

Hellfire by Diana Gabaldon

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Part I.

London, 1756

The Society for Appreciation of the English Beefsteak, a gentleman's club

Lord John Grey jerked his eyes away from the door. No. No, he mustn't turn and stare. Needing some other focus for his gaze, he fixed his eyes instead on Quarry's scar.

"A glass with you, sir?" Scarcely waiting for the club's steward to provide for his companion, Harry Quarry drained his cup of claret, then held it out for more. "And another, perhaps, in honor of your return from frozen exile?" Quarry grinned broadly, the scar pulling down the corner of his eye in a lewd wink as he did so, and lifted up his glass again.

Lord John tilted his own cup in acceptance of the salute, but barely tasted the contents. With an effort, he kept his eyes on Quarry's face, willing himself not to turn and stare, not to gawk after the flash of fire that had caught his eye in the corridor.

Quarry's scar had faded; tightened and shrunk to a thin white slash, its nature made plain only by its position, angled hard across the ruddy cheek. It might otherwise have lost itself among the lines of hard living, but instead remained visible, the badge of honor that its owner so plainly considered it.

"You are exceeding kind to note my return, sir," Grey said. His heart hammered in his ears, muffling Quarry's words—no great loss to conversation.

It is not, his sensible mind pointed out, *it cannot be*. Yet sense had nothing to do with the riot of his sensibilities, that surge of feeling that seized him by nape and buttocks, as though it would pluck him up and turn him forcibly to go in pursuit of the red-haired man he had so briefly glimpsed.

Quarry's elbow nudged him rudely, a not-unwelcome recall to present circumstances.

"...among the ladies, eh?"

"Eh?"

"I say your return has been noted elsewhere, too. My sister-in-law bid me send her regard, and discover your present lodgings. Do you stay with the regiment?"

"No, I am at present at my mother's house, in Jermyn Street." Finding his cup still full, Grey raised it and drank deep. The Beefsteak's claret was of excellent vintage, but he scarcely noticed its bouquet. There

were voices in the hall outside, raised in altercation.

"Ah. I'll inform her, then; expect an invitation by the morning post. Lucinda has her eye upon you for a cousin of hers, I daresay -- she has a flock of poor but well-favored female relations, whom she means to shepherd to good marriages." Quarry's teeth showed briefly. "Be warned."

Grey nodded politely. He was accustomed to such overtures. The youngest of four brothers, he had no hopes of a title, but the family name was ancient and honorable, his person and countenance not without appeal -- and he had no need of an heiress, his own means being ample.

The door flung open, sending such a draft across the room as made the fire in the hearth roar up like the flames of Hades, scattering sparks across the Turkey carpet. Grey gave thanks for the burst of heat; it gave excuse for the color that he felt suffuse his cheeks.

Nothing like. Of course he is nothing like. Who could be? And yet the emotion that filled his breast was as much disappointment as relief.

The man was tall, yes, but not strikingly so. Slight of build, almost delicate. And young, younger than Grey's thirty-odd by nearly ten, he judged. But the hair -- yes, the hair was very like.

"Lord John Grey." Quarry had intercepted the young man, a hand on his sleeve, turning him for introduction. "Allow me to acquaint you with my cousin by marriage, Mr. Robert Gerald."

Mr. Gerald nodded shortly, then seemed to take hold of himself. Suppressing whatever it was that had caused the blood to rise under his fair skin, he bowed, then fixed his gaze on Grey in cordial acknowledgement.

"Your servant, sir."

"And yours." Not copper, not carrot; a deep red, almost rufous, with glints and streaks of cinnabar and gold. The eyes were not blue -- thank God! -- but rather of a soft and luminous brown.

Grey's mouth had gone dry. To his relief, Quarry offered refreshment, and upon Gerald's agreement, snapped his fingers for the steward and steered the three of them to an armchaired corner where the haze of tobacco smoke hung like a sheltering curtain over the less-convivial members of the Beefsteak.

"Who was that I heard in the corridor?" Quarry demanded, as soon as they were settled. "Bubb-Dodington, surely? The man's a voice like a coster-monger."

"I -- he -- yes, it was." Mr. Gerald's pale skin, not quite recovered from its earlier excitement, bloomed afresh, to Quarry's evident amusement.

"Oho! And what perfidious proposal has he made you, young Bob?"

"Nothing. He -- an invitation I did not wish to accept, that is all. Must you shout so loudly, Harry?" It was chilly at this end of the room, but Grey thought he could warm his hands at the fire of Gerald's smooth cheeks.

Quarry snorted with amusement, looking around at the nearby chairs.

"Who's to hear? Old Cotterill's deaf as a post, and the General's half dead. And why do you care in any

case, if the matter's so innocent as you suggest?" Quarry's eyes swiveled to bear on his cousin by marriage, suddenly intelligent and penetrating.

"I did not say it was innocent," Gerald replied dryly, regaining his composure. "I said I declined to accept it. And that, Harry, is all you will hear of it, so desist this piercing glare you turn upon me. It may work on your subalterns, but not on me."

Grey laughed, and after a moment, Quarry joined in. He clapped Gerald on the shoulder, eyes twinkling.

"My cousin is the soul of discretion, Lord John. But that's as it should be, eh?"

"I have the honour to serve as junior secretary to the Prime Minister," Gerald explained, seeing incomprehension on Grey's features. "While the secrets of government are dull indeed -- at least by Harry's standards --" he shot his cousin a malicious grin, "-- they are not mine to share."

"Oh, well, of no interest to Lord John in any case," Quarry said philosophically, tossing back his third glass of aged claret with a disrespectful haste more suited to porter. Grey saw the senior steward close his eyes in quiet horror at the act of desecration, and smiled to himself -- or so he thought, until he caught Mr. Gerald's soft brown eyes upon him, a matching smile of complicity upon his lips.

"Such things are of little interest to anyone save those most intimately concerned," Gerald said, still smiling at Grey. "The fiercest battles fought are those where very little lies at stake, you know. But what interests you, Lord John, if politics does not?"

"Not lack of interest," Grey responded, holding Robert Gerald's eyes boldly with his. *No, not lack of interest at all.* "Ignorance, rather. I have been absent from London for some time; in fact, I have quite lost... touch."

Without intent, one hand closed upon his glass, the thumb drawing slowly upward, stroking the smooth, cool surface as though it were another's flesh. Hastily, he set the glass down, seeing as he did so the flash of blue from the sapphire ring he wore. It might have been a lighthouse beacon, he reflected wryly, warning of rough seas ahead.

And yet the conversation sailed smoothly on, despite Quarry's jocular inquisitions regarding Grey's most recent posting in the wilds of Scotland, and his speculations as to his brother officer's future prospects. As the former *wasterra prohibita* and the latter *terra incognita*, Grey had little to say in response, and the talk moved on to other things; horses, dogs, regimental gossip and other such comfortable masculine fare.

