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opening extract from

Montacute House

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'Ugh, droppings between my toes.' Cess kicked off her clogs anyway, because they were rubbing. She had walked to work through a misty dawn, but now the early morning sun was breaking through the clouds and it had stopped raining. She swept the poultry yard in time to the matins bells, unaware they were ringing out a warning that death and pestilence had come to the village.

'They wriggle, but they're not worms,' she laughed as the hens pecked her toes. Some of the birds had been in her care since she was taken on at Montacute House three years before, and her heart lifted when they rushed to greet her. She was lucky to have this job and she knew it.

'It is my birthday today,' she announced, used to one-sided conversations. It was also a feast day and Cess could leave the yards once they were swept. The whole village would meet to celebrate the start of the summer, to drink, flirt and forget their worries, but she knew that she would be left to one side like a branch without blossoms.

Cess bent to her work again, enjoying the patches of warmth on her back. She noticed how strong her forearms had become after so much sweeping. The skin on

them was still pale, for the winter had been hard and the spring wet, but by the end of summer she would be burnt brown and freckled, for she liked to work with sleeves rolled up and her head bare. The straw hats other girls wore to keep their skins fair itched her. She stopped to scratch her scalp just thinking about it. She knew she ought to wash her hair now that the weather was warmer. She had the ashes and a little beer to make it shine, but no pig-fat soap. Cess considered her hair to be her best feature, hazelnut brown and thick, though it was usually plaited and pinned under a linen coif as her work was dirty.

'This is my frayed cap,' she said ruefully to the hens. 'Have you eaten my good one?' She had searched everywhere for it. 'Now I am thirteen I am supposed to look like a lady,' she continued. Her mother's mirror had been exchanged for food so long ago that she had forgotten her reflection. She knew her eyes were large because she was sometimes called 'owl eyes', though more often 'cesspit'. Or 'bastard'. Her real name was Cecily, but only her friend Edith called her that, or her mother when cross. She did not mind 'Cess' – it was familiar.

Boys should come courting now, or even crown me Queen of the May, she thought, laughing, although it sounded hollow even to her. She knew that for other girls the day was marked with a new skirt, a cap or even a kirtle. Her cousin Amelia had turned thirteen a week before and paraded about in an outfit smelling of fine, crisp wool and soft shoe leather. She could remember the sweet scent of Amelia's new clothes even against the acid reek of the poultry yard.

As Cecily had lain awake that morning, in that silent

time before dawn, she had made a wish with a longing that took her by surprise.

Let this day be different.

If only her wishes were as powerful as her dreams. For as long as she could remember she had dreamt of where to find a lost hen, or whether a woman with child carried a girl or boy. Her premonitions were always right, but she had quickly learnt to keep quiet about them, for when she told people they looked at her suspiciously.

Cecily threw down her brush and took up a wooden pail. She always found pleasure in the delicate task of collecting eggs. She opened the door of the largest coop and ducked to enter. Inside, the musty darkness was lifted by shafts of light that came through gaps in the plank walls. Cecily sneezed a few times as the dust filled her nose, then bent so that her deft fingers could root out the warm, chalky eggs from the straw of the lower nesting boxes. She had barely filled a quarter of her pail when she yelped and jumped back as if she had been stung. The hen on the nest stared at her glassily and shuffled its feathers at the intrusion.

'What is this strange thing you have laid today?' Cecily whispered as she gingerly pushed her hand again under the bird's warm weight. She retrieved a box the size of her palm, covered in pale blue velvet and held shut with a tiny hook.

'God's wounds,' she swore under her breath, fingering the box nervously. She could feel something shifting within as she turned it. She longed to know what it was, but opening strange boxes was dangerous. She might unleash an evil spirit or bind herself to the faerie world and be forced to do their bidding. Perhaps it was put

here to take so that she could be accused of stealing. There were many who felt no goodwill towards her.

'This cannot be meant for me,' she mumbled as she bent to return it. But then why had it been left there?

'I should put it back and forget about it,' she said sensibly as she moved the box into one of the beams of sunlight that pierced the gloom. She picked at the golden catch with a grubby finger. Slowly the lid opened and she could see black silk within. As if a hatchling nestled beneath, Cecily gently lifted away the silk and revealed a jewel of such costliness and sparkle that she had to squint as the light reflected off it. Stones of red, fiery blue, ice and deep green edged a heavy oval pendant of rich gold. In the centre was a portrait of a woman dressed in furs, silks and jewels. There was a crest to the right of her head and, although it was very tiny, Cecily thought she could make out a black bird, like a crow or raven, standing on a white hart. The woman had a pale, almost blue-white oval face, out of which stared hazel eyes. Although the portrait was small, Cecily felt those eyes boring into her as if the woman was offended that a peasant girl should be holding her. She knew she would do well to snap the box shut and shove it back under the hen, but she was mesmerised.

'I'm just looking; there's no harm in that.'

The woman's hair was swept under a curved French hood, but Cecily imagined it to be honey-brown, like her eyebrows. Her hands could just be seen, one gloved in calf-skin, the other bare with long, ringed fingers, white as ice.

'Who are you? Why are you here?' Cecily whispered to the portrait.

She knew a girl like her could never own something

so precious, but there was no law against trying it on. No one could see her and she would put it back afterwards. Carefully, she passed the heavy gold chain over her head. She had never worn anything this valuable and the weight of it upon her neck was delicious. She shivered as she imagined the pendant transforming her inch by inch from grimy, illegitimate poultry girl into a noblewoman.

