

ASH MINETTE

By Felicity Savage

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MY DRESS FOR THE BARON of Helmany's ball was violet sateen, off the shoulders, with frothy lace cuffs to conceal my cracked fingers. It was the best I could manage in a week, sewing late at night after I finished the work I brought home from Madame Carolla's. Libby had found ten yards of pink silk, very cheap, but unflattering to her complexion. Never mind, she said, and I whipped it up into a gown in the latest mode. She modeled it for me after her last client of the night had departed. Ella was asleep in her boxroom, safe from the improprieties of her elder sisters; shutters rattled below stairs as the landlord closed up his tavern. The candlelight in our attic erased the imperfections from Libby's round, heavy features: she seemed time-smoothened, a madonna of golden stone. But when she posed for me in the dress, her over-ripeness—the way she thrust out her chest, the coyglances—spoil the illusion, corrupted it with indecent knowledge.

“Well,” I said tentatively.

“Oh, don't bother.” She waved my judgment aside. “I know it doesn't suit me. But that really isn't important, as long as it doesn't gape open down the back. It'll be such fun. The other girls standing outside the gates, shivering in their bare shoulders and their openwork slippers, and me inside. For once, inside.” She twirled, ducking to avoid the sloping rafters. “I think I've got enough put by for us to hire a carriage. I'll wave to Francine and Sharon and Marie as they flutter their eyelashes at the fine gentlemen.”

I shook out my skirts and ran my fingers through my golden hair. It is my one beauty. “What about me? Am I alluring?” Please tell me so, I prayed. Even if it's not true.

“It's a beautiful dress, Minette, as good as anything Madame Carolla can make.”

“But how do I look?” I lifted up the hair off the back of my neck and tried to imitate her come-hither smile. “I want to be wanted, like you . . .”

She let out a giggle, and gathered me in her arms. Her hot breath tickled my neck, smelling faintly of codfish. “You don't want to be like me, Minette darling. You want to be beautiful. And that's your problem.” Disappointment hit me hard in the stomach. Libby went on, “You're nineteen. Isn't it time to live instead of dreaming? You don't have to be a mousy little seamstress all your life.”

“I'm so tired of being despised,” I said passionately, “I'm jostled in the street, my purse is stolen, jokes are made about me in my hearing, because I'm a plain, poor woman, worthy of nothing but contempt. If I looked like Ella I would be

happy. She has everything, and doesn't know it."

Libby laughed. "Darling Ella hasn't got a grain of sense in her head. No, Minette, you know who my favorite sister is."

"That doesn't help. I want to be loved, Libby. And not just by you."

Ashamed that I had confessed my secret longings, I fell silent, running my fingers over the low-quality sateen of my gown. A ray of pink dawn came through the window and made a mockery of our candle, showing up the cracks of age in Libby's face.

We Ingles sisters were all born blanks. As we grew, we developed certain differences. I believe that these started with the differences in our faces. I remember Libby five years old, wriggling while Nanny dressed her in a small replica of a lady's attire; I, three, tumbling determinedly toward the nursery grate; Ella cooing, pink-faced, in the midwife's arms. The day she was born, it became clear to our parents that their three tabulae rasae were not crafted with equal workmanship. "I have given birth to an angel," my mother sighed (so Father told us), and curled up in the great bed, its linen all bloodstained from her birthing, and went to sleep.

I crept upstairs with Libby, after the relatives in their sweeping dresses of black had come and gone. We didn't understand what had happened. We pushed open the oaken door. Far away across the carpet, Mother lay between unrumpled white sheets, stiff as a clothes peg doll, unmoving, her lips slathered with scarlet to make her look alive. Her hands lay like milky glass on the sheet. Nanny in her high cap came and hustled us away. I remember the hot smell of her starch. She murmured to newborn Ella in her arms, as she swept us toward the nursery: "Poor thing, poor love-a-dove. Growing up all alone, your father a clever man, but unfit to care for so much as a mouse . . ." She turned on us, her meaty face fierce. "Look after Baby. You two great lumps of girls, you must promise you'll love her in place of the mother she doesn't have."

