded malady that is doing the rounds. Pray forgive me, but I must cut short the lesson this week.’

Mildred Aldridge nodded. ‘You do look rather flushed, Monsieur. Let us hope that all of us are all well again next week.’

As Antoine quickly collected his belongings together, he briefly caught Eliza’s eye. He had the feeling she was laughing at him and it made his pain even more acute. ‘The Mozart sonata is not a difficult piece, Mademoiselle,’ he said stiffly with what remaining dignity he could muster. ‘You must learn not to be distracted by day-dreaming.’

‘Yes, Monsieur,’ she murmured lowering her lashes in feigned modesty.

Mildred Aldridge walked with him to the front door. ‘Are you aware, Monsieur, of Miss Gilbert’s age?’ she asked, as he was about to step into the street.

Antoine experienced a sinking sensation. He should have known the intuitive teacher had guessed that something improper had taken place between them.

‘She is quite remarkably mature for someone not yet thirteen, wouldn’t you say?’

He stared at her in horror. ‘Do you mean she’s only ... *twelve*?’

‘I’m afraid so. We have had many students here over the years who were born in foreign climates. All that heat seems to stimulate extraordinary growth. Besides, I have also heard it said that her mother developed early. Physical maturity and a precocious temperament make for a dangerous combination in a female, especially when one’s mind is still that of a child and in the process of being conditioned and educated - but I’m sure I don’t need to remind you of that.’

Antoine bit his lip. ‘I ... I thank you for the information,’ he stuttered. ‘I had always assumed Miss Eliza to be at least three or four years older. I guess it also explains her ... her rather undisciplined pianoforte.’

‘Hm, yes. Can we expect you again next week?’

He gave a hurried nod, but couldn’t wait to get out of the door. Once out in the street, Antoine tried to collect his wits. He could sense the figure of Eliza Gilbert was standing in the window of the music room watching him, but kept his eyes averted from the building, feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself. How could such a thing have happened? Twelve years old – just a child. He didn’t know which was worse, her tender age or the complete fool he made of himself by declaring his affection and setting himself up for seduction. Although he didn’t want to look up at the window again, but found himself compelled to. Eliza waved at him, but he just flushed, jammed his hat on his head and marched off down Camden Place towards the center of Bath.

Meanwhile, Eliza was so excited that her first instinct was to rush and tell her sick friends all about what had happened. She had finally kissed the music master! She had sent him into such a spin that he had become quite disturbed - enough to cut short the lesson. But half-way in her sprint to the boarding dormitories, she paused and changed her mind. The taste of Antoine Morel still lingered on her lips and she could still feel the imprint of his hardness against her inner thigh and she realized she didn’t want to share the experience. It was too personal - too special - to be bandied around a bunch of innocent, giggling girls who had no idea at all of what men and women did together in private. When once she had tried to enlighten them on the truth, they had all been shocked and refused to listen to her disgusting ideas. She was just making it up, they all said. Didn’t she know babies came with storks, or from Heaven on angel’s wings?

A few of the older girls like Fanny knew otherwise, of course. She thought of telling her later, but remembered how her friend was also quite besotted with Antoine Morel and swooned her way through every music class. It was the sort of revelation that could make Fanny unhappy and upset their special trust. Fanny was the one person Eliza didn’t want to hurt. She was her only real friend and confidante because she, at least, understood what it was like to be different from others. With Mama never bothering to write to her at all, and only a few brief notes once or twice a year on her birthday or at Christmas from her step-father, Eliza felt she had been abandoned by her real family. It didn’t bother her unduly, but she didn’t want to risk losing the precious ties with Sir Jasper Nicholls and his family, for the only other alternative was to be sent back to horrid Scotland.

She turned around and retraced her steps to the music room, where she concentrated on playing the sonata to perfection.

Barbara Aldridge lay in bed, marking essays between bouts of coughing. She eyed her younger sister warily. ‘Mildred, from that particular expression on your face may I assume Eliza Gilbert has been playing up again?’

‘How did you guess?’ said Mildred, drawing up a chair next to her sister’s bed.

‘No-one else can exasperate you quite to the extent she does. What is it now?’

‘I made the mistake of leaving her alone with Monsieur Morel. I was only gone a few minutes and yet ...’

‘She managed to ravish him in the interim, I suppose?’ finished Barbara caustically.

Mildred met her sister’s eyes. ‘Hardly. I didn’t see anything, but from his impatience to leave I guessed that something of an improper nature may have occurred. What is it about that girl, Barbara? No amount of lecturing, warning or threats seem to have the faintest effect. I suspect some

of our other gentleman tutors have also felt uneasy in her presence. She's a born flirt and is beginning to be a bad influence on the other girls. I really don't know how much longer we can put up with her.'

'No-one has ever been expelled from this establishment, Mildred, and I don't intend to start now. Even the most recalcitrant girl can be salvaged. Think of it as a challenge, if you must, but we have to keep Eliza here.'

Mildred sighed. 'But I have a feeling we'll be looking for a new music master.'

The memory of her kiss and his constant dreams of Eliza nearly drove Antoine crazy. She was only twelve and he must forget her, but the more he tried, the more he thought about her.

Although there was no question that he had to resign from his position there, sometimes he would hide in the gardens near the Academy, just waiting for a glimpse of her. To see her laughing in the company of the other girls or flashing those remarkable eyes at boys in the street would give him a spasm of jealousy mixed with pleasure. After she had gone from view, his despair intensified.

Soon, he started to have trouble teaching his other pupils and lost all his positions. His life degenerated into a mess. Depressed, and with little money left, he returned to his home in Paris. Desperate to find some meaning for his existence and in a moment of recklessness, he joined with some of his old student friends in the new wave of revolution that was stirring against the rule of King Charles X. It was several weeks before news of his death on the Parisian barricades reached the Aldridge Academy. He did not suffer. The end was quick. A single bullet to the head.

At the news, Fanny and many of the other girls openly wept copious tears but a dry-eyed Eliza simply had a few minutes of quiet contemplation. She sat in her room, turning her ruby-eyed elephant in her fingers, thinking about her gentle Papa and also Antoine - and the taste of her first adult kiss. The two men who had loved her. Life had been so short for both of them, and what had they accomplished in their lives? Very little. It was so important to *live!* To really live at the height of one's capacity. To see everything. To do everything. To experience everything the world had to offer - for one never knew when it could end.

They were profound thoughts for a girl of her years, but in those few moments Eliza Gilbert took her first conscious steps towards her future. For the rest of her school years, she made a serious effort to study and learn everything the Aldridge sisters could offer. She paid attention in history and art classes, in singing and in drawing, and acquired all the graces in deportment, grooming and etiquette. She was determined that when she had finally finished with the Aldridge Academy, she would have every asset a woman would need to embark on a quest for life.

'I think I'll hang myself if I have to stay in this damnable dump of a place another minute,' Eliza announced as she paced restlessly around the sewing room.

'Eliza, why do you always have to be so dramatic? You're swearing again. Miss Mildred will kill you if she hears you using such words.'

'Fanny - all the Misses Aldridge have wanted to strangle me at least a hundred times since I came here, but you and I know that while your Papa and my step-father pay the bills, they've restrained themselves. But another six weeks and it will all be over. Just imagine - after all these years of school, I'll know real freedom at last!'

Fanny shook her head and returned to her tapestry. 'I don't know why you're so excited. You've laughed often enough at what you call the Bath cattle market. Once you're out of here there's every chance you will be part of it.'

'I most certainly will not!'

'Oh, and what, pray, do you intend to do? Walk out of the front door and become an independent lady of leisure?'

The other girls in the sewing circle sniggered, but kept their heads lowered. They could sense an Eliza Gilbert storm in the offing. While Fanny very rarely was on the receiving end of her tongue, anyone else within breathing distance usually suffered.

Eliza stopped and frowned at her friend. ‘And what’s so wrong with that idea? Why is it always assumed that women are good for nothing more than marriage?’

‘Because that’s just the way it is, Eliza. Besides, how would you live? Where would you get the money?’

‘I’ll find a rich man who will fall so desperately in love with me that he will provide for me in his will and I’ll put poison in his tea and run away.’

‘Him, yes, I can just visualize you as a Lady Macbeth, sneaking around castles, a bottle marked with a skull and crossbones in your tight little fist.’

The sewing group could no longer contain itself and each girl burst out giggling.

Eliza’s complexion rarely suffered the indignities of a blush but this time it turned an angry pink. She whirled on her friend. To everyone’s consternation, she ripped Fanny’s tapestry frame from her fingers, threw it on the carpet and stamped on it viciously as if it were a scorpion.

Tears brimmed in Fanny’s eyes. ‘Oh, Eliza, that’s so horrid and unfair. The thing’s taken me months,’ she protested weakly.

Eliza didn’t seem to hear her as her eyes flashed across each girl. ‘How dare you make fun of me? You are all the most stupid fools. Can’t any of you ever think for yourselves? Submitting meekly to the cattle market is just as bad as being suttee.’

‘What’s suttee?’ The question from one of the younger girls instantly broke the tension.

Eliza always liked the opportunity to air her superior knowledge of the world. As quickly as it had flared, her anger retreated. She picked up the broken frame and handed it back to Fanny with an apologetic smile and looked at the girl who had the question. ‘Suttee is what Hindu women have to do when their husbands die. They must throw themselves on his funeral pyre and they are burnt to death along with his body.’

There were the appropriate gasps of horror from the other girls.

‘Ugh. How dreadful. Being sent to the cattle market isn’t as bad as that, surely?’ said one.

Eliza shrugged. ‘Probably not, but I think I’d rather commit suttee than marry some of those arthritic ogres we have seen scouting at the Spring Gardens.’

Fanny lifted her head from examining her wounded tapestry. Fortunately it wasn’t as badly damaged as she’d feared. ‘I don’t know what you are so concerned about,’ she said. ‘Who could possibly imagine Eliza Gilbert with a husband who isn’t young and dashing and ever so handsome, and who simply adores her?’

The other girls grinned and nodded, while Eliza gave a heart-rending sigh and pressed her palms together in a gesture of prayer. She tilted her head slightly and, opening her eyes wide, gazed up at the ceiling. It was one of her favorite parodies - the pleading saint - that always made the other pupils collapse into fits of giggles.

Miss Mildred chose that exact moment to enter the sewing room. Over the years she had been forced to tolerate Eliza’s outrageous behavior, but her open scorn of religion was where she had to draw the line. Her eyes narrowed briefly and she gave a loud disapproving sniff. ‘Miss Gilbert, I might have known it was you causing disturbance.’

As if she had not heard her, Eliza continued to hold her pose, deliberately fluttering her long lashes while pretending to finish her prayer. ‘And may the merciful Lord grant these my heartfelt desires. Amen,’ she said rapidly.

Their mouths tightly clamped against more giggles, the girls kept their heads lowered and concentrated on their stitches.

‘Miss Gilbert!’

Eliza shook her head as if coming out of a daze. ‘Oh, Miss Aldridge, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were there. It was the strangest thing, I had this sudden urge to pray.’

But Mildred Aldridge wasn’t in the mood for Eliza’s antics. ‘You and Miss Fanny Nicholls will pack away your needles and threads and come directly to my sister’s parlor,’ she said sharply.

Fanny glanced up, her face instantly pale. Although well-known as Eliza’s best friend, she usually managed to avoid being caught up in any of her pranks.

‘Make haste if you please.’ Mildred marched out.

‘Oh Eliza, what have you done now?’ said Fanny breathlessly as they hurried across the hall a few minutes later.

‘Why do you always assume it’s something I have done?’

‘Because it always *is*, that’s why.’

The parlor door was open and the girls entered. Barbara Aldridge sat at her desk, a recently opened letter in front of her.

She addressed Fanny first. ‘I have just received this communication from your father. It seems he has been called to urgent diplomatic duties in France and has informed me that he will be in Bath within the week. As your finishing year is almost over, it has been decided to terminate your stay with us a little earlier than planned.’

‘Alleluia!’ Eliza clapped her hands.

Barbara glared at her. ‘Be so kind as to let me finish.’

Eliza pressed her lips together against the bubble of joy rising within her.

‘Miss Nicholls will be traveling with her father immediately, while you, Miss Gilbert, will stay another few days until your mother arrives.’

The bubble exploded. ‘*Mother?*’

‘Yes, I am pleased to inform you that Sir Jasper has received a letter from your step-father saying that Mrs. Craigie recently sailed from Calcutta and is expected in Bristol any day now. I’m sure you will be very happy at such news.’

Rarely was Eliza lost for words. She could only stare as Barbara Aldridge folded Sir Jasper’s letter and put it aside. ‘That will be all girls. You may return to your embroidery.’

There was an odd weak sensation in her legs as Eliza slowly followed Fanny out of the room. Her thrill at the prospect of leaving school had been replaced by an inexplicable desire to stay. It had been nearly ten years since she had last seen Elizabeth Craigie and she still remembered that unhappy farewell. In all that time she had received not a single word from her mother, not even a card on her birthday. She was now a complete stranger to her.

Fanny paused and looked back. ‘What’s the matter Eliza? I thought you’d be thrilled?’ At the concern in her friend’s voice, Eliza forced a smile. ‘Oh, I just felt funny for a moment. It must be the curse.’

‘Hush, Eliza, you shouldn’t speak aloud about such things.’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, why not? Every girl in this place gets the curse yet they all try to pretend it doesn’t exist. And of course I’m hysterical with joy to be getting out of here.’ She quickly marched ahead so that Fanny couldn’t see the tears that were glistening in her eyes.

5.

Lieutenant Thomas James lay back against the pillows of a bed in the best room of the Cross Keys Inn, drew on his cheroot and blew several smoke rings towards the ceiling.

It had only taken a day on dry land and he was beginning to feel remarkably well. Those meddlesome army quacks had said no tobacco, and definitely no physical exertion, if he was to make a full recovery from his last bout of fever, but there was nothing like a good smoke and a grind between the sheets to get a man’s blood flowing again. He gave a self-satisfied sigh as he thought about the coming months of his recuperative leave. Ah, but it was good to be Home.

The woman lying next to him gave a little snore and he elbowed her in the ribs. She grunted before opening her eyes. ‘What? What is it?’

‘It isn’t ladylike to snore.’

The eyes opened languidly and flashed sultry green daggers at him. ‘I do *not* snore.’

‘Well if it wasn’t snoring, it was a damned good imitation.’ He grinned and stubbed out his cigar

before turning on his side to face her. ‘You utter some interesting noises, my dear Betty, especially when you take a turn at riding St George fashion.’

The woman gave a half smile and her eyes clouded with a renewal of desire as her fingers traced their way across the smoothly muscular chest. ‘You do like that, little Tommy, don’t you?’ She slid towards him, forcing him deep into the pillows and, straddling across his body, ground against him. ‘Oh, but you are so greedy, my scrumptious dragon.’

He chuckled and fondled her breasts as he felt himself quickly stiffen. God, but she was good. He pulled her face to his and explored her mouth’ heat with his tongue while she slid herself over his eagerness. As she arched her back and bucked him with ferocity, he moaned. Those sly rumors he had heard before leaving Calcutta about Betty Craigie had been proved true - she was the best damned lay in the whole of the Honorable East India Company.

Two hours later, and Mrs. Betty Craigie, the respectable wife of Major Patrick Craigie of the 19th Native Infantry, sat in the waiting lounge of the same coaching inn surrounded by her mountains of luggage. A woman at the peak of physical attractiveness, her new chartreuse green traveling costume set off her bright auburn curls and audacious eyes and she drew admiring glances from every corner.

Lieutenant Thomas James, equally resplendent in his red and white uniform, wandered casually into the lounge.

‘I say, aren’t you Lieutenant James of the 21st?’ Betty said loudly enough so that all her traveling companions could hear. ‘What a small world. Will you be joining us on the Bath post?’

He revealed nothing as he bent over her offered gloved hand. ‘Why yes, Mrs. Craigie. Such a pleasure it is to see you here. I do so look forward to traveling in your company.’

‘I trust that your health has improved since we last met.’

‘The long sea voyage was most recuperative, ma’am.’

‘Will you be tarrying long in Bath?’

‘A sufficient time to take the waters and avail myself of other amusements that are so sadly lacking in India, ma’am.’

‘Ah, yes, but of course. I will think of you should I be in the mind to hold a soiree.’

‘That is most kind of you, ma’am.’ He bowed and clicked his heels. A few minutes later as they boarded the post-chaise together, Lieutenant James was careful to seat himself in the opposite corner to Mrs. Craigie.

Barbara Aldridge was surprised, to say the least. She had often wondered what sort of mother could have given birth to such an irreverent and stubborn handful as Eliza Gilbert, but she wasn’t ready for the self-assuredness of the youthful and beautiful woman who came to collect her. Miss Aldridge was vaguely disappointed, as she had been hoping to see a savage virago to give proof to her conviction that bloodlines rarely proved false. But, as the two women sat together in her private parlor, it was difficult trying to find kind things to say about Eliza’s time at the school. Barbara Aldridge murmured the necessary platitudes about Eliza’s aptitude for language, needlework and dancing, but found she couldn’t bring herself to discuss her behavior and her disrespect for authority. If it hadn’t been for a definite similarity in the boldness of eye, she almost wondered if Eliza could have been adopted.

‘It has been a devastating wrench to be separated from one’s only child for such a length of time,’ said Betty, with a graceful sniff into a lace handkerchief. ‘But it has given me great comfort to know that my dearest friend, Sir Jasper Nicholls, and you, dear Miss Aldridge, have cared for her so well and given her the opportunity for a refined education.’

Barbara preened. ‘You can be assured your daughter is well-rounded in all that a young lady needs to know, Mrs. Craigie. She will make an excellent hostess one day.’

There was a light tap on the door and Eliza entered. Dressed in her simple blue and white Academy uniform, her pale face and luminous eyes framed by her long black hair, she was the picture of virginal innocence. If there was a fleeting instant when Betty flinched at her daughter’s

unexpected beauty and Eliza's eyes flashed suspicion in return, it went unnoticed by Miss Aldridge.

'Eliza - oh, my darling, darling child!' Betty jumped up from her chair. Within seconds, she had enveloped her daughter in a silken eau-de-cologne embrace.

Eliza stood stock still, something in the woman's smell stirring in her memory. She felt smothered, frightened, yet at the same time she wanted to respond, to give her mother the comfort of loving arms about her, but her limbs refused to move. Betty must have sensed her indecision and she lifted her daughter's chin, studying her face with intense detail. 'It has been so long - these ten dreadful, dreadful years. We need to become reacquainted so that you can give your mother the affection she is her due.'

Eliza rarely mumbled, but the words she wanted to say didn't seem to come out right. Her 'Yes' sounded more like a swallowed gurgle, and she saw Miss Aldridge's brows crease with disapproval.

But Betty did not seem to notice as she took her daughter's hands in hers and stretched out her arms in order to study her from head to toe. 'Hm. You have developed an admirable figure, my dearest one. We must show it to best advantage. The English climate has served your skin well. And I see you are blessed with good hair and I see something of myself in the shape of your eyes. You are indeed a fortunate young woman.'

Betty glanced at Barbara. 'I have taken rooms in the North Parade. I will send a carriage to collect Eliza and her belongings later this afternoon. I thank you for your patience in instilling in her the necessary accomplishments.'

Miss Aldridge dropped a slight curtsy as Betty Craigie swept out imperiously.

For a minute pupil and teacher stood staring at each other. 'There have been times when I despaired of you, Miss Gilbert,' said Barbara at last, 'but I trust you will not disgrace the memory of the Aldridge Academy?'

Eliza, her brief spasm of awkwardness gone, tossed back her hair and her eyes sparkled. 'Now whatever should make you think such a thing, Miss Aldridge, I can not imagine.' Her lips formed the flirtatious smile she usually reserved for flattering music masters before flouncing out in a manner not dissimilar from that of her mother.

Barbara Aldridge gave an exhausted sigh and collapsed into her chair. She opened a drawer in her desk and drew out a silver flask. With an inelegant gulp that would have been a dreadful infringement of Bath etiquette should it have been witnessed by anyone, she celebrated the end of Eliza Gilbert with a huge mouthful of the best French brandy.

Eliza squeezed her eyes and gasped as the dressmaker pulled her corset ribbons tighter and tighter. For a moment she had trouble drawing breath and thought she would faint before Betty's cry of delight made her open them again. Her mother snatched the measuring tape from the dressmaker's hands and whipped it around Eliza's waist.

'Ah, as I thought. Seventeen and one-quarter inches! I warrant there isn't another waist that slender in all of Bath.'

Eliza felt as if her breasts were going to collide with her chin while her lungs and stomach had been forced into a fierce competition for space. She could probably continue to breathe if a morsel of food never passed her lips again, and eat only if she didn't breathe. It seemed a horrendous torture all for the sake of fashion.

'Mademoiselle has a remarkable figure, madam,' enthused the dressmaker. 'It is rare to see such a delicate waist on one with an abundant bosom.'

'Capital, quite capital.' Betty Craigie clapped her hands and stepped back to survey her daughter as if she were a statue in the process of sculpting. 'What colors do you suggest?'

'Oh, with those eyes, madam, we would recommend all shades of blue.'

The dressmaker snapped her fingers and an assistant hurried forward with several bolts of silks, each unraveled at a time and draped each across Eliza's shoulders. 'Might we suggest for mademoiselle cornflower sarcenet with blonde lace for morning wear?' And forget-me-not patterned challis for afternoon? Evening wear, *naturement*, must still be white at her age - although

moire silk may give it depth - but accessories can be in midnight blue, which is simply quite the rage this season.'

'Oh, yes, I do so adore your suggestions.' Betty glanced at Eliza. 'And what do you say, my dear? Isn't this the greatest fun? Isn't it wonderful to be wearing real clothes after all those years in that frightful school uniform?'

Eliza was afraid to speak, lest her voice emerge as a squeak but she knew the questions weren't meant to be answered. In the past few days she had come to realize Betty always talked that way. Her mother didn't have the least interest in her opinions, but it didn't bother her - the new freedom was far too exciting. Fashion magazines had been occasionally smuggled into the Academy, and Eliza and the other girls had positively drooled over the images of dresses that they contained. Now at last she would be wearing similar styles for herself. Betty Craigie was sparing no expense.

After the couturier, came the milliner for a selection of fashionably narrow *bibi* bonnets topped with concoctions of flowers to match every new dress. This was followed by a whirl through other shops for all the other essential accessories that a fashionable young lady needed: be-ribboned caps for indoors, slipper shoes, kid leather walking boots, muffs and reticules, parasols, fans and mittens - and finally a visit to the jewelers. Betty had brought a large quantity of her own jewels from India but she decided they were too exotic and flamboyant for her virgin daughter, so Eliza had to settle for discreet pearls, cameos and simple drop earrings.

Eliza's mind was still spinning with the visions of all the delights she had seen as, laden with wonderful little boxes, mother and daughter emerged from the jewelers into Beauford Square to find a young man in military uniform leaning against the door of their carriage as if it belonged to him. As he saw the two women, he stood swiftly to attention and gave an exaggerated bow.

'Good afternoon, Mrs. Craigie. I just happened to be passing by when I saw what I perceived to be your carriage. I could not, of course, continue on without paying my respects.'

'Why, fancy this, now, Lieutenant James, what a pleasant surprise,' said Betty without a flicker.

In his late twenties, he was tall and slender, with fair curly hair, handsome chiseled features and a well-curved mouth. It was not just his stance and his uniform that gave Eliza an unexpected jolt. Having no miniature portrait to remember him by, she had long since forgotten exactly what her father had looked like, but something in this man's manner, and especially his eyes with their hazel flecks, stirred her memory. They also held that unique distant quality only to be found in eyes that had reflected the hot mirage of the plains of India and the seductive coolness of her sacred rivers.

'This is my daughter, Eliza. She has just been finished and we are having the most marvelous time buying up the whole of Bath.' Betty gave Eliza an unexpected affectionate squeeze around the waist.

'Finished, eh?' The entrancing eyes danced with humor as they quickly traced Eliza's trim shape. 'Well I must say, Mrs. Craigie, it has been most admirably done.'

'We are quite exhausted and were thinking of taking tea,' said Betty, her eyelashes fluttering coquettishly. 'If you have no other pressing engagements you might care to join us, Lieutenant?'

'I would be utterly delighted, Mrs. Craigie.'

As the trio sipped their tea and nibbled on dainty biscuits in one of Bath's most elegant coffee houses, Eliza was oblivious to the sexual undercurrents in the flirty conversation between her mother and Thomas James as she was still too inexperienced to understand the real meaning of the occasional *double entendre* that passed between them. Her own mind was on other things. It was rare for her to be dumbstruck, but in this man's presence she was totally enraptured. All she could think was this is exactly how her father would be if he were still alive. This is the way he would joke and tell stories about his life in the regiment. How he would grumble about his love and hate for India. She was transported back to that wonderful time when Papa had been the most important person in her world - when she had been truly loved. That she had merged the two men into one never occurred to her. All Eliza could think of was that after all those lonely years of her restrictive and tiresome education, life had become extraordinarily wonderful.

After tea, Lieutenant James accompanied them to their rooms and assisted with the mountain of

packages. Eliza was ecstatic when Mama arranged to meet him for breakfast at the Spring Gardens, and later at the Pump Room to take the water, culminating in dinner and a visit to the theater.

Before she retired for the night, Eliza searched through her boxes until she found her elephant. She went to sleep with it tucked beneath her pillow.

From the start, Thomas James tried to avoid any lengthy eye contact with Miss Gilbert. With the instincts of the practiced *roué*, he sensed she boded trouble for him, although she was always well-behaved, even quiet, in his presence as if she was in utter awe of him. He couldn't decide if she was totally unaware of the sexual magnetism she had clearly inherited from her mother, or whether she was deliberately containing it - waiting for the right moment to pounce and declare herself. Although virgins had rarely interested him in the past, he found himself going as rigid as a bayonet whenever he thought about her, imagining what it would be like to introduce her to the arts of love. And it was Eliza's innocently seductive image that filled his mind as he thrust himself into her mother each clandestine night after the daughter had gone to bed.

As the idyllic weeks of that Bath summer passed by, Eliza's self-confidence grew rapidly. Dressed in her new finery, all those manners and graces taught by the Misses Aldridge finally proved their worth. She was aware of heads turning whenever she, Mama and Lieutenant James strolled along the promenades, entered the boxes at the Theater Royal, or danced quadrilles at the Assembly Rooms, and she enjoyed the sensation of being the subject of interest.

While she at last was free to exercise those frustrated flirtation skills that she had reserved for music masters on the new variety of males beginning to orbit around her, her obsession was with Lieutenant James, still identifying him with her beloved Papa. It was him she wanted to know, and him alone.

In the arms of Thomas James she waltzed in her own private heaven. That Betty Craigie did not actively push her into the arms of other men did not seem to her as unusual until one evening when Thomas was in an uncharacteristically irascible mood. It was to be the first time she had witnessed friction between him and her mother. They were at a levee in the Assembly Rooms. Eliza and Thomas had just completed a strenuous polka. Eliza, her heart beating happily from the exertion and her own personal delight, joined her mother to help themselves to supper from a buffet table. A puffing Thomas gulped down several cups of brandy punch.

'Far be it for me to comment, Mrs. Craigie,' he said between drinks, 'but there are a hundred and one eligible young gentlemen just dying for a turn with your daughter.'

'I beg your pardon?' Betty frowned at him.

'I am talking about *dancing*, madam. Your daughter should dance with other men. She must be growing exceedingly bored with dreary old me.'

Eliza's eyes sparkled and widened with surprise. 'Oh, no, Lieutenant James. I'm not in the least bit bored. I could dance with you forever.'

Betty looked from Eliza to Thomas and back again. A strange expression came over her face as if a beacon had been lit in her brain. 'No, he's quite right,' she said, 'I can't possibly have people thinking that he is your fiancé. He's nothing but an impoverished lieutenant who has been hoping for a promotion by ingratiating himself with a major's family.' Her green eyes glinted with metallic barbs.

Eliza stared at her mother, horrified. 'Mama - that's not true. And you're being rude to Lieutenant James ...'

'Don't challenge me, you young hussy.'

'All I said ...'

'Be quiet!'

Thomas, his face pale, slowly replaced his punch cup on the table and leaned forward. 'People are watching, Betty,' he whispered, 'surely you don't want to start them gossiping about your behavior?'

'I don't care. You're a swine,' she hissed back at him, her beautiful face now twisted into an ugly

caricature. 'I can't believe it took me so long to see what you're up to. She's not for the likes of you. I already have plans for her.'

'Betty, I don't know what's got into you. I'm not interested in your daughter ...'

'Oh yes, you are. Once a rake, always a rake.'

He scoffed. 'And you should know one.'

Betty thrust down her plate of sweetmeats and clasped Eliza's arm. 'We're leaving right now, missy. We've tarried far too long in this unpleasant company.'

Back in their own rooms, Eliza sat glumly on the sofa, bereft of her supper and a strange deflated sensation gnawing at her hollow stomach. She was trying to understand the bewildering sudden end to their evening. She couldn't even remember what had started the argument between her mother and Lieutenant James, who had also stormed out of the Assembly Rooms with a thunderous face.

'I've wasted far too much time with that stupid man,' Betty was muttering as she paced up and down the parlor, 'and forgot why I came here in this first place.'

'I thought you came to fetch me out of the Academy,' reminded Eliza flatly. 'I don't know why you had to be so horrid to the Lieutenant. He has been so kind and friendly.'

Betty's mouth tightened. 'He was kind and friendly, my dear Eliza,' she said acidly, 'because he has designs on you. Major Craigie would make a fine father-in-law for any man with ambition. I still can't believe how blind I've been.'

Eliza was surprised. The idea of Thomas James as a lover seemed vaguely disturbing. To her, he was still the father she had lost. 'I do think you're just imagining it, Mama. To be honest, I'm quite sure he's in love with you, not me.'

Betty turned her face away so that her daughter could not see the satisfied cat-smile that had formed on her lips. 'Oh, really, Eliza. What ridiculous fancies you have. I'm a married woman for goodness' sake. But it is just as well we are no longer on terms with him.'

The following morning, Betty decided not to go out early as she had some urgent letters to write, and Eliza wandered around their rooms pining for Thomas's company. He had promised to take her riding that morning. Equestrianism had not been part of Barbara Aldridge's curriculum and it had been simply ages since she had last ridden a horse. She had so been looking forward to the excursion.

After the last letter was sealed and the servant sent off to the post, Betty announced it was time to go shopping again. To Eliza's surprise, the carriage dropped them outside a discreet shop that specialized in ladies' lingerie. Not the simple corsets, cotton chemises and petticoats that the dressmaker had provided, these were quite different. Eliza had once glimpsed her mother in something similar - richly laced negligees in oyster silks with red bows - black lace and satin petticoats, silk stockings and ruffled red garters. Eliza knew enough that this was not the sort of underwear for ingénues, but for married women. Betty began selecting several items, placing them against Eliza's figure to judge how they might fit.

'Mama,' she whispered when the shop assistant was out of earshot. 'Are you buying these for me or for yourself?'

'For you, dear. For your trousseau.'

'Trousseau?'

'Don't play ignorant. When you are married, you will need to be alluring. With a husband like yours, he will need all the help he can get.'

'What are you talking about Mama?'

Betty gave an impatient clicking sound. 'We'll discuss it later.'

Something cold had wormed its way into Eliza's stomach. 'No, Mama. I want to know. What do you mean, "with a husband like yours"?''

Betty's face tightened as she continued feeling and selecting the garments. 'This is not a matter to be discussed in a shop.'

Eliza tore the silk chemise from her mother's hands and flung it on the floor. 'I demand that you tell me now!'

‘Don’t speak to me like this.’

‘I’ll speak however I wish.’

The shop assistant returned just as Betty’s hand whipped across Eliza’s face. The woman gasped as Eliza cried out and stumbled against the counter. Betty grabbed her daughter’s arm and pushed her towards the door.

Trembling from shock, and her cheek stinging from the vicious slap, Eliza allowed her mother to propel her into the carriage. Betty ordered the coachman to drive around the park. She waited until Eliza’s breathing had eased before speaking, her face a mask of icy fury. ‘Why did you think you were educated? All those lessons in French conversation and fine manners that your step-father has paid for? Did you think they were just so you could spend your time prettying yourself for balls to waltz around with a petticoat knight like Lieutenant James?’

Eliza stared back at her, her teeth clamped together against the shivering that had enveloped her body.

‘The Lieutenant James’s of this world are a pound a penny,’ continued her mother coldly. ‘They serve their purpose when a woman is bored and seeks light amusement, but what really counts is a good *marriage*. To a man who will provide you with your rightful place in society. I have arranged a brilliant match for you. Just this morning I sent word to Calcutta to Major General Sir James Lambton, Adjutant General of Bengal, that you have consented to be his bride. We will make preparations to return to India within the week.’

Little black dots seemed to dance in front of Eliza’s eyes. It was a few seconds before she remembered Sir James Lambton. He had been a visitor to Sir Jasper’s house in London one summer. A bald man with a paunch, bad breath and horrid table habits. She could also remember how she and Fanny had giggled at the way he belched. He had already been old then, now he must be positively ancient. ‘I won’t,’ she said, her voice quite lucid. ‘I won’t marry that senile old fool.’

‘You most certainly will.’

‘You can’t make me.’

‘I can make you do anything I choose, young lady.’

Eliza clenched her fingers together as she glared at her mother. Another faint memory flashed across her mind - of a day when once before a mother had broken the trust of an innocent child.

‘Why do you hate me so?’

There was no emotion in the green eyes. ‘That’s an absurd question. I am doing this for your sake, because I want the best for you. I don’t want you to struggle to get to a position in society like I did.’

‘If society is so important to you, why did you marry my Papa? Didn’t you love him?’

For a moment the pupils flared. ‘I was very young and foolish and he compromised me.’

‘You mean you were pregnant with me?’

The mother’s face, full of regret and loathing, reflected back at her child. ‘Yours was a difficult birth because I was so young. If you had died who knows how different my life could have been. As it was, I endured a horrendous voyage in a troopship to India packed into a cabin with a dozen common soldiers’ wives and their screaming brats. I spent untold months in poky bungalows in dreary cantonments sweltering from the heat in the hot season, because we couldn’t afford the hill stations, battling the monsoon and the heathens, the snakes and the bugs. When your father died, I won’t deny it was a blessing. He had been quite content to be a nothing, a nobody, but Patrick Craigie was ambitious and even now the Governor has plans for him. We have a good house in Calcutta and a respected place in society. I merely intend that you be part of it.’

Eliza turned her face to the carriage window, barely noticing the pleasant views of the park. Although she hadn’t answered her directly, her mother had addressed her questions all the same. Eliza felt consumed with a hatred for everything, even for Papa, who had died and left her with this horrible woman as a mother. For the past few idyllic weeks since leaving the Academy, she had been deluded into thinking that her mother had changed. But she knew now she would never change. Agony tore through her heart. There was no way in the world she would allow her mother

to do this to her. She had to find a way out of it - and soon.

Thomas James did not regret the rift with Betty Craigie. Liaisons of the kind he had enjoyed with her usually palled after a few weeks and he was one of those men who thrived on a change of diet. For a while he had mused on Eliza and that snug little figure of hers but, after a few days, abandoned any plans he might have once harbored in that direction. Shortly before their argument, Betty had told him of her intention to marry her daughter off to Sir James Lambton. He knew Sir James well, a gout-ridden old fart with a reputation for quirky sexual practices. A brief spasm of pity for the young Eliza passed through his mind and he wondered at the callousness of a mother sending her only child to such a reprobate. But soon both mother and daughter were forgotten as he settled into a round of new flirtations with eager women easily won over by a dazzling smile, a smart red jacket and a pair of tight white breeches.

Thomas had been playing cards at the Assembly Rooms when a woman whom he recognized as Dora, Mrs. Craigie's maid, arrived with a note. She was hot and flustered, having been searching all over Bath for him. He made her wait while he read the girlish writing.

'Dear Lieutenant James - I beg your help. My mother is sending me into the jaws of death. I have no-one I can turn to. Please save me.'

The note was unsigned but there was no doubting who had written it. He pondered for a moment, smiled as he felt himself harden as the image of that fluid young body and those sultry eyes came to mind. Why should that ridiculous old goat have first charge when here she was offering herself to him on a platter? He looked up at Dora. 'I presume Mrs. Craigie knows nothing of this letter?'

She shook her head. 'The young lady is so distressed, sir, I just had to help her. She said you were her only hope.'

'Is she allowed out?'

'No, sir. Madam insists on keeping her locked in her room, fearing she will run away to her friend, Miss Nicholls.'

'Hm. But you will have to aid her. Are you willing to take the risk? You could lose your position.'

'I don't really care, sir. Mrs. Craigie is a most difficult employer.'

Thomas grinned. 'I can well imagine.'

He wrote a short note back to Eliza, arranging to meet her at the corner of the North Parade at two o'clock in the morning. He told her to pack her portmanteau with enough clothes for several days.

Eliza's spirits soared as she read the note. At first she had been reluctant to call on Thomas James' help, and now she wondered why she had taken so long to do so. Of course he would help her. He was just like her Papa after all. Her mother was a suspicious, nasty woman. And oh, how she hated her mother. She hoped she would never have to set eyes on her again.

That night, Eliza lay awake, fully dressed beneath the coverlet, counting the hours. Betty returned from a concert at around midnight and Eliza heard her re-check that the bedroom door was locked, but lay still for another hour before going to the window. Fortunately, her bedroom faced into a side passage and few would have noticed the ladder that Dora had placed within reach of the window sill. With Betty being a lazy riser, Dora would have several hours in which to remove the evidence. When she heard the downstairs clock chime the quarter hour before two, Eliza made her move.

The portmanteau gave a loud thud as it hit the cobbles of the passage and she held her breath for a nervous minute, but no-one appeared. Nervously, she climbed down the shaky ladder. As she reached the bottom she took a deep breath and glanced back up the stone buildings. The only light burning was one in the attic window where Dora slept. She gave a quick wave to her unseen savior, and turned into the shadows.

As she crept along the deserted Parade, she suffered a spasm of terror. Never totally alone in the outside world before at such an hour, for all she knew the city could be full of footpads lying in wait

for a lone female. Her fear drove her to run the full course of the Parade. At last to her relief she saw the familiar figure waiting beneath a gas lamp. He had discarded his usual military clothing and was dressed in a modest black frock coat and top hat.

‘Oh, Lieutenant James, thank you. You have saved my life!’ Puffing, she dropped her bag and threw herself into his arms, tears flooding down her cheeks and dampening his cravat.

He held her for a few moments. ‘Come, come, now, Miss Gilbert - there’s no need to cry. Or perhaps in the circumstances I may now call you Eliza?’

Eliza sniffed away her tears. ‘Oh, yes, please. And may I call you Thomas?’

‘Most certainly.’

For a moment Eliza faltered as she noticed his expression, a strange combination of amusement and excitement, his pupils growing wide in the hazy light of the lamp. There was a slight irregularity in his breathing. He cupped her chin in his hand. When his lips lightly brushed against hers, she felt that long dead warmth that had been her Papa well up inside her. For a second his lips lingered and his grip on her chin tightened, before he relaxed and stepped back.

He glanced around at the quiet surroundings. ‘We must be on our way before the night watch finds us.’ Picking up Eliza’s portmanteau, Thomas led her around the corner to where a carriage was waiting. They climbed in and Thomas gave the coachman the order to drive on.

‘Where are we going?’ asked Eliza breathlessly, her heart beating unusually fast.

Thomas patted her on the knee. ‘Don’t concern yourself, Eliza, my dear. Far away from your mother as possible.’

‘Oh, thank goodness. I *hate* her. She played the most abominable trick on me.’

‘And we shall play an equally abominable one on her.’

Eliza giggled while Thomas James raised a sardonic eyebrow and speculated on Miss Eliza Gilbert’s reaction when she discovered exactly what was in his mind.

Since she became a lady of quality, the streak of Spanish blood that flowed in the veins of Betty Craigie was rarely allowed to boil with other than her amorous passions. It was to Dora’s eternal relief that she had already obtained the offer of another position when it did.

It had been close to mid-morning before Eliza’s escape was discovered. Dora had pretended ignorance by leaving her breakfast tray outside the door as she knew Madam had the key. Betty responded to this weak excuse by throwing the expensive teapot at her. Dora dodged in time, but it had shattered against the wall, sending fragments across the landing. It was followed a few seconds later by the remainder of Eliza’s uneaten breakfast. Dora didn’t stop to clean up the mess. Her bags were already packed.

As Fanny Nicholls was now in London, Betty assumed Eliza had gone there on her own. When she drew a blank at the coaching station where no-one of her daughter’s description had booked passage, she rushed around to the hotel where Lieutenant James was staying. She knew the awful truth when she discovered he had left late at night, that he had privately hired a carriage, its whereabouts now unknown.

Another mother in the same state might have collapsed into helpless shock and indignation but Betty Craigie didn’t need smelling salts to bring her round. Without any escort, she waltzed off to the Pump Rooms, where she indulged in a large quantity of the best French brandy before picking up the first presentable male admirer, taking him home and treating him to a morning bed ride that he was likely to remember for a long time to come.

The innkeeper of the Cross Keys was one of those who never pried into the sleeping arrangements of his guests. Being woken up in the early hours of the morning was a mild inconvenience for making a substantial amount of money from not asking questions of men of the world, such as the Lieutenant who had used the establishment for his liaisons on several occasions. Thus, it never occurred to Eliza to question the rapidity with which a lantern and key were handed over to Thomas or why he seemed familiar with the maze of passages as she followed him upstairs

to their room. Thomas opened the door and she went inside. The basic traveler's room, impersonal and scantily furnished with one chair, table and a large box bed.

For a moment Eliza hesitated. 'Is this my room?'

Thomas placed the lantern on the table. In its upward reflection his face took on a ghoulish aspect.

'No, it's our room, Eliza, my dear,' he replied softly.

She looked around. 'But where will you sleep?'

He took a few steps towards her, removing the bag from her fingers and tilting her face to his. He smiled. 'What a minx you are, playing such games with me.'

'I don't understand ...'

His lips met hers, tenderly at first before increasing their pressure, his tongue forcing its way past her teeth.

Eliza almost gagged on this invasion and she pushed against him with her fists. As he withdrew, she gasped. 'What are you doing?'

His eyes danced with reflected light from the lantern as they searched her face. 'Come now, Eliza, don't pretend that innocence. You and I know very well what's a-doing here.'

'But ...'

Her voice dried as he undid the necktie of her traveling cape and it fell to the floor. His fingers slipped beneath her lace collar, expertly finding the top button of her blouse, then the next, and the next. His mouth came back to hers, exploring gently this time while his hand inched its way past the protection of her chemise. As the heat of his hand met the skin of her breast, Eliza's body quivered. Her heart started to beat faster beneath his fingertips. She wanted to draw away - and she didn't ...

Thomas's lips moved to her ear. 'Trust me,' he murmured. 'A woman's first time is special. You are lucky to have an experienced man to teach you life's greatest pleasure.'

Her quivering intensified but she allowed him to sweep her up in his arms and place her carefully on the bed. As she lay compliant, he slowly removed her clothing, piece by provocative piece. When at last she was completely naked, she did not play the simpering virgin and rush to cover herself as he might have expected. Thomas could see that here was a girl utterly at ease with her body. For a moment he was disconcerted by that fact as he marveled at the ivory perfection of her skin, the full peaked breasts and the shadow of enticement between her legs.

Eliza, in turn, lay and stared at him while he stripped himself. When his breeches were cast aside, there was a frank curiosity at the size of his erection.

'Don't worry,' he murmured as he lowered himself on to her. 'It will not hurt too much if you are relaxed.' He spread kisses across her skin and suckling her breasts while he inched apart her thighs, his fingers searching out her virginity, rubbing and strumming it until her eyes closed with a flutter, her back arched against the mattress and he felt her gush of welcoming moisture. Without delay he thrust himself into her, ramming hard. She cried out once in pain, but a second time in the discovery of delight. But in that damnably glorious moment when he spent himself deep within her, he could have sworn she had whispered something that sounded like 'Papa'.

6.

Eliza lay in bed, tucked in Thomas's arms and watched the growing light of dawn through the murky window panes of the inn bedroom. She didn't want to move for she was flooded with a sense of utter calm. A sense of peace and safety. Not since she was Parvati's baba in an enchanted childhood, had she experienced other arms about her like this. And when Thomas's body was joined to hers, when he was one with her, and her body had responded with exquisite physical sensations she knew she had discovered what life was really all about. This was what she had unknowingly longed for so many years. The ultimate happiness she had been seeking. She turned her eyes to look

at him, his head thrown back on the pillow, his breathing steady. She wanted him to kiss her again, to feel him inside her again, and she snuggled further into the fold of his body, caressing herself against his leg. In the real world that lay beyond the walls of this room, what they had done was what her mother would euphemistically call 'being compromised', but she didn't care. To fly on these extraordinary wings of love as she had done last night was worth any compromise.

Thomas gave a little snort and she studied his features in detail. In the light of dawn he didn't look quite as handsome, with his mouth slackly open, his hair tousled in knots and the first growth of beard upon his face. But up until now she had only ever seen him in his dashing uniform, his hair under control and his mouth smiling its charm. She couldn't resist tickling him and he woke with a start. Blurry eyes took a while to focus as she ran her fingers over his chest, gentling tweaking his hairs. He stared at her for a few moments as if trying to remember where he was when his head fell back to the pillow.

'I'm hungry, Thomas.'

'Oh, God. What time is it?'

'I've no idea, but it's been light for ages.'

Thomas lay still for a second, before sitting up. 'Damn it. We'll have to get moving if you don't want your mother to find us.'

Eliza had succeeded in putting all thoughts of her mother out of her mind and she didn't relish the prospect of facing her again. And certainly not now.

'But I don't want to leave here.' Eliza pouted as the warmth of his embrace was withdrawn, leaving her feeling cold. She reached for his arm and tugged it. 'I've changed my mind. I'm not that hungry. Come back. I want to do it again. I want to do it over, and over.'

Thomas's eyes cleared as he focused on her. 'Well, damn me, girl, if you're not insatiable - just like y ...' He stopped himself in time and mussed her hair and gently unfurled the fingers gripping his arm. 'Over and over, eh?' he said with a chuckle as he clambered out of bed. 'Now what would those prim Misses Aldridge say if they heard such words coming from one of their refined young ladies?'

'I don't care. Oh, Thomas, please!' She threw back the coverlet and flung herself at him, rubbing against him, wanting to mold her body to his, to become part of him. The tip of her tongue forced open his lips.

'Oh, Lord, Eliza, we really ought to be going ...'

But this time she took charge, pushing him back against the pillows, experimenting with the crazed results of kissing him all over. With tasting him, the slightly salty spiciness of his skin. The musk of his sweat. Rubbing her fingers through his body hair. Tentatively grasping that wonderful source of pleasure between her fingers. Familiarizing herself with its shape and form. Massaging it until it moved within her fingers, hardening and blooming into full quivering power. Drawing it into herself - tightening around it and sliding on it until he shuddered and gasped - and she discovered her own ecstasy.

It was another hour before they finally left the bed. After a hurried breakfast, Thomas gave orders for the carriage to continue on to Bristol. By the end of the day they were aboard the steam packet and on their way to Ireland.

Perched on the edge of a chair in Mrs. Betty Craigie's reception room, Miss Alice James of Rathbeggen, waited with impatience for a good half-an-hour. The maid who had answered the front door was a cowering little thing, clearly new at her job, and she stuttered as she tried to assure her that Mrs. Craigie would be with her directly. Her exasperation getting the better of her, Alice was about to rise and leave, when the door opened and Betty sailed in. Like everyone meeting Betty for the first time, she was taken aback by the woman's striking looks and confident manner. At her welcoming smile, Alice's earlier irritation eased somewhat.

'I'm so frightfully sorry to keep you waiting, Miss James. I'm having a beastly job training up new staff. The girl just couldn't get my hair right. If I'd known how difficult British servants were

going to be, I'd have brought my own from Calcutta.' The green eyes quickly took in the conservative traveling dress. 'You look quite weary. Have you been offered refreshment?'

'Yes, thank you, but I declined as my visit must be brief.'

'What is it you wish of me?'

Alice took a deep breath. 'This is rather delicate.'

'From your surname, I assume you are a relation of that dreadful scoundrel Lieutenant James?'

'I am his elder sister, and I must take exception at your opinion of Thomas.'

Betty was undeterred by the woman's clear affront. 'You have seen my daughter?'

'The family has not been formally introduced - in the circumstances, of course.'

'But you know where she is?' Betty's voice rose slightly.

'She and my brother are staying at an inn not far from our home in Rathbeggen.'

Betty fanned herself with a handkerchief. 'Can I presume this disgraceful state of affairs is now general knowledge?'

'I'm afraid so, but I can assure you my brother has done everything he can to amend matters and to sanctify their arrangement, but as the young lady is under age, no-one will perform the marriage service without her family's approval.'

Betty stared at Alice for a moment before her eyebrows lifted. 'I'm afraid, Miss James, my credulity is sorely tested. Can such a rascal have one shred of honor in him? Do you realize my Eliza, my dear only child, was promised in a brilliant marriage to one of the most eminent men in India? No-one can possibly imagine my mortification at discovering her head was turned by a man who feigned at being an ineffectual sort of dandy while he squired us about Bath, while all along he was a scheming lothario of the basest sort?'

Small red spots of annoyance appeared on her cheeks as Alice smarted under the insults on Thomas's character. 'You are mistaken in your judgment of my brother, Mrs. Craigie,' she said vehemently. 'He assures me he is in love with Miss Gilbert and committed to her, body and soul, and that to marry her is his greatest desire. I believe he is most sincere.'

'So you are here on a mission. Your family is seeking my consent to this ridiculous marriage?'

Alice nodded. 'There is little choice, Mrs. Craigie. They are already living as man and wife. Even if they were to be forced apart, a great deal of damage has been done, and ...'

'And my daughter would be forever unacceptable in good society,' finished Betty through tight lips. 'Not even an aged widower in the remotest wilds of the Indian mofussil would care to be stained with such a wife.'

Alice lowered her head and fiddled in her reticule. 'I have brought the papers, assuming your affirmative answer.'

Betty gave another deeply exaggerated sigh. She scarcely read the papers as she signed them and rang for the maid to show Alice out.

At the door Alice turned. 'Is there any message you would like me to pass to your daughter?'

Betty's face was blank. 'I think not. She will know my opinions only too well. If I never hear another word from her again I shall not grieve. I will, however, arrange for her belongings to be sent. You can tell my daughter they are the only wedding gift she can expect from me.'

Alice stood on the steps for a few moments briefly wondering at the mother's cold heart. Although she had not been impressed with Thomas's choice of wife, she was beginning to have some sympathy for her.

Eliza did not grieve either over the parting from her mother. Once the wedding ceremony conducted by Thomas's brother John in a little village church in Meath was over, she completely forgot about Betty. Thomas was her life now - this handsome, dashing man who had introduced her to passion, who had made her a woman, and her life complete.

On their honeymoon in Dublin, Eliza was in the element to which she knew she had been born. Everywhere they went, heads would turn to follow the attractive couple. When they attended engagements with Thomas's regimental friends, men would clamor for a chance to sit next to her or

dance with her. Eliza was so happy. She waltzed, she laughed, and she flirted. If there was a subtle change in Thomas's attitude towards her, she was far too preoccupied to notice until he made a sudden announcement one evening after they had returned from yet another ball.

Eliza had just washed her hair using a fashionable recommendation of rum and rose water and was in the process of drying it, when Thomas came up behind her and placed his lips lightly on her neck. It sent a wonderful tingle down her back and she immediately responded, discarding the towel and turning and slipping her hands inside his half-open shirt to run her fingertips over his chest the way he liked.

He seemed unmoved. 'I know you've been having a wonderful time, Eliza,' he said, 'but you must realize I'm only a lieutenant. I simply don't have enough money to live like this indefinitely.'

'I don't care where we live, my darling, as long as I'm with you.' She began nuzzling his chest.

To her surprise, Thomas pushed her away and bent over until their eyes were level. 'Look, I'm serious, Eliza. We must leave Dublin. My uncle has offered us the use of his estate in Ballycrystal until I receive my recall notice.'

'Can't I stay here until then?'

Thomas frowned. 'No, of course you can't. You're my wife now. You have to go where I say.'

Eliza's eyes flashed a instant of resentment. And how long will that be? Will we still be able to come to the city often?'

'Can't you understand? There will be no more balls and shopping trips, Eliza. I've already far too many debts.'

'It's not just the money, is it? You don't like to see me having a good time,' she said petulantly.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, you are being utterly childish.'

'Don't you call me childish!'

Their eyes locked for a few seconds in anger, before Eliza's softened. 'Is this childish?' she whispered, her hands busy again, exploring his groin.

He moaned first, but then smiled. 'What am I going to do with you?'

She threw her arms about his neck. 'Anything you like, my love.'

Despite her attempts to persuade Thomas otherwise, Eliza's happy days in Dublin came to an end all the same. Thomas's uncle's estate was in fact a modest two-story house set beneath a mountain facing a monotonous stretch of Wexford farming land. It seemed to be miles from the nearest village and the moment Eliza stepped out of the carriage she suffered an old memory combined with an irrational sense of panic. It was Holly House and Montrose all over again. That same leaden sky. The same bone-penetrating winds. The same peasants who spoke unintelligible English. And she knew the house would have the same pinched-face matrons sitting around its stuffy parlor sipping numerous cups of stewed tea.

'I can't stay here,' she muttered, her throat stricken.

'Don't be silly, darling. We'll have a wonderful time. You can ride. I'll shoot and fish.' Thomas nibbled at her ear. 'And just think of all those wonderful quiet nights together.'

But even the daily wild canters across the open country, with the wind in her hair, and the equally wild nights of passion could not compensate for this growing feeling of being imprisoned yet again. Eliza came to realize she needed society, bright lights, and city life.

To complicate matters, shortly after their arrival, she began to feel unwell, particularly in the mornings. It was a housemaid who chuckled at her naivety and suggested she was probably pregnant. The thought of having a baby terrified Eliza. It wasn't at all what she wanted. A baby would interfere with her new discovery of life, tie her down, make her fat and ugly and even stop Thomas from loving her. She told him one night after they had made love and snuggled beneath the covers listening to one of the frequent summer storms rage around the house.

'Are you quite sure?' he said.

'Well, I don't know a great deal about it but, yes, I've missed a curse. It seems that way.'

Thomas frowned and bit his lip. 'That's a damned nuisance.'

Eliza half sat up and leaned on her elbow, staring at him anxiously. 'I didn't get like this by myself,' she said.

Thomas avoided her eyes for a few moments and studied the roof. 'I've been rather stupid not to think of this happening. I should have realized you're an innocent. There are ways and means around of avoiding it.'

'What "ways and means"?'

Thomas sighed. He quickly enlightened her as to the various crude methods available to avoid pregnancy from a woman douching with a vinegar solution or for a man to wear a sheath made of gut, which he said he hated, and refused to do.

All of this sounded quite frightful and Eliza was sure worrying about such things were bound to interfere with the spontaneity of love-making and the wonderful sensations she enjoyed. 'Well, it's too late now,' she said crossly.

'Not necessarily,' he murmured. 'It can be ended. There are people who will get rid of it - for a price.'

Eliza shivered. That prospect sounded even more dreadful than the prevention, but she really couldn't face the thought of motherhood.

'Yes, I think that might be the best bet,' Thomas murmured half to himself. 'Giving birth on board ship can be a devilish business.'

'Ship? What ship? I thought you had applied for a posting to Dublin?'

He gave a slight shrug. 'I'm sorry, love, but I can't afford to stay in Ireland now that I'm a married man. There's far more likelihood of my promotion to Captain in India. And a promotion means more money to spend on you.'

He smiled and tried to kiss her, but Eliza flung herself into the pillows and turned her back to him. India! Once, just the mention of the word and she would have suffered excruciating homesickness, but she was grown up now and had forgotten much of her childhood. Since her marriage, even the torch she had carried for her long dead Papa had ceased to burn as brightly. Yet, anywhere had to be better than this deathly existence in Ballycrystal.

She also thought of what her mother had so cruelly reminded her: how she had struggled on a troopship with a baby she didn't want and how she couldn't wait to abandon it into the care of an ayah.

Eliza rolled back and looked directly at Thomas. 'I can't possibly go to India with a baby,' she said.

'Then you won't,' said Thomas beginning to kiss her on the throat and neck again, which he knew drove her wild. 'I'll make the arrangements tomorrow.'

Later, Eliza discovered that she had the fortunate capacity for totally forgetting horrible events, for making them seem as if they had happened to someone else. While she had lain spreadeagled on the dirty table of the farmhouse half-comatose from several gulps of whisky while the scruffy Irish woman poked in her with what looked like a knitting needle, she had really thought she was about to die. If this agony was the price of love, it was far, far too high. Yet when it was finally over and Thomas gathered her up in his arms and drove her back to Ballycrystal, she found her mind seemed to have passed a curtain over the worst of it.

But not so the lingering after-effects. She was sick and shivery for a couple of weeks and had to remain in bed. She continued to bleed intermittently and feel utterly wretched. For once making love was certainly not on her mind and Thomas, not a little irritated by this disturbance to their love life, finally decided to hang the expense and take her to a proper doctor in Dublin who was furious when he saw what the Irish woman had done. He started Eliza on a strict course of treatment, including purging, blistering and the use of restorative powders, but not before he'd given her a lecture. 'You're damned lucky to still be alive,' he told her. 'There's been a bad infection of your womb. You may not be able to have more children.'

For another woman it might have been a depressing thought, but motherhood had never been a

desirable state in the mind of Eliza. Just being back in the hurly-burly of Dublin did more to hasten her recovery than any medical treatment. No sooner had the bloom returned to her cheeks, and the charge into their love-making, than Lieutenant Thomas James was recalled to his regiment. Within a few weeks they set sail on the merchant vessel *Bland* from Liverpool bound for Calcutta via Rio and the Cape of Good Hope.

Eliza loved the tightly-knit social aspects of shipboard life, and Thomas hated it. She reveled in dancing every night, playing charades, flirting with the Captain and engaging in lively dialogue with the interesting cross-section of male passengers, few of whom were immune to the promise in her daring blue eyes, while Thomas wallowed in innumerable bottles of porter or ale, lost more money at whist, or slept away most of the day. By the time *Bland* sailed into the Hoogly estuary four months later, neither of them realized they had spent more time bickering than making love.

Thomas didn't exhibit much emotion as he stood stiffly at Eliza's side on the ship's deck, resplendent in his scarlet uniform, sweat bursting out across his forehead from beneath his plumed cap. But Eliza was visibly excited and enthusiastic. The moment the sticky, hot miasma of Calcutta wafted over her - that sometimes disgusting, sometimes alluring, sickly sweet smell of blossom, spices, and death - vivid memories of her childhood came flooding back to her. Oh, marvelous, beautiful, wondrous India, she thought, how could I have ever forgotten you?

She gave no thought as to what Thomas might be feeling after his long leave at Home, or whether or not he was happy to have returned. She'd now had several months in which she might have come to realize that Thomas cared little about anything not involved with sport, cards, liquor or sex, or that a gap was gradually widening between them, and that he was, in fact, becoming rather boring.

As soon as they were settled into their barrack quarters in Fort William and Thomas had returned to duty, Eliza became aware that she had to prepare for the inevitable - the day when she and her mother would come face to face again. In the small gossipy Anglo-Indian community, the news of her spurning of Sir James Lambton and her elopement from Bath with a mere Lieutenant was likely to be common knowledge. Major Patrick Craigie tried to ease the path. He arranged for a palanquin to carry her to his offices.

Beneath the silent stirring of the punkah, Patrick Craigie embraced his step-daughter for the first time in years. 'Welcome, Eliza,' he murmured and stepped back to survey the fully-grown woman. 'You've fulfilled your promise. I always knew you would be a beauty one day.'

'Beauty is not everything, Uncle Patrick. I do have other accomplishments,' said Eliza with a pirouette and a flash of her eyes.

'So I have heard. Sir Jasper has kept me well informed on your activities over the years. Despite that dubious start in Montrose, it seems you're well finished in the social arts, although a little erratic musically I think was his final report.'

They both smiled before Patrick's face sobered. 'Come - sit down and tell me how things stand between you and your mother. I'm afraid she has refused to tell me what really happened in Bath.'

Eliza settled on a chair and told him about the rift as best she could. Without drawing breath, she also assured him she was very happy in her marriage, that she regretted nothing she had done.

When she had finished, Patrick shook his head. 'I had warned Betty against trying to link you with that old reprobate, Sir James Lambton. I knew how stubborn you could be. I always felt I knew you better than she.'

He studied Eliza closely. 'However, we are faced with a problem. If it were up to me, well, I'd forget the whole business but, quite frankly, you know how important one's standing in society is to your mother. Is there any chance at all that you will make amends with her? It would make things much easier for all of us as our paths are bound to cross on occasion.'

Eliza gave him a dazzling, almost demure, smile. 'You can tell Mama if she is prepared to forgive me first and accept Thomas as her son-in-law, I might just forgive her.'

Patrick sighed. 'I doubt she will do that.'

‘Then your problem is not solved.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

Eliza decided that if the world had ends she had already discovered two of them in Scotland and in Ireland and, to her utter dismay, after a few short months in the bustle and gaiety of Calcutta she was now resident in a third. Why was she always condemned to such places? Which was worse, she didn’t know - the freezing gales of Montrose, the boggy damp of Ballycrystal, or the dry heat and endless clouds of dust that blew across the flat plains around Karnal.

The very aspects of cantonment life that had made for her happy infancy were the ones that now restricted her. Although her memory of the languages quickly returned and she was one of the few officer’s wives who could communicate fluently with her servants, there were rules of behavior which no-one dared to challenge. As a grown married woman, she could no longer think of escaping alone to the bazaars and squatting in the dust to gossip with the shop-keepers, or stripping off her clothes and swimming in the rivers as she had done as a child.

Early in the morning before breakfast, or *chota hazri*, it was customary for European women to ride or go for a stroll. The rest of the day was an indolent waste of reading, sewing and dozing, interrupted occasionally by the odd visit of a neighbor, or the occasional ripple of excitement at finding a snake curled up in her bathroom.

As an administrative officer, Thomas didn’t seem to have much to do either and spent much of his time playing cards with his fellow officers or seeing how much brandy he could consume. Stuck in each other’s company for weeks on end, even their once fiery love-making slowly deteriorated into a routine.

In mid-April, when the thermometer started to soar, it was time to take to the hills. The moment her palanquin entered the town of Simla, snuggled into the steep foothills of the Himalayas, and she breathed of its crisp invigorating air, Eliza’s depression abruptly left her. It was here that most of British society fled for relief from the summer heat of the plains. Life again at last!, she thought. It was going to be like Dublin all over again - perhaps even better.

Eliza’s beauty and Thomas’s dashing looks were sure to make the Jameses the young couple everyone wanted to have adorn their tables and their parties. Everyone, that is, but Betty Craigie. She happened to be sitting with a new friend on the lawns in front of her rented cottage when she saw the procession from Karnal toil its way up the hills.

Frederica Lomer, who was another ambitious army wife, and a woman after Betty’s own heart, studied the palanquins as they started setting down their cargo of wives. ‘My husband tells me he expects to be sent to Karnal shortly,’ she said. ‘I’ll have to find out what it’s like.’

‘Not one of the better postings,’ murmured Betty, narrowing her eyes to study the women alighting from the palanquins. Most of them were the usual run of army wives, either common and dumpy with red cheeks, or thin and pale, and all looking utterly bedraggled after their long journey.

‘Good Lord!’

‘What is it?’ Frederica followed Betty’s line of vision. ‘Oh, I say. Now there’s a young woman with a bit of sense. And what style.’

Surveying her surroundings, Eliza James stood beside her palanquin dressed in a strange sari-like garment of brown and yellow not unlike that of her bearers.

Betty bit her lip. ‘I bet she isn’t even wearing corsets,’ she muttered savagely.

Frederica laughed. ‘Sitting whalebone-bound in a palanquin for days on end is dashed uncomfortable, Mrs. Craigie. I have to admit to having removed mine on occasion.’

Betty forced a smile. Frederica had a marvelous figure that hardly needed corseting, but neither did Eliza’s.

‘But I wonder who is she? An orchid among thorns, is she not?’

‘She is Mrs. Eliza James,’ said Betty flatly. ‘And that is her husband over there.’ She nodded in the direction of Thomas as he rode up past the women. In his dashing uniform, plumed shako and flashing a toothy smile that matched the sheen of his buttons, he seemed to capture every image of

knight on white charger.

Betty was aware of Frederica's delicate catch of breath. Yes, the bastard still turns heads, she thought.

Thomas noticed the two women watching him. For a moment his eyes narrowed, and his fulsome smile disappeared. He dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to a syce. Without speaking to Eliza, he strolled up the grassy bank to where the two women were sitting. He bowed, clicking his boot heels together and re-affixed his smile 'Good afternoon, Mrs. Craigie. It is such a pleasure to see you again.'

Betty did not bother to introduce Frederica and just gave him a haughty look. 'I really ought not be speaking to you, Lieutenant James.'

'Yes, I quite understand, ma'am. However, it would improper of me to pass by without paying my compliments to the wife of a senior officer.'

Betty's eyes remained cool. 'And is that your *wife*?' She lifted her nose at Eliza who remained standing by the palanquin, shading her eyes as she tried to see to whom her husband was talking.

'She most certainly is.'

'And can I assume she will pay her compliments too?'

'Are you sure you want her too?'

'Fiddlesticks, fool. Of course I do. Fetch her here.'

Frederica's eyes widened at the realization that the two clearly knew each other and looked forward to what might be a few fireworks.

Thomas returned to where Eliza stood waiting. 'It's your mother,' he said in a surly voice.

'So I can see. Why in all that's holy did you have to speak to her?'

'I can't ignore the wife of an important officer, Eliza. She asked me to bring you over.'

Eliza made a face in her mother's direction. 'So she can give me a dressing down in public? Tell her to go hang.'

Thomas's face paled. 'Eliza - is this wise? We're here in Simla for months. We're can't avoid running into her everywhere we go. Why don't we just get it over with now?'

But Eliza had turned her back and was busy telling the servants what to do with her luggage.

Reluctantly Thomas retraced his steps. 'Mrs. James begs to be excused,' he said cautiously.

Betty grimaced. 'Damned ungrateful hussy,' she muttered under her breath. 'She'll be sorry one of these days.' Without another word, she left her chair and marched back into her cottage.

Frederica watched Betty go and she fanned herself casually as she continued to appraise Thomas with frank interest. 'Oh dear, you certainly have upset Mrs. Craigie, Lieutenant.' She stretched out her hand. 'I'm Frederica Lomer by the way. And can I assume the three of you are well-acquainted with each other?'

Thomas sighed. 'Oh, what's the use. It'll be all over the town before dusk. Mrs. Craigie is actually my mother-in-law. She and her daughter fell out some time ago. They don't speak to each other.'

'Ah - I see. And you are just a poor man, caught in the middle?'

Thomas recognized the message in the amused eyes and managed a smile. Betty Craigie and her stubborn daughter notwithstanding, he decided that life at the hill station this summer might well have some new interesting compensations.

That season in Simla was one that would be long remembered among the gossips. Not only had the radical sisters of the Governor-General, the Misses Fanny and Emily Eden, created havoc by supporting amateur theatricals put on by half-castes and accepted their handiwork for charity fetes, but they dared to put on a dance for the envoys of Ranjit Singh and which English women were expected to attend. In this mood of racial divisiveness between the liberally-minded Eden sisters and the staid Anglo-Indians, the frostiness between Mrs. Craigie and her beautiful daughter was a much safer diversion. Neither woman was prepared to give way. One mischievous hostess even tried to bait them by seating Thomas James between his wife and his mother-in-law at dinner. If she

had hoped for sparks to fly, she was disappointed as both women ignored Thomas and occupied their neighbors with conversation while he slowly drank himself stupid and stared across the table at Frederica Lomer. Other busy-boding matrons also interfered, each hoping to be the one to persuade either mother or daughter to make up, but this only served to entrench the situation.

By the time the season came to its end, and the palanquins returned to the plains, Eliza felt revitalized by the attention she had received. Being on non-speaking terms with her mother had added a mystique to simple Mrs. Eliza James. She had enjoyed herself immensely by deliberately flaunting the conventions, dressing in the far more comfortable semi-Indian style, giggling with the controversial Eden sisters, and by being one of the few English women who openly dared to dance with an Indian.

By now, Thomas had received his promotion to Captain and, after the season was over, he and Eliza took part in the Governor-General's spectacular expedition riding on elephants and by palanquin across Northern India to the Durbar at Lahore. There, Eliza even succeeded in catching the single eye of the old Lion of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh, himself. Although he had attempted to impress the British contingent with trying to give each man in the entourage the gift of his own personal dancing girl, plus enough jewels and precious stones to completely replace the regalia of England, any hope he might have had to receive a European woman such as the delightful Mrs. Eliza James in exchange was too preposterous to be contemplated - although she had to admit there were times in her idle moments when she fantasized about what it might be like to live in a harem of a famous ruler.

But soon the glamor was over and it was back to the monotony of Karnal, where each day was much like the one before.

7.

Thomas continued to spend his leisure hours, of which there were many, in idle pursuits, laced yet again with large quantities of brandy and boorish company. His moods darkened. One night he came home from his club in a dirty temper. Eliza heard him crashing around the bedroom and pretended to be asleep but he shook her so violently that she had no option but to sit up and face him, although she tried not show fear as he bent over her with liquor breath and an angry red glare in his eyes.

'You're drunk again,' was all she could mutter, while trying to withdraw from his grip.

'So what,' he slurred. 'It's time I taught you a bloody lesson, you little trollop. I'm sick of all your airs and graces.' Before she could move, he had slapped her hard across the face. 'Think you can just keep preening when it suits you - well, we'll see about that!'

She screamed loudly but before she could clamber out of the bed, he had torn her nightgown from her and thrown himself on top of her. She struggled briefly, but he was too strong. It was easier to let him do what he wanted.

When he had finished and slumped off her into a snoring mound, Eliza felt the bile of disgust build in her throat as she nursed her bruised jaw. She glared at him, trying to remember when, or even why, she had once loved him - when his body held delightful discoveries for her instead of the rigid obscenity of brute force that had become his now all-too-frequent mode of lovemaking.

If there had ever been a time when Eliza was still a dewy-eyed girl from the Aldridge Academy, she had now disappeared and, even though she wasn't yet twenty, she was beginning to feel old, worn-out and hollow. Is this what happened eventually to everyone's dreams, she thought. The prospect of spending the rest of her life with Thomas James was now becoming abhorrent.

But what could she do? Her first instinct was to pack and leave, but Karnal was weeks from anywhere and English women just didn't set off to roam the Indian sub-continent on their own. Even if she did manage to escape, where would she go? She remembered the Eden sisters she had

met in Simla and what fun they had been and how kind to her. If they hadn't yet returned to England, they might still be in Calcutta. As a last resort, of course, there was always Patrick Craigie. Her mother as a possibility never entered her mind.

A flood of determination coursed through her veins and she clenched her fists. Anything can be yours if you want it badly enough, she reminded herself. Her life couldn't just consist of more of this desolation. She would think of something.

Fortunately, the solution began to resolve itself the very next day when Captain George Lomer and his wife, Frederica, arrived to serve a term of duty in Karnal and moved into a bungalow nearby.

Eliza recalled that Thomas had paid the attractive Frederica considerable attention when they were in Simla. She had been too busy with her own exciting social whirl to think much about it at the time, but now it seemed highly possible they might have been carrying on a secret liaison. George, Frederica's husband, was another dull administrative officer who spent so much time with his nose in books he didn't see what was going on around him.

When, as time went by, and Thomas no longer bothered Eliza in bed at night and virtually ignored her during the day, she knew she had hit upon the truth. As she had long since lost interest in going for early morning rides with Thomas herself, she guessed that was probably the time the couple were most likely to meet.

One morning, pretending to be sound asleep as Thomas tip-toed out of the house, Eliza waited until she heard his horse gallop off, then rose and dressed herself. She ran down to the Lomers' bungalow and hammered on the door until George got out of bed.

He stood on his doorstep in his pajamas. 'What on earth is the need for this racket?'

'Your wife is having an affair with my husband,' Eliza announced, loudly enough so that she would be heard by anyone within earshot. She wanted the news to spread throughout Karnal as quickly as possible.

George stared at her. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

Eliza peered behind him into the bungalow's interior. 'And where is Mrs. Lomer this morning?'

'She always goes riding early.'

'And so does my husband.'

'That doesn't mean ... oh, blast her.' He let out a deep sigh.

'Do you want me to find them, or will you?'

George's face held a resigned look. 'I'd forget it, Mrs. James. These things happen, you know. It will probably blow over before long. It usually does.' He started to close the door.

Eliza was stunned. He didn't care. Well, she wasn't going to just sit around and wait until Thomas tired of Frederica and decided he wanted her back. She let out a loud wail. 'Oh, Captain Lomer, please don't be cruel to me. You can't expect me to go back to that - that bounder - that cad!' She clutched her throat dramatically. 'What will become of poor me?'

George's face filled with alarm. 'Keep your voice down, for pity's sake, Mrs. James. Please don't make a scandal.'

But out of the corner of her eye Eliza could see a couple of the neighbors and several of their servants had already emerged into the street trying to discover what the shouting was about. She let out another emphatic wail and George Lomer hurriedly invited her inside.

When Thomas and Frederica returned from their ride an hour later, it was to discover that half the cantonment was already whispering about them, that George was in a filthy temper and that poor little Mrs. James had fainted and was being cared for and fussed over by several of the senior officers' wives.

Desperate not to let the situation worsen, Thomas lamely announced to all who would listen that his wife had been ill and acting strangely lately, probably as a result of too much sun at the recent Durbar. As she was much sicker than he had realized, he would arrange an escort for the following day to take his wife to Calcutta for a holiday, and to recuperate.

Betty Craigie sailed up and down the drawing room of her Calcutta house, wringing her hands together. 'No, I won't have it,' she wailed. 'All my life she has been a thorn in my side, and now you expect me to forget everything she has done and welcome her back as if nothing had happened!'

'Stop that nonsense and sit down, Betty, and listen to me!' Major Patrick Craigie usually reserved the boom in his voice for his army life and rarely had it been raised in his own home, but Betty's near-hysteria left him no choice.

She stopped abruptly and glowered at him. 'How can you call it *nonsense*? The silly girl elopes with a scoundrel she hardly knows, and when she denies him his conjugal rights because she's bored with him and he takes up with a more willing companion we're expected to pick up the pieces. Not likely, I say. Not *bloody* likely!'

Patrick put his hands on Betty's shoulders and forced her to sit down. 'I think you've got it quite wrong, my dear,' he said in a more soothing voice. 'I'm sure Eliza loves Captain James and I doubt she would have denied him his rights, and even if she did that's no excuse for him to make a public exhibition of himself with a tart.'

'A tart. Oh, dear.' Betty gulped and fumbled for her handkerchief. She blew her nose forcefully. 'I would never in a million years have dreamed Mrs. Lomer was like that.'

'Don't play the hypocrite, Betty,' he said, becoming irritated. 'Surely you can't have you forgotten how we used to meet at the temple.' He bit his tongue.

She emitted a horrified gasp. 'Patrick! Don't you ever mention such things.'

'No, of course I shouldn't - but you know how it is ... sometimes,' he added lamely.

She raised her hand dramatically to her head. 'I can't bear it,' she continued. 'Not only did I have to endure that simply dreadful season at Simla with my own daughter snubbing me in public, now everyone is laughing behind my back. I can just see them at Government House and at the Jockey Club.'

Patrick sat down next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. 'Nobody is laughing at you, Betty, my dear. If anything, they are probably saying it serves Eliza right for defying you in the first place.'

Betty peered sideways at her husband through tearful eyes. 'Even when she's brought constant embarrassment and disgrace on us. How can you ever forget what she did to your family in Montrose?' She sniffed. 'My poor Patrick. You'll never get another promotion now. And it's my Eliza who will have ruined you.' Betty gave another histrionic moan.

Patrick Craigie gritted his teeth and pretended to study the view of the estuary through the drawing room window. It was no use trying to reason with Betty when she was in such a state, but he couldn't put off yet again broaching the subject of Eliza returning to live with them permanently. Yet he was beginning to doubt whether it would ever be possible. Instead of Thomas's blatant adultery drawing mother and daughter together, the gulf between them was wider than ever.

He had no idea what he was going to do with poor Eliza since she had recently returned from Karnal, a pale shadow of her former self. She had hoped that the Eden sisters might take her in, but they had returned to England and she was now resident in temporary widow's quarters at Fort William barracks.

He considered his words carefully before turning to face his snuffling wife, taking care to cross his fingers behind his back. 'Betty, I understand perfectly well your feelings, but perhaps you could look on this from a different angle. Could you try and see it as an act of simple Christian duty? The return of the prodigal, so to speak. I'm quite sure people will be impressed to see how forgiving you are. Rather than detract from your reputation, it will enhance it. The Bishop might even take your example for his sermon.'

Betty paused in her blubbering. She blinked a few times. 'Do you really think so?'

Patrick had a rush of optimism. At last he had hit on the right approach. Quickly, he took her hand in his. 'Charity begins at home, Betty,' he said softly, 'and remember that Jesus forgave Mary Magdalene.'

The charity that Eliza received from her mother for the next few weeks was of the cold and severe kind, but she didn't really mind. She usually had her meals on her own and preferred to stay in her own room most of the day. Her mother communicated with her mainly through Patrick or a third person, such as an ayah or other servant and Eliza was more than content with that state. She had no inclination to go for carriage drives or picnics. Besides, there was no place within the inflexible structure of Calcutta society for that rare and most pitiful of all creatures - the separated wife.

The journey from Karnal had been difficult and for a long time after she arrived, Eliza was ill with malarial fever and confined to bed. Patrick spent time with her when he could, but neither of them dared to broach the subject of Thomas James. A rumor reached them that Mrs. Lomer had actually bolted with the Captain to the hill station of Ootacamund, but it seemed she had tired of him after a few weeks and had returned to her own husband, who decided to simply ignore the whole business. Although Captain James should have been severely reprimanded for his behavior, good men were in short supply in the 21st Native Infantry and the whole episode was disregarded by his commanding officers.

As time passed and she recovered from the fever, Eliza's naturally optimistic self slowly started to reassert itself. Thoughts of Thomas retreated from her mind and she began to dream of a return to real life. One afternoon, she had been feeling restless and during a stroll around the Craigie grounds she wandered down to the native quarters hidden at the rear, an area usually off-limits to European women. Most servants were either at work in the house, or in the gardens, with only a few old people and children sitting outside the huts.

A woman in a white and red sari was squatting in the dust, plaiting a basket. Something about her seemed familiar and Eliza approached her cautiously, pressed her hands together, bowed, and murmured a greeting.

The woman inclined her head in the direction of the voice, her eyes were milky with cataracts. 'So it is you,' she said in Hindi 'Baba finds her Parvati after all these years.'

'How did you know it was me?'

'You were once mine. A mother always knows the footsteps of her child.'

'I thought you were long dead.'

Parvati smiled, her few remaining teeth badly stained. 'My eyes are dead' she said, 'but my heart still beats. Your second father is a good man. When he found me starving in Dinapore and knew that I was once your ayah, he took pity and gave me safety in his household. Your mother does not know I live here.'

Eliza spread her skirts outwards and squatted next to her old ayah, reaching out to touch the old wizened hands. 'I have learned much and traveled far since we were last together,' she said, her heart filled with melancholy and nostalgia for her childhood.

Parvati nodded. 'I know. But you have not yet learned wisdom. Your mother promised you to an old man, yet you rejected him and gave yourself to a man of straw.'

'How could it have been wise to marry an old man?' said Eliza, frowning.

'Old men demand little, and soon die. There would not have been suttee for you. You would have been very rich and able to do as you wish.'

Eliza sighed. 'Well, it's too late for that now. I don't have any money and no-one will ever want me again. I may as well drown myself in the Hoogly.'

The ayah chuckled. 'Lakshmi's destiny for you has not yet even begun, child.' Then her face quickly sobered. 'Do you still possess that elephant with the blood eyes?'

Eliza shrugged. 'Fancy you remembering that. Yes, it's some place or the other.'

'You must find it and throw it away. It has already brought you bad luck.'

Eliza only laughed.

Parvati wagged her head. 'But now it is time for you to go. It would not do for you to be found here. You trouble your mother enough and I do not want to be thrown out on the street.'

Eliza placed a gentle kiss on the old woman's cheek. The blank eyes widened briefly and she reached out, feeling and exploring Eliza's face. 'My baba, you are as beautiful as I knew you would be. There is a great destiny waiting for you. Don't waste your beauty on men who would abuse it.'

'I never want to have anything to do with men again,' muttered Eliza.

Parvati smiled. 'Do not tell untruths. Lakshmi molded you in her image. You were made to love, and be loved. Now farewell.'

Eliza embraced the old woman briefly, then turned and ran back to the house.

That evening she sent a note to her step-father asking if he could spare her a few minutes to discuss her future and he sat with her in the garden after dinner. Betty Craigie, naturally enough, declined to be present.

'I need to talk about what I am to do. I'm starting to go crazy cooped up in this place,' Eliza said.

Patrick nodded. 'You've had a great deal of time to think things over. Is there any chance at all of a reconciliation with Captain James?'

Eliza shook her head. 'I'm sorry, but he beat me and he humiliated me.'

'A lot of men hit their wives - they don't always mean it,' ventured Patrick a trifle weakly.

Eliza gave him a withering look. 'I'll pretend I never heard you say that,' she said.

'Of course I didn't,' he countered rapidly before reaching into his pocket. 'I guess I knew there wasn't much chance of you two making a go of it.' He passed her a paper wallet. 'This is a passage ticket for Home. You will sail within the week.'

As she accepted it, Eliza's eyes brightened and her breath caught in her throat.

'Captain Charles Ingram and his wife have agreed to act as your chaperones on their vessel *Larkins* which sails next week.'

'Oh, Uncle Patrick, how can I thank you?'

Patrick held up a staying hand. 'Let me finish.' He drew a second paper from his pocket. 'And this is a draft drawn on my bank in London for two thousand pounds. It is a considerable sum, but if you are economical it should suffice to set you up in a moderate lifestyle until you can find a suitable occupation for yourself. I have already written to my sister Catherine in Scotland to inform her of your return. I know Montrose was difficult for you as a child, but you're an adult now and I'm sure you can adjust better.' His eyes were misty. 'I know I never could have hoped to replace your real father in your affections, but I have cared greatly for you, Eliza, in spite of everything. I will miss you. But I want your happiness above all.'

Eliza threw her arms around Patrick Craigie's neck and kissed him. 'I'm so sorry if I caused you so much trouble,' she said. 'I've misjudged you dreadfully. It was hard to believe that someone who loved my mother could possibly love me too.'

His face flushed with pleasure. 'If you ever need help, don't forget I am here.'

'I won't. And thank you so very much.'

There was an awkward moment when neither stirred before Eliza spoke again. 'What will happen to Thomas?'

Patrick frowned. 'If I'd been his commanding officer, I'd have had him stripped of his rank or even had him cashiered. But I'm afraid this sort of thing happens regularly in God-forsaken places like Karnal.'

'So a man can do anything he likes to his wife and receive no punishment at all?'

Patrick met the flashing eyes with equanimity. 'I wish I could say no, but yes, that is the way it is.'

'There ought to be laws against it.'

'Perhaps one day there will be.'

For a few moments longer they looked at each other before Eliza took a deep breath and set her chin. 'Well, as I've only a few days, I'd better start packing.'

Betty Craigie did not bother to see Eliza off the day *Larkins* sailed. She supervised the last-minute packing and loading of her luggage before retreating indoors without a single word of

farewell.

The last physical reminder Eliza had of her mother was the sound of her voice somewhere in the distant caverns of the house berating a *dhobi-wallah* for ruining one of her best tablecloths. Somehow it seemed appropriate. The state of a tablecloth would always be held in higher esteem than her only daughter.

Patrick Craigie, too, seemed awkward at the parting and could only manage a restrained goodbye at the *ghats*. He begged urgent official business and hurried away.

With a low ache in her heart, Eliza watched his *ghari* depart. She was sorry she had never been able to fully accept him as her father, and now it was too late. She sensed she might never see him, or India, again. A little nervous at the prospect of the life ahead of her, with her head bowed she slowly she made her way up the gangplank followed by her new maid.

‘Hello, Eliza.’

She raised her head. An arrow of cold passed through her. He was standing leaning on the ship’s rail, two traveling bags at his feet, and a curious grin on his lips that seemed to mock her. Her throat constricted and her words were hoarse. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I managed to get leave. A nice ocean voyage together would give us a chance to mend things.’

Shocked, every nerve fiber in her body strummed with anger. ‘Not on your life!’ She tried to push past Thomas, but he gripped her arm.

‘I’m your husband, but it seems you have already conveniently forgotten that fact. Sailing off Home without my permission. Tsk, tsk.’

Eliza could hardly believe his patronizing words. ‘Take your hands off me,’ she said coldly, ‘or I’ll scream.’

He sensed her seriousness and released his grip. ‘For God’s sake, Eliza, I just lost my head,’ he said in a softer voice. ‘That woman bewitched me. It was nothing serious. I was a bit of a fool and I’m not embarrassed to admit it.’

‘I don’t care. Things were over between us long before she turned up.’

‘You have to give me another chance.’

‘Don’t bully me, you oaf!’

His eyes narrowed. The harshness returned to his voice. ‘You can’t talk to me that way. You made your vow before God. Remember, “till death do us part”? You’re my wife,’ he hissed, ‘and you’ll do as I say.’

Fury suffused Eliza’s senses. She spun around to her maid and grabbed a parasol the girl had been carrying. She used it to aim hard at Thomas’s head, sending his shako flying. Yelling, and clutching his ear, he fell sideways. Several other spectators who had been watching the encounter with great curiosity scattered to get out of the way.

She glared at the stunned man lying on the ship’s deck. ‘I damn you, Thomas James, and I damn every moment I ever knew you!’ She poked the point of the parasol at his heart. ‘Now get out of my life unless you want to have “Done to death by parasol” written on your gravestone - which in your case is probably the most fitting epitaph you could aspire to.’

Edging away from the dangerous point, Thomas scrambled to his feet, retrieved his shako and dusted off his uniform. The mockery in his eyes had been replaced by something almost snakelike as he gathered up his bags and fled down the gangplank.

Eliza took one long, last look at his retreating figure, trying to remember the time when he had been handsome, and she had adored everything about him, eager to be in his arms and in his bed. A time when she had loved him. But if there had ever been such a memory it was no longer there - just the cold ashes of contempt.

The ship *Larkins* was well off the Bengal Coast by the time Patrick Craigie returned home after a difficult day in his offices. He’d also had Thomas James to contend with - the man had insisted on seeing him after Eliza refused his last-minute attempt at reconciliation. Thomas had even tried to justify his escapade with Mrs. Lomer by accusing his wife of infidelity herself, but Patrick doubted

it was true. Eliza was naturally flirtatious but he was sure she had taken her marriage vow seriously. Accordingly, Thomas James had been dispatched with little sympathy and a warning not to bother the Craigies ever again on the matter.

The house now had a desolate air. He'd grown used to having Eliza around again and, needing a strong drink to ease the end of an awful day, Patrick poured himself a large whisky and wandered into the library. To his surprise, he discovered Betty sitting at a desk writing furiously, a large stack of black-bordered envelopes in front of her. His wife had always found handwriting tedious and rarely wrote anything herself, even her society notes and invitations were usually done by a scribe.

'Betty? What are you about, dear?'

She did not look up as she firmly folded a sheet of matching black-bordered paper and thrust it into an envelope and added it to a growing pile of mail. It was only then that Patrick became aware she was wearing a black silk gown and her hair covered with a black lace cap. He hurried to his wife's side. 'Has someone died?'

Still she did not reply, continuing to write with her head down.

'I had not known anyone in your family was ill,' he ventured again.

Betty still did not speak and waved him away with an impatient hand. Patrick picked up one of the envelopes which had yet to be sealed. Like the others, it was addressed to one of Betty's many friends and acquaintances throughout the close-knit Anglo-Indian society. He withdrew the letter from the inside. After the date and salutation, she had written:

'It grieves me to have to advise that my daughter, Mrs. Thomas James, breathed her last in this house this morning. All that could be done for her was done, but she failed to respond to treatment. Her final farewell is to be a private family affair, although you may wish to call to offer your condolences at any time next week. Yours sincerely, Mrs Patrick Craigie.'

A gasp of dismay wedged in Patrick's throat. His hand shook, and the sheet of paper wafted down to the floor.

Anyone who reminded Eliza even remotely of her mother was unlikely to have a hope of influencing her. No sooner had she met Ann, the wife of Charles Ingram, captain of the *Larkins*, she knew she was in for a stormy voyage in more ways than one. The sense of elation she had felt as she watched the Ganges Delta fade into the distance was instantly threatened by Mrs. Ingram's intentions to follow out Patrick Craigie's instructions to the letter and keep a firm watch on his step-daughter.

Although it was common knowledge as to why Eliza was really going Home and the fight with Thomas on the deck had been witnessed by several passengers, the official story was that she had had a fall from a horse and was being sent to England for treatment.

Mrs. Ann Ingram had little time for women who showed emotion in public and when Eliza promptly discovered a kindred spirit in a loud-mouthed, frank-talking American widow, Mrs. Matty Stevens, the battle-lines were drawn. To Ann's consternation, Eliza opened the conversation at dinner one night by asking Matty what she thought of divorce.

'Divorce, my gal, ought to be a woman's right,' replied Matty. 'Marriage is an utter hokum, invented by men, and totally for their own convenience. I say it ought to be taken out as a contract with a time limit. You sign up for five years and if you're still crazy for it after then, you sign up for another five years, and so on. Any time after your five years either party is free to go their own way.'

Ann's eyes fluttered with horror while her husband was also clearly uncomfortable with his table guest. 'Really, Mrs. Stevens,' the Captain said, 'I have often heard you Americans coming up with radical ideas, but this is utter poppycock. What you are advocating is a complete destruction of the foundations of our society. Our holiest institute. Aside from the breaking of solemn vows, what if one party to the contract doesn't want to be free, eh? What if there are children to be taken care of?'

Matty's girlish gray-flecked curls bounced about her head. She disregarded his comments by wagging heavily be-ringed fingers in his direction. 'In a society that cared about women, that

enfranchised women, that allowed women careers ...’

‘Oh, God forbid,’ interrupted the Captain.

Undeterred, Matty continued. ‘That allowed women self-determination and marriage contracts, the care of children could be undertaken by specialist nurseries and infant schools. The day must surely come.’

Ann Ingram continued to fan her flushed face as she reeled beneath the American’s unorthodox ideas, but Eliza was thoroughly absorbed in Matty’s opinions. She had never met anyone like her - a woman who wasn’t frightened to speak her mind in mixed company. Besides, just seeing Ann Ingram heading for apoplexy was a joy in itself.

‘Of course, now, if a gal could find some way of controlling her biological necessity of producing children ...’

Ann croaked loudly and Captain Ingram knew it was time to stop. ‘Mrs Stevens,’ he interrupted quickly. ‘I hope you haven’t forgotten you had promised to give us a recital after dinner. Surely you should be resting your voice?’

Matty Stevens was as fanatical about her singing as she was about female rights. ‘Oh, lor’ sakes, you’re right.’ Her hand flew to her throat. ‘I’ll be quiet as a mouse,’ she ended with a whisper.

The Ingrams heaved a joint sigh of relief, but Eliza could hardly wait to spend more time with her new friend. Matty Stevens sang much as she talked, in a loud, bombastic fashion. She totally disregarded the distaste or open scorn on the faces of her fellow passengers as she finished her recital of American popular songs with a rendition of the *Star Spangled Banner* in too high a key for her voice. The applause was muted, but Eliza clapped her enthusiastically.

‘Never be deterred by an ignorant audience, Eliza, my gal,’ Matty said to her as she stepped off the dais in a rustle of black silk, curls bouncing, and rushed to the punch bowl for refreshment. ‘In my experience, the average spectator ain’t a clue about talent.’

‘You were on the stage?’

‘Oh, yes, my gal, didn’t I tell you? In my younger days, prior to meeting the late Mr. Stevens of the United States Consular Corps, and traveling to far-flung death-traps, I’d sung in every state from Maine to Missouri. I’m a little out of practice now I have to admit, but ain’t nothin’ a few months of solid work won’t fix.’

Matty downed three glasses of punch in quick succession, she sighed with satisfaction and studied Eliza, taking in her wide blue eyes, luxurious black hair and the way her deep rose-pink gown seemed to make her skin glow. ‘You know, gal, you sure remind me of Fanny Elssler.’

Eliza’s eyes widened. ‘Who is she?’

‘Tsk. Don’t tell me you never saw her? Not so brilliant technically, mind you, everyone agrees on that, but such presence. Such dynamic interpretation of Mediterranean passion, and sublime beauty, of course.’ Matty peered at Eliza more closely. ‘Ever thought of the stage yourself, m’gal? Even Elssler couldn’t hold a candle to those eyes and that complexion.’

Eliza rarely received compliments from women and she was momentarily nonplussed. ‘You really think ... I mean - the stage?’

‘Yep, and why not? You’re a free woman - well insofar as the stupid law and your husband will allow you to be. If things ain’t too peachy between the pair of you, as I surmise, I don’t see why you should sit about and feel sorry for yourself. You’re beautiful. If I’d been a smidgeon more on the cute side myself I could have gotten further along than I did. Don’t let a bunch of bigoted and jealous fools lock up your future.’

‘I wasn’t particularly good at music, and I can’t sing as well as you,’ Eliza ventured.

Matty fluttered. ‘Didn’t you hear me? I meant *dance*, my gal. You have a marvelous way of moving. You have a dancer’s body, a dancer’s grace. Elssler could never have been a Maria Taglioni - and you’ve heard of her, of course, a fragile bit of fluff but the greatest ballet dancer ever born - yet Elssler found her own niche and perfected the craft of character dancing. Kings and princes all over Europe flock to her performances.’

Ann Ingram appeared at their side. ‘Excuse me, Mrs. Stevens, but I do think you’re filling Mrs.

James's head with some highly improper notions, and I must protest.'

'I think Mrs. James is old enough to make up her own mind,' whipped back Matty.

'She is not yet of age and she is under my protection.'

Matty gave a raucous cackle. 'What bunkum! The gal's already been wedded and bedded, and to a right varmint from the sounds of things. Protecting her is as about as much use as closing the stable door after the prize filly's bolted.'

Eliza burst out laughing right into Ann Ingram's blushing face.

'Well, I never!' She glared at Eliza. 'If that's the way you feel, I must caution you that I will wash my hands of you.'

'Please do,' responded Eliza between giggles.

Ann abruptly turned her back and marched off.

'Some of those limey dames one meets in India can be a real pain in the ass,' muttered Matty in a low voice and Eliza's laughter echoed even louder. Never before had she heard a woman use such language. It was scandalous, and exciting, and she just adored Matty Stevens.

The next day *Larkins* called at Madras. From the ship's rail, Matty and Eliza watched the boats full of victuals and passengers embark from the shore. The Southern Indian port had no harbor and all cargoes and travelers had to brave the tricky surf to reach ships. As the expert oarsmen navigated the heaving waves Eliza's eyes were drawn to a man in smart military uniform in the rear of one of the boats. For a moment she was reminded of that moment when she first saw Thomas and she was conscious of a flaring of those inner needs that had been dormant in her life of late.

As he clambered up the side of the ship and Eliza noticed how smartly he filled out his breeches and jacket, Matty raised her eyebrows. 'Now there's a fine package to make a lady's day,' she muttered. Eliza discreetly said nothing, but secretly she had to agree with her.

After *Larkins* sailed Eliza didn't see the newcomer again until the following morning when she discovered him in a chair on the aft deck, engrossed in a book. He was no longer in uniform, but dressed Anglo-Indian fashion, with loose white trousers, a flat straw hat and an open shirt. Eliza watched him quietly for a moment before she strolled past him once, swishing her skirt with one hand as if to fan her scent in his direction. He failed to notice her, so she watched the ship's wake for a few minutes before retracing her steps. As she strolled past again, she deliberately let her small reticule slip from her wrist. It fell close to his feet. She stopped but did not bend over. He seemed absorbed in his book, so she gave a light cough.

'It's a very old trick, ma'am,' he said, his head still down. 'I'm not in the mood to stir myself for your bag. If you wish to make my acquaintance, please just say so.' He then looked up at her and grinned. His light blue eyes assessed her frankly, lingering briefly on her bosom and the narrowness of her waist.

Eliza tossed her head to one side and looked at him askance. 'Are you always this rude?'

'Only when I'm on leave. As an aide-de-camp I spend my whole life being polite to people. Rudeness is a refreshing release.'

Eliza had to smile as she bent down and retrieved her reticule. 'I am Eliza James,' she said as she straightened.

'Captain Charles Lennox,' he said.

'What are you reading?'

'A French novel. Do you read French, Mrs. James?'

Eliza sat next to him. Leaning on the arm of the chair she rested her chin in her hand, confronting the interesting blue stare with her own. '*Mais certainement, capitaine,*' she said breathily.

'You are welcome to borrow it when I have finished,' he replied, his eyes examining the curves of her mouth with as much interest as he had studied the rest of her. 'In fact I have brought with me a rather extensive library of French novels. Some of them are a little racy, however.'

Eliza moistened her lips. 'How fascinating. So I presume you expect to do much reading on this voyage?'

'It will depend on the company I may keep.'

She half lowered her lids. 'Shipboard life need not be monotonous, Captain Lennox.'

He hesitated a moment before replying. 'Can I take it you have no husband to provide you with amusement?'

'My husband has already found his amusements elsewhere.'

'I find that difficult to believe. You are extraordinarily beautiful, Mrs. James.'

She widened her eyes to full effect. 'Why thank you, Captain Lennox, or would you think it presumptuous if I called you Charles?'

'Not in the least, if I may call you Eliza.'

Eliza lifted her chin off her palm and stretched out her hand. He held it for a moment before placing a lingering kiss on it.

A week out from Madras, Matty Stevens cornered Eliza after breakfast one day and tugged her into a quiet corner of the deck. 'Now, my gal, I ought to warn you that folks have seen the pair of you and they know what they see, if you get my drift.'

Eliza looked at her blankly. 'I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about.'

'Intercourse, my gal - and not just of the social kind.'

'Really, Matty, there's no need to be vulgar.'

'I'll be vulgar when there's the need. Lor's sake, gal, when young Lennox is busy doing up your corsets you should at least close the cabin door. The whole darned ship is abuzz with your business. Why, Mrs. Ingram is permanently on smelling salts and her poor husband doesn't know where to put himself when he sees you coming.'

Eliza laughed. 'Why should I care?'

'Because you're the one who'll suffer in the end.'

'I thought you said women ought to take charge of their own lives?'

'Yes, well, so I did, but society's got a long way to go before they'll accept that fact. In the meantime, you gotta play by the rules. There are the feelings of others to consider.'

'What others? Charles is a free man and we are in love. That's all that matters.'

'Bunkum. You're not in love, you're just sea and moonstruck that's all. Happens all the time on ships. And reading them darned Frenchie novels to boot. Had you forgotten you've got a husband some place?'

'The thought is always in the forefront of my mind.'

Matty's eyes narrowed for a moment. 'Ah. Now I think I see. You're about giving him evidence, aren't you?'

'What if I am?'

Matty shook her head. 'I'm afraid you're digging yourself a mighty big hole. You know my opinion that divorce ought to be made easier, but when you've men telling women how to run their lives, it will never be. Sure enough you give him evidence, but he'll ruin you all the same. Drag you through the mud while not a skerrit of it will stick to him. You'll never be able to hold your head up in society again, not in India, not in England - probably not even in the United States - although there are some parts of the frontier where a person's marital status ain't questioned too closely.'

Eliza uttered a deep, anguished sigh of anger and frustration. 'I made a mistake and married a fool who beats me and runs off with another woman, humiliating me, and now you say I must be the one to pay for it. It isn't right. It will never be right.'

Matty attempted sympathy. 'I don't know what to suggest, but giving folks a view of Captain Lennox inside your petticoats ain't the wisest route. It'll brand you for life. If you carry on in this fashion, you'll regret it without doubt.'

Much as she had liked Matty Stevens, Eliza could only take so much of this patronizing advice and something snapped inside her. To the other woman's surprise she spun on her like a wild cat. 'You are beginning to sound like my mother. To her I was branded the day I was born. I don't want to hear you, or anyone else, telling me what to do. Ever again.' She gave Matty a ferocious glare, tossed her head dramatically and flounced off.

Unperturbed by the outburst, Matty watched Eliza retreat along the deck and shook her head. 'You've a lot to learn Eliza, my gal. The world don't take too kindly to women with minds of their own. Good luck to you anyhow.'

By the time *Larkins* arrived in Portsmouth on a cold February day in 1841, Eliza and Charles had been ostracized by all the passengers. They had been banned from the Captain's table and no-one, apart from Matty, spoke to them. But the lovers hardly noticed, for they spent most of their days in a quiet corner of the deck absorbed with themselves and bawdy French literature, and their nights driving each other to the heights of passion in either of their respective cabins. The rest of the world could have ended and they wouldn't have cared. They were the only people on board the ship who were sorry when the voyage came to its end. As soon as they docked, Matty slipped off to arrange another ship to America before Eliza even had a chance to say goodbye. Mrs. Ingram, meanwhile, had been writing reams to Patrick Craigie, reporting on his step-daughter's shocking behavior. She was just as eager to disembark with a letter bound for the express overland mail to India.

8.

As the proprietor of the Imperial Hotel in London's free-spirited Covent Garden, Mrs. Walters didn't normally bother with a close inquiry into a couple's marital arrangements. If they were quiet and paid their bills, that was all that mattered. However, after the notorious excesses of the previous two monarchs, King George IV and King William IV, with the accession of the popular and unblemished Queen Victoria to the throne, the British public's mood had changed. They were demanding spotless respectability from every strata of society. People's private lives were expected to be as pure as that of the Queen herself. This particularly made things difficult for hotel proprietors. Yet Mrs. Walters was still reluctant to turn away the smart military man and the well-dressed young woman who arrived with a large quantity of luggage distinctly marked with different name tags.

'Will that be one bedroom, or two?'

The young woman flashed vivid blue eyes. 'Just the one, with a sitting room, if you please.'

'And the account in my name,' said the smart young man. 'Lennox.'

'Will you be staying long?'

'One or two days.'

'You will have to dine in your room, of course.'

Eliza raised her eyebrows. 'Why?'

'Only married couples are allowed to eat together in the dining room.'

'What? That's absurd.'

Charles laid a restraining hand on Eliza's arm.

'Sorry, but there's new rules now,' said Mrs. Walters. 'I've a reputation to uphold. I don't want it getting about that I take irregulars, if you see what I mean.'

Charles reached into his pocket and withdrew a pouch of sovereigns. He jingled them at Mrs. Walters. 'I'm sure we can see a way around irregularity,' he said smoothly.

Mrs. Walters' eyes gleamed momentarily. She sniffed before handing over a single key.

Eliza threw her bonnet on the large four-poster bed and grimaced at the clean, but plain, bedroom. She was in a bad mood, not just from the tiring journey from Portsmouth but her *chi-chi* maid had disappeared shortly after *Larkins* arrived in port. Apparently she had been carrying on her own liaison with a member of the ship's crew while Eliza had been obsessed with hers.

Charles had merely laughed, but Eliza hated having to do any domestic chores for herself. The voyage had been wonderfully indolent but now the practicalities of life had to be faced. Not only would she have to find a more permanent place to stay, she would have to break in a new maid as well.

She sat down on the bed with a sigh of exasperation as Charles kicked the door shut. Within seconds he had rushed to the bed and pushed her back against the pillows. 'My dear Eliza, dry land at last and a real bed that does not have a mind of its own.' He attempted to kiss her, but Eliza raised her arms against him.

'Not now, Charles. I need to do some thinking. Why don't you go for a walk or something?'

It was the first time she had ever rebuffed him and he was momentarily perplexed. 'What sort of thinking?'

Her eyes showed irritability and restlessness. 'I have to make plans for my future. Where I'm going to live.'

Charles chuckled and reached out to stroke her hair as if she were a pet. 'Don't be a silly goose. You're going to live with me, of course. I'll find us a nice little suite of rooms.'

'No, Charles, I won't be living with you.' Eliza pushed his hand away and scrambled off the bed, walking towards the window where she drew aside the curtain to look into the street.

He did not hide his puzzlement. 'But I thought - dash it, Eliza, you told me you loved me?'

Eliza bit her lip before turning around to face him. She smiled. 'Of course I love you, Charles, my sweet. But after being cooped up on that ship, I just feel I need a little space. You must understand that, surely?'

He studied her warily for a few seconds. 'No, I don't, but if you want me out of your hair for a bit, I'll go for a stroll.'

'Thank you Charles. You're such a sweetie.'

She watched him pick up his hat and leave the room. Much as she adored Charles, the thought of living with him permanently was something she refused to contemplate. After all, she had learned her lesson the hard way. Living with Thomas had ruined one perfectly good romance and she didn't want a repeat of it.

A few minutes after he had left, there was a tentative knock on the door. The bellboy offered her a tray on which there was a neat white envelope addressed to Mrs. E. James.

'Dear Eliza, I was set a merry chase to track you down. It was most fortunate that the agents for Larkins finally communicated to me your whereabouts. I have booked a seat for you on tomorrow's coach bound for Montrose. I shall collect you at 6 o'clock sharp. Pray do not be late.'

The note was signed by her step-aunt, Catherine Rae.

Eliza burst into laughter. The bellboy stared at her.

'Will there be a reply, mum?'

Still laughing, Eliza proceeded to tear up the note into little pieces and replaced them on the lad's tray. 'Tell Mrs. Rae that is my answer.' She slammed the door.

Half-an-hour later there was another knock. This time it was Mrs. Walters, a grim look on her face. 'The lady what sent that note didn't care for the answer,' she said flatly. 'She's waiting downstairs and wishes to speak to you in person.'

'Tell her to go back to Scotland where she came from.'

'I certainly will not. I don't know your business, Mrs. James, but I suggest you speak to the lady directly so she can remove herself from my premises. I don't want no unpleasantness.'

Mrs. Walters and Eliza locked eyes for a moment before Eliza relented. She wasn't afraid of the Craigies, not any more, but she was damned if she was going to let anyone force her back to Montrose. It had been many years since Eliza Gilbert had run naked down the High Street, but Catherine Rae's affronted eyes reminded her instantly of the members of Miss Margaret Craigie's charity circle on that fateful morning.

'I'm not going with you,' she informed her forcefully as she met her step-father's sister in the hotel sitting room. 'I know Uncle Patrick meant well, writing to tell you that I would be returning to England, but I intend to lead my own life from now on without any more interference from either the Craigie or James families.'

'Eliza, don't be foolish,' said Catherine. 'You really don't have a say in the matter. If a woman doesn't listen to what her husband tells her, she must mind what her father says.'

‘I’ll mind no-one if you please, Aunt Catherine,’ said Eliza, struggling to quell her anger. ‘I am a grown woman. I refuse to be the property of my husband or my step-father, or any other man. I will not be ordered about by you or anyone else, do you understand?’

Catherine Rae frowned. ‘Seems to me you could do with a good whipping with a switch of willow, young lady.’

Eliza’s hand inched towards a crystal jar on a nearby table. ‘I warn you, I mean it. Don’t you tell me how to live my life. I don’t want to have to throw this at you.’

The air was heavy with menace and at that instant the door opened. Charles Lennox walked through, a posy of crocuses in his hand. ‘Oh, there you are. I say, do look, my darling - I found these at a stall in the Garden, first of the season ...’ As he realized that Eliza wasn’t alone, he halted, looking from the tense Eliza to the ramrod straight Catherine Rae and back again.

Eliza let her hand fall from the jar and she rose, half-running towards him and putting her arms around his neck, placing a firm, but passionate, kiss upon his lips. ‘How very sweet of you, my love. You’ve been gone so long, I was worried about.’ She thereupon linked her arm in that of the bewildered Charles before turning around smiling coquettishly at the other woman. ‘Charles, darling, this is Mrs. Rae, a relative of my step-father. She was under the misapprehension I needed protection and would be staying with her family in Montrose. Tell them, sweetie, won’t you, that you and I have other plans.’

A stunned Catherine Rae scowled at the equally-dumbfounded Charles. ‘Who on earth are you?’ she blurted.

Before he could reply, Eliza said, ‘Charles is my dearest friend. He is all the protection I need.’ The coquettish smile never left her lips.

For a moment she thought Catherine Rae was going to faint. Her face went from white to red and white again in the space of a few seconds before stood up and hurried out of the room without another word.

An hour later, after they had made love in Mrs. Walters’ comfortable four-poster and Charles had fallen asleep, Eliza slipped out of bed and sat down at the writing table. She wrote a brief report to her step-father relating his sister’s attempt to force her to Montrose and, although she did not mention Charles Lennox, she closed the letter with a few firm words.

‘Please ensure I am never under obligation to yourself or any member of your family again. As soon as I am in a position to do so, I shall refund in full the sum of money you bestowed on me. It would be best if you did not try to communicate with me again.’ She purposefully signed the letter, underlining her name, ‘*Eliza Rosanna Gilbert*’.

Charles Lennox knew the shipboard dalliance with Eliza James should have come to its natural end after they left the Imperial Hotel and she moved into a rented suite of rooms on her own, but he was still under her spell. Although things were often strained between them, he still couldn’t get up the courage to leave her. Living in London was far different from on board *Larkins*, where they had created their own existence and ignored everyone around them. Now, there were realities to face. Inevitably, they had started having arguments. At times he was often petulant and jealous. Surely, he said, if she loved him, she would want him to live with her, instead of letting him stay overnight but insisting that he must be gone from her rooms by early morning?

There were also problems over money. Eliza refused to take any from him as she said she despised mistresses. He took this as a personal affront and carelessly suggested in that case she should take care of the way she was spending her allowance. Her luxurious suite in fashionable Half Moon Street, the phaeton with matching grays, new personal maid, theater visits, dinners by the score, baubles, jewels, and clothes - the finest, most fashionable London could offer - must have been rapidly draining her funds.

‘You haven’t a bottomless pit of money,’ he had warned her. ‘It can’t last, not at this rate. I insist that you let me pay some of your bills.’

She had retaliated with that now-familiar explosion of hers, ‘Don’t tell me what to do! I won’t be

beholden to any man.'

'Oh, and isn't your step-father a man?'

'That's different.'

He shook his head and sighed. Eliza was a puzzle. He doubted that he would ever be able to understand her. After several months of a relationship that lurched from bickering to passionate love-making and back to more bickering, Charles was becoming tired. One morning a serious-faced man in black called at Eliza's rooms before breakfast. Eliza was still asleep and Charles, wearing a dressing gown, answered his call.

'Is this the residence of Mrs. Thomas James?'

Charles half-yawned. 'Who wants to know?'

The man did not reply. He ran his eyes over Charles's dressing gown. 'Is the lady in?'

'She's asleep, man. You can tell me your business.'

The man withdrew a legal-sized document tied with a red ribbon from his inner pocket. 'This is to be served on Mrs. James in person. Will you please fetch her.'

Charles stared at the document for a few seconds. God - she's not been paying her bills, he thought. I did warn her.

'Please wake the lady, sir. I haven't got all day.'

Charles tried to shut the door in the man's face, but suddenly a second man appeared from behind him. He was a policeman. 'The bailiff is only doing his duty, sir,' he said. 'There is no need for trouble. I suggest you get the lady out of bed.'

A few minutes later Eliza quietly accepted the document. She preened, seeming to be more concerned with the state of her appearance under the curious eyes of two men than the possibility of bad news, and Charles was overcome with another fit of irritated jealousy. Why on earth did she always think she could charm her way out of every situation? Didn't she know debt was a serious business? After the men had left, to his astonishment, Eliza threw the writ aside and announced she was going back to bed.

'Eliza - don't you want to know what's in this?'

'I'm not in the mood for bad news. You open it.' She swept her wrap about her shoulders and returned upstairs to her bedroom.

Fingers shaking slightly, Charles unraveled the ribbon. It was not a writ for debt. It was an official notice from the Consistory Court of London. Captain Thomas James of Calcutta had filed for divorce on the grounds of adultery and named Captain Charles Lennox as co-respondent. He was mortified. It was time to make the final break.

As rumors about an upcoming scandal slowly took hold among the narrow-minded Anglo-Indian circles in which she had moved all her life, Eliza found herself being gradually ostracized. She was no longer welcome in the homes of men like Sir Jasper Nicholls and even her old friend, Fanny, kept her distance. She was learning, to her cost, that even a hint of adultery was almost tantamount to committing murder, and she was also learning that the two thousand pounds that had seemed like a fortune six months before wasn't going to last a lifetime. She wished she hadn't been so proud in rejecting Charles' offers of financial help.

Well, it was too late now. Despite his protestations of undying love, he had gone. Men! They were all the same. You couldn't rely on them for a minute. She should have learned her lesson. Just as an overwhelming bout of depression threatened to descend upon her, she received an unexpected invitation in the post. Those wonderful Eden sisters she had met in Simla still remembered her, had heard she was in London and asked if she would care to join them for a weekend house party. Eliza felt her spirits lift. Either the rumors hadn't yet reached them or they had deliberately chosen to ignore them.

Perhaps unwittingly, Emily and Fanny Eden had set in motion a new pattern for Eliza's life when they placed her next to the husband of their niece at dinner. For the first time in her life, Eliza was introduced to a visionary - a vital, articulate man who had played an important role in many of the

new reforms gaining currency in Britain.

Lord Henry Brougham had an odd modulation of voice, thunder-loud one minute, whisper-soft the next, and which seemed to be reflected in an awkward, disjointed body like that of a wooden puppet on strings, but hiding behind those physical and behavioral eccentricities was one of the sharpest legal minds in Britain. His defense of the hapless Princess of Wales in her failed divorce was legendary and his all-consuming zeal in the abolition of slavery, reforms of education and mitigation of the criminal code had made him one of the most far-sighted politicians of his age. In his spare time, he had also managed to design a carriage that would bear his name.

‘Now let me see,’ he said squinting down his nose at Eliza, ‘if I can guess what manner of woman you might be.’ He wagged his jaw and lifted his large ungainly hands to form a picture frame around her face. ‘Ah, if I only knew the words to describe the beauty of those eyes. That hair of ebony. A complexion that would make a Madonna weep.’

Eliza eyed him warily as he reached for her hand, turning it over and studying it as if he were a fortune teller. ‘A gold ring but no husband present. A widow perhaps?’ He ran his bony fingers across the lines of her palm. ‘I see the spirit of adventure. An appreciation of life’s finer things.’ His sharp eyes lifted to hers. ‘Forgive me if I am presumptuous, but I think you must be an actress. Emily and Fanny know how much I adore unconventional women.’

Eliza’s initial suspicion thawed and she smiled, but still said nothing.

‘Dear lady, kill my suspense. Am I correct?’

‘Not yet, but someone once suggested I ought to think of going on the stage,’ she said.

‘And with such a enchanting voice too, you will conquer far and wide if you do.’

‘You really think so?’

‘Most assuredly. It is often assumed a lawyer and politician must be adept at pulling the wool over eyes in the course of his professional dealings, but I never, ever, lie to the fairer sex.’ He beamed and Eliza’s heart continued to warm towards him.

For the rest of the dinner, the two of them talked continuously, to the point where they neglected the excellent food and all other guests at the table. Afterward, instead of Eliza retreating with the ladies and Lord Henry staying behind with the men to smoke and drink port, the pair of them opted for fresh air in the moonlit gardens.

Eliza’s nerves tingled as she walked next to this odd-looking man with his rolling gait. It wasn’t the prickle of physical or romantic excitement - that sensation she could recognize only too well. This was the rare excitement of the mind: the discovery of a mental stimulation she had rarely known. Apart from a few dimly remembered lessons with her step-father, never before had a man thought to discuss such subjects with her.

In a darting dragon-fly manner, Lord Henry touched on the horrors of slavery, religious persecution, the rights of the common man and democracy, the penal code, and the education of children, and even the confines of married women. He did not seem to mind when she had difficulty expressing her own opinion on matters she had never before had to consider. He just tapped her hand and said, ‘You are still too young to care about such philosophies, but I despise the way men think women have not a thought in their heads but for parasols and perfumes.’

As they reached the end of a path and were about to turn onto another, Lord Henry stopped and looked at Eliza with a quizzical expression. ‘And that brings me, of course, to the subject of divorce. All women must have an opinion on that.’

Eliza’s glow evaporated. Up until now, the writ from Thomas James had been far from her mind. It was still lying gathering dust on her hall table where Charles Lennox had left it the day before he abandoned her.

Lord Henry noticed her sudden pallor, even in the moonlight. ‘Ah. I think I have spoken too much. I have touched on some secret worry. Come, sit with me. I may be able to help.’

Eliza joined him on a garden seat. With tears in her eyes, she told him everything: from her elopement with Thomas James, her mother’s subsequent treatment of her, right through to the affair with Charles Lennox and the delivery of the writ. When she had finished, she began to cry.

Lord Henry placed an arm around her shoulder and offered his handkerchief. They sat for several minutes thus before he spoke. 'Can I presume you have not replied to the writ?'

She shook her head.

'Hm, pity. It would have had a requirement that you give answer within an allotted time.'

'I don't want to give an answer. I want a divorce from that abominable man. I don't care if I am branded as an adulteress. Why should a man's adultery be acceptable, while a woman's not?' Eliza's tears began to dry with the heat of her emotions.

Lord Henry nodded agreement. 'I agree it is a draconian presumption, but it is the law, and until we can change the narrow minds and prejudices of the legislators who make such laws - those who see women as little more than male property - there is nothing that can be done. The majority of men have the attitude that their seed may be cast freely but the wife must remain chaste, if only to guarantee that the children she bears are those of the husband.' He winked. 'Perhaps they are also just a little frightened to think the female appetite for love is far more pronounced than they suspect?'

Eliza had to smile coyly. 'Surely you can't expect me to respond to that, Lord Henry?'

'Of course not,' he chuckled before his face turned sober again. 'But we must see what can be done for you in the matter of the writ.'

On the Sunday afternoon, Eliza returned to London with Lord Henry Brougham in a carriage of his own revolutionary design. During the journey she admitted to him that she had barely enough funds left to pay her rent for another week and that soon she must pawn her jewels.

