

Masquerade



Charlotte Mayo

A "Her TV" Novel



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Masquerade

by Charlotte Mayo

Chapter One

Tom closed his eyes in an effort to stop tears rolling down his smooth cheeks.

“Sorry Mi’ Lord,” Grenville, the faithful man servant, said. “It will need to be tighter. Your Master wants it so.”

Tom wanted to scream, to shout, but how could he?

Grenville placed his knee in the pit of Tom’s back, gathered up the long corset laces in his strong, masculine hands and pulled. Tom stumbled back – it was only Grenville’s hard kneecap that stopped him rocking backwards onto the floor.

“Needs must when the Devil drives,” Grenville said.

“Tighter, man, tighter,” Tom’s father, Laird MacDonald said. He stood, arms folded, watching his son’s slow transformation into the beautiful (he hoped) Kate – a daughter of distinction. “He has got to look like a woman and that means a slim waist and a womanly figure. Anyhow, his mother’s dresses will not fit unless he has the figure for it.”

Laird MacDonald’s wife, Georgette, had passed away some years earlier. A society beauty, she was well known for her splendour and poise. The Laird had never had the heart to remove her clothes from the wardrobes in her bedchamber and how blessed he was now that he had not. For hadn’t Georgette’s spirit come back to save the family in their darkest hour? Wouldn’t her dresses, stays and chemises now save her only son from the gallows? A trunk was already packed and the coach readied and fastened to his finest horses. Laird MacDonald just wanted to see his son and daughter safely despatched to London and he would flee to France – where he hoped, to once again, be acquainted with the Bonnie Prince Charlie.

As Grenville pulled the laces even tighter on his father’s instructions, Tom could not help but think that his man servant was quietly enjoying the humiliation of his young master – surely the laces did not have to be quite so tight? The white, whale-boned corset pulled ever snugger, restricting and restricting Tom’s waist and at the same time inhibiting his chest movements. Tom could not escape from its vice-like grip and already his breathing was staccato and rapid. He gazed at himself in the full-length, looking glass – and, as he did so, he could resist it no more; the tears did come. They ran down his cheeks like two streams.

“What a mess,” he mouthed to his reflection. “What a terrible mess.”

“What is, brother?” Just at that moment, his sister, Prudence, came into the boudoir without knocking and sauntered across the room with a carelessly, confident and somewhat haughty gait. Her long stork-like legs eating up the ground with ease. For she was not dressed in a skirt and bodice – as defined her gender – but rather breeches, a jerkin and a white puff-sleeved shirt; in other words, male attire. Added to which her long, black hair was pulled back in a pony tail – a gold hilted, scabbard sword swung at her side: clearly, she was rather enjoying her transformation – unlike her little brother.

“Morning, Father,” Prudence said with a broad smile as she turned to look at the large, stern, red-faced presence of the Laird. “What’s a mess?” she repeated.

“This,” Tom said. He gave his sister time to take in the sight of him – the white petticoats that hung down from beneath his corset, the white chemise filled with artificial breasts, which were pressed up as the corset grew ever tighter. The thin, male body transformed to female proportions by artifice and contraption.

