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‘She must go fro and she shall go fro and she shall go whether she will or no.’

The words, unaccompanied by the candlelight and smiling faces had a sinister sound as though some obscure threat lay behind their apparent inconsequence. Standing there in the shadows in her pale gown Barbara felt like a forlorn and resentful ghost. To be out of the bright centre of things, to be forgotten, even for this brief space, was to taste something of the anonymity of death. Why could she not stay where she belonged among those riotous young people below, instead of being undressed and put to bed with a man whom she did not love?

But to her bridesmaids this was the crowning moment of the day. A vicarious excitement was apparent in their gestures and voices. ‘As though they prepared me for my execution,’ thought Barbara sulkily. Before undressing her they urged her to partake of beer and plum buns swimming in a bowl of spiced ale. ‘To keep away timorous thoughts, dear cousin,’ murmured Ursula Worth kindly. Penelope Carew laughed boldly, ‘Oh never you fear! She will cheer up quick enough when her bedfellow comes.’

Arabella Crosbie worried, ‘I hope we have remembered to put everything in the benediction possett – milk, wine, yolk of eggs, sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg ... Moll, did we remember the nutmeg?’

But Moll Kirby and her sister were admiring the bridal bed. It was richly upholstered with olive green, rose and silver brocade hangings and curtains, and topped with plumes of ostrich feathers. Ann Kirby fingered the head valances. ‘Lord! this is the finest bed I have ever seen. Why,

Her Majesty couldn't wish for better. You ought to beget some pretty little children in it.'

Barbara said complacently, 'Sir Ralph is wondrously free and kind in his behaviour to me. He will deny me nothing.' Arabella recalled her companions to their duty. 'Come now, girls, or the groomsmen will have undressed Sir Ralph before we have Barbara ready.'

They crowded round her, lifting the chaplet of pearls off her hair, taking care to leave no pins in her curls, for that would have portended the direst ill luck. They had her in her satin bed gown, her hair combed and perfumed, and had bundled her into bed, when the noise of footsteps and masculine voices outside announced the arrival of the bridegroom.

Into the bridal chamber burst the groomsmen, all very jocular and all more or less drunk, and in their midst Sir Ralph in his embroidered night-shirt, steady enough on his feet but flushed and sweating profusely. Clapping him on the back they urged him with all the bawdy jokes proper to the occasion to get into bed with his bride.

Now was the moment for the time-honoured game of throwing the stocking. The best man and groomsmen seated themselves with their backs to the bridegroom's side of the bed, the bridesmaids seated themselves in like manner on the bride's side. Each groomsmen held one of the bridegroom's stockings, each girl one of the bride's. At a word from the bride they tossed the stockings backwards over their shoulders. Those who scored a hit on the bride or bridegroom might expect to be married themselves within the year. The room was filled with guests who had crowded in to see the fun. There was a gust of laughter, shouts,

giggles, and girlish shrieks as the silken hose flew wildly across the wedding bed. Everyone talked at once, argued, accused each other of cheating, vowed that they must have another chance, scuffled about on the floor to retrieve their stockings, ended by pelting each other with them, snatching them from one another, chasing each other round the bed, kissing each other, excited, tipsy and hilarious. The married pair sat up in bed and laughed politely, Sir Ralph concealing his impatience and Barbara her yawns, for she had been up since half-past four that morning and was sleepy.

Arabella Crosbie brought in the benediction possett at last, and handed it to the bride and bridegroom, who toasted one another as they drank from the silver cup. The guests, in spite of this hint, would have gone on rollicking in the bridal chambers for hours, but Arabella with a firmness beyond her years took the situation in hand. Assisted by her fellow bridesmaids and the more staid onlookers, she pushed and urged the revellers out of the room, warning them that if they lingered much longer it would be dawn, and time for the bride to be roused with music and a sack possett. It was obvious, even to the most inebriated, that this would not be a very satisfactory state of affairs for the bridegroom, and so the room was emptied. Footsteps and loud voices and laughter died away down the passages.

Arabella Crosbie drew the curtains of the bridal bed, saying with an arch smile, 'I wish you joy of one another,' extinguished all the candles but one and tiptoed from the room.

Her good wishes were not fulfilled as far as Barbara was concerned. She submitted to Sir Ralph but did not enjoy him.