

01 My Journey to Kent

Tuesday, June 6, 1865

I found myself traveling from London to Folkestone in Kent. I left on the 8:00 AM train of the South Eastern Railway, from Charing Cross station, passing through Sevenoaks and Ashford to reach Folkestone. My journey of 52.5 miles would take me to the sea.

The June morning was excellent, and as the cars passed from the city into the country, I could see that the south of England was already well into the beginning of the English summer. The days had grown longer, the sun brighter, and the fields greener. Everywhere I looked I could see the yellow glow of the sun in a bright blue sky, the green of farmers' fields, and the promise of an abundant harvest in autumn.

The cars were quite efficient, in that my journey by train would take no more than two hours. I had no objection to making it, as I was traveling to an interview for employment, and the prospective employer had sent funds for the trip.

While staring at the landscape, I had a chance to muse, and I fell into a study of my recent life. I was made a widow in 1854, at the tender age of eighteen years and six months, and I remained sorely aggrieved by the loss of my husband, Lt. Michael Goodman of the 3rd (West Suffolk) Regiment of Foot, in that wretched Crimean War. He had fought, but had not died, at the Battle of Inkerman in 1854. No, he had been wounded, and died of cholera. I have always found it to be a painful irony that he should have survived the battle only to die in the squalor of a military hospital in the Crimea.

I had had a decent education, both privately by my parents and in a school for girls. I received a small widow's pension of practically no consequence, and so I had become a governess. Such work had served me in a satisfactory, if unfulfilling, way, in that it provided an income. However, I found that tutoring the reluctant children of rich Londoners did not suit me a bit.

What was also true is that I had, for some reason, developed a remarkably open mind. I owe this to the free-thinking attitude of my parents and the support of my new husband in my all-too-brief marriage. By no means could such an outlook be attributed to the rigid structure of my formal schooling.

I was delighted that in 1860, Florence Nightingale, whose fame rose during the Crimean War, determined to open the Nightingale Training School for nurses at St Thomas' Hospital in London. The death of my poor Michael motivated me to attend. I hoped to take on a new and more rewarding career.

Freshly graduated in 1865, I had been trained to work in hospitals, to work with the poor, and to teach. I was somewhat unprepared for an opportunity to nurse in a home, but I could hardly resist the prospect, especially since the offer had come directly to Miss Nightingale in a letter, and she had singularly brought it to my attention. Hence, my trip to Kent to be interviewed for a position.

I studied my face with a small hand mirror from my bag. Although a widow of eleven years, I was surprisingly fresh of face at the age of twenty-nine, perhaps a little old for marriage, but then again, one could get lucky. The years had been kind to me. Besides, marriage was relatively unimportant to me, as I had met no man who held a candle to my dear, departed Michael.

Of my hair, it was quite dark, very long, but put up in a "bun" (as we say). I wore an appropriate day dress for travel, with a long, full skirt and a tight bodice with a high collar. I wore, as well, a crinolette and a jacket. My *habillement* was, if anything, a bit restrained, without an excess of lace and trimmings.

This restraint was largely due to the teaching of Miss Nightingale, since the more elaborate dress of a gentlewoman is rather a poor choice when carrying out the duties of nursing. Perhaps my dress was a trifle somber due to Fashion's deference to Queen Victoria and her loss of Prince Albert in 1861. Two widows: one a Queen and the other a young lady of no import. Her Majesty, presiding over a costly war, and I the unappreciative recipient of that war's consequences. And, I reminded myself, she with nine children, and I with none.

My body, if I may say so, was quite well formed, and I assert this without blushing, on two accounts. First, Victorian prudery is vastly exaggerated, and my young husband and I had never considered such reserve in our extensive bedroom cavorting. In our brief marriage, we had a lifetime of lovemaking. Secondly, my training as a nurse had given me a new sense of wonder about the mysteries of the body.

In public, naturally, my skirts were quite long, and I was always well corseted. My, how I longed for the corset to become a permanent relic of history! I was blessed (or cursed, if you will) with a bosom of extraordinary size and shape. My body included a smallish waist, which had the unfortunate effect of emphasizing my hips and bosom even more. However, I noted with a small smile, my husband had never complained.

In fact, we would play military games with my breasts. His "reconnaissance," it turned out, would always find them (how could he not?), and when he "captured" them, he forced them to submit to his will by licking and sucking them. He was the invader attempting to conquer "the hills." When he did, he would take them prisoner, and tie them together if need be, lest they escape. He might rub and pinch the nipples until he extracted a confession from his "prisoners," generally a series of moans from me. Finally, they would serve as a sheath for his fleshy sword, which was more than ready for the occasion. Such were the thoughts of a young Englishwoman on a train to Kent for an interview—thoughts best shared with a reader and no one else.

So now, I was destined to meet a stuffy old earl, with more money than sense, whose biggest affliction was probably a case of gout from improper diet and overindulgence. Still, nursing was honest labor and I was well trained for it. If the earl had needs, I would do my best to fulfill them.

My pleasant journey brought the cars to the station in Folkestone. It was barely ten o'clock in the morning. I had earlier telegraphed my arrival time to Folkestone Manor. Now I had to go to Folkestone Manor, somewhere near the village of Hawkinge, home of Sir Reginald Pleydell, 5th Earl of Radnor, of Devonshire, Kent. But how was I to get there?

