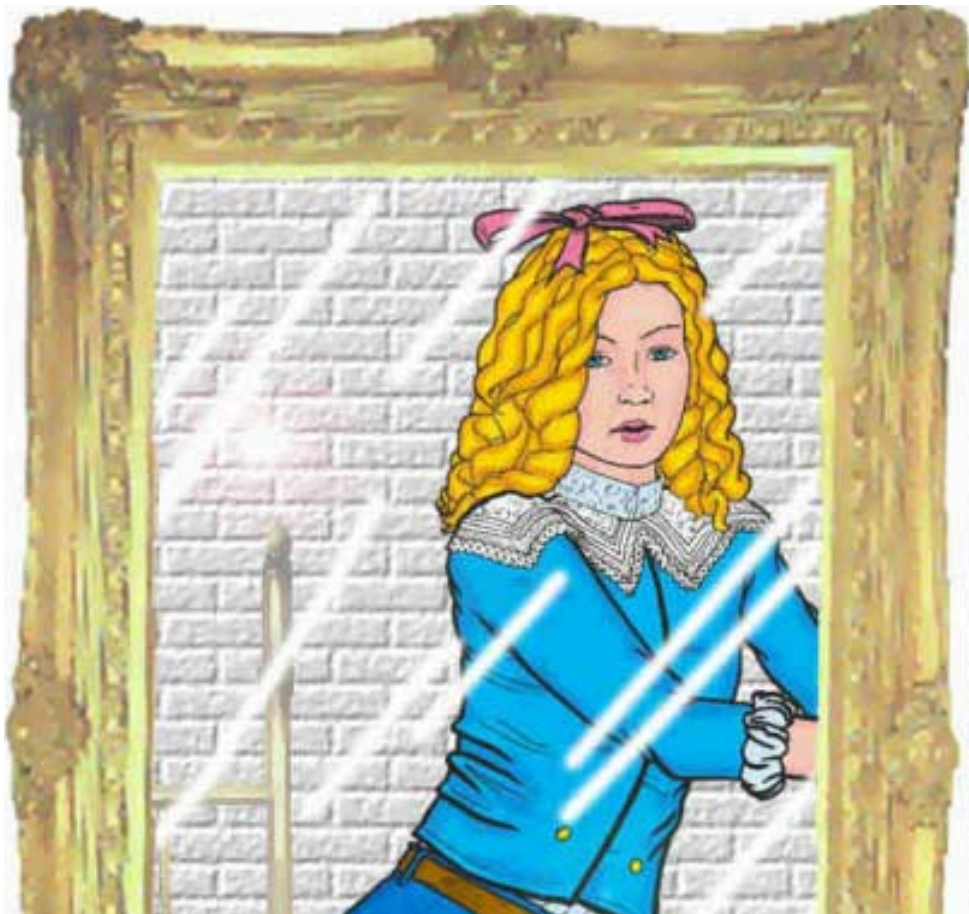


UP A WINDING STAIR

By Jane Barrett



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

AN 'ADULT TV' NOVEL

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UP A WINDING STAIR

By Jane Barrett

“Will you walk into my parlour?” said a spider to a fly:

”’Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy;

The way into my parlour is up a winding stair,

And I have many curious things to show

when you are there.”

The Spider and the Fly by Mary Howitt.

English author 1799-1888

The Journey

I'm sorry I can't accompany you to Scotland," she said as she hugged and kissed in farewell. "But I'm sure Bridget will look after you."

In one way, Ashley was sad to see his relative leave. Although in her sixties, his Mother's sister had proved a tower of strength over the last few weeks. There were times, however, when she'd shown how out-of-touch she was with the modern world. Aunt Elizabeth had been constantly chiding him and Alyce on their attitude. She was always reminding them to be polite and to show due respect to all types and classes of people. He put this down to her being over sixty and having lived in America so long. After all, he was now the Earl of Harwood and he could do what he jolly well liked. He would not receive his inheritance until he was eighteen but that didn't mean he had to wait 'til then to accept the status that went with it.

It was *fun* to have people fetch and carry for you. His parents had always been at him about noblesse oblige, stressing the obligation of the nobility to be honorable and generous. Ashley had always thought this to be quite ridiculous. Why should he so terribly polite to the commoners and servants? After all he wasn't one of them, *he* had power. Why on earth shouldn't he be allowed to use it?