Yet now and again, Grey felt the brown eyes rest on him, with an expression of speculation that both modesty and caution forbade him to interpret. It was with no sense of surprise, though, that upon departure from the club, he found himself alone in the vestibule with Gerald, Quarry having been detained by an acquaintance met in passing.

"I impose intolerably, sir," Gerald said, moving close enough to keep his low-voiced words from the ears of the servant who kept the door. "I would ask your favor, though, if it be not entirely unwelcome?"

"I am completely at your command, I do assure you," Grey said, feeling the warmth of claret in his blood succeeded by a rush of deeper heat.

"I wish -- that is, I am in some doubt regarding a circumstance of which I have become aware. Since

you are so recently come to London -- that is, you have the advantage of perspective, which I must necessarily lack by reason of familiarity. There is no one..." he fumbled for words, then turned eyes grown suddenly and deeply unhappy on Lord John. "I can confide in no one!" he said, in a sudden passionate whisper. He gripped Lord John's arm, with surprising strength. "It may be nothing, nothing at all. But I must have help."

"You shall have it, if it be in my power to give." Grey's fingers touched the hand that grasped his arm; Gerald's fingers were cold. Quarry's voice echoed down the corridor behind them, loud with joviality.

"The 'Change, near the Arcade," Gerald said rapidly. "Tonight, just after full dark." The grip on Grey's arm was gone, and Gerald vanished, the soft fall of his hair vivid against his blue cloak.

Grey's afternoon was spent in necessary errands to tailors and solicitors, then in making courtesy calls upon long-neglected acquaintance, in an effort to fill the empty hours that loomed before dark. Quarry, at loose ends, had volunteered to accompany him, and Lord John had made no demur. Bluff and jovial by temper, Quarry's conversation was limited to cards, drink, and whores. He and Grey had little in common, save the regiment. And Ardsmuir.

When he had first seen Quarry again at the club, he had thought to avoid the man, feeling that memory was best buried. And yet... could memory be truly buried, when its embodiment still lived? He might forget a dead man, but not one merely absent. And the flames of Robert Gerald's hair had kindled embers he had thought safely smothered.

It might be unwise to feed that spark, he thought, freeing his soldier's cloak from the grasp of an importunate beggar. Open flames were dangerous, and he knew that as well as any man. And yet... hours of buffeting through London's crowds and hours more of enforced sociality had filled him with such unexpected longing for the quiet of the North that he found himself filled suddenly with the desire to speak of Scotland, if nothing more.

They had passed the Royal Exchange in the course of their errands; he had glanced covertly toward the Arcade, with its gaudy paint and tattered posters, its tawdry crowds of hawkers and strollers, and felt a soft spasm of anticipation. It was autumn; the dark came early.

They were near the river, now; the noise of clamoring cockle-sellers and fish-mongers rang in the winding alleys, and a cold wind filled with the invigorating stench of tar and wood-shavings bellied out their cloaks like sails. Quarry turned and waved above the heads of the intervening throng, gesturing toward a coffee-house; Grey nodded in reply, lowered his head and elbowed his way toward the door.

"Such a press," Lord John said, pushing his way after Quarry into the relative peace of the small, spice-scented room. He took off his tricorne and sat down, tenderly adjusting the red cockade, knocked askew by contact with the populace. Two inches shorter than the common height, Grey found himself at a disadvantage in crowds.

"I had forgot what a seething anthill London is." He took a deep breath; grasp the nettle, then, and get it over. "A contrast with Ardsmuir, to be sure."

"I'd forgot what a misbegotten lonely hellhole Scotland is," Quarry replied, "until you turned up at the Beefsteak this morning to remind me of my blessings. Here's to anthills!" He lifted the steaming glass which had appeared as by magic at his elbow, and bowed ceremoniously to Grey. He drank, and

shuddered, either in memory of Scotland, or in answer to the quality of the coffee. He frowned, and reached for the sugar-bowl.

"Thank God we're both well out of it. Freezing your arse off indoors or out, and the blasted rain coming in at every crack and window." Quarry took off his wig and scratched his balding pate, quite without self-consciousness, then clapped it on again.

"No society but the damned dour-faced Scots, either; never had a whore there who didn't give me the feeling she'd as soon cut it off as serve it. I swear I'd have put a pistol to my head in another month, had you not come to relieve me, Grey. What poor bugger took over from you?"

"No one." Grey scratched at his own fair hair abstractedly, infected by Quarry's itch. He glanced outside; the street was still jammed, but the crowd's noise was mercifully muffled by the leaded glass. One sedan-chair had run into another, its bearers knocked off-balance by the crowd. "Ardsmuir is no longer a prison; the prisoners were transported."

"Transported?" Quarry pursed his lips in surprise, then sipped, more cautiously. "Well, and serve them right, the miserable whoresons. Hm!" He grunted, and shook his head over the coffee. "No more than most deserve. A shame for Fraser, though -- you recall a man named Fraser, big red-haired fellow? One of the Jacobite officers -- a gentleman. Quite liked him," Quarry said, his roughly cheerful countenance sobering slightly. "Too bad. Did you find occasion to speak with him?"

"Now and then." Grey felt a familiar clench of his innards, and turned away, lest anything show on his face. Both sedan-chairs were down now, the bearers shouting and shoving. The street was narrow to begin with, clogged with the normal traffic of tradesmen and 'prentices; customers stopping to watch the altercation added to the impassibility.

"You knew him well?" He could not help himself; whether it brought him comfort or misery, he felt he had no choice now but to speak of Fraser -- and Quarry was the only man in London to whom he could so speak.

"Oh, yes -- or as well as one might know a man in that situation," Quarry replied offhandedly. "Had him to dine in my quarters every week; very civil in his speech, good hand at cards." He lifted a fleshy nose from his glass, cheeks flushed ruddier than usual with the steam. "He wasn't one to invite pity, of course, but one could scarce help but feel some sympathy for his circumstances."

"Sympathy? And yet you left him in chains."

Quarry looked up sharply, catching the edge in Grey's words.

"I may have liked the man; I didn't trust him. Not after what happened to one of my sergeants."

"And what was that?" Lord John managed to infuse the question with no more than light interest.

"Misadventure. Drowned by accident in the stone-quarry pool," Quarry said, dumping several teaspoons of rock sugar into a fresh glass and stirring vigorously. "Or so I wrote in the report." He looked up from his coffee, and gave Grey his lewd, lopsided wink. "I liked Fraser. Didn't care for the sergeant. But never think a man is helpless, Grey, only because he's fettered."

Grey sought urgently for a way to inquire further without letting his passionate interest be seen.

"So you believe --" he began.

"Look," said Quarry, rising suddenly from his seat. "Look! Damned if it's not Bob Gerald!"

Lord John whipped round in his chair. Sure enough, the late afternoon sun struck sparks from a fiery head, bent as its owner emerged from one of the stalled sedan chairs. Gerald straightened, face set in a puzzled frown, and began to push his way into the knot of embattled bearers.

