

## CHAPTER ONE

Christopher Redmayne found conversations with his elder brother rather trying at the best of times. When there was a mirror at hand, it was well nigh impossible to have a meaningful exchange with Henry for he was continually preening himself, adjusting his wig, fidgeting with his attire, experimenting with a series of facial expressions and generally ignoring the person or persons unfortunate enough to be in his presence at such a moment of total self-absorption. Though he found such behaviour extremely irritating, Christopher schooled himself to be patient.

‘What manner of man is this Mr Hartwell?’ he asked.

‘Jasper?’ said Henry dismissively. ‘He’s an arrant fool.’

‘I thought that he was a friend of yours.’

‘A mere acquaintance. I’d never list Jasper Hartwell among my intimates. It would damage my reputation.’ He tried the wig at a slightly different angle and raised

an inquisitive eyebrow. ‘How does this look?’

‘Fine,’ said Christopher wearily. ‘It looks fine.’

‘Does it make me handsome and faintly satanic?’

‘You look like Henry Redmayne and he is both of those things with many other distinctive traits besides. Could we put your appearance to one side for a moment and discuss this Mr Hartwell?’

‘But appearance is everything, my dear brother.’

‘I would dispute that.’

‘Well, do not do so in front of Jasper,’ warned his brother, striking a peevish note. ‘In fact, I would advise you to dispute nothing in the presence of your potential client. Agree with everything he says, however vapid or inane. Jasper is all outward show. If you think that your dear brother leans a little towards vanity – a crime I readily confess – wait until you meet Jasper Hartwell. He puts me in the shade. Jasper makes Narcissus seem like a martyr to modesty.’

‘What of his inner nature?’

‘He doesn’t have one.’

‘He must, Henry.’

‘Why?’

‘Every man has a true centre to his being.’

‘Jasper is the exception to the rule.’

Henry Redmayne decided that his waistcoat was not being displayed to the best advantage and fiddled with his coat for several minutes. Christopher suppressed a sigh and waited. They were in the hall of Henry’s house in Bedford Street, preparing to leave for a visit to the theatre, a pleasurable occasion which also had a commercial purpose,

since Christopher was to be introduced to someone who might well be interested in employing him as the architect to design his new London abode. The fact that he had to rely on his brother for the introduction brought a number of anxieties in its wake. When Henry turned his attention back to his wig, Christopher tried to probe for more detail.

‘I hope that Mr Hartwell proves a more reliable client,’ he said.

‘Reliable?’ echoed the other.

‘Profoundly grateful as I am for your help, I have to admit that your introductions have not always borne fruit.’

‘What do you mean?’ returned Henry, rounding on him. ‘Did I not secure a valuable commission for you from Sir Ambrose Northcott?’

‘You did, indeed.’

‘Was it not the start of your career as an aspiring architect?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘And were not your services generously rewarded?’

‘They were, Henry. The fee was paid in full. Unfortunately, the house was never built so that all of my work went to waste.’

‘Don’t blame me, Christopher. How was I to know that Sir Ambrose would be unguarded enough to let himself be murdered? It was an unforeseen hazard. The point is that, out of the kindness of my filial heart, I presented you with a golden opportunity.’ He gave a loud sniff. ‘A modicum of thanks is in order, I fancy.’

‘I have already said how deeply grateful I am, Henry. Grateful for the introductions to Sir Ambrose Northcott and, more recently, to that other friend, acquaintance, crony, drinking companion, associate, call him what you will, Lord Staines.’

‘Fulke is part of my inner circle.’

‘So I assumed.’

‘A man on whom I pattern myself.’

‘I deduced that from his air of dissipation.’

Henry stiffened. ‘Fulke Rowett, tenth Baron Staines, is a splendid fellow in every particular. Had circumstances been more propitious, he could have looked to be the next warden of the Cinque Ports. You can surely not complain about Lord Staines. You designed a beautiful house for him and it stands to this day as a worthy example of your talent.’

‘The house was built,’ agreed Christopher, ‘but the architect’s fee was never paid. Nor was that of the builder.’

‘A temporary problem in raising finance,’ said Henry airily. ‘I’m sure that Fulke will soon rectify this situation.’

‘Not while he is still on his Irish estates. For that is where he fled when we tried to seek payment. And we were two among many, Henry. The queue of his creditors would stretch from here to Land’s End. Lord Staines may be a splendid fellow but he is also impulsive, extravagant, irresponsible and up to his neck in debt.’

‘Even the best horse stumbles at times.’

‘This one fell at the first jump.’