He had never been able to understand why his father and mother had been so reluctant to use their wealth and position. What was the point of having it? He was now eighteen; in less than six months, according to the terms of the will, would come his inheritance. After listening to the solicitor, even Ashley was surprised at how much it came to.

However, that was still five months away. Until then he was, with Alyce, the ward of Aunt Bridget. Not that this was a problem. Lady Stewart, the Dowager Countess of Ma-clean, was their Mother's other sister, and now their guardian. Aunt Bridget and Ashley's two cousins had been unable to attend the funeral. Lady Stewart had expressed her sympathy, blaming a family illness and asked that the two children join her as soon as possible at her estate in Scotland.

Aunt Bridget would be easy to handle. Neither Ashley nor Alyce had the slightest intention of living with her in Scotland. London was where fortunes were made and Ashley had already begun. Just this week he'd agreed to sell a large block of shares in a clothing factory to a Japanese real estate agency. His father had just acquired them at the request of Aunt Bridget and apparently Ashley and Alyce were the major shareholders. Despite Aunt Bridget begging him to reconsider, there was no going back on this. He'd already agreed to sell them, and his new solicitor, Edwin Madwick had advised him to get Aunt Bridget's consent. If she wouldn't oblige, the sale could still go ahead, but there would be some messy legal complications.

So he and Alyce would journey to Scotland and talk with Aunt Bridget. He'd lead his Aunt to believe they were coming to live with her. Knowing how malleable she had proved in the past, Ashley did not think he would have much difficulty in persuading her to sign the sale agreement. Once that was completed, he was sure Aunt Bridget would allow them to return to London to live. After all, who wanted to live in a drafty old castle in Scotland? The City was where the power lay and Ashley wanted to start using his, right away.

Ashley looked tenderly at his twin, sitting across from him in the carriage. Although they were not identical—of course that was impossible due to the difference in their sex—they were all but that. Ashley was slightly too short for a boy, and Alyce was just a bit too tall for a girl. Both had identical golden blonde hair. Despite Alyce's attractiveness, her features were just a touch strong for feminine beauty. As if to compensate, Ashley was just too pretty for a boy.

Until a few years ago, Ashley had been very much under the thumb of his sister. A number of times in the past, Ashley had been reluctantly persuaded to change clothing and roles with Alyce. Much to his surprise, Alyce had been readily accepted as Ashley and to his acute embarrassment, he'd passed undetected as Alyce. She'd continued to use this against him whenever he had tried to assert himself in what she saw as an unduly masculine way.

Ashley was having other problems in this area. Despite his age, there was not even a trace of the normal male facial or body hair and his voice remained far more feminine than male. To further perplex him, his chest had recently become more rounded and Alyce rather cruelly teased him about his breasts. Whilst it was something of an exaggeration to describe them as “breasts”, they *were* noticeable when naked. In contrast to this female development was the increase in his sexuality. He was disconcerted to find himself erect at the most inconvenient times. So difficult had it been that on a number of times recently, Alyce had provided some manual relief to ease his distress.

Following their parents' death, Ashley decided it was time to assert himself and he was quite determined to be the decision maker. Some tension was already evident between them but Ashley was not deterred. It was really just a matter of Alyce becoming used to his new role.

Today, with both dressed in jeans and comfortable sweaters for the journey, it was easy to mistake them for two sisters. This in fact had occurred earlier in the day; they were traveling incognito and he asked for the tickets for Ashley and Alyce Hamilton. The ticketing officer called him Miss and wished the "two young ladies" a pleasant trip. It was on occasions like that that he wished his parents had chosen a more conventional name for him.

Today, Alyce was still busy with her latest project. She was very creative and quite determined to become one of Britain's leading dress designers. Over the last months, Alyce had been researching the changing styles in women and children's formal wear over the past hundred years. Alyce had quickly dragooned Ashley into helping her and now he had also become a somewhat reluctant expert in women's fashion.

The fast Intercity Express was almost into Edinburgh before his thoughts turned to the life that lay ahead. Lord Stewart, Aunt Bridget's former husband had been the Provost Marshal of Scotland. Aunt Bridget, now widowed for two years, had two children of her own. Oddly enough, they were also twins, a girl and a boy a year older than Ashley. It must be an errant gene in the family line that keeps producing twins, thought Ashley.