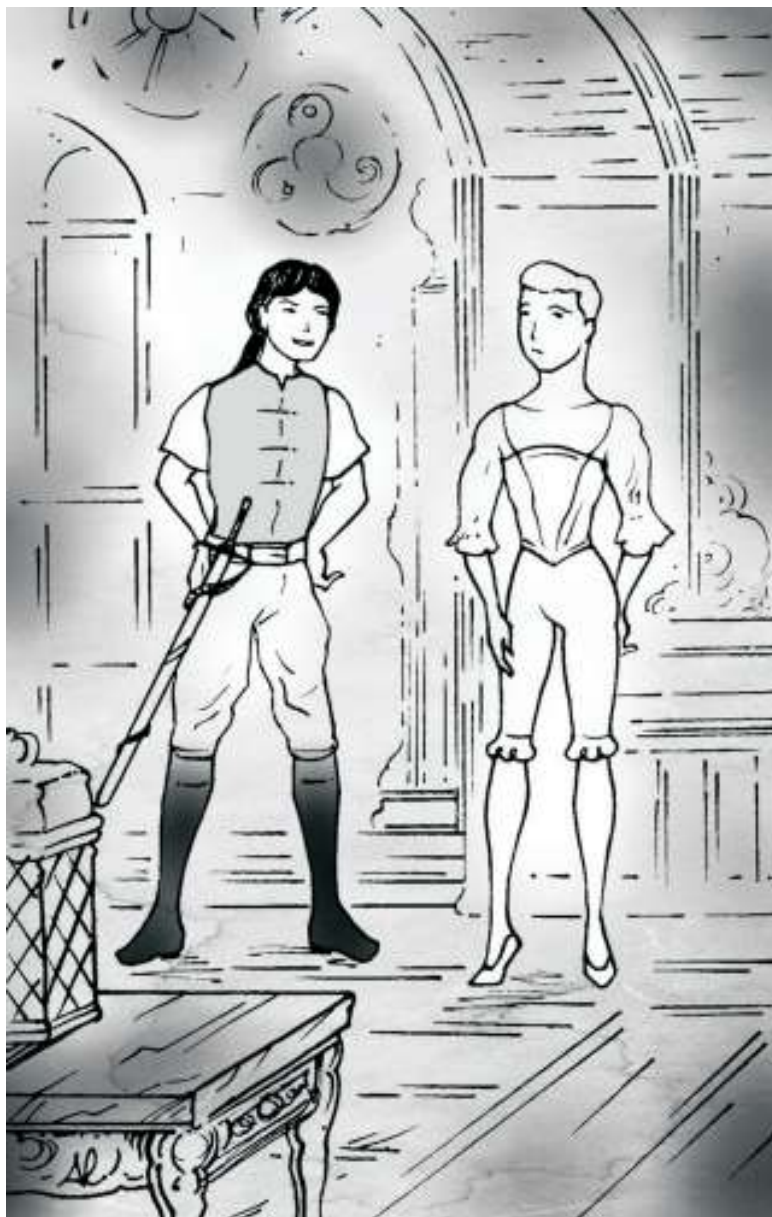
“I don’t know,” Prudence said, “I think you look rather fetching – or you will when the change is complete and you are wearing Mother’s skirts.”

“Oh, don’t mock,” Tom said. “You know I can’t stand to be in these ghastly clothes. For you, breeches mean freedom; to me stays mean enslavement.”

“And you would swap a brief period of enslavement for the hangman’s noose, would you?”

Prudence had a point – Tom knew that. Tom and his father had taken part in the bitter Jacobean rebellion against the hated English with Bonnie Prince Charlie – The Young Pretender at its helm. The loyal Scots forces had marched as far as Derby in the Midlands, drawing in clansmen from many dynasties including MacDonald, Stuart and MacLeod, McDuff and MacTavish. Then for reasons Laird MacDonald could not fathom, the Young Pretender, rather than pressing home his advantage, and marching South to London and routing the King’s forces (something he had been a strong advocate in their Council of War with the Bonnie Prince) the Scots had turned on their tails and returned North of the border with a rejuvenated English army in hot pursuit.

The final showdown had been at Cullendon on the 16th April, 1746. The Scots had been roundly routed and now the hated English, in the guise of the Duke of Cumberland and his far-from-merry men, were dishing out summary justice – hanging all who had Jacobite sympathies. The twenty-stone Laird was too old (and some might say) too heavy to ride a horse or carry a musket so he had supported the Prince in a “advisory” capacity – far away from the action. He had left the fighting to his son, Tom who had escaped with his life intact but was now on a list of Jacobites whom the Duke of Cumberland wanted to “interview” – which meant torture, a show trial and then public hanging as a deterrent to any other loyal Scotsmen who got the wild notion that could, and should, be independent from the hated English. Tom knew it, The Laird knew it and Prudence knew it.



If Tom wanted to escape the hangman's noose, then dressing as a woman for a short period was the only solution. And, after he had seen his cunning plan for his children's escape enacted, Laird McDonald, a fierce supporter of The Young Pretender, intended to flee to a sympathetic France where he hoped to rejoin Bonnie Prince Charlie and discuss their next move. A boat awaited in a cove just North of Edinburgh.

