

# Wilt Thou Be Mine?

by Susan Gee Heino

## *CURLY-LOCKS*

*Curly-locks, Curly-locks, wilt thou be mine?  
Thou shalt not wash the dishes, nor yet feed the swine;  
But sit on a cushion, and sew a fine seam,  
And feed upon strawberries, sugar, and cream.*



*Cavendish Square, London, England, 1817*

How very odd. Somehow the house on Cavendish Square had shrunk over the years. It was indeed the same house—same elegant windows, same imposing neighbors, same ornate iron gate to keep out the rabble—yet it was hardly the palatial fortress he recalled.

In his youth, the house had seemed nearly infinite in size. Hadn't the roof once reached into the skies, lost in distant and soot-dirty clouds? Hadn't the facade been as wide as the full scope of the square, dwarfing everyone who dared to approach? Hadn't the roof gleamed as if gilt with gold, the fine cut stone of the broad walls white with the finest marble? He could see now the roof was slate, like all the others, and in need of repair. The walls—far from being marble—were simply rendered brick, coated to appear as stone. These, too, showed signs of neglect.

Ah, but what tricks the years could play on a mind. He was no longer the dewy-eyed youth who had worked here, creeping about these alleys and hallways in fear and awe of his masters. His cruel Waterford masters might have lorded over him in this imaginary castle, boxing his ears and rationing his meals, but he no longer owed them anything. He was a grown man now, a man with means and, most importantly, a man with a name.

He left his carriage in the care of an eager boy, giving the lad far more than would truly be

earned by holding his horse for a few minutes. He smiled inwardly as the boy's face lit up and his grimy fingers clenched around the shining coins. Such a small thing, to offer a kindness. It took no time at all and his purse would never notice the effort. Why did so many begrudge such a simple thing?

The iron gate creaked as he let himself through. None of the elegant passers-by paid him the least attention. From his impeccable hat to his tailored coat to his polished boots, he would appear every bit as privileged as anyone else who had right to be here. He marched up the steps and rapped boldly at the door, waiting to see if he would be greeted as an equal, or tossed onto his backside.

It was only then that a wave of terror struck him. Was he a fool to do this? What business did he have here after all this time? He was an adult now and should have outgrown his foolish, childhood dreams of vengeance or reprisal. If Mr. Waterford did meet him today, what words could either of them have for each other? It was entirely possible that Mr. Waterford would not even remember him.

Ah, but he was deceiving himself. It was not Mr. Waterford that he had come here to see, was it? No. He didn't care one whit for the man, as a matter of fact. It was another Waterford who had occupied his brain all these years.

*Miss Priscilla Waterford.* Yes, he had worked for the Waterford family, but he had *lived* for Miss Priscilla. His dear Curley Locks, as he had teasingly called her. She would pout and swipe at him, pretending to hate his silly nickname. Then she would allow him to sit with her as she read from her books, pointing out letters and words until he learned to recognize them on his own. They passed hours in quiet conversation and daydreams, until someone would see and drag him back to the kitchen by his ear.

Oh, what a fool he was to come here! Why should he have even assumed that this might still be her home? Just as he had aged and grown up over the years, she would have, too. She would have made her introduction to society three or four years ago, no doubt. And she would have snapped up a wealthy husband, too, no doubt. With her pretty features, her father's money, and that halo of golden curls, she would have surely been quite the belle.

He would find nothing here but stale memories and pain. He should never have come. In fact, he was just about to turn and leave when the door was pulled open. A round-faced older woman glared at him.

"What is it?" she snapped.

"I... er, I've come to see Mr. Waterford."

"He isn't available," the woman said, her dingy lace cap bobbing as she spoke.

"Ah. I see. Well, then, I should just—"

His moment of relief was broken when a deep, too-familiar voice called from inside the house.

"Who is it, Mrs. Hatch? Bring him in, don't leave him on the doorstep. Hurry now, what must the neighbors think?"

So the gentleman *was* available. The woman pulled the door open and there he was, standing in the background, as surly and gruff as in memory, but grayer and more stooped.

"I am Mr. Waterford," he announced, stepping forward to study his visitor with suspicious eyes. "Who are you? What firm do you represent?"