Ashley and Alyce had not seen them for more than a year, not that this particularly concerned him. His last experience with Evan and Erin had been most unpleasant. Evan had been in his rebellious stage, and dressed as a skinhead. He was ill-mannered, badly behaved, always in trouble with the law, Ashley had not liked him because of his bullying manner and the way he had treated his mother. Erin had also been going through a difficult stage; although she had not been as obnoxious, their visit had been quite unpleasant.

Alyce seemed to be able to deal with Evan. Several times she had protected Ashley from a beating from his elder cousin. He remembered his parents saying that Aunt Bridget had solved the problem, however they had seemed rather loath to talk further about it to either he or Alyce. Since Evan had succeeded to his father's title, Ashley hoped he had become better-mannered. Still, this appeared unlikely and it was another reason not to stay with his Aunt.

As they emerged from the reserved carriage onto the platform, Ashley expected to see their Aunt and two cousins waiting to greet them. Instead, they were approached by a tall, smartly-dressed woman, accompanied by another clad in a feminized version of a chauffeur's uniform. She apologized for Lady Stewart's absence, explaining she was Madame Hester, the major domo and would take them to the estate.

There was another wait. Ashley was quite annoyed and wasted no time in telling Madame Hester so. She stood before him red-faced, trying not to show her humiliation. At last, the chauffeur returned. A small "hiccup" had occurred. There had been an unfortunate mishap with their luggage, it had been mislaid. Rather than facing more of Ashley's anger, Madame Hester said they would proceed to the estate.

The journey took more than an hour, the last part crossing several miles of wild and deserted moor land before passing through a small picturesque village. Madame Hester explained that this formed part of the Stewart estate and the manor house lay a mile beyond. In contrast to the miles of wild moors they had passed through, this valley was of green fields, dotted with white fleeced sheep and looked quite romantic in the soft evening light.

A Mysterious Change

The car drew up before a very high barred gate. Ashley could see a high stone wall surmounted by broken glass disappearing into the distance. This appeared to surround very large gardens and the manor house. A camera whirred into life and focused onto the car. Peggy spoke into a speaker alongside the gate. With a creak, the gates opened. Immediately, the car passed through and the gates began to close.

Aunt Bridget was awaiting them at the entrance to the manor house. They had not seen their Aunt for nearly two years and Ashley was surprised by how young she looked. He knew she was ten years older than their mother. She must be in her late forties but today she appeared no more than thirty-five. Her face was unlined and there was not a trace of gray in her reddish-blond hair. She was dressed in a cream silk blouse with a high ruffled neck and long, full sleeves. With it, Aunt Bridget wore a flower patterned long silk skirt and high-heeled buttoned boots.

Despite the multiplicity of styles in modern fashion, it was obvious to Ashley's eye her dress was in the fashion of nearly a hundred years ago. The design was reminiscent of one worn by Julie Andrews in *Mary Poppins*. She appeared completely different from the memory he had of her from when she was a leader in the feminist movement. That was only a few years ago; back then she always wore very mannish styles.

Aunt Bridget hugged and kissed each of them in turn, saying how wonderful it was to see them again and how sorry she was that it was under such sad circumstances. She was so pleased to be able to offer them a home and she hoped they'd be happy with her. She wrinkled her pert nose at their jeans and sweaters, saying it was such a pity they still wore such unattractive clothing. Ashley was rather taken aback and said that *everyone* wore them. Aunt Bridget replied that perhaps they were more conservative in the highlands, but their manner of dress had more style. Alyce placed her arm on Ashley's, silently urging him to avoid further discussion. Alyce, ever the diplomat, apologized for their clothing, saying they had worn those clothes for traveling. She said they had more suitable clothing in their luggage but unfortunately it had been mislaid.

As they accompanied Aunt Bridget along a grand carpeted passageway lined with portraits of her ancestors, she said there had been a number of changes to their lifestyle. Before she could explain further, they entered a spacious reception room and Ashley gasped in astonishment. Standing together were his two cousins, Evan and Erin. For a moment, Ashley's mind couldn't accept what he was seeing. Their appearance was quite bizarre. Last year when they visited, Erin had been into "recession wear". She'd worn a long unkempt skirt, shapeless blouse and thick, heavy boots.

Now it had completely changed. Today, like her mother's, Erin's dress was drawn from the past. It was an early Edwardian style with a dropped waistline and calf-length skirt. Unlike her mother's, it was fashioned for a young girl, one not yet in her teens. Of peach-colored silk crepe de chine, with a wide Quaker collar in white silk. She wore white silk stockings and "Mary Jane" ankle strap shoes. In her long hair, a peach-colored silk ribbon was tied. She stood very erect and moved stiffly, as beneath the dress, Erin was tightly corseted.

