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MENAGE AND MENAGERIE

When Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice*, she wasn't writing about a pride of lions, was she?

THE FAMILY OF RADFORD had been long settled in Devonshire. Their estate was large, and their residence was at Selwyn Park, in the center of their property, where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance.

Sir Radford, the present owner of the estate, did, in his habits, somewhat strain the reputation established by his father and his grandfather and his great grandfather before him. Sir Radford had a passion for exotic animals and the wealth to indulge that passion. A widower, he lacked the guiding hand of a wife to temper his eccentricities.

On his estate, he kept a menagerie of exotic creatures, brought to him by adventurers and explorers from all parts of the globe. A visitor, riding up the lane toward Sir Radford's large and handsome house, might hear the roar of an African lion or the shrieking laugh of a wild hyena. Sir Radford's collection included an Indian tiger, three ostriches from Africa, and an assortment of gaudily colored birds from the jungles of South America, all obtained at great expense.

Though Sir Radford's wife had borne him no children, he shared his home with a young woman whom he had adopted as a daughter. There were those in the county who said that Miss Selina was his natural daughter, born in one of those exotic places where he had so often traveled, and brought home to be raised an Englishwoman. But the story, as Sir Radford told it, was that she was the only daughter of a gentleman in Russia who had been much like a brother to Sir Radford. When that gentleman had met with an unfortunate hunting accident, Sir Radford had taken the man's daughter as his own.

Whatever her ancestry, Miss Selina Radford was a handsome young woman, with black hair and sparkling hazel eyes. Sir Radford had engaged governesses to teach her, and she wrote a fine hand, played the pianoforte with considerable skill, and had a lovely singing voice. She was a hearty girl, given to long walks on the downs and vigorous rides.

Sir Radford was an exceedingly sociable gentleman. Every year, when spring mists and rain gave way to warmer weather, he invited his elderly cousin, Lady Dustan to visit his estate. And so, in the spring of 1828, Lady Dustan came to the estate with a party of young friends..

Lady Dustan herself was never happier than when she had a noisy party of young people gathered about her, so that she could watch over them and speculate on

how they might best be paired off, as matchmaking was one of her favorite occupations. The first evening at Selwyn Park, while Selina played the pianoforte and the assembled company listened politely, Lady Dustan and Sir Radford sat at the back of the room, where they might converse in lowered voices about the members of Lady Dustan's party. She had brought her two nieces, Mary and Lydia, and a young man, George Paxton. A second young man, William Gordon, had joined the party at Sir Radford's request.

"I think you will enjoy the company of Mr. George Paxton, the son of my dear friend," said Lady Dustan. "He has spent the past few years in the service of the British Museum doing something frightfully scholarly with plants and animals that are found in rocks."

"Fossils," Sir Radford ventured.

Lady Dustan fluttered her hand as if brushing away an annoying insect. "I suppose. He tried to explain it to me once, but I could make no sense of it. Something about chalk and seashells and dead creatures. He's left the museum in any case and taken up with the newly established Zoological Society. They're endeavoring to make a zoological garden in Hyde Park. He's a sweet-tempered, amiable, young man, though a bit diffident and retiring for his family's tastes. His mother wished him to go into the law or the army, but neither suited him. He prefers to putter about with rocks and animals, it seems. Still, I think he has an open and affectionate heart."

"I can understand wanting to putter about with rocks and animals," Sir Radford commented, with the slightest edge in his voice.

"Of course you understand, Sir Radford. But Lady Paxton is quite bewildered by his behavior." Lady Dustan smiled at the back of George Paxton's head. "I do believe that he and my niece, Lydia, would make a fine match. Their temperaments would complement one another admirably--she is an excitable girl and I think Mr. Paxton might help make her less prone to extravagance and passion. And she might help him approach life in a livelier manner. She's an amiable girl, though not terribly handsome. She has 10,000 pounds settled on her, and that would make his family much more willing to indulge his eagerness to study animals, rather than the law."

"I imagine that would make the young man very happy," Sir Radford observed.

"But I have no match for Lydia's younger sister, Mary. She's a lovely girl, though quiet by nature." Lady Dustan shifted her gaze to William Gordon. He was handsome enough, with a fine dark mustache and a military air. "And what can you tell me of Mr. Gordon,"

"He's a Navy man. He brought me two fine macaws when he returned from South America. And he says he may bring me a zebra when next he voyages to Africa."

"What of his character.?"

"A steady man on a hunt, I can say that. He's a capital fellow, I think."

Lady Dustan shook her head, dismayed by Sir Radford's lack of useful information on the young man. Before she could inquire further or ask discreetly about Selina's prospects, Selina's song came to an end and Lady Dustan and Sir Radford joined in the polite applause. As the party moved off to the dining room, Lady Dustan continued to watch the young men that she had discussed with Sir Radford.

"Your skill in playing is matched only by your beautiful voice," William was saying. "I've never heard better -- not even in the finest salons in London."

Lady Dustan smiled. He flattered Selina unduly -- her playing was adequate and her voice was quite pretty, but no more than that. She noticed that William took care to seat himself between Selina and Lydia.

At dinner, Sir Radford told them about his latest acquisition -- a female elephant, purchased from a circus menagerie that had fallen on hard times. William had a few things to say about the unpredictable nature of elephants, information gleaned on his last expedition to Africa. "I saw a stampede of the great beasts," he said. "They trampled a village with no more trouble than you would take in trampling an anthill."