Tom was but eighteen but still old enough to be acquainted with the English rope. He had been seen running across the heather, his kilt flying high in the air with the English Redcoats in pursuit. He had hidden amongst the heather and boulders whilst shots had rung in his ears until finally he had made his way to a cave he knew. He lived there for a short while without food, only emerging at night to quench his thirst in a stream. Eventually he made it to his home where he was told by the Laird that a description had been circulated and he was on the "most wanted" list. Tom knew if he stayed in Scotland it was only a matter of time before Cumberland's men came a-knocking.

Tom was short in stature, smooth-skinned, fair-haired, and had delicate feminine features. If truth be told (and few dared say it to Tom's face for fear of a tongue lashing), Tom was more girl than boy – more feminine than masculine – and yet no one would suspect such a disguise for a Laird's son. For surely no man would demean himself by wearing stays and dresses! Who would have dreamt of such a thing? And yet had it not been Flora MacDonald who had given The Laird the idea? Had she not done the same to the Bonnie Prince? So that was the notion: dress his son as a

girl and his mannish daughter as a young man so she could protect him – for had he not taught her to fight with a sword and pistols? Without a mother to protect them and being frequently called to the Highlands to plan and prepare for the overthrow of the tyrannical English and free Scotland from its clutches, his children were often left alone. He knew they could fend for themselves and at Culloden had not Tom equipped himself well, only fleeing when the game was up?

“Get to London and your Aunt Melrose’s address in Grosvenor Square and you will be out of your stays and free to roam the enemy lands with impunity,” the Laird said.

“I know you are right,” Tom said, trying once more to repress his tears.

“Come now, son, you fight like a warrior and cry like a bairn when you are laced into stays? How come you make such a fuss?”

“I don’t like it, Father. I just don’t like it. I know I have to do it. I know you say this is how Bonnie Prince Charlie escaped with the gracious Flora MacDonald rowing him across the lake but I wish there was another way.”

“Well, there’s not,” his father rasped angrily. “I have this pale blue gown for you – it was one of your mother’s favourites. Prudence will help you put it on and then make your face up and put a wig on you. Then you both must be off. There is too much shilly-shallying - time is pressing and already there has been too much chatter about nothing and moaning about everything.”

Tom knew that it was, once again, time to cede to his father's wishes. Grenville's work was finished. Tom took an uneasy breath as his constricted chest could muster and walked from the mirror to the dress his father held up. With his sister's help, he slipped it on. Oh, how odd it felt! And how different from breeches! Surely he could not pass as a lady? His sister laced up the back. She went to work with dextrous fingers, making the neck and sleeves neater before she knelt on the floor and fanned the dress out. Tom had never felt so entrapped; he could not believe the ritual women went through to dress for the day. He returned to the table and sat down – the dress made him feel as if he were wading through water. It restricted his leg movements. As soon as he was seated, his sister applied white powder to his face and rouge to his cheeks and then a cascading blond wig was placed on his head. Prudence spent some time with combs and pin, ensuring that it looked perfect. Pleased with her handiwork, a beauty spot was marked in black on his cheek.

“Oh, how becoming,” Prudence said as if she were an artist who had just placed the last dot on a canvas.

Tom could hardly believe that the creation before his eyes was really him, Tom MacDonald. He stood up and placed his hands in front of him.

“Bravo, bravo,” his father called, clapping loudly. “A last we have a girl in the family.”

“What about me?” Prudence said, slightly snubbed.

“You don't count,” Laird McDonald joshed. “You have always been more for the boyish things and

your height and assertive disposition make you far from an ideal marriage companion. A woman who likes to wear the breeches! Who has ever heard of such an abominable creature? All men must beware!”

“It is such you have taught me,” Prudence said, rather slighted by her father’s remarks.

Laird MacDonald laughed heartily and slapped Prudence on the back.