Next to her stood her twin brother, Evan. While Erin's clothing was unusual, Evan's was quite outlandish. When Ashley last saw Evan, he was wearing torn jeans and a dirty T-shirt bearing obscene messages. His head was shaved and he'd worn heavy black "bover" boots. Today, Evan wore a "Little Lord Fauntleroy" suit of peach-colored velvet. The jacket was tightly fitted to his waist. Like his sister, it was clear he was wearing a tight corset.

Beneath the jacket were loosely fitted knee-length breeches, fastened just under his knees by wide satin ribbons. Underneath the jacket was a cream satin blouse lavishly trimmed with lace on the collar and the long deep cuffs. Evan's legs were encased in long cream-colored silk stockings; on his feet were high-heeled "Mary Jane" ankle strap shoes. While his sister wore flat heels, these were at least three inches high.

The change was not recent; gone was the shaven head. In place were shoulder-length reddish-blond locks. Beneath these was a heavily made-up face. Gray eye shadow covered his lids and mascara lengthened his blonde eyelashes. A deep red lipstick outlined his lips and a soft red blusher heightened his cheeks.

Evan was a handsome boy and would have made a striking, rather than pretty, girl. Unfortunately but quite deliberately, the effect was not a pretty girl but an effeminate boy. In one manner it had improved him; gone was the bullying manner and the superior looks which Erin and Evan had adopted for anyone they considered their social inferiors. Ashley could only ponder the immense effect on his psyche.

Tonight both cousins stood quite still, as if waiting for a sign to continue. This finally came from a young woman standing to their right.

"Well children, aren't you going to greet your cousins?"

Before Ashley could move, Evan took him in his arms, hugging him tightly and kissed him fully on the lips.

Ashley immediately drew back. It was instinctive. To be kissed by a male wearing lipstick and perfume was an anathema. Even the mere touch of the long blonde curls on Ashley's face sent a shiver up his spine. Ashley's response upset Evan. His look was stricken, his eyes dewed, almost flooding with tears as they glanced toward the woman who had just spoken.

She turned toward Ashley; her voice was low but menacing with its icy tone.

"That's very rude! How *dare* you act in such a way. Now greet your cousin properly."

Ashley was about to ask who would dare speak to him in such a manner when he saw the angry look in Aunt Bridget's eyes. He didn't want to upset her; the need to re-

turn to London was uppermost in his mind. Accepting that discretion is the better part of valor, Ashley allowed his cousin to embrace him a second time. He gently deflected the lipstick-covered mouth onto his cheek. Both groups of cousins completed their greeting under the watchful eye of the woman. Aunt Bridget stepped forward.

The French Governess

“Children, this is Mademoiselle D'Araignee. She will be your Governess,” she said.

For the first time Ashley, had a chance to examine her. It was difficult to assess her age but he thought her to be in her early thirties. She was quite beautiful, tall, slim and athletic. Beneath the raven black hair, fastened in a chignon on her neck, her skin was completely unlined. She possessed a perfectly chiseled nose beneath high arched brows; the mouth was full, her lips formed into disdainful smile. Mlle D'Araignee's eyes drew you immediately. They were unblinking as a spider's, black, almost matching her hair, piercing and cold. They looked at Ashley now, examining him as though he was an insect that had just caught in her web.

Her dress was in the same style as Aunt Bridget's. Ashley remembered it was called the “Gibson Girl” style, Mlle D'Araignee's skirt was of dark green and white striped silk worn with a high-necked blouse. It looked very formal and businesslike.

Ashley held out his hand. “How do you do, Mlle D'Araignee? I'm very pleased to meet you.”

There was a gasp from Evan and Ashley caught a look of fear in his eyes. It was obvious that he, Ashley, had just committed a serious faux pas. For a moment he thought Mlle D'Araignee was about to ignore his greeting. Instead, she accepted his hand and with an amused note in her voice said, “How do you do, Lord Ashley? I'm pleased to meet you.”

Mlle D'Araignee turned to Aunt Bridget.

“Your ward is very well-mannered. It seems there will be little trouble training him.”

Immediately, Ashley took the deepest umbrage. How dare she speak about him like that to his Aunt. He had been brought up to respect his elders and be polite. But that didn't include servants, even the semiprofessionals like a Governess. He had been encouraged to be assertive and to have opinions of his own. Now as the “man of the house”, he was very concerned about both his and his sister's future. Now Mlle D'Araignee, no more than hired help, was interfering in family business.

