

special collages edition of wellington's officers
CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON



6



**A MAJOR'S
MISTAKE**

**E-BOOK
VERSION**

A MAJOR'S MISTAKE

CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON

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SPECIAL COLLAGES EDITION OF WELLINGTON'S
OFFICERS BOOK 6

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MMXIX

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Chapter 1: LOCHIEL'S PROLOGUE

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*Rothford Hall, Edinburgh, December
1809*

“You should not have come, Lochiel!”

Lizzie wrapped the sheet around her naked body.

“If someone talks, you’ll be dead! He sent that awful hound Mordecai up here. He’s been hearing rumours, I tell you.”

Lochiel looked at his long-time lover with tenderness.

“I’m leaving with the tide, Lizzie. You cannot expect me to just go away without saying goodbye. I may die out there...”

“Oh,” she pleaded, almost in tears, “don’t say that Lochiel! Don’t you bloody say that! What will happen to the children if you’re dead and I am back in London?”

He had to swallow. His throat was suddenly dry. Had he arranged it all right?

Would the little ones be in danger when both their parents left Edinburgh?

“Mattie is taking good care of them, Lizzie. Just stop worrying.”

He started kissing a delectable breast through the cloth of the silk sheet.

“Let’s not ruin this last farewell. Let me hold you one more time, *mo cridhe*.”

Lizzie leaned back in the pillows, closing her eyes, promising herself that she would not worry, not when her lover would love her for the very last time.

She would be so lonely again, tomorrow. Lochiel had been her rock for more than five years, after he had saved her sanity when her pompous cad of a husband Lord John, the Duke of Rothford’s second son, had left her an hour after their wedding, after forcing her to mate with him against a wall in her bedroom, denying her the seed of his loins by spending on her dress and her legs.

At least his anger and his brutish ways at the consummation of their marriage had hidden the fact that she had not been a virgin. That precious gift had been for Lochiel Cameron, at the time a lieutenant. He had escorted her from her home in Ayre to her wedding in Edinburgh, instead of that lout Lord John. He had been instructed to go with a half platoon of soldiers to the small village near Glasgow, where her father had been a newly-made Baron.

Lizzie still did not know if it had been love at the time that had driven her into the handsome Lieutenant's arms; she had been too enraged with her uncouth fiancé, truth be told, to think about love.

Lizzie did not know how often she had cursed the long dead Duchess who had insisted that the 'spare' of the Montgomerys of Rothford was to marry that unknown chit from some hole in the ground in Scotland.

The spare, now the Duke of Rothford's brother, the illustrious Marques of Lorna and Kintyre, had hated her for it. Everybody knew that he had left her to rot in Edinburgh, while he played the rake and the cad in London.

It was just her bad luck that his brother Randolph, the recent Duke, married an elderly woman who was possibly beyond her fertile years. When they were certain there would not be a son forthcoming from that marriage, the siring of an heir was now John Lorna's new task. Lizzie Montgomery, Marchioness of Lorna and Kintyre, although in name only, was ordered to come to London to humiliate herself before that damnable stud John Lorna; to give the ducal family that most wanted heir at last.

She feared him, that so-called husband. She knew how ferocious he could be, his charm and good looks notwithstanding.

Someone had betrayed them, for certain, as Lochiel, now a newly appointed Major in the 42nd Scottish Highland Regiment, had suddenly been ordered away to the war in the Peninsula and God have mercy on his soul!

She sighed when Lochiel kissed her hard and insistent.

And may God have mercy on her: a cheating wife who wanted nothing to do with her equally cheating husband because in her heart she knew he would break her traitorous heart into a thousand pieces, again.

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Chapter 2: LIONEL'S PROLOGUE

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Toulouse hospital, May 1814

Lionel groaned when somebody entered the cool hospital room. When the door opened a shaft of light speared right through the darkened sickroom and jolted a bolt of pain through his head.

“Still that bad, Armstrong?” a deep voice rumbled.

Lionel had to swallow before he was capable of answering.

