Elopement

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

His suit was still in good order, but it was wearing thin. It was his meal ticket, and he was wondering how he might have it repaired to last him a little longer. It was the suit and his youth that allowed him to move easily among the higher classes and pick their pockets.

No street urchin could access a first-class carriage on the train into New York City. The staff of the rail company were watchful and protective of the higher classes. A young man who looked respectable could move easily, especially if he called out – “I’m coming Mom,” and told the conductor - “my mother is holding my ticket and she is already aboard”.

It was only because the train was busy that he found himself sharing a cabin with two middle-aged women. But he would sit that out. The time to rifle their purses was as the train was emptying, and in the crush to exit that still happened, even in first class. Then he could disappear into the crowd at the station, and board another train to do the same thing.

The more attractive of the women looked a lot like his own mother. In fact, the resemblance was such that it took an effort not to stare. Staring invited a return glance and that would compromise his anonymity. He pretended to be very interested in the newspaper that he had picked up somewhere down the train. Newspapers are always handy to hide things being lifted.

The woman took no notice. She was engaged in conversation with the other woman – somebody less attractive but clearly a good listener.

“I swear since Abigail disappeared my life has not been the same,” the woman said. “It has been so long now that I am sure that she has changed a great deal. Oh Cynthia, I would happily forgive her for running away with that man Jacob Hazeldene. What a scoundrel that man was. And his father was that convicted embezzler. The association would have ruined our family. You may say that we are rich enough to bear a little shame, but I was not prepared to bear it. So she ran away and now the younger Hazeldene has appeared without her, so God knows what has become of her. Honestly, if she were to appear tomorrow I would not only forgive her I would lavish her with gifts. I would give her all the allowance she has been due these last three years.”

He thought – ‘there goes a lucky girl. Why would she run away?’ But he buried himself in the newspaper. It would not be long before the train emptied. This woman appeared rich. And she had an embroidered bag that he could cut the bottom out with a razor while keeping an open sack below it. She would not even notice that she was carrying an empty bag without a bottom.

He followed he and her friend off the train and waited until there was a sufficient crowd around them to make his move. The trick was to do it and move clear without running – just appear to be rushing to an appointment or another train. If you could get clear before you heard a scream, that was a job well done.

The upper floor of the station had a few areas where he could examine the contents of this lady’s bag. He spread out the items. There was a purse with a good amount of money in bills and coins, there were handkerchiefs, a hairbrush, a pot of rouge and some other feminine items, there was a card case with her calling cards and there was a photograph. He knew immediately who it was, and it shocked him.

It seemed to him that he was looking at his own face, but it was the face of a woman. The main difference was the nose. His was larger and had been broken in a brawl. His eyebrows were bushy too, and his lips not quite so full, but she could be his twin sister. There was a name on the back – “Abbie”; and a date - September 5, 1896. Three years previous.

He looked at her calling card – “Mrs. John Carstairs (Madeleine)” and the address. It was good one – he knew that much. A rich person’s home. Had he known more he would have known that the family was “old city” – established and respected. But he smelled money.

The girl in the photo was the missing girl. She was lined up to receive an allowance. Maybe three years of allowance collected. That might be a fortune – maybe more than $100.00? But she was missing. She might never collect.

“What I would give to be in your position,” he said out loud, to the girl in the photo. He lifted his eyes for a moment. The place he was sitting was near a pane of glass where he could see his reflection. There she was, behind the glass – Miss Abigail Carstairs. He raised his hand as if to tuck a lock of hair and saw her do just that.

Could he do this? How would he go about it? What would be the risks of failure? What would be the rewards of success? He was a petty criminal – not by choice, but that was what he was. These are the calculations that a criminal makes each time he breaks the law. But what law would he be breaking here?

It took him only an hour to formulate a plan, and not a great deal of money or effort to put it into effect. After all, his business was impersonation to some degree. He had learned the gestures and speech of a wealthy young man to pass as one, and he had done so by observation and imitation. To pass as a wealthy young woman required the same approach, and the railway station and first-class carriages offered him plenty of examples.

He decided that he would go home to his mother with a story that he had been abducted and beaten. He would take his razor to his hair (which he kept neat to appear as a child of the wealthy) and claim that he had been shorn as punishment. He would need to shape his eyebrows and pluck other hair from his body to appear female, and he would find some female clothing to wear – it need not be anything much more than rags.