George tried to break in with some discussion of the plans of the Zoological Society with regard to African animals. They had already obtained an African elephant and they hoped to bring one of the beasts from Asia as well. And perhaps a giraffe, one of those ungainly creatures with the tremendously long necks.

Lady Dustan listened to the young men talk. She thought it unfortunate that George's considered and soft-spoken plans could not match William's tales of hunting for ferocious lions and visiting savage African villages. Lydia's eyes were on William. Young women were not inclined to understand the virtues of a quiet and thoughtful husband.

After dinner, Sir Radford prevailed upon the others to join him in a game of whist. Mary sweetly begged to be excused so that she might play the pianoforte, Sir Radford's instrument being so decidedly superior to the one she played at home. And Selina asked if she might listen to the music rather than playing whist, being an indifferent card player at best. William spoke up quickly, offering to keep Selina company.

While Sir Radford, Lady Dustan, George, and Lydia played cards, Selina and William chatted quietly in the corner. The music made it impossible for Lady Dustan to hear their conversation, but she noticed that they seemed content with one another's company. She also observed that George Paxton was oblivious to Lydia's smiles. The girl was animated in her enthusiasm for the game, her eyes bright with excitement, but George remained stubbornly distracted by the couple in the corner. Later, when Selina and William strolled onto the terrace to take the air, Lady Dustan kept her eye on George, who seemed rather downcast. He suggested a break in the game at that point, but Sir Radford insisted on another

hand.

Mary had completed a song and the others had just finished their game when Selina and William returned. The young lady was laughing at something William had said, but her laughter lacked the ease of companionable amusement. Lady Dustan detected an edge of strain, a hint of something amiss.

"Miss Selina!" Lady Dustan called. "Where have you and Nit. Gordon been wandering?"

"Only as far as the aviary," William said. "It is a beautiful night for a stroll."

"Whatever have you been telling Miss Selina to amuse her so?" Lady Dustan asked. She regarded the young woman with interest. Selina's face was flushed; her eyes unnaturally bright.

"Foolish stories," Selina said. "That is all."

"I was describing a legend I heard among the African savages," William said. "When the moon is full, they say that some men turn into hyenas and run wild on the savannah." He smiled, showing his teeth entirely too freely, Lady Dustan thought. "The moon is almost full and the story came to mind when I heard the hyenas laughing in the distance."

"My dear child," said Lady Dustan. She took Selina's hand and pressed it in her own. "I'm sure no civilized people could ever believe in such a thing."

"On the contrary, Lady Dustan, many people have believed in stories that are equally fabulous," George Paxton said. Though he spoke to the assembled company, his eyes were on William and Selina. "Tales of men who become beasts go back to antiquity. In ancient Rome, learned men wrote of the tumskin, versipellis, a man who turned into a wolf. The French tell of the same creature, calling him loup garou."

William laughed. "Do you suppose the Zoological Society will have a loup garou in your collection, George? Would they welcome such a creature?"

George nodded, but his smile was strained. "If you would only bring us one, I would ensure that the creature found a home there."

Lady Dustan felt Selina's hand tighten on hers and patted the young woman's shoulder companionably. "Enough of these foolish tales. Play another song, Mary, and let us leave these men to talk of their unlikely adventures together."

Dutifully, Mary began to play.

The next morning, George Paxton woke just after dawn when a peacock screamed under his window. He lay in bed for a moment, trying to recapture his dream. Selina had been in distress and he had been running to save her, confident that

he would win her gratitude.

George was, as Lady Dustan had observed to Sir Radford, an amiable, open-hearted young man, though too quiet and diffident to do justice to himself. He was enthusiastic when he was engaged in pursuits that interested him, such as the study of natural philosophy. In those pursuits, his understanding was excellent and his scholarly endeavors had been greatly praised by his colleagues at the museum. But he was fitted neither by abilities nor by disposition to answer to the wishes of his family, who longed to see him in a distinguished profession.

In company, his tendency was to retire to a quiet corner and observe, rather than speak out and draw the attention of the crowd to his own accomplishments. He was aware of this tendency and regretted his natural shyness, but he could not bring himself to hold forth as William Gordon did.

Sunlight shone through his bedroom window, slipping through a small opening between the drapes. As the day was clear and bright, he dressed and went out for a walk in the garden before the rest of the company woke.

A peacock-- perhaps the same one that had disturbed his slumber--strutted down the path ahead of him, colorful tail trailing in the dust. The path wound past a cage of parrots that greeted him with rude squawks and flapping wings. "Blast you to pieces!" one bird shrieked. "Blast you to pieces!" A scarlet macaw watched him with bright and beady eyes and croaked softly, "You're a bounder, you are."

No doubt Sir Radford had purchased the birds from sailors who had taught them these questionable refrains. Still, it was difficult to ignore the second bird's quiet insistence and steady gaze. "You're a bounder," the bird muttered again. George turned away, fighting the urge to protest that he was not a bounder, but he knew of a bounder in the vicinity.

The night before, he had shared a nightcap with William Gordon after the other members of the party had gone to bed. Jovial and relaxed, William had told George of his walk with Selina in the garden. William seemed smugly confident that Selina was partial to him, saying that he had stolen a kiss from the young lady when they were strolling out by the aviary.

George had contained his feelings, listening to William's cheerful confession without comment but with a sick feeling at heart. He knew the man's reputation through his connections at the Zoological Society: an officer in the Navy, Gordon often returned from his travels with exotic animals for sale. He spent the money from these sales in a life of idleness and dissipation, riding and hunting and drinking and gambling. George knew that some thought Gordon handsome, but he thought the man had rather a brutish countenance.