“That I have and now you will protect poor Kate as she makes her way to London. Aunt Melrose will take over from there. She has a plan to get Tom back into breeches – it is but a four-day ride in skirts and stays with three overnight rests at coaching inns. After you arrive in London, you will both be free. Although I fear, Prudence, we will never get you out of breeches once you have had a taste of the man’s world.”

Prudence smiled and said under her breath, “Nor poor Tom out of skirts, I fear.”

For didn’t his cunning sister have other plans for her delicate brother?

Chapter Two

Tom stood in front of the mirror, a fan in his hand practicing curtsying and the quiet, female voice he was to use during his four-day sojourn. For reasons he could not explain, he found mimicking a female came quite naturally to him. Prudence stood behind him, directing her pupil in the ways of womanly grace. Tom could hardly believe the transformation that had taken place. He was wearing a pale blue dress which fitted snugly at his restricted waist and spread out gloriously over side panniers making him more of a mobile object than a human being. Walking was difficult; running impossible.

Beneath the dress a white ruffled blouse peeped beneath the blue of the dress. His feet were squeezed into dainty gold and black shoes with a slight club heel; so confined Tom felt none of the normal boisterousness of his eighteen years. He felt as if every part of him had been restricted in some way – his feet, his waist, his movement due to the large dress, his arms with the tightness of the sleeves. Added to which the side panniers just added another burden, making doors difficult to negotiate but such was to be his lot.

“It is only four days, brother,” Prudence said, reading her brother’s negative thoughts about being so confined. “And three overnight stays at inns along the way. You will have Grenville and I at your side at all times.”

Tom took as deep a breath as the stays would allow. “It must be done,” he sighed. “I know it must be done for though I loathe how I look and must act, the alternative is far, far worse. That dastardly

Cumberland would love to get a MacDonald neck in the noose.”

“It must be done,” Prudence repeated, as she attached a necklace to her brother’s slender, swan like neck. “The coach is waiting and Father must hurry to France.”

Tom took one last look at himself in the looking glass. He was attired in a travelling costume. He stood slightly taller than his usual height – a consequence of the block heels. The dress of ruffled silk was held out by the side panniers and fell to the ground, not quite reaching the floor. His breathing was erratic and short under the tight grip of the corset. The bodice of the dress had been pulled tight by Prudence lacing it behind so it was like a second skin against the white corset. The chemise showed off his fake bosom and delicate white neck which was now adorned with a red ruby hanging from a chain. The sleeves of the bodice were tight and ended with white ruffles just above the wrist. His face was powdered and snow white with a beauty spot marked in black on his right cheek.

The wig gave his head an elongated appearance, wrapped as it was with blue ribbons which threaded through the white of the wig. Earrings had been attached to his ears. Tom held the fan in front of his dress. He felt he looked comical, slightly bizarre. No one would know his true identity. That was for sure for didn’t he have trouble recognising himself?

The spectre that was in front of the mirror was a woman, of that there was no doubt. A woman of teenage years who had grown into womanly things. Tom had to admit that his sister and

Grenville had done a miraculous job in transforming him to such womanly grandeur.

“Can you stop gawping at yourself?” Prudence said. “We need to make haste.”

“Sorry, Sis,” Tom replied, immediately adopting the quieter, softer voice of the female. “I am awe-struck by the transformation. I can hardly believe that it is me.”

“Good,” Prudence said. “For that is to be the reaction we want from Cumberland’s brutes. Should the dastardly English think you are Tom MacDonald, you know a noose awaits your neck. If they think you are just a teenage woman making her way in the world, then you will be safe.”

“I know it to be true,” Tom whimpered. “I know it to be true.”

Subconsciously, Tom felt his slender neck and the heavy diamond that hung down. The thought of the hangman’s noose made him shiver, to be thrown upon a cart with his hands tied behind his back, then transported to a town where he would be hung in front of the multitude for taking arms against the hated English. Surely panniers and dresses and corsets and chemises and diamonds and wigs and powder was so much the better.

“Come, we must go,” Tom said with sudden resolution.

The pair walked towards the bedroom door.

“I will ride on top of the carriage so you have the interior to yourself,” Prudence said.