‘What are you saying?’ demanded Henry, putting his hands on his hips as he went on the attack. ‘Are you telling

me that your brother should not put himself out to advance your interests, to honour the promise I gave to Father to lend all the help I could in your search for gainful and satisfying employment?’

‘No, Henry,’ said Christopher with an appeasing smile, ‘that is not my meaning at all. I simply wish to remind you that my experience has hitherto been somewhat chequered. My first client was killed and my second took to his heels when the question of payment was raised. All I am seeking to do is to establish that Mr Hartwell is more dependable.’

‘Have no worries on that score.’

‘How can I be sure?’

‘Jasper has no intention of being murdered, nor does he have any Irish estates which can act as a refuge from his creditors. Arrant fool he may be, but he is as rich as Croesus and more likely to pay you twice the fee you ask out of sheer benevolence. Does that answer your question?’

‘Not entirely.’

‘How do you like my new coat?’ said Henry, courting the mirror once more. ‘Does it not lend a certain dignity?’

‘Dignity *and* elegance.’

‘Truly, my tailor has ennobled me.’

‘You could pass for an earl, if not a duke.’

‘Dignity, elegance, nobility. The quintessence of Henry Redmayne.’

‘Coming back to Mr Hartwell...’

‘Now, which hat shall I wear? The choice is crucial.’

‘What is your own position with regard to him?’

‘Jasper? We exchange polite nods of greeting. Nothing more.’

‘I was talking about your pecuniary relationship,’ said Christopher, trying to catch his attention. ‘If so be it, this afternoon’s meeting does produce a commission for me, you are rightly entitled to a fee for effecting the introduction. I would prefer that you agreed the amount with me beforehand rather than with Mr Hartwell.’

Henry was shocked. ‘What I do, I do out of brotherly love.’

‘I’m delighted to hear it.’

‘I seek nothing in terms of monetary recompense.’

‘That is very altruistic of you, Henry,’ said the other politely, ‘but I am bound to recall the way that you brokered the deal with Sir Ambrose Northcott. Brotherly love was ever your cry on that occasion, too, but it did not stop you from arranging to have a percentage of my fee paid surreptitiously to you.’

‘Sir Ambrose thrust the money upon me. What could I do?’

‘Be more honest with your brother.’

‘I was, I am and evermore will be.’

‘So no understanding has been reached with Mr Hartwell?’

‘None, Christopher. I give you my word.’

‘Then I will hold you to it.’

‘That will not be necessary.’ He scrutinised his appearance in the mirror. ‘Have you ever seen a finer sight? I do believe that I will outshine the King himself this afternoon. Henry Redmayne – Baron Cynosure.’

Christopher let him twist and turn in admiration for a couple of minutes before speaking. He loved his elder

brother. With all his faults and foibles, Henry Redmayne was an endearing man in many ways. Both of them were tall, slim and handsome but the resemblance ended there. While Christopher's face shone with health, Henry's pale and ravished countenance betokened a life of studied degeneracy. The former's luxuriant dark brown curling locks had a reddish hue, whereas the latter's rapidly thinning hair obliged him to seek the cover of an expensive periwig. The earnest manner of the younger brother was in complete contrast to the easy cynicism of his sibling. One was dedicated to his work as an architect, the other to a life of idle pleasure. They inhabited quite separate worlds.

Christopher knew the futility of even attempting to reform his brother. He had grown so accustomed to Henry's sybaritic existence that he hardly recognised it as a vice any more. Someone else in the family, however, was less tolerant of Henry's shortcomings.

'I had a letter from Father this morning,' said Christopher.

'Why does the old gentleman always write to you, not to me?'

'Because I always have the grace to reply.'

'So do I,' retorted Henry petulantly, 'when his missives are civil. But that is all too rare, I fear. If only Father could forget – albeit briefly – that he is Dean of Gloucester. He will insist on treating a letter as a pulpit from which he can denounce me for my sins.'

'Then do not give him cause for that denunciation.'

'Would you have me betray my instincts?'

'I would have you exercise a little discretion,' advised

Christopher. 'Father wrote to tell me that he intends to visit London shortly and means to call on both of us. Especially on you.'

'Why me?' gasped Henry, flying into a mild panic. 'Are there not sinners enough in the county of Gloucester to keep him busy? The last thing I need is a prying parent, watching over my shoulder, calling me to account. I'll not be *judged*, Christopher!' he declared, waving an arm. 'Keep the old gentleman away from me. Tell him that I have temporarily quit the city. Tell him that I am performing military service abroad on behalf of my country. Tell him that I am on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Tell him anything you choose, but save me from his damnable sermons!'

