

No one opposed Madam Dragon, dowager countess Heath. Even King Charles, who moved to Oxford in 1642 to run a civil war from there, avoided her, who was even more despotic than he. And then a maidservant named Loyal arrived...

LOYAL AND THE DRAGON

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Loyal and the Dragon

Sally Watson

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CHAPTER TWO

THE MALAPERT MAIDSERVANT

A sudden frenzy of sleet driven by a keen winter wind swept angrily across Oxford, hurled itself up High Street past All Saints Church and several colleges, and beat against the casement windows of Heath Manor. The Dowager Viscountess Heath sat in her Great Chamber surveying her granddaughters. (Their servants, mere menials to be visible only at the whim of Madam, stood invisibly by the door.) From her throne-like armchair, the Dowager could look south, across the top landing of the wide graceful staircase, into the east end of the long gallery. By craning her head, she could see west through six smaller bedchambers. Madam liked to know what was going on in her house. To that end, she had caused the west staircase--which was out of her direct vision--to be blocked up.

A fire blazed in the large fireplace that shared the west wall with a lurid Bible tapestry. Madam disdained wallpaper, which had been invented over a century ago by the French. (Queen Henrietta was French.) Another tapestry dominated the south wall, a huge canopied four-poster bed dominated one corner; and the Dowager dominated everything else. This included grandchildren, maids and even her spoiled small dog Caesar, who took his name literally, and supposed himself to rule the world. Caesar believed himself to be huge, beautiful, ferocious, and alarming. He was actually small, craven, spoiled, noisy and bored. His only amusement was ferocious barking (from a safe distance) and biting whomever he dared. Usually Madam's hapless handmaiden Betty.

Now he eyed the new menials by the door. Mlle. Corbiot, the sallow, long-faced French governess, shrank from his gaze. She knew

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what he intended! So did Loyal. Her eyes narrowed and her jaw widened in silent threat. Caesar promptly fled under Madam's chair. Loyal smiled: bland, silent, content to be invisible for the moment, studying the dragon. A tiny elf of an old woman, she was, with damask cheeks, a searing tongue, ice-white hair, and blue eyes like bubbles of chilled glass. A tyrant. A bully, like her deplorable dog, who very much needed a lesson in manners. So did the Dowager--but that would be harder. Much! This dragon was like to prove very fierce indeed!

She surveyed her granddaughters and clearly thought little of them. "Stand straight!" she ordered. "Chins up. No, not so high. Men," Madam Grandmama asserted, "do not like assertive females." She brooded at these girl-children whom she now considered hers. They had Lennox blood and would Marry Well. She would see to it. They hastily curtsyed again. Cecily was trying a combination of meekness and charm, and managing to look merely bird-witted. Fingers of wind forced themselves into the room. Candles flickered and the tapestries waved, so that the walls of Jericho on one wall and Sodom and Gomorrah on another seemed in danger of tumbling a second time. Cecily eyed them uneasily.

"Turn your head. Haven't much of a profile, have you?" Madam Grandmama said accusingly. "No chin or nose to speak of. At least you have those eyes. Your hair will do, properly dressed." Cecily looked chastened and confused. It was clear to Loyal that she really did not understand where this monologue was leading.

She soon found out. The old woman stood, her ornate gown of a forty-years-past style falling in rich heavy folds around her. The rich fuchsia of the stomacher was unfortunate with her eyes. "Listen to me, Cecily. You are to Marry Well." Cecily looked alarmed--as well she might! Her grandmama snorted.

"I suppose you think you'd like a handsome young husband? Yes? Fustian, you beetle-witted flax-wench! He'd own you, rule you, gad about, drink and gamble, have affaires, and keep you pregnant until you died of it. Then he'd find a new wife. Close your mouth, greengirl, and think about it. All you need from a husband is a few sons and early widowhood. That's the goal of marriage, you must understand. To be a rich titled widow, child, is to have Power. The

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only way, for a woman. Until then, you are owned by either father or husband.”

This was, of course, true. Loyal silently thanked God that since she was a menial and an orphan, she could choose a husband with little bother. Sessy could not. She had always naively assumed that sweetness, guile and her parents would produce for her a pleasant and compliant husband who would agree to her wishes. This was unlikely. Cecily was a charming kitten of a girl, but--unlike Loyal--lacked the will to command.

“I shall make you the catch of England, and find you a rich elderly lord who will pass the title to your sons. An earl or marquis, at least. Or the heir to one,” she conceded to reality. (Marquises were regrettably scarce these days, and dukes even more so.) “Females have no titles of themselves; they must marry them.” Her eyes fell, disdainful, upon Loyal and Mademoiselle Corbiot.