It seemed that he would not need to spend much of the money he had just collected. He could store some of it with his suit in his secret place. The place where he also kept the gun that he had found in a stolen coat. That place was there If all went bad and he needed to start again.

He went to the address early the following morning and watched the house. He saw servants moving to and fro from the lower level and then he saw a gentleman leave by the main steps. He was the only one who did.

“Mr. John Carstairs,” he said aloud, but in a voice not his own. “My father.” A girl’s voice.

John Carstairs looked to be a severe man. His wife loved her daughter, - that much he knew that from her grief he had witnessed on the train, but this man was not a loving man. “Perhaps that is why I left?” the feminine voice from his mouth whispered.

The new Abigail decided that she should arrive the following morning after the master of the house had left for work. She would need to find some clothes to wear. Undergarments to shape the body into a more womanly form were not uncommon, even in the underclasses. Something suitably ragged was found, and an even more ragged dress to go over that, and then a man’s coat, taken from the offender, or so she would say.

She had to stay concealed. Such a bedraggled figure could not be tolerated in these streets. Only when the time was right did she rush to the front door, her skirts raised, and pound the silver knocker with her filthy hands.

A butler answered the door. Of course that would happen. Suddenly she wondered if she had thought this through. She did know him or anybody else in the household. Did he know her? There would so many in the household to convince – perhaps too many.

“It’s me, Abbie,” she said. “I need to see mother.” Her plaintive voice came with real tears of doubt and frustration.

“Miss Abbie? Is that you?” She looked in the face of the man and saw a flicker of recognition followed by deep concern. “Come in child. Wait her on the tiles. I will get Mrs. Carstairs directly.” And he hurried away.

Clearly she was too dirty to be shown into a reception room. She knew enough about upper class living to imitate it. But for now she needed to figure out the house and what was where.

The boy’s mother had worked as a maid. As a child the boy had explored a fine when it was empty and he was allowed above stairs. There are rooms in common. A sitting room, a library, formal dining room and the drawing room where all the finest furniture and art would be displayed.

Upstairs the rooms would be different. She would need to feign confusion.

“Abigail? Is that you? Is that really you?” She turned to the voice. There she was, the lady from the train. The lady whose bag had been rifled. Mrs. Madeleine Carstairs.

“Mother!” She ran across the tiled floor beneath the grand staircase and threw her dirty arms around the fine clothes the lady of the house wore by custom.

“Abbie! Oh Abbie! I knew you were alive. Let me look at you. Your father gave up hope, but I never did. But what has happened to you. What has happened to your beautiful hair? And your face looks … have you been beaten?”

“Beaten, and abused, and hair shorn off. Oh Mother? Forgive me for running off with Jacob. Please forgive me! He was awful to me. He sold me to a man who … I cannot tell you how awful it has been.”

“Your voice sounds … different,” Madeleine said.

“He tried to strangle me. The bruises have gone but he has damaged my throat.” She was quick, and now that it appeared that things were working, she had to be.

“Do you have other wounds? Do we need to call a doctor?”

“I just want to clean off three years of filth and become human again, eat something other than stale bread and sleep in a bed…”.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” said Madeleine. “Evans, get Mrs. Hadlow to run a bath and lay out some clean clothes for Miss Abigail.”

The butler – Evans. He was standing there, and a maid stood beside him. Mrs. Hadlow would be the housekeeper, and she soon appeared and hustled upstairs without a glance in Abbie’s direction. It seemed to Abbie that she must be new. If she knew the master’s daughter she would have looked at her face.

“You poor girl,” said Madeleine. “You know that Jacob Hazeldene returned to the city soon after you disappeared and claimed that you had gone missing from him too? He claims that he has been looking for you – the scoundrel!”

“I made a mistake, Mother. A terrible mistake. Jacob never loved me. No sooner than I was clear of you and Father’s protection than I was handed over to a monster, and monster called …”. Abbie cast around for a name. If Jacob Hazeldene was in the city, he could not be the culprit. “A monster known as Henry Calder.”

“Take off that coat and let me look at you,” Madeleine said. “And please call me Momsie like you always have.”

“Oh Momsie, I just wasn’t sure if you would take me back.” She dived in for another embrace, but she was suddenly concerned that close inspection without might not be a good idea. “Let me wash and we can consign these clothes to the furnace.”

“Let me get Hilton to help you wash this dirt off,” said Madeleine. “Lets get you into the bathroom without delay.”