'Father has a right to call on you.'

'What about *my* rights?' wailed the other. 'And my freedom?'

'It is the use to which you put that freedom which is bringing Father to London. I say no more,' added Christopher. 'I simply wished to give you fair warning.'

Henry shivered involuntarily. 'Of impending catastrophe,' he moaned. 'They say that disasters come in threes. First we had the Great Plague. Then the Great Fire. Now we have the Great Visitation from the Dean of Gloucester, descending out of heaven in a blaze of righteous indignation like an avenging thunderbolt.'

'You can hardly compare Father's visit with the plague and the fire. They were disasters that affected the whole city. The only person likely to suffer this time is you, Henry.'

'I am already sweating as if I have the plague and

smouldering as if I am trapped in the fire. Let us away, Christopher,' he ordered, pulling open the door of a closet to extract a broad-brimmed hat whose crown was bedecked with plumes. 'Father coming to London? How can I enjoy myself when I have this dire threat hanging over me? It has made every part about me quiver with apprehension.'

He confronted the mirror for the last time in order to place the hat at the correct angle. Standing at his elbow, Christopher checked his own appearance. He was smart, well groomed and dressed in the latest fashion but his attire had nothing of the vivid colour and ostentation of Henry's. The latter favoured a vermilion coat, whose large cuffs were adorned with an intricate pattern, over a waistcoat of red and gold silk. The breeches were dark blue above a pair of mauve stockings. Even the butterfly bows on his shoes were a minor work of art. Christopher estimated that his brother had lavished more on his apparel for an afternoon at the theatre than the young architect spent in six months.

Henry grimaced and stroked his wispy moustache.

'I suppose that I will pass muster,' he said dully.

'A moment ago, you were boasting that you would out-dazzle the King himself in your fine array.'

'That was before I heard the tidings about Father.'

'Are they so unsettling?' said Christopher.

'Terrifying!' He swung on his heel and headed for the door. 'Still, there's no help for it. Come, brother. This afternoon's business may at least give me a chance to impress Father.' Sailing through the front door, he gave a curt nod to the servant who held it open for them. 'I'll

secure that commission for you and Christopher Redmayne can continue his valuable work of helping to rebuild this ruined city.'

'Nothing would please me more, Henry.'

'Sing my praises to Father.'

Christopher grinned. 'Like a heavenly choir.'

He fell in beside his brother as they strolled towards Drury Lane, the one marching purposefully with a confident stride while the other strutted importantly and assumed an expression of total disdain.

'We should have taken a carriage,' decided Henry.

'For so short a journey? A needless indulgence.'

'Indulgence is a mark of good character.'

'And bad housekeeping,' argued Christopher. 'Why spend money on the unnecessary when it might be saved for the truly essential?'

'Cutting a dash *is* truly essential.'

'We must agree to differ on that, Henry. As on so many other things.' A thought struck him. 'By the way, you have not told me the name of the play we are about to see.'

'It is irrelevant.'

'Does it have no title?'

'Who cares?'

'I do,' said Christopher seriously.

'Forget the play,' decreed Henry with a lordly gesture of his hand. 'Remember that you are not going to the theatre to watch a troupe of mangy actors, practising their craft. You are there to ensnare Jasper Hartwell in order to part the fool from as much of his undeserved wealth as you can. As for me,' he said, revelling in the attention he was getting

from passers-by, 'I never visit a theatre for the purpose of seeing. I am there simply to *be seen*.'

The two brothers moved on, linked by ties of blood but separated by almost everything else, walking side by side towards a critical meeting with a potential client, mixing hope with enjoyment, ambition with display, sensitivity with arrogance, serenely unaware of the perils that lay in wait for them at The Theatre Royal.

## CHAPTER TWO

Jonathan Bale looked up at the house and emitted a reverential sigh.

‘There it is,’ he said, pointing a finger. ‘Study it well, boys.’

‘Why?’ asked Oliver.

‘Because this is where he once lived. Over twenty years ago, the Lord Protector, as he became, moved from Long Acre to Drury Lane and made his home right here. He sent for his family to join him from Ely. Think on that, Oliver,’ he said, with a hand on his son’s shoulder. ‘The man whose name you bear graced this house with his presence.’

‘Was he a good man, Father?’

‘A great one.’

‘Then why didn’t he become King?’

‘He did. In all but name.’

‘But we have a real King now.’

Jonathan pursed his lips and nodded sadly.

