Governess

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Part 1

It was well established that a gentleman did not travel by coach, even on the road to Bath, said to be the best road in all of England in the year 1800. A gentleman should maintain his own carriages, or be able to borrow or rent one from persons of his class, for the journey from London to Bristol, if his journey was for proper purposes.

Young Master Benedict Rotherham was of a good family, but it might be said that his purposes were far from proper. The fact is that the future that his respectable family had in mind for him, was not of his mind. Neither soldiering in Africa or India, nor a life devoted to the church were for him. He had in mind a life in the New World. There he hoped for a life of adventure without being under the command of generals, or of God.

The coach was expected to complete the journey to Bath in two full days, with an overnight stop in Hungerford. From Bath Ben and his companion expected to take a carriage or trap the 12 miles to the quayside, there to step aboard the bark “Clytemnestra” for the journey to Boston, Massachusetts.

Ben was a man of genteel habits, and so he had persuaded a junior footman in the employ of his father’s household to join him as serve as his valet. Noah Bilk was barely 17 at the time – a slim and sallow youth not suited to hard labor. His father had persuaded the Rotherham family butler to take the youngster into service at the age of 12, presuming that a life working indoors was more suited to the boy’s physical condition.

Noah had decided soon enough that his father was right, as he enjoyed the comforts of the great house and did not mind the hours or the effort. In addition, the boy was clever, and had learned enough at the church diocesan school to be able to further that education while in service. In addition to that, his employer the butler was willing to give the boy lessons in the key requirements of service, with a view to Noah rising to the position of valet in due course, although the position was only available when Master Benedict was down from Rugby School. Otherwise, Noah was a mere footman. Although it was a custom well out of favour in 1805 Noah kept his hair long and tied in a queue as did footmen of older times. His long hair was to serve useful in what followed.

Noah had also assisted in the kitchen and had developed a friendship with the mistress’s middle aged lady’s maid, Mademoiselle Burnouf. Noah was one of those persons who had a skill in learning skills, and who valued them. He was like one of those Greek sponges in absorbing the knowledge of others, even though the occasion for the application of those skills might never arise.

So Noah served Master Benedict in an unofficial capacity and they became close – some might say closer than a servant should be. The fact is that Noah was as restless as his young master. He was easily led into this adventure that brought them to the tavern at Hungerford, not far from the Rotherham estate.

When they boarded the coach that would travel the whole day through to Bath it appeared that the only persons to climb aboard were the two of them and a young lady. At the insistence of Master Benedict she introduced herself as Verity Manson, who was travelling to the small town of Weston in Somerset to join in service as a Governess to a wealthy trader recently widowed. It seemed that they might enjoy one another’s company on board the coach.

But then two young gentlemen arrived. They did not introduce themselves but quickly established that Noah was a valet and Verity was a governess.

“Servants shall sit on the backboard,” one of them said to the coachman. “There are three gentlemen who shall sit in the coach.” He had included Master Benedict as he should have.

“There is plenty of seating aboard,” said Ben. But these “gentlemen” would have none of that, and they became angry that it should even be suggested.

Noah helped Verity up onto the seat beside him, and she did her best to cover herself for the ride exposed to the elements. Fortunately, the weather was cloudy but mild, and the seating not all that uncomfortable. They had a view of the scenery and time to talk.

The full draw of six horses was changed twice on the journey but Noah and Verity did not step down. They took a small refreshment lifted up to them on a yardstick as was custom at the time. Climbing down and back up was an effort, and they were in conversation. Such a journey and Noah’s enquiring mind enabled him to learn all there was to know about Verity Manson.

In the interior of the coach Benedict Rotherham had a less pleasant journey. His fellow passengers proved to be thoroughly objectionable and far too brutish to be worthy of the title of gentlemen. They had both served in the army and had perhaps picked up bad habits, but it seemed more likely that such habits were inherent.

When the coach arrived in Bath Verity announced that a room had been arranged for her at the inn used by the coachline and she would be staying over. It seemed to late for anybody to continue their respective travels as night was falling, it was suggested among the higher classes that they partake of some hard liquor.

The role of a valet in those circumstances is to fin a place at a distance where he is not part of such carousing but is available if required. Noah found that spot near the bar. Verity as a woman alone went to her room.

The publican called time by the ringing of a bell and all sales ceased, despite the entreaties of the two ex-soldiers. With Benedict they spilled out on to the street and Noah maintained a discreet distance behind them. The drunken conversation turned to the desirability of the governess sleeping in the rooms above the inn which could be accessed from a rear stair.

