

THE CHATELAINE

AN IRREVERENT LOOK AT THE MATTER OF BRITAIN

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Serialised version – chapters 6-10

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In fact, the nymph was there, as Mother Goose very well knew. But what Mother Goose didn't know was that this nymph was no ordinary nymph; she was Ninian, sister of Vivian, the Lady of the Lake, and of Nimuë, the White Lady who had grown tired of the wizard Merlin harrassing her and had buried him, alive and forever, under a great slab of stone. Ninian, like Vivian, preferred to live as a water nymph: the White Ladies always had that option, though most chose to marry and live in a castle, at least until things went wrong and life among *people* began to be unbearable.

Ninian had been thinking exactly those thoughts as she swam upriver through the forest towards the secluded series of falls and pools where she now spent more and more time.

No one saw her as she passed. She hardly ever broke the surface, and when she did it was always in deep shadow, or behind some reeds, or under the branches of an overhanging willow. And it was always quite silent. Unlike the noisy moorhens and coots. Once a moorhen had come up at exactly the same time she did and made a splash and Old Goose had looked up and seen her. After that, of course, he was on the watch. But she didn't mind him, had even spoken to him a couple of times. Not him, *her*. Old Mother Goose. She smiled. Better. He'd never been much of a success as a man.

Now she was a woman, Ninian decided, she would show her how to do some things: do various tricks, cast certain spells. She would get a reputation for being a witch, of course, but that couldn't be helped. At least Old Mother Goose would be a "white" witch, as people called the nice ones, the harmless ones; and you couldn't get more harmless than her.

Which was *not* true of Ninian. Oh no. But the White Lady she'd had in mind when she was thinking about life among *people* becoming unbearable, the White Lady she thought really might very soon return to the water, was the Queen herself, Guenevere; and Guenevere was harmless, at least in the sense that she wasn't malicious, that she never did anything spiteful. The harm she did was not intentional. Was it her fault men fell in love with her, fought over her, left wives and children to follow her in the hope of catching a glimpse of her, or, if they were rich, powerful men, abducted her, held her captive, forced themselves on her? Or maybe she sometimes went of her own accord, gave herself willingly, flattered by all the attention.

Ninian's sympathies were all with Guenevere. No man could understand Guenevere or her needs. Least of all an Arthur, or a Lancelot. Women, intelligent, sensitive ones, could understand – but couldn't sympathise unless they, like her, were irresistible to men. At least they didn't laugh at her, mock her needs, as men, and other, lesser, women, did. And certain other very superior women, who should know better.

Men like Sir Hugue. Though he, in his brutal simplicity, understood Guenevere better than Arthur or Lancelot, the pretentious idealists, ever could. They put her up on a pedestal, turned her into a goddess who represented *their* ideal of womanhood, and were aghast when she failed. Sir Hugue had no ideal of womanhood.

Superior women like Morgan le Fay. She would continue to make Guenevere's life more of a misery, more of a shambles, than Guenevere made it herself.

Ninian knew as soon as she put her head up that Sir Hugue was there. His man smell was almost as overpowering as Mother Goose's old-witch smell. And there was another man. Then she heard music, the sound of a lyre, a man singing.

It was beautiful.

Then she smiled. So he had brought a minstrel with him, had he? As though she was some foolish little nymph with antennae curling up from her head and nothing inside that head but the urge to sway and dance in the water and out on the grassy bank in time to the music.

She wasn't that easy to enthrall.

She swam to the bank, slid up out of the water, sat on the grass with her chin on her knees, then changed her mind and stretched out, openly, languidly. And waited.

When they came to the pool, Sir Hugue discovered, to his delight, that they didn't need Mother Goose to show them where the nymph might be hiding. She was sitting quite brazenly on the opposite bank.

She had long dark red hair, and was indeed very white. After a while, his eyes stopped popping. Right. She was there. His nymph. Now he became proprietary, looked for flaws. There were none. Her body was perfect.

He knew of no one – no body – except perhaps the peerless Guenevere herself, who could match it. Then he remembered Morgan, who was Guenevere's peer in every respect. The three of them then, and only this one would ever be available to him. All right, Guenevere was universally available, but he was not a man to court the wrath of his king for an hour with a wench, no matter how gorgeous. Any wench would do when the cock upped and crowed. Look at the fun he'd had with Old Melly. Perhaps he *would* go back there after he'd finished with this nymph. She looked pretty snooty

'Come.' He brought the minstrel with him down to the water's edge. 'Sit there. Play.'

The minstrel played. The forest fell silent.

Even the birds listened.

The nymph sat on the grass on her side of the pool with a beatific look on her face. Moved, but unmoving.

'Damn. This is not working,' muttered Sir Hugue. Should he call her, or would that scare her off? Finally, he whispered to the minstrel to call her.

'No!' protested Mother Goose.

Sir Hugue boxed her ears for her again. She sank down onto her knees, clasping her ears and head, and making a strange high keening sound.

Sir Hugue kicked her to be silent, and the wailing turned to gulping sobs.

Female noises, Sir Hugue thought, amused. She definitely was a woman. He turned back to the minstrel. 'Call her, I told you!'

The minstrel cleared his throat, delicately, one finger to his lips.

Sir Hugue watched him, eyes suddenly gleaming. This one was no rival for the nymph's attentions. Pity he hadn't realised. He could have had some fun with him on the journey down. Made him sing the damsel's part ...

'Call her!'

'Come closer, beautiful nymph.'

As though she had only been waiting to be asked, she slid into the water and swam slowly across to them. When she was two yards from them, she stopped.

The minstrel sang on, in a trance.

The nymph listened, apparently equally entranced.

'Tell her to come closer!'

'Yet closer, O beautiful nymph.'

She came closer.

She was perfect. Her eyes were like Guenevere's.

She offered him her hand.

He leant forward to help her up out of the water. He took her hand, she pulled, and he flew over her head, out to the deepest part of the pool, where he hit the water with a great splash and plunged to the bottom.

At least he could swim. Unlike most knights, he was a powerful swimmer. Lancelot would have drowned. He laughed, swallowed water, and choked.

He kicked free of the weeds that clung to his legs. Gawaine and his brothers would drown, too. Of course, Arthur and Kay could swim. And Modred. Or so they claimed.

As he rose to the surface, more weeds encircled him. He tried to kick free of them, but found he couldn't. He began to panic. He couldn't move his legs at all.

He got his head out.

On the bank, the naked nymph was sitting beside the minstrel, gazing at him.

He'd kill her.

'The weeds!' he roared. 'They're holding me! Trying to drown me!'
'Shh,' said the nymph.

'Don't shhh me!' And as he shouted, he felt the weeds tug him down, gently but irresistibly, till his mouth was below the surface.

A witch.

He could just breathe through his nostrils, with his head tipped right back.

Another witch. He preferred the old, smelly one. But the panic left him. He was a Knight of the Round Table, not some ordinary little man who scared easily. Now he knew she was in control of the situation, he waited patiently, breathing through his nose.

It grew dark.

The music had stopped, he realised.

They had gone.

And he was still held there by the weeds.

Suddenly, he panicked again, kicked frantically. His legs came clear.

He swam to the edge of the river and clambered up onto the bank. He'd kill *both* of them.

He went to the cave. No one was there.

The moon came out. And there she was, white, as Mother Goose had said, in the moonlight. White and perfect. Sitting up on a rock beside the waterfall, watching him. Like a queen. Like Guenevere. But if she was like Guenevere ...

He approached her.