I was, quite understandably, lost at the Folkestone West railway station. Lost, that is, until I was met by a most unusual "gentleman."

"Are you she, then?" This was spoken by a large and robust country fellow. He had bright eyes and a tanned, leathery skin. He was, perhaps, forty-five or fifty years of age and struck me as being in the peak of good health.

I marveled at his extensive growth of hair and his wonderfully long (although untrimmed) full beard. Indeed, it flew in all directions from his chin and cheeks to his chest. This was a stalwart of modern English yeomanry, if ever one was to be found.

He wore brown pants, a white linen shirt, and a simple vest, the standard uniform of the rural farmer.

"Why yes, I am, if by that you mean Mrs. Goodman, she who is to visit Sir Reginald Pleydell."

“You are the nurse? If so, then you are her—or rather indeed *she*, as we educated gents say. I am to drive you to Folkestone Manor.”

Oh! A jocular country fellow with a penchant for good grammar! I did my best to answer in kind.

“Yes. That’s right. I am the nurse, still ‘she,’ unless I’ve had a change of gender on the train. That’s what I mean, as we educated young ladies say.”

“Ho, young Mrs. Goodman! Well, I’m Jack Bates, the general factotum of Folkestone Manor. ‘Op in the wagon, Miz. Have you a bag?”

“Oh, yes. A small one, with women’s necessities.”

My bag being loaded, we mounted a one-horse dray—a farm wagon. I was a bit disappointed that the earl, who had summoned me, had not provided a carriage.

“How far have we to go to reach Folkestone Manor?” I asked.

“It’s not more than two miles from the train station here to the manor, as the crow flies. And, if the crow was to drive this wagon, perhaps three miles. We’ll hie us first to Hawkinge, a distance of two or so miles, and from there we’ll go one-half mile or so to the manor.

We passed through Folkestone, formerly an important port, now a charming resort. I saw an amusement park with a rotunda.

Not more than three miles from Folkestone to the manor, Jack Bates had said, but already I felt odd leaving the little town. I felt odder yet, as I realized that Folkestone Manor was not in the “thick of things.” Well, things in the country rarely are in the thick of anything. It was indeed to be a rural estate. That’s what the term “country manor” usually implies.

We continued into the countryside on a road that led up through the cliffs. The view struck me simultaneously as both quite beautiful and a bit desolate. As we moved along, I ventured to pose a question.

“Do you know him, the earl? What sort of man is he? I know him only as Sir Reginald Pleydell, 4th Earl of Radnor.”

“Know ‘im? Ho! Yes, Miz, I know ‘im well. He may have a title, but I like to think of us as old friends from the army. I was his colour sergeant. When he was wounded in the Crimea, it were I who sailed back with him. I’ve not left ‘im since.

“But if you want to get formal about it, I’ll tell you this: He is indeed Sir Reginald Pleydell, 5th Earl of Radnor, of Devonshire, Kent, 3rd Viscount Folkestone, VC, Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath, and Deputy Lieutenant of the ceremonial county of Kent.”

“Oh, sir! What a mouthful! And you?”

“I love it! You call me ‘sir.’ I am just plain Jack. Like I said, ma’am, I was colour sergeant for the 33rd Regiment of Foot, also known as The Buffs. I was with Sir Reginald at the Battle of the Alma. He was a hero there. The regiment was involved in the Battle of Balaclava Haro Prii, if you call getting shot up being ‘involved.’ We were there October 25th, 1854, and that’s when Sir Reginald was wounded.”

In this time, we had driven from Folkestone and through the village of Hawkinge, via the Canterbury Road. Hawkinge, I observed, was a typical English farm country hamlet, with perhaps one provider of each needed service, and usually not two. I noted telegraph wires and a pub, as we turned west into Barnhurst Lane.

“It was like this, ma’am. We British were but 4,500, with 26 guns. The Russians were 25,000, with 78 guns. Anyways, when Sir Reginald was hit, I dragged him away and got him to the surgery at Selimiye Barracks.

“When the good Sir Reg was as healed up as well as he could be, I sailed back with him from the Crimea. That was in 1855. As I said, I have not left him since. *Au contraire*, as you city folk are wont to say, I have stuck by him and will continue to do so.”

After about one-half mile, we turned into the estate. The lane was lined with beeches—old, stately, beautiful, and quite dramatic. We approached the front of a large stone house.

“There she is, Mrs. Goodman. Folkestone Manor.”

The manor house was a great heap of gray stone, comprising three stories, as so many of them do. It was rather small in comparison to the great manors of historic England. It lacked towers and wings. At least it wasn’t one of those half-timbered monstrosities that look like a child’s jigsaw puzzle. I could see a half-level—a basement, as the Americans say—for the storage of goods, then a main floor, a second floor for sleeping rooms, and a third floor for servants.

I noted that the house, although half of the size of some which with I was familiar, was large and rather lovely, but in a poor state of repair. There were no workers about, and a part of the roof seemed to be falling in. So much for my theory about a rich earl.

There were outbuildings peeking out from behind the main house. I assumed there was a barn, a carriage house, and so forth.

“What else can you tell me?”

“Nothing, Miz Goodman. Best I leave that to your meeting with Sir Reginald. He is, some might say, a bit peculiar.”

“How so?”

“I leave it to you to find out, but I will tell you this, and then stop. He’s very rich, but you couldn’t tell that by the way we run the household. He has felt no compunction to keep the place up. Also, he’s quite the recluse.”