"Yes, Miss Selina is a beautiful girl," William said. "And I am certain that Sir Radford will settle a tidy fortune on her at the time of her marriage." He smiled, showing his teeth, and George thought of the versipellis. In the company, he had not mentioned that the French attributed the nature of the loup

garou to excess passion. Men who lacked control of their baser instincts were most susceptible to this transformation.

George shook his head, attempting to banish thoughts of the night before. The morning was beautiful; the air was fresh and clear-- until he turned a corner and caught the scent of rotting meat. He found himself looking down a long straight path that ended at a tall wrought iron fence enclosing a section of pasture land. On the far side of the fence, a hyena was prowling.

The size of a large mastiff, the hyena was a strange, ungainly animal, with forelegs longer than its hindlegs and a back that sloped downward as a consequence. As George watched, the beast yawned, exposing an impressive assortment of yellowing teeth. Its eyes were bright and alert, but something -- perhaps the way that the animal hunched its shoulders and looked up rather than looking honestly forward -- gave it a servile and deceptive air.

As it paced, the hyena was giving its entire attention to Selina, who sat outside the fence on a bench in the sunshine. She had a sketchpad in her lap and her eyes were on her work.

George hesitated, restrained by his natural shyness, then thought to approach quietly, so as not to disturb her. She did not look up as he approached, but when he was still several feet away she spoke. "Good morning, Mr. Paxton. You are abroad very early. Pray move softly, so you do not alarm my subject."

Stopping where he was, George noticed another hyena lounging in a bit of shade near the fence. Ignoring Selina and its companion in the enclosure, the animal was staring in his direction, its ears cocked forward.

"My apologies for disturbing you, Miss Selina," he said. "I did not think anyone else was awake yet."

"I often come walking early," Selina said. "Dawn is the best time to observe the animals."

She fell silent then, attending to her work. From where he stood, George could not see the sketch on her pad, so he contented himself with studying her hands, so delicate and pale, handling the pencil with skill and grace. Wishing to see the sketch, he took a step forward, but Selina, as if anticipating his interest, was already closing her sketchbook and looking up at him.

"May I look..." he began, but she waved him off with an air of diffidence.

"I am no artist, Mr. Paxton. My renderings are for my own pleasure only."

Though he wished to press the matter, George could think of no way to do so gracefully. As happened so often, he found himself at a loss, not knowing the proper formula of polite flattery that might persuade her.

Selina gathered her skirts and stood, holding her sketchpad and pencil. "I doubt

the others are awake yet," she said easily. "Would you care to stroll through the garden? I am certain we will be back in time for breakfast."

"Yes, of course. I would be delighted."

George did not know what to say, as they walked through the garden together. Surely she must think him dull, walking in silence at her side. He knew that William would have been charming her with witticisms, but George could think of nothing clever to say.

"Tell me of your experiences with the creatures you have gathered for the Zoological Society," Selina said. "I was interested in your thoughts on how one should interact with wild animals. I saw you scowling yesterday when Mr. Gordon explained the techniques used by animal trainers."

George frowned again, remembering that conversation of the day before. While Sir Radford was showing the company around the gardens, Lydia had stepped rather close to the tiger's cage. William had guided her away, saying that she must not approach the cage so closely. "I wanted to rub her ears," Lydia had said petulantly. "She looks so like a giant tabby."

"She may look like a giant house cat, but that is not the case," William had advised her. "She is a wild creature and will not tolerate such familiarity."

"I saw a circus trainer rubbing a tiger's head," Lydia had said.

"A trainer establishes his dominance over the animal and imposes his superior will. If you wish to interact with a wild beast, that is what you must do," William had explained in a tone that brooked no disagreement. "You must dominate and triumph over the animal's spirit. You must demonstrate who is master. Though you approach the beast with friendship, do not expect friendship in return. You can expect no such rational response."

"You look so disapproving," Selina said, recalling him from the memory. "Didn't you agree with Mr. Gordon's analysis? He has so much experience with wild creatures in Africa."

"Mr. Gordon and I have different feelings on the matter of wild animals. He wishes them to be under his control. I am interested in studying their lives, as they live under their own control."

"You only wish to watch them?"

"To meet with them on their own terms, not on mine. Sometimes, that means simply watching them. Sometimes, they allow a closer contact."

George thought of the bull elephant that the Zoological Society had acquired from a circus. When the beast first came to the Society, it was a foul-tempered creature. But after some months of observing the elephant's behavior, he came to understand the beast better. The elephant disliked harsh, loud voices and was

moved to anger by certain aromas -- the scent of a particular type of hair oil, the smoke of cigars. When the animal's former keeper from the circus had come to speak with members of the Zoological Society about the animal's temperament, he noticed that the man smoked cigars, used hair oil, and spoke in harsh, urgent, tones. When asked the best way to control the animal, the keeper had suggested that they make use of the whip -- the animal best understood pain and punishment. George took note and decided that the beast's prejudices were not irrational, but rather based on experience. Treated cruelly by a keeper, the creature naturally became wary of sounds and scents associated with that man.

Hesitantly, George told Selina of his findings. She nodded thoughtfully. "And you disagreed with his suggested treatment of the elephant?"

"To understand a wild creature, you must take the time to watch and wait," he said. "There is no use in rushing a wild thing. But Mr. Gordon does not wish to understand wild creatures. Rather, he wishes to bring them under his control."