“You! Who are you?” Her eyes stabbed the latter, who quailed and almost forgot her English. “Eh? Speak up! Governess? Corbet?” Mlle. Corbiot did not dare correct her. “Is their French adequate? And stitchery skills? Then an hour a day should suffice. I shall teach them social skills myself, mornings right after breakfast and chapel. Music and dancing masters. Cecily will be presented at a weekly Social Afternoon for ladies and an Evening for noblemen. Eligible bachelors, of course.” (She looked pleased. Loyal decided--correctly--that it was the prospect of more people to bully.) “Lark may attend the mornings. It is to be hoped that neither of you will disgrace me.”

It was, indeed. That ebony and silver cane looked ferocious.

“The rest of your time, you’ll earn your keep working in the house. My daughter complains that the servants keep quitting. I can’t think why!”

Loyal could. She was ready when those eyes fixed on her. “Handmaiden,” she said firmly, and curtsied.

“Speak when you’re spoken to! They’ll need you only to help them dress and undress. The rest of the time you’ll be housemaid.”

Not if Loyal could help it! “Your pardon, M’leddy, but I be no housemaid.”

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Thwap! The ebony cane was even harder than it looked. It even surprised a yelp out of Loyal, half-prepared though she was. Annoyed with herself, she refused to put a hand to her flaming arm to see if it was broken.

“You are whatever I say you are. Everyone who lives under my roof obeys me. Don’t stand there like brazen drabs! Go to! Obey me! Hence and avoid my sight!”

The mousy governess, quelled, fled into the adjoining bedchamber. Loyal moved about three feet and stood testing her invisibility. It held. Since no one ever disobeyed Madam, she could not see it when some one did. Only Caesar glared at Loyal with faint threatening growls which no one heeded.

The Dowager was now eyeing Cecily’s simple green gown, wide linen collar, and the fair hair that hung down her back as befitted a maiden. “With that baby face,” the Dowager went on, “you need an adult coiffure. Curls at the sides, a plait circling the back of your head. Not that I shall let you marry for a few years yet, but you must look old enough to be betrothed. Your new gowns,” she proclaimed, “will be modish, and in eye-taking colors: yellow, orange, scarlet, strong pink.”

Loyal winced. Sessy brightened. She had no sense at all of what colors became her. Neither, Loyal perceived, had Madam. Having heard enough, Loyal turned away through the doorway and, nursing her throbbing arm, began to explore the rest of the second floor. She strolled through the row of bedchambers running along the front of the house from the Great Chamber, each leading into the next. Each held a clothes press, stools, table, privy pot and large four-poster bed with hangings that provided privacy--if one were odd enough to care about that sort of thing. Most people were not.

At the fifth bedchamber, she found Peregrine with his face in a book. Probably Latin or Greek. (Fancy reading not merely one language, but two! And, Peregrine had told her, Greek had a quite different set of letters to stand for the same sounds! What wondrous idiocy!) Still, Loyal had always been fond of Peregrine, who was a goodly playmate when not being an intellectual. She stood still, surveying the mane of tawny hair, the lazy odd-shaped eyes, the errant

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eyebrow that aimed itself skyward, and even the lame leg badly broken and badly set when he was two.

Presently he looked up, and she grinned. "Loyal!" he said, pleased. "Where's Sessy?"

She jerked her cleft chin. "In with Madam Dragon."

He canted his eyebrow. "She'll be eaten alive!"

Indeed she would! There was nothing either of them could do about it. Rueful, Peregrine slanted his brow at Loyal. "Have you met Aunt Bear yet?"

"Who?"

"The dragon's daughter. Ursula. It means bear, you know. She's not unlike. She rules downstairs. When Madam Grandmama lets her."

He turned back to Plato, everything else vanishing from his mind. Loyal moved to the last bedchamber where Bevil, the Lennox Heir, was looking admiringly into a mirror. Guinea-gold curls flowed over a deep lace collar and rich sapphire velvet. Ribbons adorned one of his lovelocks. His eyes were as blue as Madam Grandmama's, his face as lovely as that of the King's nephew Prince Rupert. Lovelier, he decided, pleased. He glanced up at Loyal and failed to recognize her. (Bevil seldom remembered anything not directly important to his own consequence.) He merely saw a lively-looking maidservant, noted it for the future, and returned to the mirror.

His room, the last, opened into the west end of the long gallery, which ran from end to end of the second floor. There were windows along the south wall, portraits on the north, and Bible tapestries at both ends. One was of Samson destroying the temple, the other of the Red Sea destroying Pharaoh's army. (All the Dowager's tapestries were scenes of God's power and divine punishment, for she strongly believed in power for those who could use it properly. Like herself and God. She loved power, did Madam. In fact, she took it for granted. She had nearly arranged the betrothal of Bevil, and it had never occurred to her to inform his father.)

Canon Titmarsh, who served as both doorman and chaplain, strolled into the gallery in pursuit of his own portly belly, and beetled pale eyebrows at Loyal. She angled a truculent jaw at him and he

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hastily followed his belly out again. He would be no trouble. A young maid, painfully trying to clean the diamond-shaped window panes with one hand, glanced around nervously. Loyal recognized her.