"Whatever is he about, I wonder? Surely -- Hi! Hold! Hold, you blackguard!" Dropping his glass unregarded, Quarry rushed toward the door, bellowing.

Grey, a step or two behind, saw no more than the flash of metal in the sun, and the brief look of startlement on Gerald's face. Then the crowd fell back, with a massed cry of horror, and his view was obscured by a throng of heaving backs.

He fought his way through the screaming mob without compunction, striking ruthlessly with his sword-hilt to clear the way.

Gerald was lying in the arms of one of his bearers, hair fallen forward, hiding his face. The young man's knees were drawn up in agony, balled fists pressed hard against the growing stain on his waistcoat.

Quarry was there; he brandished his sword at the crowd, bellowing threats to keep them back, then glared wildly round for a foe to skewer.

"Who?" he shouted at the bearers, face congested with fury. "Who's done this?"

The circle of white faces turned in helpless question, one to another, but found no focus; the foe had fled, and his bearers with him.

Grey knelt in the gutter, careless of filth, and smoothed back the ruddy hair with hands gone stiff and cold. The hot stink of blood was thick in the air, and the fecal smell of pierced intestine. Grey had seen battlefields enough to know the truth even before he saw the glazing eyes, the pallid face. He felt a deep, sharp stab at the sight, as though his own guts were pierced as well.

Brown eyes fixed wide on his, a spark of recognition deep behind the shock and pain. He seized the dying man's hand in his, and chafed it, knowing the futility of the gesture. Gerald's mouth worked, soundless. A bubble of red spittle swelled at the corner of his lips.

"Tell me." Grey bent urgently to the man's ear, and felt the soft brush of hair against his mouth. "Tell me who has done it -- I will avenge you. I swear it."

He felt a slight spasm of the fingers in his, and squeezed back, hard, as though he might force some of his own strength into Gerald; enough for a word, a name.

The soft lips were blanched, the blood-bubble growing. Gerald drew back the corners of his mouth, a fierce, tooth-baring rictus that burst the bubble and sent a spray of blood across Grey's cheek. Then the lips drew in, pursing in what might have been the invitation to a kiss. Then he died, and the wide brown eyes went blank.

Quarry was shouting at the bearers, demanding information. More shouts echoed down the walls of the streets, the nearby alleys, news flying from the scene of murder like bats out of hell.

Grey knelt alone in the silence near the dead man, in the stench of blood and voided bowels. Gently, he laid Gerald's hand limp across his wounded breast, and wiped the blood from his own hand, unthinking, on his cloak.

A motion drew his eye. Harry Quarry knelt on the other side of the body, his face gone white as the scar on his cheek, prying open a large clasp-knife. He searched gently through Gerald's loosened, blood-matted hair, and drew out a clean lock, which he cut off. The sun was setting; light caught the hair as it fell, a curl of vivid flame.

"For his mother," Quarry explained. Lips tightly pressed together, he coiled the gleaming strand and put it carefully away.

Part II.

The invitation came two days later, and with it, a note from Harry Quarry. Lord John Grey was bidden to an evening's entertainment at Jeffrey House, by desire of the Lady Lucinda Jeffrey. Quarry's note said simply, "Come. I have news."

And not beforetimes, Grey thought, tossing the note aside. The two days since Gerald's death had been filled with frantic activity, with inquiry and speculation -- to no avail. Every shop and barrow in Forby Street had been turned over thoroughly, but no trace found of the assailant or his minions; they had faded into the crowd, anonymous as ants.

That proved one thing, at least, Grey thought. It was a planned attack, not a random piece of street-violence. For the assailant to vanish so quickly, he must have looked like *hoi-polloi*; a prosperous merchant or a noble would have stood out by his bearing and the manner of his dress. The sedan-chair had been hired; no one recalled the appearance of the hirer, and the name given was -- not surprisingly -- false.

He shuffled restlessly through the rest of the mail. All other avenues of inquiry had proven fruitless so far. No weapon had been found. He and Quarry had sought the hall-porter at the Beefsteak, in hopes that the man had heard somewhat of the conversation between Gerald and Bubb-Dodington, but the man was a temporary servant, hired for the day, and had since taken his wages and vanished, no doubt to drink them.

Grey had canvassed his acquaintance for any rumor of enemies, or failing that, for any history of the late Robert Gerald that might bear a hint of motive for the crime. Gerald was evidently known, in a modest way, in Government circles and the venues of respectable society -- but he had no great money to leave, no heirs save his mother, no hint of any romantic entanglement -- in short, there was no intimation whatever of an association that might have led to that bloody death in Forby Street.

He paused, eye caught by an unfamiliar seal. A note, signed by one G. Bubb-Dodington, requesting a few moments of his time, in a convenient season -- and noting *en passant* that B-D would himself be present at Jeffrey House that evening, should Lord John find himself likewise engaged.

He picked up the invitation again, and found another sheet of paper folded up behind it. Unfolded, this

proved to be a broadsheet, printed with a poem -- or at the least, words arranged in the form of verse. "A Blot Removed," it was titled. Lacking in meter, but not in crude wit, the doggerel gave the story of a "he-whore" whose lewdities outraged the public, until "scandal flamed up, blood-red as the abominable colour of his hair," and an unknown saviour rose up to destroy the perverse, thus wiping clean the pristine parchment of society.

Lord John had eaten no breakfast, and sight of this extinguished what vestiges he had of appetite. He carried the document into the morning room, and fed it carefully to the fire.

Jeffrey House was a small but elegant white stone mansion, just off Eaton Square. Grey had never come there before, but the house was well known for brilliant parties, much frequented by those with a taste for politics; Sir Richard Jeffrey, Quarry's elder half-brother, was influential.

As Grey came up the marble steps, he saw a Member of Parliament and the First Sea Lord, close in converse ahead of him, and perceived a considerable array of discreetly elegant carriages standing at a distance in the street. Something of an occasion, then; he was a trifle surprised that Lady Lucinda should be entertaining on such a scale, on the heels of her cousin's assassination -- Quarry had said she was close to Gerald.

Quarry was on the *qui vive*; Grey had no sooner been announced than he found himself seized by the arm and drawn out of the slowly-moving reception line, into the shelter of a monstrous plant that had been stood in the corner of the ballroom, where it consorted with several of its fellows in the manner of a small jungle.

"You came, then," Quarry said, unnecessarily.

Seeing the haggard aspect of the man, Grey said merely, "Yes. What news?"

Fatigue and distress tended merely to sharpen Grey's fine-cut features, but gave Quarry an air of snappish ferocity, making him look like a large, ill-tempered dog.

"You saw that -- that -- unspeakable piece of excrement?"

"The broadsheet? Yes; where did you get it?"

"They are all over London; not only that particular excrescence -- many others, as vile or worse."

Grey felt a prick of deep unease.

"With similar accusations?"

"That Robert Gerald was a pederast? Yes, and worse; that he was a member of a notorious sodomitical society, a gathering for the purpose of... well, you'll know the sort of thing? Disgusting!"