To his credit Master Benedict did his best to dissuade the rogues from their immoral intentions before they mounted the staircase, but when they did he decided that only physical action would suffice to prevent a crime.

The difficulty that Noah faced was that of all servants when faced by misbehavior by classes above them in standing. It is well understood that a servant may act in defence of his master, and for that reason Noah followed them up. But beyond that for a servant to do physical violence agains a gentleman no matter what the justification, was prohibited by established custom. Another fact was that while he had only met Verity Manson that very day, the whole day alongside her had drawn them close. He felt obliged to defend her.

But the determining fact was that Noah was simply incapable. He was small and weak even compared to Ben, but besides the other ruffians he was no bigger than Verity. He had no better chance than her, and as it turned out, she had no chance at all.

It all took place so quickly and with surprising little noise. He her muffled screams and the call of Ben trying to intervene, then the gurgling noise and the smell of hot blood.

Somebody struck a match. It was not him. The flame found a candle beside the bed and the scene was revealed in all its flickering horror.

Verity lay on the bed unmoving, smothered or strangled. Beside the bed lay the body of his master, the wild and lively Benedict Rotherham now losing that life second by second as the blood flowed from the knife in his belly.

“Help your master,” one of the scoundrels ordered. “Remove the knife.”

Noah was used to following orders. He reached down and pulled out the knife as if that might help. The fountain of blood shot up from the wound soaking Noah’s hand and sleeve.

“Why did you kill him? What were your intentions towards this young lady?” The other one seemed to be making up their story as he went. The knife was theirs. Noah carried no weapon.

“You did this, Sir, not I,” said Noah.

“Who would believe you?” the other said. “We are two and in the morning each of us will deny that we had anything to do with this. We were well away from here after closing time as we shall each testify – the word of gentlemen against the word of a single servant boy.”

“I see the gallows in your future,” said the first. “But maybe you can hide the murder. We do not propose to interfere.”

They were gone while Noah was gathering his thoughts.

There was sadness. He was closest to his master young Benedict, or had been until that day. Now it seemed that the two people who he cared for the most were dead, and his hand held a bloody knife. If he left now he had until daybreak and the discovery of the scene, the questioning of the true culprits, and then he would be hunted down. Could the scene be concealed? Could he set fire to the inn? Would that change anything?

He found himself looking down on the face of Verity Manson. She was not pretty and certainly no worthy of the advances of those two villains, but drink affects the vision of men when their fluids run hot. In fact, he mused that he would be prettier than her in the right costume. Mademoiselle Burnouf had said that he would have made a pretty woman when she asked him to serve as her dressmaking mannequin. So sad for Verity who had her life ahead of her, travelling to a job working for man she had not met but for a good wage, her future in service seemingly assured.

An idea entered his head – an idea at the same time driven by his circumstance, yet outrageous.

Verity had barely unpacked her suitcase. She had removed from it only a nightshirt and a hairbrush, and the travelling dress that she had worn was draped over the bedstead with her stockings, and her shoes were on the floor. Noah tried those shoes on his own feet and found that they were a perfect fit.

This was circumstance, or so it seemed. She was the same size as him. Even the dress was a perfect fit once the corset was drawn in as tightly as he could bear it, and some clean stocking placed to resemble a bosom.

As for his clothes, he decided that he would put those garments on her. He would place the knife in her hand. He would set the scene to tell another story. A young gentleman was escaping his family in the company of a young woman disguised as a man. Such a case had appeared in the Times recently. But things had gone wrong. A lovers tryst. His hands around her throat. Her knife in his guts. No other party involved. He would leave his male clothes. He would take hers. And her bag too, with personal items including the letters that she had mentioned.

Part 2

The first of those letters to be the letter from the headmistress of the Pullbury School of Orphans. The letter was addressed Mr. Tobias Canterville of Weston, the widower Verity had spoken to Noah of. It described Verity as “an intelligent and willing young woman, of pious and sober habits”. That was Noah’s impression, but while she had initially appeared reserved she had become more outgoing on their journey the previous day. Now she was dead.

The second letter was a letter from Mr. Canterville confirming her employment as governess and referring to her travel arrangements, including those from Bath onwards to Weston, another journey of some 30 miles, or a whole day by carriage.

It was that very morning, and as Noah read the letters by the first light of dawn, he had much to do in order to be present outside the inn and nine o’clock.