“That you, Hengist?” he grated weakly.

“The whole family and I are here, ready to pick you up and bring you to Bordeaux.”

“Am I allowed to travel?”

“You’ll have to. There will be nobody left here after tomorrow. I got you one of those French ambulances at last, so don’t worry. You’ll just have to share it with Brondemeire.”

Lionel opened his eyes then. He had held them stiffly closed against the intruding light and the big man standing next to his bed.

“Kit’s still here as well?”

The big Scot, dressed in a short battle kilt and the paraphernalia of a Colonel, grinned.

“And in a far worse way than you, I tell ye. That chest wound has wrecked him. It’s just that we are all leaving for Bordeaux, but he’ll be sure to be staying in France for a couple more months. He’ll need a lot more nursing before he’s fit to travel.”

“What about Berry?” Lionel asked.

His batman had disappeared weeks ago during the battle against Soult and had not been found since.

“Hello Mrs. Williams,” the Colonel greeted the nurse who had entered the room with professional quietness. “We can get Major Armstrong into the ambulance as

soon as your orderlies have moved Lieutenant-Colonel Brondemeire.”

He turned back to Lionel after having greeted the faithful nurse, who had stayed behind with a handful of medical staff in Toulouse. The whole British army had gone back to the French Atlantic coast. Now she was to travel back with the last casualties to Bordeaux as well.

“We never found him. I’m very sorry. They searched everywhere for him.”

Lionel blinked. Berry had been his batman for about four years.

“My horses?”

“We saved your big black one from the looters. The rest I’m not certain about. Maybe they went to Bordeaux with the others. We’ll have to see.”

Lionel almost nodded, but realized just in time that this would mean another sharp pain splitting his head.

“My wife wants you to come back to Oporto with us,” Hengist said hesitantly.

Lionel tried a short laugh.

“Thank Marguerite for her kindness, but it’s in the wrong direction. My father had another apoplexy and wants me back home in Went.”

Hengist nodded and turned carefully on his heels as he still felt the wound in his leg, calling out orders to have Major Lionel Armstrong wheeled to the waiting ambulance.

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Chapter 3: ROBIN'S SECRET HOUSEGUEST

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Hillview, Auldly, June 1814

He was glad somebody was indeed living in the mansion when he saw the travelling coach waiting in front of the house. He tried to increase his steps, ignoring the sharp pain that shot through his left leg. Civilization at last!

Thank you, Lord, he thought ironically. But then, how many houses in the country were empty of their occupants this time of the year? A gentile family, worth its salt, would not linger in the bare countryside, now that the Season in London had been in full swing for months. Thank God, country abiding gentry lived here!

His horse clobbered slowly behind him, favouring his right forefoot. He talked to him reassuringly. "It's all right Bo, you might look forward to some nice food and

good clear water if good Christian people live here.”

He smiled at his own words. War truly had made him a cynic.

He touched the big black stallion's soft nose and Bo breezed happily in his hand.

Lionel looked down at his very dirty, dusty cloak that hid a threadbare uniform.

He shrugged. His left boot had taken a sabre slash and looked quite odd now that he had tied a piece of rope around it to keep the higher part together. He had not been able to shave in a fortnight; he nurtured a handsome rogue's beard and moustache. Although he had dipped himself into a brook one day ago, he had not been able to entirely remove the stench from his body and clothes.

The last time he had stayed in an inn, regrettably one of the worst sort, with nothing as handy as a tub to wash in, had been three days ago. The last two nights he

had spent in an empty hovel and a smelly, though empty, sty.

His dark blond hair seemed only darker, now that he had not been able to properly wash off weeks of uneasy travel. He knew he resembled a highwayman or worse, but he had not been able to do anything about it because his batman, who always took care of his gentleman's hygienic needs as he had been his valet before they both left for the Peninsula, had been lost in action at the battle of Toulouse. As he himself had been severely wounded, he had not been able to search for poor Berry's body, making certain that the valet would have gotten a proper burial in the far away French soil. He *had* the limited use of a batman for the duration of his voyage from Bordeaux to London, but the man had opted not to follow him to Went, but to visit his family, which had been the other way.