“Who is ‘we’?” I asked.

“We, Miz, being me and my missus, Mrs. Bates. She is my one true love, as she has been for thirty years. She’s a sweet young thing, and you will meet her in a few seconds.”

“Anything else?”

“That, Miz, you’ll have to learn for yourself.”

The wagon halted at the front steps. There to greet us was a large woman, distinguished by her smile, which I took as a beacon of welcome. Clearly, this was no dour housekeeper.

She was, perhaps, forty-five years of age. Like her husband, robust in face and form. In addition to her wide hips, she had a bosom that women would envy and men would crave. A country lass, if one that old could still be a lass. She wore a simple dress, a cotton print, with an apron covering her front. No crinolines for a working woman in the country.

Mr. Bates helped me down from the wagon. Mrs. Bates greeted me, exuding a warm glow.

“Good morning, Mrs. Goodman. I’m Mrs. Margaret Bates, but you must call me Meg.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Bates. Meg, that is. I’m pleased to meet you. I have enjoyed speaking with your husband during our drive.”

“Yes, ain’t Jack a study? You are, of course, the nurse. I’ll let Sir Reginald know you’re ‘ere.” Then, confidentially, she said, “When you’re done with him, pop round to the kitchen. That’s where I always am. I’ll fill you in.”

Oh, my! I wondered what extra information she might supply.

We entered through the portal into a large lobby. I took in the double staircase leading to the second floor, and glanced at the wall paintings. They were portraits which I took to be former Earls of Radnor. I waited only a minute or two before Mr. Bates conducted me down the central hallway to my interview.

I entered through double doors and found myself in a large room. Ah, a library! The room was well lit by large windows to the south. To the east were very tall French doors leading into what I could see was a conservatory. Or *would* have been a conservatory, had it been well-maintained. The neglect was obvious, even from a distance. There was a large fireplace, and there were as well the mandatory accoutrements of a library—several large carpets, wainscoting of dark oak, et cetera. I counted two couches, two library tables, two chairs, several oil lamps, and a large desk of walnut. There were oils on the walls—more portraits of ancestors, I assumed.

But the books! They made my heart sing! Foot after endless foot of shelves, stretching from floor to ceiling. Filled with several thousand volumes, I imagined. This was a place where excellent thinking and reflection was to be done.

I adjusted my hat, straightened my jacket, and smoothed my skirt. I was a bit self-conscious about my body.

Of a sudden, the doors opened wide, and into the room came Sir Reginald.

The first thing I noticed was that he fairly flew in—via a wheelchair. Yes, of course. The man was ill. He was dressed in an excellent suit of dark brown Harris Tweed, which, as nearly as I could tell, was well fitted to him. His tie was striped, and I presumed the buff and green stripes were the colours of his regiment. He might be sick, but he dressed well.

The second thing I saw was that he was, in my estimation, the handsomest man I had even seen (except, of course, for my dear Michael). Perhaps in his mid-thirties, with dark, nicely-trimmed hair, a fine, thin straight nose, and full lips. His eyes were dark, almost black. And most surprising, for a man in a wheelchair, he exhibited a rather soldierly bearing. I felt a small twitch whose specific nature I shall share at a later time.

The third thing that stuck me was saddening. It was clear that this man was pale and looked debilitated. His beautiful eyes should flash, I thought, but instead looked a trifle dull. He navigated his rolling chair into the room with a vigor that I suspected was feigned.

“Good morning,” he said. “You are, I believe, Mrs. Patricia Goodman. I am Reginald Pleydell. Forgive me if I do not stand.”

I had to pause, uncertain whether he was serious or attempting humor.

“Seat yourself please. I wish to study you for a moment.”

I sat. And sat. After rather a long pause I felt obliged to speak.

“You sent for me, sir. You wish a nurse. May I inquire as to why?”

“Because I... I fear that I am dying.”

“Sir Reginald, we all die eventually. I presume you would like to delay that moment as long as possible.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Does your physician tell you that you are you ill?”

“If by ‘physician’ you mean Dr. Prang, that good-natured country quack in the village, his opinions are of no consequence. And, when I first returned to England, I consulted several physicians, with no satisfaction. As the saying goes, Mrs. Goodman, I do not need a weatherman to tell which way the wind blows. I *am* ill. I am in a state of decline. I see that my stamina is far less than it should be. As you may imagine, because I cannot walk, I cannot stay fit. Now I am led to believe, on the best authority, that you and your skills may be of some help.”

“Yes, Sir Reginald, I’m trained to minister to the ill and the injured.”

“I will tell you two things, and one is obvious. First, I cannot walk. Secondly, I am in constant pain. Now I will stop, for the moment. Please tell me about yourself.”

I wanted immediately to query him further, but I had no choice. I began my narrative.

“I was born and raised in Kew. My father was a schoolmaster and my mother a governess. I was educated at home, and later sent to a girls’ school, where I learned considerably less than I had at home. My parents were, if I am not to be misinterpreted, free thinkers, and encouraging of all learning.

“I myself found work as a governess from 1854 until 1860. Then I entered the Nightingale Training School at St. Thomas’ Hospital. During that period, I learned the craft of nursing, and I have spent considerable time at the Royal Hospital in Chelsea, taking care of old or injured soldiers.”

“You are married, I should think.”

