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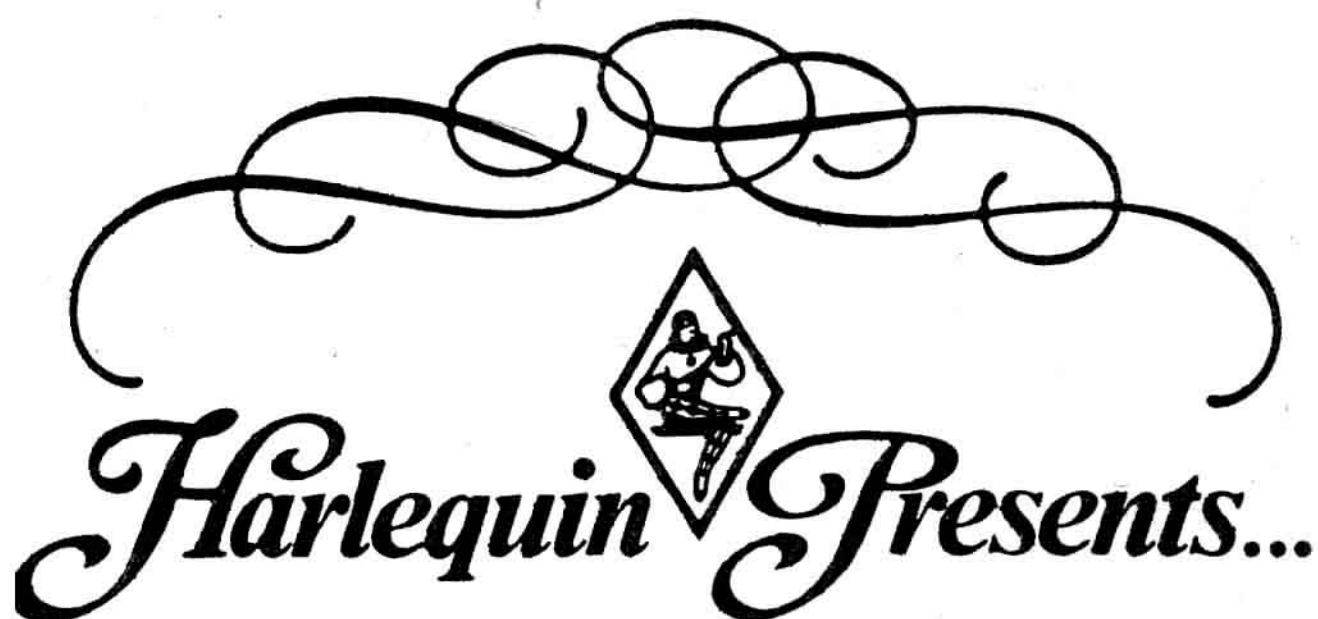
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"We both know it  
would never last."

Arwenna was shaking, but determination made her continue. "I'll work for you, as I've been forced to for now, but when it's over, that's the end for us. I've never met anyone like you before, but we have no real part in each other's life."

"You seem to have forgotten something," Garth replied softly. "Neither of us has ever loved. Perhaps we aren't capable of love. Doesn't that worry you?"

"No," she said, then asked, "And you?"

"No." They looked at each other across an unbridgeable gap. The attraction was almost tangible force. "So it might be better to work it out of our systems," he suggested. "Then we'll be free."

"You mean—have an affair?"

"What else do you think I mean?" he asked.

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# **Fire and Steel**

by

**MARY WIBBERLEY**



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## CHAPTER ONE

'My darling sweet,' said James, looking at Arwenna with some amusement, 'the man's not all that bad.'

Arwenna gazed calmly back at him, not amused at all. 'You expect me to believe that you're having him to dinner simply out of neighbourliness? Come off it, James, since when have you been concerned about anyone who moves into the village? There's another reason you're not telling me—and until you do, my answer's no.' She stood there, tall and straight, and lifted her hand to her hip. 'I'm waiting,' she said.

For a moment his mask of amusement slipped; she saw the sulky boy underneath. But it was only for an instant, and she knew him too well to let it annoy her. 'All right,' he said. 'It's business. Dad's keen to get in well with Garth Vanner——'

'Your father is?' She lifted her eyebrows in disbelief. 'Why?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know. He doesn't tell me everything.' There was a slight trace of annoyance in his words, and she hid a grin. That was true.

'And your father wants me to come to dinner as well? He's chancing it a bit, isn't he? Doesn't he remember what Garth was like fifteen years ago when he left the village?'

'He remembers him as a tough young man who vowed he'd return one day as a millionaire——'

'And the rest? Has he forgotten? I haven't,' she cut in.

James laughed. 'You were only eight when he went. How can you remember?'