‘What about me, Father?’ piped up Richard Bale, the younger of the two brothers. ‘You told me that I was named after a Cromwell.’

‘You were.’ explained his father. ‘You were so christened because the Lord Protector’s son was called Richard. When his father died, he inherited his title and his power.’

‘Was he as great a man as his father?’ wondered Richard.

‘Alas, no.’

‘Nobody was as great as Oliver Cromwell,’ boasted the older boy. ‘That’s why I carry his name. I mean to be great myself.’

‘You already are,’ teased Richard. ‘A great fool.’

Oliver bridled. ‘Who are you calling a fool?’

‘Nobody,’ said Jonathan firmly, quelling the argument before it could even begin. ‘Now, look at the house and remember the man who once owned it. We must keep his memory bright in our hearts. England owes so much to him. He is sorely missed.’

‘What about his son, Richard?’ said his namesake.

‘Well, yes...’ Jonathan tried to keep disappointment out of his voice. ‘Richard Cromwell is missed, too, but in a different way. His achievements fell short of his father’s. That was only to be expected.’

‘Where is he now, Father?’

‘Somewhere in France.’

‘Why?’

‘Richard Cromwell is in exile.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘He is not allowed to live in this country.’

‘But you said that he was Lord Protector.’

‘For a time.’

‘What happened?’

Jonathan shrugged. ‘That’s a long story,’ he said softly. ‘When you are old enough to understand it, I’ll tell it to you.’

‘I understand it,’ asserted Oliver, inflating his little chest. ‘It’s quite simple. Oliver Cromwell was famous, which is why I was christened after him. His son was hopeless so Richard was the right name for you.’

‘That’s not true!’ protested his brother.

‘It certainly isn’t,’ confirmed Jonathan.

‘They called him Tumbledown Dick,’ said Oliver, grinning wickedly at his sibling. ‘That’s how useless he was. Just like you, Richard. You’re Tumbledown Dick Bale!’

‘No!’ wailed Richard.

‘That’s enough!’ said Jonathan sternly. ‘There’ll be no mockery of the Cromwell family. Both of you should be justly proud of the names you bear.’ He shook Oliver hard. ‘Don’t ever let me hear you making fun of your brother again. You’ll answer to me, if you do.’

The boy nodded penitently. ‘Yes, Father.’

‘There is no shame in being called after Richard Cromwell.’

‘Why didn’t he become King?’ asked the younger boy.

Jonathan let the question hang in the air. Directing the gaze of both sons to the house once more, he reflected on the changes that had occurred during their short lifetimes. Oliver was almost ten now, born and baptised when the

Lord Protector was still alive. Richard was three years younger, named after a man whose own rule was brief, inglorious and mired in controversy. Both sons had grown up under a restored monarch, Charles II, a King who showed all the arrogance of the Stuart dynasty and who, in Jonathan's opinion, had devalued the whole concept of royalty by his scandalous behaviour. A devout Puritan like Jonathan Bale was bound to wonder if the plague, decimating the population of London, and the subsequent fire, destroying most of the buildings within the city walls, had been visited on the capital by a God who was appalled at the corruption and depravity that were the distinctive hallmarks of the Restoration.

The three of them were returning home after a long walk. Now in his late thirties, Jonathan was a big, solid man with a prominent nose acting as a focal point in a large face. The two warts on his cheek and the livid scar across his forehead gave him a slightly sinister appearance, but his children loved him devotedly and thought their father the most handsome of men. Long years as a shipwright had developed his muscles and broadened his back, visible assets in his role as a parish constable. Only the bold or the very foolish made the mistake of taking on Jonathan Bale in any form of combat.

He loomed over the two boys like a galleon between two rowing boats. Proud of his sons, he was keen to acquaint them with the history of their city and the significance of their names. The fashionable house outside which the trio were standing was at the Holborn end of Drury Lane, a respectable, residential neighbourhood with an abundance

of flowers and trees to please the eye and to reinforce the sense of leisured wealth. The area presented a sharp contrast to their own ward of Baynard's Castle. Untouched by the Great Fire of the previous year, Drury Lane and its environs were highly popular with the rich and the powerful. Addle Hill, on the other hand, where Jonathan and Sarah Bale and their sons lived, comprised more modest dwellings. It had been largely gutted by fire and Jonathan had had to rebuild his home before they could move back into it.

'Let us go,' he said quietly. 'We have seen enough.'

'Who owns the house now, Father?' said Oliver.

'Nobody of importance.'