We stumbled over our tongues to promise. We were three and five years old.

And though I may complain, though I may envy her her face, I love Ella as if she were my own child. I feel a swell of pride when she walks ahead of me into the market, singing a little tune, her step jaunty, a wicker basket swinging on her arm. And the stallkeepers and matrons and beggar-boys fall silent.

Nanny must have known she would be dismissed. It seemed to us as if Mother's death pulled a brick out from the bottom of Father's elaborate financial pyramid. And indeed it was Mother who had the noble title, Father was merely a clever man. We moved to a smaller house, skimmed meals, darned clothes, heated cow's milk for Ella. In the vague way children do, we came to realize just how slender a base (like that of a gyroscope) our luxurious lifestyle had balanced on.

When I was ten, Father ceased to work, even as a solicitor, by which means he had kept up our dignity. We moved to the city. His sole comforts now were the kindness which comes in brown glass bottles — and Ella, who had grown into a spritely child, with hair like golden mist and eyes like summer skies.

When I was sixteen, the brown bottles got the better of him. We, the bereaved, leased this apartment. With every move, we had sunk lower in society, and this district is in the center of the city: riddled with vice and illicit pleasures, but possessing a veneer of patched respectability. The apartment has only three rooms, and the kitchen is no wider than an armspan, but Ella still complains how much work it is to keep house. This whining is the way, I believe, in which she works out her grief for Father. I work fourteen hours a day, in the recesses of Madame Carolla's Dress Shop. Libby works at night, in this very attic, or sometimes in alleys. She gave up hope of marrying because she had no dowry, and now she says she wouldn't if she were given the choice.

We have been here three years.

The Baron is a foreigner. His country lies east of here, ringed by mountains, the hills furry with trees. I have heard that his hair is the color of black earth and his eyes like sapphires. His list of ladies and gentlemen in Society must be sadly out of date, for when he prepared to hold a winter ball in our city, he sent an invitation to Father "and his lovely wife Marguerite." It found us just a week ago, grimy and tattered. I had to give tuppence to the urchin who brought it.

"We deserve to go," Libby and I told each other. "We work hard. We should give ourselves a treat." (Although the preparations so far have been more a misery than a treat.) "We are going."

But Ella is not. All these years we have striven to preserve her innocence, and we will not have it shattered now. From our life here in Riverbank, we know the rich are more perverted than the poor, or maybe they're just less ashamed of showing it: Libby says the lord or two she has had wanted things of her that no Riverbank man would dream of. We refuse to expose Ella to such sordidity. I may be timid, but I understand what is happening around me, I wear no rose-tinted spectacles. She knows what goes on upstairs when she is asleep, but I don't think she envisions the act. Like a child, she romanticizes it.

But she was Father's favorite, and ever since babyhood he filled her head with tales of the old life, when full-bearded gentlemen escorted tinkling ladies to dinner, and music flowed out of the windows of our mansion. This, she says, is the greatest disappointment of her existence. She sulks in the kitchen, pressing her face against the grimy glass, so that the prentices passing in the street gawp up at her; and then, diverted, she flirts with them through the window. She does not understand. "I want to go," she whines over and over.

We stand in the doorway with our ugly old wraps over our dresses, watching for the carriage through the gusting snow. Libby's patience is worn to a thread. "Absolutely not," she snaps. "Now get back upstairs, you'll catch your death."

"Minette . . . ?" Ella begged. "Pleeeeeease take me with you! I want to meet a handsome noble, and marry him, and live in a mansion . . ."

"Good Lord, child," I said, my voice high with excitement. "Where did you get that idea?"

