

*Lancashire, England 1896.*

## **Chapter 1. Marleys Wade in**

Excited voices reached me from the stream I had thus far managed to protect from encroaching industry. Now it was tourists. The railroad station in the village, besides wasting cultivable land and filling the air with soot and ashes, brought hordes of city folk with bicycles and picnic baskets and no respect for the Nature they claim to worship. With their butterfly nets and collecting cases they stripped us of previously unappreciated insects and plants that were critical to our lives.

Once again, I considered building a wall like Charles Waterton did many years ago around his estate in Walton. He was said to be mad, but so was I.

Moxey, my curly coated retriever lay in the sun at the open Dutch door to the tree house. She rose and shook, her ears straining toward the shore.

A blackbird on a near branch ventured the beginnings of a melody. He was defining his territory. Given my reduced staff, it was left to me to do the same. I put down my varnishing brush and removed my leather apron.

I followed the voices to the jetty of stone that created a deep basin for bathing and stepped carefully out onto the wooden dock. It had stood solid against the rush of the spring flood, and the ice that sometimes formed. Nature had bleached it to a flecked silver that reflected sunlight. The poles were clad in the green leggings of the river algae.

There, I caught sight of a straw hat. A young voice with a London accent asked, “Might this be an *Abercrombiei, Raeta?*”

“Look again, Julia. We are not in India,” replied an adult female voice. It sounded refined and surprisingly local. A local governess would know better than to trespass on the grounds of the mad baron of Beckford Hall. “These mollusks are more likely *Margaritifera margaritifera*, and even those are a wonderful thing to find.”

My early morning shadow fell behind me. Leaning over, I could see that the governess and her charges—two of them—stood in the water on the edge of a ledge. Beyond that point, the streambed sloped to a much greater depth. The large, broad-brimmed straw hat was decorated with limp anemones and violets. The two smaller heads in unbleached muslin butted hers, bent in observation. I heard scraping, perhaps of the mollusks.

A cough downstream alerted me to the presence of a bareheaded boy who lay on the bank, wheezing. His hair was a dirty cut, short enough that pink ears were visible, unlike the rest of his skin, which was a pale sickly shade of gray.

Startling them would be most effective. I stamped and shouted, “You there! You are trespassing!”

The straw hat of the governess flipped back. For one brilliant moment, the rippling light of the water surface reflected from the hat brim on a freckled face in which sea-green eyes flashed with fierce warning. In the next moment, she stepped back and fell with a cry. Her splash engulfed the nearest child, the girl Julia. They were under water in an instant. The straw hat swirled away on ballooning clouds of silt downstream.

Alarm flashed in me. It was quelled when the governess surfaced as a swimmer does, face first. She fought the current with strong strokes until, groping on hands and feet, she gained foothold. Her spinal cord dotted in darkened fabric on her back. “Julia!” she cried, splashing underwater, then yanked the girl, choking and sputtering, to the surface.

The bareheaded wheezer on shore, slight and pale though he was, had waded in and grabbed the youngest child from the muddied water.

“Mother, your hat!” he gasped.

*Mother?* She seemed too young, too lithe, too *attractive*. My visceral reaction caught me unaware. I stared. It had been years since I had seen a woman’s body so revealed. Her thin woolen jacket sagged sodden, clung to her small breasts and outlined her ribs. The frock under it appeared loose and collarless, strange—I sucked in my breath. She wore no corset.

“Don’t care about it. Help me out instead.” The gathers and drawstrings of the mother’s undergarments were marked in a raised pattern in her water-soaked frock. It had bunched up on her thighs, encumbering her knees as she struggled to emerge. She walked like a horseman, staggering in great splashes and uneven footing to shore. Her hair shone strawberry blond in patches, though it was matted and lumped to one side of her head.

As she reached the shore, the youngest child began to wail. The mother sat by him, half comforting him, half removing her boots and pouring out the water. I glimpsed stockinged ankles and feet stained at the soles.

The older boy puffed up his slight frame and rushed up on the dock, flailing his arms at me. Moxey scrambled in front of me with a growl, and the boy drew back.

“What’s wrong with you?” The boy’s verbal assault was racked by coughs. “Look at what you’ve done to my mother and the children! I demand an apology!”