Jillian Hilton was the maid who appeared. It was clear to Abbie that she had been in the household for some time and knew the real Abigail – there was a doubt in her eyes unclouded by the emotion that seemed to be driving “Momsie”. It seemed that maybe the doubt hinted at a closer friendship.

Alone in the bathroom the maid asked the question – “Do you remember me, Miss Abbie?”

“Of course I do,” said Abbie. “It just that … well, you know.” It was a bluff. There was little that could be done except to fly a kite.

“I know. Abbie and Jill can’t be friends in this house, but outside we can be.” Jill smiled and shrugged.

“Would you let me undress alone. I have bruises that I don’t want seen,” said Abbie.

“I will wait in the hall. Call me in when you want me to scrub your back,” said Jill.

When the door closed Abbie undressed and stepped into the bath. It was the first time she had ever had a bath. She had bathed in the cold river and washed with warm water on a cloth, but never anything like this. As the warm water soaked deeply and the body floated free of gravity it seemed that this was a life that Abbie should try to live for longer than the con. Could somebody ever steal that much money.

There were clothes laid out and fresh white towels. She could dress herself. She did not need Jill. But somehow she felt close to this young woman, about her age, although a few years older than the boy. So perhaps a little recklessly, she called out.

Jill came in. Abby had a washcloth over her flat chest and was leaning forward. Jill took a loofah and used it to gently wash down Abbie’s back, freeing dirt from pores that had never seen such attention. Abbie almost shivered with joy.

“I don’t know who you are, but I will keep your secret,” said Jill. She kept gently scrubbing even as she felt the muscles stiffen.

“Thank you,” said Abbie.

“I heard what you said about Jacob and I knew it was not true,” said Jill. “Abbie was in love. I am sure that she is dead now, just as I am sure that Jacob had no part in it. It is just that the mistress has pined every waking moment for the last three years – this house has been such a sad place. Then suddenly you arrive, and it is happy again. So, welcome home Abbie.”

“It is so good to have a friend,” said Abbie, before she even considered how true that was. The boy could never have friends. He was always moving and worked alone. And now suddenly he was surrounded by four walls and had an accomplice.

“Let’s get you dry and dressed,” said Jill.

“Will you keep all my secrets?” Abbie asked.

“I promise,” said Jill. “As long as you are in this house, I will.”

Abbie stood up from the bath and let the washcloth fall.

“Oh my!” said Jill. “This is not something I expected!” She had been on her knees beside the bath and now rocked back, her eyes level with a groin that was perplexing. “You will need to ask you mother to make me your lady’s maid. Now let’s get that thing put away and get you into a corset.”

Jill smiled and Abbie smiled back. It was a pact. Abbie followed instructions and Jill dressed her. Jill attended to a whisker or two on the face that had been hidden by the grime, and to the eyebrows that needed to be reduced to a feminine arch. She found a lace bonnet to cover the short hair and a little rouge to color the lips and the cheeks. She pulled the corset tight, placing bags of wheat in the upper section to create a bust. She drew up and buttoned the blue dress with the lace along the top. She found shoes that like the dress, had been worn by the original young mistress, and the fitted at a pinch. Jill insisted that Abbie walk the room in them for a while before she pronounced Abbie ready to face her family, and society.

Jill hurried downstairs to find Mrs. Carstairs who was waiting in expectation. She stepped into the hall as Abbie gracefully descended the stairs, holding her dress as Jill had told her, and her head as a young lady should.

He mother wept. They embraced at the foot of the staircase.

“My darling Abbie,” she said.

“It’s so good to be home, Momsie,” said Abbie.

“I have called for tea and cake,” said Madeleine. “You must be hungry”.

Abbie was mindful to restrain herself, but she was ravenous. She delicately sipped her tea, and nibbled a slice of cake, and then another, and then another. When asked she simply said – “Oh Momsie, forgive me, but I would rather not talk about my ordeal. It brings it all back and produces the most fearful panic.”

She seemed all aflutter as she placed a clean hand on a breast that now seemed so utterly female that Abbie stated to believe it. She was a young lady in this wonderful house, the daughter of rich parents.

“Instead, please tell me all that has happened while I have been gone,” said Abbie. “How is father? How are your friends. How is Cynthia?” She had recalled the name of the other lady on the train. She had also recalled that the woman now her mother had done all of the talking – almost non-stop. It seemed that was the pattern again. Madeleine started to chatter and did not stop. Abbie listened, and learned.