'We'll have none of that,' he had exclaimed. 'It is time that you, Eliza James, made good of your talents - yes, the first step on to the stage where you belong.'

Many of London's acting schools were facades for brothels. Mrs. Kelly's, however, had gained a reputation as genuine and one of the best, even if many of her students did graduated to other stages at the end of their careers and often wound up as mistresses of members of the House of Lords.

Mrs. Kelly was suitably impressed with Eliza James' appearance when, dressed in a bright blue carriage gown, she arrived with her note of introduction from Lord Henry Brougham. The young woman had a natural grace and dramatic eyes which would quite easily be observed from the furthest benches in the gallery.

'So, I had heard Henry's head has been turned by a mysterious newcomer,' she said, slowly walking around Eliza, studying her from varying angles.

She could sense Eliza's hackles rise. 'I beg to assure you Lord Brougham is my *friend*,' she said stiffly. 'Nothing more.'

'If you say so.' Mrs. Kelly smiled. 'What acting experience have you had?'

'If I'd had experience I would hardly be here, would I?'

Mrs. Kelly matched the flare in Eliza's eyes with her own. 'Temperament in a graduated performer may have some justification,' she said, 'not in a beginner.'

Eliza lifted her chin with determination. 'I cannot help my nature, Mrs. Kelly. The most difficult circumstances force me to fend for myself. Others in my position may prefer to lean against a man, but I will not. My friends have suggested I explore the possibilities of a life on the stage. All I ask of you is an evaluation of any talents that I may have.'

Mrs. Kelly laughed. 'Well, well. You are spirited, I'll give you that.'

'Is that a failing?'

'No, but ...' Mrs. Kelly cocked her head to one side. 'Your voice. That accent. It has an odd quality that will require a great deal of modulation. But you have a most graceful body. Rather than acting, have you thought of dancing?'

'Someone once compared me to Fanny Elssler,' she ventured.

Mrs. Kelly nodded agreement before her eyes narrowed. 'Yes there is a superficial resemblance, but you are far more dramatic. There is a great deal of passion about you, Mrs. James. Do you have Spanish blood at all?'

‘My mother was descended from the Montalvos of Castile.’

‘Ah hah, yes.’ Mrs. Kelly reached for a small notebook and pen hanging from a chatelaine about her waist. She scribbled a few words on a piece of paper and handed it to Eliza. ‘This is the address of a man known as Espa. He is a teacher of classical Spanish dance.’

If Eliza was disappointed at the rebuff of her acting ambitions, she hid it well. She pocketed the note. As she turned to leave, Mrs. Kelly spoke again. ‘One last piece of advice. No woman called Eliza James will ever make her mark on the world of dance. I suggest you seriously consider changing your name. Find one that will bring out your true character. And make it a name that no-one will ever forget.’

Eliza pressed her lips together for a moment. ‘When I was a small child my father always called me Lola.’

Mrs. Kelly nodded. ‘Yes. That’s good. And what about Montalvo? No, perhaps not, all those ’l’s’ are a little clumsy on the tongue.’ She mused for a moment. ‘Montello ... Monte ...’

‘I have heard of a bullfighter called Montez.’

The two women looked at each other a moment longer. Mrs. Kelly reached out and shook her hand. ‘It will take hard work and a much dedication, but I think you have it in you. I wish you well – Madam Lola Montez.’

PART II

‘Courage! And shuffle the cards.’
(Reputed to be the favorite motto of Lola Montez)

9.

Lola took one last look around the rooms in Half Moon Street that had been her home for nearly a year. Most of the furnishings had been disposed of to pay off her debts and the place held a desolate air. She felt no regrets at leaving. All her other belongings were packed into several boxes and trunks and were presently sitting in the hall awaiting the arrival of the cab that would take her to her new address in modest Islington.

Only an hour previously, she had completed one last ride in Hyde Park with Lord Henry Brougham. Although they had chatted and laughed as if nothing was amiss, it had been difficult for her as she hated having to lie to him. Unlike other men she had known, Lord Henry did not deserve to be deceived, but she couldn't tell him she wasn't taking lessons with Mrs. Kelly and was spending the money he had given her on Spanish dancing lessons instead, and that there was every likelihood they would not meet again, but she had to be ruthless with the persona of Eliza James that she was about to jettison.

‘Lola,’ she said to herself, as she turned to walk down the stairs. ‘Remember who you are now. Eliza James never existed.’

Outside, a cart had overturned and the street was blocked with traffic and she saw it would be several minutes before her cab could maneuver itself to the front steps. While she waited impatiently, she noticed a tall man swathed in a long red cloak swaggering towards her along the footpath. She recognized him as Lord Thomas Ranelagh, a dandified fool who had introduced himself to her and Lord Henry while on their ride. At the time, she had been fully occupied with trying to savor her last moments in Lord Henry's company without giving away her secret plans, that she had given the other man scant attention.

As he approached and stood in front of her, he clicked his heels in an exaggerated fashion and swept his cloak over one shoulder, setting one shiny boot forward to strike an arrogant regal pose.

‘Marm,’ he said with a voice that sounded as if he had a mouth stuffed full of plums, ‘since our encounter this morning I have been unable to remove your image from my mind. My heart is torn to think of you as mistress to that frightful old noodle Bro’om when you could be transported to such amorous delights with me that your head would positively reel and each sinew of your body would echo Ranelagh forever.’

He was so ridiculous she had to laugh. ‘Oh would I indeed? You have a fine opinion of yourself, my Lord.’

He glanced around conspiratorially, not seeming to notice her boxes and that she was on the verge of moving out. He leaned towards her, swaying back and forward on his heels, his eyes glazed and blood-shot. There was a smell of brandy on his breath.

‘Now, marm, I have seen the fire in your eyes. Pray let us not make small talk.’ One hand slipped beneath the red folds of his cloak. ‘There is a fine upstanding fellow in here impatient to find his way into the warm embrace of your cellar.’

Madam Lola Montez lowered her long dark lashes, letting them sweep seductively over her cheeks. ‘Why, my Lord, I must hear more of this fine fellow. How tall is he, and does he have enough wine to keep my cellar overflowing?’

An avaricious grin parted his lips, showing yellowing teeth. ‘Oh, I do declare. Why this fellow

becomes taller and broader with every second that passes. He has an inexhaustible supply of ambrosia.'

Lola scanned the traffic jam. The cart had been righted and the cab should reach her in another few minutes. She smiled again at Ranelagh and nodded towards the door. 'Come inside, won't you?'

His face florid with excitement, he lurched towards her, but she nimbly avoided his grasp. 'Now, now, my Lord Ranelagh. You really must have patience.' Once back in the house, she led the way down the narrow hallway to a door that opened on to the cellar, the key to which was hanging on a hook. She picked up the key and slowly pushed her gloved finger into its ring, swinging it about pouting her lips with promise while she watched Lord Ranelagh. The symbolism of her actions had him panting. Again he tried to embrace her, but again she swiftly side-stepped.

'Oh, be quick, marm. Desist with this teasing. Why my fellow's pride is fit to burst!'

Lola slipped the key into the cellar lock and stepped backwards. 'Pray go first, my Lord. I will be with you in a jiffy - I must find a flint for the candle.'

'Don't bother. We don't need light ...ah ...'

She pushed him hard in the chest. He stumbled backwards down the steep stairs, giving a loud wail as he fell. Lola swiftly put the key back in the lock and turned it. She listened at the door for a few moments to make he didn't sound as if he was badly hurt and when she heard him clattering around in the dark and swearing profusely, she laughed through the keyhole. 'I trust my cellar's embrace is to your fellow's liking, my Lord?' She gathered up her skirts and hurried back to the front door where her cab was now waiting.

Despite it being fashionable on the stages of Continental Europe, Spanish dancing had never been received with much enthusiasm by the English, and Espa barely managed to make a living at teaching the art. His wife, a reformed Cockney whore whom he had met when she was a camp follower in the days of the Peninsular Wars, supplemented their income by taking in needlework in the rooms above their small studio in a less salubrious part of Islington.

Espa was a short, sinewy man with a pock-marked skin, thin black mustachios and wild curly hair that had to be plastered with a greasy pomade to make it sit flat against his head. The atmosphere that surrounded him, redolent of oil, garlic and a heavily aromatic tobacco, reminded Lola of the scents of India.

'So?' Espa marched around Lola, giving her an inspection much as Mrs. Kelly had done. 'Why do you come to me?'

He was surprised when Lola answered him in her rusty Spanish. 'To learn to dance, of course.'

'What style?'

Lola looked at him blankly.

'What style do you want to learn? Fandango? Bolero? Tango? Sardana?'

'Senor, I admit I know nothing of these. I have been told I have grace, that I may be suited to the Spanish form of dance.'

The mustachios twitched. 'What classical training have you had?'

Lola lifted her chin. 'In what regard?'

Espa tutted. 'If you have had no classical ballet training, you are wasting your and also my time. Always I have to explain to you English. One cannot just pick up a pair of castanets and stamp your heels and presto, you are a Spanish dancer. It takes years to perfect the movements of *classico espanol*. One must start very young.' He narrowed his eyes at Lola. 'You are a fully-grown woman. Your bones are molded. Even if you were to start today and work every hour for the rest of your life, you will never make a premier dancer.'

Although she felt a sinking sensation inside, Lola had no choice but to persist. 'I understand, but I am willing to work hard, Senor. I must learn as best I can. I have no other choice.'

Espa raised an eyebrow. 'Surely a woman with your beauty must have other choices?'

Her retort was swift. 'I do not choose to be owned by a man, if that is what you mean.'

He gave a wide grin. 'Ah, yes -I can see you have the spirit and blood of a woman of Spain.'

'Then you will take me as a pupil?'

'Let me see your money first.'

Lola withdrew a handful of gold sovereigns from her purse and gave them to him. 'These are on account. If I feel your tuition is satisfactory, more will follow.'

He accepted the uncounted coins greedily. 'Let us say tomorrow morning at ten. Be prepared to wear only petticoats. The body must be free.'

At first, the necessary discipline did not come easily to Lola, who had been used to a life of comparative ease and indolence. Compounded with this was the fact she was too poor now to have a personal maid to do the chores that she hated. Between studying the complex language of her lessons, practicing the physical exercises and keeping her personal appearance at its best, she was constantly at war with herself. But there was no Charles Lennox or subservient ayah to take the blame when things went wrong.

Espa felt the whip of her tongue at times, but he was a Spaniard and never retreated from the heat of an argument with a woman. Even though he had lived in England for nearly thirty years, he still found most Englishwomen insipid. She was a refreshing change.

Some days Lola was so exhausted she could barely concentrate. Espa could sense it and he would drill her almost mercilessly. 'No, No, Senhora! Again on the count of one. Castanets left ta, ta, right *ria*. Arms behind *braceo detras*. Now the feet *zapateado*. No, No! On the ball of the foot. The heel is too high. Ah, but you are forgetting the face. You look like a *bruja* - a scarecrow. You want to seduce your audience not frighten them!'

Lola would stop and stamp her heels and fling abuse back at Espa, swearing in a mixture of Spanish and English that would inevitably make him roar with laughter and goad him further. 'Ah, Senhora. Your heel beats - your *taconeo* - are coming along fine. It is your temper that needs a little more practice.'

Invariably, she would slam the door and march out into the alley, vowing that was her last lesson and Espa would ask his wife to make two cups of strong coffee. He would be sitting waiting for Lola to return half-an-hour later when he would offer her one of the cups. Lola would accept it and slowly their relationship would re-establish itself and it was back to the lessons.

Sometimes Espa played an accompaniment on the guitar and sometimes he would clap a rhythm or sing. As she swayed, dipped and turned, Lola became immersed in the soul of the music and the dance. And even the critical Espa would be forced to say nice things.

The days led into weeks, then months. Lola rarely ventured out of the Islington area. There were no amusements and no recreation, only the occasional glance at a newspaper in which Lord Henry Brougham's name would appear from time to time. She still suffered from spasms of conscience when she thought how she had deceived him. Yet of his money, there was hardly any left. It had all gone on her rent, food and her lessons. One day, she came to the realization that she was down to her last few shillings. The next step would be to pawn the few items of jewelry she still had left.

Espa sensed her gloomy mood and ordered his wife to make coffee early. 'Senhora Lola must not lose her spirit,' he said cautiously. 'You are very close now to being an accomplished dancer.'

Lola sighed. 'Accomplished? That sounds so formal and dry. I had hoped to a brilliant dancer. I wanted to set the stage alight.'

'You still do not have enough passion in your dancing. Spain flows in your blood, but you have to learn how to release it. I have taught all that I know. You must finish with a master teacher.' He gave a little shrug. 'There are no masters in England.'

'You mean I should go to Spain?'

'It is the only place. Perhaps once you have breathed the air and drunk the wine of Seville or Madrid, you will find the answer. I cannot tell.'

'You could give me the name of a master?'

Espa nodded. 'One of the best is Hernandez of Madrid. It is said he showed Fanny Elssler the

steps of her famous dance *La Cachucha*.'

'I must go to him.'

'He will be expensive. Far more than I.'

'I will find a way.'

When that morning's lesson was over, Lola strolled back to her room, deep in thought. Not enough passion? Since Charles Lennox's departure, her life had been devoid of physical passion. Lord Henry had roused quite different passions in her and whether she would eventually have taken him into her bed, she couldn't be sure but felt instinctively that it could have destroyed the special quality of their relationship. So how to revitalize the passion?

She paused outside a tavern and recognized three of the local prostitutes strolling along its frontage openly touting for business. In the beginning, they had often sworn at her as she walked to Espa's studio, assuming she was a newcomer trying to move into their territory. Lola usually just ignored them and when they came to realize she was no threat, their cat-calls usually turned into more jovial criticisms of her clothes or hair.

'Well, if t'aint Mrs. Lone Duck. Watcha do every day at that Spaniard's place? Tumble old Espa for yer shilling? Is it true his dickory-dock's half a foot long?' asked one girl with ginger hair. The other women giggled.

Lola stared at her. 'A shilling? Is that all?'

The girl was taken aback to have a response. 'It's fair enough for a quick trick. Fancy stuff an extra tanner each.'

'And what's the top price?'

'Sometimes there's toffs what like a taste o' cockney pride. I made a quid once,' boasted the second prostitute, a woman with impossibly red lips and enormous bouncy breasts.

The third woman, her heavily roughed cheeks failing to disguise the likelihood that she was consumptive, coughed and offered her bit to the conversation. 'I've heard some lasses make up to a fiver up west. Dukes 'n MP's and the like.'

'My, you don't say,' said Lola.

'Why's you askin' any way?' The woman with red lips looked at her suspiciously. 'You sick of Espa or somethin'? Thinkin' of joinin' us?' She cackled, showing a mouthful of rotten teeth.

'Of course not. I was just curious as to how much money you make.' Lola forced a smile and retreated.

Back in her room, she slumped into a chair and stared vacantly at the peeling wallpaper. Until recently, the thought of sleeping with a completely strange man for money would have been anathema to her, but not only did it seem to be the only way out of her predicament, she was forced to admit to herself that given the right situation it mightn't be all bad. A quick one-night liaison with a reasonably attractive young man, a gentleman, of course, had its excitement.

Lola groaned. During the past few months of discipline and rigorous daily exercise with Espa she hadn't had the energy to think about anything else but now that the lessons were winding down and she was at the peak of physical health, those desires she had expended on Charles Lennox were beginning to trouble her once more. Perhaps she shouldn't have been quite so hasty in dispatching Lord Ranelagh? She shuddered. No, never with a slack-mouthed fop like him. She would have to look elsewhere.

Despite her impending poverty, Lola had refused to pawn her extensive wardrobe. She hunted through her many dresses to find something suitable. She didn't want to look like a common streetwalker, but she didn't want to look like a lady either. Pale fabrics with gentle patterns were the rage among society women. Something dramatic, perhaps a color she rarely wore and in which she was unlikely to be recognized.

At last she found it - a now-unfashionable dress that she had brought from India and had last worn at Emily Eden's ball in Simla. It was a gold silk with puffed sleeves, shot with threads of red and purple and a low neckline edged in an oyster lace. So long ago now, how her life had changed since then. She almost laughed out loud when she wondered what those fatuous society ladies of

Simla would say if they knew what poor little Mrs. James was about tonight.

Remembering the woman with the red lips, Lola resorted to a little make-up. She made her cheeks pinker and emphasized the hollow of her eyes with kohl, before reshaping her mouth into a bow. If there was any chance she should see someone who had known Eliza James it was unlikely they would recognize her. She was almost ready to embark on her adventure, thinking to begin by hanging around gentlemen's clubs not frequented by members of the Anglo-Indian set, when she was alarmed by a knock at her door. Her visitors were few and break-and-enter common in that part of London.

'Senhora. It is I. Espa.'

Her teacher had never visited her before and she opened the door a crack. 'I was about to go out. What is it that you want?'

'A few words, Senhora.'

She hesitated a moment before opening the door. The sharp black eyes darted over her dress and her made-up face. He shook his head. 'No, Senhora, you must not do this.'

Lola tossed her head and glared at him. 'I don't know what you are talking about. Be quick with your business, I'm in a hurry.'

Espa reached into a pocket and handed Lola a pouch. 'My wife said I was the greatest fool ever born, but I have a conscience, Senhora. I am not a master teacher and you overpaid me.'

Lola opened the pouch. It contained at least fifteen gold sovereigns.

Espa's eyes were watery with emotion. 'You are a very beautiful woman, Senhora. Anything you desire can be yours. I saw you today talking to those trollops. They told me of your questions.'

Lola kept her face tight. She was relieved, yet also just a little disappointed for in truth had been looking forward to the challenge and the illicit pleasure of what she had intended - of being with a man again. 'You should not have interfered. What I do is my own business.' Lola tried to edge him towards the door.

'I have a friend from Spain,' said Espa quickly. 'He is a rich wine merchant come to London for a few weeks to do business. He speaks a little English.' The black eyes impressed their message. 'He is also a little lonely.'

Lola arched a slender eyebrow. 'Rich, you say?'

'Oh, yes, Senhora. His family have vineyards all over Andalusia. He could introduce you to other important persons if you decide to continue dance with Hernandez.'

Bartolo Farradella was middle-aged, balding and fat. While she could find no physical attractiveness about him, he was kind, had eyes soft and brown as an abandoned puppy and Lola was not totally repulsed at the thought of sharing his bed. Besides, his demands of her body were surprisingly tame. She had expected more of a Spaniard than a single furtive plunge beneath the sheets, but she was thankful for it saved the necessity of getting to know Bartolo any more intimately. He was far from home and missed his wife and children. He just needed a little companionship.

Lola gave up her lonely Islington living and moved into Bartolo's modest suite of rooms. He entertained a little, mostly dull traders from the City, and Lola was expected to keep out of sight on those occasions. When he was not involved in his dry business discussions, they would hire a carriage and see the sights. Lola was careful to avoid those areas such as Hyde Park where she might be recognized.

Bartolo was generous with his money and Lola made a concerted effort to save some of it. She insisted on paying her own passage to Spain when the time came for him to return home.

A worried look came into those brown eyes, but Lola assured him she only wanted him as an escort. As soon as they arrived they would both go their separate ways. Once he was back in the arms of his wife, he would no longer need a mistress. All she was after was an introduction to the famous Hernandez.

Respectable women in Spain rarely ventured out into the heart of the city, unless accompanied by a male protector or a *duenna*, for the avenues and cafes were the domains of vice ruled over by bold-eyed courtesans - beautiful, arrogant women who dressed in dramatic red silks with camellias or roses and golden lace mantillas on their hair and rubies and diamonds at their throats. They were women who had learned how to speak with their eyes or a subtle toss of the head, a slight twist of a fan, or a pout through a cloud of cigar smoke.

The first time Lola dared to venture among this *demi-monde*, she was sworn at in explicit Spanish, but refused to be intimidated. With her aptitude for mimicry, she quickly picked up every nuance and pose to be added to the persona of Lola Montez. The men who patronized the cafes were quick to see a new face, but while she could afford to remain independent, Lola had no intentions of selling herself for money.

Hernandez, on the other hand, was a man to whom Lola would have given her favors completely free. He was so beautiful that her mouth almost watered every time she watched him step out on the floor prepared to dance.

The elegant *braseo* as his arms curved above his head, one dark eyebrow raised, full lips pushing forward the promise of the kiss to end all kisses, supple back arching, a white ruffled shirt parting slightly to display smooth brown chest muscle, tight black silk trousers emphasizing the bulge of manhood ...

‘Concentrate, Senhora. Watch my feet, not my genitals!’

Hernandez was that rare man who managed to make her self-conscious and Lola came near to blushing even as she tried to exude all her sexual force at him. ‘Senhor is a handsome man,’ she murmured coyly, ‘surely it is no crime to look?’

He merely laughed. ‘Keep your mind on the rhythm and follow me.’ His high heels drummed the *taconeo* and he clapped his hands above his head, his eyes flashing back at her.

Lola danced after him, picking up the hem of her short-skirted peasant dress and flicking it emphatically.

‘Yes. Now turn. So. Tilt your head down. Now up. Show what you are thinking. You have fire in your soul. You want to bed the man watching you. Don’t be afraid to show it.’

She dipped and raised her head, tossing her black hair wildly, her lips parted, her eyes blue smoke.

‘Very good. Let me see the passion. More. *More!*’

Again she twisted, moving in towards him, striking her castanets together, spinning herself around him, her skirts brushing against his legs, rubbing herself against his back like a cat.

Hernandez ceased his clapping and for a few moments they were silent, their bodies still barely touching back to back. Lola turned around slowly, her eyes still hazed.

‘Magnifico, Lola,’ he breathed. ‘You dance like that on the stage and you will break a thousand hearts.’

‘I don’t want to break a thousand, she breathed, ‘only yours.’

His lip lifted. ‘You do not need my heart, Lola, when soon you can choose from the hearts of all the world.’

She reached out and touched his face. The tanned skin was smooth and he smelled of citrus and male sweat. Her blood, hot from the dance and desire, raced and tingled. ‘I want you. Take me now.’ Her hands slipped beneath the white ruffles and pressed against flesh that was damp, yet firm. Her lips grazed against his. He tasted of salt and lemons.

But he pushed her away. ‘Dance for me.’ His fingers linked with hers, his eyes gazing through to her soul. ‘Dance as you’ve never danced before ...’

Her frustration was building to a fever pitch. ‘Why must you torment me?’ she gasped through a constricted throat.

‘Dance, Lola,’ he said as he slid backwards, making tiny beats with his heels and clapping - almost silent at first before slowing increasing in sound.

His clapping intensified. Captured in the spiral of emotions, she stamped, rolled the castanets,

swaying, squirming, half-closing her eyes as she imagined him between her legs. All of a sudden she felt dizzy. There was a humming in her ears. The ceiling seemed to cave in upon her and she fell to the floor. How long she had blacked out she had no idea, but when she came to she was lying on the divan in the corner of the studio, a black Spanish shawl covering her.

Hernandez sat on a stool watching her intently.

‘What happened?’ she whispered.

He smiled. ‘We made love.’

She was puzzled. ‘But I don’t remember.’

‘The most powerful love is that which is made without touching. We made love through the fire and spirit of dance. Through beauty and music. Through our eyes. Our souls touched.’

She closed her eyes briefly, savoring the tranquil satisfaction. Could it really be true? Could one attain physical fulfillment in such a way?

‘A little more practice at control,’ he murmured with humor. ‘It would not do for you to faint each time you dance.’

‘Is this how you teach all your pupils?’

He smiled. ‘Oh, no. Such a skill is not for the faint of heart. But you, Lola, were born with life’s great passions ablaze within you. When men see you dance they will know what it is you are feeling. It will excite them and will also disturb them. You may induce the more righteous members of your audiences to hate you, for there are people who do not like to see our innermost secrets revealed.’

‘I am not frightened of that.’

‘Good.’ He touched her hair and wound a black curl around his finger. ‘You are a brave woman. Your future will demand bravery.’

The celestial love affair with Hernandez continued for a few more weeks. Lola left her hotel and moved in with him. But not once in that time did they make physical love, although it not through Lola’s lack of trying. The ethereal orgasms she experienced were fine enough, but she still craved the real thing.

‘Do not spoil your illusions, Lola,’ Hernandez warned her. ‘You are behaving too much like a man. How often does a man chase a woman, only to be dissatisfied once he has conquered her?’

If there really could be a comparison between her own behavior and her experience with a man Thomas James, Lola refused to consider it, until came the fateful day when it had to reach its inevitable conclusion.

Lola had been out shopping for the exquisite Spanish silks, gauzes and laces with which to make costumes, when she returned to discover Hernandez in his studio with someone whom she presumed to be another pupil. Curious, she tried to open the door, only to find it locked. A spasm of jealousy flood through her. Hernandez never locked the door when he was teaching her.

She went in search of Fermina, the housekeeper, and found her preparing one of the spare bedrooms for a new guest. It was a much larger, grander room than that given to Lola and had been decorated with several vases of flowers.

‘Senhor’s special comrade has returned from California,’ the woman said, her eyes glinting with a savage satisfaction as she smoothed out crisp white sheets on a large double bed. Her dislike of Lola had never been disguised. ‘If you are wise,’ she said, ‘you will not interfere.’

Lola bristled at the servant’s patronizing manner. ‘Who is this comrade?’

Fermina chuckled. ‘You pretend to be a woman of the world, yet there are many things you do not know. It is time you thought of leaving.’

Something cold turned in Lola’s heart. ‘It is not your place to speak to me like that,’ she countered.

Fermina was unmoved by the retort. She reached towards one of the vases of flowers and withdrew a single stemmed rose. With care, she placed it on the pillow and looked up at Lola. ‘You are a fool if you think you can change him. Take what he has given you and treasure it, for it is all you can ever have.’

Not since Thomas and his affair with Frederica Lomer had Lola suffered such a sense of humiliation. She liked to be the one to end relationships, and she felt betrayed. Dinner that evening was both one of the worst, and most challenging, experiences of her life. All afternoon she had paced her room, consumed with jealousy over this stranger from California, trying to visualize what kind of woman had captured the heart of her Hernandez, what her secrets might be.

Later, she took extreme care with her own dressing to look her seductive best, but when she entered the dining chamber nothing could have had prepared her for the shock of Mauricio.

Sitting close to Hernandez, was a slightly paunchy middle-aged man with a full beard. In one hand he held a glass of wine. The fingers of the other were caressing Hernandez's cheek. When both men looked up at the same time and saw her standing there, she was at an utter loss.

Hernandez, magnificent as always in his close-fitting suit of black silk, sensed her confusion. He jumped up and hurried over to her. Gently, he took her arm and led her to the table. 'I have been telling Mauricio of your beauty and passion,' he said, 'that you are my prime pupil. He has been longing to meet you.'

Lola barely had the presence of mind to offer her hand to the stranger. With a gallant bow, he placed a kiss upon it and a shudder of something - at first it seemed just revulsion - but was some other darker, emotion - passed along her spine. For a few moments their eyes met and Lola sensed his combative and excited mood. With another spasm of the same emotion she realized he was more than her rival, he was already the victor.

How she managed to get through the meal, she didn't know. All the skills of tact and diplomacy taught by Barbara Aldridge for one to use in awkward social occasions completely failed her although not once did either man say anything that could have made her feel uncomfortable.

The powerful undercurrents were there all the same. The exchanged glances - the way Mauricio's lustful eyes seemed to bore through her one moment before they darted towards Hernandez. The delayed break of hand contact when both men touched as they reached for the salt cellar at the same time. The unmistakable sense of arousal in the air. As soon as Fermina served the dessert, Lola had to leave. Her heart pounding, she fled up the stairs to her room.

Sleep was impossible. She tossed and turned as visions of Hernandez in bed with that man kept exploding in her head. She was not totally naive about such things. She had known India where the dancing girls at the temples, the *nautch* maidens, were not always women, and Thomas had told her of cases where fellow officers had been cashiered for buggery, graphically explaining its finer details.

But not Hernandez - her glorious Adonis!

Around midnight, came a light tap on her door. 'Lola. Are you awake?' Hernandez called through the lock.

Her first reaction was to pull the covers over her head and block him out. But he persisted, until at last she climbed out of bed and opened the door a crack. 'I'm trying to sleep,' she said, 'please leave me alone.'

He pushed against the door with his full weight and she had to let him in. Her breath caught, for in the flickering light of his candle she saw he was completely naked, his beautiful body glistening with a sheen of gold. Any trace of revulsion she had been feeling was completely swept away. She felt herself moisten just from the sight of him. He placed the candlestick on the dresser and folded his arms about her. The citrus smell of him was stronger than ever. His tongue darted flashes of fire along her lips, and her heart pounded.

'Come,' he whispered in her ear. 'Come and show Mauricio what you have learned. Dance for us.'

'No .I can never ...' Her words were cut off by his kiss, eager and greedy, reaching into her mouth, her throat, down into the depths of her womanhood, her soul. She could not fight him. Nor did she want to. He swept her up into his arms and carried her along the corridor to Mauricio's bed chamber.

Also naked, the other man was sitting up against the pillows of his double bed, the single rose

twirling in his fingers. Part of her wanted to flee, to be as far away as possible from this depraved *ménage-a-trois* and yet, when Hernandez started to undo the ribbons of her nightdress, his hands burning across her naked skin, his mouth caressing her ears, her throat, her breasts - going down on his knees - his tongue gently probing her femininity in a fashion she had never experienced before, she knew she couldn't run. As her gown fell to the floor, he slid back from her on his knees and began a slow clap.

'Now dance for us, Lola,' he whispered. 'Dance.'

10.

The English were brought up not to stare, but there was hardly a person on the railway platform at Southampton who didn't glance at least twice at the woman in black. Standing aloof and alone, on that overcast April morning she glittered like jet in a sea of somber gray.

Lord James Howard Malmesbury stared more than most. She was clearly exotic and foreign, although there was an air about that seemed vaguely familiar, but he knew his eyes were playing tricks. He would never have forgotten someone like her.

Time and again his eyes strayed over her figure. Her traveling dress was made of a shimmering black material and while its bodice was buttoned up to the neck, it was fitted so tightly over her bosom and narrow waist that every curve was delineated in a fashion calculated to make the blood of any man stir. Instead of wearing a bonnet, a black lace mantilla covered her head and shoulders.

He wondered if she was in mourning. Malmesbury found himself hoping it was her husband who had died. He had to know who she was, and he finally girded up his courage.

It was a well-worn line, but it was the only one that he could think of. 'Excuse me, madam, but haven't we met somewhere before?'

He was expecting brown eyes and was surprised to see they were blue, the kind of dazzling ocean blue a man could drown in.

'I think not,' she said in a slight accent, but without affront.

He covered his nerves by smiling broadly before bowing. 'Ah, forgive me, I must be mistaken. Lord Malmesbury at your service. I couldn't help but notice that you seemed to be traveling alone. That can be dashed dangerous for a woman.'

'I am Spanish, Senhor. We women of Spain are afraid of nothing.'

'Can I assume you will be traveling to London? I would like to offer you my protection.'

'I have traveled all the way from Seville without hindrance, Senhor. Why should I suddenly need male protection when I arrive in England?' Those remarkable eyes washed over him again and half lowered seductively. 'Besides, I was told all Englishmen were gallant, no?'

He relaxed and grinned. 'Well, most of us are decent chaps, but like every race there are bound to be a few rogues ready to take advantage of a beautiful woman.'

This time a smile curved her magnificent lips. 'No-one takes advantage of Dona Lola Montez, Senhor, but tell me a little of yourself and I will decide if I care to amuse myself with your company.'

Malmesbury's blood pumped. He didn't hesitate. By the time the train for London had pulled up to the platform, he had not only given Dona Montez a potted history of his life and fortune, he had also upgraded her second-class ticket to first so that she could share in his compartment, and had his man help her with her luggage on to the train. In return, he had been informed that she was the impoverished widow of a nobleman killed in the recent Carlist Wars, that she hoped to sell some of his property in London and that she intended to support herself by dancing or giving lessons. Interspersed with the occasional tremble of shoulders and a few carefully controlled tears, by the time the train drew into Waterloo Station, Howard, Lord Malmesbury, was putty in the hands of Dona Lola Montez.

‘What magnificent eyes.’
‘Such exquisite carriage.’
‘Absolutely enchanting.’
‘Who *is* she?’

These were the assorted whispers of the group of people gathered at the Malmesbury residence in Belgrave Square who had been invited to see Dona Montez perform a selection of Spanish peasant dances.

Lola wisely decided not to include any of the more fiery flamenco style dances in her repertoire. She well knew the conservative mood of British society and didn’t want to risk putting an end to her career before it had even begun. Her off-the-shoulder peasant blouse, tightly laced bodice and red skirt with its abundance of white petticoats were daring enough and she exposed more of her neat ankles and calves than would be considered respectable in many circles.

With skirts flying, she dipped and swayed across the drawing room floor, her castanets clicking in time with the strumming of the hired guitar accompanist. On each turn she flashed a seductive glance over her fascinated audience. She could see a few openly hostile faces among some of the women present, but there was hardly a man who wasn’t enraptured. On completing her final pirouette, she fluttered to the ground amidst a wild round of applause.

‘Oh, I say. Bravo! Bravo!’ Malmesbury rushed towards her, extending his hand. She rose to her feet and curtsied several times to a renewal of applause. ‘Isn’t she wonderful?’ he called out. ‘Shall we ask for another dance?’

The men cheered and clapped again, but most of the women were mute. Lola knew not to overstay her welcome. She begged a respite and was on her way to the room that had been set aside for her to change when a short, dark-haired man with a beaked nose stepped in her way.

‘Senhora,’ he said, ‘do you mind telling me where you danced last?’

‘In Spain, of course,’ she said curtly.

‘Where in Spain?’

‘Who is it that wishes to know?’

A pair of sharp black eyes appeared unmoved by her arrogant pose. ‘I am Bernard Lumley. I produce theatricals.’

Lola softened her expression. ‘My last engagement was at the Teatro Seville, where I danced to great acclaim.’

‘An interesting coincidence. I am shortly to stage *The Barber of Seville* at Her Majesty’s Theater. There is something of a craze for Spanish dance at the moment. Come and see me tomorrow. I may be able to offer you something.’

Inwardly, Lola wanted to scream her delight and kiss the producer, but she restrained herself and responded in a more controlled fashion, expressing thanks for his interest and, yes, she would be very happy to visit him the following day. Since arriving back in England she had met with extraordinary luck. First Malmesbury, who had swiftly introduced her into a new set of influential people and now this. The best thing she ever did was to jettison the associations around Eliza James.

Bernard Lumley had an expert eye not so much for talent but for individuals who could feed the growing cult of personality. Ever since he had abandoned both his Jewish surname of Levy and the legal profession and ventured into ballet and theater, he had been successful in bringing such dancing greats as Marie Taglioni and Fanny Elssler to the English public. He had developed an instinct for that special quality, that glow, that made all the difference in a star. Dona Montez was hardly an accomplished dancer in the mold of Taglioni, but she had a powerful charisma he felt sure would transcend the footlights.

When she arrived the following morning at his studio she carried herself with self-assurance and a dancer’s grace. However, when he tried to probe a little deeper into her experience prior to her

Seville engagement, Lola pretended she didn't quite understand what he was asking. Bernard was not troubled by her reticence. The woman was mysterious, and mystery was another of those bankable qualities he could exploit.

After giving him another exhibition of her talents, a far more sensuous version than that of the previous night, Bernard Lumley promptly signed Lola to the season of *The Barber of Seville*. It was agreed that she would perform the unique Spanish dance *El Oleano* between the acts of the opera, and an announcement to that effect was inserted in the press.

The Barber of Seville had been well publicized as the London debut of a spectacular Spanish dancer. Shortly before curtain up, in a state of quivering excitement Lola sat in her dressing room and reinforced herself by reading yet again the preview critique written by the only journalist privileged enough to see her dress rehearsal. A close friend of Bernard's, Charles Rosenberg, known to his readers only as the tough critic Q, had been in the front row of the stalls and watched her every movement with his sharp eyes. Knowing her whole future depended on it, she had employed all the skills taught by Hernandez and, to the haunting accompaniment of a brilliant violinist, she had made deliberate love to Rosenberg across the footlights. And it had worked! While he had made a slight allusion to her lack of technical skill, anyone reading his column would see it was obvious that this was a woman destined to fulfill any male's fantasies.

Bernard knocked on her door and entered. 'Full house,' he said. 'Everyone who is anyone, apart from Her Majesty herself that is, is here. Her mother, the Duchess of Kent. Queen Adelaide. The King of Hanover. Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Even Lord Wellington. He usually sleeps through the opera, but I think he may stay awake this time.' He grinned.

Lola struggled to suppress the fluttering of nerves. 'Oh, Senhor, I wish you had not told me this. What if I should fail you?'

'You? Fail? Never. Just imagine it's old Rosenberg on his own out there and you'll have them eating out of the palm of your hand.' Bernard kissed her briefly on the nape of the neck and their eyes met in the mirror. 'You and I, my dear Lola, are about to make theatrical history. We shall go far together.'

Lola responded with a stage smile. Anything other than a business relationship with the unattractive Bernard had not been part of her plans, but she'd worry about that later. Tonight, all her energies had to go into her all-important debut.

The sounds of the orchestra tuning up came drifting in. 'Good luck,' whispered Bernard and he was gone.

Lola studied herself in the mirror. She added a few extra touches of kohl and rouge and prepared herself as Hernandez had taught. For several minutes she closed her eyes and cleared her mind until her nerves had calmed. She then remembered something else. She reached into her traveling box and withdrew a small object. Although it had never left her possession, it had been several years since she had last looked deeply into those red ruby eyes of the ivory elephant. Carefully, she placed her talisman on the dressing table. Dear Papa. How she wished he could have been here today to witness her impending triumph.

Lord Thomas Ranelagh hated the opera, but one was obliged to attend as part of one's movements in society. When he did, he much preferred the raucous company of the gallery omnibus-box to being confined among respectable individuals of his own class in the stalls. The observers in the omnibus-box had the power to make or break any performance and, besides, it gave him a better aspect for watching the audience who were usually infinitely more interesting than any opera.

He had already consumed half a bottle of brandy at his club before the curtain went up, and continued to openly sip from his flask throughout the first act, his focus on the ankles of the *corps de ballet* rather than the singers. When he became bored with the ankles, he swept his opera glasses across the audience, looking for possible new conquests among the glittering peeresses and their daughters. After a few minutes, his arm ached and he had to lower the glasses. Ever since that fall

into the cellar of that damnable minx Eliza James, he had suffered from annoying arthritis in his shoulder.

Act One came to its close and there was a brief intermission before the curtain rose again to reveal the tiles and arches of a moonlit Moorish chamber. A woman dressed as a maid stood in the center looking towards the wings as if waiting for someone. The strains of a solo violin began to play. A figure swathed in a voluminous black lace shawl emerged. The maid took one end of the shawl and the figure slowly pirouetted across the stage unraveling herself as she went.

There were a few moments' pause as Lola's grand entrance was taken in by the audience. Her tight bodice of black velvet and multicolored petticoats proclaimed all the sensuality of Spain. She lowered her head briefly before she tilted it upwards, raised her arms, clicked her castanets, and began to dance.

Apart from the strains of the violin and the castanets, there wasn't a sound. The theater was spellbound. Lola twisted and turned through her movements, flicking her skirts to reveal her shapely legs, unsmiling but flashing her alluring eyes, exuding a magnetic power rarely seen on any stage. As Bernard had promised, she did indeed have everyone present in the palm of her hand.

As a man besotted with the lower regions of a female's anatomy, at first Ranelagh was solely captivated by the artful moves of the legs. How was it possible for a pair of limbs on their own to be so sexually stimulating? He was almost reluctant to look at the face of this bewitching creature in case it would be a disappointment, but finally he forced his opera glasses upward. She turned and with those smoldering eyes sent her message of wantonness out beyond the orchestra pit.

Surely not? He half-choked on his brandy and a combination of passion and rage. The music died away and Lola sank in a deep curtsy.

There was a moment's pause before a deafening applause rang through the theater. A couple of Bernard's minions ran forward with large bouquets of flowers.

Lola Montez had conquered!

As she accepted the bouquets, she bowed again and again, her face radiant with her success.

Ranelagh swallowed the last of the brandy, stood up on shaky legs, and wavered dangerously forward across the box rail. His fist punched the air. 'Fraud' he shouted in a voice hardly noticeable above the din of the applause. 'I say to you all! This woman is a fraud!'

But no-one was interested in the raving of a drunk in the gallery and he was physically pushed back into his seat by the other audience members who rose to their feet to give the spectacular new dancer a standing ovation. Furious, Ranelagh struggled again to stand up and fought his way through the crowd and out of the theater, staggering in search of the stage door.

Lola stood panting and trembling in the wings and clutching some of the flowers to her chest as the sweetest sounds she ever heard continued to echo through the curtain.

Bernard put his arm around her shoulders and gave her an affectionate squeeze. 'Marvelous. They want an encore,' he said excitedly. 'Do it again!'

'Again?' She looked at him.

'Yes. Can't you hear? Tomorrow, Lola Montez will be the toast of London.'

Lola took a deep breath and walked back on the stage as the curtain lifted again. The crowd roared. She put down her bouquets and raised her arms ready to dance again.

When the encore was over and with applause still ringing in her ears, Lola felt as if she could walk on air as she made her way through the back of the scenery sets to her dressing room. To think of all those times when she had doubted herself. All that agonized training, molding fluidity and grace into a stubborn mature body. Once again, she had proved if you want something badly enough there was always a way.

She halted. Several men in evening dress had congregated outside her dressing room. Her eyes flickered over them. She recognized her current swain, Lord Howard Malmesbury, a strange expression on his face as if he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Bernard Lumley, however, looked as pale and angry as a ghost. And Lord Thomas Ranelagh, wavering on his feet, his face

blotchy and eyes glassy with pure hatred.

A sharp pain hit her in the belly. She could turn and run, or she could remain firm and brave it out. 'Courage', she whispered to herself, 'don't let that buffoon ruin this.' She took a deep breath and walked towards her dressing room door, head high and a smile affixed to her face.

Bernard Lumley stepped in front of her. 'An excellent performance, Dona Montez' he said in a frigid voice, 'or should it be Mrs. James?'

She looked at him vacantly. '*Perdón?*'

'Oh, she's going to pretend now,' scoffed Ranelagh between hiccups. 'Don't think you can fool us, you little tramp. You're Eliza James of Half Moon Street. Lola Montez is a fiction!'

Lola lifted her chin and narrowed her eyes at him, looking him up and down as if he were something she had discovered on the sole of her shoe. '*Quién es este hombre ...* who's this man? How dare he speak to me in this fashion!'

Malmesbury sprung forward. 'Lola, I told Bernard it was all a frightful mistake.'

Lola did not look at Malmesbury, only waved an impatient hand. '*Si*, someone's mistake certainly. Who let this drunken sot into the presence of Dona Montez, widow of Don Diego de León y Navarette?'

The men exchanged astonished glances. Don Diego Leon was a well known and popular Spanish hero who had recently been shot after an attempted coup against the ruling faction in Spain.

Ranelagh watched for a few seconds before he burst out laughing. But Bernard did not laugh. Outrage was painted all over his face. In appropriating Don Diego Leon for herself, Lola sensed she had gone just a bit too far. It was time to make a quick exit. Without another word, she dodged out of Bernard's way and into her dressing room where she promptly locked the door.

She was sobbing uncontrollably when ten minutes later there was a banging on the dressing room door. 'It's Henry Brougham' he called through the lock, and she opened the door.

All around were the remains of her temper - smashed vases, broken pots of cosmetics, torn costumes and a jagged crack the full length of her mirror. Without a word Lord Henry put his arms around the heaving shoulders. He held her against his chest for several minutes until she finally managed to calm down. Slowly she withdrew and looked up at him. 'I'm truly sorry, Henry,' she whispered in choked tones.

'You're not to blame. It was that rogue Ranelagh. I heard about how he was locked in your cellar for several hours and I guessed it was through your doing. He wasn't a wise choice of enemy, my dear.'

'Well it's too late now.' She gulped, forcing back the remnants of her tears. 'I'm ruined before I even began.'

'Why didn't you confide in me? I would always have helped you, surely you knew that?'

Lola turned her face away. 'I was no good as an actress. I used all your money on dancing lessons. I wanted to earn enough to pay you back.'

'Don't be silly.' He reached for her chin and made her look at him. 'The money is nothing. I was desperately worried when you disappeared. If you had contacted me when you came back to England, I might have been able to pave the way for you and warn you about Ranelagh being on the warpath over your treatment of him. My friend Malmesbury told me that he had been instrumental in getting the new sensation dancing, Lola Montez, onto the stage. Of course I had no idea that she and Eliza were the same person.'

Her face went blank. 'I know no-one of that name. Now please leave me alone.' She started grabbing together the few belongings she hadn't destroyed.

Henry was silent for a moment as he watched her and nodded. 'Ah yes, But of course Lola is your name. It suits you so well. But you must allow me to help.'

'No. No more money, Henry. I don't want to be beholden to you further. I want to earn my own. All I ask is that I can use you as a reference as to my character. That is, after tonight, if I have any left.' She bit her lip against a resurgence of tears.

Henry placed his hands on her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. 'You are very dear to

me, and I will always do what I can for you. If we both weren't already tied, I should have liked nothing better than to marry you this very day. A peer of the realm with a firebrand dancer for a wife would set the gossips for life, and I should have thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.' He smiled.

Lola wiped away her tears. 'Oh, Henry, you're a darling.' She kissed him lightly on the lips and let him hold her again until the rage in her heart eased to a slow beat. It was only then that she recalled his odd turn of phrase. 'What did you mean when you said "if we weren't already tied"? Wasn't Thomas granted the divorce?'

Henry frowned. 'To be honest, I'm not sure - I had completely forgotten you failed to reply to the writ and you absented yourself without anyone knowing where you were. I should have to search the records.' He sighed. 'But that aside, I am still very much married.'

Lola's face softened and she managed a weak smile as she tapped him playfully on the nose. 'And you, you old rascal, just happen to still love your wife. So no more talk of running away with scandalous dancers.'

Never in all his career had Bernard Lumley been placed in such a position. Never before had he been accused of defrauding his audience. The morning newspapers were full of the scandal and even though Lola's actual dancing performance was given grudging praise by most of the critics, it was overshadowed by the controversy as to her identity. Speculation raged as to exactly which 'Mrs. James' she was. There were already several actresses, singers and dancers with this name performing around the country. But Bernard Lumley wasn't going to wait to find out. He had a reputation to salvage. He vowed to make sure Dona Lola Montez, whoever she really was, would never dance on the London stage again. He immediately terminated her all-too-brief contract.

To add fuel to the situation, Lola had dashed off an impetuous letter to one of the newspapers insisting that she knew nothing of this so-called Eliza James, that she had been born in Seville and, apart from a few months in Bath as a child, she had never set foot in England prior to two months before. She compounded this with a threat that she intended to sue her detractor for libel. The letter merely added fuel to an already raging fire.

Lola knew she was beaten, but she was determined not to go down without one more effort. The next morning, and still wearing a black satin evening gown, a gross infringement of Barbara Aldridge's rules of dress etiquette, she marched into the editor's office of London's *The Age*, sat down and refused to budge. For four hours she kept up the act, insisting she was none other than who she said she was, and threatening to reveal some unsavory facts about certain members of the British aristocracy who wanted to ruin her. The newspaper staff were at first enthralled, but when her persistence became tiresome, she was forcibly removed from the premises.

The career that had looked so bright was at an end, even though Howard Malmesbury refused to have doubts. The woman he had met on the train had seemed so genuinely Spanish, so full of remorse at the loss of her husband and the trials of the war that she had experienced, that he guessed that drunken fool, Lord Ranelagh, had definitely confused her with someone else, much to her detriment.

Lola reciprocated Malmesbury's belief in her by agreeing to do a free performance for an actors' charity in Covent Garden. She followed it up by demonstrating a very different version of *El Oleano* to him late at night in his London townhouse.

In the morning, after Lola had slipped quietly away, Howard Malmesbury was a very happy man, and utterly convinced of her identity. No woman with the very English name of Eliza James could possibly know how to dance like that, or make love in such a passionate and uninhibited way. His mind was full of plans for installing her as his mistress, not knowing that Lola had very different intentions. By the time he got out of bed at mid-morning, she had packed her bags and was already on her way to Dover.

While waiting to board the Channel ferry, Lola sat down and gathered her thoughts together. It

would have been easy to let the debacle of the past few days work against her: forget the whole thing and go back to being Eliza James. She clenched her fists. No! She hadn't gone through all that planning and practice, all that careful recreation of herself, to have it fall apart after one performance at the Her Majesty's Theater. You've come this far, she reminded herself. Before that despicable dandy, Ranelagh, ruined things, you had that audience in the palm of your hand.

Her mood started to lift as she savored the sensation of having every eye in that theater upon her, of having everyone captivated by what she could do with a look, a pose, a turn, a clap of the hands. The fires of conviction flared within her once more. She'd prove to the doubters that she was a woman to be reckoned with. All she had to do was find a place where Eliza James would never again come to haunt her, where all her skills could be used to best advantage.

She opened her travel bag and drew out an almanac on Europe. It listed everything the Continental traveler needed to know, such as coaching and railway timetables, hotels, historical sights and, of most interest to a budding star, theaters.

But where to start? It was going to depend mainly on her finances. Money seemed to slip through her fingers like water, particularly when she had an appearance to live up to. Howard Malmesbury had been generous, but she hadn't known him long enough to take full advantage of him. Bernard Lumley had refused to pay her in full for her aborted performance and she hadn't wanted to take more money from sweet Henry Brougham.

Lola studied the map of Europe with its mass of kingdoms and principalities. She sighed. Alphabetical order seemed as good a solution as any. Besides, Belgium was fairly close.

Despite her assertive approach to the theaters of Brussels, she hadn't reckoned, however, on their lack of interest. There was no demand among their staid audiences for Spanish dancers of dubious history. Still, she didn't stop to dwell on her plight for one had to survive and look for whatever opportunities might present themselves. She took rooms in a small hotel near the medieval Town Hall.

Each night, Lola descended to the dining room, dressed again as the Spanish widow. It didn't take her long to make the acquaintance of a handsome, lonely Danish businessman. He had a generous wallet and when she whispered an offer to perform services for him which his wife refused to do, she soon found herself again with money in her purse.

She didn't dwell too much about what it was that she was really doing. She justified it in stark simplicity. She was a passionate woman. He was a lonely man. She was merely indulging her own desires as well as his. The little wife back in Copenhagen would never know, and no-one would be hurt by it. And it certainly wasn't prostitution, which was having to do such things with just *anyone*, and no matter how desperate she might become, she would never stoop to that.

After the businessman returned home to Copenhagen, Lola concluded if she was going to get out of Brussels she had to seek out bigger fish. Although she could scarcely afford to, she moved into an elegant hotel on the Rue de Suede. There she bribed the porter to give her the names of any rich and promising guests. Most of them looked decidedly dull, however, and she was on the point of wondering whether she might have to make compromises as to which men she entertained, when she saw her next quarry crossing the foyer.

From his bearing, his well-cut coat and slim trousers and the way his boots shone, Lola recognized a military man. Another bribe to the *maitre d'hotel* put him at a table next to hers at dinner. It wasn't long before he had picked up the blatant invitation in her eyes and invited her to sit with him. About thirty, darkly handsome with Lola's similar combination of blue eyes and black hair, he announced himself as Count Reinhard von Reinberg.

'Tell me,' he said in perfect French, being one of those smooth men about whom everything would be perfect, 'what can a beautiful woman like you possibly be doing alone in this dreary city?'

Lola played up her Spanish persona by lighting a cigarillo with exaggerated hand gestures and blowing smoke like the Madrid *senhoras*. 'I am a dancer,' she said, 'I recently finished a very trying season in London. I thought to rest a while in a city that cares little for my kind of excitement.'

He smiled wryly and raised a eyebrow. ‘Hm. I was in London recently. I heard a story about a Spanish dancer who caused a great deal of excitement after a performance at Her Majesty’s. It seems she was not who she was supposed to be.’

Lola’s expression did not change as she drew smoke. ‘One shouldn’t listen to stories,’ she murmured.

Reinhard grinned. ‘Where is your next engagement?’

‘I haven’t decided. Paris perhaps. Berlin. Stockholm. Rome.’

‘Wherever the wind blows?’

‘You could say that.’

Reinhard’s eyes glowed as he lifted her hand and placed a lingering kiss across her rings. She could see that here was definitely a man with a knowledge of the arts of fascination.

‘I am a man who travels with the wind,’ he said, ‘I expect to leave for Leipzig the day after tomorrow. If you feel our company is compatible, you are welcome to join me.’ =

Lola inclined her head to offer a side-on aspect of her eyes that most devastated the opposite sex. ‘Leipzig? I’ll think about it.’

Lola and Count Reinhard had much in common. Like her, he was something of a mystery. She was never quite sure what it was that he did. Originally from Bavaria, it seemed he spent much of his time traveling between Munich, Berlin and other European capitals on diplomatic business. He knew many languages fluently and often dropped the names of princes, dukes, prominent politicians, artists and writers. She couldn’t believe her luck. If she wanted an open door to European society, she couldn’t have picked a better man. Plus, he was attractive - extremely so.

Not since Hernandez, had she been so charged by someone. Only this time, there would be no complications, for Reinhard’s appetites were strictly heterosexual, if somewhat demanding. He liked to be the dominating partner, even violent at times, but she was determined to equal him in her passion. In those secret months in Spain when she had been introduced to some of the more bizarre aspects of sexual expression, she had learned a few dominating tricks of her own. Her games with a whip and a pair of sharp-heeled riding boots soon had him gasping for more. They were more than well-matched.

Reinhard had his own long-distance coach, drawn by six horses and attended by two coachmen and a manservant. Although the railways were rapidly spreading across the continent, he maintained that a fast coach was still the quickest way to travel between the cities. It was large enough to accommodate Lola’s luggage and her new maid and within two days they were on their way to Leipzig.

Reinhard was reticent about his work, whatever it was, but he liked to talk at length about politics. Confined together in the coach for long hours at a time, Lola began to take an interest in Reinhard’s description of the intricate and delicate state of affairs that existed in Europe. She learned much of the subtle power struggles that went on within the German Confederation and between Austria, Russia and the Ottoman Empire.

Her interest in the aristocracy made him laugh. ‘If you are set to hook yourself a prince, Lola, my sweet,’ he said, ‘I suggest you forget the Germans. Most of them are exceedingly dull oafs who wouldn’t appreciate your ample talents. On the other hand, I might be able to introduce you to a couple of barbarous Russians, or wicked Italians and even the odd Greek who would suit you well.’

She laughed off his remarks. For the time being, she was enjoying herself with Reinhard and had no particular ambitions. When they arrived in Leipzig, their affair was still intense, and it was a foregone conclusion that Lola would stay with him in his hotel.

For the next few weeks they flitted in and out of cities and towns across Europe. Reinhard introduced her to a wide range of people and occasionally Lola found herself a dancing engagement in some of the smaller theaters where her disastrous London debut was unlikely to be known. While her earnings were negligible, in general she received good reviews and she felt better not having to be totally dependent on Reinhard.

Towards the end of the summer they arrived in Berlin and Reinhard announced he would see if he could get her an introduction at the court of King Frederick William IV of Prussia.

11.

As a rule, exotic dancers of dubious origins would have never come anywhere near the court of King Frederick William IV. To have received a personal introduction and invitation to dance was highly unusual, but at the time Lola was not to know this.

Only much later did she realize the good luck of her affair with Reinhard. She sometimes wondered if during that passionate journey in the gypsy coach she might have been closer to a throne than she realized. Reinhard's mysterious diplomatic travels might have been a respectable occupation for a bastard royal. But such thoughts were far away when she made her first curtsy in the Prussian court.

The first encounter with the King was a little disappointing. Her best Spanish pose and flash of Spanish eyes failed to generate the usual male response. He had all the culture and refinements of a King, but he still managed to remind Lola of a plump farmer with little interest in modern events. He also seemed quite content with his equally boring childless wife, Elizabeth of Bavaria. Lola seriously doubted that he had a mistress and this curious condition in a man intrigued her.

Reinhard laughed at her after she had put all her seductiveness into a lively version of *El Oleano* with plenty of eye contact over a fan only to meet with more enthusiastic applause from the Queen than the King.

'Save your strength,' he had said with a great deal of sarcasm. 'His Majesty is devoted to his wife. The King's brother-in-law, the Iron Tsar of the all the Russias, is due on a private visit in a few days. You can try your fascinations on him.'

Tsar Nicholas was a handsome man of military bearing who emitted all the autocratic dominance for which he was notorious. He was a man of whom half the world was afraid, but Lola danced before him at a fete without qualm. She could see the warmth of appreciation in his eyes as she ended and as she stared openly at him there was one stunned moment when she brazenly asked a servant for a glass of water. It was unheard of that a performer should do such a thing in the presence of two such important rulers. Reinhard, his face thunderous with embarrassment at Lola's horrendous breach of etiquette, tried to hurry her off the stage.

King Frederick William seemed nonplussed, but Tsar Nicholas raised his hand. 'No,' he said. 'Let the lady have her drink. But first bring the cup to me.' As a servant did so, the Tsar lifted the cup and placed a kiss on its rim before he handed it to Lola. 'Few women are as bold as you, Madam Montez,' he whispered. 'It is an admirable if somewhat dangerous quality.' The brief flash of warmth she had detected was quickly replaced by one of dismissal. Lola accepted the cup and let Reinhard lead her away.

'You yourself said I could try my fascinations on him,' she shouted at him later in Reinhard's private apartments.

'For God's sake, Lola, it was said in jest. I had no idea you would take me literally,' he retaliated. 'Damn it, woman, I hadn't realized how ambitious you are to get between royal sheets, but you can't boldly offer yourself to kings in such a fashion in full view of everyone, including their wives.'

Lola pouted. 'So what? The Tsar liked me.'

Reinhard ran his fingers through his hair and muttered to himself. 'This is not good. Not good at all. Your presence here is going to prejudice my own position.'

Lola glared at him. 'The Tsar kissed the cup. Everyone knows what he meant by it.'

'Yes - and the Tsarina included. She's a much stronger woman than her brother, Frederick. You're meddling in something you can't understand. The Russian court isn't like others. It would put the

Borgias to shame with assassinations and poisonings, not to mention mysterious disappearances.’

‘You can’t scare me with melodrama.’

Reinhard gripped Lola’s arm. His eyes were a frigid blue. ‘I was a fool. What was between us should have been finished a long time ago. You’re nothing but a common whore. You haven’t got what it takes to be a truly great courtesan. It was a mistake to bring you to Berlin.’

Blood surged into Lola’s head. ‘No-one ever calls me a whore!’ She struck his face with her fan but he was quick to retaliate, pinning her arms behind her back in a painful lock.

‘Spreading your legs for just any man is one thing,’ he said, his face ugly. ‘Any shop girl or dairy maid can do that, but spreading your legs for a king takes a special skill. You not only have to make love to the man, you have to make love to his whole damned court. You have to know what may be seen, and what cannot. When to show your hand and when to be discreet. With your brazen attitude you’d be better off as a camp follower. You lack the very ingredients you’ve been trying so hard to cultivate. Mystique and subtlety. Common little Eliza James will never be another Madam Du Barry.’

Lola gasped and went limp. She couldn’t speak.

Reinhard’s mouth formed a thin line. ‘How did I know who you really were? I know everything, Lola. It’s my business. You’re not that clever in covering up your traces. Now tomorrow you will pack your bags and leave Berlin. Don’t try to make trouble or show your face here again.’

‘You’re a bastard,’ she winced through gritted teeth.

He laughed with cruelty. ‘It’s taken you a long time to realize that.’ He forced her back on to the bed, his savage kiss cutting off any further speech.

After Reinhard left her, Lola tossed and turned for the rest of the night, thinking about the Tsar’s gesture and Reinhard’s cruel words. Perhaps she had been too forward for Frederick William’s boring little court, but she had enough experience of men by now to recognize that brief ignition in the Tsar’s eyes. Reinhard von Reinberg had opened a door for her and she couldn’t possibly let it be closed without investigating what lay beyond. Perhaps mistress to the Tsar himself!

Just as once long ago when she had been living in dreary Karnal and imagined living in the harem of Ranjit Singh, she had a vision of herself dressed in ermine or sable, weighed down by diamonds and riding in a troika in the glittering snow of a St Petersburg winter. Poisonings and disappearances did not frighten her, it certainly was a more exciting prospect than dancing for a living.

The following day she decided to make another attempt to get close to Tsar Nicholas. Reinhard’s verbal assaults were still agonizingly fresh in her mind. It was time she finished with him. She had every intention of doing exactly as she pleased from now on.

She discovered that the Tsar was due to review troops at Potsdam, so after she gave Reinhard the impression she was going to spend the day packing her clothes, she waited until he had gone and dressed herself in her riding costume. She appropriated a spirited horse from his stables and went in pursuit of the royal excursion.

Nicholas was an unpopular monarch in his own country and his brother-in-law, Frederick William, made sure he was not exposed to any risks when he visited Prussia, so there was an abundance of armed guards around the perimeter of the parade ground. Lola was unlikely to get within yards of her quarry but that didn’t deter her. She studied the lines of guards for several minutes and waited until they parted to let some of the government ministers and other dignitaries through in their carriages. It was now or never!

She dug her heels into the horse’s flanks and charged straight for the guards. Just as the horse was almost upon them, a gunshot rang out over her head. The horse reared up. Lola was almost thrown, but managed to keep herself in the saddle. Several of the guards rushed at her and tried to restrain the horse.

‘Let me go. I must see His Majesty!’ she shouted, but to no avail. She lashed out with her riding whip, striking one man across the forehead, knocking off another’s helmet.

‘You stupid woman. Do you want to be killed?’

She half-turned to see Reinhard, magnificent in his dress uniform bearing down on her, his pistol still smoking in his hand.

‘I have to see the Tsar,’ she gasped, all the while becoming disoriented as the horse continued to whirl around under her. She was dizzy and felt as if she was going to be sick.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting on a grass verge. The man whose forehead she had lashed was glaring at her through a slow drip of blood. Beside him was Reinhard, his face white. ‘It was as well it was me who stopped you,’ he said. ‘You could be dead by now. And for what? The vague notion that you might sleep in the bed of a king?’

Lola’s rage expended, all she could do was sit and look at him in a numb state. She wanted to cry but even that seemed physically impossible.

Reinhard murmured a few words to the injured man and he left, making his way through a circle of guards, some of whom still pointed muskets at Lola.

‘I have told the soldier you will pay his doctor’s bill before you leave,’ growled Reinhard. ‘It’s the least you can do. You are extremely fortunate I have been able to intercede for you with the captain of the guard and you will not be charged with an attempt on either the King’s or the Tsar’s life.’

She managed a gasp. ‘I wasn’t going to kill anyone.’

‘I know that, but how were the guards to know? A crazy woman charging the defenses? They would have been perfectly justified in shooting you. No, Madam, you are to be deported. Because I am responsible for bringing you here, I will take personal responsibility to see you as far as Warsaw. After that you will be on your own.’

Somewhere a band was playing the Russian national anthem. Despite her earlier frenzied state, a strange calmness was beginning to settle upon her and Lola turned her head to the sky. Heavy clouds were building up. She had a sudden nostalgia for her childhood and wondered if they ever had monsoons in Warsaw - or St Petersburg.

On their arrival in Warsaw, Reinhard handed Lola a letter of introduction to Colonel Ignacy Abramowicz, Director of the Opera, and paid in advance for a month’s residence at the best hotel, the Hotel de Rome. He promptly ordered his gypsy coach back to Berlin.

For a few minutes, Lola stood on the hotel steps and watched the coach as it rattled along the medieval cobbled streets and disappeared from view. Not once did Reinhard look back out of the window, not that she had expected him to. She admitted to a sense of relief at the end of their stormy relationship. When there was no true affection in an affair and the physical passion all spent, there could only ever be bitterness, even hate. It was time she put her energies into getting back to the stage. She turned and, head raised defiantly, stepped confidently into the hotel.

It soon became apparent that boring Brussels had been a paradise compared to Warsaw. Broken by years of bitter rebellion and now cowed beneath the brutal yoke of Russia, it lay tired and defeated beneath a perpetually leaden sky. If there was ever a city that needed enlivening, this was it.

But enlivenment for the general public was the last thing the ruler of Poland, Prince Ivan Feodorovich Paskievitch, wanted. As the wielder of the Tsar’s iron fist, he kept the Poles in a constant state of terror. On the surface, life in Warsaw continued as in most other cities, but at the least sign of a disturbance the secret police would move in. People often disappeared and were exiled to Siberia. Public floggings took place if one dared to protest against the imposition of the Russian language or religion. Word had already reached Paskievitch of Lola’s escapade in Berlin. Colonel Abramowicz was not only Director of the Opera, he was also the Chief of Police and he dutifully reported that he had signed Madam Montez to appear as dancer for a short season. Paskievitch took careful note. He had an instinct for trouble-makers.

King for a Day had been an early flop for Giuseppe Verdi, but it was an innocuous comic piece approved by the censors as suitable for a Polish audience.

With very little rehearsal time, Lola worked day and night to get herself back into shape. She was not a match technically for the prima-ballerina ousted by the instantly-enamored Colonel so that she could take her place, but she had every intention that this debut would prove her star quality.

Opening night was perfect. She didn't fault once as she pirouetted in her red and black gypsy costume across the stage and danced through the intricate steps to Verdi's beautiful music. When the curtain finally came down, to her astonishment and delight the rest of the cast were almost completely ignored. Seventeen curtain calls. And all for Lola Montez alone.

'You have conquered, Madame!' The Colonel was the first to rush through her dressing room door with a huge bouquet of roses. He knelt on the floor and handed them to her. 'Warsaw is at your feet.'

Lola laughed, still dizzy with the heights of exhilaration. She had done it. Finally proved what she had always known she could do. 'You are sweet, Colonel.' She kissed him on the top of the head and took the offered roses, breathing deeply of their scent. 'Thank you for everything you have done for me,' she added seductively.

Abramowicz was beside himself with excitement. He had been plagued by constant fantasies of how best to get Lola into his bed and he sprung to his feet, arms outstretched for the hoped-for embrace. But Lola ignored him and turned instead to the mirror to complete the removal of her make-up.

He lowered his arms, slightly embarrassed at being too hasty. 'I have arranged a special supper,' he said. 'Warsaw's leading citizens are dying to meet with you.'

'Will Prince Paskievitch be there?'

'No. The Prince does not usually mix socially with his subjects.'

Lola smiled. 'Too easy for a knife to find his back I suppose?'

The Colonel visibly paled. He raised a finger to his lips. 'Madame, I would caution you.'

She turned her wide eyes on him. 'Whatever for? Am I not saying out loud that which everyone is thinking?'

He shook his head. 'I beg you to take care in what you say here in Warsaw. This is not a free city like London.'

It was natural enough that Lola outshone everyone at the supper. Most of the guests had been in the audience that evening and were falling over themselves to meet with her.

She wore one of her best gowns, a dark blue satin trimmed in gold lace, and a matching mantilla. Her deft use of her Spanish fan added to the air of mystery she was now keen to cultivate. Although Reinhard's words on that account had been cruel at the time, she hadn't completely ignored them.

Colonel Abramowicz tripped over himself in his eagerness to introduce her to the mixture of local Polish dignitaries and foreign diplomats. He had cautioned her again on choosing her words carefully and this time she heeded his warning, using the supper to observe the society of an occupied nation. While the general air was one of merriment, Lola found herself becoming intrigued by the deep undercurrents she sensed flowing between many of the guests. Until she had come to know Henry Brougham and, more recently, Reinhard von Reinberg, politics had held only a superficial interest for her. Now, she was slowly coming to an awareness of why some men found power to be an aphrodisiac. She decided there was no reason why it should not have the same effect on a woman.

Jan Dalinski's chest tightened as he watched the vision that seemed to drift through the guests in a glorious cosmic cloud. In all his twenty years he had never seen anyone quite as beautiful as Senhora Lola Montez. As soon as he returned home he intended to write a poem about her even though he knew his father would laugh at him and make more disparaging remarks about a son who wanted to be a writer instead of a soldier.

Jan was used to it, for his poetry was often used as a smokescreen for more serious endeavors. There was no knowing what his father, who was one of Prince Paskievitch's most important deputies, would have done if he had known his son also secretly edited a subversive underground

newspaper.

Joy of joys, she had noticed him watching her. His blood raced through his cheeks as she wandered towards him and he realized the cosmic cloud was actually the blue haze of tobacco smoke. He had never seen a woman smoke before.

‘Hello,’ she said in French in a slightly husky voice that sent a thrill down his spine, ‘you are looking a trifle lost?’

‘Not lost, Senhora, only sad.’ Now why had he said that? The flush extended to his ears.

She gave a dramatic sigh and waved her fan. ‘Sad at the sight of so many fat pigs feeding off Poland’s misery?’

He came down to earth with a bump. ‘Why, Senhora ...’

‘Yes I know I have been told I must not speak of such things. But liberty demands truth.’

Still stunned, he allowed her to take his arm and steer him towards a table over which a large buffet had been spread. She picked up a piece of chicken before casting it back onto a salver. ‘All this food, while Poles starve,’ she murmured.

‘You are remarkable, Senhora,’ he said in a hoarse whisper, ‘do you know the risks you take?’

She scoffed and her glorious eyes turned to his. ‘I don’t fear tyrants. Tell me about yourself,’ she said. ‘Tell me about Poland and how it suffers.’

Beneath the protective din of the party, he told her. About his best friend who was publicly executed in the market place at the age of twelve for daring to make an effigy of the hated Paskievitch. How everything Polish - traditions, culture, literature, and even the language itself - was systematically being obliterated by the Russians. Even the simple action of humming an old Polish tune or making a sign of the cross Catholic-fashion instead of in the reversed Orthodox manner was enough to send you into exile for life. He told her of whole families who had disappeared overnight never to be seen again.

Just as he was about to confess his part in the underground, he saw Colonel Ignacy Abramowicz watching them across the room. ‘I’ve said too much,’ he muttered quickly. ‘You are a stranger here. You mustn’t be involved.’

‘Oh, but I want to be involved, Jan,’ she said. ‘I know the Tsar, you see.’

He paled. Oh, by the Blessed Virgin, what had he done?

Her hand on his shoulder reassured him. ‘I would like to help your poor benighted country. I may be able to intercede with him on Poland’s behalf.’

From the sympathy in her eyes, he knew she meant it. But when he noticed Abramowicz moving in their direction, Jan decided to beat a quick retreat.

‘A foolish boy, that one,’ said the Colonel, his eyes following Jan as he hurried out of the supper room. ‘He writes bad poetry.’

‘I found him rather eloquent.’

‘Perhaps it is your presence that brings out the best in him.’

Lola smiled graciously. ‘Dear Colonel, I’ve heard enough poetry, but I want you to tell me all about Prince Paskievitch.’

For the next few days Lola found herself thinking often about her encounter with the young poet, Jan Dalinski, and the dreadful things she had been discovering about Paskievitch. Abramowicz had painted him in glowing colors, but the truth of his character was all about her in the oppressed country of Poland. Where she might once have been disinterested, Lola now found herself seething with anger. Whenever a Russian admirer inquired about being her escort or having her attend a Russian party, she always gave an excuse. It wasn’t that she had forgotten her ambition to pursue Nicholas, but she was trying to convince herself that such a dedicated family man as the Tsar couldn’t possibly be condoning Paskievitch’s tactics. The none-too-idle thought entered her head that perhaps it would be her destiny to expose the perfidy of his Polish governor to the Tsar.

She had been day-dreaming along these lines one evening when Abramowicz arrived to announce his next opera to be staged. Lola glanced at the music with surprise. She was slightly

familiar with the Gothic plot of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*. 'Are you quite sure this is right, Colonel? I'm surprised it even got through the censors. This is a story about a tyrant. Hardly appropriate I would have thought.'

Abramowicz was unconcerned. He grinned. 'I am one of the censors. This is just a medieval fantasy. It can be rewritten to give you a wonderful part.'

'I don't sing.'

'But you can speak.'

'In an opera?'

'Why not? You dance in an opera. Why not speak?'

Lola warmed to the suggestion. A speaking part would be the chance to expand her range of talents. She instantly forgot about the Tsar. Rehearsals began within the week

Prince Paskievitch stood to attention in the opera box as the Russian anthem was played, but his eyes were busy darting over the audience, always watching for little signs of infringement of his protocols - a woman with a shawl with Polish patterns, the faint whispers of Polish speech, gold crosses around the neck not in the Russian style. Even as the music ended and the lights dimmed, he never ceased to be alert. Until the dancer came on to the stage, and all else was forgotten.

In a silvery gown that clung to her figure, she looked like a moon goddess. She gave a brief monologue of introduction in French, followed by a tantalizingly brief demonstration of her dancing talents before the opera chorus began.

Paskievitch found himself impatient, waiting for her to return. When she did reappear later in the act, she had changed costume and was now a peasant girl. As she danced, it was if she were making love to him, and him alone.

Finally the opera drew to its close and Lola returned as the goddess to give her final oration. Although her dramatic skills were less than polished, her beauty had completely captivated the audience. As she came to the end of her speech, she stepped forward close to the footlights, and raised her arms as if in supplication to the heavens. With a firm, but steady voice, she acclaimed, 'It is the right of all people everywhere to demand freedom!'

For a few moments the theater seemed to be suspended before the audience erupted. They jumped to their feet, clapped and cheered. An outpouring of Polish language exclamations filled the theater.

Paskievitch hadn't been prepared for such a rude end to the opera and it was a few minutes before he could collect his wits. When he did, he knew it would be impossible to try and make any arrests in the bedlam around him. Abruptly, he left his box followed by his entourage of officers. On returning to his palace, his first action was to order that Colonel Ignacy Abramowicz be brought to him.

In the party that followed at her hotel Lola basked in a new-found glory. Being praised for her dancing was one thing, but to become a national heroine quite another.

Never before had it occurred to her that she might have a destiny far greater than anything she had dared to imagine, that perhaps she might have an untapped source within her, the power to institute change. She walked around as if on air, accepting numerous bouquets of flowers and mementos from all manner of admirers, including Jan Dalinski, who presented her with a poem he had written in her honor.

It was close to two in the morning and the party was finally drawing to its close when the Colonel arrived. There was sudden silence as he half-staggered into the apartment. He was disheveled, his dress suit torn, several large bruises were visible on his face and he had lost a tooth.

He glowered at Lola. 'I have a message for you, Senhora Lola Montez, from Prince Paskievitch.'

'What is it?'

The Colonel raised an arm from which the sleeve had been ripped, revealing bruises on his skin. 'This, Senhora. Your fortune is your face. If you wish to keep it, you will stick to the script in

future.'

Lola scoffed. 'You can tell Prince Paskievitch I will say what I choose,' she said defiantly. 'He has no hold over me.'

The small gathering gave a somewhat feeble cheer. The undercurrent of fear had re-established itself.

Abramowicz shook his head. 'You are being very foolish. This is not your country. Do not interfere in matters that do not concern you.' He wavered on his feet before slumping to the ground. Some of the guests helped to take him away and the rest of the party broke up quickly.

Jan waited until almost everyone had gone before he turned to Lola. He withdrew a small pistol from an inner pocket and handed it to her. 'You may need this. Much as I would wish it so, in Poland today revolutions will not be made with ink and perfume.' With that, he was gone.

Lola had barely gone to bed when there was a loud rapping at her door. She rolled over and pulled the pillow over her head. But it persisted.

A voice called through the lock, first in Russian, next in Polish and finally in French.

'Open this door immediately in the name of the Governor-General!'

Lola dragged herself out of bed and went to the door, making sure she had Jan's pistol in her hand.

'What is this unholy row?' she called angrily through the lock.

'I am Colonel Oleg Smirnov. His Highness Prince Ivan Feodorovich Paskievitch demands your immediate presence.'

'Oh, he does indeed? This is a fine time to be rousing a woman from her sleep.'

'Senhora – do not play games with me. You are under arrest for sedition.'

'Don't talk nonsense.' Although beginning to quiver inside, Lola kept her voice firm.

'Open this door or I will break it down!'

'Do that and I'll shoot the first man who dares to enter!'

There was a pause. From the street Lola could hear the sounds of a crowd gathering. With luck, her supporters had regrouped. She felt more confident and the pistol ceased shaking in her hand.

Colonel Smirnov tried a more conciliatory approach. 'Be reasonable, Senhora. You do not want to cause a riot.'

'Hah! Reasonable? There is no reason in a whole country that is chained and flogged. I would be delighted to cause a riot.'

Lola moved away from the door and hurried to her balcony. She could see it was a chill, but bright, autumn morning. The square beneath the building was rapidly filling up with people. As she threw open the windows, she was immediately recognized and there was a loud cheer. She could not see Jan, but several young men whom she recognized as his companions from the reception saluted her and bowed. Lola responded by returning inside and quickly gathering up the bunches of flowers with which her room was filled. She ran out onto the balcony and began scattering them across the square.

'Hail, Lola! Spain's gift to Poland!' The young men tossed their caps in the air before scrambling to claim a flower each.

Some of Colonel Smirnov's soldiers tried to force back the crowd, but there were too few of them. Although it wouldn't be long before reinforcements arrived, and there was a chance things could become dangerous for the young men below. Lola knew that their lives would be in danger, and she didn't want their blood on her hands.

She returned to her locked door. 'If I send the Prince an apology for my hasty impromptu gesture and agree to leave Poland this very day,' she called through the door, 'do I have his promise that there will be *no* reprisals against those who supported me last night?'

The Colonel was silent for a moment. 'I can take that message to him. Are your traveling papers in order?'

Lola had a rush of panic. She had relied on Reinhard to provide her with the necessary travel documents into Poland, but he had not left her with any with which to leave. Living under a false

identity, she was currently stateless. She could apply to the British Embassy, but there was a very real possibility that her truth would be disclosed and she had no intention of letting Eliza James spoil Lola Montez's momentous triumph. She already knew that her supposed country of origin, Spain, had no representative in Warsaw.

'My papers were lost in Germany,' she murmured. 'I am at the mercy of His Highness to send me wherever he chooses.'

It was an hour before Smirnov returned. 'Prince Paskievitch is still considering your request,' he said again through the door. 'However, there is a gentleman here with a message from the French Consulate. As France is neutral, that country has offered to assist you. Now please be so good as to open this door.'

Lola pondered for a moment. The siege had gone on long enough and her confidence was being eroded by the tension. The pistol still firmly in her hand, she unlocked the door.

She locked eyes for a few moments with Smirnov, a good-looking man who in other circumstances might have proved interesting to know. He then stepped back and a young man came forward. To her astonishment, he was Jan Dalinski. He casually passed a finger across his lips as if to warn her not to say anything. She nodded, and still pointing his own pistol at him, allowed him into her apartment, re-locking the door behind him.

'There is no time for long explanations,' he whispered rapidly, leading her away from the door, 'but we have secret friends at the French Consulate who support the revolution.' He produced a document bound with a red ribbon. 'This is for you, Senhora. I must trust your confidence. Should it be discovered that the French are involved in the Polish underground, our lives will be short.'

She unraveled the ribbon. It was a certificate declaring that Lola Montez was a citizen and resident of France.

'Prince Paskievitch cannot touch you now,' Jan said, 'unless he wishes to incur the wrath of the French Government.'

Lola looked into Jan's anxious eyes. 'How can I ever thank you?'

He gave an awkward shrug. 'It is *we* who should thank *you*, Senhora, for your brave stand against the Russian Devil.'

She lifted a hand and stroked his cheek, a finger delicately outlining his lips. 'You are a beautiful and courageous young man,' she whispered. 'I only wish there was time to give you a special reward.' Her eyes were wide and his breath caught in his throat as he sensed what she meant.

'There is no time,' he said, with the pain of regret flooding his body. 'The only reward I truly deserve is to know that you are safe.'

By mid-day Lola's boxes were packed. Escorted by Colonel Smirnov and two Russian guards, the carriage had barely left the outskirts of Warsaw when they were intercepted by another troop whom Smirnov recognized as Paskievitch's personal bodyguard. 'You are to report to His Highness immediately', was the order.

Lola sent a dagger look at Smirnov. 'What does this mean? I thought you were to see me through to the Prussian border?'

'Perhaps Prince Paskievitch wishes to say farewell in person,' muttered an angry and puzzled Smirnov.

'If he tries to lock me up, he'll have to answer to the French Government,' she retorted.

'I'm sure you need have no concerns,' Smirnov tried to reassure her. But when it came to Paskievitch's methods, he could never be sure.

A shiver traveled along Lola's spine as she was ushered into the Prince's private office and saw him face-to-face for the first time. In the various portraits she had seen of him he had been made to look every inch the romantic imperial hero while, in truth, he was a scrawny, elderly man with a skeletal pock-marked face.

'So, Lola Montez, you are running away without saying goodbye to your protector.'

Lola forced herself to quell her usual hot-headed response. This was neither the time nor place to

be reckless. ‘Colonel Smirnov must have misunderstood your order, your Highness,’ she murmured. ‘He thought he was to take me direct to Prussia.’

He nodded and gave a grotesque smile. ‘Yes, but I had hoped you would give me a parting gift. Something warmer than a few ill-chosen words at a night at the opera with which to remember you by.’

Lola forced back a gasp. She had to think quickly. Although it was difficult to look into the sunken cold eyes, she had to challenge him. ‘How dare you!’ she exclaimed ‘Can it be that my secret friendship with His Imperial Majesty is not known to you?’

She detected the flash of surprise. It spurred her on. ‘You gave orders for Colonel Smirnov to take me to the west. In truth, I should have preferred that it be east. The Tsar is impatient to see me again in St Petersburg.’

‘What fancies.’ When he laughed, the gold palate supporting his dentures was clearly visible.

Lola shuddered inwardly, but pressed on. ‘If they be fancies, sir, send me to Russia and you shall have proof. I shall relate to His Majesty all that has happened to me while I have been here. He is a good and generous ruler and knows little of the truth of what goes on in Poland.’

Paskievitch glared at her. The assertion that she might be the mistress of the Tsar was so outrageous and bizarre as to be laughable, yet her supreme confidence in a situation that would have had any other person trembling at the knees made him wonder if it just might be possible. ‘You made a mockery of Russian law, yet you would go to Russia? You are either very brave or very foolish.’

Lola raised her head and set her chin in the manner that had never failed her yet. ‘Send me to Russia. Spy on me if you wish, but remember the Tsar has spies too. He will not take kindly to your interference in that which must be kept secret. If our relationship were to become common knowledge, we should both know whom to blame.’

Prince Ivan Feodorovich Paskievitch, mighty Governor-General of Poland, was stumped. He sighed. ‘If you are lying, I will find you out, Senhora, you know that?’

The circumstances were daunting, but she managed a smile. ‘Other than what I have told you, there is nothing to be found. Now I suggest you countermand your order and let me travel to Russia.’

Lola didn’t know a soul in St Petersburg. She had traveled anonymously in an overcrowded common coach from the border and found herself a reasonably priced private hotel overlooking the River Neva. The spires of the frosty forbidding prison fortress of St Peter and Paul across the river were a daily reminder of the predicament she could find herself in if she wasn’t careful. If Paskievitch had sent a spy after her she hadn’t spotted him yet, but the amorphous mass of fur-clad Russians thronging the crowded streets looked all the same to her.

She also quickly discovered that Spanish dancing in the city where ballet had reached its height of perfection was considered a second-class diversion. There would be no work for her here. It would have been easy to let melancholy settle on her. But she was Lola Montez - and her true destiny was still awaiting her. Again, she managed to draw on the inner reserve that had already seen her through some difficult times. Boldness had been the best path before and so it would be again.

Money, as always, was short, but Lola was determined to get her own back on Paskievitch. From the hotel manager she discovered the name of the best French fashion shop on the Nevksy Prospekt. Without a qualm, she waltzed in and in her best stage voice asked for the manager.

When he hurried up to her she eyed him haughtily. ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ she said.

‘Sorry, madam ...’ He stuttered, glanced at his assistants for their help, but they all shook their heads or shrugged

She gave an exasperated sigh before strolling about the shop feeling the fabrics and studying the range of goods. She kept him waiting for several minutes, before turning around to stand with one hand on her hip in her most arrogant dancer’s pose.

‘Surely you have received a communication from Prince Ivan Feodorovich Paskievitch? I am Dona Lola Montez, prima-ballerina of the Teatro Seville. I have been invited to dance before the Tsar. A dreadful calamity fell upon my wardrobe while I was in Warsaw when your stupid Russian soldiers accidentally set fire to my hotel. Fortunately, only my costumes were saved. When the Governor-General of Poland, Prince Paskievitch, heard of my predicament, he said he would arrange for me to receive a full replacement at this store.’

The manager’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open.

‘You don’t mean to tell me you haven’t received the communication?’

‘I ... I ...’

‘This is preposterous! I cannot appear before the Tsar in last season’s clothes. I need new morning dresses - walking dresses - hats, shoes - evening gowns. Why I lost everything. Paskievitch is a dog. I will report him to his superiors as a lying scoundrel and an abuser of innocent women. His name, the name of this store and the name of Russian honor will be mud from here to Madrid.’

Two hours later Lola emerged from the shop with a complete wardrobe. She didn’t bother to give more than a moment’s thought to what would happen when Paskievitch received the bill. She could only cross one bridge at a time.

The following morning, Lola spent a great deal of time at her toilette. Dressed in black and gold brocade and wrapped in a sable-trimmed hooded cape of crimson red velvet, the color of Russia, she hired a troika to take her to the Winter Palace.

Count Alexander von Benckendorff was more than a confidante and right-hand man to Nicholas I, he was also in charge of the Third Section that looked after law and order, and the secret police. When a bold young woman attempted to bombard her way past the guards and into the Tsar’s private apartments, it was inevitable that she should be brought directly to him.

The House of Romanov was the most protected royal family in Europe. Assassination attempts were an inevitable part of its existence, although not always from the public, as had been the case with Nicholas’s father, Tsar Paul I, who had been eliminated in his bedchamber with the acquiescence of his own son, Alexander I, the deceased brother of the present Tsar.

So, with such experience, Benckendorff took nothing at face value and trusted no-one. A brief report about the disturbance in Warsaw had crossed his desk. The ill-considered words of a dancer were hardly something to get excited about, but when the woman turned up in St Petersburg trying to storm the very gates of the Palace, he became suspicious. Who could she really be, this audacious female in her dazzling red cape and eyes of penetrating blue?

‘Lola Montez.’ she repeated with the air of a grand-duchess as she stood before him in his office. ‘Why does no-one believe me? The Tsar will know who I am. Ask him.’

‘His Imperial Majesty, Tsar of All the Russias, is not in the habit of acquainting himself with dancing girls,’ countered Benckendorff.

‘I am not a dancing girl. I am a premiere danseuse of the Teatro Seville. There’s a big difference. And I met the Tsar at the Prussian Court. He will verify it.’

Benckendorff rattled off a few rapid words in Castilian Spanish. ‘Can you prove it? Who is the Director of the Theater in Seville? With whom did you study? What are your principal roles? Where else are you known?’

Lola veritably blazed back the answers. ‘Who the Director is now, I haven’t the faintest idea. It was Espa in my day. I studied with the great Hernandez who also taught Fanny Elssler. *El Oleano* is my most famed interpretation. I’m known in Berlin, Brussels, Leipzig ...’

‘Paris?’

‘Not yet. It is planned for later in my itinerary.’

‘London?’

‘Hm?Yes, London.’

‘You speak Spanish with a curious accent.’

‘So do you.’

Their eyes met in a long minute of combat before Benckendorff shook his head and chuckled. 'You have spirit and courage for a spy.'

'I'm not a spy.'

'What are you, then? You're not Spanish, of that I'm sure. What is it that you really want with His Imperial Majesty?'

Her demeanor softened. Where a minute ago there had been an aggressive, forthright woman, she now tilted her head to one side and lowered her eyes and seemed as weak and compliant as a virgin. 'Really, sir. That is a personal question you must ask your master. He asked that I visit him in St Petersburg. I am merely following his command.'

Benckendorff was more than puzzled. For all his faults as a ruler, Nicholas had never been one for casually collecting women to take to bed. He was loyal to his wife and if there had been rare occasions when he had dallied, it was discreetly done with women of his own class, certainly not with bogus Spanish dancers.

Benckendorff shook his head. He rose with an almost audible creak of his old bones. 'Sit down,' he said roughly and pointed to a chair. 'I will be back to deal with you shortly.'

Lola did as he said and watched as he slowly shuffled towards the wall. There he pressed against a panel and a secret door swung open. He went through and closed the door behind him. She waited for several minutes before getting up and going to the panel, where she felt along its edges until she found a small knob. She pressed it, the door swung open and she stepped through. She seemed to be in a type of armory. Flags, ancient shields and spears, battleaxes, old and modern guns filled up every space in the wall. Medals and other types of military paraphernalia were displayed in glass cases.

Sitting at a desk in the midst of this museum of militarism and dressed in his full uniform was Tsar Nicholas while old Benckendorff loomed over him. They both looked up at the same time. In an instant, Lola found herself staring down at the muzzle of a silver pistol in Tsar Nicholas' hand. Benckendorff righted himself. He was shaking with anger and pointed to the floor. 'On your knees, woman!'

Lola instantly sank to the floor in a deep curtsy, her crimson crinoline spreading outwards like the petals of a giant rose. 'Forgive me, your most Imperial Majesty,' she said in French, 'but a lady does not like to be kept waiting indefinitely.'

There was a moment's silence, in which Lola kept her eyes averted before she lifted them cautiously to see Nicholas had placed his pistol on the desk and was looking at her with amusement. Benckendorff's face was still a mixture of fury and incredulity.

'Well, well, so it is you again,' murmured the Tsar lightly. 'Perhaps I should have taken a bet with my brother-in-law that you would not be so easily dissuaded from forcing yourself into my presence.'

'Oh, your Imperial Majesty, I would have never dared if I had not assumed that you were willing for me to do so.'

Benckendorff made a noise as if he was about to explode. Nicholas held up his hand. He murmured something to the old man in Russian and waved him away. Benckendorff frowned and muttered a few words of protest before retreating through the secret door.

'You may rise. Sit there.' The Tsar nodded to a chair.

Lola did as he asked. She met his eyes frankly.

'Now, I have to confess I find this episode quite extraordinary. If a man had dared what you have done he would be dead by now. Are you utterly fearless or just completely stupid?'

The suggestion of stupidity sent Lola's confidence wavering. If any other man on the face of the earth had dared to call her that he would have experienced the lash of her tongue, the back of her hand across his face, or both. She managed to control herself for her reply. 'Forgive me, Your Majesty, if I have made a grave error of judgment in reading your intention. I do not think myself a fool, but merely a woman unafraid to meet men on equal terms. I read an invitation in your eyes and I responded to it.'

Amusement still danced behind Nicholas's eyes as Benckendorff reappeared without knocking. He handed the Tsar a sheaf of papers and whispered something into his ear, before turning and giving Lola a vicious look that spelled triumph.

Nicholas quickly flicked through the papers, his eyes turned to ice. 'Did you really think we would not discover the truth, Madame?'

'What truth, Your Majesty?'

'Your little fracas in Warsaw. Turning my subjects against me with revolutionary speeches? Having the audacity to come here on the presumption I wished to bed you, but with traitorous intent in your heart?'

'Oh, no, Your Majesty, you are mistaken. I could not believe that such a magnanimous ruler as the Tsar could condone what is being done to poor Poland.'

'Poor Poland!' Nicholas slammed the desk and the pistol jumped with a clatter. 'Poland is the sewer of Europe. It must never defy me! It is to be crushed out of existence. How dare a whoring guttersnipe like you come here and challenge my authority!' The Tsar picked up the pistol and pointed it at Lola's head.

She closed her eyes. The last vestiges of her courage slipped away. Her destiny was to be shot by the Tsar of All the Russias.

'Get her out of here!'

12.

The winter freeze of the Baltic had just begun when Lola stepped ashore in the Hanseatic port of Lubeck. She wrapped her crimson cape around herself against the biting cold air and looked for a carriage to hire, but there were none. Herring boats from the eastern Baltic rarely carried passengers who might need a carriage. She spied an empty freight cart trundling along the waterfront and hailed its driver. He stared at her in amazement.

'I need someone to take me to a decent hotel,' she said in rusty German. 'I also have luggage.'

'Let me see your money first.'

Lola gave an annoyed sigh, felt in a bag and produced several coins. 'Roubles,' she said. 'I presume they are good enough?'

He shrugged. 'They'll do.'

Lola pointed to her two trunks and climbed up on to the front board next to the driver. She was glad to sit down. Her legs were still unsteady from the voyage and she was light-headed from lack of food.

Although she had always prided herself on her sea-legs, close to a week in a small boat on the Baltic had proved otherwise. She was convinced that Hell wasn't a fiery inferno at all, but was freezing cold, rolled continuously and stank of sprats like the lower decks of a Russian fishing boat. No matter how long she lived, she would never be able to face a herring again.

The driver grudgingly loaded her trunks before sitting down beside her and turning the horses in the direction of the city.

The proprietor of the hotel also accepted Lola's casually thrown roubles and gave her the key to a room, her only stipulation being that it did not face the sea. She locked the door behind her and collapsed on to the narrow bed, staring at the blank white wall.

What a come-down! The events of the past week reeled past her like the cavalcade of a comic opera. One minute she had been in the inner sanctum of the Tsar, the next, forcibly evicted from the Winter Palace by more guards than were necessary for a woman on her own, trundled off to her hotel, made to pack without the help of a maid, forced into a carriage and driven to the nearest wharf where the captain of a herring boat was commandeered to send her to the other end of the Baltic before the ice closed in.

The only concession had been the surprise of several hundred roubles given to her at the last minute by Benckendorff. 'His Imperial Majesty would not want you to leave thinking him ungenerous in abandoning a woman, no matter what her morals are. However, he recommends you stick to dancing in future and leave drama to the more experienced.'

She could still flush with rage at the humiliation she had suffered. The answer could only be that Tsar Nicholas I was quite crazy. Surrounded by all that military hardware and with that maniacal look in his eyes, she should have realized he was a soldier gone mad. She had never been wrong about men in the past, but when there were two men living in one personality, it was quite easy to make a mistake.

Lubeck was concerned primarily with commerce and not culture. However, the audiences at the small theater where Lola found herself a dancing role might have been unsophisticated but they were appreciative. They helped to boost her dented self-confidence and she soon bounced back, ready to take on the world once more. Over the next few months there was a string of short engagements in the towns of Schleswig-Holstein and Saxony. She did not make a fortune, but enough to keep her in adequate lodgings and to afford a new maid, Myra.

It was inevitable that men still tried to interest her in relationships, but Lola refused to have any of them. Prostitution was always left as the last resort and, strangely enough, celibacy was having a restorative effect on her as she enjoyed putting all her sexual energies into her dancing. She discovered she danced better when there was no man to complicate her life.

And then came the offer of a short season at the Court Theater in Dresden.

Lola always slept in after a late night show. Myra had been out on an errand for fresh flowers and was on her way back to their modest lodgings along a row of exclusive apartment houses that faced the Albertplatz.

To Myra's surprise, there was a large crowd of young and not-so-young women crowded around the entrance to one of them. Some of them were crying and giggling, others dancing about with excitement and even more looking pale and fanning themselves as if about to faint.

'What's going on?' she asked the driver of a waiting carriage.

He scoffed. 'Liszt again, of course.'

'Who?'

'Franz Liszt, the musician. That's his apartment. Every day there's a crowd of women hanging around just hoping for a glimpse of him. For the life of me, I don't know what the fuss is about. Scrawny fellow with long hair and a bad temper.' The driver spat into the street.

Myra grimaced and decided not to ask him any more questions. She inched her way into the throng of women. 'Who is this Franz Liszt?' she asked a young woman about her own age.

The girl looked at her in astonishment. 'Good Heavens, don't you know anything?' She sighed. 'Franz Liszt is just the most divine, adorable man who ever drew breath. He writes and plays the most exquisite music. Once you've laid eyes on him and heard him play your life can never be the same again.'

There was a sudden squeal from several of the women close to the door. It opened and a young man emerged surrounded by several bodyguards. He was in his early thirties, with a handsome aquiline face. Long fair hair flowed across the shoulders of his black velvet jacket. He waved a slender, long-fingered hand at the crowd of women. 'How are you today, ladies?'

The women squealed again and Myra watched in awe as the bodyguards pushed them back to let him pass to the carriage. As Liszt came close to where Myra was standing she saw his eyes, a perceptive hazel beneath intelligent, slightly shaggy brows. She stood back and watched the carriage depart among cheers and sighs from the group of women. Liszt waved at them and then he was gone.

Myra hurried back to Lola. To her dismay, she found her employer awake and in a bad mood.

'Where have you been? I had to get my own tea.'

'Sorry, Madame.' Myra quickly offered Lola the bouquet of flowers as a peace offering. 'I went

to buy you these. I stopped to see Liszt. There was a great crowd waiting for him.'

'Franz Liszt, the composer?'

'Yes, madam. All the ladies seem to adore him even if he's a little thin.'

Interest sparked in Lola's eyes. 'Hm.' She toyed with a stem of one of the flowers. 'I've heard a lot about Franz Liszt. I'm not dancing tonight. See if you can get me a ticket to his recital.'

Up until that day, Lola had given little thought to the common thread that had bound her various lovers together. Soon she was to realize they had all been shallow men and that real love had played a secondary role in their lives.

Thomas James and Charles Lennox had been two of a kind, caring only for a soldier's life, sport, drink and sex - and those in no particular order. Reinhard von Reinberg was primarily an ambitious, callous exploiter of others. And even Hernandez for all his fiery physical expression and obsession with the exhibition of love had nothing to give a woman when the truth in his heart was exposed.

True, pure, adoring love, if such a thing did exist, was the faint remnant of a father long dead. But when Lola saw and heard Franz Liszt for the first time, it gave her hope.

Sitting anonymously in her seat towards the rear of the recital hall surrounded by an egalitarian audience of society patrons, merchants and trades people, she was spellbound. Music was a necessary part of her life as a dancer. She was now familiar with the scores of a dozen operas and even more ballets. She had heard good music played indifferently and bad music played with an occasional touch of brilliance. But nothing like this. Nothing that could transport her body and soul to a plane of enchantment far removed from anything within her experience.

From her seat it was difficult to see the face of the pianist, but already she knew every nuance of it as if she had known it all her life. She sensed every frown of concentration, every grimace as those famous fingers challenged the complexities of his own inspiration, every sigh as he triumphed.

The final notes of his last sonata had barely ended when Lola slipped out of her seat. She left the hall and hurried around to the stage door. Already a crowd of admirers and newspaper reporters had gathered, but she forced her way through them.

There was a man on duty. 'No entry,' he barked at her menacingly.

Lola flashed her eyes at him. 'Let me pass. Herr Liszt is expecting me.'

The crowd abruptly went quiet as the man frowned as he consulted a list. 'And who may you be?'

Lola drew herself up to her full height and looked at him with scorn. 'Everyone knows who I am, you fool,' she said in her most dramatic voice. 'I am Lola Montez!'

The doorman's mouth fell open and a cheeky-faced young man in the crowd with a pencil and pad stepped forward. He doffed his hat. 'I am a reporter, Senhora,' he said quickly. 'How well do you know Franz Liszt?'

A light smile softened Lola's determined expression. 'What a leading question? Surely you wouldn't expect a lady to give you a truthful answer?'

A titter of amusement ran across the crowd. The young reporter's eyes widened. 'Have you known each other long? How does the Comtesse d'Agoult feel about your friendship?'

Lola waved an impatient hand. 'I have no idea. Nor do I care.' She looked at the doorman again. 'Am I going to have to stand here all day?'

The doorman closed his mouth and stepped aside. 'Sorry, Madame.'

The reporter tried to follow her. 'When did you meet Liszt? Is it true that he makes love even better than he plays the piano?' The door swung shut behind her and Lola didn't hear the rest of his questions.

No-one interrupted her excursion along the back corridors of the hall. She had geared herself up for a battle through managers and sycophants and was surprised to find her quarry alone in a rehearsal room.

He was the picture of exhaustion. His eyes were closed, his head with its trademark mane of hair

spread on the back of a sofa, his long fingers clasped together in his lap and his legs stretched out before him. Her heart went into irrational tremors as she watched the unsuspecting man for a few minutes until he finally opened his eyes. They stared at each other.

‘Who the devil are you?’

Before he could protest, she slipped on to the sofa next to him and rested her hand over the famous fingers, thrilling to the cool feel of them. ‘I am Lola Montez. You and I are going to make history together.’

He didn’t withdraw his fingers from her grasp. His hazel eyes wandered across her face, settling for a moment on her parted lips before coming back to her gaze.

Her heart was beating so wildly she had a sensation of suffocating.

‘And what kind of history did you have in mind, Madam?’

‘Lola, please.’

‘Lola.’ It was said with a half sigh.

She brushed her lips lightly against his. ‘The kind of history that will inspire you to write the most glorious music of your career,’ she murmured softly, tightening her grip of his hands.

A slight flush had risen on his pale cheeks and desire misted his eyes, yet still he did not move. ‘Show me this inspiration,’ he whispered hoarsely.

Her lips met his again, her tongue gently flicking at the corners of his mouth before he extracted his hands from hers and sat upright. He gripped her shoulders and pulled her close to him and kissed her. Not with the ravenous, searching kiss of lust she had been expecting, but a gentle, almost restrained, kiss.

It maddened her with frustration, yet strangely also excited her. ‘Are you inspired only to write lullabies?’ she said wickedly.

He smiled and his fingers toyed with the lace of her collar. ‘Tonight maybe only a lullaby.’ His lips touched hers again briefly, ‘Ah, but tomorrow, a symphony.’

As Franz finally stepped out from the stage door a great cheer echoed from the waiting crowd and when Lola quietly emerged from behind him, to tuck her arm into his, there was a brief moment of consternation.

The whispering began. So it was true after all. There was a beautiful new woman in Liszt’s life. Who was she? The journalists and admirers pressed forward, all eager to have their questions answered, but Franz ignored them as his assistants cleared their way to the waiting carriage.

As she passed by, Lola couldn’t resist giving the young reporter who had challenged her earlier a self-satisfied smile that said “I told you so”. He stared at her for a few moments, scribbled something on his pad and rushed away.

‘Does it concern you that we will be through all the presses by tomorrow?’ murmured Franz as they settled into the plush seat and the driver quickly whipped up the horses to get away from the throng.

In the light of the carriage lamps the sensitive face of genius glowed with his awakening desire for her, and Lola almost trembled with anticipation. ‘Not in the least,’ she replied. ‘People can think what they like.’

‘I heard about your defiance in Poland.’

She was surprised.

‘I am honored to number Frederic Chopin and the patriotic poet, Adam Miecikowicz, among my dearest friends,’ he explained. ‘Anyone who dares to stand against Russian tyranny must earn their respect.’

The knowledge that her actions were already well-known added to her inner glow, but she responded only modestly. ‘I did nothing. A few words escaped my mind without real thought for the consequences.’

‘It was a brave gesture all the same.’

When he smiled it was like Heaven flinging wide its doors. ‘From what I have read of you, you

are no stranger to defying the ruling classes yourself,' she said.

'I hate injustice, tyranny and hypocrisy. I have been blessed with privileges, therefore I see it as my duty to always publicly protest when I see such abhorrence at play.'

'But have you changed people?'

He shrugged. 'Perhaps not. But one must always try. After all, the world is always changing. We can only hope for the better.'

As she studied the finely-drawn features of his beautiful face, she came to realize that she was not only the victim of an overwhelming physical attraction, she was discovering another aspect of the aphrodisiac of power - not of political power this time, but of intellectual power. Curiously, at that moment she found she was more impatient to talk with him than take him to bed.

He seemed to know what she was thinking as he gave that angelic smile again. 'A woman of such beauty must have been loved many times, yet I detect a strange dispirited quality about you. Surely not all your lovers were fools?'

'I trust that is not a reflection of my own character?'

'I assure you not. I only meant that they were fools if they did not discover your inner beauty. Most men are fools over women. They see a pretty face, a comely figure and nothing else. I always look for what lies behind the outer wrappings. A woman's mind is of much interest to me - if not more than her body.'

'And what can you tell about me?' she said softly, her heart continually to beat irrationally.

He tilted his head and pursed his lips as he studied her. 'I see ... Intelligence. Restrained perhaps by circumstances, not unusual in the stifling world women are forced to inhabit these days. I see wit - a weapon easily dulled by lack of sharpening in the right company. Ah - and more than your fair share of rage - always simmering there below the surface. You are powerful when crossed.' He gave an almost boyish grin. 'But that can be excused. All of we artistes are entitled to a certain amount of rage.'

She said nothing, utterly swept up in the accuracy of his perceptions.

His eyes narrowed briefly. 'But, above all, all I see ... courage. Yes. An extraordinary amount of courage.'

Lola uncharacteristically flushed. She remained silent until the carriage drew up at the front of the apartment on the Albertplatz.

She turned to Franz again. 'I think I'm beginning to understand why your music has such force, such power. The way it penetrates our innermost feelings. You have been gifted with a unique vision of the world.'

'A gift, a curse, it can be seen as either.'

She reached for his hands, turning them over in her own studying the delicate long fingers before lifting them, kissing each one gently, while all the time her eyes never left his. 'Remember, tonight you promised me a lullaby,' she murmured.

It was like living a dream and, like a dream, it had to end with a rude awakening, but Lola had no intention of ever waking during those wonderful, idyllic spring weeks in Dresden.

Love, and her life, were at their ecstatic peak. Franz Liszt, the adored idol of countless thousands, was hers alone. He was her soul-mate - the destiny she had been so convinced was hers.

From the moment of their meeting all other considerations in life had been abandoned. Lola gave up her dancing and Franz cut short his musical tour for the most intense togetherness either had ever known.

Physically and mentally, they were the modern equivalent of all the great lovers. They were Antony and Cleopatra; Abelard and Heloise; Romeo and Juliet.

That these real and fabled liaisons had been doomed to desperate ends never entered Lola's mind as they made passionate love in the large four-poster of Franz's apartment in the Albertplatz, or romped and splashed in the bubbles of his bathtub, playfully ravished one another in carriages by moonlight, or in summer boats drifting on the Elbe, and even daring once to make love outdoors on

a bed of daisies, hidden among the rhododendron bushes of the Grosser Garten with the distant sound of the laughter of children at play in their ears.

Franz never ceased to be amazed at Lola's craving for physical love or her ingenuity in finding novel ways to stimulate and satisfy him. Most of the women in his life, including his mistress the Comtesse Marie d'Agoult who lived with their three children at Nonnenwerth, his island retreat on the Rhine, had been comparatively acquiescent women, happy for him to be the assertive partner. He was totally and utterly enraptured by Lola, his wild, uninhibited tigress.

That the newspapers were avidly reporting on their liaison and every time they ventured out in public together they drew the curiosity, and occasional condemnation, of spectators did not bother them.

Franz promised to take her to Paris to meet the people who had helped to mold his personality and his opinions. He told her about his friendships with all the great figures of Parisian life - the writers, artists and musicians already called the 'immortals' even in their own lifetimes - Dumas, Sand, Hugo, Balzac, Delacroix, Chopin, Paganini. Lola was tremulous with the prospect of meeting them.

But soon the inevitable clouds gathered on the horizon of bliss. Unbeknown to Lola, Marie d'Agoult did not take lightly to Franz Liszt making a public spectacle of himself at the expense of her and his innocent children, and her urgent letters to him arrived daily.

Lola knew about Marie and how she had abandoned her husband to set up house with Franz, but Franz had assured her their relationship had long since died and the letters were only reports on their children's activities.

His demeanor began to undergo a subtle change. He started to become irritable and took to spending more time at his piano, pounding away at dramatic compositions with a melancholy undertone. On the morning he locked the music room door against her for the first time Lola was filled with a sense of dread. Surely the dream was not already threatening to fade? She knocked a number of times, but he refused to let her in. She restrained herself, but she had several hours until he broke for luncheon for her resentment to build up into their first serious argument.

'I must write my music, Lola,' he said as they sat down. 'I must have time to myself to do it. I cannot spend my days with idle indulgences.'

'Oh, so I am nothing but an idle indulgence to you?'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

That he kept his eyes on his food and would not look at her meant serious trouble. She felt an ominous tightening in her chest. Her grasp on love had started to slip away from her.

'What did you mean then? You told me you loved me, that I was your inspiration. But your music, it is beginning to sound like a funeral dirge.'

He flinched before he looked up at her across the table, his eyes a mixture of hurt and anger. 'Not all music can be fountains of light romanticism. Does it not occur to you that I might wish to explore the deeper soul?'

'I don't care for the idea. Not if the soul is full of dark, gloomy caverns.' Lola threw her napkin down on the table. She had completely lost her appetite.

He stretched out his hand in supplication. 'Please don't behave in this way. You know I adore you above all women.'

Irrational jealousy cut through her. 'Yes, and how many have you adored? Which one inspired you to write your romantic fountains? Was it Marie?'

He withdrew his hand. 'Lola - you don't understand ...'

'No, I guess I not.'

'Let me try and explain'

She sighed an angry frustrated sigh. 'Am I so stupid that your love has to be explained?'

'I am not talking about love - I am talking about music.'

'Exactly. The music comes first with you. It always will. I have been so stupid. I should have known it would come to this.'

‘Lola - you must listen to me.’

She was trembling all over. Frightened of what was happening, what she was saying, sensing the gulf between them widening second by second. His eyes were moist, barely hiding his anguish and she felt ill inside as she looked at him. Why was she trying to destroy her own happiness?

‘You come first, my darling. Always,’ he said in a gentle reassuring tone, ‘but you fell in love with Franz Liszt. The music and the man are inseparable. One is nothing without the other. Sometimes the music demands attention over the man. It is the way I am. If you cannot live with that knowledge, perhaps you must leave me ...’

‘No!’ She had to put an end to this agony. Reaching for his hand, she pressed it against her cheek before raining kisses on his palm as she struggled to blink back the tears. ‘I’m sorry, sorry. Don’t ever say such things again. I could never leave you. I love you so much ...’ Her voice choked.

For a few more minutes they melted again in each other’s eyes.

At last he spoke. ‘It is time we thought to leave Dresden,’ he murmured. ‘Come with me to Switzerland. Its beauty will restore us both. Perhaps we will go to Paris.’

Relief flooded through her veins. Her fears had been groundless.

That night they attended the opera together, drawing all eyes as usual. Lola wore a dramatic gown in claret red trimmed in black lace, with a daring décolletage that showed her snowy bosom to perfection. Around her neck was a simple velvet ribbon from which hung a cameo of Franz’s famous profile.

A gruff young composer called Richard Wagner called into their box between the acts to pay his compliments. Lola tapped her fan impatiently in her palm as he discussed boring musical forms and cadences with Franz. As the lights went down and Wagner prepared to leave, he gave her an openly hostile stare and, with the height of rudeness, whispered something in Franz’s ear. Franz smiled.

‘What is so amusing at my expense?’ snapped Lola as Wagner hurried out of the box.

‘Nothing, my dearest. Wagner was merely impressed with your beautiful eyes.’

Lola didn’t believe him. At the post-opera supper she spied Wagner and cornered him. ‘You are a rude dolt,’ she said in a voice loud enough to draw the attention of everyone else in the room. ‘I trust your music is better constructed than your manners.’

Wagner set his square chin. ‘You may be able to charm some men, madam, but I see you for what you are.’

Lola’s fingers closed around her fan. ‘Oh? So what am I, Herr Wagner? Pray tell me so that everyone may know your opinion of me?’

Before he could reply, Franz hurriedly moved to her side. ‘Lola, there is no need for a scene,’ he whispered. ‘Herr Wagner complimented me on choosing such a beautiful companion, that is all.’

She ignored him and continued to stare at Wagner. ‘This man has insulted me,’ she said loudly, making heads turn.

‘Please, Lola, do not persist with this,’ said Franz, irritation creeping into his whisper. ‘Our association draws all kinds of comments. If you cannot handle them we will have to cease going out together.’

The warning in his voice was plain. Lola quickly relented. She forced a smile at Wagner. ‘Very well. This time I will forgive you, but I won’t forget.’ She flicked open her fan and raised her chin as she took Franz’s arm. Together they moved among the rest of the guests.

Richard Wagner glowered at her and shook his head. ‘The devil’s daughter,’ he muttered to himself under his breath. ‘I pray you see sense, maestro, before she breaks you.’

A few days later their trunks were packed and the bills paid. They made glorious love for the last time in the big four-poster and Lola went to sleep dreaming of their coming holiday in Switzerland, of her and Franz wandering hand-in-hand through edelweiss-bordered lanes in alpine meadows.

She woke to mid-morning sunshine streaming into the bedroom and stretched and sighed in deep satisfaction before noticing Franz was no longer in bed. They had intended to leave at dawn, but he had obviously let her sleep in. It did not matter, for they had all the time in the world.

It was only then that she noticed Myra was standing at the foot of the bed, her face pale with worry. All the fears of yesterday returned. 'What is it?' asked Lola quickly.

'Oh, Madame, Madame.' Myra wrung her hands together.

Lola sat up. 'Out with it girl!'

'He ... he's gone, madam. His carriage left before sunrise. He woke me and asked me to give you this. He said eventually you would know why it has to be this way.' Her hand trembled as she held out a sheet of paper.

Lola clambered out of the bed and took the paper without understanding. She stared at the music on the sheet. It was a sonata simply entitled *The Dream*. At the bottom he had signed his name, but nothing else.

Myra slowly inched backwards, as if waiting for the outburst that must come, but Lola could do nothing. Numbness had paralyzed her. She was a child again, standing on the edge of that great gaping hole at the edge of the *maidan* into which love had disappeared. Only this time it was not the simplicity of a father's love that she had lost. This was the man that had been her one true love - her passion - and her destiny. A destiny that had lasted only a few weeks. The sheet of music fluttered to the floor. There was an oppressive minute's silence before Myra gave a nervous little cough.

The numbness fled and Lola's wits came together like an ominous roll of thunder. 'The bastard,' she seethed. Her hand reached for the nearest object, a crystal candlestick. As it flew through the air, Myra dodged behind the door. With thumping heart, she listened for a few seconds as Lola raged and started demolishing the bedroom. The maid then fled, to return in trepidation an hour later, with the apartment manager in tow.

The sight they faced was one of utter devastation. Surrounded by smashed bric-a-brac, splintered furniture and ripped sheets, and still in her nightgown, Lola lay curled in a fetal position on the floor, sobbing. Clutched in her fist was a crushed ball of paper.

Myra exchanged a look of dismay with the manager, but he did not seem to be as worried as she. 'Herr Liszt must have known the lady very well,' he whispered. 'He left me with additional funds for he said this very thing would happen when she discovered he had gone.'

Lola spent the next few days wishing she were dead. Forced to move from the damaged apartment, she and Myra returned to their modest hotel, but most of the time she hardly knew where she was. She ate little and neglected her appearance, sitting for hours at a time in a window-seat staring at the Elbe.

Myra was worried and constantly tried to tempt her out of her depression but nothing seemed to work. She was almost at her wits' end when a visitor arrived. He was an elderly English gentleman with a strange gait and gangly limbs. His card announced that he was Lord Henry Brougham.

Lola's eyes sparkled for the first time in days and she embraced him like a father. 'It is wonderful to see you. How on earth did you find me?'

Henry sat down beside her, holding her slight hands in his clumsy paws and studied the wistful face with concern. 'I was here on official business when the British Ambassador told me you were in Dresden, but I didn't see announcements of you on the stage. Are things not going well?'

She struggled to smile between sniffs. 'Every time we meet, Henry, things are not well with me. I was a fool, for I swore never to give my heart again.'

'Ah - that Hungarian ivory tinkler I presume?'

'Does everyone know?'

'Yes, everyone who has read a newspaper in the last month or so. Not that one should ever believe everything in newspapers,' he said. 'Do you care to tell me what really happened - in your own words?'

She sighed. 'It was wonderful, Henry. Too wonderful to be real, I suppose. We were so perfect together, and I thought destiny had made us for each other, that it would last forever. But genius and music combined together have a power with which no ordinary woman can ever hope to compete. If I have one comfort it is that the Comtesse Marie d'Agoult cannot hold him either. The music will always win.'

‘There is no point grieving for something that is impossible,’ he said. ‘Enjoy the memories, but look to the future. You should be using your energies on the stage. You must get back to your dancing. I’m leaving for Paris shortly and I should like nothing better than your company on the journey. I firmly believe you and Paris were made for each other.’

Lola’s eyes brightened and a trace of color came into her cheeks.

13.

How right Lord Henry had been about Paris. As Lola’s carriage passed through the tree-lined streets, she savored every sight and sound of a city she was fast growing to love. The air was filled with a special light that reflected from the dappled waters of the Seine and highlighted the elegant framework of buildings, arches, monuments and the gardens. There was none of the gloom or austerity of cities like Warsaw. Here were vitality and a passion for life that matched her own.

As the hired carriage proceeded along Rue le Peletier towards the Opéra National de Paris, she glimpsed the remnants of a poster advertising a concert by Liszt, and pain cut a swathe through her heart. Ah, Franz, if only we could have shared this wonderful city together. She brought herself up sharply. No, I mustn’t fall into the trap of regret. With Lord Henry’s encouragement, she had finally managed to force herself to the conclusion that the fire between her and Franz had blazed too fast, too furiously, to have ever been the destiny of love she was convinced must some day be hers. Drawing again on her well of courage, Lola Montez knew she must start anew. The carriage came to a stop. She took a deep breath, stepped down and marched under the portico with all the assurance of a star.

At the completion of her audition, Léon Pillet, Director of the Paris Opéra, had no illusions about Lola’s technical abilities. It was only as a favor to Lord Henry Brougham, an Englishman of great influence and a close personal friend of the King, that he had agreed to see her in the first place.

Her style of dancing didn’t seem to fit any accepted mode. She said she was Spanish, but he guessed that was a fabrication. Her ballet skills were poor, she seemed out of practice and even had trouble keeping time to the music. But since the romance with Franz Liszt, she had a rapidly growing notoriety and, as many men before him had discovered, once on the stage in the glow of the footlights her alluring sexual quality could mesmerize an audience. *Le Lazzarone*, a new opera by the French composer, Fromental Halévy, whose star never blazed as brightly as Meyerbeer’s or Donizetti’s, was going to need something extra to draw in the crowds. The name Lola Montez on the marquee might prove worth having.