"And you do not wish to control this elephant," she said. "By what you say, I think you want to be the beast's friend."

George thought for a moment, knowing that William would be most amused at the thought of being a wild creature's friend. Then he nodded. "I think that is a fair assessment, Miss Selina. I want to understand the beast and its way of thinking, and that is the basis for friendship."

"Why did you frown before you spoke?"

"If Mr. Gordon heard me speak of friendship with an animal, he would be most amused at my expense. Mr. Gordon mistakes kindness as a display of weakness,"

She smiled archly. "You understand Mr. Gordon's responses just as you understand the elephant's." George began to protest, but she waved a hand, dismissing his words. They were nearing the house, and George thought it best to let the matter drop.

BACK AT THE HOUSE, Lady Dustan was planning the day's amusements. She greeted Selina and George with a detailed account of what would take place. Under Sir Radford's guidance, the party would tour the gardens. In the afternoon, they would have an alfresco tea beneath the shade trees near the elephant enclosure, with pigeon pies and cold lamb and wholesome bread and strawberries from Selwyn Park's own strawberry beds. Following tea, they would return to the house for a game of cards.

Lady Dustan was decisive in such matters, and her plan was carried out with the precision of a military maneuver -- until midway through tea.

The party was relaxing in the shade, conversing about the fine weather. The shade was most refreshing, and Lady Dustan was finding this time the most pleasant part of the day. She observed that William Gordon had found a seat in the midst of the ladies, where he was making every effort to amuse and be

agreeable. He appeared to be paying every distinguishing attention to Selina. That young lady met his gallantries with polite smiles, but, Lady Dustan thought, showed him no particular favor.

Lady Dustan was disappointed to see that George Paxton stood apart from the other young people, making no effort to attract the ladies' attention away from Mr.' Gordon.. How could he remain so shy and standoffish when Lydia was so lively and amiable? She did not understand the man.

As she watched him, her gaze was drawn to the object of his attention: the bull elephant. The great beast was following the female closely as she trotted around the enclosure, keeping his enormous head close by her rump. When the female paused in a corner of the enclosure, he proceeded to sniff her in a most disconcerting manner, running his trunk between the smaller elephant's hind legs repeatedly, then pausing to trumpet loudly. At the same moment that Mary looked up, Lady Dustan noticed that the bull elephant seemed to have sprouted an additional leg.

"The strawberries are lovely," Mary was saying. Then she stopped, her mouth slightly ajar, as she stared at the bull elephant.

Lady Dustan could not avert her eyes from the elephant's prodigious member, an enormous shaft of flesh that twisted and curled like a snake. "I'm feeling a bit faint from the heat," Lady Dustan said. Her throat felt tight and her voice had a choked quality, but she managed to force out the words. "I believe the sun has been too much for me."

Sir Radford, who had been directing his attention to a thick slice of pigeon pie, glanced up with a frown. "The heat{ In this cool shade?" Then following her gaze, he exclaimed in surprise.

For a time, all was in confusion, the strawberries forgotten. Lady Dustan called to the young women to accompany her to the house, as Sir Radford exclaimed about what a rare opportunity this was to observe the mating habits of the elephant, a sight never witnessed in the wild. William Gordon was unperturbed, gazing placidly at the elephant in pursuit of his lady love, but Lady Dustan observed a hot blush color George Paxton's face. As men crowded toward the fence of the elephant enclosure, the lady elephant retreated, hurrying away from the bull.

Like the lady elephant, Lady Dustan believed that retreat was the best option. "Come along all of you," she said. "Lydia, Mary, Selina -- let us return to the house."

Giggling like a schoolgirl, Lydia gathered her things. Mary continued to gaze at the elephants, more fascinated than perturbed, until Lady Dustan shooed her and her sister in the direction of the house. Lady Dustan walked with Selina, casting a glance over her shoulder at the men and the bull elephant. As they started away, the bull elephant reared up, placing his forelegs on the lady elephant's back. She shuddered beneath his weight, but stood her ground.

"Oh, Lord!" Lady Dustan breathed, an involuntary exclamation. She could feel the heat of blood rising in her cheeks as she turned away, taking Selina's arm and leading her toward the house. The blaring trumpeting of the bull elephant echoed through the garden, a noisy reminder of what went on behind them.

On the path to the house, Lady Dustan patted her face with a kerchief, feeling warm and agitated. "I would never have thought an elephant could look small," she murmured softly to Selina, her voice trembling with agitation. "But she looked small beside him."

"That is so," said Selina, "but she had her own way. He could not mount her until she stood still for it, and she did that only when she was ready. I have observed that whatever the species, the female has a choice. Sometimes, she accepts a suitor. Sometimes, she does not." Selina's voice was dreamy, as if she were talking more to herself than to Lady Dustan.

Lady Dustan stared at the young woman, startled by the matter-of-fact way in which she talked of the bull elephant mounting the female.

Selina smiled sweetly. "Pray, Lady Dustan, you will forgive me. I have been learning at Sir Radford's side for too long. I am a student of animal nature."

Lady Dustan was glad to see the manor house in the distance. "It will be lovely to get away from the dust and the heat," she observed, not caring to talk further of elephants and their choices.

At dinner that evening, George sat just across from Lydia and Mary. Throughout the meal, he was aware that Lady Dustan was trying to draw him into conversation. He answered her queries politely, but his attention was focused on the other end of the table, where William Gordon was chatting with Sir Radford about future additions to the menagerie and how he might assist Sir Radford in obtaining some rare specimens. Though William directed his comments to Sir Radford, it was clear to George that he intended them for Selina's ears. Every promise he made to Sir Radford spoke well of his own courage, his resourcefulness, his adventurous ways -- all designed to win the heart of a young lady.