"I'm Edward Jasper," he replied quickly, forcing himself not to cower before the man who now stood a good two inches below eye level. "I represent no firm, sir. I came on a... personal matter."

"Jasper? Don't know the name. If you're here to collect on something, I suggest you are wasting your time. Nothing is being settled until after the auction, so you may send any bills to my solicitor."

"But sir, I... auction?"

"Everything will go then, and not a day before. Do I make myself clear?" the man bellowed. "I am sick of everyone I've ever done business with dunning me in my own home, in front of my wife and my daughter."

*His daughter?* Did that mean Miss Waterford still lived with her parents? She was *here*?

"I'm not here to dun you, sir," Edward said quickly, the words spilling out before he'd even had time to fully formulate his wild idea. "I'm here to call on your daughter."

Priscilla was glad for the needlework on her lap. It allowed her to clench her fists tightly without the risk of Mamma taking note. Her face, she knew, was as passive as ever. Mamma scolded her less when her expression was bland, and it certainly gave Papa no reason to take his anger and frustration out on her. Or rather, *less* of a reason. No matter what she did with her face, it seemed the very sight of it was reason enough for Papa to find fault. At least if she was passive and quiet she could be easily overlooked. Indeed, Priscilla had spent a lifetime learning to feel little and show even less.

"I have to give up my home, all my beautiful things," Mamma wept, stalking back and forth in their dismantled drawing room, wringing a soggy handkerchief. "And it's *your* fault, Priscilla! All of it is your fault."

"Mamma, I understand that you are sad, but this isn't my fault. If Papa would have made better investments, if he had been more involved in—"

"Don't argue with me! If you had done as you were expected and made a decent match for yourself, I would not be losing my home."

"We are *all* losing our home," Priscilla risked reminding her. "And it isn't as if I have been beating suitors away, Mamma. Papa's financial troubles have been common knowledge for years. You saw how I was ignored every time you tried to thrust me into society."

Well, that had been too much. Mamma fairly flew at her, the handkerchief suddenly becoming a weapon as she flailed it whip-like in Priscilla's direction. The onslaught was short-lived, fortunately, because loud footsteps sounded outside the doorway. Mamma righted herself and Priscilla caught her breath just as Papa appeared. His demeanor, oddly enough, was not murderous, but confused.

"It seems we have a visitor today," he said, clearing his throat and sounding almost personable.

Mamma stood as straight and as dignified as she could while Priscilla was sure that her own expression was as far from bland as it had been in years. Who on earth would be visiting them? And why on earth was Papa not raging about it as he had done to anyone else who had been foolish enough to pause at their doorstep?

And then a young gentleman appeared behind Papa. He was tall and elegantly dressed. Everything about him spoke of quality and privilege. He must be one of their set, yet Priscilla was certain she had never seen him before. No, wait... that was not entirely true. Something about his eyes... the way they sought her out instantly, the waves of sandy brown hair that brushed his high starched collar... it was all familiar to her, in an odd way. But who was he?

"This is Mr. Jasper," Papa said, forgoing any sort of proper introductions. "I take it you and

he are acquainted, Priscilla?"

Acquainted? With this gentleman? Priscilla had no idea of it. Certainly Mamma had tried to throw her in front of every eligible bachelor in London, but Priscilla was sure this man had never been one of them. She would definitely recall being thrown in his way! But indeed those eyes were quite well known to her... where had she encountered him before?

She could not place him, not in a drawing room, not at the park, not in some crushing ballroom somewhere. If anything, the familiarity was much more intimate than that, as if she were looking into a face that was as much a part of her world as her own reflection. But how could this be? There had never been any man who made her feel so comfortable, so perfectly at ease that she should see him and think of laughter and smiles and *not* being invisible.

It had been years since she'd felt any of those things, not since she'd lost her one true friend from childhood. But that had been Ned Brown, a dirty kitchen boy who couldn't even read until Priscilla had taught him. He'd been her friend all the years they were growing up, until Papa sent him off to work for someone else. She'd been instructed to never so much as mention him again. And she hadn't.