He decided to wash his hair with soap from Verity’s bag of toiletries in the steel basin provided. It seemed sensible to dress his hair in a feminine fashion as he would be required to doff the bonnet he would be wearing in due course. While the hair was drying in a cloth, he attended to plucking out his beard with tweezers also among her belongings. It was a painful process but was assisted by the fact that Noah’s beard was sparse and fair.

Verity was not a woman who used rouge or other such products such as was the habit of Mademoiselle Burnouf, but save for some blush caused by the removal of hair, the mirror revealed the face of a woman, albeit somewhat angular. It occurred to Noah that Mademoiselle Burnouf would be a good model and he recalled some of her gestures and imitated them in front of the mirror.

He decided that he would need to lift the tone of his voice to partake of conversation, but it would seem better that he practice that outside. Although nobody had been raised by the prior night’s commotion, he was uncertain and to how thin the walls might be.

What was his plan? Noah Bilk was an intelligent young man. Of limited education perhaps, but good enough to read and learn, and with a prodigious memory that would stand him in good stead. But most of all, his short experience in service had taught him to be quick and to respond well. In this case he imagined that the passengers in the coach would be questioned. Verity Manson would need to be found and interviewed. She would say that she did not stay at the inn, leaving her room to a young gentleman and his delicate looking servant. She stayed nearby, the place of the establishment not recalled, but nowhere near the inn.

She need only be the governess until after the questioning and the determination of the events on that night.

So, it was Miss Verity Manson who walked from the inn with her suitcase, and waited outside the meeting place until a little past the hour, for the arrival of Mr. Cantervilles’s carriage.

It was not he who arrived. Mr. Canterville was in Bristol and as he often was and he had sent his driver known as Jack, to collect the young governess. “If you be Miss Verity Manson then I be here to collect you.”

“I am she,” said the governess, in he practiced tone. “Is the house very far from here? I have been two full days on the road from London.”

“Which is why nobody from these parts would bother going there,” said Jack. He offered a helping hand up into the cab, but undid the hatch so he could talk with his passenger on the ride.

“What age is the child I will be teaching,” she asked.

“Child? No, there are three children. All ages they are, and all moods.”

“And is Mr. Canterville a good employer?”

“Tobias Canterville is a wanderer and an adventurer, reckless and willful,” said Jack. “And as fine a man as you will ever meet. The death of his wife hit him hard, but not as hard as realizing that he was a father and had a family to care for.”

They turned off the main road and the carriage drove around a small hill giving a view of the sea. It was something that the governess had never seen before. She slid down the window of the carriage and breathed in the exotic air that she had heard about – clean dry air without the smell of dung that pervaded the cities, towns and highways of England. That and the boundless sea stretching into the distance could not fail but to excite her.

She could see the town of Weston below too, a small town in those days, just above the sea – “Super Mare” as they say. Then they passed into a wooded area before coming upon a massive house. In many ways it was smaller than the Rotheram home, but that was a city house on five levels. This had only two but extended out, with many outbuildings visible as the carriage approached to door. But they drove past the door, to the coach house, reminding the governess that she was only that – a governess.

Even before they stopped moving, a large man on a huge black mare thundered by, his shaggy dark hair flying. He leapt from the horse and without even looking at the carriage, he led the horse next to the stable.

“There’s the master there,” said Jack. “But you’d best go inside to wait.”

The governess was curious. She placed her suitcase by the back door and walked across to the stables. Tobias Canterville was taking the saddle from his horse rather that leaving the task to a groom. He tended to the animal with affection, as she could see.

“Sir,” she called out. “Mr. Canterville? I am Verity Manson – the governess – just arrived this moment.”

He was removing the bridle and did not even bother to look at her. He said – “Step inside the house and the cook will give you something to eat.” Still, he did not look around, so she waited. He seemed intent not look at her.

“Yes, it has been quite a journey,” said the governess. “Something to eat would be marvelous.” She stood her ground. For some reason she wanted to be acknowledged. It was not the act of a servant brought up to be a servant. It seemed to the governess that she had gone to some effort to present herself, and to present and not be seen was simply wrong.

Still, he busied himself, but he was aware that she was waiting. The horse was placed in it’s stall. He had to turn towards the house.

When their eyes first met they both felt odd. Call that what you will, but she saw something in his eyes, and he saw something in hers.

“Miss Manson is it? I apologize. I am Toby Canterville, the master of this house,” he said. “I am a little hungry too having come here from Bristol just now. Join me in some bread and whatever else the cook can find.”

He was a tall man, and seemed to fit the description Jack had given. He looked like an adventurer, reckless and willful. He was very handsome. Although the governess had never been attracted to men, to this man, she was. That feeling made her swallow slightly, as if looking at something delicious but forbidden.