She spoke first. 'Take those wet clothes off, sir knight. You'll catch cold.'

He stopped where he was, hastily stripped the sodden leathers and linens off. Then leaving everything in a pile on the ground, he resumed his walk towards her.

'My,' she said, gazing down at him.

Then, when he had come far enough, she said, 'Stop there.'

He had no intention of stopping there, but he did so.

'Kneel down.'

He knelt. Again he had no choice.

'Mother Goose is hiding – from you. Jean de Triers has fled – from you.'

'Jean de Triers?'

'The minstrel. You rode with him all these days, yet never learnt his name? Jean has fled back to his home in the north. It seems no one around here enjoys your company. Apart, that is, from Dame

Melisande. She would welcome you. And it seems you are as fond of her company as she is of yours. It *was* her you had in mind when you said you preferred "the old, smelly one" to me, I assume?"

He was sure he hadn't *said* it, but he couldn't deny thinking it.

'So you will go there. To Dame Melisande. You will go now, as you are. She is expecting you. And this time, you will remain with her for six months.'

He heard a noise, glanced round, thinking it must be Mother Goose come cringing back. There was no one.

He turned back to the nymph. She was not there. The witch, or whatever she was, had vanished into the darkness.

Witch? He'd been dreaming.

Where was Old Goose – Mother Goose? And why was he standing beside the fall stark naked? He bent down to pick up his clothes, found they were soaking wet.

He went into the cave. It was empty.

He'd ride back through the night to Smelly Melly's, have some fun there, then set off for home the next day, with only one day lost.

* * * * *

"The six months have gone by and the time has come for the Bastard (if that's what he is) to be returned to you ... Hugue, I let him spend most of his time with the girls.

He refused at first to fight with the boys – but then he is so small and delicate. When I told him that it was your express wish that he should fight them, he did make some attempt, but had to be rescued after less than a minute with a bloody nose and a swollen eye that swelled right up and by next day was black. Nor would he take part in any "manly sport", not even the hunting – except that one day I found the boys hunting him! After that, as I say, I let the creature play with the girls.

He is sweet, but if you want a son to take after you and take over from you, then the sooner you marry again and father one, the better.

Is there any further news of La Belle Ornuma and her delightful daughters? And is it her or one of the daughters you have your eye on? The elder one is ready for breeding by all accounts and the mother may now be past it."

Sir Hugue had read the letter three times since he arrived home not an hour before and it was handed to him. Reading it again would not

make it any better. His cousin was no fool, and if after six months she felt there was nothing to be done, then there was nothing to be done. At least here there were no girls for him to "play" with. "Playing!" It had been a mistake to take him there.

He pulled the bell-cord and Tess came running.

'Tell the old sergeant I wish to see him at once.'

'Master, are you really going away again? You've only just come home, and you look so pale and tired.'

'Yes, Tess. But not for long this time, I hope.'

'I'll miss you, sir.'

'I know you will. You're a good girl.'

'Oh, I'm not, sir!'

'No, you're not, but you're a nice girl, and that's better. Now run along and tell the sergeant I'm waiting!' He gave her bottom a smart slap.

She laughed and hurried out of the room.

'So, is everything quite clear, sergeant?'

'Yes, Sir Hugue. The boy's not to read, not to listen to music, not to go near no girls, not to sit and dream –'

'That's most important.'

'And I'm to keep him busy all day, every day, with manly pursuits.'

'Right.'

'And keep him well beaten.'

'Well *beaten*? He's a boy, dammit! Keep him well *flogged*! And keep him away from – ' he was going to say "the old witch" but thought better of it ' – my poor dear dead wife's old grandmother. Good luck, sergeant.'

He'd learnt what could happen to men who were rude about witches.

Several months later, when Sir Hugue was finally granted permission to leave Camelot, and made his way home once more to Beau-Regard, the first thing he did – after giving Tessa what she so obviously needed (though he did *not* believe she hadn't been spanked or fucked in all those months) – was to summon the sergeant and demand a report. The old man would only mumble, nervously, that the task of training the boy was beyond him, that he was impossible, impossible. The colonel sent for the Bastard with every intention of whipping some manliness into him. But when he gazed into that small, pale face, the lower lip trembling with fear and misery, the cheeks flushed

with resolution, he saw only Fleur-Elise as she had been when he first paid court to her, a slim beautiful girl with great dark blue eyes, as nervous as a filly scenting her first man; he sat down again, heavily, buried his face in his hands, and said only 'Go away ...'

The boy turned and went without a word.

He reminded him of his wife, the only woman he had ever loved – if that is what love was. But how could that be?

He opened the box in which he kept his papers and took out the letter his cousin had sent with the boy when he came back from Lindis.

"... if you want a son to take after you and take over from you, then the sooner you marry again and father one, the better. Is there any further news of La Belle Ornuma and her delightful daughters? And is it her or one of the daughters you have your eye on? The elder one is ready for breeding by all accounts and the mother may by now be past it."

He would soon find out if La Belle Ornuma was past it. (And if her daughter was ready for it!)

The Bastard? Sir Hugue washed his hands of him. He ordered that the boy was never to be referred to as the Bastard again. He also issued instructions via the sergeant that from now on the boy was to eat in the kitchen and stay out of sight at the back of the house. He was in fact to be treated once again as the scullion Morgana insisted he always had been. And known as – what was it? Cinders?

And never again under any circumstances to be referred to or treated as a member of the family. He was not.

When the sergeant recounted this, sitting in the kitchen by the great open fire with the boy who had been Fleur but was from now on to be known as Cinders standing before him, and Cook, who never missed anything, listening and turning to watch from her sink, Fleur realised there was nothing now about *manly pursuits*. He was simply to stay out of sight down there among the servants, but would be free to come and go – go into the forest ...

So as soon as the sergeant was finished, he said, 'Can I go for a walk now, sergeant?'

'Aye, but don't go far. I might need you later.'

He walked into the Great Forest that began where their garden ended and had almost eaten up the Great Fence that was intended to separate the two.

He passed the Brook and walked on till he came to the River. On an impulse, he took all his clothes off and slipped in – and found that despite being a boy now he could still swim like a fish. Like a water nymph.

In the bitterly cold winter of that year the old soldier took sick and died. The master gave him a perfunctory burial and forgot him.

The need for a wife had impressed itself upon Sir Hugue though, and in the spring, when failures are forgotten and new starts made, he finally came to terms with Lady Ornuma, an extremely attractive widow whom he had known – indeed been fucking – for some time. Her two delightful daughters, Jemima and Eliza, blonde blue-eyed beauties famed for their kiss-me pouts (and their bickering) favoured the alliance, and managed to smile in unison, if only because the King's Knight was rich and influential, and so their own marriage prospects would be greatly enhanced along with their social life and wardrobes.

It was arranged that the marriage should take place without delay on the first of June, and during the weeks leading up to the great day the two girls began to spend a lot of their time in the towered and turreted house that was to be their new home.

Fleur, who heard only the kitchen gossip, didn't know what to think.

Tessa, the maid who waited on the master, had been sent away. Cook knew why, Betsy, the housemaid, knew why, but when the boy asked about it they told him to be quiet, and Betsy giggled.

Betsy reported everything she saw and heard, going into raptures over dresses and jewellery, while at the same time complaining that some people were *so spoilt*, but the cook said that was only to be expected. So far as Fleur could make out, the "new mistress" knew nothing at all about him. He himself was thrilled at the thought of a new "mother" and two lovely "sisters", of soft kind faces, smooth hands, and gentle words; but he was terrified, too, at the thought of what his father might have told them about him, and of what they would think when they saw him. Such was his panic when Jemima and Eliza, exploring the house, were heard approaching the kitchen, that he fled into the garden and flung himself into the ditch beside the stables; and only emerged, wet and muddy, after several hours had elapsed.

