



A Baffling Regency Romance (The League of Meddling Butlers #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: Six Meddling Butlers and a Baffling Lady.

Matthew Jordan, Viscount Bramley, only son of the Earl of Wisterley, has spent the past few seasons in Town sowing some oats. Very little has troubled him, but trouble has currently relocated into his house. His father, the earl, has arrived and he is determined his son wed in all haste. The old soldier is fixated on his son procuring a whopping dowry to prop up the estate.

Lady Constance Condower, daughter of the Earl of DeWitton, seems to come into her season with a respectable, albeit not eye-watering, dowry of three thousand pounds. Lady Constance has a secret though—through a distant relation she is an heiress of twenty-three thousand pounds. All in her sphere are determined to keep the secret, thereby throwing fortune hunters off the scent.

Mr. Harold P. Wilburn, butler to the Earl of Wisterley, considers himself the unnamed director of The League, an elite and secret club of six refined butlers. He has carefully composed his words to his esteemed colleagues, gently hinting that his earl desires Lord Bramley to secure a sizable dowry without having to come right out and say it is required to buoy up a sinking ship.

As the season progresses, the earl and his butler take every opportunity to throw two particular ladies in front of Lord Bramley—Lady Juniper and Miss Semper are the heiresses of the season. Lord Bramley, confoundingly, keeps going in another direction. Lady Constance's direction. An unsuitable direction.

As for Lady Constance, she is certain somebody knows about her inheritance, though she is not certain if that person is Lord Bramley. Fortunately, Lady Constance, Lady Juniper, and Miss Semper join forces, determined to get to the truth.

After a mysterious letter arrives, it seems all is lost for Bramley. Love hangs in the balance, and it will be up to Lady Constance to unravel a Gordian knot of opposing facts.

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32 Grosvenor Square, 1803

Matthew watched his father, the Earl of Wisterley, pace the library. His parents had arrived to Grosvenor Square the night before, but he'd been conveniently absent. He'd left them a note claiming he was not certain which day they would arrive so he'd gone to his club.

When he'd returned home in the early hours of the morning, he'd found that his father had written him a note back. They had arrived, and he would see his son in the library at precisely eleven o'clock.

Eleven was rather early for a meeting in the library.

"Woke you up, did I?" the earl said, no doubt noting his less than exuberant appearance.

"I was out very late, Father."

"I suppose you were. Now listen here, this gallivanting about Town has gone on for three years and it's come to an end. You must marry this season."

"I really do not see what the rush is," Matthew said.

"You know very well why," the earl said uncomfortably.

"But are things as bad as all that?" Matthew asked. He hoped the answer was no, but he was not certain of it.

“Let’s put it this way—if you do not bring an infusion of cash into the estate and then produce an issue who will eventually grow and marry and bring another infusion and so on, there will be no estate to call your family seat. Do you not know how these things work? Our estate has never covered our costs, we always need to bring in a bride with a significant dowry. It is the way of England.”

His father had said something like it a hundred times before. But Matthew thought the logic did not quite hold up. If his family could not generate extra pounds and pence, then how were other families coming up with dowries?

It remained a bit of a mystery, though he understood from his mother that she and the earl were greatly relieved that no daughter ever hit the nursery, as they had no idea what they would have done about it.

Still, though his father had been harping on the subject for several years, this was the first time the old soldier had come to Town for the season. Matthew supposed the earl meant to increase the pressure by being in the house—ever staring and inquiring into where he was going.

Matthew was not sure what to do about it. On the one hand, he did not like to let his father down or shirk his duties to the estate. On the other hand, he did not like to set out on a fortune hunt. Was he to just take note of the largest dowries going and then pretend to be hopelessly besotted with the ladies who brought them? He did not think his acting skills would be quite that good.

Matthew had been long hopeful of encountering a lady who bowled him over, who at the same time bowled over his father with money. He wished for the sort of marriage his grandparents had. They had disappeared from dinners and winked at each other right to the end of their days.

Certainly, there was a lady out there who would affect him so. It was just that he had

not encountered her yet. Of course, he also knew that he'd not spent much time in places a lady such as that would be.

He well knew he spent far too much time at his club. Of the times he had gone to balls, and Almack's even, he'd not been bowled over by anybody. Rather, he'd felt like a hunted animal. He could not fathom why, either. He was not the greatest catch in the world. His lady would eventually become the countess of a respectably sized estate, but there were far bigger fish floating round the bachelor seas just now.

"It's Wednesday," the earl said. "I've arranged it all—your mother and I will accompany you to Almack's. Put your practical hat on, son. It's time to do your duty."

Matthew nodded, though he'd really rather say no, turn on his heel, and stalk off. There was only one person in the world who held sway over him and that was his father. He could not get round the idea that the gentleman deserved his respect. As a compromise of sorts, he did not always do what the old fellow wished, but he did not trouble him with outspoken defiance either.

Almack's. He supposed it would be a very long evening.

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Lady Constance Condower, daughter of the Countess and Earl of DeWitton, considered the two dresses her mother had selected as being the most appropriate for Almack's. A certain Madame LeFray had been brought in as her modiste and had spent months living with them at DeWitton Hall on the run up to the season.

The madam had brought with her a coterie of seamstresses and most of the west wing had been given over to them for bedchambers and work rooms. Constance could sometimes hear the young seamstresses' laughter drifting down the corridors and it

made her wistful that she did not have sisters and brothers.

No expense had been spared in preparing her wardrobe, nor had any expense needed to be spared. Constance was a very rich young woman, though how that had come about had been very much a surprise.

A distant cousin named Mr. Harold DeWitton Canbury had, many years back, decided to take his chances in America. He'd done exceedingly well for himself, but he'd kept his success under wraps lest he have cousins of all descriptions turning up on his New York doorstep.

He did not, in his later years, have any close relations. He'd never married and his only brother had died without issue. Mr. Canbury had been ignored and then forgotten by the rest of his extended relations.

Ignored, but for Constance and her mother.

The countess remembered Harold fondly from their youth and had always worried about him setting off for the wilds of America. She'd kept up a regular correspondence with him, always encouraging him to come back home should the barbaric nature of Americans become too much for him.

Mr. Canbury had never agreed to come home, and he'd also been exceedingly vague about his circumstances. The countess had been left with the impression that he was 'comfortable enough.'

When Constance had learned to write, her mother had set her to writing letters to Mr. Canbury in New York. It was considered great practice to write the letters and then Constance was always rather thrilled to receive a letter back from the far-off town of New York. The contents of those letters she received were always very kind. She might write of the upset of not being able to locate a certain stuffed rabbit that was

necessary to her sleep. Mr. Canbury would respond with a full paragraph over his concern regarding the current location of Bitty-Bunny and inquire if she'd checked under the bed as that was a known hiding place for such creatures. He'd been right—Bitty-Bunny had been under the bed.

As she got older, they spoke of other things. There was a time when she wrote very extensively about her pony, Daffodil, and then she reached a time where she was out of patience to be older, and finally a time when she was older and contemplated her coming out season. Whatever she'd wished to write about, Mr. Canbury always took her thoughts and opinions seriously and she adored him for it.

Then four months ago, a solicitor sent them a letter. He must see the countess at her earliest convenience—Mr. Canbury had died.

At that moment, Constance's mother had presumed that it was to be laid at her door all the arrangements that must be made for her departed cousin. She was happy to do it, and she was determined that he should be brought home and buried in England.

That was not what the solicitor had come about, though. It seemed that Mr. Canbury had no close relations and he'd lived a lonely and isolated sort of existence. One of the bright spots in his life had been the letters he received from the countess and Constance. Therefore, they were to inherit all of that gentleman's worldly goods.

Mr. Canbury turned out to have quite the pile of worldly goods.

The countess was bequeathed twenty-six thousand pounds, the proceeds from the sale of his house, and all his art and furniture. Constance was bequeathed twenty thousand pounds.

They were all very rich now, but it was a closely held secret. Nobody knew of the inheritance, and they would keep it that way until Constance married.

The fortune hunters who cruised through London like sharks looking for a rich fish would swim by Constance Condower, blind to her allurements. She would be forever grateful for her father to have seen the sense in it. Both the earl and his wife had a dozen ideas of making improvements to the estate, but they would wait. They would not draw attention or speculation until Constance was safely wed.

The gentleman who did propose would believe he would receive three thousand pounds from her dowry. Respectable, but not enough to catch a fortune hunter's eye. Those fortune hunters would beat themselves about the head when the contract was drawn up and the truth was known—the real amount she brought was twenty-three thousand.

“Well, what do you think?” the countess asked as they examined the dresses that lay on Constance's bed.

One was a divine dark blue silk with embroidered violets of the same color lining the neck and delicate puff sleeves. The other was a cream silk with no embellishments, just an elegant and precise cut that Madame LaFray called *grace et facilité*.

“I think the cream does better for my coloring,” Constance said. She did not say, but often thought, that her coloring was not very interesting. She was brown-haired and brown-eyed and, as she had spent the warmer months mostly atop her horse, her complexion was just now a little brown too. She had once pronounced it drab and her mother had said it was “not that bad.”

The countess nodded at her choice of dress. “Now, my darling, you are not to get yourself in a lather about Almack's. I know Lady Jane went on and on about her nerves over being faced with the patronesses, but it's all nonsense.”

Constance smiled. She was ever so fond of Jane, but she suspected it had been all nonsense. Jane had named the patronesses dragons of the worst sort. Though, when

pressed, she could not claim they'd breathed any fire on her. Lady Jane was mercurial and could be the most practical or the most fanciful lady alive, depending on the day.

"You do not think anyone will know?" Constance asked.

It was not necessary to explain what the thing was that people might know. Both she and her mother knew very well that they spoke of the money.

"No, I do not. The only people in the world who know of it are the solicitor, you, me, your father, and Letty. We can all be trusted."

Constance nodded. She had been assured that the solicitor could not reveal anything he knew even if he wished to. Her parents were a given. And then of course, Letty was her lady's maid and they were thick as thieves. Letty would never betray her.

"That is the only thing I really worry over," she said. "Let the patronesses breathe fire on me if they wish, I only pray that the money stays a secret."

Constance was determined to marry for love, without the taint of money hanging over the whole thing. She could not go forward for the rest of her life wondering if it had been an inducement.

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Mr. Wilburn experienced the smallest of tremblings as he entered the league's headquarters in Cheapside. His fellow members were all arriving, on time as always. This was to be his moment, the moment he led his illustrious colleagues in matchmaking.

It must all go smoothly. There must not be the windings and turns and ups and downs of last season. He would not tolerate such tomfoolery.