His attention was diverted from the morbid thoughts about the death of his servant. Somebody was obviously leaving the house because a few footmen came down the terraced steps of the front porch, hauling a very heavy looking clothing chest.

Groaning and mumbling, they strained to get it on to the coach's roof.

Lionel approached them hesitantly. The coach driver looked up at him.

“Sir?”

The coach driver was a big man, dwarfing the two footmen in their blue livery. It was a warm summer's day; they all wiped the sweat of their faces on their sleeves.

Lionel stepped forward.

Suddenly a shriek rang out.

Somebody in a cloud of light blue silk, ruffles and laces stopped in front of Lionel and punched his stomach with a matching blue parasol.

“Who is this, Holmen? Get out of here, beggar, you are straight in my path! Such insolence!”

A pair of very green eyes peered at him and clearly decided he was not really worth the bother.

Lionel thought the face would have been quite handsome if the lady had not borne such a look of disgust. When his gaze went down to her very busty neckline she lifted the parasol again and shrieking with indignation, brought it down on his head.

He swayed, realizing that she had hit him on his recently acquired, hardly healed head wound. A wound that he had received during that last battle, three months ago. As he went down on the gravel he heard the sharp female voice say in triumph: “Serves him right. Holmen, call Old Roper to get rid of him, he stinks and he is lying in my path!”

He opened his eyes a little and discovered that he was stretched out on a wooden cot. Somebody must have taken off his clothes because he was wearing a cotton night-shift, which did not seem at all familiar to him.

He tried to move, thinking of Bohemian King, his horse.

A sharp pain in his head forced him immediately back to immobility.

God, he felt his stomach heave, and almost panicked at the thought of vomiting on his bed sheets.

“Please don’t move!” somebody urged him. “Your head injury started bleeding again!”

Soft hands touched his cheeks.

“I have some cool water, if you are able to drink it. We put a straw in it.”

The lithe hands brought a beaker with a straw in it close to his face. He sucked the water with his eyes closed. He was certain

he had never tasted something so good and fresh before.

“Slowly!” the voice urged him.

The room was dark.

He wondered if it was lack of light or if the night already had fallen.

He tried to move his lips to form words.

“Don’t talk!” she urged. “You are too ill! Doctor Brooks said your head wound has opened again and that your wounds are causing a fever.”

He heard her rise from the chair next to the bed.

“I’ll go and ask Mrs. Roper to serve you a nice soup. You must be starving!”

This time he managed to open his eyes in tiny slits.

Gazing at him was the most beautiful face he was sure he'd ever seen in his entire life. Her eyes were big and of a purplish blue, her perfect oval face was slightly and unfashionably tanned, her nose was small

and straight and her mouth was shaped of beautifully curved, full lips. He thought her hair must be black or dark brown. If it had not been for the screaming headache, he would have been sure that he had died and found an angel at heaven's gates.

“Horse?” he managed to ask.

The face smiled at him.

“Young Roper has stabled him. He is fine now. Jerry said he was favoring his front leg, but it is only a strain. Nothing that cannot be cured after a few days of rest! You both are utterly exhausted.”

Her cool hand touched his head again.

“The fever is down, I think.”

Her smile was warm, showing perfect white teeth.

“Clothes?”

He almost gurgled the word.

“Lippy had them washed and pressed for you. Don't worry, please. Oh, I think Dr.

Brooks has come back for you. You had us all in a tiff, you know!”

She shifted, so that a man, probably the doctor, could sit down on a chair near his bed.

The doctor was a big man, his face clean-shaven with the look of a country gentleman. He smiled and nodded at Miss Purple-Eyes.

“How is he doing, Robin?” he asked in a rumbling voice.

“He just woke up, doctor,” her melodious voice chimed, “for now it seems that the fever is gone, and he drank some water. I’ll tell one of the Ropers to go and ask for some of Mrs. Ropers’ freshly made soup. He must be hungry.”

