

CHAPTER 18 – BLISS!

Charles stumbled into the room, tilted forward on tiptoe. His rickets condition had eased with age and the sun in Spain, but his body was still twisted slightly to the left and he was uncomfortable with his heels down.

Endymion gave him a warm smile and went to stand outside the room. After a glance from Henrietta, Mamie went with him. Charles and Henrietta were alone in a shabby ante-room in Dover Castle.

He glanced at her, then blew his cheeks out with relief. She was shorter than him. Then he noticed her lustrous eyes, sparkling like stars, gaze fixed on his face. There was a flash of pearly little teeth, his main memory of her from that night in the Louvre. He opened his mouth to say something (What? He had no idea) when to his astonishment she dropped to her knees.

Henrietta had rehearsed this little speech back in France, with Gaston playing the part of Charles. It had left them convulsed with giggles:

‘Sire, je suis venue en ce pays pour votre majesté pour estre usée et commandée de vous.’ (Sire I have come to this country to be used and commanded by you.) She added that a woman should have no will other than that of her husband.

Charles stared at her. Her head was lowered so he could see only the top of her dark, auburn-streaked hair. For a moment there was complete silence. Then Charles smiled. Her shoulders were shaking. Princess Henrietta-Maria de Bourbon was laughing like a water-spout.

Charles had been refreshing his knowledge of French. He enjoyed learning foreign languages. He had learned some Spanish before the trip to Madrid with Buckingham but had no opportunity to use it. In preparation for Henrietta’s arrival he had re-read much of the considerable correspondence he and Henry had had with the French court and even with artists like Rubens, who always wrote in French. When he spoke, the language came easily to him.

‘Marriage is the queen of friendships,’ he said. He had prepared the quotation. It had been supplied by his chaplain, Jeremy Taylor. ‘You have not fallen into the hands of strangers, my dear.’

He was about to say something else when she rose gracefully to her feet and berated him.

‘Where have you been?’ Her voice was rising high. ‘We have been waiting for you. They said you were here. They said you had gone. Where did you go? What is more important than your princess? She stared at him. ‘Oh! You look sad. Has something bad happened?’

‘Ye... ye... yes. I’m afraid it has. I have just had word that a great man has died.’

‘No!’ Her eyes were pools of wonder.

‘Mmm yes. His name was Orlando Gibbons. He died at Canterbury. That is where I went.’

‘Orlando Gibbons, the great musician? You *know* Orlando Gibbons?’

‘Oh yes. I used to dance to his music when I was a child, with my sister. Then later he was a friend. A man with a fine soul. You see, I play in a violin and viol ensemble, called Coperario’s Musique. Orlando played with us from time to time, on the harpsichord. He played at my father’s funeral. It was the last time I saw him in good health.’

‘But that is wonderful, Charles. You play music? You love music?’

‘Oh yes, yes. Giovanni Coperaria himself taught me the viol. Nicholas Lanier, our Master of Music, tells me I am quite a skilful player.’ Charles pouted.

Henrietta clapped her hands together. 'I play the lute. I love music. We must play together, husband and wife making music.'

'I should like that very much. There are pieces by Orlando we could play. Do you know "See, see the world is incarnate."?"

'Yes, yes. We know his work in France. A piece for the virginals was sent to us transcribed as sheet music, the first ever in the whole wide world I heard it said.'

Charles clasped his hands together in front of his body, unconsciously imitating her earlier feminine gesture.

'Henrietta, that piece for the virginals was played at my sister's wedding to Frederick.'

Tears came to Charles's eyes at the memory of the promise of that time, before the loss of that wretched battle outside Prague had brought it all crashing down.

'Oh Charles. How sad. How sad. She is in Holland now, is she not?' Henrietta suddenly sounded mature, for the first time more woman than girl.

'Yes. That's right.'

'Gaston told me all about it. My brother, that is. Oh, you must love her so much.'

He smiled. 'I do.'

'But let us talk of happy things. We have someone in common, you know? You and I. He is from our households. A servant. Can you guess who it is?' Now the woman was gone again and the girl was back, impish, teasing.

Charles felt his smile growing wider and wider. 'I have no idea.'

'Do you want me to tell you? She twinkled like a mischievous pixie.'

'Please do,' he said, solemnly.

'It is... M de St Antoine!'

'Of course! The riding master.'

'My *father's* riding master. My papa sent him to the English court out of love. But he came back home sometimes to visit us. He taught me and Gaston to ride.'

'Oh, Henrietta! This is... is... is. I feel God must have sent you to me. Such a bond. Do you know, before you came I was reading some of my dear dead brother Henry's letters to your father. Your father was Henry's godfather.'

'No! I never knew. But then I was so young when...'

Charles remembered she was nine years younger than him. 'Your father was a second father to Henry.'

'Tell me! Tell me!'

'We hoped your father would join a Protestant alliance with Frederick. He was...'

'Yes, he became a Huguenot. If my mother can marry a Protestant so can I.'

Charles shook with laughter at that, both hands holding his protruding hips. 'I remember your father sending Henry armour, pistols and a sword as well as M de St Antoine, his own riding instructor. I was reading Henry's letter of thanks to your father just the other day.'

'It is wonderful, these bonds between us. And, you know, it is wonderful that we met over dance. That you saw me dancing, with gay music playing and the beauty of a masque.'

'Yes. It is wonderful. And so are you.'

Then they were kissing, he diffidently, she with surprising force; kissing with open tongue.

When Charles had just arrived back from Canterbury, just before he went up to Henrietta, Endymion had murmured in his ear that the room he had used before setting sail for Madrid had again been made ready for him. He wanted to spare Charles the public lying-together ceremony. He knew Charles hated the thought of it.

Charles took Henrietta by the hand and led her up a flight of stone stairs to the next level. Henrietta looked round for Mamie, but Endymion had thought of everything – the loyal M St Georges was at that moment tucking into a plate of bread, ham and cheese washed down by a flagon of small beer in the kitchen.

Once alone in the bedroom, Henrietta again surprised Charles with her passion. Neither of them had done this before. Both were rather hazy about the details. Henrietta was wearing a dress identical to the one soiled on the voyage, but in green not red. Charles had on blue satin doublet and hose.

Charles nearly stopped altogether when he lifted her petticoats as they were so lovely frothily white and so beautifully embroidered. But her angry grunts led him to continue. The big surprise was the blood when he penetrated her. Neither of them knew quite what to do but she instinctively reassured him:

‘C’est sans importance’ Mamie’s mother, Mamangat, had warned her it might hurt the first time and she assumed the blood was something to do with the hurting.

But after the hurt she dissolved into him with all her being. He felt passionate pleasure and love at her. It went on for much longer than she had expected, the pleasure becoming so intense she briefly fainted into his arms.

Finally, at the age of twenty-five, Charles Stuart had found something he was good at. Outside, it finally stopped raining.

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