They had entered the main room of the place, it having another room in the back overlooking a garden that served as a library and smoking room.

The room was not overlarge, but it had been comfortably appointed. There was a thick carpet underfoot and they had arranged the chairs in a circle, each with its own side table to the right. A large oval table sat in the middle of the circle for a tea tray and other conveniences.

Mrs. Bellkey, the landlord's wife, had kept the place spotless for them. Now, she bustled in with a tea tray.

"Welcome back, gentlemen," she said. "Mr. Belkey sends his regards and his hopes that you find the rooms in satisfactory order."

The six butlers had ranged themselves in their circle, each taking their own special chair.

"It is well done, Mrs. Belkey," Mr. Wilburn said, "just as we have come to expect."

Mrs. Belkey nodded and her expression said she'd been sure that would be the case. And why not? They must be the easiest tenants Mr. Belkey had ever had. They were not there too often, and not at all when it was not the season, they paid on time, and they paid to have it cleaned weekly.

The door shut behind Mrs. Belkey and each gentleman took his tea.

"Mr. Harkinson," Mr. Wilburn said, "do provide us with an update on last year's efforts. How do the duke and his new duchess get on?"

Mr. Harkinson had led the last season's adventure, and frankly it had been a little too adventurous for Mr. Wilburn's taste. Lady Jemima and the Duke of Barstow had wed,

but what a struggle to get there.

“They get on splendidly, Mr. Wilburn,” Mr. Harkinson said.

Mr. Wilburn was glad to hear it, considering the time they’d had of it. Though, Mr. Harkinson looked strangely wide-eyed just now. He supposed it had to do with the question of head injuries. They’d spent a deal of time under the impression that Lady Jemima had suffered a blow to the head to account for her various surprising attributes. Then they’d invented the duke having had a blow too, to make her sympathetic toward him. Recently, though, there had been talk that neither one of them had experienced a blow.

Mr. Wilburn did not know where the truth really lay, but he thought they’d all be well-served to wash their hands of it.

“I think we must consider last year’s first venture into matchmaking as a resounding success,” Mr. Penny said. “We had our moments of doubt, but we persevered.”

“Cum Virtute!” Mr. Browning said.

“Cum Virtute,” the members answered in unison, all heads turned toward the wood plaque over the mantel. It was their motto, elegantly carved—with valor. Whatever was to beset them, they would go forward with valor.

Mr. Wilburn thought some valor would not go amiss this season. It could not possibly be as harrowing as Mr. Harkinson’s entry onto the field, but there were some small difficulties to contend with.

“Mr. Wilburn,” Mr. Browning said, “you are to take the lead this season—tell us where we are.”

Mr. Wilburn had, of course, known this moment would come. He must acquaint his fellow members with the truth. Or at least part of it.

“As you know, gentlemen,” he said, “many of our esteemed English families must keep a close eye on the subject of...the matter of...dowries.”

None of them said anything, but there was some grave nodding being done, which was rather encouraging.

“The Earl of Wisterley is desirous that young Viscount Bramley keep practicality in mind when choosing a wife.”

Mr. Wilburn stopped there and hoped the members were astute enough that he did not need to elaborate.

“Oh I see,” Mr. Penny said. “The earl hopes his son will wed a lady with a respectable dowry. Quite right, to my mind.”

“Perhaps more than respectable,” Mr. Wilburn said, shifting on his chair.

“How much more than respectable?” Mr. Rennington asked, putting the teacup down that was just now shaking in his hand.

“A very good dowry, I think he means to say,” Mr. Harkinson said.

“An excellent dowry, is what I mean to say,” Mr. Wilburn answered. It was uncomfortable to establish that point, but that point must be established.

“A excellent dowry? How many excellent dowries are hanging about?” Mr. Feldstaffer said. “I knew something would go wrong.”

Mr. Wilburn stared sternly at Mr. Feldstaffer. If that fellow was told the sun was up, he'd think something had gone wrong because it was bound to go down again.

"Nothing has gone wrong, Mr. Feldstaffer," Mr. Wilburn said.

"Wrong is barreling down the road right toward us," Mr. Feldstaffer muttered, always unwilling to admit that things weren't going wrong.

"Let us put our heads together, gentlemen," Mr. Penny said. "There is no use trying to turn the earl's mind from what he wishes for, therefore we must attempt to achieve it."

Mr. Wilburn nodded gravely and was rather thankful that none of them had bothered to inquire what Viscount Bramley, the earl's son, wished for.

That rascal did not wish to marry at all this moment. At least, not as his father would have it. Last evening, Viscount Bramley had done an awful lot of complaining to his valet, who relayed it all to the eager ears in the servants' hall at breakfast.

Apparently, the viscount said he wished to marry when he became "bowled over" by some lady. Mr. Wilburn presumed this was some ridiculous notion of romantic love.

What was it with these young people, thinking romance was a necessary requirement?

Mr. Wilburn was not married himself, but were he to ever consider it, being bowled over would not be on his list of requirements!

"Mr. Penny," Mr. Wilburn said, "I have already resigned myself to your very sensible suggestion of working to satisfy the earl's requirements. I have thought deeply and it seems to me that the two most promising candidates are Lady Juniper Croydon,

coming with fifteen thousand, and Miss Bessy Semper, coming with ten thousand.”

“Bessy?” Mr. Browning said. “We have a cow named Bessy on the estate.”

“We all have a cow named Bessy on the estate,” Mr. Harkinson said.

“That is neither here nor there,” Mr. Wilburn said.

“Ah, now I never like to disparage a lady,” Mr. Penny said, “but I have heard that Lady Juniper is...or rather is not...very genial?”

“It’s said she snaps at people. I suppose she even snaps at the butler,” Mr. Browning said.

This did give the members pause. It was a rather horrifying idea to be snapped at. Mr. Wilburn was no less affected, and perhaps more—if Lord Bramley were to wed that lady, he might very well find himself snapped at. He was a butler. The only person who dared snap at him was the earl, and that had only happened twice over the years.

Of course, poor Mr. Rennington was routinely snapped at by his housekeeper. But that was thought to be a one in a thousand aberration!

Nevertheless, the snapping lady came with sufficient funds.

“Well now, I suppose Miss Semper will be found to be pleasant,” Mr. Penny said.

Mr. Feldstaffer snorted. “It is said she resembles nothing so much as an overdecorated petit gateau—she is short and her dressmaker has piled on every frippery in London. She is a walking pastry. We are doomed.”

“Whatever deficiencies may be present in her wardrobe can be fixed, I’m sure. The

question is” Mr. Wilburn said, “what can we do to push these two ladies in Viscount Bramley’s direction?”

“My cousin is cook to the Earl of Wellerston, Lady Juniper’s father,” Mr. Rennington said. “I might tell him the viscount looks for a wife. Lady Juniper’s lady’s maid will know it soon enough, then the lady herself will know it soon enough.”

“I see what you say, Mr. Rennington,” Mr. Penny said. “It will pique her interest and separate our viscount from all the fellows who are just out for a jolly time.”

Mr. Feldstaffer shook his head and whispered, “Men who are jolly are not fully awake to this world.”

Fortunately, they were all so accustomed to Mr. Feldstaffer’s rather depressing views that nobody took notice of the comment.

“Oh and I have an old friend who is the coachman for Lady Florence Mullery,” Mr. Browning said. “I understand Miss Semper stays there for the season.”

“We will put the word out to those two ladies,” Mr. Wilburn said.

“Perhaps we do not think big enough,” Mr. Browning said. “Perhaps we let all the ton know that Viscount Bramley is ready to settle himself with the right young lady. Our connections are very good, but there may be a lady we are not yet aware of who would fulfill our requirements.”

“That is a promising idea,” Mr. Wilburn said. “One cannot be too careful or assume too much.”

“And we might even softly hint that he requires an excellent dowry, thereby weeding out anybody who would not suit,” Mr. Browning said.

Mr. Harkinson waved his hands. “No, no, no, we cannot do that. My experience last year was very eye-opening. It seems that a lady is only interested in knowing if the gentleman is entirely overcome by her. Bringing a balance sheet into it will chase them all away.”

“Mr. Harkinson is right, women are not very sensible creatures,” Mr. Rennington said. “We cannot overlook that fact. Just yesterday, my earl’s housekeeper said if I spoke to her one more time without looking her in the face, she would turn my face with a broom.”

“Why?” Mr. Browning asked.

“Nobody knows,” Mr. Rennington said sadly.

“We are decided,” Mr. Wilburn said, thoroughly unwilling to consider what Mr. Rennington’s housekeeper might do next. “We put it about the ton that Viscount Bramley has an eye to wed.”

The members all nodded in agreement.

As for Mr. Wilburn, he had fingers and toes crossed that Viscount Bramley would be promptly bowled over by either Lady Juniper or Miss Bessy Semper. Despite their less than stellar descriptions.

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Matthew wished to get his hands on the carriage door and throw himself to the pavement. How had this trip gone on so long? How could ten minutes seem like ten hours?

He was trapped in the carriage with his mother and father and they'd decided the ride to Almack's was the perfect opportunity to revisit the idea that he must marry a pile of money. Or rather, his father took the opportunity to revisit the idea. His mother, a lady who found it inconvenient to ruffle anybody's feathers, least of all her earl's, just occasionally murmured, "You see how it is, goodness, the way of the world..."

As they finally, blessedly, slowed and came to a stop on King Street, his father said, "I've done my due diligence regarding what we're looking for—I know the dowries of every unmarried lady in Town. Wilburn has been remarkably helpful in it, though God only knows how he manages to know so much. Keep your eye out for Lady Juniper Croydon. There's also a Miss Semper floating round the Town, though I doubt she's got the credentials to turn up here."

"I suppose this is what my grandfather told you as a single gentleman going into Almack's? And then you met Mama?"

This, as Matthew had supposed it would, did fluster the old man. "What? Oh, well...you see...it had not been necessary as I was quite struck by your mother."

The countess nodded congenially. "It was only an extra blessing that I brought seven thousand, my dear."

Extra blessing indeed.

He supposed he could give his parents credit for muddling on together, though he did not think for a moment that his father had been struck. His father had done what was being asked of him now—find and wed a pile of pounds.

Matthew wanted more, though. Somehow, he must have more time to find the right lady. Somehow, his grandfather had managed it and he would too. His grandfather often told the story of walking into a house party in Yorkshire, setting eyes on his grandmother, and that was it. When Matthew had come for his first season, he'd gone to places like Almack's hoping for just the same. It had not happened, though, and he'd given it up.

Though he'd not been to Almack's in years, he would not have known that by any changes made to the place. It was as staid as ever.