Before Aunt Bridget could reply, Ashley said, “I'm sure Mlle D'Araignee is only trying to help, Aunt Bridget, but both Alyce and I are quite old enough to do without a Governess. As we are about to enter University, we certainly don't need the services of Mlle D'Araignee.”

Ashley saw a look of fury come across Mlle D'Araignee's face. She looked angry enough to hit him. With a visible effort, she controlled herself and a cold smile replaced her wrath. She turned to Lady Stewart and said, “Tomorrow we'll begin, and I'll enjoy working with our young gentleman.”

At that moment, Madame Hester entered to say dinner was ready to be served. To Ashley's surprise, Mlle D'Araignee joined them, seating herself at the head of the table. As soon as they were seated, two maids came forward and tied large satin bibs about Evan and Erin's neck. They must be mortified at having to wear those in company, thought Ashley. One look at Evan's face was enough to confirm this. He was flabbergasted; why on earth were they accepting such humiliation so meekly?

Mlle D'Araignee took little part in the dinner conversation. Instead, Ashley felt her watching him throughout the meal. Aunt Bridget was concerned with how the funeral had gone and had Elizabeth returned home. The meal was not a happy occasion and Ashley was surprised when Mlle D'Araignee said it was time for Evan and Erin to retire. It was still early, only 8:00 PM, but he and Alyce were only too happy to comply. Aunt Bridget said they were to use the guest bedrooms. Tomorrow, they'd be moving into their permanent rooms.

One of the maids took him to his room.

"Megan is my name, Lord Ashley, and I'll be looking after you."

She was pretty in a plumpish fashion and spoke with a strong country accent. Lying on the pillow was a ruffled silk blue night shirt. He asked that it be changed for a pair of pajamas. Megan apologized, saying that these were provided on the instructions of Mlle D'Araignee and it was impossible to change them. Ashley considered sleeping in the T-shirt he wore beneath his sweater. In the end he decided to accept the proffered garment.

Worn out by the travel and not wanting another argument, he removed his clothes and washed before sliding the nightshirt over his head. He shivered as the silken fabric slithered sensuously down his body. With no further ado, he slid between soft cotton sheets and was quickly overtaken by unbroken sleep.

The Awakening

Ashley was awakened by the insistent hand on his shoulder.

"Come, Lord Ashley. It's time to wake up, it's eight o'clock. Time for you to be out of bed."

Bright sunlight was streaming into the room as he finally heeded Megan's voice.

"I've run a bath for you, my Lord," she said.

Ashley struggled out of the nightshirt and sank into the hot water, before he realized it was heavily scented. The next moment, the door opened as Megan entered the bathroom holding a soft wash cloth with which to wash him. Ashley asked her to leave, but the maid said these were her instructions. He insisted that she leave him; with great reluctance she did so, saying she'd report his behavior to Madame Hester.

With a towel draped about him, Ashley moved back into the bedroom to begin the chore of dressing. Megan returned and she was holding a pair of long bloomers of white silk. The elasticized legs were adorned with deep frills of lace. Laid out on the

bed were other strange articles of clothing. Ashley could see they were all about his size.

Megan said, "I've laid out your uniform for today, Lord Ashley. We'll have to hurry or you'll be late for breakfast."

Ashley was dumbfounded. "There must be some mistake," he finally managed to blurt out. "These can't be for *me*, they are girls' clothing."

"I'm sorry, Lord Ashley, but those were Mlle D'Araignee's instructions," Megan replied.

"I won't wear them, now please fetch my other clothing. Hurry up, this is becoming quite absurd," said Ashley.

He stood in the middle of the room refusing to dress, clutching the towel tightly about him. Megan disappeared and returned accompanied by Peggy, the burly chauffeur and Mlle D'Araignee. It was evident that the Governess was extremely annoyed; her face was black as thunder and in her hand she carried a slender leather dog whip.

"Lord Ashley, why are you not dressed?" Her voice was icy cold with rage.

"Because, Mlle D'Araignee, these are *girls* clothes. I'm not sure what is going on. Please fetch my own clothing immediately. You are making me very angry."

He tried to be calm, but could not avoid looking at the whip she kept tapping against her leg. A shiver went up his back as he began to feel an unreasonable fear and to understand the dramatic change brought about in his two cousins.