Grey could not tell whether this last epithet was applied to the existence of such societies, or to the association of Gerald's name with one. In consequence, he chose his words with care.

"Yes, I have heard of such associations."

Grey did know, though the knowledge was not personal; such societies were said to be common -- he knew of taverns and backrooms aplenty, to say nothing of the more notorious mollyhouses, where... still, fastidiousness and caution had prevented any close inquiry into these assemblies.

"Need I say that -- that such accusations have no truth -- not the slightest pretension to truth?" Quarry spoke with some difficulty, avoiding Grey's eye. Grey laid a hand on Quarry's sleeve.

"No, you need not say so. I am certain of it," he said quietly. Quarry glanced up, giving him a half-embarrassed smile, and clasped his hand briefly.

"Thank you," he said, voice rasping.

"But if it be not so," Grey observed, giving Quarry time to recover himself, "then such rapid profusion of rumor has the taste about it of an organized calumny. And that in itself is very strange, do you not think?"

Evidently not; Quarry looked blankly at him.

"Someone wished not only to destroy Robert Gerald," Grey explained, "but thought it necessary also to blacken his name. Why? The man is dead; who would think it needful to murder his reputation, as well?"

Quarry looked startled, then frowned, brows drawing close together in the effort of thought.

"Strewth," he said slowly. "Damme, you're right. But who...?" He stopped, looking thoughtfully out over the assemblage of guests.

"Is the Prime Minister here?" Grey peered through the drooping foliage. It was a small but brilliant party, and one of a particular kind; no more than forty guests, and these all drawn from the echelons of power. No mincing fops or gadding henwits; ladies there were, to be sure, providing grace and beauty -- but it was the men who were of consequence. Several ministers were in attendance, the Sea Lord, an assistant Minister of Finance... he stopped, feeling as though someone had just punched him hard in the belly.

Quarry was muttering in his ear, explaining something about the Prime Minister's absence, but Grey was no longer attending. He fought the urge to step back farther into the shadows.

George Everett was looking well -- very well indeed. Wig and powder set off the blackness of his brows, and the fine dark eyes below them. A firm chin and a long, mobile mouth -- Grey's index finger twitched involuntarily, tracing the line of it in memory.

"Are you well, Grey?" Quarry's gruff voice recalled him to himself.

"Yes. A trifling indisposition, no more." Grey pulled his eyes away from Everett's slim figure, striking in black and primrose. It was only a matter of time, after all; he had known they would meet again -- and at least he had not been taken unawares. With an effort, he turned his attention back to Quarry.

"The news you mentioned. Is it --"

Quarry interrupted, gripping his arm and pulling him out from the shelter of the trees, into the babble of the party.

"Hark, here is Lucinda. Come, she wishes to meet you."

Lady Lucinda Jeffrey was small and round, her dark hair worn unpowdered, sleek to the skull, and her ringlets fastened with an ornament of pheasant's feathers that went well with her russet gown. Her face was plump and rather plain, though it might have some claim to character, had there been much life to it. Instead, swollen lids drooped over eyes smudged with shadows she had not bothered to disguise.

Lord John bowed over her hand, wondering again as he did so what had caused her to open her house this evening; plainly she was in great distress.

"My Lord," she murmured, in response to his courtesies. Then she lifted her eyes and he found himself startled. Her eyes were beautiful, almond-shaped and clear grey in color -- and despite their reddened lids, clear and piercing with intelligence.

"Harry tells me that you were with Robert when he died," she said, softly but clearly, holding him with those eyes. "And that you have offered your help in finding the dastard who has done this thing."

"Indeed. I offer you my most sincere condolences, my lady."

"I thank you, sir." She nodded toward the room, bright with guests and blazing candles. "You will find it strange, no doubt, that we should revel in such fashion, and my cousin so recently and despicably slain?" Grey began to make the expected demur, but she would not allow it, going on before he could speak.

"It was my husband's wish. He said we must -- that to shrink and cower before such slander would be to grant it credence. He insisted that we must meet it boldly, or suffer ourselves from the stain of scandal." Her lips pressed tight, a handkerchief crumpled in her hand, but no tears welled in the gray eyes.

"Your husband is wise." That was a thought; Sir Richard Jeffrey was an influential Member of Parliament, with a shrewd appreciation of politics, a great acquaintance with those in power -- and the money to influence them. Could the killing of Gerald and this posthumous effort to discredit him be in some way a blow at Sir Richard?

Grey hesitated; he had not yet told Quarry of Gerald's request at the club. "There is no one I can confide in," Gerald had said -- and presumably included his cousin by marriage therein. But Gerald was dead, and Grey's obligation was now vengeance, not confidence. The musicians had paused; with a tilt of the head, Grey drew his companions back into the privacy of the jungle.

"Madame, I had the honor of a very brief acquaintance with your cousin. Still, when I met him..." In a few words, he acquainted his hearers with Robert Gerald's last request.

"Do either of you know what his concern might have been?" Grey asked, looking from one to the other. The musicians were starting up, the strains of fiddle and flute rising above the rumble of conversation.

"He asked you to meet him on the 'Change?" A shadow passed over Quarry's face. If Gropecunt Street was the main thoroughfare for female prostitution, the Royal Exchange was its male counterpart -- after dark, at least.

"That means nothing, Harry," Lucinda said. Her grief had been subsumed by interest, plump figure drawn erect. "The 'Change is a meeting place for every kind of intrigue. I am sure Robert's choice of meeting place had nothing to do with -- with these scurrilous accusations." Lady Lucinda frowned. "But I know of nothing that would have caused my cousin such concern -- do you, Harry?"

"If I did, I would have said so," Quarry said irritably. "Since he did not think me fit to confide in, though --"

"You mentioned some news," Grey interrupted, seeking to avert acrimony. "What was that?"

"Oh." Quarry stopped, irritation fading. "I've gleaned a notion of what Bubb-Dodington's invitation consisted," Quarry cast a glance of unconcealed dislike toward a knot of men gathered talking at the opposite side of the room. "And if my informant be correct, 'twas far from innocent."

"Which is Bubb-Dodington? Is he here?"

"Indeed." Lucinda pointed with her fan. "Standing by the hearth -- in the reddish suit."

Grey squinted through the haze of hearth-smoke and candle-glow, picking out a slender figure in bag-wig and rose velvet -- fashionable, to be sure, but seeming somehow slightly fawning in attitude, as he leaned toward another of the group.

"I have inquired regarding him," Grey said. "I hear he is a political, but one of no great consequence; a mere time-server."

"True, he is nothing in himself. His associations, though, are more substantial. Those with whom he allies himself are scarcely without power, though not -- not yet! -- in control."

"And who are those? I am quite ignorant of politics these days."

"Sir Francis Dashwood, John Wilkes, Mr. Churchill... Paul Whitehead, too. Oh, and Everett. You know George Everett?"

"We are acquainted," Grey said equably. "The invitation you mentioned...?"

