

the
dancing
master

JULIE
KLASSEN



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In honor of

Aurora Villacorta

*ballroom dance instructor
at the University of Illinois
for more than twenty years.*

Thanks, Miss V.

*Your lessons are forever with me. Dance steps, yes, but
so much more—etiquette, manners, respect, and grace.
Your classes were the most enjoyable of my college years.
I will never forget you.*



*Mr. J. Dawson, professor of dancing and fencing,
has the honour to announce his return from London;
at the same time begs most respectfully to say, that he has profited
by the instruction and experience of the most able professors.
Mr. J. D. has acquired all the new and fashionable dances,
the celebrated gallopades, Spanish dances, etc.
and therefore hopes to merit a portion of public patronage.*

—*The West Briton*, 1829



*Quadrilles, waltzing, minuets, Country Dancing completely taught in
six private lessons for one guinea by Mr. Levien, Dancing Master.
26 Lower Charlotte Street, Bedford Square.
A select Evening Academy twice a week, two guineas a quarter.
Also a Juvenile Academy every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon:
schools and families attended.*

—*The (London) Times*, 1821



*What place is so proper as the assembly-room to see the
fashions and manners of the times, to study men and characters,
to become accustomed to receive flattery without regarding it,
to learn good breeding and politeness without affection,
to see grace without wantonness, gaiety without riot,
dignity without haughtiness, and freedom without levity?*

—Thomas Wilson, Dancing Master,
An Analysis of Country Dancing, 1811

Prologue

MAY 1, 1815

BEAWORTHY, DEVONSHIRE, ENGLAND

We observed the first of May as we always did. We dressed somberly and rode in the black barouche from Buckleigh Manor into Beaworthy. It was tradition, my mother said.

But I knew she had another reason for visiting the village on that particular day. Lady Amelia Midwinter wanted to make her presence known—make sure no one dared forget.

We drove first to the flower shop and bought two bouquets—lily of the valley and forget-me-nots.

From there our coachman, Isaacs, halted on the corner of High Street and Green, as he knew to do without being told.

The young groom helped my mother alight. She turned to look back at me, but I ignored her, sullenly remaining in the carriage. This was her tradition, not mine.

She crossed the street and laid one bouquet before the market hall—that center of trade on an island of green amid the cobbled High Street. The place where he died.

Forget-me-nots. *Never forget.*

She returned to the carriage, though we did not immediately depart. We sat for a few minutes in silence, waiting for the church bells to ring at midday.

Clang, clang, clang . . .

As the last peal faded away, she used one dainty finger to move aside the velvet curtain and survey the street. For a moment her face remained impassive, but then her mouth parted in surprise before stiffening into a grim line.

“What is it?” I asked, rebellious hope rising in my contrary heart. I slid over to that side of the carriage and looked out the window.

There, before the village green, an elderly woman as thin as a sparrow stood. She held her skirt aloft with one hand and raised her other hand high. She looked this way and that, as though waiting for someone, and for a moment I feared she would be left standing alone in the middle of the street.

Then, from behind the market hall, an old man hobbled into view. He tossed aside his apron and bowed before the woman. And she in turn curtsied. She gave him a girlish smile, and decades flew from her face.

He offered his hand, and she placed hers in his. Together, side by side, they slowly walked up the High Street in a curious rhythm—step, shuffle-step. Step, shuffle-step. Then they faced each other, joined both hands, and turned in a circle.

“What are they doing?” I breathed in wonder.

My mother snapped, “What does it look like?”

“Who are they? Do you know?”

She made no answer.

I glanced over and saw an array of emotions cross her face. Irritation. Pain. Longing.

“Who are they?” I whispered again.

She kept her gaze trained out the window. On the couple’s retreating figures as they continued their odd shuffle-step up the street.

My mother inhaled deeply, clamping an iron fist over her emotions, whatever they were. “A Mr. and Mrs. Desmond, I believe.”

“I don’t think I know them.”

“No, Julia. You wouldn’t. They . . . live outside of town.”

I felt my face pucker. “Then, don’t they know about . . . the rule?”

“They know.”

I glanced at her, but she averted her eyes, using her father's walking stick to knock against the roof.

At the familiar signal, the coachman called "Walk on" to the horses and we moved away.

We returned to Buckleigh and paused at the estate's churchyard. My mother alighted first, waving away the hovering groom and his offered umbrella. I exited after her, and when the young groom offered his hand to help me down, I smiled flirtatiously and enjoyed watching his face redden.

The day had turned pewter grey. A cold drizzle pricked through my thin cape, sending a shiver up my neck.

I followed my mother past lichen-encrusted graves and listing markers. We stopped before the family plot, outlined in brick and set with impressive headstones like dull gems in a macabre bracelet. There I read her brother's epitaph.

Graham Buckleigh, Lord Upcott
Born January 4, 1776
Died May 1, 1797
Beloved Son & Brother

"One and twenty years old," I murmured. "So young."

"Yes," she whispered.

"How did he die?" I asked as I did every year, hoping she would one day tell me the whole story.

"He was killed in a duel."

"Who killed him?"

"I prefer not to speak his name."

My gaze wandered from the headstone of the uncle I had never met, to settle on that of the aunt I had never met either. She died in childbirth before I was born.

Lady Anne Tremelling
Born December 5, 1777
Died December 9, 1797
Beloved Daughter & Sister

The Dancing Master

I nodded toward her sister's headstone. "She died less than a year later."
"Yes."

My mother bent and laid the bouquet of lily of the valley on her brother's grave.

Lily of the valley. *Tears and humility.*

She straightened. "We ought not tarry, Julia. Your father is not at all well."

"Yes, I am surprised you wanted to come today."

"It is tradition."

I sent her a sidelong glance. "You believe in carrying on only your own private traditions, I see."