His fears, however, were well-founded. He was not quite the same boy (let alone girl) who had been banished to the kitchen the previous year. He was sixteen now and taller, though still as thin as he had become while at the Castle of Maidens. The clothes he had on were all he possessed, and he'd been wearing them day and night; they were in tatters. His life had been hard, and he had a nagging presentiment, aggravated by Betsy's chatter and Cook's comments, that it would only get harder, whatever his hopes.

All this time he had been living in the kitchen, sleeping among the ashes by the open grate where it was warm, for the old sergeant, knowing his master well enough to take advantage of the situation, had on that very first day cleared the boy's possessions out of the room he had been given six months earlier and had sold them in the city. He had taken Fleur with him, making him carry the heavy bundle. He had sold everything, even what the boy was wearing. When not one item of fine clothing remained, and the boy, naked now, had begun to believe that he would be next to be sold, the old man had grudgingly purchased him a cheap shirt and a second-hand pair of breeches. This done, and with gold in his pocket, he had set off for his favourite tavern, where he told the boy to wait outside for him and gave him a cuff on the ear to make sure he did.

It began to rain, but Fleur, sitting now hunched up in the gutter, his thin shirt soaked and clinging to his skin, didn't dare move. Evening came. It grew dark. The rain stopped. Noise of laughter and quarrelling, singing and fighting came from the tavern as people came and went. The smell of cooking and of food. Two men were thrown out. One got up onto his knees and vomited, then stood up and staggered away; the other lay where he had landed. The boy went to see if it was the sergeant. It wasn't. He returned to the gutter, and to his dreams and memories. Finally, the old man lurched through the door, roused him with a kick and a curse, and the small, slender boy, barefoot and shivering, had to support the staggering man on the long trudge home,

They came in by the stables through the servants' entrance to the kitchen, where the sergeant threw off his enormous cape and slumped down on the stool in the chimney corner.

'Stand 'ere, lad. 'Ere! In front of us! That's it.' He looked the boy up and down. 'Not so grand tonight, are we, eh, lad?'

'Er, no.'

'Sergeant!'

'No, sergeant.'

'Yer's trembling like yer's got the aigue, lad. Afeared, ain't yer.'

'No, sergeant.'

'Yer will be.'

'Yes, sergeant.'

'Now take them things off afore yer catches yer death. Not as it'd matter if yer did. Come on, move! Strip off!'

'Yes, sergeant.'

The boy slipped out of his shirt and hung it on one of the lines above the hearth.

'And the breeches, lad ... Not so fine as what yer've grown accustomed to, are they. Still, you'll get used to them. Well now. Let's 'ave a look at yer. Now we're 'ere in private like. Turn round. That's it ... Fear, boy, fear. That's what's making you shake. And well it might. Bend over. Ah yes ... quite the little beauty, ain't we? Quite the little darling. Now if I was one of them as are partial to lads ... Pity for you I ain't. I've known some as'd've sold their souls to 'ave you where I've got you now ... Stand up, lad! Face me! ... "Keep 'im out o' my road," the master says. "Keep 'im downstairs in the kitchen. Keep 'im out the back. I never wants to see nor hear tell o' 'im again." Yer no bastard of his, he says. Never wants to clap eyes on you no more. So, yer sleeps

'ere in the kitchen, yer eats whatever Cook gives you from the leftovers, and yer does whatever yer ordered to, see lad?"

'Yes, sergeant.'

'Aye, and I'll make sure yer does. "Don't spare the rod, sergeant" Them was the master's words. I won't, master, you rest on that, just leave 'im to the old sergeant. Bend back over then, boy – *bend over when I tell yer!* That's it ... Aye, there's some as'd do other things to yer than what I'm going to – know what I mean, lad? Even the master himself, who is one for the damsels, could never say nay to a pretty boy, could yer, master. But no, them wasn't the doings, not this time. This one's for the rod. "Keep him well flogged," yer says to me – that's what he's for: flogging. A grand word for a thrashing. Well, but I'd like yer to see 'im now, all ripe and ready ...'

He seemed to sleep – then woke with a start. 'You'll come to kiss the rod, my boy. After a month or two yer won't be able sleep unless'n yer's 'ad it – be begging me for it nights I'm too tired or too belly-full of good ale to bother with yer. But my old leather'll do for tonight. Stop that shaking and stay still ...'

He struggled to his feet, and stood swaying behind the boy, fumbling at the great brass buckle on his belt. 'Stay still ... You start moving or screaming and wake the house up, it'll be the worse – *Hey!*'

But the boy had leapt away, and after a brief glance round the kitchen, fled out into the night, leaving the door wide open.

'Little bastard. All right, spend the night out there in the cold and wet. And me worrying about hanging your clothes up to dry less'n you take cold.' He bolted the door from inside. 'But just you wait till tomorrow. I'll give you run away ...'

Grumbling and threatening, he made his way up the back stairs and through to his little room over the stables, where he slept with a smile on his tired old face, dreaming of his gold pieces and the ale he would enjoy next night in the city or at the local tavern in the village.

Fleur ran to the far end of the garden and waited there, petrified, in the shadows, trying to see back along the path.

The night was black. The rain had drenched the grass and bushes.

After a while, he crept back to the house. There was no light in the kitchen. Had the sergeant gone to bed, or was he sitting there in the dark, waiting, with the leather belt in his hands? Probably gone to bed, but ... He needed to see.

Silently, he tried the door. It was locked.

He tried the stable door, windows, everything, in vain, then crying with frustration, plunged back into the darkness, not heeding where he was going until he felt brambles tearing at him and turned aside and took a step into nothing. He rolled heavily down a steep bank – the bank that gave, he suddenly realised, onto his grandmother's herb garden – and gave up, and lay there, quite still on the plants he had crushed.

'Come here, boy.' It was her!

He sprang to her feet.

'Over here.'

He saw a lantern and stumbled towards it, then remembered he was naked, and hesitated.

'Come on.'

He went on. Without another word, the old lady turned into the house through a small door and Fleur followed her up the long spiral of stone stairs that led to her boudoir at the top of the tower, the oldest part of the building, and into a warm room. He ran over to the log fire and crouched down in front of it, enjoying the heat on his wet, numb body. The old black cat looked up at him in puzzlement. His teeth were chattering, he realised. He grinned and stroked the cat.

The old lady poured him a mug of hot, sweet mint-tea, which he drank gratefully, then sat down in her rocking-chair and watched him recover.

'So you wouldn't bow to such rough justice ...' she said, at last. Then: 'You are so like your poor mother when she was your age.'

'Betsy says I'm like Tessa.'

'Tessa? Ah, yes. Your father's maid. Mm. And what do you think?'

'I wish I was.'

'Like Tessa?'

He nodded. 'My father *loves* Tessa.'

'*Loves*?'

'I saw him once with her and Tessa was kneeling on his bed with her bottom up in the air and he was doing it to her and she was crying, you know, *happy* cries, and they were happy and excited and – but her bottom had been *beaten*, it was all red! He couldn't have done that, could he?'

She didn't answer.

And after a moment, the boy went on, 'If I was a girl still ...'