The scrap of a boy couldn’t be more than ten years old, a child himself. But the mother continued to arrest my attention. Glancing at me, she hastily drew at her wet clothing and shook out the skirts clinging to her thighs and waist. She pushed together the small boy and girl, who was shivering so violently that her clattering teeth could be heard.

“Bart, come here. Help Julia.”

Bart glared fiercely at me before turning to relieve his mother. Moxey looked up at me, whined, and followed, the traitor. In passing, the mother commanded Bart. “Respect others’ dogs,” before striding toward me.

The weight of her wet clothing continued to strain her sweater over her breasts, revealing her nipples—I finally tore my eyes away. Reaching me, she stood nearly as tall as I was. I squared my shoulders.

She extended a dripping, blue-white hand. It shook with cold. “Good day, sir. My name is Bridget Marley, and these are my children, Bartholomew, Julia, and Lewis.”

For a pointed moment, I stared at her hand and kept my hands safely behind my back. Dear God, not a New Woman! On what terms could she expect to shake hands with me? And introducing me to her children! I raised my eyes to her eyes, bright green, rimmed in red. She had sharp features and bright orange freckles contrasted her white-blue skin and purple lips.

“So you won’t shake hands.”

“You are trespassing. Have you not read the signs?” The villagers, excepting the poachers, respected the hedges surrounding my most immediate property. The signs had been recently added.

“We are, all four of us, quite literate, and I assure you we would have respected any signs we had seen.”

“Then you must have purposely ignored them.”

“We waded along the shore, up from the mill in the village. We didn’t see any hedges. Where were the signs?” Mrs. Marley’s hand, which had been shaking like a weapon in the hand of a drunk, sank to her side.

“Certainly not in the water. The current should be warning enough.” Soon I would have to add sign maintenance to the growing list of my groundskeeper’s duties.

Mrs. Marley stepped closer. Besides shaking with cold, she reeked of river water. I recoiled, but she merely indicated my sleeves, spattered with resin and burned in spots, then pointed beyond me, where a thin, white line of smoke rose from a long stovepipe reaching out like a bare branch.

The stovepipe was an ingenious extension of the tree-house chimney, constructed to lead the issuing sparks out and away from its harboring oak, the branches of which had been trimmed as usual in early spring. Unfortunately, there could not have been a clearer direction given.

“We need to dry ourselves by your fire. We cannot possibly return to the village as we are. We shall catch our death of cold.” Mrs. Marley spoke loudly and enunciated clearly, as if I were daft, when I turned back to her, stunned.

“Children, there’s a fire. We must find it.” Indicating the way with one hand, she was already ashore, swooping up wet rucksacks. Moxey ran around them, tail wagging, sniffing, and licking the face of the youngest child—Lewis?—who grasped the dog’s jaw and parted her lips to look at her teeth.

The woman scooped up Lewis to her hip to make greater haste. Moxey trotted after them.

“Just a moment!” I shouted. “Where do you think you are going?” I hurried after, so complete was my loss of control, tramping through the unrolling young bracken fronds, until the tree house came into view. The family straggled to a halt, Mrs. Marley staring, Moxey racing ahead and back, Bart taking staggering steps forward.

“Blimey!” breathed Bart. “Holy—”

“Bartholomew, language,” his mother whispered.

The local people told stories of my tree house, as if it were enchanted. The ground floor, shingled and thatched, was built into the oak’s trunk. Moss grew on the river-stone foundation and the flagstones before its Dutch door. Ivy climbed the massive trunk, stairways, and the rooms extending out into the branches. Its rambling construction was at its most visible just now with the early-morning sun glinting off diamond-paned windows among the young yellow-brown foliage.

“Swiss family Robinson!” crowed Lewis, sliding to the ground from his mother’s hip.

“It must be a rich man’s folly,” said Mrs. Marley, breathlessly. “A beautiful one. Imagine that this belongs to one man.”

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A tree house is a folly after all, a recreated fantasy. Mine was not the desire to master nature but to be a part of it. To be included. It had become, over the years, my refuge. When memories, regrets or anger overtook me, I could retreat to that hearth, my leather armchair sized large enough to let me feel like a boy, but with a whiskey that was older than my thirty-nine years. I could sleep and wake in the early hours, still in my chair by the dead fire of the hearth, not to heartache and shame, but to the dawn and the reassuring constant of the stream.