“I am married. Or I was, I should say, to Lieutenant Michael Goodman, 3rd West Suffolk Regiment of Foot, also known as ‘The Bloodsuckers.’ He was wounded in the Battle of Inkerman, on November 5th, 1854. The Russians launched 7,000 men against the Sandbag Battery, which was defended by 2,000 British soldiers.”

“I know. I was there,” Sir Reginald interrupted.

I started visibly.

Sir Reginald continued, "And he died?"

I fought to overcome a sudden sadness. "Yes, but not from his wounds. They took him to Selimiye Barracks in Scutari, where he died from bad food and cholera."

"Again, I know. I was there."

Jack Bates had told me that Sir Reginald had been at Selimiye Barracks, so I continued.

"How did it come to pass that you were there, Sir Reginald?"

"I am, or was, rather, a Major in the Royal East Kent Regiment, formerly 3rd Regiment of Foot, 1st Battalion. We are known as 'The Buffs.' I was quite a promising officer and soon, I was told, would command the regiment as Colonel."

"I will summarize the end for me: Battle of Alma, September 20, 1854; Battle of Balaclava Haro Prii, October 25th, 1854. We had 4,500 troops and 26 guns. The Russians had 25,000 troops and 78 guns."

"Yes. Jack Bates had mentioned those exact numbers on the drive here."

"At Balaclava Haro Prii, we were beating the tar out of the Russians when a shell landed next to me. Case shot, perhaps. Anyway, the Russians weren't too particular about what they put in their cannon. They must have been low on nice iron balls. They used nails, scrap iron, lead, wire, and so forth."

"It was Colour Sergeant Jack Bates who got me out of there. Brought my sword, too, although I'm uncertain why. That's it hanging over the fireplace."

"So I, like your poor husband, went to Selimiye Barracks in Scutari, where I was subject to the tender mercies of army surgeons. The surgeons removed most of the shrapnel, but it's obvious that they didn't get it all." Anyway, I nearly died in the hospital, but not, thank God, of infection. Bad food, mainly, made me ill. It was there, by the way, where I met your Florence Nightingale."

"Have you tried since to have the remainder removed?"

"I'm told it cannot be done. The doctors say they cannot find it, and if they could, they wouldn't dare remove it. The surgery is not safe, they tell me. Frankly, Mrs. Goodman, a man of action, which I was, does not care to be told to 'Get over it.'"

"And the outcome, sir?"

"Well as you see, I lived, but cannot walk. I am restricted. I am restricted, as well, in... other things. Yet I have a great deal of persistent pain. Ironic, no? Some of my parts feel nothing; other parts report to me whenever I move. I manage the pain with great quantities of laudanum and Irish whiskey. I am not happy with this outcome, but am inured to it. To put it simply, Mrs. Goodman, I am quite bitter."

"Perhaps there is a cure, Sir Reginald."

"A cure? It is quite clear to me, madam, that there is no cure, only a decline that will lead to my early death. I wish, as you say, to 'delay that moment as long as possible.'"

I paused a moment before speaking. "If I may say so, bluntly, you are a short-sighted man. There is always a cure."

I believe I startled him. "Can you grow back an amputated limb?"

"No, but I have helped men to walk."

It was now Sir Reginald's turn to pause. It was a long pause. At last, he spoke.

"When can you start?"

"I can be here at the start of next week. I must return to London, and make arrangements regarding my things."

I answered promptly, for indeed, I had made up my mind in the positive. This man was beautiful, if I might use that term. I found him to be very attractive. I was, I must say, moved to fondle him, although I later blushed at this very unprofessional thought. Most of all, I was immediately challenged by what I perceived as his biggest problem—his intractable attitude. I had seen that before, and it had hastened the demise of more than one patient.

"You do not ask the wage?"

"Sir Reginald, I'm sure you will be more than fair."

Actually I was not sure about this, given the general dilapidated state of the manor. Still, I reasoned that Jack and Meg Bates seemed happy, content, and devoted to their employer.

"Very well. You shall have a salary of £500 per annum. I will arrange for quarters for you in the village, in the rooms kept by Mrs. Bourne. At my expense, of course."

"The wage is very generous, sir. It is over five times that of an army ensign!"

"Yes, and greater than that of the colonel of a regiment. Money is not a barrier, Mrs. Goodman."

"I would require a reasonable allowance for the equipment and substances needed to effect your treatment. These will be essential in improving your health."

"Mrs. Bates will give you all that you require. I do not intend to pinch pennies on a matter that I consider to be vital."

"I have several provisos, upon which the continuation of my service hinges."

"Very well, what are they?"

"The therapy is based upon nutrition and sanitation, an improved regimen of medications, and what is now called physical therapy. We must improve your upper body strength, from which derives better self-care and what we call transfer skills. I must ask you to follow the therapy to the greatest extent possible."

“That will not be a problem. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, Sir Reginald, there is one other thing. Your attitude—your outlook on life—will help or hinder you. I cannot change it, nor can you consciously change it. It must evolve. But I ask you to be open to the process.”

“Very well. It seems that I have hired a commanding officer. Shall I answer you, ‘Yes, Sir?’ In any event, I should like to shake your hand to seal the deal.”

“That is an excellent test of your strength.”

I rose, went to his side, and he extended his hand. His hand gripped mine, his fingers pressing warmly into my skin.

“That’s strong.”

“So women tell me. Told me, I should say. I wish I could say that for all of me.”

“When I return, I shall query you further.”

“I might be too embarrassed to relate the details.”