Alexandre Dumas considered himself the stallion of Paris. He spent almost as much time seeking feminine conquests and making love as he did writing his thrilling manuscripts. There were those literary critics who scorned his talents as sensational fodder for the masses, but with money jingling in his pockets, Alexandre Dumas could afford to treat them with equal scorn.

He was hardly handsome, being a plump man with a round, fleshy face and a head of extraordinarily frizzy hair, a result of his Creole inheritance, but his personality and exuberance for life drew women like moths to a flame. He wasn’t fussy either about whom he took to bed, be it society matron or gutter girl, it just depended on his current fancy. All women interested him, and all were fair game.

When his friend, Léon Pillet, mentioned he would be giving a small ballet role to the woman with whom Franz Liszt was said to have been seriously entangled, Dumas’ senses were sharpened. A rumor was doing the rounds that Liszt was playing at less than his usual perfection these days and his problems with Marie d’Agoult were far from resolved. Could this woman have been the cause?

Thus, Dumas was in the front row of the stalls the night Lola was to make her Paris debut. Other men might have preferred to watch from the exclusivity of the opera boxes, but he liked to be as

close as possible to the action. The combined smells of greasepaint and perfumes struggling to camouflage the sweating bodies of the singers and dancers were like an aphrodisiac to him.

In the seat next to him and wearing his instantly recognizable scarlet waistcoat was Théophile Gautier, the flamboyant writer and ballet critic for *La Presse*, the newspaper that published much of Dumas' writing. On his other side was the newspaper's editor and part-owner, the somewhat dull and proper, Henri Dujarier. It would have been imprudent to totally ignore Dujarier but Dumas enjoyed sensing the man's discomfort as he exchanged a series of particularly vulgar jokes with Gautier until the curtain went up.

Lola was having trouble with her pre-show routine. Usually, after she had completed her make-up, she would place her little mascot, the elephant, in front of her on the dressing table, close her eyes for several minutes, empty her mind and compose herself. But tonight it hadn't worked. She was highly strung. And not just for the reason that the Parisian audience was likely to be far more critical than any other since London, it was as if a black cloud was hovering somewhere overhead.

'Are you sure all the buttons are done?' she asked Myra for the third time and yet again, Myra ran her finger down the row of tiny buttons at her back.

'Yes, Madame. Every one.'

'My hair. The pins - check them again.'

'Yes, Madame. They are fine.'

Lola studied her own reflection critically in the mirror. Her make-up was immaculate, her lips outlined in red and her eyes magnificently emphasized in kohl. The black satin costume with its short tulle skirt fitted her neat figure tighter than any kid glove.

'Something is not right. I just feel it,' she muttered angrily.

'Madame isn't wearing her *maillot*.'

'Don't be stupid, Myra. We've already been through all that. The Director agreed any controlled undergarment would restrict my particular interpretation of the dance.'

'I can't imagine anything else, Madame.'

Lola sighed. She fingered the elephant. She couldn't understand it. Here she was about to debut at the famous Paris Opéra and the greater part of her was wishing to be somewhere else.

There was a knock at the dressing room door. Myra opened it and Léon Pillet entered. 'An excellent house, Lola,' he said rubbing his hands in anticipation.

There was a strange look in his eyes which Lola did not like. In fact, she did not like Léon Pillet at all but he was the last person she could afford to antagonize if she wanted to be a success on the Paris stage.

'Monsieur Gautier,' he continued, 'the theater critic for *La Presse*, has a front row seat. He is the one you must aim to please if you wish a good review.'

'What does he look like?' asked Lola quickly.

'Gautier?' Pillet gave a somewhat ambiguous smile. 'Oh, surely everyone knows him? He is sitting next to Alexandre Dumas.'

Lola didn't want to admit she had no idea what Dumas looked like either. Franz had talked at length of all his famous acquaintances in Paris but she had been too obsessed with their relationship at the time to care too much to know Victor Hugo from Honoré de Balzac. Now she wished she had paid more attention.

The sounds of the orchestra tuning up came drifting through the door. Pillet turned and nodded. 'Good luck, Madame,' he murmured before leaving.

Lola had not taken more than five steps when she realized her instincts had been right. It was going to be a disaster. She could swear the orchestra was playing at a faster pace than they had rehearsed, so she increased her tempo and managed to get in time. She pirouetted up to the footlights where she did a series of slow *jerezana* steps, pointing her foot and flicking her skirt while she tried to focus on the three men just illuminated in the middle of the first row. Two of them were watching her with typical lust-filled male eyes. The more conservative of the three just stared,

his pale somber face filled with shock. He must be the critic, Gautier. Oh God, not a puritan! Going without a *maillot* had not been a good idea. A subdued murmur of consternation to that effect was working itself above the solo violin accompaniment. Pillet, that bastard! He had encouraged her to do so, giving the impression that Paris was too sophisticated an audience to worry about a dancer's respectability and whether she was wearing tights or not. Pillet would know what Gautier was like. He had deliberately set out to crucify her!

The crazed thoughts generated her to more frenzied steps. She flashed her eyes repeatedly at the man in the middle of the row, who continued to stare as if he had seen a ghost. This was one time when her unique method of making love across the footlights was definitely not working.

Hisses began rising from the galleries.

Then came the ultimate disaster. In the middle of a turn, a ballet slipper left her foot and skidded across the stage. She stopped. Applause laced with laughter echoed through the Opéra House. She almost panicked, yet something inside her told her she could still salvage that applause. Quickly, she bent over and picked up the slipper and just as quickly removed the other. She gave a deep curtsy, placed a kiss on each slipper and threw them both up towards the boxes. Both were caught by young men, who cheered and lifted their trophies. The hisses died away and the applause increased. Lola curtsied again, blew several more kisses at the audience and one to the man in the front row, before beating a sprightly retreat.

Lola had stripped off her costume and make-up and was struggling to get her into her street clothes when there was a loud knock on the dressing room door. The first act of the opera was still in full progress, but she had hoped to be gone before Pillet could have the satisfaction of sacking her.

'If it's that moron Pillet tell him to go and bugger himself,' she called hotly from behind her dressing screen. 'And preferably with something with a sharp point.'

'Madame!' Myra's ears burned. Lola occasionally let fly with earthy talk, but she had rarely heard her swear quite so richly.

'And don't you start pretending to be a bloody goody-goody, either, like that prick Gautier.'

'Sorry, Madame.' Myra sidled towards the door and opened it a crack. 'Madame is indisposed,' she announced timidly.

It had no effect. The door was pushed open and in marched a great bear of a man. 'Where is she? Where is the most beautiful, courageous woman in all of Paris!'

Myra gaped. 'But sir ...'

Alexandre Dumas continued his rollicking progress to the screen. Myra squealed as he pushed it aside.

Lola was naked except for the red petticoat. She did not attempt to cover herself as his eyes rested on her breasts, savoring them for a few second before they traveled slowly downwards along the tulle-swathed legs to linger briefly on her naked feet before returning by the same route to her face.

'Magnifique,' he said with a hoarse whisper. 'A construction of the gods.'

Lola glared at him. 'And who the fuck are you?'

'Oh, my - a dirty talker, too!'

'Dirty talk for dirty men,' she said caustically, this time her eyes taking in his rotund shape, noting the ash and dinner stains on his coat and lapels. 'You obviously live in a gutter.'

'Ah.' His sigh was laden with admiration while his eyes watered with acute sexual arousal.

Lola, hands on hips, stared brazenly at him. 'Well? Are you going to do at least one decent thing and introduce yourself?'

He bowed with a flourish. 'Dumas, Alexandre. Scribbler of some note. Acquaintance of a certain Monsieur Liszt.'

The mention of Franz made the vulgarity of her visitor all the more acute. Lola snapped her fingers at the stunned Myra who scampered forward with a dressing gown. 'I am surprised Franz acquaints himself with such garbage,' she said haughtily as she wrapped herself against his stare.

‘He would never stoop to what you have done.’

Dumas seemed chastened. He dropped his eyes briefly. ‘I apologise, Madame. I was so excited by your dance, I was unable to control myself. Of course I should have realized our mutual friend would not associate himself with *une putain*.’

Lola’s color flared again. ‘Is that what his friends think of me? That I’m a *whore*? Is that why you and those others came to ogle at me? Is that why Pillet deliberately made me look a fool?’

‘No, Madame, I assure you ...’

Her hand flew and she slapped him hard across the face, the edge of her nails drawing a thin trace of blood.

‘Agh!’ He clutched his cheek and staggered back in shock.

‘Now you get out of here and tell those arse-crawlers who call themselves Franz’s friends that they had better mind their tongues when talking about Lola Montez.’

Dumas stared at her for another few moments and looked down at the blood on his palm. He began to laugh. ‘*Mon Dieu!* But you are wonderful. Forgive me, forgive me. A thousand pardons.’ He pressed his hands together as if in prayer and collapsed on one knee. ‘I am desperately in love with you already. Let me be your garbage. Kick me. Abuse me. Have supper with me and I will be your slave for eternity. I will do anything for you.’

Myra had burst out giggling and even Lola had difficulty in maintaining the scorn in her face. With a raised eyebrow she studied the amusing spectacle of the famous writer. ‘*Anything?*’

‘Anything within my power, *ma belle*.’

‘Can you find me a new venue to dance? The Opéra and I are not compatible I think.’

He grinned. ‘That will be no problem. The audiences at the theater of the people - de la Porte Saint-Martin - will adore you. I know the manager. I know everyone worth knowing in Paris.’

Lola reached down and ran her fingers through the tight frizzy curls. Dumas rolled his eyes and panted as if already close to orgasm. She laughed. ‘You are a droll sort of fellow I suppose,’ she said in her silkiest, most seductive voice. ‘But for God’s sake clean up that jacket before you take me to supper.’

When they weren’t at the most popular place to be seen, the Café de Paris, the trio of friends, Dumas, Gautier and Dujarier, often took supper late at night at Les Trois Freres Provencaux, a lively restaurant with a risqué reputation.

Situated beneath the arches of the famous Palais-Royal, its trellis-hid cubicles had long been popular for illicit liaisons. In vain, the authorities were always trying to clean up its image where, on the upper floor of the Palais, boutiques selling every type of frivolous accessory or ornament did little to hide the real purposes of a stroll along the galleries - a visit to the gambling tables or a quick fling with the girls who openly paraded their wares.

His friends, Dumas and Gautier, regularly visited the galleries, but Henri Dujarier was a fastidious man. He came to Trois Freres for its excellent food rather than what went on upstairs. Blatant prostitutes with their painted faces, blousy figures and musky scents had no appeal to him.

At twenty-nine, he was a wealthy, good-looking man and not without experience but his few affairs had been discreet, selective and tame by Dumas’ standards. A meeting of minds with a woman was as important to him as that of the body and he could never quite see what such a clever man as Dumas was endeavoring to prove by bedding so many stupid women, except that he had probably acquired every sexual infection going. Dujarier shuddered at the thought, sipped at his coffee and bent his head to work on an editorial he planned for later in the week. He was so preoccupied he barely noticed Gautier slip into the chair next to him.

‘So you didn’t last the distance, my friend?’

‘Hm?’

‘The opera - you left early. It did get a little better in the second half.’

Dujarier sighed. ‘It was appalling, Gautier. That ballet finished me off.’

Gautier grinned. ‘You didn’t care for La Lola? She seemed to stare at you most of the time.’

‘I can’t imagine why. She was frightful.’

‘Dumas has gone to ask her to join us for supper.’

Henri Dujarier groaned. ‘Oh, no. Why does he bother wasting his money on feeding them first?’

‘A little good food and fine wine never hurt a romance, my friend. No wonder you never have much luck with women.’

‘Romance? What Dumas does is more like common barnyard rutting. It may be La Lola tonight, tomorrow he’ll be just as happy with one of those cows from upstairs.’

‘What’s made you so tetchy tonight, my friend?’ Gautier asked with a smile.

Dujarier threw down his pencil. ‘I should have known better than to try and write this here. I’ll have to take it back to my office where there is some peace and quiet.’

‘You’ll take a drink with us before you go, of course?’ Gautier beckoned to the entrance to Trois Freres where Dumas stood next to a woman dressed in a gown of brilliant blue. The big man saluted in return and began making his way through the tables.

Dujarier grimaced again as he saw the couple approaching. ‘Just one drink,’ he muttered, ‘but for God’s sake don’t expect me to be civil to her.’

As Lola followed Dumas through the crowd of patrons at Trois Freres, she was in an optimistic frame of mind despite the fiasco of earlier in the evening. Dumas’ wit and humor had quickly forced her to forgive his behavior. And he was exactly what she needed now, a man who could make her laugh. However, her equilibrium was briefly disturbed when she saw the other two men stand up in the cubicle. Oh no, not the critic and his editor.

Dumas introduced them. ‘Theophile Gautier, Madame Lola Montez.’

‘Charmed, Madame.’ The man with bushy black beard, long dark curls and bright scarlet jacket bowed over her hand, placing a lingering kiss upon it. Lola had a moment of confusion. She had them the wrong way around.

Her composure quickly righted itself and she gave him her best theatrical smile. As he lifted his head from her hand, Gautier’s eyes emitted the sexual interest she always recognized. She had a sense of relief. Perhaps the critic might be on her side after all.

‘And this is Henri Dujarier, editor of La Presse.’

She turned to the other man, the one with the seemingly puritan outlook. Dujarier was tall and handsome in a palely aesthetic, almost English, way that contrasted remarkably with his two swarthy Gallic compatriots. He did not bother to disguise an impatience with her in his gray eyes, and his neat mustache twitched irritably above firmly controlled lips. He merely nodded and murmured a gruff, ‘Madame,’ before sitting down again and turning his attention to some sheets of paper he had next to him.

Dumas signaled a waiter and ordered a large supper of oysters and bread and three bottles of wine. ‘You will have to be patient with our friend, Dujarier,’ he said with a chuckle as he fell into a chair. ‘He is an intolerably serious man who gets no pleasure out of life except that produced by pen and ink.’

Henri glanced up again, irony undisguised in his eyes. ‘Is the famous writer, Alexandre Dumas, trying to tell us that he derives no pleasure from his own literature?’

Dumas grinned. ‘Touché, my friend, but of course that is not the case. I say to write well one must also live well, no?’

‘That’s debatable. Your idea of living well is not quite the same as mine.’

‘Everyone knows Dumas’ ideas on life,’ said Gautier in a teasing voice, ‘but what are yours, my friend? You are always most secretive about your pleasures.’

‘My pleasure is the knowledge that I personally may have been instrumental in forcing social or political change, that in some way I have helped to make France a better place for all its citizens,’ said Dujarier stiffly, glaring at both Gautier and Dumas. ‘To me that is the true purpose of pen and ink, not dabbling in fairy stories for simpering ballerinas or nonsensical historical farces.’

‘My *Giselle* is an acknowledged masterpiece,’ said Gautier roughly, the humor rapidly leaving his face, ‘and my beautiful Carlotta Grisi does not simper.’

Dumas grinned and playfully punched Gautier on the shoulder. 'You fool. You know how Dujarier always tries to rattle we two who care nothing for politics. He is just jealous that his tiresome tracts about republicanism can never earn the money like my *Three Musketeers* or your *Giselle*.'

Dujarier scowled and started to rise in his seat. Dumas pushed him gently back. 'Come on friend, let us not quarrel tonight in the company of this beautiful lady. You would not want her to think the wittiest, smartest trio of men in Paris to be Philistines, surely?'

'Why should I care what one of your tarts thinks?' blurted Dujarier as he rose up again and snatched his jacket from the back of his chair. 'And the truth is you are Philistines, damn you. Good night.' He turned and tried to march away, but found his way blocked by several waiters and a group of people arguing over a table.

There was a moment's pause before both Gautier and Dumas burst out laughing. '*Mon Dieu*. Come on back, Dujarier,' called Dumas. 'What's a little banter between friends? Have a drink with us man, like a good fellow.'

Touchy as always at any assertion that she was a tart, in other circumstances Lola would have quite happily seen him leave, but she had become curious as to why he was so defensive and it was her voice that made him hesitate. 'Monsieur Dujarier, I am horrified to think that in Paris just because a woman is a dancer by profession she must therefore also be a tart. I deserve your apology.'

Dujarier turned slowly. His lip quivered briefly before he bowed. 'If I misinterpreted your performance this evening I must express my regrets, Madame,' he said icily. 'I will admit I am ignorant about Spanish dancers and perhaps they all dance without their underwear. Monsieur Gautier is the theatrical critic and has spent much time in Spain. He is the one you are going to have to persuade as to your true profession.'

As their eyes met briefly through the smoky atmosphere, Lola was unusually at a loss for words and any fiery retort was not forthcoming.

Dujarier nodded curtly again before forcing his way through the melee.

Dumas shook his head. 'You will have to forgive him, Madame. If that had been anyone but Henri Dujarier, I would have demanded he get on his knees to you, but I doubt he meant to offend you. He is usually the most polite and accommodating of fellows.'

'Well, he was in a damn touchy mood tonight,' murmured Gautier. 'I wonder what's got into him?'

Dumas shrugged. 'You know Dujarier - always so serious. He had some trifling argument with his rival, Monsieur Adolphe Granier de Cassagnac, who's the editor of *Le Globe*, and the whole thing has been blown out of all proportion. He needs a good woman to lighten that load of the world he carries on his shoulders.'

'And preferably one who wears underwear,' added Lola caustically. She gave the two men a wink and they roared again with laughter.

Lola sat up in bed the next morning and through throbbing eyes read the critique of the opera in the newspapers. She seethed and flung *La Presse* to the floor. 'The rotten, two-faced, lying bastard!'

'Excuse me, Madame?' questioned Myra as she gingerly placed the breakfast tray beside the bed. She knew Lola well enough now to guess when one of her storms might be brewing.

'That louse, Theophile Gautier. Last night he pretended to be charming. This morning, he is a viper. See what he has written about me.' She groaned and fell back against the pillows. 'Whatever you do, Myra, never trust men who force you to take oysters and brandy before retiring,' she muttered.

Myra bent down and picked up the morning's edition of *La Presse*. She scanned the sheet until she came to the offending paragraphs.

'We are reluctant to speak of Lola Montez,' Gautier had written, 'who claims to be a daughter of Spain. Yet the only quality Andalusian about La Lola is a magnificent pair of eyes for she speaks

Spanish indifferently, French hardly at all and only passable English. La Lola has tiny feet and pretty legs, but what she does with them is another matter. She has received attention for a certain equestrian adventure in Prussia and after last night's performance we can only say La Lola is more at home in the saddle than on the boards ...'

'I am sorry, Madame,' offered Myra, 'but perhaps other critics have been kinder?'

Lola shook her aching head. 'I can't bear to look. You read them. Tell me if there is anything in which I redeem myself.'

Myra scanned the newspapers. 'There is another. It is not so good.'

'Oh, damn. Read it anyway.'

'Young dancers such as Lola Montez should first acquaint themselves with the taste of Parisian audiences and not attempt to create applause by devices which divert from her art such as throwing her slippers to the galleries.'

The maid's eyes widened. 'Oh, Madame, did you really do that?'

'Yes.' Despite the continued throbbing in Lola's head she managed a cautious smile. 'And you know something, Myra, I bet you long after *Le Lazzarone* is a dusty, forgotten old opera, people will remember the night Lola Montez threw her slippers.'

Myra beamed. 'I shouldn't be surprised at all, Madame.'

Lola may have failed to win a discerning Opéra audience, but overnight she had become the most talked-about woman in Paris. Within days, she was hired for the less demanding Porte Sainte-Martin, where spontaneity and improvisation on the stage were welcome. It was a venue ideally suited to Lola's often erratic standards. If an audience became rowdy, she now knew how to divert their attention. She would strip off some item of clothing such as a garter and throw it into the crowd, and they loved every minute of it. Even Theophile Gautier came to change his opinion of her, writing several critiques that found something more positive in her performances. Lola Montez had at last found her place in the hearts of the people of Paris.

Meanwhile, Alexandre Dumas continued to press his attentions on her and she continued to deftly avoid them. She knew he was thoroughly confused by her and she preferred to keep it that way. One minute she would flirt outrageously with him, giving him every promise that she would sleep with him that very night and the next she would flash her eyes at some other man with equal power.

Will she, won't she? He was dizzy from the speculation. 'Damn it, you are a temptress of the first degree,' he would grumble.

'You know you love it, you silly old bear. If I give in to you, you will become bored with me,' she would retaliate wickedly and chuck him under the chin as if he were a pet.

'Bored with the most beautiful woman in Paris. Never. I adore you, oh, desire of my heart.' It was then that he would try to kiss her, but she usually managed to dodge him.

Nevertheless, he was more than put out when Lola started to be invited to the salons and parties where men fell over themselves to be her escort. She took to going about town with the wealthy novelist Eugène Sue, the author of the sensational *Paris Mysteries* and Dumas' closest rival in the mass serials. Heads would turn as Lola and Sue rode in his open carriage in the Bois or take his large pack of beagles for a walk in the Tuileries.

In a glum mood, Dumas sat in Lola's dressing room one evening watching her put on her make-up. 'The man's nothing but a dandified prick.'

'Tsk, Monsieur Dumas, do I detect jealousy?'

'You're damned right. Here I am dying of love for you, and you treat me disgracefully by wasting your favors on a hack.'

'Well, if I recall, you did ask to be my garbage.' Her eyes glinted. 'And you're being most unfair to Monsieur Sue. He is a most accomplished journalist. He isn't afraid to write about the seamier side of life. I find him most interesting.'

Dumas first scoffed and then moaned dramatically. 'Who wants to read about the slums? If you

persist in this fashion, I may fall into the Seine and put an end to my misery.'

Lola gave a tinkling laugh. 'There is nothing between Monsieur Sue and me, dear bear, that can cause you pain, I assure you.'

'Prove it. Let me make love to you tonight. I have a bed prepared. Come frolic with me among the rose petals I have scattered upon it.'

Lola turned and met his eyes. There was a soulful desperation about them. 'I am sorry, but some time ago I swore to never again sleep with a man unless I am in love with him. I am very fond of you, but I don't love you.'

'You may change your mind.' He gave a heartfelt sigh. 'What about Sue? Are you in love with him?'

'No.'

'But surely there must be someone?'

'There was someone. I gave him my heart and he crushed it. I may never love again.' Her mouth dried and she turned again to her mirror, hoping that he could not see the sudden prickle of tears threatening the corners of her eyes.

'Franz Liszt, I suppose?'

The lack of response was her answer.

'I think it is time you met Madame Aurore Dudevant. She'll put you on the straight and narrow about that arrogant show-off, if anyone will,' he muttered.

'I hardly think meeting his past mistresses will help to repair my own hurts.'

'Oh, Aurore wasn't his mistress - or not in the conventional sense. However, one can never be sure of anything to do with Aurore. She's just as likely to have had a *menage-a-trois* with him and the Comtesse Marie d'Agoult. She has some rather bizarre fancies.'

At the mention of threesomes, Lola was disturbed as memory of the house of Hernandez resurfaced. 'What are you talking about?' she ventured cautiously.

'Didn't you know? The three of them lived together for a time. What their personal domestic arrangement was I wouldn't presume to know. But Aurore has always had radical opinions. She believes that women are downtrodden and ruthlessly exploited by men and that they should be allowed to experience everything that life has to offer men. And that includes being a man - in every sense. Her affair with an actress called Marie Dorval is legendary.' Dumas gave an earthy chuckle.

Lesbianism held little fascination for Lola and she frowned. 'That sounds quite dreadful.'

'Maybe after you meet Aurore you will think differently,' he replied with a grin.

Lola pondered carefully on what she should wear for her first visit to the salon of the famous Aurore Dudevant, better known to the world as the writer, George Sand.

While on the stage she was becoming known for her brief and sometimes revealing costumes, Lola was cautious now in her day dress. Fashion was going through a fussy period but she deliberately chose a simple black silk skirt and bodice, beneath which she wore a white blouse with a peasant collar. In her hair she wore a delicate Brussels lace cap adorned with an artificial red silk rose. The effect was stunning in its simplicity.

Even though Lola had been prepared - for George Sand's eccentricities were well-known throughout Paris - seeing her in the flesh and discovering her to be a coarse-featured, almost ugly, woman astounded her. Not only was she dressed as a man in trousers, shirt, cravat, black velvet smoking jacket and carrying a large cigar, this was the woman said to claim the affections of many famous men. Dumas had openly hinted she had bedded as many members of the opposite sex as he had, besides quite a few of her own.

As well as the suggestion of her having had Franz in her thrall, more recently she had been involved with the delicate Polish piano genius, Frederic Chopin, who spent most of his time at her country house, Nohant, where he recuperated from his continuing illnesses and wrote many of his compositions. Lola could understand a rival who was beautiful. But this woman?

Aurore welcomed the newcomer to her circle at her salon in the Place d'Orléans with a frank

appraisal. Her hostess drew deeply on her cigar as she did so. 'And you are the Spanish witch who tosses shoes to young men yet teases them like an immature schoolgirl?'

'That is an unfair thing to say,' countered Lola swiftly. 'I tease no-one.'

'Hah.' Aurore's eyes glittered as they lit on Dumas. 'My friend here tells me otherwise. Why won't you sleep with him? Everyone else has.'

'Including yourself?'

Aurore's thick eyebrows raised in surprise. 'Hardly. He tells me he finds me too ugly - never mind that I have tried to explain to him in the dark all bodies are the same.'

'Perhaps I think the same of him,' said Lola with a sly glance at Dumas. She patted his rotund stomach. 'And as I disagree one must only make love in darkness, you can see my problem.'

Alexandre and Aurore exchanged glances before both of them laughed.

'What they say about you is true,' said Aurore, smiling. 'I'm not surprised Franz found you irresistible. His Marie is far too ladylike to let such words pass her lips.'

Lola started to feel relaxed and Aurore's independence appealed to her. Physically, they were utterly different, yet there was the kindred spirit of two women challenging convention between them.

Dumas wandered off to chat to Theophile Gautier and a fellow writer, Victor Hugo, while Aurore took her by the arm and guided her through her salon, introducing her to other guests.

To Lola's surprise, leaning against a mantel and looking rather bored was the editor of *La Presse*, Henri Dujarier. His eyes flickered over her restrained dress and she detected his momentary surprise.

'So, Madame, we meet again,' he said, his bored voice still holding a trace of rancor. 'You have succeeded in keeping Dumas amused far longer than I would have expected.'

'She tells me she isn't his mistress, that's he too fat,' said Aurore with a masculine chuckle, 'and I'm inclined to believe her. You know very well Dumas never hangs around once he has conquered.'

'How curious,' murmured Dujarier.

'Yes, isn't it.' Aurore chuckled again. 'Now I must leave you.' She turned and headed across the room.

Dujarier's face was a mask as he studied Lola. 'Too fat, eh? Are you that fussy?'

'It was just a little joke.'

'So you mean you are his mistress?'

'I am the mistress of no-one.'

'I find that hard to believe. People have seen you with Sue in his carriage. You were at the theater with my good friend, Joseph Méry. It is said you have usurped Olympe Pélissier in his affections.'

Lola had met Olympe Pélissier once or twice. She was considered the queen of the *demi-monde* and had long been the mistress of the poet, Méry, among others. She had made no secret of the fact that she hated Lola on sight and considered her a threat. Lola, however, had enjoyed seeing her discomfort and deliberately played on it by flirting fast and furious with anyone in her circle.

'Gentlemen ask to escort me, Monsieur, and I am happy to oblige. But why is it automatically assumed I bed them? I do have some discretion. Besides, you might care to remember Monsieur Méry is also extremely fat.'

The icy facade seemed to thaw a little.

'It is good to see that you know how to smile,' she added softly.

The defensiveness dropped from his eyes. Lola was surprised to see a shy warmth hidden in them. To her own astonishment she felt that tug in her chest that had been missing since her affair with Franz had ended. Only this time it was different. It was a gentle, almost comfortable, feeling, and strangely not overly complicated by a searing physical desire.

'Yes, curious,' he repeated quietly as their eyes continued to meet. 'I read about your exploits in Prussia and Poland. I was so sure of your ambitions.'

'And now you are not so sure?'

‘I don’t know. What are they?’

‘I am a dancer. It means I can earn my own living. I am not interested in becoming another Olympe Pélissier and answerable only to men if that’s what you mean.’

‘But as Gautier and others have reminded you, your skill has its limitations.’

‘So? Are you going to start giving me a lecture on my shortcomings as a dancer as well as my morals?’

‘I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.’

‘Quite right, you shouldn’t have. I made the mistake of debuting at the Opéra, where the audience is full of snobs.’

‘And so you are happy at the Porté Sainte-Martin?’

‘It will do - for the time being.’

‘And are you not concerned about the future?’

Lola’s heart had begun a totally irrational beating. Why she was finding herself attracted to this serious young man who was so opposite to her in every way? They could have nothing in common, yet she was being drawn to him inch by inch with every word he spoke.

‘The future?’ she repeated slowly. ‘I live for today. What point is there in worrying about something that may never happen?’

‘What do you want to be remembered for when you die?’

‘Good heavens, what a question, Monsieur Dujarier. Are you always this solemn and intense?’ He attempted to smile again before giving a shrug. ‘Life is invariably short. I do not want to waste it.’

‘Oh, dear, dear.’ Lola moved closer to him and pressed her forefinger in the furrow between his brows and gently smoothed it away. ‘If you are not careful, all you will be remembered for will be your gloomy countenance and I am sure that is not what you had in mind, now is it?’

She noticed his breath had become a little ragged and color was flooding into his cheeks. ‘No, of course not,’ he stammered. The last traces of crystallized reserve were dissolving to pure honey in his eyes as Lola continued to massage his forehead.

‘Now, isn’t that better,’ she purred. ‘See what one little finger can do. I have a marvelous tincture of Florence oil and musk that can relax the whole body to the point of drowsiness. I’d be happy to demonstrate it for you.’

As if he had just woken from a day-dream, Dujarier’s eyes clouded again and his frown returned. ‘Are you trying to insinuate yourself with me for gain?’

Lola was deeply wounded by his suggestion. She withdrew her fingers and tightened her fists. ‘Oh, so you think you are so rich and influential that a woman could not possibly find you attractive for yourself alone?’ she snapped.

He withered. ‘No, I mean ... Oh, damn, I’m sorry. You see - I get so wary of sycophants. Of people asking for favors - wanting me to publish their work - seeking introductions to other influential people. And I can’t abide street whores with ambitions to be courtesans. But you confuse me. You behave quite differently. I don’t know what you really are.’

Lola took his hand in hers. She raised it to her lips and kissed it as a man might kiss a woman’s. ‘You are a charming man, monsieur. I am pleased to have come to know you a little better. Some day perhaps when you are not quite so cynical about my motives we could become friends. Adieu.’

She released his hand and gave a light curtsy before turning around to search the salon for Dumas. Although she gave the air of being quite unconcerned, inwardly she was anything but calm.

14.

As he watched Aurore continue to guide Lola among the illustrious members of her salon, he could hardly believe his own ineptitude. Had the articulate Henri Dujarier really been at a loss for

words with a whore?

But Lola Montez was no common whore, and yet she wasn't a respectable woman either. His own newspaper had carried a few columns on her very public affair with Franz Liszt. But what was she? Who was she? And what had she done to him to set his mind into this strange whirl, and his blood racing?

She looked so demure, gliding elegantly around the room in her simple black gown with its fresh innocence of a white collar that he couldn't possibly believe the stories about her. He watched as Dumas came up to her, whispered something in her ear and she threw her head back and roared like a barmaid at a risqué joke. He suffered a distinct physical pain beneath his breast-bone. She denied sleeping with Dumas, but the thought of her lying in his arms, that beautiful head of raven-black hair resting on that plump, pompous chest, that over-exercised part of Dumas' anatomy invading her

...

'Not feeling well, Dujarier?'

He turned with a start. The man who spoke was the handsome, arrogant young Creole, Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon, the brother-in-law of Dujarier's former associate and now most bitter enemy, Adolphe de Crassagnac. Dujarier had never thought to see him at one of George Sand's salon evenings.

His heart, already beating irrationally over Lola went into a new spasm. 'What in blazes are you doing here?' he snapped.

'Is the salon of George Sand only limited to Republicans?'

He scowled. 'As a rule, yes.'

'Tsk. Yet you are always espousing democracy in your paper.'

'You didn't tell me what you are doing here,' repeated Dujarier.

The sensuous lips formed a secretive smile and de Beauvallon produced a pad of paper from a pocket of his blue silk coat.

'I am here in my new capacity as literary and drama critic for *Le Globe*,' he said. My brother-in-law, Monsieur de Crassagnac, might support the Bonapartist cause, but that doesn't stop him from reporting the activities of you high-minded Republicans.'

He sent Dujarier a sly glance. 'Oh, and by the way, Madame Albert asked to be remembered to you should our paths ever cross.'

Dujarier bit his lip. He was mortified to think that his infrequent nocturnal visits to the woman should be known to such a man as de Beauvallon. His bodily needs were the same as any other men, but he had always endeavored to be discreet. 'I don't know of whom you speak,' he said tetchily.

The other man smirked, lifted his shoulders. 'As you like. But she's damned good, eh?' He winked. 'And I bet that one is too.' He nodded in the direction of Lola, who was surrounded by half-a-dozen men, all seeming to hang on to her every word.

The allusion set Dujarier's teeth on edge. 'Piss off,' he muttered angrily.

The young Creole laughed. 'Fancy her yourself, eh? I bet she wouldn't care to be poked by a skinny old stick like you.' He placed his hand over his crotch and waggled provocatively. 'Now here I have a sturdy oak of the finest timber.'

Dujarier had to turn away in disgust. His emotions, already ignited by his unexpected reactions to Lola were in danger of being set completely ablaze by this young fool.

He was half way to the door when Aurore stopped him. 'Leaving so soon, Henri?'

'Someone here stinks,' he muttered.

'Who - oh, Jean-Baptiste? He's just a puppy who needs toilet training.'

'Whipping is more like it,' he growled.

Aurore seemed unconcerned. 'Tell me before you go - what do you think of La Belle Lola?'

To his embarrassment, he felt himself flush. 'I ... I hardly know her.'

'She drove Franz quite crazy you know. He wrote to me about it, pleading for advice. He couldn't compose, or even play a simple piece of music when she was around. Couldn't do

anything. She consumed him completely.'

'And I suppose you advised him,' he muttered.

'No, what could I say except that I too have suffered from such fanaticism and obsession and sometimes one has to be cruel to be kind. La Lola and Franz are too much alike. They both need to be idolized. It's like a drug with them. They need partners who are opposites. That's why that stupid Marie was good for Franz, until she got above herself and tried to copy me and turn herself into a writer.'

Dujarier didn't want to get sidetracked into Aurore's well-known fights with Marie d'Agoult, who was definitely not stupid, but a gracious woman whom he had always found charming and attractive. 'I must be going,' he said. 'Good night.'

'You would be good for La Lola, Henri,' said Aurore as he pushed open the door. 'You and your respectable little ways. A man like you could keep her steady.'

Once out in the Place d'Orléans, he breathed deeply of clear the evening air. He hailed a waiting cab and gave the address of the newspaper's office in the Rue Lafitte. As he sank back into the seat, he thought about what Aurore had said. Opposites. Perhaps there was something in that, but after the shooting-star Franz Liszt, a man like Henri Dujarier would be a dull rock indeed. It was foolish to hold out any hope.

Lola was disappointed when she noticed Henri Dujarier had gone. Surrounded all evening by some of the most intelligent, fascinating men in Paris but most of whom had only one purpose in trying to flatter her, she felt rather lonely. Although she flirted with them all in one way or another, it was that intensely serious face that lingered in her mind. It was an ordinary face compared to those of many of the other men, particularly the wildly handsome Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon who reminded her of Hernandez, with his beautiful Indian-god features and lean, sinuous body. A year ago she would have been panting to bed him the moment he offered - now she was strangely indifferent to such a thought.

Aurore must have noticed her mood and terminated her current conversation to draw Lola aside. 'Come, sit and talk with me for a change.'

Lola remembered what Dumas had told her and she eyed Aurore warily as she led her to a sofa. She wondered if it were true that she had Lesbian relationships, but Aurore did not attempt to infringe her space and gave no indication she was interested in such a possibility.

'Franz spoiled you, didn't he?' she said lighting up another of her cigars and offering one to Lola. 'Spoiled you for other men, I mean. His brilliance. His beauty. He is one of God's - if you believe in God that is - most wonderful creations.'

As Lola savored the rich tobacco of the cigar, to her surprise, she found she could now think of Franz dispassionately. The scars had begun to heal without her realizing. 'He can get damned irritating though,' she said.

'Ah, yes.' Aurore blew a puff of smoke to the ceiling. 'But all men are that sooner or later, even the best. Henri Dujarier is one of the best.'

'Oh?' Just the mention of his name and Lola felt her blood flow a little faster. 'Are you telling me he is one of the best as in *best*, or that he is best at being irritating?'

Aurore smiled. 'Both, I suppose. He's a clever man who continually struggles with principles and morals and is forever having to compromise them, poor fellow. For what it's worth, I suspect it won't take long before he finds himself falling in love with you - and I guarantee he'll be losing sleep over it.'

Lola's heart beat a little faster. 'He thinks I'm *une putain*,' she said, hating to have to use the word, but she couldn't hide the fact.

'So? What is a whore? Just a woman who takes money for her body like a banker takes interest for a loan. If I'd taken money each time I gave my body, I'd have had enough to buy the Louvre and all its contents by now.' Aurore shook her heavy head. 'Pah. Always the double standard. A man can have as many women as he wants and is praised and envied. A woman does the same thing and she

is ostracized, loathed, even spat upon. But even worse is the woman who enjoys it.' The dark eyes gleamed. 'They hate that more than anything, because it is something too threatening - too dangerous - too deep - for mere mortal men to comprehend. Ah. *le petite mort*. I am still seeking the perfect encounter.'

Aurore sighed and seemed to go off into a trance for a few seconds before refocusing on Lola. 'Show Dujarier you have the capacity to be true to him and he may forgive your past. I think you two fit together.'

Lola didn't reply. She was too busy thinking about the exciting possibility that, despite his coolness towards her, Henri Dujarier might still fall in love with her. Since the failure of the romance with Franz, the idea she had some special destiny or place in history had started to wane. Kings and piano maestros had proved to be shallow goals. All she wanted now was to be an ordinary woman. A woman able to love, and be loved in return.

'Henri rides in the Bois every morning, rain or shine, before he goes to the newspaper office,' said Aurore, guessing at her thoughts. 'I'm sure it wouldn't be difficult to arrange an accidental meeting.'

Alexandre Dumas had drunk far too much wine and seen too many men hardening in Lola's presence, so he was in a highly amorous mood when the time came to escort her home. As he saw her to her front door, he made the mistake of pawing at her bosom and trying to kiss her. He received a cutting slash from her fan across his cheek in reply before she slammed the door in his face without a word.

He ended up sitting on the edge of the street and weeping for half-an-hour until a buxom street-walker approached and lifted the edge of her skirt to reveal a well-rounded ankle. He gazed at it briefly before lifting his reddened eyes.

'Need a little cheering up, *mon cherie*?'

The woman wasn't particularly attractive, with a pock-marked face, but she was wearing a bright red dress with Spanish ruffles and had long black ringlets just like Lola's. If he didn't look at her face ...

'All bodies are the same in the dark,' he muttered to himself.

'What's that, *cherie*?'

'Nothing. Come on - let's have a night to remember.' He whistled for a cab and took the woman back to his apartment.

Even by his own standards, Alexandre Dumas had one hell of a night. He lost count of the number of times he'd plowed her field of delights, but all he did remember the next day was that each time he came he had wept and cried out Lola's name.

Lola rose before dawn and, without waking Myra, dressed herself in her riding habit and slipped out of her apartment house. She took a horse from the hire stables and trotted to the Bois de Boulogne.

There, she waited in the shadows of the trees, watching the various early-morning riders enter the park. It was foggy and could be dangerous for a woman on her own, but Lola now always carried the Polish poet's pistol in her purse. She still practiced her skills whenever possible and had no doubts she would use it if necessary.

At last she saw him. Wearing a old cloth hat and half his face muffled in a scarf, he was riding a bay horse. She waited a few moments after he cantered past before urging her horse forward, keeping a good distance between them. Her opportunity came when she saw him dismount near a pond and disappear behind a tree to relieve himself. She quietly rode up and waited beside his horse until he returned. He recognized her instantly in her green riding habit and with plumed top hat, and was embarrassed that he should still be buttoning the front flap to his trousers as she looked at him.

'Bonjour, Monsieur Dujarier. I wasn't too sure at first, but I see it is you.' Her horse was restless, but she controlled it with competent ease.

He acknowledged her with a formal nod before reaching for his horse's reins. 'I thought all you dancers slept in until at least mid-day,' he muttered.

'We do as a rule but something urged me to get up early today.' She paused. 'Perhaps it was knowing I would meet you,' she added in a voice without any coquettishness.

The sun broke through the mist and she was flooded with the dawn's delicate light. He couldn't help but gaze at her, serene as a queen in her beauty and he wished he could capture her image at that moment for a portrait, that he might keep it forever ... God - what was he thinking? What a fool. He forced his eyes away. 'Are you not with someone?' he said glancing around.

'No.'

'A woman shouldn't be here on her own.'

'Perhaps I can ride back to the city with you?'

'Of course,' he mumbled as he remounted.

They rode together for several minutes without exchanging a word, but the invisible tension between them was as tight as a rope.

All of a sudden, he reined in his horse and shouted. 'Damn it. I can't go on like this!' He pulled his cap off his head and threw it to the ground, running his fingers through his hair in exasperation.

'What is it?' Lola struggled to restrain her horse's alarm at the sudden outburst.

'You.' He turned in the saddle. 'I can't go on denying myself. Ever since I first saw you on the stage at the Opéra I've been trying to forget you. To tell myself that you're an ... an adventuress whose sole aim in life is the exploitation of male weaknesses, that I'm on the point of making myself into the biggest fool in Paris.' His eyes watered and he seemed to have trouble even breathing. 'I can't fight it any longer.'

'Are you trying to say you are in love with me even though you also despise me?' Her voice remained cool.

His pale face betrayed all of his inner anguish. 'Is that what it sounds like? I don't know what I'm saying.' He nervously ran his fingers through his hair again. 'How could I possibly despise someone I love? I've never been in love. Is this what love is like? It doesn't make sense. None at all.'

'We will have to try and make sense of it,' she said softly. 'But don't let's discuss it out here in the Bois. Perhaps we can share breakfast?'

'Do you mean you're not ... not angry with me?'

She smiled. 'Just a little. But although you are a strange one, Monsieur Dujarier, I am charmed by your plainly spoken sincerity. I would like to know you better.' Their eyes met. 'Your apartment or mine?'

He swallowed, half of him feeling as awkward as a boy, the other half wanting to proclaim his joy to the world. See! I've made a fool of myself yet she still wants to know me better. Me. Dull, boring Henri Dujarier.

'Did you hear me?'

He shook himself and flushed deeply. 'I'm sorry. I was just walking in the clouds, marveling at what is happening.' He gave a rare smile.

Her eyes widened and she tilted her head to one side, surveying him with the most enchanting expression he had ever seen on any face. 'Well, I should like to frolic on those clouds with you, my sweet, but I think we both need breakfast first.'

He was so overcome, he didn't think he could breathe. She had called him sweet. No woman had ever done that before.

'Yes - yes of course.'

Henri Dujarier's man-servant, Gabriel, was surprised by the unexpected guest and hurried to set another place at his master's table. In all the years he had worked for Dujarier, his employer had often entertained women for dinner, but this was the first one he had ever invited for breakfast. Gabriel decided it was an important occasion indeed, and needed a special touch. From one of the

early morning flower-sellers, he purchased a small posy of violets and popped them into a vase. That made it look more like a lovers' breakfast. Gabriel gave a happy sigh. Monsieur was a good man. It was about time he took life a little less seriously and found himself a beautiful woman.

The couple's breakfast hunger, however, was not for croissants and coffee.

Henri was hesitant and almost frightened to touch her, fearing as soon as he did so he could be lost forever. But she made the first move, taking his hand and leading him to the chaise-lounge in his study, encouraging him to recline. She stretched across him. Her bosom pressed against his chest as she caressed his brow, that magic finger smoothing away the frown lines as she had done the previous night. His skin flooded with pleasure and the taut nerves slowly relaxed.

'I find it hard to believe you don't know love,' she murmured softly, her lips close to his, her exotic perfume filling his senses. 'Living here in a city where everyone is always in love.'

'Paris is a charade, a masquerade. It is an invention of men like Dumas and Gautier,' he murmured, 'who are always seeking love, yet never truly finding it.'

She made a little clicking sound as if reproving him. 'We must do something about your cynicism.'

The warm mist of her breath spread across his face before her lips brushed his and her tongue played a sudden joke by darting into his mouth. His pulse raced and he fell into her eyes, their sapphire boldness deepening into whirling pools of desire. She made no secret of wanting him physically and he was both shocked and thrilled by his immediate need for her. But he detected something else, a deeply buried need - a hunger for contact with someone who understood her true heart - with the same fears as his own - the fears of rejection and loss.

He caressed her cheek. Her skin was smooth and tender and he was almost afraid to exert pressure in case he should damaged its perfection. 'I think I'm beginning to understand what love can be,' he whispered. 'And it terrifies me.'

Something flared in her eyes. Surprise ... and joy. 'I'm scared too,' she said.

His lips reached for her mouth.

An office boy arrived at ten o'clock from the office of *La Presse*, with a message from the chief clerk wanting to know if Monsieur Dujarier would be attending work that day as several people had arrived for appointments and all were wondering where he was. Gabriel responded with a brief note reply that Monsieur was indisposed with fatigue for the rest of the day, even if the big wink accompanying it was somewhat lost on the young lad.

One of the disappointed people waiting on an appointment was a frail-looking man dressed in a slightly shabby suit of clerical black. 'It is not like Monsieur Dujarier to be absent from his beloved newspaper' he said on hearing the news from the clerk. 'I do hope his malady is not serious?'

The clerk, who guessed from the cryptic tone of Gabriel's reply at the real cause of the fatigue, managed to keep a straight face. 'Oh, no, Father. I'm sure it's only a mild indisposition. He is bound to return by tomorrow.'

'Ah. In that case I may call again.'

'Certainly, Father.'

The old man smiled. 'There is no need to call me Father. Remember, that church of despots has told me I am a disgrace to the cloth.'

'I am sorry, Fa... er, sir. I should have remembered.'

'Good day to you.'

Feliticé Lamennais, rebellious Catholic priest, still known to all as Abbé Lamennais, nodded to the clerk and began a slow shuffle to the entrance of the office of *La Presse*.

He had almost reached the door when Alexandre Dumas burst in. 'Why Lamennais, my good fellow. How grand to see you.' He grabbed his hand and pumped it fiercely, nearly crushing the arthritic bones in the process.

Lamennais managed to hide his wince. 'So, Dumas. Even in real life ever the egalitarian musketeer, eh?'

Dumas laughed good-naturedly and parodied a sword action. 'Allez! All for one and one for all!' 'Would that my books sold as much as a yarn about three fencing libertines, I should perhaps be as full of *joie de vivre* as you. But people don't care to read about serious matters - they prefer to bury their heads in nonsensical fiction.' Lamennais gave a mock pout.

Dumas put an arm about the man's thin shoulders and gave him a hug. 'Poor Lamennais, gloomy as ever. No wonder you and Dujarier are such close friends.'

'If you have come to see him, he is not here today' said Lamennais. 'Since *La Presse* began, I have never known Dujarier not to be in his office. They tell me he is unwell, which is most disturbing.'

'*Alors!* We will visit him together at his home. Joyful company is the best remedy for any ailment.'

Dujarier's clerk tried waving a warning, but neither man saw him.

Gabriel answered the urgent knocking and before he could say a word, Dumas barreled into Henri's apartment, a bottle of wine under one arm and some flowers under the other. He was closely followed by Abbé Lamennais.

'Where is he? What's the matter with the fellow?' Dumas bounded towards the stairs leading to the bedrooms.

'Monsieur Dumas, sir - I wouldn't ...'

But Gabriel's words went unheeded. Dumas kicked the bedroom door open with his foot. 'Dujarier! I bring you wine and Felicité! Such a name for such a sorry fellow ...'

Henri Dujarier, his naked body covered with the sheen from a rich oil, lay flat on his back, arms and legs outstretched. Crouched between his legs, her lips and fingers strumming the ultimate in lover's music was an equally naked woman. Although her back was to him, Dumas knew in an instant from the translucent quality of her skin and the cascading black curls that it was Lola.

Henri half raised his head and met Dumas' eyes with an expression of sheer heavenly bliss. Lola's body stiffened slightly but she did not turn around as she continued her caresses.

'*Merde!*' Dumas let the flowers slip from his grasp and he quickly stepped back, slamming the door.

'What is it? Is he infectious?' asked a worried Lamennais, just behind him.

'What ... er ... Hell - I don't know.' Dumas half staggered to a chair, and fell on to it, clutching the wine bottle to his chest. 'Aagh,' he groaned, rolling his eyes. 'But what a way to die!'

By now a puffing Gabriel had managed to put himself between the bedroom door and the two men. 'I am sorry, gentlemen, but I did try to warn you,' he said with a shamed face.

Abbé Lamennais looked from one to the other. 'For goodness' sake, can someone tell me what is going on here?'

There was a stressed pause as Gabriel's mouth opened and closed a few times before the door behind him was thrown open and out marched Lola, carrying the bedraggled flowers, her own wild hair flowing and eyes dagger-drawn. She had wrapped herself in Dujarier's purple dressing gown which gave her added drama. 'You total swine, Dumas. Call yourself a friend? You're nothing but a frigging pervert.'

She was about to throw the flowers in his face when she saw the frail figure in his black suit and she hesitated. 'What's this? Thought you'd bring your grandpa along for a rise, eh?'

Dumas jumped off the chair, sending the wine bottle rolling across the room. 'Lola, please - mind your language. This is Abbé Lamennais. We were told Dujarier was ailing.'

It was a few moments before comprehension dawned, and her hand flew to her mouth. 'Lamennais? Oh, no. Oh, I'm so sorry.'

The dressing gown had fallen open slightly and one breast was on the verge of displaying itself. Dumas quickly bent forward and tied Lola's sash as she stared in embarrassment at the priest.

But a benign smile had filled the old man's face. 'So? Dear Dujarier has himself a wife at last. Why didn't anyone tell me?'

Lola collected her wits remarkably quickly. 'Ah - er - we had hoped to keep it a secret,' she said,

her eyes sending an warning darts in Dumas' direction before she gave Lamennais a dazzling smile. 'Abbé, please forgive me for such language, but Dumas' tact is often lacking, and he has the most appalling manners.'

Lamennais chuckled. 'I agree. One should always knock at a closed door. I do hope Dujarier is not too indisposed to see us.'

'Oh, he is a little sleepy, but I'm sure a coffee will revive him.' Lola glanced at Gabriel. 'Coffee for our guests in the salon, if you please.'

Gabriel was only too glad to scamper away while Dumas clamped his lips together to stop himself from laughing or, perhaps, exploding into tears. The look that Lola gave him as she retreated to the bedroom spoke volumes.

A few minutes later Henri emerged wearing the dressing gown, while Lola had swiftly managed an expert costume change into a riding habit which struck Dumas as a curious garment for a new bride, although old Lamennais would never have noticed it.

'Lamennais, my friend, I apologize I was not at the office.' said Henri as the group descended the stairs, 'I had forgotten we had an appointment.'

'No trouble, but your clerk confused me when he said you were unwell. Henri Dujarier is never unwell. Now I see it was just a ruse to let you have some time with your new bride.' The Abbé smiled knowingly.

Dujarier looked puzzled for a second but Dumas rushed to the rescue, his eyes wide for emphasis. 'Dujarier, my dear old friend, like most of us, the Abbé did not hear about your um ... marriage,' he said slowly and pointedly.

'Oh ... I see. Right.'

Fortunately the coffee arrived in time to avoid any further discussion at cross purposes and Lola took charge of pouring.. 'Abbé Lamennais, I am so pleased to meet you at last,' she said, handing him a cup. 'I heard so much about you from Franz Liszt.'

'Ah, my dear Franz, yes. Such genius. One of the most noble, beautiful souls I have ever met. Did he tell you that it was when he stayed with me one summer - about ten years ago now I think - that he seriously began to compose music?'

'Yes, and I know he reveres you greatly.'

'I am honored to have played some small role in his life.'

'Lola - the Abbé's claim to fame is more than an association with a piano-player,' said Henri, barely bothering to hide a trace of resentment at reference to Lola's previous lover.

'I am sure it is,' she murmured.

'The Abbé believes that the Catholic Church interferes too much in government. That is why he has been at odds with them for years now. He is an extremely brave man and has even served time in prison for his stance. I admire him above all other men.'

'You are too kind, Dujarier, my boy.'

Dujarier placed a hand on his shoulder. 'No, Abbé - I am proud that you are my friend. Liszt might have learned how to write tunes at your knee, but I have learned the power of one man's battle for truth, which is a far greater thing altogether.'

Thereupon Henri and the Abbé excused themselves and took their cups of coffee and went out to the garden to discuss some new article they had planned together, leaving Lola and Dumas sitting together on the sofa.

'Isn't it fascinating,' he mused, 'that Dujarier's new bride should have Lamennais in common with her last lover, eh? The Abbé may be worldly-wise about some things, but in others he is most naive.'

Lola glared at him. 'If it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have had to lie about this. He's bound to find out the truth.'

'Oh, so can I take it you're *not* married? Mischievous glee filled his face.

'Stop being facetious. God, Dumas, sometimes you are the most intolerable man on earth.'

Lola was about to stand up, but Dumas sobered, grabbed her wrist.

‘Mark me, Lola. You and I are alike in many ways. I know my failings and I also know yours. I don’t want to see Dujarier hurt.’

‘Why should he be hurt? I love him, and he loves me.’

‘In that case, I am happy for you both, but Dujarier is not a man to take love lightly. For me, I will nurse this broken heart of mine for a while, but I will recover in time from that glorious scene I just witnessed in the bedroom. But if Dujarier is truly in love with you and were to see you do the same with another man it would kill him.’

Lola seethed. ‘Are you suggesting I do not have the capacity to be faithful?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘You’re a bastard. I ought to whip the hide from you!’

Dumas had a wicked grin twisting his lips. ‘I could think of nothing more divine, but you won’t, not while the Abbé and your er ... “husband” ... are within earshot. I want your promise, Lola, that when you start to tire of Dujarier ...’

‘I will never tire of him. I love him ...’

Dumas’ grip on her wrist tightened. ‘Hear me out. When he starts to become boring and you tire of him, you must give him the impression that he is the one who wishes to terminate the affair.’

‘I hate you, Dumas.’

‘No you don’t, you just know I’m right.’

The two men had moved indoors again and Dumas released Lola’s wrist and reached for the abandoned bottle of wine. He stood up and handed it to Dujarier.

‘I must be going. Have a little celebration with your bride on my account.’ He glanced briefly at Lola. ‘I wish you a long and happy life together,’ he said with a straight face.

Lola gave a self-conscious smile as Henri came and put his arm around her. ‘Thank you, Dumas,’ he said. ‘We will discuss certain matters later.’

Dumas grinned. ‘Yes, I think you may have to.’

Abbé Lamennais left shortly after and they were alone once more.

Henri took her in his arms and kissed her lovingly. ‘I am sorry if I seemed jealous just now when you mentioned Liszt. You must understand the thought of other men in your life is most painful to me.’

Lola caressed his frown with her fingertips. ‘Oh, my sweet one. My dear Bon-Bon. Please believe me when I say that none of them mattered. They were the foolish passions of a silly young girl who had dreams of finding true love. This morning in your arms I discovered that love. I am no longer a girl. I am a woman. A woman who has found the real meaning of her life.’

‘Oh, Lola, I love you more than you can ever know.’

They kissed again before Lola took his hand, her eyes smoky with renewed desire. ‘Come, Bon-Bon. Let me finish showing you how much I adore you.’

A day later Lola and her maid publicly moved into the Dujarier apartment in the Rue Lafitte. The rumor that Henri Dujarier had secretly married the Spanish dancer, Lola Montez, was soon rife throughout the salons. Despite the relaxed moral codes of the Bohemian circle in which they both revolved, it was still considered extremely bad form for a mistress to live openly with her lover in his own home. Mistresses were always maintained in discreet, separate establishments, therefore the rumor of their marriage had to be true.

Aurore Dudevant was pleased with herself as she felt partly responsible for the match, while Lola’s band of male admirers consoled themselves elsewhere and Dumas actually tried to reconcile himself with his own wife in the hope he could capture something of the fire he had witnessed between Lola and her Bon-Bon.

The weeks passed by and Lola knew real fulfillment for the first time in her life. She didn’t miss her life on the stage and almost totally retired from dancing, except for the odd special guest performance at Porte Sainte-Martin.

While she didn’t exactly become the equivalent of a housewife - domesticity was hardly her forte

- she was content to immerse herself in her Bon-Bon's interests and lifestyle. He worked long hours at La Presse and in the evenings enjoyed staying at home having intellectual discussions with his wide group of friends.

Henri constantly encouraged Lola to broaden her mind and her outlook. Abbé Lamennais visited the couple often, and Lola increasingly came under his spell. She took to spending long sessions with him attempting to come to grips with Lamennais' arguments over the evils of Church domination of government.

And after everyone had gone home, there was always bed. Although they made love whenever they could, sometimes several times during the day as well as at night, Lola sensed there was something hidden deep within Henri that stopped him from giving complete rein to his passion. There was still a reserve, some tiny corner of his inner heart that she couldn't quite reach. It challenged her, and also fascinated her.

Ultimately she knew it was part of the strange magic of two opposite natures. It was the very thing that would keep them together for the rest of their lives.

15.

There was only one cloud over Lola's near-perfect existence. When she had been younger, and simple Eliza James, motherhood had been the furthest thing from her mind. The abortion that Thomas had forced her to have had been no more than an unpleasant memory. Now that she had found her true love with Henri, she started to think about a child. It would be complete fulfillment of their devotion and commitment to one another.

Henri never raised the subject, but she knew he would be a wonderful father given the chance. He was devoted to his sister's little son. It was only right he should have child of his own by the woman he loved. Secretly, Lola consulted a doctor said to specialize in such problems. He lived across the city, well away from circles in which they were known. He told her he couldn't see any reason why she couldn't fall pregnant, provided she lived a good life, thought good thoughts and drank his special nostrum before retiring to bed.

One day, Lola and Myra were returning by carriage from one of her regular visits to the doctor when a simple wrong turn by the coachman began a chain of events that was to set a tragic and irrevocable seal on her destiny.

The narrow streets around the Hotel de Ville were not the sort of place Lola would have normally traveled. They were a rat-infested, disease-rife warren of dirty tenements choked with the foul smells of rotting rubbish and open sewers, and over-populated by the desperately poor and the worst of common criminals.

Myra was horrified and clutched a scented handkerchief to her nose, but Lola's curiosity overcame her distaste. She peered out the coach window, seeing a familiarity in the scenes that reminded her of Calcutta. This was the world that men like Henri and the Abbé Lamennais discussed at length with the French writers who were beginning to expose its evils to their readers. Here, Eugène Sue and Victor Hugo had dared to wander, gathering the raw material for their epics, *Mysteries of Paris* and *Les Miserables*.

All of a sudden, the coachman swore as he was forced to come to a grinding halt, their passage blocked by a row of several surly individuals armed with cudgels and sticks.

Myra recoiled at the site. 'Oh, Madame, we're going to die,' she wailed
'Nonsense,' said Lola. 'They are only hungry.' She felt in her reticule for a purse of coins, but simultaneously checked on her pistol. Myra's eyes widened as Lola checked its firing mechanism and slipped it into the pocket of her cloak before she opened the carriage door.

'Madame, please get back inside,' exclaimed the coachman, but Lola ignored him and marched determinedly to the front of the horses.

A scrawny and scarred young man with lank hair, haunted hollow eyes and dressed in nothing more than rags seemed to be the leader of the group. He scowled at Lola. ‘What kind of stupid fool woman would travel this street?’ he muttered in a strong rural accent.

Lola kept her head high. ‘A fool who may be able to help you. What is your name?’

He looked at her with suspicion and threatened her with his stick. ‘I give no name to the likes of you. Give us your money.’

‘I have very little with me. But I can get you more if you are willing to tell your story to a newspaper.’

The hollow eyes darkened. ‘Hah. Stupid bitch. None of us here can read newspapers. They are useless to us. Give your money.’ He took a few steps towards her, but Lola stood firm.

‘I know the editor of *La Presse*. He is trying to make the government take notice of what goes on here, to give you jobs ...’

‘Jobs?’ he said with a sneer. ‘Who would work when there are bitches like you to rob.’ The group behind the leader sniggered and muttered obscenities.

Lola realized she had failed and quickly pulled out her pistol, aiming it at the young man’s forehead. With her other hand, she extended the purse of coins before tossing it over her back and into the gutter where it burst apart, scattering its contents in the raw sewage.

The other men yelled and rushed past her to scramble for the coins. Only the leader stayed where he was, his eye on the pistol. ‘Shoot me, if you wish. I will be content to die,’ he said almost with pride.

‘Is living that bad?’

‘It is here, away from the fields and fresh air of my home in Provence.’

‘Can you not go back?’

‘To what? I saw my wife and son die from starvation when the harvests failed. Here at least I can eat rats.’

Lola shuddered. ‘Is there no-one to help? Someone from the church perhaps?’

Hatred glowed in the sunken eyes and he spat on to the cobbles. ‘The devil take the church. My son was dying in her arms but it was into the church’s begging bowl my wife gave her last sou. The Jesuit told her it would guarantee eternal life.’

The sound of horses’ hooves at the further end of the street put an end to the man’s words. In a flash, he had disappeared into the shadows, and when Lola turned around, the others had also vanished and there were no coins to be seen.

Lola had just climbed back into the carriage when a small enclosed cabriolet drew up alongside them and a tall angular figure in a frock coat clambered out. As he removed his top hat, to Lola’s astonishment she saw of all people it was none other than Lord Henry Brougham.

‘I thought it was you!’ he exclaimed. ‘What on earth are you doing in this den of iniquity?’

‘Lord Henry. My goodness. I could ask the same of you.’

‘I asked first, Lola, my dear,’ he said with a grin.

‘We are simply lost,’ she replied. ‘My stupid coachman got himself confused and turned into the wrong street. And you?’

‘I have been visiting my friend, the foreign minister, François Guizot. You may recall he was at one time French Ambassador to England, and we embarked on an argument in which I said the slums of Paris were worse than those of London. I have forced him on a reconnoiter to add fuel to my argument.’

‘You have Guizot with you?’

He nodded. ‘I recommended that he keep his face covered and stay within the carriage. I doubt he would get a civil reception if he were recognized.’

‘Well, I’m just sorry you missed my encounter which I doubt would have happened in London in broad daylight.’

‘You’ve been robbed?’ Lord Henry’s face filled with alarm.

‘Oh, yes, and I was forced to brandish my pocket pistol.’

‘This is frightful. I’ll make Guizot call out the gendarmerie.’

Lola shook her head. ‘I’d rather you didn’t. These people are starving,’ she said in a firm tone. ‘That’s the only reason they turn to crime. Just tell Guizot that. And rather arguing about which city has the worst slums, use your influence to get King Louis-Phillipe to take notice of what conditions are really like. This place must be cleaned up and the people must be given hope.’

‘Good heavens, Lola, what’s come over you? Is this your voice I hear, or have you been spending too much time with liberals and reformists?’

Lola fairly blazed at him. ‘Aren’t you pleased? You were the one who first made me think about what liberalism and reform meant. Or are you now deciding you preferred me when I was a vacant-headed ninny?’

Lord Henry’s eyes filled with admiration. ‘Never for a moment were you vacant-headed, Lola. As for being a ninny - perhaps you were just a touch that when it came to your choice of men.’ He chuckled.

She had to relent and smiled. ‘You must meet Henri Dujarier,’ she said. ‘He wouldn’t put up with a ninny for a minute.’

As one by one the guests arrived for dinner and congregated in the salon of the Dujarier apartment, the French Henri eyed the English Henry with growing suspicion. When Lola had told him that she had invited Lord Henry Brougham, he was astonished that she could possibly know such a distinguished English statesman. It was slowly dawning on him there were still many things about Lola of which he knew nothing. The most treasured aspect of their love was that it was very much of the present, and the future. Even though it was impossible to discount the immediate past altogether when the image of Franz Liszt was too public to be ignored, Henri had hoped never to dwell on Lola’s past adventures, whatever they had been.

However, as she chatted away to Lord Henry in colloquial English, he began to realize that it was futile trying to block out the past any more. He wondered why he had never questioned her about the kinds of things a lover would probably want to know about his beloved: about her birth and childhood, her parents and family. What was her real nationality? How she came to speak so many languages and be a dancer wandering about Europe on her own. He tried to remember the news reports to which he had barely given credence, assuming them to be fanciful nonsense. Some fracas on a horse at a military review in Prussia, inciting a riot in Poland and rumored deportation from Russia. And now she was deep in conversation with Guizot’s personal friend, Lord Henry Brougham, chattering about mutual acquaintances in London. His musings were curtailed when he saw the Abbé had arrived and hurried to meet him, guiding him towards Lord Brougham.

‘Well I did tell Guizot what you said, my dear,’ Lord Henry was saying to Lola, ‘and he damned nearly nearly had apoplexy. Clean up the slums, indeed ...’

Henri interrupted. ‘Lord Brougham, have you met Abbé Lamennais?’

‘Why yes. Lamennais!’ Lord Brougham pumped the priest’s hand. ‘My good fellow, it’s been a while since we were both thrown out of King Ludwig’s court for our opinions.’

‘Lord Brougham, this is a surprise,’ exclaimed Lamennais, ‘I didn’t realize you knew Dujarier?’

‘Oh, I have known Eliz ...’ Lord Henry quickly bit his lip. ‘I have known Madame Lola for quite a few years. Dujarier, of course, I have only just met - and what a fine chap he is.’

Henri struggled to quell his resentment of these hidden undercurrents of which he knew nothing. Lord Brougham had taken an instant liking to him, but that didn’t change things. He waited until the Englishman had become engrossed in his conversation with the Abbé before looking at Lola.

In a burgundy silk gown trimmed with white satin roses and her hair neatly captured in a black beaded snood, her skin glowed and her eyes gleamed. She was more beautiful tonight than she had ever been. His love for her had grown every day they were together and he couldn’t tolerate the thought of something insidious in her past coming between them. But they had to talk. He had to know.

He took her arm and pulled her to one side. ‘Lord Brougham nearly called you by another name.

What was it?’

She looked at him with those wonderful adoring eyes that couldn’t possibly hold deceit. ‘Oh, you know the English. They are always using those silly little names like “pet”.’ She pursed her lips as if to kiss him. ‘No different really from me calling you my little “Bon-Bon”.’

Henri struggled to quell the irrational jealousy building in him. ‘How is it that he dares to be so familiar with you?’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Henri? What are you saying? Lord Henry Brougham is old enough to be my grandfather. I’ve known him for years.’

‘You must have lived in England?’

‘Of course I did. I thought I told you? I went to school there for a time.’

‘No, you didn’t, damn it. Hell, I don’t know anything about you.’

‘Henri, this isn’t like you. We both agreed that what was past was irrelevant.’

‘Well, I don’t know that was such a good idea.’ He knew he was sounding like a spoiled child, but he couldn’t help it.

‘I don’t know what’s got into you all of a sudden but this isn’t the time to talk like this,’ she said quickly. ‘Look now, cheer up, here is our friend, de Beauvoir.’

Roger de Beauvoir, in an evening suit and waistcoat in the most extraordinary shades of pink and with his hair coiffured into a remarkable twist, presented an eccentric figure. He was one of Lola’s favorite people. He was much like Alexandre Dumas, being a writer, raconteur and a great ladies’ man, and always one step ahead of his creditors, but somehow or the other he always managed to come up with those few extra short stories or poems that helped to pay his way out of trouble.

‘Dujarier, *mon ami*, I must speak to you about a novella I have written that I know you will just adore,’ he said

‘Not tonight. I don’t like to talk business at social occasions,’ said Henri sourly.

Roger glanced at Lola. ‘Oh, dear. Glum is he? Not bad news I hope?’

‘Of course, not. You know what Henri can be like. All soul.’ Lola laughed and took Henri’s arm. She gazed up at him and his resentments slowly slipped away. ‘Come, Bon-Bon, you must forget about all those silly little problems that don’t matter. Besides, can’t you see our guests are starving?’

It was the small hours of the morning before everyone left. Lola had forgotten about Henri’s earlier irritability as she sat at the dressing table and started removing her jewelry. She did not notice the scowl on his face as he slumped into a bedroom chair.

‘Wasn’t it the most marvelous dinner party,’ she said. ‘The best we’ve ever had.’

‘Hmph.’

‘I must compliment the cook. The *poulet-aux-champignon* was marvelous and that burgundy must have been good, we got through dozens of bottles of it. And wasn’t Roger de Beauvoir a scream? What about that story of how he emptied his chamber-pot on his tailor’s head ...’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Lola, shut up!’

Her hand stopped in the action of undoing an earring. She turned to face him. ‘You really drank too much, Bon-Bon.’

‘Didn’t you hear me? Just shut up. I don’t want to hear another thing about dinner parties and pricks like Roger de Beauvoir. I don’t want any more dinner parties. Ever.’

‘Bon-Bon - what’s the matter with you?’

‘And stop calling me that.’ His eyes narrowed into slits. ‘It’s what you call them all, isn’t it? You exchange those stupid little names. Pets and sweeties and bon-bons. How many of them have there been, Lola? How many?’

‘Oh, Henri, no. We said this wouldn’t happen.’

‘What else have you kept from me? I know who your precious Lord Brougham is. I’m a newspaper man, remember - my job is to know such things.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘He’s the special agent of the British Foreign Minister and you’ve been his spy haven’t you? I

can see it all quite clearly now. You are no dancer. You're not even Spanish. Gautier spotted you as a fraud that first night at the Opéra. I was too blinded by love to have realized that there was something very strange in a woman wandering around Europe on her own, disrupting King Frederick William's court, challenging Paskievitch in Warsaw, even daring to taunt the Tsar in St Petersburg. You were sent by the British to cause trouble. It's all part of a major British plot to destabilize Europe. To get rid of regimes they don't like, to make the French look like fools.'

Lola was frozen to the seat, her brain too dulled by cigars, food and wine to function fully. This was some bizarre game Henri was playing with her.

'And how many men did you have to sleep with to get the information they wanted? Six? A dozen? A hundred?'

She suffered a spasm of sick dizziness. The special potion that her doctor had prescribed didn't react well with her rich dinner. Beats of moisture broke out on her forehead. There were two Henri's, and then three. She clutched her stomach and retched.

She didn't know how long there was nothing but a haze of pain. It could have been mere minutes. Or hours. Even days. She was delirious, only vaguely aware of Henri's anguished whispers and the coolness of Myra's hand, and someone else examining her, a doctor perhaps. Vaguely aware of the lights and shades of time passing.

Henri - oh my love - don't ever leave me. She tried to reach him through the haze, but her arms couldn't move. She was paralyzed with fear. But almost as rapidly as it had begun, it was over. Full lucidity had returned and she opened her eyes. She was lying in her bed, Henri watching her, his face gaunt and unshaven, his eyes brimming with tears.

'Lola, oh my precious Lola. Thank the Lord you have come back to me.' His head dropped on to her bosom. 'Forgive me,' he sobbed. 'this has been the worst week of my life. I thought I would lose you.'

'Poor Bon-Bon,' she murmured through cracked and dry lips.

Tears streamed down his cheeks. 'Why didn't you tell me you were going to that quack? That stuff he gave you was pure poison. You are lucky to have survived.'

'I wanted to give you a child. He promised me it would work.'

Henri shook his head. 'I had no idea. Why didn't you confide in me?'

The memories of their argument were clear again in her mind. 'Would it have made a difference?' She turned her head to the wall. 'You have grown to hate me.'

'No, no.' He clutched at her shoulders. 'I love you so much that I would have killed myself if you had died. Without you, I am nothing. As soon as you are well, I want us to be married. We'll go away from Paris. To Italy perhaps. Just the two of us.'

She turned her eyes back to his. 'But if you marry me, there will be never be a son.'

He shook his head impatiently. 'I don't care. You are all that matters to me.'

'And all those horrid things that you said - that I was a spy?'

He groaned. 'It was the drink speaking. Sometimes too much wine makes me lose all reason. I've torn myself apart wishing I could have taken even one word back. I couldn't believe that I was meant to be happy. Does that sound crazy?'

'Oh no, my darling, my Bon-Bon,' she whispered, her own eyes full of tears. 'But we must start again. And you must promise me - on a Bible with the Abbé as witness if need be - that you will never let your imagination create such cruelties again.'

'Oh, I promise ... I do so promise!'

Once Lola returned to full health, everything should have been the same, but now a vague sense of a cloud hovering somewhere in her life persisted. A sense of melancholy and foreboding often came over her at unexpected moments. Henri sent her to a specialist surgeon who examined her and confirmed she was unlikely to ever bear children and she must resign herself to the fact. Perhaps her gloominess of mind was an inevitable part of such truth. Yet deep in her heart she knew it was more

than that. Something intangible was slipping away from her.

Although Lord Henry Brougham visited them again before he left Paris, Henri never even hinted at the preposterous accusations he had made about Lola's association with him, but she knew they must still be there somewhere lurking in the depths of that secret corner of his mind, waiting for a moment of stress to reveal themselves again.

There was only way to keep them hidden - she was the one who had to change. It was difficult to go against her natural instincts but, instead of being flirtatious and garrulous, she became reserved and withdrawn. Where she had been assertive, she was acquiescent. She even let Henri take charge of the plans for their forthcoming wedding and did not protest when Alexandre Dumas boldly pushed forward the preposterous idea that he would accompany them to Naples on their honeymoon.

Henri hardly noticed the change in her. Matters at *La Presse* kept him fully occupied. The complicated legal suits were still current with his rival, Adolphe de Crassagnac, who continued to taunt him from the pages of *Le Globe*. There was a never-ending battle to keep subscribers' interest through serialized fiction while struggling to maintain the newspaper's basic republican message without compromising its quality.

Alexandre Dumas detected the signs of Henri slipping into one of his dark periods and had decided to arrange a party. 'My son has a new mistress,' he announced with his usual gusto, as he burst into Henri's office one morning. 'We must celebrate!'

Henri frowned at him across a desk stacked with paper. 'For God's sake, Dumas, if you and your son were to celebrate every time you go to bed with a new woman, you would both be at a party every night of the week.'

'So? What's happened to you, friend? Just a few weeks ago you were glorying in your own enchanting mistress. Now you look as if all the deaths of the whole world are on your account. Are you having second thoughts about marrying the beautiful Lola?'

'Of course not. But there are many business matters troubling me at the moment.'

'And how does the fair Lola cope with this neglect?'

'She is not neglected. She has been unwell recently and has been under the best medical care in Paris.'

'I didn't mean that, you fool. I meant her *heart*. Lola's heart needs constant nourishing and from your behavior I can see she might be starving.'

Henri banged his fist on the desk, a film of moisture coating his eyes. 'You're a fine one to lecture me about how to treat women, you ... you Casanova!'

'Whoa. Calm down, friend.' Dumas promptly sat down on the opposite side of the desk. 'There is trouble between you? What is it? Can I help?'

'I know you, Dumas. You'd like for there to be trouble, so that you can try and win her away from me.'

'Dujarier, you are fantasizing. It's no secret I've always admired Lola, but she's yours and always will be and I have resigned myself to be happy for the both of you. From what I've seen of the way Lola hangs on to you, you have no cause to doubt her love.'

Henri ran his fingers through his hair. 'Now you're going to tell me I'm a fool, always being jealous when there is no cause.'

'Yes. And I suggest you hurry and make definite plans for your marriage and honeymoon, or she may get tired of waiting.'

'But the newspaper ...'

'The paper will always be here. It won't fall apart in your absence. You have deputies. Give them some extra duties for a while.'

Henri attempted a wry smile. 'You're right. I wish I could be like you and never worry. You're a genius at getting the most out of life, Dumas.'

Dumas grinned. 'Ah, *ce st la vie*. Please come with us tonight, Henri. Drink a little. Eat a lot. Play cards and laugh even more.'

‘Where is this celebration?’

‘Les Trois Freres Provencaux. We haven’t been there together in a long time.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

Henri returned home to find Lola had cleared an area in a spare room and was working at ballet exercises. She had lost weight but in her practice *maillot* her figure was even more trim and taught than ever. He felt his heart tighten with sheer joy as he watched her for several minutes before she even noticed him.

‘Are you sure you’re well enough to be doing that?’ he said at last.

‘Bon-Bon!’ She rushed to him and rained kisses on his face. ‘I’ve been waiting ages for you to come home. You’ll never guess. There’s a new musical comedy opening at the Porte Sainte-Martin and they’ve offered me a part.’

Henri swallowed. ‘I thought you weren’t going back on the stage?’

‘Well, I won’t after we’re married. of course. But I thought one little part before that wouldn’t hurt.’

‘Lola - I don’t want you parading about half-naked in front of the riff-raff who go to the Porte Sainte Martin,’ he said almost primly.

Color rose and fell in her cheeks. ‘Bon-Bon,’ she said very carefully as if trying to control her temper, ‘I will be dressed as a shepherdess and I promise I will be wearing a *maillot*.’

‘All the same - you’re going to be my wife, damn it. I don’t want half of Paris ogling you, wanting to go to bed with you.’

Lola dropped her head slightly. ‘I’m sorry, Bon-Bon, if you feel that way, but I must have something to occupy my time. I am useless at being idle, and dancing is all I know how to do.’

She looked so wistful, Henri relented. He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. ‘Dumas suggested I was neglecting you and he’s probably right. Tomorrow I promise I will set my clerk to organize our travel to Naples. What do you say to being married this time next week?’

Lola flung her arms around his neck and gave him a deep kiss. ‘Oh, my wonderful Bon-Bon,’ she murmured as he felt his body charge with desire, ‘You have made me so happy.’

After they had made love, followed by a light meal, Henri told Lola he had to go out for a while as he had promised Alexandre Dumas to make a brief appearance at a party he was giving.

‘Can’t I come with you?’ she asked in surprise.

‘I’d rather you didn’t. You know what a disreputable place Les Trois Freres is.’ He kissed her gently. ‘It’s worse than ever these days. Good women - wives - don’t go there.’

If Lola was disappointed she did not show it. Just before he left, she kissed him again at the door. ‘Don’t be too late,’ she whispered, ‘and remember I love you more than all the world.’

As soon as Henri arrived at Les Trois Freres, he knew he had made the right decision to keep Lola away. A raucous party bordering on an orgy was in progress. Most of the libertines who were Alexandre’s friends were there with their mistresses or other well-known whores.

‘Welcome, Dujarier!’ Dumas rolled towards him with the inevitable glass of champagne in his hand. ‘But where is your beautiful lady-love?’

‘She declined to come,’ he murmured.

‘Lola turning down a party? I don’t believe it. Is she still sick?’

Dumas didn’t know what had made Lola so ill and Henri intended to keep it that way. All memories of that awful evening were painful and he could never speak about it. ‘She has a rehearsal for a new engagement early tomorrow and sends her apologies,’ he said instead.

‘Ah, well, too bad. But you’re here and you must enjoy yourself. Come and meet Mademoiselle Liévenne.’

Alexandre Dumas, *fils*, was a paler, more serious-minded copy of Alexandre Dumas, *père*, but he had one thing in common with his famous father and that was a weakness for attractive actresses. His new attachment to Anaïs Liévenne, a popular music-hall star, was the reason for the party. Although he probably would rather have kept it discreet, his father had announced the fact to the

entire Parisian *demi-monde* and the younger Alexandre had merely gone along with it.

Anaïs was an attractive enough woman, but hardly in the class of Lola. She smiled prettily at Henri Dujarier, took his arm and led him to the group of tables that had been reserved for the Dumas party which included the brightly-dressed dandy, Roger de Beauvoir.

As they passed a table at which several men were playing lansquenet, Henri glanced down and found himself staring momentarily into the molten hate-filled eyes of the Creole, Jean Baptiste de Beauvallon. He quickly glanced away, glad that Lola was not there. Relieved by the thought, Henri relaxed and accepted a large glass of champagne and downed it in one gulp. A warm feeling settled in his stomach. He sat down at the table and drank another two glasses without pause. The business and private worries of the past few weeks started to diminish. His vision blurred slightly and Anaïs smiled at him. Sitting with her back to the booth, he was reminded so much of Lola.

‘Ah, lovely lady,’ he exclaimed raising his glass between hiccups. ‘Dumas *filis* is a lucky man. Why don’t you give him up and be mine instead?’

‘Monsieur Dujarier! What are you saying?’ Anaïs’s hand flew to her mouth.

There was a sudden silence at the table. Shocked looks formed on the faces of Dumas’ usually unshockable friends, including his son, whose cheeks puffed out as if he were about to explode.

‘How dare you!’ He kicked back his chair and leaned over the table, grabbing Henri by the collar.

Henri struggled to control his vision and there was a strange humming noise in his ears. The room seemed to spin. ‘Did I say something wrong?’ he stuttered.

‘You certainly did, my friend,’ said the senior Dumas, attempting to smooth tempers. ‘But I think perhaps you’ve drunk too much champagne too quickly.’

A flush of embarrassment overwhelmed him. ‘Dear Lord, I’m so sorry. I apologize. I just wasn’t thinking.’

Dumas’ son released his hold and his father slapped Henri on the back. ‘We all know you were thinking of Lola. It was here that you met her for the first time I seem to remember?’

‘Yes ... that must be it.’

Henri was careful not to drink too much after that, but instead of the feeling of euphoria, he was plunged back into a kind of gloom. The swaggering buffoon, Roger de Beauvoir, came and sat by him and with a flourish produced a wad of papers from his waistcoat pocket. He had yet another novel he wanted published.

‘Not now,’ growled Henri. ‘Leave it at my office tomorrow.’

‘If I were Dumas with a new novel you would read it this very minute,’ retorted the petulant de Beauvoir.

‘Dumas creates works of art. His work always takes precedence. You merely daub.’

De Beauvoir scowled. ‘That’s a fine thing to say to someone who thought he was your friend. I demand you take it back.’

‘I will not. You write trash. Are you looking to duel with me?’

De Beauvoir clenched his fists. ‘I don’t purposely look for duels, but it seems sometimes they find me.’

Dumas again saw what was happening and he hurried to put himself between the two men. ‘What is the matter with you, Dujarier?’ he hissed in his friend’s ear. ‘Must you offend everyone here tonight?’

Henri withdrew from him and pushed his chair back. ‘I am sick of your dubious friends, Dumas. I will find better company elsewhere.’

Dumas shook his grizzled head and exchanged a glance with Roger de Beauvoir as Henri wandered off towards the card tables. ‘He’s always been a difficult man,’ he muttered under his breath, ‘but this is the worst I’ve ever seen him. If he carries on like this, he’ll lose Lola in spite of himself.’

Henri paid fifty francs to buy himself into a game of lansquenet. He was winning until one of the men left and the Creole, Jean Baptiste de Beauvallon, took his place. He casually threw a hundred francs into the kitty.

Henri scowled. 'Are you sure you want to play against me?' he said roughly.

'Why shouldn't I? Isn't my money as good as everyone else?'

'If it's money that's earned honestly.'

'Are you implying mine is not?'

'Imply whatever you wish.'

The banker frowned. 'Monsieur Dujarier, if you are serious to play this game, I suggest you caution your tongue.'

Henri muttered under his breath but raised his stake.

They played steadily. Gradually the rest of the participants gave up and withdrew until only Henri Dujarier and Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon were left.

Henri started to sweat as he realized he was losing badly. He was in debt to Jean-Baptiste for two-and-a-half thousand. He threw down his final hand. 'You win, de Beauvallon.'

A cat-like smile had spread across the Creole's face. 'I presume you are able to pay?'

'Of course, but only a fool would carry that much money on his person. See me at my office tomorrow. I'll settle up with you then.'

'That's not good enough, Dujarier. I am entitled to my winnings now.'

The last effects of the champagne had worn off and Henri was left with a grinding headache and the realization he had made an utter fool of himself in front of a man he despised. He looked around the restaurant. Many of his acquaintances had disappeared, probably to the bordello galleries above the restaurant. Only Roger de Beauvoir and the senior Alexandre Dumas remained. He had already offended Roger earlier. Besides, neither of them were likely to be much help as they were both always broke.

'I must ask your indulgence,' he said as he struggled to keep face.

'I don't see why I should oblige. You have never been indulgent when it comes to writs against *Le Globe*.'

Henri felt trapped by the tawny eyes. 'A private game of cards is hardly the same as a legal suit,' he said flatly.

'This is your opportunity to make it otherwise.'

'Are you suggesting I void my legal action against your brother-in-law in exchange for release of my debt?'

Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon shrugged. 'You owe me a considerable amount of money. If you do not pay it now, I may be forced to take steps.'

Henri was feeling decidedly sick. He wished he'd never come to Dumas' stupid party and played this stupid card game. He stood up. 'You don't frighten me, de Beauvallon. I have a respectable name in Paris. You can be assured I will pay what I owe you in the morning. Goodnight.'

He turned his back and headed out of the restaurant. When the fresh night air hit his face he felt a great surge of relief. Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon had behaved better than he would have expected of such an upstart. Tomorrow the debt would be paid and that would be the end of an unfortunate matter.

16.

After Henri had gone out, Lola spent a restless evening alone. Although she had tried to play the acquiescent role, the truth was she was furious with him for not having been allowed to go to the Dumas party. If being a wife meant one was never again to enjoy the company of Paris's more interesting restaurants and amusing characters, she had to wonder why so many women craved such respectability. She began thinking of many of the words she had heard from Aurore, George Sand. At their last meeting, she had been particularly scathing of the institution of marriage.

'A woman becomes nothing but man's possession when she marries,' she had said. 'Even the

best, most noble man in the world will soon make her into his chattel. The law is a disgrace. Marriage strips woman of the right to control her own destiny.'

Of course, Aurore bore more scars on her heart than the average woman and she was perhaps too bitter to see anything positive about being tied for life to someone loved as much as Henri was loved.

'Wives are ill-used creatures forced to bend their opinions to the husband's will,' she went on. 'Have a mind of your own and you will be castigated and laughed at. Try to broaden your mind with learning and you will be ordered not to climb above your station in life.'

Lola had her own scars. Thomas James still existed somewhere in the world and her own dreadful experience of marriage couldn't be completely buried.

'No, you must stop thinking like this,' she ordered herself aloud. 'Henri acts the way he does because he loves you so much.'

She lit up a cigarette. Henri didn't like to see her smoking. She had to resort to subterfuge whenever she craved tobacco. It helped to steady the nerves and make her think more clearly. But she went to bed with a heavy heart all the same and didn't sleep well, having a strange series of dreams in which she was dressed in widow's weeds and riding through the streets of Paris on the back of a white elephant with red eyes.

It was past two in the morning before Henri finally returned, and woke her. When she saw how disheveled and weary he looked, she resisted the impulse to castigate him. Instead, she took him in her arms where he instantly fell asleep.

Henri had barely arrived at his office, when his clerk announced that two gentlemen wished to see him urgently. They bowed elegantly and introduced themselves as the Comte de Flore and Vicomte d'Ecquevillez. As a true republican, Henri had little time for aristocrats, and even less for those who pretended to be ones, which might be the case with this pair.. He eyed them with suspicion

'We come at the suit of Monsieur John-Baptiste de Beauvallon,' said the Comte pompously. 'How do you answer?'

Henri frowned. 'I know I told de Beauvallon I would have the money this morning, but it's a little early. Please give me time to call at my bank.'

The Vicomte's lip turned with an arrogant sneer. 'We are not money collectors. We are here to demand satisfaction.'

Cold realization dawned slowly in Henri's mind. 'A *duel*?' he gasped. 'You can't be serious?'

The silent stare from the two men was all the answer he needed.

'But what is the man playing at? De Beauvallon accepted that I couldn't pay last night. I gave him my word the money would be available as soon as the bank opens in the morning. Everyone knows I am an honorable man.'

'It is not merely a question of the money,' said the Comte. 'In your manner, you insulted both Monsieur de Beauvallon and also Monsieur Roger de Beauvoir. Monsieur de Beauvallon has nobly taken Monsieur de Beauvoir's cause jointly with his own. Both gentlemen demand the right to satisfaction.'

Henri's mind whirled, trying to remember exactly what he had said last night that was so wounding to both men to have brought about this disaster. He should have been much more cautious in dealing with the snake-in-the-grass de Beauvallon, but Roger de Beauvoir was an old friend who had usually taken his mock insults in good humor - but never a scathing criticism of his writing. Oh, God, what had he done?

'Well, what is your answer?' said the Vicomte impatiently.

'I ... I will have to discuss this matter,' stuttered Henri. 'Please give me time to consult on my reply.'

'By mid-day at the latest,' snapped the Comte, as the two men left the office.

Alexandre Dumas fled from the arms of his latest conquest as soon as he received Henri's note. He found his friend still in semi-shock.

'First of all,' said Henri, 'not a word of this to Lola.'

'News of a duel always travels like wild fire. She's bound to hear of it.'

'Not if I don't fight.'

'I can't see any alternative.'

'Damn it, Dumas. You've survived more duels than the average man. You know all the rules. There has to be an alternative, even if I have to pay de Beauvallon double.'

Dumas shook his head. 'It's too late now. When they think their honor is at stake, men like him rarely make compromises.' He sat down next to his friend and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I'm sorry. But you have the advantage in the right to choose your weapons. How well do you use a rapier?'

Henri looked at him blankly.

'Ah. And pistols?'

The response was similar.

'Mon Dieu, don't tell you have never learned to defend yourself in any way?'

'My only weapon has been the pen.'

'Well you can't fight with pens at thirty paces,' said Dumas angrily. 'When do they want answer?'

'By mid-day.'

'That's hardly time at all. You must appoint your seconds, but I will try to delay matters a little.'

'Thank you. You've been a good friend to me.'

'Don't tempt the fates by speaking in the past tense,' said Dumas, trying to make light.

Henri gave a wistful smile. 'I must be realistic but please remember, not a word to Lola.'

Dumas nodded and left immediately.

Later that afternoon, two of Henri's friends, Charles de Boigne and Arthur Bertrand held a heated meeting with the Comte de Flore and Vicomte d'Ecquevillez. As Dumas had predicted, there was no room for compromise. Both de Beauvallon and de Beauvoir had been insulted by Dujarier's behavior, and that was that. All that remained was for the date and time to be set and which weapons were to be used.

In the meantime, Henri had remained in his office trying to keep his mind distracted with work. He had not succeeded. When Dumas arrived late in the afternoon with the bad news that they had been unsuccessful in changing de Beauvallon's mind, Henri was resigned.

'My son has shared fencing lessons with Jean Baptiste de Beauvallon,' said Dumas. 'He says he is a master with the sword but he might be lenient when he sees you are no match.'

Henri sighed. 'I doubt it. It will have to be pistols.'

'We had better get in some practice.'

At the shooting gallery Dumas groaned with almost physical pain when he saw how inept Henri was with guns. After twenty-four shots, he only managed to get two near the mark.

Honor or not, there was only one alternative. 'Leave for Naples. Now. Tonight,' Dumas said. 'Take Lola and get married. Stay away as long as you can. Roger de Beauvoir is a good fellow and not one to bear grudges indefinitely and in a couple of months that rat, de Beauvallon, too, will have forgotten all about it.'

Henri shook his head. 'No, I will not be a coward. When I have fought with him, there will be no more quarrels for me.'

'You know what the outcome could be?'

'Yes. I am resigned to whatever fate has decreed.'

The two friends walked back to Henri's apartment together in grim silence.

Lola sensed something odd when a somber-faced Dumas accompanied Henri into the apartment. Henri looked wan and tired, but despite her probing, neither man gave indication of anything being wrong.

She had still been nursing hurt feelings at being excluded from the previous evening's party and when she cautiously announced she was thinking of going to the theater to start rehearsing for the new musical comedy to her surprise Henri seemed keen for her to go. 'Yes of course, you must,' he said in a half-distracted fashion.

'You're sure you don't mind?'

He smiled at her. 'I'm sorry about what I said yesterday. You mustn't give up your dancing. I was being unreasonably selfish.'

She kissed him on the cheek. 'Oh, Bon-Bon, how I adore you.'

'One other thing,' Henri lowered his eyes for a few seconds before looking at her again, 'I think it might be best if you move into a hotel for the next few days. There are some aspects of etiquette that even we broad thinkers must adhere to when it comes to brides and bridegrooms.'

Lola's eyes widened. 'Oh, Henri - what day have you chosen?'

'Well, there are still a few loose ends to tie up but, barring any unforeseen circumstances, how does next Saturday sound to you?'

'Oh my darling - just marvelous!' She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him again.

Henri carefully removed her arms. 'Now you'd better get to that rehearsal before you're late.'

After she had gone, Henri asked Dumas also to leave.

'Are you sure you wish to be alone at a time like this?' his old friend asked him.

Henri nodded. 'I need to settle my state of mind,' he said. 'Besides, there is necessary paperwork to see to.'

After Dumas had embraced him and kissed him on both cheeks with all the affection of a brother, Henri Dujarier sat down at his desk and started to write out his will.

Myra always enjoyed accompanying Lola to the theater. While her mistress would be engaged in rehearsal, she would sit in the wings where she could watch the performance, attending to repairs to costumes and listening to theater gossip. But that afternoon, Myra wished she hadn't heard the latest rumor that was spreading like wildfire. The story had apparently originated with Anaïs Liévenne's maid, who was always a reliable source. One of the stage assistants had enjoyed telling Myra some of what had happened.

'Apparently Monsieur Dujarier was terribly drunk and made an obscene suggestion to Madame Liévenne right in front of Monsieur Dumas, fils, who got extremely angry with him. It then happened that Monsieur de Roger Beauvoir was also insulted, as Monsieur Dujarier told him he wrote trash. Everyone was surprised. No-one has ever seen Monsieur Dujarier behaving so badly. The others all left him and apparently he went off to play cards.'

Myra found the whole story difficult to believe. Monsieur Dujarier might get bad-tempered occasionally, but he had always been a perfect gentlemen. He would never make obscene suggestions to another woman, and certainly not when he was so obviously in love with Lola.

'Any way, that's not the end of it. Would you believe there's going to be a duel?'

Myra's mouth had fallen open. 'Are you sure? Between whom?'

'Well, I don't know the exact details. Monsieur Dujarier, of course, who has never fought a duel in his life, and I suppose Monsieur Roger de Beauvoir.'

Myra's heart was heavy as she watched Lola tackle the complicated steps for her part in *La Biche au Bois - The Hind in the Forest*. She doesn't know, she thought to herself, but I have to tell her. They are going to be married. She has to stop him. Myra waited until they were in the carriage returning to Lola's hotel before she told her the gist of what she had heard, carefully leaving out any reference to the improper suggestion made by Henri to Anaïs Liévenne.

Lola's face turned pale and she ordered the driver to take her to Henri's office instead. He wasn't there, so she went to his apartment which was almost next door. She found him still writing at his desk in his study.

'Bon-Bon!' she cried as she ran towards him. 'Why have you involved yourself in this terrible thing? Why?'

He slowly looked up and they stared at each other for a few seconds. 'Why? Because it is a matter of honor.'

'Honor! How can you, who have always despised such pig-headed nonsense, fallen into such a trap?'

Henri's face tightened. 'Don't pressure me, Lola. What's done is done. I can't walk away from my mistake.' He resumed his writing.

She fell to her knees by his side. 'But what about *us*? How could you calmly tell me that we will be married next week while all along you have been planning this stupidity.'

He bit his lip. 'None of it was planned. I can't explain why it happened any more than I can explain why I love you more than anyone on this earth.' He fought against tears in his eyes. 'Sometimes destiny has a strange way of dealing out cards.'

'When will it be?'

'Not for a day or two yet.'

She gave a relieved sigh. 'So - there is still time for you to see sense.'

He bent over and gave her a kiss on the forehead. 'It is but a trifling matter. When we are married, we will surely look back at it and laugh.'

Lola struggled to smile. 'Oh, my Bon-Bon, how I love you. Don't let's worry about appearances. Let me stay with you tonight.'

He raised his hand. 'No. Tonight I would prefer to be left alone, if you don't mind. Come tomorrow morning after breakfast. We can spend the day together.'

She didn't want to leave him, but he gave her a gentle push.

'Tomorrow it is,' she said.

Sleep didn't come easily to Lola, her mind reeling over the impending events. Playing the role of the complacent little wife against her own nature had caused this to happen in the first place. She should never have let Henri go to Trois Freres alone, falling prey to his weakness for champagne and the taunts of fools like Roger de Beauvoir.

She still found it difficult to believe that the foppish Roger had actually challenged Henri - it seemed so out of character. At least, she had the consolation that they were both probably useless with rapiers. Once this whole business was over, no matter if Henri complained, she was never going to be meek again. She couldn't wait to tell him that he had fallen in love with the fiery, assertive Lola Montez, and that she was tired of playing a role that didn't fit.

Just before dawn, Lola sat down and wrote a note to Henri, pleading with him to come to her apartment for breakfast immediately. She woke Myra and told her to take it to him. Myra returned a few minutes later, saying Henri would be with her shortly. But the minutes, and then the hours, ticked by. Soon it was seven ... eight ... nine o'clock. And no sign of Henri.

A sense of dread began to take hold of Lola. At last Gabriel arrived with a letter. She tore it open in his presence.

'My dear Lola - I am going out to fight the duel with pistols. That is why I wanted to sleep alone and not see you this morning as I have need of all my concentration. By afternoon all will be over. A thousand embraces, my darling wife Lola, whom I love so much, and the thought of whom will never leave me. H.D.'

Her heart hammered so loud it seemed to echo in her ears. She looked at Gabriel in horror. 'Where is it happening?' was all she could say.

'I don't know, Madame. He would not tell me because he was sure you would ask this very question.'

Lola flashed a look at the mantel clock. It was already nearly ten. 'When did he go?'

'Two hours since.'

'Oh, God.'

Lola dressed hurriedly and rushed back with Gabriel to Henri's apartment. She could find nothing, except an abandoned pair of pistols owned by Alexandre Dumas. She then went in search

of Dumas himself. She found him sitting pensive and alone at his desk where he had been attempting to write, but with the ink long since dried on his pen.

‘Why didn’t you tell me about this?’ she screeched at him.

‘Because Henri made me vow not to.’

‘Because I would have put a stop to it!’

‘Perhaps - but there are times when a man must defend his honor.’

Lola threw herself angrily about the study. ‘The fool! At least he is fighting another man even more foolish ...’

‘No, Lola,’ interrupted Dumas. ‘He isn’t fighting Roger de Beauvoir.’

Lola stopped in her tracks. ‘What do you mean? Myra told me ...’

‘Yes, I know there is some confusion in the rumor as the surnames are similar. It is Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon who called for satisfaction.’

Lola wavered on her feet, and Dumas jumped up and led her to a chair.

Her breath was shallow and it seemed as if she might faint. Dumas quickly poured a glass of absinthe which momentarily revived her.

‘De Beauvallon,’ she gasped at last. ‘The Creole. I have heard he is a master with both sword and shot.’

‘Yes, it is true.’

‘And yet you still did *nothing* to stop this?’

Chastened, Dumas dropped his eyes.

‘We know what the outcome must be,’ wailed Lola in deep anguish.

‘Not necessarily,’ blustered Dumas. ‘De Beauvallon claims he is a honorable man. He will know they are ill-matched. I am sure he will shoot wide.’

Shaking, Lola struggled to speak rationally. ‘How can you be so stupid? I can’t believe you have forgotten de Beauvallon is the brother-in-law of Henri’s worst enemy. Henri is the lifeblood of *La Presse*. Did it never occur to you that if something happens to him, there will be rejoicing in the offices of *La Globe*?’

They stared at each for a few more moments before Dumas’ face turned pale. He started to tremble.

‘Mon Dieu. I am stupid. Why had I not thought of that? Could it be a conspiracy? I should have realized - it seemed to be such a trifling matter over which to fight a duel.’

Lola managed to compose herself and stood up, smoothing out her skirt. ‘I am going back to Henri’s apartment to await his return,’ she said calmly although her eyes had turned a dark and turbulent ocean blue. ‘Don’t bother to accompany me,’ she said with undisguised scorn. ‘I will leave you to dwell on your abysmal service to your best friend.’

Large fluffy flakes of late winter snow brushed against the shutters and window panes of the house in the Rue Lafitte, building up along the frame, softening the view and shrouding the branches of the trees. The busy sounds of the street traffic had become muted, as if the world was slowly being wrapped in a comforting blanket.

Lola had been standing in the same position with her shoulder leaning against the window frame for so long that the nerves in her arm had deadened. Myra’s inquiries if she would like something to eat or drink were dismissed with silence. Until she knew Henri’s fate she couldn’t think of such things.

Dumas had not known where the duel was to be held. It could have been in any one of the numerous parks or gardens within the region of Paris. Lola’s first instinct had been to take a carriage and search, but if the duel had been scheduled for early morning it would have long since taken place. Instead she must wait, powerless, for her Bon-Bon to come home.

At last, a familiar carriage drew up at the front door. Her heart was beating crazily, her breath misting on the window. She wiped it impatiently away and recognized the men emerging from the carriage. The first was Charles de Boignes and the next, Arthur Bertrand. But where was her Bon-

Bon? She turned and fled from the drawing room window, flying down the stairs to the front door and out into the street.

The gentle snow whirled about, settling on the hats and shoulders of Henri's two friends as they stood either side of the carriage door. A quick glance at their pale, drawn faces and she knew the worst.

'No!' she screamed. 'No! No!'

She stumbled up the steps into the carriage. Henri Dujarier lay across the seat, his face covered in blood from a neat bullet wound near the bridge of his nose. He had been dead for some time.

All of literary and artistic Paris came to a halt on the day they buried Henri Dujarier in the cemetery at Montmartre. Alexandre Dumas, Honoré de Balzac, Joseph Méry and Emile de Girardin, the co-founder of *La Presse*, were the principal pallbearers.

Many of the street spectators who had gathered knew little about Dujarier - they were more interested to catch a glimpse of the intriguing woman who was said to have been Henri's one great love - but she was so heavily veiled that nothing could be seen of her beautiful face and famous sapphire eyes.

At times during the service in the Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, Lola came close to fainting but with the help of the strong arm of Dumas managed to keep some semblance of dignity. Only later when her friends had dispersed and she returned to her hotel could she give full vent to her grief.

Myra, who had seen Lola's temper on display more times than she cared to remember, immediately feared a repetition of the Franz Liszt episode and quickly removed any dangerous items and as much china and glass as she could.

But for the first few minutes the pale-faced Lola did nothing, except sit on a chair and stare at the snow that still dusted against the windowpanes. After a while, she closed her eyes and a great wail of anguish rose from somewhere deep within her soul. She let out a scream and her hands went to her hair, tearing at the carefully wound ringlets, sending the pins flying. She dragged at her clothes, ripping apart her buttons and tearing off the sleeves of her dress. With her fingernails, she raked at the flesh of her arms, drawing blood. Her eyes now wild, she looked about for something to slash her wrists or her own throat.

Myra, who had been expecting a rage, was terrified. This was far, far worse. Madame could injure herself fatally. She attempted to restrain her, but Lola seemed to have acquired super-human strength and she virtually threw Myra across the room. Just when Myra was sure she was about to be murdered, there was a furious knocking at the door. She stumbled towards it, throwing it open to find Alexandre Dumas and a doctor. She cried a thanks to God. Dumas must have guessed Lola would try something foolish. The two men took one look at Lola and bounded towards her. After a struggle, they managed to restrain her and forced her to take a large dose of laudanum. Within minutes she was in a deep sleep.

The doctor insisted on keeping Lola heavily sedated for several days and when she finally emerged again into the present, her mind was quite clear. She felt curiously calm and contained, without the need for the crutch of further drugs. It was as if she had gone through some kind of transformation. Myra told her it was Saturday: the day when she was supposed to have become Madame Henri Dujarier.

Lola clambered out of bed and looked at herself in the mirror. She was thin and her arms still bore the deep scratch marks she had inflicted on herself and her hair was witch-wild. Dark shadows had formed under her eyes, and her famous cheekbones were more emphasized than they had ever been.

She stared deeply into her own eyes. Was this dreadful creature the foolish, compliant woman who had mildly sent the man she loved to certain death? If it was, she was despicable. She certainly wasn't Lola Montez. This woman wasn't the Lola who had ridden through the Prussian guard - who had defied Polish tyranny - who had marched into the Tsar's inner sanctum. That Lola would have

pushed Henri aside and faced the pistols of de Beauvallon herself. And she would have won. And she would have been getting married today.

With growing resolve, Lola spun around and threw open her wardrobe doors. To Myra's consternation, she began rifling through her clothes, throwing every second bodice or skirt into a pile on the floor. 'All of this will have to go,' she muttered.

'But, Madame, they are all new ...'

'Look at them.' Lola lifted a pale yellow jacket, embroidered with delicate flowers. She had thought to use it as a traveling coat for her honeymoon to Italy. 'Whatever possessed me to choose pastel *yellow*? Yellow was never my color. I must have been out of my stupid mind.' She threw it on to the growing pile. 'I feel like wearing purple. Do I have anything in purple?'

'But, Madame, shouldn't you be in black?'

Lola flashed her eyes at Myra. 'Lola Montez always wears black. When she mourns, it will be purple.'

Myra trembled. 'Yes, Madame.' She quickly went to the back of the wardrobe where a low-necked dress of deep royal purple was hanging. It was more like a stage costume, having been made for Lola before she met Henri and discarded when she started wearing the more conservative colors of a married woman. She offered it to Lola.

Lola raised an eyebrow. 'Hm. Yes. It will have to do.'

Despite its obvious suggestion as the dress of a courtesan, Myra had to admit Lola looked magnificent in it. Her pallid white skin contrasted against the luxurious color which brought out strange dark depths in her eyes that Myra had never noticed before. Lola added the accessories of a pair of garnet earrings and a fichu of red Spanish lace. 'My carriage coat,' she demanded.

'Madame is not going out, surely?'

Lola's eyes flashed again. 'What would you have me do? Sit around and weep myself to death. I will go crazy here on my own. I must live, if I am to live!'

Since burying Henri Dujarier, Alexandre Dumas had not been idle. After looking again at his friend's body and seeing the accurate shot between the eyes he knew that Lola had been right about Jean Baptiste de Beauvallon's motive. When he spoke to the two men who had been Henri's seconds and learned the finer details of the duel, and particularly the evidence that de Beauvallon's pistols appeared to have been fired before the duel, it proved beyond all doubt to have been no more than an excuse for one rival newspaper to get rid of another. He had already been to the police and set his case as one of murder. Within hours, a warrant was out for the arrest of Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon.

By the time he returned to his own house, Dumas was exhausted with lack of sleep and grief. Even the possibility of spending time with his latest young mistress held no attraction. He was planning to try and take a nap and more than surprised to find Lola on his doorstep a few minutes later.

She waltzed in and looked around his study. 'So, this is where the literary genius writes his masterpieces?'

'Lola - what are you doing here? Did the doctor say you get up? Shouldn't you be at home?'

'That is what everyone says - stay at home dampening handkerchiefs and mourning like the good little wife I was. Well, being a good little wife only succeeded in turning me into a good little widow.' She removed a glove and draped it provocatively under Dumas' several chins and blew him a kiss.

He was stunned. 'Has the doctor given you something?'

'Do you mean am I drugged?'

'Well you are acting a little strange.'

'No. In fact, I'm beginning to realize I was probably drugged senseless for the past six months. Love can have a devastating effect on a person. One loses all sense of reality. Now I'm back in the true world.'

To his further astonishment, she placed an open-mouthed kiss upon his lips. ‘And I never intend to lose that sense again.’ Her eyes bore into his with frank sexuality.

Dumas recognized it as the invitation he had been dreaming about ever since he had first seen the bewitching Lola Montez. At any other time he would have had her on his bed before she knew what was happening. Now, he was simply appalled. His throat constricted. ‘How ... how can you do this - with Henri hardly cold?’

At his shocked reaction, the boldness weakened in her eyes. They flickered rapidly for a few seconds as if she was trying to clear threatening tears. The assertive set of her shoulders slumped slightly. Her brave attempt to thrust her love for Henri so callously aside had failed and she visibly crumbled.

‘Oh, Alexandre, I can’t bear to be alone tonight,’ she whispered. Her arms went around him and she nestled her face into his neck. ‘Hold me. Please, please, don’t let me be alone.’

Henri Dujarier’s latest will had fallen out of the top pocket of his coat as his body had been borne in from the carriage. It was brief, and had provided that Lola should receive half of all his assets, the other half going to his mother, sister and infant nephew.

However, Henri’s financial affairs were complicated and nothing in the estate was likely to settled for some time. Lola was left to support herself once again and, less than three weeks after his death, she debuted in *La Biche au Bois*.

Her performance was poor and, even if the critics were sympathetic owing to her tragic personal loss, it did not augur well for her future as a dancer. If she had been anyone else, the management of the Porte Sainte-Martin would have fired her. But Lola Montez was becoming famous and she drew in the crowds, even if they only came to jeer and openly mock her.

For three nights a week over several months, Lola would bravely face them, sometimes managing to finish her dances without letting her temper get the better of her, but more often than not stopping in the middle to let fly with abuse of the audience. They loved every minute of it and she played to packed houses.

In the meantime, the wheels of criminal justice turned ponderously. At the rushed initial hearing into Henri’s death there was insufficient evidence to hold Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon and he escaped with the Comte d’Ecquevillez to Spain.

Alexandre Dumas and Henri’s other influential friends refused to leave it at that. They lobbied the police and forced them to continue with the case and as soon as stronger evidence had been established, a new warrant was issued for the arrest of de Beauvallon as soon as he returned to France.

With the advent of summer, Lola’s run at the Porte Sainte-Martin came to an end. It was hot, and Paris stank. Alexandre Dumas and most of her other friends abandoned their lovers and Bohemian lifestyle and rushed away to the countryside to hide behind the facade of respectable family life.

She found herself once again alone. It would be all too easy to become bored and let depression and a longing for those lost days with Henri to take over and diminish her spirit. Funds were low and she was deciding if she could afford to have some kind of holiday when a newspaper article caught her eye.

It informed her that Franz Liszt was in Bonn, supervising the arrangements for the Beethoven Memorial Festival. In the presence of many dignitaries including Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and the King and Queen of Prussia, a statue to Beethoven would be unveiled in a celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of his birth.

Lola still carried a seed of anger at Franz’s treatment of her in Dresden. A reckless urge to get some of her own back caused the seed to sprout. She ordered Myra to start packing.

Frazzled by the inefficiency of the Festival’s organizing committee and what he perceived to be the doltish manner of Bonn’s city fathers, Franz Liszt found himself single-handed at the helm of

the Festival. While he ranted and raved at the lack of organization in just about everything from embarrassing errors in the invitation lists to the city's woefully inadequate accommodation, other slighted performers accused him of trying to turn the Festival into a one-man-band of which Liszt was the sole conductor and performer. With daily temperatures soaring to over ninety degrees Fahrenheit, it was inevitable that tempers were sorely frayed. Into this boiling controversy came the last person on earth Franz Liszt would have wished to see.

Dressed in a figure-hugging gown of sheer black satin and with a perky feathered bonnet to match, her sultry eyes flashing her intent on making more trouble, Lola Montez swept into Bonn. With every major newspaper in Europe having a reporter making note of each new disaster connected with the Festival, her arrival was greeted with added delight. The newspapermen followed her through the city where she marched into the foyer of the official hotel chosen for the proceedings, Zum Goldenen Stern, the Golden Crown, asserting that the best suite had been reserved for her.

'But Madame,' said the flustered manager, 'your name is not on the guest list.'

'What?' challenged Lola. 'This is a disgrace. Surely not all the guests of Franz Liszt are without beds? Are we to sleep in the street?'

The gaggle of reporters cheered as Lola flounced out again and visited various other hotels, using the same challenge until she was finally able to find a room.

For the next two days Lola enjoyed herself for the first time in months, watching with glee as Franz's great plans came unstuck one by one. Timetables for concerts went awry, there was constant bickering among the performers and an ultimate *faux pas* when the royal guests found themselves facing the back of Beethoven's statue when it was finally unveiled.

She even managed to commandeer a seat at one of Franz's own recitals. It was worth the cost of the bribe alone, just to see the appalled expression on his face as he sat down at the piano and saw her glaring at him from the front row in a seat that had been reserved for some illustrious personage who was left storming about outside. That his recital received rough justice from the critics was expected in the circumstances.

On the closing night of the Festival, Lola donned her provocative purple and red gown and, along with a large crowd of other intoxicated hopefuls, gate-crashed the ceremonial banquet that was being held outdoors under large awnings. Fisticuffs broke out over seats, but Lola managed to find a chair a few feet from her quarry. She flashed him a seductive smile across the rim of a champagne glass and Franz went white with dismay.

'Why are you doing this to me?' he hissed at her. 'Have you no respect for the dignity of the Master?'

'After what you did to me, you don't deserve any respect,' she retorted loudly.

'I'm not talking about myself, you fool, This is an occasion to honor the Master - Beethoven,' he snapped back.

Lola picked up a fork and pointed it at him. 'Insult me again and I guarantee this event will go down in history as Franz Liszt's greatest embarrassment.'

'For God's sake, Lola, please be reasonable ...'

'I have no intention of being reasonable. I want your apology.'

'For what? We had a few interesting weeks together. You and I both know it had to end the way it did.'

Lola waved the fork. 'You took the coward's way out.'

Franz gripped his own fork, ready to do battle. 'No guttersnipe dares to call me a coward!'

The master of ceremonies banged on the table, calling for order. Lola was forced to retreat, but she sat back and vengefully watched as Franz smoothed his straw-colored hair and adjusted his waistcoat. He stood up to give the closing oration. With his composure severely affected, his speech seemed hesitant. His German was far from perfect and he stumbled through the words.

'... Here are gathered peoples from all nations come on pilgrimage to honor the master. The Dutch, the English, the Viennese ...'

He paused, as if trying to collect his thoughts, when the French representative who was the worse for wear after unlimited bottles of champagne stood up. 'What about the French?' he shouted. 'Don't you like the French?'

'Pardon. Of course I haven't forgotten the French,' said Franz petulantly, 'How could anyone forget France? I lived there for fifteen years ...'

'Yes - and you hated every minute of it!' shouted Lola, seizing on the opportunity she had been waiting for.

At her words a tremendous hue and cry instantly broke out among the French guests who started flinging insults at Franz and at anyone else who dared to leap to his defense.

One of the officials climbed on to the table in an attempt to call for order, but he was pushed aside by Lola who followed his example. Purple petticoats whirling, she skipped along the table, pirouetting and kicking aside champagne glasses and plates. Women screamed, dodging flying glass and food. Men's mouths dropped open as they ogled the famous legs at close quarters. The esteemed Beethoven Seventy-fifth Anniversary had deteriorated into the worst possible shambles.

All of a sudden while Lola was still dancing along the tables, the heat-wave broke with a cataclysmic crash above the awnings. A violent thunderstorm with forked lightning and hail put an abrupt end to the proceedings. The guests scattered.

Hardly noticed by any of the participants, Franz Liszt had remained in his chair at the table and slumped forward in a state of utter mental and physical collapse.

Lola's shocking exhibition was the humiliating final straw. Never again would the city fathers of Bonn invite the great Liszt to participate in any proceedings connected with Beethoven.

17.

Lola's triumph over Franz at Bonn sustained her spirit for several days. She decided to celebrate by taking a leisurely trip along the Rhine to the resort town of Baden-Baden, the gathering place of the royal, rich and beautiful, a place full of excitement and new possibilities. As usual, her funds were low, but she managed to keep up a wealthy appearance and participated in a small amount of gambling and a large amount of flirting.

Far away from Paris and its reminders of that other life - and that other Lola who had loved Henri Dujarier - the more reckless side of her nature was given full rein. Everywhere she went, she caused a sensation with her unladylike language, her purple or scarlet dresses which fitted her glorious figure so tightly that people swore they were molded on to her body without the benefits of corsetry beneath.

As she had done in Bonn, she disrupted another dinner and danced on the table, flinging her petticoats high, showing off her legs and thighs for all to see. The final straw was an exhibition of how high she could lift her leg, by placing it around the shoulders of an ecstatic male spectator. No woman in the resort's long history had ever behaved so shamefully in public. While the newspaper reporters gleefully wrote their copy, yet another group of city fathers went into various states of apoplexy. The order went out to expel Lola Montez from Baden-Baden.

Lola seemed to take it in her stride, even being boastful of what she had done. She and Myra returned to Paris by a roundabout route, stopping here and there where Lola had no qualms about picking up any presentable looking man to share her lonely bed for a night or two.

She was careful not to learn too much about them - most of the time not even caring to know their names. She had a burning need for physical closeness, for their bodies, but not their hearts. If one dared to bring her flowers or show any kind of sentimental attachment such as writing verse, she would instantly dismiss him.

Myra, who still retained much of a conventional moral upbringing, had been deeply distressed herself by Henri's death, and was now appalled at Lola's behavior. If her mistress was selling her

body to pay her bills, that she might understand. But Lola took no money from these men. It was as if she were trying to find some way of burying her grief in a greedy, debased passion that had no meaning.

When one morning in a wayside inn, Myra entered Lola's room with a breakfast tray to discover she had not one, but two, young grooms from the inn's stables in her bed, she dropped the tray, burst into tears and fled. Lola immediately ordered her young lovers out and stormed into Myra's small room where she discovered her packing her bags.

'I'm sorry, Madame, but I can't work for you any more,' said Myra, a mess of tears and indignation.

'Then you are a self-righteous little fool,' snapped Lola. 'I won't be preached at by a chit of a maid.'

Myra managed to hold her chin firm. 'Look at yourself, Madame, and see what you have become,' she said. 'Have you thought what you are doing to the sacred memory of Monsieur Dujarier? And suppose he is watching you from up there in heaven?'

Lola scoffed. 'Heaven? There is no such place. When we die there is nothing - just the cold hard clay of the grave. Life must be lived to the fullest, for there is no second chance.'

Myra stared at Lola, overcome with pity for her. 'Oh, Madame, I never knew you believed that. Of course there is a heaven. I am so sorry for you - and poor Monsieur Dujarier - who loved you so much.' She struggled with a resurgence of tears while she continued her packing.

Lola sat on the maid's narrow bed, her face filling with alarm as she realized Myra was genuine in her intentions. 'Please, Myra, don't leave like this. If it's a question of extra money, I will try to pay you more.'