“But Mother,” said Julia. “You said one cannot own beauty.”

“Precisely, my dear. It should be publicly owned that we all may benefit. Like the lakes. Beauty or no, there is a fire within. Come, children, inside.”

“Stop! What are you doing?” My voice was lost as they swarmed through the open Dutch door. When I entered, the children had disappeared up the stairs. Mrs. Marley alone remained in the hearth room.

“It’s so lovely. Is it made by local craftsmen?” She took the broom from its hook and swept the hearth, moving to one side the boots I had left there the night before.

“What are you doing, woman!”

“Oh my goodness, fishhooks!” Between forefinger and thumb, she dropped three uncleaned hooks into a whiskey glass.

“Madam, you cannot possibly—”

But she had gone to the bottom of the steps and called. “Children, come down, immediately! Do not disturb anything!”

The tramping of the children shook the entire tree as they descended from whatever havoc they had made in the sleeping lofts. The din of their voices was unbearable. Mid excited reports of secret hideaways in my private areas, Bart fell into a fit of coughing. Before I could understand the forces at play, Mrs. Barley had stripped Lewis of all but his knee-length linen shirt. Julia was at the bellows raising nascent flames from the dwindling embers and feeding it all the dry kindling I had gathered—enough for at least twenty fires.

“Madam! Mrs.—”

“Marley, yes?”

“Your child, she is, that is kindling! Please use—”

Mrs. Marley prodded in two small logs, then sat on the leather footstool of my armchair. She pulled Julia close and began to unbutton the apron over her frock. “That’s better, isn’t it darling?” She looked Bart over. “You’re dry enough. But empty our boots outdoors. Julia’s are by the door. Wait, take mine, too.” She began to pry them off. I had already seen her ankles. Would the woman now strip before my eyes?

My cozy hearth room, my most private den, strewn with damp clothing, steaming with wet wool and women undressing on my sacred ground. Nothing I said—or tried to say—had any effect. And what did I do? As usual, I turned tail.

As soon as I stood outside with the boys on the flagstones, both halves of the Dutch door were shut behind me.

Bart emptied his boots with a splash onto the trampled earth of the clearing and watched the water gather in a puddle. When Lewis made to copy him, I grabbed him and directed him to the rain barrel at the base of a drainpipe.

Bart's eyes traveled hungrily up the pipe to the top of the tree house, where small gables bridged branches and formed the children's loft. There, the shutters of one of the highest latticed windows opened, and Julia waved down at us.

"Get out of there immediately!" I shouted. Julia reached out and tugged at a stump of rope under the eave.

Bart whistled and waved back. To his younger brother he said, "Lawk, Loulou, d'you see?"

"What is it, Bart?" Lewis, or Loulou, asked, hugging his sister's boot with his head tilted back.

"It could be for a rope ladder, like the Swiss family Robinson's," Bart said wistfully.

It had been only a knotted rope, removed for the safety of my sister Margaret's daughters. I took the boot from Loulou and empty it out into the rain barrel.

The children's loft topped the fairytale construction I had built as a love nest for my betrothed, Adeline. Above the hearth room on the ground floor was my current sleeping space, our intended bedroom. Hooks and garderobe space for her pretty gowns had been cleverly hidden in the woodwork, and a dressing table with a mirror surrounded by beveled windowpanes had been given delicate laced brass candle holders. Those finesses had been removed. Now, a hard bed of furs replaced the fine wool and featherbeds intended for Adeline. The rooms were quickly warmed by the bricks of the long climbing chimney when a fire was made in the hearth below.

"Were you shipwrecked here?" Loulou asked

"Don't be silly, Lou," Bart said angrily. "People don't get shipwrecked in England! Do you live here, sir?"

Before I could answer, Loulou pointed at the canoe I had been varnishing. "Then what is that over there?"

It struck me that I was indeed shipwrecked, attacked by these urban pirates. I knew I should return to the house and have the servants take care of this situation, but I feared the children would put their little fingers on my incomplete coat of varnish, now they had discovered it. I returned to the canoe to assess how much work remained and how best to protect it.