“You be Betty,” she announced, and frowned on the heavily bandaged hand. “You shouldn’t be using that. Was it Madam or her pernicious dog bit thee?” Blood spotted the rag. “Has anyone put oil of lavender or honey on it? Nay, I suppose not.” She hesitated. It was against her principles to volunteer at housework, but-- “Here, let be. I’ll do that for thee.”

She snatched the cloth from the fearful girl, winced and changed arms, saw the scared glance aim itself at Madam’s Great Chamber, and grinned. “Madam Dragon be busy bullying her granddaughters,” she said easily, and grinned again at Betty’s horrified brown eyes. “You may have the cloth again ere she comes forth. Now, tell me of the household.”

But Betty seemed unable to do so, and Loyal’s arm probably hurt at least as much as Betty’s hand. With another shrug she surrendered the cloth again, and--not particularly wishing to pass the dragon’s doorway--looked around for the back stairs.

They were near Bevil’s chamber--and blocked. Loyal considered the matter and went back to Betty. “Where be the servants’ staircase?” she demanded, sure that there was one. Betty pointed. It was in the west wall, discreetly behind the edge of the Samson tapestry. Madam had left that stairway open because the Lower Orders must not sully the front one. It had never occurred to her that any of her kin or guests would ever dream of entering the servants’ area. Madam was a snob. (She was also mistaken. Loyal would have bet a year’s wages that Peregrine entered it freely.) Loyal opened the door.

The stairs were dim, narrow, steep and bare, since the Lower Orders did not need light or convenience. They led up to the third floor (doubtless where the servants slept and things were stored) and also down. Loyal briskly felt her way down. There were no cobwebs, since it was used a great deal; and any rats kept away, rather to her relief. She did not fear rats, but she was not fond of them. Mice were rather sweet--at least the small ones.

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Presently she reached a landing with a door, pushed it open, found herself in a huge kitchen which probably took up a quarter of the ground floor. There was the usual fireplace, large enough to roast whole animals. Doors led presumably to the stillroom, the bolting-house, the bake-house, the back garden and the buttery. To her left, was a doorway to a small parlor; ahead was the dining room. And facing her was the scowling, bear-shaped, tallow-faced, gray-haired, puce-clad figure of the dragon's daughter.

Mistress Ursula's life was largely devoted to furtive revenge on Madam Mother, overlapping to anyone else within range, for her anger was all encompassing. Not only because her mother had never allowed her to marry: she had never much wanted to. What she had always wanted and never had was freedom of choice, freedom from bullying, and freedom to run a household with no meddling from a vicious old woman.

She in turn saw a wiry girl with large front teeth, unruly chestnut hair that escaped in all directions from the demure white cap and thick plait, and the face of a particularly wicked squirrel.

They looked at each other without pleasure.

"Perdy," said one. "You're no French mouse, so you must be Loyal, come to help me with the housework."

It was worth another try, and there were no canes in sight. "Nay, Mistress Ursula, I'm to do all other things *but* housework," she said untruthfully. (Loyal was always perfectly happy to lie in a good cause--and her own welfare was the very best of causes.) "Errands. Shopping. I be wickedly clever at bargaining. And my da was a gardener and taught me well. And I can help in the stables. And Sessy will need me with her all the rest of the time, to help her deal with the dragon."

Having all but asked to have her ears boxed, Loyal was neither surprised nor annoyed when it happened. She merely wondered whether it was a blow of anger or principle, and decided that had Mistress Ursula been fond of her mother, she would have hit harder. So she set her feet more widely, and clasped her throbbing arm against her waist. She looked about as remorseful as Boudicca. Two or three other maidservants had gathered at the far end of the kitchen and were

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watching, agape. Mistress Ursula eyed Loyal as she might a pheasant that had been hanging overlong and become much too decayed to eat.

“Cock’s bones!” she sniffed quellingly. “Is that how you behave at Gracewood? You’ll not do so here. And did Elizabeth never teach you to curtsy?”

Loyal, unquelled, bent her knees ever so slightly and went on looking. Mistress Ursula reminded her vaguely of a candle that had been extinguished against its will and was still smoldering. All the same, she seemed preferable to her mother. Much! One might argue with her. Possibly. Or possibly not. One might try.

“’Tis a sorry waste to put me at a thing I do badly,” she reasoned, “when I do other things well. M’leddy Heath--”

--sent a note to me,” said Mistress Ursula grimly. “About you.”

“Strewth!” bleated Loyal, shocked at such perfidy.

“Quite,” agreed the other.

Loyal rallied. “Ah, Mistress, but you see she had not the whole of it. Her housekeeper understood well how poor I am at housewifely matters, and set me at other tasks.”