He heard her go to the door and whisper to somebody who had obviously been waiting outside.

The doctor took Lionel’s pulse.

“A lot better!” he exclaimed, “A lot better indeed! You must have had one hell of a headache, sir! Pardon me the expression, Miss Robin. That’s a nasty wound there on your head. Hardly inflicted by the Baroness’ parasol would be my guess, although she may have contributed to your bad state now.”

He pointed at Lionel’s left leg.

“That cut looks like a saber slash! It is quite infected. I have put some worms in there to clean it all out. A thing I learned from a Russian sailor. You will know when they have finished eating the rot away because you will start to holler with pain when they start on your healthy flesh. Don’t be too valiant; I have to know when to remove them! Where on earth did you get that slash, if I may ask? You have not been dueling, I hope?” Lionel stared at Doctor Brooks. What would a country physician know, living safely in Yorkshire?

“War.”

There was a sudden flutter of hands and feet.

“He said war?”

“I am afraid so.”

Doctor Brooks leaned back in the chair.

“There was a big battle on the Continent only a few months ago. I am afraid this young man was in it. What’s your name, sir?”

Lionel swallowed deep.

“Leo. Armstrong.”

He was not sure why he had used the short version of his name. Surely these were good people who meant well.

The doctor rose, taking Robin Purple-Eyes’ hand in his.

“He won’t be well for some time, Robin. My guess is that he will need at least a fortnight to heal entirely.”

He saw her hesitation and understood.

“He was a little bit grubby, but he has the looks of a gentleman to me. If you cannot have him here we’ll have him moved to my house as fast as possible.”

The girl’s eyes widened.

“Oh no, Doctor, I would say it would be too torturous for him if he is moved today.”

The girl’s grey gown rustled when she turned towards the door with Dr. Brooks in her wake.

“Bertha and the Baroness will be away for at least a week and they never come to the lodge anyway. It’s normally the Ropers’ house, you know.”

“Ah, the Lovely People,” the Doctor nodded.

Lionel wondered if there was some sarcasm in his voice.

“The Ropers share rooms in the servant’s wings, now that Mrs. Ely married Old Roper. The lodge is not handy for the cook to live in. Not with the Lovelies’ demands

when it comes to food. My guess is that Mr...ah,...Armstrong will be fine here.”

The Doctor turned and pointed at the chair next to the bed with a pillow and a blanket close by on a chest.

“Who slept here last night?”

She blushed profusely.

“I did. He was in such a bad state and I wanted somebody to be there if he woke up, or needed assistance. There was nobody else to take that chore. I will go back to my own room tonight if you think that would be more proper. It’s just that the lodge is not visible from the house and there is no way he will be able to warn any of us if he needs anything.”

The doctor looked at Lionel. He was lying there motionless, his eyes closed.

“Who took care of his bodily needs, Robin?”

She hesitated. “The Ropers washed and bathed him. Why, he is too heavy a man for

me to do that. I just do the nursing. Nobody around here allows me to do a thing, now that the Lovelies are away. Now, let me get you to the house for some refreshments before you ride back to Auldly.”

Lionel did not hear the Doctor’s answer. He had unwittingly drifted into a very deep sleep again.

He looked up with an expectant smile when the door of the lodge opened.

Yes, it was his Purple-Eyes again! Her hourglass figure formed a sharp contrast with the sunlight behind her.

She walked in slowly, carrying a large tray.

“Good morning!”

He was again amazed by her melodious voice. He did not doubt that if she had been a lady she would have sung at many a ‘musicale’. She put the tray on the table in the middle of the lodge.

“Doctor Brooks said you might want to be up a little and try to take your meal at the table.”

Lionel would have nodded eagerly if it had not been for his head. The stinging pain was gone, but he still felt quite woozy.

He sat up slowly in the bed, pulling his legs over the bedside.

She rushed by his side, to put her arm under his for support.

He felt a soft breast pressing against the side of his torso and had to close his eyes.