He led the way to the door picking up he suitcase and holding the door open, as if she was a guest, not staff. Servants hold doors, not masters.

The cook was a friendly woman, and she had plenty of food. It was just her and the housekeeper Mrs. Dunphy living in, assisted by maids from the village. The other staff was the estate man Mr. Chews, who could serve as butler when required, Jack in charge of stables and maintenance, and a gardener.

“We have a nice room for you upstairs, Miss Manson,” said Mrs. Dunphy. “A room with sun and a view of the sea.” It sounded like heaven.

“Now that you know the staff, you should meet the children,” said Toby. “Have them assemble in the library Mrs. Dunphy. That is the room where you might wish to do your instruction.”

These words troubled the governess, who was, of course, not a governess at all. This might soon be discovered, so a plan was developing in her mind. She would spend time learning about the children before she started formal lessons.

The oldest was Harriet, the only daughter. She was responsible and had been something of a mother to her younger brothers. The experience had taught her to be practical.

The older of the two sons was Daniel, and he was obviously the smartest of the children. He was a reader and observer, and had little time for people who tried to teach him. His younger brother was less robust. Crispin was eager to please, and seemed loved by everybody in the household.

“Miss Manson has been brought up in a strong Christian tradition,” Toby told his children. “You can expect to be taught morals and the proper way to behave. In addition to the Bible, I expect that you will be instructed in the finest works of English literature, and I assume languages – perhaps Latin or Greek?”

The governess noted that he looked a little confused. He genuinely had no idea what his children were to be taught. That seemed useful.

“I will teach as you require, Mr. Canterville,” she said. “Certainly, proper conduct will be a priority, but as for literature I am more inclined towards practical English – reading and writing – the skills of the modern age. I am sure that as a trader and a businessman you will agree. As for dead languages, of course I have learned those, but French is a very useful language, and I prefer to teach it as it is spoken. And I see that young Daniel here has collected some insects – I do believe that all children should be taught about the natural world and the science that reveals. And mathematics too – but practical arithmetic – useful numeration. Don’t you agree, Mr. Canterville?”

The master seemed momentarily silenced. This was not the woman he expected. He assumed she would be a Bible thumping moralist ready to cram his children’s heads with rote learning.

“I agree absolutely, Miss Manson,” he looked at the three young faces. “And I think my children do too. Now let Mrs. Dunphy show you to your room and you can get started.”

There was something about the young faces that struck deep into the soul of the governess. It was almost as if she was born to be what she pretended to be. She saw in those faces a hunger for attention, but also for knowledge, and even for love. Harriet, Daniel and Crispin.

And they had something for her too, as she heard over the evening meal.

“You could be so beautiful,” said Harriet. “My mother was a renowned beauty, wasn’t she Father? She had the most beautiful clothes all stored in the attic. Won’t you let me put some curls in your hair?”

“The orphanage would not allow frivolity,” said the governess. “But now I am no longer there, so perhaps we might dress up occasionally?” Somehow the idea appealed to her. If she was dressed as a woman why not be a pretty one?

“Have you heard about the work of Mr. Charles Darwin,” said Daniel. “I have been carrying out my own observations and breeding my own variation of chicken. Would you like to see it? Or do Mr. Darwin’s ungodly notions offend you?”

“My education was strict and focused on a strong Christian faith,” said the governess. “But would it be sinful to admit that I prefer Mr. Darwin’s view of the world? It makes it such a more interesting place, don’t you think Daniel? I hope that I will learn as much from you as I can teach to you.”

“Will you play with me?” asked Crispin. The governess knew what he needed. He wanted to feel a mother’s embrace. She would give it, but not in front of the others. Their’s would be a special relationship, she and Crispin.

She looked across and Toby Canterville, smiling in the candlelight. It was well after bedtime for the children. Her bed she had seen and laid down upon – the softest and sweetest bed she had ever known. She was looking forward to it. She caught his glance and smiled. It was a knowing exchange, but quite what one knew of the other was not certain.

“I think that we should retire,” said the governess. “Tomorrow will be busy. We have curls and chickens and games to look forward too. And perhaps some mathematics and French too.”

Part 3

The following day, she learned to her relief that Daniel would be conducting the lessons in mathematics, and in natural science too. Harriet was a reader and was invited to speak to the class (her siblings and an equally ignorant governess) about the great books of the English language. That left the governess with practical reading and writing, and oral French, two subjects she knew well.