Why was she thinking of him now? And why did this man, this stranger named Jasper, have the very same gold-flecked eyes that she had known so well in dear Ned? She could make no sense of it. All she could do was stare dumbly as Mr. Jasper smiled at her and bowed very nicely.

"Good morning, Miss Waterford," he said in a cultured voice that couldn't possibly have belonged to an orphaned waif like poor Ned. "I'm glad to see you looking so well. You must forgive me for not calling on you sooner."

Priscilla was at a loss for words. Fortunately, Mamma had always made it her habit to speak for her. This was the first time Priscilla actually appreciated it.

"How kind of you to visit, Mr. Jasper," Mamma declared. "Did you meet our daughter at a recent soiree? The ball given by Mrs. Garland, perhaps? But that was weeks ago."

He nodded, though Priscilla was sure she had not met him there. There could be nowhere else, though, since their family had been left off most invitation lists this Season. He deftly dodged Mamma's question, leaving Priscilla still wondering.

"Has it been that long?" he said with a noncommittal shrug. "My business has kept me from Town. I'm glad that I arrived when I did, though. It appears you are going away?"

Priscilla felt her face go warm. Yes, even a stranger could look around their house and notice the vacant walls where paintings had once hung, the empty corners where furniture had been, the scattered boxes and crates that held what few belongings they would take with them when they left. Going away was indeed what they would be doing. Going away in shame.

"We are closing up our London house," Papa said grandly, as if they had any number of other houses to go to, and as if there was ever any hope of them coming back to this one. "As the Season is ending soon, I have decided to spend some time by the sea. We will be taking a house near Brighton."

What he failed to add was that the house they were taking was an ancient cottage some distant relative owned but had deemed not worthy of inhabiting. And when Papa said "near" Brighton, he actually meant a dozen miles away from it in a town no one had ever heard of. Priscilla supposed Papa's lies hardly mattered, though. It was not as if anyone would come to visit them once they left London. Her parents had never been good at making friends and even worse at keeping them. Indeed, once the scandal of their bankruptcy and forced removal had faded away, London would not think of them again.

The young gentleman knew nothing of this, of course. He continued on as if Papa's

implications could be believed.

"Brighton! Such a lovely place. I have a house there as well, or rather, my father does. I suppose we'll see each other at the shore, or perhaps in some of the shops. Is your home on the Marine Parade? Royal Crescent, perhaps?"

Papa had the decency to be just a bit flustered at the man's casual reference to such illustrious directions. "Er, no sir. We'll be living outside of town."

"Ah. I see. Well, I'm glad to have found you still here then. I would very much like to ask Miss Waterford to come driving with me."

Driving with him? A perfect stranger? No possible good could come of that! Despite the man's charming demeanor, his claims of acquaintance, and those dratted gold flecks in his eyes, she couldn't possibly go anywhere with him. He must know she would refuse.

Mamma must have known, too, because she never gave her the chance. "Oh, but she'd love to go driving with you, Mr. Jasper. The weather is excellent and I'm sure everyone would love see the two of you in the park today. Why, you might run across half the people we know on such a fine day as this."

"But Mamma," Priscilla started to say. "There is so much to be done here, preparing for our departure. Don't you think I should rather stay and—"

"Nonsense." Papa interrupted her. "Mr. Jasper has honored you with an invitation. You wouldn't wish to be impolite, would you?"

Mamma supported Papa's instruction. "Hurry, Priscilla! Run to fetch your wrap so you may be off. Fine gentlemen like Mr. Jasper hardly like to be kept waiting."

To prevent any hope of Priscilla's refusal, Mamma nearly shoved her from her chair and pushed her out of the room, toward the staircase, chattering about what a perfect day it was for a drive and how Priscilla should certainly wear her blue wrap because the color matched her eyes and would go nicely with her best bonnet. There was no hope for Priscilla to get a word in edgewise or to make any other suggestion. After all, she only had but one bonnet that was fit for public these days, and the blue wrap did indeed go well with it.

As they ascended the stairs, Papa's voice boomed out from the drawing room. "So, Mr. Jasper, your family is from Brighton?"

