

A Marriage is Arranged

by Judith Horth

The door closes quietly as the maid leaves, and Lady Challoner reaches for the teapot. “I trust Earl Grey is to your liking?” Her voice is clipped and her smile does not extend to her eyes as she pours the tea into china cups, handing them to Greta and Marguerite, who are upright and anxious on the stiff-backed, hard Victorian sofa. She offers tea to her husband, Sir Geoffrey, who declines. “It is kind of you to call, Mrs ...How can we help?”

Greta stiffens. She puts down her cup. “Mrs Turlington,” she says, “and I believe you know why I am here. Your son, Henry...” she nods her head in the direction of the boy, who is sprawling with one leg thrown casually over the arm of the big, chintz armchair he has commandeered, “appears to have made fast and loose with my daughter’s affections, with the result that she is now expecting his child.”

Marguerite cannot look up. Head bowed, she can feel the colour draining from her face.

“Marguerite has been wronged,” Greta continues, “by a young man who is older than she, and more worldly wise. I do not condone her part in this, but Henry is to blame, and he must make reparations.”

“Reparations?” Sir Geoffrey laughs. “Come now, Mrs Turlington, you make it sound as if a war has been fought. Reparations!” His jowls wobble as he laughs. “Boys will be boys, you know – boys will be boys!”

“Geoffrey!” Lady Challoner’s eyes blaze. “This is not a laughing matter. I’m sorry, Mrs...but if your daughter is in the family way, she has only herself to blame. Henry would not have done anything without her consent and if she has given herself to my son then I’m afraid it is a testament to her lack of morals.” She casts a withering glance at Marguerite. “Indeed, how are we to know that she has not granted the same freedoms to other young men?”

Marguerite gives a little cry, and Greta’s eyes narrow. “I will not dignify that remark with an answer,” she snaps.

“My wife is quite right to ask the question,” Sir Geoffrey says. “Your daughter finds herself in an awkward spot, due to, if not loose morals, then at the very least an unfortunate accident of timing and lack of ...protection – and you attempt, quite without proof, to cast the blame on Henry, a young man with a bright future. It will not do, Mrs Turlington. It will not do.”

Marguerite expects her mother to explode, but instead, Greta picks up her cup. “May I trouble you for another cup of tea, Lady Challoner? Thank you.”

She turns to Sir Geoffrey. “What will not do, Sir Geoffrey, is for Marguerite to be left to bear this burden alone. She has told me that he is the father of this baby and I believe her, for Henry is the only boy whom I have permitted to take her out. Accident it might have been, but it takes two to make an accident and in this is Henry’s accident too. He knew what he was doing and what the risks might be. They must marry, and before the child is born.”

Henry splutters. “What? No!”

Sir Geoffrey lets out a nervous laugh and his wife just stares.

“Oh yes, Henry,” Greta says. “You will marry Marguerite, make no mistake about it. If you refuse I shall see to it that your reputation is ruined in the same way that hers will be. I promise that you will rue the day you refuse.” There is steel in her voice.

As Greta and Marguerite make their way down the long drive from Challoner Court, Marguerite is still reeling from the events that have just taken place. Somehow, she is now engaged to be married. “Mother,” she says, “I’m so sorry – but do I have to marry Henry? I don’t like him.”

Greta turns to look at her daughter. “Wasn’t that fun?” she says, and her eyes sparkle. “I won’t have people like that look down on me. They think they are so wonderful but I made them squirm, Ha! Their faces! And that little weasel, Henry – he looked as if he was about to cry! God, I’m good!”