I referred, of course, to May Day, which had not been celebrated in Beaworthy for twenty years—though I had heard whispers about the old tradition and its demise.

Mother turned toward the carriage without reply, and I tried to ignore the sting of rejection as easily as she ignored my sharp tongue.

"What was the duel fought over?" I asked, following her.

She did not answer. Ahead of us, the waiting groom opened the carriage door.

"Why do you not put flowers on your sister's grave?" I asked. "Why only your brother's?"

With a glance at the groom, my mother said quietly, "We shall discuss the matter another time. Not now. We have left your father alone too long as it is."

I doubted he would mind my absence. But then, I doubted he cared for me at all.

My father left *us* the next day. And in the aftermath of death, of mourners and bombazine, of funerals and the selection of headstones, we buried my questions along with my father, knowing they would someday be resurrected.

Her Ladyship had been out riding and was dressed in a long riding habit . . . She danced capitably and made use of her riding whip in the most playful manner.

—*A New Most Excellent Dancing Master:
the Journal of Joseph Lowe*

Chapter 1

NOVEMBER 5, 1816

BEAWORTHY, DEVONSHIRE, ENGLAND

Julia Midwinter joined the inhabitants of Beaworthy gathered between the village church and inn. Although Julia's mother, Lady Amelia, had put a stop to the May Day celebration years ago, the village continued one long-held tradition. Her mother rarely attended, but she allowed Julia to go along with their neighbors, the Allens. Each year on the fifth of November, the villagers encircled a massive stone, some six feet by four and weighing more than a ton—this estimated by a supposedly renowned man of science no one had ever heard of when he visited Beaworthy several years before.

That long-ago year, Julia had stood at the edges of the crowd, watching as the man of science studied the rock with great interest. He peered at it through a magnifying glass and declared there was no stone like it in all of the West Country, nay the whole of England. He scratched his chin and pondered aloud how it had come to be there.

Julia could have told him. Any of the villagers could. But they enjoyed his befuddlement—that they knew something this learned man did not. Every child in Beaworthy had been told the tale sitting atop his grandfather’s knee: The stone had fallen from the devil’s pocket as he fell from heaven to hell. And that was why, every year on the fifth of November, the church bell ringers turned the great stone over—to keep the devil away.

But this year was different. The bell ringers could not turn the stone, despite their straining efforts. Julia, standing there with Sir Herbert Allen and his sons, wondered if the bell ringers had grown too old and feeble.

Men from the crowd joined in, using sturdy poles for leverage, and strength built in the clay works, forges, and fields. More stout poles were brought and more men—Sir Herbert and his sons among them. But still the stone would not budge.

Sir Herbert speculated the ground had frozen early. Others shook their heads and decried such an earthly explanation. No, it could mean only one thing.

The return of the devil.

The most superstitious among them declared it a portent of dire happenings to come. But almost everyone agreed on one thing—change was on the way.

Julia Midwinter hoped they were right.

Anything to shake up the plodding days, endless church services, and somber silent meals. Days spent on needlework for charity, and evenings spent reading Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women*, *The Mirror of the Graces*, and the few boring novels her mother deemed proper for young ladies. Her only diversion was to escape into the company of her bosom-friend, Patience Allen. Or her horse, Liberty.

But November, December, and January passed without the hoped-for change, and nineteen-year-old Julia grew increasingly restless. The mourning period for her father had passed as well, though the pall still lingered. At least now she could quit trying to gain the man’s approval.



On a grey February day, Julia and Patience rode together through the extensive Buckleigh Manor grounds. They followed a trail through a wood just beginning to awaken after winter—ivy and moss beginning to green, but the gnarly tree branches overhead still bare. A few brave birds warbled rusty melodies, perhaps hoping, as Julia did, that spring would arrive early.

Ahead of them, the wood opened into a meadow, and beyond loomed the west hedge. A wickedly delicious thrill threaded up Julia's spine, and a grin lifted one corner of her mouth. She leaned low over Liberty's neck and, with posture and voice, urged the mare to gallop—the riding crop she held mere affectation, like a man's walking stick. She would never strike her horse.

She vaguely heard Patience shout that the hedge was too high. But as Julia's horse was faster than hers, and Julia twice the rider, her friend's words were the faintest buzzing in her ears. She rode confidently, as comfortable in sidesaddle as a man riding astride. Exhilarated by the wind, the speed, the sense of freedom, she gave Liberty her head. The beautiful horse galloped for all she was worth, straight for the hedge that bordered her mother's estate—Julia's confinement. Beyond it lay the whole of Devonshire, and England, and the world.

One last time, Patience shouted, "It's too high!"

For a flash of a second Julia regretted risking the legs, the life, of her beloved Liberty, but it was too late.

Liberty jumped, and for a blissful moment Julia felt the weight of the world fall away. She was flying. Escaping.

The horse thudded to the spongy turf on the other side and Julia braced herself, keeping her seat with effort. The horse bobbed slightly, and Julia hoped Liberty hadn't lodged something in her hoof upon impact.

With a "Whoa," Julia reined her horse to a walk, then nudged her to turn back with the slightest pressure of ribbon and knee. A few yards away stood a stile—built to allow pedestrians but not livestock to pass the hedge. She would use it to dismount and check Liberty's hooves,

though she would not be able to remount without help. No matter. She could walk her horse back.

She unhooked her knee from the sidesaddle pommel, reached down to grab the top of the stile, and slid to its top step. Tucking the riding crop beneath her arm, she gently picked up one foreleg, then the next, inspecting the hooves.

Patience came riding toward her a few minutes later. She'd had to ride out the west gate a quarter of a mile away to reach her.

She looked at Liberty with concern. "Is she all right?"

"I think so, yes."

"And you?"

Julia grinned. "Never better."

Patience didn't return the grin, but at least she didn't scold—not like Julia's mother was sure to do if she heard of the jump.