They entered the ballroom and that was not changed either. It was still filled with the same people, or at least, the same attitudes even if some of the faces were new.

There was some strange effect Almack's had on people. It was as if the tightfistedness the patronesses kept over the vouchers made people feel as if they had climbed to a mountaintop and must be very careful not to slide back down again.

Never were so many grave people gathered for a ball.

Matthew surveyed the crowd, noting his acquaintances. Then his gaze stopped its travels.

Amidst the pastel spring flowers of silk and satin stood an elegant lady who had no need of announcing herself with a bright color. She was tall and exuded grace. Her hair was the color of strong coffee, her complexion spoke of sunshine. Her features were somehow delicate and determined at the same time.

He had a weakness for brunettes, especially that shade.

She wore a simple cream color with no bits and bobs and ruffles. She really wore it too. It was thoughtful and yet unstudied.

Sometimes, Matthew viewed the torturous confections of dresses on young ladies as a thing separate from themselves. They'd been wrestled into the thing, but the thing did not reflect them at all. It was as if they'd been swirled in icing to distract the eye from whatever was underneath. This simple and elegant dress was not one of those.

Matthew guessed she was no simpering and delicate flower who had been raised in the hothouse of a reserved and stifling drawing room. If his eyes did not tell him tales, she was a lady of some energy who preferred being atop a horse to closeted inside a carriage.

"Who is she?" he asked, hardly realizing he'd said it out loud. Nor did he know why he wondered. The lady stood with Lord DeWitton, who was a member of his club.

How had DeWitton not mentioned he had such a daughter waiting in the wings?

A sudden tap on his shoulder brought him to his senses. Lady Jersey had just hit him with her fan. "If you mean the brown-haired lady, that is Lady Constance Condower, daughter of the Earl of DeWitton. I give you leave for her card, if you like it." Lady Jersey paused and then smacked him with her fan once more. "Good to see you here again, Lord Bramley. Finally."

Lady Jersey sailed off to wield her fan elsewhere. His father said, "Forget it. I already know DeWitton has only funded her with three thousand."

Matthew did not answer but strode in the direction of the very interesting Lady Constance Condower.

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Constance found herself very thankful for Madame LaFray's diligent efforts in dressing her. When she'd arrived to King Street, she had the sudden feeling of needing some propping up. If she were not the prettiest lady at the ball, and she already knew she would not be, then she could at least be confident in her dress.

It had been an odd experience being introduced to a series of patronesses. Then odder still to discover that if a gentleman wished to put his name down on her card it must be sanctioned by those ladies first.

It seemed the sort of thing Lady Jane might have mentioned to her, rather than going on and on about the patronesses being dragons. They had not been dragons at all. Matrons who took themselves very seriously, yes. But not dragons.

Goodness, they had plenty of those sorts of matrons at home. All one need do is pay the proper respect, as that was all such women looked for. So she did, and was promptly named charming. Easiest thing in the world.

The far more nerve-wracking idea was her card. What if it remained blank, empty, unwritten upon? It would be noticed by everyone of any import in society. Her parents would be deeply embarrassed. What would they do about it? Take her home and hide her away for another year?

Constance knew very well that she was allowing her thoughts to run away with her.

Gracious, it felt as if she were for sale atop an apple cart. And she could not fool herself that she was the shiniest apple either. There was nothing about her that anybody ever picked out and commented upon. She was not known for her lovely hair or lovely eyes or lovely complexion. Her mother assured her that she was pretty, but there was nothing in particular to point to. As for Constance's own assessment

when looking in the glass, she generally came up with ‘could be worse.’

In a place like this, surrounded by all these glittering ladies, could be worse was not exactly sufficient.

Thankfully, a series of gentlemen did take this or that set. One of them even claimed he would take her into supper if he were not otherwise engaged for it.

Such had been her fright of shaming her family that she hardly noticed who these gentlemen were, nor knew if she would recognize them when they returned for her.

Constance was just grateful to them, whoever they were. She could not even tell from her card—most of them were just scribbles.

“Lady Constance?”

Constance turned to find a magnificent man standing in front of her. He was tall and broad shouldered and had dusky hair—the sort that would change its shade with the seasons, matching the constancy of the sun. He had dark blue eyes and the most perfect lips.

What on earth did he want with her?

“Ah, Bramley, how do?” her father said.

“Lord DeWitton,” the marvelous man named Lord Bramley said. “Lady DeWitton.”

Her mother nodded and smiled her acknowledgement.

“May I, Lady Constance?” Lord Bramley said.

“Goodness, yes,” Constance said. She did not know why she’d said it. A simple yes would have been sufficient. Who went round saying “Goodness, yes.”

She peered to see what he was doing, attempting to will the pencil in his hand toward the slot before supper, and also willing it away as it would be too nerve-wracking.

He did pencil in for supper. She squinted to be sure. Yes, he’d put his name down for supper. They would have extended conversation. Was that good or bad?

What would they talk about? She dearly hoped he had some ideas, as just now her mind was an alarming blank.

He handed her card back and bowed. “Until then, Lady Constance.”

Lord Bramley turned and walked off. Yes. Until then. She must get her mind working by then.

Gracious, her mother said Jane could be a bit of a ninny sometimes. Constance had never felt such a ninny in all her life.

“I do like Lord Bramley,” her mother said.

“Yes, fine fellow, he’s a member of my club,” her father said.

Constance did not know if being a member of her father’s club at all recommended him. However, she would agree that he was a very fine fellow. Very fine indeed.

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Mr. Frederick P. Ludwig, eldest son of Baron Finster, dusted off the last of his journey as his carriage barreled into Mayfair. The ship back to England had been as

harrowing as it always was. If one were not worried about pirates, there were always the interesting imaginings of sinking in a storm. If that did not occupy a person well enough, there was seasickness to keep one from falling into the doldrums.

The weather had been diabolical, and his stomach had railed against it. However, it had not been a total loss. Sometimes, one came upon information one did not even know they looked for.

Attempting to distract himself with strolls on deck, he'd become chummy with the captain. Then, that genial fellow had told him a story. It was not a story a person could do much with unless that person knew some other facts beforehand.

It seemed that on the ship's last sea voyage from New York, the body of a Mr. Harold DeWitton Canbury had made the crossing. The captain claimed poor Mr. Canbury had not one relation in America. Now, he was being returned to distraught relations in Surrey to be buried in the family graveyard.

That had caught his interest and set him to thinking. Having been in New York on several occasions on business, he of course knew of Mr. Canbury. The fellow was an old recluse worth somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty thousand pounds.

He also knew that Mr. Canbury had no wife or son. It would seem to him that any distraught relations bothering to ship his remains back to England must be the distraught inheritors of that fellow's fortune.

He'd pressed the captain to look into the ship's manifest for that voyage and give over the names of these distraught relations, under the guise of wishing to send his condolences.

DeWitton. The Countess of DeWitton was the distraught relation who would bury Mr. Canbury's remains in her graveyard.

He did not know the family, but he had high hopes that there was a daughter lurking about. There usually was a daughter hanging about as an inconvenience to everybody. A desperate spinster who would not question him too closely or have any other offers would be ideal.

If luck was on his side, he'd come out of it with a cracking dowry in hand.

In any case, it was something to talk about when he got home. His business in New York had gone nowhere and his father would not be enthusiastic to hear it.

They'd been counting on a windfall coming from that direction but it was not to be. His would-be investors had been a little too canny for it.

Somehow, they needed a windfall from somewhere, else the estate would need to be mortgaged. Everybody knew what a sinking ship that would be.

It was one thing to fear drowning in the ocean, but drowning in society was a deal more terrifying. What was he supposed to do if that happened? Get a job? They did not even have the funds for a commission in the army. They hadn't paid the rent for the house in Town. They'd lose the estate eventually, as who ever got out from under a mortgage? They would be titled and homeless nobodies.

He would not let that happen.

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Finally, Matthew's evening would take a turn for the better.

After engaging with Lady Constance, he'd dodged his father for a few minutes, but he could not dodge him forever within the confines of the ballroom. The old man found him and fairly dragged him to a lady's side.

“Lady Juniper Croydon, this is my son, Lord Bramley.”

“Lord Bramley,” the lady said, looking down her thin nose.

Matthew bowed. This was one of the ladies his father had already decided as being ideal regarding their pounds and pence. Now that he’d been thrown in front of the lady, it would be rude and insulting to forgo asking for her card.

He did as he was expected to do. He asked to be put down, though he did not wish to. Nor did he think Lady Juniper had much interest in it.

The lady’s features seemed perennially pinched and she did not seem eager to make his acquaintance.

“Viscount, I presume,” the lady said, handing over her card with reluctance.

“My eldest son, Lady Juniper,” Matthew’s father said. “The next earl.”

Lady Juniper did not seem impressed by that revelation, nor was Matthew impressed by Lady Juniper. She was only an earl’s daughter, not the Queen of England. She had the looks of an irritated spinster and the manner of a displeased despot.

If this is what his father saw in his future, his father was much mistaken.

He was forced to take the first, as that was all that was open. Who were these other fellows who’d put their names down? They could not have done so willingly.

Matthew supposed they all had fathers who had noted Lady Juniper’s primary charm—the fifteen thousand she came with.

Lady Juniper took her card back, delivered the barest of curtsies, and wandered off.

Matthew turned to his father. “You cannot be serious.”

“What do you mean?” the earl asked. He might pretend he did not know what his son meant, but he’d gone rather red in the face.

“Father,” Matthew said.

“Now see here, I’ll admit she might not be a shining star in the looks department, but she’s got other qualities.”

“A dowry is not a quality. Furthermore, she is not a shining star in the charm department either.”

“Well, you know how these things are,” the earl said. “She’s got on her high horse over being well funded. That’s all. Use your own charm to draw out hers.”

Matthew’s mother joined them and said, “Who was that lady? She is rather frowny.”

“Lady Juniper,” the earl said, his complexion getting even more red.

“Oh dear,” the countess murmured.

“Oh dear is right,” Matthew said.

The next hours were tedious, though nothing could have been as tedious as his first dance with Lady Juniper. The lady had not improved on further acquaintance. Rather, she’d got even worse. She’d informed him that she believed in forthrightness in all things and it was something she lived by.

Matthew had, at the time, wished he could say the same. However, if he were to go about saying things forthrightly, he’d have been forced to forthrightly explain that he

found her tedious.

As he did not say that, or anything for that matter, Lady Juniper was so good as to allow him a further peek into her own thoughts.

She unfortunately had a lot of thoughts. First, she knew her worth. Matthew did not bother to explain that everybody else knew it too—her dowry had been well-advertised.