'Be happy with what is, child; with what you have. You look like Tessa, a little – the lips, the turn of the shoulders – and you *are* like Tessa, a little: a menial, in no position to question the wisdom or

justice of those set over you or the chastisements they choose to impose. Be thankful. Accept your fate with equanimity. You did not, and now look at you, covered with bruises, your legs torn by thorns and thistles, your feet raw ... Had I not come to you, what state would you have been in by morning? Let there be no place in your heart for either bitterness or pride; the higher a pendulum rises, the faster it will fall, the further swing, exposing the folly and vanity of those who presumed upon its remaining poised in the ascendant. We are all in the hands of providence. In helping you tonight, I am the minister of providence, as I would be had I declined to help. Do you understand?'

He didn't, but ...

For perhaps half an hour there was silence, save the creak of the rocking-chair, the purr of the cat. Then: 'You must go back to the kitchen now. Put your clothes on and curl up by the fire.'

She rose and moved towards the door. He followed her reluctantly. In the doorway, she smiled: 'Now that your status has been clarified – 'My status?'

'As a menial – there are one or two chores you might do for me, chores no one else bothers with. But come only when you are free.' She kissed the boy's forehead. 'Go now, and pass quietly through the house, for you should not be there. And tomorrow, do not run away. Think instead upon all I have said. I shall not repeat it. Good night, my child.'

'Good night.'

He slipped down the stairs and along the passages inside the house, creeping past his father's bedroom, until he came down to the kitchen. There, he pulled on his dry clothes, curled up on the flagstone hearth, and slept.

Next morning, he was woken by the cook, and when Betsy and Tessa arrived there was a great deal of laughter and gossip about the clothes he was wearing, how dirty he was, and what they were to do with him. However, the sergeant's first action upon descending from his room was to fetch a cane from the garden and, bending the boy over his fat left thigh, to thrash him with it until he was so exhausted he had to stop for breakfast; this being done to impress the three women as much as his victim.

Fleur found that he was expected to wait hand and foot on his tormentor, fetching and carrying for him, and accompanying him wherever he went, including the regular trip to a tavern and the long wait outside in the cold. And the only thanks he got was a cuff on the head whenever the old man thought of it, a belting each night the old man was not too drunk to get his belt off, which mercifully he often was, and frequent thrashings with his cane to "teach him his place".

And so it continued for about another six months. Then one night the old sergeant collapsed. Thinking it was the drink, and unable to move him, Fleur fetched a blanket and covered him up and left him where he was. Next morning, with the help of the stable-boy, he got the sergeant up to his room, where he lay for a few days with Fleur looking after him, then, whimpering with fear and self-pity, turned yellow and died. His last words were that he wanted Cinders to have his few possessions – which the cook promptly took to her room, telling the boy that *she* would look after them.

The following day, when his father announced that he would not be attending the funeral as he had a cold, Fleur asked the cook whether he might go. The cook was so pleased at being asked that she overcame her usual hostility and prepared the boy for the occasion in a brusquely maternal manner, declaring that he could be no filthier if he lived in the sty, that she knew about pigs and that by the time she'd finished with him he'd be as pink as pork. She placed a large tub in the centre of the kitchen, filled it with hot water, made him undress and get into it, then scrubbed his thin, grimy body till it shone.

When she'd finished, she stepped back to survey her handiwork. The boy's ears glowed as though there were candles behind them, and he actually looked, as he felt, raw, while Cook looked modestly pleased with herself and with him, with a good job well done, as though she always skinned pigs with just a scrubbing brush. She put

her head to one side. Then the other. 'Turn round,' she said. Fleur did so, still standing in the water. 'Well, I don't know what to make of you, Cinders, I'm sure,' she said finally.

'He's more like a girl than a boy,' murmured Betsy, taking a closer look.

'That's the truth of it, and that's why he's down here,' replied the older woman. 'One quick slice with my carving knife, and – presto! A slip of a girl.'

'Cook! The way you talk! I mean as if he really were a porker!' giggled the maid, blushing with unaccountable pleasure at the thought.

'Those great big eyes, that deep red hair: he's almost the image of the mistress that was ... Ah, well, this won't do!' She gave the boy's bottom a resounding slap. 'Over to the fire with you, to dry off. And give those disgusting clothes of yours a good shake before you put them back on!'

Thus he went to the funeral, barefoot and ragged, but clean; and the tears of the young and tender, the tears of the very thin-skinned, saved the old man from being as completely unmourned as he had been unloved.

Free, he took to visiting his old grandmother each morning to see if she wanted anything done that day. He would be given jobs such as running errands in the village, scrubbing the floors and digging in the herb garden – though he wasn't allowed to touch the herbs, only his grandmother and Hazel, her little apprentice from the village, were allowed to do that.

When he was not helping his grandmother, he would hang around the kitchen, listening to the gossip and watching Betsy, who fascinated him, and whom he would have loved to please, to receive some small measure of friendliness from; but Betsy rarely noticed him, and when she did it was only to tease and laugh, passing the idle moment. At other times, especially when Cook was beginning to glare and he didn't want another of her "wee beatings", he slept outside in the sun, undisturbed by the squabbling, scratching hens, until one of the stable-lads came by and woke him with a coarse joke or a kick and a laugh. Then he would escape over the garden wall into the woods that lay behind the house and hide there, and wander, and hide again, among the cool dark trees and bushes and bracken that meant peace. He would sit on a fallen tree-trunk so long and so still some evenings that hungry rabbits and wood-mice, tired birds and soft silent moths would forget his presence and he in his turn would no longer see or hear

them, but lost in a twilight reverie enter the undemanding and all-embracing green and woody world of the forest itself, so often discovered unsought by such of the animal kingdom as find themselves rejected by their own kind.

One night shortly before the wedding, there was a big party. Footmen and butlers and extra maids were hired for the occasion, and the flustered cook, unused to such a crowded kitchen, chased Cinders out with her cleaver, shouting after him that if she caught sight of him again before the party was over she'd chop him into joints.

He stopped running – and laughing – after a few moments – it was her cane he feared, not her cleaver! – but kept on walking, walking. Oh, and her rolling-pin, which left terrible bruises, but she only used that when she lost her temper, and if you were quick you could dodge the blows. He remembered poor Will, the previous scullion-boy, and how everyone used to say being thrashed did him good, and only she – Fleur – had defended him. But not seriously. She hadn't really cared – indeed, had half agreed, it probably did do him good, and certainly she could see no reason why the poor thing would work like he did if he wasn't kept thoroughly thrashed. And now no doubt they said the same about her. *Her*. She laughed again, this time bitterly. She must stop thinking of herself as *her*. Of *himself* as *her*. She was *him*. *He* was him. The new scullion-boy, Cinders.

He wandered further and further without thinking where he was going, and eventually arrived at the city gates. He passed through, and made his way along to where he had sat outside on that first and several other cold winter evenings waiting for the sergeant. This time, however, the sun was still shining and the evening was warm. He squatted down in one corner of the little square where there were a few trees and a trickling fountain, enjoying the sunshine, the smells of cooking coming from the open windows nearby, and the sight of children playing. Some were dancing round and round, others skipping, and all were chanting as they went:

*What are little girls
made of, made of?
Sugar and spice
and all things nice -
that's what little girls
are made of!*

*What are little boys
made of, made of?
Slugs and snails
and puppy-dogs' tails ...*

He noticed that it was the little girls who were dancing and singing, while the little boys were running and jumping, fighting and shouting. He watched the girls who were skipping, bells tinkling on the handles of their skipping-ropes; so dainty, so pretty and clean. He looked round at a young woman crossing the square, hips swinging, hair blowing free in the breeze, gold earrings dangling and flashing as they caught the last rays of the setting sun; and wished – oh, how he wished! – that he were still a girl, still Fleur.