Evans, the Butler, appeared to announce that the master, Mr. Carstairs, had returned from his place of business. Madeleine shot up from her chair and rushed to the hall.

“My Darling, my Darling,” she trilled. “The most wonderful news. Our daughter has returned to us. Abbie is home. She is in the sitting room.” She then reappeared in front of Abbie to stand beside her as John Carstairs walked in.

Abbie saw the hostility immediately. It seemed that he needed no close examination to know that the young woman was an imposter. He glowered as he approached.

“I am the happiest woman in the world,” gushed Madeleine. “My sweet, sweet Abigail is back with us.” Her arm was around Abbie’s corseted waist, and even through the stays and all that fabric, Abbie could feel the love.

And John Carstairs could see it. The moment that his gaze shifted from Abbie to his wife, Abbie could see the change. He loved his wife, there was no doubt of it. Her happiness was important. If this stranger in their midst made her happy, then maybe she could be tolerated … for a while.

“Abigail, of course I am pleased to see you back home, but you have caused us a great deal of pain and anguish. Forgive me for not being as loving as a father should be.”

“I understand, Father,” said Abbie. She understood. She understood everything. She would be gone from this house as soon as this man could arrange it. It might just be a question of price.

“I have arranged something special for dinner,” said Madeleine. “We should all think about going upstairs to get changed into the appropriate attire.”

“Momsie, can Jill help me?” said Abbie. “Would you allow Jill to be my lady’s maid? Would you?”

“You mean Hilton? Of course, Darling. If you want it. I mean she is really just a chamber maid, but I understand that she is competent, and she knows you … from before.”

“Please don’t let us dwell on the past, any of us,” said Abbie, looking at both her parents alternately. “I have made an awful mistake in my life, and I have paid a terrible price. But now I only want to look forward. I just want us all to be happy. All of us.”

John Carstairs received those last words directly. He nodded.

“Well said, young lady. Well said … Abigail.”

Jill was waiting at the stairs to take Abbie up to her room. The room was huge – as large as a house, or so it seemed to a person who had never known such wealth. Jill took her through everything, including the very obvious question as to why it was necessary to wear two changes of clothes in a day.

“Sometimes more,” Jill explained. “If you are going out then you need to choose the clothes you will need depending on if you are walking in the park, or riding, or visiting. Sometimes it seems that in service we are lucky to need to wear only one uniform, and only another for parties.”

“Parties?” It was all new to Abbie, but she would need to hide that.

Jill also explained that she would be eating a meal at the table, and there were rules applying to that. Although just an observer, she was a good one. Abbie was better. The boy had to be. Watch and learn, and get it right first time, and every time after that.

With these skills she presented herself at dinner, in a resplendent gown and with a wig on her head to cover the rough tufts. A lace bonnet would not do for dinner.

“I found the wig among my things, my Darling,” said Madeleine. “But tomorrow we will have you fitted for something in your own hair color. You had such beautiful long hair. It will grow back, but until it does a number of good quality wigs will do the job.”

“Thank you, Momsie,” said Abbie. She looked at her mother and realized that there was an unfamiliar feeling deep inside. The boy had been abandoned and had nobody to care for him but himself, and now here she was. But it was not gratitude, which was also strange to him. It was something deeper. Could it be love?

Furthermore, her parents respected her wishes not to mention the past or to pry into details of her ordeal. John Carstairs made only one remark referring to – “That scurrilous devil Jacob Hazeldene” – but otherwise he left it, and spoke of the many friends of Abbie that she might wish to meet with.

Abbie could see his intent. She said – “I am deeply ashamed of what I did, Father. I do not think that I can face anybody who knew me three years ago. I want to start life afresh, if you will let me?”

John Carstairs smiled. Whoever this young lady was she appeared to him to be cultured and very smart. He admired intelligence in people, even his adversaries.

Still, he knew that he would have to confront her. He needed to know her plan, or her price. But it was not until they were ready to retire to bed that he had the opportunity.

He waited for a while and then knocked and entered Abbie’s bedroom. Jill had finished prepared her mistress for bed but was still there and so the room was unlocked. He dismissed the servant so that he could be alone with his daughter.