The master of the house held the office an elder of Weston town and he was busy there the first day, and then Bristol the day following and Bath the day after that. But he was always home for supper and the evening meal. He had decided that from now on the governess should be seated at the table and that dining should include a discussion of what had been learned, or seen and lived, on that day.

Within those first few days Verity had become easily accepted, and when Saturday came and Toby had no pressing business, he decided that she might like to see the estate and surrounds.

Harriet had tied Verity’s hair in rags the night before, and insisted on pinning the ringlets into a nice arrangement in the morning. But it was not to last.

“Do you ride, Miss Manson?” said Toby. “There is much that I would like to show you, and ground to cover not all of it suited to wheels.”

“I ride, but not well sir,” said Verity, for in truth she had never ridden side saddle. “If only I could straddle the horse I might feel a little more confident.”

“I had a riding dress made for my wife,” he said. “But she was much to refined to have a horse between her legs. Let me see if I can find it and you can get changed.

It was indeed a beautiful garment. It could easily have been mistaken for a full bottom dress in green and with blue petticoats, but a clever split was engineered. It was in fact a pair of elaborate bloomers that fell like a dress when dismounted and even in the saddle could pass as one from either side.

They rode to the edges of the property. He pointed out what he owned and the homes of his neighbors beyond and the handful of tenant farmers who remained.

”I bought this land from a local lord,” said Toby. “They never have enough money. Probably because they know nothing of business. Perhaps too much Latin and Greek and not enough practical English, Miss Manson?”

The cantered down to the town of Weston and he pointed out some sights and paused to speak to a few locals. He introduced a few to “Miss Manson, a free-thinking governess I have found for my unruly children”.

They arrived at the beach, a large stretch of sand with an old ruin on the point in the distance.

“I think that you are a better rider than you suggest, Miss Manson,” he said. “And you sit atop a fast horse. What say I race you to the island fort at end of the beach yonder?”

“Sir, that would be highly unseemly and most unladylike,” scolded Verity, but then took her chance and dug her heels into the horse’s flanks. She was off, a head start of a good 20 yards. Despite his considerable riding skills, Toby had not lied. His horse was slower. He could not peg back her lead.

She stood astride he horse laughing. She had lost her bonnet and most of the pins in her hair. The tidy ringlets had become a mass of blond curls, bouncing in the sunlight as she settled her horse. He drew close enough to reach over an pull out the last hairpin.

“You are a phenomenon, Miss Manson,” he said, as she grinned in victory.

“Not too unseemly and unladylike?” she tittered. “Harriet will be angry with me for ruining her efforts.”

“Let us go back to town for a mug of ale,” said Toby.

“Good sir, what do you take me for?” said Verity. “I will take my ale in a glass, thank you, provided you can find one the same size as your mug.

Part 4

It was a few days before a member of the constabulary of the City of Bath came to call about an investigation into a double death. Toby was surprised and insisted on sitting in on the interview.

“The victims were one Benedict Rotherham and an unknown young lady,” said the constable. “Mr. Rotheram comes from a good family but was clearly of a wild spirit. He had booked passage to America for himself and a servant, but seems to have joined this young lady instead. The servant, one Noah Bilk, is unaccounted for. Did you see a servant with Mr. Rotherham?”

“I assumed that the rather slight young man was his servant ,” said the Governess. “There was not another woman in the coach. There were two other men, but I did not converse with them. They called themselves gentlemen, but I would not regard them as such. No, indeed. I could describe them if you wish. They were at the inn when we arrived but I decided not to stay there. I went to the meeting place and waited there. People would have seen me there as dawn broke.”

“Yes indeed,” said the constable. We have spoken to the coach driver who remember you as a governess coming here to the Canterville house, and he remembers to young man and his valet, and two men he described as young officers out of uniform. We are trying to find them but at this stage this seems to have been some kind of elopement that turned into a crime of passion. Only this Noah Bilk is missing.”

“If the valet was not a young man at all, then perhaps this fellow never got aboard the coach in the first place?” Verity suggested. “Perhaps you should pass it back to London? I have to say that that it is rather romantic – a young man eloping with a woman dressed as his valet. So sad that it ended so badly.”

Toby Canterville interrupted – “Is it not typical of a woman that they build a romance around such a tawdry affair. Is there anything more that you need from Miss Manson. She had a job to and my children need her knowledge.”

“Understood Mr. Canterville, Sir,” said the constable. “I will take my leave. I won’t wish to speak with you again Miss.”