“If you do badly, you can be taught or dismissed.” Ursula watched the wide mouth pucker, thin, relax, start to open. “You’re about to say there’s a great shortage of servants in Oxford, and you can find other employment.” She was. The lips closed, considered, parted again, were interrupted again. “And how will you protect Cecily, then?”

Loyal’s lips closed once more. She cocked her head. When in danger of defeat, curtsy and shift to a flank attack. The curtsy recognized a worthy opponent. It was also assertive.

“I know something of healing, too, Mistress. And ‘tes my belief that Betty’s hand needs a leech and some oil of lavender and a poultice and a proper bandage.”

She had her effect. “Betty? That wretched Caesar bit her again, I make no doubt! Why did you not say so at once, malapert baggage? Where is she? Agnes, go fetch her. Hannah, bring hot water to the stillroom and fetch the leeches. Now, saucy drab, you will show us whether you have the skill you claim.”

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Loyal did so. When the leeches had sucked up as much of the poisoned blood as they would, and the poultice was applied, Mistress Ursula nodded grudgingly and turned on her. “And next, you,” she said in reward. “Here’s arnica for that arm of yours. I trust my mother has not broken it, for there’s a deal of silver wants cleaning.”

Beshrew it; her eyes were much too sharp, that one! Loyal gritted her teeth. She particularly loathed cleaning silver. Impudent blue eyes and dour blue-gray ones challenged each other. The owner of the dour ones had all the ammunition and knew it.

“I suggest,” she said when it was clear that this had been well established, “that you try very hard to appear as meek and obedient as is proper to a female and a servant.” Loyal narrowed her eyes, wondering if Mistress Ursula had deliberately said ‘appear’ rather than ‘become’. It was, she decided, possible. Barely.

But her new mistress had not finished. “And you may suggest to Cecily that she study how best to defend herself from Madam Dragon without your help. No one can help her with that. Not you, for you were clearly born bold and never had to learn it. Not even I,” she added bitterly, “since I never learned, myself.”

Loyal, for once, was struck silent.

CHAPTER TEN

PERNICIOUS ROGUE

Oxford was depressed. Here it was June, and victory still eluded the Royalist Cause. Unacceptable! God was definitely slacking. 'Twas said that the *morbus campestris* sickness was spreading. So was quarrelling and backbiting among the King's leaders. The common soldiers were vexed, because they were afraid of Rupert and Boy, and--worse--had not been paid for weeks. The colleges grumbled that the king had quite stripped them of their silver plate in order to mint more money--and what had he done with it? Not paid his soldiers, certainly! They had begun sleeping, hungry, on straw mattresses in the streets. The gentry were packed more tightly than ever in stuffy garrets, and even the aristocracy were now crowded and uncomfortable as never before in their pampered lives.

Only in Heath Manor did laughter appear, hesitant, feeling very much out of place. What on earth was it doing here? Madam Dowager certainly did not approve of it, nor did her daughter. Still, here it was. .

Onyx, ignoring the Dowager's stern order that he was not to leave the Great Chamber, shot at full speed through the row of bedchambers and turned tightly into the far end of the long gallery. His wildly scabbling feet caused the rush mats to shoot off in all directions, to his great delight and Loyal's amusement. He picked up speed on his way back to the landing, skidded again in an even tighter turn there, and raced recklessly down the stairs. There, he circled the wide front hall, ran deliberately between the outraged Canon Titmarsh's short stout legs, peered into the winter parlor and frolicked through the library, the sewing room, and the small parlor--where all he

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need do was look at his calico sister to send her diving under a very low trestle cupboard. Finally he ran back to the front hall and through the wide central doors to the grand parlor, where he paused, picked up regal dignity, and strutted into the dining room and through to the kitchen, feet, head and chest lifted like a thoroughbred horse. The kitchen staff smiled at him fondly. Always good for a laugh, that one. And he were beginning to show interest in they mice-holes. At such a young age, too!

Upstairs, the Dowager stared balefully at the empty doorway. Why had she ever agreed to take the wretched beast, who never obeyed unless he chose? Outrageous impudence! This was the only creature in the world who had ever dared simply to ignore her commands. ‘Twould not do! She would teach him discipline! Just wait until he showed his insolent black face back in here!

The long golden afternoon was peacefully waning when there was a roar from the Great Chamber. A silver and ebony cane came hurtling into the long gallery, smashing a fine old porcelain vase. It was closely followed by Caprice, who dived behind the nearest tapestry, and Caesar, who scrambled on his short legs all the way downstairs and to the kitchen. Loyal, Mistress Ursula and most of the household, rushing up the stairs, almost fell over him.

Not that there was any great mystery about the source of the roar. But the Dowager never raised her aristocratic voice, and this was a bellow. Cecily and Lark eyed the shards of the vase uneasily and tiptoed across the landing.