“You were a soldier and I suspect you still are. I should think courage comes easily to you.”

“Very well.”

“Then I will take my leave of you. I must ask Mr. and Mrs. Bates to arrange some things.”

With that, I turned and left the library.

I made my way from the library to the kitchen. This required striding the entire length of the manor’s main hallway, as the library was located at the far eastern end and the kitchen at the far western end. That was a distance of about 192 feet. I knew, because I counted my steps.

“Hello, Mrs. Bates. I’m here.”

“Mrs. Goodman. Do come in. And remember, you can call me Meg, dearie.”

“Then it shall be so. Please call me Patricia.”

“I don’t think that’s a proper form of address for a lady.”

“I can assure you, Mrs... er, Meg, that I’m hardly a lady. I am merely a working woman, and a widow.

“Well, there’s dignity in all work. Sit you down. I have some water near ready for tea, and a small bit for our elevenses.”

I sat down at a small table in the kitchen. Looking around, I saw that the kitchen was enormous, nearly as large as the library I had just occupied.

There was a large Rumford fireplace and numerous pieces of cooking furniture. Among the items, I saw a Castrol stove with several fireholes, and there was an oven for baking. The room was lit by the same sort of large windows as in the library, only these faced to the north and west.

“Did he hire you?”

“Sir Reginald? Yes, and I agreed. I do hope it was a good choice—on both his part and mine.”

“It’s good, Miz Patricia. Sir Reg, he’s better-most, as we say in Kent. I know that he could use good ministrations, and he’ll do right by you. What’s next for you?”

“I should ask your husband to drive me to the village, if it’s not inconvenient. I must arrange for rooms. Then I would appreciate a lift to the station to take the cars back to London. I plan to return in one week.”

“No problemo, as those accursed Papist Spaniards say. Jack’ll be happy to oblige.”

“Now I’ll get up our snack. Here’s our Devonshire tea. The scones are fresh baked and warm, as they should be. Thank goodness for Horsford’s Yeast Powder!

“We split the scones and cover them with clotted cream, as you likely do in London. To that we add strawberry jam. Raspberry jam would *not* do in Devonshire. We’re in the County of Kent, of course, but we should remain true to tradition.”

I split a scone and prepared it for eating. “Thank you, Meg.”

“And tell me Mrs... Patricia, what did you think of the young earl?”

“I had expected a much older man. And certainly not one whose infirmities were derived from being wounded in war. I must say, candidly, that he’s the handsomest man I have laid eyes upon, except perhaps for my poor dead husband. He *is* pale, and a bit dissipated, but I think that can be addressed.”

“Yes, he’s a looker for women. I must say that I myself have not ignored his appeal. He’s robust, except for bein’ all crippled up. Otherwise, he’s just like my Jack.”

“Yes. Of course, you mean Mr. Bates?”

“Yes, or Master Bates, as they used to call him. That hasn’t been a need of his since I came along. I’ll tell ye one further thing about Sir Reg: He makes me twitch in my, you know, cock-pit.

“Meg! You are very candid. I marvel!”

“And I’ll tell ye these reasons why I talk in such a way. First, I’m a simple farm girl who was blessed—or cursed, perhaps—with a randy disposition, and I met my match in Jack. Second, take a look at these carriage lamps. Are they not a large, proud pair? They will charm a man into submission. At least, they always have with Jack. And third, to drive the point home, if you get my meaning, I will tell you this about *that*.” She pointed to below her waist. Since me monthly juices stopped flowing, this little part of me is no longer a nursery. It’s a playroom.”

“Oh, my! You *are* very frank!”

“And I am glad you’re not fanteeg—flustered, that is. I don’t mind putting out the truth, between us ‘girls.’ Jack is the most robust man I’ve ever known. And I did me part. Raised four strapping boys, now soldiers in India.”

“Well, Jack does seem to be extraordinarily energetic.”

“Tell me! Oh, young lady, there’s nothin’ like goin’ out to fetch the milk and bein’ bent over a rail in the barn by my Jack. He latches on to me big milk bags and won’t let go. And that’s often without a moment’s warning! Then he plows me from the rear like a new field. It’s a wonder I don’t alarm the village with me shoutin’.”

“Well, I *am* a bit flustered. Oh! What can I say? But I’ll tell you with equal frankness, it was that way when I was married to my young lieutenant.”

“Got you good, did he?”

“Absolutely. Thinking about it still makes me quite faint.”

“Did you swallow the sausage?”

“Did I swallow...? Oh, Meg! Of course I did. There was no better meal in England.”

“And so it is with me, my young dear. And so it will be tonight. Jack makes the kind of clotted cream you can’t get atop a scone.”

“I must tell you, I have never met a woman who bantered so. You are a delight!”

“You should spend more time in the country, dearie.”

I thought I should direct the conversation to more serious matters, and I said, “If I may ask about the manor, what is the work that you and Jack do here? How do you maintain the place?”

“Jack bosses the outside, and I the inside. Jack takes care of the stable, and I take care of the kitchen.”

“But where are the servants?”

“As for the labor, they are hirelings, not servants. Sir Reginald will not tolerate servants, as he finds the very designation demeaning. We have several people from the village and from two nearby farms. They work for a wage and rather welcome the money.

“In the house I have maids who come in to keep some order on the ground floor. Sir Reginald neglects the second floor, and the third floor is servants’ quarters, unused. I get some help on wash day, and there’s a milkmaid, too.