“You are clearly a clever young lady, so let me get straight to the point. I want to know who you are and what you game is. I have been happy to play along for now, for the sake of my wife, who is clearly addled by the whole experience. You need to tell me – what do you want? Who are you?

“It is me Daddy. It is me, Abbie, your daughter.” She made a point of calling him “Daddy” and making her eyes as wide as possible – the very face of childlike innocence that had been much practiced by the boy.

“Oh, you are a very good likeness, but you are not my daughter,” John hissed. “She is dead, God forgive her for her sins.”

“You are mistaken, Father,” Abbie simpered. “How did she die? Where is her body? She disappeared without a trace. Everybody knows it. And now she is back.”

John Carstairs could not restrain himself further. This imposter stood before him, taunting him. His strong hands gripped her by the upper arms, that seemed surprising firm beneath her nightdress.

“Where is her body? Where it will never be found, I can tell you that,” he snarled, his face near her ear. “How did she die? At my hand, that is how. She would bring dishonor on my family – it is better that she dies than do that. And if a father can kill his own child, his own flesh and blood, how quickly do you think he could kill a harpy like you?”

There was fear. How could there not be? But a child of the streets lives in fear. Abby needed to collect her thought and consider who was in a position of strength here.

“I understand,” she said, in as pleasant but disinterested a voice she could muster. “You would deprive you kindhearted wife of her daughter not once but two times? You would cast Madeleine into an even deeper depression.”

John pulled back to look at her, still in his grip. Once again, he understood that this was not like any woman he had ever dealt with.

“Do not mention my wife’s name,” he snapped.

“You are right to care for her,” said Abbie. “I do to. She is the kind of mother I always dreamt of having. I promise that I will do nothing to make her sad. I will leave in due course. I am sure that we can make arrangements. When I do, I hope to leave her happy. That would please me. That and a suitable payment.”

He let go of her. His anger turned to resignation. “Of course,” he said. “Money is important to you.”

“As it is to you, I think,” said Abbie.

“How long do you propose to continue this charade?” he asked.

“Not too long, Father,” said Abbie. “Now that I feel more welcomed, I am sure that I can help to restore this family. When that is done, I will leave with an appropriate parting gift.”

John left her room. His anger had left him in favor of a rational analysis. He prided himself on being a man of reason and good business. His own activities had been hampered by his wife’s long grief, and now it seemed that here was somebody who might end that. He would happily have paid a live in nurse to deal with Madeleine’s distemper, and it seemed that the new Abbie was just that. And if she was true to her promise that his wife could be restored to good humor permanently, then that was worth a fee. How much was a matter for negotiation depending entirely on outcome.

Abbie slept well. Her new father was a murderer and yet she did not fear and knife in her chest as she slept. She understood him. He had a temper – she had witnessed that. But I given time to think he would always seek a practical solution. He had found that and so had she.

The following day they visited the wigmaker. Madeleine was precise about the color, a golden light brown like sun on honey. The hair would not grow in that color and that would present a challenge, but she discovered that the wigmaker would use a dye, and it seemed sensible to procure some in that shade, privately.

She offered something in the meantime to replace the bonnet over her short hair. It was a match for the dress and in the mirror, it disclosed that Abbie was a very attractive young woman.

Madeleine seemed anxious to reintroduce her. “You remember my daughter Abigail. She has been staying with an Aunt in Europe. I can assure you that anything else you may have heard is a scurrilous rumor. Here she is.”

What was clear was that nobody thought Abbie was anybody other than Abby, or the did not care or care to say. Abbie just needed to follow her own observed proper conduct, with a few tips from Jill, and she was Miss Abigail Carstairs, no doubt about it.

The delight of her mother was there for all to see, but the person Abbie most cared about was her father, for that is what he now accepted he was – at least for the time being. It seemed to John to be a good bargain. When he exchanged glances with his daughter past the smiling face of his wife, it was to nod in approval.

It seemed to Abbie that this was the life of dreams. There was no hunger, no cold, no wet. There was no work unless you call work the constantly visiting or being visited, or planning parties or attending them. A bath could be enjoyed daily, and there were other luxuries too. Corseting, and its equivalent in the groin, seemed a small price to pay for all of the pleasures of the rich.

Word spread that Madeleine Carstairs and her pretty daughter Abigail were now back in the society of the city. All rumors were untrue. The reputation of the family was restored. The daughter was unmarried, and by all reports, intact.

It was only a matter of time before word reached Jacob Hazeldene.