As she left it seemed like a huge weight had fallen from her shoulders. She was free at last. She could take her leave of this place and shed this disguise.

“I always thought of myself as a roisterer, but it seems that I am but nothing to you. Trouble follows you.” Toby Canterville was teasing her. He was smiling at her with those eyes that sparkled and danced and seemed hint of adventure. There he was confident and rich. And she was penniless. She was not free at all.

“It was awful,” she said. Suddenly she realized that she was crying. It was not something that should be done, let alone in front of a member of the household.

She felt his strong arms around her. He said – “You had better tell me, Verity.”

“I saw the bodies. I saw the blood. It had nothing to do with me. I just didn’t want to get involved. I lied, but only because I was not involved,” she sobbed.

“Cry it out,” he suggested. “We all face horrors in our live. We cannot let them haunt us. Cry them away, and let them soak into the soil and be gone. Now you are here, with me. You are happy here, aren’t you.

“Yes,” she said. She looked up at him. He saw those big blue eyes, wet with tears that made them shine and made her eyelashes look dark. He saw her trembling lips, full and pink, and her flushed face. What man could resist? He kissed her.

She kissed back. It was an instinctive reaction, even an animal one. Her hands were in his hair and she was pulling his face to hers as if trying to consume him or be consumed – to become as if one.

Then as suddenly as it had happened, she pulled away. All the knowledge of her present situation that has disappeared in a cloud of passion returned with a jolt. The knowledge that this could never be. She was not a woman, although in that moment she wished that she was.

“Mr. Canterville, I cannot …”, she panted. “What kind of woman do you think I am?”

“One of flesh and blood,” he said. “Just as I am of flesh and blood.”

There was fire in his eyes. Here was a man driven by desire to the point of frenzy, and driven there by her. Despite everything, it made her feel good. It made her feel wanted, and a little empowered by that. It made her feel things that she had never felt before. She felt her heart beating, as if to prove that it was the seat of love, despite what science might say.

“I cannot give myself to you,” she said. The unsaid words would be – ‘as much as I want to’. It seemed to her that he could see that.

“I apologize,” he said. “I meant to be supportive, but I overstepped. I took advantage of your distress. It is unforgivable. This places me in a very difficult position. Of course I will see to it that you have the very best of references…”.

“Don’t send me away,” she said, her face creased into a heartfelt plea. And yet this would have been the perfect opportunity to take her leave of this place, and of this disguise. It dawned on her that she did not want to do that. She wanted to stay. She wanted to be Verity.

“Miss Manson, I have shamed myself and you …”.

“No, it is I who have shamed you.” She interrupted him again.

“I don’t understand. You have always behaved perfectly, as a woman should.”

“That is the problem, Mr. Canterville … Toby.” Her lip trembled. The only way out was the truth. His response would determine her future. The odds were that she would be thrown onto the streets as a penniless pervert, but this man deserved honesty.

“I am not really a woman,” she said.

He stared at her in puzzlement. He could see him processing her words, and looking at her face, and her body.

“How interesting,” he said. “You continue to amaze me, Verity.”

Part 5

“I trust that you are no longer in pain, my Love,” Toby said. “I would not have suggested that we ride if I thought it might hurt you.”

Verity moved in the saddle. It felt right, this adjustment to her anatomy. She smiled at him.

“I am very comfortable, thank you,” she said. She had wanted to surrender those things, and offered them up before they had married. It seemed the right thing to do – a sign of commitment. A clear statement that she would be forever Verity, just as the ring on her finger confirmed that she would be forever his Verity.

Now she felt more of a woman than ever. Her hair and her skin shone with good health, silky and smooth, and with a little color from the sun that city would scorn at. It is just than when you ride to keep up with a man like Toby Canterville, no bonnet will stay on, let along the brimmed hat packed behind the cantle of her seat.

“The children will be wondering where we are,” he said. “We must ride back to the point and open the hamper that Mrs. Dunphy and Cook have prepared for us.”

She laughed. “Yes. Let’s get back. Daniel will have his share of specimens and Harriett will want to rearrange my hair.”

“And Crispin will be missing you,” grinned Toby.

“I love them all, but Crispin just a little more,” she conceded, as she turned her horse towards the sea.

“And what about me? Do you love them more than me?”

“You, husband, I love in a very different way, as you know,” she scolded.

“And in that I have no choice. I must love you in a different way, and I do,” he said, his eyes showing the truth of it. “Now, let’s see who gets to the picnic first.”

And he galloped off. He had a head start, but she would catch him, again.

The End

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