“Is it too painful?” her worried voice asked him.

He clenched his jaws. He actually felt nothing but the soft breast. Women’s breasts! It had been so long!

Damnation, he could hardly get an erection now that he was wearing this very loose tent of a nightshift.

He sucked in his breath, trying to concentrate on his headache, corpses

stinking in a field, worms on his leg, anything, as long as it was not that soft...

“Are you able to cope, Miss Robin?”

“Oh! Andy! Do help me with Mr. Armstrong, please. The doctor wants him to get out of bed a bit so as to help his blood move.”

Old Roper took Robin’s place and lifted Lionel easily onto his feet.

Lionel found himself shuffling to the table. At least Roper’s interference had cured him from that one urgent problem.

He sat down while Purple-Eyes removed the covers from the plates.

“My God, is that a steak? And potatoes baked in butter? Are those asparagus? And strawberries?” he exclaimed delightedly.

She grinned at him and took a chair opposite him.

“Don’t be too happy, Mr. Armstrong; we are sharing.” She put some asparagus on her plate and started to eat them. Her tiny pink

tongue sprinted in and out of her mouth as she devoured the asparagus one by one...

Lionel moved his chair immediately closer to the table, keeping one eye on Roper, who was looking at him with a knowing smile.

Christ, didn't Purple-Eyes know what a sight she was, nibbling at those stalks!

Down, Beast, down! he warned that specific part of his body that kept surging and hardening.

He knew he should concentrate on his food and not on the little lady opposite him.

"The Doctor said you would be up to something more substantial."

"Yes, Miss Robin," he succeeded to utter, "quite so!"

She turned to Roper.

"It's alright, I think, Roper," she claimed, "I'll ring the bell when Mr. Armstrong is finished, so please don't stray too far from the lodge."

Roper nodded, threw a look at Lionel, and then left the lodge, leaving the door wide open.

Lionel swallowed profusely when she picked up a strawberry, dipped it in cream and put it in her mouth. Her lips almost made a sucking noise...

“Do call me Robin!” she told him softly, after she wiped her hand with a napkin.

“In that case I insist you call me Lionel!”

He fixed his eyes on his steak. When was the last time he had eaten so well? At Madame Boissier's billet in St Jean-de-Luz for sure! That had been way before the battle at Toulouse. His friend, Kit Andover, Viscount Brondemeire, had been paying because he'd had a nice windfall; his brother the Marques of Andover had found him a rich bride with only a tiny smut on her blazon. “Dr. Brooks said some red wine would do you good. It strengthens the

constitution, you know,” she said conversationally

He nodded, hardly daring to think of that other part of his constitution that was strengthening. God, if this meal could just be finished! He would crawl back into his bed and...

“Lionel, would you mind telling me where you are from? We’ve been curious about you for more than six days, you know.”

He stared at her, laying down his knife and fork.

“You know your manners and you know how to use your cutlery!”

She pointed at his knife and fork. “And Lippy says you were wearing a major’s uniform, blue and white with red lapels, which he said would belong to the King’s Cavalry.”

He hesitated. “I guess you know it all then,” he admitted. “I’m Major Lionel

Armstrong. I was on my way home when I suffered this little female and almost fatal attack on my person. I was looking for a place to rest and a bite, also for Bo. He stumbled somewhere close to this house and started to favor his leg. Poor boy, I was in such a rush to get home, that I forgot he is only a horse, albeit a fierce one!”

He did not know why he ‘forgot’ to mention that he was actually Lord Lionel Armstrong, Baron Loveall, maybe soon to be Earl of Wentworth.

Who cared, he never used his title in the army anyway, except when he was invited to Wellington’s table. The Marques of Wellington adored the company of titled officers.

Her mouth shaped into a warm smile.

“That’s a strange name for a horse; Bo. Or is it Beau?” For a second he looked at her with a startled expression. Old Roper had told him yesterday that Miss Robin was

the appointed keeper of the Hillview Mansion, as young as she was. Lionel presumed Roper must have meant 'housekeeper.' How educated was she that she also spoke French?