Myra looked down at her. 'I wouldn't stay even if you tripled my wages,' she said. 'You are so beautiful and clever, Madame. I have admired you so much ever since we first met and I hate to see you wasting yourself crawling in the gutter. You were made for much greater things.'

Lola was hit with a cold shock. Reflected in the disgust in her maid's eyes she saw the truth that she had tried so hard to deny. In her desperation to evade the grief that still consumed her, she had foolishly thought she could hide from it by indulging in mindless passions and disregard for convention.

'Do you really think Henri sees what I am doing?' she asked huskily.

Myra nodded firmly. 'I definitely believe in a life here-after and that the way we live on earth governs whether we go to heaven or not. Monsieur Dujarier was a good man and he is in that place. But you, Madame, are not a good woman. You will probably go to the other place and the two of you will never be together again.' Myra clipped the locks on her portmanteau and picked up her traveling cloak.

Lola gave out a heart-rendering wail. 'But I can't help it. I have this ... I have this *pain*, this need, that consumes me. I don't know how to fight it.'

Her sobs rent the air and Myra almost relented. 'I pray you will have to find a way, Madame,' she said. 'You are a strong woman who can fight anything. Let yourself grieve for Monsieur naturally as others grieve and soon the pain will lessen.'

'Don't leave me, Myra,' Lola whispered, clutched at her maid's skirt. 'I promise I'll try and change.'

'No, Madame, I must go. It is also a good time to visit my own family again.'

Lola was devastated as she realized how dependent she had been on the maid and the number of times she had treated her badly or taken her for granted. 'I'll be lost without you - will you promise to come back to me in Paris?'

Myra gave a little shrug. 'I can't promise anything, Madame.'

After she had gone, Lola thought long and hard about the conversation. In her simple way, Myra had brought her life into a new focus. While humiliating Franz Liszt had brought some amusement and satisfaction, ultimately it was a hollow victory, and indulging herself in mindless sexual encounters had done nothing to lessen the agony of the loss of Henri. She started to seriously

wonder if the soul did exist beyond the earthly plain and that perhaps one day she could be reunited with Henri. Joy at such a possibility might put an end to her downward, depraved and indulgent spiral. Dare she try to discover hope?

Soon, with these new optimistic thoughts flooding her mind, she no longer found herself lusting after every attractive young man who crossed her path, and the first thing she did on returning to Paris was to consult the Abbé Lamennais.

The Abbé, who had been greatly upset by Henri's senseless death, welcomed his young widow with sympathy. If he had secretly known all along that Lola and Henri had never been married in the temporal sense, he kept that knowledge to himself.

When she explained to him the purpose of her visit, the Abbé could only smile. 'Since the beginning of time mankind has been seeking the answer to your question,' he said, 'I can advise you only to let constant prayer and faith sustain you.'

She left the Abbé highly dissatisfied with what felt like a stock clerical answer. She had never been much good at praying and nothing in her life had given her reason to have faith. She wanted something more immediate - some proof that Henri still existed.

Next, she called on Aurore, a woman whose mind was always open to all manner of philosophies, and she suggested she might like to investigate the vogue for spiritualism that was gaining ground. Aurore gave her the address of a Russian woman who was supposed to be able to communicate with the spirits.

Lola was nervous when she entered the drab little house tucked away in an unfashionable street in Montmartre, not far from the cemetery where Henri was buried.

Madame Lena, a dark mouse of a woman with glittering eyes greeted Lola with interest. 'Ah, so you have come at last. I have been expecting you,' she said.

Lola was surprised, not realizing it was Madame Lena's standard way of capturing the custom of her new clients. 'But how could you know?'

The woman smiled. 'I receive the vibrations,' she said. 'Come.'

She led Lola into a small windowless sitting room draped in velvet and simply furnished with a round table and two chairs. A small lamp stood on the table, casting the walls with strange shadows.

Madame Lena settled herself in one chair, Lola the other. Across the table, she took Lola's hands in hers and closed her eyes. 'Now, I ask you to be calm. Empty your mind of all unnecessary thoughts and concentrate on the loved one you wish to contact. Think of him alone. Visualize the person the way you remember him best.'

Not bothering to ask why Madame Lena was so sure she wanted to contact a man, Lola closed her eyes.

'Are you there?' said Madame Lena. 'Is there someone who wishes to speak to Lola? Give me your message.'

The minutes went by and Lola immersed herself in imagining Henri that day in the park when they had first fallen in love. In her mind, she gave form to him as he had stood next to his horse in that charming, slightly awkward fashion, trying to hide that rare shy smile, and the growing love in his eyes. She saw him, too, as he had been as later as they sat together at a breakfast table holding hands - with a posy of violets between them - its delicate scent filling the air around them.

Madame Lena gave an abrupt jolt, and a strange sound emitted from her throat.

The vision of Henri abruptly left her and Lola opened her eyes to see the medium with her head thrown back, her face twisted in an extraordinary manner. She twitched this way and that and began to whisper in a sing-song voice in a language that was not French.

'Baba ... my little one ...'

Lola strained to hear. Surely not? The words were Hindustani.

'Baba. You have not used Lakshmi's gift wisely ...'

Her blood ran cold. She would have snatched her hands away, but the medium was gripping them too tightly.

‘Parvati? Is that you?’ Lola whispered hoarsely.

‘Baba. Seek truth. Seek beauty. Your love waits in the stars ...’ Then the voice faded away.

There was a long empty silence before Madame Lena jolted again and slowly her head righted. She blinked. ‘Well? Was it the person you wished to hear from?’

Lola was too overcome to speak. She could barely shake her head.

Madame Lena sighed. ‘Ah, well. Sometimes the ones we hope for are stubborn and will not communicate. Perhaps they are angry at having died before their time and blame those left behind. But I sense someone spoke. Did you know who it was?’

Lola nodded dumbly as she finally managed to extricate her hands. Even if there was a remote possibility that this woman could speak Hindustani, she could never have known about Lola’s connection with India, and that she had once had an ayah who called her Baba.

Her heart was beating wildly. If that was Parvati’s voice, and she was sure it was, it proved that the soul did live on. So that meant that Henri did still exist. ‘Oh, can we try again?’ she asked breathlessly.

Madame Lena shook her head. ‘Not today. It is an exhausting process that is very draining to me. You are lucky that someone contacted you so quickly. Sometimes it takes weeks - months - to establish a link and even when it happens, it is not always satisfactorily. We must be patient. Come again in another week’s time.’

Lola spent the week in a fever of restlessness. During the day she would visit Henri’s grave, tending it and sitting next to it and whispering to him all the things she wanted him to hear. How much she loved him. How sorry she was to have been unfaithful with other men, but that it was because she didn’t know how to deal with her grief that had driven her to do such shameful things. That she would never do them again. That she could hardly wait for them to be together again in heaven.

And at night, she would sit on the rear terrace of her hotel and gaze up at the stars for hours on end. ‘Your love waits in the stars,’ Parvati had said. She wondered which one of the countless million twinkling lights was Henri’s special star. There was no way of knowing, but her eyes kept going back to one particular tiny pinprick of light not far from the North Star. Could that be the one?

It was out on the terrace that Myra found her. She had been watching her for some minutes. ‘Madame - you will catch your death of cold sitting out here without a wrap,’ she said firmly.

Lola spun around. ‘Myra - you came back!’

The maid nodded primly, trying not to smile. ‘Life at home seemed so dull after being with you, Madame. I’m sorry I was so dreadfully rude to you. It was naughty of me. If you don’t want me, I’ll go again ...’

‘Oh, no, please stay,’ said Lola with a laugh as she gave her a hug. ‘Thanks to you, I’ve found out something wonderful.’ She led her inside and told her about the visit to the spiritualist, that her life was now turning around.

Lola paid a visit to Madame Lena every week for the next few months, but there were no more messages and her hopes of communicating with Henri never eventuated. It seemed as if that brief message from Parvati was all she was ever going to get.

At times she wondered if perhaps she had imagined it. That in fact there was nothing at all after death. But there were other times she would sit outside at night and look up at the stars, and know: just *know* - that he was there - watching out for her - but keeping his distance. That was Henri’s way after all. And she was comforted.

Unaware of the evidence that had been gathering against him, Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon returned confidently to France from Spain the following winter. On his arrival, he was re-arrested on the charge of murdering Henri Dujarier. Fortunately for him, his newspaper editor brother-in-law, Adolphe de Crassagnac, was able to afford the services of the best legal mind in France -

Antoine Pierre Berryer.

The trial was expected to draw huge public interest and the authorities decided to hold it in the provinces rather than Paris. It opened at the Assize Court at Rouen in March, 1846. Even so, the middle-class crowds arrived in droves, eager to catch glimpses of the notorious Parisian figures who were expected to give evidence. They were not disappointed.

The most famous witness was Alexandre Dumas, père who, as an expert in the finer points of dueling, was to spend several hours of each day on the stand. There was also Alexandre Dumas, fils and his mistress, the beautiful Anaïs Liévenne, plus a string of other loose-living women who called themselves actresses, but must have had to earn their money some other way to afford such fine servants, carriages and clothes. Plus there was Roger de Beauvoir, in his gaudy colored frock coat, the man rumored to have bedded even more women than Dumas, père.

And finally, there was the mysterious and beautiful Lola Montez, looking almost frail and delicate as she stepped down from her carriage, dressed in her customary snug-fitting black silk, with a black lace veil over her head and a Spanish shawl wrapped about her shoulders.

Although dueling was illegal, it was still common in France. The pivot of the trial was the assertion by the prosecution that Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon had forced the late Henri Dujarier into a mental state where he had no choice other than to fight a duel. However, everyone was by now aware of a possible ulterior motive, the elimination of Dujarier as a rival in the highly competitive newspaper wars. In addition, the prosecution declared there was a suspicion the pistols used had been tested and fired prior to the duel, this being both dishonorable and illegal. Dumas was questioned at length on this point and several witnesses, including Henri's two seconds, were called, all of whom testified at seeing powder on de Beauvallon's fingers and on the pistols themselves prior to firing.

When Lola was called to give her version of the events, all eyes were riveted on her. She gracefully eased herself into the witness chair and even though the packed court was warm, drew her shawl tightly about her shoulders. She glared directly at the prisoner, not bothering to disguise her loathing of him.

After some routine questioning by the prosecutor, the defense moved. 'What is your personal recollection of the events of the night of March 7th?'

'Monsieur Dujarier told me he had to go out to Les Trois Freres Provencaux to keep Monsieur Dumas happy.'

'Why did you not accompany him?'

'Because he did not wish me to.'

'For what reason?'

Lola paused, her eyes never leaving de Beauvallon's face. 'As it was intended I should become his wife, he did not want me to meet with certain persons whom he considered to be ill-bred.'

A low murmur of amusement echoed through the courtroom, at which Lola flinched.

'What did you say to Dujarier when you discovered he was about to fight a duel?'

'I reproached him, and said that if I had been allowed to be present at the party he would not have succumbed to such a ridiculous challenge.'

'Did Dujarier know how to shoot a pistol?'

'No. However, I do. He thought it a most curious amusement for a woman.'

'Is it true that you were not overly concerned?'

'At first, no, as I was under the misapprehension that the antagonist was Monsieur de Beauvoir - a man as ineffective with weapons as Monsieur Dujarier. If I had known that it was in fact the brother-in-law of Monsieur de Crassagnac, I would have hastened to the police or even attended the duel myself. However, I learned this fact too late.'

'And what purpose would have been served by you witnessing the duel?'

Lola's eyes narrowed with pure hatred as she glared at de Beauvallon. 'I would not have stood idly by as a witness. I would have taken Dujarier's place - and I can assure you I would not have missed my target.'

The court broke out into an excited babble and it was a few minutes before order was restored and Berryer was able to continue. 'I have here a letter that was sent to you by Monsieur Dujarier on the morning of his death.' In his firm tones, the lawyer read out Henri's last words.

After he had finished, a pall of silence fell across the court and Lola dropped her head, her cheeks flooded with tears.

'Do you not agree that this is the letter of a man who knows exactly what he is about to do? That it is not the letter of a man unaware of the deadly outcome of such an event?'

Lola could only nod and Berryer repeated his questions.

'Yes,' she managed to say.

'Thank you. That will be all.'

Dumas was recalled.

'What sort of man was Dujarier?'

Dumas mused for a moment. 'Sometimes a little puzzling - of a dual nature perhaps. With his friends, he was full of humor and abandon, but always tight and dry with strangers. Once you knew him well you would discover him to be charming. We loved him with all our hearts.'

'Why did you not act as intermediary in the duel?'

Dumas shifted in his seat. His eyes caught Lola's briefly before looking away. 'He told me that I was too busy with my writing to waste my time on a trifling matter. He said "It's my first duel. It's astonishing that I haven't had one before now. It's a baptism to which I must submit".'

'Did he tell you the cause of the duel?'

'He told me that it was a futile matter and he wasn't sure why he was fighting, but underlying it was the war between *La Globe* and *La Presse*.'

'He said that to you - that it was a *war*?'

Again his eyes met Lola's and quickly dodged away. 'Yes.'

'And yet he still persisted, even to the point of waiting in the cold for Monsieur de Beauvallon for several hours, long past the appointed time, when he could by rights have abandoned the duel without losing face?'

'Yes.'

'And when he had fired his shot and missed, Monsieur Dujarier did not attempt to evade death by turning his back. According to his seconds, he remained quite still, providing an easy target?'

'So I have been told.'

As Dumas left the witness stand, Lola's already diminished opinion of him faded yet another degree. He had done nothing to dissuade Henri, perhaps even urged him on. Beneath that boisterous, good-humored appearance was a shallow man with feet of clay. Rather than being angry, she was saddened that a loyal and long friendship should have come to such a dismal end.

The round of witnesses continued.

Roger de Beauvoir, dressed in ridiculous pink and white, avoided her eyes altogether.

'What was your opinion of Monsieur Dujarier's behavior on the night in question?'

De Beauvoir preened. 'Aggressive, I would say.'

Lola nearly interjected, but thought the better of it and bit her tongue.

'Oh, really? Please tell us.'

De Beauvoir described the tense atmosphere around the supper table. When he calmly mentioned Henri's alleged toast to Anaïs Liévenne, that he would sleep with her, Lola couldn't believe it. If Henri had really said such a thing, it was merely a drunken jest that had been taken out of context. Not for the first time did she wish with all her heart that she could discover the real truth of that night but it was unlikely ever to be known as witness after witness reported it with variations until not even the lawyers would be able to paint a clear picture.

'And did you challenge Monsieur Dujarier to a duel because he was rude about your writing?'

'Well, not in so many words,' said Roger de Beauvoir.

'Did you ally yourself with Monsieur de Beauvallon on this matter?'

'No, but he knew that I was angry with Dujarier.'

‘Thank you, Monsieur.’

An attractive, well-dressed woman called Madame Francine Albert took the stand. She gave her name and address and Lola looked at her curiously, wondering what was her role in the events.

‘Is it true that you were once a prostitute, Madame?’

She woman hesitated a moment. ‘Yes.’

The court buzzed.

‘Was Monsieur Henri Dujarier ever a client of yours?’

‘Yes.’

Something dark in the pit of Lola’s stomach moved. Never - I don’t believe it!

‘And how often did he frequent you?’

‘Once a week until I met Monsieur de Beauvallon. After that, there was no other man for me.’

The honeyed gaze she exchanged with the prisoner confirmed the truth. Lola struggled with her composure.

‘Would you say then that Monsieur Dujarier had cause for animosity towards your new lover?’

‘Oh, undoubtedly.’

‘That will be all, Madame Albert.’

By the time Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon himself was called to the stand, Lola was furious, beginning to understand his wily lawyer’s method. With his questions, he had succeeded in making Henri seem a jealous, indecisive and slightly foolish man who almost welcomed his death. Nothing was further from the truth. It was Henri’s stubborn sense of honor that had killed him.

De Beauvallon had an arrogant confidence as he gave his testimony. ‘I bore no grudges towards Dujarier. He was drinking and losing heavily at the gaming table and made a suggestion that I did not make an honest living. I was prepared to ignore it, but he continued to cast slurs on my character. I consulted with the Comte d’Ecqueville who urged me to press for resolution by duel. I proposed rapiers to lessen the danger as I had certain skill. I gave my word I would seek only to disarm and not to wound, but Dujarier insisted on pistols.’

‘Did you use your own pistols?’

‘No. My brother-in-law gave me a new set.’

‘Had you fired them prior to the duel?’

‘No.’

‘Why did you leave Monsieur Dujarier waiting?’

De Beauvallon gave an exaggerated shrug. ‘There was a problem with my own carriage and, of course, there is never a cab for hire when one needs one urgently. I can assure the court my lateness was not intentional.’

As there was a pause while the prosecution prepared its questions Jean-Baptiste’s dark eyes briefly met Lola’s with such arrogance that she wished with all her heart that she had the power of a Medusa and could turn him to stone.

One of the prosecutors, Léon Duval, who was acting in the interests of Henri’s family, stood up. ‘Monsieur de Beauvallon, you have said you were affronted by Monsieur Dujarier’s assertion that you were dishonest?’

‘That is correct.’

‘But is it not true that you were once convicted of stealing? That you stole a watch from a member of your own family and tried to pawn the same?’

The arrogance slipped visibly. ‘A minor charge, sir ...’

‘Dishonesty all the same,’ whipped back Duval. ‘No further questions!’

The trial dragged on for three more days. The string of witnesses continued, each often contradicting the other and creating a murky image of the real purpose of the duel instead of the clear picture Lola had hoped for. There were times when she had to admit to herself that she had not really known the true Henri either. Why had she never had an inkling about his relationship with Francine Albert? Why, when they were so much in love, had he behaved so recklessly on that night,

getting drunk, gambling, and making lewd comments that were not in his normal nature? What force had compelled him onto a path he must have known would lead to disaster?

The devastating possibility that there was something in her own nature that had triggered his behavior was almost too frightening to contemplate. Instead, Lola would rush outdoors each night during the trial, trying to seek out his star, begging him to send her a sign, desperate to find some kind of answer. But the late skies were always overcast and mute.

The summing-up became a fiery battle of words and will between the prosecuting lawyers and the artful Pierre Berryer. As Lola had begun to fear, Berryer won. As the verdict was pronounced that Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon was acquitted of premeditated murder, but required to pay thirty thousand francs compensation to the dead man's mother and sister, Lola burst into tears and fled from the court.

Dumas hurried after her and caught up with her just as she was about to enter her carriage. 'Lola - all is not lost,' he gasped. 'We will fight on.'

Her eyes were still glazed with tears. 'What is the point? You played into Berryer's hands with all your fine posturing about how noble duels are. He took delight in molding our testimony. I couldn't go through that again.'

She climbed up into the carriage and Dumas followed her, closing the door behind him. He gripped her hands, but she kept a stiff pose and averted her eyes.

'Listen, Lola. Just now I spoke to a man who is willing to swear he saw de Beauvallon fire those pistols before the duel. Perjury is a very serious offense.'

Heat flared as she turned to look at him. 'So why did he not come forward before? What does it matter anyway? Nothing will bring Henri back to me.'

'We will avenge Dujarier's death some way, that I promise you.'

'You must do the avenging on your own. I am too tired.' Lola bit her lip as her tears dried upon her cheeks. 'I need to decide my future.'

'At least Henri must have left you well provided for.'

'Yes, I still have that.'

No sooner had Lola returned to Paris, than she was summoned to meet with Madame Dujarier's attorney, Léon Duval, to discuss Henri's estate. She visited his offices the next day, fully expecting to be told she had inherited a fortune.

Duval flicked back the tails of his coat and sat down at his orderly desk. His blank legal eyes gave no indication of what he was about to tell her. 'Now, Madame,' he began in a cool voice, 'or should it really be Senhora or even Senhorita? There was some confusion about your marital status and origins at the trial.'

'Madame will do.'

'Very well. Now, Madame, as you are aware, Monsieur Dujarier drew up a new will the night before he died in which he made considerable financial provision for you. However ...' Duval played with some sheets of paper as he pursed his lips

Lola felt her throat tighten. 'However - what?'

'However, I'm afraid Madame Dujarier and her daughter - on behalf of Monsieur's nephew - intend to lodge a legal dispute to this will to have it claimed invalid.'

'But I thought ...'

'Yes, I can see that you probably thought you would inherit something of his estate - his half-share in *La Presse*, or his several houses or securities - totaling more than half-a-million francs - but I'm afraid it is impossible.'

Lola stared at him. Her knowledge of the legal world was scant at best, but she had seen the will with her own eyes. Henri had wanted her to have half of everything. 'Stop beating around the bush, Monsieur. Why is it impossible?'

Duval pursed his lips again. 'Because French courts do not look generously on whores.'

A pain rent through her and she felt as if she had been stabbed. Her eyes flickered with fire and

her fists tightened. 'No-one calls me that and gets away with it,' she hissed.

Duval instinctively held up his hands before his face. 'Before you make the mistake of trying to assault me, Madame, hear me out,' he said rapidly.

Still seething, Lola forced herself to control, her fists remaining tightly clenched in her lap.

'France is a country like Janus. With two faces. The face that looks out is conservative, morally correct and virtuous. The other face is tolerant of vice and looks back to the shadows of the demi-monde. But our courts always find in favor of the outward face. Monsieur Dujarier inherited most of his money from his father and no court in this country would ever substitute the inheritance of rightful family members for that of a passing love interest.'

'But I was going to marry Henri,' she blurted. 'Everyone knew that. Our wedding had been set for the week after the duel.'

The lawyer tilted his head. 'That may be so, but the fact remains you openly cohabited with Monsieur Dujarier without any regard for the moral propriety. In that you deeply offended Madame Dujarier ...'

'Henri never spoke about his mother. I never even knew he had one until I saw her in the court.'

'Men rarely speak about their mothers to their mistresses.'

'We were going to be married. Doesn't that count for anything?'

'Monsieur Dujarier's intention and the fact will be seen as two quite different matters.'

'Can I not fight it?'

'You can try, but the chances of success are nil. I know the minds of most of our judges.'

As Duval finished speaking, a pall of silence fell on the room and he took a deep breath.

'Madame Dujarier is not totally insensitive to your plight and she expected you to lodge some dispute. She has authorized me to offer you the sum of fifty thousand francs in exchange for your co-operation.'

Lola's head swam. 'I need time to think about this,' she said hoarsely.

'Of course. Let me know your decision as soon as possible.'

Once she had recovered from the initial shock at Duval's crushing news, an angry Lola hurried in search of Dumas. She paced furiously about his studio and gave him an expletive-riddled account of what the lawyer had said.

But he only shook his head. 'He is probably right. I know only too well from my own experiences how conservative judges can be. Fifty thousand francs is a lot of money. I suggest you accept.'

'He dared to call me a whore to my face. If I accept the offer, it means I will have also accepted that I am a whore in the eyes of Henri's family,' she protested.

'I don't see any other way around it.'

'I was going to be Henri's wife, and he loved me. His intention was clear in his will. I will defend my name even if I can't claim my inheritance.'

'In that case, you will need a lawyer of your own.' Dumas wrote out the name and address of someone he thought might help her.

Before he handed her the slip of paper, he studied Lola for a minute, noticing subtle changes taking place in her. Still favoring black, with only a simple white lace collar as contrast, she looked every inch the unfortunate widow. She had lost weight since the trial and her usually sultry beauty had acquired an uncharacteristic fragile quality that made him feel more protective towards her than amorous.

Over the past few months he had wondered often about what had been going through the mind of Henri Dujarier between that fateful encounter at the Trois Freres and the morning he died. What was it that had troubled him so much he had tried to drink it out of oblivion? If he had really wanted to marry Lola, he could have arranged it at any time, yet he had continued to hold out until it was too late. He could have spurned the duel and not lost face. And he, Dumas, could never come to terms with the image of Henri standing still and letting de Beauvallon shoot him between the eyes.

It was as if he didn't care and had really wanted to die.

'Why are you staring at me like that?'

The beautiful tear-laden eyes had darkened and for the first time since he had known her, he was aware of something sinister hidden deep within those hypnotic sapphire wells. Something that she carried perhaps without her own knowledge. The shock of that sudden discovery made him stutter. 'P ... Pardon. I was just thinking of Henri - of how much the poorer we all are for his loss.'

'Yes, well, I'll be very much the poorer if I let Madame Dujarier have her way.' Lola dabbed at her eyes and almost snatched the note from between his fingers. 'Adieu,' she said briskly and left.

Dumas slipped slowly into the chair at his desk feeling a little queasy. His loss of interest in Lola as a sexual conquest had made him see more clearly the disturbing layers to her nature. Initially, he had thought the scandalous rumors whispered through the *demi-monde* of promiscuous dalliances with grooms and boot-boys in the Rhine country after the debacle at the Beethoven Festival to be no more than some fledgling reporter's wild imaginings. But now they seemed to carry some weight. That dark side of Lola he had just glimpsed was capable of sucking the lifeblood out of any man. Her appetites were capable of wreaking unimaginable havoc.

He let out an anguished sigh. 'Why did I not see it before? I might have saved you, Henri. Oh, my old friend, I am so sorry. It could just as easily have been my fate, but my bull-headedness and my thick skin have protected me. Lola Montez is not done with the world yet and soon some other tender man will fall victim to that fatal touch. How I pity him.'

With that strange divide that had developed between her and Dumas and no longer confident in his friendship, Lola spent several days consulting Henri's other friends, including Aurore, about what she should do. They were all unanimous that she should accept the money. However, she hesitated too long and Duval informed her that Madame Dujarier had promptly cut the offer to half.

With fiery indignation, Lola ordered her new attorney to file a suit for damages, demanding one hundred thousand francs in addition to the twenty-five offered. The more sensational Paris newspapers had the whiff of a good scandal brewing. Wild mistress versus saintly mother!

Madame Dujarier was appalled at such a prospect and promptly offered to settle out of court. Lola finally accepted the original fifty thousand francs and some shares in a Parisian theater. It wasn't the fortune she should have received, but it was enough to give her the independence she had always craved. There was also more than enough for a wardrobe of the finest gowns in Paris, jewels and a new carriage, groom and horses.

But the prospects of continuing her career on the Paris stage had dimmed. Besides, the city held too many sad memories. Lola announced to Myra that the time had come to pack their bags once again.

'Where will we go, Madame?' asked the maid.

'Who knows?' said Lola lightly, rather enjoying the prospect of a future that held no definable goals. 'It will depend on where we find ourselves.'

As the maid began to clear out the cupboards and boxes, she discovered an old travel booklet listing details of the royal families of Europe and was about to discard it, when Lola noticed it and picked it up. She flicked through its pages, remembering her unsuccessful earlier attempts at finding herself a prince. Well, there were still many more names in the book.

The evening before their departure, Lola paid a final visit to Madam Lena. The spiritualist tried again and there were a few brief moments when she went into a trance and faintly uttered the word, 'Baba.'

Her heart racing, Lola had cried out 'Parvati!' But nothing followed. It was as if the curtain separating the two worlds had refused to lift again. She had to console herself with a brief communication with Henri's star through the carriage window on the way back to the apartment.

Just after sunrise the next morning, Lola rose early and went to the flower market where she bought a large bouquet of white roses and violets and walked alone to the cemetery at Montmartre. She placed the flowers on Henri's grave and stood quietly with her head bowed for several minutes

before she took a deep breath, raised her head and ran her fingers across the marble headstone.

‘Farewell, my darling Bon-Bon,’ she whispered. ‘Remember whatever it is that I now go to do, you are the only one who ever completely held my heart. You are the only one who matters. Now ... and for always.’

PART III

‘There are no little events with the heart. It magnifies everything. It places in the same scales the fall of an empire ... and the dropping of woman’s glove, and almost always the glove weighs more than the empire.’

(Honoré de Balzac)

18.

The readers of newspaper gossip columns followed the wanderings of the notorious woman now known simply as ‘La Montez’ with avid interest. Myra took great delight in reading out the latest reports to her as they traveled across Europe.

‘Oh, Madame, listen to this one: “A reliable report informs us that a certain Spanish lady was seen traveling on the newly-opened Paris-Brussels train with a great deal of luggage and an Englishman named Francis Leigh in tow. We have heard of nights of wild passion and even wilder arguments in a hotel bedroom in Ostend, where the unfortunate gentleman was said to have narrowly missed a shot from the Senhora’s pistol”.’

Lola chuckled. It was only partly true. Tired of temperamental Frenchmen, Francis Leigh had been a bland and brief diversion. He had been hopeless as a lover and when she had discovered he had known some of Eliza James’ acquaintances, she hadn’t been able to think of a way of getting rid of him fast enough.

‘Now you know, Myra,’ she said with a sly glance, ‘that pistol really only went off by accident.’

‘But of course, Madame.’

They both laughed, and continued to enjoy the sensational press reports:

‘Was that Lola Montez seen taking the waters at Aix-le-Bains in the company of a certain duke who is without his duchess?’

‘A reliable source informs us that La Montez has been seen in the company of a Russian baron at Heidelberg.’

‘In Bern this week, Senhora Lola Montez has been riding with Mr. Robert Peel, the Secretary to the British Ambassador. Mr. Peel is the son of the recently retired British Prime Minister.’

‘Can it be? A well-known Spanish dancer on the arm of the Prince of Orange in the assembly rooms at Wiesbaden.’

‘Who is the infamous lady active in all the best resorts, but who seems to avoid Weimar where an equally infamous maestro of the keys is now in residence?’

Whether the reports were remotely true or not, Lola reveled in them. Each one only served to add to her mystique and her fame. Eventually, in a return visit to Baden-Baden, it seemed as if she had finally made the royal conquest she was rumored to be after.

Prince Heinrich LXXII ruled over the tiny, tidy, principality of Reuss-Lohenstein-Ebersdorf that any average horseman could canter around in less than three hours. He was rich, lived in a small but somewhat drafty and gloomy castle at Ebersdorf, and he was instantly hypnotized by this exotic woman who could ride, swear, and carouse as well as any man yet never lose her femininity in the process. He invited Lola to be his guest.

Myra thought he was dreary and didn’t hesitate to tell Lola so. ‘Any prince who comes from a dynasty that has seventy-two Heinrich’s has to have no imagination at all,’ she said with a sigh. ‘Madame will be bored with this stuffy place within weeks.’

Lola responded to her maid’s frank statement a threat to have her whipped for being cheeky, although instinctively she knew she was probably right. Still, she intended to create enough of a flurry to make the place interesting, for a while at least.

When the aging Prince's attempts at physical love-making were a complete failure, despite all her usual techniques, Lola turned her attention to attempts to modernize the castle. She persuaded Heinrich that if he wanted to be taken seriously as a ruler of note he had to update his outlook and way of life. She managed to get him to part with a small fortune for furniture, linens and glassware and suggested he give serious thought to knocking down half the palace and building a new one. The palace dignitaries were fit to be tied. Lola's blatant attempts to relax the pompous medieval formality of the court raised cries for her dismissal.

At first, Heinrich enjoyed the disturbance created by this whirlwind in their midst and ignored the grumblings but soon her exuberant presence began to tire even him. One day when he looked out of a window and saw her commit the folly of walking across newly-sown flower beds in the palace gardens in her riding boots, he called out to her to walk on the path.

Lola who was in a bad mood at being confined in the archaic surroundings, lifted her head. 'Oh, bugger the flowers,' she called up at him, shaking her riding whip. 'And bugger you too, you stupid old fool!'

Prince Heinrich grasped the row of medals and insignia that permanently decorated his chest and nearly passed out. Never in his principality's thousand-year history had a commoner - and a female at that - dared speak to any ruling head of the principality in such a fashion! He sent for his scribe who wrote out an expulsion order and gave it to Myra, who found Lola in the stable a few minutes later.

She laughed as she read it and tossed it into the air. 'Ah, well, we had some fun,' she said. 'But I'm not quite finished with that nincompoop yet.' Still in dirty boots, she marched over the carpets and through the drafty halls of the castle until she came to Heinrich's bedroom. Without knocking, she walked in, whip still in hand. Still suffering from shock, the Prince was lying on his bed, being fussed over by several concerned courtiers.

'So, is this how the Princes of this toy-town treat their advisers?' Lola said in her haughtiest voice, waving her dismissal notice. 'It's a disgrace!'

The Prince managed to raise his head. His face already red with rage turned to purple. 'Adviser? You're nothing but a meddling witch.'

Lola strolled around the bedroom pretending to examine the tapestries while tapping her gloved hand with her whip. 'I am quite prepared to leave,' she said, 'but first I insist on payment for my services rendered.'

The courtiers gave varying exclamations of horror. Royal mistresses were a fact of life and it was usually the Prince's prerogative to get rid of them. Never before had one been quite so brazen.

'I owe you nothing, woman,' snapped Heinrich. 'Now get out.'

Lola uttered a dramatic sigh, turned and gave her sweetest smile. 'Very well. But before I do, perhaps you would like to know that I have written a diary about my time in this squalid little court where pretty young girls are lured to give window dressing to a Prince who travels around the spas giving the impression of being a great lover when he is really nothing but an impotent old miser. I am sure *La Globe* in Paris would pay me well to publish Lola Montez's diary.'

There was a long pause while Heinrich's complexion faded to a pale puce. 'No you wouldn't ...' 'Try me.'

A few hours later, as Lola's carriage bumped its way over the rutted road that led to the border of the principality she and Myra were still chuckling. Her expenses over the last few weeks had been more than recouped from that fool Prince Heinrich, she'd had an adventure and life started to look promising once again. All that had to be decided now was which route to take.

The carriage lurched. There was an ominous grinding noise and the vehicle wobbled dangerously. Myra squealed in fright but the coachman managed to pull up the horses just as the sound of splintering rent the air. The carriage crashed heavily on to its side and the door fell open. Lola was up and out in a flash to discover they had lost a rear wheel.

At first, she was not too concerned knowing they carried a spare but René, her coachman, was

shaking his head in puzzlement. He pointed to the other rear wheel and to Lola's dismay, she noticed that it too had splintered and was on the verge of coming off the axle.

'Is this a coincidence?' she asked René.

'I don't think so, Madame,' he said in his slow fashion.

'Do you mean both wheels have been tampered with?'

'I would say both were loosened, and certainly not by me.'

Lola glanced back at the distant spires of Ebersdorf. A shiver ran down her spine. Someone in the Prince's court had hoped to get rid of her for good and it was only René's quick thinking that had saved them.

Well, there was no going back there for repairs. She surveyed their surroundings. They had been passing through the start of a pine forest when the accident occurred. The next town was probably miles away. Lola didn't intend to sit around waiting until the would-be assassins of Reuss came investigating the success of their deed. There was only one choice and that was to unhitch a horse and go for help.

To René's consternation, Lola ordered him to part with his cap, trousers and jacket. He protested that he should be the one to go, but Lola muttered tersely that he might be good at making horses stop but she was the only one to make them fly.

The male clothes were far too big for her, but she managed to hitch up the trousers as best she could and tucked her hair under cloth cap. Leaving René and Myra with a pair of pistols to guard the carriage and its expensive load of belongings, she saddled the best horse and galloped south.

She hadn't gone more than a few miles when she came to a village surrounded by hills. A carriage bearing a crest was parked outside an inn. She breathed a sigh of relief. Here at last was the chance of salvation.

The innkeeper gaped as Lola took off her cap and shook free her hair as she strode into the bar-room. 'A beer if you please,' she announced loudly. 'Your roads are abominable. There's enough dust in my throat to make a desert.'

The innkeeper continued to look stunned. Lola stopped and put her hands on her hips and retaliated with her usual withering stare. 'I am dressed like this because my coach has broken down and I've had to ride for help. Does that satisfy you?'

A chuckle emanated from a corner. 'Well, by Saint Christophe, can it be she who dances on tables?'

Lola turned around and saw a middle-aged man sitting on a bench, legs laconically crossed. He was well-dressed, balding and with a trim mustache.

'Are you talking to me?' she asked stiffly.

The man looked pointedly around the bar-room and its few yokel customers. 'I don't see anyone else who fits that description.'

'You must be mistaken. I've never danced on a table in my life,' snapped Lola and turned her attention to the innkeeper who had produced a beer.

'Oh, really? It must have been your twin sister I saw in Bonn last August. The same sister who used to dance Spanish tarantellas at the Porte-Sainte-Martin Theater in Paris.'

Lola's eyes slid cautiously sideways as she sipped on the beer.

'I thought she was rather good actually,' continued the man as he examined his fingernails. 'It warmed my heart to see that pompous prick of a piano-player Liszt taken down a peg.'

This time Lola turned to face him. 'So, you assume to know who I am. Can I ask who you are?'

Slowly and deliberately the man rose to his feet and bowed. 'Baron von Maltzahn at your service, Madame. I am Chamberlain to His Majesty King Ludwig of Bavaria. Now did I hear that you need assistance with your coach?'

The light from the second story window cast its lonely beam across the cobblestones of the Residenz courtyard. It often glowed at four o'clock in the morning but, apart from the palace guards, few of the residents of Munich who might have been about at such an hour would have

guessed it was the King himself hard at work. They would have been even more surprised to know that he was not busying himself with important dispatches, but writing poetry.

Ever since he had been a boy, Ludwig had been one of those rare people who needed less sleep than most. Whether it was the natural result of a precarious and nightmarish childhood lived in the shadow of the guillotine or just another of his several eccentricities, even Ludwig himself would have been unable to say. He liked the peace of those early hours without the distractions and stresses of daily life at court in which to indulge in his favorite past-time.

More often than not his poems fairly blazed with exuberant emotion, but today he was in a more somber mood. Lately, he had been feeling tired and hollow inside. He was sixty years old and for the first time in his life he was without focus. He was not in love.

Slowly he dipped his quill and wrote the title: *Unloved*.

'To charm me Nature hath no might,

No longer Beauty gives delight ...'

Politics and diplomacy were inevitably the most important part of a king's life, but to Ludwig Wittelsbach, King of Bavaria, Love, Beauty and Art were the true reasons for existence.

His passion for Beauty and Art had turned Munich from a dull provincial country capital into one of the most magnificent cities in Europe, with broad streets, grand classical buildings and galleries filled with paintings, mostly from the Italian masters, all purchased at great expense.

But Love couldn't be captured on canvas or in stone. It was far too ephemeral and his life had been an endless quest for its perfection. He still had deep devotion for his wife of over thirty years, Queen Therese, but although she had been beautiful when young, she was now in her fifties, had borne him seven children, and their days of passion were long over. Therese knew him well and she quietly tolerated the indulgences so necessary to his nature.

Great volumes of his poetry and love letters filled the shelves of his private library. To his greatest love, the Italian beauty, Mariannina Florenzi, he had written nearly three thousand letters and received almost as many replies. But Mariannina, like Therese, had also been unable to halt the march of time. The perfection of features that had sent him into raptures of delight had also faded and no longer moved him to write poetry about her.

There had been many others, of course, that captured his fancy over the years. Princesses or wives of diplomats, the infamous Englishwoman, Jane Digby: others were the daughters of simple farmers or shopkeepers. Pedigree had no relevance to him. First, it was their physical beauty that attracted him and only then would he hope for Love. At times, he would embark on an affair of great joy, but sooner or later reality would interfere in the guise of a father or husband who wanted a more practical existence for the woman. He would be forced to bid fond farewell, although he would promptly start searching for another Beauty to light his life.

Ludwig was well aware of the lewd comments made by the courtiers and ministers behind his back whenever he discovered an enchanting new face, but he had learned to ignore them. They simply didn't understand. Sensual pleasures could be had anywhere and at any time, and he had taken his fill of those as well, but true Love was sacred. It was to be prized and kept pure at all costs and if it was set alongside Beauty, it was the ultimate joy of his life.

He dipped his quill again and wrote the closing stanza:

'All Love is finished, Beauty dead

And I with Love with no longer wed.'

Uttering a world-weary sigh, the King lifted his eyes to gaze out across Max Joseph Platz as the dawn lit up the angles of the royal Residenz. The city he had created in the image of an ancient Athens or Rome held a rosy glow and Ludwig's heart filled with that sought-after moment of pleasure. Perhaps it wasn't too late after all and Love was still out there somewhere searching for him.

'I've never heard of anything so ridiculous!'

Dressed in her most dramatic, if somewhat flimsiest, red and black costume, Lola stood on the

stage of the Court Theater, hands on hips and gave the director, August Frays, an imperious glare. She hadn't taken more than two steps before her audition was rudely interrupted by his cries and a wave of his hands.

'I am sorry, Senhora, but those are the rules,' said Frays stiffly. Her blatant expectation to receive at least half the box office receipts had astounded him enough, but it was her costume that gave him a valid excuse to reject her.

Lola turned to the wings. 'Baron! What kind of a petty kingdom is this? In a pathetic Poland one expects censorship, but I thought Bavaria was more civilized?'

Baron von Maltzahn who had been watching the abortive audition lifted his shoulders. 'I'm sorry, but it must be a new rule that the King has introduced since I was here last.'

Lola scoffed, and Frays frowned. 'The King only wants the best theater for his subjects,' he said.

'Oh, and Spanish dancing is not suitable, is that it?'

'I didn't say that, Senhora - only your costume is not appropriate. It is a little too ... revealing.'

'Fiddlesticks!' Lola took a deep breath, causing her breasts to heave and re-emphasize their ample curves. 'I will go the King myself, so that he may decide.' Lola spun her skirts and flounced off the stage.

Frays' face was tight with fury as the Baron attempted an excuse. 'I'm sorry, Herr Director, you know what Spanish women are like,' he said lamely.

'No, I don't,' snapped Frays, 'but if she is an example, I won't have any in this theater.'

A few minutes later the Baron found Lola cooling her heels outside the theater and puffing angrily on a cigarette. 'Well, that wasn't a very good start was it?' he said.

'Why didn't you tell me this was another country still living in the dark ages?'

'Lola, that's untrue. King Ludwig is one of the most enlightened monarchs alive today. It's his public service that is sometimes archaic.'

'So? We by-pass his servants. You told me you know the King personally. Get me an interview with him.'

The Baron sighed. 'Very well. I'll do what I can.'

King Ludwig's depressed mood had returned by the time his valet came in to shave him. A meeting with the Minister for the Interior, the formidable and religious Karl von Abel, had been scheduled for after breakfast and he would rather not have to think about it.

In recent years, Ludwig had been content to leave Abel with the daily routines of running the country while he indulged himself in his acquisition of Art and Beauty. Lately, however, the clouds of dissension had been gathering among the other ministers over Abel's autocratic methods and his oppression of religious freedom. Even the Crown Prince felt it was time his father stepped in before the population became agitated. Suffering from a degree of deafness from childhood, Ludwig had often used his handicap as an excuse when he hadn't wanted to hear an argument, but the noise being made was too loud to ignore any longer. Sooner or later he would have to deal with it.

While his valet prepared his shaving mixture, Ludwig frowned at himself in his looking-glass, wondering if he was now far too old and ugly to ever be truly loved again, when an aide-de-camp came into the dressing room, bowed and saluted.

'Well, what is it?' said the King gruffly, his attention now focused by what looked like the beginnings of a boil on his forehead.

'I have for your Majesty's perusal the list of people seeking audience today,' said Count Reinhard von Reinberg.

'I can't see anyone today. Have you forgotten I must talk with Abel? That is far more important than trifles.'

'Some of these people have applied several times, your Majesty.'

'Can't the Crown Prince see them?'

'No, your Majesty. The Minister of the Interior has refused their requests and they are demanding to see you. You were always available to your subjects before. They are not so easily dismissed.'

Ludwig let out a heavy sigh. ‘Tell me the names and their complaints and I will decide whom I can see.’

Reinhard unrolled a sheet of paper and began reciting the names. It was the usual dreary list of petitions and requests for licenses or compensation that in his younger, more enthusiastic, days Ludwig would have dealt with personally but increasingly over the years had handed to the hands of his ministers. The boil still had Ludwig’s main attention as he nodded or shook his head in response to each request.

‘Lola Montez seeks permission to dance at the Court Theater.’

‘Eh? Did you say *dance*?’

‘Yes, your Majesty.’

‘I can’t waste time with dancers. What is Herr Director Frays thinking of, sending such a request to me?’

‘It is not from the Director, your Majesty. This request comes from your Chamberlain, Baron von Maltzahn, on behalf of the Senhora herself. They allege Frays is dismissive of the lady’s dancing and wish to demonstrate her skills before the King.’

‘What did you say was this woman’s name?’ If Ludwig hadn’t been so absorbed in the state of his face he would have noticed his aide-de-camp’s lengthy hesitation. Less than two years before, Reinhard von Reinberg had known the woman in question on highly intimate terms. He had continued to follow the newspaper reports of her colorful career with continual astonishment.

‘Speak up, man. What did you say?’

‘Apologies, your Majesty. She is Senhora Lola Montez.’

‘Who? Oh, wait a minute. Senhora did you say? She is Spanish?’

‘Er ... she alleges that she is, your Majesty.’

Eventually, Reinhard was to regret many times not telling the King immediately that Lola was a complete fraud, but at the time it would have meant having to explain how he knew her, and there were a few of his own secretive activities that he would rather keep to himself. However, not in his wildest dreams could he have imagined what would ultimately transpire as a result.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen a real Spanish dancer,’ mused the King, his tired eyes showing a fresh spark.

Lola dressed carefully for her audience with the King. She chose one of her molded, corset-less, black velvet gowns that emphasized her full breasts and tiny waist. In her ears, she wore a pair of drop pearl earrings - a gift from the Baron for some extra amusement she provided for him since they had arrived in Munich - and her hair was covered by one of the gold lace mantillas she wore for dancing.

She sensed some added charge to the autumn air that day as she took a cabriolet for the short trip from the Bayerischer Hof to the palace. The citizens had just finished celebrating the Oktoberfest and the city retained its happy atmosphere.

At the foot of the great sweeping staircase that led to the royal audience chamber, she paused, aware of the looks she generated from the passing courtiers. Taking a deep breath, she mounted the stairs.

Two sentries stood guard at a large double door which apparently led to the King’s chambers, and a man in uniform sat at a large desk. Bending over him, discussing some papers was another uniformed man - and one of the last people she ever thought to see again. Her breath caught.

Both men looked up at her at the same time. There was instant interest on the face of the seated man while Reinhard’s cold eyes betrayed nothing. ‘And you are?’ he said rapidly.

She stepped forward and handed him the Baron’s letter of introduction. ‘Senhora Montez. I was told to call at this time.’

‘Take a seat, *Senhora*.’ Reinhard’s deliberate emphasis of the Spanish word retained a hint of mockery. ‘His Majesty is extremely busy. He will see you when he can.’

Lola glanced around the empty waiting room with its ornately carved high-back chairs and an

enormous vertical baroque clock with a very loud tick. 'I trust I will not be kept waiting too long,' she murmured.

Reinhard did not bother to respond, while the other man sat and ogled Lola for several minutes. She reciprocated with a brief flirtation through her eyelashes as she perched primly on the edge of one of the uncomfortable chairs.

The distant sound of a bell ringing put an swift end to the communication between the two men and the sitting man abruptly left his chair and hurried through an unobtrusive narrow door at the end of the room while Reinhard remained standing, flicking through papers on the desk.

The clock ticked by and Lola began to get irritable. 'Are you keeping me waiting on purpose?' she said at last.

Reinhard did not bother to lift his eyes. 'Now why should you think that, Senhora?'

Lola stood up and strolled to the desk, where she edged close enough to Reinhard for their sleeves to touch. 'Because I have a long memory, Count,' she said in a breathy voice. 'You might choose to forget our acquaintance, but I most certainly have not.'

He glanced aside at her, his face remaining blank. 'Have we met?'

'Ah.' Lola nodded. 'I see. That's the way we are playing this game.' She pressed herself close to him. 'I wonder if you ever heard the rumor about what I did in St Petersburg?'

She detected the flash of uncertainty in his eyes before she shrugged and turned around, pretending to amble back towards the waiting room chair before darting off in the direction of the small door through which the other aide-de-camp had disappeared. Before either Reinhard or the two guards standing to attention on the main waiting room door could react, Lola had flung the discreet door aside. It opened on to a small ante room and yet another door.

'What the hell! Come back here!'

With the guards' clattering swords and boots and Reinhard's curses echoing in her ears, she fled towards the second door and struggled with the handle for a few seconds. Just as it turned in her grasp, Reinhard managed to grab hold of her shoulder. She twisted her arm away, and there was the sound of black velvet tearing. She kicked him hard in the shins. He yelled and fell back a fraction, enough to let her slip through the door. She slammed it behind her, noticing there was a key in the lock which she swiftly turned. She pressed her back against the door, closing her eyes for a few seconds as her heart pounded to get her breath back. When she opened her eyes again, she was looking straight into the astonished face of King Ludwig of Bavaria.

The King stood motionless, oblivious to Reinhard's yelling and banging on the opposite side of the door, wondering if his own imagination had conjured up this vision that stood before him.

Eyes of vivid Mediterranean blue - moist red lips half parted - wild tendrils of glossy hair cascading over a delicate shoulder - a single naked breast as translucent as alabaster, its rosy nipple the artist's final touch of perfection - the living symbol of Botticelli's Venus rising from the sea in all her magnificence.

When she spoke, the vision became reality.

'Go on - stare. I've two of them,' she said.

He did not hear the acid tone in her voice. Only Venus speaking her love to Mars.

Lola pulled away the torn bodice to reveal her second breast and thrust herself forward. 'There! What do you say to that?'

His held breath escaped in a gasp of near ecstasy.

As the banging on the door became more insistent, the first aide-de-camp reappeared from behind the King and failing to avert his eyes from the spectacular view of Lola's breasts, moved mechanically to unlock the door.

Reinhard and the two guards nearly fell into the room. Lola instantly crossed her arms over herself. For a few seconds all men seemed frozen as they stared at the half-naked Lola, before one guard pounced and grabbed her upper arm, his fingers pressing hard into her flesh. Lola gave a cry of pain and tried to twist away.

Ludwig was horrified as he came out of his daze. 'What are you doing, you fool? You will

damage her skin!’

The guard released his grip. ‘But your Majesty, this woman means to harm you!’

The King shook his head as he continued to drink in Lola’s beauty for almost a minute until he became aware of the indelicacy of the situation. ‘Nonsense. You are idiots. Bring the lady something to cover herself,’ he said roughly.

Reinhard, his face red with anger rather than embarrassment, quickly unbuttoned his own jacket and placed it around Lola’s shoulders. As he did so, he couldn’t help but notice the victorious expression on her face. ‘Take care with what you are doing here,’ he hissed in her ear, knowing the King was too deaf to hear, ‘or you’ll have me to answer to.’

The lips of Venus mouthed ‘Piss off,’ in Reinhard’s ear in response and he fought to control the instinct to hit her.

‘Now you can all leave us,’ said the King.

‘But your Majesty ...’

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ Ludwig waved an impatient hand at the men.

As the door closed behind them, Ludwig himself turned the key in the lock. He smiled at Lola almost shyly. ‘Such fools,’ he said gruffly. ‘All they know is swords and pistols.’

‘Your Majesty must have such men for your protection,’ she murmured.

The King shrugged lightly as he continued to stare into Lola’s eyes. ‘But I know you have not come to harm me.’

Lola studied his face, taking in all the crags and valleys of a strenuous sixty years. This was not the haughty aristocratic face of a Tsar Nicholas or Frederick William. Crowned with a shock of graying hair, it was a blunt-featured face in which a pair of wide-set light blue eyes regarded the world with a mixture of irritability and a strange kind of benevolence. The well-formed lips hiding between a untidy mustache and narrow Van Dyke beard looked as if they had spent a lifetime compressed against revealing the true character. She remembered hearing that the Wittelsbach line was said to be sown with the seeds of madness.

She had a brief flash of regret at her loss of temper and lowered her eyes to concentrate on buttoning the frog fastenings of Reinhard’s jacket before lifting her eyes again. ‘I apologize if I behaved in a rude manner towards your Majesty,’ she said silkily.

Ludwig blushed like a boy and raised his square-fingered hands in protest. ‘No. It is I who should apologize. To have stared at you so when you were in a state of er ... *dishabille* ... was unforgivable,’ he replied.

Lola smiled and dropped into a curtsy. ‘I accept your apology, sir,’ she said demurely. ‘I am Dona Lola Montez from Seville. I have an introduction from Baron von Maltzahn.’

Ludwig nodded. ‘Please come and sit.’

Lola did as he asked, looking around the King’s study, surprised at its white-walled austerity. She had heard King Ludwig was a great collector of art but there was nothing in here but the flat surface of cupboards and shelves lined with books.

He seemed to know what she was thinking. ‘This is just a room where I work on matters of state,’ he said. ‘I keep its distractions to a minimum. I must show you my collections some time - especially my Gallery of Beauty, where soon your portrait will hang.’

Lola lifted her eyebrows. ‘My portrait?’

‘Oh, but yes.’ Ludwig beamed and yet again she was surprised by the air of innocence about him. ‘You are the most ... most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Your portrait will have pride of place.’

She fluttered her eyelashes. ‘You honor me, sir, but I hadn’t come here on such account.’

‘No, of course.’ Ludwig sat down behind his desk. ‘You wish to dance at the Court Theater?’

‘That is correct, your Majesty. Your Director refuses my request. Herr Frays said I may not dance as I am lewd,’ she said.

Horror filled Ludwig’s face. ‘I can not believe he would have said that?’

‘He did. Perhaps I can dance for you, your Majesty, so that you can see for yourself?’

Ludwig's face flushed again and swallowed awkwardly. 'Er ... well, yes certainly you may dance. But don't you need music?'

'The dances of Spain have their own music,' said Lola.

She stood up and gyrated slowly, twisting her head over her shoulder while maintaining eye contact with the King. She clapped her hands above her head, stamped and tossed her hair. Lowering her arms behind her back, she swayed her hips rhythmically. Reinhard's oversize jacket slipped off her shoulder and she was conscious of her seductive image. She made love to the King with all the power of her hypnotic eyes. Hernandez would have been proud of her.

The King's tight mouth fell open before he managed to restrain himself and he waved his hand. 'Er ... thank you, Senhora, that will suffice,' he stuttered. 'Your interpretation is quite ... quite moving.'

Lola stopped and sank gracefully on to the chair, her eyes never leaving the King's. 'So do I have your Majesty's permission to dance at the Court Theater at fifty percent of the take?' she said.

Ludwig frowned slightly and put his hand behind his ear. 'I'm a little deaf. What did you say?'

Lola put both elbows on the royal desk, looking deep into his eyes while she cupped her chin.

She enunciated her words crisply. 'I said I'm looking forward to your Majesty attending my first performance at the Court Theater.'

The compressed lips eased into a smile. 'Oh, yes, definitely. Never fear, I shall be there.'

For the next half-an-hour Ludwig concentrated on small talk, practising his Spanish, asking Lola questions about her background, the answers to which he barely digested. He was too busy struggling with the disturbing images she had created during her dancing. He didn't like to have Beauty and Love and their other, darker, ally - Sex - mixed up together. Beauty was for admiring. Love was for cherishing. And both were for putting on pedestals. Sex was a messy grunting romp with a harlot or cheap actress in her boudoir, a quick physical release just as quickly forgotten. But how was he going to separate the one from the other in this exquisite woman who had literally fallen into his life? How thick and glossy her hair. How exquisite the tip of her nose. How small and neat her hands and feet - and always the memory of those spectacular breasts.

When the clock chimed to remind him of other duties and he had to dismiss her, he was impressed with the dignity with which she managed to curtsy despite her torn dress and a man's jacket.

Ludwig sighed inwardly. If he had been younger, the temptations might have proved too strong but in the case of this magnificent woman, this gift from God, he decided that, first and foremost, Beauty must win the day.

Lola made a point of ignoring Reinhard as the King escorted her out of his study and into the antechamber, by now full of concerned courtiers and guards come to discover the cause of all the fuss.

She surveyed them with a haughty glance before turning to the King, saying in a clear voice, 'Your Majesty can tell your aide-de-camp that I will see his coat is returned to him.'

Shocked expressions at the familiarity in her tone painted their own picture and Lola again felt that curious charge within her, not unlike the sexual urge but infinitely more variable, more capable of lasting and growing into something grander, more consuming. She recognized it for it was: it was the germination of the seed of power.

After Lola had been escorted out of the Residenz by two of the King's personal guard, Ludwig ordered Count Reinhard into his study. 'You will see that Senhora Montez is given full accreditation as a Spanish dancer of the Court Theater,' he said. 'And that all courtesies are extended to her - except that she will be paid one-third.'

'Herr Frays says she is not up to the theater's high standard,' began Reinhard cautiously.

Ludwig glowered. 'What does he know? He's just an oaf. Now don't argue with me.'

For the next two nights, Ludwig hardly slept at all. His body seemed to have regressed thirty years. Energy and vitality surged into tired muscles and arteries. He would retire at midnight to be freshly awake again four hours later when he would hurry to his desk overlooking the Max Joseph Platz and write reams of poetry about the new-found purpose in his life.

*‘Joyfully wakens the heralded morning
Rapturously dawns Love’s bright sun anew.’*

In the morning, he would abandon all state matters to his ministers and ride for hours through his favorite trails in the English Garden, seeing Lola’s grace even in Nature - in the delicate fall of autumn leaves, in the glide of swans. Her lilting voice in the birdsong, her eyes in the blue of the sky.

At first, he told no-one about his feelings, but after he attended Lola’s debut at the Court Theater, he knew he would not be able to contain himself no longer. He wanted everyone - the whole world, in fact - to know about his love for the greatest Beauty of their age.

‘The Enchanted Prince’, a musical play in three acts with its curiously prophetic title, opened on 9th October 1846. Ludwig sat impatiently through the first act of the improbable farce with hands clasped tightly.

Eventually came the interval and a few minutes’ pause. A violinist started to play and the curtain lifted to reveal a woman posed with a veil over her face. She slowly lowered it to reveal her stunning eyes, casually flicked back the black lace skirt that sparkled with a thousand hidden diamantes, and stepped forward into the life of a King.

Ludwig did not hear the mixed applause, even the usual hisses from the more discerning members of the audience. All he heard was the sound of his blood pounding in his ears, the beat of his own heart, the trembling of his own breath, his brain busy with plans on how best to woo his Venus.

Karl von Abel had been one of the first to detect the change in the King. For two days in a row, Ludwig had failed to attend their usual briefings in the morning. When his servants reported that he was not ill, but had been wandering around communing with Nature instead, Abel sighed with exasperation. Yet another of the King’s eccentricities. He went in search of him and found him contemplating the rose bushes in the arcades of the Hofgarden, a few of which still carried the remnants of summer blooms.

‘Ah, Abel, my good fellow,’ said Ludwig jovially as he saw him approach. ‘Isn’t life a marvel? Just look at these plants. Aren’t they delightful?’

Abel hesitated. ‘Ah, yes, your Majesty.’

‘I have written a poem about roses. Three pages. You must read it.’

‘Sir - there are important dispatches for you to attend to.’

Ludwig either didn’t hear him, or pretended not to. He hummed to himself as he moved among the roses. ‘I am glad you have come. I want you to arrange a special convening of the court. I want everyone to meet my new friend, Senhora Lola Montez.’

Abel coughed. Although the whole incident had been hushed up, he already heard from Count Reinberg about the debacle that caused the aide-de-camp to part with his jacket. It became clear to him that the King had been acting strangely because he was preoccupied with the woman involved. Ludwig had often displayed similar symptoms when he was sickening for love in the past, but he had always been discreet, never mentioning the woman’s name - but to introduce her to the court?

‘I am sorry, your Majesty, did I hear you correctly? You wish to officially present a *dancer* to the Court?’ He stared at the King with incredulity.

‘Am I the only one privileged with deafness?’ retorted Ludwig impatiently. ‘You heard me. Senhora Montez is not just a dancer - she is going to be my friend and teach me about Spain.’

Abel had been given a brief résumé on the woman by Count Reinhard, something about dubious

origins, numerous love affairs, duels, associations with irreligious personalities. He wished now he had paid more attention to it before this meeting. 'If his Majesty wishes to study Spanish,' he said, 'I am sure he could find a suitable tutor among his own priests.'

Ludwig scowled at the interruption to his happy mood. 'Are you daring to argue with me?'

Abel bowed his head slightly. 'Never, your Majesty, but this woman, you know little about her. I have it on authority she has led a disreputable life ...'

Ludwig waved at him. 'Enough. I know everything I need to know about the Senhora. Now do as I ask before I seriously consider making changes to the Ministry.'

Abel retreated to his offices in a rage. He was used to Ludwig's occasional bouts of irrational behavior, but this time there was a feeling in his gut that this was different.

At the second night's performance of '*The Enchanted Prince*', Lola was not hissed or booed, unaware that Ludwig had ordered his secret police into the stalls and gallery to make sure everyone gave her the appreciation to which she was entitled. As she concluded her latest version of *El Oleano* to a wild applause, she sank down in a deep curtsy. After blowing kisses to the audience, most of which were aimed in the King's direction, she took a number of spritely and delicate skips to leave the stage.

Waiting for her in her dressing room was a large bouquet of flowers and an envelope with the royal cipher which contained the King's request to pay a visit to her at her hotel, details of an appointment with the royal portraitist, and a short poem.

*'Time hath ceased to be
Youth hath conquered age
Since Andalusia's goddess
Danced upon my stage.
My eyes do barely close
When in my dreams I see
Renewal of my hope
Sweet Love's return to me.'*

Lola smiled. It wasn't a very good poem, but it had the painstaking mark of sincerity. He was writing of love. Could it be that she had so quickly succeeded in turning the old King's head? Remarkable possibilities now lay at her feet.

Right from the start, Ludwig didn't bother to disguise his new intoxication. So overjoyed was he with his discovery of the ultimate Beauty, he wanted to show Lola to the world, and in bold contravention of every rule of royal etiquette, he did. Ignoring the shocked faces and sniggers, he openly visited her at her hotel and accompanied her to the studio of the artist Joseph Stieler where she sat for the first sketches of her portrait.

Abel watched Lola's rapid progress guardedly. It was not surprising the King was dazzled by her. Not only was she outstandingly beautiful, she was intelligent, had a wide knowledge of European politics, and a ready wit. Yet there was also something about her that was dangerous. All he could do was hope that it was just an infatuation that would soon pass away.

Ludwig and Lola were rarely alone together for long. Only in the confines of a carriage or in her hotel sitting room were they safe from prying ears and eyes.

Lola's German still needed perfecting, but Ludwig insisted they speak Spanish, never realizing that it was not her native tongue. She often had to rack her brains to make herself sound convincing but fortunately there were no other Spanish-speakers in Ludwig's court.

'Please don't call me Majesty,' he said as he escorted Lola back to her hotel from a sitting for her portrait. 'I am just Ludwig.'

'Ludwig,' Lola murmured the name with a slight frown, thinking it sounded similar to the English earwig, which was hardly an attractive synonym. 'To be honest, I don't think it suits you.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Oh, really. What sort of name would you like me to have?'

Lola studied him with a coy tilt of her head. 'You are cultured. Refined. Romantic. To me, you

are more of a ... a Louis.'

He flushed. 'Why, that is the French equivalent of my name.'

'May I call you Louis?'

Ludwig's lips compressed for a few seconds. 'My godfather was Louis XVI of France. To be honest, I've never cared for the French much after what they did to him and my poor godmother, Marie Antoinette.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry - I ought to have remembered.'

'You weren't to know.'

'But I do know. I've been reading and studying so much about you - and all the wonderful things you've done for Bavaria - how much your subjects adore you.'

Ludwig flushed again.

'I loved the story about how when you were born the soldiers from your father's regiment all shaved off their beards and had a little pillow stuffed with the shavings as a present to you.'

He laughed. 'How astonishing, and what other little gems about me did you discover?'

'Oh, that you adore art, music and science. That you passionately love your country and most of modern Munich is your creation. Apart from German, you speak French, Italian, Greek and English - and just a smattering of Spanish, of course. I know that you believe in tolerance and personal freedom.' She shook her finger playfully at him. 'And I also know that you can be a little miserly and irritable at times, but that you have a generous heart.'

'My goodness, you have been busy. And you are not afraid to be frank, which is most refreshing.' Ludwig edged towards her, his face glowing with pleasure. 'Is this irritable, miserly old King really that interesting to someone so young and beautiful?'

'Utterly fascinating.'

He sighed tremulously and reached for her gloved fingers, cupping them as tenderly as if they were birds. 'My little Lolita. You can't begin to imagine the joy you are bringing into my life. I love you. Be with me. Anything you want is yours.'

'Anything?'

He nodded, his eyes moist with tears of happiness.

The carriage drew up outside her hotel and Lola glanced out of the window.

'Well, my sweet Louis, first of all I could really do with somewhere better to live.'

Joseph Stieler was ordered to paint slowly. The portrait of Lolita would be the most important one in Ludwig's Gallery of Beauties - and the King wanted it to be perfect.

Lola was dressed in her usual smooth black velvet with a silver belt at her waist and a white lace collar at her neck, at the center of which was a jeweled pendant - one of Ludwig's first gifts to her. On her head she wore a short black veil fixed with three red carnations. Her wide blue eyes stared demurely from a three-quarter profile, with her expression revealing nothing of her inner thoughts.

She had had several portraits painted over the years, each of which had shown something of her tempestuous nature, but this one had to be different. She already knew what she was up against, for the tongues of Munich had already started to wag.

Events had escalated swiftly. Ludwig had moved Lola and her maid into a small house close to the Residenz but he was already talking to architects with the intent of finding something better.

In the few weeks since their first meeting, he had already showered her with enough money and jewels for her to forget about ever appearing on the stage again. And so far Ludwig had asked for nothing more in return other than her constant presence whenever he could escape his royal duties.

'Lolita, see what I have brought you.' The King came hurrying into the artist's studio, a small sack in his arms. 'And you can take a break, Stieler,' he added.

The artist sighed and put down his brush. This was the third time that day the King had found some excuse to interrupt, and each time Stieler was expected to absent himself. He took off his smock and left, grumbling to himself.

Ludwig placed the bundle in Lola's arms. It squirmed and whimpered, and she opened it to

reveal a black Newfoundland pup. 'You told me how much you adore animals,' he said. 'He's only a few weeks old. When he grows up, he'll protect you.'

'Oh, Louis. Oh, the darling!' She cuddled and stroked the puppy and carefully put him down on the floor where he promptly scampered around wagging his tail. She threw her arms about Ludwig's neck and kissed him on the mouth.

He stiffened and extricated himself from her embrace. 'It is best you don't thank me in such a fashion,' he said.

Lola looked at him in amazement. 'But, Louis, why ever not? I have been waiting so long for you to kiss me.'

He swallowed and lowered his eyes briefly. 'It is not that I don't want to kiss you, but kisses lead to other ... things.'

'Of course they do. Is that so wrong?'

'It is when it could ruin what is special between us.'

'I don't understand.'

Ludwig's mouth compressed into its tight line. He turned his attention to the partly finished portrait for a few moments before looking at her again. 'You, my precious Lolita, represent everything that is beautiful in this world. And Beauty is sacred to me. Were we to lie together, I would feel I had defiled that Beauty. We would relegate ourselves to the mundane and you would compare me to the other men you may have known, and soon I would lose you.'

Lola stared at him, trying to comprehend what he was saying.

'You mean that our love must be *platonic*?'

He nodded. 'I can see that such an idea is strange to you, but I have always believed that men and women are capable of far greater spiritual love than they ever strive for because they are always blinded by passion. The demands of the body can be trying to any relationship. One partner wants more than the other is prepared to give. One is not satisfied with the other's performance. Soon there is cause for jealousy or boredom and the love dies. That must not happen to us. Destiny has brought us together for a far greater purpose than that.'

Lola was silent for a few minutes before picking up the puppy, stroking its head while she digested Ludwig's words. She had been quite prepared to give herself to the King, even though his aging body held no attraction for her. She knew that she could detach herself mentally from the act if she absolutely needed to, but somehow the thought of a platonic relationship with him seemed far more intimate.

Ludwig had spoken of destiny. Perhaps finally this odd spiritual love affair was that destiny she had always been seeking. She felt both relieved and strangely excited at the prospect. Without being obliged to tease and tempt Ludwig with the promise of physical release, there would be no limit to what she might be able to extract from their partnership.

She answered with a smile. 'If that is how you wish things to be, Louis, that is fine with me. And if you ever want to change your mind, all you have to do is say.'

Ludwig took a deep breath and gave a little shake of happiness. 'Oh, my adorable Lolita, what a woman you are.'

Lola laughed and the puppy echoed by barking. 'And now, my equally adorable Louis, what are we going to call this little terror?'

As a humble maid, Myra should have watched the roll of events as no more than the captive bystander, but she and Lola had been through a great deal together. Companions in the lean times, they had laughed and squabbled together, had parted acrimoniously yet been reunited. Myra knew Lola better than anyone - knew both the light and dark sides of her nature - and had often been her sole confidante. But Lola's behavior in those months after Henri Dujarier's death was nothing compared to the mercenary nature she was revealing now. With the power of a throne within her grasp, she would not take the advice of anyone, least of all from Myra. In turn, Myra sensed the time was coming when Lola would no longer want her around. She was a reminder of the past, and

Lola always removed the past whenever it was necessary.

It was just as well that Myra had plans for a new future of her own. Shy René, Lola's French coachman, had fallen in love with her. He disliked Munich and wanted to go home to Paris. He had asked Myra to return there with him as his bride.

All she needed now was to find the right moment to break the news to Lola.

Her body glistening with the delicate sheen of scented oil, Lola stretched out along the divan like a cat while her fingers toyed with the folds of a red silk toga draped across one naked shoulder. All her life she had enjoyed the sensation of a body free of clothing and soon that image would be captured forever on a glass plate.

'Please do not move, Madame. Not even a blink,' whispered the photographer. 'You must be still for at least to the count of sixty.'

The daguerreotypes were to be a special present for her Louis. Painted portraits were all very well, but few artists were able to capture the truth like the wonderful new invention of the camera. And Lola wanted to give Louis the truth as she really was. Frozen in her erotic pose for the required time she wondered if the photographer wanted her. He was young, and it had been far too long since she had felt the hardness of a male.

'Very good, Madame. Do you wish another?'

She blinked and rolled on to her stomach, the red material slipping from her shoulders. Lifting her legs, she crossed them at the ankles and placed a finger in her mouth while giving the young man a sultry look. 'How does this look to you?' she murmured.

'Most attractive, Madame.'

She didn't fail to notice the way his voice had thickened.

Again there was the long frozen pause as Lola stared at the camera through half-closed lids, imagining herself as Cleopatra seducing Caesar.

When the exposure was completed, the photographer quickly turned around to dismantle his contraption. 'I should have the plates ready and framed for you within a few days, Madame,' he said with his back to her.

She sat upright and studied the young man's athletic frame, noticing the nervous sweat that was staining the underarms of his shirt, the firm shoulder muscles, the way his trousers had creased between the tight buttocks. She slowly stretched out and drew the sensuous silk of the toga between her legs, feeling it trigger the moisture of her desire. She imagined how he would feel - firm, young and virile. It wouldn't take more than a few minutes and if he was well rewarded no-one need ever know.

Myra waited until the photographer had packed up his boxes and left the house, before she dared to enter the boudoir. Still naked, Lola lay on the divan one arm thrown back in a languid pose, a cigarette in her hand and with a self-satisfied smile playing on her lips.

Myra had often been puzzled by what went on in Lola's boudoir when the King was with her. There was never any evidence of love-making between the sheets and the air always retained its innocence. Now, as soon as she entered the room she could smell the unmistakable musk of passion.

With a frown, Myra handed Lola her silken dressing gown. 'Madame should be careful,' she said.

Lola's eyes narrowed at her maid. 'Are you daring to lecture me?'

'Yes, because I'm the only person you will listen to. If the King should find out what you were doing just now.'

'Who's going to tell him? You?'

'Certainly not, but that man with his magic pictures, you hardly know him.'

Lola scoffed. 'So? He has no reason to tell anyone. He has been well paid for his services. My Louis wouldn't believe him even if he did try to slander me.'

Myra bit her lip. 'His Majesty is too trusting a man.'

Lola's mood darkened. She leaped off the divan and struck Myra across the cheek, her long fingernails leaving a streak of blood. 'Bitch!' she snarled. 'Who do you think you are? I've had

enough of you and your presumptuous behavior. I should never have taken you back.'

Myra's hand flew to her cheek and she stared down at the trace of blood on her fingers. Her eyes filled with water and she glared back at Lola. 'And I should never have come back,' she countered. 'I thought you were genuinely ashamed about what happened on the Rhine. Now I see you will never change. You're a whore of the worst sort.'

Lola's rage exploded in a scream and she grabbed at Myra's hair, twisting her head into a lock. 'I'll have you whipped for speaking to me like that!'

But Myra managed a sharp kick to Lola's naked buttocks. She yelped and let go of the maid's hair. Myra dodged around the divan. 'You're never going to have that satisfaction,' she gasped. 'Because I've quit. And for good this time! René and I are going back together to Paris.'

Panting like a captured wild cat, Lola glared at her. 'You and René. So that's how it is. Calling me a whore when you two have been rutting away behind my back.'

'There's a big difference to making love and what you do. You're the one doing the rutting.'

Lola looked around for something to throw, but Myra had dodged her way out from behind the divan. She threw the silk wrap at Lola's face. 'I hope you go to hell, Lola Montez. I'm only sorry that you'll probably drag that good King with you.' She turned around and fled.

In a few short months, the house built on the Barerstrasse for Lola was to become a Versailles in miniature. No expense had been spared in its decoration. Masterpieces by Raphael and Titian appropriated from the public galleries hung side by side at the head of a crystal staircase that led down to the marble floors of reception rooms paneled in gilt. Murals copied from Pompeii and Herculaneum decorated the walls. Bronzed window frames, curtains of red damask, fountains that spurted perfumed water - the list of extravagances multiplied constantly. Few had been privileged as yet to see Lola's bathroom, but it was rumored to be modeled after a Roman bath-house in pink marble with an open view to the sky. It was said that the three steps leading up to her bathtub were made of solid gold.

Nearly every day King Ludwig would be seen hurrying to the house after breakfast, sometimes not returning to the Residenz until late at night. His ministers were at their wits' end trying to convince him to be more discreet.

'This simply can not go on!' exploded Abel as he glared at the array of newspapers Count Reinhard had spread across his desk. In a dozen languages, the readers of Europe were being treated to a day-by-day account of the King's very public infatuation with a dancer. There was nothing, however, in the Munich newspapers, as they were subject to censorship.

'But the house is no more of an extravagance than many of the King's other projects,' murmured Reinhard tactfully.

Abel winced. 'The house is the least of our concerns.' He raised an impatient hand. 'And there is no need to remind me of those other monstrosities. For years the King has been obsessed with recreating Ancient Greece in Bavaria and we, like fools, have conceded to his eccentricities because most of them have been built out of his own money. But now not only has he built this whore a palace of her own, he is now talking of granting her Bavarian citizenship and ultimately making her a Countess! Can you believe it? He has succeeded into turning us into the laughing stock of Europe.'

'Does His Majesty not take the advice of his own ministers?' queried Reinhard with a touch of hidden sarcasm.

'Advice? He won't listen to anyone. Not his wife, not his sisters, the Queen of Prussia and the Dowager Empress of Austria. And least of all his priest. What is it about this woman that has turned him into a blind fool? Tell me that?'

'Men of over sixty often have difficulties in love-making. I have heard that she has er ... certain skills.'

Abel glared at him. 'Don't be stupid. It's far more than just a bit of fancy handiwork in the bedroom. This isn't just a case of physical domination. She is slowly taking over his mind

politically. She has openly boasted of her associations with those Bohemians in Paris and, in particular, that renegade priest, Abbé Lamennais. I believe she is probably an agent of those who wish to see the Catholics purged from Bavaria. At one time she also had connections with liberal members of the English aristocracy. Do you really need me to say more?’

Reinhard’s expression slipped for barely a second. The thought that Lola had muscled in on his own territory of spy and counter-spy seemed preposterous. Could he seriously have misjudged her? ‘Has anyone as yet presented the King with a dossier on her?’ he ventured.

‘Finding out the truth about that woman has occupied the police department for months. She’s well-known everywhere, yet she has no genuine papers. She lies blatantly and told the King she is only twenty-one, but any fool can see she is far too well-traveled and experienced to be such a tender age, yet he believes her. She tells him she was born in Spain and arrogantly dares to give Spanish lessons, yet native-born Spaniards see immediately she speaks the language like a stranger, but again the King believes her. I fear for our King - he is bewitched and completely under her spell.’

Reinhard smiled. ‘I may be able to help, sir. I have heard that her personal maid and groom have just left her service. It would be an opportune time to replace them with persons with allegiance to Bavaria.’

Abel’s face lifted. ‘Excellent idea.’

‘I may also be able to provide additional information. When I was seconded to the Prussian court, I had some investigations carried out on Senhora Montez.’

Abel’s eyes narrowed. ‘Why didn’t you tell me all this before?’

Reinhard shrugged. ‘Frankly, at the time she seemed irrelevant. I thought her to be no more than a petty adventuress with low-born appetites looking for high-born prey. It never occurred to me that she really had the capability of worming her way into a position of political power.’

‘You say you have this information readily available?’

‘I can arrange for it to be collated.’ Reinhard paused, a sly smile twisting his mouth. ‘But there may be some expenses involved in its retrieval.’

Slowly realization dawned in Abel’s eyes. He glared at Reinhard. ‘Ah, I always thought there was something odd about you, Reinberg. Who are you really working for? Metternich of Austria? The French? The British?’

‘Why, sir, I am a loyal Bavarian to the core.’

Abel scoffed. ‘Of course. Loyal as long as the price is right, no doubt.’

‘Is your Excellency still interested in the dossier?’

‘Of course, damn you. Now - how much?’

Crescentia Ganser seemed to be a suitable replacement for Myra. She knew exactly how to present herself for her interview, being sufficiently self-effacing while demonstrating her excellent skills at hairdressing, needlework and, most of all, discretion.

Lola hired her without hesitation, not knowing of the pencil and diary provided by Reinhard that Crescentia had tucked away in her apron pocket. Its first secret entry was made when a young photographer arrived with a collection of daguerreotypes and stayed an inordinately long time in Madame’s boudoir. The second, when Lola met a young man in the street who rescued her from some hecklers. His name was Lieutenant Friedrich Baum, and Lola invited him back to her house to take tea. He also spent longer than he should have behind closed doors.

20.

Lola and Ludwig had been strolling in the small garden at the rear of her house with the puppy, now almost grown to full size and named Turk, when a servant interrupted them to say that Baron

von Pechmann, the Munich Chief of Police had arrived with an urgent message for the King, that he must return to the Residenz immediately.

The calculating image of Reinhard flashed before Lola's eyes. Her instincts warned her this might be his doing. Her fingers tightened on Ludwig's arm as he waved the servant away.

'I can't imagine what is that urgent that I must leave you,' he said grumpily.

'Louis, my darling,' she said in a honeyed voice, 'you mustn't neglect affairs of state totally for those of the heart, you know. Perhaps there is trouble with the Protestants again?'

Ludwig sighed. 'I don't really care. That's Pechmann's job.'

Lola stopped and placed her finger and thumb under Ludwig's chin, much like she did with Turk. 'Of course my Louis cares. You love the people of Bavaria, no matter what their religion, but you have been guilty of neglecting them for far too long. They believe you are indifferent to them.'

'You really think so?'

'Didn't you once decree that all of your subjects should be free to practice whatever religion they wished? And didn't you also once scrap censorship of the press?'

'Yes, and look what happened in France when that was done. People don't know how to handle freedom. There were riots and revolts. Absolute chaos. I had to reinstate firm laws for fear that could happen here.'

'Tosh. That was France, which is full of hotheads and revolutionaries. This is peaceful Bavaria, where the people love and respect their Kings. And you are Ludwig, the most noble and enlightened ruler in Europe. For too long you have trusted in men of the Ultramontane Party like Abel who believe in the total Catholic domination of government. Everywhere I see signs of Bavaria becoming another tortured country like Poland, where to cross oneself in the wrong manner can mean instant imprisonment.' Lola stroked the King's unruly head of hair. 'My Louis who so admires the words of Democritus mustn't blind himself to such wicked schemes. Give back those freedoms to your people, and you will prove yourself to be their greatest King.'

Ludwig's eyes watered with emotion. 'My Lolita, how simply and clearly you see things. Do you really believe Abel is working to further his own ends?'

'Of course he is. And I must warn you that now he knows that it is I who is revealing the truth to you, he will do everything possible to discredit me in your eyes. Already there are nasty lies being spread about me. He won't hesitate to use them against me.'

Ludwig clenched his fists. 'As I live and breathe, he will not dare.'

The Chief of Police, von Pechmann, had difficulty keeping up with the King as he tramped his way back to the Residenz, his threadbare coat flapping around his ankles and an old battered cap on his head. Ludwig of Bavaria had little time for pomp and ceremony and was usually happy to greet his subjects with a smile or cheery wave, but this time he was totally oblivious of them, his face a mass of worried wrinkles. 'This had better be important, or your it'll be your job,' he muttered as the two men hurried into his study.

Count Reinhard, Karl von Abel and a plain-looking woman dressed in brown were waiting for him.

'This is Frau Ganser, Your Majesty,' puffed the Police Chief. 'She has been in the service of Senhora Montez.'

Crecentia gave the necessary, if somewhat insincere, curtsy.

'She has a diary that your Majesty must read,' added Reinhard.

With trembling fingers, Ludwig opened the notebook handed to him. His blood ran hot and cold as he scanned it before promptly throwing it to the floor. Only a few minutes before Lola had warned him Abel and his cronies were intending to discredit her, but reading such detailed facts made him tremble with rage. 'Lies,' he cried. 'All lies!'

'Frau Ganser has sworn on the Holy Bible it is the truth,' said Abel. 'We only wish for your Majesty to see this Spanish woman for what she is.'

The King's eyes traveled rapidly between the group, his heart sinking as he detected traitors all

around him. 'Senhora Montez will be given the opportunity to defend these accusations,' he said, 'and prove that they are monstrous lies.'

The men exchanged glances. 'As you wish, your Majesty,' said Abel, 'but the facts speak for themselves.'

In answer to the immediate summons, Lola arrived at the Residenz and was met by Reinhard. 'Your little game is up,' he whispered to her as he escorted her towards the King's study. 'That gutter appetite of yours has done for you this time.'

'I'll have your head if this is your doing,' she hissed back at him.

At the study door, their eyes met. 'In that case, it is likely to be my head or yours,' he said, his hot breath caressing her lips. 'Either way, the loser takes all.'

'What does that mean?'

He placed his mouth to her ear. 'If I win, I'll take my pleasure of you when I choose. You win, and I'm yours to do with as you wish.'

'You arrogant, self-opinionated bastard ...'

Reinhard opened the door.

Lola's frown instantly transformed into one of concern. She ran to the King with outstretched arms. 'Oh, Louis, my poor little pet. What are they trying to do to us?'

Ludwig rose even earlier than usual the following morning to write his poetry. It had been snowing and the city was wrapped in a soft blanket which helped to muffle the discordant sounds of life and somehow eased the pain and torment of the previous day. His pen flew across the sheets of parchment.

Life of my life, I am thine - I am in thy thrall -

I hold no compact with thine enemies.

Their blandishments are powerless on me,

No arts will serve to seduce me from thee.

The power of love raises me above them..'

He dipped his nib again and paused, staring out of the window, letting a blot drip on to the sheet. How could they have thought he would believe their word over those of his Lolita? His darling. His joy.

Lola had wept copious and enraged tears in front of him at the suggestion that she had had liaisons with both a traveling photographer and a lowly lieutenant. Yes, she had admitted to having daguerreotypes done, but they were meant to be a secret present for her darling Louis on his birthday. When she had discovered there were spies in her house she had all the plates destroyed.

And yes, she had made the acquaintance of a certain Lieutenant Baum. It was common knowledge that the young man had gallantly and innocently come to her rescue when she was being verbally abused by people in the street. Surely it was only good manners to invite him to take tea with her? How could Louis stoop to believe there was anything wrong in these things?

On her knees, Lola had begged him to get rid of those men who surrounded him who were capable of such obscene thoughts.

He flushed again at the memory of his own tiny flash of doubt. But he would never forget the way his adorable Beauty - his Love - his Lolita - had come flying in to the study, arms open wide to him, trust shattered in her innocent eyes. He dipped the nib again.

'With thee my earthly pilgrimage will end

As is the union between the body and the soul,

So, until death, with thine my being is blended

In thee I have found what I ne'er yet found in any

The sight of thee gave new life to my being

All feeling for any other has died away,

For my eyes read in thine - love!'

It was only a matter of time before Abel tried yet again to prove Lola was nothing more than a promiscuous adventuress. The unrest that had brewing for years under Abel's own harsh policies was carefully maneuvered onto Lola's shoulders. By now, Abel believed he had the people of Munich on his side. Her attitude in her dealings with everyone from soldiers to shopkeepers was appalling. She wouldn't hesitate to use a riding whip or set Turk on anyone who got in her way. Whether he had approved them or not, her growing list of extravagant expenses were always sent directly to the King who paid them without complaint.

Yet the more the people complained or mocked the affair, the more stubborn the King became. Nothing would ever force him to give up his Lolita, the light of his life - his love.

When Abel refused to countersign the letters patent granting Lola Bavarian citizenship which would ultimately pave the way to her being awarded a title, the two men locked horns for the last time.

A copy of Reinhard's dossier listing most of Lola's misdemeanors in Prussia and Poland was given to the King but like the diary before it, he threw it on to the floor and this time actually ground his boot into it for added effect. 'What are you trying to do to my beautiful Lolita?' thundered Ludwig. 'Whose filthy mind has created these obscenities?'

'They were not created, your Majesty,' said Abel patiently. 'They are fact. There are sworn affidavits. Everything in the dossier can be proved.'

'I will not listen to this. It is all lies! Lies cooked up by my enemies. Probably that scheming knave Prince Metternich. He would like nothing better than to see Bavaria grovel to Austria.'

'I can swear that Metternich has nothing to do with this,' said Abel, struggling to contain his temper. 'Senhora Montez is more likely an agent of protestant Freemasons - probably the British - sent here with the sole purpose of infiltrating your court and destabilizing the thousand years of Catholic Wittelsbach rule. All Bavarians, whether poor or rich, believe themselves to be governed by a foreign woman whose reputation is branded.'

'Rubbish and more rubbish! Who is putting these stupid ideas into your head?'

'If your Majesty would only examine the dossier ...'

But Ludwig continued to rage. 'My Lolita hasn't a deceitful bone in her body. She loves me with a pure and honest love. Do you understand me? And I insist you draw up the letters patent granting her Bavarian citizenship now, or else your appointment as Prime Minister is at an end.'

Abel paled and stepped back. 'You have left me little choice, your Majesty, but to resign.'

'No, I will not give you that privilege. You will be dismissed by royal decree.'

After the treachery of Frau Ganser, Lola no longer trusted Bavarian servants and decided to employ foreigners. As to her own physical safety, she had no qualms even if Ludwig had become worried that someone might try to make a personal attack upon her and he insisted she have her own guards.

She had scoffed at the idea. 'I can look after myself,' she said, promptly rushing the King outdoors on a cold winter's day to watch a demonstration of her expertise with a pair of pistols. They stood in the snow in the Hofgarden while Lola neatly picked out bull's-eye after bull's-eye on a target set on the black trunk of a tree.

'Oh, Lolita, what a remarkable woman you are. I should die if we were ever forced apart,' he sighed dramatically.

'Shut up, Louis, I'm trying to concentrate.' Lola closed one eye and aimed. She pulled the trigger and another bullet found its mark. 'There. Six in a row. A perfect score.'

'Promise me you will never leave me.'

Lola lifted the pistol and through its trace of smoke blew a kiss in the direction of the King. 'Now why on earth should my darling think I would do that?'

He sighed again with an exaggerated lift of his shoulders. 'Everyone is conspiring against us. No-one cares about our happiness. I dread the day when you have had enough of this old man, weary of being ostracized and you will run away back to Seville.'

Lola shook her head and smiled. She replaced the pistol into the box being carried by a servant and dismissed him. When he was out of earshot, she took Ludwig's arm and beamed into his face. 'I will never leave, my dear, sweet Louis. And when I am a Countess, your people will have to accept me.' She tilted her head in that manner that never ceased to have its desired effect. 'You promised me a title, Louis. It seems to be taking a frightfully long time.'

Ludwig frowned. 'Soon, my love. I had no idea how much protocol and ridiculous paper-shuffling is involved in such a matter. There will be no problem with the title. It's the naturalization which must be countersigned by the senior ministers. I'm doing everything I can.'

'But you dismissed Abel. Surely the new Minister George von Maurer will approve it?'

Ludwig swallowed. 'I had hoped so, but he seems to be stalling.'

'Dismiss him as well.'

Ludwig's tired eyes grew wide. 'Another change of Minister? What will the people think?'

Lola's fingers tightened on his arm. 'You are the King, my sweet Louis. You have to show that you are quite committed in this. Be firm and decisive. Remind your people of the man who once defied Napoleon.'

His shoulders drooped. 'I was young then and full of ideals and dreams.'

'But I know in your heart you still harbor those ideals and now you have me at your side to help you realize your dreams. Don't let others belittle them.'

'Oh, my little Lolita, how I do adore you.' The King shivered and gave a sudden sneeze.

Lola placed a chaste kiss on his cheek. 'Now it's time you went back to your duties before you catch cold.' She mused briefly before adding an afterthought, 'It's your decision, of course, but I do believe Franz von Berks would make an excellent choice for the cabinet. You could do far worse.'

'Oh, you really think so?'

'Well, although he is a Catholic, he is committed to democracy and is sympathetic with the ideas of the Abbé Lamennais. I am sure he would be popular with the people.'

Ludwig nodded. 'I'll give it some thought.'

They trudged back together through the snow to the Residenz, but just before they reached the palace gate, something came flying over a wall, just missing the King's head and landing with a soft thud in the snow. Ludwig staggered back in alarm, but Lola bent down and picked the object up. It was a rock with a sheet of paper wrapped around it.

She unraveled the paper. Written on it in foul language was a brief parody of one of the King's latest published poems. Below the words was a cartoon of an old man wearing a crown and a python with a woman's head wrapped around his lower body. '*Death to the Whore*' was scratched in red ink across the bottom of the sheet.

'What is it?' asked Ludwig cautiously.

Lola rolled the paper into a tight ball. 'Just a prank, my sweet,' she said calmly. 'Students no doubt.'

'Let me see ...'

'Really, it's nothing.' Lola thrust the ball of paper into a pocket. 'I'll attend to it. You've far more important things to concern yourself with.'

The worry in Ludwig's face eased. 'You don't know what a relief it is after all these years to have found someone who understands the demands of kingship,' he blurted. 'I only wish you could be my consort. You would be such a queen.'

Lola gave Ludwig another kiss on the cheek. 'You already have a Queen. You mustn't tempt the Fates by wishing aloud.'

'I can't help it.' His eyes kept watering. 'I just love you so much that I just have to keep telling you.' He sneezed again.

Lola gave him a little push towards the gate. 'Run along. You'll catch your death if you stand around here any longer.'

Back at her home in the Barerstrasse, Lola warmed herself before a large enamel stove while she gave instructions to her secretary. 'Send Herr von Berks a message that I wish to see him'

immediately,' she ordered, 'and then prepare for me a list of names of those who run the university.'

Lola had chosen Franz von Berks for the simple reason that he was madly in love with her. The ministers of King Ludwig fell into two camps, not just Catholic and Protestant, but those who were for Lola and those against. Admittedly, on the whole, there were more against her, but the ones who supported her were also enamored of her. Some of them would go to great lengths to receive her approval, no doubt secretly hoping to be granted even more intimate privileges. As Ludwig himself had proved, a man in love could be a most malleable object.

'Herr von Berks, I am so glad you could spare the time to see me.' Lola glowed as her intended Chief Minister hurried into her gilded reception room and bowed gallantly over her outstretched hand.

'For you, Senhora, I always find the time.'

'Come and sit,' she murmured, leading him to a love-seat that would give the advantage of being closer to her than if they were to sit on a more formal sofa.

Lola looked deep into his eyes. 'Herr von Berks, I am at a loss with my dear Louis. He is persisting with this crazy idea to make me a countess to the point of losing sleep over it. I have told him that I don't care either way for such trappings. After all, what is a title compared to a King's affection? But he says it is the only way I can ever hope to be presented officially at court. In fact, he is worrying so much about the way I am treated by many of the courtiers, I fear for his health.'

'God forbid.'

'For myself, I never care about what people think of me, but he is a sensitive man. He doesn't need these unnecessary concerns.'

'What would you have me do?'

'Tell the King I would rather leave Bavaria forever than see him suffer more on my account.'

Berks shook his head. 'I could never be the one to carry such news. He has come to rely so much on you. He would probably accuse me of joining the camp of his enemies.'

Lola half closed her eyes and pretended to remove a speck of fluff from his jacket, her hand lingering a fraction longer than necessary. 'You must move quickly to bolster the King's confidence in you,' she murmured. 'I have a feeling he is considering yet another change to the cabinet. There could be high offices waiting to be filled.'

There was unmistakable excitement in the man's breath. 'That is most interesting.'

'My Louis wants stability with a strong, decisive leader who is willing to put up with a few of his eccentricities. Surely conceding to him the matter of a title for me is a tiny price to pay for the chance to lead his ministry?'

Berks was ecstatic. He clutched her hand and rained kisses on it. 'You are remarkable, Senhora. You will go down in history as another Madame Pompadour.'

She laughed. 'Oh, no, I have no such ambitions. I just want to see my Louis happy.'

'Ah, such modesty. Such loyalty. You are an example to all women.'

Lola endured the hand-clutching a few more seconds before disentangling herself. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I'm rather busy with other matters.'

'Of course. I will arrange to meet with the King as soon as possible.'

Lola walked with him into her marbled hallway where he waited for her butler to bring his coat. Just as he was about to leave, she spoke again. 'You have a son at the university I believe?'

'That is correct.'

Lola felt in her pocket for the ball of paper. She slowly unraveled it and handed it to him. 'This isn't his handiwork I trust?'

Berks turned pale as he studied it. 'Oh, Senhora, this is shocking. My son would never involve himself in something so disgusting.'

Their eyes met. 'The new Chief Minister will have to act swiftly to make sure the university doesn't become a hot-bed of sedition,' she purred.

'Whoever has done this will be rooted out, never fear,' he said through clenched teeth.

Lola gave a fetching smile and tilted her head as she put out her hand for him to kiss. 'Until we meet again, kind sir.'

Ludwig had a headache and felt a cold coming on. As a young man he had often frolicked naked in the snow, but he no longer had a soldier's stamina. The Queen urged him to take to his bed, but he had too much on his mind. Besides, there seemed to be a mountain of paper on his bed needing his attention.

Usually, his aides-de-camp filtered his incoming mail but for some reason today a great many letters had been placed in front of him. Most of them were anonymous, each concerned about his relationship with the Spanish dancer. His headache intensified as he read through them. Only a few were written in a gentle manner, begging him to show discretion. The rest were highly abusive and rude.

'They don't understand,' he muttered to himself as he threw each letter into the wastepaper basket. 'They have all believed foul gossip. They don't know you, my precious Lolita, as I do.'

Included in the pile were several official letters, the first from the Archbishop of Breslau himself. It was both flamboyant and brutal in its attack.

'Beside you grows a poison tree, its deadly fumes stupefying and blinding your eyes, intoxicating your senses and inflaming your heart so that you do not see the abyss yawning at your feet. It threatens your honor, your reputation, your family's happiness, your life and the very salvation of your soul. Remember you are reaching the end of the road when all earthly pleasures cease. Do not try to imitate your doomed French namesakes. Wake up from the dream! Throw off this magic bond, uproot the poisonous tree, stamp the serpent underfoot. Reassure and comfort your people. Give yourself back to your family and country. Cast out this miserable, ill-famed paramour!'

Ludwig crushed the parchment in his fingers as pains shot through every limb. 'No,' he whispered hoarsely, 'even men of God have been made to believe the Devil's mischief.' Although his head thundered and his vision blurred, he took up a fresh sheet of paper. It was time to bare his soul and defend to the world the monstrous injustices to him and Lolita.

'My Lord Archbishop,' he wrote, *'the web of lies around my attachment forces me to write my defense. Appearances are deceitful. I have never cared for mistresses and do not now. But friendships I have always enjoyed, wherever the fancy took me, and they were my best protection against sensuality. I give you my word of honor that for the past nine months I have had no intercourse with any woman, either my wife or any other. I ardently desire to find any means possible of proving to the world that in reality there is no scandal. I cannot break off this friendship. In that case I would cease to respect myself. You must not ask of me what is impossible.'*

When he had finished the letter and affixed his signature, he rang for his aide. 'Before this is dispatched to the Archbishop,' he said, 'see that a copy is sent to every bishop in the country. If it has to be read out in every church to be believed, so be it.'

Ludwig cast a cursory glance over the other letters. Many of them were from ambassadors and princes and, while not quite so forthright, they all relayed a similar message. There was even one from his sister, Karoline Augusta of Austria, berating him for his behavior. Feeling sick and tired, and with a sense of his mortality hanging heavily on his head, he swept them all on to the floor.

After Berks had left, Lola sat down at her own writing desk and smoothed out the piece of paper, reading again the obscene parody of Ludwig's poem and studying the cartoon more closely. To have herself thought of as a snake slowly squeezing the King to death had at first made her extremely angry, yet the more she looked at the crude drawing the more her anger was replaced with a kind of perverse excitement. It built slowly from within that dark and hidden inner core where every life-changing emotion she ever experienced had been created. All the love and hate, the courage and fear, the rage, the savagery and the lust seeming to combine into an overwhelming triumph of her own indomitable spirit.

She was now proud to be likened to a snake, to know that she was capable of such grotesque

power. She clasped the paper to her chest, her breath racing. She smiled and narrowed her eyes as she reveled in the thought of those heads that had already rolled because of her. Of Abel and Maurer, and all their depraved Jesuit acolytes. Soon she would be a Countess and she would complete the work she had now set out to do. Soon Bavaria would be rid of every one of those terrifying Catholics. Bridget Riley's Catholics ...

By now, the excitement had spread through her body and every nerve seemed to quiver; the quiver turned to pulsing, and the pulsing to the inevitable ache of her insatiable needs. She wrote a short note, and rang for her new personal maid, a French girl called Jeanette.

'See that this is delivered to Lieutenant Baum at his house in Fruhlingstrasse immediately,' she ordered, 'and then draw my bath and prepare my body oil.'

While the maid was gone, Lola quickly walked through her house to a tiny chapel that Ludwig had built for her on the assumption that all good Spanish Catholics must have need of one. He was unlikely to know that never once had she used it.

Draped across the altar cross was a set of black jet rosary beads from which dangled a ruby cross, another of Ludwig's gifts again unlikely to ever be used for its true purpose. Lola gave a chuckle as she snatched up the beads and went back to her bedroom.

Jessamine flowers distilled in a mixture of rose and orange oils to which were added traces of musk and ambergris were the basis of Lola's special oil. To this, she would sometimes add a pinch of eastern spices such as sandalwood or myrrh to enhance her most exotic qualities. Its subtle perfume filled her boudoir as Lola lay on her bed and Jeanette obediently massaged the oil into her back and thighs until her skin glistened in the candlelight.

Just as the maid was rubbing her feet, there was a gentle knock on the door. Lola's lips trembled with anticipation. 'That will be all,' she said in a husky voice. 'You may leave.'

Jeanette was still inexperienced with Lola's ways but, unlike the outspoken Myra, she knew a maid's place and would never have been so bold as to express shock at her mistress's affairs. As she and Friedrich Baum passed each other between the door into Lola's bedroom, she did not lift her eyes.

Lola remained on her stomach, eyes closed, breathing in and savoring her own scent and the new ones that had come into the room - of horse, and leather, and male sweat and arousal ...

Friedrich picked up the pot of oil and dutifully continued the maid's work, his fingers kneading her ankles, calves, thighs - straying between into the crevices.

Lola moaned. 'Wait,' she whispered, turning quickly on to her back. 'I want you to do something special.'

Friedrich's eyes watered as they wandered over her gleaming breasts and erect nipples, the subtle curves of her belly, the dark down already heavily soaked with her desire.

Lola reached beneath her pillow and produced the black rosary beads and cross. They glinted brightly in the candlelight.

A frown momentarily passed over Friedrich's face. Lola looped them over his neck and drew his face down to hers. She whispered in his ear what she wanted him to do with them.

He drew back. Shock tainted the desire in his eyes. 'But that's ... that's terrible ... sacrilegious. It's profane.'

'Yes,' she whispered hotly, 'I know.'

21.

Ludwig's cold turned into a mild fever and although there was never any serious threat to his health, the Queen and his physicians insisted he remain in bed for a few days.

He hated being confined. It was a kind of purgatory as it gave him long hours in which to fantasize about his Lolita. Platonic Love was so noble, but it was also so very difficult, that was

why it was so precious. His endeavors to keep his Love for her pure were failing rapidly as images of her in bed with other men constantly crowded into his mind. Could what everyone told him possibly be true?

His mind would wander, remembering that one and only glimpse he had had of her breasts. He longed to put his lips to them, his hands around that tiny waist, to feel the pure alabaster skin of those graceful limbs wrapped around his own body. To have those delicate feet walk across his chest - to take them in his mouth.

Lola visited him during one of his fantasies. She walked up and down his bedroom, talking politics, berating him over censorship, telling him of the many anomalies in his government, how he must get rid of all the Jesuits and of her decision that Berks was really the man for the job of Chief Minister.

But he hardly heard her, he was so obsessed with her physical presence. 'Stop!' he cried out at last, as a sweat burst out on his forehead, 'I can't go on like this.'

Lola paused and looked at him in surprise.

'I love you,' he gasped, rolling the edge of the sheet frantically in his fingers. 'I can't bear the thought any longer of others touching you. I must ... I must have you.'

She hurried to his bedside and put her hand on his brow. 'Oh, my poor Louis, you are so feverish. You don't know what you are saying.'

His hands clutched at her. 'Yes, I do. I want you. I have tried to keep my Love pure, but ...'. Tears burst from his eyes and ran down his hot cheeks. He reached momentarily for her breasts, but his hands had started to shake 'What am I going to do?' he wailed.

Lola continued to smile blandly. She took both the King's hands and put them under the coverlet, tucking him in and fluffing his pillow. 'First you must get well, Louis. After that, we will see.'

'Tell me what you do with the Lieutenant,' he said abruptly.

Her eyes rounded. 'Do? With whom? I don't understand ...'

'Baum. If he has some special skill that you enjoy, I can do the same for you. I may be an old man, but I know what pleases a woman.'

She grasped both his shoulders, her eyes staring frankly into his. 'Louis, you are sick, and your mind is playing dreadful tricks on you. The only thing I ever do with Lieutenant Baum, apart from inviting him to take tea, is go horse-riding and I occasionally laugh at his weak jokes. Nothing else. I have sworn on this on my honor to you before. I will excuse you today because of your fever.'

He smiled and sighed his relief. 'Oh, I am so glad to hear it.'

'Now you must rest.' She stood up, ready to take her leave.

'One more thing, my dear Lolita, before you go.'

'Yes?'

'I would get well so much quicker if I could have something - a little reminder of your bodily presence for me to cherish. To kiss when I am feeling sad.'

'But you have my portrait.'

'No, I mean something that has been close to you. That has the scent of your body.' He started to stutter and his face broke out into a new sweat. 'Cl ... Close to your skin. to your br... breasts ... and between your l. legs.'

She kept her lips firmly pressed for a few seconds before giving her silky smile.

'Of course,' she murmured. 'Anything that will make my darling Louis happy and well again.'

He had been half-terrified of asking her, unsure of her response. But now he knew what they told him was all lies. They must be! 'Oh, but you are wonderful, Lolita. I adore you.'

Lola blew him a kiss and abruptly left.

Friedrich Baum decided that the next time a note came, he would not respond. He was tired, not just from Lola's bizarre and seemingly insatiable demands on his virility, but more so from being constantly at her beck and call at odd hours of the day or night. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in weeks.

How often he regretted ever making that initial error of gallantry. If he had only known that going to the rescue of what he thought to be an innocent woman being abused by foul-mouthed hecklers in the street was going to change his own life so dramatically, he would never have done it. But no-one could possibly have envisaged how something that was just good manners on his part could have escalated into a giant spider's web of deceits, excesses and depravity which he could no longer handle.

He cared little for politics and still remembered that awful time when he had been questioned at length by Pechmann, Ludwig's Chief of Police, about certain matters to do with Lola and Jesuits, on which he hadn't the slightest clue. When he had been asked outright if he was sleeping with the Senhora he had managed to display sufficient indignation. After all it was true that he didn't actually sleep with her. Usually when he had satisfactorily completed his masculine obligations, he was promptly bundled down the backstairs and out the servants' entrance. Often he would have just returned home, when she would summon him again.

He decided he had had enough, and when Lola's note arrived at his apartment at eleven o'clock that night, he absented himself by going to a tavern on the other side of town.

When Friedrich failed to arrive within the usual few minutes, Lola became agitated. Where was he? How dare he not respond to her summons.

The truth was she didn't want to dwell on the fact she might soon have to oblige the King as a real mistress. Physically, she was unmoved by his rugged, marked face, his often bad breath and his aged body, which would probably need extra stimulation on her part to reach an adequate performance. She needed to forget about this problem by indulging herself with Friedrich.

When the clocks chimed midnight and he still hadn't arrived, Lola ordered Jeanette to walk with her through the silent streets to Friedrich's apartment house. Not knowing which number was his, she started to ring each of the bells. One by one lights appeared in the windows and eventually the landlady appeared at the door, followed by several residents dressed in their night attire.

'Where is Baum?' demanded Lola imperiously.

The landlady looked at her crossly. 'How should I know? I'm not his keeper.'

Lola responded by once more jangling each apartment bell.

'Will you cease that at once!' cried the landlady.

'Don't scream at me, you cow,' snapped Lola. 'No-one speaks to me in that fashion. Remember who I am. I am the king's mistress.'

The residents exchanged shocked looks as she flounced off. By morning, the whole city was abuzz with the scandalous episode. Also in the morning, Ludwig received a request from Lola insisting that Lieutenant Friedrich Baum be transferred out of Munich, as he had deeply offended her by being rude to her. As well as her official letter of complaint there was an extra note.

'My dear Louis. Herewith the special items you requested - which I send with much love and kisses. I pray they make my adored Louis well again. Your Lolita.'

They were a handkerchief and a washed, but stained, menstrual rag. There was no need for the King to know that Lola had appropriated them from one of her kitchen maids.

Lola had no great fondness for the snowy winters of Bavaria and she remembered only too well the confining damp winter misery of Scotland and Ireland. She began to wish she hadn't let her temper get the better of her and not been quite so hasty in having Friedrich transferred out of the city, for she now she often found herself confined indoors with little to occupy her during the day - or night.

The King had recovered from his fever and was making broad hints about her finally spending the nights with him. She kept giving him all sorts of excuses, but eventually she knew she would have to succumb. In the meantime, she desperately needed to find new distractions.

The sons of both Baron von Maltzahn and Franz von Berks were at the Munich University and belonged to a small group of students who admired Lola's stand against the Jesuits. They expressed a wish to meet her and she decided it would be interesting to invite them to take afternoon tea in the

English manner.

Most of the students were aged around twenty, and as their small group arrived at her house, she surveyed them as if they were plates of sweetmeats to be sampled. Her winter gloom quickly dissipated.

While she flirted with each student individually, causing a great deal of excitement and flushed faces, she privately set her sights on a tall, studious boy with pale eyes hiding behind a pair of spectacles. He was just like what Henri Dujarier might have been like at the same age, reserved but with his depth of character already evident. His name was Fritz Peissner.

‘We have talked among ourselves and decided to form a new student club,’ he told her, ‘and we wondered if Senhora Montez would be its patron?’

Lola was suitably delighted. ‘Why, goodness me, I know nothing about student clubs. Please enlighten me.’

‘The university has several,’ explained Fritz, ‘usually named after different regions - Franconia, Swabia - and so on. We are part of a group that one day hopes to see all the Germanic countries united in a common democratic purpose, with freedom of thought and freedom of religion. We thought to call ourselves the Alemannia. Your courage in speaking out against the tyranny of certain Jesuits has given us hope that it may yet come to pass.’

With his quiet eloquence, Lola was again reminded of Henri. ‘I would be more than pleased to help however I can,’ she said, her eyes never leaving his face.

‘We would need somewhere to meet. As we can expect to encounter much resentment, we would need club rooms preferably away from the university.’

‘That could be arranged.’

‘Also a uniform.’

‘I would be happy to provide anything you need.’

‘And a motto?’

Lola smiled at the enthusiastic young faces all around her. ‘Ah, a simple “Liberty”, perhaps?’

Fritz lifted his hand in a salute. ‘Yes, indeed. I say to “Lola and Liberty”.’

‘Lola and Liberty!’ echoed the others, lifting their fists and cheering wildly.

There was no opportunity to be alone with Fritz that day, but Lola began making plans. As luck would have it, there was a small empty building for rent close to her own house and she took out a lease and arranged for its conversion into a club-house. She set about designing a uniform for her new army of protectors. White silk culottes, black velvet jackets and yellow sashes, to be topped by jaunty red caps with gold tassels. When the first uniform was ready, she sent a message to Fritz to come and try it on and see the club rooms she had arranged.

She personally led him through the club-house. ‘I trust there is everything you will need. Kitchen. Dining room. Sitting room with bar - I know how much you students enjoy your beer.’

She gently pushed Fritz ahead of her. ‘And a bedroom - in case anyone is too tired to return to the university.’ Lola closed the door behind her and leaned against it.

For a moment Fritz stared at the pair of empty beds with their innocent white coverlets before he looked at Lola. ‘You said you had a uniform for me to try?’

Gliding up to him, she raised her hand to touch his hot cheeks. ‘There is plenty of time, Fritz. Perhaps we can talk a little first. I would so much like to know you better.’

‘There is nothing much to know,’ he stuttered. ‘I’m just a student of philosophy and law. And Latin.’

She twirled a lock of his hair between her fingers and pressed herself up against him. ‘Latin, hm? Amo. The verb to love.’

Her other hand cupped the growing bulge in his trousers. ‘Do you have anyone to love, Fritz?’

He gasped as she moistened her lips. ‘No ... Oh, God, Senhora - is this wise?’

She brushed her lips against his, while starting to gently rub him. ‘You shouldn’t be worrying about wisdom at your age. Youth is a time for frivolity and passion,’ she murmured. ‘Now, if you’re

going to try on that uniform, let me help you to take your clothes off .

Much later, Lola left the club-house in a good mood. She enjoyed male virgins. Young Fritz was a little awkward with the impatience and inexperience of youth but with a few more lessons, he would turn out to be a vigorous lover. After she had initiated him into life's greatest joy, she knew she hadn't needed to swear him to secrecy, he was well aware of the consequences for both of them should such an interlude become common knowledge.

As she entered her own house, she recognized Reinhard's carriage in the stable-yard. What on earth did he want? It was impossible that he had already discovered her latest dalliance.

Reinhard had made himself comfortable in her private sitting room, lounging on one of her sofas as if it were his own. He rose as she entered and even had the nerve to offer her one of her own cigars.

'I can't imagine this is a social call,' she said curtly.

'No, I'm the bearer of official tidings.'

Her heart skipped a beat. 'My title?'

He shook his head. 'Not yet, dearest.'

She bit her lip. 'Then what is it?'

Reinhard withdrew an envelope from an inner pocket. 'A personal letter to Senhora Lola Montez from the Australian Chancellor, Prince Metternich.'

'Why would that viper write to me?'

'I don't know. Open it and find out.'

The envelope was bulky and affixed with the Austrian state seal. She tore it open. A large bundle of bank notes fell to the floor.

'What the hell is this?' she muttered.

'From the looks of it, I would assume bribery,' murmured Reinhard.

Lola's eyes narrowed as she scanned the accompanying letter.

'At the personal request of Her Majesty the Empress Dowager, we request that Senhora Lola Montez accepts the enclosed gift in exchange for her immediate departure from Munich. In addition, 50,000 francs will be paid annually into her nominated Paris bank account.'

Lola didn't bother reading any further, she merely ripped the letter into pieces and threw them at Reinhard. 'Does that Austrian Jesuit rabble really have the nerve to think they can buy me off?'

Clearly Reinhard wasn't surprised by her reaction. Wry amusement filled his face. 'You can't help admiring them for trying,' he said. He glanced down at the bundled notes. 'There's enough there to set anyone up for life.'

'What kind of woman do they think I am?' Lola kicked the notes, scattering them across the floor. 'I wouldn't take one sou from those frigging Jesuits even if I was bloody starving!'

'Well, you could be starving if the Austrians decide to invade Bavaria and remove Ludwig,' said Reinhard calmly.

Lola looked at him aghast. 'You can't be serious?'

'Metternich is getting very irritated at the instability here in Bavaria. Besides, there are rumblings all over Europe for reforms against autocratic governments. Who knows what he might decide to do if he gets panicky? If you had any sense, you'd take the lot and go.'

'And abandon my Louis? Never.'

Reinhard scoffed. 'Oh, for God's sake, Lola, you don't love him. Why keep up the pretense any longer?'

Lola glared at him for a moment and he stepped back, fully expecting to have his face slapped.

But instead, her expression softened. 'Poor, foolish Reinhard. You can't believe I could love the King. You think I am a woman who only knows lust.'

'Yes, I do, as a matter of fact.'

'Well you are very wrong. There are many kinds of love in this world and I have known nearly all of them, but what I feel for my Louis is something special. It is unique and pure.'

Reinhard gave a choked laugh. 'Pure? You?'

Lola continued to resist her impulse to slap him. Although there were times when she positively loathed Reinhard, he was one of the few men who would always be frank with her and on whom she could vent her spleen without drastic consequences.

'We have tried to tell them, but no-one will believe us,' she said in a controlled voice. 'But we know the truth of what we feel for each other and that is all that matters.'

He watched her guardedly. 'Even if I was fool enough to believe your nonsense, others never will. You realize, I suppose, that there are genuine risks to the throne?'

'From Austria - you just said.'

'No, from within Bavaria itself. Surely you can't ignore the signs? The people are denouncing you as a serpent, a witch, a Salome.'

'Spare me the dramatics. I've seen the cartoons. They're just student pranks. The people of Bavaria are thankful to me for making the King see the light and getting rid of that Jesuit-infested government.'

Reinhard shook his head. 'Stop deluding yourself, Lola. These people of Bavaria are staid and moralistic at heart. You have simply given them the freedom to hate you.'

'How can they hate me? Don't they realize I'm trying to help them?'

'They don't want help from you. If you were the true Queen, they would treat you as a saint. The simple fact is you're a foreigner and the King's whore.'

At the dreaded word, Lola's mood altered again. 'I don't want to hear any more of this,' she said through clenched teeth. 'Get out.'

Reinhard grinned. 'Very well.' He pointed at the money scattered on the floor. 'What do you want me to do with that?'

'Send it back, of course. Every damn note of it. And don't you dare pocket any of it or I'll have your head.'

Reinhard bent down to gather the notes. 'Yes, your Majesty,' he whispered sarcastically under his breath.

That night Lola finally consented to the King's request to end their platonic relationship.

She lay back on satin cushions and watched Ludwig from under bemused eyelids as he wandered around her body like some awe-filled explorer savoring the tastes and aromas of a new continent.

If there were any assets in his rather ponderous love-making it was that he was old, and that made him slow. Not so slow as to make the experience a complete bore, but enough to give her some pleasure of her own.

She was surprised when she realized it was her feet that obsessed him more than any other part of her. His mouth paid full attention to her breasts and the smooth flatness of her belly, to her soft inner thighs, as smooth as those on any of his statues. He paused only briefly to savor and breathe deeply of what he called her garden of Eden, but it was her feet sent him into ecstasies.

He sucked each toe and licked at her soles until she almost laughed from the tickling sensation. At last he grasped her feet together at the ankles and pushed his penis into the gap between the arches, making her rub against him, weeping and crying with joy as he fulfilled his dreams and spent himself onto her sheets. Finally, he crawled upwards to her and lay his head on her shoulder, traces of his tears wet against her skin. She stroked his head.

'You have made me so happy,' he said in his half-choked voice. 'My Beauty. My Love. I would die for you.'

In a few seconds he was asleep. Lola waited a little longer before easing out of the King's embrace. She wrapped herself in her dressing gown and hunted for a cigarette. Strolling to the window, she drew deeply on the calming tobacco, and opened the shutter slightly so that she could look out into the quiet winter's night.

She glanced upwards towards the heavens, but it was an overcast night and Henri's star hidden from view. It was probably just as well, for she it was not sure that she wanted him to know about

what had just happened. She looked back at Ludwig, curled in the large bed, snoring softly, and was overcome with a sudden, inexplicable, rush of tenderness towards him and momentarily angry with herself at making him wait so long for what had turned out to be such a simple pleasure. Although she had fully expected him to perform the act of love in a more conventional manner, it could be argued that, in the strictest sense, their union remained platonic. She smiled. Now, of course, she held the final ace to complete power over him.

The next day, after the King had returned to the Residenz, Lola ordered Ludwig's sculptor to attend her and made him take plaster casts of her feet to be turned into bronze. On his next birthday, Ludwig could have the gift of her feet for posterity.

22.

Chuckling to himself, Count Reinhard sat in his carriage and read the King's latest poetic effort that had been sent to every foreign ambassador in Munich.

*'Men strive with restless zeal to separate us
They plan thy destruction but vain are their endeavors ...
Our love will bloom the brighter for it all
Two rocks are we against which constantly breaks
Our adversaries' craft, thy enemies' open rage
But scorpion-like themselves they pierce with deadly sting
Thy cruelty will be revenged upon themselves
Love will compensate for all that we have suffered ...'*

Despite everything that had been done to try and open Ludwig's eyes to Lola's true nature, he was more stubborn than ever.

Reinhard himself had switched allegiance several times in the past few months depending on whichever party looked to be gaining the upper hand, and now he was surprised to find himself firmly in Lola's camp. She might be a whore and an opportunist, but she had also precipitated some badly-needed democratic changes. Although the King still ruled, Lola's influence was evident. The Jesuit stranglehold on education was at an end and as it looked as if Lola had played a part in the dismissal of Ernst von Lasaulx, a philosophy professor, there were serious rumblings in the university. It was only a matter of time before all hell broke loose.