Was there anything to be done? Of course not. Destiny, her grandmother had called it, fate, providence. Why did she talk so of acceptance? In what way could one possibly *not* accept?

From now on, he decided, he would, *must*, think of himself as Cinders.

It was dark when he got up to go.

He went back by a different route, making his way through the dark forest. He circled around, taking time, unwilling to arrive, but too preoccupied to relax and allow the peace and quiet of the forest to flood through him, calming his troubled mind, as he would normally have done.

A full moon was shining down through the trees, and when he came to the river he sat for a long time on the bank gazing at the black and silver water rippling over a submerged rock and round some floating branches. Then he took off his breeches and shirt, and waded and swam across the river holding them above his head. On the other side, he hid them and walked slowly back in, held by the beauty of the moonlit water.

He was swimming quietly along with the current, trying not to disturb the surface around him, overawed by the silence and blackness of the forest on either side, when he saw a young man on a white horse riding along the bank. Before he could get to the rushes and out of sight, he heard the man exclaim: 'A water nymph!' and watched in horror as he dismounted and crouched at the water's edge and called softly: 'Don't go, I pray you. Are you flesh and blood? No, I see you are not. Come closer, little maiden.'

Cinders didn't understand. He looked round, hoping to catch a glimpse of the water nymph for himself.

She had gone.

Or perhaps the man had been imagining it, and would soon go away; so she waited, quite still. She saw the man, the braid on his tunic glittering, take his hat off, as though in reverence, and go down on his knees; he seemed to be looking straight at him. Again he heard the soft voice coming out over the water, and realised with a sudden shock that set his heart pounding that it was directed towards him, that *he* was the object of ...

'Come closer, I beg you.'

Quite unable to grasp the situation, to see what was happening, or to stop himself, he swam slowly towards the bank. As always, he wanted only to please, and never had he seen anyone, or heard any voice, he would rather obey.

When he was within a few feet of the bank he stopped, his mind in a whirl, and looked up, shyly, but the man, unaware of his confusion, saw only the pale form moving gracefully, silently, towards him. And softly, gently, he spoke again: 'In all my travels I have never seen anything, I have never seen anyone, more beautiful than you ... You, now, bathed in moonlight, your hair, your shoulders, your throat, your breasts, all shimmering, lovelier and more perfect than any statue. Come closer.'

Mystified and incredulous, Cinders remained motionless.

To the man it seemed that the nymph's white skin was shining, radiating moonlight; that she was a creature of light, unsubstantial, and would even now, as he watched, vanish with the enchanted moment, leaving the world black and desolate once more.

'Stay!' he cried. 'Don't go, I beg of you! Never have I beheld such depths in human eyes, nor looked upon a face so innocent. Will such a countenance lure a man to destruction? If so, then so be it. In my heart, I know, I should feel fear, but I feel none. Ah, little water nymph, those black lips are ripe with danger, wet with treachery. But no, you are so gentle, so trusting: I must trust you too. Gentle nymph, sweet silver nymph, I must kiss your lips, those soft black lips. Stay. Stay there. I will come to you.'

He stepped down into the water and waded towards her.

Cinders retreated.

'Stop!' the man cried.

In the boy's heart common sense struggled in vain with a deep need for love. He stopped, waited, and in another moment was in the man's arms, his lips responding first to a gentle touch, then to a long,

passionate, searching kiss, the embrace of a lover who will now cast heaven itself aside for he has found his own.

The boy's whole body writhed and shook as this strange and wonderful man kissed his neck and his shoulders, brought his fingers down the sweep of his back, stroking, caressing, murmuring, 'I adore you, I adore you ...' He gasped in ecstasy as those hands, those tingling fingers, slid down the backs of his thighs, round to the front, and slowly, blissfully, up and out along his groin, then down again – till suddenly horror shocked through his brain and with a cry of despair he tore himself out of the man's arms and plunged away into the water.

For what seemed hours to the desperate, heart-broken girl in a boy's body, the man knelt there in the water, turned to stone. Then slowly he lifted his head, sure the nymph had gone, and when he realised she was still there he was transfigured by joy, his love, his manifest adoration, tearing at Fleur's very soul.

He began to move nearer, and only then did he cry out: 'I would love you, sir! Would gladly suffer a thousand deaths rather than cause you so much as one second's pain or distress! But I implore you, please, for your own sake, come no closer!'

The man gazed in wonder. 'Now I shall never forget your voice, either, lovely nymph. The more I know of you, the better I see that you are one of the immortals, and that I should ask no more than to be allowed to worship you. Very well then. Here on my knees in your sacred river, I beg you to accept my worship, the worship of a man.'

There was a moment of silence. Fleur longed to go to the man, to surrender to him again, completely and for ever.

Then the man spoke again, hesitantly. 'Allow me to approach you just once more,' he beseeched. 'I shall not touch you. You have my word.'

Fleur felt the tears well up in her eyes. She swam right up to the man, so that her face was within inches of the man's chest, but kept her body stretched away across the surface of the water.

'What are you?' asked the man.

She moved gently in the water and, not knowing what to say, smiled, unconsciously seductive in her innocent desire to please.

'Ah, little enchantress. Know that I shall always love you. Give me your hand.'

He pulled a ring off his own little finger and, kissing it, slipped it onto her middle finger, the only one which was big enough to hold it. 'May I kiss your hand?'

Fleur nodded, dumbly. So tender were the lips pressed against her fingers that she found her body floating down through the water again towards the man. Then instinct came to her aid. 'Please go now,' she said, and kissed the man's lips, fleetingly, the gesture of farewell. 'Do not pause or glance back.'

'Very well, I promise. Farewell, beautiful one.'

He stood up, towering over her in the shallow water, then turned abruptly and waded to the bank and his waiting horse.

Fleur, left alone in the water, watched him gallop away downstream with never a backward glance; then, wiping the tears from her – *his* – eyes, and beginning to shiver, Cinders made his way back to the beech tree and his clothes.

When he reached the kitchen, it was in darkness. Thinking everyone had gone to bed, he sat down in his corner to get his breath back. Had it all been a dream? No, there was the ring. But surely it wasn't possible, it was all a mistake. He slipped his hand inside his shirt. His skin was soft, yes, and smooth. He was pale, too, he knew, and would seem very white in the moonlight. But was he beautiful still?

He fetched the broken piece of mirror Betsy used to check her appearance while she was working. The glow from the embers was not bright enough, so he lit a candle, and studied his face intently. He shook his long hair forward, then held it up, then pushed it back; he smiled, he frowned, he threw up his chin imperiously, he half closed his black eyelashes, suspicious, enigmatic, then he pouted provocatively and kissed the lips reflected in the glass.

He was still like a girl, still attractive, it was true. Ah, if he could only wear pretty clothes, then ...

He looked again at the ring on his finger. It bore a crest, but wasn't very pretty. Still, it was *her* man's, *her* lover's.

He felt a cold sensation of guilt. He was being fantastic.

He stood up and took off his clothes, looked down at himself. "One quick slice with my carving knife," Cook had said, "and hey presto – a slip of a girl." Just one ... He fetched the sharpest knife from the drawer, tested the edge on his thumb – but when blood spurted from the cut, lost his nerve.