"Oh, yes." Quarry shook his head, recalled to himself. "I finally discovered the whereabouts of the hall porter. He had overheard enough of Bubb-Dodington's conversation to say that the man was urging Gerald to accept an invitation to stay at West Wycombe."

Quarry raised his brows high in implication, but Grey remained ignorant, and said so.

"West Wycombe is the home of Sir Francis Dashwood," Lady Lucinda put in. "And the center of his influence. He entertains there lavishly -- even as we do --" her plump mouth made a small moue' of deprecation, "-- and to the same purposes."

"The seduction of the powerful?" Grey smiled. "So Bubb-Dodington -- or his masters -- sought to entice Gerald? To what end, I wonder?"

"Richard calls the West Wycombe assemblage a nest of vipers," Lucinda said. "Bent upon achieving their ends by any means, even dishonorable ones. Perhaps they sought to lure Robert into their camp for the sake of his own virtues -- or --" she paused, hesitant, "-- for the sake of what he might know, regarding the Prime Minister's affairs?"

The music was starting afresh at the far end of the room, and they were interrupted at this delicate moment by a lady, who spotting them in their leafy refuge, came bustling in to claim Harry Quarry for a dance, waving aside all possibility of refusal with an airy fan.

"Is that not Lady Fitzwalter?" Buxom and high-colored, the lady now pressing Quarry's hand provocatively to her breast was the wife of Sir Hugh, an elderly baronet from Sussex. Quarry appeared to have no objections, following up Lady F's flirtations with a jocular pinch.

"Oh, Harry fancies himself a great rake," Lady Lucinda said tolerantly, "though anyone can see it comes to nothing more than a hand of cards in the gentlemen's clubs and an eye for shapely flesh. Is any officer in London greatly different?" A shrewd grey eye passed over Lord John, inquiring as to what his own differences might be.

"Indeed," he said, amused. "And yet he was sent to Scotland for some indiscretion, I collect. Was it not the incident that left him with that slash across the face?"

"Oh, la," she said, pursing up her mouth in scorn. "The famous scar! One would think it the Order of the Garter, he do flaunt it so. No, no, 'twas the cards that were the cause of his exile -- he caught a Colonel of the regiment a-cheating at loo, and was too much gone in wine to keep a decent silence on the point."

Grey opened his mouth to inquire about the scar, but was silenced himself by her grip upon his sleeve.

"Now, there's a rake, if you want one," she said, low-voiced. Her eyes marked out a man across the room, near the hearth. "Dashwood; him Harry spoke of. Know of him, do you?"

Grey squinted against the haze of smoke in the room. The man was heavy-bodied, but betrayed no softness of flesh; the sloping shoulders were thick with muscle, and if waist and calves were thick as well, it was by a natural inclination of form, rather than the result of indulgence.

"I have heard the name," Grey said. "A political of some minor repute?"

"In the arena of politics, yes," Lady Lucinda agreed, not taking her eyes from the man. "In others... less minor. In fact, his repute in some circles is nothing short of outright notoriety."

A reach for a glass stretched the satin of Dashwood's brodered plum-silk waistcoat tight across a broad chest, and brought into view a face, likewise broad, ruddy in the candle-glow and animated with a cynic laughter. He wore no wig, but had a quantity of dark hair, curling low across the brow. Grey furrowed his own brow in the effort of recall; someone had said something to him, yes -- but the occasion escaped him, as did its content.

"He seems a man of substance," he hazarded. Certainly Dashwood was the cynosure of his end of the room, all eyes upon him as he spoke.

Lady Lucinda uttered a short laugh.

"Do you think so, sir? He and his friends flaunt their practice of licentiousness and blasphemy as Harry flaunts his scar -- and from the same cause."

It was the word "blasphemy" that brought back recollection.

"Ha. I have heard mention... Medmenham Abbey?"

Lucinda's lips pursed tight, and she nodded.

"The Hell Fire Club, they call it."

"Indeed. There have been Hell Fire clubs before -- many of them. Is this one more than the usual excuse for public riot and drunken license?"

She looked at the men before the fire, her countenance troubled. With the light of the blaze behind them, all individuality of lineament was lost; they appeared no more than an assemblage of dark figures; faceless devils, outlined by the firelight.

"I think not," she said, very low-voiced, glancing to and fro to assure they were unheard. "Or so *Idid* think -- until I heard of the invitation to Robert. Now..."

The advent near the jungle of a tall, good-looking man whose resemblance to Quarry made his identity clear put an end to the clandestine conference.

"There is Richard; he is looking for me." Poised to take flight, Lady Lucinda stopped and looked back at Grey. "I cannot say, sir, what reason you may have for your interest -- but I do thank you for it." A flicker of wryness lit the grey eyes. "Godspeed you, sir -- though for myself, I should not much respect a God so petty as to be concerned with such as Francis Dashwood."

Grey passed into the general crowd, bowing and smiling, allowing himself to be drawn into a dance here, a conversation there; keeping all the time one eye upon the group near the hearth. Men joined it for a short time, fell away, and were replaced by others, yet the central group remained unchanged.

Bubb-Dodington and Dashwood were the center of it; Churchill, the poet, John Wilkes and the Earl of Sandwich surrounded them. Seeing at one point during a break in the music that a good many had gathered by the hearth, men and women alike, Grey thought the moment ripe to make his own presence known, and unobtrusively joined the crowd, maneuvering to a spot near Bubb-Dodington.

Mr. Justice Margrave was holding the floor, speaking of the subject which had formed the meat of most conversations Grey had heard so far -- the death of Robert Gerald, or more particularly, the rash of rumor and scandal that followed it. The Judge caught Grey's eye and nodded -- his worship was well acquainted with Grey's family -- but continued his denunciation unimpeded.

"I should wish that, rather than the Pillory, the stake be the punishment for such preventative."

Grey restrained the urge to clasp himself protectively.

"Cogent, indeed," he said. "You suppose the man who cut down Robert Gerald to be impelled by moralistic motives, then?"

"Whether he were or no, I should say he has rendered signal service to society, ridding us of an exponent of this moral blight."

Grey observed Harry Quarry standing a yard away, gleaming eyes fixed upon the elderly justice in a manner calculated to cause the utmost concern for that worthy's future prospects. Turning away, lest his acknowledgement embolden Quarry to open violence, he found himself instead face to face with George Everett.

"John," Everett said softly, smiling.

"Mr. Everett." Grey inclined his head politely. Nothing squelched, Everett continued to smile. He was a handsome devil, and he knew it.

"You are in good looks, John. Exile agrees with you, it seems." The long mouth widened, curling at the corner.

"Indeed. I must take pains to go away more often, then." His heart was beating faster. Everett's perfume was his accustomed musk and myrrh; the scent of it conjured tumbled linens, and the touch of hard and knowing hands.

A hoarse voice near his shoulder provided welcome distraction.

"Lord John? Your servant, sir."