Reinhard was now on his way to warn Lola that there might be trouble, and to make sure that the bolts on her house were secure. He wondered if he might have a chance to inspect that Roman boudoir or even that infamous pink bathroom he had heard so much about. He also wondered who she was sleeping with these days for Lola was exhibiting all the sexual traits of a man who was acquiring power, and he doubted she was able to lead a totally chaste life. What went on behind the closed doors with Ludwig himself, he still had no idea. Reinhard smiled to himself and shook his head. Of course, King Ludwig was crazy enough to have an innocent affair with the most beautiful woman in the world and still manage to call it true love.

Lola was sitting in her parlor embroidering a cushion. She had rediscovered her girlhood aptitude for needlework as a form of relaxation from the stormy affairs of state in which she was now well and truly embroiled. It also gave her the time to think more clearly.

She was the one who had precipitated the avalanche of change in Bavaria, opening the King's eyes to the injustices that had abounded under the Catholic stranglehold. Yet what thanks had she received from Ludwig's people for this bold step towards democracy?

Ludwig has promised that soon she would be awarded a title, yet still she was snubbed by most of the court. She was either openly cursed, or ridiculed, and since she herself had instigated the lifting of press censorship in Bavaria the cartoons in the newspapers had been vicious in the

extreme.

Was this the price one paid for giving others freedom? She sometimes wished she'd never set foot in this accursed country.

Lola's butler entered the parlor and announced that Count Reinberg wished to see her.

She wasn't in the mood for him. 'Tell him I'm indisposed,' she snapped.

'He says it most urgent. There is trouble at the university.'

'What is that to do with me?'

'He says you may be in danger.'

Lola sighed and laid down her embroidery frame. 'Nonsense. But I suppose I'd better hear him out.'

Reinhard marched into the parlor in his usual arrogant fashion. 'Lola - you must either leave or start barricading your doors and windows.'

'Against what?'

'Why the students of course.'

'Students? You expect me to be frightened of mere children?'

'You can't expect me to believe that you didn't expect trouble when you ordered the dismissal of a popular Jesuit professor.'

'That was the King's doing.'

'Only at your insistence, Lola.'

'Lasaulx was a yellow Jesuit. It had to be done.'

'I really think you are carrying this obsession with Jesuits too far. Aren't all Spaniards supposed to be good Catholics?'

Lola glared at him. 'Don't try tempting me with that bait. You know I'm right. One of these days Bavaria will thank me.'

'But first they'll hang you,' muttered Reinhard, his face pale.

Lola studied him for a moment. She was surprised to see a battle of emotions going on behind that usually cold facade. Could it be after all this time, Reinhard had finally fallen in love with her?

She smiled just as the muffled sound of shouting echoed up from the street. 'They'll never hang me, Reinhard. Martyrdom is the last thing on their minds.'

'I wouldn't be too sure.'

Lola put away her sewing. She pulled a bell rope and the butler reappeared. 'Bring some champagne and chocolates,' she said to him. 'If we are to have visitors, we must toast them in style.'

'Lola, what are you doing? Why aren't you giving orders to barricade the doors and windows?'

She chucked Reinhard under the chin. 'So now you care about me, Reinhard? Me, who you have accused of being a witch and a harridan - and more besides?'

A trace of sweat had broken out on his upper lip. 'Damn it, Lola, don't let's waste time. My carriage is in the yard. We can still get away if we hurry.'

Before she could reply, a pane of window glass shattered and a large stone rolled across the carpet.

'I think it's a little late for that,' she said.

Reinhard frowned. 'At least find a safe room.'

'No. I am not afraid of the children of Bavaria.'

At that moment, the butler walked in with the champagne and chocolates. The shouting in the street increased to a roar. Calmly, Lola dismissed the visibly nervous man and poured herself a glass and, with a handful of chocolates in her other hand, walked straight towards the window.

She half turned to Reinhard. 'My hands are full. Open it, if you please.'

'Are you completely crazy?' he half shouted.

'Open the bloody thing!'

'No, I won't. They'll kill you. Don't you understand? They hate you, Lola.'

Their eyes met for a long agonized moment. 'Open the window,' she repeated.

As he shook his head, another stone hit the frame, shattering the lock. The window swung open of its own accord.

Remember - the cobra will never strike those who have no fear ...

Lola stepped into the open window and quickly scanned the surge of students for the club colors of the Alemannia, but there were none. Their affiliation with Lola was well known by now. She hoped none of them had been hurt by this stupid rabble.

At the sight of her, there was a sudden hush. Lola raised her champagne glass. 'A toast to King Ludwig!' she shouted and threw the handful of chocolates into the sullen crowd.

Again there was a moment's silence before another large stone came flying through the air. Again it hit the window, sending glass splintering, some fragments landing in Lola's hair. She did not move, only shook her head and laughed, bent down and picked up the stone and hurled it back into the crowd, knocking a young man on the head.

This time a rumble of sound started to build up. 'Death to the King's whore! Death to the whore!'

More missiles - chunks of ice, old bottles - began flying.

She felt Reinhard's hand on her arm and he pulled her back into the room. 'For God's sake, Lola, I don't want your death on my conscience!'

By now, Lola's almost flippant mood had darkened to one of anger. 'Did you hear what they are calling me?' she gasped. 'Did you hear?'

'Yes, and you must be blind stupid if you expected anything different,' growled Reinhard as he led her away across the room.

'Their minds have been twisted by those Jesuits. They believe their filthy lies. I'll have them all punished!'

Reinhard stopped and gripped both of Lola's arms. He shook her hard. 'When are you going to see the writing on the wall? You can't fight this. You should have taken Metternich's money and been long gone.'

Lola closed her mind to Reinhard's words and the tempest still brewing outside as she twisted her way out of his grip. She set her sights on her shaken butler. 'Where is my Louis?' she shouted at him. 'Why isn't he here? Where are the police?'

No monarch could expect to reign for nearly a quarter of a century without occasional disturbances, but few of them had been life-threatening. Ludwig had been eating his lunch when the first build-up of people in the streets was noticed. He ignored it as long as he could and it was only when someone told him a mob was on its way to Lola's house that he was galvanized into action. Without fear for himself, he hurried through the streets. Most of the crowd now consisted of interested on-lookers and they cheered when they saw him and let him pass without hindrance.

The students gathered beneath Lola's windows were less enthusiastic about their King, and his arrival was met with mainly boos and whistles. Ludwig didn't fail to notice several of them holding rocks big enough to cause serious damage.

'This is a disgrace!' shouted Lola from the top of the flight of crystal stairs as Lola's guards let him enter and he hurried through her hall. 'My life has been threatened, and where have you been?'

Ludwig puffed and sweated up stairs. 'Oh my angel, I'm so sorry but no-one told me. I had no idea they meant you harm.'

'Then you're a bloody fool!'

'More of my guards are on their way.'

'It's a bit late now. Have you seen the damage?'

'Oh please, please forgive me, Lolita.' Ludwig fell to his knees in front of Lola as she stood frowning down at him with hands on hips.

'The guards should have been here hours ago.'

'I know, I know.' Ludwig started to weep and, to Reinhard's added consternation and embarrassment, the King picked up the hem of Lola's skirt and plunged his face into it.

'What are you standing there like that for?' Lola screeched at Reinhard. 'Hasn't anyone thought

to secure the stables?'

He promptly turned and fled down the stairs.

Lola waited until he was gone before crouching down and cradling the head of the still sobbing King in her lap. 'Louis, my sweet,' she said. 'It doesn't do to let men like the Count see you like this.'

Ludwig sniffed and half lifted his head. 'I am not afraid for myself - only for you,' he said with a gulp.

'I fear nothing, and certainly not a mob of pimply adolescents. You must show kingship, Louis. You must weed out the instigators of this fracas from the university. This is Jesuit doing.'

'You think so?'

'The people love you too much to hurt you, so they need a scapegoat.' Lola stroked the tousled gray head. 'I am built of strong stuff, but I can only take so much of their misdirected anger.'

They sat quietly together on the top stair for several more minutes, listening to the cries still echoing from the streets until Reinhard reappeared. 'I'm sorry to interrupt,' he said formally, 'but your Majesty should know that the police are having great difficulty in restraining the mob. They are now moving on the apartments of the Queen.'

At this alarming development, Ludwig left Lola as quickly as he had come. Again he disregarded his own safety and hurried through the streets on foot accompanied only by Baron von Pechmann, the Chief of Police. Most of the rioters stood aside to let him pass, and some even respectfully removed their hats, only to be threatened by others.

However, by the time he arrived at the royal apartments where the bulk of the students had now gathered and were shouting 'Down with Lola! Long live the Queen,' his fury had dried any remaining tears. The police were ordered to be as rough as required to clear the mob.

'Wanton conduct!' he bellowed. 'Never since Munich was built have stones been thrown at the King. Is this the price of liberty? I can lose my crown - even my life - but I will never yield to such ingratitude!'

The rioting was finally quelled by midnight. The next day orders were given for the removal of all remaining Catholic professors from the Munich University, and Lola wrote letters to the free newspapers of the world defending her actions and blaming the Jesuits for the riot.

'I was brought up from my earliest youth to despise Jesuits who have long had Bavaria as their headquarters. I was greatly incensed when they attempted to bribe me and offered me 50,000 francs a year if I would leave and promise never to return. This opened my eyes. I refused their offer with indignation. Since then they have moved Heaven and earth to get rid of me and have not ceased to persecute me.'

The next day Ludwig was confined to bed again, this time with a skin disorder no doubt exacerbated by the stresses he was under. Long-suffering Queen Therese had given up all hope of a return to normal family life and could not be bothered to stop Lola from visiting her husband whenever she chose. The Queen turned her back on the affair and retreated into her own world.

Ludwig continued to write letters and reams of poetry defending Lola. The poems were duly published in the local newspapers and just as duly parodied. But he would never give up. 'The more they try to sever us, the more we are chained together,' he cried over and over.

With the coming of spring the resentments of the winter seemed to fade a little, and by June the court split for its summer holidays. Queen Therese headed off to one spa resort and the Crown Prince and his family to another. Ludwig, meanwhile, was going to spend his summer between his retreats at Bruckenau and Aschaffenburg and while he would be expected to travel around with full pomp and a military guard, everyone assumed Lola would not be far behind.

As most of her belongings were being packed for the journey, Lola received word that her once dear friend, Lieutenant Friedrich Baum, who had recently returned to Munich, had just been seriously injured in a riding accident and hovered between life and death. But rather than rushing around to see him in the hospital, she went first to the Residenz where there was a general state of

upheaval organizing the summer removal of the court.

Ludwig stared at Lola with incredulity. 'You wish me to accompany you to this man's bedside?'

'They say he may not live. If you still hold doubts about my friendship with him, this is your chance to ask him directly,' she said, her eyes dancing with a strange kind of fervor.

Ludwig was disturbed at such a thought. Yes, it was probably unlikely that any man would care to die with a lie on his lips but he didn't know if he could ask such a question at all.

Lola pressured him again by sighing into his ear. 'Show that you have faith in me, Louis. The Lieutenant will tell you the truth. I know it.'

Ludwig reluctantly followed Lola through the dark corridors of the military hospital. He didn't like sick chambers. He'd seen too many of them over the years.

When they entered the ward and he saw that the poor Lieutenant had been subjected to an operation in the vicinity of his lower regions, it was all Ludwig could do to keep his presence of mind. To ask an intimate question of the sort Lola had mentioned of a man who, even if he lived, was unlikely to ever have a woman again would have been insensitive in the extreme.

Instead, Ludwig struggled to maintain his kingly presence by remaining quite still, while Lola slipped into a chair beside the bed. The King noticed that in her hands she held some rosary beads that he had given her. She closed her eyes and murmuring softly, turned them in her fingers.

Baum was deathly pale. His breath still retained the smell of a strong liquor used to deaden what must have been the horrific pain of the surgery. At the sound of Lola's whispers, he opened his eyes and tried to focus. Lola leaned closer to him.

'Friedrich.' Her hot breath fanned his face. 'The King is here.' The rosary beads clicked in her fingers. 'If you can speak, tell him that nothing we ever did together was wrong. Tell him that once we even prayed for an end to the Jesuits.'

Friedrich's eyes wandered around the room. He recognized Ludwig and tried to lift his head, but the King waved a calming hand. He was also aware of Lola's close scrutiny. She was holding the rosary beads to her lips and dangling the ruby cross close to his face.

'You remember, Friedrich, don't you? The last time we met, we prayed together,' she said. She clicked the beads again.

He moved his face away from them and looked directly into the King's eyes. They held a strange combination of dread and sorrow. Friedrich managed a nod and a cracked smile.

'There was nothing wrong done,' he said at last in a croaky voice, 'and it is true that the last time we met, we prayed.'

By the time Lola arrived to spend her holiday with Ludwig in Bruckenuau, she was in a bad mood. Apart from a tiring journey partly by train and by coach, she had received surly or abusive receptions at each town she passed through. When on one occasion onlookers dared to throw pebbles at her, she was quick to set Turk on them and flourish her pistol.

'Meddle with me and you'll be sorry, you ungrateful wretches,' she shouted and the crowd dispersed, but not before she was treated to a barrage of rude fingers.

When she found that not only had Ludwig's old tutor, Heinrich von der Tann, been invited to spend the summer but that Crown Prince Maximilian and his wife Marie had also changed their minds about going to the spas and were also in residence, she was even more annoyed. The Crown Prince and Princess had always refused to have any contact with her, and Tann was given the duty of distracting Lola in Ludwig's many absences.

It didn't take Lola long to become bored. Although there were plenty of the outdoor activities she always enjoyed, the decrepit Tann could never by any stretch of imagination be considered amusing. And not only did she yearn for the activities of city life, she actually missed the promise of spending a few nights alone with Ludwig himself. Could it be that in her heart of hearts she genuinely felt some attraction for the old man after all?

To avoid Tann, she took to going for long walks with Turk and one morning she discovered a clearing in the forest that still retained a drift of mist from the night before, giving it a slightly

mysterious air. Apart from the twitter of birds, it was utterly peaceful. She sat on a log and Turk lay down at her feet with his head on his front paws. For a few minutes she drank in the silence before being overcome with a sense of someone's presence. She glanced around at the dense trees but could see no-one.

'Bon-Bon? Can that be you?' she whispered. 'Give me a sign that you are listening.'

After a brief silence, the dog raised his head and barked at something in the forest. Lola felt a tingle along her spine. 'Oh my Bon-Bon. You cannot begin to imagine how much I still miss you,' she said, tears of joy forming in her eyes. 'How I wish we could be together again. You were always so wise and knew me so well. Guide me in this trying time of my life. What can I do to change what people are saying about me? How can I convince them of the truth, that I only wish to give Bavarians the gift of freedom? You will understand that I do love my dear, sweet Louis - that it is not the way I loved you - and always will love you. But no-one can believe it. They think there is only one way for a man and woman to love. So often we talked together about the freedom of the human spirit, yet there is no such thing for me. Were I a man, I would be esteemed as the King's adviser for trying to drag his kingdom out of the Middle Ages. But instead I am pilloried and despised - all because I am a woman - a woman who was forced to make her own way in life as best she could.'

The dog barked again and Lola closed her eyes, seeing Henri's image before her, but with an angry questioning on his face. 'Yes, yes, I'm sorry that sometimes I am a little wicked,' she whispered. 'So what of it? No-one cares a fig if a man satisfies his body's needs where and when he can in any manner that he chooses. You know that I am not like other women. I don't pretend, nor try to disguise my desires. You know they mean nothing.'

Yet Henri's face remained angry until it slowly dissipated and Lola opened her eyes, feeling a chill as clouds covered the sun. 'Bon-Bon, please - you must understand. I would never do anything to harm our beautiful memories. Oh please, don't leave me.'

But the sense of presence had disappeared altogether and the dog lowered his head once more on to his paws.

Lola returned to the castle with a tight feeling in her chest. After all those abortive attempts to raise Henri's spirit, at last he had come to her when she had least expected, and she should have been overjoyed, but that final frown she thought she saw on his face troubled her. Surely spirits were beyond jealousy over brief earthly passions? Or was it something else of which Henri disapproved?

Ludwig knew about Lola's near-marriage to Henri Dujarier, how she still carried the torch of love for him and had tried to contact him through the efforts of a medium. The King also had an interest in mysticism and the occult himself and it was the sort of story that appealed immensely to his romantic senses.

Later, during a stroll through the castle garden, she discussed her experience in the forest with Ludwig, cautious to leave out any part to do with her earthly lusts. 'I am sure Henri came to warn me of something,' she said. 'I wish he had been able to speak.'

'On the other hand, he might have come to reassure you,' said Ludwig.

Lola sighed. 'I don't think so. For all the good I have attempted to do for this country, perhaps I should have given in and taken Metternich's money so that people could justify their ill-founded thoughts about me.'

Ludwig stopped. His eyes were liquid with fear. 'Don't ever speak like that. You must never again talk of giving in to the rabble.'

'But what is the solution? I can never be your Queen and, even if I were, your ministers would never agree with a woman's view of what the world should be. I am becoming tired of the endless battles against insurmountable odds.'

Ludwig lifted her hand and placed a kiss upon it and cradled it to his chest. 'You are my Queen in all but name,' he said. 'Please don't waver now. We are slowly influencing ministers to the cause. It takes a long time to change deeply entrenched views. I have sent to Paris for Prince Wallerstein to

return to my service. He is one of the best and most fair men I know. Together with Herr von Berks we will create a liberal ministry and our dreams of a truly free Bavaria will become a reality. Giving birth to a new order never came easy.'

'But why must it be me who suffers all the labor pains,' murmured Lola a little petulantly.

'Do you not think I suffer too?' countered Ludwig with a sob in his voice. 'If you were to see some of the evidence they keep bombarding me with to try and convince me of your true nature.' He bit his tongue, but it was too late.

Lola snatched her hand from his embrace. 'What sort of evidence? Did you not hear the dying words of poor Baum for yourself?'

His mouth tightened. 'Yes - and that is why I should not have spoken of it.'

'What are you keeping from me? How can we fight united if I don't know what their weapons are?'

Ludwig dropped his eyes. 'They talk of the Alemannia,' he whispered hoarsely.

'Those brave boys who have sworn to defend me?'

He barely nodded.

Lola gripped his arms and shook him. 'Look at me, Louis. What are those Jesuits saying to you?'

He winced as his eyes darted across hers. 'That ... they ... and you ...'

Lola's grip intensified. 'Louis?'

'They are saying that they are your male harem. That you keep a special bedroom for them. That you participate in nightly orgies and use each man in turn to satisfy yourself.'

Lola clutched her forehead. 'Oh, God.'

'I wish you hadn't made me speak of it,' he groaned.

Lola rocked on her feet briefly before she refocused on the King. For a fleeting second she thought she detected the first genuine doubt she had ever seen in his watery eyes. This was why Henri had come to warn her. Everything she had achieved was on a precarious balance. The ploy with Baum was not enough. She wished she hadn't been tempted with Fritz as well. How stupid she had been, as of course there would have been spies watching the length of time he spent in the Alemannia hall near to her house. From now on she would have to struggle with celibacy or else lose everything she had accomplished. She forced herself to be calm.

'Oh, Louis,' she whispered, stroking his cheek with her finger tip, 'what depths they must plumb to destroy us. I can withstand anything they throw at me, but you must never be forced to hear such wicked lies again. When we return to Munich, we must dismiss everyone who bears us such ill-will. Even if it means ridding the court, the university, and the government of every official, minister and teacher. For this new order I will suffer all the labor pains necessary.'

Ludwig's face lifted and the moment of doubt disappeared. He put his arms around her and laid his head on her shoulder. 'Oh, my darling Lolita, whatever would I do without you? What a treasure you are to me.'

When Crown Prince Maximilian and Marie decided to leave Bruckenuau, Lola knew that if she was to salvage anything of her summer idyll with Ludwig, she had to get rid of Tann. He was Ludwig's closest male ally and for most of his life had been more like a father to the King than just teacher. She was unaware of the advice he gave Ludwig but it was hardly likely to be in her favor.

At dinner that night she dressed in one of her most provocative gowns and let her hair flow loose down her back. She sat next to Ludwig, in the seat that would normally have been the Queen's, and which she could know must cause Ludwig's old mentor embarrassment. When she engineered the conversation around to the granting of her title and Ludwig seemed to be reluctant to be drawn on the subject, she demonstrated her famous temper. 'Fine,' she snapped, 'I should have known you're nothing but a puppet surrounded by sycophants and unable to make a single decision for yourself.'

Ludwig was horrified. 'Lolita! What's got into you? How can you say such things?'

'It's the truth,' she retaliated. 'You've gone back on your word. Call yourself a king? You're nothing but a despicable toad.'

Ludwig's face went from white to red. He kicked back his chair and stood up. 'Never in all my life has anyone dared to speak to me in this fashion,' he shouted. Visibly shaken, he turned and marched out of the dining hall.

Lola was left staring into the shocked eyes of Tann.

'By God, but you're an evil harlot,' he muttered. 'This time you've gone too far. In an earlier age, you would have been executed for far less.'

'Be careful, old man, what you say to me,' Lola warned.

But Tann was undaunted. 'The King may be temporarily blinded by your spells but they have no effect on me. I can see you for the whore you are - and one day so will he.'

Lola's sudden scream rent the air. She picked up the nearest plate and threw it at Tann's head. The old man dodged just in time.

Lola knew that Ludwig would be sorry, but she decided to make him sweat. The next morning she arranged for a carriage to be seen being loaded with her luggage and the word put out that she was leaving Bruckenuau, and Bavaria, for good. She was sufficiently confident in the result that her luggage was actually empty. Within minutes, a red-eyed, sleep-deprived Ludwig knelt on the ground before her, pleading forgiveness for his own behavior the night before.

'I'll only stay if Tann goes,' she said, fondling the top of his head.

'He's already left of his own will,' he said.

Lola bent down and helped Ludwig to his feet. She kissed him on the lips. 'We are alone at last, my precious Louis' she whispered, kicking off her slippers. 'Anything you desire is now yours.'

Ludwig followed up his summer holiday with a brief official tour of the southern provinces and Lola returned to Munich. Wherever she went, she still had a hostile reception. The resentments that had been curbed during the summer had not been completely buried and were getting ready to flare again.

Early on the morning of the King's birthday in late August, a special package arrived for Lola. She opened a pair of blue velvet covers to reveal a multi-paged document, to which was affixed the large wax seal of King Ludwig of Bavaria. In fine calligraphic lettering the document declared that Dona Lola Montez had been created the Countess of Landsfeld. Opposite the King's signature was a coat of arms, its four quarters containing a lion, a dolphin, a sword and a pink rose, and topped with the nine-pointed crown of a countess.

Lola clutched the precious document to her breast and closed her eyes, overcome with sweet ultimate victory. For a few seconds, little Eliza Gilbert danced naked through the streets of Montrose in the pouring rain. Yes, Eliza! I've proved it again. You can have anything you want, if you really, really try.

The King had also included a personal note.

'My ever dear Lolita. On my birthday I give myself the gift of giving. I hope this changes your social standing, but it can't change the government. Many will be furious to see you a Countess and it will be more necessary than ever for you to be modest and prudent and avoid occasions for tumult. Enemies may try to cause disturbance to make attempts on your life. Be careful. Your adoring Louis.'

The King's birthday was a national holiday. Lola celebrated by making a public statement in going to church to offer thanks for her new status. In the evening she had a grand dinner party, for which she dressed in a magnificent black and gold brocade gown, across which was draped a white sash and pinned with a diamond star brooch from which hung a miniature of Ludwig. In her hair, around her neck and on her wrists she wore more indisputable diamantine evidence of the special place she had in the heart of the King of Bavaria.

The evening ended with a display of fireworks. When the guests finally left in the small hours, Fritz Peissner slipped into her house as had been secretly pre-arranged. Lola greeted him with a shower of passionate kisses.

‘Fritz, darling. How I’ve missed you.’

‘I hate to think of you with the King all those months,’ he muttered, his fingers rapidly working to remove the sash and its diamond pin. ‘I’m insane with jealousy.’

‘You have no reason to be jealous,’ said Lola as she nibbled on his ear, which drove him to even greater impatience, his hand inside her dress bodice. ‘There is nothing like this between us.’

‘I can’t possibly believe that.’ He lowered his head to continue his search with his mouth.

But Lola lifted his chin. ‘Come with me and I shall prove it.’

Taking his hand, she led him quickly to her small private chapel. At the prie-dieu in front of the large crucifix Lola pulled Fritz down to kneel next to her. She linked her arm in his and placed her palms together as if to pray.

‘Here in front of God, we will make our vow to be faithful and loyal to each other for ever.’

Fritz was so overcome that he could only stutter. ‘For ever?’ he gasped. ‘Does that m ... mean you will m ... marry me?’

Lola flashed him a strange look. ‘Who said anything about marriage?’

‘But ...’

‘Repeat after me. “I, Fritz Peissner, swear faithfulness and loyalty to the Countess of Landsfeld forever”.’ She pulled his face to hers and gave him an invasive tongue kiss that seemed to suck out the very essence of his heart, his very soul. He gasped as she released him.

‘Oh, yes, yes, I do so swear.’

23.

Conferring Lola with her title was not without its costs to Ludwig. Not only was the Countess of Landsfeld allowed to exercise feudal rights over two thousand indignant people in Landsberg and Feldshut, the two districts that combined to create her title, she was also to receive an income of twenty thousand gulden a year.

For much of the autumn and into the winter, Ludwig suffered from bouts of ill health, exacerbated by the continuing howls of protest from his subjects over his behavior and another highly charged interview with the Pope’s personal emissary, the Cardinal of Breslau, in which Ludwig shouted his defense until he was hoarse. ‘My love is a friendship of the most high and pure imaginable. If you drive me to extremes you will have my death on your conscience!’ was his cry.

The Cardinal left Ludwig’s court convinced that the Royal House of Wittelsbach was prone to demoniac possession.

Meanwhile, the scandal continued to rebound around the courts and governments of Europe. Scurrilous articles in newspapers around the world goaded Lola into often ill-considered replies in which she defended herself and Ludwig as innocents caught up in a web of Jesuit-inspired schemes. Her dramatic responses did nothing more than add fuel to an already blazing fire.

‘Remember, you are a Countess now. People will have to defer to you, whether they like it or not,’ Ludwig had tried to reassure her. It made little difference.

Those few like the Alemannia who supported Lola did so with almost fanatical enthusiasms for her beauty, charm, intelligence and her determination to see that every citizen of Bavaria should be allowed freedom and equality under the law. Those who hated her continued to try and discredit her in Ludwig’s eyes and when that failed time and again, they were increasingly left with only one alternative.

But Lola had prepared herself for such a possibility. Wherever she went, she would be escorted by at least two or three of her loyal Alemannia students and her dog Turk who, it was rumored, had been trained to attack on sight anyone wearing a cassock. In her pocket, she always had her pistol and the damage she was able to wreak with a riding whip had become legendary. Knowing full well that her enemies were capable of trying even more insidious methods, she took to making sure her

staff tasted any food before it was brought to her.

She was fearless. She would appear at the theater or opera, dripping in Ludwig's diamonds, or riding in her new coach with the crest of Landsfeld on the door. Often, she would be seen in the students' favorite venue, the Rottmann's Cafe, wearing a female version of their uniform and carousing as if she were a male student herself. These exhibitions did nothing to enhance her reputation.

While an uneasy truce existed at the university, Lola still went ahead with her campaign to eliminate everyone whom she suspected of being a spy, or holding Jesuit allegiance.

Ministers in the government changed yet again and Berks finally became Chief Minister. Prince Wallerstein infuriated Lola by at first sitting on the fence, neither committing himself to total reforms nor rejecting the previous style of government. When he made the fatal error of advising Ludwig to keep Lola's wild plans in check, she lost her temper, vowing to have his head before the month was out.

Ludwig sank deeper into the chaos around him and did nothing, finding it easier to defer to Lola's every wish for the sake of peace.

Servants came and went. Shopkeepers lost their royal warrants. Lola hired and fired with an almost maniacal abandon. Just a sly glance could lose a maid her job. A minister who laughed at the wrong joke would be ousted in a flash. Until at last came the final catalyst.

A popular professor, Dr. Joseph Gorres, died. As a man long interested in mysticism, he had been a close friend of the King's since his youth and had become increasingly distressed at Ludwig's stubbornness over Lola, detecting in his obsession with the woman dark and dangerous portents. A rumor took flight that Gorres had died of a broken heart and his last words bore that out: 'I die because I cannot live under the rule of a harlot.' When neither Ludwig nor the Alemannia turned out for the funeral, the first fires of true revolution were lit.

Although Lola's house has been reinforced with iron grills since the last episode with the students, she was unafraid when she saw the new gathering beneath her windows. Placards and effigies of herself were scattered among the crowd. Fists shook and they yelled at her. 'Down with the sorceress!'

Disregarding all warnings, she marched out into the icy wind of the street to meet them head on. 'Why don't you children go back to your books and your beer?' she shouted at them, her black hair flying in the wind and her pistol in hand, reminding all who saw her of one of the Valkyries about to ride.

'Hang the whore!' came a loud cry.

Lola's eyes raced across the crowd, looking for the face to match the voice. She saw him - a dark-eyed burly student who had once attempted to flirt with her and had been rebuffed. It had always been the same in her life. Always the ones she rejected gave her the most trouble.

'If you don't disperse this minute, I will have the university closed!' she yelled in competition with the wintry wind.

This was too much. The crowd rushed forward and someone knocked Lola's pistol from her hand. It was only the sudden appearance of several of her Alemannia that saved her life. They rushed forward, shielding her from the encroaching mob. Fritz drew a knife and a tussle ensued with another student. He cried out as his own knife was turned against him and stabbed him in the arm. 'Run!' he gasped. 'We can't hold them for long!'

At the sight of blood on Fritz's sleeve, Lola abandoned her bravado, picked up her skirts and fled, skidding and sliding on the icy footpath.

Not far away was the Austrian Embassy. With several of her Alemannia at her heels, she rushed at the door, but the guards would not let her in. She looked around wildly. It was a long way to the Residenz, and her only hope. Again she started to run, dodging an avalanche of stones and chunks of ice.

Fritz, who had managed to evade his assailant, was close behind her. He pointed ahead at a large yellow building. 'The Theatinerkirche. They won't touch you in there!'

Panting, Lola reached the great doors. Just as she did so, the student who had called her a whore made a grab for her. She fell to the ground with him on top of her. A pair of huge hands were around her neck, squeezing hard. For a few terrifying seconds she thought her end was in sight, before Fritz and several of the other Alemannia had pulled him off her and were pounding and kicking at him.

Lola struggled to her feet and pushed against the doors of the church. Thankfully, they opened and she fell into sanctuary.

Ludwig and his soldiers were swiftly on the scene. At the sight of the King in person, there was a slight tempering of the crowd's rage. An armed escort was hurriedly provided for Lola. As she emerged from the church, the crowd began to jeer but Lola, whose pistol had been recovered and returned to her, walked with her head in the air, waving her pistol and a smile of pure defiance on her face.

Ludwig hurried up to her and as she strode forward to take his arm, she fired a few shots into the air. At this challenge to them, the crowd seethed and swelled again, but Ludwig's cuirassiers held them back as in the full view of everyone, King Ludwig and the Countess of Landsfeld walked slowly arm-in-arm towards the Residenz. It was late at night before the troops had cleared the streets and it was safe enough for Lola to be secretly returned to her own house.

But Ludwig did not retire. He spent the night walking up and down. His kingdom was fraying around him and his power with it. Lola had come close to being killed, and by a bunch of unruly students at that. Ungrateful wretches! At dawn's first light he sat down and wrote an urgent message for Prince Wallerstein to attend him immediately.

'Close the university?' gasped Wallerstein. 'But Your Majesty, this is utter madness.'

'Are you daring to challenge my authority?'

'No, but I feel I must warn you of the consequences. Such a step is extremely serious. It will bring unspeakable misfortune upon thousands of respectable families. They do not deserve to be penalized in this manner because of a few rowdies. This is not your Majesty's command, it is that of the Countess Landsfeld. We all saw her today deliberately baiting the crowd, knowing exactly what Your Majesty's reaction would be.'

'Then I must ask for your resignation.'

The Prince bowed. 'Very well.'

'But first you will close down the university for one year. All students who are non-residents of Munich will have to leave the town within twenty-four hours.'

The Prince stared at Ludwig for a few moments. 'Is there no way in which I can change your mind?'

'Never!'

Wallerstein turned on his heel and marched out.

Ludwig's decree was posted by mid-morning and soon thousands of protesters had gathered in the streets, not just students, but everyone whose livelihood depended on the university or just those who had had enough of Lola Montez and the King's madness. When it was known that Prince Wallerstein had resigned, violent scuffles broke out in front of the Ministry and several people were bayoneted by the guards, some seriously.

Thousands marched to the Rathaus, the city hall, and a vote was taken for Burgomaster von Steinsdorf to petition the King to re-open the university and disband the Alemannia. Thousands more gathered silently in front of the Residenz as the Burgomaster tried to gain entry and was turned away. But the crowd remained, growing restless. Again Steinsdorf tried to enter, asking to speak to the King's son, Prince Luitpold. This seemed to have the desired effect and after much shouting between the young Prince and his father, Ludwig finally relented.

In full dress uniform with sword, Ludwig stood in the middle of his throne room and with a thunderous expression on his face, received the Burgomaster. 'What custom is this to petition your King in the thousands?' he yelled. 'I thoroughly considered my action in closing the university and I will not be cowed by threats. The Munich burghers are ungrateful - they forget what I have done for this town in the past twenty years. There is nothing to prevent me moving my capital elsewhere.'

‘Please, your Majesty, we are not ungrateful. These people are simply those whose livelihoods depend on the university - the bakers, butchers, shop-owners, innkeepers. We beg your Majesty to reconsider.’

‘I will not be intimidated by such tactics. You can take my life, but never my will.’

Steinsdorf slipped to his knees. ‘No-one wishes your life, Majesty, only the fairness and consideration for your subjects for which you have been loved these past twenty-three years.’

Ludwig’s shoulders slumped noticeably. ‘Leave me,’ he said. ‘The Ministry will inform you of my decision.’

After the delegation returned to the Rathaus, Ludwig sent for Berks and sent him with a message to Steinsdorf ordering the burghers that provided they did not congregate again, he would relent and allow the university to re-open after six months. The message was received with hostility. Steinsdorf sent a reply saying it was not enough, the university must be opened now.

Meanwhile, the crowds in the streets grew angrier. Barricades were set up throughout the city. One mob howled for the head of the Chief of Police, while another pelted Lola’s house.

Steinsdorf, Berks and Prince Wallerstein convened a meeting to decide what should be done.

‘The King must reopen the university,’ said Steinsdorf, ‘and Lola Montez must go. The students are threatening to set fire to her house and smoke her out.’

‘If she should be killed, there is no knowing what disaster will follow,’ said Wallerstein.

‘Although I have resigned, I cannot abandon my King.’

They both looked at Berks and asked that he give the King an ultimatum, telling him that there is talk of the students arming themselves and of Crown Prince Maximilian being called to take sides. At all costs the King must be made to see reason.

He just wanted to sit in his favorite chair looking out at his view of the beautiful city he had created, and write poetry. That’s all. He wanted to shut out the crass, disgusting, world out there and dream of Beauty, and Art, and Love. He no longer had the energy or the heart to be a King.

‘Your Majesty. You must open the door!’

Every bone in Ludwig’s body seemed to ache as the aide-de-camp continued to thump on his bedroom door. ‘They refuse to leave, your Majesty. Please speak to them.’

‘Ludwig! This is Therese, your loyal wife and life’s companion. For the sake of your family and your crown you must face your obligations or I shall no longer have any respect for you.’

So, they had dragged poor Therese out of bed at this ungodly hour to add fuel to their fires. Poor darling. What a wonderful wife she has been. I have been careless in my treatment of her.

Slowly, Ludwig climbed up off his bed. He had not closed his eyes once that night. Neither had he bothered to remove his boots or undress, knowing instinctively he had to face them not as an old man in his nightgown, but as a King.

He donned his uniform jacket with its mass of medals and decorations, picked up his sword-belt where he had left it on the floor, and carefully buckled it around his waist. The voices still called to him.

‘Your Majesty. There is talk of mutiny in the army and the execution of the Countess!’

Oh, no. Not my Lolita. My love. My enchantment. What have I done? Bringing you to this. You will never forgive me.

Ludwig threw open his bedroom door. The outer chamber was packed with members of his own family, senior policemen and representatives of the ministry.

Queen Therese knelt down before him. ‘Ludwig, on my knees I beg you to see reason. Listen to your people. Make the decision you know in your heart of hearts to be right. If not for my sake, then for that of our children and the future of our country.’

Someone handed him a folder. ‘Your Majesty has consistently refused to believe the activities of the Countess of Landsfeld. Once again we petition you with the truth. The people will no longer tolerate this woman and even the police can no longer guarantee her safety. If you care about her life, you must act.’

Ludwig took the folder, but didn't need to read it to know what it contained. He looked at Berks. 'What do you wish of me?' he said in a croaky voice.

'That the university be reopened immediately and that Lola Montez be banished from Munich within the hour and the country of Bavaria as soon as possible thereafter.'

All those expectant faces, staring at him.

Yet all he could see was one face - with skin of alabaster, lips as tender as the gently parted petals of a rose, hair flowing like black silk, and eyes that put the blue of heaven to shame. Venus, the Goddess of Love.

Most men would have rather faced the battlefield than be the one to order Lola Montez out of Bavaria. Even with the King's signed order of banishment in his hands, Prince Wallerstein hesitated. In the end it was Count Reinhard who volunteered to speak to her first.

She stood by a marble mantelpiece in her main reception room drawing deeply on a cigarette. Dressed in her favored black velvet, she seemed smaller than he remembered but there was no hint of defeat in the defiant set of her shoulders.

Reinhard met the infamous blue of her eyes with a knot in his heart. For the thousandth time in recent months he wished he could turn back the clock to that time when they had been together, to discover a way past the smoke-screen of their physical passions and her elaborate facade to reach the real woman hidden within. Was she utterly cold and fearless or was there some secret corner that trembled with warmth and real tenderness? Was she capable of ever truly loving a man?

'Don't keep me waiting,' she said without blinking. 'What is my Louis doing about this rabble in the street? Don't they ever sleep? I am thoroughly tired of being cooped up like this.' Her words were rapid as if she was trying to avoid what she must sense was coming.

'Madam Countess Landsfeld ...'

'Such formality, Reinhard? That's not like you.' Her voice dried.

He set his chin and held out the scroll. 'Madam Countess Landsfeld,' he repeated. 'I bring you the order of His Majesty King Ludwig of Bavaria.'

Lola stared at the scroll. 'I have a slight headache. Why don't you read it to me?' She averted her eyes and turned to face the window.

At the sight of flakes of snow building up along its gilded frames her face paled. 'There is always snow when the news is bad,' she murmured as if to herself, 'it is so beautiful isn't it? So soft and pure and gentle. I wonder why that is?' She glanced again at Reinhard. 'Read it. Please.'

With a hard lump of agony in the back of his throat, Reinhard read out the order. She barely flinched as the words of banishment filled the room. When he had finished, they had descended into a well of silence.

He didn't know what to expect from her. With Lola anything was possible. Tears. Rage. But for a long time there was nothing, as if the words had merely washed over her. She sighed lightly. 'There must be some mistake,' she said. 'My Louis loves me. Who was it who twisted his arm to make him sign this nonsense? Was it you?'

'Lola, it is not nonsense. The King didn't sign this under duress. He signed it of his own free will. I was there when he did so. I can vouch for it.'

Her lips lifted into a vague smile. 'You have been a liar ever since I first met you, Reinhard. Don't think for one moment I haven't been aware of how you change allegiances to suit yourself. You made up those dossiers about me. Why should I believe you now?'

'I will fetch the other witnesses. Von Berks and Prince Wallerstein were there. Also the Queen herself. It is true, Lola. And you of all people know that King Ludwig never tells a lie.'

Her lips quivered and the facade started to crumble. 'The Queen, you say?' Tears filled her eyes. 'But *I* am the Queen. My Louis promised that *I* should wear the crown one day.'

She turned again to the window, pressing her palms up against the panes of glass and her fingers working as if trying to grasp at some unseen figure in the snow on the other side. She started speaking in a strangely-accented English. 'Papa - does it snow in the Himalayas? I don't want you

to get cold and miss all the fun. I'm going to be the Queen, you see. And Mama will have to curtsy to me. She won't like it, but we'll make her do it, won't we? Over, and over, and over again.'

She stared through the glass for a few more seconds before plunging her face into her hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

Reinhard didn't understand much of what she said but realized he had just glimpsed that secret corner he had wondered about. He wanted to put his arms around her and hold her close yet he hesitated, knowing his were not the arms she would want. Instead, he moved closer and whispered in her ear. 'You must go now, Lola. The crowd want your blood. The King signed the banishment order rather than see you hurt. I have a carriage waiting to take you to the train to Switzerland.'

At his words, she raised her tear-stained face and the shutters to her soul abruptly snapped shut. 'Go? Never! Where is my Louis? I must have this order countermanded.'

Reinhard winced. 'But Lola, don't you understand what this means? You are not allowed to see the King again. You are banished from Bavaria forever.'

Heaven's blue eyes iced over and she set her mouth. 'Is that so?' she said through gritted teeth. 'Well, we'll just see about that!'

She fumbled in a desk drawer and drew out her pistol, pushed past Reinhard and ran out into her garden. Angry members of the mob had already scaled the wall. Many were coming towards her, stones in hand, but she did not falter and planted her feet firmly on a small mound of earth and faced them, brandishing her pistol. 'Here I am, you scum-suckers!' she cried. 'Kill me if you dare!'

Each member of the mob seemed momentarily transfixed by her until one man threw his stone, then another did the same, and another. As if enjoying some kind of gladiatorial game, Lola dodged them all, laughing hysterically. 'Such bad shots!' She thumped herself over her heart. 'This is where you must aim if you want to kill me!'

The mob was again briefly awestruck by her behavior and Reinhard took advantage of the pause, running the gauntlet of the threatening crowd and with a rapid sweep he collected the Countess in his arms.

'Let me go, you bastard!' she shrieked, kicking wildly as he dragged her in the direction of the stables. 'I'm going to kill them all, so help me!'

Reinhard's strength managed to hold until her coach and horses burst out from the stables and galloped in her direction. As it reached the battling pair, a coachman leapt down and threw open one of the doors. Without hesitation, Reinhard threw her in and scrambled in after her.

When they saw that their quarry would escape, the crowd came to life again. A rain of obscene language, rotten eggs and vegetables as well as stones bombarded the brougham as it pulled out and raced along the Barerstrasse. After it had gone, the crowd turned in a wave and rushed towards the house itself, intent on looting and destroying as much of it as they could.

'I'm sorry it had to end like this,' gasped Reinhard as they sped off towards the palace, 'but you must have realized it was the only outcome.'

Wild and defiant, with her black skirts spread across the red velvet carriage seat, Lola looked like a spider about to pounce. 'Pah. Why do you talk of ends? I am only just beginning.'

'Oh, Lola, for God's sake, stop deluding yourself,' snarled Reinhard. 'You're as bad as Ludwig with his dreams.'

She sneered at him. 'There is nothing wrong with my Louis's dreams. Don't tell me it is a sin now to love peace and beauty? Or do those stinking Jesuits plan to make a law against it? I can just see them sitting around in their dirty cassocks planning their next moves while they fondle the choir boys. Beautiful women and freedom are banned. The only God is the God of Vengeance and Hell. The only things you are allowed to love must be the perverted, the ugly and the brutish.'

'It won't ever be like that, Lola. The Ultramontane Party has lost its power. Their kind of rule is finished all over Europe.'

'Yes, thanks to people like me.'

'I don't think you can take all the credit,' he said sarcastically.

Lola narrowed eyes at him. 'So now is the time for truth. Who were you working for?'

He lifted his lip. 'We have a mutual acquaintance - one who designed this very vehicle in which we are riding, in fact. With my help, the British were influential in ousting the Jesuits from Switzerland.'

'Ah, Lord Henry Brougham. So that's how you knew so much about me.'

'When you turned up in Munich, I thought you were also working for Brougham. When I realized that wasn't the case and that you were acting alone I'm afraid I had no scruples about using my information to discredit you. Can you ever forgive me?'

She shrugged. 'What does it matter now? When one is obliged to live by one's wits, morals aren't an issue.'

'Is that a reflection of yourself?'

She managed a laugh that carried a seductive quality. 'A reflection of both of us, Reinhard. We are very much alike. I never thought I'd say this, but I shall probably miss you.'

'I'm so glad you have finally accepted the inevitable and will leave Bavaria.' He reached for her hand, his arrogant face softened with adoration. 'And there is no need to miss me. I will follow you wherever you wish.'

She looked at him curiously while withdrawing her hand from his grasp. 'I think we are at cross purposes. I'm not going anywhere, Count Reinhard. As soon as I see my Louis, I intend to have you dismissed from his service. Permanently!'

She relished the shock in his eyes. For all that she had enjoyed their sexual and cerebral jousts, she had never forgiven him for the way he abandoned her in Warsaw. And now he had thought her defeated, but she wasn't going down without a fight. 'I wouldn't care to guarantee your chances of survival once I relate your spying activities to the newspapers,' she added bitterly.

His expression remained fierce for a few moments before he burst out laughing. 'My God, Lola, no wonder they have started calling you the Magnificent Montez. To think I was as bamboozled by you as all those other men and even your stupid Louis. That little exhibition back in your drawing room, weeping and babbling at the snow, was just another act - giving me the impression that you might really have a heart when all along you've always been as hard and cold as stone.'

A smile played about her lips. 'But you're wrong, my dear Count,' she said softly, 'not just common stone. Hard and cold as diamonds.'

Lola banged on the roof and the brougham lurched to a stop close to the royal Residenz. Before Reinhard realized what was happening, she had gathered up her skirts and was out of the carriage, running across the square towards the palace gates, but the guards drew their swords at her approach and she was forced to stop.

'Now do you believe me?' said Reinhard, puffing, as he ran to reach her. 'They've had their orders. 'Give in, Lola, for God's sake.'

Reluctantly, she let him lead her back to the carriage but Reinhard did not get back in himself and told her he would not be going further with her. He withdrew a note from a breast pocket. 'As I had been laboring under the delusion that we might have had a future together,' he said in a thick voice, 'I had not intended to give you this. Now, of course, it does not matter.'

When Lola saw the King's handwriting she spat at him. 'Bastard!'

She lifted a hand as if to strike him, but Reinhard gripped her arm and before she could resist, kissed her fully on the mouth, lingering for several moments to savor the memory of her, before pushing her away. 'Farewell, my dear,' he whispered hoarsely. 'Go and dazzle the rest of the world with those diamonds.' He then pushed Lola into the carriage and slammed the door.

As the coachman whipped up the horses once again, Reinhard stood for a few minutes watching until the vehicle disappeared from view. Rather than returning to his duties at the Residenz, he strolled in the direction of the Englischer Garten. He wandered through the drifts of snow for several minutes before finding a secluded summerhouse shrouded in icicles, and walked inside. Calmly, he drew his pistol from its holster and put it to his temple. Without a second's hesitation he pulled the trigger.

Lola opened the note from Ludwig as the carriage charged on out of Munich. As she read it, and the promise that all was not lost, the desperate gloom that had threatened to overwhelm her lifted. Of course her Louis would never abandon her! He explained he had been forced to sign the banishment order virtually at the point of a bayonet. He asked that she make all the appearances of going to Switzerland, but he told her the Alemannia would be waiting for her at the royal hunting lodge at Blutenburg, a few miles outside of town. There she could lie low until he could find a way of seeing her.

It was dark and snowing when the carriage finally reached the lodge. The group of students who were huddled around the large fire in the hall cheered with joy when they saw Lola. She hugged and kissed them all, some passionately on the mouth.

Although she put her arm around his waist, Fritz seemed less responsive as she shouted. 'Come my heroes. We must go back. We cannot abandon our King. All is not lost!'

The cheers, however, were feeble and Fritz turned to face her. 'No, Lola,' he said. 'We can't. It's over for you - and for us.'

She distanced herself from him and glared. 'I didn't think you would be another rat deserting the ship?'

Pain filled his face. 'I am only being practical,' he muttered. 'You can fight the King's cause better if you are not with him.'

'What rubbish.' Lola's eyes flashed pure vitriol. 'You are jealous of him, that's all.'

The anguish made his eyes water. 'No. Yes. Damn. I thought you and I ... we ... you promised that we'd be together. You said that you loved me.'

Lola threw back her head and laughed. 'But of course I love you.' She spun around waving her hand at the other students. 'I love all of you, who have been so faithful and loyal.'

A few of the others cheered and Lola sailed up to one of the youngest students, Ludwig Leibner, and cupped his face in her hand planting a long probing kiss on his mouth. As she released him, he staggered back gasping and flushing to the others' cheers.

'See,' she said, laughing again. 'There is one of those for each of you who pleases me.'

Fritz promptly responded by smashing a beer stein into the fireplace. 'You bitch,' he cried.

Lola spun around and, before he could retaliate, she smacked him across the face. 'Have you forgotten what I have done for you, you ungrateful pup? Didn't I get your father a job? Didn't I buy you that pocket-watch you so proudly wear? Didn't I teach you how to be a man?'

He gritted his teeth, turned and ran from the hall.

Several of the other students, fortified by long hours of beer-drinking and Lola's apparent willingness to share her passion, crowded around her each hoping to be the next to receive her gift. But she pushed them aside and charged out of the hall into the snow.

His shoulders shaking, Fritz was fumbling with his pistol. It was too dark to see what he was doing and the weapon fell into the snow. As he bent down to retrieve it, Lola flung herself at him. 'I'm sorry, oh, so sorry, Fritz, darling. Please forgive me.'

'Get away from me. I want to die,' he blubbered.

'No, you don't.' She gripped his shoulders and forced him to look at her. 'Listen Fritz. In the excitement of the moment, I often say things I don't mean. I do love you, you silly boy. I will marry you, if you want.'

'What about the King? Don't you love him?'

'Yes, but not in the way you and I love each other. We swore before the holy crucifix remember.' Her hands went in between the frog-fastenings of his jacket, rubbing at his chest. 'Come back to Munich with me and I'll see that you are made a Count. And then you and I shall be married. We'll have our own estate and I promise there will never be anyone else.'

'But why do you kiss the others like you kiss me? How do I know that you haven't slept with them too?'

Her face hardened. 'It means nothing. Is it so wrong to bring a little joy into their lives? You are the only one to share my bed.'

‘Did you sleep with the King?’

‘Never.’ She reached up and ran her hot tongue over his lips. ‘Believe me. Now come back inside where we can cuddle somewhere warm.’

Unseen, Ludwig had slipped out of the Residenz and made his way to Lola’s house. For a time he stood in the shadows, an unshaven, stooped figure in his old blue coat watching as his guards completed the final barricading of Lola’s home on the Barerstrasse.

Much had been looted or was damaged - the gilt mirrors and chandeliers, the crystal staircase and the rose marble bathroom - but the main part of the house had been saved in time. A woman wearing a dress that he recognized as one of Lola’s waltzed by in drunken merriment. He thought his heart was already broken, but this was infinitely worse.

The woman recognized his forlorn figure. ‘Look King,’ she cackled disrespectfully. ‘See what Munich thinks of your whore.’

He shook his head. ‘Vandals. Have you no respect for things of Beauty?’

The woman cackled and a looter ran past with one of Lola’s mirrors in his arms. As a guard intercepted him, it crashed on to the pavement, slivers of glass exploding and raining over the King, cutting his face and hands. He staggered back, blood streaking down his face. Another guard quickly guided him out of the way and escorted him back to the Residenz where a more restrained crowd had gathered.

Some of them cheered as they recognized him. Others sang the national anthem. But the renewal of his people’s faith in him had little effect on Ludwig. He took to his bed and for the first time since childhood, cried himself to sleep.

In the morning, against all advice, Lola decided to secretly return to Munich. Perhaps the King was locked up? She must go to help him. Fritz tried to dissuade her, but she refused to listen.

Covering her hair with white powder, she dressed herself as a man in clothes borrowed from one of the serving boys and, with two of the Alemannia similar disguised, took a cart into town. Once there, she went to the house of the Chief Minister.

Berks was terrified when he discovered her presence. ‘Are you crazy? They nearly burnt your house - they won’t hesitate to do the same to you!’

‘What have they done with my Louis? I must see him,’ she demanded.

‘You can do nothing for him now. He has given the order to return the status quo. If it is any consolation to you, the Jesuit party will not rise again and the people everywhere have had enough of all kinds of tyranny. And not just in Bavaria, there have been revolts in Sicily and Moldavia. We have had reports of unrest brewing in Paris, in Prussia, in Austria. I would not wish to be a king anywhere at this time.’

‘In that event, he will need me more than ever,’ she exclaimed, ‘I will not move from this house until I see him.’

Berks had no choice but to make hurried arrangements for them to meet secretly at the private house of a physician friend of the King’s. Ludwig was spirited out of the palace late at night and taken to the rear of the house, where he rushed through the servants’ quarters to find his Lolita.

And there at last she was - sitting on a parlor chair, hands folded in her lap, thin and pale and dressed in the curious clothes of a young boy. Those feet that had sent him into ecstasies were bare and dirty.

His first impulse was to take her into his arms and crush her to him, but she looked so vulnerable and unlike the Lola he had known that he was unsure of her. Instead he stood still, tears streaming down his cheeks. ‘My Lolita, oh, my darling,’ he bubbled, ‘can you ever forgive me for what they made me do?’

Lola wearily stood up and walked towards him. He noticed her eyes were red, probably also from weeping, her hair uncombed. She had lost nearly all her possessions, even her hairbrushes had been looted from her home. Anger consumed him once again. Such damage to his sacred Beauty.

‘Louis, my sweet,’ she said, taking his hands in hers. He was surprised that they felt cold and the skin slightly rough. ‘We must talk quickly. If word should get out that I am here, your life may be in danger.’

‘My life? What do I care for that? It is you who are important, not me.’

‘We are both at peril,’ she said hastily. Her breath on his face held the slightly rancid trace of tobacco and beer. He had always known that she liked to smoke and drink, but her breath had always seemed as sweet and clear as a mountain stream.

‘Louis? Are you listening to me?’

‘Yes, my love.’

‘You have done all you can, but you must face the truth that you are old and tired and beaten. They have already forced you to recant on the closure of the university. Before long it will be the restitution of the Catholic professors. They will remove Berks and reinstate the Jesuit Ultramontane Government. All that we have accomplished together will be swept away. If you believe in truth, justice and honor and the future of Bavaria, you will do that which I would never in my wildest dreams have ever imagined I would advise you to do.’

He stared at her blankly.

‘You must abdicate the throne and give it to your son, Maximilian. He is young and popular and has the strength to see that your reforms are maintained.’

He was not surprised. These very thoughts had been passing through his mind for several days. ‘Give it all up?’ he asked breathlessly.

Her fingers began working at the buttons of her shirt, drawing it apart so that her breasts swung free. He stared at them, remembering that first day he had seen them. Once, they had been sculpture of the gods. Now they seemed as ordinary as those of any barmaid. She also slowly divested herself of her trousers as well. She wore no underwear.

Pressing herself so close to him, he could see himself reflected in those hypnotic wells of blue as she raised a hand and ran her fingers through his hair. ‘Yes, Louis. Give it all up. For Bavaria. For me. We can go away together. To my Spain. Or your Italy or Greece. Wherever you wish. You can show me all the wonderful beauties of antiquity that you so adore. We can spend the rest of our days together, dreaming among the islands of legend, without a care for politics or matters of state. We can be King and Queen of the Dodecanese.’

‘But I already have a Queen,’ he blurted.

The hypnotic wells stirred with irritation. ‘Leave her behind. She doesn’t care a fig. She’s old and no longer loves you.’ Her body rubbed against his and he could feel her breasts pressing against his chest. He didn’t like the sensation and flinched.

‘What’s the matter, Louis? We can’t go on like this forever, you know. The time must come when I will have to be your Queen in every sense.’ She grabbed his hair and brought his face close to hers and kissed him, her tongue probing his mouth with lust.

The scent of her filled his nostrils - the heat of a woman’s desire. But underlying it was that other unmistakable earthy smell - of a woman who had recently been lying with a man, and in that second he admitted to himself the truth that he had always denied. The gorge of it churned in his stomach and he pushed her away. ‘No,’ he gasped. ‘Do not defile your Beauty. Please, no.’

Lola stepped back, her face puzzled and distorted.

He began to wonder if he was going mad.

‘I can see I’ve rushed you. I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘You will need time to think over such a momentous decision. I will leave now for Switzerland. There I will wait for you for as long as it takes.’

With undisguised relief he watched her re-button her shirt and pull on her trousers.

One kiss and the fantasy he had created had cracked and the shades that his ministers had long tried to uncover were finally lifted from his eyes. She was no longer an infallible goddess, but just another woman. It was the moment he had long dreaded, for he had known deep in his heart it would have had to happen one day. He blamed himself. He should never, *never* have touched her.

Sex - disgusting, grasping and worldly - had forced Beauty aside.

Until today he hadn't believed the most recent report that even while she was proclaiming undying devotion to him, she was satiating her lust with not just Fritz Peissner, but probably with most of the other Alemannia. Now he knew it was true.

Lola would always be a woman who needed the intensity of physical love. For her the platonic ideal would forever be out of the question. While once he had been prepared to sacrifice everything for her, now he was no longer sure.

She stretched out her hand again and shook his formally. 'Adieu my darling Louis. I will think of you every day we are apart.'

'And I likewise.'

Before removing her hand, she tilted her head slightly. 'There is just one thing.'

'Yes?'

'I was only able to take my box of jewels from Barerstrasse. As you can see, I need clothes.'

Ludwig was reminded. He reached into his pocket and handed her an envelope. 'My draft on the Bank of Lucerne,' he murmured. 'While I live, you will never want for anything.'

Her eyes rounded. 'Are you quite sure? They who have destroyed us won't like it.'

'There is no need for them to know. What I do with my own personal money is my own business.'

'I am sorry it has come to this, Louis.'

'So am I, my dearest Lolita.'

She smiled, and Beauty was restored. His heart lifted with renewed hope. Perhaps his mind had been playing tricks and he had imagined those physical sensations because he so badly wanted to believe ill of her. Just perhaps ...

'Remember, whatever happens, I honestly loved you,' she whispered and kissed him again, chastely this time on the cheek.

When the rumor did the rounds that Lola Montez had returned to Munich, the city was once again in uproar. Ludwig locked himself in his palace, writing reams of disjointed poetry and reading from the classics, oblivious of the cries for him to get rid of Berks and appoint a new government.

But then came the news that Louis Phillippe had been forced from his throne in Paris, that Berlin was ablaze. Metternich was preparing to flee Austria. The Hungarians were in open revolt. The forces of change were sweeping across Europe and the old order everywhere was slipping away.

Without Lola's influence and guidance, Ludwig was lost. Night after night he thought endlessly about Lola's urging him to abdicate and live with her in exile, but then he would look out across the Max Joseph Platz at the towers and spires of the city. His beautiful city. He may have ceased to be the King he had once been, but he could never leave his creation, or the people to whom he had dedicated his life. Beauty in a woman had proved to be a fleeting thing - ephemeral, elusive and false - but the Beauty in architecture and Art that he had given to Munich would last forever.

For all the extensive dossiers on Lola's activities that had been forced upon him in the past tortuous months, it was the discovery of a short note hidden among the effects of the traitorous, and fortunately deceased, Count Reinhard, and addressed to the young student that made up his mind.

'Fritz, my darling. I can hardly wait. Midnight. Usual place. Destroy this. L.'

Foolishly, the young student had kept her note and somehow it had fallen into the wily hands of the duplicitous Reinhard. It was now common knowledge throughout the city that Fritz Peissner had traveled to Switzerland with Lola.

Before he signed the certificate of abdication, King Ludwig of Bavaria sat down with his goose quills and his sheets of parchment.

*'Twere far better had I never known thee
I trusted in the love I thought thou gavest
And set myself defiant against all men
The dream of years for evermore has vanished*

*And I awaken in a wilderness
What I have felt of joy and pleasure banished;
My crown is forfeit, and my happiness*

PART IV

‘It is true that there is hardly a great or heroic woman of history whose name has escaped the contagion of scandal ... because, I suppose, the world has no right to expect any degree of morality in the life of a great man.’

(Lola Montez, Lectures, ‘*The Heroines of History*’)

24.

Little foam-capped waves danced across the lead-colored lake as far as the eye could see. Dark snow clouds with their innocuous pink undertones had already gathered, ready to dump yet another load of their fated cargo across the Alps.

She felt trapped. Not just by mountains and snow, but by the very nature of Switzerland itself. A landlocked country besieged in all directions. Like her.

Lola drew her cape more tightly about her shoulders and forced herself to continue her walk along the terraces of the chateau that had once belonged to another woman of whom love had extracted its bitter price, the spurned Empress Josephine. Apart from Turk, she was alone.

She needed to have exercise to clear the mind, although she was restricted to the chateau’s grounds on the shores of Lake Geneva. Even when it snowed, there were always people crowding around her gates, or in boats on the water hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman the newspapers were now calling infamous. And not just newspaper reporters or just curious sightseers, there were also creditors, all whining loudly about the unpaid debts she had left across Switzerland since her flight from Bavaria.

‘What have I done to deserve all this, and where are you, Louis, damn you?’ she muttered to herself for the umpteenth time. The chaos of the past few weeks had now resolved itself into a frustration of endless waiting - and doubts.

She stopped and looked towards the end of the lake in the vague direction of Bavaria. After the abdication, she had thought it would only be a matter of days before Ludwig crossed the Swiss border and rushed to her side, but he never arrived.

At first, his letters were full of promise and undying love. Now he was coming, now he wasn’t. Once again he had started accusing her of infidelity with not just Fritz, but others Alemannia students including his namesake, Ludwig Leibner.

She had retaliated with both fiery and tearful letters swearing her undying love for her precious Louis, vehemently denying the accusations. But she guessed that once again there was a spy in her household, probably put there by that double-crossing toad, Berks, the man who, as soon as he became Chief Minister, had forced the King’s arm and had her banished. Yet another personal maid had just been fired for that very reason.

She stopped and took a deep breath and glowered at the impending darkness over the mountains. Where was it all going to end? People said she lied. But when was something true, or not? One person’s truth was another’s lie. How on earth could Louis think that the truth of the pure love she felt for him could be equated on the same level as the animal love she felt for Fritz?

The truth of an Eliza Gilbert was not necessarily the lie of a Lola Montez. She was confused and unhappy. And not quite sure she knew anything any more.

The wind whipped at her face and she turned back towards the chateau. Fritz stood on the steps waving at her. She paused for a moment, studying his lithe young figure and fresh face. He was a habit that she must find the strength to break. With the never-ending bouts of headache and fevers she seemed to be battling this winter, his body satisfied her better than any sleeping draft, but he kept talking about marriage. Even if Louis never came for her, she couldn’t possibly marry a penniless student. Not with an avalanche of debts threatening.

Another figure moved to stand behind Fritz. She groaned inwardly. Ludwig Leibner. The pair of them had probably been fighting over her again. She sighed in deep exasperation. Must she forever be the victim of such follies, too?

Young Leibner, poor lad, he had always looked so frustrated when he had watched her embracing and kissing Fritz, what possible harm could come of lifting her skirts and parting her legs occasionally when they were alone together in her parlor, and allowing his agonized member the quick relief it throbbed for? The only trouble was now, as it had been with Fritz, once a favor is given, the more they wanted it.

She drew the hood of the cloak tighter around her head and whistled for Turk. She had decided. It was time to have it out with both of them and send them on their way. Time to close another chapter.

In time, spring came to the Alps and it was warm enough to hire a yacht, *Le Corsaire*, which was moored at the chateau's jetty. Lola occupied her idle hours learning to sail with a new group of young male friends from the fringes of Geneva society, and who inevitably received the collective title of the 'corsairs' from the locals. Although they were often seen to stay overnight at the chateau, she was careful enough not to favor one over another. The acrimonious and necessary parting of the ways with the Alemannia students had seen to that.

At least Fritz had had the good sense not to threaten suicide this time and resigned to what was inevitable, taking her money instead so that he could continue with his law degree elsewhere. Ludwig Leibner merely returned to Munich with a broken heart.

Lola began to doubt if she had the strength to put all of her heart into love again, either physical or platonic. And any love at all was so difficult without money. Life seemed to have degenerated into an endless battle, much of it consumed with correspondence with the ex-King. Thank goodness for the new household manager who had taken over her affairs.

Auguste Papon sat at his desk in his office, ignoring the grand view of the gardens and the lake and concentrating instead on neatly pinning each reply from King Ludwig to the copies he had made of Lola's begging letters. 'Pathétique,' he murmured to himself, 'what fools we humans, even kings.'

'Louis-. It seems as if soon there won't be any Lolita on earth waiting for you any longer. I can't sleep or eat anymore. Again you inflict this terrible punishment that you refuse me a few thousand francs. If you only knew how hard it is to suffer for lack of money. If you don't help me, I'll kill myself or go mad. Is this what I get for my sacrifices in Munich? your faithful Lolita.'

'My precious Lolita, I beg you to keep some order in your affairs and pay your debts each month. Remember I am no longer King - my allowance is not even a quarter of what it once was. I can pay you 20,000 florins a year but no more. My purse is in no position to pay for your superfluous expenditures. Do not occur further debts. Your eternal Louis.'

'Darling Louis - How much I am still in love with you. At last I receive news we are to meet again! I count the hours! Life without you is nothing. I'm always unhappy. Sometimes I'm so depressed I want to die. Herewith the freight bill for my furniture just come from Munich. Fifty-six crates in all weighing eight tons so they tell me. Yours in loving anticipation, Lolita'

'Dear Lolita, It tears my heart to inform you that yet again I am unable to travel to Switzerland. The Munich burghers have met and vowed that should I visit you, I will never be able to return to Bavaria and they will terminate every penny of my income. I cannot incite more revolution. I am much a prisoner as you are, your faithful Louis.'

'Louis - Life or death - it's all the same to me. I'm afraid you will be angry, but everything was damaged in transit. Curtains, carpets all ruined. Chandeliers and porcelain - all broken. With tears in my eyes and death in my heart, I see your angry face before me, but these were indispensable things. I can't pay it all myself. My monthly allowance just covers the house, stables and servants. I had to cease my harp lessons and send back the harp. Yesterday they sent a bailiff

against me. With all this, Jesuits are still intriguing against me. A gentleman from America suggested I could earn a lot of money dancing because my name is well known there. Dear Louis - to leave you would be death. But what can I do? Lolita.'

And then there were those other communications: the private notes enclosed with the official ones and which Ludwig asked Lola to destroy: notes filled with sexual fantasies and ravings in which he revealed all of Lola's erotic arts and the special secret pleasures they had once shared.

A sneer curved the mustachioed lips of Papon as he addressed Lola's latest reply to the King. If she were ever to discover that he included among his many talents as her new secretary and major domo, the skills of manipulating envelopes and re-sealing their wax, he could very easily find himself once again out on the street. But he doubted it would happen. For all her worldly experience, the Countess of Landsfeld was just like any other woman and susceptible to any man who lavished his full attention and devotion upon her; and he, Auguste Papon, also known by the bogus title of the Marquis de Sard and several other names to various police authorities throughout France and Switzerland, was a past master at devotion to women.

When he had first discovered the now world-famous woman virtually on his doorstep, renting the Empress Josephine's chateau across the lake from his own mother's villa, it hadn't taken him long to arrange an accidental meeting between his own boat and *Le Corsaire*.

Although he was a secret supporter of the Jesuit cause, his well-honed skills of flattery and subservience to Lola's beliefs paid off. Within days he had been invited to spend time at the chateau and when his private inquiries revealed Lola's disastrous handling of money, he offered her his services. By the time summer came to the Alps, Auguste Papon had his own suite of rooms at the chateau.

Lola entered his office just as he had replaced the re-sealed letter in his outward tray. She was dressed in male sailing attire of blue trousers and jacket, her hair hanging loosely down her back and a most fetching sight.

'Auguste,' she said, 'I insist you put away that boring nonsense and join us on the water. It is too gorgeous a day to be playing with papers.'

He stood and gave an exaggerated bow. 'Certainly, my glorious bluebird.'

Lola tittered with girlish delight and tugged at his hand.

'Bluebird,' he said smoothly as they relaxed later on the deck while *Le Corsaire* drifted aimlessly in the quiet shallows of the Lake, 'have you thought about publishing your memoirs?'

Lola was stretched out on a chair on the deck, not seeming to care about the effects of sun upon her famous complexion. She laughed. 'What? At my tender age?'

'Ah, but in your few short years you have packed the lives of a hundred women into one. As your *charge d'affaires*, I also happen to know about the state of your bank account,' he murmured. 'If you go on spending money like water, you will soon be dried out.'

Lola seemed unconcerned. 'I will write again to my Louis and tell him I need an increase in my allowance. You don't have to worry about starving.'

'It will have to be a big increase. A paltry twenty thousand florins a year is just not going far enough when one has a lifestyle to maintain. This chateau, servants and fine clothes to pay for, not to mention carriages or yachts like this.' Auguste stroked the fine timber rail. 'Besides, there is an outstanding bill for my services.'

Lola laughed. 'Since when did you have to start worrying about money? Aren't you the Marquis de Sard, with your own villa? Surely you have your own income?'

'Yes, but I have incurred expenses in attending to your affairs. I am still owed a salary. Three months at three thousand a month, which comes to nine thousand ...'

Lola sat up sharply. 'Just a minute. We never discussed a salary.'

He gave a suitably distraught sigh. 'Oh, bluebird, I was loathe to bring the subject up before, but our family has recently suffered a dire loss on some of our investments. My poor mother and sisters are in grave difficulties. I promised I would help them as soon as I was paid.' His eyes glistened with moisture.

'You've just told me I can't live on twenty thousand a year and now you are expecting me to pay you nearly half that sum? You're crazy!'

'Oh, bluebird, I'd hate to be forced to make a legal case out of it,' he said in a level voice. 'Can you imagine the fun the newspapers would have with such a story? A major-domo working all those months for the famous Countess, giving his all for her and never receiving any salary. Why even a tight-fisted Swiss judge would be infuriated. They would never let you win, you know.'

Her face turned pale as realization dawned that he was serious.

'I'm only trying to help you, bluebird,' he continued. 'I hate to have to say this, but your Ludwig is never going to abandon his precious Munich for you. It would be wise to get everything you can out of the old fart while he still harbors some affection for you.'

Lola's eyes blazed. 'How dare you speak about the King that way? He loves me. He is coming for me in August. I *know* he is.'

Papon raised his hands. 'Bluebird, calm down. I'm only telling you the truth that you refuse to admit to yourself. Stop wasting your time and fabulous talents on a lost cause. You're going to need money soon. Let me collaborate with you on your memoirs. You've become one of the most famous women in the world - they'll be queuing up from here to Calcutta to learn the secrets of your life with the King of Bavaria. You'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams.'

Calcutta? Lola had a moment of panic. Was it just a coincidence he had mentioned that place, or did he know? How could he know? Was Auguste not what he appeared to be? Was he another spy?

She struggled to collect herself. 'I will never involve myself in such a despicable scheme,' she said. 'I would never tarnish the love I shared with my darling Louis.'

'He's deserted you, bluebird. Can't you see that? You don't owe him any allegiance now.'

'Never!'

'I'm only trying to help you. We can make thousands out of your story.'

'I don't want any part of it,' she suddenly screamed. 'Draw yourself your damned ten thousand and get out of my life!'

He realized he had gone too far and he sank to his knees. 'Oh, my bluebird, I am so sorry,' he bleated, palms together as if in prayer. 'I adore you so much, I only wanted to help you. Please forgive me. Kick me if you want.'

At the abject expression on his face, she relented as quickly as she had flared. She touched the crown of his wiry black hair. 'Dear Auguste, I see you mean well. But the King is coming soon with the rest of my jewels. I am sure I can persuade him to be more generous with his allowance.'

Auguste looked up at her adoringly and slowly lifted his hand to clutch gently her inner thigh. They stared at each other for a moment. In the course of his colorful career he had bedded many women although his natural preference was always for young men. The prospect of a woman dressed as a man would be an interesting new diversion, however.

She seemed to sense what he wanted as she continued to stroke his head and stare into his eyes. 'I think tonight, Auguste,' she said in a honeyed voice, 'we might stay aboard *Le Corsaire*. See if there is anyone among our corsairs who would like to join us in a little imaginative party.'

'Lolita- When we meet I want your feet in my mouth. Don't even wash them. This is how much I love you. Louis.'

'Louis - You are the only man in the world I care about. I draw a kiss upon this paper. It is the kiss of a tender and devoted heart. I haven't a cent left. I need at least a thousand francs to travel to meet you in the Tyrol. Lolita.'

'Lolita. Tears come to my eyes because instead of clasping you to my heart, I cannot be with you. Wicked stories have been spread by the revolutionaries that I have given you the diamonds which belong to the State, accusing your Louis as a thief! New fighting is expected and persons dear to me have warned me against going to the Tyrol. If I try to come back to Bavaria they will stop my money. Please don't love me less, it is not my fault. Louis. P.S. Who is this Marquis de Sard of whom you write?'

There was also another discreet message enclosed with Ludwig's letter and meant for Lola's eyes only that interpreted her drawn kiss as another part of her anatomy, to which he sent a multitude of return kisses. Grinning, Auguste folded the private note and put it with the others in his bureau drawer, and considered his next move.

Although Auguste had warned her against the trip, Lola was in a furious temper when she returned from the Tyrol. No Ludwig. No jewels. Only a valet with a few thousand francs, several long-winded poems and another letter enclosing an obscene little note.

'That's it!' she ranted at Auguste. 'You were right when you called him an old fart. That family of his will do anything to keep him from me.'

'Perhaps now you will see that you must move to cheaper accommodation. It is time you thought again of writing your memoirs.'

'No, not that again.'

'We must think of some other way to raise funds.'

But still the correspondence came from the King.

'Lolita - Why do you not write to me? My heart is broken. Over a month not one tender word for me to kiss. Is it true that Peissner has returned to you? It seems to me you want your Louis for love, this Papon Marquis for conversation and Peissner to fuck. Your jewels have been sent to your bankers. Louis.'

Lola's yells of frustration filled the chateau as she scribbled back another letter.

'Louis - How can you say such terrible things to me? One day all the world's secrets will be opened before God and you will know the truth of my faithfulness and love. My soul is dead. You have abandoned me. I am doomed to a disgrace worse than death in this infernal country. My God, where is my self-respect? The Countess of Landsfeld has nothing, no security, no hope. The whole world ridicules me. My honor is lost. My health is fragile. Do not abandon me. Please receive this kind man who came to me at the moment of misery and offered his services. Lolita.'

This time, her private note held no sexual allusions, just a final histrionic plea.

'I am on my deathbed, coughing blood. Adieu.'

Ludwig eyed the small, dark-eyed man with suspicion. His secret correspondent in Geneva had kept him fully informed of Lola's doings, but no-one seemed to know much about this Auguste Papon who also called himself the Marquis de Sard. Yet here he was now, bowing and scraping, bringing him first-hand information of Lola. His dear Lolita, whom he had tried so hard to forget, but who haunted his dreams constantly. Lola for whom he had abandoned his right of kingship.

'How is the Countess - *really?*' he asked hoarsely.

'The doctors fear for her health, your Majesty. Everything she owns has been pawned. Her creditors are about to foreclose. She pleads with you to give her hope.'

The man seemed sincere in his pleading and Ludwig wondered how true it all was as he re-read Lola's latest agonized words. Although the shades had been lifted from his eyes and she had proved herself incapable of ever telling the truth, or of monogamous pure love, it was as if some unseen cord still bound them together. Ludwig reluctantly signed the order for another twenty thousand.

It was not just the first crisp breath of yet another winter as it swept across Lake Geneva that put an end to the idylls aboard *Le Corsaire*. Auguste had finally persuaded Lola that she could no longer afford such an indulgence as a yacht, or to live in Josephine's chateau, and he forced her to move into a rented house with his own family.

After what she had become used to, it was cramped, she hated having to fit in with his mother and sisters, and she suffered from a sense of panic at the thought of another winter's confinement. She had spent far too long waiting for Ludwig. Even when she had told him she was dying, he had not come. Now she knew that he would never come.

Her strange relationship with Auguste was highly unsatisfying and slowly she began to see him for what he was. Although he had told her his own investments had failed, she finally realized that he was lining his own pockets at her expense.

One night at the theater, she was still suffering from her angry trapped mood. During the intermission, she slipped away from Auguste and his sisters and went outdoors. For the first time in months she studied the night sky. Henri's star glittered brightly. She breathed deeply, closed her eyes and was just about to attempt to conjure his image when someone spoke to her from the shadows.

'I'm sure the second half has to be better.'

Alarmed, she spun around, and a man stepped forward. 'Julius Mecklenburg at your service.' He bowed.

He was extraordinarily handsome. It only took a second for that welcome kick of sexual excitement to hit her belly. She smiled and inclined her head slightly. 'I am the Countess of Landsfeld.'

They stared at each other, the current between them running wildly. 'I've a mind to skip the second half altogether,' he said at last. 'Care to join me?'

Auguste was beside himself with fury. All his plans were threatened. Barely three days after she had escaped from the theater with him, Lola announced she was engaged to twenty-year old Julius Mecklenburg. Not only was he good-looking in that boyish fashion Lola adored, it was well known that he was heir to an enormous fortune.

Lola had completely lost interest in pursuing Ludwig's money. Yet that in itself was not the worst of it. Auguste had harbored his own secret designs on the youthful Julius for some time. While Lola in her many uninhibited moments might have indulged in the odd *menage-a-trois*, she was unlikely to accept such an arrangement within any serious marriage.

It was time Auguste Papon started looking out for himself. He sat down at his desk and began his own letter to King Ludwig.

Julius succeeded in distracting Lola from everything she didn't want to think about: money problems, the impending Swiss winter and most of all from Auguste, whom she was beginning to loathe. Remembering the only occasion when she had lost her head and slept with him made her feel physically ill. He had turned out to be another Hernandez but, unlike the gentle Spaniard, he had a cruel streak. The whippings he had attempted to inflict on both the corsair and the poor unfortunate Swiss maid who had been unwittingly recruited to make up their orgiastic foursome would have severely injured both of them if she hadn't grabbed the whip from him in time.

Although she valiantly tried to forget the episode, it often came back to haunt her, usually in the quiet hours of the night when she was forcibly reminded of the various perversions in which she had indulged. She dared not think of Henri at such times. The moment his disapproving image came into her mind, she would quickly switch to one of Julius - delicious, fun-loving Julius who knew how to make her laugh, was rich, and wanted to marry her. She didn't think of Ludwig either, and her letters to the King abruptly ceased.

Auguste Papon's, however, did not.

By subtle manipulation of the old man's emotions, making him believe that Lola was getting ready to brave dire poverty rather than asking the King again for money, he was on the verge of getting Ludwig to deposit a million francs into his own bank account when his jealousy got the better of him. He arranged for Julius to receive from one of his best friends an expertly forged document which purported to be the marriage certificate of the Countess of Landsfeld and the Marquis de Sard. Julius reacted to this news by realizing he had been made a fool and bolted.

Lola began writing again to Ludwig.

'Louis - The Marquis has proved false and I have evicted him and his family from my house. He told the world that I was for marrying him and he has sworn vengeance in pursuing me everywhere

and to make me die on a bed of straw! I love you forever. My duty and honor would not permit me to marry anyone, even that I was foolishly tempted with a certain Mecklenburg. My memory of you made me strong in rejecting him. Lolita.'

His reply was swift and curt, and there was no secret note included.

'Lolita. How I reveled in the truth of your love for me. But I must no longer put my interests before yours. If this Mecklenburg would make you happy, then marry him. It would be unbearable to think of you as a kept woman. Remember even if you marry, I will never feel the same passion for any other. Louis.'

Lola was alarmed the King thought she was considering marriage.

'Louis - Julius Mecklenburg no longer cares for me. I am leaving Switzerland within days. A warning as to the deviousness of the evil Papon. He was caught committing unspeakable acts with a young man in a public park. To think he lived under my own roof! I like that you tell me to be married but when a woman has been loved by a king it is impossible to descend to any other man. Farewell my only illusion, Lolita.'

Auguste Papon had gone, but Lola had the feeling she hadn't heard the last from him. He was a dangerous, twisted man who thought he knew a lot about her, when really he couldn't know much at all. She had changed her story to suit her circumstances so often she hardly knew who she was herself any more but, far worse, he had been privy to her correspondence.

Lola was determined to keep the King interested and wrote again to Ludwig, asking outright if he intended to come to her or whether she must face the fact he no longer loved her. The answer took a long time and when it came, she opened his letter with a sinking heart.

'Lolita - I have delayed much in writing, hoping each night to sleep and to wake in the morning to find some miracle has come to wipe away my pain and grief at our parting. Yet each morning I am faced with cold realities. Trusting in your affection for me and your genuine goodness, I steadfastly refused to believe ill of you even when I was offered what others vowed was undeniable proof. Monsieur Papon has opened all wounds yet again by approaching me with a threat to publish the letters - including our special notes - that we have exchanged unless I pay to him the sum of ten million francs ...' -

Lola's breath caught in her throat. She should have pushed the bastard overboard from *Le Corsaire* when she had the chance!

'... Needless to say, this I will not do. You must be prepared, therefore, for this evil man to use his experiences and the vicious rumors which have attached themselves to you to his financial advantage, and your detriment. Take care, my sweet Lolita, and promise me that you will go back to your roots and seek out a new love who can give you that which I was never able to do. Knowing that you have found happiness in the arms of a husband will help to fill this old, empty heart of mine with joy, your adoring Louis.'

She fought against the tears stinging the back of her eyes. In her hand was the last remnant of truth. The King and Queen of the Dodecanese of her imagination would never now exist. Her Louis was out of her life forever and he had even urged her to find a new love.

Love! What tortures were committed in its name. What false dreams. She could hardly bear to think of it. Even when it was harmless and almost platonic it had succeeded in giving her nothing but anguish.

Lola turned to the view of Lake Geneva. There was still that cold grandeur in Switzerland's beauty that could bring on the most awful melancholy.

'Go back to your roots', Louis had said, probably still under the impression she was from Spain.

Could she ever go back? Where were her roots? Most of Europe was in turmoil and her beloved Paris was out of the question. She sighed. There was only one alternative. Some of those roots were British.

Lola made two trips to England, the first a quiet, incognito investigation to test the water, and the second the full-scale invasion of a famous celebrity. The only person she contacted on the first trip was Lord Henry Brougham and they met discreetly in a Dover inn. There, the old statesman had greeted her with all the same enthusiasm and affection.

He had rushed towards her with his puppet arms outstretched and gave her a breath-squeezing hug. 'Well, well, my wonderful Countess, you have certainly turned the world on its head.'

'Hardly the world, Lord Henry,' she had laughed.

'A large chunk of it - Germany in particular. You've no idea what a glorious time I've had observing your progress. Never has there been such a woman as you.' He completed his welcome with emphatic kisses on both her hands.

'I can pay you back now, Henry,' she said, still laughing. 'With interest.'

He pretended not to hear by putting a hand to his ear. 'What's that? I didn't hear a thing about money, I trust? You owe me nothing. Reading of your adventures has been repayment enough.'

'You're so sweet, Henry.'

The leathery lines of his face suffused with a boyish blush. 'I've had many adjectives attributed to me in my lifetime, but "sweet" has never been one of them.'

Smiling, Lola led him to a quiet corner of the inn's parlor. 'Henry, I need your advice. As you know, I am not exactly welcome in certain quarters.'

'Indubitably.'

'And I had thought to return to England ...'

'Marvelous.'

Lola paused, looking questioningly at him.

'And you want to know how you will be received?'

She nodded.

He pressed his lips together and frowned. 'I honestly don't know. I personally will be ecstatic to escort the beautiful Countess of Landsfeld anywhere, and any politician worth his salt will be dying to meet you, but you're infamous now and can expect to be shunned by many.'

'What about the Court?'

He shook his head. 'No chance, I'm afraid. I have heard that privately Queen Victoria has followed your adventures with as much enthusiasm and curiosity as the rest of us, but Prince Albert is a conservative German. The political ramifications of your being seen in royal circles would be horrendous.'

Lola's face dropped. 'I am entitled to meet the Queen. I am a Countess,' she said, a trifle weakly.

'Is it that important to you?'

A sad, vacant look filled Lola's eyes for a few moments. She sighed as she re-gathered her thoughts. 'It's no matter, Henry. I'll create my own court. What do you think?'

He clapped his ungainly hands. 'Splendid, You'll be the toast of London.'

When Lola made her second crossing of the Channel she did so in the full glare of publicity. At least her arrival helped to divert a worried population's attention from the Chartist and trade union demonstrations that were threatening to send England into similar upheavals to those still raging on the Continent.

She descended on London complete with the full regalia of the infamous Lola Montez, Countess of Landsfeld, and uncrowned Queen of Bavaria. By now her arrogant posture, sleek black dresses and dashing hats, cigars and whips had become her trademarks. Everyone stopped to gape as she swept by in her open landau, haughtily ignoring them as if she were a member of the British royal family itself.

Despite London being in a state of semi-siege with sandbagged thoroughfares and batteries of

policemen, Lord Henry managed to negotiate a lease for her on a ten-room house off Piccadilly in her old haunt of Half Moon Street.

In the newspapers there was as much confusion as ever over who she really was. She still insisted she was Spanish, that her father had been a matador, although the current rumor that she was really the illegitimate daughter of an Irish earl had taken a firm hold. When she made her first major public appearance at the House of Lords with Lord Brougham as her escort the London gossips were agog as she sat composed and aloof in the peeresses' gallery watching as Lord Henry listened to appeals and gave impassioned arguments on proposed amendments to the divorce laws.

Rumors of a romance between the two soon flourished while, officially at least, the cream of society ignored her. However, several members of their ranks, mostly male, would slip away to the social afternoons Lola soon instituted in Half Moon Street. Here, they could mix freely and discuss radical ideas with the eclectic assortment of European exiles, liberal politicians, artists and writers who gathered around the woman who had brought down a king and his government.

A few weeks after her arrival Lord Henry invited Lola on a mystery outing, the twinkle of mischief barely disguised in his eyes. 'There is someone I should like you to meet,' was all he would say. 'Dress as if you were going to meet the Queen.'

Lola, who had been suffering from a bout of inexplicable depression despite the success of her salon, dressed herself in her best purple silk with its matching feathered hat, and sat back to enjoy the morning trip through the spring English countryside in one of the carriages of Henry's own invention. Even as they drove through the gates of the grand house near Richmond Lola still had no idea whom she would be meeting.

A butler showed them into a vast library where an elderly figure sat writing at a desk. He kept his grizzled head lowered for quite some time before slowly raising it, and Lola found herself looking into a pair of sharp eyes made even more hawk-like by the impressive beak of nose and the long, tired drag of his face.

Lord Henry chuckled and stood back from the encounter as if he expected sparks to fly.

'So the fates decree we should meet at last, Countess,' said Prince Metternich without standing up.

Lola shot a furious glance at Lord Henry before looking down her nose at the deposed Austrian Chancellor. 'Lord Brougham has a perverse sense of humor,' she said tartly, 'but if he expects me to scratch your eyes out, I won't waste my time. You're a toothless, clawless old devil who deserved to be thrown out of Austria!'

Metternich's thin lips formed a crooked smile. 'So you are as fearless as they told me. I have often wondered how it happened that you escaped Munich with your head intact. I see now that even a hangman would hesitate to place a noose around that neck.'

Lola's eyes flashed. 'There was never a moment when my life was seriously at risk. I often walked freely among the people of Munich. If they had wanted to kill me, it was not for lack of opportunity, I can assure you. Despite all those disgusting rumors you invented about me, deep in their hearts the people of Bavaria knew that I had exposed the truth about men like you and your Jesuit lackeys.'

Metternich narrowed his eyes, as if studying a specimen. 'You are a curious woman of contradictions. Bravery and honesty are expected to be companions, not bravery and deceit.'

Lola took a step towards the old man's desk, her fists tightening. 'Are you calling me a liar again, you old reprobate?'

Unruffled, Metternich merely shrugged. 'Let us say we all deceive not only others but ourselves in one way or another.' He exchanged what was almost an amused glance with Lord Henry. 'They tell me the Countess boxed the ears of at least a dozen diplomats and ministers in King Ludwig's court. I'm inclined to believe it.'

'An exaggeration,' muttered Lola grimly. 'Probably only six or seven.'

Lord Henry slapped his thigh and burst out laughing. 'Now see, your Highness. Isn't Lola the grandest excuse to lose a kingdom?'

Metternich's stern visage softened. 'It is a pity you indulged yourself with that oafish Bavarian dreamer, Countess,' he murmured silkily. 'If your politics had been a little more conservative, you and I could have made a formidable team.'

Lola gave him a frank stare before she allowed a trace of humor to escape her eyes. 'Well, your Highness, if my coach had broken down on the road to Vienna instead of Munich there's no telling what might have happened,' she said.

A raspy laugh echoed from the old man's throat. He pushed back his chair and walked around to the front of his desk. He bowed over Lola's hand. 'Countess,' he said, 'I can now say that it has been a privilege being your enemy.' He glanced again at Lord Henry who wore a grin from ear to ear. 'I hope you are both able to stay for luncheon?'

Later in the afternoon as the brougham returned to London, Lord Henry watched Lola's face. It had acquired a glow and her eyes held a sparkle that had been noticeably lacking of late. 'You were quite splendid, Lola,' he said. 'Not even Napoleon would have cared to bait that old bear. To have been so frank and yet still charmed Metternich is quite an accomplishment.'

'I doubt he is ever susceptible to charm, Henry, but at least I may finally have earned a tiny shred of his respect.'

'You enjoyed yourself, didn't you? All that verbal cut and thrust. What a pity women can't be politicians. Just think of the wonderful debates there could be on the floor of the House if you were there.'

Lola laughed. 'Oh, Henry, I must admit it was fun.'

'Despite the salon, life has been boring for you after Munich, hasn't it?'

'A little.'

'You need a new interest. Have you thought of writing your memoirs?'

Her face darkened at the memory of the last time this suggestion was made. 'I'm not quite a has-been yet,' she muttered.

'What about giving lectures on your experiences?'

'That sounds rather dull.'

'You could always go back on the stage.'

'I haven't danced for two years. I've had much illness. I'd be frightfully out of condition. I really just want a quiet life.'

But no quiet life was to be, and huge amounts of money had yet again gone through her hands like quicksilver. Auguste Papon's attempt to blackmail Ludwig failed when the old man refused to give in. The first spiteful installment of Papon's version of Lola's life was about to be published. Ludwig was frantic. The correspondence that had cooled between him and Lola was revived.

'Louis - What sort of fool do you think me to be to let Papon see our letters? London is so cold. My cough has returned. The doctors say my lungs are weak. I shall go mad if you no longer provide for me. Lolita.'

'Lolita - Why live in London when the weather is so bad? Take heed of your money. I can give you no more than 20,000 a year. Find a husband to provide for you and give you children. Other friends of yours also plead with me for money. The student Peissner came to me and fell on his knees, penniless and with his hand on the Holy Book vows that you slept with him many times. Also his friend, Leibner. I need no more proof your heart will always be unfaithful. It is against your nature. I can remain only as a friend. Louis.'

Lola sighed. More of the same. She hardly knew what she was writing any more: what was truth, what was fantasy, and whether it was her life or entirely that of someone else.

Ludwig was again pressing her to find a husband - and a have child. But the type of husband who could give her the kind of life she was used to was unavailable to Lola. Men might gather around her like moths to a flame but none of them would risk their status in society by involving themselves more closely with the most notorious woman of the day.

And as for a child, she knew it would never happen. There had been so many men since Thomas James, she had lost count, and in the heat of the moment she had never bothered to take precautions, but not once had their seeds taken. In an attempt to fill that gap in her life, she even resorted to taking the odd orphan girl beneath her roof for a while, teaching her music, dance and a smattering of the languages she knew, dreaming of making her her own. But too often her own powerful will would come into conflict with that of the child's and in the end she would let her go, knowing that she had not been blessed with the patience or skills of motherhood.

A sense of loneliness swept over her and once again she tried to communicate with the spirit of Henri Dujarier. She searched for his star, but the night sky of London was always obscured by fogs or burgeoning industrial emissions from the world's greatest city.

Sleep proving elusive, she would often rise early and go for a stroll in Hyde Park, where the crisp air and lack of distraction would help to sharpen her memories of Bon-Bon, making his face so clear before her she could almost reach out and kiss his lips. Soon those few minutes full of blissful agony became a compulsion she couldn't avoid.

One morning in May when the air was filled with the scent of spring, of lilacs and apple blossom and the hint of precious violets, Lola strolled as usual along the path beside the Carriage Road, twirling her parasol and her mind occupied with trying to recreate Henri, when a large black dog ran up to her. It gave a friendly woof and sat down in front of her. She smiled, remembering dear little Turk whom she had been forced to leave behind in Switzerland.

'And where is your master?' she murmured, bending down to pat the dog on the head. He wagged his tail and woofed again. Lola glanced around. There was no-one in sight, save for a closed carriage stopped under some elm trees a distance away.

'Well, you can keep me company, if you like,' she said. The dog ran around her skirts enthusiastically and fell into a lope alongside her. She walked on for a few more minutes before becoming conscious of someone following her. She stopped and turned. The carriage although still a fair distance away from her had been moving forward slowly.

Disconcerted, she frowned. She hoped it wasn't one of those annoying newspaper reporters who had discovered her early morning walks and was looking for a chance to entrap her. At that moment, the dog bounded off in the direction of the carriage. The door opened and it leaped in, after which the driver turned the vehicle around.

Lola sighed relief and tried putting her mind back to Henri but for some reason she couldn't visualize him at all.

The next day the same thing happened. Again the black dog came up to her and again there was the same carriage parked in the road. As whoever owned the carriage obviously had no intention to disturb her, Lola tried to ignore it. The dog was even more friendly and she found herself becoming quite attached to him. He was just the sort of company she needed on a permanent basis.

When the events were repeated for a third time, Lola decided the time had come to investigate her mysterious follower. She arranged for a manservant to accompany her at a discreet distance on her next walk and to follow the carriage to find out where it went.

In due course she discovered that the carriage belonged to a Cornet George Trafford Heald who resided in the Regent's Park Barracks of the 2nd Life Guards. Curious to know more about this secret admirer, Lola wrote an invitation on a small card.

'The Countess of Landsfeld presents her compliments to Cornet Heald and requests the pleasure of his company at a small party of friends at her residence tomorrow evening at eight.'

The next morning when she went for her walk and the dog arrived as usual, she tucked the envelope into the dog's collar and sent him back to his master. After the dog jumped into the carriage, she watched as it turned around and disappeared down the Carriage Road. She now felt in a most cheerful mood and was flooded with the sense that her destiny was about to take yet another turn.

John Dale sat somber-faced in the gallery of a provincial theater while all around him the

audience was in hysterics, whistling and applauding the farce being played out on the stage.

The actress returned their appreciation with much ad-libbing, reveling in her comedy role. She was a huge woman who had been laced and squeezed by goodness knows what means into a tight black velvet gown. Her face was heavily rouged in a clown-like fashion. Across her ample bosom she wore a red ribbon and an enormous medal in the shape of a bleeding heart.

She periodically batted enormous false eyelashes at a cowering dwarf dressed in an equally absurd white uniform with gigantic epaulettes. In her hand she carried a large cattle whip which she used to expert effect, making the diminutive figure skip about the stage.

‘Take that, you coward!’ screamed the woman as the whip cracked again. ‘Call yourself a man? Why, I’ll have your nuts for breakfast!’

The dwarf skipped off the stage holding to the front of his trousers while the audience raucously cheered.

But by now, John Dale had had enough. He slipped out of his seat and made his way down the aisle. Once outside the theater, he drew breath and lit himself a cigar while the laughter of the audience’s enjoyment continued to echo in the night air.

He had probably been the only one in the audience not to laugh at the buffoonery of the exotic Spanish dancer, Zepherine Joliejambe, and her tormenting of Count Muffenuff, the Russian Governor of Neveraskwehr. It was most unlikely anyone in the audience had been in Warsaw at that time, or known the real Lola Montez, or suffered the real cruelties of the Count Paskievitch.

His name might now be John Dale, but once it had been Jan Dalinski. He had also once dreamed of being a poet, but now he was a freelance scribbler barely eking out a living as a freelance penny-a-liner. And he never explained his origins to anyone.

There was not much else an exiled Polish poet could do but write, and at least his excellent knowledge of languages had given him a subsistence of sorts, and also some freedom to travel wherever he wished. After the French had helped him to escape from Warsaw, he had lived in Paris for a time until the fear of being embroiled in yet another revolution forced him on. His ultimate goal was to go to the land of the free - America - but first he had to earn enough for the passage ticket.

It was not the first time he had seen a performance of *Pas de Fascination, or Catching a Governor*. Originally, it had opened in London at the Theater Royal with the title of *Lola Montez, or Countess for an Hour* and in which all the characters went by their real names with the exception of King Ludwig who was called Prince Greenasgrass. It had run scarcely a week when it had been closed down by the Lord Chamberlain, at the indignant prompting of the Bavarian Ambassador.

The farce had been hugely popular as it toured the English provinces and, in spite of his abhorrence of it, John Dale had forced himself to sit through it several times, wondering if one day he would have the courage to stand up and shout out to the audience. ‘This is utter rubbish. It is cruel and vicious. Lola Montez isn’t like this at all. She is a champion of freedom!’

But he never would, for he knew he would be booed down and ridiculed. People believed what they wanted to believe - or what hacks not unlike himself said they should.

John Dale checked his pocket-watch. If he hurried, there would be just enough time to catch the last train to Kings Cross.

Sitting ramrod straight in her corner of the express coach from Lincoln, Miss Susannah Heald averted her eyes from her fellow passengers and watched the flat expenses of the Fens fly past the window.

She hated having to go to London. Its bustle was bad enough on her virginal nerves, but its sights and sounds which hinted at layers of unspeakable vice were infinitely worse. Like her three spinster sisters and four bachelor brothers, she much preferred to close herself off from the baser realities of life, living a simple devout existence in her quiet Lincolnshire village rather than having to endure the worldly environment of her elder brother George’s grand house of Berrymead Priory, Acton.

Unfortunately since George’s death, she had been forced to visit London several times to attend

to matters relating to his estate. Her brother had been a successful barrister who had accumulated a great fortune in his lifetime which had been bequeathed entirely to his only child, George Trafford Heald, to be held in trust until the boy turned twenty-one.

George Trafford had been a difficult child. His father lived for his work and his mother had died when he was quite young and, conscious of her Christian duty, Susannah had moved to Berrymead for a time to take responsibility for his upbringing. It had not been easy, for young George was one of those vacuous children who lacked concentration, had little aptitude for lessons and was seemingly impervious to the discipline of the willow stick. When at last he reached boarding school age, Susannah had closed Berrymead and retreated to Lincolnshire with a sigh of relief.

In the past few years she had seen George only occasionally, most recently at the celebration of his commission into the Life Guards. Despite the military life, and now standing well over six feet tall, in character he had hardly matured at all. With his twenty-first birthday imminent and the whole of the Heald fortune about to fall into his hands, no wonder his father had pleaded with her on his deathbed to continue to watch over his young son.

Susannah pressed her withered lips together, closed her eyes and prayed for the Lord's guidance.

For a time, Lola wondered if he would come; perhaps he hadn't seen the note in the dog's collar. All of her other guests had already made themselves comfortable, chatting and smoking in her lounge, when there was a tentative knock at the front door. The maid was about to answer it, when Lola pushed her aside. If it was him, she wanted to see him for the first time on her own.

She looked into a pair of wide blue eyes with long fair lashes. Her breath caught in her throat.

'Countess,' he said, with a bow. 'Cornet George Trafford Heald at your service. You've already met Blackie, of course.' The dog sitting at his feet wagged its tail in recognition.

For a few seconds she could only stare. Not only the eyes, but the fair hair and eyebrows, the broad forehead, even the modulation of voice was so familiar, belonging to a distant echo. Only the nose, with its slightly feminine retroussé marred the vision.

'Come in, won't you please,' she managed to say at last, standing aside to let him enter.

'What about Blackie?'

She glanced down at the dog who looked at her expectantly. 'Oh, dogs are always welcome in my house. My maid will find him something in the kitchen.'

Her eyes were drawn to George's taut, lean physique made even more attractive by the dazzling combination of red, white and gold. Despite all the lessons she should have learned from her experiences over the years, she still had an inherent weakness for the glamor of a British military uniform.

'Thank you for your invitation,' he said belatedly, a blush patently obvious on his fair complexion. 'I had been trying for so long to drum up enough courage to speak to you.' He gulped awkwardly.

Lola smiled, releasing a rush of mixed emotions. He had all the physical hallmarks of a mature male that she found irresistible, yet he was also as gauche as a schoolboy. It was that potent combination of lust and mothering in which she had already delighted with Fritz and his friends, and the corsairs. 'I guessed as much,' she murmured, reaching for his arm. 'I'm so glad that you decided to come. I'm not really as daunting as my reputation.'

'You're very beautiful,' he stammered, his eyes glued to her face.

She allowed her own eyes to race over his body once again. 'And so are you, my pet,' she purred. 'Come, now, and meet my friends.'

'Lola, what are you up to with young George Heald?' asked Lord Brougham as he followed Lola into his box at the Drury Lane Theater a few nights later.

She gave him a coquettish glance as she sat down, settling her lush burgundy velvet skirt about her. 'Why, nothing at all, Henry, dear. We met through a business transaction. I just recently bought a dog from him. Occasionally we stroll together in the mornings. Don't tell me you are jealous?' she

murmured playfully.

‘I’m well past that stage with you. I know an old creak-bones like me can’t compete with twenty-one year old muscle and sinew.’

Lola laughed. ‘He is rather gorgeous, though, isn’t he.’ She leaned forward on the rail of the box and blew a kiss over the top of her fan to the fair-haired young man gazing up adoringly at her from his seat below in the stalls.

Lord Brougham flicked out the tails of his evening coat and flopped on to the chair next to Lola. ‘You women never cease to amaze me when it comes to what you find attractive in a man. You’re years cannier than him. And that nose of his is a sign of an infantile mind if I ever saw one. Pity he didn’t inherit his father’s brain. I knew old George Heald very well. One of the sharpest, richest barristers in Chancery. I believe young George has recently inherited his fortune.’

‘It’s not his brain or money that I’m interested in,’ Lola murmured, still flirting distantly with George by means of bold eyes and her fan.

Lord Brougham gave her a knowing glance. ‘Have you seduced the fellow yet?’

Lola gave a girlish giggle. ‘Really, Henry, I can assure you my intentions towards George are quite honorable.’

‘You shouldn’t tease, Lola. If you want the fellow, why not just take him? It’s not healthy for a young stripling like him to be driven mad with desire.’

Lola’s tinkling laugh still echoed as the theater lights dimmed and the first strains of the orchestra began. A few minutes later, to resounding applause, Fanny Elssler, the ballerina with whom Lola had once had ambitions to compete, stepped on to the stage.

Ever since returning to the city, Susannah Heald had been struck with the feeling that George was keeping something important from her. Sitting next to her in the stalls, he seemed quite disinterested in the ballet. He had been craning his neck a great deal to look at one of the boxes and several times she had to reprimand him for his bad manners. However, just as the lights dimmed, she lifted her opera glasses and swept the boxes herself.

She recognized the scandalous Lord Brougham, who had been one of her late brother’s legal friends, and was amazed to see him whispering into the ear of a raven-haired woman wearing a low-cut gown and a fortune in diamonds. She definitely knew she wasn’t his wife.

The woman smiled seductively in Susannah’s direction and she promptly put down her opera glasses. She glanced at George. He was responding to the woman with a face filled with sheer adoration.

Fury and indignation flooded Susannah. How dare a woman of that sort lay her evil eyes on innocent young George. She simmered angrily for a minute before the strains of the ballet overture began to soothe her. She was reminded of her life’s duty. She had vowed to her brother to protect young George, and that she would most certainly continue to do.

George was uncomplicated and his feelings so plainly expressed that Lola found him to be the easiest man she had ever courted. She knew where she stood with George. Inexperienced with women, there was none of the deceit and duplicity which had marked so many of her affairs.

Perhaps Lord Henry was right when he said he wasn’t particularly smart or subtle, but loving clever, sensitive, men had brought its fair share of torment too; she had the scars of Henri Dujarier, Franz Liszt and King Ludwig to prove it.

George never hid his obvious physical arousal whenever he was close to her. At any time she chose, she could have swept him into her arms and relieved his distress.

But the time was past for mere dalliance. With a life with Ludwig becoming more remote than ever, she had been forced to think seriously about her future.

The second installment of Auguste Papon’s scurrilous biography had appeared in France and in which he poked such vicious fun at the King and Lola that most people who read it found it tasteless and, if anything, unbelievable. There wasn’t the stampede to buy it that Auguste may have

expected. In addition, it seemed that the Swiss Government had had enough of this embarrassing confidence trickster and deported him and his family back to France.

While she continued to have erratic correspondence with Ludwig still declaring her love for him in the same breath as the state of her bank account, his letters in return pressured her to find a husband.

There was the added complication of her status. Ideally, she wanted to return to Spain where she might be able to find some way of getting papers to prove she was Spanish, and her Bavarian passport had expired and there was not much chance of it being renewed. To obtain a British passport would mean declaring herself to be Eliza James. Or she could always marry a British subject.

George never seemed to have to worry about money. When she heard that he had just turned twenty-one, she had asked him boldly how much he was worth. He had shrugged. 'Haven't a clue, sweetie,' he had said. 'I just sign the checks.'

Lola made some discreet inquiries about the Heald inheritance and when a figure of nearly ten thousand pounds a year was hinted at, she made up her mind.

'Louis - I am to be married. The young man is not wealthy, barely eight hundred pounds per annum. Now, my dearest Louis, always cherished unto death, believe me when I swear to you before God I am not in love with this gentleman, it is his character and honorable position that offers me protection from the insults I have endured from the world. Please remember I am still yours with all my soul. A husband can make no difference to my love for you. Please don't waste time in replying. Without your permission that you promise me the same income for my life, the gentleman's family will not permit the marriage. A thousand kisses and eternal love. Lolita.'

'Lolita - What is this? I still wish for nothing more than your happiness, but do not rush before making inquiries of this man's background. You say he has an adequate eight hundred pounds per annum but if the gentleman's family insists as a condition of the marriage, however, that your income is secured, I may still manage ten thousand florins a year. Do not be hasty. Seek Lord Brougham's legal advice to make a marriage contract. Also a doctor. After your long illness you may still be delicate and intimate relations difficult for you. Your devoted Louis.'

Early one morning, Aunt Susannah knew something was up when George's commanding officer called on her. It seems George had been missing from his post and skipped parade on several occasions with the excuse of illness but when medically examined was found to be in the best of health. If Miss Heald wished to avoid the disgrace of her nephew's commission being canceled, it was suggested that she speak to him and make him see sense.

Susannah forced herself to endure the hated West End city streets as she made a frantic search for George in his known haunts. At last someone in his club gave her a hint, saying he had mentioned an important appointment in Hanover Square at eleven o'clock.

By the time she got there, the Square was crowded with people, most of whom were congregating outside the grand portico doors of St George's Church. Although she never normally spoke to strangers in the street, Susannah had no choice to but to ask an ogling bystander what was going on.

'Can't you see it's a wedding?' was the gruff response. 'Some toff marrying some foreign countess, so's the rumor goes.'

Susannah pressed her lips together. So George had been invited to a wedding. Why couldn't the boy have just asked for leave of absence in the normal way? He'd never get promoted if this was his attitude.

A large carriage drew up outside the church and a woman dressed in a swathe of pale pink satin emerged. Her face was obscured by a white bonnet with pink veil. A gasp went up from the crowd as she elegantly glided up the steps into the church and the breeze lifted her veil to reveal a face of exquisite bone structure dominated by a pair of dramatic blue eyes.

'Why ain't that the real Countess Joliejambe?' murmured someone.

‘Lor’ sakes! Who’s she be marrying this time?’

‘Perhaps she’s going to make a honest man out of Prince Greenasgrass after all!’ A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd.

Susannah hadn’t a clue what they were talking about although the woman did look familiar, finally realizing she was the one with Lord Brougham at the theater who had been making eyes at young George. All she could do was stand and wait for the ceremony to be over and the guests emerge from the church. She fully intended to give young George an earful for associating with the friends of such a dubious person.

Half-an-hour later, the married couple stood on the steps of the church. The bride with the bold eyes turned to her new husband and gave him in a very passionate kiss in full view of the crowd, who all cheered loudly.

As Susannah’s eyes rested on the cuirassier groom, her legs almost dissolved into water. She gasped and clutched at her chest. Fortunately, she was able to brace herself against one of the church’s Corinthian columns and thus avoid drawing attention to her distress. She could not add to the disgraceful scene by fainting in public.

Lying against a pile of pillows, through a haze of her tobacco smoke Lola watched a naked George go through his daily exercise routine. Every twist and bend, every flex and stretch was pleasurable to watch. Physically, he was a perfect man and just watching him move was enough to start her pulses racing all over again.

In bed they were perfectly matched. George’s experiences with women had been limited, but oh, was he a fast learner. And his stamina was phenomenal. He could make love all night and hardly show any sign of tiredness.

‘I really ought to get back to the barracks,’ he said, swinging his arms in an arc while the sweat of his endeavors trickled down the smooth golden chest. ‘I’m in a dashed lot of trouble with the C.O. as it is for taking leave.’

‘George, you don’t have to stay in the Guards any more,’ she murmured. ‘You’ve enough money to do whatever you want.’

‘But I like the Guards,’ he said, twisting around and bending over with his back to her so that she was faced with the delectable view of his firm buttocks. ‘I’m fond of the horses and the chaps are jolly good sports.’

‘You can buy your own horses you know? As many as you want.’

He looked at her from around his knees. ‘Yes, I suppose I can. I hadn’t thought of it.’

‘You don’t know much about money at all, do you George my pet?’ she said.

He bent over a few more times and turned to face her. To her amazement and delight, he was showing signs of another powerful erection. He grinned and leaped towards her, crushing her against the pillows. She squealed in mock protest as he slid into her without any preliminaries.

‘To hell with money,’ he gasped. ‘You can have it all ... Ah ... Oh, God ... but this is the best damned thing in the world!’

Lola threw back her head and abandoned herself to the intense ripples of the orgasm. How glorious it was to be in love again.

‘Lolita! I am angry. You wrote me you would follow my opinions in marrying this man and whose family would not consent if you did not continue to receive the same income from me. I now learn this man is George Trafford Heald, that he has an income not of just eight hundred but well over seven thousand. This changes thing. Louis.’

‘Louis! Because I am now married, that doesn’t make me love you the less. I feel nothing for Mr. Heald. We have a great need of money now for furniture but I will not ask for more and get by on that which you give me each month. I know you are too much of a king and a gentleman ever to take anything from me that you promised me for life. I repeat I feel nothing for Mr. Heald. Lolita.’

The newly-weds didn't spend quite all of their brief honeymoon in bed in London. George drove Lola out to Berrymead Priory, the Gothic mansion he had recently inherited, intent on showing her around its ivied halls and vast grounds.

They were met at the door by George's aunt, Susannah Heald, who had a face that reminded Lola of a pickled apple. She immediately sensed the woman's antagonism when she bothered neither with congratulations on their marriage nor to give them the customary tea, but merely stood aside and let them enter, watching Lola's every movement with her sharp eyes.

Lola responded with one brief haughty stare before sailing her way through the oak-paneled rooms, crying out in delight at the many interesting pieces of furniture, the carpets, tapestries and paintings. Although the house itself was badly in need of modernizing and major renovations, she found herself becoming quite excited at the prospect. Beneath these oddly assorted turrets and chimneys she might find a new peace and contentment at last. Here, she would establish herself in society as plain Mrs. George Heald and, in time, all the scandals associated with Lola Montez, Countess of Landsfeld, might just be forgotten. After the years of dramatic public living the prospect of being an ordinary wife had a strange appeal.

As they later prepared to return to London, Susannah Heald was nowhere to be seen. George hardly noticed, but Lola had a sudden flash of intuition that her vision of her future with George was already doomed. She returned to London in a depressed mood.

They had been married just eighteen days when her intuition proved correct.

It was high summer and London was empty of most of its society figures. George and Lola were in the process of packing their carriage with the intention of continuing their honeymoon on the Isle of Wight when Lola's current maid, Anna, came with a message that there were several persons at the door wishing to speak urgently to the Countess of Landsfeld.

Dressed ready for traveling, Lola came down the stairs, but halted half-way and looked down into the vestibule.

George, Susannah Heald, and another man whom she recognized as a solicitor friend of George's, stared up at her. At their side stood two policemen, with chimney pot hats tucked under their arms. A wave of uncertainty struck her, but she raised her chin and proceeded down the stairs. 'What seems to be the matter?' she asked as she reached the bottom step.

The more senior of the two policeman approached her. 'Are you Mrs. Eliza James?'

That black sense of foreboding that she had experienced earlier now settled on her like a cloud. She had a moment of dizziness. Oh, please, not this ... 'I .. I don't follow,' she stuttered. 'Who?'

The policeman produced a sheet of paper and, to her added consternation, the other policeman stepped forward. In his hands he held a pair of handcuffs.

'What is this about?' she managed to ask.

'Mrs. Eliza James, it is my duty to inform you that you are under arrest.' He nodded at the handcuffs. 'I trust you will come quietly and I shan't have to use these?'

'I don't understand - on what charge?'

The policeman frowned at her. 'That on 19th July, cognizant of the fact that your husband Captain Thomas James was still alive, you did contract a form of marriage with Cornet George Trafford Heald and therefore knowingly committed the criminal act of bigamy.'

It was said that when one was drowning, all of one's life passed before one's eyes in the space of a few seconds. As Lola looked from George's distraught face to the self-satisfied wizened apple one of Susannah Heald she was overcome with such a sense of suffocation that she knew what it must be to drown. Her limbs refused to move. She couldn't breathe! She was going to die!

'Lola, my love, it's just some silly mistake,' said George, hurrying to take her arm. 'Why don't we go with them to the police station? There's probably a very simple explanation.'

Breath came at last as she leaned heavily on him. 'Yes ... yes of course it's a dreadful mistake. There was an Act of Parliament, don't you know ... it was over a long time ago.'

Susannah Heald's eyes seemed to bore victory into her and Lola's breathlessness left her in a blaze of anger. She pushed George violently aside and charged towards the spinster, being stopped

in time by the alert action of the younger policeman who waved the handcuffs at her.

‘I suggest you come quietly, madam. You can do your explaining at the police station.’

26.

On the sixth day of August, 1849, John Dale joined in the crush of reporters in the Greater Marlborough Police Court and found himself a seat at the rear for the hearing presided over by Magistrate Peregrine Bingham.

Dale set about recording the proceedings in as fair a fashion as he could, given his own feelings about Lola, but he also had to bear in mind the insatiable demand for salacious details that would guarantee him a generous payment.

‘At half past one o’clock the Countess of Landsfeld, leaning on the arm of her erstwhile husband, Mr. Heald, came into the court and was accommodated with a seat in front of the bar. Mr. Heald was also allowed to have a chair beside her.’

There were enough pencils scribbling in the court to give the impression that half the reporters in London were present at the hearing. If Lola had imagined that with her marriage, her departure from the newspapers would be over, she couldn’t have been more mistaken. Lola Montez was in trouble yet again and there was nothing the press loved more.

‘The lady appeared quite without embarrassment, and smiled several times as she made remarks to her husband.’

Once over the initial shock of her arraignment, Lola was convinced that she was in the right and had nothing to fear. It was all a dreadful mistake, she had assured her husband, the police, her hurriedly appointed legal counsel, Sir William Bodkin, and anyone else listening.

‘This is a complete nonsense,’ she had protested. ‘I don’t know whether Captain James is alive or not, and I don’t damned well care. Lord Brougham knows about my divorce.’

‘She was stated to be 24 years of age, but has the look of a woman a trifle older. She was dressed in black silk, with close-fitting velvet jacket, a plain white straw bonnet trimmed in blue, and blue veil. Her extraordinary eyes seemed to spread a blue haze through the courtroom.’

Lola reserved her fiercest glare for Susannah Heald, sitting next to her own counsel in the front row of the court, and cause of all her trouble. If looks could kill, the dried-up old spinster would have been dead within seconds.

‘Her reputed husband, Mr. Heald, during the whole of the proceedings, sat with the Countess’ hand clasped in both of his own, occasionally giving it a fervent squeeze, and at particular parts of the evidence, whispering to her with the fondest air, and pressing her hand to his lips with great warmth.’

‘George, pet, don’t fret so. The whole thing is a monstrous misunderstanding - just you see,’ Lola murmured as Miss Heald’s barrister, a Mr. Clarkson, stood to present his case to the Magistrate.

‘Your Worship, Miss Heald is placed in extremely painful circumstances but she has felt it to be a duty she owes to her deceased brother to lay before you the evidence of her young nephew’s marriage with the lady at the bar.’

He paused and glanced around for effect and to allow the busily scratching reporters to catch up. ‘Mr. George Trafford Heald, the son of the well-known Mr. George Heald of the Chancery Bar, has gone through the ceremony of marriage with the lady by his side, otherwise known as Eliza Rosanna James.’

The courtroom buzzed with consternation. The mysteries long surrounding the notorious Lola Montez, Countess of Landsfeld, were now being disclosed.

Mr. Clarkson had to raise his voice. ‘I shall further prove to you that the lady is in fact still the wife of Captain Thomas James of the 21st Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry who is presently with his regiment in India.’

The whispers continued and the pencils scratched more furiously.

‘Mr. Heald is an inexperienced young man of barely twenty-one who has recently inherited a substantial estate and has irrationally involved himself with a woman of far more years and experience.’ Mr. Clarkson raised an eyebrow in Lola’s direction but avoided her looking her straight in the eye. ‘Of course, whatever may be the distinction or notoriety of the lady in question, I shall refrain from making any allusion to it on this occasion.’

Lola gave no indication of her inner turmoil by continuing to exchange whispered sweet nothings with George, who did not seem to be in the least concerned with what was going on around them. However, she was deeply conscious that with each word uttered, the past she had tried for so long to hide was about to irrevocably collide with the present. There was nothing she could do. Her only regret was that sooner or later Ludwig would hear of it, and any lingering illusions he might have retained about her Spanish origins would be finally swept away.