"I'm not as stupid as you think." Ella glowered, beautiful even in the lantern light of the entryway, her lower lip stuck out, her brown dress cinched around the waist with Father's old belt. "I listen to people talking. Sharon Cooke told me nobles are kinder and handsomer than Riverbank men. She said if you look pretty and can dance well, you stand a chance of netting one, no matter what your birth." She outstretched her arms and broke into a waltz, there in the cramped passage. She would have made a brilliant danseuse, among many other things. "And anyway, I am born to it, even if our fortunes have fallen."

"Oh, will you stop your capering." Libby's teeth chattered. She gave Ella a push. "I've worked with Sharon many a night. She likes to believe birth doesn't count, but it does. Birth and breeding. The lords might fuck her, but they wouldn't marry her if she was the most ravishing beauty in the city."

Ella's eyes widened. "Sharon would never work with you." Libby winced involuntarily. Ella said with unintentional, adolescent cruelty, "She's got real employment. She knows things. And she's right! Nothing else counts, as long as you're pretty enough!"

She fled upstairs, crying.

After a silence, "We do deserve it," I repeated, trying to convince myself. "We work our hands to the bone to buy bread, while she sits at home, dusting the mantelpiece. We do deserve to go."

"Yes." Libby wiped one eye, careful not to smudge her powder. "We do. But that was hard. Here — here's the carriage." She stepped into the street and hailed it. Pulled up sharp, the horses pranced, tossing their heads, as if they considered it beneath their dignity to venture this deep into the bowels of the city.

Inside the carriage, I gazed up through the leaded panes. Ella sat with her chin on her hands in the boxroom window, silhouetted against the amber glow of a candle. Now and again she dabbed her eyes with her sleeve. "She's crying," I said. "But she knows we're watching. Don't fret." My excitement was returning. Tonight, I thought, I would enjoy myself — and just maybe I would change my life. I did not know how or where, but perhaps I would find love.

Here is the story of what happened while we were at the ball, as I had it from Ella next day:

After we had clattered away, she being no longer observed, she started to leave the window. But the snow stopped, and she became fascinated with the shadow she cast on the white street. She got out her little treasures — a fan, a pair of drop earrings that had been Mother's, a comb Father had bought her — and experimented with her image, piling her hair on top of her head, half-hiding her face, glancing ingenuously over her bare shoulder. It was thus Duchess Chiliver saw her. The foreign Duchess was trotting along the street in her eggshell carriage, badly out of temper, late for the Baron's ball, not even sure whether she wanted to go. (You must understand that here I am using my imagination.) Her coachman was new to the city, and had lost his way in the slums. "What is that enchanting little picture in the window?" the Duchess said to her maid-in-waiting. "Stop the carriage! Marianne, dear, go and knock on the door."

"Madame, the ground is wet. I will spoil these lovely slippers you gave me."

"Nonsense. It's only snow. See what that girl really looks like if she is as lovely as her silhouette. If she's only a courtesan whiling away time between customers, at least you can ask her which way it is out of these awful slums."

When the maid was gone, the Duchess sat back, fanning her plump, be powdered face. "These locals," she muttered to herself. "They can't tell a leper from a Marquise. I do hope . . ." Her entrepreneurial eye had seen a wealth of possibilities. Also an excuse for being late to the ball. She was renowned for her shrewd choice of proteges: they had become, among others, a famous ballerina and a politician's mistress.

The carriage door swung open, letting in a blast of icy air. The maid's face was bright pink, but not from the cold. "Madame," she gasped, "you must come and see —"

Behind her, an angel hovered in the entryway, her golden hair haloed in the light.

THE BARON'S mansion was outside the city, on the edge of a frozen lake. Lanterns on flower-stem-like wooden poles illuminated the lawns which sloped down to the ice. Candles garlanded the trees. The French windows stood wide open, but the house was heated so efficiently by its many fires that, coming inside, one passed from cold to hot as if walking into a sweat-lodge. A buffet supper was spread in the dining room. In the ballroom, an orchestra played on and on and on. I thought I should never escape the strains of those minuets and fandangoes. I hear them in my head still.