The boys fell in beside him as he strode off down Drury Lane, unable to match his long stride and all but scurrying to keep pace with him. They had reached the long bend in the thoroughfare when the sound of an approaching carriage made them turn. It came rumbling at speed from the direction of Holborn, the rasping sound of its huge wheels augmented by the urgent clatter of the horses' hooves. The coachman did not spare them a glance but one of the occupants leant forward with interest. As the vehicle went past, the smiling face of a young woman appeared at the window and a delicate hand waved in greeting. Jonathan lifted a rough palm in response.

'Who was that?' asked Richard, hugely impressed that his father should know anyone who travelled in such style. 'The lady waved to you.'

'It was Mary Hibbert,' said Jonathan.

'She was very pretty.'

'Yes. Mary takes after her mother.'

‘Is she a friend of yours?’

‘I know the Hibbert family well. They used to live not far from us in Carter Lane. Good, kind, decent, God-fearing people.’ A distant regret intruded. ‘Mary was a dutiful daughter at first. But times have changed.’

‘What do you mean, Father?’ said Oliver.

Jonathan shook his head dismissively. The coach had now slowed to pick its way through the crowd that was converging on Bridges Street. Recognising one of the occupants of the vehicle, several people cheered or gesticulated excitedly. A few young men ran alongside the coach to peer in. Richard surveyed the scene with increased awe.

‘Is Mary Hibbert famous?’ he asked.

‘No,’ replied his father.

‘Then why is everyone waving to her?’

‘I suspect that there is another lady in the coach.’

‘Who?’

‘Nobody you need concern yourself with, Richard.’

‘Is the other lady famous?’ said Oliver.

‘That is not the word that I would use.’

‘Who is she, Father?’

‘Tell us,’ said Richard. ‘Who is the famous lady?’

‘And where are all those people going?’

Jonathan raised a disapproving eyebrow before shepherding his sons down a side street in order to avoid the gathering crowd.

‘To the theatre,’ he said.

Christopher Redmayne caught only the merest glimpse of her as she alighted from the coach and made her way through a

circle of admirers. When she and her companion entered the building by means of a rear door, there was a collective sigh of disappointment, immediately replaced by an anticipatory glee as those same gentlemen realised that they would soon view her again upon the stage. There was an involuntary surge towards the front entrance of the theatre. Christopher and his brother waited while it spent its force.

Henry watched the stampede with wry amusement.

‘Did any woman ever lead so many men by their pizzles?’ he observed. ‘Truly, their brains are in their breeches when she is near.’

‘Who is the lady?’ asked Christopher.

‘Who else but the toast of London? The uncrowned queen of the stage. A veritable angel in human guise. She is the prettiest piece of flesh in Christendom and I speak as a connoisseur of such creatures. I’ll hold you six to four that she could tempt a saint, let alone a Pope or an Archbishop. Yes,’ Henry added with a wild laugh, ‘she might even make our dear father abandon his piety and dance naked around the cloisters of Gloucester Cathedral with a rose between his teeth.’

‘Does this paragon have a name?’

‘Several. Most call her the royal nightingale.’

‘Nightingale?’

‘Wait until you hear her sing.’

‘Can she act as well?’

‘Sublimely. Upon any man with red blood in his veins.’

‘And her real name?’

‘Harriet Gow. She is the sole reason for this *mêlée*, this undignified scramble you see before us. Whenever the

adorable Harriet Gow appears in a play, the gallants of the town positively fight to get into the theatre.'

Christopher smiled. 'I'm surprised that you don't join in the brawl, Henry. It is unlike you to forego the opportunity of feasting your eyes on a young lady of such fabled beauty.'

'What?' said Henry, recoiling slightly. 'Run with the herd and get my new coat creased? Never! Besides, I have standards. Henry Redmayne never chases any woman. I make them come crawling to me.' He tossed his head and set his wig trembling in the sunshine. 'As for the delectable Harriet, gorgeous as she may be, I would never waste my shot on a target that is already beyond my reach.'

'Beyond your reach?'

'Did you not catch her nickname?'

'The nightingale.'

'The *royal* nightingale.'

'Ah!' said Christopher, understanding him. 'The King himself has also succumbed to her charms. That explains your unaccustomed restraint. Miss Gow is spoken for.'

'Doubly so. For she is Mrs Harriet Gow.'

'Married then?'

'Yes, Christopher. I would need to be a congenital idiot to compete with a King *and* a husband.'

'You have done so in the past.'

'An aberration,' said Henry, anxious to consign the unpleasant reminder to oblivion. 'How was I to know that that particular lady was already warming two beds? Forget the wretch. She deserves no rightful place among my *amours*.'