"Oh no, sir," Mr. Jasper replied and Priscilla slowed her step just a bit to be sure she might hear. "My father's estate is in Essex. He merely keeps a house in Brighton, though I don't know why. It seems every time he visits, the Prince Regent insists he leave his home and stay at the Pavilion."

"The Prince!" Papa's astonishment was audible.

He went on to fluster and fawn over their guest, but Priscilla had reached the top of the stairs and Mamma was pushing her on, directing her as if fetching a bonnet and wrap had never once happened before. Priscilla felt too much of her own astonishment to pay much attention, though.

Who was this strange, familiar man who's family kept company with the Prince? And what in heaven's name did he want with her?

Edward tossed the boy with his horse another coin for his efforts. The carriage was waiting quite safely where it had been left. The boy grinned and bowed awkwardly, then ran off down the street clutching his pay. Whatever that family's circumstance, things would be slightly improved for a day or two, at least. Edward's satisfaction at the boy's gratitude, however, was instantly overshadowed by his awe as Miss Waterford appeared in the doorway of her home.

She was radiant. The sunlight played off her golden ringlets and even the out-dated bonnet she wore could not dim the brightness of her blue eyes. The breeze caught her skirts and the fringe at the edge of her faded wrapper danced. Edward had to let himself stare much longer than was appropriate. She was the living, breathing vision of a dozen years' worth of dreams.

"My, what a lovely carriage," the lady's mother said as she and Mr. Waterford followed their daughter and surveyed Edward's conveyance.

"Well sprung, it appears," Mr. Waterford said. The lust in his eyes was everything Edward could have hoped for.

"There is nothing quite like going through the park in an open carriage," Mrs. Waterford said. "I remember years ago..."

She prattled on, but Edward paid her no attention. His mind was wholly occupied with taking in Miss Waterford and helping her into the carriage. The lady's nervousness was evident and she held her wrap tightly around her as she settled into the bench, as far to one side as possible.

Her parents, the greedy, unfeeling schemers, hardly cared for her well-being as they shuffled her off with a total stranger. They had the whiff of Edward's money and would sacrifice Priscilla far too willingly. It would serve them right if he truly did have nefarious intentions.

Thankfully for her, he did not. How could he? Miss Waterford was not like them, not at all. She never had been. There was no reason to allow her terror to continue.

"Do not worry, Miss Waterford," Edward said softly as he slapped the horse into motion. "You're perfectly safe here with me."

The carriage rocked gently and began to move away from the covetous gaze of her parents. Priscilla hardly seemed comforted by his words, or the fact that he refused every instinct to reach out and touch her, to take her hand in his or to brush one of those golden ringlets from her cheek.

"I expect your explanation, sir," she declared, her voice fragile but her words firm. "I know for a fact you were not at Mrs. Garland's ball and we have never once been introduced."

"Are you so certain?" he asked, turning to catch her gaze. "Do you truly not recognize me, Curly Locks?"

Her eyes went wide. "Dear heavens! Ned, it *is* you!"

The recognition and relief that washed over her face nearly undid him. She remembered him! He'd been trying to steel himself for the devastation of being forgotten. But he hadn't been; she remembered him! And she was pleased to see him again.

"I was afraid you wouldn't remember me," he admitted.

"Of course I remember you! You were my dearest friend. No wonder you seem so... Oh my, this is just too much to take in. You still remember *me*!"

He had to laugh at that. "Of course I do! You were the only bright spot in my life after my mother died. I've hardly gone a day without thinking of you."

"Is that true? But I've thought of you, also. When they told me you were gone, that Papa had arranged for you to go work for someone else, well... I was quite inconsolable. I missed you, and I worried you would be treated badly, even worse than in our home. I prayed every day that you would find some success in your life, but this... I can't believe it, Ned!"

"It's true. I'm not the same boy who used to sleep on a pallet of rags in your kitchen. When I left your house, I thought my life would be over. If I'm to be honest, I did some praying, too. My wishes weren't so charitable as yours, however. I prayed your father would suffer for his cruelty and the way he tossed me aside."

"It appears both of us had our prayers answered," she said as the smile faded from her face.

"I'm sorry. Are things very bad for your family?"