Releasing Liberty's leg and untying the rein, Julia began walking her horse home. Patience rode slowly alongside.

Nearing the west gate, voices drew her attention and Julia paused to listen.

Patience halted her horse. "What—?"

Julia held up a hand to silence her. The voices were coming from the other side of the old gate lodge, long abandoned. The voices did not sound familiar. Or pleasant.

Looping Liberty's rein around the branch of a nearby tree, she whispered to her friend, "Wait here."

"Julia, don't," Patience hissed. "It could be dangerous."

Ignoring the warning, Julia tiptoed across the damp ground, holding forth her riding crop like a weapon. She crept along the wall of the stone building and peered around the corner.

It took her eyes a moment to register the scene before her. A beefy man held back a thin young man in workman's attire and flat hat. Meanwhile another man, wiry with lank blond hair, harassed a young woman, taking her hand and spinning her around.

"Come on, love," he urged in an oily smooth voice. "Let's see you hop. Dancin' in the spirit, I believe your lot call it—that right?"

Indignation heated quickly to anger as Julia recognized two of the parties involved. Those infernal Wilcox brothers.

She marched forward, riding crop at the ready. “Unhand her, Mr. Wilcox.”

Felton Wilcox turned, beady green eyes narrowing. “Well, well. If it ain’t Miss High and Mighty, stickin’ her nose where it don’t belong.”

“I said, let her go.”

“Oh, come, miss,” Joe, the younger Wilcox urged. “It’s only two of them ranters. Just want to hear ’er sing and see ’er prance, as they are wont to do.”

“Leave her alone!” the captive young man shouted, struggling against Joe’s grip.

Joe Wilcox kned him in the back.

“Benjamin!” the young woman shrieked.

Felton Wilcox silenced her with a viselike clamp to her cheeks. He squeezed so hard the young woman’s lips puckered like a gasping fish.

“Rant for me now, my pretty dissenter. Let’s hear it.”

“I sing to praise God,” she managed, “not amuse bigots.”

“Why you . . .” Felton frowned thunderously and reeled back his hand as though to strike her.

Julia slammed her riding crop across his wrist.

Felton jerked back, stunned by the whip’s bite and her audacity.

He turned on her, reeled back his hand again, but hesitated.

Julia stood her ground, unflinching, glaring at him, daring him. “Perhaps you think the constable won’t bother if he hears you’ve harassed these people. But I promise you, you will find yourself swinging by the neck if you dare lay a hand on me.”

He shook the stringy hair from his eyes and snarled, “Witch!”

In a flash of anger, Julia again lifted the riding crop and sent it slicing through the air. But Felton snatched it from her hand.

Snakelike eyes glinting, he lifted the crop menacingly. “Who says I’d lay a *hand* on you . . . ?”

From a distance came the sound of galloping horse hooves. Julia kept her eyes pinned on Felton Wilcox, but he glanced toward the west

gate and frowned. He threw down the crop and turned to his brother. "Come on. This was supposed to be a private party, but our uninvited guests have spoilt it."

With a nasty shove, Joe pushed the young man to the ground and ran with surprising speed for one so bulky, following his brother into the wood.

The slim young man scrambled to his feet and made as though to pursue them, but the girl grabbed his arm. "Benjamin, don't. Let them go. I'm all right."

He pulled his gaze from the retreating figures to scan the girl's face. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Perfectly." She turned to Julia. "I know you meant well, miss. But you ought not have struck him. We are to turn the other cheek."

Julia felt her brows rise. "You may turn the other cheek all you like. Felton Wilcox will only strike the harder next time."

The girl gave her a pointed look. "As you did?"

Julia was incredulous. "I was trying to help you."

The young man laid a hand on the girl's arm and looked at Julia. "I am grateful, miss. Truly. Only ashamed I could not help Tess myself."

"Don't feel too bad," Julia consoled. "The Wilcoxes are local wrestling champions. You are not the first man to be laid low by them, and you won't be the last."

He picked up his fallen hat and bowed. "I'm Ben Thorne, and this is my sister, Tess. Again, we thank you, Miss Midwinter."

They knew her name, Julia noticed, though she hadn't known theirs. She had seen these two before in passing, she believed, but had never met them.

The riders finally reached them, reining in with a storm of thundering hooves and flying dirt.

"Are you all right?" James Allen asked as he gracefully dismounted, handsome face tense.

"Yes. Quite."

Beside him, his brother, Walter, swung his leg across the saddle to dismount. He caught his boot in the stirrup, hopped to keep his bal-

ance, and finally loosed his boot with a desperate jerk, which sent his hat flying to the ground.

Miss Thorne stepped forward, bent to retrieve it, and held it out to him. "Are you all right?" she asked gently.

Walter's face reddened. "Yes, miss. Thank you, miss."

James's gaze remained on Julia. "Patience found us out riding and told us you were in trouble."

Had she? Julia hadn't even heard her ride away. "The Wilcox brothers," she explained. "They were bothering these two. But they've gone now."

Ben Thorne nodded. "Thankfully, Miss Midwinter and her riding crop convinced them to leave."

James Allen's fair brows rose. "Riding crop? Julia, that was not wise. Who knows what sort of revenge those two might resort to."

"Well, thankfully you rode up when you did."

Walter, she noticed, was still staring at the young woman called Tess. The girl was lovely, with a wild, wood-sprite look with long reddish-brown hair tumbling about her shoulders, and big brown eyes.

Poor Walter. The tall young man was ever awkward around females. But a *pretty* female his own age? Heaven help him. With his unremarkable light brown hair, sad eyes, and unfortunate ears, Walter possessed a sweet face, but not one a woman was likely to think handsome.

Before Julia could make introductions, Patience came galloping up. Her hair, even fairer than James's golden locks, danced around her flushed cheeks. Poor Patience. The proper young lady was usually so sedate. Julia had never seen her ride so fast. Even so, she had apparently been unable to keep up with her brothers.