It was impossible, he couldn't. He would bleed to death, would die slowly in a pool of blood, and they would find him like that tomorrow.

He began to cry, sitting at the table with his face in his hands. The whole thing was madness. The man was tall, elegant, rich. In daylight, he wouldn't notice this – no, not girl – but not boy either! – this sissy whose own father wouldn't recognise him. Why, there were thousands of lovely girls and ladies for him to choose from! ... But that rhyme, it wasn't true: slugs and snails and puppy-dogs' tails? Oh no. This young man, hardly more than a boy still, was beautiful, was ... all things nice: so kind and gentle, so charmingly modest, so sweetly eager to serve, to be allowed to admire. If only he himself could be in reality what the young man had dreamed he was, be worthy of that adoration!

Gazing around, uncertain what he was looking for, his eyes lighted on some clothes of Betsy's airing on the line above the grate. He

walked over and took down a white shift, then, trembling with excitement, slipped it on over his head. It was soft and light. He turned – he twirled – then he remembered the mirror and tried to see himself in it. His reflection was that of a girl.

The house door opened and a real girl walked in.

He dropped the mirror and stood, hands behind his back, gaping at the girl.

'Who are you?' the girl demanded. 'Well, don't just stand there, girl! Answer me!'

'I – I sleep here.'

'Disgusting. What's your name? ... Oh, who cares! Listen, I want something to eat. You should know where it's kept if you're some kind of kitchen-maid.'

Another, taller girl came into the kitchen. 'There you are, Eliza!' she cried. 'Mama's ready to go, at last. What are you doing?'

'I'm trying to get this half-witted creature to tell me where the food is kept. I'm tired, and I'm hungry.' And she suddenly boxed the boy's ears, her hands landing with a resounding slap on either side of his head. 'Now answer me when I speak to you! Oh, forget about the food – if you haven't forgotten already! We're going home. But I want to speak to you tomorrow afternoon, understand? ... Oh, God! Nod your head if you understand!'

He nodded, dumbly, and flouncing her petticoats the girl followed her sister back out of the room.

Left alone once more, he changed back into his own clothes, hid the ring behind a loose brick – he'd been lucky they hadn't seen that! – blew out the candle, curled up, and slept.

He was ready and waiting for Eliza before midday.

He had told the cook first thing and she had promptly scrubbed him again in honour of the great occasion – an interview with one of the new young mistresses! – then put him on his best behaviour, telling him only to speak when he was spoken to, always to agree with what was said, and always to say "Miss Eliza". Then pointing to the cane, which still stood in the corner where the old sergeant kept it, she vowed to beat him to a jelly if he let her down. She had never thrashed him soundly like the poor sergeant used to, but he knew from the beatings she *had* given him that when she did she would do as good a job on him as she did on eggs and cream and tough steaks. Then he remembered poor Will, which only added to his fears as he waited hour after hour, knowing Betsy would find out he had worn her

clothes, and dreading her laughter as much as the inevitable punishment. What too would Eliza say when she discovered that he was a boy? But she was probably quite kind. Last night she had been tired. How pretty the two sisters were – and how wonderful it must be to wear clothes like that!

His mind kept returning to the previous evening in the forest. How handsome the young man had been, how gallant, and how sad! But he would never see him again, never know who he was. He had spoken of travels; he was a knight, of course: perhaps he had come from a distant land ... was a nobleman ... a prince even, searching for a bride ... Tears began to flow down his cheeks once more.

Betsy saw him and laughed, and made a joke about him to the cook. Blushing, he went out into the yard to hide his embarrassment, and sat down by the wall.

At about four o'clock, Betsy came bursting into the kitchen. 'Where's the boy? The mistress wants him at once in her boudoir!'

'The *mistress*?' Even the cook was surprised.

'Is he still outside?' She rushed across to the backdoor and shouted: 'Come in here, boy! Quick! Run, will you!'

He ran in.

'It's the new mistress herself!' went on the flustered Betsy, her eyes flashing and her bosom heaving. She had very fixed ideas about "the house" and "the family", and the thought of this ragged good-for-nothing passing into the former to offend the sensibilities of the latter horrified her.

'Just look at you!' she shrilled. 'She said *At Once* and we're keeping her waiting! She'll take it out on me! Well, move!!' She slapped his face. 'Move, I said – and brush your hair!'

He ran to the broom corner, avoiding looking at the cane for fear of drawing Betsy's attention to it, grabbed the scrubbing brush and began frantically trying to make his hair tidy enough to please her.

'All right!' Betsy cried, snatching it and throwing it back into the corner. 'Now wipe your feet. Use that.'

At last she was satisfied, and led him hastily along the corridor to the mistress's boudoir. She went in, leaving him at the door, told the mistress the boy was there, and explained that she had had to clean him up a bit.

'Tell him to wait outside. Close the door after you.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

She went, telling Cinders in a whisper not to dare move or make a sound: and so he began another long wait, petrified lest Sir Hugue should come by and see him.

Meanwhile, Betsy returned to the kitchen and sat down. 'Really!' she exclaimed. 'I can't think why she wants that lazy little ragamuffin taken into the house!'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, he is! Those rags he wears – and him supposed to be the scullion and he never does a stroke of work except for that old witch in the tower.'

'You better watch your talk, wench. The "old witch" as you calls her happens to be the mistress here, even if she don't bother us much, which thank God she don't. And that one in there you're running around for is nothing at all here yet. And if the master, God preserve him, was to drop down dead this minute, her and her daughters'd soon know it. Because your lazy little ragamuffin could well turn out to be your master and master of the whole house afore you had time to say so much as "Sorry, sir"! *Would*, because he has the old Lady's favour. So mind your tongue.'

'Some master! Mistress more like!' Betsy muttered.

The cook held her peace. Betsy was irrepressible.

'And that new mistress!' she began on another tack. 'Says *At Once*, so I rush around, shaking myself up, and then she says *Tell Him To Wait Outside*.'

'We'll have to wait and see about her.'

'You've changed your tune, anyway. This morning you was scrubbing the boy, and promising him a hiding if he didn't mind his place. And that just for Miss Eliza, and her only a slip of a girl.'

'Yes, well. I'm watching to see which way the wind blows. You know what they say about old cooks? They've been burnt before. You mark my words.'

'What d'you mean?'

'There's a war being fought in this house. As long as the old Lady regards the boy as the master's son – never mind whether or not he's acknowledged him as his heir – the new mistress and her brood are no more than visitors here. Blood's thicker than water, even if he is more like a girl than a boy, and a bitter disappointment. More like a girl, I say? Why, he's the spit n' image of the poor dead mistress – the old Lady's daughter, or granddaughter or ... or poor little Fleur. Though how that comes to be is more than I can say or will hazard a guess at.'

The *new* mistress, on the other hand, is after the whole estate for herself and for her children. *Now* do you understand?'

'Well I knew *that* ... It's terrible though, isn't it, what do go on in these big houses and high-up families. I'd almost forgot the boy was the master's bastard, him living down here like an orphan and doing what he's told by the likes of you and me. Funny though.'

'If the new mistress has her way, he'll be declared an orphan soon enough. But don't forget the old Lady. She'll have a hand in it at the finish – and she won't take kindly to them three.'

Just then the bell rang, and Betsy raced off to the drawing room to find the boy still outside. She went in.

'Show the boy in, Betsy. Then leave us.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

She fetched him, not daring to risk so much as a whisper.

'The boy, ma'am.'

Betsy went, closing the door behind her.

'Come here, boy. Stand there. That's right. Now, who are you? ... Answer me, boy.'