“His name is Bohemian King, actually.”

“Ah! He does not look very Hungarian, except for his blackness of course!”

“Are you familiar with horse breeding as well?”

The girl did not cease to amaze him.

“Yes, well, my father bred horses. I know the Hungarian ones are quite sturdy, but small. Your Bo is actually huge!”

“We bred horses for a long time. It’s all in the family,” he explained. “I guess we crossed with Hungarians a long time ago. Bo would be a destrier in former times, a real warhorse. His strength and stamina saved my life at the battle at Toulouse. My other horses are to be shipped back soon with the rest of the baggage train.”

He hoped that would turn out fine with his newly acquired batman, who was to report to the family's townhouse in London. He hardly knew the man, as someone had referred him in Bordeaux before Lionel was to step on board of his ship.

“Were you in such a hurry to go back home then?”

He sat back against the chair.

“I am sorry to say so, Robin! I am still in a hurry to go back. Right after the battle, when I was hospitalized, I received a letter that my father had a stroke, regrettably already his third, and the doctors feared he would not survive it this time. Actually, now that I am up and about again, I must insist that I leave you as soon as possible. How many days have I been here, six, seven? I am afraid I may not find Father alive!”

She jumped up from her chair.

“Of course you should go home! But I don’t think you should ride Bo. You might injure yourself again! Let me talk to Hoffman, the butler. He might know a solution. I’ll ask Lippy to bring back your clothes, right now.”

His clothes! He would not have to sit around in this damnable nightshift any longer! He had been longing for his breeches since he had been conscious of the beautiful Purple-Eyes rushing in and out of the lodge.

One hour later he leaned back on the bed, this time wearing his white cavalry breeches with the red cumber band and a blinding white lawn cotton shirt. The shirt was not his own. One of the gentle souls of the household had probably found it in a lost closet as it smelled faintly of lavender. He knew by now that the household, in which he was an unexpected guest, only consisted of women of the Quality.

Although they mentioned a baroness once in a while, there was no reference to a baron at all.

His now neatly repaired boots were next to the bed. Somebody had sewn the slash and waxed them until you could see the reflection of your face in them.

So he was to go home soon, he reflected. How could he have been so ill? The baroness's parasol could hardly have hit him that hard!

He strained to hear if Purple-Eyes was on her way to the cabin. He wondered how he could thank her. Maybe a fat gold purse would do, but something inside him told him that she would not appreciate such a gift; she was that kind of woman.

He thought it was a pity that she was only a girl working in a big mansion. She was lovely enough to marry and he had felt enough lust towards her to want to bed her, but it was not a done thing under any

circumstances to wed a servant. Not when he was to become an earl when his father died.

“Lionel?” She suddenly stood before him; a vision in the grey, demure, homely house-keeper’s dress. Her keys jangled softly on the ring that was attached to her close-fitting belt.

He rose from the bed and stood before her. She was only a small chit of a girl, barely reaching as high as his chin.

Without realizing at first what he was doing, he drew her into his arms and then into a sudden embrace.

Her breath was warm and smelled of mint. Her lips were as soft and yielding as he had imagined them, when he was lying in the bed, unable to move a muscle due to his pounding head. His beard and mustache felt very strange when he kissed her; he had never worn any before. “Robin! Robin!” he whispered. “Thank you, beautiful Purple-

Eyes!” Her arms had gone around his neck; her hands had stroked his long dark blond hair that was almost streaming to his shoulders now.

“Hoffman has hailed you a livery from Auldly. You will be taken to Went. He assured us it will be a bit more than two hours in this weather.”