In the Great Chamber, Madam Grandmama was on her feet, trying to clutch her bleeding hand and point at the same time to Onyx, who sat in the middle of the floor with perfect aplomb, chest out. Only his tail swept back and forth across the floor in lordly irritation.

“Out! Away, you pernicious rogue! Ungrateful rantipole! Hence and avoid my sight! Take him away! A pox on the churlish varlet! I say, remove him this instant!”

No one did so. It did not, on the whole, seem a good idea. The staff hovered outside the doorway trying to be invisible. Everyone stared at Onyx, who began pointedly to wash the bad taste from his mouth. He did not look very removable. Madam waved her wounded

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hand at him. "Begone! Get rid of him! This instant! Kill the wretch!" Onyx paused in his cleansing, favored them all with a quietly sinister look which no one cared to challenge. "Obey me! All of you!" For a lady who never screeched, she was coming perilously close to it.

Lark, from behind Aunt Ursula, ventured to kneel and reach out a tentative hand. "Onyx?" Onyx did not deign to look at her. He finished washing his face, stood, stretched insultingly--first his hind legs and then the front ones--yawned, lifted his tail, chest and chin, and sauntered out, plummy tail and lean haunches swaying insolently.

And still they stood, staring after him. Madam's voice grated them to attention. "Well? Are you seized by the devil? That cat *is* the devil! He tried to kill me!" She waved the bleeding hand again. No one dared ask how she had earned the four punctures on it--but the entire household knew that she had earned them.

Mistress Ursula jerked her chin. "Loyal, fetch medications. Oil of lavender, calendula ointment--aye, and honey. Agnes, bring up a kettle of hot water and some clean rags. Sessy, a bowl, and salt. Betty, the leeches. Lark, stay out of the way."

With Loyal's expert help, Mistress Ursula leeches, soaked and dressed the wounds--warily. One never knew whether Madam would submit to doctoring like a lion or a lamb--though the odds were for the lion. This time, surprisingly, although the punctures were quite deep, she just sat grumpily silent. Clearly she was more wounded in spirit than in body. They all wondered exactly what she had done to offend Onyx. They would never know. But he would be protected from her vengeance: they were all fond of him, and would try to keep him well out of her sight. If they could find him. He was nowhere to be seen. Neither were Caesar or Caprice.

Caesar stayed firmly hidden for the rest of the day. Caprice presently crept out from behind the tapestry and curled up under the oaken settle. But when night came and the late summer sunset had turned the northwest sky crimson and gold, with Madam back in her Chamber being a Foxe's Martyr, and Cecily, Lark, Caprice and Mlle. Corbiot in the long gallery making music, Lark raised her head.

"Look," she whispered, round-eyed.

They stopped playing and looked. Lord Onyx had just swaggered up the stairs, and was now doing a tour of the long gallery as though he'd never seen it before. He paused to sniff at Caprice (who growled warningly) and passed on. Having finished, he sat upright in the center of the floor, chest well out, and gave the particular ear-shattering yell that commanded instant attention.

Silence from the Great Chamber. Onyx yelled again, piercing and demanding. "Yow-ow-ow-ow-OWWW!" He really had the most unpleasant feline voice any of them had ever heard, and he was outdoing himself. From across the landing came a voice almost as harshly unpleasant.

"Well, come along, then, if you must. Brutish barbermonger!" it added. "Abhorred villain! Cullionly miscreant!" Madam had a splendid vocabulary of invective, and it was clear she was not nearly at the end of it. "Limb of Satan!" she went on in a lower voice as the svelte black flanks strutted across the landing. "Churlish caitiff! Vile monstrous knave!" From the Great chamber, presently, came the sound of gravelly purring. And when Loyal peered in later, she beheld Onyx seated on Madam's lap, leaning up against her stomacher, eyes blissfully shut.

Inside the bed hangings, Caesar snuffled unhappily. He had never, in fact, been happy--but he had not known it before. Now he knew very well that he was miserable, and his Human had rejected him for the Monster. He looked around for some one to bite, and could not find anyone, for the Betty one was hiding downstairs and the Loyal one would make him sorry. She had told him so, and he believed her.

On a warm afternoon, Madam stalked into the small parlor and fixed Lark with an eye like a sword. "Go up and protect Caesar from Lord Onyx. Find out what that villainous cat keeps doing to make him yelp. Cecily, let me see your needlework."

Caprice quietly vanished under the trestle cupboard. She had decided very quickly that this was one thing in her new home that might indeed Bite.

Cecily rose, curtsied, and held up her crewel work with the face of shattering saintliness that she had cultivated this past eight

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months. Grandmama examined it as sharply as a robin looking for worms. When she failed to find any flaws (for Cecily sewed as she did everything, with exquisite joy in perfection) it made her crosser than ever.