“On the grounds, Jack manages the three cows, five horses, and vehicles. The population of chickens and pigs is rather unimportant. Jack employs a stable boy, a gardener, and groundskeepers, and there’s gamekeepers to patrol the forest. And more: anyone who asks Jack may hunt in the forest, as is Sir Reg’s wish. Consequently, we have no poaching.”

“But Meg, the building seems a bit run down. The roof looks damaged, and I could see from the library that the conservatory is not maintained. Why is that?”

“In my view, Miz Patricia, Sir Reginald no longer cares. He didn’t care much about the building or grounds when he first came back from the Crimea, and now he doesn’t seem to care at all.”

“It is a shame, since one’s environment cannot help but improve one’s attitude. I thought, perhaps, that he was impoverished nobility, the kind who go to America to trade their title for the hand of a millionaire’s daughter.”

“Nay, don’t believe it. He’s as rich as Croesus. This here isn’t what you’d call a workin’ farm. He has three other large estates—two in Kent and a large one in Nottinghamshire—and they are well managed. I ought to know, as I am Sir Reginald’s exchequer, and the managers bring the money to me. I rather enjoy doing the sums. In fact, I’d say that I excel at spreadsheets.”

“Meg, if I may, I’d like to ask you some things about Sir Reginald’s needs. You do the cooking?”

“Yes, all of it. It’s my passion, except for those moments with Jack, of course. I spend much of my day in the kitchen. I have a young girl from the village, a child really, named Julia, who helps with the baking.”

“How does Sir Reginald eat?”

“Formerly, he was rather a hearty eater, but in recent few months, he seems to eat with great reluctance. I don’t take it personal, though. I have a first-class kitchen, and the victuals is good.”

“What does he eat?”

“Meat, mostly. Beef, pork, and mutton. My fresh-baked bread, of course. Sometimes I can get him to eat a roasted potato. Then there’s his Irish whiskey and laudanum, which do not promote appetite. Odd, but Sir Reg doesn’t object to how much I cook, or if I send items like my baking to folks in the village. He just doesn’t care to eat.”

“When I return, I will suggest that he consume some new and different foods. This is in the interest of restoring his health.”

“That would be most welcome. They call Kent the Garden of England, you know, and there’s plenty of good things to eat. No problem, missy.”

“I will attempt to improve sanitation for Sir Reginald, if he, and you, will permit it. That may prevent him from contracting a disease. And as to his medications, I may bring some that are superior to his laudanum.”

“Then you will be doing him, and us, a great service.”

“Tell me, does Jack give ‘Sir Reg’ any personal attention?”

“Indeed he does. Jack helps him a little to dress. Especially, he helps with the bath. Jack would push that wheelchair for him, but our knight/earl/viscount doesn’t care to go anywhere, not even to tour the lovely grounds.”

“Does the man get any exercise?”

“Hardly any. Jack has rigged up something, a kind of bicycle that doesn’t move, so that Sir Reg might exercise his leg muscles a bit. Jack, you see, is what we call a dabster—very skilled at putting things together. Now, about the bicycle, I cannot say how Jack prevails upon Sir Reg to use it—but Jack insists and Sir Reg complies.”

“Well, Dear *Madame* Doctor Bates, what do you conclude about the health of our charge?”

“Well, Dear *Madame* Nurse Goodman, it strikes me that there ain’t no life in him. In many ways, he’s given up, and that’s not the Major Pleydell that Jack knew in the Crimea. At the least, Sir Reg has had the good sense to engage you.”

“Meg, I hope to work some magic there. I find myself keenly motivated to restore his health. He has offered an enormous salary, but that means nothing to me.”

“Patricia, the doctors say that he will never walk again.”

“What if the doctors are wrong? They are frequently wrong. He held the hill at Balaclava when outnumbered by Russians. He must be equally defiant of long odds now. We might restore his ability to walk.”

“Can ye make him walk again?”

“No, I only say that we *might* restore his ability to walk. I’m not a physician, nor am I surgeon. Yet, I suspect that it is possible. He has assured me that he will try to restore himself. He is a fighter, or *was*. I can see that. He can fight his afflictions or fight me. I would prefer that he confront the former.”

“Can ye restore his vigor? The doctors say that will never happen, either.”

“His vigor?”

“Can ye help him make the beast with two backs?”

“Oh, Meg! I blush. I cannot answer until I devise a test. But I will say this: If it is within my power, I will do so.”

“Jack says that young Reg was quite a rake—before and during the war. It ain’t right for a handsome man to see fertile fields, and not have a workin’ plough to use on them.”

“Then a rake again he shall be. I may have the skills, and he motivates me mightily.”

“Har! I can barely imagine your doing to Sir Reg the things I do to my Jack.”

“I dare not ask the details, but I suspect that you are all the woman, and more, that Jack desires. I learned on the drive here that he loves you dearly.”

“And so he should, as I am the Queen of Tarts, in both my baking and my acting the trollop. And besides, I’d cut his ballocks off if he came to a different conclusion!”

“Very well said, Dame Bates!”

“‘Dame’, indeed! Out with you, young lady. ‘Get thee hence,’ as our beloved William Shakespeare might say.”

Jack Bates entered the kitchen.

“Hello, ladies. I’ve returned from Sir Reginald. I’ve moved him off to his chamber for a nap. He seems pleased that Mrs. Goodman will work with him.”