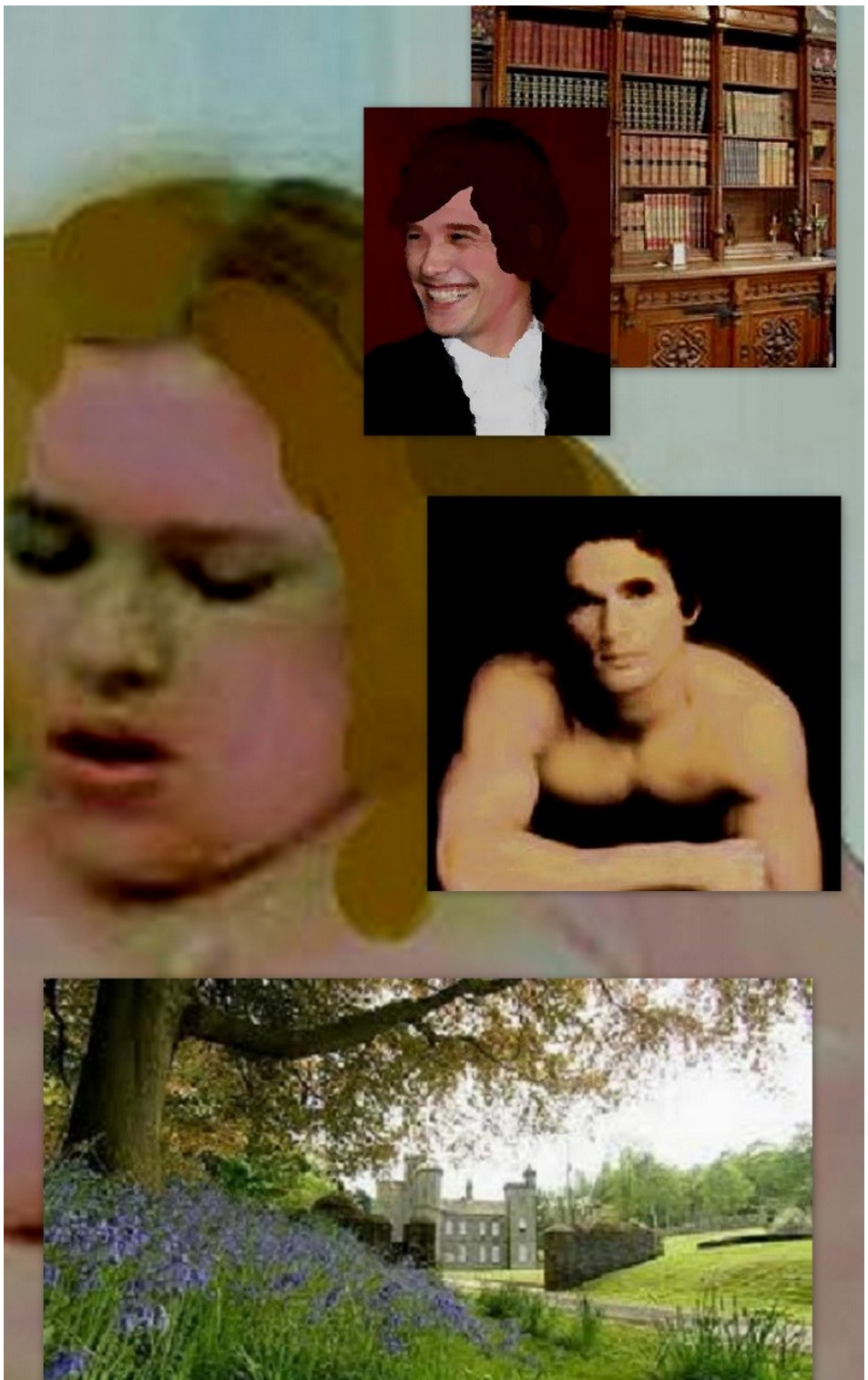
“So it’s goodbye then?” She looked at him sadly.

“More like a farewell, I fear. Goodbye Major Lionel Armstrong. Beatty will come and fetch you, as Holmen is gone with the Baroness. I hope life treats you well from now on.”

He walked to the door and saw her sweet hourglass figure disappear through the brush that led to the mansion.

He rubbed his eyes. He was not crying, was he? The war had surely turned him into a ninny!

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Chapter 4: NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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