'I'm – er ...'

'Are you perhaps the scullion?'

He thought about that. His father had said he was to be treated as a scullion, but he did no work in the kitchen ...

'I'm waiting, boy.'

'I ... No. No, I don't think so.'

'You will address me as "ma'am".'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Are you then the kitchen maid – a *girl* – dressed as a boy?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Is it possible that you were once considered to be Sir Hugue's bastard?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'What happened? ... Quickly, boy! I haven't got all day.' She held a tiny, scented handkerchief to her nose, as though warding off an offensive odour, but the boy, his mind racing, didn't notice. 'Don't you ever wash, boy?'

'Yes, ma'am. I am clean, ma'am. I've just been scrubbed.' Tears pricked his eyes.

'Perhaps it's the clothes. They're disgusting. Well, go on! What happened between your – between the master and you?'

'I'm sorry, ma'am. My – that is, the master, ma'am – told me, one day, to stay out of his sight. To live in the kitchen. He never wanted to

see me again. Ma'am. He said I was never even to be mentioned in his presence, ma'am.'

'Did he, now ... *Never*. That's very interesting. Mm. And did you know, did you understand – do you understand now – *why*?'

'Er ...'

'It doesn't matter. I can see why. You should have been born a girl.' She looked him up and down. 'Would you like to have been born a girl?'

'Yes, ma'am.' He blushed. He had almost said he *was* born a girl.

The mistress gazed at him. 'So when did this happen? When did you last see the master?'

'A year ago, ma'am. More than a year.'

'I see. Well, I will do what I can to help, of course. I am a religious woman and I try to be kind. Do you work in the kitchen?'

'No, ma'am. Not really. That's why I said no when you asked me if I was the scullion.'

'I see.'

The door flew open, and Eliza skipped in, followed by the more sedate Jemima.

'Oh look! Here's that little maid! It's the stupid one I was telling you about, Mama. But what's she doing dressed up in boy's clothes?'

Jemima smiled superciliously. 'I'm glad you said "little". She's quite as tall as you are, yet you never accept my calling *you* "little", little sister.'

'She doesn't have breasts – not like mine anyway – and that's a sign of maturity. In fact my breasts are far more beautiful than yours, everyone says so. Leodegrance told me only last night that –'

'He did not! Oh!'

'He did, so. He said he just adored haughty girls who went around turning their nipples up, and that I had the most insolent little breasts he had ever seen. So there!'

'*Little* – he said *little*! There you are!'

'Will you two be quiet!' cried their mother. Then turning to the boy, she told him to go and wait outside the door again until she sent for him.

He went.

'Oh, Mama! Those breeches!' laughed Eliza, watching him leave. 'They're just – what's that word you use? Brazen, that's it – they're just brazen, the way they show her thighs. And there's even a hole in the bottom! I bet she only wears them to give the local boys a thrill.'

'Eliza! That girl is a boy! And what is more ...'

Outside in the corridor, Cinders waited, fidgeting, unable to stand still. Since he became a boy, he always found it difficult to contain himself, especially when he was frightened.

He heard the bell ring, then saw Betsy come running. She raised her eyebrows at him as she went in, but didn't speak.

She came out and disappeared down the corridor.

A moment later she reappeared carrying some old garment folded in her hands, then having left this in the drawing room, went back to the kitchen.

After another few minutes, Eliza put her head out and called him in.

'Stand over there, where you were just now,' ordered the mistress.

He did so.

They all looked at him

Then the mistress spoke again. "You told me you wished you were a girl. Is that right? I want to be sure."

'Yes, ma'am.' He blushed again, and avoided looking at the two girls.

'And you would like to wear a smock and other pretty things such as girls wear.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Then because I am, as I say, a religious woman, and kind-hearted by nature, as are my dear daughters, and we don't like to see anyone unhappy, I have decided to let you be a girl ... so far as possible, that is, of course. You may wear this old smock. And Eliza – very generously, in my opinion – is giving you this string of beads to wear round your neck. Well? Are you pleased?'

'Yes, ma'am.' He still didn't quite understand what was expected of him.

'She doesn't look very pleased,' observed Jemima.

'She's shy!' trilled Eliza. 'Look, she's blushing! Isn't she sweet? She'd make a perfect ladies' maid. Most maids are so sure of themselves. So critical.'

'Well, you can't have her, she's the scullion.'

'Scullions aren't girls!'

'This one is – now. Though she just sits around down there doing nothing all day, apparently.'

'You can't call her a scullion,' insisted Eliza. 'I know! She can be the kitchen maid! And then she can come upstairs and help us sometimes when we need her.'

'Perhaps it might be possible,' murmured their mother. 'What do you think, Jemima?'

'It would be different, at least. Having a boy for a maid, I mean.'

'It's a lovely idea!' Eliza was delighted. 'But she's not a boy, she's a girl! I must think of a nice name for her.'

'That doesn't matter now. Come on, boy – I mean girl – take those filthy rags off and put this smock on.'

'Have you got any other names? What do people usually call you?'

'Cinders, Miss Eliza.'

'Cinders?! Oh – Cinders. Like Hearth – Heartha. Mm, something like that, from where she sleeps, Mummy. Look at the ash on her clothes.'

'Cinders is not a name, nor is Hearth. You might as well call her Grate.'

They all burst out laughing. Eliza said, 'No, but from cinders – Cindy –'

'We need something that sounds *feminine*,' objected Jemima.

'What was it George called you the other night? I heard him.'

'You must *not* listen to my private –'

'Bella! Ma Bella, he called you, so ... Cinder – Cinderbella. Cinderella! That's a marvellous name! What do you think, Mama?'

'Cinderella will be fine. Now, Cinderella, take off those things!'

'Yes, ma'am.'

The girls giggled as the boy loosened his breeches, crimson with embarrassment.

'Turn your back. My daughters are far too young, innocent and modest to want to see how masculine you are.'

'*Masculine?*' murmured Jemima, as the boy turned his back on them and slid the breeches down, then glanced round for help and, at a gesture from the mistress, dropped them to the floor and stepped out of them. Then he pulled his shirt, which was tight on him now, up over his head, wriggling his bottom as he did so. All three ladies gaped.

'She certainly looks like a girl from behind,' remarked Eliza. 'Look at that waist!'

'How does she manage to be so shapely when she's so thin?' gulped her sister.

'You're jealous!' teased Eliza.

'Of course I'm not!' cried Jemima. 'I've got a figure! It's you that should be jealous!'

'Girls!' snapped their mother. 'Please try to behave yourselves in a seemly manner! Give him the smock, Eliza.'

She took it to him and, just as she handed it over, peeped, and giggled. 'Oooh! She is a boy! But only just ...'

'It's not fair!' protested Jemima. 'Turn round at once, Cinderella!'

He faced them, and they all laughed, even the mother, though more at his shyness than anything else.

'Put the smock on at once, boy – girl – what's your name? Cinderella.'

Fleur pulled it on, awkwardly, and stood before them, happier at once just from the feel of the soft, loose cloth.

'That's better.'

'It suits you,' Eliza said, pleased with the effect. 'Here you are, put these pretty beads on, too. That's it, over your head ... pull your hair out ... that's right.'

'Plain and demure, as becomes the poor,' was Jemima's comment. She took after her mother rather more than Eliza seemed to.

'When you get back to the kitchen, Cinderella, put those rags you were wearing straight on the fire. And I don't ever want to see you in breeches again.'