Winded, she called, "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, my dear," Julia said. "Thanks to you. Thank you for calling in the cavalry."



On Sunday, Julia Midwinter sat in her usual pew in St. Michael's, her mother on one side of her, her friend Patience on the other. The rector, Mr. Bullmore, stood above them in the raised pulpit, droning

on about something or other. Julia wasn't really listening. The rector liked using lofty words, and many of them, apparently enamored with the sound of his own voice. Worse yet, the man reminded Julia of her father. Whenever he looked at her, his eyes were cold and disapproving. Like her father's had always been.

Julia noticed the rector's son was visiting again from Oxford. Cedric Bullmore planned to follow his father into the church. She wondered where he might secure a living—somewhere interesting, far away? She decided she would have to make more of an effort to flirt with the young man. In fact, she would begin that very afternoon.

Eligible son or no, Julia preferred when Mr. Bullmore left the sermon making to dear old Mr. Evans, the curate. On special holidays, Mr. Evans still led worship at the church on the Buckleigh estate for any who wished to attend—usually just her, Lady Amelia, the Allens, and a small clutch of servants and tenants. Everyone else, it seemed, preferred the newer village church.

Attention straying, Julia glanced over her shoulder across the aisle. There she noticed a man she had never seen before, sitting in Mr. Ramsay's pew a few rows back. The young man had dark hair and a handsome profile, a good nose, firm chin, and strong cheekbones. But his most striking feature was his unfamiliarity—he was *not* from Beaworthy.

She leaned nearer Patience and whispered, "Who is he?"

Patience, who'd actually been listening to the sermon, roused herself from concentration long enough to follow Julia's gaze. "I don't know," she whispered back.

Without removing her dutiful gaze from the Reverend Mr. Bullmore, Lady Amelia laid her gloved hand gently on Julia's knee, signaling her to sit quietly.

A few minutes later, as the congregation rose to sing a hymn, Julia noticed a woman of perhaps forty-five, in somber black, standing beside the unfamiliar man. His mother, Julia assumed. And on the woman's other side, a slender girl of seventeen or so. His sister, she guessed.

She hoped.

After the service finally concluded, Julia followed her mother down the aisle to thank the rector. Mr. Bullmore's cold eyes slid past Julia to rest on Lady Amelia.

He smiled at her and said, "Your ladyship, might I introduce a few newcomers to the parish?" He gestured toward the trio standing nearby.

Her mother politely inclined her head and turned to face the woman in black.

"Lady Amelia Midwinter, may I present Mrs. Valcourt, Mr. Ramsay's sister."

The woman smiled wanly and dipped her head. Julia saw no resemblance to Mr. Ramsay, the prim, rotund solicitor who stood a few feet away.

"How do you do," Lady Amelia said in a tone that did not invite reply.

The rector continued, "And this is her daughter, Miss Aurora Valcourt"—the pretty girl dipped a graceful curtsy—"and her son, Mr. Alec Valcourt."

The well-dressed man bowed with impressive address. "A pleasure to meet you, your ladyship."

Julia blurted, "Are you visiting Mr. Ramsay, or have you come to stay?"

Her mother stiffened at the forward question, yet turned to acknowledge her. "And this is my daughter, Miss Midwinter."

Again Mr. Valcourt bowed and the ladies curtsied.

Julia smiled at the Valcourt family. "A pleasure to meet you all. Welcome."

Mr. Valcourt's mother was handsome, Julia decided. Though the sad downturn of her cheeks, and even her nose, kept her from being pretty. And black did not flatter her complexion. His sister, however, was lovely, with brown hair and bright blue eyes set in a sweet, fair face. Mr. Valcourt was perhaps an inch or two shy of six feet and athletically built—broad shoulders narrowing to a trim waist. His dark hair was wavy, where his sister's was straight. From the front, his face was even more attractive than it had been in profile. Full lips, well-

formed slightly belled nose, and blue-grey eyes. He was not only more handsome on closer inspection but older as well. Perhaps as old as five and twenty.

Julia gave him her most effective smile.

But instead of smiling in return, or blushing, or any of the responses she was accustomed to, he merely blinked and looked away.

“Um . . . and as to your question,” Mrs. Valcourt replied, sending a quick glance toward her brother, “Mr. Ramsay has kindly invited us to stay for as long as we like. Just how long, we have yet to decide.”

“Ah, I see.” Julia nodded, though she didn’t see. Not really. It was, after all, a vague answer, but she knew better than to press the matter. She guessed she was already in for a lecture on prying as soon as she and her mother were out of earshot.

Mrs. Valcourt went on to thank Mr. Bullmore for the sermon and his warm welcome.

While the woman spoke to the rector, Julia stepped nearer her mother and said quietly, “Patience has invited me to go riding this afternoon, and then perhaps to do some needlework for the ladies’ aid society. You don’t mind, do you?”

“On Sunday?”

“Yes, she is most insistent.” Julia turned to Patience, who was talking to a little red-haired girl nearby. “Are you not, Patience?”

Patience turned and blinked her pale blue eyes. “Pardon me?”

“I was just telling Mamma that you have asked me over for the afternoon. You have your heart set upon it, don’t you?”

Her friend’s lips parted. “I . . . I do, yes,” she faltered, then added more convincingly, “Nothing would please me more.”

“You see?” Julia beamed at her mother. “Girls our age enjoy talking and sharing secrets. Did you not do so when you were a girl?” It was something Julia could not imagine of the woman of three and forty years, but she was determined to win her way.

Her mother’s eyes clouded. “I had few friends of such an intimate nature.”

“But then, you had a sister, whereas Patience and I do not.”

“Yes, I did,” Lady Amelia said, her voice strangely clipped. “Very well, you may go. But have the groom escort you.”