The flounced, ruffled dresses of the Ladies and Marquises and Baronesses floated on the streams of sound, like miniature sailing ships. Supported by their upright black counterparts, they bobbed into every corner, gathered in backwaters talking animatedly, spilled out over the frost-tinged lawns. Bare arms glowed pale in the shadows where perversions were already being practiced. The faces of the women were no more extraordinary than ours: but they had the courtesan's art of disguise. What we saw were elaborate, laughing contrivances. The men embraced them lustfully, but this seduction was itself contrived. I believe that this is why Ella was such a success. She was not contrived at all.

Until about eleven o'clock, Libby stayed by my side. She was as shy as I, not because her gown was inferior to the ladies' (I keep that tiny scrap of pride), but because she had no one else to talk to. From the moment we came in the door, and the haughty doorman made us produce the tattered parchment to prove our identities, we were out of place, like daisies in a prize flower arrangement. The ladies embraced, the lords shook hands and exchanged glasses of champagne, we caught snatches of conversation by which we knew they had all been to the same parties last night, last week, last year. Perfumes washed over us like an aromatic rainbow. We had thought it indelicate to wear any, because Libby and the girls outside the gates doused themselves with scent of a night, to disguise other smells. We had been wrong.

Every move we made seemed wrong.

When the Baron stretched out his hand to us, Libby grinned and kissed him on both cheeks as if they were old friends. Her smile was almost silly. Mortified, I slid away from behind her. But my head was spinning, I do not know if I should have had the strength to touch him. The inside of my chest prickled slowly, in waves. My eyes were dazzled.

He was the most suave of all the nobles; the most elegant of the gentlemen; he had the most delightful foreign accent. Neat teeth, violet eyes, dark curls of hair on the backs of his hands. I had not touched him, not spoken to him nor made eye contact. I watched as he turned and bowed and kissed hands, jousting good-humoredly with his friends. I wanted to wrap myself around him. I wanted — I wanted — my stomach was hollow with wanting.

I was in no condition to talk. Libby's attempts at chatter produced raised eyebrows and silences like clear puddles. Blushing, we withdrew to a dimly lit alcove behind the orchestra. Libby was subdued. I trembled gently, my mind pulsing.

At last Libby said, "Damn it if I'm not going out there, Minette. I know how to do one thing well, and I'm going to do it."

I clutched at her. She was my flotsam in a sea of helplessness, of melting dreams. "Don't leave me alone!"

“Don’t be so shy, Minette. If you don’t talk to the gentlemen, how are you ever going to make one love you?”

“I’ve given up that hope,” I said wretchedly. “I only want one, and I can never have him.”

“Not the Baron. Not even you are so silly.”

I looked up at her with guilty eagerness. She knew about men and women, perhaps she could help me . . .

She blew out breath in exasperation. “Oh yes, you look just like a fine lady of Helmany,” she said, and turned and strode away.

The group of young gentlemen she joined looked as nervous as I. Perhaps it was their first dance, too. I had not a jot of compassion to spare for them. In the golden light of the chandeliers, I saw that Libby was presenting herself as a whore, her body language advertising it clearly in the delicate atmosphere of the ball. She captured one of the boys with ease. Heads turned as he took her arm, and I heard murmurs of surprise, but neither noble nor servant moved to throw her out. I do not think they connected her with the gauche lady who had shaken the Baron’s hand. The gap between guest and courtesan, through in private it might not exist, was publicly impossible for them to bridge.

The Baron stood not twenty feet from me, talking to a pretty, red-haired woman seated on a couch. She looked up into his face, her body angled toward him: at first they seemed intimate, and I could have sworn I saw them brush lips, but then one corner of his mouth developed a sardonic twist, so it seemed that he mocked her with every word. My heart lightened. Eventually he chucked the woman under the chin, quite hard, so that her head snapped back, and strolled away. The red-haired woman sat very still for a minute, then dropped her forehead to the back of the couch.