Tom knew she was enjoying the masquerade – to be in breeches, a sword swinging at her side had been a dream for her for many a long year. Now she was getting to play the hero of her fantasies with her little brother cast in the role of damsel in distress – his brave defence at Culloden forgotten. How she had begged her father to be part of the infamous battle. How she had wanted to be at Bonnie Prince Charles' side during the long march to Derby in the Midlands! How jealous she had been of Tom for fighting and defending the Young Pretender as he had marched South into enemy territory and then when the brave Scots had been routed at Cullendon. But alas that was not to be!

The way of the world deemed that women should toil in domestic servitude or be child bearing ornaments and decoration for the parlour and the drawing room, proficient only in music singing and dancing whilst men sought action and adventure. For a woman like Prudence, twenty years of age and full of cunning and guile, such a role was always to prove a disappointment. So she was glad to have a father who had taught her to fight with pistols and swords and take care of herself and did not believe in the notion that a woman should be quiet and passive. Oh, what a rarity that was in a man and a father to boot!

So the two siblings left the house which was then locked and boarded by the servants who had been paid off and told to seek other work. The only servant that remained was Grenville who would accompany them to London. Indeed, father, son and daughter knew it was unlikely they would return. Laird MacDonald just hoped that his investments in the West Indies would bear fruit; coffee and silk and tea. The Laird was a canny business-

man, no mistake, and one who happily put differences with the English aside when it came to trade.

The Laird bade his children farewell and soon the coach was rattling and rolling out of the Highlands. It rattled onto the road to London. Prudence and Tom knew that the most difficult part would be crossing the border into England at Wallsend – the further South they got, the safer they would become as there would be more carriages, stages and people and it would not be clear from whence they had come. The beginning of the journey was on rough, unmade roads through desolate heather-covered countryside where troops patrolled and every Scotsman and woman was a possible Jacobite and would be questioned. And there was nowhere to hide for the coach was isolated and alone on the heather boarder roads and paths, easy prey to a looking glass some miles away. Prudence and Tom knew their lives were in peril as the coach made its slow journey south. Hadn't the hated English banned the wearing of tartan? Such was their ardour to take revenge on the Scots and destroy their heritage and culture.

Tom held onto the leather straps above the door of the coach as it clattered through the chalk path that wound through the grasslands and gorse. The vibrations lead to great discomfort for the corset was so tight it made breathing difficult and his stomach and chest ached and longed for release. He wished there was another way but, alas, once his Father's mind was made up, there was no turning him. It was, after all, the way Bonnie Prince Charlie had escaped the English, something Prudence had reminded The Laird of when he had first thought of the plan. For although the Laird had conceived the idea of such an escape, had it not

been dear Prudence who had sown the seeds in the Laird's artful brain? Had she not said, "How did Bonnie Prince Charlie escape, father?"

The coach rocked on with Tom feeling more and more sick. Being on the coach was a little like being on a ship in a stormy sea buffeted from side-to-side by giant waves. He felt as if he was going to be seasick. He closed his eyes and tried to think of the battle that he had fled from with the rest of the vanquished Jacobite forces. For although he would not admit it, he cursed his involvement in the Jacobite plot and Prince Charles' tactical ineptitude. Why, oh why, had he turned his forces around at Derby and not marched on London? Young Tom had seen a great career in front of him; a loyal servant of the monarchy would be justly and rightly awarded with land, titles and employment but instead all Tom had earned for his labours on behalf of every true Scotsman and woman was emasculation in corset and skirts and the risk of the hangman's noose if his guise were to fail. Would not the hated English, if they realised his deceit, hang him wearing such apparel to make a laughing stock of the great MacDonald clan?

The shaking of the coach gave way to smooth roads and Tom actually managed to fall asleep. Half dozing and somnolent after days of worried sleep, his mind wafted to pastures new, where he was not obliged to wear skirts. The soft scent on his breast and neck created a relaxing palliative to the nightmare of the reality. It was a reality that darkened not ten miles from the English boarder for suddenly the coach was stopped.

"Who goes there?" an English soldier in a red tunic and tricorne hat asked. A white leather sash crossed his body, his pistol was raised and his

sword scabbard rested against his leg. Behind him were three or four more others and a captain on horseback.