‘If you say so, Henry.’

‘I do say so. With vehemence.’ He spotted a familiar figure and softened his tone at once. ‘Here comes the very person we seek. Jasper Hartwell, as large as life and twice as odious. Smile and fawn upon him, Christopher. His pockets are as deep as his ignorance.’ Henry beamed and fell on the newcomer. ‘Jasper, my dear fellow!’ he said, grasping him by the arm. ‘How nice to see you again. Allow me to present my brother, the brilliant architect, Christopher Redmayne.’

‘Oh,’ returned the other, displaying a row of uneven teeth. ‘Is this the young genius of whom you spoke so fondly, Henry?’ He squinted at Christopher. ‘Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr Redmayne.’

‘Your servant, Mr Hartwell,’ replied Christopher politely.

‘Well, now, isn’t this a happy coincidence?’

‘Chance meetings are always the most productive,’ said Henry easily. ‘But why have we come to watch a play when a far more dramatic sight confronts us? You look quite superb, Jasper. A sartorial sensation. Elegance Incarnate. Is he not, Christopher?’

‘Indeed,’ said his brother.

‘Have you ever seen a coat better cut? Scrutinise him well, brother. Admire the sheer artistry. Jasper Hartwell wears nothing but the best and that means keeping a score of Parisian tailors at his command. The periwig is a triumph – Chedreux at his finest.’

Henry continued to pour out the flattery in large doses and Jasper Hartwell lapped it up greedily. Christopher

smiled obediently when he really wanted to laugh with derision. Jasper Hartwell's apparel was, to his eye, frankly ludicrous. The man himself was short, plump and ill-favoured, features that were exposed rather than offset by his attire. He wore a scarlet coat that was slightly waisted with a short flared skirt, made of a garish purple material, falling just below his hips. The coat was collarless and fastened from neck to hem by gold buttons, as were the back slit and the low horizontal pockets. Close-fitting to the elbow, the sleeves had deep turned-back cuffs fastened and decorated with a plethora of buttons.

Around the neck was a linen cravat with a lace border. Across the body was a wide baldrick, supporting the sword, while the waist was entwined in a silk sash, fringed at both ends. Instead of giving him the military appearance at which he aimed, the outfit emphasised his complete unsuitability for any physical activity. The square-toed shoes were objects of scorn in themselves, fastened over the long tongues with straps, large square buckles and limp ribbon loops with an orange hue. It was as if the tailors of Paris had conspired to wreak their revenge on the perceived lack of taste of the English.

If his clothing invited ridicule, Jasper Hartwell's wig provoked open-mouthed wonder. It was enormous. Made of ginger hair, it rose up in a series of massive curls until it added almost a foot to his height. The wig fell down onto both shoulders, ending in two long corkscrew locks that could be tied at the back. Perched on top of this hirsute mountain was a large, low-crowned hat, festooned with coloured feather plumes. Out of it all, gleaming

with pleasure, loomed the podgy face of Jasper Hartwell, powdered to an almost deathly whiteness and looking less like the visage of a human being than that of an amiable pig thrust headlong through a ginger bush.

Christopher's hopes were dashed. Expecting to court a potential employer, he was instead meeting a man of such overweening vanity that he made Henry Redmayne seem self-effacing. If the commission were forthcoming, what sort of house would Jasper Hartwell instruct his architect to build? In all probability, it would be an expression of the owner himself, gaudy, fatuous, over-elaborate and inimical to every precept of style and symmetry. Christopher was crestfallen. It would violate his principles to design such a house for such a client.

Yet in one sentence, his prospects were suddenly resurrected. Leaning forward until his hat wobbled precariously atop its eminence, Hartwell gave him a confiding smile and a first whiff of his bad breath.

'Henry has shown me your drawings, Mr Redmayne,' he said with a note of respect, 'and I declare, I think them the best I ever beheld.'

Christopher was dumbfounded. His brother winked at him.

'First, however,' added Hartwell, 'let us see the play.'

'And then?' pressed Henry. 'We will come to composition?'

'Of course.'

It was over as simply as that.

Formerly a riding school, The Theatre Royal occupied a site in Bridges Street off Drury Lane. The conversion of

the old building was a signal success, the only complaint being that the corridors to the pit and the boxes were too narrow. None of the patrons criticised the interior. It was circular in shape, the walls lined with boxes that were divided from each other to ensure privacy and equipped with rows of seats. As befitted a theatre that was known as The King's House, the prime position was taken by the royal box, overlooking the stage from the ideal angle and offering greater luxury to those who reclined there. The pit, the large central space on the ground floor, was the domain of those unable to afford a box or too late to find one still available.