The first that Abbie knew of it was when Jill handed her a letter that had been smuggled to her when she was visiting her aunt in the upper part of town.

“The truth is that when he was courting your predecessor, he passed letters to you all the time through me and my aunt,” Jill explained. “He has heard that you are back, and he wants to see you.”

“But I cannot meet him, Jill, and you know it,” said Abbie. “He will be expecting to see somebody else.”

“He won’t take no for an answer,” said Jill, somewhat distressed by the problem. “Imagine yourself in his position. The woman you love has returned. I can’t just carry him a letter saying that you do not want to see him. But if he meets you, he will have all sorts of questions. I don’t know what to do.”

This new Abbie did not know either, but she trusted herself to resolve it on the hop, and not to sit back and wait for things to go wrong.

“Carry him a message that I will meet him then. Did they have a special place?”

“They did. I will,” said Jill.

What sort of man was Jacob Hazeldene. Abbie knew that she should be prepared. Jill could only say that he was from a good family and he was educated in the correct fashion, but that due to family misfortunes he was virtually penniless. Mr. Carstairs regarded him as a gold digger, but Jill maintained that his love for Abbie had been genuine, and that she was a hopeless romantic and had fallen hard for him.

Their meeting spot was a small art gallery in a slightly bohemian area – a place where a respectable lady in the company of a companion or trust servant might visit without reproach, but only briefly. Apparently, Jacob knew the owner and had access to the gallery and rooms upstairs. Abby would have preferred somewhere more public should her appearance provoke a scene, but it seemed wise not to change prior arrangements.

She and Jill arrived at the assigned time. Abby had taken particular care over her appearance. Her new daytime wig fitted perfectly, and the bouncing curls caught the sunlight in a most alluring way. She now used kohl on her eyes as well as rouge, but she avoided powder where good skin care was preferable. She could easily turn the heads of gentleman, and she did. It seemed to Abby that beauty was its own defense. Nobody wants to do ill to a pretty woman.

She entered the gallery with Jill and made a show of closely examining some items for sale. There were paintings on the wall but what caught Abbie’s eye was a collecton of wood carvings in the middle of the display area.

It was only moments before she heard a voice behind her, that prompted her to turn.

“Abby. Oh, I apologize. I thought that you were somebody I knew … somebody who looks very much like you. The same hair, the same ….”.

“You must be Mr. Hazeldene,” said Abby. “I am Miss Carstairs, although perhaps not the one you were expecting.” She held out her hand for him to grasp and perhaps kiss. He just held it for a moment with a look of barren disappointment.

“She is not coming, is she?” he said. He seemed to be trembling slightly.

“We should talk,” said Abbie. She wanted to spare the man public embarrassment. “Perhaps somewhere more private?”

“The is a room upstairs that we would use,” he said. “It has been years, but it should still be free for us, and it is private.”

Jill seemed to back away as if to suggest that this was the custom. Her young charge would disappear into the back room and up the stairs. She would wait.

Abby felt a little uncomfortable, but she was confident enough in her capabilities to go with Jacob. She climbed the narrow stairs ahead of him and they entered a workshop of a kind. There were wood carvings like she had seen downstairs and chisels, gouges and knives. Jacob opened a door and ushered her through.

It was a bedroom. It looked like a place of sin. It was bare except for the bed and a nightstand with a basin and jug. What kind of person had the original Abbie been? Somehow things seemed to have changed.

“Who are you,” said Jacob.

“I am the new Abbie Carstairs,” said Abbie. “I am a cousin, as you might tell by the family resemblance to your friend. My parents are passed, and John and Madeleine Carstairs have adopted me and asked that I take their daughter’s name. And I am happy to do it, for my Aunt Madeleine that is. So you see, I am not the person you are looking for.”

“Where is she?”

“I am sorry to say that she is dead,” said Abbie. “She dishonored the family, and her father took the ultimate action. He was not happy to simply disown her. He killed her and I hate him for it. But now he has taken me in as her replacement, perhaps to tone for the wrong he did.

“And you are now the heiress to the Carstairs’ wealth?”

“I suppose I am. Yes.” It seemed like a curious question. He had not asked how she had died, or where her body lay. He should be more concerned about her, and not her status as an heir.

“I think that you are even more beautiful than the first Abigail Carstairs,” he said.

