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An Embrace

by Gill Hilton

Sir James Cardew stepped down from the carriage.

“Come back in ten minutes, Travers,” he said.

He strode up the wide steps before him and pulled on the bell. The great door opened almost immediately and a sharp-faced woman spoke.

“Ah, Sir James, it’s good to see you. Your wife has been very distressed, talking about a letter again. Caused quite a commotion.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Matron,” he said. “I may be able to calm things a little.”

He stepped inside. Matron’s keys chattered in the silence as she re-locked the door. Sir James kept in step with her as their footsteps echoed past the handle-less doors. They stopped outside the door marked 107.

“Just five minutes, thank you Matron,” he took a breath, “Emily, my dear,” he said as he entered the cell.

“James. Thank God. *Thank God.*”

Sir James was rather taken aback to see her shrunken beauty. Could it have been so long since he visited? In the gloom he could hardly see the colour of her skin, her hair.

“Now, what’s all this about a letter?” he said

“You *know* James.” He leaned slightly forward to catch her words as she caught her breath. “The letter. To say that I can leave. James, the things they do here - ”

“I told you last time, my love,” he interrupted, “you’re going to have to show that your condition has fully improved, over time. You’ve been very ill, and Dr Simpson is far from convinced that you are ready to leave.”

He saw her eyes widen and waited for her to speak.

“But when you sent me here you said that as soon as Dr Simpson had given me some treatment I could leave.”

He said nothing.

“Haven’t you brought the letter?” Her voice sounded somehow broken, almost wild, to him. “For God’s sake, help me James.”

“Of course I’ll help you,” he said, moving towards her.

Her eyes brightened as she looked up at him.

“You’ve got the letter, haven’t you?” she said, “this is just a test. You know I’m better.”

“Ah, my dear child,” he said, “you must stop all this nonsense.” He embraced her, and spoke lightly. “This is not a letter, but my arms about you.”

For a brief moment, as he held her, he felt slightly nauseous. Her poorly-washed hair, the odour of carbolic. And the distinctive smell of the straightjacket. Yet he remembered the small, young body that was now so firmly bound. He found himself unexpectedly aroused, and wondered if she could feel him through the stiff material.

“My embrace is a token of my love,” he said, “the letter is just a matter of time.”

“James,” she breathed, “this *will* send me mad.”

“My love, you do not understand these things.” He stepped back from her.

She was paralysed by his impenetrable words. He gave a brief bow and rapped the door sharply for Matron to release him.