Very slowly she began to sway then twirl inside the cramped coop as if it was a great hall filled with sweet music. Silks and Dutch lace caressed her body and pearls and precious stones sparkled against her skin and in her hair. The stench of chicken droppings was replaced with the scents of fine food, spiced wine and the perfumed clothes and hair of the high-born men and women dancing with her. All around were faces smiling and nodding. She was beautiful and admired and knew how it felt to be wanted.

A harsh whistle and the clucking of alarmed hens in the yard outside pulled her up short.

'Oi! Cesspit! I've come for ten birds!' shouted the kitchen boy as he neared the yards. Cecily shoved the pendant down into her bodice and dashed outside to shoo her favourite birds into the furthest coop to keep them from the pot.

'Oi, where are you, girl?'

'Coming!'

'I want ten . . . what's with you?' he said as he let himself in. Cess did not reply, but her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glittered. The boy stared at her a moment, then shrugged and began a strange, jagged dance around the coop as he tried to catch the wary creatures.

'Reckon you'll actually have to do some work, eh, when the Queen arrives,' he sneered unpleasantly.

'The Queen?' repeated Cess in amazement. She usually ignored the kitchen boy, for he strutted around her like a pompous ass. His trips to the coops were the only time in his day when he was superior to somebody, and he revelled in it.

'Do you hear nothing?' he said. 'She's expected here in a few weeks. They'll be needing more food than was on the Ark. You'll have yer work cut out then.' Cess watched him scrabbling after the terrified birds and forcing them into the baskets he carried with him.

'Don't suppose you'll be helping,' he grumbled.

'Not in here!' she yelled at him furiously as he went to wring a bird's neck.

He looked at her with contempt and smiled as the sound of cracking bones filled the air. Cess turned away. She could not bear to watch her beautiful hens die at the hands of this brute.

She left the boy to his murderous task and took refuge behind the largest coop. She thought of the pendant deep inside her bodice and wondered what she should do with it.

'If I put it back and someone finds it, I'll be accused of stealing it,' she reasoned. 'If I give it to the steward, he won't believe I found it under a hen and will call me a thief just the same. I will be hanged from the gibbet either way.' When she was alone again she took out the pendant, questions turning endlessly in her head about how it came to be there and who the woman was. Only when the hunger in her belly outgrew the excitement she felt as she gazed at the portrait did Cess take a deep breath and drop it back down her bodice. It felt cold

against her ribs, reminding her that she had just made a decision that could cost her life.

Her cloak bundled under one arm, with the empty velvet box inside, Cess picked up the pail to take the eggs to the kitchens. Even though she was one of the lowliest servants on the estate, she felt proud to belong to Montacute House. Halfway across the vegetable gardens she stopped and gazed at the beautiful building as the morning light fell across it. She had watched it grow from its foundations since she was a little girl. It stood proudly amongst the gentle rolling hills and woods of the county, a great monarch of a house ruling over a kingdom of hamlets, small towns and villages, including Montacute itself. Visitors came from afar to marvel at the sight of the soaring facade, its walls of golden, Somersetshire stone, pierced with so many windows that they looked to be made of lace. Hundreds of saints, marvellous creatures and armoured knights kept guard in delicate niches in the walls, and a forest of chimneys told the world how comfortable, modern and wealthy was the owner.

She walked across the south drive, used by servants, tradesmen and visitors of the poorer sort, past the stables and into the kitchen yard. As she handed over the eggs, an apprentice cook thrust a cup of small beer and a chunk of rye bread and beef dripping at her in return – breakfast. The kitchens were in uproar with servants flapping from dairy to storeroom, brew-house to wet-larder, fire to rolling table, in a fluster of preparation for the evening's banquet to celebrate the fact that Montacute House was finally finished. It had been ten years in the building and Sir Edward Mortain, Earl

of Montacute, now had one of the most beautiful houses in the country.

Smells of roasting and the thick, greasy smoke of spitting meat made Cess's stomach roll in longing. People came and went, stepping round her as they might a puddle. Small groups of men-at-arms hung idly about, waiting for the stable boys to prepare their horses. Some of the men were in Sir Edward's livery, but others wore the silver and black of his son, Viscount Drax Mortain, who had been a guest at the house for the past few weeks. Cess had not seen him. Unlike his father, he had shown no interest in the poultry yards.

Eyes down, Cess walked quickly across the kitchen yard. She tried to be invisible when the men-at-arms were about. Their manners with unmarried servants were lewd and rough. She hurried past the stables to the south drive and walked quickly towards the village. She was halfway down the drive when a strong prickling sensation ran up her spine and made the roots of her hair tingle unpleasantly. She stood still, unsure whether to look or to run. She knew the sensation. Someone was watching her.

Her breath quick and shallow, she turned very slowly. The path was deserted. The servants in the gardens and orchards were busy with their chores. Her eyes were drawn to the southern facade of the house, where there was a great oriel window. As she squinted against the sun she felt her heart jump in her chest. Someone was looking out of it, straight at her. At such a distance Cess could not tell for sure who it was, but she could see the glint of gold chains. It was one of the noble guests, the steward or her master himself. Cess's

heart thumped uncomfortably with the guilty knowledge of what she carried in her bodice. Although she had not thought of it before, something of such great value must have come from the House. She raised her hand to shield her eyes, hoping for a clearer impression, but the figure backed away into the darkness of the room behind.