Libby reappeared and began to work the edges of the dance floor. From my hiding place, I saw that her lip rouge was smeared.

A murmur arose by the doors. I looked that way wearily, my eyes blurred with other people’s perfume and unshed tears. The guests parted to let her step onto the dance floor. Floating in a mist of naive awe, in a gown the color of her eyes, with pearls around her throat, she waved to them all, a proud little flutter of fingers.

“Baron,” trilled a woman’s voice, “look here at what I found, in the city, not an hour’s drive away. Doesn’t she remind you of my little goose girl, and the others?”

She danced without stopping all evening. If the plump, white-gowned Duchess had not early on taken charge of her schedule, I think she would have given a dance to every gentleman who asked. Now and again she stopped to accept champagne from the servants, who practically crawled at her feet, grinning like pet dogs. The Marquises and Countesses watched her hostilely. Unaware that she was envied, she smiled at them all — and then, captivated by her sweetness, they had to smile back. She waved at Libby, and would have dashed to meet her, bubbling with excitement, but Libby ducked under people's arms and out of the ballroom. She knew that would have been the end of Ella's popularity.

“Who was that, my lady?” a gentleman asked her.

Ella looked as if she were about to tell the truth, then she tittered. “Someone I thought I knew. Nobody, my lord.”

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Later, of course, she and the Baron danced. They drifted past my hiding place, twined in each other's arms. Their blue eyes were locked. His hand trembled, splayed like a hairy starfish on her back. Ella chewed her lip. Both of them looked as if they were in pain: bruises in sensitive places, perhaps, that hurt when they moved. The orchestra played slower and slower for them, violins wailing like grasshoppers in the forests. I put my knuckles to my eyes and wept.

Libby appeared at my side, breathing hard. “We're going home.”

“What, aren't you making as much here as you would in the Golden Hog?” I said viciously through my tears.

She indicated her bosom. Five or six strands of jewels dripped into her cleavage. “They keep them in their pockets just for gifts to courtesans. No, it's that I can't stand to think of you here in the shadows, crying your heart out over that ugly little Baron. Will you fetch Ella or shall I?”

“How can you talk of him like that?” I sobbed. “He's the most beautiful man in the room!”

“He's creel and stupid. If I didn't love Ella so much, I'd say they suit each other nicely. But she doesn't understand what she'd be getting into, she doesn't see. I wouldn't leave her with this lot for a minute. Look at their teeth. The minute they get her alone, they'll tear her to pieces.” She shuddered. Her words were so heartfelt that I scrutinized the ballroom again. Everyone was watching Ella, yes. Could I possibly have misread their indulgence and admiration?

“I want to watch him.” I followed the Baron with a yearning gaze. “Just a little longer . . .”

“Ella! Ella!” Libby shouted, flinging away from me. “We’re going home!” Our sister posed on the far side of the dance floor, surrounded by a worshipful court of young gentlemen. She was refusing their offers of drinks because the Baron had just slipped away for a minute to get her something. Her cheeks were flushed, her teeth flashed. “Come on, Ella!” Libby grabbed her and started pulling her straight across the floor.

“No! Don’t! Libby —”

“We’re leaving.”

Ella twisted in Libby’s grasp. “Come for me, Baron!” she cried out to the crowd. “Please! Soon!”

A bitter taste came up into my mouth. The gaudily colored dresses swam before my eyes. My head spun with the mixture of perfumes as I stumbled along in Libby’s wake. Before I knew it, we were hurrying down the broad steps, snow whirling around us. Icy cold knifed into me. “Goddamn it, where’s the carriage?” Libby squinted left and right through the snow, gripping our hands tightly. Ella was crying, and I suspect I was too. “Coachman!” Libby screamed. “There he is!” She dragged us across the drive, practically under the feet of the blowing, stamping horses, and pushed us bodily into the snug interior just as a party of gentlemen burst out of the mansion. The door slammed.

Ella huddled small, crying uncontrollably.