After dinner, Lady Dustan insisted that Mary entertain them with a song at the pianoforte while George and Lydia played whist with her and Sir Radford, allowing George no way to gracefully excuse himself. The game lasted until just before sunset, when George made his escape. With uncharacteristic forcefulness, he insisted that Mary take his place at the table, a request to which she obligingly acquiesced.

While the game continued, George left the house to stroll in the garden. The only purpose he admitted to himself was the need for fresh air, after the closeness of the parlor. He had had several glasses of wine with dinner and was feeling a trifle light-headed. He was not searching for Selina, though she had left the manor house just after dinner, saying that she wanted to do some sketching. He was certainly not searching for William, whose absence from the

parlor he had noted not long before he set out.

The sun was setting and the full moon was rising, casting silver light over the menagerie. In the moonlight, the peacocks that strutted across the lawn were no brighter than English sparrows, their brilliant colors fading to shades of gray in the dim light. The macaws stirred as he strolled past, and one bird called after him -- "You're a bounder, you are!"

By the hyena enclosure, he found Selina's sketch pad abandoned on the wooden bench. The three hyenas were awake and alert. The largest of the three, the one that Selina had been drawing that morning, was pacing the length of the iron fence that confined them, whining in her throat and staring past him, down the path that led to the downs. The other two answered her whines with strange yaps and growls.

George Paxton took up the sketchpad, gazing about him. "Miss Selina?" he called. "Where are you?." The garden was quiet. In the moonlight, he opened the sketchpad and studied the pencil drawings within. A sketch of the tiger, her eyes glaring through the bars of the cage. A sketch of the hyena lounging in the sun, perhaps the one that Selina had been drawing when he encountered her that morning. Another sketch of the hyena enclosure -- the same iron grillwork, the same drooping tree, the same boulder. But the hyena was gone. In place of the beast, in the center of the enclosure, an elderly woman with an air of dissipation and sloth, reclined on a high-backed sofa.

Something about the lady-- perhaps her toothy smile or the intensity of her gaze -- reminded George Paxton of the beast. The woman wore a shabby fur collar that had markings similar to those on the hyena's coat. In the carefully penciled shadows behind her, Mr. Paxton could make out another face-- a coarse, ill-tempered young man, the old woman's son, he would guess. He did not like the look of the man, lurking in the shadows and waiting for an opportunity to do ill. A drunkard and a coward, he thought, ready to pick a man's pocket or slit his throat.

George frowned, wondering at Selina's fancy. Why had she drawn two people in the hyena enclosure and why such unattractive subjects?

Uneasy, George closed the sketchbook and looked around him for other signs of Selina. The hyenas were staring toward the downs. Following their gaze, he saw something white, fluttering on the fence. He stepped closer and found a woman's dress -- Selina's dress -- hanging from the wrought iron. Beside the dress, a delicate chemise, carefully worked with delicate white embroidery, blew in the evening breeze. On the ground, a pair of stockings, neatly tucked into the toes of a pair of lady's shoes. To convince himself he was not imagining things, George touched the chemise, feeling its silky fabric against his hand.

What could be happening? Selina was naked, somewhere in the garden. The thought of it warmed his blood -- and chilled him in that same moment. He imagined her graceful limbs, bare and pale in the moonlight.

And William Gordon was somewhere nearby. Could William dare take advantage of a young woman of Selina's station? Could Selina be so lost to her family, to all propriety, that she would throw herself into the power of a scoundrel? Surely she could see that William Gordon was not a man to be trusted.

George stood frozen by the fence, not knowing what to do, when he heard a low wail in the distance. The wail rose to an eerie shriek -- the howling of a hound. Then the hyenas began a hideous cacophony, of barks and yelps and yapping wails that sounded for all the world like lunatic laughter. Over the hyenas' noise, he heard a man's voice calling desperately for help.

The path toward the downs was shaded from the moonlight by trees, a dark and lonely way that led to open pasture land. A group of Gypsies had encamped not far off t George remembered Sir Radford had mentioned them. Perhaps the hound was theirs.

Again, the distant howling, barely audible above the eerie wailing of the hyenas. No Gypsy cur could make a sound like that. The howling was that of a wild beast on the hunt.

George ran down the dark path, heedless of his own welfare, seeking only to find the danger -- whether it took the form of man or beast -- and protect Selina from it. In the darkness, he could not see his way. A patch of mud, slippery from the late afternoon showers, caught him unaware. His feet went out from under him. He slipped, he tumbled, he fell headlong into the ditch beside the lane. His head came down on a rock, a stout piece of English stone. And then he lay very still, unconscious and rescuing no one.

The morning found him in the ditch still, eyes blinking as he slowly came to consciousness. His clothes were muddy and torn and wet with dew. His mind was not quite his own, still muddled from the blow to his head. When he lifted a hand to his forehead, it came away sticky with blood.

He lifted his head and gazed about him. A shady country lane. The song of birds in the hedge. An ordinary scene, with nothing to frighten a man. His alarm of the night before -- surely it had been a dream. Selina's clothes on the fence. The sounds of a savage beast. Surely he had imagined these things.