Grey turned to find the gentleman in rose velvet bowing to him, a look of spurious cordiality fixed upon saturnine features.

"Mr. Bubb-Dodington, I collect. I am obliged, sir." He bowed in turn, and allowed himself to be separated from Everett, who stood looking after them, a faint smile upon his lips.

So conscious was he of Everett's eyes burning holes in his back that he scarce attended to Bubb-Dodington's overtures, replying automatically to the man's courtesies and inquiries. It was not until the rasping voice mentioned the word "Medmenham" that he was jerked into attention, to realize that he had just received a most interesting invitation.

"...would find us a most congenial assembly, I am sure?" Bubb-Dodington was saying, leaning toward Grey with that same attitude of fawning attention he had noted earlier.

"You feel I would be in sympathy with the interests of your society?" Grey contrived to infuse a faint tone of boredom, looking away from the man. Just over Bubb-Dodington's shoulder, he was conscious of the figure of Sir Francis Dashwood, dark and bulky. Dashwood's deepset eyes rested upon them, even as he carried on a conversation, and a ripple of apprehension raised the hairs on the back of Grey's neck,

"I am flattered, but I scarcely think..." he began, turning away.

"Oh, do not think you would be quite strange!" Bubb-Dodington interrupted, beaming with oily deprecation. "You are acquainted with Mr. Everett, I think? He will make one of our number."

"Indeed." Grey's mouth had gone dry. "I see. Well, you must allow me to consult..." Muttering excuses, he escaped, finding refuge a moment later in the company of Harry Quarry and his sister-in-law, sharing cups of brandy-punch at the nearby buffet.

"It galls me," Harry was saying, "that such petty time-servers and flaunting jackanapes make my kin to be the equal of the he-strumpets and buggerantoes that infest the Arcade. I've known Bob Gerald from a lad, and I will swear my life upon his honor!" Quarry's large hand clenched upon his glass as he glowered at Mr. Justice Margrave's back.

"Have a care, Harry, my dear." Lucinda placed a hand on his sleeve. "Those are my good crystal cups. If you must crush something, let it be the hazelnuts."

"I shall let it be that fellow's windpipe, and he does not cease to air his idiocy," said Quarry. He scowled

horridly, but suffered himself to be turned away, still talking. "What can Richard be thinking of, to entertain such scum? Dashwood, I mean, and now this..."

Grey started, and felt a chill down his spine. Quarry's blunt features bore no trace of resemblance to his dead cousin-by-marriage; and yet -- his face contorted with fury, eyes bulging slightly as he spoke... Grey closed his eyes tightly, summoning the vision.

He left Quarry and Lady Lucinda abruptly, without excuse, and made his way hastily to the large gilded mirror that hung above a sideboard in the dining room.

Leaning over the skeletal remains of a roasted pheasant, he stared at his mouth -- painstakingly forming the shapes he had seen on Robert Gerald's mouth -- and now again on Harry Quarry's; hearing in his mind as he made them, the sound of Robert Gerald's effortful -- but unvoiced -- last word.

"Dashwood."

Quarry had followed him, brows drawn down in puzzlement.

"What the devil, Grey? Why are you making faces in the mirror? Are you ill?"

"No," said Grey, though in fact he felt very ill. He stared at his own image in the mirror, as though it were some ghastly spectre.

Another face appeared, and dark eyes met his own in the mirror. The two reflections were close in size and form, both possessed of a tidy muscularity and a fineness of feature that had led more than one observer to remark in company that they could be twins -- one light, one dark.

"You will come to Medmenham, won't you?" The murmured words were warm in his ear, George's body so close that he could feel the pressure of hip and thigh. Everett's hand touched his, lightly.

"I should... particularly desire it."

Part III.

Medmenham

Abbey West Wycombe

It was not until the third night at Medmenham that anything untoward occurred. To that point -- despite Quarry's loudly-expressed doubts beforehand -- it had been a house-party much like any other in Lord John's experience, though with more talk of politics and less of hunting than was customary.

In spite of the talk and entertainment, though, there was an odd air of secrecy about the house. Whether it was some attitude on the part of the servants, or something unseen but sensed among the guests, Grey could not tell, but it was real; it floated on the air of the Abbey like smoke on water.

The only other oddity was the lack of women. While females of good family from the countryside near West Wycombe were invited to dine, all of the houseguests were male. The thought occurred to Grey that from outward appearance, it might almost be one of those sodomitical societies so decried in the London broadsheets. In appearance only, though; there was no hint of such behavior. Even George Everett gave no hint of any sentiment save the amiability of renewed friendship.

No, it was not that kind of behavior that had given Sir Francis and his restored abbey the name of scandal. Exactly what *did* lie behind the whispers of notoriety was yet a mystery.

Grey knew one thing; Dashwood was not Gerald's murderer, at least not directly. Discreet inquiry had established Sir Francis's whereabouts, and shown him far from Forby Street at the time of the outrage. There was the possibility of hired assassination, though. And Robert Gerald had seen *something* in the moment of his death that caused him to utter that last silent accusation.

There was nothing so far to which Grey could point as evidence, either of guilt or depravity. Still, if evidence was to be found anywhere, it must be at Medmenham -- the deconsecrated abbey which Sir Francis had restored from ruins and made a showplace for his political ambitions.

Among the talk and entertainments, though, Grey was conscious of a silent process of evaluation, plain in the eyes and manner of his companions. He was being watched, his fitness gauged -- but for what?

"What is it that Sir Francis wants with me?" he had asked bluntly, walking in the gardens with Everett on the second afternoon. "I have nothing to appeal to such a man."

George smiled. He wore his own hair, dark and shining, and the chilly breeze stroked strands of it across his cheeks.

"You underestimate your own merits, John -- as always. Of course, nothing becomes manly virtue more than simple modesty." He glanced sidelong, mouth quirking with appreciation.

"I scarce think my personal attributes are sufficient to intrigue a man of Dashwood's character," Grey answered dryly.

"More to the point," Everett said, arching one brow, "what is it in Sir Francis that so intrigues *you*? You have not spoke of anything, save to question me about him."

"You would be better suited to answer that than I," Grey answered boldly. "I hear you are an intimate -- the valet tells me you have been a guest at Medmenham many times this year past. What is it draws *you* to seek his company?"

George grunted in amusement, then flung back his head, breathing in the damp air with enjoyment. Lord John did likewise; autumn smells of leaf mold and chimney-smoke, spiced with the tang of ripe muscats from the arbor nearby. Scents to stir the blood; cold air to sting cheeks and hands, exercise to stimulate and weary the limbs, making the glowing leisure of the fireside and the comforts of a dark, warm bed so appealing by contrast.

"Power," George said at last. He lifted a hand toward the Abbey -- an impressive pile of gray stone, at once stalwart in shape and delicate in design. "Dashwood aspires to great things; I would join him on that upward reach." He cast a glance at Grey. "And you, John? It has been some time since I presumed to know you, and yet I should not have said that a thirst for social influence formed much part of your own

desires."