It was Christopher Redmayne's first visit to the theatre and its architecture intrigued him. Nobody would ever have guessed that horses were once schooled around its circumference. Jasper Hartwell led the way to a box where he was welcomed loudly by half-a-dozen cronies at various stages of drunkenness. Henry knew them all but Christopher hardly caught their names above the hubbub. Sitting between his brother and his client, he let his gaze rove around the interior.

'The builders have done a fine job,' he remarked.

'At a cost,' noted Henry.

'Oh?'

'I had it from Tom Killigrew himself. The projected cost was fifteen hundred pounds but it had risen to almost two and a half thousand by the time the renovations were complete. Tom was most unhappy about that. He keeps a tight hand on his purse.'

The money was well spent,' said Christopher, looking

upward. 'I do like that glazed cupola. It lends distinction and adds light.'

Henry grimaced. 'It also lets in the rain. Be grateful that we came on a fine day. A *very* fine day, Christopher. Our fish is landed before we even set sail. We can feed off Jasper Hartwell until we burst.'

'We, Henry? I thought that I was to be his architect.'

'Yes, yes, but you must allow me some reflected glory.'

'Feeding suggests more than glory.'

'Stop haggling over a damnable verb!'

Henry accepted the glass of wine that was handed to him and joined in the badinage with the others. When some new guests came lurching into the box to take up their seats, the level of jollity reached a new pitch of intensity. Jasper Hartwell was at the centre of it, basking in the flattery of his friends and dispensing banalities as if scattering words of wisdom. Christopher was left to take stock of his surroundings. His eye took in every detail. The stage was high and framed by a proscenium arch, guaranteeing the play's visibility to everyone in the theatre. What Christopher was less certain about was audibility. Would the actors' voices reach all parts of the audience? More to the point, would those same spectators abandon tumult for a degree of silence so that the play could be heard?

The noise was deafening. As more patrons crowded into the boxes or elbowed their way into the pit, the cacophony steadily worsened. Laughter and ribaldry predominated, male guffaws counterpointed by the brittle shrieks of females, many of whom wore masks to hide their blushes or

to conceal the pitiful condition of their complexions. Wives, mistresses and courtesans were dotted indiscriminately around a house that seemed to consist largely of braying aristocrats or indolent gallants. Prostitutes cruised for business among those in the pit while pert orange girls swung their hips and baskets with studied provocation.

Christopher noticed one orange-seller who was being used as an emissary, taking a note from a pop-eyed man in a monstrous hat to a vizarded lady who sat in the front seat of a box. Other flirtations were taking place on all sides. The Theatre Royal was a giant mirror in which the assembled throng either preened themselves, got riotously drunk or made blatant assignations. A brawl erupted in the pit. An unseen woman screamed in distress. The wife of a visiting ambassador swung round to spit incautiously over her shoulder, unaware of the fact that someone had just taken the seat directly behind her and, providentially, unable to comprehend the language in which he began to abuse her. Swords were drawn in another box. An old man collapsed in a stupor.

It was at this point that the play began. Christopher had never seen *The Maid's Tragedy* before and he was not about to see it properly now for, though the pandemonium lost some of its rage when the actors appeared, it still bubbled mutinously, drowning out most of what was being said in the opening exchanges. Before the play was a minute old, the tall, stately figure of the King himself slipped into the royal box to take his place among his friends and to cause a ripple among the audience. His timing was impeccable. No sooner had he settled down than Harriet Gow, the

object of his affections, came onto the stage in the role of Aspatia, the betrayed maiden.

A hush fell instantly on the whole auditorium. This is what they had come to see, a frail, delicate, impossibly beautiful creature who moved with natural grace and whose voice plucked at the heart-strings.

*'My hard fortunes  
Deserve not scorn; for I was never proud  
When they were good.'*

It was all that she uttered on her first, fleeting appearance but it drew a gasp from every man present. Christopher Redmayne was among them, moved by her patent suffering, struck by her wan loveliness and captivated by that soft, lilting voice. In the space of a few seconds, he came to appreciate the magical qualities of Harriet Gow. Once she quit the stage, a heavy murmur returned to fill the air, punctuated by the occasional outbreak of hostilities in the pit or by some altercation in one of the boxes.