“And his mood?” asked Meg.

“Struck me as a smidge less melancholy. Meg, he’s instructed you to give Nurse Goodman £150 to buy her equipment and all, with the promise of more if needed. I’m to take care of your lodgings in the village.”

“Excellent! Today is Tuesday. I will return on Tuesday next, with personal goods and with, I hope, a full armamentarium of medical equipment and substances. I may send some things ahead by the railroad.”

“Excellent, Miz Patricia. Monday is wash day, so Tuesday will be better. Now I’ll fetch you your banknotes.”

“Meg, I can’t tell you how much I’ve enjoyed talking with you. You are a rare find.”

We exchanged thank-yous and courtesies. I took my leave, to return with Jack Bates to the village and onward to the train station.

We mounted the wagon, my “coach and one” as Jack called it, and set forth for the village of Hawkinge.

The drive was pleasant, the weather quite fair, and I was still filled with excitement about my new challenging employment. So much had taken place in just one morning!

Jack said, “So you’ll be taking care of Sir Reginald, yes?”

I said, “Yes. I look forward to the work.”

We rode along in easy silence. After the briefest of rides, scarcely over one-half mile, we turned from Barnhurst Lane into the Canterbury Road, and entered the village.

Hawkinge was everything one might expect in a country farm village. On the right was the postal office, which, I could see, also served as the telegraph office. On the left were the requisite public house, The Black Horse, a greengrocer, and a dry goods grocer. There was also a blacksmith’s establishment. The side streets had predictable, direct English names: Mill Lane, Church Street, and School Street.

“Mill Lane? Is there a mill? And, my! What are those round buildings with the very high pointed roofs?”

“Yes, there’s a mill. And we calls them buildings oasts, Missy. They’re for dryin’ hops. You can’t find better hops than in Kent.”

School Street had a two-story stone building, perhaps for the constable and the municipal court. There was also a small park. Looking up Church Street, I saw the steeple of a simple white church on a hill. I suspected the graveyard next to it was filled with stalwarts who had never ventured beyond Hawkinge.

“Why Jack, this is a lovely little town.”

“I suppose, Miz, but do understand that I’ve been to Istanbul, and I found that place to be a bit more lively. Well, Canterbury is only 13 miles away, if a person needs something that isn’t here.”

“Where do those paths lead?”

“Ah, Miz Patricia, the wagon roads and paths go to the farms. They are all around the village.”

I saw numerous cottages lining the side streets, with gardens for produce and small orchards of fruit trees. We drove past a few smiling pedestrians and a wagon. At another pub, The White Horse, we turned into a side street, and came upon five fine three-story houses. Jack stopped the wagon at the first house on the right, a lovely white clapboard structure.

“Jack, what street is this? These houses are much bigger than all the others in the village.”

“This is Oak Lane. It’s the Grosvenor Square of Hawkinge. The doctor’s on this street, and also a farmer. Two are owned by Londoners, and are empty. This here’s the home of Mrs. Bourne, who lets rooms.”

Before I could respond, out the front door bounced a lean, lovely, cheery woman. *My gosh*, I thought, *does everyone smile all the time in Hawkinge?* I made a note to determine if there was some special chemical in their water.

“Allo, Jack. What say you?”

“Ah, Mrs. Bourne, you fetching lass! The most beautiful woman in all of Kent! I’ve brought you a tenant. This is Mrs. Goodman, Sir Reginald’s new nurse. She has come down from London by train.”

“Colour Sergeant Bates, I’ll tell Meg you said that. I will, for sure! Well, I’m pleased to meet you, Mrs. Goodman. I’m sure Sir Reg has made a good choice.”

“You knew about his wanting a nurse?”

“Of course. Everyone in Hawkinge knows everything about everyone else. But by the same token, what happens in Hawkinge stays in Hawkinge, if you get my drift. Now step down, Mrs. Goodman, and I’ll show you to your rooms.”

Jack said, “If you don’t mind, I’ll wait here whilst you women coo over the furnishings.”

I dismounted my carriage. I must say, if Mrs. Bourne bounced down the front stairs, she absolutely glided up them. I reminded myself to learn much more about these lively country folk.

Mrs. Bourne conducted me to the front hall on the ground floor. I saw the parlor at my left, which was simply done. Not too much chintz, I can happily report. At the right was a large dining room, which I saw featured brightly painted walls and an immaculately-scrubbed floor. Checking for cleanliness may be an occupational hazard of a career in nursing, but I found myself instantly approving.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor, and entered a large room at the front of the house, overlooking the street.

“You’ve got two rooms, Mrs. Goodman. One for sleeping, one for sitting. The furnishings are simple, but I hope you’ll be comfortable. Here you’ll see a settee, chairs, table, and bookshelf. And the bedroom has a dresser and armoire, and, *quelle surprise*, a bed. Oh yes, of course there’s a basin for doin’ your ablutions, and a commode for answering nature’s calls.”

My eyes took in the sitting room, and I peeked into the bedroom. Again, the walls were well painted, the floor well-scrubbed, the carpet free of holes, and the curtains quite restrained in their color and pattern. “I’m sure I shall be very comfortable. The rooms are lovely.”

We left my new rooms and descended the stairs. "May I ask about meals?"

"Ask away. I serve three meals a day. Breakfast is at 8:00, dinner at 1:00, and tea at 5:00. On Sundays, there are only two meals, dinner and tea. Mighty good victuals, too, if I do say so myself."