Grey wished no discussion of his desires; not at the moment.

"The desire of power in excess caused the angels to fall,' he quoted.

"The desire of knowledge in excess caused man to fall." George completed the quote, and uttered a short laugh. "What is it that you seek to know then, John?" He turned his head toward Grey, dark eyes creased against the wind, and smiled as though he knew the answer.

"The truth of the death of Robert Gerald."

He had mentioned Gerald to each of the house-party in turn, choosing his moment, probing delicately. No delicacy here; he wished to shock, and did so. George's face went comically blank, then hardened into disapproval.

"Why do you seek to entangle yourself in that sordid affair?" he demanded. "Such association cannot but harm your own reputation -- such as it is."

That stung, as it was meant to.

"My reputation is my own affair," Grey said, "as are my reasons. Did you know Gerald?"

"No," Everett answered shortly. By unspoken consent, they turned toward the Abbey, and walked back in silence.

On the third day, something changed. A sense of nervous anticipation seemed to pervade the air, and the air of secrecy grew heavier. Grey felt as though some stifling lid pressed down upon the Abbey, and spent as much time as possible out of doors.

Still, nothing untoward occurred during the day or evening, and he retired as usual, soon after ten o'clock. Dismissing the valet, he undressed alone. He was tired from his long rambles over the countryside, but it was early yet. He picked up a book, attempted to read, but the words seemed to slide away from his eyes. His head nodded, and he slept, sitting up in the chair.

The sound of the clock striking below in the hall woke him from uneasy dreams of dark pools and drowning. He sat up, a metal taste like blood in his mouth, and rubbed away the sleep from his eyes. Time for his nightly signal to Quarry.

Unwilling to allow Grey to risk such company alone, Quarry had followed Lord John to West Wycombe. He would, he insisted, there take up station in the meadow facing the guest wing each night, between the hours of eleven and one o'clock. Lord John was to pass a candle flame three times across the glass each night, as a sign that all was so far well.

Feeling ridiculous, Grey had done so on each of the first two nights. Tonight, he felt some small sense of reassurance as he bent to light his taper from the hearth. The house was silent, but not asleep. Something stirred, somewhere in the Abbey; he could feel it. Perhaps the ghosts of the ancient monks -- perhaps something else.

The candle-flame showed the reflection of his own face, a wan oval in the glass, his light blue eyes gone to dark holes. He stood a moment, holding the flame, then blew it out and went to bed, obscurely more

comforted by the thought of Harry outside than by the knowledge of George Everett in the next room.

He waked in darkness, to find his bed surrounded by monks. Or men dressed as monks; each wore a rope-belted robe and a deep-cowled hood, pulled far forward to hide the face. Beyond the first startled exclamation, he lay quiet. He might have thought them the ghosts of the Abbey, save that the reassuring scents of sweat and alcohol, of powder and pomade, told him otherwise.

None spoke, but hands pulled him from his bed and set him on his feet, stripped the nightshirt from his body and helped him into a robe of his own. A hand cupped him intimately, a caress given under cover of darkness, and he breathed musk and myrrh.

No menaces were offered, and he knew his companions to be those men with whom he had broken bread at dinner. Still, his heart beat in his ears as he was conducted by darkened hallways into the garden, and then by lantern-light through a maze of clipped yew. Beyond this, a path led down the side of a stony hill, curving into the darkness and finally turning back into the hillside itself.

Here they passed through a curious portal, this being an archway of wood and marble, carved into what he took to be the semblance of a woman's privates, opened wide. He examined this with curiosity; early experience with whores had made him vaguely familiar, but had afforded no opportunity for close inspection.

Once within this portal, a bell began to chime somewhere ahead. The "monks" formed themselves into a line, two by two, and shuffled slowly forward, beginning to chant.

"Hocus-pocus,

Hoc est corpus..."

The chant continued in the same vein -- a perversion of various well-known prayers, some merely foolish nonsense, some clever or openly bawdy. Grey restrained a sudden urge to laugh, and bit his lip to stop it.

The solemn procession wound its way deeper and he smelt damp rock; were they in a cave? Evidently; as the passage widened, he saw light ahead, and entered eventually into a large chamber, set with candles, whose rough-hewn walls indicated that they were indeed in a catacomb of sorts. The impression was heightened by the presence of a number of human skulls, set grinning atop their crossed thigh-bones, like so many Jolly Rogers.

Grey found himself pressed into a place near the wall. One figure, robed in a cardinal's red, came forward, and Sir Francis Dashwood's voice intoned the beginning of the rite. The rite itself was a parody of the Mass, enacted with great solemnity, invocations made to the Master of Darkness, the chalice formed of a upturned skull.

In all truth, Grey found the proceedings tedious in the extreme, enlivened only by the appearance of a large Barbary ape, attired in Bishop's cope and miter, who appeared at the Consecration. The animal sprang upon the altar, where it gobbled and slobbered over the bread provided, and spilt wine upon the floor. It would have been less entertaining, Grey thought, had the beast's ginger whiskers and seamed

countenance not reminded him so strongly of the Bishop of Ely, an old friend of his mother's.

At the conclusion of this rite, the men went out, with considerably less solemnity than when they had come in. A good deal had been drunk in the course of the rite, and their behavior was less restrained than that of the ape.

Two men near the end of the line seized Grey by the arms, and compelled him into a small alcove, around which the others had gathered. He found himself bent backward over a marble basin, the robe pushed down from his shoulders. Dashwood intoned a prayer in reverse Latin, and something warm and sticky cascaded over Grey's head, blinding him and causing him to struggle and curse in the grip of his captors.

"I baptize thee, child of Asmodeus, son of blood..." A kick caught Dashwood under the chin and sent him reeling backward. A hard punch in the pit of the stomach knocked the breath from Grey and quieted him for the remainder of the brief ceremony.

Then they set him on his feet, bloodstained, and gave him drink from a jeweled cup. He tasted opium in the wine, and let as much as he dared dribble down his chin as he drank. Even so, he felt the dreamy tendrils of the drug steal through his mind, and his balance grew precarious, sending him lurching through the crowd, to the great hilarity of the robed onlookers.

Hands took him by the elbows and propelled him down a corridor, and another, and another. A draft of warm air, and he found himself thrust through a door, which closed behind him.

The chamber was small, furnished with nothing save a narrow couch against the far wall, and a table upon which stood a flagon, several glasses... and a knife. Grey staggered to it, and braced himself with both hands, to keep from falling.

There was a strange smell in the room. At first he thought he had vomited, sickened by blood and wine, but then he saw the pool of it, across the room by the bed. It was only then that he saw the girl.

She was young and naked and dead. Her body lay limp, sprawled white in the light, but her eyes were dull and her lips blue, the traces of sickness trailing down her face and across the bedclothes. Grey backed slowly away, shock washing the last remnants of the drug from his blood.