"Is that a boat from Canada?" Bart asked at my elbow.

“No.”

“Where it is from?” Bart moved closer, extending a finger.

“Do not touch it!”

He snapped his hand back. “Are you an Indian?”

“No.”

“Is he an Indian, Bart?” the small boy whispered.

“He must be. Look at his long black hair and dark skin.”

The hours I spent outdoors had darkened my skin, of course, enough to disqualify me as a gentleman, even a country gentleman. As such, I was a savage.

My pot of varnish was just barely warm enough to continue. Loulou stood on his toes to watch me reach the next section of the hull.

“Did you build it?” he asked.

“Have you been to Canada?” demanded Bart at the same time.

Moxey dropped a stick at their feet, offering an opportunity to get rid of the boys. “Go throw it,” I said. “Over there!”

Loulou picked up the stick and ran off. Bart stayed at my side. The bottom half of the Dutch door opened, and Julia ducked out. Her hair was combed and braided and appeared a lighter shade of ginger blonde. She skipped over to us. Her plain muslin chemise was dry in spots. One arm and calf were bright red from the heat of the fire.

“Mother wants you, now, Loulou,” she called before telling us, “I’m to sit in the sun. There are beds for children upstairs.”

Once again, I had two children at my elbows.

“Mother says you’re a gamekeeper,” she said. “Are you the gamekeeper? Or tree keeper since you live in a tree house?”

“No,” I said.

“He’s a shipwrecked pirate,” said Bart. “He stole this boat and sailed here with his treasure.”

Before I could respond, a flash of white caught my eye in the opened lower half of the Dutch door. A bare foot toed the brush mat just outside the door sill. I looked away and recognized the rattle of the top half of the door being forced. The wood tended to swell and stick in spring.

“Loulou, where are you? Leave the dog and come immediately. And Julia, get in the sun!”

Julia left my side for a patch of sunlight. The voice of Mrs. Marley softened and withdrew. Both halves of the Dutch door closed. Moxey dropped her stick at Bart’s feet, and he finally left me in peace.

The varnish was hardening in the pot. It would have to be returned to the fire unless I hurried to complete my task, which I did, shutting out the situation around me. The tourist invasion needed solving in a more permanent way. Some way to protect my lands. A wall? Guards? I could barely afford the staff I had managed to retain.

I had not yet scraped the last thickened varnish from the bottom of the pot when I heard a pane-rattling crack. A groan of irritation—no, anger—escaped me. Of course it would come to this.

Mrs. Marley halted barefoot on the mat while the door swung back and hit her arms, which were full of rucksacks and clothing. Her hair had been combed like her daughter’s into the same girlish plaits, and the expression on her face was that of a horrified child.

It changed when the girl ran to her. “Julia, stop, there’s broken glass! Stay there.”

Julia halted. In scanning the ground for glass, my eyes were drawn to Mrs. Marley’s bare feet. Their slender whiteness made the straw mat look dark, and their smoothness made everything surrounding them rough. A sensation of heat flushed me. Mrs. Marley heaved her bundles into the clearing, and her skirt fell to cover her feet.

Bart pulled on his boots and approached the door. “There’s no glass on the ground, Mother. It’s just a crack. No, two cracks. Three.”

Before I could give voice to the fury that rose in my throat, Mrs. Marly confirmed Bart’s discovery by running her fingers over the panes. “Oh dear! It feels like that glass from the Black Forest. Oh dear, oh dear.” Her face expressed true remorse. “I am so sorry. I shall have it replaced.”

I was so surprised that she identified the glass, though it was an imitation, that I gasped and sputtered, “The glass is locally made. I shall have the glassblower sent for.”

“What is his name? I will send for him as soon as we get back to Wick’s Falls.” She waved to Bart. “My boots. Julia, you’ll have to put on this damp frock, dear, but perhaps it will dry in the sun as did your chemise. Bart, get Loulou and dress him.”

The commotion of dressing mesmerized me, a flurry of thin stockings, rough woolen socks, boots and hats. From what looked like a small collecting case, Mrs. Marley withdrew a ruler and set about measuring the size of the broken pane.



I hastened to stop her. Otherwise, there would be further contact, an overwhelming thought.