He knew she would try to deny it, but he'd seen the state of their house. He knew her father's bluster was falsehood. As much as he might rejoice in the parents' downfall, he would have never wished this for her.

"We will survive," she said simply and dredged up a more cheerful expression. "I want to hear your story, though. Look at you! And it's not just the carriage and the clothes... your language is different, too. My parents had no idea you aren't... well..."

"That I'm not really a gentleman?"

"Forgive me, I did not mean it to sound so impertinent!"

"You sounded merely honest," he said. "Of course it's true; I was not born into quality. It's no secret that I had no father, that my mother worked the lowliest jobs simply to feed us. She took abuse from the rest of the staff, was treated as scum, yet she worked hard for your family. I was barely five years old when she died, and lucky to be given that pallet of rags and allowed to stay on."

"You never complained."

"Not to you I didn't," he admitted. "The rats in the cellar heard plenty from me, though."

"So what happened after you left us? No one would even tell me where you had gone. If you were well, why did you never try to correspond or let me know where you were?"

This was the part of the story he hated to tell her. "I couldn't. I'm afraid that your father... well, he disapproved of our friendship. After all, we were no longer little children in leading strings. He sent me off with the warning that if I ever attempted to see you or speak to you again, you would be punished. From what I knew of the man, I trusted his threat."

She nodded, not bothering to defend her father. "So you stayed away, all these years. For my sake."

"I was not very far away, actually. I was 12 when I left, and large enough to be useful. A merchant in Chelsea took me on for the purpose of hefting things for him. However, since you had so kindly taught me to read, he recognized that I could be useful in other aspects of his business."

"So that's what you do now? You work as a merchant?"

"No," he replied, guiding the carriage around a corner. "It's much better than that. I had been with the merchant for no more than a year when I met Mr. Jasper."

"But that is the false name you gave to my father!"

"No, it isn't false. Edward Jasper is *my* name."

"I always knew you as Ned Brown."

"And that's all that I knew, too, until Mr. Jasper came to do business with my employer. I began to hear odd whispers about the striking resemblance between us—it became rather a joke, in fact. But Mr. Jasper didn't laugh. Instead, he asked questions. When he learned my previous employer had been your father, he became most interested in me."

"I don't believe my father knows anyone named Jasper."

"No, I doubt that he does. But my mother *did*."

"Your mother?"

"Mr. Jasper, I discovered, is my father."

He paused a moment to let her digest that information. She blinked, very likely just as stunned by this information as he had been all those years ago. Even now, he was still overcome by waves of emotion any time he recounted the story.

"My mother was going to marry Mr. Jasper," he explained. "His parents were against the match, though. As you might guess, Mr. Jasper comes from a family with connections and status."

My mother—God rest her soul—did not. They were young and impetuous, but in the end my mother chose to run away rather than to be the reason her lover was disowned by his family. She never told him about me, and she never once told me about him."

"What a sad story! But if he did not know about you, how did he learn that you are his son?"

"Because he had searched for my mother. When he finally found her some years ago, it was too late. He learned that she worked for your father, but that she had died. No one mentioned she'd left behind a son, so he grieved her and went on with his life."

"Until he learned you had worked for my father and been orphaned."

"Exactly! The resemblance between us really is remarkable, so when he asked about my mother, I merely confirmed his suspicions. He immediately embraced me as his son, took me to his home in Essex, adopted me as his heir, gave me his name, and saw that I had an education."

"So you truly are Edward Jasper!"

"I truly am."

His companion laughed. The sound made the sun shine even brighter. With all the turmoil in her life, he wondered how often she had reason to laugh. Just now, he was grateful he could provide some of that reason. If only there was more that he could do, but their reunion was too fresh to even consider suggesting such a thing. It would be too forward, too presumptuous.

For now, the best thing he could do for her was to make their day as pleasant as possible. No more talk of the painful past, no questions about the uncertain future. Instead, he let her relax in his fine new carriage as they turned onto Rotten Row. She would have her promised ride through the park, and heaven help anyone who looked at them askance or murmured disparaging remarks about her father's financial situation.