Tom pulled down the window a little to observe a contingent of King's men. Prudence, ever calm, replied.

"I am just escorting my sister to London, Sire, I mean no harm."

"And you are?" the captain on horseback asked. He closed in on the coach. Tom could see the horse's forelocks.

"Harold McTavish, Sire, loyal to the King as ever was, Sire. Like many Scots, I am going to find peace and tranquillity in England away from the Jacobite's and traitors."

"Glad to hear it, Sir," the captain said.

The captain asked a soldier to take the reins of his horse and dismounted. He pulled open the carriage door. His brown eyes fell on Tom disguised as Kate McTavish. He ran his eye up and down her as if he were inspecting prey and then a brief, flirtatious smile formed on his face. Kate raised her fan to her eyes to appear demure and also to cover her face for Tom feared he would reveal to be a man at any moment. The captain stepped back and swung his hat chivalrously in the air. Tom's heart quickened.

"McTavish, you say. Not a name I am familiar with but you don't look like Jacobites."

"I can assure we are not!" Prudence said with a good deal of confidence. "As I say, we are loyal to

the Crown and have only one wish – that is for a peaceful and settled life south of the border.”

The captain looked up at Prudence who sat upon the box next to Grenville.

“You, Sir, look as if you should be in school.” The captain laughed. “I think you would be as useful at fighting as a crab with new claws.”

Prudence felt riled. “I am but seventeen,” Prudence said. Then she calmed herself; she knew she must not become agitated. “Our father has passed away, Sir. Our mother some years earlier, so we are all alone in the world. We are sent for in London where our Lady Melrose will care for us.”

“Good, well, be on your way.” The captain slammed the door and slapped the hindquarter of one of the horses. Grenville raised his whip and the horses trotted off.

Tom/Kate was mighty pleased that the deception had worked. Now there was but the border to be concerned about and then freedom beckoned in the form of the high road to London!

They proceeded without further incident, crossing the border in the early afternoon. The road became better and Tom heard Prudence discussing an overnight stop with Grenville.

“I think we need to stop, Master Harold. I have driven the horses hard today to get over the border but now we are in England, I think we need to find a coaching inn.”

Tom heard his sister agree. He, of course, knew that they could not make London without stops.

With the coach averaging around 45 miles a day – depending on roads – three days would be required to cover the 180-mile journey – possibly four without a change of horse. Tom knew that stopping was thwart with danger.

At last, the coach pulled into the yard of The Rising Sun Inn. Prudence, freed from her skirts, jumped down from the box with great abandon. She opened the door gallantly for her little “sister.”

“For the continuation of the journey, I will ride with you, sister,” Prudence said. “It will be safer now.”

Tom smiled and fluttered his fan coquettishly. Then, guided by his sister’s outstretched hand, he was lead down the single high step and onto the gravel of the inn. Straight away his heart pounded. He knew danger lurked in every dark corner of the pub where men with white clay pies lurked with tankards of beer, discussing the day and politics and farming but in their midst spies lurked. The King had his men everywhere watching and waiting for the artful and creative Scots to once more show their brave steel and take the crown of independence from the wretched English throne.

Prudence had an air of confidence about her. There was no doubt that whilst Tom felt tethered by femininity, Prudence had become emancipated by the freedom that male guise brought, for did she not seem taller and her walk a more purposeful stride?

Tom held his sister’s hand until they reached the door which Prudence pushed open. Tom was inside at last. He held his fan against his skirts. He felt nervous, scared, full of the fears of discovery

and the potential for disaster which would surely see them both hung and Grenville imprisoned.

“Come now, brother,” Prudence whispered. “Show courage.”

The inn’s darkness blotted out the brightness of the day. Tom was struck by the smells of burning wood in the grate, of wax in the air and a prevailing mustiness which mixed with the ale and the wood and pipe smoke created a heady, intoxicating mix.

Tom walked further into the bar behind his darling sister, every step a misery in his too-high heels which clung to his feet like scallop shells. His skirts fell about his legs as he walked. Men looked up from playing cards and drinking and smoking and talking but soon went back to their leisure endeavours. At last Prudence reached the bar where a shirted craggy faced man stood.