“Mamma, that is hardly necessary. It’s less than half a mile from our stables to Medlands. It would take Tommy longer to saddle his horse than to ride there and back.”

“I insist.”

“Oh, all right. But don’t make him wait for me. One of the Allens can escort me home.”

“Very well.”

Triumph surged within her breast. As she turned away, Julia allowed herself a secret smirk of satisfaction—only to find Mr. Valcourt watching her.

She paused, and for a moment their eyes met. He held her gaze with a knowing look that told her he had overheard their conversation and was not fooled. She opened her mouth to say something, but he turned away without a word and escorted his mother and sister outside.

By 1706, even dour Philadelphia had a dancing and fencing school, despite protests by the Society of Friends.

—Lynn Matluck Brooks, York County Heritage Trust

Chapter 2

On his first full day in Devonshire, Alec Valcourt left the village church still seeing Miss Midwinter's lovely face in his mind. She was beautiful, yes. And she knew it. She reminded him of too many spoiled young ladies he had met who enjoyed flirting—practicing both their seduction and dance skills with him, but only in hopes of snaring a more suitable gentleman in future.

Alec had overheard enough of Miss Midwinter's conversation with her mother to know she was up to something. Her coy manipulation had brought to mind Miss Underhill, and Alec had turned away, determined to put both young women from his mind.

He had more important things to consider.

Already missing London, Alec walked through diminutive Beaworthy with his mother and sister, and an uncle he barely knew. As they passed the inn, he glanced at the upper windows, wondering if the inn had an assembly room. He would have to stop in sometime and meet the proprietor.

Uncle Ramsay lived outside the village in a two-story whitewashed cottage capped by a tile roof—with a small stable, paddock, and other outbuildings behind. As a young partner he had lived over the law

practice on the High Street, he'd explained, but had bought the cottage when he bought the practice. Now his two clerks shared the rooms above his office, while he lived alone, with a cook-housekeeper and manservant to keep the place going.

Shortly after reaching the cottage, Alec joined his family in the dining parlor for a stiff early dinner at the bachelor's meager table. It was not that his uncle was poor—he was after all the only solicitor in town and employed two clerks—but apparently he was exceedingly frugal and his cook-housekeeper had learned to stretch a sixpence into a pound.

Alec was careful not to eat too much of the plain roasted chicken and boiled potatoes so there would be enough to go around. Covert glances at his mother and sister revealed they did the same, slicing a small potato into tiny slices and eating them slowly and delicately, so that their plates did not empty ahead of Mr. Ramsay's. If their uncle ate this way regularly, he should have been a thin, spindly man, but he was not. Rather, he possessed a well-rounded waistcoat that belied his parsimonious table.

The conversation was meager as well. His mother had explained the previous night why they had come, as well as her husband's fate. At the time, Cornelius Ramsay had nodded gravely but said little.

Now, abruptly, he began, "Perhaps we needn't share the particulars of how it happened, hmm? It is enough for people here to know your husband is gone and that is why you've come."

Around the table Alec, his mother, and Aurora nodded in somber agreement.

After the meal, Alec retrieved his violin case. Knowing his music would fill the small house, and unsure whether his uncle would welcome it, he took his instrument outside. The February day was chilly, but he found a sunny bench—the breeze blocked by the garden wall—and felt quite comfortable. Sitting down, he removed his violin, positioned his bow, and began to fiddle. As he played, he reviewed his plans in his mind.

He had a small stack of pamphlets left over from London, describing

the fencing and dancing classes he'd taught in private homes or the academy. If he cut off the bottom portion, which listed the Valcourt Academy's address and weekly dance times, he could still use them. Armed with the pamphlets, he would introduce himself to local schools, as well as middle-class families and gentry. He thought he would teach private lessons in homes first. Then, when he had sufficient students and income, he would find and let a suitable place in Beaworthy to open a new academy.

He thought again of the pretty Miss Midwinter he had met that morning at church. He supposed a young lady like her already counted dancing among her many accomplishments, but it wouldn't hurt to ask. . . .

Aurora came out, wool shawl around her shoulders, and sat on the bench beside him. She stared peacefully over the dormant garden and silent road beyond, listening as he played.

After a few minutes, she asked quietly, "That's new, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "Not exactly. It's a variation of Grandfather's '*L'Aimable Vainqueur*.'"

"Ah." She stood and began walking through the dance steps in a demure, understated fashion while Alec played.

A horse and cart rumbled by, and the man at the reins turned to stare at them. Self-conscious, Aurora stopped and waited until he had passed before resuming the steps. As Alec added spirit to the tune, Aurora raised her arms and twirled a pirouette, nearly losing her shawl as she did so.

"Stop! What are you doing?"

Aurora whirled again, this time to face a flushed Uncle Ramsay. Did he reprimand her because she had danced on Sunday? Alec had not taught lessons on the Sabbath, but their family had often spent a pleasant hour or two with music and dancing on Sunday afternoons.

Alec lowered his fiddle and stood. "I'm sorry, Uncle. Was the music too loud? We came outside, hoping not to disturb you."

"You do disturb me." Glancing toward the road, he gestured them forward. "Come inside, the both of you."

Alec and Aurora exchanged uncertain glances and followed him through the door and into the sitting room, feeling like naughty children.

Inside, Mrs. Valcourt looked up from the book of sermons she was reading. Her gaze shifted from her children to her brother, worry lines creasing her brow.

Uncle Ramsay turned to face them. “Dancing is frowned upon here.”

“On the Sabbath, you mean?” Alec asked. “Aurora was only walking through the steps of a variation I’ve composed. My fault, I’m afraid, not hers.”

“No, not *only* on Sabbath,” Uncle Ramsay said. “Dancing is not allowed here in general.”

Alec stared at the man, certain he must have misheard. “I don’t understand.”