It had been two full days since that glorious drive through the park. Priscilla still felt warm and tingly inside any time she thought of it. From the dark cloud that had hovered over her for so long, this one bright ray had shone through. She had found dear Ned, after all this time! Or rather, he had found her. True, she had not seen him since he returned her home after their drive, but he sent a note assuring her that he would be looking forward to calling on her again.

Unfortunately, he would have to hurry. The auction was today, but Papa's creditors were becoming restless. There was talk that even after the family sold everything they owned, there would still not be enough to pay all the debts. Priscilla had heard her parents talking that morning—they were planning to leave town earlier than expected, probably to avoid whatever confrontations might arise after the auction.

From force of habit, Priscilla glanced up at the mantle to check the time on the clock. The clock wasn't there, of course. It had gone with the men from Christie's, taken to the auction house. Very likely, it was up on the block at this very moment. Surely the auction had started by now. How many of the things that had filled her surroundings for all of her life now belonged to strangers?

Papa's footsteps echoed in the empty house. Up until this morning he had boasted that he would attend the auction, planned to glare at those who would profit from his undeserved misfortune, perhaps even buy back his own things. But of course there was no money for buying, and unsurprisingly, no courage for glaring. He entered the drawing room where Priscilla sat with her mother in two of the few remaining chairs, the ones deemed too inferior for auction.

"I hope a pox lands on every one of those vultures, scavenging our things and gloating over their spoils," Papa grumbled.



Mamma sighed. "And to think, when Mr. Jasper appeared to show such interest in Priscilla, I had brief hope she might bring the man up to scratch."

Priscilla merely chuckled at her mother's audacious words. If they only knew who the man really was! Oh, but she would not tell them. That would be for Ned to do, if he chose. For now, it was her own private joke. Papa, however, took exception to her untoward show of mirth.

"You think our misery is something to laugh at? Who is that Jasper fellow, anyway? Probably just sniffing around you to see what scraps we might leave behind that he can scoop up for himself."

"Mr. Jasper is a friend of mine," she said simply.

"Not much of one, I daresay," Mamma said. "Since when have you ever attracted friends? He likely realized he'd get nothing from you and we'll never see him again. Oh, if only you had made yourself more agreeable! You've never known how to handle yourself, though, so I don't know why I'd expect you to make any sort of effort now, in our most dire time of need..."

"I have no idea what you think I could have done, Mamma. Perhaps I should have sold myself into a harem for you? Gathered a few pennies in Covent Garden?"

Mamma's face turned white and Papa's cheeks boiled with anger. "Don't speak to your mother that way! How dare you utter such filth in this house."

"Why, Papa? Will the new owners object?"

Once again, one of her parents was lunging at her in rage, seeming to threaten bodily harm, but once again this was interrupted by someone at the door. The knocking sounded quite loud as it bounced around the empty house. Papa froze in place, mere inches from striking her. Mamma was still gasping for air after Priscilla's uncharacteristic outburst regarding harems and harlots in Covent Garden. For a moment they all just remained still, eyeing each other and apparently confused as to what should be done.

"There's no servant left to open the door," Priscilla calmly pointed out.

As Papa was the only one of the three standing, he growled in frustration and stormed from the drawing room. A moment later, the front door could be heard opening and voices sounded. Male voices. Quickly the voices and footsteps were moving their way.

The two ladies leapt to their feet as Papa ushered someone into the room. It was Ned! He had come to call, just as his note promised. There was no way Priscilla could hide her joy at seeing him again, but she did manage to refrain from bleating out his name and throwing herself into his arms. Barely.

"Mr. Jasper!" Mamma greeted warmly with a smile so sweet it made Priscilla's teeth ache. "We had nearly despaired of ever seeing you again."

He bowed genuinely. "Forgive my intrusion. I'm sure you are very busy with preparations for your journey. I hear talk that, er, you will perhaps be leaving London somewhat sooner than expected?"

Mamma looked chagrined and Papa cleared his throat. "Things are in order already so I see no reason to delay. Any business that comes up can surely be handled by my solicitor."

"I'm sure you have nothing to worry about," Ned offered. "I just came from the auction and I have assurances that no unusual business will arise. You and your family are free to go as you like."