Second, she was prepared to take on the running of a household and had firm ideas of how it ought to be done.

Frankly, by her description of how she would go forward, all Matthew could think of was how terrified his mother would be of the lady. He almost laughed at the picture in his mind of his mother creeping from room to room, peering round corners on the lookout for Lady Juniper.

Third, she had set ideas on the raising of children and marital relations in general. Any relations would be for the purpose of producing children and must be scheduled in advance, lest the lady be taken by surprise.

Lady Juniper did not like surprises. Matthew had not the least interest in surprising her.

As for children, she would hire nursemaids and a governess who knew what they were about—no coddling! The coddling that was currently the fashion would end being the death of England. Her children would be stalwart and regulated.

Somehow, from there, she touched on her opinions regarding food—she was not fond of sauces, as they seemed a deal too French.

Matthew supposed Lady Juniper had long lists of other grim ideas, but the dance blessedly ended before he could hear what they were.

The other ladies he'd danced with were pleasant enough. In truth, he likely found them more pleasant than they actually were after experiencing the unique delights of Lady Juniper.

But finally, it was time to lead Lady Constance. She was the only woman in the room who'd caught his eye. She was the only woman who had caught his eye in years. Or ever, really. As well, he quite liked that when he'd asked for a dance, she'd said, "Gracious, yes." It seemed...enthusiastic.

He was rather enthusiastic too.

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Constance had danced with the partners who had put their names down on her card and, as she had predicted, she'd not remembered much about them when they came to collect her.

She realized that the one thing that truly struck terror into her heart was not her own embarrassment if nobody had wished to dance with her, but her parents' embarrassment.

They were both so kind and had given her every possible advantage since she'd entered the world. They'd spared no expense on her education. They'd spared no expense to give her all the things she'd wished for.

They were rich now, but as an adult, Constance now understood that had not always been the case. The estate produced enough, but not an endless amount of extra. Her father would have had to juggle some things to ensure she had a fine pony and excellent tutors and a new pianoforte. And then of course, there was the dowry he'd saved up over the years.

Now, this moment, was the time to show them if their care and consideration had been worth it. It was a heart-stopping prospect to imagine letting them down.

Fortunately, that had not happened. Though now, another heart-stopping moment approached. Lord Bramley was coming to collect her.

Unlike the other gentlemen who'd put themselves down on her card, she had not forgotten his face. Nor did she expect she ever would. There was something about it that pulled at her. She'd never seen such a man.

“Lady Constance,” he said, his voice full of cheer.

She managed to smile, but that was all she managed to do. Where were her words? She knew so many of them—what were they?

“Viscount Bramley,” he said, “in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I have not forgotten,” she said. Her words, there they were. They were not the most particularly erudite words she knew, but they had at least come out in order.

He held his arm out and she laid her hand upon it. It struck her as very steady. A very strong and reliable arm. Why had she not noticed that about the other gentlemen? Certainly, their arms had been strong too.

Somehow, his steadiness began to calm her rather jangled nerves. He was such a marvel to look at that it was a little intimidating. But then, his manner was not intimidating at all.

When it was their turn at the steps, he led her with the utmost confidence. He did not take on some sort of haughty expression, as some of her previous partners had. She’d not known what they were trying to say by it, but guessed it was along the lines of ‘I am such an elevated personage that dancing at Almack’s is so very commonplace for me that I am almost bored.’

Lord Bramley appeared to actually enjoy himself, which made Constance calmer still.

When it was not their turn to dance, they exchanged information rapid-fire. She emanated from Warwickshire, he from Surrey. She liked dogs, he did too. She liked cats, he shrugged and told her of Mischief—an old feral who used to hide behind doors at the stables and launch at his legs whenever he got the chance. He still had some scars from those adventures.

In Mischief's defense though, he'd been a very good mouser.

Constance thought those opinions were very indicative of Lord Bramley's genial temperament. Some gentlemen, she was sure, would have condemned Mischief entirely for the affront to their person. But Lord Bramley gave credit where it was earned, despite his dislike of the creature.

Of course, she knew that she was being a ninny to size up a gentleman's character based only on what he had to say about an old barn cat. Nevertheless, she did.

They had gone into supper and continued talking, entirely ignoring the less than inspiring offerings of the table. They had so much to say to one another. There was so much to know.

"Lady Constance," Lord Bramley said, "if this is not being too bold, I would issue you an invitation to accompany my family on our barge for Lord Bestwick's regatta. If the weather holds, it should take place the day after tomorrow. Your father and mother might come, or if not, my mother could act as chaperone. She would be delighted to do so."

If there had been any moment in which Constance would prefer to say yes, very enthusiastically, it was that moment. She could not, though.

"That is very kind, my lord. However, I understand my mother and father have already accepted an offer on my behalf. I am to be on the Duchess of Barstow's barge to watch the race."

"Ah, I see."

His disappointment in the matter was rather a delight.

“I suppose you will attend the prince’s party after the race?” Constance asked.

“Yes, yes I will. Will you attend too?”

“Yes, yes I will.”

“And then, I believe Lady Kendrick’s rout is on the morrow,” Lord Bramley said.

“Will you attend?”

“I am not certain,” Constance said. “I believe we have received an invitation to it though.”

She did not quite tell the whole truth there. They had received an invitation and her mother had put it aside. Neither of her parents enjoyed a rout—they described it as a crush of people aimlessly milling about.

Somehow, she would convince her mother or father or both that they must go to that rout!

“I will go,” Lord Bramley said, “and hope to see you there. I know Lady Kendrick’s house fairly well and I will make my way to the ballroom. She sets tables all through it and it tends to be the least crowded.”

“Oh yes, the ballroom with tables sounds very pleasant.” Somehow, she would convince her parents that they must go to Lady Kendrick’s house and repair straight to the ballroom.

“Yes, it is very pleasant. Now, if you attend, it will be crowded. Simply make your way down the hall to the second pair of double doors and that will lead into the ballroom.”

“The second set of double doors,” Constance said, committing the directions to memory.

What an evening. What a man. What a second set of double doors she was determined to find herself walking through.

If there had been anything at all to mar it, it was the very small and nagging feeling of wondering what the lord saw in her.

He was enthusiastic to know her, that was clear enough. But there were far prettier ladies in the room. Why her?

She silently scolded herself over it. If the Viscount wished to know her, then he wished to know her. She would not be a defeatist about it.

In any case, she would see him at the prince’s party, and other places too. She would just wait and see what came of it.

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Mr. Wilburn had acquired a decidedly sinking feeling as he’d gazed down his servants’ table. As always, his staff were relaying whatever tidbits of interest they’d managed to come upon.

That would not have discomposed him—he learned quite a lot by listening.

However, this time the talk had been all about Lord Bramley’s venture into Almack’s and the talk was not very promising.

According to Lord Bramley’s valet, who really was told too much in Mr. Wilburn’s opinion, the lord had been entirely struck by a certain Lady Constance Condower,

daughter of the Earl of DeWitton.

Masterson went on to recount how the lord was torn over his father's wishes and his own, as Lady Constance only came with three thousand.

Torn, was he? What did Lord Bramley think he was doing, getting torn over a lady who only brought three thousand?

Then Masterson had said the words that had made Mr. Wilburn's blood run cold. "I reckon he throws caution to the wind and pursues Lady Constance anyway. He's that keen on her. He even asked her to attend him on the barge for the regatta. She said no as she's already engaged elsewhere, but she's going to the prince's party and so is he. And then she might attend Lady Kendrick's rout too."

The idea of throwing caution to the wind very predictably caused half the women at table to swoon. It was all so romantic, a housemaid said.

Romantic. He must stop that sort of nonsense at once.

Masterson went on. "I'm to order flowers for the lady. Daffodils, mind. He wishes to communicate his regard without going too far, you see."

Flowers? How had they got to sending flowers already?

"I will handle that directly, Masterson," he said. He would handle it too, by entirely forgetting to put in the order. Daffodils, indeed.

Mr. Wilburn had then taken the opportunity to mention a few things to his staff that might make the idea of a lord throwing caution to the wind seem less romantic. Primarily, that if a family were to find themselves pinched, servants were always the first to go.

That had put some starch into them and the swooning had promptly ceased.

Now though, he must take real action. It was all well and good to get the servants' minds all sailing in the right direction, but he must do something about Lord Bramley himself.

He softly knocked on the library door, knowing full well that the earl would be in that room alone at this time of the morning.

"Enter," the earl called.

Mr. Wilburn slipped in and shut the door behind him. "My lord."

"Ah, Wilburn, what is it?"

"I hope I am not being too forward, my lord, in positing a suggestion for your attendance at the regatta?"

"Got some new idea about the picnic baskets, have you?" the earl asked genially. "I am all ears."

"No, my lord. Rather, I was thinking you might invite a few guests. Two guests, actually. The bargeman assures us we have room for ten, so might not a certain Lady Juniper and a certain Miss Semper be invited by the countess?"

The earl laid down the paper in his hand. "I say, Wilburn, that is a cracking idea. You're rather clever to think of it. Yes, I will direct the countess to issue the invitations."

Mr. Wilburn nodded. Now, there was just one more hurdle.

“And I suppose it might be a pleasant surprise to Lord Bramley. When they arrive.”

He did not wish to give Lord Bramley any time to wiggle out of the thing.

He might not be able to do anything about Lady Kendrick’s rout this evening, but he could ensure that Lord Bramley spent an equal amount of time with ladies who were more suitable.

“Ah! We won’t tell him? Yes, that’s a jolly good idea—let him be surprised,” the earl said. “I suppose I’ll be surprised myself, as I’ve yet to lay eyes on Miss Semper.”

Mr. Wilburn assumed he would be equally surprised, as he had not laid eyes on either one of those ladies.

He just hoped the descriptions he’d heard of them were...exaggerated.

He also hoped that trapping Lord Bramley on a boat with two ladies who brought the necessary dowries would shake some sense into him.

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Matthew had been to enough of Lady Kendrick’s routs to know the set-up. He usually did not stay, but he was fond of the lady so made an effort to drift through the rooms, pay his respects, and casually drift out again.

He supposed that would account for the lady’s surprise that he’d turned up so early. And then he’d gone straight to the ballroom and commandeered a table.

He sat himself down and that was where he intended to stay. He could not be certain if Lady Constance would attend, but if she did she would know where he could be found.

If she wished to find him, which he very much hoped she did. Surely, she would. She did not strike him as a lady full of guile and tricks. She'd said she hoped to see him here so he would believe that she did.