'I remember what I heard off *my* father——'



'That's all history. Okay, so your dad and his had a standing feud. So what? It was over twenty years ago——'

'And now he's come back, the new owner of Raneley Hall, and all of a sudden, because he's rich, he's made stacks of money, he's socially acceptable——'

'That's a foul thing to say!' James cut in, face pale.

Arwenna laughed. 'It's true. Twenty years ago your family wouldn't have given him or his family the time of day, and you know it. And you were only ten when he left, so you don't know the half of it either.' Her cheeks were pink. She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. 'I'm not keen to have anything to do with him, you know that. Why me?'

'You're my fiancée,' he said, 'that's why.'

'And?'

'And Dad thought——' He hesitated.

'Yes?' she said silkily. 'Dad thought?' She paused. At last she might hear the truth.

'Well, he's supposed to have an eye for a pretty face——er——if you're here, he might be more——amenable.'

'Thanks!' She looked at him, wide-eyed with amused disbelief. 'You mean I'm a sort of decoy, is that it? A pretty face to soften him up over the hors d'oeuvres? Hah! I've had some left-handed compliments from you, James, but honestly, this takes the biscuit! And what will you do if he starts ogling me over dessert? Tell him to keep his eyes to himself?'

She turned slightly and looked into the ornate mirror over the sideboard. Her face looked back at her, a rounded, striking-looking face with long dark-lashed beautiful eyes that were usually laughing. They weren't now. She turned away and towards her fiancé.

'Please, Arwenna,' he said softly. 'Please, don't be angry. I thought you'd be pleased.'

'Pleased? I'm not. I feel as if I'm being used, if you must know.'

He closed his eyes, and Arwenna went towards him, soft-footed, graceful, and touched his arm. 'Don't you see?' she said. 'How can I be nice to him? I love you, James, you know that, but you're asking the impossible.'

'Do you?' he said bitterly. 'I sometimes wonder—you're in no hurry to get married.'

'I've told you why,' she said softly. 'Until you can break free of your father's domination.'

'He's not as bad as he was. He admires you tremendously.'

'I know. And I'm learning to get on with him, but it's an uphill battle. He doesn't actually like people who speak their minds.'

'He's accepted you,' James pointed out.

'Accepted? Yes, I suppose he has. Admires? Yes, I know that too—but only because he had no choice. Only because for the first time in his life he met someone who wasn't frightened of him.'

'You're not. You're not frightened of anyone, are you? That's what I find so—so—unusual about you, Arwenna.' James sighed. 'God, you're the most unusual, *wonderful* woman I've ever met.'

'Is that why you came chasing after me to France?' she asked mischievously.

'That's only one reason, and you know it, you little minx,' he growled, taking hold of her. 'How could you travel all over Europe, working for all those greasy foreigners?'

'I went because I wanted to,' she said, and there was a slight reminiscent smile touching her lips. 'And they weren't "greasy foreigners", they were decent families.'

'You know what I mean,' he groaned, and kissed her. 'Say you'll come tonight. Please—for me.'

She was about to open her mouth when the door to the drawing room opened and Colonel Rhodes walked in. White-haired, white-moustached, tall, erect, he was,

every inch of him, the country squire, the gentleman.

Arwenna turned towards him, disengaging herself from James' suddenly embarrassed arms. Poor James, she thought, terrified of his father. How he ever plucked up courage to pursue me half across France, I'll never know.

'Hello,' she said. 'James has just been telling me you'd like me to come for dinner tonight, to meet Garth Vanner.'

Henry Rhodes coughed and looked at her. She knew that she threw him completely, and she had no compunction about speaking her mind to him. He was so hidebound by tradition that he found it difficult to talk normally to anyone. Yet between them had grown a kind of mutual respect. 'Er—yes,' he admitted. 'Lends a bit of—er—femininity, you know. Jane is—um—rather shy at meeting strangers, and I thought——'

'Garth Vanner is hardly a stranger,' she said, as he hesitated. 'Considering he lived here with his family until fifteen years ago. You did know, didn't you, Colonel?'

'Well—um—yes, of course.' He looked uncomfortable. 'But the past is past, Arwenna. He's now a successful businessman. I think it's important to welcome him back here, don't you?'

She smiled, meeting the Colonel's blue eyes with her own hazelly blue, beautiful ones. 'If you say so,' she said slowly.

James spoke for the first time since his father had come in. 'Arwenna doesn't particularly like the man,' he said. His father looked at him as if he had crawled out from under a stone.

'Really?' he queried, voice cold.

'Yes, really.' Arwenna added, sensing the latent hostility, never far away, between the two men, and hating it. 'But don't worry, I'd be delighted to accept your invitation. James persuaded me.' She smiled at the



younger man, knowing that this was important to him, knowing . . .