Clarkson presented a document to the court. ‘This is a copy of a Certificate of Marriage conducted at Meath, Ireland, on 27th July, 1837 between Eliza Rosanna Gilbert and Lieutenant Thomas James. And this is the woman who went forward and contracted another marriage knowing full well that her husband was still alive, or that every reasonable ground existed for believing he was alive.’

George was in his own world, oblivious of the proceedings. He was busy rubbing Lola’s fingers and tickling her palm. ‘You know where my hand would really like to be, don’t you,’ he whispered in her ear. She chuckled loudly and all the eyes in the court turned towards her.

Susannah Heald looked fit to combust. In fact, Lola almost wished George had said the words louder and really shocked all those puritanical, self-righteous hypocrites staring at them.

‘Would the respondent please show some decorum,’ muttered the magistrate sharply.

Lola lowered her lashes while Clarkson continued to sketch out the details of Lola’s life as the wife of Thomas James in Ireland and India, and that she had returned alone to England.

To Lola’s further annoyance, Captain Ingram was called as a witness to identify her and said that although she had changed considerably, she was definitely the Mrs. Eliza James who had traveled in his ship *Larkins* from India to Portsmouth.

This was followed by a clerk of the Consistory Court who read out the records relating to the dissolution of their marriage, the terms of which stated that Thomas James and Eliza Rosanna James be separated, *a mensa et thoro*.

Sir William Bodkin, Lola’s own counsel, bent towards her. ‘This is most unfortunate,’ he whispered. ‘Weren’t you aware of the terms of the separation?’

‘Who understands all that legal verbiage?’ quipped Lola with a slight shrug.

‘Your divorce was never made completely final,’ he said. ‘*A mensa et thoro*, means bed and board - another way of saying that you were permitted to live apart, but that neither party was allowed to marry in the other’s lifetime.’

Lola felt as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over her. ‘But that’s impossible,’ she gasped. ‘Lord Brougham knows all about it. He helped to arrange the divorce for me.’

‘You mean he acted for you?’

‘Well - I ... I always thought he did.’

‘Unfortunately he’s not here to ask. We’ll have to do the best we can,’ muttered Bodkin.

The Magistrate asked that the clerk show Lola the papers. ‘Is this the document relating to the dissolution of your marriage.’

Her lips quivered and she nodded. ‘I don’t deny it.’

Murmurs continued to waft through the courtroom as an official muster document from the East India Company was produced certifying that as of six weeks previously, Captain Thomas James of the 21st was alive and well at his station in India.

It was then the turn of Miss Heald to give her testimony. She briefly stated she had acted only out of duty towards her nephew, wishing to protect him. Learning of his association with the Countess and, deeply concerned, she had immediately instituted an investigation of her background. ‘Of

course, had I known of his intention to actually *marry* her, I would have acted much earlier,' she finished. 'She's nothing but a money-hungry adventuress out to exploit an innocent boy ...'

'Miss Heald, that's quite enough,' said the Magistrate. 'Please step down.'

'Bitch,' muttered Lola beneath her breath and sent more eye daggers as the old lady passed her by.

Sir William Bodkin presented his case. His voice was firm and convincing.

'Never in all my days as counsel have I known a case of bigamy in which neither the first nor the second husband was a complainant. There is no reason for Mr. Heald to be present at this hearing, but he has chosen to be here to comfort the accused. No doubt he would have chosen to prevent this case from being heard if it was in his power to do so.'

Lola nudged George in the ribs and he flashed a smile and kissed Lola on the hand. A ripple of low laughter echoed through the court while Susannah Heald continued to frown. Bodkin set his eyes on her. 'I venture Miss Heald brought this suit solely out of malice,' he said. 'If she had been truly concerned for her nephew's welfare she would have been better advised to have first warned him and the Countess of the facts she had discovered, and attempted to reach some private settlement. Instead she has chosen to make a very public attempt to ruin the Countess of Landsfeld and injure her own nephew's reputation in the process.'

Here and there in the court there were echoes of approval and the Magistrate was obliged to use his gavel.

Bodkin quickly scanned the notes of his interview with Lola. 'The facts of this case are that the Countess made a hasty elopement when she was still but a child and had not known what she was doing. Through her acquaintance with Lord Henry Brougham, who is a well-known advocate for divorce reform, she assumed that he had acted on her behalf in this matter. She was under the impression that Lord Brougham had been instrumental in obtaining the necessary bill of divorcement in the House of Lords ...'

Clarkson interrupted. 'If such an Act of Parliament is in existence, no-one knows better how to avail himself of it than my learned friend,' he said sarcastically.

'I further submit,' continued the calm Bodkin, 'that the Countess is not guilty of a deliberate falsehood in this regard, but she was merely ignorant of British law. I therefore ask the court that she be set free on bail pending the gathering of evidence for the defense from India and elsewhere. My client is anxious to obtain justice and has only one desire and that is to clear her name.'

The Magistrate seemed more than happy to adjourn the proceedings. Lola was ordered to provide sureties and bail amounting to two thousand pounds.

Not until the door closed behind her in the hall of her London townhouse, did Lola finally let down her defenses. She burst into a flood of tears and fell into George's arms. 'Why am I always condemned to such torture? No other woman on earth has to suffer these agonies. Why do the fates conspire against me?'

George, unaware until that day of Lola's background, could do nothing but hold her. In truth, he had hardly concentrated on the proceedings assuming them to be just a lot of poppycock drummed up by his spiteful Aunt Susannah. 'I'm not against you,' he said simply. 'I love you.'

Lola's tears slowly dried and she looked into his open face. 'How much do you love me, my pet?'

Childlike, he grinned and flung his arms childishly out. 'This much!'

'They are going to lock me up, Georgie,' she said. 'We have to go away, you know that don't you?'

His face sobered. 'Surely not?'

'That's why we have to leave. Now.' Lola abruptly left his arms and charged towards the stairs.

'What about the bail, Lola?' That much at least he had remembered.

Half-way up the stairs, she turned and looked down at him, her distress replaced by a sudden cold determined fury. 'Stuff the bloody bail.'

‘Where will we go?’

She paused and took a deep breath. ‘I don’t care. Not the Isle of Wight that’s for sure. I should have remembered what stinking hypocrites the English can be. Even in Jesuit Bavaria women are better treated.’

Early the next morning Mr. and Mrs. George Heald slipped quietly out of England and sailed to France.

There were times in the next few months of her life when Lola wondered if it mightn’t have been better to have stayed in England and faced the sentence of the court. For all she knew, the judge could have been lenient. With men like Lord Brougham on her side, the cruelty of sending a woman to prison whose only real crime was a misunderstanding of a draconian law might even have been a political tool his Liberals could have used - but only if the woman involved had been anyone but Lola Montez.

Their wanderings took them across Europe. No sooner had they settled in some city or town, news of their arrival would inevitably leak out and their hotel or apartment house would be hounded by reporters or curious sightseers. Always terrified that the English police would come after her with an extradition order, Lola would tell George they must pack up and move on.

In the beginning, George enjoyed the adventure and their passionate gypsy lifestyle, but slowly it began to dawn on him what it was he had given up for his love. He didn’t like being in countries where he couldn’t speak the language and hated the strange foods and customs. He began to miss his friends and his simple ordered life in the regiment of guards. By now there was probably every chance his commission had been revoked. While Lola spent his money like water, he started to find solace in other liquids.

Their first serious row was over Ludwig. George had never been concerned that Lola still wrote to the old King for he believed her when she told him they had never been lovers, that Ludwig had been like a father to her.

However, when they arrived in Rome, Lola insisted on making a visit to Ludwig’s home there, the Villa Giardino di Malta. It was locked, but Lola charmed the caretaker to let them in.

She barely spoke and seemed in a light daze as she wandered through the rooms, lightly touching statues or gazing at paintings and sitting for a few minutes on the King’s bed, running her hand repeatedly over the damask covering. For almost an hour, she sat quietly on the terrace gazing at the garden and murmuring the words of some poem Ludwig had written for her.

George became petulant, feeling locked out of some secret part of Lola’s life. After they returned to their hotel and while dressing for dinner that night, he noticed Lola had decided to wear a large diamond ring and matching necklace from the jewelry given to her by the King, in preference to items from the extensive Heald family collection.

‘Why don’t you ever wear my engagement ring?’ he said grumpily.

Lola was applying a final dusting of powder over her face and noticing, not for the first time lately, a slight puffiness under her eyelids and, horror of horrors, the vaguest hint of the beginnings of a double chin. After the nostalgic experience in Ludwig’s villa, she was in a melancholy mood.

Her eyes darted to George, frowning at her from a slumped position on a corner chair. He had been drinking again and there was a slovenliness about him. ‘I don’t wear it, because it looks cheap,’ she snapped, returning to study her worrisome complexion in the mirror.

‘Cheap? The bloody thing cost a hundred quid!’

‘No wonder, then.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

She glanced back at George, her irritability turning into venom. ‘If you had spent a thousand, George my pet, instead of a mere hundred you might have found a piece like this.’ She twiddled Ludwig’s diamond at him, sending out its provocative shafts of fire.

‘I want you to send it back,’ he said.

‘Don’t be stupid.’ She lifted her chin this way and that to see what might done about her problem.

George's face went red. 'Christ, Lola, I'm serious! Send it back or I'll ... I'll ...'

'Or you'll what, George? Leave me?'

His lips formed a pout and he was silent for a moment. 'No, of course not,' he mumbled. 'I just don't like the way you keep writing to that old loony all the time.'

She spun around in her chair. 'That old loony as you so disgustingly call him is a great man! He truly loved me. He even gave up his throne because of me. We could have been together now, but he was worried he couldn't make me happy. He told me to go out and find a husband.'

'Oh, so now the truth comes out? You married me because the old loony ordered you to?'

'Yes!' she screeched. 'And look at what I got? A lazy, stupid boy who hasn't got a brain in his head. Who can't understand how it was between us and what I meant to the King. God, I wish I'd never laid eyes on you.'

George's shoulders sagged and his eyes filled with tears. 'Lola, you can't mean that?' he whispered.

Lola closed her eyes and clenched her fists, while her blood raced, pounding in her head. It had been a long time since she had had one of her uncontrollable temper tantrums. She bit into her lip. I must fight against it, he's not worth it.

George burst into tears. 'I love you, Lola. I love you as much as he ever did, if not much more,' he blubbered. 'I'm so sorry I said those things. I'll buy you anything you want. A ring worth thousands - anything. Only, please don't say you wished you'd never ...' His voice faded into a croak as the tears gushed over his cheeks.

The storm in her head dissipated and she was swept with remorse. 'Oh, my pet, my little pet. I'm the one who should be sorry. Come here.' She stretched out her arms and George ran to her, falling on to his knees and burying his head in her lap. She stroked his head like a child. 'We mustn't fight like this,' she murmured. 'You mustn't be jealous of the King. He only wants us to be happy. We can't disappoint him now, can we?'

A few minutes later all thoughts of dinner had been forgotten as they stripped off and fell into bed together. Lola took the dominant role, making love to George with an almost punishing fury that left him quite dizzy and deliriously happy. Perhaps it was worth having fights if this was the way to make up.

But the brief peace did not last and they had another row a few days later after dining with Lord Brougham, who now spent most of his declining years in a villa in the South of France.

Under the influence of too much claret, George was rude, accusing him of not supporting Lola at the time of the hearing.

Lord Henry, ever the diplomat, struggled to keep his composure but couldn't disguise his intense dislike of Lola's husband. 'I can assure you, Mr. Heald, that as I was in Cannes at the time I knew nothing of what had taken place until it was long past. If I'd even had a glimmer of the idea that Lola was contemplating marriage with you, of course I would have advised her immediately that it was impossible.'

He shot a reprimanding glare at Lola. 'Besides, I always thought she knew exactly the terms of her divorce. I am amazed that a woman who had manipulated the complicated political maze of a country like Bavaria could be naive about her own marital state and to think she could continue to fool the world that she was Spanish.'

With his patronizing words, Lola sensed the death-knell of her long association with Lord Brougham. She knew that, in the end, even he would turn against her, just like so many others. She was angry, and sad, and just a little bewildered. Inevitably she blamed George and in the carriage back to their hotel he received another tongue-lashing which, as before, was soon regretted and he was compensated with another night of passionate lovemaking.

However, the next day Lola decided she had enough of the Riviera. They packed up and moved back to Italy, and to Naples. Ludwig had often spoken to her of his love for Naples and she had always wanted to see it for herself. No sooner had they moved into a top floor suite of the sumptuous Vittoria Hotel with a magnificent view of the Bay, when George discovered an urgent

message waiting them at his bank. It was from Lola's lawyer, Sir William Bodkin, stating that she was required in England immediately, that all the misunderstandings over her marriage were to be settled.

The bitterness in Lola's heart dissolved. Lord Henry must have acted on behalf after all, and she felt remorseful that she had thought ill of him.

Lola and George hired the first available means of transport, a steamer leaving for Marseilles. From France, they took an express coach to England, crossing the Channel incognito as Mr. and Mrs. Trafford and booking into a modest London hotel where the reporters were unlikely to expect to spot them.

Lola ordered George to stay in the hotel and hurried to Sir William's chambers.

His clerk looked at her in surprise. Was she quite sure that Sir William Bodkin was expecting her? He had left no message to that effect and he was out of town on another matter.

Exasperated, Lola finally wheedled out of the clerk that Sir William was seeing a client in Ramsgate. Yet again, there was another hurried train journey. When she finally tracked Bodkin down in a teashop in the seaside town he looked at her in utter amazement. 'What in the blazes are you doing here?'

'But you sent me an urgent message to come back to England?'

'I sent no such message.'

'And so what is this?' Lola flashed the letter in front of him.

'That's my letterhead, but it is not my writing.'

'I thought Lord Brougham had contacted you, that he had cleared up all the confusion over my divorce.'

Sir William shook his head. 'I can't imagine where you got that idea. When you told me Lord Brougham was your friend, I tried to enlist his help but I was told he had gone abroad. I'm sorry, but you must understand he never arranged any special Act or Parliament to dissolve your marriage. Personally, I think he stayed in Cannes as he wanted to avoid testifying on your behalf.'

Again her hopes were most cruelly dashed. Tired and utterly dispirited, Lola sat next to Sir William and let him pour her a cup of tea. 'Do you mean to tell me I've chased half across Europe for nothing?'

'Yes. Unless' His hand froze in the act of passing her the cup. 'Good Lord, ma'am, I've just realized - you shouldn't even be here. Where is Mr. Heald?'

'George is in London.'

'Oh, dear.'

'What is it?'

The lawyer's face was pale. 'I didn't write this letter to you, but someone else obviously did. Someone who wanted you back in this country to face the music.'

'Bloody Susannah!' Lola's unladylike cursing brought horrified glares from the other customers in the teashop and Sir William quickly paid the bill and hurried her out into the street.

'I can't say for sure who wrote it, but that is a possibility. It wouldn't have been too difficult to get someone to bribe one of my clerks to get a sheet of my letterhead.'

'I left George in London. Do you think she's found him yet?'

'Probably not, if you've covered your tracks. She lives in Lincolnshire and it will be some time before the news reaches her that you're back. But you had better get out of England quickly.'

George had enjoyed the day on his own. Lola had told him to stay put, but he had missed London so much he just had to wander around the streets, and even paid a visit to his old club. The doorman recognized him but said as he was no longer a member he was not permitted to enter.

Dejected, he walked along the Mall and watched a troop of the 2nd Life Guards ride past resplendent in their red jackets, cuirasses and bearskins. He waved at them but doubted whether any of them recognized him.

Lola was waiting for him in great agitation when he finally returned to the hotel. She told him

nothing of her visit with Bodkin and, to his horror, was in the wildest temper he had ever seen, throwing things and screaming.

‘I told you not to leave the hotel! Who did you speak to? Don’t you see it was all that old witch’s idea? She wants to get her claws into you. I won’t let her have you back. You’re mine! Mine!’

Finally he managed to calm her down, by holding her close and telling her how much he loved her and promising he would never go back to his aunt. She calmed down sufficiently for a quick and complete consolation in bed before she told him they must dash back to France. Without telling him why, she ordered George to travel on a separate packet boat and to meet her in Boulogne.

It was a rough crossing and Lola was one of only two passengers to brave the rolling deck. Her emotions were as chaotic as the sea itself. She walked up and down, hardly noticing the pitch of the ferry or how the wind clutched at her hair and skirts and the salt spray stung her face and eyes.

Like a fool she had depended too much on Lord Henry. He was an old man who preferred to indulge himself soaking up the French sun and was no longer interested in pursuing causes. Now she knew she would never trust anyone again. There was only George - adoring her, but so often irritating beyond belief.

She raised her head to the turbulent yet sullen skies. ‘Oh, Henri, why must it be like this again? Where have I gone wrong this time?’

‘Excuse me - were you speaking to me?’

Lola had hardly been aware of the other passenger and she was almost on the point of bumping in to him as he leaned on the rail observing her.

‘Sorry, no,’ she said loudly above the wind. ‘Just talking to myself.’

The young man swathed in a bright plaid cape smiled at her. ‘It’s a shame when an attractive lady has only herself to talk to,’ he said in English with a faint accent.

‘Well, perhaps it’s the only way I can have a decent conversation,’ she muttered without looking at him.

He grinned. ‘I’ve an ear for anything if you care to distract yourself with me.’ He produced a hip flask from somewhere within the plaid cloak and held it up. ‘Care to share a drop?’

Lola looked at him more closely. Something about his round pleasant face and the lilt in his voice registered in her memory. ‘Do I know you?’

He nodded and gave a light bow. ‘Warsaw. Like you Countess, I’ve been forced to hide my traces. You knew me as Jan Dalinski. I’m John Dale now.’

Her face lit up. ‘Why, of course! The poet with the pistol who made me a temporary Frenchwoman’

He smiled. ‘The same.’

She put her hand to a pocket in her skirts. ‘I still carry your pistol. It has served me well on occasion.’

‘That is most gratifying to hear.’

‘I’ve often thought of you,’ she said, ‘and how much you risked for me.’

‘I’m flattered that you remember, but it was nothing - compared to what you did. There are many people in Warsaw who have never forgotten you.’

She smiled. ‘Or forgiven me either, I think.’ She took his arm. ‘Come. Sit with me a while.’

They found themselves a sheltered corner of the deck and shared the flask of whiskey and she found herself talking about many of the things that had happened to her since those dim days in Warsaw. About personal things - about Franz Liszt - the mad glorious days in Paris and especially Henri Dujarier. The highs and the lows of her life with the ex-King Ludwig. Of her husband George and the bigamy trial. After she had talked for an hour, she felt better. The packet was almost at Boulogne before she finally realized he hadn’t said a word.

‘I’ve talked of nothing but myself. And what of you? What have you been doing with your life? Do you still write poetry?’

He bit his lip before he answered. ‘Poetry doesn’t pay the rent. I’m a journalist,’ he said almost

apologetically. 'I'm hoping to go to America soon. I've just been hired as a roving correspondent by the London bureau of the *New York Herald*.' He handed her a card.

Lola read it and her eyes flickered for a few moments. 'And what is your current assignment?'

Their eyes met for a minute before he dropped his. 'I will not lie to you. I am to keep the American readers informed on the activities of European royalty.'

Her eyes went glassy. 'Why, not you too, you stinking son-of-a-bitch ...'

She raised her hand as if ready to strike him, but he swiftly stayed her wrist. 'As you have just told me,' he said, 'life has the habit of dealing us all dirty tricks at times, and you have had more than your fair share, but I promise you faithfully on my life that what Jan Dalinski has heard, John Dale will never put into in print.'

'How do I know that?' she spat back. 'What I have told you could make you very rich.'

He pressed her gloved hand to his chest, cherishing the feel of it, and not bothering to disguise the tears that threatened in his eyes. 'On the word of honor of Jan Dalinski who will never forget your great courage and what you tried to do for my country of Poland, I will never speak to any living soul of today.' He then removed her hand and placed a kiss on her fingertips. 'Until we meet again in better circumstances, Countess. Farewell.'

Without another word or a backwards glance, Dale simply swept his plaid cape about his shoulders and strolled away.

Disturbed by the encounter with Dale, when Lola checked into the Hotel Londres in Boulogne she discovered that she had yet another problem. Not only had she blabbed the most private details of their lives unwittingly to a friend who hadn't bothered to tell her first he had turned into a newspaperman, but sending George on a separate ferry hadn't been a good idea either. He had met up with an old Guards friend from whom he discovered that his commanding officer had definitely revoked his commission and that his name was being bandied about London as that of an utter nincompoop.

He angrily challenged Lola before she even had time to give him a welcome kiss. 'Lola, what happened with Bodkin? I know I'm not particularly smart, but I've just lost my commission and I'd like to know why.'

Lola stared at him in frustrated disbelief. 'George, I can't believe you're asking this. Did you sleepwalk through the entire bigamy hearing?'

'You told me it was all nonsense. A silly mistake. I believed you. I didn't pay that much attention because I thought you said it would be all sorted out. Now I insist you tell me exactly what is going on and why we had to leave England again. I want to go home. I want us to live in Berrymead where we belong.'

Lola lit up a cigarette, trusting in the tobacco to calm her shredded nerves. George could be so irritating at times. He was really quite thick. Yet he did love her and she must try to be patient.

'Bodkin didn't write that letter asking us to go back. Your Aunt Susannah did.'

'You can't be serious?'

'I am. She was very clever and tried to trap us both. She wants to put me in prison because she thinks I only married you for your money.'

George gasped and was briefly silent. 'But I thought Lord Brougham ...'

Lola didn't let him finish. 'We can forget about any help from him. I made the mistake of trusting him. He promised me he had made the divorce final, when it is obvious he did nothing of the sort. He deceived me. I want no more to do with him.'

George thought again. 'So that means nothing has changed. We're still not properly married.'

Lola stubbed out her cigarette and put her arms around him, looking up into his eyes. 'We're married in our hearts, George. We have each other. That's all that really matters.'

He held her stiffly as he tried to digest the confused state of affairs. 'What do we do now?' he asked.

'Well, seeing that half the damn newspapers of the world have put reporters on my trail, there is

nothing to stop the English police coming after me as well. We'll have to move on again.'

George did his best, but by the time they had spent two trying months in Paris living beyond their means in a suite of apartments in the Rue de Rivoli, entertaining phalanxes of impoverished aristocrats and eccentric theatrical personalities, he was thoroughly depressed.

The woman with whom he had fallen in love seemed to change completely in the company of others. She shone, while he felt as dull as a stone. Still awkward in French, he always felt inferior in charm, intellect and wit. Gradually he found his consolation in more and more French wines and brandies. Inevitably, their fights became more frequent and even when they were resolved passionately, his depression always returned the next day. Matters steamed to a head when they moved on to Barcelona.

One evening, Lola complained of a migraine and went to bed early while George wiled away the time playing cards in the hotel saloon lounge. In the course of the evening he was introduced to a young Englishwoman and when it transpired that she was slightly acquainted with one of his relatives and several of his Guards friends, George was overwhelmed with homesickness. How wonderful it was to find someone who spoke English and was content to listen to his woes.

Although he had no interest in the newcomer as a woman, when she said she was leaving for London within a few days and he was quite welcome to join her party on the return voyage, he had a sudden longing to go.

But was he strong enough to make the break from Lola?

They weren't legally married so he had no real obligation to her. Yet he couldn't live with her - but could he live without her? And the thought of her bedding another man in the same fashion as she did him was enough to send him insane.

The next morning, with Lola still in bed, he took the dogs out and went for a long walk on the seafront, trying to gird up the courage for a decision one way or the other.

Lola's maid, Anna, saw him go. She didn't like George much and had heard gossip from some of the other servants that he had spent several hours in the company of another woman in the hotel lounge. She thought her mistress ought to know about a possible new rival and whispered a sly hint in her ear.

Lola's migraine headache was certainly not helped by such news. Instantly she jumped to conclusions. Although she had no proof, her mind went wild with imaginings.

Anna said the woman knew George's aunt. That was too much of a coincidence. Consumed with a combination of fear of losing George and intense jealousy, as soon as she heard him returning from his walk, Lola climbed out of bed and waited at the door.

'Where have you been?' she said in a flat voice. Her eyes had a pained, glazed look. She ignored the dogs as they ran to meet her, tails wagging.

George unwound his scarf and gave her a smile. 'Oh, hello, my love. Are you feeling better?'

'I asked you a question.'

'I just took the dogs for a walk ...'

'Don't lie. You've been out with a woman.'

'What?'

His eyes were drawn to something glinting in Lola's hand. It was a small pocket dagger that she often carried with her as well as her small pistol.

'It's Susannah's doing, isn't it? She sent her, didn't she? Sent her to take you away from me. Well I won't let her have you. Nobody will have you!'

Lola lunged at George and, before he could react, she had slashed his arm. He yelled in pain and fell backwards. The wound was only superficial, but it was producing copious quantities of blood.

Lola continued to slash the air with the knife. 'Come here, you traitor! We will die together. And then they'll all be sorry!'

Horried, and clutching his bleeding arm, George turned and fled from the room.

The reporters were in their usual haunts around the hotel and when they saw George Heald bleeding profusely and clambering into a cab, ordering the driver to the British Consulate, they

knew they were on to another good story.

It was several minutes before reality returned to her and. Lola stared at the knife in her hand, still wet with George's blood.

'Oh, dear God. Oh George, what have I done?' The knife dropped to the floor with a clatter and she hugged herself, weeping. 'I didn't mean to hurt you. I love you. Oh, George, but you are such a fool.'

The migraine had returned with a vengeance. Her head seemed to be full of pain and blackness. Anna gave her another sleeping powder and led her back to bed.

Two days later, George slunk back. Unkempt, unshaven and looking more like a lost child than a man, he stood waiting for Lola to look up from her letter writing.

'It's no use,' he muttered. 'I can't leave you. I can't function without you. Will you have me back?'

She kept writing for another minute, but her hand was shaking. At last she laid aside her quill. 'Why should I? You have had everything with me, yet you want to go back to your auntie's skirts and play around with other women.'

'That's not true.' He fell down on to his knees. 'I never want to see Aunt Susannah again. And there are no other women. There never were. There never will be.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Why should I believe you?'

He held out his hands, palms outwards. 'Use your knife and cut my wrists. I will die here in front of you, if you want, to prove it.'

Lola took a deep breath. A smile built up on her lips and she opened her arms. 'Oh, my poor pet. Come on back to your mama.'

'My dearest Louis, I have not written for so long because I am in misery. I think of you so much, but am ashamed of the dungeon I have dug for myself. What a pity you cannot see the eternal punishment under which I must now labor. Not only is my husband a wretch of a man - a fool without spirit - he is brutal and insults me in public for all the world to see. How I deceived myself when I thought I could love or be happy with another than you. In my unhappiness my soul travels to you. I love you more than ever, your adoring Lolita.'

'Lolita - I no longer care about your problems. It is not your enemies who have made me change my feelings for you, only your own conduct. You say all your friends have betrayed you. You always blame others for what happens to you, but you must learn to look at your inner self. Try and be happy. Herewith are bank drafts for three months. Louis.'

'My darling Louis - I thank you with all my heart for your money. (However, a little more would always be welcome.) Write to my husband and tell him what a wretch he is. Your words might have some effect, where mine fall on deaf ears. How I miss you, my adored Louis, your eternal Lolita.'

As much as both tried to put an end to it, their relationship had become like a drug to both of them. When he was with her, Lola treated George abominably, shouting at him, calling him names, despising him. When he ran away, she ached for him, wanting to mother him, take him in her arms, lose herself in the sweet satisfaction of his body.

They continued to wander around Spain, Lola refreshing her skills in Spanish dancing to avoid the never-ending boredom while George drank himself into stupors. The inevitable result of too much alcohol put the final seal on their troubles.

One night, George had trouble proving himself in making love. Despite all Lola's skills with her fingers and mouth, his once dynamic instrument lay flaccid. The more she tried, the worse it seemed to become. There was no mistake. George was now impotent. Lola did not have the patience to nurture back to health that which no longer served her. She pushed George aside and clambered out of bed.

Scornfully, she looked down at him. 'You had better cure that brewer's droop or I'll have to find

myself a potent young Spaniard.'

George rolled on to the floor and scrambled to his knees, tugging on one of her legs and pleading. 'Lola, please, darling. I've been sick. I just need time to recover. Everything will be as before, I promise.'

He reminded her of one of her dogs, begging for a biscuit. 'Can I trust you to be Lola's good little boy and not drink so much?'

'I'll try. I really will,' he wailed.

She patted him on the head, and drew his face toward the damp, dark vee of her legs. 'Your tongue still works, I presume?' she said in a caustically breathy voice.

'Oh yes, my love,' he whispered eagerly.

'Then use it.'

In public, too, Lola vented her frustration with George by belittling him. The reporters, including John Dale, who watched them at the races and in gambling casinos, filled their notebooks with details of their arguments, even witnessing Lola smacking George across the face and wondering how any man could stoop to being so degraded by a woman. What was the extraordinary power she wielded to reduce a man to this whimpering shadow?

John Dale could see that George was losing his battle with the bottle. One evening he discovered him in a low-class cantina, almost comatose on cheap Spanish wine. George didn't seem to care that Dale was a newspaperman as he blubbered his tale of woe.

'Why don't you leave her?' asked Dale.

'I've tried. God knows how I've tried. It's as if she has a spell over me. As soon as I'm away from her, I'm more consumed with her than ever and I have to go back. She's not even my real wife, yet she spends all my money. Soon there'll be nothing left and she'll throw me out, I know.'

'Perhaps that's the best thing that can happen?'

'The best thing would be if I were dead,' moaned George into his drink.

Looking at him, the tattered remnant of the once smart young Guardsman, Dale was inclined to agree with him, but didn't say so, although he still wondered at Lola's bizarre behavior towards him. He felt angry and more than a little sad.

The more he learned about her, the more he realized Lola no longer bore any resemblance to the brave woman he had met in Poland. Where had she gone? Or perhaps she had never really existed and she was just the figment of his once-romantic imagination.

Maybe everyone was eventually sucked down into the morass that was life. If he, the idealistic poet, had been reduced to earning his living by shadowing a pathetic couple in their tortured quest for a happiness they were never likely to find, whom was he to judge?

All he could do was to try and encourage George to pull himself together and find the willpower to get himself back to England. He offered to make the arrangements and travel with him. George even spent the next two nights sleeping on the floor of John Dale's hotel room while trying to dry out.

Not having any idea of George's whereabouts, Lola added yet more fuel to the destructive fire of their passion by inserting a sickening advertisement in the next day's newspaper that was destined for its own brand of infamy.

'Lost. One lap dog answering to the names of "George" or "Pet". If found, return to the Countess of Landsfeld at the Grande Hotel. Small reward offered.'

To John Dale's astonishment and dismay, instead of being infuriated by this final disgusting affront to his dignity, George Heald lapsed again into the role of victim and raced back to Lola.

His sexual powers briefly restored, George once again found favor, and Dale witnessed them parading through a Madrid park, arm in arm as if they were new lovers, although the newspaper man could only wonder how much longer it could possibly last.

After yet another blazing row in Cadiz on Christmas Day 1849, George Heald finally picked up the courage to walk out. This time, in an act of drunken bravado, he actually managed to find

himself a ship bound for England.

As soon as she received his brief note, saying it was over and he couldn't take any more, Lola rushed to the quay in time to see the steamer already out to sea. Fighting back the tears, she promptly turned around and packed her bags again for Paris.

Dear Paris. The only place in the whole world where she might be able to restore her life and find some kind of reason for existing.

With the latest installment of Ludwig's money, she made the down payment on a lease on a large chateau off the Champs Elysees. No sooner had she settled in, when a carriage arrived at the front gates. George was back.

He stood in front of her, tall and determined. She was reminded of that first time she had ever seen him. A vision in white and gold - with gentle, dreaming eyes.

'Hello,' he said softly. 'Can we try again?'

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

27.

George had not only brought himself back, but also a complete entourage of servants, furniture, horses and carriages. Berrymead had been silent and empty without Lola and his days there had been filled with remorse and introspection, trying to control his drinking and find reasons for the desperation he felt. His friends offered little support, still calling him a dupe and a fool. Unable to understand that he could still love Lola, Aunt Susannah had retreated to Lincolnshire in disgust.

It was no use. In spite of everything, he still loved Lola with a passion that made no sense. He'd rather be treated like a slave than live without her. He also knew that Lola had to be kept in a certain style, that she needed luxury and sophisticated company to survive. For her to be happy, he must make one last attempt to fit in with her world, even if meant spending every penny he had.

Lola couldn't redecorate Berrymead, but she was determined to make the Chateau Beaujon into one of the finest private residences in Paris instead. Within days of George's return, painters and decorators were at work on the house. Life was good again. George had pulled himself together. He was able to fulfill her every wish, both behind closed doors at home, and in society.

The couple became a familiar sight in the Champs Elysees, riding in their carriage drawn by four matching white horses. Lola went to the best fashion designers and had a complete new wardrobe created. A new portrait was commissioned by the fashionable painter, Claudius Jacquand, of the Countess of Landsfeld sitting on a sofa with George Heald in full Guards uniform standing at her side, gazing adoringly into her eyes.

Once again Lola moved into the world that she loved, although she deliberately avoided most of the places associated with her old literary friends and her days with Henri Dujarier. When she was happy, she didn't want to be reminded of Henri.

But, as always, the happiness proved to be fleeting. George began getting letters from his solicitors and bankers. He was seriously overdrawn and his presence was requested in London to sort out the mess in his affairs. He was frightened to tell Lola that the money was running out.

The final act began one morning shortly after breakfast. Lola was in the good mood that a night of satisfied lovemaking always created and so she did not want it disturbed by the sudden arrival of the owner of the chateau, an irascible Irishwoman.

'What does she want at this hour?' she asked the servant who interrupted her cozy breakfast with George.

'Madame, this lady is come with a cart for the contents of the wine cellar,' he said.

'Well, she can't have it. I rented the house, including contents.'

'I tried to explained that to her, Madame, but she insists the wine is hers.'

Lola threw down her napkin and still wearing her negligee, marched to the front door where the

two women eyed each other. Something about her reminded Lola of her own mother, whom she hadn't thought of in years. It was not a memory she enjoyed.

'I signed a lease for the house and contents,' she repeated coldly. 'Now you are interrupting my privacy, so get lost!'

'How dare you speak to me in such a fashion,' snarled the woman. 'You are nothing but a whore, even if a king's whore!'

Stars exploded in Lola's brain and instinctively she struck the woman across the face. 'Bitch!' she screeched. Fingernails gouged down the woman's cheeks, her shins were kicked and Lola gripped the woman's hair, twisting it fiercely. Screaming, the pair fell together to the floor.

George heard the commotion and rushed downstairs. For a moment all he could see was the tangled mass of female petticoats, bloodied limbs and the high-pitched caterwauling of each woman. It was not a pretty sight. His meal turned in his stomach. Lola, the beautiful, elegant woman he had loved was behaving no better than a common fishwife.

He didn't bother to try and force the two women apart. He just stood there for a few more minutes, listening to Lola's obscene tirade. George Heald turned around and marched back up the stairs. He went into his bedroom and silently packed a bag.

Lola didn't realize he had gone until after the police arrived to break up the fight, followed by the inevitable gaggle of newspaper reporters. Bleeding and bedraggled, she retreated upstairs, still swearing and ready to take out her remaining fury on George. She searched for him in all the rooms before realizing some of his things were gone. She slumped down on to the bed they had fleetingly shared and punched the pillows angrily. 'You rotten bastard,' she muttered. 'I wonder how long it'll be before you come creeping back this time?'

Lola waited, and waited, but weeks went by and George Heald did not return to her arms.

In England, John Dale caught a brief sight of him as, supporting his elderly Aunt Susannah, as he made one more public appearance at the Marlborough Street Court in which he petitioned for his marriage to the Countess of Landsfeld to be annulled, thereby putting an end to the case of bigamy. George agreed to pay all bills up to that date but thereafter any debts incurred by her would no longer be his responsibility. He also arranged with his solicitors to pay Lola the sum of fifty pounds per month until his death. Yet again, he packed his bags, took a train to a Channel port and quietly disappeared.

'My darling Louis - My faithless husband has abandoned me to utter wretchedness. I have nothing left but debts, dire poverty and sickness. My life is worthless, your loving Lolita.'

'Lolita - It was disagreeable to hear that your husband left you. I am sorry. Louis.'

'Dear precious Louis - You write so few words. Have you forgotten your dear Lolita? It is as well that I sent to London for the package containing your letters, for this wicked man went to my attorney to ask for them. God knows what he would have done with them were they in his hands, most likely he would publish them. He is vicious and capable of everything base and dishonorable. Why he has even taken my dogs from me, my only consolation. I have no money left, not enough even for a pair of shoes. He wishes to annul the marriage, but I will certainly resist for the other marriage was never legal. I have but tears, loneliness and poverty. For God's sake do not abandon me now in my hour of greatest need. Your most devoted Lolita, once your beloved.'

'Lolita - You can send your letters to me care of any banker. When I have them in my hands, I will send you three advance installments of your allowance. Louis.'

'Louis - Why must you be so cold towards me? None of this is my doing. It is not my fault I am unhappy and poor. I think I shall keep your letters to comfort me for the time even if it means I shall have no money. Your devoted Lolita.'

'Lolita - Again you are lying to me. I have heard of the comfort and style in which you live in Paris. There will be no more funds until the letters are returned. Louis.'

'Louis! Is this how it must be? You once promised me a pension for life. It is the now of the greatest necessity. You can't imagine what necessity means - such a terrible word. If you prefer I

will accept a sum on delivery of all your letters and then we will speak no more of money. If you want to do that, you will not have to pay me a pension any longer. I will be satisfied with the sum you choose. I know the letters are very valuable and if something were to happen to me, others could do with them what I would never be capable of doing, although many publishers here and in London have offered me a lot of money to publish them. When a person is in need, one is capable of a lot. Lolita. P.S. Nothing I have written here on the subject of your letters or the pension is my own idea - it is on the advice of friends who want to manage the whole thing without scandal.'

One letter that Lola didn't see was sent by Bavaria's ambassador to the ex-King..

'Your Majesty. In reply to your recent inquiry into the conduct and status of the Countess of Landsfeld in Paris and whether her husband has guaranteed her any sum or pension should he predecease her, I can only inform you in the strictest confidence that the consensus in Paris is that were he to do so, his life could be forfeit. Yours faithfully, August von Wendland, Bavarian Ambassador.'

Paris was the same, and yet it wasn't the same. She was looking at it through the eyes of a different woman. She wished she could recapture the magic but since the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 the city was filled with a more somber, conservative mood. Those once wild and irreverent Bohemians now conducted more discreet lives under the reign of Louis Napoleon. The mistresses and lovers were still there, but they lived a more shadowy existence, never to be flaunted in public.

With George gone, apparently for good this time, Lola was faced with another crossroads and the ugly issue of money. The lavish lifestyle begun in Munich had continued with George and the thought of having to drop her standards was daunting. The old pattern of her life was re-emerging. Creditors besieged her yet again. They told her George would no longer pay her bills and, not believing them, she paid an impulsive secret visit to England determined to storm the Heald family.

First she met the lawyer, Bodkin, who explained her situation. While she no longer needed to fear the law now that the bigamy case had been dropped, since her marriage was also annulled George had no more responsibility towards her.

Ignoring his advice to let well alone, Lola hired a carriage to take her directly to Berrymead Priory. There was no sign of George but, as luck would have it, old Susannah Heald happened to be there. Lola was not allowed to even approach the threshold.

Like a raven fighting off a cat, the old woman stood in the doorway and bared arthritic claws at Lola. 'Harlot!' she cried. 'You have some nerve coming back here. You ruined my nephew's life!'

'He was already well ruined when I met him, you old witch,' retaliated Lola swiftly. 'You had seen to that. Where is he?'

'Even if I knew, you are the last person on earth I would tell. Now get out of here before I send for the peelers.'

Lola complied, but drew a tiny shred of comfort to realize George had abandoned his meddlesome old relatives as well as his wife.

On her return to London, she tracked down one of George's few remaining friends, but he had taken an oath never to reveal his whereabouts, neither to Lola nor to Susannah. None of Lola's wiles worked on him and she left disappointed.

Back again in Paris, and unable to pay the rent on the Chateau Beaujon, a new acquaintance, Count Michel de Corail, helped her to find slightly cheaper accommodation in the Rue du St Honoré. There, without the constant wrangling with George and the pressures of never-ending debt, she attempted to gather together the shreds of her life - and to finally give way and let her guilty thoughts dwell on Henri, the true love that she had abandoned.

It pleased her to see there were already fresh roses on the tomb when she wandered into the Montmartre Cemetery, so at least some of his friends still remembered him. She placed her own small posy of violets on the marble headstone and bowed her head.

'I have tried, Bon-Bon,' she whispered hoarsely, 'but since you passed from my arms nothing has ever gone as I planned. Am I always doomed to fail those who love me? Please speak to me. Let me

hear your voice. Tell me what I must do now.'

Lola closed her eyes, pulled her veil over her face, trying to block out the bright summer sunshine and the distant hum of Parisian life, but even this close to his earthly remains she was unable to sense an echo of his spirit. Depression swept over her. She willed her thoughts outwards, desperate to reach some fleeting essence of her one true love, but she was overcome by a sense of panic.

'Oh, where are you, my Bon-Bon? I no longer have the strength to persist with this charade called life. I am coming to you, my love. We can be together forever.'

With her eyes still closed, she felt in the secret pocket of her skirt where she kept her pistol and was in the process of pulling it out with the intention of putting it to her temple, when a familiar voice made her open her eyes.

'By all the saints, at first I thought you were a ghost!'

Alexandre Dumas, père, his frizzy hair now quite gray and his stomach more well-rounded than ever beneath a red spotted waistcoat, came hurrying towards her with open arms. 'Lola, Lola - I heard you were back. Why did you never come to see me?'

Damn. Why *him* of all people? Almost reluctantly, Lola let the pistol slip back into the pocket. In her heart, she had never forgiven Alexandre for the part he played in encouraging Henri to fight the duel. Even through the folds of her veil, there was no mistaking the aloofness in her stare. His hands dropped awkwardly to his side.

'There are some friendships best left buried,' she said in a cold voice.

The smile left his face. 'We have all changed, Lola. Life and revolutions have seen to that.'

She glanced down at Henri's gravestone. 'He will never change, though. He will always be the same.'

Alexandre shuffled cautiously forward to stand by her side. 'I am sorry to see that you still grieve,' he said. 'From what I have read of you, I thought your life was well occupied with many new loves and glorious adventures.'

She scoffed. 'Monsieur Dumas of all people should know better than to believe fiction.'

He was silent a moment. 'I come to visit so many of my friends who are now gone,' he said wistfully. 'And I always tell Dujarier the flowers are from you.'

Lola detected a deep and genuine sadness in his eyes. So, he must feel some guilt after all.

'We managed to have Jean-Baptiste de Beauvallon and his seconds tried again, you know,' he continued. 'He was sentenced to eight years hard labor, but when the prisons were opened in the revolution they all escaped, I am sorry to say. The last I heard he was back in Guadeloupe.'

'I don't really care,' she said. 'The past cannot be rewritten.' She promptly turned her back and hurried away from the grave, not wanting for him to see her own torment.

Alexandre panted as he struggled to keep up with her and failed. He shouted after her. 'Lola! You must come and have dinner with us - all your old friends - Gautier, and Hugo, and Sue - and George Sand of course - we would all enjoy your company once again.'

But Lola never once looked back and just ran towards the gates, tears now flooding down her cheeks. She knew that Alexandre's pleas meant nothing and were as hollow and empty as her own heart.

Ignoring any curious onlookers who might be wondering who the veiled figure was, she scurried back into her carriage. She was half way back to her apartment when a wild thought entered her head. Perhaps Alexandre's appearance just at that critical moment when she was about to put the pistol to her head was not a complete coincidence? Could it have been Henri's way of stopping her from committing the final foolish act? Her hands clutched at her chest and her heart raced with renewed hope.

'Oh, Bon-Bon - you were there - watching over me. It isn't my time yet. You want me to go on.' She took a deep breath, releasing it as an anguished sigh. 'Very well, for your sake, I will draw again on my depleted courage, but please don't abandon me. I need you more than ever now.'

Although the money wolf was never far away from the door, gradually her depression began to

lift, but rather than accepting Alexandre's invitation to rejoin the French literary coterie, she gathered new friends about her with more diverse backgrounds and made a serious start on personally writing her eagerly awaited memoirs.

'Louis - I have written you twice without response. My God, what crime am I guilty of, except that it is the love I still have for you? The only way I can live now is to publish my memoirs, you can be assured neither you nor anyone close to you will be compromised. This is the only proof of my affection for you that I can give - to let the world know of your genius and noble spirit. Please, dear Louis, don't fail me now in my situation, the misery of which I can't describe for you, your adoring Lolita.'

This time there was no reply.

Occasionally, Lola glimpsed John Dale among the hordes of pressmen who followed her every move, reporting their outright lies. She had never forgiven herself for letting him know the intimate details of her life, yet he had not used them as yet and so he was the only reporter she felt she could trust - not that there was a choice.

She started to buy copies of the newspaper in which he reported on her activities in the brash, sensational style that was at odds with his own character but which seemed to appeal to American readers. Although his reports were often as full of inaccuracies as the others, Lola liked his frank manner, and not once was he cruel or disparaging, and she found herself wondering about America as a possible new destination.

Augustus Green, an American banker, helped to put the shambles of her finances into some kind of order. With the great California Gold Rush at its height, he suggested she buy a few shares in the Eureka gold mine. With the limited funds she had left, she took his advice and thought little more of it.

For a time she was seen at the races and at the opera on the arm of the Oxford-educated Nepalese Ambassador, Prince Jung Bahadur. They spoke Hindustani together and ignored the whispers as she publicly displayed his gifts of jewelry and exquisite Kashmir shawls. Her other new friend, the Count Michel de Corail, helped to organize her first grand party to celebrate the publication of her memoirs.

Even when she occasionally gave way to her natural weakness and allowed Michel to share her bed, she never allowed any liaisons to go beyond the temporary or superficial. George Heald had cut deep and she still fooled herself with the glimmer of hope that one day he would return to her, all the past agonies forgotten, and become a true and loving husband.

Meanwhile, Alexandre Dumas had eagerly followed every report on Lola over the past few years, as she had written her way out of the gossip columns and into the history books. His prediction that any man who linked himself with her was doomed to disaster had proved itself several times over. Immune himself now to her physical charms and which he, as a professed expert on such matters, detected were slowly beginning to go the way of all female flesh, he still found himself captivated by her unpredictable spirit. A man could never be quite sure about Lola and that was her greatest fascination for him.

After the encounter in the cemetery their paths crossed again on occasion. The woman who had given a name to a shade of black now took a fancy to wearing white. In utter defiance of the trend for bigger and bigger crinolines, she would grace receptions in simple Empire folds with flowers in her hair, turning heads more than ever.

At the lavish party to celebrate the impending publication of her memoirs, she relented in her resolve in keeping her distance and invited some of her old friends from the Dujarier days. Her presence was dazzling as she made a grand entrance in shimmering white watered silk trimmed in black. On her head was a diamond tiara and across her bosom, a regal sash of red with the emblem of the Countess of Landsfeld defiantly displayed for all the world to see.

Alexandre watched her with admiration and wondered briefly if at last the dramatic pages of her life had ceased to turn, yet he doubted it. From his own bitter experience, he guessed that all her

show of wealth was probably covering a serious shortage of money. Even with the healthy annuity she was said to receive from Ludwig, no-one could live for long like this in Paris these days.

He smiled to himself. 'I doubt the world has heard the last of you, my dear Lola,' he murmured. 'There are still a few tricks to turn in your house of cards.'

Lola's memoirs in the newspaper *Le Pays* never went beyond a few erratic chapters which included a flowery opening dedication to King Ludwig.

'In publishing my memoirs my purpose is to reveal to the world the poet, the artist, the philosopher, and the lofty ideals of a liberal, intelligent and gracious King. I wish to lay all this before Europe, which has now sunk into vulgar materialism, which no longer believes, no longer thinks, no longer acts. Society has done all it can to make us women hypocrites. We are ceaselessly driven to say the opposite of what we really think. I will disclose many scandalous things that have been concealed up to now. I will nonetheless remain ever within the confines of decency. When I must touch upon the private life of public figures I will always do so with moderation and consideration.'

Rumors were rife and people were jittery. Lola was going to expose the pasts of everyone she had known: Ludwig was frightened of what she was going to write and had bought her off: unnamed members of the French nobility didn't want a scandal and threatened to close any newspaper involved in publishing the memoirs. However, like the fated Papon memoir before it, when it finally appeared, the first installment fell flat.

To make sure any future installments didn't cause international embarrassment, under pressure from the Bavarian Ambassador and the French foreign and interior ministers, the nervous editors of *Le Pays* finally decided discretion the better part of valor and sent back the manuscript, plus a paltry few thousand francs.

After all her months of work, Lola was devastated. Furious at the rebuff, she hawked the book around all the other newspapers, but everyone was wary. Too many well-known Parisians had been associated with Lola Montez and no-one wanted to risk the storms her story might release.

Not only did she feel betrayed, she had been depending on the publication to make her more money. George's fifty pounds a month went nowhere. This time genuine destitution was on the horizon.

On one of those dreaded snowy days in February she paid another visit to the grave at Montmartre. This time anger had replaced her depression and she had no thoughts of doing away with herself. Instead she marched around Henri's grave muttering about the ingratitude and injustices she had received at the hands of his former newspaper associates.

She hardly noticed when the snow turned to sleet and her coat and fine kid leather boots were soaked through. It was only when her carriage driver came in search of her that she realized the state she was in. Lola began sneezing on the way home. By nightfall she was confined to bed with a raging temperature, another victim of the influenza epidemic that had already decimated much of the Parisian population.

For days she hardly knew where she was, passing in and out of consciousness as her body seemed to boil, freeze, then boil again. Sometimes she was in the arms of her maid, Anna, who wiped the sweat away from her brow and forced her to sip some foul liquid. At other times Henri was there, his gentle face filled with care as he tucked the blankets around her shivering shoulders and whispered into her ear how much he loved her, that she must fight to get well for her wedding day.

In this strange world half-way between living and dying, Henri was as real to her as Anna and when at last the fever broke and she was left in a state of quiet calm when she didn't know if she were alive or dead.

It was the arrival of Michel de Corail that brought her back to reality. He was the first visitor allowed into the house since she had fallen ill and he still kept his distance from her, staring at her from across the bedroom. After handing Anna a bouquet of flowers, he muttered a few platitudes

and abruptly left.

Lola could only barely remember him. Since her illness, it seemed that her mind had developed several blanks. Anna chattered to her about people and places she didn't seem to know and soon became exhausted from trying to remember them. But there was worse to come. When she finally sat up against the pillows and asked for a mirror, Anna bit her lip and hesitated.

'What is it?' asked Lola. 'Am I that ugly?'

'Madame has,' Anna touched her own hair, 'a little problem.'

Lola raised her hands and ran her fingers through her hair. To her horror, whole strands came away in her hands. She croaked. 'Damn it! Fetch me a mirror!'

She held up the mirror with shaking hands. The woman who stared back at her was a grotesque stranger. Gone was the famous translucent beauty, her cheekbones prominent and skeletal, her eyes a dull blue surrounded by dark purple pools, her once voluptuous lips narrow and dry. As she stared, more strands of hair drifted from her head, leaving distinct bald patches.

'I'm dead! I'm in Hell!' Lola screamed and threw the mirror back at Anna.

Anna rushed to reassure her. 'No, Madame, you are still very much alive, but you came close to dying. The doctor said sometimes the hair falls out when one has been as sick as you. It will grow back.'

Lola thought of her crowning glory and burst into tears. 'It will take years!'

'Madame can use wigs. They are fashionable again this season.'

'Wigs?' Lola nearly choked on the despicable word. Her hands went to clutch her chest and met with little resistance. She looked down to see that her ample bosom had disappeared as well. Her body was nothing but skin and bone. No wonder Michel de Corail had left.

'Oh, Anna,' she wailed 'look at me. No-one will ever love me again.'

The maid patted her hand. 'Of course they will, madame. You have been ill. It will take time to get better.'

But Lola's recovery was slow and she plunged back into depression. She smoked incessantly and had little appetite for the food she needed to put weight on. Anna took the drastic step of shaving off what little hair remained, but even the most expensive wigs in Paris were dull compared to the glossy raven locks that had been one of the trademarks of Lola Montez. Padding of her undergarments might fool the general onlooker as to Lola's curves, but she hated resorting to such deception.

One afternoon after a thoroughly dispiriting morning being fitted out for a range of the latest fashions that did nothing to lift the dullness of her skin tone or bring back the sparkle into her eyes, she was visited by one of the few friends who had stuck by her during this trying time.

It was Augustus Green, her banker friend who had advised her to invest in the Californian Eureka mine. She liked him because he was polite but unpretentious, if a little gauche in the subtle games of manners and flirtations practiced by the more sophisticated European men. Besides, she also liked the way he always used her title and emphasized it with robust Yankee syllables.

'Countess, I've been studying your state of affairs and it's set me a-thinking,' he said as he parted his coat tails and took a seat. 'To be frank, Countess, it seems to me you're in a bit of a tight squeeze.'

Lola waved a disinterested hand. 'Don't tell me Mr. Green, I really don't have the energy for such matters.'

'You'll just have to find some, Countess. While you were ill, I received a stack of invoices near high as this room. I paid what I could, but there's a mighty big shortfall.'

'Send them to my Louis.'

'I tried that, Countess. He sent them back.'

She frowned at him. 'Surely not?'

'It seems that ex-King Ludwig thinks you are already well provided for. He said he was sorry you had been ill, but he can't pay you any more.'

'But what am I to do, Mr. Green?'

‘You could always go back to earning your own money.’

Lola stared at him for a few moments. ‘Are you suggesting I return to the ... the stage?’

He nodded. ‘I recently received a communication from a certain Mr. Phineas T. Barnun, he’s a well-known entrepreneur from New York ...’

‘Yes, of course I’ve heard of him,’ interrupted Lola impatiently. ‘And?’

‘He indicated to me that the Countess of Landsfeld might find an enthusiastic reception in the United States were she to sign with him for a tour.’

Feeling about as motivated as a sack of potatoes, Lola fell back against her chaise-louge. ‘I couldn’t possibly, Mr. Green. I haven’t danced seriously before an audience for several years.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying so, Countess, you need to take a good look at yourself. You’re still young and beautiful. So, you might have lost a little weight lately, but dancers look better when they’re not overly fleshy. Get a little discipline back into your life and with a bit of training I reckon you could step into Fanny Elssler’s little old ballet slippers with ease.’

Lola raised her head slightly. ‘Me? Elssler?’

‘Why not indeed? I saw her a few times before she retired and must admit she was a perky package to watch, but she never had your fire.’

Lola felt that slight glow of optimism begin to form somewhere deep in her being, the glow that always heralded the start of something new in her life, another new beginning.

She eased herself upright, her mind alert with possibilities. Without Elssler as a rival, Lola Montez might be able to make a successful comeback. ‘With whom could I train?’ she ventured.

‘I do hear tell that a Monzure Mabile is the greatest teacher of dancing in Paris.’ Green gave a secretive smile. ‘In fact I already took the almighty liberty of asking him if he would take on a new pupil. He said he would be delighted to coach the distinguished Countess of Landsfeld.’

The man said it so nicely, Lola couldn’t take affront at Green’s presumption that she would accept his suggestion. She just smiled. ‘You must allow a lady time to think about it, Mr. Green.’

‘Louis - I am trusting this package to a friend who is visiting Munich. Although your letters have become sacred to me they are now at your disposal. Believe me when I vow that as long as I live nothing will ever be written of Munich. Oh, but if you only knew the miserable situation I am in. I am poor, yes very poor, but I would prefer to live honorably as I now do than possess luxury by evil means. I must pawn my silver to pay the cost of the courier. Oh, dear Louis, be charitable. Remember it is your Lolita who begs. The one whose heart is ever the same for you. I will never trouble you again. I shall hide the pangs of my breaking heart from all the world and try to end my days in peace with God and men. Your ever devoted Lolita.’

Ludwig did not reply directly, although he curtly expressed thanks via the courier and sent one last bank draft of three thousand francs. With her small allowance from George Heald, it was enough to commence the next phase in the life of Lola Montez.

28.

Never before had she worked so hard. Seven days a week for four months at the Jardin Mabile dance studio, Charles Mabile grilled Lola through the particular steps that suited her talents. Mistakes in style that had contributed to her earlier failures were corrected. Elements of Spanish, French and Italian folk dances were combined with classical ballet to produce a repertoire of six special dances that were unique to Lola Montez.

Physically, she grew stronger and leaner under the punishing regime. Her hair, however, was taking a long time to re-grow but with the subtle use of floral coronets, scarves or veils, few people would have known she was wearing a wig.

During this period, Lola kept her social life on a discreet level, taking no lovers and

concentrating on her dancing. With the rumors continuing to flow that she was going back on the stage and that she would soon be sailing to America, she was often invited out to functions given by Americans. She almost accepted one to celebrate the Fourth of July until she discovered it was to be held at Trois Freres Provencaux where Henri had met his fate. After that, she declined all invitations and even restricted calls from her gentlemen admirers.

By the beginning of autumn, Charles Mabile declared she was ready. At a private preview, she gave a demonstration from her new repertoire and the uncompromising Parisian critics, including the difficult-to-please Theophile Gautier, were surprised. Could it be that finally Lola Montez had learned to dance?

Although still pale and slender after her illness and the long months of unrelenting practice, her eyes shone with the old familiar fire, but the raw, uncontrolled passions she had exhibited in her days at the Porté Sainte-Martin had been honed into more sophisticated routines that, if anything, had more power and fascination than ever before.

With a Monsieur Roux appointed as her manager, she embarked on a whistle-stop tour of several French and German cities. Even though she occasionally had to cancel German performances for fear of left-wing political disturbances and even once or twice fainted on stage from exhaustion, the tour was both a critical and financial success. By the time she returned to Paris, Lola had earned enough of her own money to clear most of her debts. It was the most triumphant feeling to finally be truly independent - to no longer have to lie and grovel to a man for money.

One evening as Lola and Anna returned to her apartment off the Champs Elysees, she was a little dismayed to see John Dale waiting alone to see her.

‘Yes, Mr. Dale,’ she said mechanically as she swept past him and before he even had a chance to open his mouth, ‘I am considering a tour of the United States. The press, including yourself, will be informed when, or if, it will take place.’

‘I didn’t come just about that,’ he said. ‘I have some news of your husband.’

She stopped. ‘I have no husband,’ she said haughtily.

‘News of Mr. Heald.’ Dale looked bleak, as if he had been waiting out in the chilly weather for some time.

‘What? So he’s finally decided he wants a reunion? Why did he have to go through a newspaper reporter? Tell him it’s too damned late. I wouldn’t take him back if he was the last man on earth.’

‘He’s very ill and suffers from desperate melancholy.’

A few snowflakes fluttered down on their shoulders. Snow in Paris. Always snow and bad tidings. She relented. ‘You’d better come in,’ she said.

Between sips of the warming soup Lola had asked Anna to bring, Dale told her the woeful story of George Heald. He had slipped back into dissolution and alcoholism, spending his days wandering around the Mediterranean haunts that he and Lola had frequented together. Dale had run into him again in Monte Carlo where he had seen him gambling recklessly. It seemed his once large fortune was dwindling away.

‘A letter - just one kind word from you would do much to restore his spirit,’ said Dale.

Lola had not been moved by the plea. ‘George was always a wastrel and a buffoon. He treated me abominably.’

‘Oh come now, Countess, you know that’s not true.’

Her eyes flashed. ‘Just because once in a moment of supreme foolishness I told you certain things about me, doesn’t give you the right to presume to have a special knowledge of my life.’

‘I never would make such a presumption, but George Heald loved you. And still does. You are not callous. I know there is a generous and kind side to your nature. A little compassion wouldn’t go astray.’

She didn’t want this, having to reopen a wound that was still fresh - being forced to remember George and their brief snatch at happiness and the betrayal of her dreams of a new life at Berrymead.

‘How do I know this isn’t some newspaperman’s ploy? What you do call them - “scoops”?’ she

said cynically. 'Your name on some cheap headline declaring the Countess of Landsfeld finds her lost husband?'

'I could have had all the scoops I wanted any time, Countess,' said Dale calmly, 'and well you know it. I have remained true to my promise not to print any of that which you told me in unwitting confidence. Besides, if you are seriously thinking of going to America, you will need at least one newspaper on your side. My editor and publisher, Mr. Bennett, will be in Paris shortly. He has been impressed with my reports of you.' He gave her a penetrating look. 'For both our sakes I'm sure you won't want to disillusion him.'

A smile formed on her lips. 'You're a smart fellow, Mr. Dale. A hypocrite like all your tribe, but you do have a sentimental streak.'

He grinned back at her. 'Not unlike yourself, Countess.'

This time she laughed. 'Oh, very well. I will write poor George a few words. You can also tell him that I no longer require his allowance. I am quite capable of earning my own money now.'

The campaign to introduce Lola to America soon went into swing. However, it was soon apparent that the great showman, P.T. Barnum and Lola Montez were a volatile mixture destined to explode. Well-known for his museum showcasing the bizarre, his great recent success had been in introducing the very moral 'Swedish Nightingale', Jenny Lind, to the American public. Barnum made the fatal mistake of using certain words to describe Lola and while not exactly including the dreaded word 'whore', they came close enough to it to bring her out with bared teeth and claws.

'You tell that trickster I'm not some kind of freak to be paraded around with wizened mummies, mermaids and midgets!' was her reaction, and Barnum's Parisian agent was sent fleeing from her house with his tail between his legs. He made a last ditch effort to sign Lola by threatening her. 'Mr. Barnum can ruin any hope you have of success in America.'

Lola retaliated with an obscene finger gesture. 'Pah! If he wants to know ruin, he should take care of me. I have upset more kings, politicians and poets and I can annihilate this Napoleon of showmen at time I choose!'

The newspapers loved it. Lola was back in all her glory and ready to take on the United States.

Barnum's agent had a last rueful word for the reporters. 'She probably thought,' he said, 'that Barnum and Montez, two of the greatest humbugs of the age, in one pill, would be too great a quantity for the generous people of the United States to accept in a single dose.'

Lola signed one of Barnum's rivals, Edward Willis, as her new manager and set sail from Le Havre on the *Humboldt* in November, 1851.

The ocean voyage proved too rough for the other most eminent passenger, Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot who had also rebelled against Metternich and the Austrian yoke and who ought to have had much in common with the Countess of Landsfeld, but Lola rarely saw him and when they did meet, she thought him self-centered and gloomy. Besides, she had had enough of the political intrigues of the Old World. Instead, she concentrated on cultivating the rich and distinguished passengers who shared her dining table. She made an inevitable conquest of an elderly American tycoon who manufactured steam engines and kept him in mind as a possible benefactor.

On arrival in New York, the flags and bunting were out, a thirty-one gun salute for Kossuth had been arranged and the streets thronged with people, but many of the newspaper reporters in the crush were more interested in Lola than the revolutionary.

After the hullabaloo reception for Kossuth at Staten Island was over, Lola agreed to hold a press conference but not before she had given Edward Willis the first indication of her sharp tongue when she rebuked him over booking her on the same ship as another celebrity.

The American reporters' questions were frank, fast and furious.

'Where were you born?'

'How old are you?'

'Do you really carry a whip and pistol at all times?'

'How many times have you been married?'

She replied in an equally frank, yet lighthearted, fashion. She knocked six years off her age without batting an eye, assured them her father was a Spanish bullfighter, was vague about any husbands and laughed off the allusions to whip and pistol by saying she was never without her Spanish dagger.

The reporters loved her and the questions grew bolder.

‘Did you toast the Munich mob with champagne?’

‘Come on, Lola, tell us the truth - were you really the mistress of King Ludwig, Liszt, and Dumas?’

It was important she didn’t lose her temper on this her first day in the United States. Whatever she said to the press now would set the tone for the rest of her stay. She widened her eyes at the reporter who had asked the question, giving him a shot of their blue fire.

‘I was only the King’s political adviser,’ she said in a mellifluous tone. ‘Would I be forced to earn my living on the stage if I had been the mistress of such rich men? No, I can assure you although I have been offered thousands of dollars to perform privately for men, I would never stoop to such a thing.’

The press corps all grinned widely.

‘What do you think of America?’ asked another reporter.

‘I am looking forward to seeing more of your beautiful country. How lucky you are to live in the land of liberty and freedom away from the oppression and tyrannies of Europe. I only hope the United States will not be too hasty in forming the wrong opinion of me. So many falsehoods have been printed.’

‘And what about American men?’

She lowered her lashes briefly, smiling coyly. The increased heartbeats of a dozen men were almost audible.

‘All men have the same dreams,’ she murmured, ‘but I have found Americans to be more honest in telling a women exactly what they want.’

‘Do you enslave men?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Slavery of any kind is dreadful.’

By the expressions on their faces, Lola knew she had won them over. Some of the reporters insisted on escorting her personally to her hotel.

The next morning she read their reviews. Most of them were flattering.

‘I was surprised at her appearance. From all accounts of her exploits I had imagined her to be Amazonian in stature. Instead, Lola is of a slender, almost delicate, build with a figure of a girl in her teens.’

‘Madam Montez is a fierce advocate of anti-slavery.’

‘The number of her conquests is greatly exaggerated. She has little faith in men.’

However, a few newspapers, such as Horace Greeley’s *Tribune* were scathing, barely acknowledging her presence in New York and describing her as:

‘This woman who has obtained an unenviable notoriety throughout the world on account of her romantic disposition and singular conduct.’

Well, she knew it would have been too much to expect to have won them all, but on the whole she felt happier than she had for months. She wished she’d come to America long before this.

The honeymoon with the press lasted but a few days. Lola’s hotel was besieged constantly with gentlemen callers. She entertained in her flower-filled suite, drinking champagne, smoking cigars, playing on the piano and singing, but to her, New York with its flat streets seemed rather dull.

She made a few innocent comments about the city. ‘How odd that the streets have no names, only numbers,’ and these were quickly picked up and interpreted in the newspapers that Lola thought New York was boring.

This was swiftly followed by more bad publicity. Monsieur Roux, the manager abandoned in favor of the American, Edward Willis, arrived in New York and announced that he would be suing her for the amount of sixty-five thousand dollars for not completing her European contract.

Lola exploded, counter-suing with a claim that Roux had published a bogus biography of her along the lines of the earlier one by Auguste Papon, and had worked her so hard that she had collapsed from exhaustion. She stopped short of actually accusing P.T. Barnum of sour grapes and collusion with the French manager. This did nothing except send sales of the cheap, hastily and poorly-translated, copies of the bogus biography soaring.

With her hotel constantly besieged, Lola took flight in the middle of the night for temporary lodgings in White Street. She didn't go to bed, but prowled around the sitting room, chain-smoking.

'Why am I bedeviled yet again?' she shouted at Anna, her long-suffering maid. 'I tell them fables and they believe me. I tell them the truth and they laugh at me. No other woman in history has had to put up with such shit!'

Anna scuttled about making sure there were no precious objects in sight. Lola had changed a great deal in the past few months. There were less of the quiet, reflective periods that had followed her illness and more of the rages. Like many who had gone before her, Anna had discovered that Lola in a rage made life very difficult for any lady's maid. She threw and broke things and left a lot of mess to clean up afterward.

'What in hell's name are you doing?'

Anna stopped in the process of removing a china clock and clutched it in her arms, looking fearfully at Lola. 'This doesn't belong to us. I don't want it broken.'

Lola frowned at her as if she didn't understand. 'Why should it get broken? God, but you're a stupid girl, I don't know why I put up with you.' She lit another cigarette. Her hands were shaking.

Anna slowly put the clock back on the dresser. Normally placid in nature, she was finding it harder to deal with Lola's unpredictability, plus it had been a long time since she had been paid. 'It's three in the morning, Madame,' she said timidly, 'will you be going to bed?'

Lola glowered at her through a haze of smoke. 'I don't feel like sleeping,' she muttered and gave a long, heartfelt sigh. 'Oh God, I wonder where the hell is George? Doesn't he know I'm waiting?'

Anna wondered if Lola could have possibly forgotten that George had been gone a long time. Her unease with her mistress grew. 'May I retire, Madame?' she asked hesitantly.

Lola waved her hand, scattering ash. 'If you must. I'll just talk to myself. At least I'll get a decent conversation.'

After the maid had gone, Lola continued to wander up and down the sitting room, her mind a jumble until she stopped abruptly and looked around her. There was nothing familiar in sight and a moment of panic gripped her chest. She hadn't the faintest idea where she was yet she knew she had been in this room, or one like it, a thousand times before.

Her head started to throb as the feeling of panic spread through her limbs. It wasn't the first time she had had one of these episodes. Her heart racing, she closed her eyes, trying to remember where she had been that day, but her mind was a complete blank.

As she stood shaking, trying to get a grip on reality, a faint gush of warm air surrounded her ankles and she opened her eyes and looked down. It was coming from a grate in the skirting board. She quickly glanced around the room. There was no stove or fireplace, so she wasn't in Munich or Paris or London. A lightheaded sensation began to replace the panic. She rushed to a pair of green velvet drapes and drew them aside. Outside was a quiet gas-lit street with a terrace of dreary houses. It had been snowing.

Snow - so many memories. Her mind was clear again. How stupid. This was New York! America - the land where so many weary people found new hope. This was where she must begin to rebuild her life.

Bidding had been brisk at the auction held in the lobby of the Broadway Theater for tickets to the opening night of *Betley the Tyrolean*. Hundreds of men and scarcely thirty broad-minded women packed the theater to see Lola Montez take her first steps on an American stage.

The weeks leading up to opening night had been filled with more sensations and gossip. Lola had dismissed Edward Willis in another fit of temper, accusing him of mishandling her funds. His

brother, Nathaniel Willis, a well-known New York editor and writer, had rallied to Lola's side.

Nathaniel, in turn, had been named as co-respondent in the divorce suit between a famous actor, Edwin Forrest, and his wife, Katherine, so when Lola was seen in public with the darkly handsome Nathaniel Willis this caused yet another sensational twist to the case. No matter that her association with him was utterly innocent, scandal was drawn to her like a magnet.

To top it off, Anna took the bold step of consulting an American attorney and had walked out and was now suing her for unpaid wages.

Lola had been glad to shut this world of personal chaos out by concentrating her energies on her dancing. If she wanted her American career to go well, she had to be good. That meant practice, and more practice. Once or twice she had suffered those odd relapses in memory, but the episodes had been brief, lasting barely more than a few seconds. She put them down to nerves.

If the audience had been expecting a scantily-clad woman, making suggestive movements, they couldn't have been more mistaken. The curtains opened to reveal a large chorus of male dancers in military uniform. As the music struck up the opening bars, Lola made her debut from the wings dressed in a modest Tyrolean costume with short striped skirt, gold trimmed black velvet jacket and a jaunty red cap that might once have been part of an Alemannia uniform.

The packed theater burst into applause. Even if there were moments when she was slightly out of time with the music and she seemed to forget her steps, she was a great success and ended the performance with repeated curtain calls. Her arms full of bouquets, Lola ended by making a short speech.

'I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for the very kind reception you have given me, a poor stranger in this most noble land.'

The audience went wild. It was the perfect ending. Lola's future was assured.

Although there were the inevitable criticisms, on the whole the reviews were complimentary.

'The most beautiful dancer ever to set foot upon these shores.'

'Although inferior in technique, there is a nameless grace of nature about her person and movements which, with her history, gives her an attraction that a better artist could not command.'

'There is nothing immodest in her performance ... an innocent air at variance with her reputation.'

The few enlightened women who had seen the show quickly spread the word that there was nothing offensive about Lola Montez. Many of them began to see her as just another victim of male prejudice and a woman persecuted unjustly for defying convention. Several of them started a deliberate campaign of smoking in public to show their support. Lola was unimpressed. She had enough trouble on her own without becoming some kind of a beacon to bluestockings as well.

Due to her problems with Willis, money was short again. Any other woman would have sunk beneath the weight of legal suits and counter-suits with which she was plagued. Her reaction was to live more furiously than ever.

There was another dash from her lodgings in the middle of the night, leaving a large rent bill. Rather than seek a less expensive residence, she deliberately moved into a house near the exclusive Washington Square. Here, she gave lavish parties she couldn't afford and toasted students from her balcony in the manner of Munich. It was inevitable that the staid residents were horrified when rumors of drunken orgies in a canopied bed decorated with floating cupids soon took hold. The police were summoned and Lola ordered to move yet again, leaving her bewildered attorney to settle up her financial tangles as best he could.

'I cannot sneeze without it being called a hurricane,' she grumbled later to Nathaniel Willis as they discussed this latest tidbit that had found its way into the newspapers. 'I have a perfectly ordinary party and they write this trash!'

'Lola, you can never be ordinary,' reminded Nathaniel. 'You're paying the price of being the most famous woman in the world.'

'If fame means being slandered, traduced and vilified then I want no part of it. If half of what is said of me was true I ought to be buried alive!'

Nathaniel grinned. ‘Such mock indignation. Lola - you thrive on controversy. It’s your very lifeblood. Without it, you’d wither and die.’

Lola eyed him darkly. ‘I’ve boxed men’s ears for speaking to me like that.’

He was unperturbed. ‘Go ahead - it will just be more fodder for the press tomorrow.’

She relented and sighed. ‘What am I to do? Like most people, I’ve made mistakes. My greatest fault is being frank.’

‘Most people hide behind illusions. They don’t like frankness. To say what one is really thinking is the greatest sin of all.’

‘So it seems I’ll have to go on sinning.’

Nathaniel laughed. ‘And so you will. My brother made serious errors in how you have been presented to the public. You are going to need a new manager to help you, and I know just the person.’

The Reverend Joseph A. Scoville sat in his favorite seat in Pfaffs, the cave-like basement Broadway cafe that was the haunt of the Bohemian set, and surveyed the Countess of Landsfeld over his coffee cup through the inevitable haze of smoke.

Immaculately dressed in a pale blue coat that emphasized the famous eyes, she was slender and far less voluptuous than he had expected. Her lips were lightly rouged and her complexion powdered, but not quite enough to hide the signs of the encroachment of a woman’s middle years. Her black curls were unfashionably short and partially hidden by a red Turkish-style hat with a long tassel. She was too sultry to attract him personally, he preferred his women blonde and cool, but he could see why half the world’s male population was fascinated with her.

Nathaniel Willis sat close to her, caressing her gloved hand and Scoville wondered if they were yet lovers.

‘He’s not really a man of God,’ Nathaniel was telling her with that superior smile he often wore, ‘he is only called the Reverend as he once deputized for a preacher as a jest. And he was such a great success at it, the congregation begged him to return.’

Lola’s eyes were not on her companion. She was surveying Scoville with reciprocal amused interest. ‘Do you always allow other people to explain who you are?’

He smiled. ‘It has gotten a little tiresome over the years. You don’t know me well yet, Countess,’ he said in his Southern drawl, ‘but when you do, you’ll discover I’m the most irreverent man you are likely to meet. That’s the joke.’ He winked and reached into a pocket and withdrew a silver hip flask and poured a good amount of its contents into his coffee.

‘Nathaniel tells me you might be interested in representing me?’

‘I can do a damn-side better job than that pussy-foot brother of his.’

‘Anybody could,’ retorted Lola.

The Reverend swallowed his coffee, leaned across the table, his face close to Lola’s. She did not move back as another woman would have done even though the whiskey on his breath must have been overpowering.

‘Americans are intrigued by you, Countess,’ he said, ‘but mostly they are also God-fearing and law-abiding. Just when they have been trying to make up their minds whether to like you or not, you get yourself kicked out of your accommodation for rowdiness. With law suits flying left, right and center you start being seen about town with this rascal here. Contrast that with the modest behavior of Jenny Lind and you’ll know what I mean.’

‘Jenny Lind is a fat bore,’ said Lola with a pout. ‘Is that what Americans want?’

‘Americans don’t like their heroines tarnished. They love someone who’s had to struggle. They love victory over adversity.’

‘I’ve struggled, damn it. If you’d known what it took to get where I am today ...’

‘But I *do*, Lola. I’ve studied every move you’ve ever made, especially what you did to get the Jesuits out of Munich. That’s why I want to present you as a battler for democracy who deserves respect. You’re smarter, wittier and more beautiful than Jenny Lind will ever be but you’re going to

have to behave yourself for a while so that people start to take you seriously.’

Lola’s wary look softened. ‘And what does behaving oneself American-style involve?’

The Reverend glanced at Nathaniel and grinned. ‘Well, no gentlemen callers after midnight for a start.’

With the Reverend Scoville guiding her publicity, Lola and *Betley the Tyrolean* went on the road. The first stop was Philadelphia, but the town was unimpressed. Her dancing between the scenes was again erratic and out of time with the music. The familiar hisses from the audience sent her further off balance. She rushed off the stage and cursed at Nathaniel behind the scenes. ‘They’re out there. They’re trying to ruin me,’ she panted.

‘Who? What are you talking about?’

‘The Jesuits. Who else? I can see them - they’re there in the second row. Why can’t they leave me alone?’

Nathaniel cautiously approached the edge of the curtain and drew it aside a fraction. The first few rows were filled with the usual theater-goers, mostly men and the odd curious woman, but not a cassock in sight. ‘I think you’re imagining things, Lola,’ he murmured, letting the curtain fall back.

Her eyes blazed. ‘Are you calling me a liar?’

Nathaniel had learned to treat these strange off-balance moments of Lola’s with kid gloves. He had long moved in a world filled with many highly-strung artistes and his best friend had been the late Edgar Allan Poe, the most tortured soul of all. ‘No, of course, not,’ he said softly, ‘I just don’t know how you can tell what a Jesuit looks like?’

‘They’re out there, I know they are.’ Lola drew the curtain aside herself. Her eyes darted around the auditorium before they settled on the musicians. ‘They’re in the orchestra too – look!

Nathaniel’s eyes followed her pointing finger. He doubted that any of the bored-looking individuals wearing the cheap, faded black suits common to musicians had the brains or the energy to be political activists.

He placed a gentle hand on her shaking shoulder. ‘Every stage performer finds the City of Brotherly Love difficult,’ he said reassuringly. ‘Tomorrow we leave for Washington. Our legislators are a far more open-hearted breed.’

Nathaniel was right. The Reverend had organized Lola’s visit to the capital to play up her political persona and play down the private scandals that still trailed in her wake. She was invited to visit the House of Representatives and feted at a dinner in her honor. Surrounded by sophisticated men who recognized the importance of the political reforms she had instigated in Bavaria and were interested in her opinions, she blossomed.

The last traces of her illness the year before had now gone and her body had filled out again. Although her cheekbones were still prominent, this gave her lustrous eyes even more emphasis than before. Rather than wearing the dramatic black now firmly associated with her name, she took to dressing in elegant dark red or blue brocades with the fashionable new crinolines, decorating her hair with a dusting of diamonds. She was witty and charming and she sparkled. But she did not flirt or give any one of her vast number of admirers the slightest suggestion that they were dealing with a tempestuous fireball who could transport them to amorous delights; no, this was the portrayal of Lola the visionary and the reformer - the woman who proved that women did have the power to institute political change.

Each night at the theater the audiences were appreciative. Her confidence was high and she gave her best performances in years. The applause was always deafening.

Nathaniel continued to hover discreetly in the background, conscious of the scandals associated with his own life. He asked no more of her than being her escort although he didn’t give up hope of something more binding in the future.

On the last night in Washington, the carefully constructed image of propriety collapsed. Lola was taking her final bow, her arms full of bouquets when she caught the eyes of a dark-haired man in the front row. He sneered at her, pressed his thumb to his nose wagging his fingers at her in school-boy

fashion.

A chill flooded her veins and her eyes watered. She didn't recognize him, but he could just as easily have been one of her erstwhile biographers, the hated Papon or Roux. Or Abel, or even Metternich, or the Tsar of All the Russias. He was all the men who had ever mocked her.

She threw the flowers to the stage and marched up to the footlights, glaring at him. 'I didn't come here to be insulted,' she yelled at him, giving him an unladylike finger gesture.

The man was undeterred and he gesticulated again. Within seconds, several other men had pounced on him and a fight began. Lola turned and ran off the stage.

The Reverend Scoville had watched the debacle from the wings with Nathaniel. All his carefully engineered public relations efforts had been torn apart. 'How could you be so stupid?' he snapped as she marched past him to her dressing room. 'You've ruined everything.'

Lola retaliated with a stinging slap across his cheek and she glared at both men, her eyes wild. 'I told you they were there, waiting for me, but you didn't believe me.'

The furious Scoville grabbed her arm and twisted it hard. 'I don't know what you're talking about, but unless you want the rest of the tour sunk, you get back out there and say goodbye in a lady-like fashion!'

Lola winced and her eyes darted from the Reverend to Nathaniel. He gave her a solemn nod. 'Listen to him, Lola. Don't lose it all now.'

Wrenching her arm free, Lola took a deep breath and returned to the stage, pale-faced. In the stalls, the police had arrived to break up the fight and several men were being escorted away. She tried not to look at them. Instead she curtsied and concentrated her eyes on the upper galleries. 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,' she said in a husky voice. 'I return to you my most grateful thanks for your kindness to me during my sojourn in your magnificent and extraordinary city.'

The applause that followed was muted. With a sinking heart, she knew that yet again the images that would taken away that night would not be those of a talented and gracious performer. Tomorrow's newspapers would be full of reports of her loss of temper. None of them would believe that the man in the front row had been an agent of the Jesuits sent to discredit her. She cried all the way back to her hotel.

Boston didn't seem to be bothered about the Washington fracas. All her performances were sold out in advance. The city was the home of revolution and tolerance and although the critics gave her the inevitable panning, she felt genuine warmth emanate from the audiences.

Unperturbed by Lola's savage swipe at him, the Reverend blithely continued with his efforts to whitewash her reputation. He had a friend on the Boston Grammar School Committee and arranged for Lola to visit some of the local schools, as was customary with prominent visitors.

Moving through the classrooms and corridors of the exclusive Wells School and wearing a subdued rose-pink carriage gown trimmed with white fur, a matching bonnet and muff, Lola made the young girls sigh with envy. Most of them would have had little idea who she was, all they knew was that she was a Countess and she was beautiful and elegant. Her smile was warm as she demonstrated her skills with several languages, leaning over their shoulders to study their workbooks and correcting their sentences in French or Spanish and even Latin. When leaving, she gave a brief speech of thanks for allowing her to visit their school and the girls curtsied and applauded.

At the end of the day when the students returned home and their mamas and papas discovered the identity of the beautiful visitor, the organizers of the visit were in deep trouble.

After all these years, Lola should have learned her lesson by now not to read about herself in the newspapers. Rarely, if ever, was there anything in them that was complimentary towards her. But she was still tormented by a compulsion to digest every word and defend herself where necessary.

What was written in *The Transcript* the next day was savage and wounded her to the core. Every distortion and lie ever attached to her name had been dragged up and printed. It was all there from her long-forgotten affair with Captain Lennox right through to her eviction from her house in New York. But worst of all was the suggestion that innocent school children should not have been

exposed to such a pernicious woman.

‘It’s all a storm in a tea-cup,’ growled the hung-over Reverend as she flung the paper at him the next morning. ‘Ignore it. Remember the best defense is silence. The editor’s just a young whippet trying to increase his circulation.’

Lola was getting fed up with Scoville. He had promised to refashion her into a respectable, credible personality but seemed to spend more of his time getting blind drunk. ‘Well, if you won’t do anything about, I will, so help me God,’ she retorted.

‘Don’t do anything hasty,’ he growled.

But Lola was beyond listening to advice. She sat down and wrote an equally savage response to the editor of *The Transcript*.

‘Fie on you, sir! You are an ill-bred, snarling cur, unworthy to stand in the portals of public opinion.

Do you think that any of those children would have had one impure or improper thought connected with my visit if it had not been put into their heads by yourself?

Did the people of Boston think it improper to accept the capstone of the Bunker Hill Memorial from Fanny Elssler - a woman whose indiscretions are not cast in secrecy?

Yes, there are men who would stand before the statue of Venus or Apollo and see nothing of their art but only their nudity! These same men who created that sly, Jesuitical infamous design to unsex me - to deprive me of the chivalrous protection accorded to women in this generous country by men.

The moment I announced my intention to visit America, every journal from Canada to Mexico was flooded with communications of a black-guardedly nature. I have read that I tame wild horses single-handedly; I fight duels and horsewhip policemen; knock flies with pistol balls off the bald heads of aldermen; throw people overboard for the sake of saving them from drowning.

Were such nonsense true, would it not follow I would have preferred to accept offers of a personal nature that would have made me a fortune without having to prove myself on the stage? Would I have received such a warm reception from the people of the United States? I have never tried to buy the good opinion of the journals. I have never posed as anything but an artiste.

Americans are no fools, sir. Never give circulation to aspersions on the character of a lady of which you know nothing, which are false in themselves and which, for my own part, I defy any man living to prove.’

The response released the floodgates of popular opinion. *The New York Herald* jumped to her defense while other more conservative newspapers decried the amount of space credited to a mere publicity-seeker and questioned her paranoia about Jesuits in the woodpile. Many of the free-thinkers of Boston rallied around her, eager to champion a persecuted woman. On her last day in the city, she paid a visit to another popular institution, the Boston House of Correction. Lola wryly noted that no-one in the newspapers complained about her having a bad influence on the inmates of that institution.

The Reverend meanwhile displayed a grudging admiration for her attack on the editor. ‘You don’t need me,’ he laughed. ‘You’re your own one-woman band.’

She relented, and was all seductive forgiveness. ‘Of course I need you, Reverend. But I’m not going to appear in any more of these third-rate provincial shows of yours. It’s time to get back to New York and give the public what they really want.’

Lola Montez in Bavaria, was a project that had been in Lola’s mind for some time. The original English parody, *Pas de Fascination*, was still doing the rounds and she felt it was time to set the record straight. It would be a play unique in itself, the first time historical events had been presented in which the protagonist actually played herself. With public opinion currently riding high on her side, she could use the play as a vehicle to prove once and for all her revolutionary democratic role in Ludwig’s court.

The spring months of 1852 were spent in rehearsal, with a cast of thirty-four. The play consisted of a series of vignettes, in which Lola portrayed the Dancer, the Politician, the Countess, the

Revolutionist and the Fugitive. If the public had been expecting the Mistress they were destined to be disappointed. The script was almost dry and safe and the only moment of real excitement would be Lola as Revolutionist using her whip on the mob.

Since Boston, Lola's personal spirits were also high and her health fully restored. She had made a fortune on her tour and was able to settle her outstanding debts in New York. She was accepted back into the Howard Hotel and moved into a suite on the top floor.

Although rehearsals kept her busy, she began to feel the old familiar yearnings for physical love. But living her life under a magnifying glass, with dozens of reporters dogging her every step hoping to catch her out in any indiscretion, no matter how minor, was a serious barrier.

Nathaniel was more than willing to rush into her bed and although she liked him she couldn't get interested enough in him. Besides, she knew he wouldn't be able to keep his mouth shut about it.

However, her body's urges were getting beyond control. She had to have a man - preferably someone novel and exciting and who could restore her jaded appetite.

One morning, on her way to rehearsal she saw the answer to her prayers standing in the foyer of the Howard Hotel. Surrounded by a vast quantity of luggage and an entourage of floridly dressed and equally glossy-skinned minions stood an immense black man. His powerful build was barely disguised beneath a sophisticated top hat, scarlet frock coat, striped trousers and double-ruffled white silk shirt. On seeing her, his mouth broadened into a wide smile revealing as perfect a set of teeth as she had ever seen.

The dormant core of Lola's womanhood received an electrifying jolt and she lowered her eyelashes briefly at him in acknowledgment of the charge that had passed between them. As she brushed past him, she took a deep breath of his almost primeval body odor and retained it in her throat until she left the building. As she reluctantly released it to the spring air, she smiled to herself. Now here at last was something worth taking a risk on!

29.

'Are you out of your friggin' mind?' hissed Scoville at Lola as he hurried after her down the carpeted hotel corridor.

'You're being vulgar. It isn't seemly in a man of the cloth,' she retorted acidly without turning her head.

'Bejesus, woman, you're opening at the Bowery Theater in less than a week!'

Lola stopped outside the door to her suite and spun around, her eyes diamond sharp. 'Then do your job, damn you, Or isn't my money good enough now?'

Scoville took a deep breath. 'It's not that, Lola,' he said with all the calmness he could muster. 'If word was to get out of what you're doing, you'll be ruined in this town for good. You'll never dance on another New York stage and certainly never in the South.'

'Bloody hypocrites, all of you,' she muttered as she turned the key and swept into her room with Scoville at her heels. She was still shaking from having run into him seconds after sneaking out of Bobo's room at two in the morning. She had had no idea the Reverend had been at a gambling game being run on the same floor. His one look at her rumpled negligee had put two and two together.

'God, I need a smoke,' she said, as she turned up the gas light and looked around for one of the well-stocked cigarette boxes scattered around her apartment.

'Look, Lola, I know as well as anyone that forbidden fruit is the sweetest, but shagging a nigger is too bloody dangerous.'

'Don't insult Prince Bobo by calling him a nigger!'

'*Prince?* Now that's a joke.'

Lola, drawing deeply on a cigarette, stepped up to Scoville and met him eye to eye. 'A common soldier called Napoleon makes himself Emperor and the world marvels. The same thing happens on

a small Caribbean island and the world laughs.'

'Shit, Lola, Haiti is hardly in the same league.'

'Prince Bobo is the emissary of the Emperor of Haiti. He deserves to be treated with respect.'

'Oh, and is that what you were doing with him in the middle of the night - treating him to some of your respect?'

Scoville managed to dodge Lola's fist. He grabbed her arm and twisted it, until she winced. 'Now listen to me,' he said, 'the Yankees might like to pretend all the righteousness in the world when it comes to niggers, but even they draw the line at white women sleeping with them, title or no.'

'I was not sleeping with him. We were talking politics.'

Scoville snorted and shook his head. 'Don't try soft-soaping me. You went to him for a fuck and I hope it was a damned good one because if I have anything to do with it, he's not giving you another.'

'Oh, and how are you going to stop me?' She snatched her arm from his grip. Instead of hitting him across the face, as he might have expected, she gave him kiss so savage, it drew blood on his lower lip. 'I should fire you, you bastard, but I haven't finished with you yet.'

He resisted for a moment, but her body was still singing from the orgasmic orchestra with her black prince. She had a desperate urge for one final encore. She pushed the Reverend Scoville up against the door and felt for his trouser buttons.

He gasped as she gripped him. 'Christ, woman, you're raving mad.'

'Oh, shut up and enjoy it,' she replied huskily.

When Lola woke up next morning, she fell wretchedly sick. She lay in her bed and stared up at the ceiling, wondering what was wrong with her. She hadn't eaten much the night before and had barely sipped at a glass of champagne. But this was a strange, melancholy type of sick that seemed to reach deeper than just a stomach upset or a hangover. She shivered and closed her eyes again. A voice echoed in her head. 'Oh, Lola, my precious one. What are you doing to us?'

'Bon-Bon?' she whispered.

'Lust without love is so ugly - so depraved ...'

She reached out, hoping to feel his arms about her, but there was nothing there. 'Oh, Bon-Bon, I'm sorry. I don't know what comes over me. It's as if I'm possessed by a devil. I can't help myself.'

'If you want us to be together, you mustn't go on like this ...'

The awareness of another presence faded.

'Bon-Bon? Don't leave me. Please!'

Hot tears welled up in her eyes and the wretchedness turned like a snake in the pit of her stomach. She sat up and, leaning out of the bed, vomited on to the carpet.

Bleary-eyed and sallow-faced, Scoville stood outside the stage door as she arrived for rehearsal. 'You're damned late,' he muttered as she walked slowly to her dressing room still in a half daze.

'I ... I didn't feel well this morning,' she said weakly.

'If you had been anyone else I might have guessed it was your conscience rebelling,' he said caustically.

She stopped and narrowed her eyes at him, noticing for the first time the trace of disgust on his unshaven face. 'What's that supposed to mean?' she said, feel a new wave of nausea coming on.

The Reverend Scoville had never held attraction for her. Why she had done what she did with him, she had no idea. Just the memory of it was enough for the gorge to rise again. She would have to struggle to keep it down.

'For a while there you even had me fooled. All that indignation and outrage. All those suits against newspapers. But you've proved what you really are. You belong in the gutter. You're nothing but a ...'

She knew what he was going to say and she couldn't bear to hear the word. 'Don't play that trick with me,' she interrupted swiftly. 'You were as hard as iron. You wanted it as well.'

‘A man takes what is offered at the time, but he doesn’t always have to like it.’

Lola felt dizzy. How could she have done it?

‘From now on, Countess, we’re strictly a business arrangement. Don’t pull that stunt on me again, or I’ll tell America what you really are.’

The Reverend Scoville continued to manage her as if nothing had happened but the opening night of *Lola Montez in Bavaria* did not go well. Lola went through the motions like a wooden puppet. The critics and the audience found it a bore and it closed after a five night run.

Lola suspected the Jesuits were to blame and went off half-cocked, writing again to the newspapers swearing that attempts to shoot, stab or poison her while she was in Bavaria had conveniently been forgotten by everyone. Few people believed her wild tales. Lola Montez was getting just a little more crazy, they said to themselves.

For a while, Lola and Prince Bobo appeared together at restaurants and the theater, but she always made sure there was a very public parting of the ways on returning to their hotel. Scoville did his job well and not a single newspaper hinted at anything indiscreet about their relationship, not that it had continued anyway.

But soon another debacle brought her back into the headlines. Desperately trying to fight the bouts of black depression that had been sweeping over her, Lola resorted to the only cure she knew - by never being alone and surrounding herself with a constant stream of visitors. Nathaniel Willis and Scoville had introduced her to many of the rising literary and stage stars. It brought back memories of those wonderful times in George Sand’s salon in Paris. Although half of her longed to hear Bon-Bon speak to her again, she was also terrified of what he had tried to say. With the constant din of a party in her ears, his voice would never get through.

One evening after her guests had consumed a little too much fine champagne the conversation slid away from social conditions and politics to gossip. Discussion revolved to the Edwin Forrest divorce case. Nathaniel Willis had been pushed aside as Katherine Forrest’s lover and she was now being courted by an old acquaintance of Lola’s from her Parisian days, the Prince of Como, whom she called Carissimo.

Long ago, Carissimo had shown interest in Lola, but now he couldn’t talk enough about Katherine Forrest, who was fortunately absent. Although she had never been particularly attracted to Carissimo, Lola was consumed with jealousy. ‘Edwin Forrest was well rid of that baggage,’ she announced haughtily.

Carissimo’s dark Italian eyes flashed. ‘What’s this? You should be the last woman on earth to criticize another.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’ve forgotten I’ve known you for years, Lola, sweet’ continued the Prince with intoxicated bravado. ‘I was there at the Beethoven Festival when you decided to get even with Franz Liszt and followed it up by undertaking an interesting little diversion along the Rhine.’

Lola’s mind went blank. It was a long time ago and much had happened in her life since then ... God - the Rhine. An indistinct image of a romp with two young stable-hands passed across her mind. Oh, Henri - I’ve done worse things than the other night.

‘Are you daring to insult me?’ she retaliated in a harsh voice, trying to ignore a resurgence of that sick sensation welling up within her.

Carissimo laughed. ‘What are you going to do? Box my ears? Whip me? Come on Lola, you don’t need to pretend with your old friends.’

Lola narrowed her eyes and turned her back on him, snapping her fingers at one of her waiters. ‘Go downstairs to the manager and tell him to send someone to evict this man.’

‘Lola, sweet, it was only a little joke.’

A few minutes later Carissimo found himself deposited in the saloon by a pair of burly hotel servants. He was furious and proceeded to tell everyone within earshot what had happened. A fellow Italian joined forces with him and they marched upstairs again, forcing their way back into

Lola's party. Within minutes all hell broke loose. Fists flew and the air was hot with swearing in half-a-dozen languages and the barking of Lola's dogs. The police were swiftly summoned and they arrived with several newspaper reporters in tow.

The next morning Lola hit the headlines again in the manner the Reverend Scoville had done his utmost to avoid. 'Why do you always let this sort of thing happen,' he growled at her later, 'and after all I've done to smooth things over?'

'I was insulted,' she said primly. 'Carissimo is in the pay of the Jesuits.'

The Reverend looked at her with scorn. 'You can't keep using that old scapegoat every time you cause a ruckus. You're beginning to look ridiculous. I'm going to have to work overtime to put you in the pink again.'

Lola thought better than letting Scoville have a piece of her mind as well. She couldn't afford to lose yet another manager.

Despite the well-promoted '*Grand Picnic and Cotillion Excursion to the Romantic Woods and Groves of Yonkers*' in which politicians and journalists were relegated to secondary roles behind that of the star attraction, Lola Montez, Scoville knew he was close to the end of his tether trying to present Lola in a respectable light. After the last debacle with Carissimo, her chances of ever conquering New York polite society were slimmer than ever.

Lola, however, co-operated by being well-behaved at the Picnic. She abandoned her black silk and whip for the softer lines of pink-and-white muslin and a frilly parasol. She danced and laughed and impressed even her hard-bitten antagonists such as P.T. Barnum and Horace Greeley with her gaiety and charm. And she showed the promise of good intentions by promptly withdrawing her various law suits against the newspapers.

But it was too late to make much difference to her career. There were no more offers for stage work and the money was going out faster than it came in. Scoville didn't intend to waste any more of his time without the prospect of his commission being paid. He blatantly suggested she try other American cities.

'You want to get rid of me,' she said with a pout.

'No, Lola, dear, I just think it's time the rest of America should see what you have to offer.'

She didn't miss the sarcasm in his voice. 'I don't need you,' she countered fiercely. 'I'll manage my own affairs from now on.'

Scoville didn't bother to hide his relief. 'Fine. I wish you the best of luck, Countess.' He promptly turned his back and marched out of her life.

Lola sulked for a day or two. She had thought of going back to Scoville, on bended knees if necessary, because he was the only manager she had ever had who had actually proved himself worthy of the title. But she was too proud and she knew deep in her heart there was no changing his opinion of her after that episode she now found shameful to recall.

The many mercenary sexual encounters in which she had engaged since her days in Spain were coming back to haunt her. They had all seemed inconsequential at the time, but for nights on end her dreams were constantly filled with the forgotten echoes of grasping, twisting bodies belonging to faceless men. And standing at the foot of her bed would be rows of disapproving figures looking down at her as she climaxed - people she hadn't thought of in years - Miss Bridget Riley, and Provost Craigie, and even Susannah Heald - or Jesuit monks in hooded cloaks pointing accusing fingers.

The dreams would always end abruptly and she would sit bolt upright, suffused in a cold sweat, mortified to her very soul. She would then leap out of bed, rush to the window, throw up the sash and search the skies for Bon-Bon's star, but she never seemed able to find it.

He had come to her before and he would again, she was sure, but only if she found a way of fighting the devils of rage and passion that seemed to consume her without warning, without reason.

'I'm trying, Bon-Bon,' she would cry. 'You must help me!' But the sky remained silent.

With sunrise, the night horrors would fade and she would laugh at her own foolishness and soon

be herself again.

Still, Lola was determined to be more circumspect with men. If an attractive man crossed her path, she forced herself to look away and, strangely enough, found she felt much calmer for having done so. The strange episodes of forgetfulness had also ceased. She put them down to a manifestation of the stresses she had been under.

Life in New York, however, proved to be expensive. While her ventures onto the stage had been moderately successful, in order to keep up the lifestyle she needed, the never-ending problem of money was always lurking around a corner.

The Reverend Scoville's plans for her had included a ghost-written true version of her biography and also a book on beauty hints. The women of New York might snub her socially, but Scoville had implied they would fall over themselves to buy a book in which the infamous Lola divulged the secrets of her success with men. She toyed with both ideas for a while, but she did not have the discipline for serious writing.

Restlessness again urged her to move on. There were offers to appear in Cincinnati, Cleveland, St Louis and New Orleans. And she had become interested to see the golden state of California where her shares in the Eureka Mine had started to pay handsome dividends.

However, before she left, Lola decided to say farewell in her own style. She didn't need Scoville or P.T. Barnum, she'd create her own ballyhoo.

'I'll give all those high-minded society bitches something to remember me by,' she told Nathaniel. 'They all love to read about me, but they think they'll catch something deadly if we should actually meet.'

Advertisements were placed in several newspapers announcing a series of receptions at the Howard Hotel. Members of the general public would be admitted for the price of one dollar. In return, they would be rewarded with fifteen minutes in the company of the Countess of Landsfeld and she would converse with them in English, French, German, Spanish or any one of the other five languages of which she had some knowledge.

In stunning magnificence, Lola stood on a small dais and shook hands with thousands of New Yorkers. Dressed in one of her finest red or black gowns, draped with a royal sash clipped with her star, a diamond tiara in her hair and more of Ludwig's jewels around her neck and wrists, she was every inch the royal personage few Yankees would ever get to meet.

Although initially most of the audience were males, as word spread that Lola was a dignified lady and nothing like the immoral tigress portrayed in the press, women started to go to the receptions. When some of them actually curtsied to her, Lola was filled with a sense of triumph. She didn't care that the newspapers were making fun of her receptions as a desperate Montez publicity stunt. The ordinary people of New York admired her and, in the years to come, many of them would be telling their grandchildren they once met a real live Countess. Besides, the dollars were rolling in again, which at the moment was the most important thing.

Although most of her stage performances played to successful houses, there were stories from each city through which Lola passed on her way south. In St Louis it was reported that she horsewhipped the manager of the theater and smashed his nose with a candlestick when he dared to criticize her work. Sure enough, there had been a disagreement but nothing as lurid as was written in the press. Yet she was beyond caring about the truth. Her reputation filled the theaters and her bank account.

No sooner had she disembarked from the riverboat in New Orleans, her latest maid decided to quit. She accused Lola of not paying her wages and stormed off to the police.

When a green young policeman duly arrived at her dressing room with a writ, Lola turned on a spectacular performance. Drawing the prop dagger from her Spanish dancing costume, she brandished it in his face in a grand Shakespearean gesture.

'See here! What you have driven me to. I will end it all now!' To his horror, she plunged the dagger into her heart. Stumbling, as if mortally wounded, she pushed her way past the stunned policeman returning a few seconds later with a small bottle marked with a skull and crossbones.

By now, all the actors and stage crew had gathered to watch the fuss. When Lola pretended to drink from the poison prop bottle and collapsed twitching violently to the floor, they burst out laughing.

Flushed with embarrassment, the young policeman curtly ordered Lola to the station, but she fluttered her famous lashes and smiled sweetly at him before taking his arm. 'Only a little jest, I meant no harm.' She simply acquiesced, went quietly to the station and talked her way out of prosecution by arranging to pay the girl's wages.

Lola didn't need to read the newspapers the next day to know that this latest episode had been exaggeratedly reported to the point where it was stated she had actually attempted suicide in the front of the policeman, but at least the last laugh was on her as it guaranteed that the theater was packed for the next few nights.

In the meantime she had fallen in love with New Orleans and quickly felt at home, as the city's characteristics matched her own - a vibrant mixture of many cultures and languages. In its sultry air, lush gardens, its Gothic and Greek-revival colonnaded mansions framed in arches of Spanish moss and even in its spicy foods, she was reminded of the Calcutta of her youth. Her performances at the Varieties Theater were well received and many members of Creole society accepted her and welcomed her into their homes. It was a only a serious outbreak of the endemic deadly yellow jack fever that spurred Lola to leave New Orleans and set out for California.

While supplies usually took the long route around Cape Horn, most passengers preferred the shorter route via Panama, which involved taking a ship to Aspinwall on the Caribbean coast, journeying overland partly by train and thence by mule to Panama City, ultimately transferring to a steamer for San Francisco. It was a long and arduous trip that required much planning.

The day before she was due to embark a telegraph message from New York arrived at her hotel.

'Report received George Heald drowned boating accident Lisbon. Will investigate and advise further. Deepest sympathy. John Dale.'

Numbly, Lola looked at the words, overwhelmed with a vague sense of sadness, but not grief. She wondered what she should be feeling. Her life had consisted of so many different compartments, each so separate from the other, that she had difficulty remembering where George Heald had fitted in.

Oh, yes, poor George - dashing in appearance, but so immature and gauche - irritating, trusting as a dog. Yet he had loved her truly. He might have been one chance at a normal life - until the Fates had again conspired against her.

Then, as had happened before, her mind seemed to go misty and one of those strange spells of indifference came over her. George Heald was a nobody.

She ripped the telegram into pieces and switched her thoughts on how best to advertise for a new maid.

Josephine was vague about her parents, she said both died in a fever epidemic when she was five and she had been raised by an aunt. As her father was white and her mother one of the beautiful quadroons who lived in that strange in-between society that had been freed under an old French law but was never quite accepted by the new American owners of Louisiana, she had grown up with an acute sense of not belonging to anywhere in particular. She was also blessed - or cursed - with a special gift inherited from her ancestors, that of the second sight.

It was this common unrealized thread in their backgrounds that instantly drew Lola and Josephine together. Although Josephine was darker, having inherited her mother's smooth cafe-au-lait skin, they even looked a little alike, both with high cheekbones, glossy black hair and remarkable blue eyes. Lola had seen half-a-dozen hopeless candidates before Josephine presented herself and she was tired of interviewing.

'I'll warn you that I'm a hard taskmaster and I've had a damn too many maids,' said Lola in her most autocratic voice. 'Most of them were stupid and utterly useless. I don't have time to give you a trial as I am sailing to Panama within the next few days. Give me three good reasons why I should

choose you’

Josephine bobbed politely. ‘I’ve been well trained,’ she said in perfect French. ‘I’m discreet,’ she added in Spanish. Her eyes had a boldness as they met Lola’s own. ‘And I have the gift of seeing the unseen,’ she finished in English.

Lola’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Hm. So you are well-educated. But second sight? What possible use is that to a lady’s maid?’

‘I see that Madame has a troubled aura. Perhaps I can help to bring a little peace into her life.’

Lola stared at her. ‘You’re presumptuous.’

‘Excuse, I am sorry, Madame, I only speak the truth.’ Josephine bobbed again and turned as if to leave.

‘Just wait a minute. What exactly is it that you see?’

The girl’s brilliant eyes darted around Lola’s head. ‘There is the grayness of much unhappiness but I sense a powerful spirit trying to guide you.’

Lola’s heart leaped. Could it be that this girl could ... could see Bon-Bon? She tried not to show her excitement. Instead, she kept up her haughtiness and pursed her lips.

‘Josephine is a rather grand name for a maid. Too many syllables. If you work for me I’ll have to call you something simpler.’ Lola let her stern expression slip. ‘As you’re from the South, how do you feel about about Belle?’

30.

Patrick Purdy Hull stood at the rail of the side-wheeler *Northerner* watching the arrival of the steady stream of passengers and the loading of stores from Panama. The air was steamy and oppressive and full of the rich stench that were always part of this busy tropical port.

Four years before, the discovery of gold in California had created a boom such as the world had never seen. Thousands of men from the eastern United States and Europe had slashed their way through the jungle from the Caribbean side of the Isthmus and stormed every available ship on the Pacific side hoping to beat the other guy to the biggest claim in El Dorado.

Pat had seen it many times: the eagerness on the faces embarking on the outward voyages and the disillusionment and weariness of the men going home. He hadn’t been a gold-digger himself but he had been caught up in the excitement of the birth of a new society all the same. It was a far cry from his days in Washington where he had campaigned for President Zachary Taylor who, on being elected to his brief term in office, had given him the job of taking charge of the census of the new state of California. However, one breath of the vibrant air of burgeoning San Francisco, and he had decided to stay, buying a half-share in a newspaper and steadily making a name for himself as a fair-minded but tough political organizer in a city that needed strong men to take charge.

He had just returned from a trip to report on political affairs in the East and having missed a connecting steamer had been forced to cool his heels for several days in Panama, a town he hated; teeming, squalid and vice-ridden. Just seeing the place made him more determined than ever to see that the wild child San Francisco was managed honorably and without corruption. Perhaps it was a pipe dream, but he was damned well going to stick to his principles.

Someone was waving at him from the wharf.

‘Ahoy there, Pat, you old son-of-a-gun!’

He shaded his eyes against the tropic glare and saw the familiar figure of his wily Mormon friend, Sam Brannan. He grinned and waved back.

Sam had made himself famous with his shouting. He was almost single-handedly responsible for the Gold Rush. After a foray into the Sierras he had returned with a small bottle of nuggets and run down Montgomery Street shouting out the fateful words that echoed around the world. ‘Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!’ However, he was canny enough to have made sure he bought

up most of the stores in San Francisco before he made his famous run. He was now one of the richest merchants in California.

Pat's eyes were drawn to the figure next to Sam. For a moment he had thought it to be a young man, but no male could fill a pair of moleskin breeches like that. A broad-brimmed hat and anti-mosquito veil hid the woman's face and the upper part of her body was also well-protected with a smartly cut male jacket. A riding whip was gripped under her arm and as it glinted every time she moved, he realized that the damned thing was studded with diamonds. At her feet was a small dog.

Without even knowing who she was, Pat could sense a dynamic personality. And from the look on Sam's face as he chatted to her, he could see he was smitten. Pat wondered who she could be.

A few minutes later he watched as the couple proceeded to board the ship. The number of porters and quantity of luggage that followed the woman astounded him. There looked to be at least forty assorted trunks and portmanteaux. As soon as they were on board, Sam took the woman's arm and headed in Pat's direction.

'Countess, I'd like you to meet Pat Hull, editor of the *San Francisco Whig & Commercial Advertiser*. And don't let that stern Irish mug of his fool you. He's all taffy at heart.' Sam winked broadly as Lola lifted her veil.

She smiled. 'Such quaint turns of phrase,' she murmured in a slight accent that Pat couldn't place.

'You'll find we're all plain speakers in the West, Countess' said Sam, 'none of that back and fill they's prone to back East.'

She stretched out her gloved hand. 'Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hull.'

Pat faltered a moment, dazzled by the extraordinary color of her eyes before he took her hand and bowed. 'How do you do,' he said formally, feeling a little uncomfortable under her bold scrutiny. 'Sam talks rather a lot, Countess,' he added swiftly.

'So I have discovered. I've had his company all across the Isthmus.' The magnificent eyes glinted with humor.

'By Jo, Pat, you oughta seen the way the Countess handled those durned mules over the Panama trail. She must have been born in the saddle.'

'Not quite, Sam,' murmured Lola, her eyes never leaving Pat's face. 'But mules are easy. They are sterile, aren't they? You will have to watch me ride a stallion some time.'

Sam chortled and slapped his thigh while Pat felt his blood rise beneath his beard. It wasn't the kind of double entendre he would have expected from a woman of quality. If she was a real Countess, he was Chinese, but women like her usually preferred to go by a single nickname. They liked titles - he'd known the odd 'Duchess' and 'Marquise' in his time. San Francisco needed another whore like Sam Brannan another dollar.

'Oh look, I have shocked Mr. Hull,' she said with a laugh that reminded him of the tinkling of bells. 'I had thought all you Californian gold diggers were - how do you call it Sam - rough and ready?'

'Some of us are endeavoring to change that impression,' murmured Pat stiffly. 'And contrary to popular myth, we're not all obsessed with gold.' He raised his hat. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I have to find my cabin.' He turned and walked down the deck, knowing that the woman's eyes were following his back. He felt vaguely disappointed that she was probably nothing but a whore. Classy, but a whore all the same.

'Pat ain't usually rude to ladies,' said Sam, casting his eyes over Lola's trousers. 'You must have stunned him with them inexpressibles.'

'Oh, he wasn't rude,' murmured Lola. 'You didn't introduce me properly, Sam. He has no idea who I am.'

'Didn't I, by Jo? I'll start again.' He started to go after Pat, but Lola stopped him.

'Wait until we've set sail and I've had a chance to change my clothes.' She smiled at Sam. 'I'm sure you can arrange for us to be seated at the same dining table?'

Belle never thought she'd be so glad to see the inside of another ship. The journey by steamer from New Orleans to Panama had been occasionally rough and the cabin assigned to Lola not nearly big enough to store her vast wardrobe, but it was sheer luxury compared to the hot and sweaty trip in hard-benched carriages on the half-finished railway line to Gorgona where they were forced to alight and wait overnight before traveling the rest of the way by mule.

But Belle had to admire the tenacity of her fiery new mistress. The accommodation in Gorgona was abysmal. Men were usually crammed ten to a room in the lice-infested hotels, many forced to sleep on the floor. For this accommodation, the sleazy proprietors knew they could charge what they liked as no-one cared to sleep outdoors in a steamy tropical night full of mosquitoes.

When Lola marched into the ramshackle hotel demanding not only a private bedroom, but also a separate cot for her spaniel, Flora, she caused unheard-of consternation. The hotel owner gawked at her and said he couldn't possibly toss one of his paying guests out of his bed and onto the floor for a dog!

Lola gave one of her famous imperious glares and fingered her whip. 'I couldn't care a fig about where or how your guests sleep,' she said, 'but I'll have you know that my dog has slept in palaces. Now get the cot before I lose my patience.' The hotel owner complied, but in the morning when he gamely asked for an extra five dollars for the dog's accommodation, Lola answered his question by producing her pocket pistol.

During the arduous crossing of the Isthmus by mule, Lola never complained about the harsh conditions. In fact, she seemed to rather enjoy them, dressed in male riding gear and guiding her mule at the front of their cavalcade with her diamond-studded whip, leaving other travelers to follow in amazement.

Belle had discovered a great deal about Lola during the past few weeks. She had learned to accurately prejudge the moods that swung between sheer exhilaration one minute and plunged to the depths of despair the next. Whether her mistress had always been like that, she did not know, but being prepared for Lola's sudden twists and turns kept her continually on her toes. It was a challenge but it made for a much more stimulating life than languishing in service in the ennui of a New Orleans mansion.

'Belle - what do you think? The white or the pink?'

Standing naked before the narrow cabin mirror, Lola held a full-skirted evening gown to her chin and angled her head while she waited for her maid to finish filling the enamel bathtub that Lola had transported everywhere she went.

The maid detected a trace of excitement in Lola's voice. 'Definitely the pink, Madame. And the ruby necklace and earrings.'

Not one of her usual colors, the dress was now one of Lola's favorites. With the slight tan to her skin, it would make her look younger.

'Is this for the benefit of Monsieur Brennan?' asked Belle mischievously.

Lola caught her eye, pretended for a moment to be stern and laughed. 'No. He's amusing but he always keeps boasting about being rough and ready. A little too rough and a little too ready for my liking.'

'Ah, so Madame has noticed another gentleman perhaps?'

Lola dropped the dress to the cabin floor and with a secretive smile about her lips moved from side to side as she surveyed her own body in the mirror. Although a little on the thin side, it was still in damned good shape for a woman heading towards her mid-thirties. 'There just might be,' she said. 'As a woman with the gift, you will understand the sensation of precognition?'

'Yes, Madame, I know it well.'

Lola nodded. 'Mr. Brennan introduced me to someone today when I came on board and for one second I felt as if I was reliving the moment when I first met my darling Bon-Bon. He is so like him - pretending to be all serious and moral. And the strangest thing is he does the same work as Bon-Bon did. He's a newspaper editor. Now what do you think of that?'

'Ah, perhaps just coincidence, Madame.'

‘Oh, come now. You’re the one with second sight. You mustn’t keep things from me, if you know.’

Belle closed her eyes for a minute to concentrate before she re-opened them. Lola’s aura glowed in a pale light but the spiritual presence that she sometimes sensed about her was not there. She had no firm conviction that Lola was moving towards any momentous meeting that would drastically change her life.

Lola watched her expectantly, her eyes glowing with anticipation.

Belle couldn’t tell her there was absolutely nothing remarkable about her that evening. ‘Yes,’ she lied and nodded. ‘I do see Madame finding a new companion.’

Lola just frowned. ‘Can’t you tell the difference between a companion and a lover?’

‘Sorry, Madame, of course I mean a lover,’ she said quickly.

Lola’s face eased and she dropped the dress to the floor and ran her hands down her body, as if savoring its feel. ‘You had better add some extra jessamine to the bath water,’ she said, ‘I can’t afford to be smelling like a mule tonight.’

‘Christ, Sam, why didn’t you tell me who she really was,’ hissed Pat Hull in his friend’s ear as they stood up from the Captain’s table to greet Lola as she wafted across the dining room on a beautifully scented pink cloud.

‘Because I thought everyone in the friggin’ world knew her,’ Sam whispered back. ‘You’re a scribbler by trade. You must have seen her picture.’

‘Good evening Mr. Brennan - Mr. Hull.’

Pat nodded at Lola’s greeting and with feigned equanimity met the eyes that had been haunting him all afternoon. ‘Countess. You are looking most attractive this evening,’ he said smoothly.

‘An improvement over trousers, no doubt,’ she said, slipping into her seat between the two men.

Overcome with her subtle perfume and the dynamism of her physical presence, Pat sat down somewhat awkwardly. ‘I apologise if I was a little rude this afternoon,’ he mumbled.

Lola opened a Spanish fan and gave it an subtle toss. ‘I quite understand. You took one look at a rather scruffy woman dressed in a man’s riding clothes, a woman who had obviously been traveling unaccompanied, and so you assumed certain things about me.’ Her eyes met his. ‘Isn’t that so?’

Pat fought against flushing. ‘Well - um ...’

‘I’m used to it, Mr. Hull. It seems I spend an inordinate amount of time trying to correct wrong impressions. Sometimes it makes me so mad that I go berserk with my whip.’ Her eyes widened and sparkled with amusement. ‘Or, at least that’s what the newspapers say I do. And you know how editors love to exaggerate.’

Sam and the other men sitting at the table grinned, while Pat found his defenses crumbling. She was making fun of him in a gentle way, but he didn’t mind it. ‘I can breathe easy, for I see you are not carrying your whip tonight,’ he said with a smile, nodding at her fan.

She chuckled and lifted her fan to partially cover her face and looked slyly at him over its lace rim. He felt his heart constrict in his chest. The legends about her beauty were all true. No wonder so many men had been bewitched by her.

‘If the truth be known, Mr. Hull, the skilful use of a fan is probably more capable of felling newspaper editors than a whip,’ she said in that breathy voice that seemed to be coating him in honey. Oblivious of the others at the dining table, for a few seconds he felt as if he was being drawn into delicious whirlpool.

‘Hey, boy, the Countess ain’t interested in a poker-faced scribbler like you,’ joked Sam, ‘not when she’s got the richest men in California at her table.’