“Sire, do you have a room for the night for two lonesome travellers who have travelled far but go still further and our coach and horse and our coachmen too?”

The bartender smiled, his gaze never leaving young Tom who blushed prettily and bent his head in abject submission.

“Sir, I have a room for you and your lady. Is it a double you’re be requiring?” the innkeeper winked.

“Oh no, Sire!” Prudence said, aghast. “We require separate rooms for we are brother and sister, Sire, newly orphaned and making our way to our Lady Melrose, out dearest aunt in London.”

The innkeeper laughed heartily as did some of his customers who were seated close by the conversation.

“I see,” he cried. “I believe I have much mistaken you. We still have two vacant rooms and they are one next to the other which should suit fine and we have a room for your driver. We can cater for your horses too.”

“I am much obliged,” Prudence said.

With a show of much deference, the innkeeper took a large set of keys from a hook and asked the pair to follow him upstairs. Prudence paced up easily whilst Tom was struggled with his skirts and panniers. He felt uncomfortable and wanted to be free from the chains of femineity – oh, how he longed to get to London and remove (or more likely have removed) the blasted corset which was causing him so much pain and the skirts which were so awkward and cumbersome.

The innkeeper showed Prudence and Grenville to one room and “Kate” to the room next door.

“I will get one of my lads to bring up your trunks.”

Once alone, Tom lay on the bed and closed his eyes but even that manoeuvre proved difficult with the heavy skirt around his legs, the panniers and the constant restriction around his chest and waist. The feeling of nausea and seasickness he had felt due to the constant rocking of the coach passed and he started regaining his equilibrium. When he closed his eyes, he was taken back to the wild heather and bracken of his Scottish homeland and that fateful Battle of Cullendon where Bonnie

Prince Charlie's forces had been routed and he had been pursued by The Red Coast who every now and again stopped to take pot shots at him, as his kilt had flown in the wind and his silver sword blade had glinted in the sun. But had he not felt alive and invigorated? For was it not true that to stare death in the face and survive gave you a sense of infallibility?

Prudence tapped on the door.

"Come in," Tom called in the female voice he had been practising.

"How are you, sister?" Prudence asked.

"I'll be glad to be rid of these skirts and stays."

"All in good time, impatient one, all in good time. You will dine with us next door. I have asked the innkeeper to bring victuals to our room so we do not have to mix with the other drinkers and diners in the inn downstairs. There may be roughnecks and braggarts who would treat you with disrespect, my little one, so we must protect you."

Prudence smiled with an air of male arrogance. All at once Tom felt how it must be to be a woman and how it must be to be always inferior to the male of the species. Though female, Prudence had taken to the male gender as if she were born to it – which some might have felt she was.

Tom was glad to eat alone and not risk the comments, sneers and looks of the roughnecks he had seen drinking downstairs in the bar. At least it meant he did not have to act.

The porter brought the chests and settled them in their respective rooms. Tom unfastened his and looked at the array of chemises, shoes, dresses, corsets and petticoats, all of which exuded a soft sensual scent. Another smaller chest contained jewellery. Tom picked up a white chemise and buried his head in it.

“Oh, for trousers,” he muttered. He was conscious that the chest contained no male attire and he wondered how he would change when he arrived at Lady Melrose’s abode.

“Oh do not worry your pretty head about such things,” Prudence said. “I have made plans.”

She said this as they feasted on roasted chicken and ale (wine in Tom’s case) and whilst they did, the three spoke of the soldier’s they had met. Prudence insisted Grenville dined with them rather than below in the servants’ quarters. For though Grenville was a loyal and trusted sergeant, she also knew him to be partial to ale and she did not wish his lips to become loose through drink.

“Methinks that Redcoat had his eye on you, little sister,” Prudence said.

Grenville agreed he had.

Kate did but blush for was it not embarrassing and against the teachings of the Holy Book to think of a man liking another man? Even if that man was in the guise of a woman!

They feasted and ate. Tom risked in his eating by the tight corset.