“Whatever’s wrong? Go, coachman! To Riverbank! Ella, darling, what is it?”

“Leave me — alone! I’ve lost — my shoe — “ Ella gasped. “I love him so much — I didn’t tell him — goodbye —”

We knew she was not crying for want of the shoe. But one of her feet was bleeding, peeking out from under the pearl-trimmed hem, her toes cut by the gravel under the snow.

Madame Carolla’s shop buzzed with customers spreading gossip. The Baron of Helmany had mounted a search throughout the city. He swore he would find the girl who had dropped the slipper on the steps of his mansion, or die trying. Every golden-haired woman who aspired to a barony was queueing up to try to force her foot into the shoe. “It is ridiculous,” sniffed Madame Carolla. “All nobles are crazy, and those females trying on the shoe are worse.”

“Oh, but it’s so romantic,” said one of the girls stitching beside me. “Do you know, he says that if she doesn’t come to him, he will search all the houses in the city until he finds her?”

When I got home, I found Ella singing and sighing in turns over the housework. Having been starved for an audience, she immediately fell to prattling about the ball, it drove me away from her, to the attic. Crushing my face into the pillow, I writhed on my bed, hating myself, hating the face that had not given me a chance to win the Baron. I would have chopped my nose off if I thought it would do any good. His face hung before me, so close I could see the wide-spaced pores in his skin, could smell his dusky, slightly acrid perfume.

Libby came home at ten o'clock, unusually early. The poverty and squalor of Riverbank must have hit her especially hard after last night. I could imagine Ella's fervid babble about the Duchess and the Baron did not go down well. "If you want the bastard so much," I heard Libby shout, "why don't you go and find him; Nobody would re[use to give you a lift out of the city! Not with that pretty face!"

"But that wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be womanly. The Duchess told me all about being womanly," Ella said — seriously, I believe. "You don't know anything."

"I try so hard to protect you and Minette." Libby sounded as if she were almost crying. "And you never make it easy for me! You never give me the least bit of thanks —"

Then I heard Ella's footsteps running upstairs. She burst into the room, giggling desperately, bounded across my bed. "Hide me, Minette — hide me —"

A few moments passed. "It's all right," I said sourly. "She's not coming after you."

She poked her head up, squatting under the slope of the roof, resting her elbows on the bed. Cobwebs clung like silver hairnets to the golden mass. "That's good, I was scared she'd — Minette? What's wrong?"

I hid my face in my arms. I could not speak.

She touched my shoulder. "Minette, I love you."

Bitterness welled up inside me.

"The Baron is coming to fetch me. I can feel it in my bones. Isn't that wonderful? Do you know what he said to me? I love you because you are real. Mmmm . . . If he takes me to live in Helmany, you can come too. And Libby."

Little sister. Oh little sister, how easily I could come to hate you.

RIVERBANK FOLK are eager to help anyone who wants to poke his nose into

other people's business. The matter of the glass slipper and the vanished girl must have captured their imaginations. They quickly made the connection between the tattered invitation the Ingles sisters received a week ago, and the Baron's search. He arrived at dawn, a few days later. A muffled cavalcade of horses and men stamped down the new-fallen snow. The Baron himself bestrode a dappled stallion. The gold thread on his riding costume glinted in the sunlight, and his handsome, cruel face was lit brightly. Looking down through the window, I knew I would have him if it killed me. He was everything I was not. I had sense enough to realize this, but I believed it meant that we would complement each other perfectly. The resolution hardened in my heart, blocking out all else.

Just because Ella was beautiful . . . ! Our faces weigh too much in the balance of our destinies, I thought, and I ran upstairs to wake Libby.

"He's here," she said, instantly awake.

"Yes."

"Has he seen Ella?"

"No. I'm going to pretend I'm her. Please help me, Libby."

Her hair a dark, frowsy mat, her face still thick with paint, she knelt up in bed and looked out the window. "Let me think . . . your hair's the right color . . ." She chewed her lip. "But that's not enough, is it? You have to fit into the shoe. And she has such tiny feet."