Matthew had already driven off several of his friends who'd thought to sit with him. He must keep the seats at his table wide open. He had no time for those gentlemen.

Had it happened to him? Was he bowled over? It felt as if he might be. He'd thought about Lady Constance all the night before. She was lovely, that could not be denied. Of course, so were many of the other ladies attending Almack's. It was just that they were not lovely in the same way.

There was something about Lady Constance's coloring, her deep brown hair and dark brown eyes, and then her complexion was not very pale. It struck him as warm. It occurred to him that he really did not care for fair-haired ladies with skin so translucent that one might spot a vein on their neck. It was a very cold sort of coloring.

Of course, her looks would have added up to nothing had not her person been warm too. She was so charming in an unstudied and enthusiastic sort of manner. They'd got on in conversation so easily! He could imagine having that sort of conversation over a breakfast table.

He could imagine reaching out for her hand at that breakfast table, as that was exactly what he'd had to stop himself from doing last night.

In fact, he had imagined both those things and a lot more.

That was what signified, was it not? He would not go by his own parents' example. As a usual thing at breakfast, the earl complained about something on the sideboard and his mother explained that it was the way of the world and there would always be

another breakfast on the morrow. His father would be annoyed that yet again the way of the world was to blame for burnt kidneys. Then they'd carry on in silence.

Matthew could use his grandparents as an example, though. They'd never run out of things to talk about and very little of it had been complaining.

The one argument he'd ever witnessed between them had eventually been resolved when it drifted into hilarity.

His grandfather had posited that it had been over a year since they'd had the local squire to dine and they must issue an invitation.

His grandmother had sniffed and said they'd just managed to get the stains out of the cloth thanks to his atrocious table manners and his conversation lacked gentility or sense.

His grandfather claimed any earl worth his salt did not ignore his neighbors.

Then his grandmother threw the salt cellar at him and told him he could keep all his salt.

They had both collapsed in laughter. Matthew never did find out if the squire came to dinner.

He could not imagine ever having any sort of argument with Lady Constance, though he supposed all husbands and wives had them from time to time. If they did disagree on a matter, he imagined the disagreement would be gentle and not last long. Or she would throw the salt cellar at him and it would all be resolved.

Masterson had pointed out that though Lady Constance sounded like a cracking sort of lady, she did not come with a whopping dowry and the earl was certain to be

against it. Matthew refused to think of that point.

He had not been struck with a lady until now and he was not at all prepared to turn and walk away over money concerns.

There. Finally. There she was.

She had come to the rout. She had come to the ballroom, just where he said he would be.

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Constance had gone through a time of it convincing her mother and father to attend Lady Kendrick's rout. Her father, especially, did not favor the idea. It would be crowded and hot and loud and he could not understand why anybody in the world went to them.

The countess was, however, a bit more astute. She seemed to eventually guess that Constance was so intent on going because she was intent on seeing someone there. Her mother had not asked who and Constance did not know if she could guess at that too.

Now they were in the doors and the earl said, "I suppose we ought to track down Lady Kendrick and say hello. Constance, you can see what this is, very tedious. Perhaps we pay our respects and slip back out the door. I ought to have told our coachman to just drive up and down the street and wait for us."

Constance had no intention of being turned round now. She grasped her father's arm and said, "Come, Papa, we will head straight to the ballroom and you can sit down. I have been told it will be filled with tables and chairs and is the least crowded room."

“A chair? Yes, that would suit, I suppose,” the earl said.

Her mother was amused. “Goodness,” she said, “let us repair to this ballroom with all the tables and chairs...and whoever we may encounter there.”

They had pushed their way through the crowd. Constance had not forgotten Lord Bramley’s instructions—make her way down the great hall to the second set of double doors.

“This way, Papa,” she said, pulling him along.

She ignored her mother’s laughter on her other side.

Lord Bramley had told no tales; the ballroom had been the easiest thing in the world to locate thanks to his directions.

They stood just inside the doors. Then, she saw him. He sat alone at a table with four chairs and he leapt up and waved at her.

He’d leapt up and waved at her. It was a very charming thing to do, she thought.

Attempting to keep her composure, she did not wildly wave back, though she would have liked to. Rather, she said, “Oh look, there is Lord Bramley. We ought to go say hello.”

“I do not doubt it,” the countess said with a small smile.

“Ah Bramley, fine fellow, let’s do,” the earl said.

They made their way over and Lord Bramley greeted them. “Earl, Countess, Lady Constance, if you would care to sit with me I will track down a footman to bring

refreshments.”

“Very kind, Bramley,” the earl said. “I do not as a regular thing enjoy a rout but Constance insisted on going. This does not seem too bad, though.”

Constance hoped her face had not burst into flames brighter than a thousand suns. What was her father thinking of, telling the lord she had insisted on coming?

Lord Bramley did seem pleased to hear it though. He nodded, smiling, and if she were not mistaken his own complexion had deepened. Gracious, it was both awkward and not awkward. It was as if they understood each other, but were embarrassed by it, and also glad of it.

He hurried off to locate a footman, which was rather delightful as he’d entirely forgotten to inquire what it was they wanted.

The countess had already seated herself. The earl made to sit across from her and she said, “No, my darling, do come and sit next to me. We can better have a conversation.”

Constance was grateful for her mother to think of it. It would place Lord Bramley sitting next to her, rather than across.

“A conversation?” the earl asked warily. “Have I done something?”

The countess laughed. “Goodness, can I not wish to have a conversation with my dear husband without him imagining he’s done something?”

The earl looked as if he did not know what to make of it. Constance did, though. Her mother was managing her father very well and she had every hope that the lady would engage her husband in a long conversation regarding something or other.

Lord Bramley returned with a bottle and four glasses. “I realized I never asked what you might care for,” he said. “I had a look at Lady Kendrick’s offerings though, and took the best of the bottles she had. It’s an aged hock.”

“Oh yes,” the earl said, examining the bottle ticket, “we have that at the club from time to time with the dessert course. That will do very well.”

Lord Bramley seemed relieved to hear it. He poured out four glasses and handed them round. Constance noticed that she was handed her glass first, though it should really have been the countess. She thought the countess noticed too and was amused by it.

“I say, Bramley,” the earl said, “what do you make of this bet between Collins and Brinkley—the race to Brighton? Who will take it?”

Before Lord Bramley could answer with a prediction, the countess said, “Now darling, I insist on hearing of every detail of that proposed race before we press Lord Bramley to guess the winner. I wish to know it all. I suppose Lord Bramley can explain the whole thing to Constance.”

“Well I don’t see why I ought not tell you both at the same time,” the earl said, looking back and forth between his wife and daughter.

“The ballroom is rather loud,” the countess said, though it was not particularly. “Let us not add to it by shouting across the table.”

“Loud—”

Before the earl could point out that it was not overloud, the countess laid a hand on his arm. He knew as well as Constance did what that signal meant. He might not know why he was meant to stop talking, but he would know that he should.

The earl, particularly in his younger days, had not had a particularly astute ability to read the feelings he was invoking in other people. He was better at it now, but still was not very good at noting subtle signals. It had long been agreed between husband and wife that she would lay a hand on his arm when he ought to abandon ship, as it were. The countess would explain why later.

The earl gave the slightest of shrugs and turned to his wife, giving up all idea of explaining the bet to the table, all at once. Once resigned to it, he began to outline to his wife with enthusiasm all the details of the race to Brighton.

Lord Bramley said, “Lady Constance, shall you wish to understand the ins and outs of the bet between Lord Collins and Lord Brinkley?”

“Not really,” she said laughing.

“I am glad, as I do not actually know them. I heard of the bet but did not pay too much attention to it.”

“You are not a gambler, then?” Constance asked.

“No, I’ve never really taken to it. I did at one point consider it as a way to bring in more to the estate, but I’ve never pursued the idea—too many have failed at that effort. As for enjoying it as one enjoys a sport, it does not catch my interest.”

“Nor mine,” Constance said. “Would it be very shocking to admit that I don’t even particularly care for cards? I cannot be bothered to struggle through it in pursuit of a few pounds.”

“Ah, whist. A more tedious game has never been invented. I cannot see what people like about it.”

Constance nodded. “It can go on too long, and then one’s partner can become so irritated if one is not paying strict attention.”

Lord Bramley laughed. “One time, at a house party, the Duchess of Ralston pronounced me the worst partner she’d ever had.”

“Goodness. In front of other people?”

“Other people, and the queen, in fact. It was Lady Dudmore’s annual eccentric house party and the queen always attends.”

“I should be frightened to death to play cards in the same room as the queen. I was vastly relieved to get my curtsy done.”

“I do not believe it,” Lord Bramley said. “You seem the type of lady who has an inner fortitude. Not one to walk round trying to prove how bold you are, but when needed, the strength will be there.”

Constance sipped her wine, as she did not know how to answer that. It was very complimentary, though she was less sure it was true.

“I have embarrassed you,” Lord Bramley said. “I will change the subject and ask a question I have been wondering about for years. What do ladies do with those monstrous court dresses? I do not have sisters, otherwise I would have asked them about it.”

He did not have sisters. That was a fact she had not known about him. She already knew he was the only son—the heir with no spare, her father called it. She did not have brothers or sisters either.

“Well, I do not wish to disparage the style of dress Queen Charlotte insists upon,”

Constance said, “but I think I may at least say it is not meant for wear in any other setting but a curtsy. Mine is packed away and has been sent to our modiste. She will take it apart and use the various materials for something more...practical.”

“Excellent idea,” Lord Bramley said, refilling both their wine glasses. “I suppose my sisters, had I any, would have done just the same.”

“I did not know you had no sisters, though I did know you had no brothers. I am a single child as well.”

“Did you miss the absence of brothers and sisters?” Lord Bramley asked. “I always have.”

“Indeed, yes, I have always thought it would be lovely to have had that. Especially brothers.”

“Really? Now I have always thought it would be helpful to have sisters. I might be able to ask them all sorts of things.”

“That is precisely why I wished for an older brother,” Constance said.

“Well, we could always ask such things of each other,” Lord Bramley said with a smile.

“Yes, we could, I suppose.”

“And I have always thought, God willing, that I wish for a house blessed with a lot of children.”

“I too,” Constance said.

“But you are not frightened of the birth...”

Lord Bramley trailed off. Constance was not surprised by it, how on earth had they managed to land on pregnancy? It was not exactly a topic for a rout, or anywhere really. There was something intimate in even referring to it. Though, she could not say she was sorry, or shocked.

“I am not frightened,” she said.

They fell to silence, both perhaps realizing they had wandered into impolite territory.

Lord Bramley said, “If I may ask, what sort of hobbies do you enjoy?”