Lola glanced away and gave Sam an equally seductive flutter of her eyelids. ‘Why, is that so? Now, how about introducing me to them - and properly this time.’

When Lola had finished conquering the other men at the table with her eyes and her fan, she turned again to Pat. ‘From the name of your newspaper, I must assume you are a Whig yourself. Are you conscience or cotton, Mr. Hull?’

He was surprised by her question. Pat was in his mid-thirties and well-experienced in the ways of the world, having lived and worked in the bear-pit of Washington. Like most men, he figured politics were a man's game. He'd had his share of romantic entanglements but none of the women he had been involved with had ever shown much interest in what he did for a living. The few who did were invariably the mousy, bluestocking variety who had to compensate for their lack of feminine charms by developing their minds. That there could be women who were both sexually attractive and politically astute was a novelty that he had trouble adjusting to.

'Why, conscience of course, Countess,' he replied.

She nodded. 'I am glad. Slavery is disgusting. I had half a mind to stay longer in the South, but the idea of one human owning another is abhorrent to me.'

'It is a pity more Whigs hadn't felt the same,' muttered Pat.

'Yes, it seems you are finished as a party since the 1850 Compromise.'

'We're not dead yet - at least not in California.'

'Do you think there could ever be a war between the States?'

'Oh, God forbid. But I've seen too many members of my own party deny their conscience and pledge allegiance to expediency for the sake of temporary peace. But feelings are running deep. One can't easily plug a kettle once it starts to boil.'

Lola's bejeweled fingers rested on his hand. 'I am glad that at least California is free,' she murmured, 'and that it has far-sighted men to run it.'

At her touch, shock waves echoed through Pat's body. He looked into her eyes, beginning to understand why some of the most famous men of their age were said to have been captivated by her: artistic men like Liszt and Dumas. Politicians such the admirable British reformer, Lord Brougham. And never forgetting King Ludwig, who gave up everything because of her.

'May I ask why you are going to California?' he said quickly. 'What can be the attraction for someone of your accomplishments?'

Her smile was radiant. 'Some time ago I had a small amount of money to invest. It was suggested I buy shares in the Eureka Mine, and I always intended to visit it some day when I had the time.'

'The Eureka has done extremely well. You were well advised.'

'All I need now is for someone to take me there.'

Lola's fingers traced little walking movements over the back of Pat's hand. He thought he would go crazy from the delight they created, and her eyes had a wide-eye questioning that he couldn't fail to answer.

'If you'd consider me, Countess, I'd deem it a great honor to escort you anywhere,' he said in a husky whisper.

Lola was careful not to let her weakness for the romance of salt air and moonlight go to her head, much as she was longing to get Pat Hull into her bed, but as *Northerner's* most illustrious passenger, all eyes followed her every move. Her long-ago affair with Captain Lennox on *Larkins* still carried repercussions that haunted her. Perhaps it was a little late in her life to start thinking about decorum, but she didn't want to prejudice her arrival in San Francisco with another scandal.

However, they did manage a few surreptitious meetings in the deck shadows late at night after everyone else had retired and where they shared a first tentative kiss after which she was in raptures. Pat was just like her beloved Bon-Bon all over again. In the way he moved his body, the way the moonlight lit up the glints in his eyes, the way his arms made her feel warm and safe and even the way his mustache tickled her lips when he kissed her. Only his voice, with its trace of Irish antecedents, was different. But that didn't matter. Here at last was a new beginning. In a new land, and with a new love. Finally, she might even be able to let the spirit of Henri Dujarier rest.

As Belle helped her mistress to undress after dinner one night, Lola was glowing, telling her how happy she was and how she had at last found someone who was perfect for her.

Belle tried to share her enthusiasm, but she wasn't so sure. She was still troubled with a sense that there was something not quite right about Pat Hull who seemed just a little too ordinary for Lola. Besides, he hadn't seen her in a tantrum yet.

When *Northerner* sailed into San Francisco Bay just over two weeks later on May 21st, 1853, the vessel created history. Not because she had on board a wide array of Senators, Congressmen, Government officials, half-a-dozen newspaper editors - and Lola Montez - but because she was carrying the largest quantity of mail ever delivered into the Golden City.

At first, the crowd that had gathered to greet the side-wheeler as she docked at the Long Wharf were more interested in their letters than the elegant woman in a high fashion crinoline and carrying a parasol who elegantly maneuvered her way ashore. But someone who had seen her on stage in New York recognized her.

‘Why it’s Lola Montez!’ The cry went up.

Within minutes, the mail was forgotten as hundreds of people, nearly all men, crowded around Lola as she struggled towards the line of waiting carriages. Several men were so enthused that they rushed forward and unhitched the horses from the leading carriage. Seeing what they were about, Pat Hull swept Lola up into the cab and to her astonishment, the men ganged together to pull the carriage up through the streets.

‘Barnum started the tradition,’ explained Pat. ‘It’s San Francisco’s way of welcoming illustrious stars of the stage.’

Lola laughed and blew kisses out the carriage window to the growing throng. She felt like a queen being carried forward to her coronation rather than just to the city’s best and most respectable hotel, the Russ House.

However, her subjects were a motley lot, the city being a melting pot of every kind of man from nearly every country on earth. The voices that reached her ears were in a dozen languages, many of which she understood. Some of the comments were complimentary, but just as many were not, being accompanied with cat-calls and jeers.

She heard a German mock her in an echo from her days on the Barerstrasse. ‘Down with Lola!’ he called and gave her a rude finger sign. Pat Hull also noticed the gesture.

‘Why, the son-of-a-bitch ...’, he began.

Lola placed her hand on his arm. ‘Don’t concern yourself,’ she said, although her eyes were instantly glazed, her face white. ‘He’s probably a Jesuit. Wherever I go, they are always there, waiting to harass me.’

Pat’s hand closed tightly over hers. ‘But I must concern myself with your welfare. I don’t want to see you hurt.’ He chuckled her under the chin. ‘You know I ... I’d do anything for you,’ he said. ‘I think I’m in love with you.’

Lola was flooded with another sense of glorious repeat of memory as her mood switched again. She gazed adoringly into Pat’s eyes, seeing in them every nuance of Bon-Bon when he had first told her he loved her.

‘Oh, do you really?’ she whispered. ‘Those are the most wonderful words I have ever heard.’

The next day news of Lola appeared in the press. Pat ensured that his paper reported her arrival truthfully without alluding to her notoriety, but most of the others couldn’t resist dragging out every known and imagined episode in her life that involved whips, boxed ears, swearing and bad stage performances, not to mention old kings and ivory-tinkling lovers.

Lola took it in her stride, but Pat was furious. ‘How can you put up with it?’ he asked.

‘Because the more I try to fight it, the more they write,’ she responded pragmatically, not knowing how to explain it was the double-edged sword by which she made her living. Pat wouldn’t understand the bizarre nature of publicity.

Obsessed as she was by her new, and as yet unconsummated relationship with Pat, dancing was not the first thought in Lola’s mind although she knew she had to do it, if only to pay her bills. Although not quite as bad as in the earlier days of the Gold Rush when eggs fetched a dollar each, San Francisco was still an expensive place to live.

Her new agent was Jack Henning, a man she had met on the outward voyage from New Orleans

and who was more experienced in handling circus lions than temperamental lady performers. He offered to get her a season at the newly refurbished American Theater, where she was bound to be a raging success.

Jack was also on the receiving end of her first tongue-lashing when he complained as she repeatedly turned up late for rehearsals. It was inevitable in a city that thrived on rumor that the behind-the-scenes discord became known. The scramble for tickets at five dollars a piece for the opening night of *The School for Scandal* was fast and furious. Although there were the inevitable criticisms of her acting performance, Lola played to a packed and wildly appreciative audience. She was rewarded with thunderous applause and masses of flowers thrown at her feet.

On the second night she introduced a dance that she been experimenting with for some time. Loosely based on Fanny Elssler's famous *La Tarantule*, Lola had added her own special touches and renamed it the Spider Dance.

Pat sat in the front row, not caring whether she was a great artiste, he was in love and entranced with everything that she did. Everything but the Spider Dance.

The curtain opened to a figure draped in a full length black cape, on her head a grotesque mask like the face of a spider. Taking darting little steps, she slid slowly towards the front of the stage where she abruptly cast off the cape to reveal a Spanish-styled dress with a full, short skirt and a pair of well-shaped legs in flesh-tinted tights. This created the inevitable stir from men in the audience and, to the sound of eerie music from the orchestra, she slid across the stage, dipping and swaying in an imitation of a spider spinning its web.

When she reached the footlights, she paused and tore off the mask, to reveal her beauty beneath. Her glossy hair, grown now to almost shoulder length, was pinned with flowers. Her glorious eyes were dark and dramatic. She had now become a young girl caught in the web. Twisting this way and that, she tried to free herself, the music slowly growing louder as her legs became more entangled. In one grand sudden movement, she arched herself, and writhed in agony as the bite of the spider took hold. Staggering around the stage, she clutched her forehead, before sinking to the floor and vainly trying to rise.

The audience was utterly spellbound until the orchestra began to play more lively music, which aroused her. She jumped to her feet and began searching for the spiders in her skirt, attempting to shake it loose with leaps into the air. She lifted and shook each colored petticoat in turn, as if discovering a spider in each layer. The music increased and Lola's actions grew in abandoned excitement. With each furious shake, she seemed to reveal more spiders and more and more of her legs.

Lola lifted the last petticoat, running her hands erotically over her thighs as if to rid herself of the last invader. She gave one final leap and stamped the last of the imaginary spiders to death, before reeling off stage as if in a daze.

The audience went wild, whistling and cheering, but Pat sat, stupefied. He wasn't sure exactly what he had witnessed but knew he didn't like it. This wasn't the woman he was in love with; this was the exhibition of a harlot. He knew that he must do everything he could to take her away from a life where she had to perform in such a fashion. While Lola was taking the first of many curtain calls, he slipped his way out of the auditorium and around to the stage door, where he hurried to Lola's dressing room.

When she finally returned, she found him waiting. She threw her arms around him, kissing him passionately. 'How was I?' she gasped. 'They loved it, didn't they?'

Pat was enveloped in the heady combination of greasepaint and her bodily exertions. Half of him wanted to throw her to the ground and ravish her there and then, but the other half was appalled by such a thought. 'Lola,' he gasped between her kisses. 'Lola - you must marry me.'

She stopped and stared at him with her kohl-rimmed eyes. 'Oh, Pat. But I can't possibly ...'

He placed a hand over her lips. 'I won't take no for an answer. I don't care about whatever has happened to you in the past. All I know is that I love you more than my life is worth and if I can't have you, I might as well be dead.'

‘No - please don’t talk about death ...’

‘Just say yes.’

Lola’s third presentation at the American Theater was to be *Lola Montez in Bavaria*. Finding actors in San Francisco who could play the important roles of Prime Minister Abel and King Ludwig in a dignified, believable manner was almost an impossibility and those who attended the audition for the parts looked on the whole presentation as some kind of a burlesque show. It was only a matter of time before Lola lost her temper.

‘Why must you portray the King as a mentally defective buffoon?’ she yelled at the third auditionee for the role who had been mincing around comically. ‘He is one of the finest men who ever lived!’

The wary actor looked from Lola to the director and back to Lola and muttered something under his breath.

‘What did you say?’ Lola eyed him threateningly and fingered the diamond-studded handle of the whip lying in her lap.

‘I ... er ... I said I thought he was a fool ...’

Lola was swiftly on her feet, whip in hand. ‘Why, you nasty little turd!’

The actor cowered. ‘A fool not to marry you, Countess,’ he finished swiftly.

She paused, glowering, her eyes racing over the other cast members who were doing their best not to snigger. ‘What is so funny?’

Jack Henning hurried to ease the situation. ‘I’m sure they didn’t intend to upset you, Countess,’ he said. ‘Remember they are just a bunch of backwoods hicks.’

‘Oi - who are you callin’ a hick?’ protested as an actor, stepping forward, fists clenched. ‘I’ll have you know I’ve acted in New York with Edwin Booth himself.’

Lola rolled her eyes in a dismissive gesture while Jack made a placatory wave. ‘Just calm down everyone, please,’ he said. ‘You must treat this seriously. The Countess played an important role in European history and she deserves to be treated with some decorum.’

‘You really a Countess?’ asked another laconic cast member.

‘Of course I am,’ she retorted. ‘I am Countess of Landsfeld, and two thousand people lived on my estates.’

‘Oh, yea, and did the King give you some royal ancestors as well?’ was the sneered reply.

The cast members could control themselves no longer and all burst out laughing.

Lola’s lip trembled and she raised her whip. ‘Shit!’ she shouted. ‘You damn bastards need to learn a little respect.’ She rushed towards the steps leading up to the stage.

The actors scattered and Jack Henning caught at her arm. ‘For God’s sake, Lola, they were only having a bit of fun.’

Lola spun on him and pushed him backwards. He stumbled and fell to the floor and Lola flung herself on top of him, pounding into his chest with her whip stock. For a few seconds the cast watched in horrified amazement until someone realized she might seriously damage poor Jack. As one, they all rushed forward and pulled Lola off the distraught man.

She screamed. ‘Get your hands off me, you dim-witted morons!’ But they managed to hold her fast while Jack struggled to his feet.

‘All right,’ he seethed through bleeding lips. ‘You don’t want to do the play. That suits me. Because I don’t want to be your agent one minute longer!’ He felt in a pocket of his disheveled waistcoat and drew out a check book and with shaking fingers wrote out a check. ‘Here’s my commission back.’

Lola shook herself free of her captors and snatched the check. She promptly tore it up into pieces and scattered it over Jack’s head like confetti. ‘You can take your filthy lucre and stuff it up your ass!’ she shouted before dusting down her skirt, lifting her chin and marching out of the theater.

Varying reports on the episode went around the greater part of the Bay area in under an hour. Up until then, Lola had displayed a model restraint, but at last she had given San Franciscans a taste of

what the rest of the world had already had. This was the Lola they had wanted to see. The theater was packed out for the next few nights despite the fact that *Lola Montez in Bavaria* had a substandard cast that kept forgetting its lines and Lola herself appeared wooden, except when she demonstrated the Spider Dance in the intermission.

Pat Hull didn't want to question her directly about the episode with Jack Henning. He was convinced it had all been set up by a less ethical newspaper in the hopes of generating a few extra sales. Lola, in turn, didn't mention it at all. In fact, she was almost quiet when he escorted her on visits to the prominent residents of San Francisco in the mushrooming mansions on the city's many hilltops. Although they welcomed her, she dressed decorously in subdued colors and seemed reluctant to join in conversation. This was yet another Lola, certainly not the one Pat had known on board *Northerner* and she was still reticent giving him a firm answer about setting their wedding day.

One afternoon, after a picnic on the slopes of Telegraph Hill with their new friends, the jovial song-writing entertainer, Dr Billy Robinson and his wife, Lola wrapped herself in a shawl against the brisk breezes and went for a stroll with Pat. She seemed more interested in the view of the Bay than talking, but Pat was tired of her hedging.

'You will remember I promised to take you to see the Eureka Mine,' he said. 'I can arrange for my deputy to manage *The Whig* for a while. It would be wonderful to make our trip a honeymoon.'

Lola didn't look at him right away. When she did, her eyes were misty, perhaps from the wind. 'Oh, Pat, I think you're wonderful, but I really don't know if I can marry you. Both my previous marriages were cursed.'

He gripped her hands and brought them to his lips. 'Is that what has been bothering you?'

'That - and a few other things about me that you might not care for.'

'I don't care. I told you before. What happened in the past is of no relevance to us. You must put those disappointments behind you. Here in California anything is possible. Here we can make our dreams come true.'

'I don't deserve you.'

'Don't say that. Just give me your answer.'

Lola looked away again at the steely gray waters of the Golden Gate. 'Please give me a little while longer,' she said. 'I don't want to make another mistake.'

He tightened his grip on her hand. 'We can never be a mistake,' he said, but Lola was flooded with indecision. She still had a few more shows to do. Once they were over she would reconsider.

Belle was no help at all. The girl said she had second sight but when it came to giving advice whether she should marry Pat, she had nothing to say. 'I'm sorry, Madame,' she said for the umpteenth time. 'I wish I could say I see the answer, but the spirits are silent.'

Exasperated with her inability to decide, Lola tried to put Pat out of her mind and concentrated on presenting another play and dance to the theater-goers of San Francisco. In between acts of *The Maid of Saragossa*, she resurrected *El Oleano*, the dance with which she had begun her career and which still had the power to enchant, and also introduced a sailor's hornpipe in which she wore tight canvas trousers and jacket which had almost the same effect on the males in the audience as her spiders.

By now, however, sales of tickets were falling off and her brief season was to close. Lola was overwhelmed with a sense of panic. She had to give Pat an answer. Living with him as his mistress would have been the easy choice, but the city was notorious for its many whores and the last thing on earth she wanted was to be considered in the same class as them.

Dr Robinson came up with a suggestion that she do a benefit performance to raise money for a worthy cause. Lola jumped at the opportunity. She could extend her season and also be seen to do a good deed at the same time. Pat had no objection, he even encouraged her and arranged the publicity.

The first concert was for the Hebrew Benevolent Society. Apart from Lola, several other prominent artistes took part, including the Hungarian violinist Miska Hauser and vaudeville

favorites, Billy Chapman and his daughter, Caroline. It was a tremendous success. This was followed up with a second benefit for the San Francisco Firemen's Fund which raised the unimagined sum of more than thirty thousand dollars. When the performance concluded, it was Lola who received the greatest accolade and she was bombarded with flowers and even a fireman's helmet. She picked up the helmet and filled it with some of the flowers, holding it to her chest and with tears in her eyes, bid a fond farewell to the audiences of San Francisco.

'You are in my heart forever,' she exclaimed to resounding cheers.

It was unfortunate that she did not ask the Chapman duo or Miska Hauser to step forward and share in the final acclaim and was unaware of the resentment hidden beneath their forced smiles.

Pat was waiting in the wings as she ran off. He swept her into his arms, kissing her passionately in full view of everyone. 'Oh, how I love you,' he whispered in her ear. 'Don't keep me waiting a moment longer.'

'Just give me one more day,' she whispered back.

Madame de Cassins was an astute Frenchwoman who had no desire to be associated with San Francisco's famous whores either. Instead of depending on a man for her existence, she had created a niche for herself as a respected fortune-teller. Even hard-headed businessmen had been known to visit her before making decisions on buying and selling mining stocks and her word carried much weight.

When the Countess of Landsfeld requested an appointment, she was surprised. She had often seen Lola around town, riding her horse, or swaggering up and down the timbered sidewalks and muddied streets in her trademark black silk with her whip in hand, marching into hotels and saloons without an escort and seemingly without a qualm in the world. If there was ever a woman who knew her own mind, Madame de Cassins would have thought her to be Lola Montez. She commented on the fact when Lola sat down and offered her palm.

Lola smiled. 'It is easy to know what one wants at a moment's whim. The future takes more careful planning.'

'Ah.' The fortune-teller studied the palm presented for a minute, noting its erratic heart and head lines. 'There has been much unhappiness in your life,' she said finally. 'The ones you loved most have failed you.'

Lola took a deep breath. 'I have received a proposal of marriage. I need to know if it is the right thing to do.'

Madame de Cassins could see quite clearly it probably wasn't and she hesitated before replying. 'If you accept,' she said, 'you will have to adapt to a completely different way of life and give up much that you have become accustomed to. I cannot advise you, as you alone know what is in your heart. If you truly love this man there will be no difficulty and your future can be anything you wish.'

Lola bit her lip. 'Love comes in so many guises,' she murmured. 'How can I be sure?'

'Do as we Californians do when we are unsure.'

'And what is that?'

The woman laughed. 'Toss a coin. Cut the cards. Throw the dice. Life's a gamble whatever you do.'

At six o'clock in the morning on July 2nd, 1853, dressed in a simple gray gown and bonnet and carrying a small posy of orange blossoms, the Countess of Landsfeld walked down the aisle of the old adobe-built Mission Dolores.

In the sight of God and a congregation of about forty that included most of the prominent citizens of San Francisco, except for her erstwhile admirer Sam Brannan, she vowed to have no impediment as to why she should not take Patrick Purdy Hull till death did they part.

When the steamboat *New World* sailed from the Embarcadero later that afternoon for Sacramento, a large crowd of well-wishers gathered to bid it farewell. They were given the added bonus of seeing the happy newly-weds standing together arm-in-arm on the deck.

Lola's favorite supporters, the firemen, gave her a particularly enthusiastic send-off that did much to restore her faith in San Francisco and its citizens. Up until that moment, she had been feeling glad that she was getting out of a city in which the usual Lola parodies and jibes had begun to take over and she felt threatened.

The curtain had barely come down on her last benefit when that vindictive pair, Billy and Caroline Chapman, in cahoots with the man Lola had thought to be a friend, Dr Robinson, had thrown together a parody of everything that she had performed. The result was a vicious burlesque entitled *Who's Got the Countess*. It poked fun at Lola's acting, her dancing, made allusions to her numerous lovers and topped it off with a dance called the *Spy-Dear* which had Billy dressed as her and looking for male spies in his petticoats.

Pat was furious and even Lola's toughened shell took one of the worst hammerings in years. Although the parody packed the theaters for the first few nights and most of the newspapers found it highly amusing, the firemen and a few others sprang to Lola's defense. Apart from Pat's protests in *The Whig*, an anonymous letter to the *San Francisco Herald* restored her faith a little.

'It was an exceedingly coarse and vulgar attack upon one who, whatever her faults and foibles may have been, has proved herself a noble-hearted and generous woman and who little deserves that her exertions be repaid by ridicule and scurrility.'

The anonymous writer went on to remind San Franciscans of the great amount of money Lola's benefits had raised and attacked Caroline Chapman as:

'A woman who can play anything and everything and do it well. I cannot believe that lowering herself in this manner to a more profaned depth than I supposed low comedy to be capable of, can be any more agreeable to herself than it is to her admirers.'

As the letter was signed 'S.', there were only guesses as to who may have written it. At least Lola felt partly vindicated, but the wounds this time had gone deeper than she at first realized. She did not realize it, but they were to have a profound effect on the future of her marriage.

Pat and Lola consummated their marriage in their cabin before dinner. Lola was looking forward to using her skills of extending their mutual pleasure in those subtle ways she knew best, but Pat was overcome with a brutish excitement of having her at last and wasted no time in the preliminaries. He had pushed her on to a bunk, thrust and spent himself inside her before she had even had time to completely remove her petticoats.

As her husband pulled himself off her and fell into an instant doze, she stared at him with disbelief for a few seconds before prodding him fiercely in the ribs.

'Wha ... what?' His bleary eyes tried to focus.

'What the hell did you call that?'

'For God's sake, Lola, don't tell me you don't know a fuck when you get one.' He yawned widely.

'I hate that word.'

'I've heard you use it often enough.'

Lola dug her fingers into his shoulders and shook him. 'Yes - it's a good word for what it is - but I won't be treated like some cheap Barbary Coast whore. You're married to me, Lola Montez, remember. And I expect to be treated like a Countess.'

Pat's eyes cleared. 'Oh, and do Countesses not fuck like everybody else? You're plain Mrs. Hull now, not some bloody aristocrat.'

For some strange reason Lola didn't slap him as she had every right to. Instead, she felt a hollowness inside as she stared into the gray eyes. Outwardly, he was still so much like Bon-Bon,

and she couldn't bear for this marriage not to turn out right. She had to remember Pat had spent several years with a bunch of hard, practical men who didn't waste their time with culture, who hadn't learned how to make love to a woman in a palace or a French salon. Yes, that was it, he just didn't know the finer details of love-making.

She heard herself say, 'I'm sorry, Pat.' She caressed his tousled head and traced her fingers down his cheek. 'But the next time, you mustn't be in such a rush. Making love is the most wonderful thing in the world. I can show you how a woman really likes it to be.' As she reached out and kissed him gently on the lips, she didn't notice the flinch of hurt in his eyes.

Pat was still a little surly when they sat down in the dining saloon, the other passengers ogling them. Lola was dressed in one of her magnificent brocaded gowns. Around her neck was an unusual topaz necklace Pat hadn't seen before. When he asked her about it, she announced flippantly it had been a gift from her late husband, George Heald.

'Is that how you celebrate your wedding nights?' he muttered sarcastically, 'by flaunting gifts from the previous husband?'

'Don't be churlish, Pat, dear,' she murmured. 'But I haven't had a wedding present from you yet.'

Pat scowled. He was only beginning to realize that his moderate bank balance wasn't going to be enough to keep up with Lola's extravagant tastes. The ring, the necessary donation to the priest at the Mission Dolores, the wedding breakfast and now the trip to Sacramento had already set him back an astonishing amount. 'So you simply regurgitate an old one,' he added caustically.

'What's the matter with you?' she said. 'Surely you aren't trying to create a scene? Do you want us gossiped about in every saloon in from here to St Louis?'

'You started it,' he retorted. 'I'm trying to figure out what kind of woman wears another man's gift on her wedding day?'

Lola managed to restrain herself. She stood up from the table. 'I'm not very hungry,' she said in a flat voice. 'I'm going to bed.'

Pat sat by himself for a few minutes, downing several whiskeys and aware of the curious stares from the other diners. Although he had always enjoyed being involved in public life in various ways, having his private business under a magnifying glass not going to be easy. He had been so besotted with Lola's beauty and in such a hurry to get her into his bed, he hadn't even begun to understand the amount of extra baggage he had acquired in the process. She was a woman from a completely different world than that of a simple Irish lad from Ohio. He started to wonder about all those other men in her life with whom he was being compared. Cultured men. Rich men. Even kings. And he began to have doubts about his ability as a man.

When the whiskey gave him enough courage to pull himself together he went back into their cabin. Lola was sitting up on one of the bunks, smoking. She was wearing nothing except the topaz necklace.

Pat's breath caught in his throat. 'God - you're beautiful.'

Her fingers toyed with the necklace. 'I had wanted to take this off,' she said seductively, eyes half closed, 'but there's something wrong with the clasp.'

She turned her back and lifted her hair. The curve of her shoulders and the nape of her neck were as erotic a sight as he had ever seen and his arousal almost painful. He fumbled with the clasp of the necklace but it wouldn't separate.

'Break it if you have to,' she murmured hotly.

Using both hands he tore the links apart and threw the jewels to the floor and pressed his hungry lips against her skin. She moaned and turned over, cupping his face. 'Now - let's take it slowly, shall we?'

When *New World* arrived in Sacramento the next day, Pat was again in a contrary mood. Any other man who had been treated to the delectable range of lovemaking skills that Lola had employed would have been over the moon with joy. But the whiskey glow had gone and Pat found himself thinking about where, and in what circumstances, she had learned all those tricks.

Her unashamed eagerness was not what he had expected in a wife. In his mind, wives were supposed to be submissive. He should have been the one initiating the delights and surprises of the married state. Somehow he felt vaguely cheated.

They had another argument later in the morning when Lola turned her nose up at the Sacramento boarding house where Pat had made reservations. 'You can't expect me to stay in a place like this,' she had exclaimed, and promptly went in search of something more in her style.

The Orleans Hotel with its velvet saloon and crystal chandeliers was the best the raw, bustling town could provide. It also cost three times as much and the bill went into Pat's name.

When he also discovered she had no intention of going on immediately to visit the Eureka Mine as Pat had planned, but had already arranged to dance at Sacramento Theater, he nearly exploded. 'We're on our honeymoon. My wife shouldn't have to do this!'

Lola pouted, twiddled his mustache and gave him a provocative kiss. 'Come now, Pat, dear. You must remember I'm no ordinary wife. Besides, it's only for a few days. You can't expect me to come this far and disappoint my audience.'

Sulkily, Pat watched as Lola rehearsed for the opening night. When she came to the Spider Dance, he had to leave, heading for one of the many saloons.

The opening night went reasonably well, but the second was an utter disaster. The rough, tough miners who packed into the tiny theater with its hard benches were already in a belligerent mood because of a late start and the combined effects of an evening gambling and drinking. They were not completely unsophisticated, however, and they knew a good performance from a bad. Many another performer before Lola Montez had discovered his or her failings in Sacramento.

Deciding to start with *El Oleano*, and dressed in demure rainbow-colored tulle rather than her usual vibrant Spanish costume, Lola had taken no more than a few steps when she realized that in spite of the support of Miska Hauser, the violinist who had been with her in San Francisco, the motley orchestra gathered to accompany her was hopeless. They had completely messed up her cue.

'Hey - I gotta mule can dance better'n that.'

'Yea - and I seen better clothes on a tea-pot!'

Gales of laughter echoed through the small theater.

Lola froze for a few seconds. She waved her hand at the musicians to stop. Stamping across some of the bouquets provided by the theater management, she stood at the gas footlights, hands on hips and glared into the audience. It was nearly all male - the few gaudy women present probably whores on their dinner break.

'Gentlemen,' she said, struggling to keep her voice from becoming shrill. 'Lola Montez has too much respect for the people of California not to perceive that this stupid laughter comes from a few silly puppies ...'

The laughter grew even louder. A number of the miners stood up on the benches and pretended to be panting dogs, while others parodied her steps.

She shook her fist at them. 'Shut up!' she screeched over the bedlam, but her actions only egged them on. Some of the miners had obviously come prepared for fun and started throwing missiles at the stage. Apples and eggs splattered on Lola's costume, in her face, and on her hair.

'So that's how you want it!' she shouted. 'Come on up here. Give me your trousers and you can have my skirts. You're not worthy to be called men!'

Charles King, the manager, who had watched the debacle with growing dismay, hauled Miska Hauser out of the orchestra and pushed him on to the stage. 'Play something to calm them down,' he was ordered as Lola flounced off, dodging a large cabbage that scattered the remaining musicians.

Shaking in his shoes, Hauser started fiddling a soft German tune. The missiles stopped and it seemed as if he had restored sanity, but to the manager's and Hauser's dismay, Lola stormed back on. She attempted to edge the violinist off and the crowd starting booing and hissing. Hauser stood his ground and launched into a rendition of *Yankee Doodle*, while Lola embarked on the Spider Dance unaccompanied. The resulting confusion and uproar was even greater and members of the audience started yelling for their money back. King fled to his office and locked his door.

Vandalism took hold. Benches were overturned and seats smashed through windows. In a matter of seconds, curtains were ripped apart, lights and props were demolished.

Pat, who had received a message that his wife might be in trouble, arrived in the nick of time and managed to hurry a disheveled, cursing Lola back to the Orleans Hotel, followed by a mob of riotous men. But despite Pat's protests, Lola refused to lock herself in her bedroom. She grabbed a lamp and pushed her way past him and marched on to the hotel balcony. She was greeted by the crowd that had followed her with more hisses and boos, an orchestra of pots and kettles and a great deal of obscene name-calling. She held the lamp high enough so that they could see her face. It was like Munich all over again.

'All right, you filthy scum!' she shouted at them, 'you're nothing but despicable, stinking curs. If any one of you has the guts, I'll meet him face to face with whatever weapons he chooses, and so help me, I'll give him the fight of his life!'

Her face illuminated by the lamp, Lola stood composed and brave. The hullabaloo continued for a few more minutes before it slowly subsided. There was a long silence.

At last one miner stepped forward and removed his hat. 'Ma'am,' he said. 'It seems to me you got more spunk n' a cornered rattler. I, for one, is mighty sorry I called you a mule.'

A second man did likewise, with a meek expression on his face. 'T'weren't smart neither to comment ill on your costume. 'Tweren't no tea cozy.'

Lola swiftly relented and raised the lamp. 'Apology accepted,' she said in a silky voice. 'I hope we can be friends in future.' She blew kisses to the crowd. This time they burst out cheering.

In a situation that would have defeated anyone else, Lola Montez had won her place in the hearts of the tough miners and by the time the Sacramento vigilantes arrived to break up the demonstration they had dispersed without complaint.

When Lola returned to her bedroom later, she found Pat slumped across the bed. While she had been on the balcony, he had drunk at least half a bottle of whiskey. 'Can't resist re-playing the part, can you?' he slurred.

'What do you mean?'

'The la-di-da Countess of Landsfeld, pacifying her subjects again. You don't know how stupid you look. Sacramento's hardly Munich.' He hiccuped.

Lola gave him a withering glance. 'You've had too much to drink, Pat. Why don't you get undressed and sleep it off?'

He lumbered to his feet. 'Yea, I'll just do that.' Before he could even pull his boots off, he had crashed face down onto the bed and was snoring in an instant.

Lola looked down on him with dismay, remembering the words of the fortune-teller, Madame de Cassins, about having to change to a totally different way of life if she wanted to keep the man she loved. Pat's resentment of her past went far deeper than she could have imagined.

Yet she didn't know if she had the strength to change. For a few moments tonight, she had enjoyed that exhilaration of power she never thought to feel again. Sure enough, the mob might have only been a bunch of rough, tough miners, yet she was able to turn them with a glare and few well chosen words. To give up that spot in the limelight was going to be much harder than she would have imagined.

She sat on the bed and stroked her husband's tousled head. As with George, she had discovered many of the similarities to Henri were only superficial, and that Pat was a much rougher diamond. She could be happy with him if she tried, really tried to control her temper and her whims, which seemed to descend on her without any rhyme or reason.

'I think I do love you, Pat' she whispered in his ear. 'Please be patient with me. But I'm really going to try this time. I have to.'

The following night, Charles King had managed to make a few repairs to his theater and Lola played to standing room only. As a precaution the police were on stand-by, but the audience were well-behaved. Among them was none other than Johan Sutter, the man upon whose property the Gold Rush had begun, and also a large number of prominent citizens and their wives, adding their

degree of respectability to the evening. After the overture was over, Lola was applauded as she came out on to the stage to give an explanation of what had happened the previous night.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ she said. ‘I am overwhelmed by your reception of me this evening and feel it is my duty to explain to you the misunderstanding which occurred last night. I have been accustomed to being well received and loved by the United States public wherever I have appeared before them. These recollections will ever remain in my mind and endear America to me. I came before you last night with the same confidence in your kindness and the utmost desire on my part to make my performance pleasing to you. Two or three individuals insulted me grossly by sneering and laughing at me. Perhaps I was more sensitive than most artistes upon such an occasion for the reason that I am persecuted and followed by the agents of my political enemies in Europe and who annoy me on every occasion. I know that no American would gratuitously insult a woman. You have too chivalrous and gallant a nature and women are far more respected here than in any other country in the world.’

The audience burst into a wild round of applause. Lola went on to explain the movements of her Spider Dance, that if she stamped upon bouquets left by admirers, it was not done with malicious intent but part of her tempestuous movements in order to rid herself of the spiders, contrary to what had been written in certain newspapers.

‘As for the circumstances which occurred last night,’ she said finally, ‘I wish to draw the veil of oblivion over them. It does not become me to speak of, or you to listen to them. Again, I return my sincere thanks and I hope that we shall be all good friends together and that I may feel the same regret at leaving my friends at Sacramento as I have experienced elsewhere in this land of the free.’

Thereupon the manager announced that Lola had offered that her next performance would be a benefit and the proceeds would go to repairing the damage done the previous night. She also intended, as she had done in San Francisco, to give another benefit for the Sacramento volunteer fire department.

Although all this goodwill endeared Lola to her audiences for the next few nights, there was still vacillation in the local press. Some newspapers questioned the sanity of the Sacramento people as they found it baffling an artiste could be thoroughly ridiculed one night, only to be acclaimed the next.

An article appeared in *The Daily Californian* which suggested that Lola’s enthusiasm for Sacramento was a sham and that she had hired people to applaud her. Her carefully constructed control of the past few days exploded. She sat down and raced off a letter to the editor before Pat could stop her.

‘Sir - The extraordinary article concerning myself which appeared in your paper this morning requires an extraordinary answer. I use the word “extraordinary” for I am astonished that a respectable (?) editor should LIE in such a barefaced manner and be so devoid of gallantry and courtesy as yourself. I am a woman but I do not advocate women’s rights. I can right myself by inflicting summary justice upon all jackanapes! After such a gross insult you must don the petticoats. I have some which I can lend you for the occasion. You must fight with me. I leave the choice of two kinds of weapons to yourself, for I am very magnanimous. You may choose between my dueling pistols, or take your choice of a pill out of a pill-box. One shall be poisoned and the other not, and the chances are even. I request that the affair may be arranged by your seconds as soon as possible, as my time is quite as valuable as your own. Maria de Landsfeld Hull (Lola Montez)’

The editor declined to respond or apologize, but in a city famous for its craziness, Lola’s letter reached new heights. Those who thought she was quite mad, had their suspicions confirmed. Within days the mining towns were rocked with laughter and the quip whenever a fight occurred for it to be resolved by ‘pistols or pills’ became a fad.

Pat, meanwhile, was smarting. Lola had flirted openly with the city’s firemen to the point of embarrassment, and she was turning them both into a laughing stock. And why on earth had she signed herself as ‘Maria’ he asked grumpily after breakfast.

‘So - I just feel like a change,’ she had responded petulantly. ‘It is one of my given names.’

‘Oh, and what are the others, pray tell? I think I ought to know. There’s still a helluva lot I don’t know about you.’

Lola glowered at him, her mind going blank again in that in that frightening and infuriating way. For a few seconds she didn’t know who she was. The only name she could think of was Eliza - but who was Eliza? And who was he? Henri? George? No ...

‘I ... I can’t ...’ She raised her hand, clutching her forehead, swaying on her feet. Pat caught her before she fell.

‘What is it? Lola - are you unwell?’

‘Just a little dizzy,’ she murmured, pressing her face against the reassurance of his shoulder.

‘You’re tired out. You’ve been doing too much,’ she heard him say before he pushed her gently down to a chair while he studied her closely, his eyes sober and concerned. ‘We haven’t gotten off to much of a start, have we, what with you performing all the time and me trying to put up with all the nonsense that goes on with it. We were supposed to go to the Eureka, remember? It’s beautiful up there in the mountain country. We can forget about things for a while and have a real honeymoon, the way it ought to be, just you and me.’

Pat ... yes, that is it. He was Pat - her husband. And he loved her. Oh, yes, I remember now. Love. Relief swept through her. ‘Oh, darling,’ she whispered, ‘that sounds wonderful. They’ve asked me to do one concert at Marysville.’

‘And that will be your last.’

How wonderful his protective arms felt about her. ‘But what about the newspaper?’ she asked. ‘You’ve been away longer than you thought.’

‘I’ve been doing a great deal of thinking. I want this marriage of ours to work, Lola, and it won’t if we are both going in different directions like this. I’ve decided to resign and put my share of *The Whig* up for sale.’

‘And for my part, I must quit the stage?’

He lifted her chin and kissed her gently. ‘Yes. We’ll buy ourselves a ranch somewhere up in the Sierras and raise horses and ...

‘Marvelous.’

‘And perhaps a few kids. What do you think of that?’

She felt a momentary panic. Children – but that was impossible. They had never discussed it.

‘Yes, children of our own. What I wouldn’t give for a son.’ Pat hugged her close.

Lola’s brief few moments of joy evaporated as her mind went blank again. Unresisting, she let him hold her close to his chest for several more minutes and when he kissed her, she thought it was Bon-Bon.

Marysville was fifty miles from Sacramento, the road journey by stage coach cramped and dusty and the temperature climbed to well over the century Fahrenheit mark. By the time they arrived, Belle was grumbling at what the dust had done to their clothes, Miska Hauser was worried about the state of his violin strings and Pat was simply dying for a decent glass of beer, or anything wet. None of them had noticed, however, that Lola had been quieter than was usual for her since leaving Sacramento.

They were not to know there had been several more episodes of mental confusion and blanking out while she sat in the coach. They had only lasted a few seconds, a minute at the most, but they made her feel very insecure. Once out of the coach and in the comparative coolness of the hotel, she felt better and put the strange happenings down to the intense heat. Within a day, it was forgotten and she was back to her usual self although she continued to be irritable with everyone.

Despite a new theater and a few residents who appreciated a touch of culture, Marysville was a rough town and the performance was not a success. Struggling with the heat, Miska Hauser ignored Lola’s advice to play sprightly tunes and his slow ballads were not well received. The audience was in a contrary mood when Lola stepped on the stage. Her choice of the Spider Dance was

unfortunate. As she stamped and shook her petticoats, the overheated miners quickly latched on to its erotic qualities. They whistled and jeered.

‘You’re not lookin’ in the right place!’

‘Higher up!’

‘Take ’em all off!’

Lola halted mid-step and glared at them before letting fire with a few choice epithets, which only goaded the men on. But she persevered to the end of the dance. When she came off the stage, she was consumed with rage. Miska Hauser was the first in the way of her tirade.

‘You fool,’ she screeched at him. ‘You deliberately ignored my instructions!’ She slapped him hard across the face several times and the violinist yelled as he fell backwards.

Pat, who had been cooling his heels outside the stage door, not wanting to witness yet another performance of the Spider Dance, heard the bedlam and came running. To his horror, he saw Lola sitting astride the prostrate Miska, pummeling him for all she was worth.

‘Lola, for God’s sake, woman.’ He gripped her arms and pulled her off the terrified violinist. ‘Are you crazy?’

‘Yes,’ she panted as she struggled violently in Pat’s arms. ‘Everyone says I’m crazy. No-one listens to me.’

‘Calm down.’

‘Why should I?’ She was remarkably strong and only when Pat managed to press her up against a wall did she stop struggling.

Miska by now was on his feet. ‘I’m leaving,’ he croaked, shaking his fist at Lola. ‘Never in all my life have I been treated this way.’

‘Go,’ she spat back at him, ‘and you can forget about being paid.’

‘I wouldn’t take a cent from you if my life depended on it.’ Bruised and limping, the violinist left.

‘Lola, Lola, what’s the matter with you?’ Pat held her close, feeling the extreme force of her anger in the tenseness of her body.

‘Nobody here understands artistic expression. I’m sick of being treated as a strumpet ... a ... *whore*.’ The word, when it escaped her lips, veritably quivered with anguish.

‘You can’t expect anything else,’ he said, as he endeavored to calm her by stroking her hair and skin. ‘This is a mining town. You come out on the stage, lifting your petticoats, showing your legs, teasing them.’

‘I am not teasing,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘The Spider Dance is a cultured dance from Spain.’

His hands tightened their grip. ‘Don’t talk crap, Lola. You know exactly the effect that dance has on men. Yet when it works, you act affronted. I’m sick of trying to understand you.’

Her eyes blazed into his. Never before had he seen in them such fury. It was as if she had become another person - someone who hated him. His grip relaxed and Lola freed herself.

‘Get out of my way,’ she snapped. ‘And seeing as you’re sick of me, you can get out of my life.’ She pushed past him and marched off, with a distressed Belle hurrying to keep up with her.

It was the last straw for many others in Lola’s entourage and some of them disappeared with Miska Hauser.

Pat sighed with deep anguish and retreated to the nearest saloon while Lola cried bitter tears and vented the remains of her rage by emptying all of his wardrobe out of the hotel window. She ordered Belle to pack her own things for another engagement in Grass Valley.

The maid waited until Lola had fallen asleep from exhaustion as often seemed to happen when she had had one of her tempers, before she stole downstairs and rescued Pat’s clothes. She went in search of him.

‘Madame didn’t mean it, Mr. Hull,’ she said when she found him in a bar. ‘Tomorrow she will have forgotten all about it.’

Pat shook his head. ‘Damn me, woman. I’ve given up a lot for her, but I don’t know if I can put up with it any more.’

‘She loves you, sir. Her heart has been broken so many times, if you leave her I fear for what she might do.’

Pat’s face sobered. ‘Is it that bad?’

‘She needs someone to take care of her. I can do so much, but it is nothing like the love of a strong man.’

Pat bowed his head and yielded yet again. ‘I’ll give it one more chance.’

32.

Despite the heat, dressed in a sheer blue muslin and a straw bonnet, Lola was coolness itself as she approached the stagecoach that was being loaded for Grass Valley. When she saw Pat waiting for her, she smiled and lifted her veil. Her eyes were puffy and red with weeping.

‘Oh, Pat - I’m so sorry,’ she murmured as he pulled her close.

He didn’t kiss her, not with half of Maryville’s population ogling her departure, but whispered in her ear. ‘I’m sorry too, Lola. Let’s give it another go, shall we?’

Belle gave Pat a secret smile as they all climbed aboard the coach together. She also hoped that this time it would work out.

A few minutes after the coach rattled its way through the hamlet of Rough-and-Ready and negotiated the hazards of Breakneck Hill, Lola drew back the curtains which had been tightly closed against the heat and dust, and caught her first glimpses of Grass Valley.

Framed by the purple-tinged and still snow-capped Sierra Nevada, the town of wooden buildings and tents straggled along the twists and turns of Wolf Creek. Although the scars of a hundred diggings had ravaged the lower landscape with pits and mounds of dirt, there were broad stretches of green meadows and a majestic beauty in the towering pines and the mass of wild flowers growing on the mountain slopes. Despite the thundering echo of the batteries crushing the gold ore, the air itself was crisp and pure.

Lola took a deep breath and was overcome with the first feelings of calm and real peace that she had known in a long time.

‘Pretty, ain’t it?’ said Pat, as he squeezed her hand in his.

‘It’s absolutely beautiful.’

‘A good place for a new start?’

Lola turned and kissed Pat on the cheek.

The news that Lola was coming to Grass Valley had reached the town long before the stagecoach did, and when it drew to a halt at the Beatty House there was already an expectant crowd gathered, some for the mail, and some just plain curious. As she emerged with a grinning Pat in tow, she smiled and waved at them and a welcoming cheer went up.

A man pushed his way towards them through the crowd. ‘Well, buddy, you finally made it.’ He clapped Pat on the shoulders and grinned.

Pat shook his hand vigorously. ‘Good to see you, Gil.’

Gil gave Lola a frank but friendly appraisal. His face was ruddy and his eyes bright, a combination Lola had discovered was common in California men who spent most of their lives outdoors and looked at mountains a great deal. She liked him immediately.

‘Lola, this is Gil ...Gilmore Meredith. He’s a fellow Whig and probably the richest man in the Valley. We go back a long way together. I had written to him to say that we would coming on a visit.’

‘And a darn long time ago it was too,’ said Gil, ‘I’ve been expecting the pair of you for a couple of weeks.’

‘Lola had some dancing engagements to complete,’ said Pat.

‘Yeah, so I read. Some of those scribblers have been mighty rude towards your lady, I reckon. Not *The Whig*, of course,’ he added hastily.

‘That’s all right, Gil,’ said Lola with a soft laugh. ‘I’m past caring about what they write. I’ve wasted far too much energy on them.’

‘We haven’t had a proper honeymoon yet,’ said Pat as Gil started to help him and Belle with Lola’s vast amount of luggage. ‘I’m looking forward to showing Lola the Eureka, and her mountain.’

‘My *mountain*?’

Pat winked at Gil. ‘Didn’t you know?’ he said to her innocently. ‘Actually, it’s really just more of a rocky hill. I don’t know who named it the Lola Montez, but it’s one of the best known placer diggings hereabouts.’

Lola beamed. ‘And does it pay well?’

Gil laughed. ‘Well, just let’s say, it more than covers its expenses.’

Lola’s sense of something special about Grass Valley grew with every minute she was there. The surprising fact that someone had named a hill after her long before she had even set foot in California struck her as an omen. Since coming to America, she had come across several race-horses and even a yacht named after her, but to be celebrated in a piece of golden earth was different.

Gil Meredith insisted they stay in his house. He had built it two years before as a mine office with living quarters attached. Stands of sycamore and a huge oak tree gave it shelter from the ravages of the mountain weather and from its porch could be heard the steady thump of the distant quartz stampers that had made Gil wealthy. Inside, it was furnished in sparse bachelor fashion, but Gil often entertained guests and there were a few, if somewhat Spartan, luxuries such as feather beds and even a bathtub.

That evening, after a delicious meal made by Gil’s Chinese cook, Lola sat in a hickory rocker on the porch with her needlework. Pat and Gil sat next to her on the steps, puffing on pipes and discussing the current price for gold and the problems Gil’s company had experienced in extracting gold from quartz, Grass Valley being one of the first places in which the new method was being trialed.

Lola was barely listening to their conversation. With every breath of that wonderful air, she was thinking instead that she didn’t want to leave this raw and wildly beautiful place. The internal tossing and turning of spirit that had plagued her almost ever since she could remember was strangely missing. She just wanted to sit in that rocker forever.

Later that night she and Pat made love the way it should have been between them from the start, languidly and deeply fulfilling, and in the morning, Lola was full of her new-found joy. The sun was barely up when Pat roused her to go riding.

The scent of pine was strong as they set out along a trail leading upwards into the mountains and the morning air was filled with bird song. They stopped for a while on the mossy banks of a rapidly rushing stream where they made love again with only a few curious squirrels and a lone eagle as spectators. Later, Lola gathered bunches of wild flowers while Pat ventured into the scrub and shot a couple of grouse to take back for dinner.

On their way back to the valley as the setting sun tinged the mountain peaks pink and the pines sighed, Lola reined in her horse on the top of a ridge and said, ‘I think I’d like to live here.’

Pat halted beside her. ‘It’s beautiful, but it’s nothing like you’re used to. You’d be bored in five minutes.’

‘No, I wouldn’t. I need a place like this, Pat. I’ve lived in palaces and mansions but I’ve never had a home of my own, not a real one.’

Pat’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Are you serious?’

She breathed deeply and smiled wistfully at him. ‘I want to be an ordinary woman, Pat - and just a wife. I want to wear dimity and cook flapjacks. I want to keep chickens and cows. I want to grow my own berries and make jam. Grass Valley is a place where I know I can be ordinary.’

Pat didn't know whether to laugh or frown. The vision of Lola Montez kneading bread or washing shirts was too far-fetched to even contemplate. 'Ordinary women in Grass Valley don't have maids,' he said. 'Belle would have to go. Somehow I can't see you blacking the stove or cleaning out pig-swill.'

Lola pouted slightly. 'Don't make fun of me,' she said. 'I didn't say I wanted to be a drudge. I just want to live normally.'

'I'm sorry - you are serious?'

'I've never been more so.'

They stared at each other for a few moments.

'No more dancing?' said Pat at last.

She shook her head. 'No. I've had enough. Maybe once in a while just for fun, that's all.'

'And you'd want me to stay here too?'

Now it was her turn to show surprise. 'Of course - you're my husband after all.'

Pat glanced away. 'I'm not sure what I could do. I've always avoided being involved in gold-mining, it's too risky for me. Don't forget I'm a printer by profession.'

'There isn't a newspaper yet in Grass Valley.'

He looked back at her. 'That could be just as risky.'

She shrugged and urged her horse forward. 'Suit yourself. I never thought of you as being afraid of risk. I've decided I'm going to stay.'

Pat followed her at a distance thinking over Lola's decision. Much as he loved the mountain country himself, he was a realist as to his chances of making a living here. If Lola gave up the stage, she would be dependent on him. The way things were at the moment, he would hardly make enough to keep her even in the 'ordinary' fashion she had been talking about. She was day-dreaming. Lola was too used to salons and boudoirs, and the wit and conversation of famous men to be content in a remote pine cottage for long. Besides, Grass Valley in summer was nothing like the bleak place it would be when the winter rains set in.

Meanwhile, Lola said no more on her decision over the next few days, during which they roamed many miles over other mountain tracks, went trout fishing and even camped out under the stars. It was a wonderful time together during which she was lighthearted and loving, and Pat ought to have been happy. Yet he felt the tranquility was not destined to last, ever wary of that other Lola with sharpened claws hiding somewhere beneath her placid exterior.

The fortunes of their marriage turned yet again when Lola was asked to give a few performances at the local Alta Hall and also in the nearby towns of Downviewville and Nevada City.

'You told me you'd had enough,' said Pat when he found out that Lola had accepted.

'I have, but as it seems my husband can't afford to give me an allowance, I must earn my own,' she retaliated savagely.

Pat was cut to the quick. 'Lola, please be reasonable,' he said. 'You know I'm stretched until the sale of my share in the paper is settled.'

'Then you shouldn't be wasting your time wandering about the hills,' she countered. 'You ought to be talking to Gil Meredith about your options.'

The dormant embers in her eyes looked ready to flare, so he backed down, but he knew their brief honeymoon was definitely over.

In fact, Lola had more than enough money to live on. She had made a small fortune from her American tour and had a large amount deposited in New York. At the suggestion of a new acquaintance, Johnny Southwick, a young mining engineer, she also invested a large amount in the underground Empire Mine near Grass Valley.

She wasn't quite sure at first why she was trying to antagonize and hurt Pat, but as time went by she had to face the fact she was becoming bored with him. The pleasures of their physical union weren't enough to make up for his lack of sophistication and interest in the wider world she knew so well. Whenever she mentioned Europe, or her life in Bavaria, a glassy look would come into his eyes. He was plainly jealous of her continued correspondence with the famous men she had known.

Even when she assured him she had never been the King's mistress in the normal sense of the word, she knew he no more believed her than did most of the rest of the world.

Pat talked to Gil about investing in mining shares but had nothing else to do but drag along on Lola's tour to Nevada City and the other string of mining towns of the Yuba. The endless dust irritated his throat and he developed a constant cough which did nothing to ease his mood.

Lola mostly ignored his grumbles and was received with the usual damning praises from the rough audiences, but she did not seem to be duly troubled. Her plans to settle in Grass Valley occupied her thoughts much of the time.

In Downieville, the simmering tensions between the couple came to a head. A rich German was doing a tour of the California gold fields, and hunting and fishing in the mountains. He presented himself after the show one night and as he and Lola openly flirted and babbled away in German as if they had known each other for years, Pat witnessed the way Lola's eyes had ignited in his presence. Instead of asserting himself and keeping the German at arm's length as another husband might have done, Pat suffered a loss of confidence, and he retreated to the uncomplicated sanctuary of a saloon.

The next day he witnessed Lola and the man, who called himself Dr Adler, go off on a ride together. Seeing it as the omen he had been expecting, Pat decided not to offer any protest and promptly threw his clothes into a carpet bag and hitched a ride on the next stage back to Grass Valley.

Lola had not intended to have an affair with Kirk Adler. In appearance, he was too like Reinhard of distant memory. Besides, the fire for such wild liaisons no longer burned as intensely within her. Yet she soon found herself stimulated by his smooth, well-educated manner and his vast knowledge on many subjects. He knew as much about the mountains, forests and wild life of California as he did of his native Bavaria. From the moment they first met, they had also had Munich in common. Kirk was able to relate first-hand gossip and tell Lola what had happened to many of the people she had known. He even told her of how Ludwig was often seen wandering forlornly alone about the city he had helped to create and standing for hours outside her old home on the Barerstrasse staring up at the balcony as if he expected her to emerge.

'The people have accepted him back,' Kirk told her. 'King Maximilian is a dullard compared to his father. Some even say Ludwig should never have been made to abdicate, that since he left, Prussia has become a threat and Bavaria's days as an independent kingdom are numbered. And there are also many, Countess, who accept that what you did was right, getting rid of those Jesuits.'

So at last - vindication! For a few crazy moments she toyed with idea of leaving Pat and going back to Bavaria with Kirk. But the energy wasn't there. There was no longer that ambition to launch back into politics as if nothing had happened. She was tired, and she needed peace.

Pat, like a fool, didn't wait for an explanation of her relationship with Kirk. He tore off in a huff before the thought of sleeping with him had even entered her head. Finally, she did, just to spite him. She felt no great passion for Kirk and no great remorse over Pat either. She performed the act as if it was no more than another dance routine.

Kirk, however, had made the same mistake as countless other men of falling in love with her. When she told him she had no intention of leaving her husband and going back to Europe with him, he announced in that case he would stay in California and he followed her back to Grass Valley.

When Lola arrived back and headed to Gil's cottage, she found Pat sitting on the porch. Kirk Adler had been discreet enough to stay out of the way and take a room at the Beatty House.

'So, you think you can just waltz back in here as if nothing had happened?' Pat growled as she came up the steps followed by Belle.

She frowned at him. 'Nothing would have happened if you'd bothered to be a husband.'

'Oh, I see. You expect me to challenge every man who looks at you to a duel?'

She paled. 'Don't be stupid. And don't ever be flippant about duels.'

'And, pray tell me what I am supposed to do? I'm afraid I'm just a hick from Ohio. I'm out of

your high-falutin' league, Countess. Where I come from, wives are faithful to their husbands. They don't take up with wandering krauts one minute and then expect their Johnnies to be waiting patiently at home the next.'

Lola's face was cold and indifferent. 'And what are you doing now, if it isn't waiting?'

He sat up, made a pretense of dusting off his knees and took a deep breath. 'I'm waiting for the next stage out of here. I'm going to file for a divorce as soon as I get back to 'Frisco.'

'Well, that's just fine and dandy with me too.' Lola flicked her skirts and brushed past him, her nose in the air.

Belle didn't follow her mistress. She stood on the porch with tears in her eyes. 'Oh, Mister Pat, I was just so sure she loved you. I'm so sorry.'

Pat forced an ironic smile. 'I don't think the Countess even knows what real love is, Belle. And well, I made a mistake too. I just lost my head and my common sense. Best forget that it ever happened.'

From her upstairs window, Lola watched as Pat slowly ambled towards the nearest saloon. She was momentarily flooded with remorse at her treatment of him. It wasn't his fault that she had become bored with him. They'd had some good times together but she was still a victim of whim and her own unfathomable needs.

Gil Meredith had been thinking of returning East for some time and when Lola talked to him that evening and offered to buy his house, he made up his mind. 'It's a damn pity things ain't worked out with you and Pat,' he said to her as they agreed on a price and arranged for the necessary exchange of papers. 'But everyone said you two were a mismatch from the start. Pat's a good man, but I guess you're a little too exotic for the likes of him.'

'I haven't given up on him yet, Gil,' she said, 'and as for being exotic, I've had enough of it. I'm going to be an ordinary woman, just you wait and see.'

Gil smiled aside. He doubted she could ever be anything but extraordinary.

But Lola made a good effort to prove them all wrong. She made a quick trip to San Francisco where she settled up some of her business dealings, and ran into Nathaniel Willis who had arrived in the Golden Gate. She informed him that she was not in the least interested in pursuing any kind of romance. Instead, she went on a domestic shopping spree for furniture, carpets, crockery, cutlery, material for curtains and to everyone's consternation, a menagerie to keep her company. In addition to animals such as a horse, goat, a few more dogs and cats, she also acquired several parrots and a grizzly bear cub. These matters attended to, she dressed in her infamous black finery and trailing the bear on a chain, went in search of Pat who had moved back to the city.

She found him at a table in one of the more notorious gambling saloons. It was the sort of place that had several accommodating women draped about, and one that no respectable wife would ever enter.

There was an unusual hush and gaped mouths as Lola marched her way in with the bear lolling along, his chain clanking loudly.

Pat's face paled and he coughed as he saw his wife. 'Oh, for God's sake, Lola,' he said, 'is this some kind of new burlesque act?'

If she was hurt by his lack of enthusiasm at seeing her, she didn't let it show. 'I must talk to you, Pat. But not in this dump.'

At first Pat refused to move, but the thought of Lola causing a scene forced him to follow her out into the street. San Francisco was a city used to strange sights, but Lola and her husband walking along the sidewalk with a grizzly cub between them was still enough to turn all heads.

With the bear tied up in the yard of her hotel, Lola pushed a spluttering Pat up the stairs to her room. 'You're not well,' she said as soon as the door was closed. 'Have you seen a doctor about that cough?'

'No, and why this sudden concern?'

'You're my husband, I worry about you.'

'Oh, don't give me that,' he said with a choked laugh. 'Were you worrying about me when you

were tossing in the hay with that kraut?’

Lola kept a straight face, but ignored his sarcasm. ‘I want you to come back with me to Grass Valley. I want us to make a real home together.’

‘You amaze me, Lola. You think you can just barge back into my life and I’ll follow along like that damned bear. Well, I won’t.’

Her eyes widened seductively as she touched his face. ‘Please, Pat. I need you.’

He edged away. ‘And I’m not falling for that again.’

But she persisted, pushing him up against the wall, trapping him against her. ‘I know I’ve made mistakes, but I sincerely want to give up my old life. You are the only one who can help me to do it. I’m finished with the stage and all that it involves. Have you forgotten the good times we’ve had, Pat? Riding up in the Sierra, sleeping under the stars?’

Pat burst out into a coughing fit and Lola’s hand caressed his cheek. ‘You need me too, Pat,’ she said. ‘I’ll nurse you - make you better. In that mountain air.’

He took a deep gulp of air and gripped her shoulders. ‘You’re living in a dream, Lola,’ he said. ‘Why can’t you get it into your head that it’s *over* between us? I don’t want to indulge in your fantasies picking pansies. At the moment it’s all a novelty to you. Just wait until you’re stuck up there under six feet of snow and unable to move.’

‘Snow?’ She faltered.

He shook his head. ‘Jezz. Don’t tell me you haven’t even thought that far ahead? Life in California isn’t one long summer, Lola.’

Her face tightened and she backed away. ‘Of course I know it snows in the mountains,’ she snapped at him. ‘I’m not a fool.’

‘You’re many things, Lola, but certainly never that.’

They glared at each other for a few moments, Pat’s eyes hard and his body rigidly defensive.

Lola was the first to back down. She gave a shrug, her expression softened. ‘Have you any message for Gil?’

Pat gave a relieved sigh. ‘No, just say hello – that I’ll see him someplace or the other.’

She nodded and went to the door, indicating that it was time for him to leave. ‘Goodbye, Pat,’ she said. ‘If you change your mind, you know where to find me.’

He gave her a quizzical glance and brushed past her. When he was half way down the stairs he looked back at the hotel landing, but Lola had closed her door. For a fleeting second he wondered if it was possible, that she really meant it, that she truly cared for him and would change. He shook himself. ‘Nah,’ he said and hurried out into the street.

Lola lived for a time in Harriet Robson’s boarding house while the renovations to Gil’s house were being completed.

With the introduction of more sophisticated mining methods, a new breed of people had started moving to Grass Valley. The old rough bachelor existence of the Forty-Niners was changing. The whores were being ousted and respectable wives and children were taking up residence.

Where exactly the infamous Countess fitted in was difficult for many of them to figure out. While she was certainly in a class way above the average saloon girl, she thought nothing of walking into a saloon alone, chatting to the men, puffing on monstrous cigars and even ordering a neat whiskey or throat-scraper or two. On the other hand, she seemed keen to be accepted as a respectable resident. The famous tantrums were nowhere to be seen.

When Mrs. Robson’s daughter was ill, Lola often sat by her bedside for hours, tending to her needs and keeping her amused with stories.

Mary Ann Crabtree ran another boarding house next door and she often exchanged gossip with Harriet across the fence.

‘I hear tell there’s a mighty shipment of furniture on its way from Bavaria,’ said Harriet.

‘My goodness. Where will she put it all?’

‘Well you wouldn’t believe what she’s done to that old cottage. It looks twice as big inside as I

seem to remember. The Countess let me have a peek inside the other day. There's walls been ripped out and fancy sliding panels put in instead. You can make rooms to fit whatever you want. Slide one wall this way and you got yourself a great big drawing room. Slide it another and you got a dining room or another bedroom. And she's gone and put in a genuine marble fireplace, and everyone's seen those pretty new windows with real Frenchie glass.'

'Fit for royalty to come a'visitin' do you reckon?'

'Well Mary Ann, I wondered about that myself, but the Countess told me she has no plans for illustrious visitors. She's just plain tired of that rip-roarin' life she was leading. She likes us Grass Valley folk well enough to stay here for good, she says.'

Mrs. Crabtree shook her head. 'Well, who would have thought such a thing.'

'You know, when she first came here I thought the same as everyone else,' said Harriet, 'that she was a scarlet woman of the worst sort. All that ruckus with the King of Bavaria and such, and the lewd dancing. Yet she was happy to sit at my Susie's bed and read to her and tell her stories and not once was I a'feard she might fill Susie's head with immoral thoughts. She's a real lady. It just goes to show you can't believe what's printed in those durned newspapers. And I saw her do that Spider Dance down at the Alta Hall. There's nothin' to it. I've seen scantier clothes and more leg at a temperance picnic.'

A red-haired, freckle-faced girl skipped out from Mary-Ann's kitchen. She pirouetted around her mother's skirts and hopped from one foot to the other as she grinned boldly at Harriet. 'Morning, Mrs. Robson. Do you want to watch my new dance?'

'Well hello there Lotta. My goodness, Mary-Ann, does that child never stop prancing about?'

Mary-Ann sighed as she looked down lovingly at her daughter. 'Never, Harriet. I wish there was someone to take her in hand and show her how to do it properly.'

Lotta pretended to be a butterfly, flitting between the sycamores.

'You know, Mary-Ann, the Countess might be happy to teach her a step or two.'

'Do you think so? Why that would be grand.'

'I'm sure she will. I'll ask her at supper tonight.'

Every time the diminutive six year old Lotta Crabtree bounced into her house, Lola's heart would ache a little for the child she'd never had. Lotta was feisty and quick-witted and although her own mother often found her a handful, Lola saw something of herself in this only child banished to a remote wilderness. She understood her perfectly. They were firm friends from the moment they met.

Together they would roll back the carpet in the drawing room and to the accompaniment of polkas or waltzes on the player-piano, Lola would teach her dance steps. Flicking up their hems the pair would laugh and sing and tap merrily across the wooden floorboards.

Lotta adored Lola and was always keen to impress her by making sure she practiced. She was also the only child in the town not afraid of Major, Lola's grizzly bear who spent most of the daylight hours tied to a post on her veranda.

With the first flurries of snow, Kirk Adler abruptly returned from another spell of his mountain wanderings. Lola was not particularly keen to see him. She told him quite frankly that she might ride with him occasionally and he was quite welcome to join in the Wednesday evening salons which she had instituted for both the residents of Grass Valley and any visitors to the town, but that there would be no further intimate favors.

Kirk was hurt but too much a gentleman to protest and resigned himself to doing odd jobs for her, such as building a stable at the rear of her house and organizing a wine cellar around an underground spring. He never gave up hope that Lola would change her mind, even when he suspected he had a serious rival in the young entrepreneur, Johnny Southwick, who let everyone know he was in love with the Countess.

One bright morning a few days before Christmas, Kirk decided to go hunting up in the mountains for a deer to add to the festive larder. He asked Lola to join him, but she had arranged a Christmas party for the young children of the town and had much organizing to do. It was the first time she

had ever done such a thing and the fact that the parents were happy to let their children visit her had thrilled her. For years she had been snubbed by other women, yet here in Grass Valley she had been accepted by most of them without question. This was a precious time for her. Hunting could wait.

Lola had decorated a large fir in the German fashion with bows and candles and tiny hand-wrapped packages of sweetmeats for the children. So as not to alarm the little ones, Major was locked away out of sight but her other animals roamed free.

The children arrived on time with Lotta Crabtree confidently leading the way. Lola met them at the door and presented each child with a small gift. There was music, games around the Christmas tree and a great deal of laughter. Belle was rushed off her feet bringing out trays of cakes and cookies which disappeared as fast as she put them down.

When the winter afternoon closed in and the children finally went home, Lola was as exhausted and as exhilarated as if she had given one of her better stage performances. Only this hadn't been performing and she had genuinely enjoyed the lively spirits of the children who had not yet learned any adult artifice. She retired early and it was not until she woke the next morning that she remembered Kirk.

Johnny Southwick was among the group of men who went out to look for him and, as he knew Lola best, it was decided that he should be the one to tell her the bad news.

Lola met him at her front door. He was panting as if he had been running. Snow trimmed the edge of his hat and the lapels of his heavy coat. His eyes were the eyes of a man who had just seen death.

'How did it happen?' she asked without a quiver in her voice.

'Can't say for sure, Countess. Looks as if he was stalking a deer perhaps, slipped somehow and his gun went off.'

'Was it quick?'

'Oh, yes - clear through the head.'

'He didn't suffer.'

'No.'

She sighed, her eyes strangely blank. 'Thank you, Johnny. You must be freezing. Come in and have a brandy.'

Johnny removed his hat, shook off the snow, and followed her into her well-heated house, trying not to think about the minor confrontation he'd had with Adler when the Bavarian had discovered he had a rival. 'You don't want to link yourself with her, Johnny, my boy,' he had warned him. 'The French writer, Alexandre Dumas, was right when he said she's got the fatal touch.'

Johnny remembered how he had laughed at Adler. He couldn't tell possibly tell her it that it looked more like suicide than an accident and his hand shook as he accepted the crystal glass offered.

'It's the best cognac,' she murmured. 'And there's more than enough to last the winter.'

He swallowed the brandy in one gulp and Lola poured him a second, all the while with a strange smile about her lips, her eyes half closed as if she were going into a trance. She was so beautiful, yet vulnerable. He was charged with an overwhelming desire to kiss her, to make love to her right there in her parlor.

'Life is fragile, Johnny,' she murmured. 'We must savor each moment as if it were our last.'

'Countess ... Lola ...' He stepped forward and touched her exquisitely molded cheek with his fingertips. It was as cold as marble.

Her eyes flew wide and the blank expression dissipated into fierceness. 'No, Johnny, you have just seen what can happen.'

'I don't care,' he said in a husky voice. 'I'm willing to take that risk ...I love you.'

She let him continue with his caresses, allowing the return of those physical sensations that were both her joys, and her demons. When he kissed her, she responded hungrily.

After Johnny had gone, Lola wrapped in herself in her gown and sat by her stove, her head bowed in misery. He had been a far better lover than she had been expecting. He was young and

vigorous and had learned how to pleasure a woman. She should have had no trouble in reaching the pinnacle of passion for which her body was crying out. But it simply had not happened. She had wrestled in his arms, surging towards a climax that never came, whilst trying to rid her mind of the cavalcade of faces of all the men who had entered and spent their seeds in that voracious but ultimately barren body. The last, Kirk, was half smiling, but the saddest face of all was Henri's. In the end, Lola Montez, the woman of passion, had to play-act the finale. Johnny was none the wiser and he had crept away home with a broad grin on his face.

Although Johnny had tried to suggest it was an accident, she knew full well that Kirk had killed himself in the same Prussian fashion as had Reinhard. Her love was a poison.

What was it about her that had condemned so many men? What deadly gift had she received from the gods?

The questions had plagued her before, yet each time she had managed to conquer the thoughts by not blaming herself but the circumstances of her life and by throwing herself into the arms of yet another man where she could lose her conscience in the delights of the act of love. But now the act of love would no longer mask the truth. She must find the blame in herself.

She raised head, stared up at the timber ceiling. 'Why me?' she asked the unseen in a hoarse voice. 'I can't live with this curse any more.'

Belle moved quietly into the parlor, with a pile of wood in her arms ready to restock the fire. She pretended not to have heard the anguished cry and attempted to distract her. 'Madame,' she said, as she put the wood on the floor, 'one of the men, Joe, who went to search for the doctor was injured while trying to retrieve his body. He lives alone and has no-one to care for him. I have prepared some soup. May I have your permission to take it to him?'

Lola took a few moments to refocus her thoughts. 'What? Yes, of course. No, wait a minute.'

She met her maid's calm eyes and saw reflected in them a way to begin to absolve herself. Her anguish eased slightly. 'Give me the soup,' she said. 'I'll go.'

33.

'There was a newspaperman here the other day,' said Harriet to Mary-Ann across the fence, 'and he said they wouldn't believe it back East. In fact, he said, they wouldn't believe it anywhere in the world that Lola Montez is living a quiet life.'

'Well, I don't really know what all the fuss is. I reckon most of what's been written about her is bunkum. She's a little strange, what with that bear and them parrots and such, but there's a good heart beating somewhere beneath that bosom. Look at how she's taken care of Joe who broke a leg when he went out after that crazy German. And Lotta loves her, and children ain't usually wrong about folk.'

'The scribbler asked me if she was having any romances,' said Harriet. 'I told him that in a town this size a person can't pee that some other person don't know about it. If men were stopping over betimes after those parties, we'd sure be able to tell. Somebody told me that Johnny Southwick once saw more than just the wallpaper of her parlor, but if he did, he sure ain't seeing it any more, not with the way he mopes about drowning his sorrows in the saloons.'

'They should just leave her be.'

'Yes, that's what I told the newspaperman. He went away a mite disappointed. He'll probably have to invent something.'

Lola, who still hated snow, did manage to find something appealing in its purity and its silence. The people of the town told her so much snow was unusual. The mining had to be suspended as the ditches were all frozen and sleighs and sleds were retrieved from storage.

Wearing a fur-lined cape Lola would often travel to Nevada City by sleigh. There she would

collect her stores, writing paper and books that she had ordered. These journeys, with sleigh bells jangling as she sped across the smooth whiteness, reminded some observers of an image from a book of fairy tales, or that of a Russian princess.

Once back in her house, and in her favorite spot by the stove she would smoke, write reams of letters to her friends, do her needlework or delve into the mysteries of life in the many books she had acquired on spiritualism. The parties were suspended and, like Major, who was sleeping the winter away in a shed, Lola was in a kind of hibernation.

Her first temper outbreak of the year coincided with the coming of spring. In March, Major grumpily stirred and bit Lola on the hand when she went to feed him. Without a thought for the bear's ultimate fate and to the amusement of the residents, she placed an advertisement in the local newspaper, 'Grizzly Bear for Sale'. Only later when the animal was sold, and to her great sorrow, did she discover the animal had been used for bear-baiting purposes and had probably been savaged to death by dogs.

'Mary-Ann, what's this I heard about Lotta dancing in public?'

'Well, Harriet, it's like this. The Countess took my Lotta over to Rough-and-Ready the other day. Her horse happened to throw a shoe and she visited old Fippen, the blacksmith, you know, the one who plays tunes on that anvil of his, well, the Countess picked Lotta up and stood her on the anvil and Fippen played the tune and Lotta danced a jig. Gathered quite a crowd, so I'm told.'

'Well, fancy that. You might be putting Lotta on the stage yourself?'

'You know, Harriet, I'm seriously thinking of it. If I could make money any other way than slaving over ungrateful guests in a boarding house, I'd sure be doing it.'

'She'd need to have the right training.'

'Well, until there's some kind of proper dance school hereabouts, I'm sure the Countess won't mind to keep on teaching her. She's fond of my Lotta.'

As spring gave way to summer, Lola took to spending more time outdoors. She tended her garden herself and became a familiar sight in a simple calico dress, working with her hoe and spade. She often went without a bonnet and her face took on the glow of a tan.

The eclectic garden amused the locals. After excursions into the woods, Lola often returned with the roots of wild flowers and shrubs which she planted next to rose bushes and violets. When she cultivated a row of cacti, there were snorts of derision. Who in their right mind would put a cactus in a garden? Lola ignored her critics, as she had always done. She was sure one day others would discover the bizarre beauty of these spiky plants.

Although she reinstated her Wednesday evening salons when she would dress in one of her best brocades and wear her famous jewels and entertain visitors with repartee, music, wine, and good food, much of her week was filled with her own solitude. If she wasn't in her garden, she would ride up into the hills to a special place that she had discovered in a grove of birches. There she would lie back among the ferns and grasses, close her eyes and reach out for a few illusive moments of complete peace.

She was sure Henri came to her there. She could feel his touch in the fern fronds brushing against her skin. His breath in the puffs of summer-scented breeze. His voice in the fluttering of the leaves overhead. And there were other spirits there too, shadowy images of the past that hovered beyond the trees - a soldier father with laughter in his eyes and an *ayah* whose voice was as melodious as the bells on her ankles.

Sometimes she would whisper aloud. 'Papa, is that you? Parvati? I know you're there. I'm not afraid. Come to me, please. Bon-Bon?'

Once as she lay on the grass, trying to conjure her visions into reality and muttering, she was spied upon by a passing miner who couldn't wait to get back to the saloons to tell what he had seen.

'Well, I've always known she was eccentric, Mary-Ann, but talking to herself in the middle of

the woods makes you wonder if she isn't more than a little crazy.'

'Perhaps she was praying, Harriet?'

'Nobody lies flat on their back to pray, Mary-Ann.'

'Well the Countess never did things the same way as others. I must admit she don't look as smartly turned out as she used to be. Lately I've seen her wearing the same dress three days in a row.'

'Hm. Fancy a woman like her letting go of her appearance. That's a sure sign her mind is unhealthy. I'm beginning to wonder if perhaps you shouldn't let Lotta visit her quite so often?'

'She won't be. I'm thinking of moving on. There's a dancing school opening at Nevada City. Lotta has talent. No point in letting it go to waste.'

'I'll miss you, Mary-Ann Crabtree.'

Twice in the next few months Lola came close to joining her spirit world. In the first she suffered a near-fatal fall when her horse failed to jump a creek and she landed in the water to be pinned under by the horse and some fallen timber. Luckily, she was discovered within minutes and rescued. No bones were broken, but she was severely bruised for several days.

In the second, she went on what was intended to be a two-week camping trip into the high Sierras to the Truckee Meadows with several residents from Grass Valley and a few visitors from San Francisco. It was destined to be a disaster.

They had already departed when Lola discovered one of them, Alonzo Delano, was a newspaperman. This put her in a wary state of mind from the start. She wished she hadn't agreed on such an extended trip with a group of people she hardly knew. Her new life had been largely free of the press and she liked it that way.

Alonzo Delano, who had also failed to mention that he was a good friend of the departed Pat Hull, did not notice Lola's further deepening of mood when she discovered that fact.

'Pat's in good spirits,' he cheerfully said to her as the party sat around the camp fire on their first night out. 'He has a new job with *The Examiner*. His health is restored. The mountains did not agree with him.'

'Is that a way of suggesting I did not agree with him?' sniped Lola, the glow in her eyes matching that of the camp fire.

'No, Pat is just a straightforward fellow, not used to hobnobbing with the aristocracy.'

'I don't care for your sarcasm.'

'None was intended.'

'So what is intended, Mr. Delano? If you are trying to draw me into talking about Pat, you'd better think again. The man was a dolt.'

Alonzo's face flushed and he set his jaw. 'He's nothing of the kind. Pat Hull is one of the smartest, most honorable men I know.'

'An honorable man doesn't up and leave his wife to fend for herself.'

The members of the party who knew that wasn't exactly the true state of affairs exchanged puzzled glances. Louis Delevan, a vague-minded newcomer to Grass Valley, made the mistake of laughing. 'Seems to me that ain't no problem for you.'

Lola didn't have her whip handy, but her rifle was close at hand. She jumped to her feet and pointed it at Delevan. 'You butt out of this, you worm.'

Delevan raised his arms. 'Lor' sakes, woman, I ain't meanin' no harm ...'

'Countess, let's cool this down ...'

Lola spun on Alonzo. 'You started it, you son-of-a-bitch. Sneaking into this camp so you can spy and write filthy lies about me.'

Alonzo was also on his feet challenging Lola with equal fierceness. 'I don't sneak, Countess, and I take exception to your attitude. Now put that thing away before someone gets hurt.'

Lola's eyes traveled rapidly between the two men. The blood that had rushed to her head drained just as quickly and she felt slightly dizzy. But she refused to let them have the last say. 'You'll both

apologize first,' she said.

'You're the one should apologize,' muttered Delevan.

'Like hell!' Lola raised the rifle again and aimed at the man's head.

'Jeez, I don't believe this!' Alonzo took advantage of Lola's unsteadiness on her feet and grabbed the barrel of the gun. 'This is enough,' he barked.

Lola relinquished the gun as her head spun. She sank to the earth.

'She's coon-crazy,' muttered Delevan.

Lola's head cleared and she raised her eyes. 'And you're a prick!'

'Pretty language for a Countess.'

'I'll give you pretty, you fucking mule brain!'

'Holy cow ... I heard sweeter words from a whore.'

Lola flung herself forward and grabbed Delevan's ankles. He fell backwards, narrowly missing the fire, but she was on him, pummeling his chest before he knew what was happening. Alonzo and the others quickly pulled Lola off him.

'For God's sake, we've got to live together for two weeks,' said Alonzo. 'Let's call truce, eh?'

'Not until you apologize.'

'Fine,' said Alonzo, 'I apologize.'

But Delevan frowned angrily at Lola. 'I ain't apologizin' for nothin'.' He turned his back and headed off into the darkness.

In the morning it was discovered he had gone, and so were the all the pack-mules carrying the food and spare ammunition.

The party took two days to find its way back to Grass Valley, while Delevan was lost a great deal longer and, when finally discovered, was still able to make a joke that he had wanted to starve Lola Montez out of the mountains. Alonzo Delano headed straight back to San Francisco and Lola's name hit the newspapers again for the first time in months.

Lola's peaceful frame of mind had been thoroughly disturbed by the camping trip. She suffered again from blanking episodes and bouts of illness and was belligerent towards Belle. She blamed Delano. Her opinion of newspapermen sunk even lower.

The job that could have been Pat Hull's, editor of the *Grass Valley Telegraph*, had been filled by a hot-tempered alcoholic called Henry Shipley. For a long time he had carried on a fierce editorial rivalry with the nearby *Nevada Journal* in which violent insults were flung about in print. With the reawakening of interest in Lola's activities, it was inevitable that sooner or later she would come into his firing line.

Shipley's derogatory account of some passing singers was the first trigger. Lola leaped to their defense by writing to the *Nevada Journal* a strongly-worded protest at hard-working stage performers being criticized by sniveling, hard-drinking editors.

Shipley retaliated by marching around to Lola's cottage to have it out with her. Although she had been sick in bed, she found the strength to meet him at the door with her pistol in hand. News of this stand-off swept through the gold mining area like wild fire. It was followed a few days later by a real fight that went beyond the confines of Grass Valley and made it as far as London and Munich.

Harriet Robson had much to tell when she next met Mary-Ann Crabtree who had been touring the camps with the fledgling dancer, Lotta.

'And so there she is, bold as brass, threatening to blow Shipley's brains out. He says she deserves to have her throat cut. Lordy, what a to-do! We thought we'd have to send for the marshal. And that was just the start. A few days later, Shipley writes that the Countess is insolent and a barefaced hypocrite. And that's nothing to what he says about her when he's in his cups at the saloon.'

'My - and what did she do then?'

'Well, it's the middle of the morning and she marches down to the Golden Gate saloon and bails him up at the bar with her whip. She flicks it and draws blood on the shoulder. He grabs the whip from her. She calls him words that would make a miner blush and spits in his face.'

‘Can this be true? She was always such a lady before.’

‘Well, nigh on a dozen folk were present and swear it’s true. Shipley’s got the cuts to prove it.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘Someone grabs the whip off Shipley. She appeals to the miners to help her. They laugh and she has to back down. And she rides all the way to Nevada City to tell her story to the *Journal*.’

‘I still find it hard to believe.’

‘Well, that wasn’t all. Reverend Wilson heard tell she did dance in the altogether at one of those Wednesday shindigs of hers.’

‘Never!’

‘And he cries from the pulpit that she is a hussy: “shameful devil in the guise of a dancer” were his words.’

‘Harriet, I do declare you are exaggerating.’

‘Pon my honor, Mary-Ann. Ask anyone in Grass Valley.’

Lola had cracked one of her pretty French windows, slashed several curtains and smashed half-a-dozen plates before Belle managed to calm her down.

‘I thought they were my friends!’ Her voice was still hysterical as Belle placed a firm arm about her shoulder and led her to a chair. ‘My friends. I took them food and knitted caps and mittens for them. I tended their animals and their children when they were sick - and this is the thanks I get.’

‘It’s all Mr. Shipley’s fault, Madame. No-one else. The people here all like you.’

‘And what about that Reverend Wilson? Who was the sly lying bastard who told him I dance naked in front of my Wednesday visitors? Who was it? I can’t trust any of them. Not any more.’

‘It was probably someone like Mr. Delevan, Madame.’

‘I’ll kill the son-of-a-bitch.’

‘No, you won’t, Madame. But you must watch your language.’

Lola put her hands to her head and uttered another scream. ‘I hate this place. I should have never come here!’

Belle forcibly gripped Lola’s arms and pinned them down into her lap. She glared at her. ‘You don’t mean that, Madame. The people of Grass Valley have all come to love you. Just because one or two have the sour grapes isn’t a reason to blame them all.’

Lola’s eyes responded with a blank fury. ‘It’s the end. I can’t live here any more.’

‘You’ll feel different when you’ve calmed down.’ Belle managed to maneuver a cup of a special herbal tea into Lola’s hand. She had quickly concocted it when she heard the first stirrings of Lola’s tantrum. Its mixture was a secret only to Belle, but it included a certain quantity of laudanum.

Lola obediently sipped at the cup and soon she relaxed. She looked vacantly around at her damage. ‘Did I do that?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘What am I going to do, Belle?’ she said with a sob in her voice. ‘It’s starting all over again. I don’t think I can take it any more.’

‘It’s just a passing trouble, Madame,’ said Belle coolly. ‘Mr. Shipley has been sacked from the paper. He won’t bother you any more.’

‘And what about the Reverend Wilson? For a year-and-a-half I’ve lived here in peace and not once did he say anything against me. Why is he raking over old coals?’

‘I’ve no idea, Madame. Perhaps you ought to front him direct?’

The next day Lola was seen wearing a voluminous cape and striding along the banks of Wolf Creek on her way to the Reverend Wilson’s cottage. His wife was stunned when she hammered on the front door and pushed past, discovering the Reverend half-dozing in his parlor.

As he clambered to his feet, she threw off the cape to reveal her spider costume over a maillot.

‘This is how the devil dances, Reverend. Unless that God of yours has given you the skill to see through several layers of velvet, silk and gauze, I defy you to tell me how anyone could call this buck naked?’

The man of God was flooded with embarrassment and apologized profusely.

Lola slammed a small bag of coins on the table as a donation to his church and marched back out.

Within hours the Wilsons' gossipy housemaid had made sure an embroidered version of Lola's visit was doing the rounds of the saloons. By nightfall it was said she had stayed for tea and given the Reverend an exhibition of the Spider Dance right there in his front parlor, complete with prop spiders.

Although Lola returned home from the Reverend's house feeling somewhat vindicated, her heart was still hollow. Grass Valley had been growing rapidly over the past year. The rough timber shops and houses were giving way to more solid brick edifices. The old mining population had accepted her without judgment, but newcomers were wary and treated her with a mixture of awe and derision. Children no longer visited her to sing and dance, or play with her animals. Most of all, she missed young Lotta Crabtree.

The recent mishaps had slowly started the restless tides moving within her once again. Mines in which she had been encouraged to invest by Johnny Southwick were not doing as well as others. That specter of money was once more destined to haunt her.

A letter was waiting for her. It bore a New York postmark and was from her old nemesis, John Dale.

'Dear Countess, Just a missive to impart some news, good or bad as depends on your current status, especially any particular marital condition you find yourself in at the present time ...'

Lola blew her cheeks with impatience. To think this wordy, presumptuous man once aspired to write poetry?

'Contrary to my earlier advice, it appears the report on George Heald succumbing to the waters of the Tagus River at Lisbon was false. He survived the accident, but his present whereabouts are unknown. Would you like me to trace him, or would it be best to let the sleeping dog lie, so to speak?'

She didn't fail to notice the word 'dog' was underlined, but closed her eyes and tried to control her fast-beating heart. She ought to have been furious with Dale's attitude, but she was relieved to know poor pet George was alive after all. Perhaps the curse with which she was sure she was afflicted might be weakening at last. It was also ironic that she wasn't a widow after all when she married Pat Hull. It was just as well their Californian divorce had already been made final. To have gone through another sensational bigamy trial would have been too much. She read the last paragraph.

'As you may already have been informed, Queen Therese of Bavaria died from cholera this past month and ex-King Ludwig is free to marry again. Should this information spur you to removing yourself from your hideaway in Grass Valley (and keeping in mind the special relationship we have between us insofar as your past deeds) I should deem it a privilege to be the first to have notice of any impending joyous event. Regards, J. Dale.'

The letter shook in her fingers. Her momentary happiness for George turned into sadness. Dear Ludwig who, despite all his other romantic attachments throughout his life, had always been devoted to his Therese. Although they had not communicated for over two years, she had begun to regret much of her behavior towards him. There would always be a very special place in her heart for the old King.

She smiled ruefully and shook her head. 'No, Mr. Dale,' she murmured. 'There will be no joyous event. There will be never be another marriage.'

She rushed to her bedroom, changed out of her costume and into her riding gear. Within minutes she was galloping up towards her secret place in the woods. There, she fell to her knees and raised tear-filled eyes to the sky.

'It's a sign isn't it, Bon-Bon?' she prayed. 'Oh please guide me to my new path.'

PART V

‘The noblest courage, after all, is to dare to meet one’s self - to sit down face to face with one’s own life, and confront all those deeds which may have influenced the mind or manners of society, for good or evil.’

(Lola Montez - *Autobiography*, 1858)

34.

As a packed stagecoach carrying the Pacific Players bounced its way across the rutted dirt track from Downieville to Grass Valley, one member of the company tried his best to block out the incessant noise and human and horse smells while he pondered his future.

It was not an unusual pastime for Noel Follin. Since arriving in California as a Forty-Niner, he had never ceased believing that one day his ship of success would come in. For a young man who had once been used to an ample paternal allowance and an easy life in New York, scrabbling for the elusive gold dust had been an exercise in futility, and he had ended up drifting through a series of jobs in mining camps that barely kept him in pocket money.

Of the group of men with whom he had traveled to ‘see the elephant’, only one had made himself a modest fortune and retired back East. Most of the others had either become drunks, died in mining accidents or in one of the frequent cholera outbreaks. After five years in California, he was feeling very much alone. But being alone was preferable to going back to live with his wife and children in Cincinnati.

Just thinking of his wife Carrie gave him an ache, and certainly not the ache of love. He didn’t exactly hate her - she was after all the mother of his two children - but he disliked her intensely. Even after five years, he could not think of the woman who had trapped him into marriage as anything more than a fortune-seeker who had been sadly disappointed when she discovered that his father wasn’t willing to continue the allowance once his son was married. He had sent money to her when he could, always with the promise that soon he would be coming home with more. The truth was he simply didn’t have the courage to return to Cincinnati empty-handed.

In the past few months things had improved a little. One of his many jobs in San Francisco had been working in a theater box office. He met many performers and a life as an actor had started to appeal to him. Although untrained, he had a natural ability at changing his voice and, since being given his first small part, hadn’t bothered with any other kind of work, even if the pay was usually pitiful. It was a life that often provided more interesting adventures than while using a pick and shovel.

Tonight, they were due to play at the Alta Hall in Grass Valley and the manager had said there was a chance that the famous Madame Montez might happen to be in the audience.

Belle hurried about the parlor, making sure that the cracked window pane would not be visible behind the drapes. She ran her fingers over their red velvet folds. If the lamps were turned low, no one would notice her hasty darning of Lola’s slashes. She never ceased to be amazed at the damage one woman’s temper could cause in a matter of minutes. Turning to the kitchen, she made sure that the cook had baked ample cakes for that evening’s salon. The few bottles of champagne left from the cellar had been cooling in buckets. Everything was ready, but Belle had a feeling that with money getting scarce, these Wednesday evening salons would soon be a thing of the past.

Lola had returned late from her visit to the woods. She had seemed distant and disinterested in bathing and dressing but when Belle suggested she cancel the salon for that evening, a change had

come over her. She had straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. ‘No, Belle,’ she had said. ‘Never let it be said that I disappoint my public. No matter how broken I feel in spirit, the show must always go on.’

An hour later, she was ready. Although the passage of the years might be detected in the fine lines appearing on her face, Lola’s figure was still bewitching and her waist as narrow as when she had been a girl. Belle thought she had never seen Lola looking quite so beautiful in her black gown studded with diamantes, and a black lace mantilla for her hair. Lola had also ordered Belle to unpack her red sash of aristocratic rank and had it placed diagonally across her bosom, fixing it with her diamond star.

Lola studied the effect in her mirror for a long time, as if she, too, sensed that tonight held the beginning of the end of another phase in her life. She took a deep breath and said to herself, ‘Well, Countess, let’s see how the cards shuffle tonight.’

Noel lurked in the corner of the parlor next to a large potted cactus and sipped at his champagne. He kept one eye on the plant’s fine spines and wondered why anyone would keep such a grotesque object indoors. Ever since arriving in this strange house, with its mixture of sophisticated exotica and rustic charm, he had felt awkward. Most of the men surrounding Madame Montez were full of banter or showing off their repartee, talking about worldly subjects such as politics and finance, neither of which had ever interested him in the least.

He was in the process of stifling a yawn when the eye of his hostess caught his. He flushed and tried to edge further behind the cactus. He found the infamous Lola Montez was more than a little intimidating, dressed in that curious royal get-up and puffing on a great cheroot. His heart sank when he saw her remove herself from the men around her and saunter across the parlor towards him. He had read enough about her to know that she ate young men like him for breakfast.

‘Now, let me see. You played Claude in the play tonight, didn’t you?’

‘Yes ... er ... um ...’

‘Madame Montez or Countess. I answer to either. I am not fussy.’

‘Er... yes. Madame. Countess’ Noel blinked hard for a few seconds to avoid a large puff of her smoke and was instantly dazzled by the blue intensity of her eyes.

‘And your name is?’

‘Um ... Frank Folland.’

‘I know a stage name when I hear one,’ she said slightly impatiently. ‘You don’t look like a ’Frank’ to me.’

‘Well, my real name is French - Follin. Noel Follin.’

‘Ah. Parlez-vous français?’

‘Oui, Madame.’

Lola stubbed out her cheroot in the sand surrounding the cactus and he continued to feel himself awash in her blue stare. She reached out and took his hand. ‘Ah - Noel - now that is a name that really suits you. Come and sit with me a while.’

Her hand was firm and warm in his and he followed her to a serpentine-backed sofa upholstered in a red and gold material. He had seen one like it once in New York and knew it would have cost someone like him at least a year in wages.

‘So, Noel, tell me about yourself,’ she continued in French. ‘How do you come to be a traveling player in this far-flung corner of the world?’

Her smile was warm. She wasn’t at all as fearsome as he had imagined and his nervousness started to dissipate. ‘I could ask the same of you, Madame,’ he said, letting a grin escape.

Her laughter was like bells, her eyes more sparkling than the diamonds she wore.

‘I made a deliberate choice to be here,’ she said, turning over his hand, studying his palm, sending a strangely tingling sensation running the length of his spine. ‘But in you, I can detect a reluctance.’

She widened her eyes before lowering her long lashes, making his heart beat a little faster. ‘You

are no gold digger, yet something compels you to stay.’

Within minutes he found himself telling her everything: about Papa, the son of a French immigrant who had done well for himself in New York and Mama, who was Papa’s mistress. Normally he was embarrassed to admit that he was illegitimate, but he sensed Lola Montez would never be fazed by such a revelation. He told her about Miriam, his much loved half-sister and produced the photograph of her that he carried everywhere.

Lola studied it with genuine interest. ‘Why she’s beautiful. Is she an actress too?’

‘She would like to be, but Papa would be horrified. He says it’s a fair occupation for an illegitimate son, but it would never do for his rightful daughter.’

‘Fathers are like that.’ She closed her fingers around his palm. ‘Now, Noel, tell me about the woman you love. Is it she who keeps you here in California?’

The frank and intimate questions caught him by surprise. He’d never told anyone about Carrie, let alone pondered on whether he loved her. He bit his lip for a moment. ‘There isn’t any woman. At least, not now.’

‘But once there was?’

‘It’s been over for a long time, but there are children involved, and so I still have paternal obligations. They are back East.’

Sensing his difficulty she smiled knowingly and gripped his hand tighter. ‘There is no need to speak of what is painful. In matters of both the agonies and joys of human heart, there is no-one who understands better than I do.’

Thoroughly captured by the spell she was spinning, he wallowed in her gaze for several blissful seconds until someone interrupted them, urging Lola to give an impromptu song and dance.

She winked before releasing his hand. ‘Don’t go away, Noel,’ she said in a hushed tone. ‘I do so want to practice my French with you a little more.’

Much later, in the bunk-room at the Brassy House, Noel lay back and gazed through the narrow window at the stars in the clear night sky. For once the snoring of the other members of the troupe with whom he was forced to share accommodation didn’t bother him. He didn’t want to sleep anyway, not if it might mean losing that graceful, radiant image imprinted on his mind. He knew now that at last he may have finally found some purpose to his nomadic and unsatisfying existence. And it involved the most enchantingly beautiful woman in the whole world.

Ever since her schooldays, Lola had never had patience with paperwork. She looked just once at the piles of bills and receipts covering her desk and swept them aside and onto the floor. Since Kirk Adler’s death, she’d had one or two itinerant clerks to assist her, but the fact of the matter was that her bookwork was in a shocking state. She had no idea how much she had in the bank or how much she owed. Up until now the Grass Valley merchants had been flattered to have her as a customer but she sensed a change in their attitude. Just that day Belle had been informed her standing order for truffles and champagne had been canceled and in future no orders would be delivered to her cottage until they had been paid for.

‘I simply can’t be bothered with all this,’ she repeated to Belle who had bent down to gather up the accounts she had so carefully set out for Lola’s perusal.

‘Please Madame, you must pay them,’ she replied. ‘Winter is coming and we need to stock up. It’s a long way to go to Nevada City every time we need groceries.’

‘Bills? Groceries? To hell with the lot of them.’ Lola slammed a fist on the desk. ‘Why am I wasting my energy on such trivialities? Oh, it’s simply too awful. I don’t know if I can take another winter in this place.’

Belle stared at her. ‘Madame – but this is your home now.’

‘Oh, shut up.’ Lola turned away from the desk. ‘Light me a cigarette,’ she ordered.

The maid quickly did so and watched Lola warily as she began walking up and down the floor, puffing furiously. She wasn’t quite sure when this change had started to come over Lola, but she had a feeling it had stemmed from the recent visit of the Pacific Players.

Belle thought she was familiar with all of Lola's moods by now and usually recognized the signs when one or the other was about to consume her. She was able to spot the onset of the bouts of deep depression when Lola neglected her appearance and spent hours on her own in the woods. These were often followed by spells of euphoria when she made plans, spent money and entertained gaily.

But this was something different. Belle recalled the way Lola's eyes had sparkled after she had been to the performances in the Alta Hall. Perhaps Madame was becoming bored. Perhaps she was simply missing her life on the stage.

As if in answer to Belle's own thoughts, Lola stopped her pacing and snapped her fingers for another cigarette. She lit the second from the stub of the first and drew deeply. She glanced at the pile of retrieved bills. 'Belle, dear, get these out of my sight. Burn them.'

'But Madame ...'

'Don't argue with me..'

Gingerly Belle gathered the bills into her apron and scampered from the room.

Lola sat down and sighed with relief at the clear desk. 'That's better,' she murmured and drew a sheet of writing paper out of a drawer. She dipped her pen and began to write in French.

'My dear Noel - How sweet of you to send me a copy of the latest Hugo poems. Ah, dear Victor, such a friend he was to me - how he must suffer in his exile. But that is life - so many of us exiled from the Paris that we adored.'

'Dearest Noel - I wonder if when you are free from your commitments to the Players, you might care to re-visit a woman who longs for the comfort of a language that was spoken by those she loved best in all the world?'

'This woman also has a proposition she would like to discuss with you which is best not committed to paper as yet. Sincerest wishes, Lola.'

At first, Johnny Southwick had no inkling of why he was back in Lola's favor. The woman who had loved and spurned him with equal ease had changed her colors yet again. She repeatedly invited him to the Wednesday evenings until his determination to stand firm against her was weakened. When he arrived, she welcomed him with open arms and a kiss that held the promise of something more than an evening of champagne and chocolate cake. After her guests had left, they sat together on her porch smoking.

'You've been such a good friend to me, and I've treated you so badly, Johnny,' she purred. 'Can you ever forgive me?'

'No, I won't,' he said, 'not unless you agree to marry me.'

Her hand froze in the action of lifting her cigarette to her lips. 'Now, Johnny, that's unfair,' she said gaily a second later. 'Marriage only ruins friendships.'

His eyes blazed. 'Damn me, Lola, I don't know what your meaning is of the word friend, but you know we've been more than that. It's made things mighty tough for me.'

She stared back at him with almost innocent wide eyes. 'Dear Johnny, I'm so sorry that you misinterpreted my affection for you.'

'What do you *really* want from me, Lola?' he snapped.

'The honest truth?'

'Yes, damn it.'

'I'm broke. I need money.'

'You? I don't believe it.'

Lola stubbed out her cigarette. 'I'll be frank. I've been living beyond my means, Johnny. You know as well as anyone that the mines have suffered from the summer drought, the dividends have been low.'

Johnny waved his arm at the house behind him 'I thought you had more than just dividends. What about all this? The furniture? The jewelry?' He hesitated. 'I thought the King'

'King Ludwig ceased to give me support a long time ago, Johnny. My husbands have given me nothing. Everything you see here now was earned by my own legitimate efforts. I've had no-one to

manage my funds properly. Although it grieves me, I must leave Grass Valley and return to the stage.'

'Surely not?'

'I have no choice, Johnny, unless someone can help me.'

The frosty moonlight reflected the pleading in her magic eyes. Every fiber of his body strummed with longing for her. He wanted to reach out and crush her to him. To love her and tell her that he would help her, that everything he had was hers, but the wound she had inflicted on his heart still throbbed its reminder.

'I wish I could, Lola, but I'm afraid I've been relying too much myself on those same dividends. I'm probably even worse off than you are.'

She barely flinched before giving a light shrug. 'Ah well, *c'est la vie*.'

'As it seems I'm no use to you, I'd better go,' he muttered as he half-raised himself to get out of his chair.

Her hand touched his sleeve. 'Oh, please don't.' There was a thawing of that cold moonlight in her eyes. 'I'm awfully lonely tonight, Johnny.'

She had been hoping her extended celibacy would have helped to revitalize the passions that had once been so vital to her existence but, although Johnny did his best to please her, her own body failed to be moved. As on the previous occasion, she had to fake her passion. None the wiser, Johnny snored softly in her feather bed.

Lola rose silently and went to her window. Most of the night sky was covered with the black silhouettes of soaring pine trees and she could not see Bon-Bon's star, but that tide of longing for some undefined place - some other existence - swept over her yet again. She knew now for certain that there was no future with Johnny Southwick, nor anyone like him. The energy she had drawn from Grass Valley was exhausted.

The plan that had been formulating in her mind since she had met young Noel Follin was becoming more defined. She didn't know exactly what it was about him that appealed to her. Certainly, he was good-looking in that slightly boyish way that reminded her of George and Fritz, but he had seemed to be without ambition, inclined to be more morose and introspective than was good for him. Yet she had recognized in him something of herself, that restlessness, that sense of not belonging anywhere. Perhaps they would find a common destiny together. Her heart beat faster at the prospect. She could see the headlines now:

'Madam Lola Montez returns to the dramatic stage in triumph, ably assisted by handsome newcomer, Mr. Frank Folland.'

She could almost hear the applause and every nerve of her body tightened. How she had missed it. No matter how long she hid herself away in the mountains she would never be free of the stage. She had an insatiable need for the admiration of the whole world.

While Noel had been thrilled and surprised at Lola's invitation to visit her, he was thoroughly flabbergasted when, within a few minutes of arriving at her cottage, she told him she was going back on the stage and would like him to arrange a theatrical tour for her.

'But why me? I hardly know anyone important in the theater,' he had protested. 'So far I have played nothing more than junior leads.'

'That's exactly why I have chosen you,' said Lola giving him one of those dazzling smiles that sent his pulses racing. 'I noticed you seemed to be detached from the usual jealousies and bickering that go on with stage folk. I need someone who is self-contained, yet will be loyal to me. How does a hundred a week sound?'

Noel struggled with the enormity of her offer. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined such a thing. And such a high regular wage. 'I have little idea of what an agent does,' he muttered.

'Oh, there's nothing to it. I will tell you exactly what to do.'

‘If you know all about it, why do you need me?’

‘It’s nearly two years since I trod the boards professionally, Noel. There will be a lot of preparation ahead. Business matters have a nasty habit of interfering with my concentration, and I want to be at my best ever.’

She smiled again, and his life took on a new meaning. He wondered if she noticed how flushed he felt.

‘Firstly, I want you to book me into a run in San Francisco and then ... then we will go to Australia and entertain our digger friends in the Antipodes. What do you think of that?’

‘I ... I’m speechless.’

‘After that I should like to take my troupe through the Far East,’ she continued as she squeezed his arm and gazed into his eyes. ‘You, my dear Noel, will be in charge of booking the first world tour of Lola Montez and Company.’

The initial thrill of Lola’s proposition soon wore off, particularly when Noel discovered that a man called Johnny Southwick was also playing some part in Lola’s life. He experienced his first flash of jealousy as they met over her dinner table and each eyed the other with suspicion.

‘So, it’s you we have to thank for taking Lola away from Grass Valley,’ said a sullen and already somewhat drunken Johnny as the first course was served.

Noel flashed Lola a pleading glance.

She was dismissive. ‘Oh, Johnny, don’t be silly. I’d already decided to leave before asking Noel to take on the job.’

Johnny scowled. ‘The least you could have done is tell me first.’

Lola’s eyes flashed. ‘What? Are you trying to say I had to ask *your* permission? What I do is my own business.’

Johnny glared back at her. ‘What about the mortgages I’ve taken out so I can help you pay off your bills? That makes your business my business, Madame.’

‘Johnny, it’s vulgar to discuss such things in front of a stranger.’

‘Stranger be damned!’ Johnny’s eyes switched to Noel’s and he shook his finger. ‘Take care, my friend. You want to think twice before linking your star to this witch. She’ll pretend to give you heaven and by God, she’ll suck you dry.’

A gurgling sound rose from somewhere in the depths of Lola’s throat. She stood up and with a rapid sweep ripped the cloth from the table sending glasses and crockery crashing to the floor. Stunned, Noel remained in his chair, his lap full of soup. Mercifully, it was no longer hot.

‘By Jesus, Southwick!’ Lola screamed, tearing her diamond necklace from her throat and throwing it at Johnny. ‘Here. Take this! That should cover your precious mortgages, and more. No backwoods boy is going to tell me what to do.’

Johnny’s face was livid as he staggered to his feet. He gave a mockery of a bow before throwing the necklace back at her. ‘Keep your frigging icicles, Countess, I’ll find more warmth in a bankruptcy writ.’

Noel watched the other man march out of the room before daring to steal a look at Lola. To his surprise, the few moments of white-hot rage had disappeared and now there was nothing but a fragile vulnerability with tears in her eyes, her knuckles in her mouth.

‘Oh, Noel,’ she cried, ‘what an awful thing for you to witness. Now you’ll think I’m the most horrid, ungrateful woman who ever lived.’

‘Certainly not,’ he replied cautiously. ‘It was obvious he started it. I couldn’t believe he was really saying those things about you.’

‘I asked him for a little help with a few bills and he was ungentlemanly enough to think that gave him rights over me.’

‘That’s dreadful.’

Lola moved around the table and saw the state of Noel’s trousers. ‘Oh, you poor dear. Look what I’ve done. We’ll have to get those cleaned right away.’

A few minutes later, the table had been re-set and Noel found himself back in his chair wearing a snug pair of Lola's denim riding trousers. The thought of them enclosing Lola's hips and legs was sending not unwelcome sensations through him. How that oaf Southwick could have treated her that way he couldn't imagine.

Yet Lola seemed to have forgotten the whole episode and spent the rest of the meal discussing her plans. By the time the evening was at an end, Noel had been given a complete briefing on what she wanted him to do. He was to return to San Francisco right away and begin the process of hiring a party of twenty actors to form a new company. He was also rewarded with a brief kiss that sent his already heightened senses reeling again. By the time he returned to his hotel room, he knew he was consumed by love. For this woman he would do anything, even die if she so commanded it.

Harriet Robson embraced her old friend at the staging post with enthusiasm. 'It's been quite a spell since I last saw you, Mary-Ann. I've really missed you.'

'And it's good to see you too, Harriet.' Mrs. Crabtree looked about at the row of new brick buildings. 'Glory be. How Grass Valley has changed.'

'You heard about the fire, of course.'

'I sure did. Perhaps it was just as well, there was nothing pretty about those ramshackle clapboards.'

'Just about the whole town was burnt out. We were lucky up there in Mill Street.'

Mary-Ann and Lotta collected their bags and followed Harriet to a waiting buggy. 'Can we visit Madame Lola?' asked Lotta.

Mary-Ann frowned and pursed her lips. 'Hardly, Lotta. She doesn't live here any more.'

'Oh, yes, I forgot,' murmured the child.

'Her house survived the fire,' said Harriet, 'but it's all boarded up now.'

'What happened to the animals?' asked Lotta.

'All gone, I'm afraid, child. I told her I don't mind keeping my eye on her things, but I wasn't going to spend my days feeding parrots and monkeys and the like.'

'It must be quiet here without her,' said Mary-Ann as the trio settled into the buggy.

Harriet flicked the reins and they moved off along the banks of the creek. 'Oh, she ain't missed much. She fell out of the habit of paying her bills and things got sour with the merchants. Johnny Southwick bailed her out in the end, although he mortgaged himself to do it, poor man. He ain't been right in the head since she left. Folks kinda feel sorry for him.'

'Tsk. Well, I'm very glad I didn't let Lotta go with her,' said Mary-Ann. 'She came to see me, you know, over in Rabbit Creek. Asked if Lotta would like to go traveling with her to Australia in a new show she was putting together.'

Lotta pouted. 'I wanted to go, but Mama wouldn't let me. She was horrid.'

'Mind your tongue, young lady. Lor'sakes, there is no way I would let a seven-year old child travel around the world with that woman.'

'They tell me she was received well when she played 'Frisco,' said Harriet hurriedly. 'That her acting has improved.'

Mary-Ann sniffed. 'Maybe, but I reckon she was acting all the time she was here. I wouldn't stoop to parting with one cent to see her again.'

'I liked her. She showed me how to dance and she was always nice to me,' said Lotta petulantly.

Her mother glared at her. 'She was a very wicked woman. She was immoral and was only nice to people when she thought she could get something out of them. Now you remember that.'

The buggy trotted past Lola's cottage. The branches of the sycamores danced lightly in the wind and the roses had just started to bloom in their rows between the cacti.

Lotta stared longingly at the veranda on which Major, the grizzly bear, had once sat and growled at her. She wondered if Mama was wrong about Madame Lola, and she felt a little sad inside.

Thirty-seven days at sea in a cramped vessel gave Noel his greatest test of managing both a theatrical troupe - and Lola Montez - no mean feat for any man. By the time the *Fanny Major* arrived in Australia, he was stretched almost to breaking point. For more times than he cared to remember, he had been called upon to mediate in the friction that inevitably existed in a group of confined, highly-strung people. In the process he had begun to glimpse the many layers of Lola's personality and was secretly afraid he was destined to see more.

After one disastrous episode when Lola virtually came to physical blows with a supporting actress over some triviality, she turned her back on everyone and spent several days down in third class where she drank rot-gut, smoked cheap cigars, threw dice and played endless rounds of cards with a group of rough miners who were abandoning California for the new golden horizons in Australia. At night, she would return to her own cabin in first class and Noel's arms. It was only when their short but comparatively successful season had ended in San Francisco, that Lola had finally rewarded him by taking him to her bed.

Although it should have been the fulfillment of all his dreams, in truth he wondered if it was a reward that he would have been better off without. Making love to Lola proved to be a challenging business that had left him ecstatic yet also exhausted, and a trifle ashamed. While he had known she would hardly be submissive, Lola had attacked him with all the passion of someone who had discovered a fountain after wandering in a desert dying of thirst.

There were times when male pride and his natural instinct for propriety surfaced and he tried to rebel against her overwhelming possession of him. This would invariably lead to a violent squabble that was just as invariably made up with yet another frantic explosion of their desire.

He brooded, and the awful realization finally dawned on him that while, on the one hand he was spellbound with a bizarre kind of love, on the other he was slowly building himself into a prison from which there was unlikely to be any escape.

Shortly before leaving San Francisco, he agonized for days over a letter to his mother and half-sister, Miriam, in New York. When he finally picked up the pen, the words more than hinted at his despair.

'Dearest ones - I hardly have the heart to write. I have tried to do so twenty times during the last week but could not. Now that the moment has arrived, in desperation I send but a few lines. In three days I leave California bound for Honolulu, Sydney, China, India, England, Paris and finally New York. I shall be gone two years or more. I go with the Countess Landsfeld, Lola Montez, as agent. If successful, I could make twenty-five thousand dollars. I have nothing to lose and all to gain. Things have been very dull in California for months. Lola pays me a hundred dollars a week and two percent on receipts. It is a bold move.

Mother - I ask that you relay this information to Carrie on my behalf. I dare, dare not trust myself to say more. I should die if I did. God bless. I love you. Noel.'

Gold Rush Australia had waxed as Gold Rush California had waned. Hundreds of ships filled the magnificent harbor of Port Jackson and Sydney buzzed with the same excitement as San Francisco had, as thousands of people came from all over the world to try their luck in a new country.

Parts of Sydney modeled itself on London with elegant hotels, fashionable shops and a fledgling high society that aped English customs and manners, but the country's convict origins still carried a taint that a second generation was struggling to eliminate.

Lola quickly grasped a sense of the atmosphere. There was an underlying prudishness and snobbishness similar to the attitude she had experienced in Calcutta or Simla where, rather than convicts, it was the Indians who constituted the lower classes. Of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the country she saw little, save the occasional drunken individual sitting in a gutter. They were even lower than the convicts in the social scale.

But Lola had little time to reflect on the make-up of politics of this new society. She had bookings to arrange and shows to rehearse. She commenced the season with her stock piece, *Lola Montez in Bavaria*, which opened to mixed reviews with some newspapers failing to give it a mention at all, and followed it immediately with *Yelva* and *Follies of the Night* in which the Spider Dance was presented for the first time. It was met with the usual howls of protests from the moralists and matched with the usual enthusiasm from the predominantly male audiences.

Noel was distressed when several members of the troupe finally decided they had put up with enough of Lola's ways and threatened to resign en masse, demanding payment for their performances thus far and also return passage to San Francisco. Lola retaliated by ordering Noel to sack the lot of them and hire the much better local actors to play the parts.

'This is preposterous, Lola,' said Noel as she lay on her bed in her suite at Petty's Hotel, the best in town, her hand clutching a forehead gripped with migraine. 'You must pay them what they are owed.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, Noel, I don't need a pain in the ass as well. They were bloody useless - not a professional among them.'

Noel flinched. 'Have you any idea how difficult it was to find actors who were willing to hitch themselves to you and agree to travel around the world just on your promise?'

Lola flung back her hand onto the pillow and half raised her head. She glared at him through blood-shot eyes. 'Seems to me you had no trouble jumping at my offer. You were the one who hired them, Noel, and you can be the one to tell them they're finished.' Her head fell back with a groan.

'I can't do that.'

'Then you're sacked as well. Get out of my sight.'

Lips trembling, Noel stood staring down at Lola, struggling to control the feelings rushing through him. If he had any sense he'd take her literally, turn around and march out of her life, but he knew she didn't mean it. So often she said things she didn't mean. Besides, he could never leave her. Not now, now that she'd become the sole reason for living. Without her, he'd rather be dead. He waited several minutes until she opened her eyes again. The anger in them had waned and only the physical pain was visible. She managed to smile.

'Cancel the rest of the run, Noel,' she murmured. 'Tell them I'm sick. Find me a decent lawyer, then book us on the next boat to Melbourne.'

The actors soon discovered Lola was about to abscond for Melbourne on the paddle steamer, *Waratah*, and a spokesman rushed down to the wharf to try to intercept her. Still suffering from the after-effects of her headache and the strong doses of laudanum she had taken to control it, Lola was in no mood to talk to him.

'I have nothing to say to you,' she said archly. 'I am a married woman.'

She pushed past him and flounced up *Waratah's* gangway, leaving Noel in her wake valiantly trying to explain to the angry actor that as New South Wales was a British Colony, Lola was entitled to take advantage of a British law under which a married woman could not be sued separately from her husband.

The actor retaliated with a few choice American curses.

'You will have to deal with Madame Montez's attorney,' responded Noel gruffly as he hurried up the gangway after Lola, the thought crossing his mind as to exactly which husband Lola had in mind to take advantage of this law. She rarely spoke of her past life and he knew little about her husbands, or even how many she had had. Just the thought of them and he was overcome with an attack of jealous gloom.

The paddle-wheels were already turning when Bailiff Brown of the Supreme Court of New South Wales was seen to be clambering up a rope ladder at the ship's side. The Captain told him unless he had written authority to prevent the ship from sailing, they would not be returning to the wharf.

Lola had retreated to her cabin and the Bailiff pleaded for the Captain to raise a flag to summon the water police. The Captain refused. Desperate to serve his writs and get back to Sydney with the pilot boat, Brown went in search of Lola's cabin. He banged on the door, and shouted through the

keyhole.

‘Madam de Landsfeld Heald, I have here several writs for unpaid wages totaling seven thousand pounds which I am obliged to serve on you. I ask that you proceed with me immediately to the pilot boat so that you can answer to these charges directly.’

‘There is no-one here of that name,’ retorted Lola through the closed door.

‘The name on the writs states that you are also known as Lola Montez. That is you, isn’t it?’

The door flew open. Lola stood there in a white silk dressing gown, her hair loose over her shoulders. She looked the bailiff up and down with a haughty glare. ‘Fine! You want me to return to Sydney, you’ll have to take me as I am.’ She drew her dressing gown apart.

The stunned bailiff’s eyes traveled over her trim, but utterly naked, body. His face turned first white and then various shades of red before he turned and fled down the passage. Lola laughed as she closed the door behind her. Sometimes one had to resort to dramatic steps to get rid of nuisances. Once he was over the shock, she guessed that Bailiff Brown would probably be dining out on the event for the rest of his days.

Melbourne was the city that had flourished since the Gold Rush and, although without the beautiful setting of Sydney, it had a fluctuating population not unlike that of San Francisco as men came to try their luck in places like Ballarat and Bendigo. It had an energy and vitality that quickly infected newcomers.

In her suite at the Grand Imperial Hotel, Lola felt as if life was taking a turn for the better. For the present she was free of blank spells and those infuriating headaches that had inexplicably started again in Sydney. At least, she had a new troupe of competent local actors. Also Noel seemed to have discovered the knack of keeping her happy. He had received rave reviews for his acting and was the perfect foil for her in dramatic parts on the stage.

Although they had the inevitable arguments behind the scenes, he didn’t seem to hold his grudges for long. She was sure that at last she had found in him all the qualities she needed in a man. The only problem was that he was still married to some mousy little woman in Cincinnati to whom he sent most of his money. Noel admitted he had been trapped into the marriage and had never really loved Carrie, but he had an obligation to his children. Lola kept the opinion to herself that with a woman like that the children might not even be Noel’s at all. When they finally got back to the United States she would find a way of talking Noel into getting a divorce.