"I have to have him, Libby. I know I've been ungrateful to you before—" I was nearly weeping with tension — "but please help me . . ."

"Oh, gladly," she said with an inflection I could not identify, and fumbled under her mattress. "I always keep this. Just in case." I gasped. She produced a long, wicked knife. "Give me your foot."

"No, Libby. You can't mean that."

"Do you want him as much as I think you do?" Her voice was bitter, and even vindictive, as if she were repaying me for all the injustices I had done her. "I thought you couldn't be as silly as Ella. But I was wrong. Wasn't I. Wrong about you, Minette. Give me your foot."

Bang! Bang! "Open up!"

It would not be long before they woke the street. I moaned. Libby said, "Women chop off bits of themselves, push themselves apart, squeeze themselves together, sing and tease their hair, make holes in their ears, tie their feet up so they

will be smaller . . . all for beauty. You saw it last night. And this is a better cause than mere looks. Isn't it?" She sounded almost gloating as she said, "Are you afraid of the pain?"

No, I wasn't! Pain was no object!

I held out my foot, gritting my teeth, turning my head aside as if I feared Libby was going to take the knife to my face, uglifying me even more in exchange for my heart's desire.

I stood up in the little glass slippers, turned a circle, swaying on my feet. "It fits!" the Baron breathed. "It is she! My lady!"

He swept me into his arms, spun me around, my head nearly bumping the ceiling of our tiny parlor. My golden hair flew loose around the veil that covered my face. Smelling him so close, I nearly fainted, and not from blood loss alone. "My love," I whispered.

He made to lift the veil and kiss me, but I stopped him. Libby said swiftly, "My lord, surely you would not be so improper as to kiss your bride before the wedding."

He looked over at where she sat, ankles primly crossed, on the couch. He sounded as if he were mocking her as he said, "Oh, no, mademoiselle. Of course not."

But his thick, strong fingers curled mine with a suggestive pressure. One of the sentries muttered to the other, and they both snorted with laughter.

The mixture of pain and happiness made me so giddy I could hardly stand.

"Do you know what you have been concealing here?" the Baron said to Libby. "She is a real treasure, she is nothing like the other ladies of the court. That is why I have to have her. Let us be on our way, darling."

Libby embraced me at the door. She smelt of sweat, so pungent that I, rendered nauseous by my ordeal, had to hold my breath. I tasted strands of her hair. "He's going to try to get it on in the carriage," she hissed. "Don't let him. He mustn't see you before you're married. He's stupid enough not to feel the difference between your and Ella's figures, but he can't miss it if he sees your face. Once the priest has his say, though, there's not a damn thing he can do." The carnage bells jingled impatiently. She released me; then thought of something else and caught me back. "I love you." She kissed my cheek, leaving a greasy lip-print. "Be happy."

"Why were you goading me?" I whispered, at the end of my strength. "You were trying to make me angry."

She laughed humorlessly. “Let me tell you a secret. I wanted him too. Why did you think I kissed him in the receiving line, like a twelve-year-old girl with a crush? But I’m too coarse for the likes of him. It could never have happened.”

“Libby,” I breathed, stunned, and fell away from her, stumbling independently of gravity, as if I were sinking backward into deep water. The Baron caught me and made a step with his hands, boosting me into the carriage. “Such a little foot,” he gloated.

As we neared the end of the street, I heard a faint scream and looked back. A golden-haired figure pelted after the carriage, a scrap of nightgown fluttering around her thighs. The Baron asked me disinterestedly whether I knew who that might be.

“Oh—” I strove to keep my voice light — “just my little sister. I didn’t have time to say goodbye to her. No doubt she is upset.”

“I thought you only had one sister. No, no, love, don’t bother with explanations.” His voice was lazy. His arm went around me, his fingers kneading the soft flesh under my dress, just above my corset. I lost myself in the ecstasy of contact with him.