Constance bit her lip. Asking about hobbies was certainly one way to get off the subject of childbirth. “I suppose I ought to list all the usual things a lady is meant to like—playing an instrument, netting a purse, painting a fire screen and such. But the one thing I do like to the exclusion of all others is drawing. I am not very good at it, but I like it all the same.”

“Have you taken a sketch paper out in London?”

“I have not,” Constance said. “I did bring all my supplies with me, but so far have only done a pencil sketch of the view out my window.”

Lord Bramley then described a certain view along the Serpentine in the park that might be inspiring. He went on to say that the late afternoons provided the most enchanting light.

“My mother likes to draw too, perhaps she will wish to try out the spot. Some late afternoon.”

The earl suddenly turned to face them. “Well Bramley, I hope you’ve managed to acquaint my daughter with the facts of the race to Brighton. My countess has wrung every last point out of me.”

“I feel I know as much as I need to regarding the race,” Constance said. It was the truth, too. She did not know the first thing about it, nor did she need to. She’d found out more about Lord Bramley and that was what she was interested in. Lord Collins and Lord Brinkley could run themselves off the road for all she cared about it.

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Matthew would have gone to more routs if he'd known how interesting they could be. Of course, Lady Kendrick's rout had only been made interesting by the arrival of Lady Constance. If she had not come, he would have just ended sitting alone, driving other people away from his table and looking very eccentric.

But she had come. And, if he were not mistaken, her mother, the countess, looked very favorably upon him. The lady had been so good as to engage her earl for the better part of the evening. Matthew suspected the earl was rather confused by his wife's intense attention to him.

His own earl had just sent a note up to his bedchamber that he wished to see his son in the library. It was about the last place he wished to go, but go he must.

As he jogged down the stairs, he braced himself for another lecture on the importance of a large dowry. He still had no idea what he was going to do about the estate's practical needs, but he would not give up the pursuit of Lady Constance.

He went into the library and found his father at his desk, looking grave as an undertaker.

"Shut the door, son."

Matthew did so, and though he had not been looking forward to this appointment, he now began to feel alarmed.

"Has somebody died?" he asked.

“Died? No,” the earl said. “I wish to speak with you about Lady Kendrick’s rout. I have been informed you spent the whole of it in the company of Lady Constance Condower.”

Matthew blanched. How had he come upon that piece of information?

“Wilburn knows...” the earl trailed off. “I don’t remember the whole connection—he knows somebody who knows somebody else who knows somebody working in that house.”

“Our butler is a bit of a tattler, then,” Matthew said.

“Do not attempt to change the subject to how the information was delivered. The fact is, it was delivered. What are you thinking? The lady comes with next to nothing!”

“Three thousand is not next to nothing,” Matthew said.

“As far as I’m concerned, it is,” the earl said. “And to pay such marked attention to her? With her parents there, too? People will begin to talk. They will begin to anticipate an engagement.”

Matthew did not answer, as he was anticipating an engagement. If all proceeded as well as it had so far, what else could be the end of it?

The earl let out a long sigh. “The lady seems very agreeable, I will admit. But there are practicalities to consider. We will end exceedingly pinched if you make such a mistake.”

Matthew had not yet worked out how to solve the estate’s problems without a large dowry, he’d just contented himself with imagining he’d think of something. Now, though, he really had to actually think of something.

“Father, how is it that we’re always so pinched, and yet others somehow manage not to be? Others even find money for things like dowries.”

“How should I know?” the earl said. “All estates are different, I suppose. Ours is simply not the money generating kind.”

This did not seem to make much sense. For one, their acreage was on the large side of things. If he understood it correctly, their acreage even surpassed the Earl of Wellerston’s, and that gentleman had managed fifteen thousand for his daughter.

His friend Souderton was a marquess who was only in control of one small estate, as his duke kept a tight rein on the rest of the holdings. Souderton had told him he squeezed every pence out of it to allow him ample funds to gamble and rent a house at a good address. How were they doing it? How was Souderton squeezing every pence?

“Have you spoken with Crickenly about how we might generate more than we have?” Matthew asked.

“Have I spoken to Crickenly? All I do is talk to that steward about it! He assures me every economy is being employed.”

“I just feel there must be another answer to our difficulties,” Matthew said.

His father stood and said, “If you mean to imply that we don’t require a large dowry, get that out of your head right now! You are suffering from an infatuation—they do not last. A partnership firmly standing on the ground of sense and pence is what lasts.”

Matthew could see he would get nowhere with his father in his current mood.

“The way of the world, I have been told,” he said. Then he hurried to the door, got out of it, and ordered his horse before his father could say more.

He was going to have to solve the estate’s problems somehow, and it was not going to be with a dowry.

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Constance had spent most of the previous day mooning about the house. It was very hard to stop thinking about Lord Bramley.

She’d never imagined she’d be so struck by a gentleman. Of course, she’d grown up on the stories of knights and courtly love, but none of that had ever seemed to have anything to do with her. All those ladies were the loveliest in the land, and she was not.

The countess had come into the drawing room and said, “The bells have been rung, Lord Bestwick’s Thames regatta is on for the morrow.”

Constance felt her cheeks pink over the news. It was the stupidest of reactions. She was not even to be on the same barge as Lord Bramley.

She might have been, though. He had asked.

“Goodness, Constance, you are fairly blooming these days. It seems London agrees with you.”

“I think it does, Mama,” Constance said. The comment sent her thoughts racing along at a brisk pace. Her father had thought to say something similar at the breakfast table. He’d said she was looking “very well.” He never commented on her appearance.

She'd kept wondering at Lord Bramley's interest in her. Especially at Almack's, which had been a ballroom filled with beauty. Could it be that she was prettier than she'd thought? Or getting prettier than she had been?

It seemed a rather conceited idea. But then, what if it were true?

She'd occupied the next hours very casually glancing in every looking glass she passed by. She could not say she saw anything different than she'd always seen.

She was still not very remarkable compared to what she'd seen at Almack's. She was not a glittering blond princess or a dramatic raven-haired beauty or a lively auburn goddess. She was brown-haired and brown-eyed, as always.

But then, was there not every chance that Lord Bramley, for reasons only known to himself, might prefer her sort of coloring? She must keep that in mind. It would not be reasonable to imagine that there was nobody in the world who preferred it.

Of course, it did seem like a very small chance that someone like Lord Bramley would happen to be included in that handful of gentlemen.

She was determined to put all those thoughts aside. After all, Lady Jane might sometimes be a ninny, but Lady Jane was often the giver of sensible advice. Once, when Constance had made comment that she would give anything for Jane's hair, a charming shade resembling the color of summer wheat, Jane had sighed and said, "If I wear pastels, I tend to look insipid, but you do not hear me advertising that idea far and wide. Chin up and believe you are the best thing going."

Constance had not yet managed to view herself as the best thing going, but she had taken Jane's point. To complain to one's friends on such a matter was self-indulgent and childish. She'd not mentioned the subject again.

She had even imagined that she'd not thought of it again. Until Lord Bramley. She liked him so much it seemed strange that he would like her too.

Because, clearly, she was far more of a ninny than Jane ever was.

The day and night had dragged along but now it was time for the regatta. It was time for a chance to see Lord Bramley on another barge, which would hopefully be anchored nearby.

The household had risen shockingly early and set off before dawn to the river for the regatta. It had been an eerie trip through foggy streets, the mist hushing the usual sounds of the town. All who had been out late were home in their beds and all who would rise with the dawn had not yet emerged from their houses. It was one of the few hours when London was quiet, but for the knocker's up who used batons to wake people for their work.

They were to meet the Duchess of Barstow's barge to watch her duke compete in the sailing race and had been advised that the duchess wished to set out early.

The connection to the duchess had been explained to her the day prior. It seemed the lady was the daughter of the Duke of Eddleston and that duke and her own father had been at school together. Over the years, her parents had visited the duke's house often for the shooting.

The duchess, or Lady Jemima as her father had always known her, was said to be a lively lady. When she'd been a child, she'd always egged Constance's father on to tell stories of his travels in the Hebrides. The earl had not in fact ever been to that location, but he was game to make up stories.

The favorite tale was of a little girl chased by a giant eagle named Claw who was saved by Herbert, a clever otter. Lady Jemima had made extensive plans to lead a

military campaign to the Hebrides to defeat Claw once and for all.

Constance's mother commented that society had been much surprised at the match between Lady Jemima and the Duke of Barstow. That gentleman was rather reserved and the duchess was very much not reserved. The match had been made at a house party the queen always attended and it had included some very untoward happenings between the duke and a certain Lord Varnay.

Constance had wondered if it were the same house party where the Duchess of Ralston had pronounced Lord Bramley the worst whist partner she'd ever had.

Neither her mother nor her father had been willing to outline what those untoward things between the duke and Lord Varnay had been, her father only saying, "How a duel was not the end of it, nobody knows. I suspect the queen put her foot down."

Constance supposed it was all very nice to have been invited onto the duchess' barge, but there was another barge she'd much rather be on.

Hopefully, Lord Bramley's barge would be right next to their own. Perhaps even close enough to talk? But then, if it were not, she would see him at the prince's party afterward.

The wharf was even foggier than the streets and the Thames just a dull grey expanse that disappeared into the mist. Such vistas always made Constance's heart grow a bit cold. She was an excellent swimmer, as they had a lake on their own property, and she held no fears for her person. But she did not like to think of sailors going down with their ships, those poor men knowing there was nowhere to swim to—every bit of land in the world was too far out of reach.

The duchess' butler, Mr. Jacobs, had been lurking where they would be let out of the carriage and he led them down a private pier to the barge.

It was far larger than Constance had been expecting. She had, of course, seen barges sailing the Thames, but at a distance. She'd had no idea of their real size. This one in particular was at least ninety feet long and twenty feet wide.

The bargeman and his crewmen were hoisting the ochre-colored sails. The duchess came to greet them. "Dear Lord DeWitton, Lady DeWitton, and this must be Lady Constance."

Constance curtsied and said, "Your Grace."

The duchess laughed and said, "You will not find much graceful about me when we are better acquainted, as your dear parents can tell you. I suppose you ought to call me Duchess."

Constance thought that was very kindly done and she liked the look of the lady. Unlike her own rather dull coloring, the duchess was all vibrancy. Her auburn hair and her red velvet cloak seemed to brighten up the grey morning.

"Now, Jacobs will see that you have everything you need. I will find the bargeman for a conference as we will wish to set off soon and get a good place. The duke is determined to win it this year and I am equally determined to see him do it."