"I would like you to get dressed now, Ashley." Mlle D'Araignee's voice was deceptively calm.

"Mademoiselle, I am becoming rather tired of this. It is quite ridiculous. I am a guest in this house and will not be ordered about by the servants. Now, fetch some proper clothes immediately so I can talk to my Aunt." Ashley used the tone that had always made other people jump to do his bidding.

It had no effect on this occasion. Instead, Mlle D'Araignee nodded to Peggy. The chauffeur stepped quickly forward and seized Ashley's wrists. He tried to twist free but found himself helpless in her grasp. With almost contemptuous ease, she took both of his slender wrists in one hand and pulled the towel from about his waist with the other. Peggy bent his naked body over the bed and held him there. His head was forced down into the bedclothes, lifting his buttocks high in the air.

Before he could cry out, he heard a swish and unbelievable pain exploded through his whole body. Never before had Ashley experienced corporal punishment. His parents had believed in reason and he had never been physically punished before. Ashley had not believed such pain existed. A white hot knife seemed to run completely through him. Before he could cry out, the whip slashed across his buttocks a second time.

"Well Ashley, are you willing to dress?"

Before he could scream his agreement, he heard the whip once again swish towards him.

“Yes, yes, I'll do what you say! *Please* stop,” he screamed. There was a sickening thud as the whip slashed into the bed alongside him.

At once, Peggy released him and helped him to his feet. He stood before Mlle D'Araignee, tears welling in his eyes.

“I will *not* have disobedience from my pupils! When you are asked to do something, you must do it instantly. Do you understand?” she asked.

Ashley nodded his head. He squealed again as the whip lashed against his bare leg and another blinding flash of pain passed through his body.

“Come, that wasn't too hard. Just a reminder for you. When you answer my questions, it is good manners to say, ‘Yes, Mlle D'Araignee.’ Is that clear, Ashley?”

Ashley was so shaken he almost repeated his mistake, but at the last moment managed to say, “Yes, Mlle D'Araignee.”

The Governess looked him up and down, examining his slender girlish frame. Her lips curled in a contemptuous smile as she said, “Why on earth you protest about wearing women's clothes, I'll never know.”

With his mind in turmoil and his thoughts confused, he made no further protest as Megan began to dress him. About his waist went a satin and lace garter belt. It was quite broad, covering from the top of his hips to just below his chest and he had to breathe deeply before Megan could fasten it. Once in place, it was quite uncomfortable; a half-dozen suspenders dangled down his legs. Ashley had to sit while the maid rolled white silk stockings up his legs.

As the pain gradually diminished, Ashley grew more conscious of the humiliation he had suffered. To his consternation, he realized he was having an erection. It was impossible to hide and by the time Megan had smoothed the stockings up his legs and tightened the suspenders, he was fully erect. Peggy noticed it first and her giggles gained the attention of Mlle D'Araignee and Madame Hester. By this time, Ashley was scarlet with embarrassment and was only too happy to hide himself within the voluminous white silk bloomers Megan drew up his legs.

Mlle D'Araignee and Madame Hester left the room, still chuckling at his discomfort. Megan and Peggy continued the dressing; over his head Megan drew a silk and lace camisole. Ashley reacted to the soft caress of silk as it slithered down his body, sending excitement coursing through him. A blouse was next, of pale blue silk. The long full sleeves finished with delicate cream lace frills, and a high-necked Eton collar trimmed with the same cream lace. Taking a broad dark blue satin ribbon, Megan slid this beneath the collar and fashioned a large floppy bow tie.

Megan slid a pair of pants up his legs. Ashley breathed a sigh of relief; at least his shame would be covered. They were of pale blue panne velvet. They fitted tightly, clinging to his thighs before flaring slightly. The cuffs were trimmed with a band of dark blue satin and these reached only to the top of his knees. Emerging from beneath them were the elasticized legs and the cream lace frills of his bloomers. Next was a jacket fashioned in the “Eton” style: very short-waisted with three-quarter sleeves. Megan adjusted the blouse, ballooning it about his waist and cuffs.

Megan instructed Ashley to seat himself. He did so gingerly, his buttocks still tender. Megan fitted low-heeled ankle strap shoes to his feet. In white glaze kid, they gleamed softly against the white silk stockings. Ashley started to protest as Megan began using makeup on his face. Peggy swished the whip against her skirt in warning and he immediately stopped. He could taste the lipstick, then something covered his eyelids.