"You were at the auction? You knew about that?" Mamma cried.

Ned's expression suggested that everyone in London knew about that. "I was there," he simply said. "And I'm bringing you gifts, as a matter of fact."

It was only then that Priscilla noted he had a bag slung over his shoulder. As they watched in

amazement, he opened the bag and pulled out a small parcel. Without further ceremony, he handed the parcel to Mamma. She eyed it skeptically.

"For you, Mrs. Waterford," he said. "Go ahead, open it."

Mamma did so, hesitantly. Seeing the contents, she dropped back into her chair and put her hand to her heart. "My grandmother's pearls!"

Carefully, she pulled a long string of pearls from the parcel. Priscilla recognized them immediately. Indeed, they were great-grandmother's pearls, Mamma's prized possession. Had Ned bought them from the auction? Oh, the dear, wonderful man!

"I thought it was a shame for those to leave the family," Ned said.

Mamma gazed at him in wonderment. "Thank you... but, how did you know?"

He just shook his head. "You wear those pearls one every occasion, and each time you say that they were your grandmother's, a gift from the Princess Sophia Dorothea for some lady-in-waiting business or other, do you not?"

Mamma nodded, astonished. "Yes, it's true! That's very true!"

"Well, now you have them back. As for you, Mr. Waterford, I have this."

Ned extracted something else from his bag, this time a pouch. It jingled as he handed it to Papa. The older man wasted no time pulling it open and digging inside.

But he frowned. "There's only half a crown in here."

Half a crown? That was nothing compared to the pearls Ned had just produced for Mamma. Not that Papa deserved anything from him, of course, by why bother with half a crown?

"Consider that payment of a debt," Ned said, his eyes cold as steel as he glared at Papa.

"Consider us equal now, sir."

Papa still searched the pouch as if he expected to find something of great value, but Ned turned his attention to Priscilla. Her heart fluttered when his gold-flecked eyes met hers. No steely glare now, he was all warmth and tenderness.

"Here, I have something for you, too."

One last parcel came out of his bag and he gave it to her. Her fingers trembled as she pulled back the paper, exposing a book he had carefully wrapped. She recognized it immediately.

"Mother Goose!" she exclaimed, touching the cover and carefully running across the edges.

"You used to read that over and over," he said, moving toward her. "Of course you had every rhyme memorized, yet you read every word on every page. Because I asked you."

"I remember," she murmured, lost in the wonderful haze of the past.

"I could listen to you read from those pages for hours. My favorite, in fact, is this one."

His fingers brushed hers as he opened the book and turned through the pages. She knew exactly which one he would stop at. But instead of asking her to read it, he leaned over her and read the words into her ear.

*"Curly-locks, Curly-locks, wilt thou be mine?  
Thou shalt not wash the dishes, nor yet feed the swine;  
But sit on a cushion, and sew a fine seam,  
And feed upon strawberries, sugar, and cream."*

She had only to turn her face the slightest bit and his lips were at her cheek. The book weighed heavy in her hands and her eyelids wanted to droop. His nearness was as warm and intoxicating as if he'd wrapped her in his arms.

Thankfully he hadn't or else Papa might have even been more disgruntled. "What the devil is this? You bring my wife pearls and you make love to my daughter right in front of my eyes?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Ned said, straightening. "I thought the gifts I brought made it quite clear my

intentions are honorable. I wish to marry your daughter at the earliest possible time—as long as she'll have me, that is."

Oh, she would most certainly have him! She would have melted into his arms and told him so, too, if Papa hadn't interrupted.

"Wait just a minute," he boomed. "This is very irregular. You claim to be a man of means, sir, but all you give me is half a crown? Perhaps I should ask you to offer proof that you are as you appear."

"I offer you nothing more," Ned replied. "Merely my promise to love Priscilla, to devote the rest of my life to her, and to care for her far better than you have."

"Well, perhaps I don't wish to give you my daughter," Papa argued.

Mamma appeared terrified, as if she could sense Papa was just about to ruin this the way he had ruined everything else with his bluster and greed.