As she hurried off, the duchess called over her shoulder, "And Earl, I do hope I may hear of Claw and my heroic otter while we have you onboard?"

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Matthew was not opposed to viewing a sailing regatta. In fact, over the summer he'd toyed with the idea of building his own boat and entering the race. He would have, too, had he been able to wrangle the funds from his father.

What he was opposed to, though, was the time of morning they'd had to set off for the thing. It was not to start until ten and yet they'd had to be on the barge before dawn.

When he'd come down the stairs, he'd found Mr. Wilburn racing this way and that by candlelight, supervising what was to go into the carriages. One might have imagined they were preparing to set off for a sea voyage of some months by the looks of it.

His father seemed in an equal sort of tizzy—overly jocular for so early in the morning. Strangely jocular, considering their conversation of the day before.

They'd gotten there after no end of palaver and Matthew had taken himself to the bow and found a quiet spot to take a nap to pass the hours before the sun would be up in the sky, the mist burned off, and the race would begin. With any luck, he'd wake and find Lady Constance on the barge next to their own.

He'd shut his eyes and nearly fallen asleep listening to the bargeman and his crew get the sails up. Then something unexpected had fallen on his ears.

Something as unwelcome as it was unexpected.

A lady's voice was clear as a bell. "I suppose it will do."

A second lady's voice chimed in. "I think it's rather grand."

Matthew recognized the first voice well enough, though he wished he did not. Lady Juniper of the many grim opinions. Who the other lady was, he did not have the first idea.

Until, he did.

There could only be one reason why Lady Juniper could be turning up on his barge—her large dowry. Therefore, the other lady could only be his father's second target—Miss Bemper or Kemper or something like that.

His father was really taking things too far. What on earth did he think would happen? His son would be thrown together with Lady Juniper on a barge and suddenly perceive the charms that she most definitely did not have?

He leapt to his feet in time to find his mother coming toward him. "Ah, there you are, dear. Do come and help entertain our guests."

"Why do we have guests, Mother? Why do we have those particular guests?" he asked, trying and failing to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"Oh, well, you know...your father...the way of the world..." The countess said.

Matthew sighed. Whenever his mother was faced with any sort of unpleasantness it was immediately blamed on the way of the world. He was trapped, at least for the next few hours. He might as well go and face the absurd situation.

He trudged back to the middle deck where a long table and chairs had been set up.

"Son!" the earl said with forced enthusiasm. "You rejoin us at last. You already know Lady Juniper. This is Miss Semper."

Of course, Matthew did unfortunately know Lady Juniper and she was looking as disapproving as ever. Miss Semper, on the other hand, was a lady of a different stripe. A rather hilarious stripe.

Miss Semper was short in stature but that did not deter her from decorating herself with every possible ornament. All of these accoutrements had some sort of naval

flavor to them, he supposed in honor of the regatta. Fringe hung about her shoulders like epaulets and her hat could have been worn by Nelson himself.

Matthew bowed. "Lady Juniper. Miss Semper."

The ladies curtsied.

Before any conversation need be had, the bargeman hurried to the earl's side. "We are ready to push off, my lord. I suggest the ladies be seated until they can properly get their sea legs."

This prompted a flurry of activity. One might have thought his father did not hear the bargeman correctly as he had included himself in those who must be seated.

The chairs in question were sturdily built and the bargeman explained they had weights in all four legs to prevent them from sliding on deck.

"Gracious, this is very exciting," Miss Semper said, her epaulets swinging back and forth as she looked about her.

Lady Juniper did not seem half so excited to be seaborne on the Thames.

"I suppose we can all swim?" Matthew said.

Lady Juniper's eyes narrowed. Miss Semper cried, "What?"

"It was only a joke, Miss Semper," Matthew said.

"That's my son, always joking!" the earl said jovially.

Lady Juniper patted Miss Semper's hand. "Never mind, Miss Semper. Do not allow a

gentleman to get a rise out of you. It is a sport with them.”

“Is it?” Miss Semper said, this idea seeming very new.

“I am afraid so,” Lady Juniper said, giving him the eye.

“Really, I did not mean anything by it,” Matthew said. He was irritated that Lady Juniper had seen fit to scold him. On the other hand, he had no wish to unduly startle the short lady admiral.

“I’m sure you did not, Lord Bramley,” Miss Semper said smiling.

At least Miss Semper seemed to be in a better temperament than Lady Juniper.

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Mr. Wilburn had watched the scene unfold before him. For reasons only known to himself, Lord Bramley had seen fit to frighten the ladies with ideas of swimming.

Or at least, frighten one of the ladies.

He had hoped that descriptions of these two ladies had not been particularly accurate. And yet, here they were, just as described.

Mr. Wilburn hurried to set out the things he’d brought in the picnic baskets, certain that food and drink were always a welcome distraction.

As he did so, his mind galloped forward at a furious clip. There was no getting round it, he was very afraid that Lady Juniper was fast going out of consideration.

For one, Lord Bramley did not appear to like the lady. For another, Lady Juniper did

not appear very fond of Lord Bramley either.

It must be Miss Semper. Her rather uninspired origins had always put her in second place, but Mr. Harkinson could see now that she was the only viable option.

After all, she seemed a pleasant enough personage. Would it be insurmountable to do something about her taste? Who was dressing this lady? She simply had not been shown how to model any sort of restraint. One did not attend a regatta attired in clothes suited for the navy unless the regatta was somehow also a masque ball.

Mr. Harkinson would not have allowed her to step out of the house with that monstrosity of a hat on. Nor would the countess, he could see very well. The lady eyed that piece of headwear as if it might launch itself at her.

The barge had slowed, the sails came down, and anchors were thrown out. The sun was rising in the sky, the fog lifting, and it looked to be a fine day.

All he had to do was somehow grease the wheels between Lord Bramley and Miss Semper.

As the only grease he had on hand were bottles of champagne, he began to pour out liberal glasses.

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Constance stood at the railing, peering at a barge some distance away. It might be Lord Bramley's barge, she saw the outline of someone very like him, but her eyes would not cooperate in seeing any better than they usually did. It was just too far.

"Ah, spying out the other barges," the duchess said. "You will need this I think."

The duchess held a brass spy glass, the sort one might imagine Nelson using as he stood on the bow of HMS Victory at Trafalgar.

"Oh, no I was not..."

The duchess laughed. "Then you do not wish to try it out?"

Of course, Constance wished very much to try it out. She nodded and took the spy glass. Extending it to its full length, Constance applied it to her eye and gently rotated the cylinder until it was focused.

She took a breath. Yes, it was indeed Lord Bramley. There were two older people she must assume were the earl and the countess. But who were the two other ladies?

They were not sisters. He did not have any. Might they be cousins? They looked very different from one another to be sisters. They were different in every respect. One was very tall, the other much shorter, one was dressed rather somberly and the other wore an absolute parade of decorations. One was frowning and the other was laughing.

But Lord Bramley, what was he doing?

He stood at the gunwale. He looked in her direction. Surely he did not see her? If she could not see him well enough without a spyglass then he could not see her.

He waved.

Constance lowered the glass, feeling as if she'd been caught out at some sort of shameful behavior. She would not wish Lord Bramley to think she was spying him out! Even though she'd been spying him out.

"May I?" the duchess said, sounding very amused.

Constance handed the glass back to the duchess and the lady peered through it.

"Bramley," she said.

"Yes, I believe it is Lord Bramley," Constance said, attempting to sound as if it were no matter one way or the other. Trying to sound even more casual and unconcerned, she said, "I do not think I recognize the two younger ladies though."

Please let her be told it was Lord Bramley's cousins. If they were not cousins, what did it mean?

The lord had invited her to join his barge and she'd taken it as a very great compliment. But if they were not relations, what did it signify? Had he asked every lady he encountered if they wished to come aboard?

If that were the case, then perhaps she'd allowed her imagination to run wild. Perhaps she'd imagined a marked preference that was not actually there.

"I recognize one of them," the duchess said. "Lady Juniper Croydon, daughter of the Earl of Wellerston. She comes with a shocking amount of money. As for the other

lady, I cannot be certain but will hazard a guess that she may be Miss Semper. I have heard the lady described as well-funded and seeming to wear all those funds on her person. Gracious, I quite adore her nerve in wearing that hat.”

Constance did not answer, there was nothing to say. It was too much to take in. Lord Bramley had invited two ladies with significant dowries to accompany him on his barge.

And he had invited her too. Did he somehow know of her own money? She did not see how it could be so. But on the other hand, she did not believe much in coincidences. The lord had two moneyed ladies as guests on his barge and would have had a third if she’d been able to accept.

All of her insecurities came rushing back to her. How foolish she’d been, imagining that she might have grown prettier and glancing in all those looking glasses to see if it might be true.

She was no more attractive than she ever had been. It could very well be that it was only her means that were judged attractive.

How Lord Bramley could have found out about the money, she could not say.

Another thought came upon her. If he knew, were there others that knew?

How could she ever be certain that a gentleman’s regard was true?

She had seen the results were she to make a mistake in that direction. Lady Jane’s own father had wed her mother for her funds. Then, he’d made himself pleasant until he’d got an heir. After that was accomplished, the lady rarely set eyes on her husband again. He lived mostly in London while Jane’s mother was relegated to the countryside.

Jane had once whispered that it had left a bitterness in her mother's heart. Constance also suspected that was why Jane had wed Sir Anthony. She'd known him since they were both children and could trust him. As she'd said to Constance, the gentlemen she'd encountered during her season only made her more sure that she ought to run home to Sir Anthony. And so she had.

The sound of a sudden gunshot startled her.

"Ah hah!" the duchess said. "The race begins. Come now, Barstow, you really must win. Else, I'll be cajoling you out of a sulk over it."

"Will he really be that put out?" Constance asked, attempting to sound rational and make conversation.

"He will be very put out. Barstow has a very competitive nature. Fortunately, I can pull him out of the doldrums if I must. However, I am really hoping things go his way today."

"Yes, of course we all hope so," Constance said. Really, she did not much care if the Duke of Barstow was put out. She was far more taken up with her own situation.

She did not know what to think. Was Lord Bramley really some sort of cold-hearted fortune hunter?

If he was, then he was a very good actor. He had not seemed cold-hearted at all. Especially not at Lady Kendrick's rout. He'd told her where he would be and was sitting alone at a table and then had waved at her, just as he'd done now.

It spoke of partiality. And then, their conversation! They'd fallen into it so naturally. There had not been a hint of any machinations going on.

Was she being fooled, or was she not?

Perhaps there was another explanation as to why those two ladies were on his barge. Though, she could not think what it could be.

The logical part of her mind said turn away, walk away, and think of him no more. It was too dangerous.