“Mrs. Marley, please. You needn’t worry. I will have that seen to.”

“Certainly not. I will ask Mr. Reston about your local glassblower.”

“Reston at Wicks Falls? The fellmongers?”

“Fellmongers?”

“Yes, madam, the skimmers!” Yet again, she had shocked me. Her language and manner had convinced me that, though not a lady of quality, she was more refined than someone familiar with the skimmers of animals.

“The Restons produce fine parchment from those skins. Their family has preserved the traditions from the Middle Ages, practices that produce the finest parchment.”

“Fine—what? Middle ages?”

“Yes. The backwardness of this area has preserved the individual treatment of the skin that produces the best result.”

Clearly, the woman did not realize the weight of anxiety of running an estate on the edge of ruin and protecting my country. Despite her complimentary description, I was very close to shutting down that tannery. It ruined the stream I fished in. “The best result for what?”

“For preparing parchment for art books. These are natural materials drawn from the countryside.” The woman’s voice gained a preaching glow. “It is a craft workshop, not a factory, and we would be reviving a traditional craft. We are not interested in legal parchment, which is factory produced and too expensive. Rather, we wish to investigate and revive a traditional craft. The hill sheep here are lean and close at hand, and Reston ensures they are properly butchered. We are looking to invest.”

“Investing? Investing in Reston? That will never happen.”

“Why not? Because the local lord prevents any kind of social advancement and instead keeps his people in serf-like conditions? He doesn’t realize that the success of those who live and work on his property contribute to his success.”

“Reston wouldn’t dare.”

Mrs. Marley pointed her little measuring stick at me. “We have a business agreement, a six-month contract to develop fine parchment for our firm, Marley and Son Publishers.”

“And you would be Marley or Son?”

“I am Marley, obviously. I signed the contract with Mr. Reston for the firm.” She raised her chin.

I grit my teeth. “He understands the terms of his lease. I was present when my steward explained them to Mr. Reston.”

“Your steward.”

“Yes. The terms of the lease clearly state that they are to reduce their operations and cease fouling that stream or they will be ejected from the property. You will have to take your business elsewhere.”

“You are his landlord. The squire. Baron Beckford.”

“I am not the squire. The village has a council.”

“Why aren’t you in London, then? Isn’t Lords in session?”

The Lords. That social gathering was to be avoided until a matter of importance arose. What they termed debate was often no more than self-promoting speculation. They could gossip until late at night, well past the time a sensible estate owner retired. “My presence is required here. Clearly.”

“But this cannot be. Good parchment is difficult to come by these days. The local sheep provide premium skins, and Mr. Reston—”

The children had finished dressing and watched our exchange with serious faces.

“Mrs. Marley, are you aware of how they operate? They pour lye that burns the skin and even fouler substances—animal brains and defecation—into the river bordering the village. Along with parts they don’t use, sometimes entire carcasses. It kills the fish, it kills everything in my river. I will shut them down.”

“Your river? You can’t own a river.” She twisted the ruler in her hands. Her heightened perspiration raised the scent of the stream water than still permeated her skin, clothing, and hair.

“I own that river and all the fish in it when it flows on my land. I advise you invest elsewhere such as Manchester or Liverpool where your contamination will not be noticed.”

“But no. The conditions for parchment making are ideal here.”

“Print something else, then. Penny dreadfuls are great sellers, I’ve heard.”

“Certainly not, that is a declining market. We publish half-penny periodicals and etiquette manuals, which sell very well, thank you. I can send you one, as you appear to be in need.”

I glared at the woman. “I’ll escort you to Wicks Falls, Mrs. Marley. I shall have word with Mr. Reston.”

“You needn’t come to Wicks Falls, sir. Lord Beckford, that is.” She brushed a stray lock of ginger-colored hair from her eyes and breathed in and out. “I’ll discuss the issue with Mr. Reston. He may be willing to relocate upstream from your estate.”

At that I saw blood. Industries always wanted to locate upstream of the others for access to the purest water and the freedom to dump their refuse on their competitors downstream. I had crushed every attempt upstream even outside my borders. That was when it was worth attending a session of Lords.

Mrs. Marley studied my face a moment before raising her eyebrows. “Come children. It is time to depart. Good day, my lord.”