"Mr. Waterford, have a care," she cautioned him. "Think what you are saying. The man bought back my pearls and he wants to marry Priscilla!"

But Papa had smelled money and he wanted more. Instead of thanking Ned, he glowered at him. "You hand me a bag with a few shillings and think it's enough to purchase my daughter?"

Ned looked appalled. "Good God, man. I would never insult Miss Waterford in such a manner. Purchase her? No, never for a hundred crowns. A thousand! She is beyond priceless. Those shillings I gave you, sir, are the exact amount of *my* worth. At least, that's what you felt I was worth when you sold me to the merchant who took me out of your kitchen ten years ago."

At last Papa was stopped. His eyes narrowed as he studied Ned, seeing him for the first time. "You... you can't be! Not that dirty little orphan who slept on the floor. But you aren't called Jasper! You didn't have any sort of name, the dirty child of a dirty whore."

"Watch how you speak of my mother," Ned warned and his eyes flashed fire. "I have bought myself back from you. Now, for the sake of Miss Waterford, I will not war with you. I was Ned Brown years ago, but today I am Edward Jasper."

"It's true, Papa," Priscilla said quickly. "His father found him after he left our house. He is who he says he is and I *will* marry him!"

"I'm so glad to hear you say that," Ned said with a grin, forgetting her father momentarily.

"Then it's settled!" Mamma said brightly. "We can't leave London now, not while the Season is still on. My daughter is to be a bride, all our friends will want to pay their respects to her!"

"We have nowhere to live here, Mamma," Priscilla reminded. "We're going to the coast, remember?"

"I really don't care at all where I marry you, Miss Waterford," Ned said, taking her hand to give it a squeeze. "But if you would like to stay here in London a while longer, I think perhaps the new landlord might be agreeable."

"What? You didn't buy this house, did you?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, but even I don't have quite that much money."

"But someone has purchased it? You saw that it was sold?" Papa asked.

Ned confirmed that it was so. A reliable source told him the house had been privately sold. Mamma whimpered, clutching her pearls all the more tightly.

"The good news," Ned added quickly. "I'm told it went at a good price. You need not worry about any debt remaining, and very likely you will be left with something to live on. Not extravagantly, of course, but I daresay the Waterford family will not be completely bereft of comfort."

"That is good news then," Mamma said. "And if Priscilla will be happily wed, we can find

some consolation in that, I suppose."

"Perhaps just a bit," Ned said, grinning at Priscilla.

"Very well," Papa finally said. "I see there is nothing to do but give my consent. You two will be married, and I will find this new landlord and discuss his plans for this house. I suppose my solicitor will know who he is."

"He will indeed. My father is well known to your solicitor."

"Your *father*?" Papa gaped.

"Of course. I haven't the funds for such an expense," Ned explained, clearly enjoying the moment. "But my father thought it might make a fine wedding present."

"Your father bought my house?" Priscilla asked, still trying to grasp all the various parts of this amazing development.

"*Our* house, my dear," Ned corrected. "We'll help your parents find a place of their own, of course. We must be charitable to those in need, after all."

"You always were the kindest soul I ever knew." She could do nothing but return his giddy grin, entwining her fingers with his as he pulled her up to stand by his side.

"If you truly believe that, then how about rewarding my kindness with another drive in the park?" he suggested. "The weather today is even more fine than two days ago."

"Everything today seems more fine than two days ago!" She laughed.

Mamma and Papa sputtered, unable to come up with anything worthwhile to say after all that had just happened. Priscilla would have ignored them anyway, so their silence was just as well. The only thing that mattered now was that Ned was here and he wanted her to be with him. Forever.

"Come, Curly-Locks," he said. "I want to tell everyone we see that I am driving with the future Mrs. Edward Jasper!"

"You may tell them that," she said demurely, allowing him to lead her past her dumbstruck parents and out toward his carriage, gleaming in the sunlight. "Or better yet, tell them I will be Mrs. Ned Brown. I could never wish for anything better than that."

He just laughed. "Indeed, Ned Brown has always loved you completely. But just wait until you see how Edward Jasper loves you!"

Her insides fluttered at the promise in his words. Indeed, she hoped she would not have to wait very long.

*The End*