Aurora gave a tentative smile. “You must be teasing, Uncle. For you know Alec is a dancing master.”

Uncle Ramsay’s mouth fell ajar, apparently thunderstruck. “What?”

Alec felt a quiver of dread snake up his spine but steeled himself and met his uncle’s gaze directly. “I am a dancing and fencing master, sir. Like my father and grandfather before me.”

Uncle Ramsay’s face darkened in displeasure. He turned to his sister. “Really, Joanna. You should have told me your son was following the family line before you came.”

“I knew you would not approve,” she replied, setting aside her book and averting her eyes.

Alec looked from his mother to his uncle, mind reeling. “Surely my profession does not come as a surprise to you.”

“It does. And not a happy one. I knew your grandfather was a dancing master, and French in the bargain. But your father vowed to forsake the profession if I would permit him to marry my sister.”

“He did give it up,” Mrs. Valcourt said, then added, “for a time.”

Cornelius Ramsay shook his head, eyes troubled. “He promised. Upon his honor.”

Mrs. Valcourt’s lips tightened. “Men do not always keep their promises, I find.”

Several moments of strained silence followed. The mantel clock ticked. Aurora sent Alec a nervous look. It was the nearest thing to an accusation they had yet heard from their mother.

Uncle Ramsay picked up the fire iron and jabbed at the embers in the hearth. “I suppose your husband’s return to the profession, and your son’s following him, explains your vague and infrequent letters over the years?”

He sent his sister a challenging look, but she did not meet his gaze.

“Well, well,” he said briskly. “If you had divulged your son’s profession, I could have warned you there is no dancing here in Beaworthy. And precious little call for a dancing master. In fact, I cannot think of any place *less* in need of one.” He shoved the fire iron back into its stand with a *clang*.

“But . . . why?” Alec sputtered.

“A decision of the leading family of the parish. Lady Amelia Midwinter, daughter of the last earl.”

Alec’s stomach churned. Flabbergasted, he asked again, “But why? Is she a Quaker or some such?”

His uncle shook his head. “It’s the way things were when I came here years ago as partner to old Mr. Ley—God rest his soul.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying there’s an actual law or ordinance that says one cannot dance here?”

Uncle Ramsay’s lower lip protruded in thought. “Not an actual law that I know of, though certainly an unwritten one.” He shrugged. “I own I’ve never looked into it. Didn’t affect me—I never went in for that sort of frivolity.”

“But—”

His uncle laid a hand on his arm. “The *reason* is not the main point here, my boy. The fact is, dancing is not done here in Beaworthy, hasn’t been for twenty years, and is unlikely to start now you’re here.”

Alec looked at his mother, stunned by this unexpected turn of events. “Mamma, why did you not say anything? If I had known—”

Her eyes sparked. “If you had known . . . What? We still would have come. We had no other choice. And thanks to my generous brother, we have a roof over our heads. Let us be thankful.”

“But we cannot presume to live on Uncle Ramsay’s goodwill for long, Mamma,” Alec insisted. “I must earn my own way—support you and Aurora.”

His uncle nodded. “Well said, my boy. Well said. A young man of nearly five and twenty must have some skills and abilities to recommend him.”

Alec lifted his chin. “I am a skilled and able dancing and fencing master, sir.” He hesitated, then added, “Though I did apprentice as a clerk for a time, before Father reopened his academy.”

“Ah! A clerk. Now, that’s something useful.”

“I’ve never regretted the experience,” Alec allowed. “Even after I began teaching alongside Father, I was able to help with the business side of the academy—keeping the books, paying taxes, that sort of thing.”

His mother asked hopefully, “Might Alec help you in your law practice, brother?”

His uncle considered this, then shook his head. “Unfortunately no. I have two clerks at present and haven’t need of another. Nor have I heard of any such position available nearby. But I shall ask around.”

Alec wanted to please his uncle, but he did not want to be a clerk. He said, “Perhaps there is more interest in dancing than you think. And I teach fencing as well. I might find pupils for that skill at least.”

“Enough to support yourself? I think that highly unlikely.”

“Then I shall go farther afield to seek pupils,” Alec said. “I may have more luck in neighboring villages.”

“But folks around here are primarily farmers and laborers. Few well-to-do families interested in dancing.”

“How do you know?”

“Call it an educated guess. My professional opinion.”

“It cannot hurt to ask.”

“Actually, it can. It can hurt your reputation and your reception. It won’t do me any favors either.”

“But—”

Uncle Ramsay held up his palm. “Look. Alec. I am a reasonable

man and will not forbid you. However, I would advise you to tread carefully and be discreet. And do not tempt fate by going to Buckleigh Manor or its neighbor, Medlands. Give yourself, say, a week, and if you haven't rummaged up sufficient pupils by then, we shall discuss alternate plans for your future. All right?"

"That sounds reasonable," Alec's mother agreed. "Quite generous, brother. Thank you."

A week? Inwardly, Alec rebelled. He felt his life beginning to spin away, out from under his control, and he didn't like it one bit.

Dismissed, Alec exchanged his violin for a sword and strode back outside. Instead of turning right into the village, he turned left into the countryside. In his uncle's compact cottage, there was precious little room for privacy. He needed a place to exert himself and burn off his vexation with no one to criticize, or scoff. A place where he could toss aside his coat and work himself into an ungentlemanly sweat.

His small sword held inconspicuously to his side, he strode down the unpaved road, eyeing with interest the wooded area ahead.

He passed a walled churchyard, the listing graves and grey limestone church far older than the one he'd attended in the village. Not sure if the place was in use, he walked on. The road entered a copse of trees both deciduous and evergreen. Though only February, birds sang hopefully. Evidently, spring returned earlier here in the southwest. Perhaps all was not as bleak as it appeared.