“You’re hunching your shoulders, girl: straighten up. How do you expect to find a husband?” And she was gone, to poke around the kitchen, berate Ursula about the lack of staff, and then stalk back upstairs to inspect all the bedchambers. Cecily scowled at her departing back. When she saw Perry again, she must tell him that one was, in fact, not obliged either to like or love one’s grandparents, for she did not. She almost wished she could become a queen’s lady-in-waiting, as Mother had been. True, Mother had disliked it--but how lovely ‘twould be to get away from Madam Grandmama! (Still, it might be going from ague to plague, for Oriel said most courtiers and ladies were exceedingly pernicious, and the queen, worse. And the ladies Cecily had met--except for Lady Kirke--were indeed wonderfully churlish.)

Caesar dreamed that he was a puppy again, with his mother grooming him lovingly. He awoke, and for an instant, still believed it. Then he discovered to his horror that it was the Monster, who had invaded his private retreat and was energetically washing him. He made a sound somewhere between yelp and snarl, and bolted from the bed.

But the next day he awoke to find a warm being cuddling against him in what was undeniably a comfortable and comforting manner.

And again. And again. It seemed the Monster had chosen to like him. Caesar growled a little, remembering certain stings on his nose and on his rump--but there were no stings just now. Just drowsy cuddlesome softness. Presently he stopped fighting it and accepted that the world was again quite changed--and this time for the better. His human began to caress him again. The Monster started playing with him, batting at his ears with soft unstinging paws. Slowly he felt less need to prove his importance by biting people. He did not even mind--

much--that the sharp black chin resting on his back seemed betimes to drool upon him.

The Dowager Countess regarded them with mixed feelings. "Wretches!" she remarked, not altogether displeased. And speaking of wretches-- "Fetch those Scottish wretches to me at once," she commanded Loyal.

They promptly arrived in her Great Chamber and bowed with engaging reverence and merry smiles.

"Cecily's quite old enough to be betrothed," she announced.

The lads turned alert eyes to her, and agreed warily that indeed she was.

"Might either of you aspire to her hand?"

Brown eyes met blue, and their owners beamed and nodded.

The Dowager snorted. "Presumptuous! Cecily is daughter to a viscount. What are you? Scottish barbarians! What prospects have you? Even John," she pointed out, "will inherit a castle."

"Och," Alex smiled. "But Ian will have a title, as ever was, and a fine estate and much land: 'tis only that Highland nobility are not called earls or viscounts, but clan chiefs and chieftains." She snorted, not believing this truth for an instant. So Alex shrugged and added a bit of embroidery. "Ian will be something between duke and marquis."

"Taradiddles!" she snapped. "I permit you to live here so long as you amuse me. But don't presume on that imaginary kinship: you are both quite ineligible to wed her. Particularly you, Ian. Such a misalliance is out of the question."

Ian sighed. "I fear me so," he agreed sadly. "Twould be different with Alex, for his ancestor married yours, as ever was, and no harm done to him; for he was not a clan chief. But 'tis my father is Cameron of Glenfern, and I his heir. And no Glenfern," he told her with quiet pride, "has ever wedded a Sassenach."

He smiled sweetly, they both bowed low and were gone before his words had worked their way through her shocked ears to bemused brain.

She threw her cane anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KING CHARLES

She did not wait to see more. Too much time had already been wasted. She rushed in at the kitchen entrance, past the anxious Mistress Ursula, and on down through the wine cellar. “No time!” she called over her shoulder. “I must warn Lord Montrose!” And she was off, without hindrance, through the tunnel to the rain-soaked opening, the drenched thick leaves of the laurel hedge, and presently over the wall into Magpie Lane. At the High she turned left and raced to the Star Inn--where, unsurprisingly, a splendidly-dressed doorman barred the door to the ragged, mud-spattered street wench who presented herself with the arrogance of a lordling.

“I’ve an urgent message for the Earl of Montrose,” she proclaimed, and scowled at his scorn. “Or the Marquis of Staveley,” she added more loudly. Tuneless she might be, but her voice carried like a clarion. “M’lords Montrose and Staveley will be sore angered an’ you fetch them not!” What if she could not reach them! Or if they were not here! She clenched her fists and drew her breath for a louder clarion.

It was not needed. At a corner table, a tall, gaunt, sable-clad figure turned, spared a quelling glance for the doorman and an urbane one for Loyal. “How now; ‘tis the malapert minx. What’s amiss?”

In a moment she was leaning her fists on the table, giving orders like the original Queen Boudicca. Well, why not? She had the information, and she had had time to think it through. “M’lord Montrose, you must at once to the King; he sent Prince Rupert to fetch you. And the Watchers mean ill; I think ‘tes the thing they have feared.”

Sally Watson

“What thing?” Two pairs of eyes narrowed at her.

“Why, doubtless that the King has heard what Argyll and Hamilton are truly doing in Scotland!” Why were they staring? How could they think she had not understood all that talk? But Staveley raised his arched brows.

