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Opening extract from
The Girl in the Mask

Written by
Marie-Louise Jensen

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*The Girl
in the
Mask*

ALSO BY MARIE-LOUISE JENSEN

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For Tom

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CHAPTER ONE



I didn't hear my cousin's voice at first. It wasn't until the library door was flung open with a bang, making me jump, that I came back down to earth.

'There you are, Sophia!' exclaimed my cousin Jack loudly, bursting into the room. He was a tall, gangly young man with laughing blue eyes, ruddy-faced from many hours spent outdoors. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. Didn't you hear me calling?'

'Vaguely,' I admitted. 'But I didn't realize it was me you wanted.'

'Well, who else would it be?' demanded Jack, exasperated. 'If I'd wanted the servants, I'd have rung for 'em.'

'Sorry. This arrived by carrier this morning . . . ' I showed him the play I was reading, knowing he'd understand. 'It's *The Rover* by Aphra Behn!'

Jack rolled his eyes and looked disapprovingly at the trail of discarded brown paper and string that led to the settle where I now sat curled up by the empty fire grate. I'd spent the past hour chuckling with glee at the wit on the crisp, new pages.

'Another book!' he exclaimed. 'What do you see in them? As if we don't have enough of books with the tutor. You'll be doing your Latin homework next!'

'I've already done it,' I said with a grin, nodding to the desk on the far side of the library where my volume of Virgil lay still open on the desk, my scrawled notes discarded beside it. Also on the desk lay scattered several volumes of poetry, with markers at the pages of my favourite verses.

'Come now, Sophia,' exclaimed Jack, disgusted. 'Put that dull stuff away. I've much better sport to offer you.'

'But it's so funny!' I told him. 'Listen. I must just read you this passage . . . !'

'No!' cried Jack, stuffing his fingers in his ears as I leafed through the play. 'No book nonsense! We've a day off studies and we're going to have some fun.'

'Please!' I begged. 'Just this one joke!'

'Not even one!' Jack risked unblocking his ears long enough to twitch the beautiful, leather-bound volume out of my hands. He cast it carelessly onto the settle and pulled me to my feet.

'Wait!' I said crossly, resisting his efforts to drag me out of the room long enough to check he'd not damaged the pages. Then I allowed myself to be towed away. 'Where are we going?' I asked.

'To the orchard. I've pinned up some playing cards and thought we'd have some sport with my pistols,' he said.

'Oh, all right then,' I agreed, willingly enough.

The overnight rain had cleared away now, leaving a chilly spring day with a fresh wind blowing. I hesitated in the porch wondering aloud whether I needed my cloak. But Jack pulled me impatiently onwards. We passed through the shrubbery, crossed the damp lawn and went through the gate into the walled orchard. A

few geese feeding on the grass amongst the apple trees, bright just now with pink blossom, honked and waddled hastily out of our way.

‘Here, you take this one,’ said Jack, passing me one pistol as he took up the other. ‘Take care now, mind those geese!’

I grinned, but handled the weapon gingerly, knowing it could go off at the lightest touch. Jack loved his pistols, and kept them in prime order. He thought himself a fine shot, and it was a sore point with him that I could shoot nearly as well as he could.

‘I’ll challenge you to a match. Whoever can blow the pips out of three cards with the fewest attempts. I’ve set us each an ace, a two, and a three.’

I looked across at the posts where Jack had nailed the cards, trying to gauge the difficulty of the task. ‘Very well,’ I said at last. ‘And the stakes?’ Neither of us had any money to speak of, so the wager was always a dare or agreement.

‘The winner chooses the afternoon activity,’ said Jack promptly. ‘I want to take the dogs ratting in the barn.’

I pulled a face. I loathed rats with their thick, wormy tails, but I didn’t much care for seeing them torn apart by Jack’s dogs either.

‘I propose,’ I said, and hesitated, unsure of my own inclinations.

‘No books, Sophia!’ warned Jack.

‘Oh very well. How about an expedition to South Farm?’

‘What the devil for?’ demanded Jack, an expression of outrage on his face.

‘I have estate business there. I need to speak to the tenant about draining his bottom meadows. They’re under water half the year.’

‘I can hardly contain myself,’ interrupted Jack, sarcastically.

‘And it’s a fine ride across the moor in this weather,’ I continued as though he hadn’t spoken. ‘We could gallop the horses.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Jack with a weighty sigh. ‘It’s all irrelevant anyway, as I shall win.’

‘Don’t be so sure,’ I warned him, straightening my shoulders and bringing my pistol up to aim my first shot. The report echoed in the walled orchard, a tendril of smoke curling from the barrel.

‘By Jove, cousin, you’re getting to be good,’ confessed Jack admiringly, looking at the hole blown clean through the ace of my card. ‘It puts a fellow on his mettle, so it does!’

He stood ready himself, sized up the distance to his own card and in one smooth movement brought his arm up and fired. The shot was as clean and accurate as mine, the ace holed neatly.

‘Now it gets trickier. Your turn,’ he said.

We reloaded and shot on, neck and neck. I missed one shot, then so did Jack. It was all on the last diamond of the three. Jack missed, and cursed fluently. I covered my ears in mock horror.

‘Mind your language, cousin, when there’s a lady present,’ I objected.

Jack snorted, amused. ‘What’s so funny?’ I demanded. ‘Do you forget I’m a young lady?’

‘You don’t often give me reason to remember it,’ said Jack frankly. ‘I suppose at least you’re dressed like one today. Unusual. Haven’t you been out riding, then?’

‘Yes, of course, hours ago, whilst you were still enjoying your beauty sleep. But it was still raining then. I was soaked when I got back, so I changed.’

‘Just as well. You’re scandalizing the good people hereabouts. They call you the Squire, you know.’

‘Someone has to manage the estate business. Anyway, it interests me, and I have plenty of time on my hands after all.’

‘Only because you never sleep! No one has the right to as much energy as you. Damn, it’s not decent!’

‘I can’t help your notion of what’s decent! It’s a wonder to me that you can slumber so many hours away.’

‘Huh,’ retorted my cousin scornfully. ‘Your shot, cousin.’

‘Yes, let’s finish this. I’m looking forward to that gallop,’ I said provocatively. I took careful aim, steadying my breathing and my hand, confident I could win the match.

‘So-*phia!*’ exclaimed an outraged voice behind me. Startled, I jumped. The gun exploded in my hand, the shot going wide and burying itself in a nearby tree. I dropped the pistol unheeded into the grass and turned, my limbs turning to water.

‘No,’ I whispered, horrified. I caught sight of my cousin’s face beside me, looking as white and shocked as mine felt.

Striding towards us through the blossoming fruit trees was a tall man, who looked strange and yet at the same

time appallingly familiar. He was dressed in what looked, to my untrained eye, to be the very height of fashion. A long, green velvet coat fell in graceful folds around him, turned up in great cuffs at the wrist, and open at the front to reveal a lavishly embroidered waistcoat. The hilt of a sword was just visible through the vents in the coat skirts. He was booted, spurred, and wore a travelling wig. In one hand he held a whip, in the other a three-cornered hat. His guise suggested he'd come straight from a journey, which indeed he must have done, as I'd thought him at least a thousand miles away.

I took in these details as the man walked swiftly towards us. All the time my brain was thinking frantically, no, it cannot be. It cannot possibly be. It was the sight I dreaded above any other. He was burned brown from the tropical sun and had new lines in his face which betrayed the years that had passed since I'd seen him last. But there could be no doubt. Without warning, with no word of announcement, my father had returned. I didn't know what had brought him all the way from the West Indies, but I knew that from this moment, everything was over.