

As Susan smoothed the ribbons of her favourite gown, pleasurable visions of London danced through her head. If she could but manage her uncle!

Susan doubted her authority for this assertion, as Miss Priscilla had never bestirred herself to marry at all, so she assured the lady that she contemplated no such rashness, and then submitted to a lecture on making herself discreetly useful back at home, something Susan had no intention of doing, for what else were servants for?

I need hardly add that it is your duty to curb these impulses, and to become as thoughtful, quiet and obedient as possible.'

Susan thought, 'Yet a fine spirit can set off beauty almost as well as fine clothes' – but she had wisdom enough to keep this observation to herself.

And in a lower voice, though still within the compass of Susan's sharp hearing, 'Girls only get one chance, as all the world knows. 'Tis different for young men; they can play the fool for a while, if they like it.'

Her aunt glanced up at her still-brilliant colour and thought involuntarily, 'She is certainly handsome. She is handsome indeed!'

And where in Susan was the 'submissive dependence, timidity of temper, lovely meekness, modest pliancy and complacent deportment' so fervently recommended by that worthy Scot? – Aunt Emily had to collect herself, to respond to Lady Catherine as she ought.

'Then I envy the fellow, whoever he might be. You could captivate anybody, with that sideways glance of yours. You have captivated me, you know.'

'Then I will shield you. But I beg, once you come into your kingdom, that you remember me.'

'The lady has a reputation for being a good friend but a bad enemy. Yet, young and unknown as you are, I cannot see how you could have offended her – or indeed anyone.'

. Her ladyship smiled upon her and advised her to always attend to the best practitioners for 'Nothing becomes a young lady more than the art of music' – a comment Susan received as eagerly as if her ladyship had struck out an original line of thought.

‘I think you will find that young men of good family are not often as foolish as those in the papers.

As for their friend Mrs Cooper, when shown the Earl’s invitation she shook her head knowingly: ‘I said it would be so. ’Twas the gown that did the mischief!’ and to Aunt Emily, rather lower, ‘Mark my words, she will be off your hands before she turns seventeen!’

She was instantly aware of the increased attention of the crowd, but the music lifted her; and she forgot the stout man’s warning, forgot Miss Morris, forgot her fears about Edward, and flew down the set with such enjoyment that even the older ladies found themselves deprived of anything to criticise. (‘Delicious – most charming!’... ‘A breath of fresh air, indeed!’)

But had she truly been restrained by Mr Oliver? She had been in danger of falling, which might serve as his excuse – but she could not forget the moment when she had tried to move, and he had held her.

She was not to know until the morning.

‘Women,’ said Alicia sagely, ‘are often unkindest to their fellows.