*The Maid's Tragedy* slowly unfolded. Beaumont and Fletcher's play was over half a century old but its theme had a curious topicality, a fact which led to the suppression of the piece when the manager, Thomas Killigrew, had tried to stage it earlier in the reign. The plot revolved around a lecherous King and his corrupt Court. Amintor breaks his engagement to Aspatia at the King's request and in her stead marries Evadne, sister to his friend, Melantius. On their wedding night, Evadne reveals to her husband that he will never enjoy her favours because they are exclusively the property of the King. Unwittingly, Amintor has been

tricked into being a cuckold, betraying his true love, Aspatia, in the process. The seeds of tragedy are sown.

Those who could hear the play felt its deeper resonance. The King on stage bore a marked resemblance to the one who sat so calmly in the royal box. Charles II was not always discreet in his private life. It was well known that he had sometimes provided husbands for his mistresses in order to give them a cloak of respectability. More than one real-life Amintor had heard the dread confession from his wife on his wedding night. Henry Redmayne missed none of the innuendoes and sniggered time and again. Jasper Hartwell let out a high-pitched, asinine giggle, accompanied by a violent shaking of his body that made his wig tilt at a dangerous angle. A tragic situation offered much unintended comedy.

There were neither sniggers nor giggles when Aspatia swept in once more, accompanying the treacherous Evadne to the latter's bedchamber. Harriet Gow was a picture of despair, reflecting upon her woe with a sense of resignation rather than self-pity, then cutting through the taut silence with a song that touched even the most cynical listeners.

*'Lay a garland on my hearse  
Of the dismal yew;  
Maidens, willow branches bear:  
Say I died true.  
My love was false, but I was firm  
From my hour of birth.  
Upon my buried body lie  
Lightly, gentle earth.'*

Christopher was entranced. Not only had he seen

the small miracle of a rowdy audience being subdued to respectful silence, he had heard one of the most melodious and affecting voices ever to issue from a human mouth. Harriet Gow was truly a nightingale. The rest of the cast might display the full range of their abilities but the memory that would linger in every mind was that of Aspatia's sad song in the second act of the play. Christopher's mouth went dry and his eyes gently moistened. Aspatia's vulnerability left him tingling.

When she was offstage, the interruptions resurfaced and many of the lines were lost beneath the commotion but Christopher did not mind. He watched and waited for Aspatia to make another entrance, to impose order once more on the mild chaos and to trumpet the virtues of honesty and loyalty in a society that was bedevilled by vice. The play ended in a welter of deaths, Evadne's killing of the King being presented as a perverted sexual act that excited the senses of the dullest onlookers but it was Aspatia, yet again, who soared above them all, dying with such realism and poignancy that she set women weeping and strong men snuffling. Christopher was not ashamed of his own tears.

Thunderous applause was directed mainly at the hapless Aspatia, now gliding back to the centre of the stage like its undisputed jewel, luxuriating in the ovation and giving a gentle curtsy to the King who was leading it from the royal box. Christopher was a prey to swirling emotions. Pity for Aspatia welled up inside him along with deep affection for the actress who portrayed her. Envy soon took over, then a feeling of betrayal, then a sense of loss. Resignation finally claimed him. While she had been singing her plaintive

song, Harriet Gow had been his and every other man's in the audience, reaching out to each one individually with the sheer power and musicality of her voice. Now she was indicating her preference very clearly. A royal nightingale for a royal bed.

'Well?' said Henry into his brother's ear. 'Was I right about her?'

'Oh, yes,' admitted Christopher. 'She is without compare.'

'I would give anything to make her mine,' said Hartwell effusively. 'Harriet Gow is the most beautiful woman in the world. Have you ever heard such a charming voice? It still echoes in my ears. She is absolute perfection.'

'Invite her to your new home, Jasper,' advised Henry.

'Do you think that she would come?'

'She might. If I delivered the invitation – by way of the King.'

Hartwell grabbed him. 'Would you do that for me, Henry?'

'That and much more, my friend. You will have one of the finest houses in London. It deserves to be celebrated with a banquet to which only the most distinguished guests will be invited. Do you agree?'

'Oh, yes!' said the other. 'Mightily!'

'Only one thing remains, then.'

'And what is that?'

'A practical matter,' said Henry with an arm around his shoulder. 'You must engage my brother, Christopher, to design the house for you. When she sees the result, Harriet Gow will snatch at your invitation. In Christopher's

hands, architecture is an act of seduction in itself.'

'Then he is the man for me!' announced Hartwell.

'It is settled. Are you content, brother?'

'Yes,' said Christopher. 'Very content.'

But his smile of gratitude concealed deep misgivings.