

HIGH HEATHERTON

Excerpt from Chapter 11 of High Heatherton

(Book 3 in the series)

Although they had lived their lives within High Heatherton's boundaries, Philip guessed that most of them had never been inside the house. The old custom of inviting every labourer on the estate into the Hall to dine with their lord on feast days had been long discontinued by Philip's father, on account of Henry's unpredictable behaviour.

Now they stood staring round them, obviously as awestruck as Thomas had been. They stared at Thomas as well and Philip beckoned him to his side.

"They are a ragged lot," Thomas whispered to him.

"They are indeed. They look a little hostile too."

"More like they're scared to death of you, my Lord."

"Perhaps, but I still think we have some trouble-makers here. No matter, I shall win them over."

Philip paraded slowly before them a few times to let them all have a proper look at him. Whatever else his faults might be in their eyes he knew that his looks could not fail to impress them.

When he thought they had seen enough he stopped suddenly and turned to them.

"My friends, and I call you that because I sincerely hope that is what you will become, you are aware that High Heatherton came into my possession only a short time ago. Until then I had not set foot inside this property for more than twenty years and I had no notion of the sorry state of things. If you reckon that I should have made myself acquainted with how matters stood then you are right and

I am very wrong. The only defence I can offer for my negligence is to appeal to those of sufficient age to remember how I spent my childhood here. They, perhaps, can understand why I never came to visit with my brother."

Looking at their faces he could see that many did remember, and he guessed that those who did not must have heard the stories



Judith
THOMSON

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of Henry's brutal treatment of his younger brother.

"We know why you didn't come before," ventured one, a little bolder than the rest, "but now you are here are you going to go away again?"

"Aye, back to London, I expect." said another. "Entertaining dukes and earls whilst our wives and children starve."

There was a rumble of agreement and Philip held up his hand for silence.

"I have some pressing business which I must return to London to finish and then it is my intention to devote my time exclusively to Heatherton."

"This business, is it more pressing than your duty here?"

Philip looked at the last man who had spoken. It was Dick Searle, who John had felled for his impertinence on Philip's last visit. Small and shifty-eyed, Searle had never been a friend of his when they were boys. He had been loud-mouthed and belligerent, and always jealous of John Bone.

"My duty? You are as impudent as ever, Searle. I tolerate that from no-one." Philip subjected him to a withering glare. "You will not question what I do if you intend to benefit from my generosity."

"We've seen no evidence yet of your generosity," Searle sneered.

"Have you brought us money?" asked another.

"Are you going to help us?"

"Of course he's not," Searle said. "I say we should sell whatever's left in the house and live as paupers no longer."

One or two murmured their assent and even began to move menacingly toward Philip. Both John and Thomas started to his assistance but Philip shook his head, for he was not afraid of them.

"You will do no such thing. Get back!"

Philip was used to giving orders, and to having them obeyed. There was an authority in his voice which evidently none, even Searle, felt inclined to challenge.

"This house and everything in it is mine," he told them, "and so it will remain. You can air your grievances when the time comes and each one will be listed in the proper manner and dealt with as I see fit. Now hear me out. Firstly, there is something you should know about me. Contrary to all you may suppose, I am not a rich man."



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“Then how are you going to help us?” several voices cried out in dismay.

“Ask rather how you are going to help yourselves,” Philip returned sharply. “You turn to me for money as I once turned to the Earl, my father. Do you imagine I have lived on Henry’s generosity these last few years? No, I have not. Instead I have employed my talents as best I could, and that is what you, too, must do. It is of no use to beg to me for money which I do not have. You must resume your farming, for crops can grow in the fields again, sheep can graze once more upon the downs and cows be milked. You need to work together, share your gains, for this time there will not be any madman to rob you of them. I’ll restore High Heatherton and turn this wilderness into the rich estate it used to be, but firstly we must cut the timber.”

“And when we have cut it you will take your money and be off again,” Searle reckoned.

“Dear God!” Philip cried in frustration. “Is it not enough that my inheritance should be a dilapidated house and barren lands? Must I also have as my dependants folk who are capable of no emotion save resentment and no words save accusations? You demand I house you, feed you, care for you; what do you offer me?”

“What can we offer you?” cried one. “Only ourselves.”

“And a sullen, peevish bunch you are!” Philip had decided that the time had come to show them who was the master. “I would fare badly on the deal, I think. John Bone is the only man of spirit amongst you.”

“What do you expect?” Searle’s voice could be heard again. “Your brother bled us dry.”

“And what is it that you expect, Dick Searle? That I shall spend the rest of my days making amends to you for Henry’s failings? I have suffered quite enough on account of him, for I still bear the marks of his spite. All I offer you is the chance to help yourselves, to change from whining beggars back to proud men who can hold their heads high in the knowledge that they support their families with their own toil, not the charity of their lord.”

His audience looked taken aback. They had obviously not expected him to turn upon them.

“You have a very poor opinion of me, that



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is clear,” Philip continued in a gentler tone, for he had learned the winning arts. “I suppose I cannot blame you. I have not lived a life of any particular virtue, nor will I pledge I shall do so in the future.” He smiled at them disarmingly. “What I do pledge is that I will not desert High Heatherton, even though I’ve been advised to do so. Whether or not I am proved right depends on all of you.” He made an eloquent gesture which embraced them all and then his smile faded and he glared at them. “Or, to be more precise, it depends on whether or not you are capable of crawling out of the morass of self-pity in which you are wallowing.

I want your labour, and I want it willingly. In return I offer myself as your defender. I will provide for every man in sickness and for every man’s dependants when he dies. I will uphold your rights, protect your property and render unto each of you the income that he earns.”

John looked unable to restrain himself any longer. “That sounds right honourable to me,” he called out. “I stand for Lord Philip!”

“And I,” cried nearly a hundred voices more, whilst even Searle could apparently find no argument with Philip’s terms.

“Listen, all of you,” Philip ordered, when they had quietened down. “I am used to commanding troops upon the battlefield. I expected complete obedience from them and I demand the same of you. We fight not foes but poverty here, and it will prove as difficult an enemy I am sure. I never asked my soldiers to attempt anything I was not prepared to do myself and I say the same to you. I’ll work beside you when I return, as hard as you and for as long, but I am the master. You will not forget that, any of you, and I shall not tolerate rebels or dissenters. Those who follow me will ultimately share in my rewards, I promise that, though it may be a little while before we harvest all the fruits of our endeavours. Who is with me?”

“All of us,” cried John, and this time the rest shouted with one accord that they were with him.