"Any other boarders?"

"Just one, at the moment. And, speak of the devil, here he is now."

As we descended the stairs, we practically collided with a young man rushing in.

"Oh! I'm very sorry, to be sure."

The words came from the mouth of the oddest man I believe I have ever met. This fellow was distinguished by a height of over six feet, with the leanest of frames. He was perhaps in his late twenties. His face was so pale and hollow that for a moment I was concerned for his health. He had black hair and black eyes, which made his face look remarkably like a skull. His choice of clothing was no help—an outfit entirely of black.

"Mrs. Goodman," said Mrs. Bourne, "this is Mr. Uriah Grimstead, my boarder. He is a nice young man from London. A poet, so he tells me."

He extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, to be sure."

I took his hand and shook it. Thank God I was wearing gloves. The cold of his hand shot right through them, but at least I didn't have to feel the clamminess that must have certainly accompanied the cold.

"And I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Grimstead. What brings you to the country, if I may ask?"

"I am here, er, for my health. Yes, for my health, to be sure!"

"Well, Mrs. Goodman, come along, come along. We must get you off to your train." With that, we abandoned Mr. Grimstead, and joined Jack Bates at the wagon.

"Thank you, Mrs. Bourne. I'll return a week hence. I will send my things ahead."

"Hello, Lady. Did you call for a hansom? I'm your driver. Shall I help you up?"

"Jack, you'll make me pop my corset if you keep me laughing so! No! I can climb into your rig on my own."

That settled, we drove the two miles or so into Folkestone.

After a short while, I ventured to query Jack.

"So, Jack... What do you think?"

"About what, Miz Goodman?"

"Sir Reginald."

“Could ye narrow that down a bit? As we say in Kent, that’s too wide a field to plow.”

“How does he deal with each day?”

“Well, seein’ as you’re now his nurse, between you and me and the horse’s arse in front of us, I’ll say this: He drinks too much, he don’t eat right, and he sucks up the laudanum the way a calf pulls on a teat.

“Oh, my!”

“Well, I’ll grant you he’s got pain all the time. So you can see why he must make himself numb to it. He don’t get much exercise, except the little bit I force on him, and that often takes a fight.”

“What does he do each day?”

“Well, I’ll be plain with you, against the case where he tells you different: After he’s bathed and dressed proper, he spends the morning in the library. Not in the conservatory, mind you, and you’ve seen that we’ve let it fall into ruin.

“Then at one o’clock he wheels himself into the grand dining room, unless he wants to eat in the library. He picks at his food, no matter what great cooking my Meg sets before him. He’s grateful, mind you, but he don’t eat much. You can’t believe the amount of food Meg’s helpmate, Julia, carries into the village, and Sir Reg never objects.”

“And his afternoons?”

“Same as the mornings, Miz. In the library. He reads, drinks whisky, and swallows laudanum. Sometimes he just stares out the window. He does that until high tea, which Meg brings to him in the library.”

“Then what?”

“Barely touches the food. Then he reads. Finally, he wheels himself into his bedroom and gets himself into bed. The next day’s just like the day before.”

“How much atrophy is there? I mean, are his legs greatly shrunk in size?”

“Not as much as you’d think, Miz Patricia. His legs get a little exercise every day from that sort of bicycle I rigged up in his bedroom. And he’s got some fine arms and shoulders on account of hoisting himself in and out of bed.

“I tell you, it ain’t so much that his body is wasting away, ma’am. In me humble opinion, it’s his piss-poor attitude, as we say in the army, that has cost him his spirit. It breaks me heart, as I love Sir Reg like me son or me younger brother. I’ll tell you one more thing, if I may blunt.”

“Jack, I believe you are a smart man, who thinks sharp and speaks bluntly. What?”

“What Sir Reginald Pleydell needs is a wife. Plainly, he needs what men do with a wife. But what good would that do? There ain’t no lead in his pencil, if you catch my drift. And it’s been ten long years since the Crimea. Me, I was away from my dear Meg for three years, and she had no reminder of me but watching the stallion mount the mares in the pasture.”

“Jack, your candor is second to no one’s, and I’ve spent my share of time nursing soldiers. Well, let us take things in order. We’ll work on the Sir Reg’s legs first, and then address the tool between them.”

“Well, said, nurse! So you tell me—will he walk again?”

“First, he must become healthier. Secondly, I have ideas about how we—you and I, Jack—can make him more mobile. This much can happen if you and Meg, his best friends, will help. Third, will he walk again? I truly don’t know, but at the least we’ll discover what prevents his walking.”

Upon our arrival at the Folkestone East station, we found the train nearly ready to depart.

“Jack, it has been a great pleasure to meet you and Meg and to talk with you both. You encourage me greatly.”

“Well, the job must have sounded promising to you, missy. And it were Sir Reg who made the judgment about your hire.”

“As you know, I shall return on Tuesday next. If I may, I will send my trunk ahead for Mrs. Bourne’s boarding house. Also, I will use the money from Sir Reginald to buy many needed things in London, and I will forward them to the manor.”

“Good, Miz Goodman! I’ll be down to this station to fetch ‘em in me all-purpose vehicle.”

And so I entered my train compartment, waved goodbye, and settled in for my return to London. As the cars left the station, I had a brief moment of exultation, pride, self-confidence, and more than a bit of excitement.