The reviews were much the same as Lola had come to expect, the usual mixture of admiration and condemnation, with her inevitable fiery letters to the local papers defending her morality and the artistry of the Spider Dance. It was the best kind of publicity and packed out the theaters both in Melbourne and nearby Geelong for over thirty performances.

Later came a short season in Adelaide and a tentative return to Sydney. The American actors had since given up their legal suits or dispersed elsewhere and Lola was welcomed back without rancor. This time her reviews were more favorable, with her smoking in public coming in for more criticism than her acting or dancing.

In the meantime, Lola had appointed a new agent, James Crosby. This was a great relief to Noel as he could now concentrate more on his acting persona as Frank Folland without having to attend to business matters. Crosby announced he had received an invitation for Lola Montez to return to the Colony of Victoria to take part in the inauguration of the large new Theater built in the gold-mining town of Ballarat.

Its geographical setting was nothing like Grass Valley, being comparatively flat and dusty, but Lola immediately felt at home in the raw, sprawling place. Although the methods of gold extraction were also different from those in California, Lola rediscovered her natural affinity with the tough, independently-minded men who mined the precious metal.

Only a year before, Ballarat had made its mark on history by being the site of the famous Eureka Stockade where many of those same men had fought and died beneath their flag of the Southern Cross in defense of their democratic rights and against the onerous taxes and charges of an

oppressive government. These were the kind of people and the kind of politics that Lola understood very well. Ballarat welcomed her with open arms and her grand debut at the Victoria Theater was a great success.

Lola celebrated afterwards with a party in the United States Hotel which backed onto the theater, during which she entertained local dignitaries and the men of the press, plying them with food and a great quantity of French champagne.

However, the following morning, Henry Seekamp, the editor of *The Ballarat Times* and a local hero - being a survivor of the Eureka Stockade - objected to the fuss being made over Lola and wrote an acid attack on her morals in his newspaper.

Lola was brewing for her first major tantrum in months. 'It's Henry Shipley all over again,' she cried. 'What is it with these editors? They are happy to be in my company and drink my champagne and as soon as my back is turned they drive daggers into it!'

'Don't take his bait,' said Noel as both he and Belle struggled to placate her. 'He just wants to draw attention to his silly little newspaper that's all.'

'What? Do you expect me to turn the other cheek? I've never done it before and I'll be damned if I do now.'

'The best thing to do is ignore it.'

She glared at Noel. 'If you were a real man, you would have defended my honor.'

Noel's eyes flickered. 'That's a cruel thing to say,' he muttered.

But Lola was no longer looking at him. She was busily searching among her boxes and cupboard drawers. 'Mr. Seekamp is going to get what he deserves!'

'Lola - please don't do anything rash - we can do this properly through legal channels.'

'Pah. Lawyers. They're just as bad as editors. Belle - where in tarnation is my pistol?'

With her pistol loaded and tucked in her belt, Lola was half-way down the stairs of her hotel when she was hit with sudden pain in her temples. As if her head was held in a vice, she faltered and would have fallen, but Belle and Noel were close behind her. The pair forced her back upstairs, where they helped her into bed. Belle hurriedly went to prepare Lola's special headache powders as Noel soothed her brow with one hand while carefully removing the pistol to his pocket with the other.

When the terrible pains eased at last Lola opened her eyes. The room seemed misty. A solemn-faced young man with fair hair was gazing down at her and an olive-skinned maid holding a glass containing some tincture. Words formed in her head but failed to reach her lips.

Papa? Parvati? It's been such a long, long time. I've missed you both desperately ...

'How are you feeling?'

A gentle voice - a voice of love ...

Her lips felt tight, but she managed half a smile. His hand soothed her brow and his touch sent tingles of joy through her body.

'Now I want you to take it easy for the rest of the day. I need to get a rehearsal in at the theater, so I'll be right next door if you need anything. Just send Belle over.'

Love ... how wonderful is love ...

She sipped at the offered glass, and the warm cocoon of the drug wrapped her up and she fell into a doze. When she awoke a couple of hours later, the pain was gone and her memory of the morning was a little fuzzy.

'Wasn't there something I was supposed to do today?' she asked Belle.

'Er ... I do believe there was a charity bazaar you promised to go by,' said Belle quickly. 'But Mr. Follin wanted you to stay here.'

'Oh, never mind him. It's too hot to stay inside. Let's away and support the good cause.'

It seemed strange to be wearing muslin and a straw bonnet in February, but this was the peak of summer in Australia, and an arid hot wind danced through the dusty Ballarat streets as Lola made her way to the hall where the bazaar was taking place. As she strolled along the boardwalks, people stared at her as they always did but her mood was friendly and she smiled and stopped to chat

occasionally, the anger and agony of the few hours earlier now totally forgotten. Not until she bought several raffle tickets and drew a prize, did she remember what she had really intended to do that day.

Belle stared at Lola's winning in dismay. Of all the prizes that Lola Montez could have won, why did it have to be a riding whip?

Henry Seekamp stood at the bar of the United States Hotel, fortified himself with a glass of scotch, and waited. He adjusted his spectacles as there was the sound of a side door being flung open. Even across the smoky bar-room he could see the blaze in her eyes and it seemed as if there were sparks in the air around the slight figure dressed in blue. They stared at each for a few moments. Words were superfluous.

Lola marched across the room. With an expert flick of her wrist, she struck the first blow across Seekamp's head. 'How dare you abuse a woman!' she cried.

'Whores are made to be abused,' he shouted as he lifted his own ready whip, striking her on the shoulders.

She screamed and flailed him again, cutting his cheek and sending his spectacles flying. He retaliated with an equally savage crack that just missed Lola's ear. Although he had the heavier weapon, Lola was quicker on her feet. Her whip flashed and slashed, nipping and slicing through Seekamp's neck and shoulders, blood spurting in several directions.

The spectators who had been mostly stunned into silence, began cheering. But Seekamp wasn't about to give up. Instead he ran forward, and with his fist punched Lola square on the chin. She fell back on to the sawdust floor with a howl.

The cheers changed to boos and hisses and two men tried to restrain Seekamp. 'No gentleman hits a woman in the face!' cried one of them.

Lola was on her feet again and although her jaw was already swelling, she charged at Seekamp kneeling him in the groin. He buckled over in pain, evading his captor's grip in the process and quickly twisted around, grabbing at Lola's legs. They both crashed to the floor, Seekamp's fingers locked in Lola's hair.

'Whore!' he hissed.

'Bugger!' she hissed back. Lola sunk her teeth into his hand and, locked together, they rolled over and over until several men rushed forward and managed to drag Seekamp off.

Just at that moment Noel ran into the bar waving Lola's pistol. 'Where is the son-of-a-bitch?' he shouted.

The wily Seekamp again slipped out of his restrainers' arms and dodged past Noel and out into the street. Noel ran after him and caught him. 'What kind of animal hits a woman? I'll kill you for this!'

'Go on then!' Seekamp parted his waistcoat to reveal he was armed with only with a small cudgel.

Noel faltered. 'You're damn lucky, you rotten bastard. But I warn you, you haven't heard the last of this.'

By now the scene was surrounded with witnesses all berating Seekamp and threatening to beat the living daylights out of him. He ran off, pausing briefly to thumb his nose before being pelted with rotten fruit, stones and anything else the miners could lay their hands on.

In the meantime, Noel charged back into the saloon to help Lola. But she seemed to have collected herself without trouble. Although disheveled and sporting several cuts and bruises to her face, she was leaning up against the bar downing a large complimentary glass of porter.

'Three cheers for Lola Montez!' shouted one of the miners.

She grinned and raised her whip to their 'Hip Hooray's'

Noel shook his head in disgust. 'Tell me I'm mistaken - but you actually enjoyed that, didn't you?'

Her eyes twinkled. 'Let's say it was a most satisfying experience.'

‘You realize, I suppose, that this story will be telegraphed around the world and you will be complaining you don’t understand why people make up fantastic stories about you?’

‘Dearie me, Noel, you are too droll sometimes. Don’t be such a bore.’

‘I’m sorry, but is it so wrong of me to object to you making a spectacle of yourself?’

Lola’s face sobered and she fingered her whip again. ‘Don’t talk about me as if I’m your property, Noel Follin.’

Noel gave an exasperated sigh. ‘Well, seeing as you hardly needed me to rescue you from this little fracas, I may as well return to my rehearsal.’

‘Yes, why not,’ she retorted, turned her face away and banged her whip on the bar. ‘Barman. Drinks all round on me!’

The miners were still cheering as Noel slipped out of the side door.

The Montez-Seekamp battle was hardly over before it started to turn into an Australian folk legend. At the end of her next performance, Lola stood at the front of the stage and showed off her bruises to a wildly supportive audience, vowing to make ‘Seekamp, the coward who thought he could beat a woman, de-camp!’ and within days poems, cartoons and even songs had been written about the event.

Noel wished the whole matter would be forgotten, but Lola seemed to revel in it. The publicity wasn’t doing her any harm and she was more popular than ever with the miners. Invited to visit the diggings and dressed in a pair of trousers and broad-brimmed hat, she descended ladders into the pits where she would discuss mining techniques with the men. She was even invited to perform the naming ceremony of a new reef, the Victoria.

Meanwhile Seekamp did not lie low. He produced his own version of the event in his newspaper, making yet another sly suggestion about Lola’s morality.

Lola angrily consulted a solicitor called Ed Lewis who retaliated with a suit for criminal libel. Seekamp countered with a suit for assault with a whip. Both cases were thrown out by the magistrate, but Lola was determined to keep the matter alive and, at Lewis’ suggestion, cooked up a new allegation that Seekamp was publishing a newspaper not registered according to law.

The magistrate rejected it as well but Seekamp made the mistake of calling Lewis a ‘dirty, pettifogging Jew’ in his newspaper and Lewis retaliated with a suit for libel, Seekamp eventually having to pay a hefty fine.

Margaret Crosby, the wife of Lola’s new manager and agent, James Crosby, was a large, unattractive woman and unsuccessful actress who had never liked the graceful and beautiful Lola, whom she had erroneously believed to be intent on getting her insipid husband into bed. Buoyed up by Seekamp’s attack on Lola, she waited her chance to do the same. Lola had only started to recover from the cuts and bruises she had suffered at Seekamp’s hands when the malicious woman saw her opportunity.

Lola and James Crosby were having an argument backstage about a discrepancy in the takings for the previous night’s performance. Noel deliberately kept out of earshot busying himself with stage matters, but Margaret stood close by in the wings, listening to every word.

‘I’ve been in this business long enough to know that eighty pounds is the least I could expect from a house as full as last night,’ said Lola.

‘Are you suggesting I’m defrauding you?’ retorted Crosby.

Lola’s eyes flashed. ‘Not yet. I’m assuming you can’t count.’

James offered Lola the takings box. ‘Sixty-five pounds ten shillings. I swear that’s all there was. Count it yourself.’

‘Hmph.’ Lola snatched the box and weighed it in her hands. ‘Are you sure you didn’t let people in for half price?’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘I don’t know, Crosby, it’s the sort of thing you do.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means you’re unreliable. It means I can’t trust you.’

‘Now hang on a minute, that’s bloody unfair, after all I’ve done for you.’

Margaret moved in from the wings, her hands holding something behind her back. ‘You can’t talk to my husband like that,’ she said in a cold voice.

Lola looked at her as if she was something that crawled out from behind a rock. ‘I’ll talk to both of you however I choose. I pay your wages, remember.’

With a flourish, Margaret produced her weapon from behind her back. Again it was a whip, but this was a large one such as used by bullock drivers. Before Lola knew what was happening, the woman had brought it down on her shoulder. With a cry of shock and pain, she buckled under the blow, landing heavily on her hand.

Margaret pounced forward and began pummeling her so fiercely about the head and shoulders that the shaft of the whip snapped in half. She grabbed a handful of Lola’s hair and slapped her face from side to side.

Awestruck, James Crosby stood by and did nothing until Lola was rescued by two members of the company who came running at the sound of her cries.

That night, a cocky James Crosby stood before a full house, waving a medical certificate and announced that Lola would be unable to appear. He introduced his wife Margaret as if she were the victor of a great battle, calling her the ‘whipperess of the whipperess of whippers’, and the woman swaggered on to the stage carrying the remains of her whip, abusing Lola with a string of expletives that stunned even the hard-bitten miners. Rather than receiving praise for their actions, the audience quickly turned on this pair who had damaged the popular Lola and hounded them off the stage, demanding their money back.

It was inevitable that by now Lola had had more than enough of the wild life of Ballarat. This time her injuries were far more severe - her wrist was broken and the doctor ordered her to have at least a month’s rest. Belle was ordered to pack bags and the troupe headed back to Melbourne.

Noel wasn’t pleased to be manager again, and Lola’s injuries made him give serious thought to their future.

‘We must face facts,’ he said to her one evening as she rested on a lounge in her suite at the Grand Imperial, ‘this tour is never going to get as far as China or India. As fast as we make money we seem to spend it.’

Lola glowered at him through a wreath of cigarette smoke. ‘What you really mean, Noel, dear, is that I make the money and I spend it.’

He shrugged. ‘Frankly, yes.’

She lifted her bandaged hand. ‘I’m incapacitated, remember.’

‘You brought it on yourself,’ he said sullenly.

‘Oh - so now I’m supposed to have invited that bitch to beat me over the head with a bullocky whip?’

‘Why must you always fight with everyone? You’re never bloody happy unless you’re fighting.’

‘Crap. Some of my happiest moments have been when I’ve been completely alone.’

‘Why do behave this way, Lola? I can’t live like this, never knowing when you’re going to create a scene and tear into someone or have yourself torn apart.’

‘You’d rather hide behind that actor’s facade of yours than face real life.’

‘What? You’re a fine one to talk. You’ve spent your life avoiding real life. It’s you who’s the greatest actress of the day.’

Lola’s impulse was to throw something, except that she couldn’t quite reach anything suitable and her hand still pained her. ‘Oh, fine. Here I am suffering from headaches and a broken wrist, while all you’ve done since the tour was interrupted, is mope about, worry about money and criticize me.’

Noel sat down next to her, meeting her eyes calmly. ‘Please listen to me, Lola,’ he said. ‘I’m not interested in being goaded into yet another fight. I ask you to use this time wisely to think about what you really want. For what it’s worth, I’d prefer to finish up the tour as soon as possible and

return to America. I aim to go back to Cincinnati and ask Carrie for a divorce. After that, I'd like to go to New York and look at putting together a new acting company. Not a fly-by-night affair of comedians and roustabouts - a proper company of serious stage actors. No more Spider Dance. We would study the masters and do Shakespeare and Sheridan.'

He lifted her bandaged hand and placed a tender kiss upon it. 'I love you Lola, and I want to be with you for the rest of my life. However, if you don't love me, just say so. We've been good for each other but we could be so much better: we could be the greatest partnership in American stage history, but you're going to have to get down from your arrogant self-centered perch and meet me half way.'

Lola watched Noel with fascination. It was the longest speech he'd ever given off-stage and she could see the sincerity in the tears in his eyes. She remembered the fantasy in which she'd briefly indulged: the acting company called 'Montez and Folland'. It could still happen - but did she love enough him to make it so?

'Oh, Noel, I don't know what to say.'

He carefully laid her injured hand down. 'Say nothing. Just think about it. We've still a week before we're due in Bendigo. Give me your answer after that.'

36.

Noel left Melbourne a few days before Lola in order to make the arrangements for the rest of their tour through the Victorian goldfields. Although she should have been revitalized by her enforced rest, Lola still felt weary, not just physically, but in spirit.

She thought constantly about Noel's ambition for them as a serious acting partnership. If successful, it would give her the respectability she had so long craved as an artiste. She knew her dancing days were limited and that she had become mechanical, without the fire she had learned all those years ago from Espa and Hernandez and so carefully re-ignited by Charles Mabile.

For hours she would pore over her tarot cards trying to find some confirmation that this was her new destiny. Early in her stay in Australia, she had discovered that Henri's star was not visible in Southern Hemisphere skies and she had tried to contact him through spiritualists and mediums, and even her own meditating processes, but he had stayed firmly out of reach and it seemed there would be no answer from him.

She missed Noel's physical presence when he was absent, but still didn't know if she truly loved him enough to mold to the discipline necessary for a future with him. His bouts of melancholy would be difficult to live with, but he seemed to be one of the few men who was determined to grapple with the essence of who she really was. She was worried, unsure what would happen when he did discover the real woman behind the facade; the day he realized the truth.

Although she wasn't fully aware of its significance at the time, Lola received what she came to realize was the first powerful portent of her future while on the stage of the Criterion Theater in Bendigo. The curiously prophetic title of the play was *The Little Devil*.

Thunder had been rumbling all afternoon across the hot and parched gold-mining town. Lola had been amazed at the violence of the Australian weather. In her brief time in the continent she had experienced extremes of heat and cold, often within hours of each other, huge bush-fires fanned by violent winds, and storms that flooded creeks within seconds, or hailed down chunks of ice as big as eggs.

Often that afternoon the intensity of the thunder had interrupted rehearsals and the predominantly timber Criterion seemed to shake to its very foundations. It was an oppressive, dry storm, without any rain, the kind that sets a person's nerves on edge, and Lola had been battling another headache just to get through the rehearsal.

They opened to a packed house and were half-way through *The Little Devil* when a tremendous

explosion hit the tin roof and a huge ball of lightning crashed through it directly onto the stage in the space between Lola and Noel. With fire and sulfur smoke streaming in its wake, it hurtled on past the wings and exited the timber walls in a blazing wheel, sending pieces of wood and splinters flying everywhere. It left the gauze scenery curtains ablaze and a hole more than three feet across in the roof.

The audience collectively leaped up in horror as Lola briefly caught Noel's eye across the blackened trail at their feet. He was white as a sheet and trembled as panic and screams broke out among the actors. But Lola didn't lose her presence of mind and remained as calm as she always was in moments of intense physical danger. She turned to the audience and shouted for everyone to be orderly, and for someone to fetch buckets of water. She swiftly organized a partial clean-up of the stage before ordering the cast members back to their places and although everyone suffered from nerves and missed cues, they managed to complete the play. Lola concluded the performance with the Spider Dance and received the most resounding applause she'd had in a long time. She stepped forward to give a closing speech.

'Thank you for persevering under difficult circumstances,' she said. 'Many times in my life I have faced powder and ball, yet this must be the first and only time this little devil has danced her way through real fire and brimstone.' The audience cheered.

'But speaking seriously from my heart,' she continued, 'we must thank Providence for divine dispensation that no-one was injured. I trust everyone here tonight will give thanks to the Almighty as soon as they are home.'

When Lola returned backstage to her dressing room, she found Noel there on his knees, praying. She laughed at him. 'My goodness, Noel, I had no idea you would be so swift to take up my suggestion.'

He made no attempt to disguise the sorrow in his eyes. 'We could have both died tonight, Lola, everyone was terrified and yet somehow you've managed to make light of an Act of God. It was a warning we should both heed.'

She watched in amusement as he climbed slowly to his feet. His mouth gave an odd little twist and, as he walked towards the door, she caught his arm. Her physical senses had been sharpened by the danger on the stage and her body flowed with an immediate need. She wanted to make love, violently and urgently, defying this challenge of brimstone still floating in the air.

But Noel's lips continued to curl in disgust and he snatched his arm away from her. The look in his eyes bore the full impact of a soul in torment. 'When was the last time you prayed, Lola? Really *prayed*?' he whispered hoarsely. 'You should try it. It can make the mind so much clearer.'

The remainder of the tour of the goldfields was marred by the tensions now evident between Lola and Noel. Each performance was preceded by bickering and some nights Noel even refused to appear.

In the raw bush town of Castlemaine, Lola's dancing was met with derision, catcalls and obscenities. She engaged in shouting matches with her audiences, her opinions conflicting wildly. On the one hand she compared Castlemaine to its racy California counterpart of Rough-and-Ready and, on the other, derided it with a statement that it had too many damned churches than was healthy in any town.

With each passing day, Noel seemed to distance himself from her. Lola suffered more headaches and she began to hate this strange country with its climate as unpredictable as her own moods. The summer months of hot winds and dust had deteriorated into a soggy autumn when the roads were almost impassable. A brief re-appearance in Melbourne was followed by a return to New South Wales where the earlier legal suits seemed to have been forgotten, and passage was booked for California.

In May, Lola, Noel and Belle sailed from Newcastle on the American barkentine, *Jane A. Falkenberg*. The confinement of the long weeks at sea did little at first for their relationship. Lola continued to be plagued by bouts of tiredness and headaches, which gave her the excuse of not

having to think about giving Noel a definite answer about their future together, while Noel himself seemed occupied with deep thoughts and spent long silent hours at the ship's rail gazing out to sea.

Shortly after a call at Honolulu, Lola made an attempt to lift both their spirits by asking the captain to put on a party in celebration of Noel's twenty-ninth birthday. Under the influence of soft music, champagne and a balmy tropical night, they came together at last. Noel made love to her as he never had before, with a wild desire tempered with intense sweetness that pleased her even beyond the heights reached all those years ago with her precious Bon-Bon. As they lay together afterward within the tight confines of an ocean bunk, rocked by the gentle motion of the ship and watching the crescent moon through the porthole window, Lola whispered in his ear. 'I'm sorry that it has taken this long to tell you that ... I love you.'

Noel closed his eyes briefly. 'Is this love?' he murmured, as if to himself. 'I wonder if it isn't a final trial.'

'What do you mean?'

He opened his eyes again and looked at her, his eyes filled with reflections of starlight. 'Oh, nothing, my darling. Nothing important.'

After Lola had fallen asleep, Noel disentangled himself from her arms, dressed and slipped out to his own cabin. There, he sat down to write a brief entry in his personal diary. Returning to Lola's cabin, he placed the book next to her pillow. He studied her for a few minutes, as if she were a stranger and he were seeing her for the first time, noticing how even in the faint moonlight the ravages of life were catching up on her, emphasized in the fine lines and the slighting sagging chin, yet the impeccable bone structure remained. He reached out as if to touch her, but let his hand fall. 'Ah, sweet beauty,' he whispered, 'unmasked in the moon, may you yet find salvation.'

Late the next morning, Lola woke and stretched, feeling contented, the best she had in weeks. She wished Noel had stayed with her so that they could make love again, but his absence meant that he had returned to his own cabin. Poor Noel, still such a stickler for moral propriety even after all this time of being together. As she arose, she unwittingly covered the diary with her pillow.

She was not unduly worried when Noel didn't turn up at breakfast but when she hadn't seen him by luncheon, Lola sent Belle to his cabin to see if perhaps he was unwell. The maid reported his bunk hadn't been slept in, and an uneasiness crept over Lola. She hunted through the ship's public rooms and when she couldn't find him, pushed her way into the lower class areas, thinking perhaps he had found some kindred spirit among those passengers with whom he was passing the time. No one had seen him and the Captain was alerted.

Within half-an-hour, the Captain faced Lola with a somber face.

'I'm afraid, Countess,' he said, 'Mr. Follin is no longer aboard this ship. We can only assume he fell overboard at some time during the night. Far too much time has elapsed for us to turn the ship around to search for him.'

A cloud of white condensed in Lola's mind. She had no idea who this man was in front of her. Or who she was. Or where she was. Snatches of sounds that made no sense drummed in her ears. Double visions appeared before her eyes. The white blankness turned a murky gray, before dissolving into a black oblivion that swept over her.

Belle later found the diary as she plumped up the pillows around the unconscious Lola's head. Too worried about her mistress and not realizing its importance, she placed it among a pile of Lola's books as, with tears in her eyes, she knelt down beside Lola and prayed for kind Mr. Follin's soul.

'In the absence of any note to the contrary, we are unable to determine beyond reasonable doubt that Mr. Follin took his own life. Therefore we must assume he fell overboard some time during the night while unsteady on his feet in a state of intoxication.'

The words of the Captain still resonated in Lola's brain as she stood at the ship's rail as *Jane A. Falkenberg* finally sailed past the misty portals of the Golden Gate and into San Francisco Bay.

After three weeks of overcast weather she was beginning to wonder if she would ever see a blue sky again: ever see the stars. Her life was as mist-shrouded as the Golden Gate itself. She had

thought those first few agonizing days and nights when she believed the Captain's findings - that Noel had fallen overboard by accident - were the worst she ever had to endure, but she had been wrong. There was even worse to come.

There was *now*. When she knew the truth. When she had read the book now clasped in her arms. Noel's diary - his final parting gift - the pages full of the outpourings of a tormented soul.

'I have abandoned my responsibilities to my family - to my wife - discarded my children - all for the shallow promises of the flesh.'

'They tell me many countless other men from kings to stable-boys have suffered under the spell of those devil's eyes and believed her false words of love.'

'She is heartless, and an inveterate and compulsive liar of the most devious sort ... her compulsion to physically strike those who offend her is nothing short of cruelty.'

'I fear she will soon tire of me as she did of those others yet I can not help myself ... I too have been struck by the curse.'

'I feel as if I have been marked by God in some way - that I have been chosen to bear my love for this woman as Christ bore his cross through the streets of Jerusalem - that I too must suffer crucifixion before she is made to see the truth ...'

And that final entry ...

'I can carry this burden no more. I welcome the embrace of eternal night. Adieu, my love, Lola. May the Lord have mercy on your soul.'

Lola's eyes strayed to the sullen waters breaking around the ship's hull.

'Adieu dear sweet Noel, with God's help I promise I will see that your life wasn't lived in vain,' she whispered softly, and dropped the diary overboard.

The letters were the most painful she ever had to write, but there was no-one else to write them. From his diary, it was obvious that Noel had been eaten by up his guilt at not being faithful to his wife, or loving and caring for his children as a father should have done.

Lola couldn't atone for that, but she could offer Carrie and the children any financial help they required. She also wrote to Noel's father, stepmother, and his half-sister Miriam with the same offers of assistance. It was poor compensation for Noel's brief life, but was the least she could do.

Even when the sun eventually struggled to break through her own personal mist, Lola was permanently subdued. However, her grief didn't stop her from being a spectacle for the curious. Speculation ran wild through the world's press as to the cause of death of this latest lover. While no-one actually dared to mention the word suicide, the fatal touch of Lola Montez was often repeated.

There were the inevitable comparisons to the unfortunate George Heald. No sooner had Lola arrived back in San Francisco, she was to read a short report in the local newspapers that, riddled with consumption and chronic alcoholism, George Heald had finally passed away a few months before. He was the same age as Noel and had died alone, and broke, in a run-down English seaside hotel.

In public she kept her head raised but, privately, there were times when she wished that she too had fallen from the deck of the *Jane A. Falkenberg*. It was only her vow to Noel's memory and a growing conviction that she must atone for the excesses and indulgences of her own life that kept her from completely losing reason. Keeping herself busy was the only solution for impending insanity.

Although San Francisco was in the throes of one of its infamous Vigilante episodes, she was barely aware of the tensions and violence around her. She rented a small house on Telegraph Hill and opened at the American Theater to great acclaim, receiving some of the best reviews of her life for her roles in the plays in which she had acted with Noel in Australia.

There was the usual concurrent revival of a satire on her adventures in Australia, but the San Franciscans generally were loyal to Lola and even her critics gave her praise where praise was due.

'Lola Montez has actually discovered how to act - and she hasn't boxed anyone's ears for at least a week.'

‘Lola has surprised us all. Her talents as an actress have definitely been under-rated.’

‘Her role in Follies of the Night could not have been excelled by any of the actresses who have visited us.’

It was an ironic culmination after all these years, but Lola’s heart was no longer in her performances. The Spider Dance was performed as vigorously as ever, but it was not spiders that she tried to stamp under her feet, but her own demons.

She was coming to the cold, brutal realization she could no longer hide from her past and repress the kind of woman she had been, and the life she had led. Mercifully, with the aid of various medications, the headaches and blank episodes were presently at bay although those dreaded dreams had returned at night - vivid and filled with strange faces and voices, haunting and accusing. She often woke to a hammering heart and a body drenched in sweat.

One morning after a particularly trying night, she rose early and sat at her desk to write another letter to Noel’s wife. Mail from the East still took weeks, even months, and she felt frustrated by the inaction. Belle hovered behind her not wanting to interrupt, but Lola was conscious of her. Finally, she put down her pen and turned around, struggling with her irritation.

‘What is it?’

‘Perhaps Madame could tell me which gown she will wear this morning for her visit to her dressmaker?’

Lola frowned. The thought of clothes and dressmakers at this time seemed frivolous. ‘Oh, I don’t care,’ she muttered and turned back to her writing. ‘You choose something.’

Belle hesitated. ‘Perhaps Madame could tell me which jewelry she will wear.’

Lola put the pen down. If dresses seemed frivolous, what could be said of jewelry? She turned around again. ‘Bring me the box.’

As Belle lifted the lid of the large cedar box, and peeled back the protective velvet cloth, the glint of gold, diamonds, rubies and emeralds escaped in a dazzling kaleidoscope of color but, rather than reveling in their beauty, Lola now found them repulsive. She picked up George’s topaz necklace with its still-broken clasp, remembering how she had unwittingly set out to ruin her marriage to Pat Hull by wearing it on their wedding night. Also the diamond ring from King Ludwig that had caused a similar reaction from poor George. All her chances at happiness had been ruined by the spells and evils of jewelry. She flung the pieces back into the box.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I will never wear any of it again. Give it away.’

Belle stared, amazed. Although Lola’s behavior of late had altered drastically, for her not to wear jewelry when out in public was unimaginable.

‘But Madame, there is a fortune here? You cannot just give it away.’

Lola frowned again before her face brightened. ‘We’ll sell it. The proceeds can go to help Noel’s children.’ She waved. ‘Now get it out of my sight.’

‘Are you sure there is not even one item you wish to keep?’ asked Belle cautiously.

‘Make a list. I will see.’

Belle couldn’t help wondering at Lola’s foolishness. Just the sale of one of her numerous rings alone would have been enough to support an average woman for the rest of her life. If she hadn’t been born honest, it would have been so easy to take an item herself and for Lola to not even notice, at least in her present frame of mind. But Belle listed each piece faithfully, most of them being made up of Lola’s favorite diamonds, but there were also ruby rings and pearl earrings, emerald bracelets and exquisitely turned gold filigree brooches and watches, necklaces and crosses, even belts studded with diamonds.

At the bottom of the box was a small item wrapped in tissue paper and tied with a red satin bow. Belle hesitated a few moments before opening it, sensing it wasn’t part of the ornate collection. It was a tiny object, easily sitting in the palm of her hand and hardly likely to fetch much compared to the other pieces. Belle put it down as the last item on the list: ‘One ivory elephant with ruby eyes.’

Like Belle, the auctioneer thought Lola was crazy to rid herself of every single piece of jewelry, but the commission on the sale was likely to be the biggest ever earned in San Francisco. The

auction was duly advertised and the collection described as probably the largest individual collection of jewelry in private possession in all of the United States of America. It was expected to bring in excess of thirty thousand dollars.

Lola had barely glanced at Belle's painstaking list and it was the auctioneer, who drew her attention to the last item. 'A very insignificant piece,' he said. 'Hardly in the caliber of the other items. It looks like a common curio.'

Lola gave a gasp as she read the list. So that's where it was - Papa's little elephant - at the bottom of her jewelry box all this time. She remembered how she used to carry it around in her younger days, often placing it in view in dressing rooms or in hotel bedrooms. Somehow in all the constant moving around over the years, she had assumed it to be lost. One of her numerous maids must have packed it and put it in the bottom of her jewelry box for safe-keeping where it was forgotten.

'Do you want it included?' asked the auctioneer.

'Oh, no,' said Lola with a sigh of relief. 'That must never be sold.'

If Lola had been present at the auction to model the jewelry pieces in person she might have achieved the thirty thousand dollars expected. As it was, only ten thousand was the final take. The auctioneer grumbled that the population of San Francisco was still too small to have absorbed such a vast collection and that people had acquired themselves unbelievable bargains.

Lola didn't particularly care. When the gavel fell on her jewels, she was far away in Sacramento fulfilling a short season at the Forrest Theater, and generating the highest receipts in its history. When her run ended, dressed in a deliberately drab dress and Quaker bonnet, she took the stagecoach and traveled unrecognized on to Grass Valley.

She wandered through her now unkempt garden, seeing something of herself in the way struggling rose bushes were now being dominated by the wilder cacti. She was the rose and her small thorns were no longer protection against the greater swords of life. Pricked, stabbed, slashed - her body and her spirit were no longer as strong as they had once been.

Fires had raged through the towns and forests of the Sierra the past summer and while the hammering sounds of rebuilding echoed in the air, much of the area was covered with great swathes of blackened timber. She took a horse and went in search of her secret place in the woods, only to discover that it had disappeared and a noisy sawmill was standing in its place.

There was nowhere left where she could commune with the spirits. This place no longer welcomed her as once it had. She promptly turned the horse around and returned to Grass Valley where she immediately arranged for the house and its contents to be put up for sale.

Her neighbor Harriet Robson suggested she might like to pay a visit to Johnny Southwick, who had lost all his wealth and now lay dying, but for one of the few times in her life Lola's courage failed her at the last minute. She was too fragile herself to look into any more accusing male eyes, to see the wreckage she had caused in yet another life. Without a backward glance, Lola boarded the next stage and left Grass Valley forever.

Back in San Francisco, she arranged for the proceeds of the jewelry auction to be sent east to Mrs. Noel Follin of Cincinnati. She subsequently moved into a small house on Telegraph Hill and made plans for her farewell performances in San Francisco before returning herself to the Eastern States.

'Dear Harriet, Thank you for your letter and asking after my "La Petite Lotta"' who is well acclaimed here in San Francisco. Both Laura Keene and Edwin Booth have seen her dance and predict she will be a great star some day.

Can't say I'm surprised that the Countess sold up. It's as well you are rid of her. There's some who says she's not far off stir crazy since Frank Folland passed over. I glimpsed her the other day in Montgomery Street in her widow's weeds and a bonnet with a veil a yard long. She sold her jewels, you know, for Folland's children, and there was not so much as a ring about her person, but she still takes a fancy to those strange creatures - on her shoulder one of those white Australian parrots - a cockatoo they call it - and she'd rather talk to it than folk, they say.

My Lotta asked to visit her and I said, "Not on your life my girl. I'll not have you associating with an immoral hussy who talks to dead people and birds." Lotta kicked up a fair tantrum and I laid the strap to her. I don't want her turning out like the Countess.

Affectionately, your friend, Mary-Ann Crabtree.'

When the steamship *Orizaba* sailed out through the Golden Gate on Thanksgiving Day, Lola was deeply aware that the voyage also symbolized another end to a major part of her life. The dwindling audiences and newspapers had not spared the truth that her dancing days were over and she still harbored some faint optimism that she could carry Noel's ambition through by turning more to acting, but there were other matters that had to come first.

There had been no reply from Noel's widow, but his father and stepmother had written they were quite prepared to welcome her when she returned to New York. The prospect of facing them made her uncharacteristically nervous.

She wished Belle was with her, but the maid had met a young miner, fallen in love, and had decided to stay in California. Saying goodbye had ended in a flood of tears for both of them. They had been through much together and Belle probably knew her better than anyone. Yet Lola accepted it as further proof that she was being called upon by some higher power to redeem herself and that her future path must be mainly a solitary one.

A few weeks later, Lola stood at the window of her hotel and stared at the busy traffic in the Manhattan streets, her unease exacerbated by a few flurries of snow. A new maid, Martha, had just announced that Mrs. Susan Danforth Follin and Miss Miriam Follin had arrived at the hotel and were waiting to meet with her.

'Oh, Noel. Bon-Bon. Anyone. Let me feel your presence. Give me the courage,' she whispered, her breath leaving a mist on the window pane. 'I have faced many dangers in my life. Yet this ... this must be the worst.'

'Excuse me, ma'am?'

She took a deep breath, turned around and gave the maid a forced smile. 'Just talking to myself,' she said. 'Please show the ladies in.'

For a moment Lola was disconcerted that neither woman was dressed in mourning. Noel's fair-haired stepmother was about her own age with an abundant figure squeezed into a red visiting dress liberally trimmed with feathers and beads, while his beautiful wide-eyed sister seemed no more than a child in a demure blue dress, her thick black hair flowing down her back and loosely tied with a white ribbon.

Lola raised a hand to her mouth and burst into tears. She dropped to her knees. 'Oh, God forgive me. I have killed your son. I have killed your son!'

There were a few moments when the only sound in the room was Lola's sobbing before Susan Follin bent over and stretched out her hand. 'Please, Countess,' she murmured with obvious embarrassment. 'You mustn't blame yourself. We know it was just an accident.'

Lola raised her head, trying to focus through her tears. 'If I could have stopped him ...'

'You mustn't hint at dark reasons. We've received a copy of the findings of the inquiry. Noel simply lost his footing when the ship gave a sudden lurch. We are satisfied with that.'

'I still feel responsible,' Lola said as she clambered to her feet and dabbed her eyes with a lace handkerchief. 'Taking him so far away to Australia.'

'Noel was a Forty-Niner, remember,' said Susan. 'We gave up trying to control his sense of adventure years ago.'

With the lack of sadness in the woman's voice, Lola realized that Noel was not sorely missed by his family. 'I wrote to his wife,' she said. 'I even tried to deposit some money to her credit, but the bank wrote back saying she wanted nothing to do with it.'

'Caroline is a right piece of ... I mean, she's a stubborn woman,' gushed Susan. 'Even if she doesn't want any money, I'll make her see sense. The children should get it.'

Lola nodded. 'Yes, of course. That was what I would like.' Her eyes turned to Miriam, standing

demurely with her hands behind her back. 'And what about you, Miriam? Have you finished your schooling yet?'

Miriam flashed a quick glance at her mother, then lowered her eyes. 'Yes, ma'am,' she murmured.

'Such a lovely girl,' said Lola, reaching out to touch the luxuriant hair that was just like hers had been at the same age. 'You must have many beaux.'

Susan pursed her lips. 'Miriam has her admirers,' she said curtly, 'but few of them are suitable.'

Lola remembered her own youth. 'They rarely are. When a girl is of tender age and beautiful, she is easy prey.'

Miriam said nothing, keeping her eyes lowered while behind her back her fingers were sticking up in a vulgar gesture.

Not long afterward, Lola was invited to move into the Follin home in Stuyvesant Place and, in the course of time, she discovered that the enchanting Miriam was in fact all of twenty and definitely not the innocent girl that she appeared.

It was common gossip among the servants, and Martha related the story that Miriam had been seduced at sixteen by a young man in a jewelry store who gave her diamonds in exchange for certain favors. The man was given the choice of marrying Miriam or going to jail. Although the marriage took place, Miriam was promptly snatched back home by her mother. She never saw her husband again and he later sought an annulment.

At first, Lola was upset that the Follins hadn't thought to tell her the truth, but Miriam reflected so much of what she had been at the same age that she understood the girl perfectly. However, she saw it as yet another portent of the new role Lola Montez was destined to play. Here she had the perfect opportunity to mold a young girl away from the vices and indulgences that had littered and destroyed her own life. Lola knew very well lecturing the girl would have no effect - she must find another way to the girl's heart - and she hit on the perfect solution. Miriam was invited to join Lola on the stage.

Susan had no objections to the idea and seemed almost relieved to have Miriam doing something useful. Within days Miriam was re-born as 'Minnie', the sister of Lola Montez. A month later they debuted together in Albany in an anti-slavery play called *The Cabin Boy* which opened to encouraging reviews. With tickets selling for only a dollar or fifty cents apiece, the receipts were hardly going to make Lola a new fortune. After the run in Albany, the pair were booked into Providence.

Severe winter storms had been racking the Eastern States with many animals being drowned, and houses flooded, but Lola detected an opportunity for a little extra publicity. Instead of taking the standard route by train and road, she offered a ferry-man a hundred dollars to row her and Miriam across the Hudson. It was a highly dangerous excursion, for the river was full of ice floes.

Miriam was terrified, but Lola thrilled to the experience as the boatman dodged the ice and an Arctic wind lashed at the two women. A second boat they were towing was torn away, carrying their costumes down-river. When they finally caught the connecting train and reached the appropriately-named Providence, the reporters who had been primed ahead of the event were waiting. An illustration appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of the two women in a half-submerged boat defying the elements. Lola added another page to her legend and she guaranteed that the Forbes Theater was packed for the whole of their run.

It was a brief return to glory, however, for despite her vow to Noel, Lola discovered that her heart was no longer in the career of serious actress. Since she had been forced to face her own failings, she only had to look at herself in a mirror to know that her racy life had left her with a face and body both aged before their time.

She also had to admit the fact that her hope to fashion Miriam into the star in her stead, was being thwarted. Miriam was proving to be more than a handful, a strong-willed girl who had ambitions that extended far beyond being the little sister of Lola Montez. She enjoyed the glamor of the theater but saw it only as a stepping stone to better things.

Miriam, in turn, found that off the stage Lola herself was a great disappointment. Could this really be the woman who had conquered men as diverse as King Ludwig and Franz Liszt, who had defied nearly every female convention, who whipped editors? Miriam hardly thought so. The glimpse of the famous Lola on the voyage on the raging Hudson aside, this other Lola often reverted into a somber shadow: a subdued, aging woman who spent most of the day with a dog on her lap and her nose in boring books about religion and spiritualism.

It was inevitable that Miriam became bored. She struck up a flirtation with one of the young actors and one afternoon Lola discovered them behind the scenery.

For several seconds Lola had watched unseen as Miriam and the young man were locked together on a costume box in a rutting frenzy. Miriam's head was thrown back, her face highly flushed, eyes closed but her mouth wide and moist, the man panting, his naked buttocks pumping hard. Once, at such an erotic sight, the devils within her own body might have been set in motion, but now the far stronger force of revulsion hit Lola like a tidal wave. '*Whore!*' she screamed.

The man climaxed from the fright and fell off Miriam landing on the floor in a quivering heap.

Lola did not bother to look at him as Miriam stayed where she was, lying back on the costume box, legs still provocatively apart and the liquid of love glinting on her thighs. A pair of smoky defiant eyes challenged her. For a moment in time it was as if she and Miriam were one person. Further words were unnecessary. Sick at heart, Lola could only turn her head and walk away.

The remainder of Lola's theatrical tour went on without Minnie Montez. She played to full houses in Pittsburgh, St Louis and Chicago and the usual varying degree of acclaim over a period of three months. By the time the tour was over and she returned to New York she was exhausted. Dancing had become almost a painful chore and she had often had to cancel performances due to continuing ill health. She realized she wouldn't be able to face much more of the rigorous stage life.

Her dream of making good her vow to Noel's memory and his family had also soured. His widow continued to spurn both her and her money. Miriam had proved she had no desire to benefit from Lola's guidance and, in fact, had fast worked her way up in the social scale of mistresses, now being ensconced in a love nest provided by a prominent banker. Miriam Follin had discovered there were easier careers than being an actress.

Lola was in a quandary. She still needed to find some way of atoning for her sinful life, but she also needed to make her own living. Fortunately, both problems were resolved the day the Reverend Chauncey Burr came into her life. She met him in the parlor of a discreet house on Nineteenth Street, where a small group of people would gather once a month to read the Bible and various other religious and scientific works, and attempt to explore the links between Spiritualism and Christianity.

Lola was still convinced that Henri Dujarier often walked at her side, that he had been with her all along, trying to guide her towards the path she was at last set upon. She decided that it had been her innate stubbornness and weakness for the pleasures of the flesh that had blocked the messages he had tried to send to her. Now that the truth was clear in her mind, she needed to find a way so that the channel between them would be kept open.

Chauncey was a journalist and also a minister in the Universalist Church. He preached a brand of Christianity that appealed to Lola. The Universalists had open-minded views and believed that everyone, no matter how much of a sinner they had been, would eventually be redeemed by God. Their services were informal and not cluttered with ritual or dogma.

Lola felt at ease with them, and particularly with Chauncey. Although he was a distinguished man with passable good looks, it was a unique experience for her to develop a friendship with a man untrammelled by sexual attraction, and it gave him the unique freedom to be critically frank with her.

'Lola, my dear,' he said to her one evening as he escorted her to a small house she was renting further along Nineteenth Street, 'I have seen your acting and it is passable but, let's face it, you are no spring chicken and you have neither the skill nor stamina to be a Medea or Lady Macbeth.'

Lola stiffened and she came to an abrupt halt.

‘And before you threaten me with your famous whip-wielding indignation,’ he continued with a grin, ‘hear out what I have to say.’

She glared at him sullenly before relenting, falling back into step beside him.

‘You have a wonderful speaking voice. You have a wit and repartee unlike that of any other woman. And you have an incomparable knowledge of the vanities of this world. I do believe you ought to use your talents as a lecturer.’

Lola stopped again and he turned to her. ‘There’s not a person alive who can read a newspaper who doesn’t know about you and has formed an opinion about you, erroneous though it is likely to be. This is your chance to enlighten and amuse far wider audiences than have seen you dance. And perhaps you could use such opportunities to defend yourself at the same time. What do you say?’

Lola mused for a moment. ‘Most of the time when I open my mouth I am bombarded with abuse,’ she said. ‘What would you have me lecture on that would not cause high-minded indignation?’

Chauncey laughed. ‘Is this timidity I detect in the infamous Lola?’

Sparks flared in her eyes. ‘Certainly not!’

‘Can I take it you will consider my idea?’

Lola tilted her head. ‘I may do,’ she said slowly, ‘when I know what subjects you have in mind.’

Beautiful Women. It was an appropriate subject and one with which Lola was clearly identified. Rather than opening the lecture tour in New York, Chauncey suggested she start in the smaller centers where opinions on Lola’s history were likely to be rigid. If she could sway her audiences there, she should have no trouble elsewhere.

The Canadian town of Hamilton, Ontario, was chosen. Lola was uncharacteristically nervous as she stepped up to the podium for the first time. No longer could she hide behind a character in a play or the persona of a dancer. This was Lola Montez herself, without adornment of any kind, her only embellishment the addition of ‘Countess of Landsfeld’ to her name on the program.

The sea of faces before her were the mixture of curiosity, suspicion and outright animosity that she had seen so often before. Some were expecting her to be a disaster. Strangely enough, that fact alone gave her the courage she needed. She took a deep breath, politely cleared her throat and began.

‘In attempting to give a definition of beauty, I have drawn on the classic parable of Psyche who was forced to descend to the lower regions and bring back a portion of Prosperine’s beauty in a box. The too inquisitive goddess, impelled by curiosity or perhaps by a desire to add to her own charms, raised the lid, and behold, there issued forth a vapor which was all there was of that wondrous beauty ...’

Chauncey watched from the curtains at the side of the hall. The upright figure in a Grecian gown of white silk, with unfashionably short springy curls swept back from her face and her skin glowing in the gaslight had an ethereal quality. He was pleased with the effect. While her rebellious nature meant she was still having trouble conforming to that never-fail formula of sinner repentant, she had made an excellent start. He had suggested they begin with the fairly innocuous subjects such as beauty and manners which would get the women to come and see her. Later, more profound subjects might be explored.

Lola, of course, had had her own ideas over the content. At times they had argued, but usually compromised. Only a very astute observer would observe the subtle differences of authorship in its passages.

‘But though there is difficulty in settling upon a perfect standard of female beauty, there can be no doubt about its power over the customs and institutions of mankind. The beauty of woman has settled and unsettled the affairs of empires and the fate of republics, when diplomacy and the sword have proved futile ...’

A delicate skirting of Lola’s own history but enough to make any bored member of the audience sit up and take notice.

‘Where are we to detect this special source of power? In a dimple? Sometimes beneath the shade of an eyelid? Or perhaps among the tresses of a fantastic curl? I am ashamed to think what small things will often move the strongest and bravest of men. Many times in my life in the company of kings and nobles have I been forced to reflect on Milton’s words ...’

She stumbled a little in the passage. Perhaps she was right when she had argued with him about not littering the lecture with too many quotes from others. But by the time she passed into name-dropping of famous people, the audience were in awe.

‘The Duchess of Sutherland, the most magnificent woman in England ...’

‘The present Duchess of Wellington is remarkable, but without any animation and as cold as a statue ...’

‘Empress Eugenia when I last saw her was certainly one of the most vivacious women in Paris ...’

‘And then of course the Grand Duchess Olga ...’

After meandering through a historical discussion of the fads of fashion, what indulgences women ought to avoid if they wanted to stay beautiful plus the advocating of a daily bath in water and bran, Chauncey could sense she had won them over completely.

‘It has been my privilege to see the most celebrated beauties that shine in the gilded courts of fashion throughout the world, from St James to St Petersburg, from Paris to India, and yet I know of no art which can atone for the defects of an unpolished mind and an unlovely heart. That charming activity of soul, that spiritual energy, which gives animation, grace and living light to the frame is, after all, the real source of woman’s beauty.’

Lola paused, raising her head from her notes. Chauncey no longer noticed the slight sagging of chin or the faint dullness in her eyes. Out there, before an audience, her own beauty had returned in all its sparkling glory.

‘I thank you for your patient attention - and I wish you all a good night.’

There was a moment before the applause broke out. Several people stood up, clapping wildly. ‘Bravo! Bravo!’

Chauncey rubbed his hands together. The re-invention of a legend had begun.

37.

Few realized the last performance of Lola Montez as a dancer had taken place as her fame as a lecturer spread. Soon no-one could remember when she last performed the Spider Dance, and neither could Lola herself.

Despite her success in many cities with subjects that included *Gallantry, Wits and Women of Paris* and *Comic Aspects of Love*, she still managed to create controversy with *Romanism* - a savage attack on what she saw as the backward nature of the Catholic Church. It was the one subject that had to be dropped in cities wherever the Catholic faith held sway. Despite her personal discovery of Christ, Lola still hated the Jesuits and what they had stood for in countries like Bavaria.

Chauncey Burr occasionally let her have her head as it was good for business. She still answered her critics with fire, mainly through letters to the newspapers. A bland Lola would not bring in the crowds.

Lola concluded her lecture season in Philadelphia with *Heroines of History and Strong-minded Women* in which she answered the growing women’s rights movements and their conventions with her own views.

‘One or two hundred women getting together in a convention and resolving that they are an abused community and that all men are great tyrants and rascals proves plainly enough they - the women - are somehow discontented and that they have perhaps a certain amount of courage, but I cannot see that it proves them to have any remarkable strength of mind.’

‘Really strong-minded women are not women of words - but of deeds, not merely of resolution, but of action. History does not teach me that they have ever consumed much time in conventions and in passing resolutions about their rights, but they have been very prompt to assert their rights - and to defend them too - and to take the consequences of defeat!’

She went on to discuss various famous women of history from the Amazons and Cleopatra to Queen Elizabeth and Catherine the Great and concluded with a swipe at the men.

‘That masculine philosophy which regards and would treat woman as an inferior being, is not only an insult to that God who created her as the equal companion of man, but is contradicted by every stage of history and experience.’

Her lecture was well received by some women activists, but her dubious past blocked any acceptance of Lola Montez as a true campaigner for the rights of the common woman. She was unconcerned: Lola had rarely made friends with women when she was younger and it was unlikely she would care to do so now.

With money again in the bank, Lola retreated to Nineteenth Street and entertained much as she had done in the past even though the people who flocked to her cottage now were not of the truffles and champagne society she had once attracted, but rather a collection of misfits - radical religious leaders, socialists, ne’er-do-well writers, artists and people tinged by other scandals.

She hardly knew who was there most of the time. The truth was there were days when she no longer found much enjoyment in other people’s company. It seemed as if her state of mind varied as much as the state of her health. One day she would be feeling full of joy, would cast off the shapeless Grecian veils of the lecturer and revert to immaculate fashion in Montez black - again the defiant, flirtatious woman the world knew best. The next day she would be unable to drag herself out of bed, ridden with headaches and melancholy, dwelling in the past, and not bothering with her appearance. On those days she simply wished she were dead.

Often she would kneel by her bedside, crying as she tried to communicate with God, or Bon-Bon, or whatever soul out there in the mysterious ether would listen. Her desire to atone for her life was still compounded with an insatiable longing for earthly love.

So it was that she was in a highly vulnerable state when a shadow from the past flitted into her drawing room. He arrived at one of her evening soirees uninvited, cast off a voluminous red cape and threw his arms wide. ‘Ah, Countess - so many years since I have seen you!’

Lola stared at him, wondering if she were suffering from another blank spell.

‘Prince Johan Sulkowski, surely you remember me?’ He bowed deeply over her hand, placing a lingering kiss upon it. ‘We met in Berlin.’

‘Berlin?’

His eyes glittered. ‘Yes, Count von Reinberg was my dearest friend.’

He seemed so elegant and sure of himself that she didn’t doubt him, although she was surprised that she hadn’t remembered how good-looking he was, for she rarely forgot the really handsome men.

‘You are more beautiful than ever,’ he purred, still holding her hand. ‘So often I have dreamed of meeting you again. Fate has a strange way of dealing out the cards, no? Perhaps you and I are destiny.’

For Lola to be swept off her feet by any man was a rarity. With the exception of her first love, Thomas James, for most of her life it had been the other way around. She promptly forgot all her other guests and they talked together until late about life in the courts of Berlin and Munich. Apparently the Prince had been exiled in the turmoils of 1848 but had plans to return shortly to Europe to claim his Silesian estates.

Lola went to bed giddy and with a knot of excitement in her heart. She felt once more like the beautiful young woman who had conquered Europe. The Prince’s attentions to her proved that she was still attractive, that she didn’t have to bury herself in good works, that she was still the fabulous Lola Montez; and that she might still find true love in every earthly sense. Why, he had even been so bold as to suggest that she would be the perfect Princess to rule over his vast estates in Silesia.

In the morning, even though plagued by another headache, which she refused to admit might have been due to rather too much champagne, she could hardly wait to invite the Prince to dinner again that very night.

Chauncey Burr found her busily writing in her study. He was surprised to see how bright her eyes were and the youthful flush in her cheeks. 'I called to see if you would be interested in a new lecture I have been putting together on slavery,' he said, withdrawing a ream of paper from a briefcase.

Lola waved at him impatiently as she continued to write. 'No more lectures. There are more important things to do.'

Chauncey raised his eyebrows. 'I've also been asked if you would address the ...'

'I'm too busy.'

'Very well. But don't forget we need to talk about the tour of Europe.'

Lola stopped writing and looked up. A strange smile danced on her lips. 'Didn't you hear me? No more lectures. I'm going to Europe on my own, Reverend. I'm getting married.'

Chauncey was used to Lola's strange turns of temperament, but he could have been knocked over by a feather.

She saw his consternation and laughed. 'I'm going to be a Princess at last. Isn't that ironic? All these years, and now it will really happen.'

'Who ...?'

'Prince Sulkowski. I knew him years ago. We're not actually engaged as yet, but we soon will be, never fear.'

Chauncey had to sit down. 'This is highly disappointing,' he said.

Lola's eyes turned sharp. 'Why - are you not happy for me?'

He shook his head. 'I don't know what to make of you. You swore to me with your hand upon the Holy Book that your past was behind you, that you wanted to give your life meaning ...'

Lola was swiftly on her feet. 'I did no such thing.' She pointed imperiously at the door. 'If you don't care for my happiness I ask that you leave me!'

Chauncey was quick to do as she asked. In his carriage on the way home he tried to understand what had taken place. He came to the conclusion that Lola was being tempted, just as the Lord had been tempted in the wilderness, and he must find some way of bringing her back on to the path of righteousness. However, Chauncey didn't find the way quick enough.

Over dinner that night, Prince Sulkowski took Lola's hand in his and pressed kisses upon it, looked adoringly into her eyes and told her he was sailing for France the very next day. He said he had business in Paris before traveling to his ancestral lands in Silesia.

Swept up with her new-found romance, Lola was disappointed. 'But we've only just become reacquainted,' she said, giving him the full impact of her famous eyes. 'I can't believe we are to be parted so soon.'

'I would stay, but my business matters are urgent,' he continued smoothly. 'But I hope to remain in Paris for Christmas.' He pressed another kiss on her hand. 'Where I shall be so lonely.'

Lola's heart skipped several beats. 'Paris,' she murmured. 'The city where I first discovered love.'

'And if you join me there, you shall rediscover it again, my darling.' His kiss on her lips sent her last vestige of reason flying.

With other matters to distract him, Chauncey had been unable to act immediately on his plans to bring Lola back into the Christian fold, although she was constantly on his mind. He did, however, find the time to make some discreet inquiries about this mysterious Prince Sulkowski. It was several days before the truth was laid before him and he rushed to the cottage on Nineteenth Street. When he arrived he discovered that it was locked up and was told by neighbors that Lola had sold most of her belongings and had taken ship to France. He hated to think what kind of temper she would be in when she discovered the sort of man the Prince really was.

Under Napoleon III, Paris was in the throes of being rebuilt. The medieval alleyways and congested slums were being torn down and everywhere the city was being reformed. But Lola did not have the time to feel any remorse for the streets that Dumas and Hugo had made famous, she was too busy ordering a new wardrobe and undergoing beauty treatments, preparing herself for a return to a regal life. She wanted to look her best for when the Prince introduced her to his royal friends, and when she took her rightful place as a Princess.

As soon as she felt she was ready, Martha was sent with a discreet message to the Prince's townhouse which was not far from Lola's hotel. It read:

'Darling J. Let us begin the voyage of rediscovery! I adore you. L.'

The maid returned not long afterward with a long face and handed the message back to her.

'What do you mean - it's the wrong address?'

'The butler said the house belongs to the Turkish ambassador.'

'That's ridiculous. You must have made a mistake.'

'No, I asked at all the other houses nearby. No-one has ever heard of a Prince Sulkowski.'

A few years earlier and Lola would have had a tantrum, venting her anger on her surroundings and poor Martha. Now, all she could do was stare with shock at the maid for a few minutes, before crumbling on to the nearest chair, her mind reeling. She had been duped! Finally, a man had got the better of Lola Montez!

With a bitter hollowness in her heart, Lola discarded the new red silk gown with which she had hoped to impress the Prince and donned one of her simple lecture dresses, covering it with a cloak. She asked Martha to call a carriage.

No-one passing through the cemetery at Montmartre would have recognized the cloaked and veiled figure standing beside the grave of Henri Dujarier. Lola was grateful at least she hadn't told any of her Parisian friends that she was in town for she had planned to surprise them by arriving at the salons with a Prince on her arm.

At the picture in her mind, she laughed out loud, even though the tears still spilled down her cheeks. 'Oh, Bon-Bon. See what fools we are - how we deceive ourselves? How clever of you to plan for this to happen. I swear now, on your grave, that never again will I let myself be diverted from my purpose. I promise that I will accomplish what I set out to do and allow the spirit of God into my heart. Amen.'

Lola's frozen acceptance of what the Prince had done to her didn't take long to thaw. She had the return incognito voyage to New York as plain Mrs. Heald in which to wrestle with both the heat of her anger and her vow at Henri's grave. By the time she arrived, knowing full well that John Dale and the rest of the press would probably have wind of the story, she had decided she would have trouble remembering who Prince Sulkowski was should anyone be so bold to ask.

Chauncey was the only man who dared to broach the subject directly after Lola sent him a message to say that she had returned and was briefly resident in a boarding house. 'I tried to warn you,' he said. 'I hadn't imagined you would have been so incautious. The Prince has a wife and five children on a farm up-state, and I hurried to tell you, but you'd already gone.'

Lola swept this information aside with barely a murmur. 'Reverend,' she said. 'you recently suggested I should set straight in print the misinformation that abounds in my life and that you would be happy to assist in the writing of my autobiography.'

'Why, yes ...'

'I'd like to make a start on it as soon as possible.' She eyed him threateningly, 'and if you feel for the sake of truth I should include some mention of a recent incident, I want to make sure the gentleman - no, I can't possibly call him that - the *rat* - in question is exposed fully.'

Chauncey smiled. 'It would be my pleasure.'

She seemed to relax, taking his hand. 'Now I want to pray. I want to thank the Lord for guiding me through my moment of temptation, to ask His forgiveness and the renewal of my strength.'

Chauncey gave a sigh of relief and together they knelt on the carpet and began to pray.

He might have known that Lola wouldn't be able to control her irascibility for long and her successful new round of lectures at Hope Chapel had barely started when she was again reported on at length in the newspapers.

A confidence trickster originally from Montrose, Scotland, a David Jobson, was involved in a number of messy legal suits involving debt and libel. The prosecution discovered that Lola had known the shady doctor in London when he tried to bribe her and George Heald with an offer to write her memoirs. Although merely a witness in the case, the legal shenanigans that followed in the court put the spotlight on Lola.

Lola had woken the day of the court case with a searing headache. At times she saw double and during breakfast suffered another blanking episode which left her shaken and wary. It was not a good day to be facing cross-examination at the hands of smart attorney.

As she might have guessed, the court was full of reporters, including John Dale whom she hadn't seen in person now for some years. She wondered how it was he could still find things to write about her.

Jobson's counsel, a Mr. Schemerhorn, had every intention of making her out to be an unreliable witness. He opened with the usual questions of name, birthplace and age. She had already admitted to being born in Limerick, that her maiden name was Gilbert and her age was thirty-three, when he flatly asked, 'When were you born?'

What was he trying to do - trip her up? 'Can't you count?' she snapped. 'And as to where I was born, I cannot tell - I wasn't present when I was born.'

A ripple of laughter passed through the court.

'Were you married to a Captain James?'

'The ring was put on my finger, but my spirit was never united to him.'

'What other husbands have you had?'

Lola struggled with her foggy mind. Husbands? 'Now, wait a moment - I'd never have you, I know that much.'

Again there was laughter in the court and the magistrate called for silence.

'How many intrigues have you had?'

The fog cleared and she saw red. 'Why - how many have you?' she retorted, hardly aware of the court's amusement.

The magistrate asked her to answer the question.

'None,' she said, eyes flashing. 'I resided at the Bavarian Court for two years.'

'Who did you know there?'

'Everybody - except you.' The chuckles rippled again. 'I knew millions of people. I knew the King of Bavaria ...'

'Were you the mistress of the King?'

Lola bounded to her feet. 'What? No, sir. You are a villain for I'd take my oath on that book which I read every night' she said, pointing at the Bible, 'that I had no intrigue with the old man. I knew the King and molded his mind to the love of freedom. He presented me before the whole Court as his best friend. I was on the stage in Bavaria. It's easier to be a man's mistress than a dancer. After the revolution for liberty I fled. I was engaged in political business only.'

She felt dizzy again as the blood seemed to drain from her head. 'You might call me Prime Minister, if you please, or as the King said I was the King. Now there was a prime minister of straw for you ...'

Looks of puzzlement passed between the court as Lola paused for a moment, wavering on her feet trying to muster sense into what she wanted to say. 'The memoirs that have been written about me are all lies.' She pointed at Jobson. 'That man wanted to write my memoirs - but he tried to blackmail me ...'

The magistrate interrupted and ordered her to sit down.

Mr. Schemerhorn waited a few moments for Lola to re-compose herself before attacking her reputation again. 'Isn't it true that Mr. Jobson gave you a guinea in London to keep you from taking

to the streets for a livelihood?'

Lola couldn't believe what she was hearing, and it seems neither could the magistrate. He reprimanded Schemerhorn, but not before she had jumped up again. 'I came here in good faith as a witness and instead I find I am insulted. Where are the gentlemen to protect me?'

The ripples within the court had turned into a combination of laughter and hisses. It was just like being on the stage all over again. The magistrate called adjournment and Lola fled.

News of the Jobson case and Lola's heated testimony spread throughout the city like wildfire. By the time the hearing recommenced a few days later, the magistrate had taken the precaution of putting extra policemen on duty and ordered that admission to the court would be by ticket only.

Unbeknownst to Lola, a woman sitting in the gallery of the court was watching the proceedings with more than mere curiosity. After reading of the first day's proceedings in the newspaper she had pleaded with her husband to get her a ticket for the second part of the hearing.

He had looked at her quizzically. 'Now why on earth, Maria my lass, would you want to go and listen to some petty squabbling between crooks like Jobson?' asked Isaac Buchanan. 'It's hardly the sort of place for a lady.'

Although Jobson had been well known in Montrose, Maria didn't tell him at first she had a feeling she personally knew one of the witnesses. Isaac was very conscious of his growing prosperity and position. He had made a long, hard climb from immigrant Scottish barrow boy to successful Manhattan florist and didn't like to be reminded of his origins.

'I'll tell you later,' was her reply. 'I just have to be sure of something first.'

Isaac shook his head. Although he didn't care for the idea, he had never interfered too much in Maria's life and they had a good marriage because of it. He made the necessary inquiries and purchased her a ticket.

As soon as the woman in black sat down in the witness box, Maria knew for certain it was her. No-one else could possibly have eyes like that. Fancy, for years she had been aware of the famous Lola Montez, for who hadn't, but she had never read about her in much detail. Isaac didn't care for the sort of newspapers that reported at length about such people.

Schemerhorn approached the woman in the witness box and glowered at her. 'Now, madam, was your name not originally Betty or Molly Watson?'

Lola appeared tired and highly irritated. 'I don't choose to answer such ridiculous questions.' She wagged a finger at Jobson. 'I don't answer to falsehoods.'

'Were you not born in Montrose, Scotland and not Limerick, Ireland as you have stated and is your mother not Mary Watson?'

Lola turned her gaze back to Schemerhorn. 'May I answer Yankee fashion one question with another?'

The magistrate banged his gavel. 'No, madam, you may not.'

Lola ignored him. 'I have much to ask this Mr. Schemerhorn or Skrekhorn or whatever his name is - I have some questions about a lady that he beat the other day when he was brought before the Police Court ...'

'Madam, madam!' protested the magistrate.

'I only ask whether it is true Mr. Schemerhorn put his hand on that lady's neck ...'

'I ask you, madam, not to speak unless to answer a question ...'

'I only answer Yankee fashion - one question with another ...'

The magistrate banged away for several minutes until Lola had calmed down.

Schemerhorn tried again. 'Were you not assistant chambermaid in the Star Inn in Montrose?'

Maria put her hand to her mouth to restrain a giggle. Where on earth did these lawyers find such ridiculous information?

Lola's stare was enough to wither the entire bench. She pointed again at Jobson. 'How can anyone expect anything better from such a rascal? That man is dirt ...'

'Madam - I insist you keep quiet!'

Lola seemed to relent. 'I was not born in Montrose,' she said. 'I cannot be made out to be a

chambermaid. Not that it is a dishonest thing, either. If I was a chambermaid I would consider myself a far greater woman than I am today. Why I ask you - how do you know anything about me, or that I was I chambermaid?’

Schemerhorn continued to glower. ‘I would say to this woman ... this lady ..’

‘Pray call me a woman. I am proud to be a woman. Your mother was a woman!’

By now the court had deteriorated into fits of laughter. The magistrate lost control and Jobson jumped to his feet threatening Mr. Seely, the attorney for the respondent in the case. Seely replied he would throw Jobson out of the window and all hell broke loose. Within seconds Jobson had hit Seely on the head with his cane and Seely retaliated with a hook to Jobson’s chin.

While all eyes were on the fighting men and the policemen endeavoring to pull them apart, Maria watched Lola, who in turn surveyed the brawl with a kind of bored detachment as if she had seen it all before.

When order was finally restored by the court attendants, the furious magistrate announced he would have no more to do with the case, sentenced both Jobson and Seely to two days in jail for contempt of court and marched out, leaving Lola to face the clamor of reporters.

She held her head high as the reporters scribbled furiously. ‘You have seen what these scurrilous men have tried to do. Is there no law in this country that can prevent a woman’s character from being injured in such a manner?’

When one reporter asked about Mr. Jobson’s right to bring a case of assault against Seely, she laughed. ‘I don’t know what you call an assault, but I have spent a lifetime under the assaults of people like you.’ Her eyes briefly met those of John Dale, who merely grinned before she gave an emphatic rustle of her black skirts and made her way out of the crowded court-room.

Maria could hardly wait to get home and tell Isaac that she was now very sure that Lola Montez was naughty little Eliza Gilbert who had once run naked through the streets of Montrose.

The result of this latest Montez court sensation was that her lectures were booked out for weeks. A few nights later, as she prepared to entertain her audience with an autobiographical talk about her own past, a huge display of flowers arrived at her dressing room. Chauncey made a little joke about them being from Mr. Schemerhorn who was probably sorry for what he did, but Lola doubted it. Her discovery that the attorney was known to physically assault women as well as verbally hadn’t had so much as two seconds’ airing in the court before she was cried down. Chauncey has told her she was lucky the magistrate didn’t have her up for contempt of court too by attempting to raise another matter that had no relevance to the case.

‘One of these days women will make the laws in this country,’ Lola had retaliated, ‘then we’ll see a few changes in how courts treat their female witnesses.’ The glint in her eyes forestalled any further comment from Chauncey.

The flowers came from a Mrs. Buchanan of an address near Broadway. The name meant nothing to Lola, but she was intrigued by the little note enclosed.

‘Dear Eliza (I hesitate to call you Madam Lola for you were always Eliza to me) I see you are as fine at putting people in their places as you ever were. I should enjoy renewing memories of our schooldays. Please call on me at your convenience. Maria Buchanan (nee Thompson).’

Isaac Buchanan was at first disapproving about Maria’s friend. They even had a rare argument when he heard that Maria had invited her to tea. ‘She’s the most scandalous woman on earth and you are asking her into our house,’ he had spluttered.

‘Oh, Isaac, don’t be priggish,’ Maria had said. ‘Most of what has been said about her is lies. You wouldn’t believe the nonsense they tried to bring up at the court case. Besides, she has publicly told everyone she is reformed. She reads the Bible every day.’

Although still skeptical, Isaac preferred a peaceful life in his home and relented. He had intended to be absent when Lola called, but at the last minute his curiosity got the better of him and he watched warily as the two women met each other for the first time in nearly twenty-five years.

Isaac had difficulty reconciling the pale, wide-eyed figure in black with the siren who had

conquered kings. Seeing the two women together, at first she seemed as unremarkable as his own wife. Perhaps Maria had been right when she said that most of the stories were inventions.

Maria stretched out both hands in welcome. 'Madam Montez or is it Countess? I really don't know what to call you. I only remember you as Eliza Gilbert.'

The other woman smiled and Isaac was reminded of the fading petals of an exquisite rose. He had a sudden pang of regret that he had never seen her in early bloom.

'Oh Maria, it's been so long since I was Eliza, but I'd be happy if you would just call me Lola.'

The two women embraced before Maria introduced her husband. He felt himself warm under Lola's gaze and spent a few minutes with small talk before excusing himself and leaving the two women to chatter over old times in the parlor. He was of the opinion that one shouldn't believe gossip. Lola Montez was really quite harmless - and rather charming.

Strangely enough, Lola had also felt quite comfortable with Maria as they reminisced about their childhood at the Montrose Infants Sabbath School. Although she still preferred for that strange exotic child Eliza to remain buried in the past, the sharper edges of memory had been dulled with time and she almost had a sense of nostalgia for the cold, windswept village with its smell of wet cod and dry religiosity. It may have been a dreary place for a wild child, but it was the sort of place a mature woman could see in a new light. Lola decided that she might take a look at Montrose again when she embarked on her upcoming tour of Britain.

Before that happened, however, there were a few more lectures to give in New York, a new official autobiography to launch on the public, plus a book of beauty secrets. It was going to be a very busy year but Lola needed the busyness. It was a way of keeping control. The strange turns of mood and mind were becoming more frequent and sometimes she had difficulty with her vision, and suffered from sensations of numbness in her limbs. She had consulted several physicians who all gave wildly varying diagnoses and prescribed various nostrums.

One of them, who specialized in the diseases that discreet society only whispered about and which were only just starting to be investigated more carefully, suggested that it was her highly immoral life catching up with her. He even went so far as saying that she was suffering the long-term effects of a dose of the pox she must have had when she was younger.

Lola left his surgery in fury and disgust. Furious with both the doctor and herself for daring to bring out what she was afraid was the truth. There had been so many men and her desire so urgent at times she had often failed to take even the simplest precautions. It was the price she now had to pay and yet she saw it as the final and fitting retribution from God. Rather than returning home immediately, she had gone into the nearest church, where she knelt down and prayed.

Lola, the authoress, claimed new success. Her *Autobiography*, written with Chauncey's help, sold out of several editions and so did her *Arts of Beauty, or Secrets of a Lady's Toilet, with Hints to Gentlemen on the Art of Fascinating*. Women all over the world were interested to learn that daily baths, teeth cleaning, exercise and moderation in all things were the cornerstones of staying young and beautiful and they all chuckled at Lola's deliberate tongue-in-cheek attack on men.

She still couldn't avoid controversy, particularly when one journalist said that Lola wasn't clever enough to write her own lectures or books. She wasn't completely humbled yet and retaliated in vintage Montez style with an angry letter to the newspaper.

'Sir. I should prefer not to draw attention to this matter but for the noise of some brainless snipper-snappers who bear the same relation to literature and literary people that sneaks, gossips and backbiters do to respectable and well-bred people. One of them, probably the most starved and ragged of the demented crew, has ventured to attempt to levy blackmail upon me, as though it were possible for me to stand in any fear of twenty thousand such cowardly robbers!'

She had another parting salvo at the press when, shortly before leaving for her tour of Britain, she gave a free lecture to raise funds for a damaged church. The religious press were outraged. How could any church accept charity from the notorious Lola Montez? Her response was another savage letter reminding the writers that it was *'The doctors of theology and pious folks who crucified the*

Master?

Chauncey was glad to whisk her away on the steamship *Pacific*, bound for Galway Bay.

The pace of the tour was frenetic. Even if Lola would have wished, there was little time in places like Limerick or Dublin to remember her past associations with them. Her lectures were packed. She gave all her standard subjects, with the exception of her one on the Catholic Church, and included a few new ones - on the characters of Americans and the current state of the anti-slavery feelings.

After Ireland, she traveled throughout the rest of Britain, creating the inevitable condemnation in the press which in turn only served to bring in the crowds in record numbers. Financially, she was better off than she had been for years.

Unfortunately, there had been no time to visit Montrose or other places associated with her youth and in the end she decided it was best that she didn't. Privately, her mind was too preoccupied with her current quest for salvation to be indulging in the past. At every opportunity, she would go to church, spending long hours on her knees praying.

In London, Chauncey rented out the fashionable St James Hall off Piccadilly for her lectures. Aside from her court appearances in her bigamy trial, it was the first time she had appeared publicly in London since that disastrous dancing debut fifteen years before. Her lectures on *American Slavery* brought in the crowds. Lola warned that unless slavery was left to die a natural economic death, the United States was heading for war and anarchy. As usual, the critics let their reviews be colored by their own bias and personal morality.

Lola never bothered to read anything written about her any more. She had finally learned to ignore all of it, the good and the bad. The inner peace that she was striving for seemed to be slowly coming within reach.

Chauncey was surprised when Lola announced she was going to try and settle down in London again. He thought she was crazy but she was determined to show the British she had changed and they must finally accept her into the fold. So he returned to New York and Lola rented a large house on Park Lane which she hoped to make into a boarding house filled with lodgers also looking for salvation. However, her odd behavior intimidated people. No sooner had someone signed up for a room than she would rush him into her parlor and press a Bible upon him. The lodgers soon failed to turn up.

Meanwhile, in the evenings, she continued with her lectures and during the day she would either be at church or strolling with her dogs in Hyde Park.

John Dale discovered her one afternoon sitting on a park bench. Most of the people passing by had no idea who the subdued figure in black reading the Bible was, but he would have known her anywhere.

He paused in front of her and removed his hat. 'Good day. Can it be Mrs. Heald?'

She glanced up. The brilliant color in the eyes had dulled a little, but it was still that blue that belonged to no other woman on earth. 'Is it? I don't know. Call me whatever you wish.'

'I heard your lecture on slavery. It was very moving. Let us pray there will not be a war between the States.'

'When men close their ears and eyes to the truth, all that is left is prayer.' Lola's eyes returned to her Bible, her fingers tracing the words and her lips moving silently.

John Dale hesitated a minute before speaking again. 'I was with George Heald shortly before he died. He told me in spite of everything that had happened, he still loved you.'

Lola's hand started to shake. Slowly she raised her head.

Dale didn't know whether it might be advisable to flee now or stand firm to face the torrent of abuse he half-expected, but there were only tears in her eyes.

'We can't bring back the past,' she said softly, 'but with God's help we can atone for the wickedness of it. You don't know how often I've wished for just one chance to fling myself in the dirt before the feet of all those who I wronged and beg their forgiveness.'

Dale gazed at her in awe. He had heard the rumors that she was on her way to becoming a

penitent but had dismissed it as yet another Lola Montez publicity trick.

‘I had no idea,’ he said with a lump forming in his throat.

‘I lived only for myself and now I must redeem that self. It is an extremely painful process, but I am determined to succeed.’ She managed a faint smile. ‘You’re quite welcome to read the good book with me.’

He looked at her for another minute. ‘Thank you, but not just at the present.’

‘You ought to read the Bible, Mr. Dale. All journalists should. If all of us lived our lives in truth as God had intended there would be no hurt - no wars - no suffering. There would be only love.’

Lola’s eyes had glassed over and she no longer seemed to notice his presence.

She was still muttering to herself as he quietly slipped away.

38.

The rent fell due on the house in Park Lane at the same time as Lola succumbed to a bout of serious illness. The last of her funds from her British lectures were used to pay off the staff and her numerous debtors. She was on the verge of being thrown out on to the street when Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, an elderly couple whom she had met at a Methodist Church service, came to the rescue. They spirited her away to a cottage in the grounds of a manor house they owned in Derbyshire and there she was tended by a local doctor and a nurse.

Although she didn’t quite recover full physical health, she slowly managed to crawl her way back from the edge, knowing that her penance was not yet complete. She gave up her chain-smoking and her waking hours were spent sitting or strolling in the peaceful garden, reading the works of religious writers and communing with God and Nature. Each week she attended the local Methodist chapel, finding in the simple services the answer to her search for the ideal Christianity. In the evenings, when she was quite alone, she sat at a desk in her small sitting room and wrote a diary, pouring out her heart and agonies.

‘Oh, I dare not think of the past! What have I not been? I lived only for my own passions. How many years of my life have been sacrificed to Satan and my own love of sin? What have I not been guilty of, either in thought or in deed, during these years of misery and wretchedness. What would I not give to have my terrible and fearful experience given as an awful warning to such natures as my own.’

She paused only to stretch her cramped fingers before continuing:

‘What has the world ever given to me? (And I have known all that the world has to give - all!) Nothing but shadows, leaving a wound on the heart hard to heal - a dark discontent. How manifold are my sins, and how long have I lived a life of evil passions without a check.’

For hours she wrote until, exhausted, she collapsed at her desk and the maid found her and helped her into bed.

After several months of an existence that seemed to have purged every last vestige of Lola’s wicked life, an event occurred that tested her new-found redeemed self.

While Mrs. Edwards would have been happy to allow Lola to stay in their cottage indefinitely, Mr. Edwards was concerned about the costs. They had paid for the doctor and the nurse while she was ill and were still providing the services of extra maids, the food she ate, her laundry and even the vast quantity of writing paper, pens and ink that she seemed to get through.

One night at dinner in the manor, Mr. Edwards ventured to ask what Lola’s plans were for the future. She gave him one of those vague looks which made him wonder if sometimes her mind was a complete blank. When she failed to answer him he repeated the question. ‘I asked, Countess, whether you might be making any plans for the future?’

‘Now why should she be making plans, Mr. Edwards?’ said his wife who never referred to him by first name. ‘The Countess can live with us for as long as she likes.’

‘Of course, dear,’ he replied. ‘It was just that I assumed as she has now recovered she might wish to return to America, or wherever it is that she prefers to call home.’

Lola’s faraway look intensified into one of concern. ‘I have no home,’ she said. ‘I belong to no one and to nowhere.’

‘Now look what you’ve done, Mr. Edwards,’ said his wife swiftly. ‘You’ve upset her.’

‘I’m sorry, I was only a little curious. I just assumed the Countess would want to pick up the threads of her life elsewhere.’

Lola seemed to be having some sort of internal struggle at this suggestion. ‘I had no idea I had become a burden to you, sir,’ she said in a waspish tone.

Both husband and wife were taken aback. ‘Now, I never said that, Countess,’ murmured Mr. Edwards, ‘I can assure you that you are no burden.’

‘No, but you meant it all the same.’

Silence settled over the dining table while Lola glowered at him. Mr. Edwards was at a loss for words. He briefly wondered if Lola could ever be truly humble.

Mrs. Edwards spoke for him. She patted one of Lola’s hands. ‘Mr. Edwards didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, Countess. Please excuse his manner. Perhaps he was thinking, as I must admit I have been doing, that now you are well you might like to go out into the world again and work with others less fortunate. Your fame as a lecturer could bring many lost souls into the bosom of the Lord.’

Lola switched her glare to the woman. ‘Fine. If that’s the way you both feel, I will leave in the morning.’ She struggled up to her feet and marched out of the dining room, leaving the husband and wife staring at each other in astonishment.

‘Surely we didn’t say the wrong thing, Mrs. Edwards?’

‘Oh dear, Mr. Edwards, it seems we did.’

Lola’s heart was pounding by the time she got back to her room. So, she had overstayed her welcome. She might have guessed. Every time she had found some peace and contentment in life, it was cruelly snatched away from her. Was it never to end? The old impulse to pick up something and throw it or to slash at some curtain or drapery overwhelmed her and her hand was half-way to a china figurine before she realized what was happening to her.

God was testing her. Yes that was it. He was trying to see if she were truly penitent, if all the prayers and purging had finally rid her of the dreaded obsession with self. She burst into tears and fell to her knees. It seemed as if she still had a long way to go.

The next day she took her leave of the Edwards couple and could only manage a stiff goodbye and few words of thanks. In the train back to London she forced herself to open her diary and write a new entry.

‘Since last week my existence is entirely changed. When last I wrote I was calm and peaceful - away from the world. Now, I must again go forth. It was cruel indeed of Mr. E. to have said what he did, but I am afraid I was too hasty also. Ought I to have resented what was said? No, I ought to have said not a word. The world would applaud me; but, oh my heart tells me that for His sake I ought to bear the vilest reproaches, even unmerited. Goodbye, all the calm hours of reflection and repose I enjoyed at Derby. My calm days at the cottage are gone - gone. But I will not look back. Onward! must be the cry of my heart. Lord, have mercy on the weary wanderer, and grant me all I beseech of Thee. Oh, give me a meek and lowly heart.’

Few people on board the steamship that sailed from Southampton in October paid much attention to the frail and withdrawn woman traveling third class and who called herself Mrs. Heald. When the ship docked in New York, it was to the frightening news that an abolitionist called John Brown had seized an arsenal in Virginia and was trying to incite a slave rebellion. The United States was hovering on the brink of catastrophe. From that time on, few reporters, with the exception perhaps of John Dale, would be interested in the opinions of a middle-aged ex-dancer who had found God.

Chauncey was likewise preoccupied with other matters, but he managed to find the time to

organize a new round of lectures for Lola. However, he could see that she was unwell and tried to persuade her to retire, but she insisted that she had to carry on for it seemed she was without money again. At first Chauncey had no idea what she did with it and the fact that she might have been giving it all away didn't occur to him until he saw her one day riding a streetcar and trying to press religious tracts and brand new Bibles on the passengers.

He could see by the expressions on the faces that most thought her quite mad and literally climbed over each other to get out of her way. Probably not one of them would have realized who she was. And when she had glimpsed him watching her, she had hurried up to him, offering a Bible. She did not seem to know him.

'Lola, it's me, Chauncey, and you know I already own several Bibles' he said gently.

She looked at him with blank eyes for a few seconds before recognition dawned. 'Well, no matter. You could also do with another,' she had said, forcing it into his hand.

Although she often looked frail on the lecture platform, particularly in that she always wore loose white robes now instead of her snug-fitting famous black, she had lost none of her fire and wit. The scatty-minded woman who rode the streetcars and lived in a modest boarding house disappeared the moment she set foot on a stage.

Despite most New Yorkers' preoccupation with the worsening situation between North and South, they still found time to attend her discussions on female rights which she still derided as nothing but a lot of hot air and suggested that women would be better off being women and exploiting their feminine attributes than trying to imitate men.

In other lectures, she took a swipe at the British Empire and its exploitation of native peoples, which she even went so far as suggesting was worse than American slavery. It was inevitable she still managed to cause controversy and dissension, but they brought in the ticket-buyers and the more tickets she sold, the more Bibles she could buy.

Chauncey booked Lola to appear in various other cities: St Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Toronto. He worried about her being able to complete such a rigorous tour, but she insisted. They also talked of starting a new religious newspaper together to be entitled *The Thunderer*, partly in recognition of that heavenly bolt out of the blue she had experienced in far-off Australia, and Lola's head was full of ideas as to its content. Thinking ahead also helped to keep her mind active and in control. Although she no longer suffered from blank episodes, a pain down the left side of her face which the doctors dismissed as common neuralgia, troubled her constantly. She was glad to get back to New York and settle down again.

One hot June afternoon after she had been to chapel, she was walking back to her boarding house off Washington Square when she saw a fashionably-dressed young couple approaching her. The girl was leaning heavily on the man's arm and giving him the full effect of a pair of seductive eyes. Lola stopped, feeling slightly dizzy. The girl was Noel's sister, Miriam, but the young man was definitely not the wealthy diplomat whom she had recently married.

The couple found their path blocked by the strange woman and attempted to move around her, but Lola clutched at Miriam's arm. 'Don't be foolish,' she said. 'Give him up. It will only bring you pain and grief.'

The young man gave Miriam a puzzled glance and she, in turn, glared at Lola as she snatched her arm away. 'Get out of my way!'

'Please, Minnie. The pleasures of the flesh are only an illusion. They are the Devil's instrument. You must ask for the Lord's forgiveness. Read his works and know the truth.'

As she tried to make Miriam take the Bible she was carrying, the young man pushed Lola roughly aside. 'Be off with you, you old slut,' he snapped, 'Or I'll call a policeman.' He proceeded to steer Miriam, saying 'Who on earth was that scruffy broad? She seemed to know your name.'

'I've absolutely no idea,' snapped Miriam loudly, so that Lola could hear, 'I never saw her before in my life.'

Lola watched the retreating couple for several minutes. The dizziness persisted and she was feeling hot. Very slowly she managed to drag herself back to her room. She lay down on her bed.

All of a sudden, it felt as if her head exploded inside. When she tried to move she discovered that her left side was paralyzed and that she had lost all power of speech.

Even when Lola had lapsed into a coma, Maria Buchanan refused to believe she was going to die.

‘I won’t let you go, Eliza,’ she said as she sat her bedside, smoothing her brow and trying to spoon sustenance between the pallid lips. ‘It’s not your time yet. The Lord still has work for you to do.’

Whether Lola heard her or not, she didn’t know, but just when the doctors assured Maria that she was unlikely to survive another day, she opened her eyes.

Her mind was clearer and sharper than it had been for years but her body refused to function. Words that took a split second to form in her brain wasted themselves in a frozen tongue and a dribbling mouth.

The doctors told Maria it was useless, trying to urge Lola back into the world. She’d had a stroke and could have another one at any time, with fatal consequences. They suggested it would be better to let nature take its course.

But behind those faded eyes Maria could see a trace of brilliance still sparkling and she refused to listen to them. Instead, she took Lola to her own home where she sat her in the garden and spent hours each day urging her to try to speak, to try to walk - and to keep praying to God.

Within a few days, Lola could move her fingers on her left hand. Within another few, she could form intelligible words.

‘I told them you would do it,’ said Maria at last on the day Lola took her first steps. She was hesitant as a toddler, but at least she could walk.

Although Maria would have been happy enough for Lola to remain with her until she regained full strength, Lola wanted to be independent again and not a burden on anyone. Maria tried to argue that she shouldn’t live alone, but Lola insisted. They came to a compromise when Maria moved her to a boarding house at West Seventeenth Street not far from the Buchanans’ home. An acquaintance of Maria’s, a Scottish nurse called Margaret Hamilton, was hired to keep watch over her.

The room was sparse, but clean, with a single bed and chair, a pine dresser and worn rug. There was little to see from the small window apart from an alleyway and rooftops, but there was a patch of sky and at night Lola could sometimes glimpse the stars.

Here there were no velvets and brocades, no gilded bedsteads and buckets of champagne, no jewels and not even a single mirror - not that Lola gave even a single thought to such things. She was content to continue to recover her strength sitting in her single chair, reading her Bible.

At last came the day when she felt sufficiently recovered to venture out into the streets once more. Margaret Hamilton reported Lola’s restlessness to Maria.

‘You must let her go, Margaret,’ said Maria.

‘Och, madam, she’s as frail as a feather. A puff of wind and she’ll blow away.’

Maria smiled. ‘You obviously don’t know Mrs. Heald. I’ll make sure she has good company. A friend of mine, Reverend Francis Hawks, wishes to visit her. He might be able to talk sense into her.’

Unlike Chauncey, who was a minister not averse to using publicity to gain funds for his church and had long since decided Lola was unlikely to be of further use, Francis Hawks was more interested in true Christian salvation and real Christian deeds. He was a quiet man with a stoic capacity for listening. On his first visit to Lola they quickly formed a strong bond. He didn’t try to restrain her and was with her as she took her first hesitant steps back into life.

‘I’m not long for this world,’ she said as they sat together on a park bench watching children play among the autumn leaves. ‘I won’t see another spring.’

‘I’m sure you’re wrong.’

‘No, Reverend, I am content with my fate. I only wish I could do something more useful in the time I have left.’

Francis frowned. Lola still could take no more than a few steps at a time and her speech was often garbled and difficult to understand. She wouldn't have the stamina or ability to stand up and give another lecture. Even writing was beyond her now. He could think of little for her to do, except pray. It was then that he glanced up.

Two women were sauntering along the path and, from the brightness of their clothes and sauciness of the feathers in their bonnets, he didn't need to see the boldness in their faces to know they were prostitutes. He took a sharp breath. It was a disgrace, here in a public park with respectable families and children playing close by.

Lola's hand clutched at his arm. She had seen the women at the same time as he. 'It's not their fault,' she whispered. 'Blame men. Blame society.'

He turned and looked at Lola. The eyes that had been dull now glowed with life.

'Are you saying they never make their own choices?'

Lola managed to lift part of her face into a smile. 'Few women deliberately set out on such a course. Men introduce us to base passion,' she said, 'and men exploit it.'

Francis looked again at the women, one of whom didn't even avert her eyes when she saw he was a man of the cloth. If anything, her come-hither look intensified as she passed him by in a cloud of cheap perfume. He flushed with anger at both her and the response he knew she would be capable of creating in his body. He quickly turned his eyes back to Lola. 'I think there is a place you might like to visit,' he said. 'There is a refuge out on Eighty-eighth Street for fallen women.'

'Call them what they are. You mean a refuge for whores.'

'Well, yes, if you must.'

'My mother was a whore before me. I was conceived in fornication and lust and it was my destiny to be a whore. I pretended to be other things but in my heart of hearts I liked being a whore.'

Francis pressed Lola's hand in his. 'You must stop saying such terrible things.'

'The truth requires courage,' she said, 'admitting it to yourself is just the beginning. Asking God for His understanding and forgiveness is the hardest part.' Her eyes followed the disappearing figures of the two women. Yes, Reverend, I should very much like to visit the refuge.'

Maria Buchanan was in her best parlor and half-way through presiding over a meeting planning a charity function in aid of the Magdalen Society of Eighty-eighth Street when her maid interrupted her to say there was a woman in the hall who wished to see her urgently.

Maria frowned. She was having difficulty trying to convince some of the committee women that there were prostitutes who genuinely wanted to reform, that the Society needed money to help them. Crossly, she told the maid to tell the woman she had called an inopportune time and she could either wait or call back another time but from the fearful expression on the maid's face it appeared that this was a woman who wouldn't take no for an answer. Maria relented and excused herself from the meeting.

Although she was well into middle-age, her peppered gray hair still held traces of what must have once been a head of stunning auburn and her eyes had an exotic and magnetic greenness. Despite being dressed in fashionable mourning black, she wore an extensive amount of jewelry.

'Mrs. Buchanan?' Her voice had a slight brogue, but with a hard edge. She looked Maria up and down as if she disapproved of her lavender morning dress.

'Yes.'

'I am Mrs Patrick Craigie.'

Maria's preoccupied mind failed to register anything. 'What can I do for you, Mrs. Craigie?'

'You don't know who I am, do you?'

'No - you have me at a disadvantage.'

'I understand you attended my daughter in her last days.'

'Sorry - who?'

'Eliza Gilbert - or probably known to you as Lola Montez.'

Maria could only stare at the woman. To her knowledge, Lola had never mentioned her mother, she didn't even realize she still had one. She took a few seconds to compose herself. 'Why, yes, I know her very well. But why did you say "last days"?'

'What? Do you mean to say she isn't dead?'

Maria was horrified to detect a flash of something that could only be described as disappointment in the green eyes. 'I don't know where you got that idea,' she said.

'The London newspapers said she had a stroke and wasn't expected to live. I came as soon as I could.' Mrs. Craigie glanced downwards and smoothed her hands over her black skirt. 'Tsk. Seems I didn't need the expense of this gown after all,' she added.

'Lola isn't fully recovered. But she can walk a little and talk. I'll take you to see her if you like.'

Mrs. Craigie seemed to be undecided.

'If you wouldn't mind waiting, I could send a message,' said Maria. 'She lives quite close by.'

'Thank you.' The smile seemed forced.

Maria led the way into the study and asked the maid to provide Mrs. Craigie with some tea, while she scribbled a quick note to Lola. As she gave it to the maid, she wondered if perhaps it wasn't the best way to tell Lola her mother was here. At the last minute, she changed the address to that of Reverend Francis Hawks. It would be better if he broke the news to her.

Hawks had just taken an exhausted Lola back home after one of her trips to Eighty-eighth Street when the note from the Buchanans was redirected to him by his wife. He delayed opening it for some time as Margaret Hamilton rushed to put Lola to bed.

The hours Lola spent at the Magdalen Society were some of the most challenging of her whole life. Trying to instill some kind of self-respect and a faith in God into prostitutes was no easy matter. She vowed if she could help just one young girl leave the streets forever and find peace in religion it would have been worth while. Her frustrations were compounded by her own physical weakness and lapses in coherent speech. As she lay back against the pillows after drinking a tonic and trying to re-gather her strength, Francis sat beside her bed and opened the note. His face was puzzled.

'What is it?' she asked as if sensing it had something to do with her. 'Is it bad news?'

He shook his head. 'No, but it seems there is a woman who wishes to see you waiting at the Buchanans' house. Maria was hesitant about informing you directly. I don't quite know why.'

'Who?'

Francis glanced up. 'A Mrs. Patrick Craigie?'

A silence so heavy filled the small bedroom that nothing could be heard for a full minute except Lola's unsteady breathing.

'Shall I send for her to come?' asked a hesitant Francis at last.

Lola's face was pale before she shook her head vehemently. 'No,' she said hoarsely. 'I have been dead to her for years. She is dead to me now.'

'Who is she?'

Lola's eyes strayed to the small window with its view of the rooftops and patch of sky. It had a grayish pink quality that was the portent of winter - and snow. She wondered if it would snow on the day she died. 'Who indeed,' she murmured at last. 'She was once my mother. And it is she who bears the sins of Lola Montez.'

She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Maria did not relish having to tell Mrs. Craigie after she had waited two hours that her daughter would not see her and she was glad it was Francis Hawks who conveyed the message.

'But I have come all the way from England,' protested the woman. 'How dare she not see her own mother after all these years!'

'She is very frail and any kind of shock could be detrimental to her health,' said Francis, 'if it is indeed years since you last saw her.'

'I don't know why I bothered,' muttered Betty Craigie. 'She was always nothing more than an

ungrateful harlot.’

A look of consternation passed between Maria and the Reverend. ‘Your daughter is quite reformed, madam,’ said Francis quickly. ‘I am sure you can find it in your heart to forgive any of her transgressions against you.’

Darts of anger burst from the green eyes. ‘Forgive her? She abandoned me, her own mother, to the fates while she indulged herself in a disgusting life of publicity and debauchery. While she preferred to disguise her past, I could still live with some respect. Once she boasted to that court and so all the world of her origins, I was utterly ruined. Have you any idea what it is like to find yourself a widow and an outcast in society?’

‘Indeed, I deal with society’s outcasts every day, Mrs. Craigie,’ said Francis, struggling to hide his dislike of the woman.

The irony was lost on Betty Craigie. She set her glare at Maria. ‘If she is so incapacitated, who is taking care of her business affairs?’

‘We are,’ said Maria, ‘but Lola has very little money left. She has given most of what she had away to the poor.’

‘I find that hard to believe. Where is all her jewelry?’

‘There isn’t any,’ said Francis. ‘Everything is gone.’

‘Are you quite sure? Where are Ludwig’s diamonds and rubies?’ There was an accusing glint in Betty’s eyes.

‘I don’t know,’ said an indignant Maria. ‘Would you like me to attest on the Holy Book?’

Betty Craigie backed down. ‘That won’t be necessary,’ she said haughtily and fumbled in her reticule. She placed a visiting card and a few dollars down on the table. ‘This is my address in London and here is some money towards the cost of any medicines, or such. I ask that you write to me with full details of my daughter’s will, as I presume she has made one.’

She added an afterthought. ‘Or, of course, should there be any improvement in her condition. Now please have your maid show me out.’

After she had gone, neither the Reverend Hawks nor Maria could bring themselves to speak for several minutes but each guessed at what the other was thinking.

Christmas Day 1860 dawned bright and fresh. The winds that had been blowing for weeks had died down and even though there would be no strength in its wintry rays, Lola had a desperate urge to be outside and to feel the sun on her face again. Margaret Hamilton tried to dissuade her from her planned outdoors excursion, but Lola insisted. It was also the first time she managed to walk without assistance and she wanted to prove that she might be on the path to recovery.

They hadn’t gone more than a few yards together along the sidewalk, when the icy air swept over Lola, sending her into a paroxysm of coughing. Margaret rushed her back inside. When the doctor arrived, she was diagnosed with pneumonia.

Flickering candlelight cast the walls in a cavalcade of ghostly shadow fantasies. Elephants and peacocks melted into ships in full sail. Coaches and horses into castles. A piano - into the silhouette of a man holding a pack of cards. As he fanned them she thought she heard the distant echo of mocking laughter. The winter wind snarled at the panes of the tiny window, and the candle guttered. The cards left the shadow man’s hands and dissolved into a swarm of spiders scuttling through the room in every direction.

She closed her eyes and gagged, no longer able to find the strength even to cough.

‘Take courage, my dear, you are not alone.’ The warmth of a man’s hand tightened over her own. An intense smell of spring - of violets - filled the room.

‘Bon-Bon? Is that you?’

‘No ...’

‘But Bon-Bon, why did you keep me away that night? If I’d been there it would never have happened.’

‘Och, her mind’s quite gone, poor lady,’ murmured Margaret.

‘Hush, if you please,’ said Francis. ‘Just let her speak.’

‘Bon-Bon, kiss me. Take me in your arms. Let me feel you move within me ...’

‘Tsk - so much for all her pretenses to be a penitent.’

‘For pity’s sake, Margaret, can you not be silent?’

Eyes, once a brilliant sapphire blue but now dull as slate, opened in pain.

‘Was it so wrong to have lived life, to have loved too much?’ she breathed with acid breath.

‘One can never love too much, my dear, only unwisely.’

‘And what is wisdom?’

Francis sighed. ‘Would that we knew the answer. If we did, our lives might follow the serene path of truth. There would be no hate or bitterness, no wars, no heartaches.’

The famous provocative lips, now thin and bitter, drew a struggled smile. ‘Ah, serenity. I have known so little of it.’

‘It will be with you soon.’

A few moments of silence dragged in the stale air of the tiny room.

‘Bon-Bon.’ Her fingers clutched again for the man’s hand. Her eyes widened as she pulled him down to her. ‘You were the only one who ever mattered,’ she whispered. ‘The others were all just part of the play.’

Her eyes focused on some unseen presence as she smiled. ‘I see you know. Come to me, my beloved. Kiss me. Love me the way you always loved me ...’

The long black lashes lowered, brushing against pallid cheeks. Her body echoed a shudder and her breath drifted away. And she was still.

The man of God and the nurse stared down at her for a few minutes.

‘So. It’s done at last,’ said Margaret with a sigh that did not disguise her relief. ‘Such a pity her last words weren’t more profound. Reporters from the newspapers are sure to ask us.’

Francis picked up the worn Bible from the bedside table and placed it in the pale hands.

‘I have been present at many a passing,’ he said. ‘In my experience last words uttered are not always a true reflection of the dying mind. You can be assured I will tell the world what it needs to know.’ He stood up. ‘If you lay her out, I will see the Buchanans about organizing the funeral.’

Margaret nodded and glanced back at the wasted figure lying on the simple bed. ‘Looking at her now, it’s hard to imagine she was once the most beautiful woman in the world,’ she said.

Francis did not smile. ‘I never knew that woman,’ he said. ‘She belongs to the past. I only knew a truly Christian woman called Eliza Gilbert.’ He reached for his top hat and overcoat from a hook on the door and made his way down the flight of stairs.

Margaret sat in the stillness for a few more minute before standing up. Well, another difficult nursing case over. But she had known worse. She hoped that this time there would be enough money to pay her wages. So often solitary deaths like these had little to show for the lives just ended.

She wandered around the simple room to see if there was anything worth appropriating that wouldn’t be missed by the executors. Often before, she’d found the odd item that might fetch a few dollars. Her hand traveled over the dresses in the wardrobe, most of them old-fashioned and in need of repair. Also the shoes were badly down at heel, hardly worth the effort. Moving back to the bed, Margaret bent over and opened the small drawer in the bedside table.

There was nothing in it save some religious tracts and a handkerchief tied with ribbon. Something was inside. She undid the ribbon to find a small ivory elephant with curiously red eyes that glittered in the candlelight. Well, it probably wasn’t worth much, but her grand-daughter would probably like it. Margaret slipped it into her apron pocket, as she attended to the laying out.

When she was finished, she studied the features as they turned to waxen serenity. It seemed as if all the lines of illness and pain had disappeared and a strange bloom returned to her cheeks. Even the streaks of gray in her luxurious black hair seemed to have retreated. The trace of a smile lifted the famous voluptuous lips. Lola Montez was hearing the applause of eternity.

An old frock coat flapping about his legs and hatless in all weathers, the old man with his untidy silvery hair and lost expression was a familiar sight on the Barerstrasse, but women always crossed to the other side of the street when they saw him coming. They knew well enough that he was harmless, but his habit of pouncing on an unsuspecting woman and lifting her chin to see what she looked like was both frightening and embarrassing. Young or old, plump or thin, pretty or not, the chances were she would receive the same proposition in the off-pitch voice of a man who was almost stone-deaf.

‘Come Beauty. Sit and pose for me.’

Inevitably, the woman would cry out, or dodge and run, leaving him staring after her, disappointment filling the deep furrows of his sad face. ‘Do not fear me,’ he would cry. ‘Beauty, I say, and Love, and Truth. That is all in the world that matters.’

But not even the ugliest woman would turn around at his strange words. He would just utter a deep sigh and his quest for Beauty would continue.

For thirteen years he had searched, but despite moments when others had blinded him with false optimism, he had never found her again. At times he would become distracted from his quest, stopping to shout some bawdy rhyme from his young soldiering days at a street-sweeper or rich burgher in his carriage, or he would amble into a shop to argue at the top of his voice with an amused shopkeeper over the price of goods he never needed to buy.

He knew they often laughed behind his back but that deep within themselves they still loved him as they had always done but invariably he would become confused and weary of wandering and shuffle back to his rooms in the Residenz.

His son Maximilian ruled in Bavaria now, but he still let his old father have use of the top-floor study where he had written his poems to Love. There, he could sit for hours and gaze out through misty eyes across the cobblestones of the Max Joseph Platz to the magnificent city of Munich he had created in his youth. There, he could remember when Truth, and Love, and Beauty had really existed - when his heart had been filled with such joy and such promise - before he had been forced to choose between them and the throne.

One wintry afternoon there was a letter waiting for him on his desk. Addressed in an unfamiliar hand, it bore a black border and an American postmark. The rhythm of his heart became irregular as his fingers fumbled with the envelope. For a moment he stared at the spidery words. English had never been an easy language for him.

In polite stilted tones, a woman called Maria Buchanan informed him that Beauty was dead, but that before she died she had deeply repented of all the wickedness that she had inflicted on him. She had asked to be remembered to him with pure and sincere affection.

He sighed, releasing all the remembered hurts from his memory. So, she was gone from this earth, yet she had thought of him before she went. Ah, but what did it matter now? It was too long ago that Beauty had broken his heart, and snatched away Love and Truth. There was now nothing left worth living for.

With tears in his eyes, ex-King Ludwig of Bavaria lifted up his quill and smoothed out a blank sheet of paper.

*‘All’s over. Thou and I no more may meet
And yet within my heart I breathe a prayer
God have you ever in his charge, my Sweet
And may He give us peace.’*

In a contemplative mood, John Dale leaned on the ship's rail and stared out at the steely immensity of the North Atlantic. He was sick of ships. He had traveled this route so often, that each voyage seemed to blend one with the other and finding something new and fresh to write about was becoming impossible. He also felt he'd betrayed himself as a writer. He no longer wrote poetry as he had long since learned that no romantic poem ever stirred a nation to fight injustice, that it was strong words that ultimately carried strong actions.

He had begged to be sent to the war-front, but his editor had other ideas. He said Dale had become too good at the frivolous and shallow: the fashion, gossip, and scandals that American readers were going to crave as relief since the conflagration between the North and South had broken out. So he had been dispatched yet again to Europe instead, to report on what elegant society would be doing in the spring and summer of 1861.

As he turned from the breeze to cup his hands in order to light a cigar, he noticed a lone woman sitting in a deckchair. With a blanket covering her and a shawl around her head, she was engrossed in one of those despicably empty journals that were his lifeblood. She was so familiar, for a moment he suffered from a sense of repetition. Where had it been? Another ship? Ah, yes, he remembered now. It had been on a packet ferry from Dover to Boulogne.

Only it was her - and it wasn't her.

As if aware of his scrutiny, the woman raised her head.

His breath caught. Although she must in her late fifties, and the tendrils of hair that escaped from beneath the scarf were a dingy auburn rather than jet black, and her eyes reflected green fire rather than sapphire blue, there was no doubt she was her double.

Dale flicked his cigar over the rail, took a deep breath and sauntered towards her, nodding at the adjacent deckchair. 'Is anyone sitting here?'

'I believe it may be taken,' she said tetchily. 'You'll have to see the deck steward if you wish to reserve a chair.'

When he heard the voice with its faintly Irish lilt, he knew for sure. 'Well, I'm sure the owner won't object if I rest here until he returns.'

She pursed her lips and dropped her eyes to her magazine.

'You're Mrs. Craigie, aren't you?'

The green eyes flashed up at him warily.

'My name is John Dale. I'm a reporter for the *New York Herald*. I've written about your daughter for many years.'

She lowered the magazine. 'My daughter?' she questioned innocently.

He grinned. 'The most extraordinary woman I ever met. Most beautiful too, I'd say. Or at least she was, when she was in her prime. I can see now where she got her looks.'

'I really don't know who you are talking about.'

'Oh, come now, ma'am, don't try bluffing me. I've the sharpest nose in the business. I know why you made two trips to New York in the past few months.'

She subjected him to the full force of her wide green eyes. 'I don't talk to strange men about personal matters.'

There was no point in being anything but direct. 'You can't afford to travel first class on an army widow's pension, Mrs. Craigie. I reckon for a hundred bucks you just might be persuaded to have a chat.'

'Oh, I couldn't.' She paused, her eyes glinting. 'Well, certainly for nothing less than two.'

'Okay. You win. Two hundred dollars.'

'I must ask for your promise, Mr. Dale. I don't want one single word traced back to me. I have a reputation to guard.'

'Of course, ma'am. My sources are always kept strictly confidential.' Dale reached into the depths of his fur coat and started to extract a wad of dollar bills.

'For goodness' sake, don't count them out here.' Betty's eyes darted about the deck. 'Whatever

will people think?’

He chuckled and stuffed the money back into his pocket.

‘How can I help you?’ she asked demurely.

‘I didn’t see you at the funeral. I was wondering why?’

She squeezed her eyes and sniffed. Fortunately the Atlantic breeze was brisk enough to create the requisite trace of tears. ‘Oh, dear. I didn’t know she was going to die so soon. They told me she was quite well, you see ...’

‘They?’

‘The Buchanans and Reverend Hawks - those ghastly people who had been controlling her. When I first received word that she was seriously ill, I dropped everything and dashed over to New York late last year and when I arrived, they informed me I had wasted a trip, that she was improving and well-cared for, but that she refused to see me. Fancy, not wanting to see her own mother - and after so many years? I ask you, would you believe that? I’m convinced they had locked her away in some frightful cold garret where she was abused and forced to sleep on a dirty old mattress and with barely enough food or water.’

‘Did you go to the police with your suspicions?’

Betty gave a light shrug. ‘What could I say? I couldn’t prove a thing. The Buchanans and Reverend Hawks seem to be highly respected people in New York.’ Her hand flew to her neck and she exaggerated a sigh. ‘I’m in such straightened circumstances myself these days or else I would have hired a lawyer or an investigator.’

‘Do you know if she left much money?’

‘When I received the news that she definitely had died, I dashed back to New York a second time but the funeral had already taken place and the Buchanans told me it was all gone, that she’d made a will leaving what remained to charity, that there was nothing for her poor mother. I could hardly believe it. Where are the jewels that the King gave her? The shares in the French theaters? The stocks in the California and Australian gold mines? Not to mention the receipts from her dancing and her lectures. Why, her books sold in the thousands.’

‘She did enjoy spending money, I know that,’ Dale said, ‘but I’m surprised all the same. Perhaps I could investigate on your behalf?’

Elizabeth fluttered her eyelashes to increase her tears. ‘Oh, no, I couldn’t bear yet another scandal, not now, not when she’s just breathed her last. There’s been a lifetime of scandal. And such deception, such lies. Why, you can’t begin to imagine what the family and I have suffered at her hands all these years.’ She ended with a throaty sob.

Dale swiftly produced the obligatory handkerchief. ‘Don’t stress yourself, ma’am. It’s all in the past now. I’m sure you will find it in your heart to forgive her. Besides, I firmly believe that we all receive our just desserts in the end, and you will no doubt have yours.’

She widened her eyes. ‘Oh, do you really think so?’

‘Yes, I sure do, ma’am. Now how about we get out of this weather and settle up our business arrangement?’

A few hours later in the ship’s saloon bar, John Dale’s face was fixed with a wry smile as he downed a bourbon spider and thought of the unexpected bonus he’d been offered in Betty Craigie’s cabin. When he declined, on account of the fact that he did not care to have carnal relations with a woman old enough to be his mother, let alone a pale imitation of the magnificent Lola Montez, she’d thrown several toiletry items at him and screeched a range of words that would make a sailor blush.

Perhaps he really shouldn’t have been so surprised, after all there was that old saying; like mother, like daughter. He had an enormous scoop, if he chose to follow it up but, no, he would keep his promise to Lola and even her mother, for that matter. Despite his years as a hard-bitten Polack journalist he still retained a few qualities of that innocent Polish poet’s scruples.

He lifted the bourbon glass. ‘Well, Lola, my love, here’s to you. Since I’ve now had the pleasure

of your mother's company I think I can understand you a little better. You gave the world your best years and sold a lot of newsprint in the process. God damn it, woman, I'm going to miss you.'

The barman looked at him queerly.

'Just toasting an old friend, who's passed on,' muttered Dale.

'Sorry to hear that, sir. Close, were you?'

Dale mused into his glass 'No, I guess in the end I hardly knew her at all.' His mustache twitched for a few moments and his eyes felt moist. 'And when it comes down to it, all things considered, I don't think she even knew herself.'

FIN

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Neither truth nor reality diverted Lola Montez on her meteoric charge through the middle years of the 19th Century. Since then, millions of words have been written about her, many of them pure fiction deliberately generated by Lola herself and subsequently reinforced and embellished by scores of journalists and writers, even composers, playwrights, and film-makers. Whether you condemn her, or secretly admire her attitude to life, it is that very fiction surrounding Lola Montez that is still as important a part of her legend as her unconventional and defiant spirit, her brilliant sapphire eyes, and the lashings inflicted by her whip on lesser mortals.

While I trust I have not strayed too far from the chronology and boundaries of historical fact within these pages, with the novelist's prerogative I have purposely bent the truth Lola-fashion for dramatic effect whenever it seemed to suit both our purposes. Some characters are my own invention and some are real people who have had their names altered, often just to avoid confusion with other persons. Several of the letters I have included are direct extracts from those actually penned by Lola and Ludwig, while others have been invented in a similar style. Likewise, newspaper reports have been used verbatim or edited for clarity.

For anyone wishing to pursue Lola at an academic level, there are numerous avenues of research to follow, but it is recommended they begin with *Lola Montez - A Life* by Bruce Seymour. This definitive and meticulously-researched biography has swept away many layers of lies and fantasy by going back to the original sources wherever possible. Mr. Seymour is also the co-editor of a German collection of Lola's and Ludwig's letters which has shed new light on their relationship and which he has translated into English for the first time. In addition to this exceptional scholarly work, Mr. Seymour has been most magnanimous in sharing all his discoveries and notes, as well as a time-line and complete bibliography of everything else that anyone could possibly want to know about Lola Montez on the Internet. See: <http://www.zpub.com/sf/history/lola/Lola-Seymourfiles.html>.

While the Seymour biography is the acme of all things Lola, it is still worth going in search of other points of view. Every few years there is another attempt at solving the Lola conundrum by way of biography, novel or play and even the worst of them can often reveal some new facet to add to the record. I personally found the greatest value in works that were not intent on debunking Lola's fantasies or exposing her as a fraud, but rather sought to understand her, a lone woman trying to make her own way in a male-dominated world by using her intelligence, her female wiles and limited dancing talents to her best advantage.

Lola's own *Autobiography* can't be relied on for truth or any great insights, but it does impress us with the force of her determination and personality, and its *Lectures* component give us her perceptive opinions on a variety of topics which indicate some surprisingly modern notions. Her *The Arts and Secrets of Beauty with Hints to Gentlemen on the Art of Fascinating* carries considerable wit and tongue-in-cheek humor at her own expense and that of others.

E. B. d'Auvergne's *Lola Montez, An Adventuress of the Forties* was written when Lola was still within living memory of many and gives us the flavor of 19th Century male attitudes and their ongoing fascination with this woman. Female biographers tend to see Lola in a different light and although Helen Holdredge's *Lola Montez* written in the 1950s may have considerable fantasies of its own that Mr. Seymour dismisses almost entirely, it is still worth reading for possible germs of truth. *The Uncrowned Queen* by Ishbel Ross is another biography from a female point of view that is good value, and *Lola Montes: The Tragic Story of a Liberated Woman* by Michael Cannon is useful for its Australian detail not duplicated elsewhere. For a comprehensive and sympathetic study of the life of King Ludwig, the 1938 biography *Ludwig I of Bavaria* by Count Corti remains a major reference work and includes some of the translated poems reproduced herein.

Lola was highly intelligent and politically astute, but had little time for feminism. She was

physically courageous, but could be gentle, vulnerable and clinging. She could also be petulant, cruel and temperamental. Clearly, she was always desperate to find one true love while indulging in a sexually-liberated lifestyle rarely seen in any 19th century woman and which might still raise eyebrows today.

Her uninhibited conduct and outbursts may have been evidence of some form of mental instability caused as a result of exposure to malarial fevers or Victorian-era cosmetics and medications that included dangerous substances such as lead and mercury. In all likelihood, she had acquired a sexually-transmitted disease such as syphilis. (It would have been surprising if she hadn't, given her promiscuous behavior.) This disease can lie dormant in the body for years before manifesting in the nervous system, with loss of mental functioning and in the heart and blood vessels, resulting in strokes. Perhaps it is also possible Lola suffered from an undiagnosed form of manic depression that would explain the extraordinary mood swings, highs and lows. Her turning into a 'born-again Christian' seemed inevitable although, even by that stage, she still persisted with inventions about who she really was and where she came from.

And what more can be said of the 'fatal touch' and some of the men affected by it?

Franz Liszt continued on his path towards musical immortality but his conscience started to trouble him about the same time Lola's did and he reverted to a religious life, ending his days as Abbé Liszt.

Alexandre Dumas the Elder staggered on for a few more years under a growing load of debt and vices. Writing became a financial necessity but none of his works was to reach the quality or success of the famous novels written during the years of his association with Henri Dujarier.

With financial aid from King Ludwig, Fritz Peissner immigrated to America where he became a language professor. Turning to religion himself after the death of an infant daughter, the fatal touch caught up with him on a Civil War battlefield.

Although Ludwig lived on until 1868, and indulged in some further fantasies with young women, eventually his hearing completely failed and his last few years were filled with silent unhappiness. Most of his children, including Maximilian, died before him and he was to see his grandson, destined to be known as the 'Mad King Ludwig', ascend the throne and become embroiled in a scandalous obsession with the composer Richard Wagner, whose second wife was Cosima, the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt and Marie d'Agoult.

Other men who played important roles in Lola's life also died comparatively young. Not long after his affair with Lola, Charles Lennox died in India of fever at the age of twenty-three. Patrick Purdy Hull, Lola's last husband, was bed-ridden for a year with paralysis and died aged thirty-three in Marysville, California. Ironically, it was exactly twenty years after Lola's father, Edward Gilbert, died from cholera that Patrick Craigie also breathed his last at Dinapore and he is buried in the same cemetery.

Only the first man in her life, Captain Thomas James, was destined for longevity. After years of unremarkable service in obscure Indian outposts he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and returned to Britain just in time to avoid the Indian Mutiny. He was not to marry again until well into his sixties and after he fathered several children.

Of the few women whose lives were altered by knowing Lola Montez, Lotta Crabtree was to dance and sing her way into American vaudeville history, becoming one of its most popular and highly paid performers. She never married and died a virtual recluse, leaving her fortune to old actors and animals.

Miriam Follin continued her upward social climb with her own degrees of fantasy through the bedrooms of New York, marrying Frank Leslie and ultimately taking over the publishing of the famous magazine that bore his name. One of her husbands was the brother of Oscar Wilde. She also suffered mental impairment and ended her days at the Chelsea Hotel, where she was known as the 'Mad Baroness'. She left her fortune to the suffragist movement.

Little is known of Elizabeth Craigie's life of seventy years. She ended her days in a London boarding house and died from burns suffered in a fire in her bedroom. Even in death, she would

probably have been greatly relieved to know that her obituary in the local newspaper failed to make any mention of her famous daughter.