Megan said, "Just a moment 'til I fix your hair."

He felt a ribbon being fixed into his long blonde hair. In that moment he wished he'd had it cut short as Aunt Elizabeth had wanted.

There was one saving grace; at least he was not asked to view himself in the mirror. That would be just *too* awful. Ashley had begun to recover some of his spirit, but he still felt caught up in a nightmare. He wanted to see Aunt Bridget as soon as possible. Ashley was certain that she would not allow this travesty to continue. He wanted his clothes back and a promise to allow him to lead a normal life. If not, Alyce and he would return immediately to London. After all, he would have a title upon reaching his majority and that was only months away. If the authorities would not allow them to live on their own, he was certain Aunt Elizabeth would take them in.

Alyce! What on earth had happened to her? Every morning it was Alyce who dragged him out of bed. He was about to ask when Megan took his hand.

"Come along, Lord Ashley, you're late for breakfast."

A Pinafore For Lord Ashley

As Ashley entered the breakfast room, he saw his sister had received similar treatment. Alyce was dressed in an identical costume to his own and from the redness of her eyes he could tell she had experienced Mlle D'Araignee's whip. Alyce was standing near the wall. Close to her were Evan and Erin. There was little surprise in finding them wearing the same costume.

Moments later, Mlle D'Araignee entered the room. Both cousins stood together, came to attention and, with their fingers delicately holding the hems of their shorts, performed a curtsy.

At her "Good morning, children," they both replied in unison, "Good morning, Mlle D'Araignee."

They stood together at attention as the Governess carefully examined their clothing and dress. Erin was congratulated, but she found fault with Evan's nail polish. There was a tiny crack on the left finger and Mlle D'Araignee ordered two demerits.

Ashley saw Madame Hester enter this into a large black note book. On completion, she showed it to Mlle D'Araignee.

"That makes ten this week, Evan. Do you know what that means?" said Mlle D'Araignee, a mean smile forming on her lips.

All the color fled from Evan's face. He was so obviously stricken with fear, his voice was barely audible when he murmured.

“Please, Mlle D'Araignee, I deserve two strokes of your whip.”

“Come now, Evan, *two* strokes? That would be Erin's punishment. What is yours for the same offense? What must we do for *you*?”

There was a distinct tremor in his voice as he said, “Please, Mlle D'Araignee, I deserve four strokes of your whip.”

“Yes you do, Evan, and we will add another two for forgetting to ask for the correct number. After gym, Peggy will administer punishment.”

The Governess removed the slender leather whip from her wrist and, opening the loop, hung it about Evan's neck.

“There now, this will remind you of what you are about to receive. Now Evan, I want you and Erin to help the new children with their pinafores.”

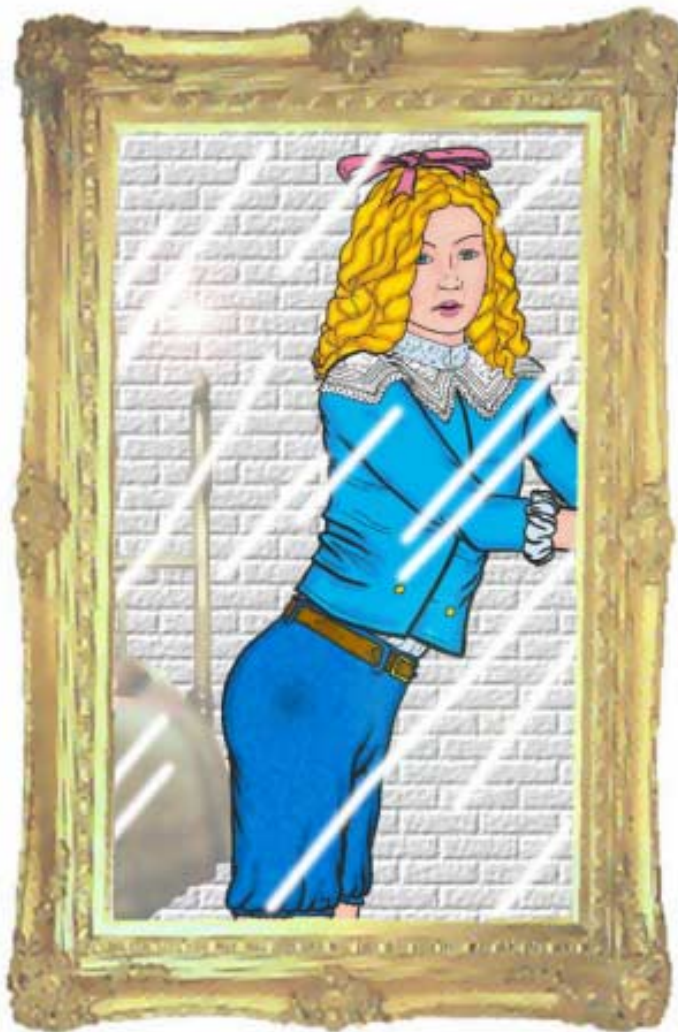
As Mlle D'Araignee turned to walk away, Ashley said, “Excuse me, Mlle D'Araignee, I would like to speak to my Aunt. Where would I find her please?”