“How if His Majesty has heard lies, and sends for Montrose to chastise him?”

She shook her head so that curls escaped and her long braid flapped. “Nay, for then he’d have sent soldiers. Not Rupert alone, and looking--” She paused. She did not know the word, so she made a face like a chagrined squirrel. They nodded. “So you must go at once to the King, M’lord, and not return to Heath Manor, for the Watchers will wait for a chance to slay thee.”

Infuriatingly, he sat still. “How do you know?”

Angrily, she repeated the Gaelic snatches she had heard--and in the Gaelic.

“Ah,” said the Marquis, looking at Montrose’s face. “Very convincing, I assume?” He stood. “Then I think we will just--escort--our friend safely to Christ Church, mmm?”

Montrose stood as well. So did Loyal. “Is it worth perhaps--a shilling?” she asked, hopeful. She thought of something. “No, ‘tes not enough, for I’ve more news of import. Say--two silver shillings?”

She received a small sharp slap upon the cheek. Knowing the Marquis by now, she merely presented him with a small cheeky smile and level eyes. He met them, scornful. “Do you never do aught for love or friendship?” he inquired, and turned to lead the way from the inn.

“Strewth!” she told his back, indignant. “I’d warn thee in any case! But that,” she pointed out, “should not prevent thy gratitude, either. Especially,” she told them as they emerged and turned down Cornmarket, “as you’ve not yet heard the other news. Hurry!”

For the entire short distance to Christ Church College, she scurried between two noble lords, describing the whipping and Ian’s part: information and orders in equal measure. They raised tolerant eyebrows across her head. What a wondrous froward wench! Amazing to think she was no relation to Madam!

Loyal and the Dragon

Loyal, carried away with her own plans, never noticed their amusement. "--so M'lord Montrose must stay safe here, and His Majesty must send soldiers at once to seize the Watchers before they do something evil. But His Majesty be of no use at all to Sessy, any more than her father. 'T'es you must take care of that," she ordered Staveley with utter confidence that he could and would. "We must take her home to Gracewood, and at once. Ian and Alex and Lachlan will come, but they be not English: they'd get lost. And only three against attack. We'll need thee, M'lord, and your man-at-arms. And even Hodge," she conceded.

"So you have it all worked out, Colonel Minx?" he fleered in the way that once she had found daunting. She no longer did.

"Aye." Of course. How not? "I've had more time to think it through," she told them kindly, and with that they were at Christ Church gate.

No question this time of being admitted! One look at the Marquis, and the guards stepped back respectfully, with merely a brief doubtful glance at Montrose and a still more doubtful one at the sodden and muddy Loyal. "Send word at once to His Majesty," Staveley told the guard. "Say that here is the Earl of Montrose, whom he wishes to see."

They were in an entranceway. Beyond, she saw at last the fabled Quadrangle--the Tom Quad--enormous and well-trampled by humans and cattle, with the tower and bell, and many gorgeously dressed men and a few women. A pity she had but one set of eyes! She craned to see everything at once, whisked a triumphant skirt at the least respectful of the guards--and then they were across the Quad, and she gaping at a miniature man--scarcely over five feet, in fact-- with a pointed beard and dark curls, to whom both Lords were bowing deeply.

This was King Charles? The King who mysteriously held the loyalty if not the respect of Ian and Alex and others: who was at once vacillating and mulish, who listened to all the wrong people, like Digby, and who, having started the civil war might well lose it?

He turned his head and looked at her.

'Twas the King indeed; no one could look at his face and doubt it! Loyal remained stuck in a deep curtsey, head tipped upward, gaping

like a toothy squirrel. She felt drowned in a sea of Royal Consequence that put the Marquis quite in the shade and made Madam seem like an upstart. Here was a man who did not merely believe he had Divine Right to rule--he knew it with every bone and every hair in his being: knew it so conclusively that perhaps it did not matter whether God knew it or not.

The Marquis spoke. The King first looked uncertain and then obstinate; and Loyal could not hear what he answered. But presently he went away into a room with Montrose. Loyal arose and tipped her head at the Marquis. He had not much enjoyed the past few moments. Loyal could tell by the curl to his lips and eyebrows. He seemed to have forgotten her. Then his lip curled a little further, and he nodded at her.

“Is he going to take care of everything?” she begged. “Montrose and the Watchers--”

He started to turn away, turned back with obvious patience. “You had the right of it, minx. Almost. His Majesty has learned that an army of hostile Scots Covenanters is on the march toward England against us. Hamilton’s treason--or ineptitude?--is now blatantly apparent, and Montrose proven right. The King will keep him here in Christ Church henceforth, as Royal Advisor on Scotland. And doubtless raise him to the rank of marquis and, when winter ends, send him north to raise an army.”

“And what will happen to Argyll and Hamilton? And the Watchers?” she demanded bloodthirstily, quite forgetting that she was not really a Royalist in principle.