The dawn glanced red off the river. Once we crossed over, the light seemed to weaken, beating ineffectively on the filthy snow. The ground was already trampled, kicked up into slush by local urchins and their parents on their way to work. This was the worst part of Riverbank, too miserable to be even a little glamorous, too poverty-stricken to be respectable.

On the broadest thoroughfare, another carriage approached us, and halted. In the interests of courtesy we had to stop too. The Baron muttered a curse and lifted his face: he had been kissing my hair. “Probably some doddering Marquis who wants to pass the time of day, darling. But it doesn’t do to be discourteous.” He opened the window, letting in a rush of air so cold it froze my nostrils.

A plump yet drawn-looking woman leaned out of the window. “Baron! What a relief! I have been wandering around these slums ever since I left the mansion! This coachman does not know the river from a blind alley.” The man sitting on the box looked weary, resigned to being dismissed as soon as the Duchess got home. “Can you beat the directions into his head, perhaps?”

“But of course, Duchess.” The Baron beckoned me. “But first let me present my bride-to-be, Ella Laide.”

“You found her! My dear!” the Duchess squealed. But then she looked at me suspiciously, and my heart thudded. “Ella? Is it you? It is not. Baron, this isn’t my protegee.”

The Baron held me away and looked at me. “Of course it is. She is wearing the slipper, and what’s more, her sister had the match to it.”

The Duchess gave a social laugh that had not a grain of tolerance in it. “Baron, I sometimes think you are quite empty-headed. Or are all men the same in that respect? Of course it isn’t Ella. Any fool could see that. Her sister has tricked you.”

The Baron’s eyebrows drew together.

I sobbed. I could not help myself. Far away, church bells rang.

“We shall find out just who it is, then,” my husband-to-be said, and flicked the veil from my face.

THE SNOW burned my feet like hot coals. But it was worse torture to wear the slippers. The snow soaked through my dress, numbing my body where I leaned against the cold brick wall of a tenement. My tears froze on my cheeks. I did not think they would ever come off.

I smelt my own blood. Libby’s expert bandages had not stood up to my tottering on them through the crowds of workers; they unwound and the blood flowed. I sank down among the beggars at the side of the road. The poor, truncated stumps stuck out in front of me. I could see the ends of whitish bone where my toes should be, filmed over by bright blood. The sides of my feet quivered, raw, where Libby had lopped off excess flesh.

A carriage went past in the street, kicking sheets of slush up from the wheels. Wearily I looked up. I knew how infrequent nobles’ carriages were here; and from this low vantage, I understood the starved Riverbanker’s desire to pounce on it and rape it of all it contained.

Hers golden, his dark brown, their heads rested side by side in the window. His arm lay along her shoulders, puffing up her hair. Her hand flew up as if in protest, he took her wrist and pulled it down.

They passed out of sight. The angry grumble of the thoroughfare resumed.

Little sister, how easy it is to hate you. I ought to feel sorry for you, because I know what you are destined for: a life of high-class abuse at the Baron’s hands in the name of love, and eventually, transformation into one of the painted ladies, those who flutter frustrated on the edge of aristocracy. Your beauty won’t protect you. But I can only covet your fate. Bleeding from the feet, weeping, I am uglier than ever I was before, but I cannot accept my condition, as Libby did years ago, even though I am unable even to stand up. The cold sun stings my bare, tear-swollen face.

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Felicity Savage has just completed her second year at Columbia University, and already her writing career is underway. She has sold F&SF a number of short stories, including her first. "Brixton White Lady," which appeared in our March issue. Tomorrow Magazine recently published her second short story, and she has sold two novels to Roc Books

About "Ash Minette" she writes, "Cinderella' is an example of the fairy tale of the ugly duckling commoner who makes good. But within the European culture that produced the story, poor men had few opportunities to escape their situation, poor women had even fewer, and poor, plain women had absolutely none at all." Many writers have taken their own angle on this familiar fairy tale, but none from this particular point of view.