The vague rumble and wave of two voices reached him. Through the trees, he glimpsed movement. He paused, not wishing his footsteps to announce his presence, or to meet anyone in his current mood. Something about the uncertain shapes beyond the pine boughs drew his attention. He walked gingerly from the road into the copse, careful to avoid stepping on downed branches.

He stopped behind a dense Scots pine and peered around it. The shapes became clearer. Two horses. Two people. Partially shielded by the horses, a man and woman stood, reins in hand, heads near in

conversation. A love scene? he wondered. At all events, Alec realized he had no right to intrude.

Alec was about to turn away, when one horse lowered its head to nibble among the brush and he saw the young woman more clearly—Miss Julia Midwinter, whom he had met in church. Who was *supposed* to be out riding with another young lady. Her present companion was young but not female. He was a handsome, well-dressed gentleman in green coat and buff trousers. Miss Midwinter smiled coyly up at him and leaned very near.

Again the image of Miss Underhill appeared in Alec's mind, and his gut pinched with guilt and regret.

Suddenly Miss Midwinter looked right in his direction. Had Alec made a sound after all?

The pretty blonde frowned and murmured something to the man. Then she added more loudly, "What a pleasant surprise to happen upon you, sir. But now I must bid you good-day."

Alec turned and walked away. Her stilted words had not fooled him. Miss Midwinter had clearly deceived her mother. What would he do if he ever came upon his sister in such a compromising situation?

Deep in contemplation, Alec tripped over something in the wood.

"I say, have a care," a man grumbled. "That's my leg you're kicking."

Alec spun around, startled by the affronted male voice. He had not realized anyone else was near.

And no wonder, for the person addressing him was seated on the ground amid the brush, legs sprawled, back reclining against a tree. The offended man was a few years younger than Alec and well dressed, though his cravat was an untidy wad and stained with mud. Or was it . . . chocolate?

"I beg your pardon," Alec said. "I did not see you."

The fire faded from the man's dark eyes. "Well, no harm done."

Alec hesitated, taking in the man's position. "Are you . . . all right?"

"I expect so. Good thing I was wearing my boots."

Alec looked down at the man's riding boots and saw that one of them was clamped between the metal jaws of a trap.

“Good heavens. Are you hurt?”

“Not too bad, I don’t think.”

“How can I help?”

The man thought. “You don’t happen to have a fire iron or crowbar on your person, I don’t imagine?”

“I’m afraid not.” Alec raised his sword. “I have this, but I don’t think—”

“A sword? Handy thing, that. Not every chap carries one these days.”

“I fence,” Alec murmured. He feared that using his blade as a tool would break the tip, but he couldn’t very well leave the young man entrapped. He searched the ground for a sturdy stick, then knelt beside the fallen man.

“Dashed foolish of me, I know,” the young man said. “The game-keeper has warned me time and time again to mind his traps. Yet somehow I stumbled into this one.”

Alec slid the edge of his sword between the metal jaws and pried the trap open just far enough to insert the sturdy branch.

The young man eyed his sword with interest. “Perhaps we might fence together sometime. Though I fence very ill, no doubt.”

“I could help you improve your skills.”

“Really? Excellent.”

Using the stick as a lever, Alec began prying open the trap.

“Wait ’til James learns of this,” the young man moaned. “I shall never hear the end of it.”

“James?”

“My brother.”

“Perhaps he needn’t learn of it.”

“You’re not from this parish, I gather, or you’d know there’s no keeping it secret. Everyone hears everything eventually. Besides, I’d not rob my brother of a good laugh, would I? Have you no brothers?”

“No. Only a sister.”

“Ah.” The young man nodded. “One ought to be gentler with sisters. Though Patience is quite sporting about our teasing, I will say.”

Trap released, Alec held it gingerly while the young man extracted

his foot. He woefully eyed his dented boot. “At all events, I fear there’s no hiding *this*. Father’s valet will throw a fit when he sees all his polishing gone to ruin.”

“And your foot?” Alec asked.

The young man rotated his ankle. “Hurts but seems all right.”

Alec offered his hand and helped pull the man to his feet. He nearly lost his own footing, so much heavier was the man than he appeared. Standing, the man’s lanky height became evident—he was several inches taller than Alec and likely a stone or two heavier.

Tentatively putting weight on his foot, the young man winced.

“Is it broken?” Alec asked.

“I don’t think so. But it’ll be black-and-blue tomorrow if I don’t miss my guess.”

Alec offered his shoulder. “Here, lean on me.”

“I don’t live far. Medlands. Do you know it?”

“No. I’ve only just arrived from London.” Though Alec did recall his uncle mentioning the place. “We’re staying with Mr. Ramsay—my uncle.”

“I know him—he’s my father’s solicitor. Well, welcome to Beaworthy. A good show you came when you did.” The young man stuck out his soiled hand. “Walter Allen.”

Seeing the muddy hand, Alec withdrew his pocket kerchief and placed it in the man’s waiting palm. “Landed in a spot of dirt when you fell, by the looks of it.”

Walter looked down at his palm, then obligingly wiped his hands. “And so I did.” He held out the soiled kerchief. “Many thanks.”

Alec smiled and waved away the offer. “Keep it.”

The man shrugged and pocketed it. “Didn’t catch your name,” he said.

“Alec Valcourt. How do you do?”

“About average.” Walter grinned. “For me.”

He put his arm around Alec’s shoulder, and the two walked slowly out of the trees and onto the road. Not far past the walled churchyard, they came to a wrought-iron gate with a lion’s head baring its teeth and glaring down at them from atop the metal scrollwork.

Seeing him glance down its long drive, Walter said, "That's Buckleigh Manor."

"Is that where the Midwinters live?"

"You've met them?"

Alec nodded. "At church."

"Ah." Walter lifted his chin in understanding. "Yes. They're our neighbors." He turned his head. "Medlands is just there, on the other side of the road."