With an effort, he climbed from the ditch and stood for a moment in the lane, staring at the treacherous patch of mud that had caused his precipitous plunge into the ditch. Beside the marks left by his own skidding feet were three other sets of prints. Two sets of prints headed out toward the open pasture -- the marks left by a man's boots and the paw prints of a large dog. By the length of the stride, George guessed that the man was running -- running for his life. In more than one place, the paw prints overlay the boot prints, an indication that the beast followed the man -- close at his heels, perhaps.

Heading back in the opposite direction, toward the manor house, was a set of human footprints, left by someone walking without shoes. A delicate foot -- that of a child or a woman, George thought. He shook his head, attempting to clear

away the fog that prevented him from thinking.

"Mr. Paxton! Whatever happened to you?" George turned toward the house and saw Selina hurrying down the lane, her arms stretched toward him.

"I do not know "he began. "I cannot say "As she reached him, her arms held out to support him, his legs trembled beneath him. "You are well," he murmured. "That is all I ask. I thought...I heard a beast howling in the darkness. I feared you were out on the downs with Mr. Gordon. I was afraid for you." He glanced at Selina, then felt himself color as he realized that he was suggesting an impropriety on her part. But she continued to regard him steadily. "I wanted to help. But instead I fell in the ditch." Again, he felt himself color, feeling that she could not help but think him clumsy and undignified in his rescue attempt.

"That was very gallant of you," Selina said softly. "Though your efforts were unnecessary, I thank you for them. Now you must allow me to help you back to the house."

And so the lady he had thought to rescue was the very one who helped him back to the manor house, draping his arm over her shoulders in a most familiar manner and insisting that he lean on her in his weakness. George was too muddled to appreciate the warmth of her body alongside his at that moment, though later he recalled it with great pleasure.

As they approached the manor house, Selina's calls for assistance were heard by Lydia and Mary, who fetched a manservant to help George inside. As the man helped George, the young women kept pace. They were flushed with excitement, and Lydia was talking so quickly that her words tripped over each other.

"Whatever has happened to Mr. Paxton! Oh, what a morning this is We never have any excitement like this at home."

Between Lydia's exclamations, Mary told George what had happened. "They found poor Mr. Gordon out on the downs, collapsed in exhaustion, his clothes torn and muddy. He had been running all through the night, chased by a wild beast. The men brought him home not minutes ago."

"A beast was chasing Gordon?" George asked dully.

"It must have been a terrible beast, don't you think?" Lydia exclaimed. "He is such a brave man and a great hunter. He's accustomed to lions and tigers and such -- I thought that nothing could frighten him."

"He said it was a terrible, fierce wolf," Lydia said. "With glowing eyes and fangs. Though I've never heard of such a creature in Devonshire."

George's bloody arrival added to the confusion at the manor house. William had been carried upstairs only moments before. The physician who had been called to attend to William's wounds ministered to George as well, cleaning his head wound

and advising rest for both men.

George slept the morning through. In the middle of the afternoon, he joined the rest of the company for tea. Lady Dustan insisted he sit in a chair by the fire, though the afternoon was warm. By the time he had finished his first cup of tea, he felt he had told his story of the past evening far too many times, and had heard William recount his at least twice that number.

His own story did not change with retelling. He had heard a beast howling and a man shouting. (He did not, out of respect for William, say that the man was screaming in terror.) He ran to help; he tripped and fell. He did not mention discovering Selina's clothing -- only her sketchpad.

William's story, George observed, improved each time he told it, which Lydia pressed him to do, again and again. The first time William told it, he was as subdued as ever George had seen him, his face pale with the memory of the beast snapping and snarling at his heels as he ran. He had been out for a walk in the light of the full moon when the beast dashed from the bushes, attacking without warning. He had nothing with which to defend himself and no matter how he had tried to circle and return to the house, the creature had cut him off, almost as if it knew of his desire. He had called out for help, but no one had come.

The second time he told the tale, he recalled more details. He had kicked at the creature, while it snapped at his boots, its eyes glowing in the moonlight, the foam of madness on its lips. "With a stout walking stick, I would have triumphed." He smiled grimly, inviting his listeners to consider how the beast would have suffered if he had been armed. "But without any weapon, there was little I could do."

By the fifth accounting, William was no longer pale and his story had been embellished with many details. He had taken a tumble down one grassy knoll, but had succeeded (having learned something of acrobatics from a sailor aboard his ship) in rolling back to his feet and running on. He had snatched up a handful of dust and cast it into the creature's eyes, slowing its advance. He had been brave and resourceful -- though of course he did not say that directly. He left that to Lydia, who exclaimed frequently at his heroism.

George sat quietly by the fire, listening and watching. He noticed Selina, on the other side of the room, was doing the same.

THE PHYSICIAN had advised George to rest, sit in the sun, and take moderate exercise. The next day, George used that as an excuse to stroll in the menagerie, avoiding company. He was passing by the elephant enclosure when he met William, walking along the path in the opposite direction. George invited William to sit for a time in the shade, hoping to find out more about Selina and how her clothes had come to be hung on the hyena enclosure.

With a little encouragement, William provided a complete account of his evening before the beast had appeared. He had gone out for a walk after dinner, in search of Selina. He had come upon her by the hyena enclosure. "She said that

she preferred to sit in solitude," he told George, "but in my experience young women rarely admit their true feelings. I detected an eagerness and an energy in her manner that convinced me that her protests were not heartfelt. Finally, I acquiesced, saying that I would return to the house alone, and I left her, proceeding down the path toward the house. But I did not go far. As I walked, the full moon rose above the trees and I thought of how the sight of it might awaken romantic thoughts in a young woman's heart. At that thought, I decided to speak with her again. I was almost to the spot I had left her when the beast emerged from the bushes and set upon me, chasing me down the path, away from the house, snarling and snapping at my heels."