James grinned in relief, and his father unbent sufficiently to smile. 'Ah, splendid,' he said. 'Splendid.'

She didn't know why she had agreed, except that the atmosphere was so tense, the minute the older man had entered, that she had felt a strange pity for James. It was an uncomfortable feeling to have. She shouldn't feel pity for the man that she loved, only warmth, and love . . .

'I'll go and see Mrs Rhodes,' she said. 'If you'll excuse me?' and she smiled at them both and walked towards the door. 'What time do you want me?'

'Seven?' said James, with a look at his father, who nodded. 'I'll pick you up.'

'Seven will be fine,' Arwenna agreed. 'I'll be ready.' She went out, and heard Colonel Rhodes' voice as she closed the door. She couldn't hear the words, but the tone was hard and angry. She sighed, shook her head, and went towards the kitchen to find James' mother.

It was seven-thirty, and they were waiting for the visitor. Jane Rhodes, James' mother, a tense bundle of nerves, fluttered anxiously in from the dining room, a smudge of mascara beneath her eyes, lipstick slightly askew. 'All ready,' she said. 'Oh dear, I do hope——'

'Don't be stupid, Jane,' her husband said sharply. 'Relax.'

It seemed to Arwenna, sipping cool champagne by the window, to be a wasted admonition. There was no way Jane Rhodes would ever relax when guests were expected. Her whole life was geared to pleasing her husband, and she never fully succeeded, for how could anyone please a perfectionist? She was never able to behave as other women. Arwenna had always liked her, felt sympathy for her, and occasionally wished that she knew her well enough to tell her to tell her husband to

go to hell, and walk out. She went over to her now and put her hand on the older woman's arm, sparing Colonel Rhodes, stiff and formal in black tie and evening suit, a brief glance as she did so. One more word from him . . .

'I'm sure everything's perfect,' she said, smiling soothingly at Jane Rhodes. 'There's a glass of champagne I've been keeping for you,' and she led her to the leather-topped table by the window. It was light outside, cool, with a slight breeze coming in through the open windows, welcome after the heat of a July day. 'Here you are. A couple of these and nothing will matter.' She raised her glass. 'Your health.'

'And yours.' Mrs Rhodes sipped, flicking a brief glance at her husband, who stood by the fireplace. Doing his lord of the manor bit, thought Arwenna wryly, while the serfs look on admiringly.

'He said he'd be here at seven-thirty,' she whispered, so that the Colonel couldn't hear.

'It's only just——' As Arwenna said it, the door chimes went. Henry Rhodes stiffened, adjusting his tie, Jane Rhodes nearly dropped her glass, and James darted towards the door. Arwenna was the only one who made no move. I wonder what he'll look like now, she thought. I wonder. After fifteen years away from here . . .

She hadn't long to wait. There were voices from the hall, and then the door opened and the man she had thought she would never see again walked in. She had heard so much about him that she felt as if she knew him. She had only a hazy recollection of him, as an eight-year-old—a vague memory of a dark, shaggy-haired youth with wildness in his blood and lightning in his fists, a young troublemaker who had hurt her parents and caused trouble wherever he went, and now she was seeing him properly for the first time, and it was such a shock that she found herself catching her

breath. She didn't know what she had expected. But not this. Not this.

Garth Vanner was bigger than she had remembered. Big and dark, sleek and bold. His eyes came to hers, right across the room, and she experienced a shock that went right through her, as though the look was charged with electricity. For an instant of time it was just the two of them in the room; everything else faded away. He stood and looked at her, and she was naked, her whole being revealed to him in that moment.

Then the spell was broken, Colonel Rhodes spoke, walking forward, hand outstretched, and all was normal. The civilised preliminaries began; that primitive moment might never have been at all. 'Welcome, Mr Vanner,' said Henry Rhodes, 'nice to meet you.'

'And you, Colonel.' The men shook hands, and Henry Rhodes turned.

'My wife, Jane, my son, James—and his fiancée Arwenna.'

She was the last one with whom Garth Vanner shook hands. She stayed where she was, her glass now in her left hand, and held out her right as he walked towards her. 'How d'you do, Mr Vanner,' she said pleasantly. It had not gone unnoticed by Arwenna that the Colonel hadn't said her surname. She had no intention of telling him. Once having agreed to come, she would play her part well, be the pretty decoy for this man. For this one evening, no more. She wouldn't let any of them down, for that was not her way.

'How do you do, Miss—er——?' He raised a polite, questioning eyebrow. It was a thick, dark eyebrow, above dark grey-blue eyes that were as strong as the rest of his face.

'Call me Arwenna,' she answered, and heard the imperceptible sigh of relief from behind Garth.

'How kind. Thank you.' He turned slightly, and released Arwenna's hand. His hand clasp was cool and