Ahead, an open, inviting entrance awaited, with two stone pillars on either side of a gently curved drive, with no menacing lion to warn visitors away.

The house beyond seemed relatively modern and well maintained, or perhaps recently refurbished. It was built of warm red brick with white-framed doors and windows. Its roof of many gables and tall brick chimneys was crowned by a cheerful white cupola.

In spite of the man's humble, self-deprecating manner, he was apparently from a wealthy family.

Glancing up at the house, Alec glimpsed a fair head in one of the upper windows. A flick of a curtain and the figure disappeared. As they reached the front stairs a few moments later, the door burst open and a young woman hurried out, pale face a mask of concern, framed by the lightest blond hair Alec had ever seen.

"Walter!" she exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Pet, I am."

"Then why are you limping? What happened?"

"I shall tell you by and by, or you'll wring it from me, I know. But first, let me introduce my rescuer." He released Alec's shoulder and gestured with a sweep of his hand. "Miss Patience Allen, my sister, please meet Mr. Alec Valcourt, newcomer to Beaworthy."

She turned to him, her light blue eyes round. He found himself comparing her to Miss Midwinter, who was also blond, though that lady's curls were a deeper, honey hue. Miss Allen's eyes seemed wide and innocent, compared to Miss Midwinter's knowing gaze.

"I believe I saw you at church today, Mr. Valcourt," Miss Allen said.

“Allow me to express my heartfelt appreciation on behalf of my entire family. Better yet, come and meet them. I know Mamma and Papa will want to thank you.”

Alec hesitated. “I don’t wish to intrude.”

“Not a bit of it,” Walter said.

“They are just here in the drawing room. This way.” Miss Allen turned and led the way across the hall. When she opened the broad paneled door, Alec glimpsed a scene of domestic happiness framed in its threshold. A woman of forty or forty-five sat at an embroidery screen before the fire. She had paused in her needlework to regard with fond amusement her husband holding a biscuit before a hound on its rear haunches in eager beggar’s pose. Hearing the door open, the man gave the hound his reward and praised him with a fond “Good boy.” He then rose and turned toward the door with a ready smile.

He was a tall, handsome man with silver threaded through dark blond hair. His wife was equally attractive with faded blond curls and the dimples of a young girl. She rose and stepped to her husband’s side.

Walter introduced Alec and shared the story of their meeting. As he did so, Sir Herbert and Lady Allen gazed at Alec with smiles that lit their eyes and gave him a warm feeling of approval and value. Their expressions of gratitude were instant and genuine, and both took turns vigorously shaking his hand.

Sir Herbert insisted on inspecting Walter’s foot and bid him sit in a nearby chair to do so.

As the examination commenced, Walter’s older brother, James, came in, dressed in green coat, buff trousers, and tall boots—riding clothes. Alec recognized him with a start as the man he had seen with Miss Midwinter near the wood.

Perhaps then, Alec thought with relief, there had been nothing untoward about Miss Midwinter stopping to speak with a neighbor while out riding. Mr. Allen had clearly not lingered with the young lady.

James Allen’s hair was a halo of tawny gold curls, his features finely formed. Even Alec could not miss noticing that he was an exceedingly handsome young man. He was in appearance very like his sister,

Patience. And both resembled their parents. Alec wondered idly who Walter resembled.

Walter repeated the story, and James Allen thanked Alec and shook his hand, though with more reserve than his parents had shown.

But when James turned to his brother, his reserve fell away. His eyes sparkled and a smile played about his mouth. As Walter had predicted, James lost no time in teasing him. “Not another trap, Walt. What does that make—two or three this year?”

Walter ducked his head to hide a sheepish smile.

“You might have called out,” James said. “I rode very near that spot.”

He didn’t mention meeting Miss Midwinter on his ride, Alec noticed, and wondered why.

James continued, “We shall have to ask Hooper to paint the traps yellow to warn you off—and all the foxes and weasels in the bargain. What do you say, Papa. Spare the game birds or poor Walt’s foot?”

His father smiled. “There are many birds in those woods, but Walter has only two feet. Better spare those.”

James nodded. “I quite agree. The Beaworthy cricket team would be hard-pressed indeed if our best batsman showed up lame.” He laid a hand on his younger, though larger, brother’s shoulder. “Jesting aside, I am glad you are all right, old man. You must promise to look about you next time you go for a ramble.”

Walter grinned. “I shall.”

Lady Allen spoke up. “I am afraid it is Cook’s half day, Mr. Valcourt, or we should invite you to stay for dinner.”

“Thank you anyway, Lady Allen. But no further thanks are necessary.”

“You’ve not eaten Mrs. White’s puddings,” Walter teased. “Or you’d not be so quick to decline.”

“Another time, then,” Sir Herbert suggested.

Alec bowed. “Thank you, sir.”

Alec recalled his uncle’s admonition to avoid soliciting pupils at Buckleigh Manor and Medlands, yet even had he not, Alec would have been reluctant to press his advantage—to spoil the moment by asking

for their patronage. His father's critical voice, saying, "*You must be more persuasive and assertive . . .*" echoed in Alec's memory, but he ignored it.

"And I hope we might fence together one day," Walter added. "James and I had a few lessons, but it's years ago now."

Alec explained, "That's why I was wandering about today. I'd hoped to find an out-of-the-way place to practice, but . . ."

"But instead you found me." Walter chuckled, then added, "The churchyard isn't used much. Or you're welcome to come here."

"Perhaps after your foot heals," Alec suggested.

"Oh, I'll be right as a trivet in a day or two." Walter gingerly replaced his stocking.

"You mustn't rush things, Walter," Lady Allen said. "And I don't know that playing with swords is, um, the best pastime for you."

"Worried I'll cut off my own head?" Walter turned to grin at Alec. "You see how my reputation precedes me."