His smile was wintry. He had a great dislike of treachery. “The Duke of Hamilton is expected to visit his--er--beloved monarch again soon. I fancy he will have a--er--surprise awaiting him.”

Loyal, beaming, very nearly reached out and took his hand as if he were her Da. Just in time, she had second thoughts. “And will His Majesty send troops at once to arrest the Watchers? Before they harm any at Heath Manor? Come, let us go with them.”

“His Majesty may do so anon,” said the Marquis, expressionless. “I have further--er--business here. You may wait here or not as you choose.”

Loyal and the Dragon

“But--” she protested at once. “‘Tis not soon enough, ‘anon’! He must do so presently, at once, ere the Watchers harm--”

A sharp slap to her cheek silenced her. His baleful eyes kept her silent. This impudent wench did not in the least know her place and probably never would. He did not know why tolerated her. (Doubtless that was why.) ’Twould never do to let her suspect his soft spot for her. If she was impossible now, what would she then become?

“No one tells the King what he must do,” he said inaccurately, for the Queen did it constantly, and Digby and other lords; and Hamilton had done so until now.

She eyed him warily, decided to risk it. “Then what of Cecily?”

“Cecily is my--er--business now,” he told her, turning away. “I go to see her father.”

“But ‘tes-- You--”

He glanced around. “You, Queen Minx; did your highness not--er--appoint me to be your--er--commander in chief?”

“But he be too muddy-mettled to--”

Suddenly he was angry. “How dare you, ignorant baggage, saucy greengirl, presume to judge him muddy-mettled? What do you know? You, who were allowed to run wild, even less disciplined than Cecily: what would you know about growing up under the heel of Madam with no succor or escape? Or--choice.” He stared down, icy, at her stricken face, and turned again. “I shall to Heath Manor when I can. You may wait or go now.” He did not even wait to learn which she would do.

Loyal stormed out of Christ Church College past the startled guards, and turned right, up the slope toward Carfax Tower and the High. Why had no one but herself the wisdom and courage to act? She raged at Staveley, at His Majesty, Lord Heath, the Watchers, Madam--even Cecily--which she knew was altogether unfair. Sessy was wondrous brave about everything but hatefulness. And, truth to tell, Loyal herself felt pigeon-hearted about one or two things which she never mentioned to anyone. This did not matter now. With no one to help, Loyal must do it all herself, and only Lachlan and Ian and Alex to aid her.

Sally Watson

The rain began to fall in waves of cold unpleasantness, quite matching her mood, which was changing now from anger to--uneasiness? A few steps before reaching the High, she paused. Was it, after all, a good idea to return alone? What if she ran into Callum or even Seumas? Should she go back to Christ Church and wait for the Marquis, after all?

This idea at once caused her to be angry at herself as well as everyone else. She wrapped the cloak (probably, from its size, Agnes's) tightly around her, marched forward, turned right on the High, and then, assailed by the conviction that it was a in truth a bad idea, pulled the hood over most of her face and peered from side to side under it, furtive as a stoat in another's territory.

Even on rainy days, the High was always busy, with soldiers, townsmen, scholars and strangers. 'Twas the strangers that worried her. Particularly Scottish ones. Peering ahead, she could see nothing untoward. No one seemed to notice her--but she kept hearing sibilant S's and rolling R's. She hurried a little. 'Twas none so far to Heath Manor: only half that far to Magpie Lane. She had passed All Saints Church; this was King Edward Street, and next, Oriel Street and Oriel College. . .

A gust of wind blew--possibly?--a voice like Geordie's--which might have said "The lass-- Take her--"

In panic, she began to run, hearing or imagining heavy feet behind. No use trying to stop strangers for help. At Oriel College she hesitated for one breath. John Bankes lived there--but females were not allowed in colleges (except for Merton which the Queen had temporarily taken over) and Loyal would probably not get past the door even if he were in and not with the headache. And Loyal had had her fill of trying to depend on anyone else. She sprinted past Oriel, turned right again on Magpie Lane, hurtled down it, and was over the wall in a flurry of skirts and cloak, burrowing into the hedge like a hedgehog, and then becoming as still as a rabbit, listening.

Silence, except for her thudding heart and the rain pattering heavily on the broad leathery leaves which, heartless, dumped collected water on Loyal. She did not notice. Some one wandered past, chatting. Over the wall a Highlander prowled up and down Magpie Lane, *sgian*

Loyal and the Dragon

dhu in hand, in baffled silence before shrugging and going back to the High.

For the rest of her life, Loyal would not know whether she had fled from real or imagined danger. She took a deep breath and headed for the tunnel.

No one opposed Madam Dragon, dowager countess Heath. Even King Charles, who moved to Oxford in 1642 to run a civil war from there, avoided her, who was even more despotic than he. And then a maidservant named Loyal arrived...

LOYAL AND THE DRAGON

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