"I must have been moments behind you," George said. "When I came to the hyena enclosure, Miss Selina was gone, though I found her sketchpad." He did not mention that he had also found her clothing, a puzzling and indelicate detail that he saw no reason to share with William.

"Miss Selina told me that she returned to the house by another path," William said. "She must have left the hyena enclosure shortly before you arrived."

George nodded, thinking of Selina and the clothing she had abandoned and wondering where she had been.

"It was a terrible night," William said. "The worst of my life."

The next day, the afternoon was bright and clear. George was taking the sun by the tiger cage when Sir Radford came upon him and inquired after his health. When George indicated that he was feeling much recovered, Sir Radford sat on the bench beside him. From her cage, the great tiger lay in a patch of sun, watching the men through narrowed eyes.

"And how are you doing, old beast?" Sir Radford said to the big cat in a conversational tone. The tiger stood and stretched, then strolled over to rub her chin against the bars. Sir Radford reached out and scratched behind the animal's ear, eliciting a giant rumbling purr. "I brought her back from India myself," he told George. "Got her as a cub."

George watched the big cat's eyes close in contented response to Sir Radford's attentions. "You are doing precisely what Miss Lydia wished to do," George commented.

Sir Radford nodded. "That is so. But I felt it would not have been good to encourage Miss Lydia."

"Of course. Being strong-willed, she would have insisted on trying to do the same. And though the tiger enjoys your attentions, she might not tolerate Miss Lydia's. It does not pay to force your attentions on a wild beast who does not want them."

From the corner of his eye, George saw Sir Radford cast a considering glance in his direction. For a moment, Sir Radford was silent, then he spoke in a low

tone. "I think you understand a good deal more than you let on, Mr. Paxton. That's an admirable trait in such a young man."

George hesitated, wondering what had encouraged such flattery from Sir Radford. He was pleased to be complimented on his understanding, but baffled as to what Sir Radford thought it was that he understood.

Sir Radford leaned back on the bench and returned to studying the tiger. "Selina told me of your concern for her well-being. Under the circumstances as you saw them at the time, it was bold of you to try to run to her rescue."

George felt his cheeks grow hot, as he remembered his failure. He did not know what to say and he was puzzled by Sir Radford's phrasing: "under the circumstances as he saw them at the time." How was he to understand them differently now? There was a wild beast on the prowl, William Gordon was in fear of his life, and Selina had left her clothes by the hyena enclosure. How was one to understand such circumstances?

"Of course, being a man of discernment, you have realized now that my daughter did not need rescuing. I'm glad of that." Sir Radford clapped him on the shoulder. "Let me just say that Selina and I are very well pleased that Lady Dustan included you in her party."

"Thank you, Sir Radford," George said, resolving to ask for an explanation, even though that request would betray his lack of discernment. "I..."

"No, no. Do not say too much," Sir Radford interrupted, smiling broadly. "Some things are better left unspoken." Before George could say another word, the old gentleman stood and strode away down the path with great vigor.

George shook his head, wondering what it was that Sir Radford had supposed he was about to say and wishing that he possessed the perceptive nature with which that good man credited him. For a time, he sat alone in the sun, where he could think without interruption of all that he had seen and heard. Somehow, Selina had not needed rescuing, though she was naked on the downs. And the reason was one that Sir Radford would rather not speak aloud.

Over the last few days, Selina had, more than once, made a point of seeking him out. At dinner, she had made quiet conversation with him, while William held forth to Mary and Lydia about his travels on the Dark Continent -- beginning over the soup with a description of an elephant hunt and ending during dessert with a tale of his narrow escape from angry savages. Selina had ignored William's tales, obviously preferring to talk with George. He had been struck once again with admiration for both her beauty and her disposition, for she spoke her mind with serenity and confidence on many topics-- from the animals in the menagerie to books she had recently read. Talking with her, he could not imagine her being taken in by William's bluster. But what else could explain her clothes on the fence?

He was puzzling over the matter, making no progress, when he saw Selina coming

down the path toward him. "Would you take a turn through the garden?" she asked him sweetly.

He offered the lady his arm.

She commented on the weather and he agreed that it was the perfect temperature, the perfect day. They were silent for a time and he cast about for another topic of conversation. "Have you been sketching lately?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Not so much. With all the alarms and confusions, there has not been time."

"I confess, the other night" He hesitated, for he could not remember the other night without blushing for his failure and thinking of her nakedness. "...I took the liberty of glancing in your sketchbook. I should not have done so, but I could not resist the temptation. I was struck by your skill, by the delicacy of line. I was particularly struck by the woman who bore such a strange and uncanny resemblance to the hyena."

She was smiling. "I was inspired by Mr. Gordon's tales of Africa. And it struck me -- if a woman can become a wolf when the moon is full, perhaps the transformation can proceed in the opposite direction. But of course, these are ordinary hyenas."

He glanced at her and found her smiling, a sly and playful look in her hazel eyes. He considered her words, remembered Sir Radford's words, and realized how she might have been naked on the downs but never in danger.

"Of course," he said slowly, then took a deep breath. "Ordinary hyenas." He found his eyes drawn to her hand-- fair and delicate, the hand of a lady, meant for playing the pianoforte and sketching in the garden. He imagined that hand transforming to become the paw of the beast who had left her tracks in the mud. Such a marvel, such a mystery, such a fascinating secret. He lifted his eyes to meet hers. She was smiling.