He rubbed both hands hard across his face, striving to think. What was this, why was he here, with the body of this young woman? He brought himself to come closer, to look. She was no one he had seen before; the calluses upon her hands and the state of her feet marked her as a servant or a country girl.

He turned sharply, went to the door. Locked, of course. But what was the point? He shook his head, his brain slowly clearing. Once clear, though, no answers came to mind. Blackmail, perhaps? It was true that Grey's family had influence, though he himself possessed none. But how could his presence here be put to such use?

It seemed he had spent forever in that buried room, pacing to and fro across the stone floor, until at last the door opened and a robed figure slipped through.

"George!"

"Bloody hell!" Ignoring Grey's turn toward him, Everett crossed the room and stood staring down at the girl, brows knit in consternation. "What's happened?" he demanded, swinging toward Grey.

"You tell me. Or rather, let us leave this place, and then you tell me."

Everett put out a quelling hand, urging silence. He thought for a moment, and then seemed to reach some conclusion. A slow smile grew across his face.

"Well enough," he said softly, to himself. He turned and reached toward Grey's waist, pulling loose the cord that bound it closed. Grey made no move to cover himself, though filled with astonishment at the gesture, given the circumstances.

This astonishment was intensified in the next instant, as Everett bent over the bed and wrapped the cord round the neck of the dead woman, tugging hard to draw it tight, so the rope bit deep into flesh. He stood, smiled at Grey, then crossed to the table, where he poured two glasses of wine from the flagon.

"Here." He handed one to Grey. "Don't worry, it's not drugged. You aren't drugged now, are you? No, I see not; I thought you hadn't had enough."

"Tell me what is happening." Grey took the glass, but made no move to drink. "Tell me, for God's sake!"

George smiled again, a queer look in his eyes, and picked up the knife. It was exotic in appearance; something Oriental, at least a foot long and wickedly sharp.

"It is the common initiation of the Brotherhood," he said. "The new candidate, once approved, is baptized -- it was pig's blood, by the way -- and then brought to this room, where a woman is provided for his pleasure. Once his lust is slaked, an older Brother comes to instruct him in the final rite of his acceptance -- and to witness it."

Grey raised a sleeve and wiped cold sweat and pig's blood from his forehead.

"And the nature of this final rite is --"

"Sacrificial." George nodded acknowledgement toward the blade. "The act not only completes the initiation, but also insures the initiate's silence and his loyalty to the Brotherhood."

A great coldness was creeping through Grey's limbs, making them stiff and heavy.

"And you have... have done this?"

"Yes." Everett contemplated the form on the bed for a moment, one finger gently stroking the blade. At last he shook his head and sighed, murmuring to himself once more. "No, I think not."

He raised his eyes to Grey's, clear and shining in the lamplight. "I would have spared you, I think, were it not for Bob Gerald."

The glass felt slick in Grey's hand, but he forced himself to speak calmly.

"So you did know him. Was it you who killed him?"

Everett nodded slowly, not taking his gaze from Grey's.

"It is ironic, is it not?" he said softly. "I desired membership in this Brotherhood, whose watchword is

vice, whose credo is wickedness -- and yet had Bob Gerald told them what I am, they would have turned upon me like wolves. They hold all abomination dear -- save one."

"And Robert Gerald knew what you were? Yet he did not speak your name as he died."

George shrugged, but his mouth twitched uneasily.

"He was a pretty lad. I thought -- but I was wrong. No, he didn't know my name, but we met here -- at Medmenham. It would have made no difference, had they not chosen him to join us. Were he to come again, though, and see me here.

"He would not come again. He refused the invitation."

George's eyes narrowed, gauging his truth; then he shrugged.

"Perhaps if I had known that, he need not have died. And if he had not died, you would not have been chosen yourself -- would not have come? No. Well, there's irony again for you, I supposed. And still -- I think I would have killed him under any circumstance; it was too dangerous."

Grey had been keeping a watchful eye on the knife. He moved, unobtrusively, seeking to get the corner of the table betwixt himself and Everett.

"And the broadsheets? That was your doing?" He could, he thought, seize the table and throw it into Everett's legs, then try to overpower him. Disarmed, they were well-matched in strength.

"No, Whitehead's. He's the poet, after all." George smiled and stepped back, out of range. "They thought perhaps to take advantage of Gerald's death to discomfit Sir Richard -- and chose that method, knowing nothing of his killer or the motive for his death. The greatest irony of all, is it not?"

George had moved the flagon out of reach. Grey stood half-naked, with no weapon to hand save a glass of wine.

"So you intend now to procure my silence, by claiming I am the murderer of this poor young woman?" Grey demanded, jerking his head toward the still figure on the bed. "What happened to her?"

"Accident," Everett said. "The women are drugged; she must have vomited in her sleep and choked to death. But blackmail? No, that isn't what I mean to do."

Everett squinted at the bed, then at Grey, measuring distance.

"You sought to use a noose for your sacrificial duty -- some mislike blood -- and though you succeeded, the girl managed to seize the knife and wound you, severely enough that you bled to death before I could return to aid you. Tragic accident; such a pity. Move a little closer to the bed, John."

A man is not helpless, only because he is fettered. Grey flung his wine into Everett's face, then smashed his glass against the stones of the wall. He whirled on a heel and lunged upward, jabbing with all his might.

Everett grunted, one side of his handsome face laid open, spraying blood. He growled deep in his throat, baring bloody teeth, and ripped the blade across the air where Lord John had stood a moment before. Half-blinded by blood and snarling like a beast, he lunged and swung again. Grey ducked, was hit by a

flying wrist and fell across the woman's body. He rolled sideways, but was trapped by the folds of his robe.

The knife gleamed overhead. In desperation, he threw up his legs and thrust both feet into Everett's chest, flinging him backward.

Everett staggered, flailing back across the room, half-caught himself, then froze abruptly. The expression on his face showed vast surprise. His hand loosened, dropping the knife, and then drew slowly through the air, graceful in gesture as the dancer that he was. His fingers touched the reddened steel protruding from his chest, acknowledging defeat. He slumped slowly to the floor.

Harry Quarry put a foot on Everett's back and freed his sword with a vicious yank.

"Good job I waited, wasn't it? Saw those buggers with their lanterns and all, and thought best I see what mischief was afoot."

"Mischief," Grey echoed. He stood up, or tried to. His knees had gone to water. "You... did you hear?" His heart was beating very slowly; he wondered in a dreamy way whether it might stop any minute.

Quarry glanced at him, expression unreadable.

"I heard." He wiped his sword, then sheathed it, and came to the bed, bending down to peer at Grey. How much had he heard, Grey wondered -- and what had he made of it?

A rough hand brushed back his hair. He felt the stiffness matting it, and thought of Robert Gerald's mother.

"It's not my blood," he said.

"Some of it is," said Quarry, and traced a line down the side of his neck. In the wake of the touch, he felt the sting of the cut, unnoticed in the moment of infliction.

"Never fear," said Quarry, and gave him a hand to get up. "It will make a pretty scar."