'Even if the stable-boy does fancy you in them,' murmured Eliza. 'If you feel you must show off your legs, you'll just have to lift your skirt.'

'Really, Eliza!' The mistress turned angrily to Cinderella. 'I don't ever want to hear that you've been playing the trollop with boys!'

'Oh, Mama! Look at her!'

'Do your work quietly in the kitchen, and stay right away from the stable and the boys. And don't forget to tell everyone that from now on you're to be treated as a girl and to be known as Cinderella. All right?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'She can go now, can't she, Mama?' asked Eliza. 'Go along then, Cinderella.' She laughed.

'Just a moment, Cinderella,' called the mistress.

'Yes, ma'am?'

'Curtsy to each of us before you go. Try, anyway. You can get Betsy to teach you how to curtsy later.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

She curtsied.

'But you *know* how! Where did you learn to curtsy like that?'

'I –'

'Oh, what does it matter? Go on.'

He – she – curtsied to the two daughters.

'And another thing: who beats you when you forget yourself? I noticed marks on your bottom.'

'Cook does, ma'am.'

'Then tell her I said you need to be thrashed, soundly, at once. To teach you to say "thank you" when people are kind to you. You didn't even thank Miss Eliza for those lovely beads.'

'Oh! I'm sorry. Thank you, Miss Eliza –'

'It's too late now. And ask the maid to escort you straight back here to me afterwards.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

She backed out of the room, then fled to the kitchen, clutching her old clothes.

'Goodness! What's this?' gasped the cook.

'It suits him!' exclaimed Betsy. 'Oh, doesn't it suit him?'

Cinderella put her old clothes on the fire, then turned to Cook, frightened, beginning to cry.

'She's crying! I mean *he*. Oh, he's so like a spoilt girl I don't know where I am!' laughed Betsy.

'I – I think you m-must,' Cinderella sobbed, 'you m-must say "she". I'm to be called Cinderella and I'm to w-wear a smock and everyone is to treat me as a girl, say "she", not "he", and – and so on. That's what they said ...'

'They're winning.' Cook winked at Betsy. 'In fact they've won, near as not.'

'And Cook, the m-mistress says you are to b-beat me – she said "thrash" me – now, at once, to teach me to say "thank you" to Miss Eliza for the necklace, and then B-Betsy is to take me b-b-back up there straightaway ...'

'You are in a state, aren't you. Oh, you stupid boy – I mean girl. And after all I told you about being on your best behaviour. Well, don't say you didn't ask for it. Fetch me your cane ... That's it. Lift that skirt up off your bottom and bend over ... And you a big girl, now, too.'

'He's seeing how big girls get beaten,' laughed Betsy.

'*She*, not he.'

Twice Cook stopped for a break, then carried on (as she had with Will) and when she did finally decide Cinderella had had enough, Cinderella didn't even realise. She didn't hear the joke Cook made to Betsy, all she could think about was the pain, and trying not to start screaming, trying to remember what her great-grandmother had told her and not leap away and flee out into the wood.

Expecting more, she stayed bent over where she was, trying desperately to control the crying and the shaking.

At last, she heard Betsy's laugh from close behind her. She peered between her legs and saw Betsy's long skirt. 'Let's see what the mistress says.'

'Yes, take him – her – on up, and see. That's the best thing. Then we'll know where we are.'

'Come on, Cinderella. Up.' She gave her a kick on the back of the leg, not hard, just enough to rouse her. 'Up!' I said.

Cinderella pulled herself upright and felt the smock fall back down over her legs, brushing against the flesh. She put her hands up under it, gingerly feeling the ribs and welts that covered her poor bottom.

'Stop that! Put your smock down and behave yourself. Now, stay right behind me.'

'Yes, Miss Betsy,' she sobbed.

Betsy grinned. She liked that. No one had ever called her "Miss" Betsy before. She stuck her tongue out at Cook and led the way out of the kitchen and back up the passages to the drawing room, where the two girls were still sitting with their mother.

'Don't go, Betsy,' the mistress told her. 'Wait there, by the door. Cinderella, take your hands off your bottom, child, and stand properly. That's better. Can't you stand still? And stop making that ridiculous blubbing noise.'

'Yes, ma'am,' she gulped.

'Then do so. Now, what have you learnt from your beating? Anything?'

'Yes, ma'am. I – I've learnt to say *thank you* to Miss Eliza, ma'am.'

'She's waiting. And I think you owe her a big *sorry* as well as a *thank you*.'

'Er – yes, ma'am. Thank you, Miss Eliza. Thank you very much for the lovely beads. You are very kind. You are all very kind. And – and I'm very, very sorry I was rude to you, Miss Eliza. It won't happen again.'

'I'm sure it won't.' Eliza smiled sympathetically at the whimpering figure in the old grey smock. 'You look as though you've been

punished sufficiently, so – all right, I forgive you. Just try to be a good girl from now on, eh?"

'Oh, yes, Miss Eliza.'

'All right, you can go,' said the mistress, covering a yawn. 'Show her back to the kitchen, Betsy.'

Just in time, she remembered to curtsy to each one of them, starting with Eliza, who laughed again, delighted with her; Jemima didn't bother to look up from her book, and the mistress just waved her away.

Back in the kitchen, Betsy described the scene to Cook, but couldn't speak for laughing when it came to the three curtsies.

'Curtsies?' asked the cook.

The still sobbing boy explained. 'And – and the m-mistress told me to ask you to teach me, Miss Betsy. P-please.'

'What – to curtsy?'

'Yes.'

'This I must see,' said Cook.

By the time the lesson was over, Cook had quite decided that the boy made a much more graceful girl than the maid did, and certainly curtsied better, but she didn't say so.

'M-may I go out for a walk, please, Cook?'

She looked at him. Her. Her left cheek was bright red from the slaps Betsy had given her during the lesson.

'Yes, all right, dear.'

The bell rang and Betsy ran off through the house door.

'You make a lovely girl,' continued the cook. 'I'll tell you something while that Betsy's out of the way, dear. You don't mind me calling you *dear*?'

She managed a smile on her swollen, tear-stained face.

'Whatever happens, you mustn't mind me – if I have to take the stick to you, give you a wee beating, you know, things like that. I'm only obeying orders, same as your old sergeant was. You remember him? The way he used to thrash you?'

Cinderella nodded and smiled, tears coursing down her face.

'Course you do. I'm only obeying orders and minding my place, which I can't afford to lose. I don't mind admitting I had it in for you at first, spoilt, finickity creature, I thought you were, no kind of boy at all. But now ... well, now you're a girl ... and let's just say I've grown quite fond of you and don't wish you harm. You're a good girl.'

'Oh, C-C-Cook ...' Cinderella cried (Fleur again for a moment), her hands on her bottom under her smock, quite forgetting what she had been told about that.

'Off you go, and don't you be late back.' She laughed. 'Young girls shouldn't be out alone after dark.'

'I won't be late, Cook. And thank you.'

She made her way across to the tower door. She wanted her ring, and early that morning she had given it to her grandmother for safe-keeping.

As she went up the narrow staircase, her bottom hurt terribly – Cook's arm was much stronger than the sergeant's had been – and the skirt was rubbing against it, making the soreness worse.

The door opened. 'Come in, my dear. I was expecting you. Here's your ring.'

'Thank you, grandmother.'

The old lady studied her, then put a hand up and stroked the bruised cheek. 'Don't worry, child. When you've washed the tears off your face, you'll be as pretty as ever.'

The Chatelaine
Serialised version – chapters 6-10
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