"The hunt in which your father was killed," he said at last. "I would suppose that was a wolf hunt."

She nodded. "A tragic misunderstanding. Sir Radford went hunting on the night of the full moon, having failed to understand my father's warnings. He shot a wolf B and found himself with the body of his friend."

They walked in silence for a few minutes. George was very aware of the warmth of her hand on his arm. As they strolled along the path toward the hyena enclosure, George heard William's voice, though he could not make out the words. "Let us turn here," Selina suggested. "Mr. Gordon is telling Lydia about the animals and I would rather not disturb them."

George followed her lead, quite willing to avoid conversation with William and Lydia. "Mr. Gordon seems to have taken no permanent harm from his night of

terror on the downs," he remarked. "In fact, I think the experience might well improve his character."

"You are an optimistic man," she said.

George hesitated, uncertain of the propriety of what he was about to say, then plunged ahead. "Mr. Gordon seems to feel he knows a great deal about what women want. I suspect that..." Again, he hesitated. "I suspect that Mr. Gordon did not behave toward you as a gentleman should behave toward a lady."

She continued to smile. "He thought that I favored him -- but he was not a terribly observant man. A better observer would have noticed the one I truly favored."

George found himself unable to speak. Could she mean that she favored him? There was nothing else she could mean."

"You have nothing to say, Mr. Paxton."

"I have too much to say," he began. "My heart overflows with more admiration and affection than I can begin to express." But for all that he said he could not, George continued, telling her of his feelings and avowing his love and admiration in tender words.

For days after, the neighborhood could talk of nothing other than the alarms and confusions of that night. A great hunter, pursued by a vicious beast. A young man, injured in his attempts to offer assistance. Both were made out to be heroes, after a fashion.

The identity of the beast that had pursued William through the moonlit night remained a mystery to the community. The first conjecture -- that the animal was an escapee from Sir Radford's menagerie -- proved false, for all of that noble gentleman's charges were accounted for. The Gypsy band was located and the dogs owned by the band were examined. They were, by all reports, a mangy lot, but none of them seemed large or energetic enough to menace a strong man like William Gordon. Sir Radford led many hunts, as did William Gordon when he had recovered. But no animal answering to William's description of the beast could be found.

Before Lady Dustan left Selwyn Park to return to London, she arranged for a small party at the manor house, wishing to mark the occasion of her departure. For that event, the manor house was splendidly lit up and quite full of company.

Lady Dustan and Mary were listening to Gordon talk about his upcoming expedition to Africa, when Lydia interrupted to invite Gordon to join a game of whist. Initially Gordon was reluctant, but Lydia insisted. "You know you are my favorite partner, my darling. I can't play without you."

"It seems my services are required at the whist table," he told Lady Dustan and Mary, and allowed himself to be led away.

Lady Dustan smiled after the couple approvingly. "It is wonderful to see Lydia so much in love. And I believe I shall come to be quite fond of Gordon. Lydia seems quite willing to take him in hand and calm his warm, unguarded temper. That is, of course, a wife's role. And that role will, I think, soothe Lydia's own excitable nature. It's a fine match. I'm quite confident that Mr. Gordon will be calling on your father when we return to London."

"Miss Selina and Mr. Paxton seem to have an amiable attachment to one another as well," Mary said. "I do believe they have become close friends."

"Friends?" Lady Dustan smiled at Mary as a mother smiles at a foolish child. "If you think that will lead to romance, I will tell you that you are mistaken. A man and wife have no business being friends. That's like a friendship between...between a man and a tiger."

"Ah," Mary said. "Like a man and a tiger." Just that morning, she had, while wandering in the garden, caught a glimpse of Sir Radford scratching the ears of the tiger. He had made her swear she would not tell the others, lest they be tempted to attempt to try the same -- to their peril.

"Certainly," Lady Dustan said. "There could be no question of friendship there."

Mary nodded, keeping her own council and acquiescing to Lady Dustan's firmly held belief.

After her return to London, Lady Dustan was astounded to receive a letter from Sir Radford indicating that George had asked for Selina's hand in marriage. She returned to Selwyn Park for the wedding.

At Selina's request, with Sir Radford's enthusiastic assent, and despite Lady Dustan's earnest protestations, the wedding itself did not take place in the manor house chapel, as would have been customary and proper. Instead, the couple was joined in matrimony alfresco, on the lawn beneath the shade trees near the elephant enclosure. Throughout the ceremony, Lady Dustan kept a nervous eye on the elephants. Fortunately the bull elephant spent his time placidly watching the goings on and flapping his ears idly. He behaved himself and gave Lady Dustan no cause for alarm or retreat, for which she was very grateful.

George continued his work with the Zoological Society, dividing his time between London and Selwyn Park. Selina accompanied him to the city. Her grace and charm (and the fortune that she would have from Sir Radford) made her welcome in the Paxton home.

Lydia and Gordon were married as well, in a splendid [though conventional] wedding in London.

Mary, benefiting from the observation of these two very different marriages, formed her own opinion of the connections possible between men and women, between humans and beasts. Though her understanding of the matter differed

substantially from Lady Dustan's, she never endeavored to share her views on the vagaries of the human heart with that formidable individual.

Though Selina and George enjoyed London, they retained their affection for Selwyn Park. Every month, she and George returned to the country for the night of the full moon.