Ashley's question bought a deathly hush to the room except for a gasp from Evan. Mlle D'Araignee turned slowly and fixed two gimlet eyes on Ashley. Mlle D'Araignee was smiling, but there was no mistaking the menace in her voice as she said, “Lord Ashley, you must wait to be noticed before addressing me, otherwise you lose four demerits. As you are new, I will overlook it this morning. But that is your final warning. Now, why do you wish to see Lady Stewart?”

Despite the fear that had been steadily growing since he entered the household, Ashley refused to be intimidated. After all, he would soon be a Knight of the Realm in his own right.

“This is a personal matter, Mlle D'Araignee, and I prefer to discuss it directly with my Aunt,” he said, trying desperately to hide the nervousness he felt from his voice.

Her eyes continued to stare at him. Ashley felt transfixed, as helpless as a fly caught in her web. After what seemed an eternity she said, “Normally, I act for Lady Stewart,



but on this occasion you may speak to her direct. Peggy will take you to her after breakfast.”

As Mlle D'Araignee strode from the room, Ashley could see Evan and Erin were still transfixed by his temerity. Even Alyce, normally very outspoken, appeared completely cowed in Mlle D'Araignee's presence.

Evan and Erin collected from a large cupboard four snowy white garments. They were of fine eyeleted Swiss voile, so sheer as to be almost transparent. A large frill of silk organdy ran completely around the garment, foaming along the sides, armholes, and neckline. Evan helped him unbutton the shoulder and left side, then fitted it to his body. It floated down, enveloping his body almost to his ankles and swirled about him with every movement.

He shuddered as the pinafore brushed sensuously against his silk-clad ankles. Never had he felt so humiliated; the ridiculous suit he was wearing was bad enough but the pinafore was *really* mortifying. Ashley had tried to psychologically adjust to this situation by pretending (at least for the moment) he was in fancy dress. He might have succeeded except for the pinafore. Being dressed in *that* made the self-deception impossible. The garment was designed to demean them, to reduce their status to that of children. Wearing it with the silk and lace bloomers, the satin blouse and makeup made him feel so feminized that he just wanted to hide away and cry.

He turned to protest and saw the triumphant look in Peggy's eyes. She wanted another chance to punish him and use the whip to humble him further. Ashley was not ready for another confrontation which he could not win. With as much dignity as he could assemble, Ashley seated himself at the table. Apart from asking politely for the various ingredients on the table, there was little talk among the participants. Evan was still very preoccupied with his forthcoming punishment. His whole body seemed to quiver whenever the whip, now hanging beneath the pinafore, happened to touch his arm or swung against his body.

The maids standing waiting for their charges to finish, glowered at Ashley and Alyce as they began talking to each other. He signaled with his eyes, begging her silence. Poor Alyce was clearly intimidated by all that was going on about her. Ashley did not want to add to her problems by talking to her. Instead, he tried to lift her spirits by gently squeezing her hand beneath the table. He at least succeeded in bringing a tiny smile to her lips.

By now Ashley was finding his new clothing quite difficult to handle. The frills on the sleeves of his blouse kept covering his hands; several times they narrowly escaped dipping into his drink. He also discovered the silken underwear was having an effect on his body. Each time he moved, the slippery sensuous fabrics slithered across his skin and he could hear a sibilant hiss as the silk stockings slid up and down, interacting with his silk bloomers. There was a pleasant tickle as the gossamer frills of his pinafore tickled his smooth skin through the stockings.

It had proved impossible to ignore the sensation. The reaction to it all was centered between his legs and he knew that again he was quite firmly erect. He prayed that before it was time to leave the table everything would once more be under control, or at least that his pinafore would help disguise his embarrassing condition.