There was no mistaking the look. While Abby had only been presenting herself in this way for a matter of weeks, she now recognized lust when she saw it. It was a consequence of beauty and the discomfort it might produce was a small price for all the advantages.

“I wanted to meet you to explain to you that whatever relationship you had with my cousin, it is necessarily over. Sadly, she is no more, so whatever friendship you shared is also … no more.”

“Friendship. It was not that. It was passion,” he said, licking his lips. “Call it love. But it was powerful beyond all understanding. It drove her. It drives me.”

He had his hands on her hips and was pulling himself closer to her.

“Unhand me, Sir,” snapped Abbie. “This is quite beyond all propriety. Back away, Mr. Hazeldene! At once!”

But this man was strong, and he seemed driven by animal desires that gave him the strength of an animal. He spun her around. He had a knife in his hand, taken from the workbench. He used it to cut the buttons on her dress and the laces on her stays and then to cut away her undergarments. It seemed as if he had her naked within seconds and had deprived Abbie any opportunity to resist.

“What the devil is this?!” she could see the horror on his face. It seemed to Abbie that she had defeated him in that moment with using any of her own strength. Jacob Hazeldene was intent on rape, but she had nothing for him to rape. She found herself laughing at him, standing there was his knife and the tent in his pants now collapsing.

To laugh at a man with a knife is never a wise thing to do. And to laugh at a man with a knife when you are naked and the object of his horror and humiliation is there before him, is a much worse idea.

It seemed as if Jacob Hazeldene was able to achieve his ends with the skill of a surgeon, when in fact it was probably just luck that kept Abbie alive. She was able to close the wound with some items from the workbench, and to staunch the flow of blood with rags, but the two tiny orbs had been cast out an open window into the alley behind and were lost forever.

Jill came up the stairs. Jacob Hazeldene had rushed past her in the gallery, his hands covered in blood. She immediately had thought the very worst. She was surprised but happy to find Abbie alive but badly hurt.

“We should take you to a doctor, or bring one here,” said Jill.

Abbie felt faint. The enormity of what had happened had yet to hit home, and the pain should have lead her thoughts. But it seemed that she was more Miss Abigail Carstairs than even she realized.

“My dress is ruined, and my corset too, and there is blood all over my undergarments,” said Abbie. “You will need to hurry home and get me some clothes. When I am dressed then we can find a doctor to stitch me up.

She sat on the floor of that studio for the hours that it took for Jill to return. There was time to consider what had happened and what the future might hold, but it could never be whatever future the boy had imagined. Jacob Hazeldene had put paid to that.

And other events were to follow that very afternoon. Mr. John Carstairs was at his desk in his offices when Mr. Jacob Hazeldene burst in covered in blood and with a knife in his hand. He was like a wild animal, they said. Mr. Carstairs had a revolver in his desk and was quick enough to draw it out and discharge three bullets into Mr. Hazeldene’s chest, but the last of those was discharged after the knife had reached his heart. Both men died instantaneously.

It was said that Miss Abigail took to her bed for weeks following the tragedy.

Later she was to explain that she had left for Europe to escape the lustful attentions of Jacob Hazeldene but that upon her return the man had attempted to engage with her again. She had tried to explain to this unwanted suitor that her father had forbidden any contact and that she, as a loving and dutiful daughter, followed her father’s wishes. In a rage Hazeldene had told her that he was “Going around to deal with the man at once”.

It was the talk of the town. A lustful suitor and an upright father both found their ends in an embrace of death, while the distraught but beautiful Miss Abigail Carstairs could only mourn.

Some said it was the shock of that which made her remain forever a spinster, although other pointed to the close relationship with her mother that saw her nurse the old woman into her nineties leaving it too late to find a husband.

But there were many dalliances and many proposals. It was just that she could never permit a man to have intimate relations with her, and you now know the reason why.

The End

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Erin’s seed: “100 years ago or so, a runaway boy overhears a conversation between a woman who is missing a daughter who ran away. She moans about how much she would love her if she came back and thinks every day that she might. The boy decides to pretend to be the missing girl after noting a family resemblance to the mother. Mom isn’t fooled but pretends to be - the daughter didn’t run away - the mother killed her to keep her from eloping with X. X isn’t fooled either (but is fooled to the extent he thinks the imposter is really a girl) but he needs to find out what happened to his girl, so he kidnaps her to learn more…”. I felt that Mom should be genuine so the father should be the killer, and the lover should dispose of him.