The other part, the not so rational part, answered that doing so would be very hard indeed.

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Mr. Wilburn had never been so glad to set foot on dry land in his life. What a day.

Though he'd attempted to grease the wheels between Lord Bramley and Miss Semper by way of champagne, it had not gone as planned.

Lord Bramley spent most of his time at the rail, staring at another barge in the distance. The earl made game attempts to drag him into conversation with the ladies, with not much success.

Miss Semper did not seem to perceive her limits regarding champagne, which perhaps Mr. Wilburn must take some responsibility for as he had kept filling her glass. Then, apparently, the seagoing life did not agree with her and she was subject to several unfortunate interludes of the sickness variety over the side of the barge.

That had led to her admiral's hat falling into the Thames, which he really did not consider a loss, but then the bargeman had fished it out. It had sat dripping on the table like a cold reminder of the events of the day.

While all that was going on, Lady Juniper never touched her champagne and simply frowned by way of conversation. She was not amused by any of it.

The capstone of the whole fiasco was the earl urging Miss Semper and Lady Juniper to allow him to accompany them to the prince's fête to celebrate the regatta.

Lady Juniper informed the earl that her parents had already made arrangements. She did so in no uncertain terms. The earl had seen he'd get nowhere with it and turned to set his sights on Miss Semper. After several demurs, she sadly produced her ticket from her reticule.

There was no marked star on it. She had not been invited.

Both Mr. Wilburn and the earl had left the barge rather shaken. The countess had only murmured something about it being the way of the world.

As if all of that had not been bad enough, Lord Bramley's valet had come down to the servants' hall with the news that the lord was glad to have "shaken off" those two ladies and looked forward to encountering Lady Constance at Carlton House.

It felt as if they were all sailing off the edge of the world and Mr. Wilburn did not know how to turn this ship round.

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Matthew had insisted on riding his horse to Carlton House. He'd spent quite enough time with his mother and father for one day. In particular, he was weary of his father's scheming.

If there had been anything at all good coming from this day, it was that he'd been certain that Lady Constance had found him using a spyglass. He'd waved and she'd

promptly put it down and never looked again. It was unnecessary modesty, he thought, but he found it rather charming.

The Duke of Barstow had taken the win and absolutely everybody understood how pleased he'd be. Lord Varnay had got in his way the year before and Matthew suspected the duke had considered himself robbed.

Those were the two positives. Unfortunately, the negatives had far outweighed them. His father had been ridiculous in his efforts to start a flame between himself and one of the ladies he'd brought onboard.

It was a hopeless effort. The only thing that would ever be between he and Lady Juniper or Miss Semper were sodden coals that refused to light.

Of course, he could not dislike Miss Semper. She was faintly absurd in her dress, but she was a cheerful enough creature. At least, cheerful enough when she was not heaving over the side of the barge.

He'd tried very hard not to laugh at the sight of her dripping concoction of a hat sitting on the table to dry out.

But then, he could not say all of it was her fault. What was Wilburn thinking of to press so much champagne upon the lady? And then his father pressuring her to come in their carriage to Carlton House, never thinking that Miss Semper's father was a country baron who was not likely to have ever come to the prince's notice. The poor lady had been embarrassed into admitting it.

Matthew had high hopes that his father would have taken it all in and given up the ghost.

The idea did give Matthew a little pause though. He really did not know precisely

what sort of financial shape the estate was in. If he pursued his own inclinations, was he dooming his family in some way?

He put that niggling idea out of his mind. Certainly, there must be a way round the problem.

Matthew had just greeted the prince at the door and gone inside Carlton House. With any luck, Lady Constance would already be there.

He scanned the crowd. There was Barstow, looking very cheerful for Barstow. His duchess was by his side, admiring him.

They'd been such an unlikely pair, and the stories about their courtship were so outlandish as to be hardly countenanced. And yet, as he saw them now, side by side, the match seemed the most natural in the world. The reserved duke and the fun-loving lady were somehow greater than the sum of their parts.

Where was Lady Constance, though?

A gentleman moved out of his line of sight and revealed her. There she was.

Matthew stared. Why on earth was she standing with Lady Juniper?

He wished to approach Lady Constance, but he did not wish to approach Lady Juniper. He'd rather not encounter Lady Juniper for the rest of his lifetime.

He took a breath. He would not be put off.

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Constance had dutifully watched the regatta and had been pleased for the duchess that

her duke had won it handily.

The duchess herself had been wildly enthusiastic and had stood on the bow with her auburn hair and red cape blowing in the wind, shouting out encouragements to the duke. She really was rather glorious.

It should have all been most entertaining, but for what she had seen on Lord Bramley's barge. She knew very well what she ought to think about seeing that he had two particularly well-funded ladies aboard.

But she did keep reaching for reasons why it might not signify. Perhaps the ladies were related in some fashion. They were not, as she knew very well, his sisters. But that did not mean they were not cousins of some sort.

People had all sorts of relations hanging about and one was not to know every connection in the world.

Or perhaps both the ladies' sets of parents had asked the earl for the favor of chaperoning them. There could be any number of reasons why they could not do it themselves. There might not have been any more available barges to rent.

Her thoughts were a veritable mishmash of ideas.

Now, she had come to Carlton House. Her introduction to the prince had gone smoothly. He pronounced her charming and they'd moved on.

Constance suspected the prince had pronounced more young ladies charming than there were stars in the sky and would no more remember her than the rest of them.

People made such a fuss over being introduced to royalty, but she believed the fuss to be all on one side. Her curtsy to the queen had been just such a

production—Constance was in, curtsied low, then out, and it was unlikely the queen would have any recollection of her.

Carlton House itself was rather remarkable in its bold statements. Red seemed a rather favored color. It was not to her taste, as she did not see how anybody could ever relax in such loud-colored rooms, but then she was not a prince so what did she know of it?

As she looked about her, she'd seen the Duchess of Barstow by the side of her duke as he received his congratulations for his win.

Then she saw her. One of the ladies who'd been on Lord Bramley's barge. Lady Juniper, the duchess had named her.

She stood with two people who most certainly were her parents.

"Mama," Constance said, "Are you acquainted with the Countess of Wellerston? I have an interest in being introduced to her daughter, Lady Juniper."

Her mother looked at her quizzically.

Constance hurriedly said, "I really feel the loss of having a female friend nearby. I miss Lady Jane, you see."

The countess had nodded. "I do see, I hadn't thought. Well, quite right, I think. You really ought to have some friends in Town. Let us approach, I've known Lucretia forever."

Though Constance claimed to be looking for a friend, what she was really looking for was information. She dearly hoped to hear of a cousin connection between Lady Juniper and Lord Bramley.

They were swiftly introduced and much to Constance's embarrassment her mother said, "My daughter is interested in making some friends while she is in Town."

The Countess of Wellerston seemed to take this as a fine idea. "I was only yesterday saying to Juniper, you must make an effort to make friends with other ladies. They will be your lifelong friends during the seasons and you may even write to them when you are at home."

"As we have done," Constance's mother said.

"Just so," the Countess of Wellerston said. "Now, I do not suppose these two young people can strike up any sort of confidential conversation with their mothers hovering over them. Juniper, why do you not take Lady Constance to the refreshment room, as you already know where it is."

The two mamas drifted off, leaving them alone together.

"That was rather ghastly," Lady Juniper said.

Constance giggled despite herself. "Rather," she said.

"I suppose we ought to do as we have been told," Lady Juniper said.

"I think we ought, lest they return with any more embarrassing words of wisdom."

This caused Lady Juniper to laugh and they set off down the long corridor toward the refreshment room.

As they made their way there, Constance said, "I happened to see you were on Lord Bramley's barge at the regatta."

Lady Juniper nodded.

If Constance had been hoping for a long explanation of how Lady Juniper had got there, it was painfully apparent that she was not to get one.

“Lord Bramley had invited me as well, but I was already committed elsewhere.”

Lady Juniper turned to her. “Really?”

Constance nodded. Then, Lady Juniper said something she would not have predicted in a thousand years.

“We were not on the same barge today, but it seems we are in the same boat. Far too well-supplied with pounds and pence. I sometimes feel as if I am a cow brought to market.”

Constance looked at her wide-eyed. Did the lady mean to say that she thought Constance must also be well-funded to have been invited?

If that were the case, was it somehow public information?

“You seem surprised, Lady Constance. I must admit, I have not been surprised. Nor was I surprised to find Miss Semper had been invited too. I cannot imagine anything more obvious.”

“But I am not so well-supplied,” Constance said.

Lady Juniper raised a brow. “Hm, then I suspect they at least think you are.”

Constance did not answer. Lady Juniper had said “they.” Did that mean Lord Bramley’s whole family was engaged in some sort of hunt for a fortune?

It made her sick to think it.

They had come to the refreshment room and Constance gratefully accepted a glass of hock.

Lady Juniper seemed thoughtful. "Poor Miss Semper did not make out very well today, I am afraid. I was thinking of sending her a note to come for tea on the morrow. Should you wish to join us?"

"Yes, that is very kind," Constance said. She did not know what the meeting would be like, but she at least might come upon more information than she had at the moment.

"Two o'clock," Lady Juniper said. "If the weather holds, we can have it in the garden."

They had since made their way back to the reception room and attempted to ignore their mothers' approving glances.

Then she saw him. Lord Bramley. And he saw her.

He made his way over directly.

"The man of the hour," Lady Juniper murmured before he was within hearing.

"Lady Constance. Lady Juniper," he said, bowing.

They duly made their curtsies, though any friendliness Lady Juniper had possessed had fled at the sight of the lord.

"Lady Constance, I hope you enjoyed the regatta?"

“Oh yes, it was very entertaining.”

“Yes. I saw that you were on the duchess’ boat. She must have been very pleased with the day.”

“Very pleased, yes.”

“I imagine it was a more pleasant barge,” Lady Juniper said flatly.

Constance had nothing to say to that, nor did Lord Bramley. Nor would anybody in the world. She could feel an almost visceral dislike of the lord coming from Lady Juniper.

“Lady Constance,” Lady Juniper said, “I very much look forward to seeing you at my house on the morrow.”

“At your house?” Lord Bramley said. Then he absolutely looked as if he were surprised that he’d said it out loud.

“Indeed, Lord Bramley. I have invited Lady Constance and will issue an invitation to Miss Semper, too. We ladies do like to compare notes, you see.”

It did not seem as if Lord Bramley saw at all. In fact, his expression was almost...guilty?

“Ah, yes, of course,” he mumbled. “Lady Constance, I hope I was not too forward in sending the daffodils?”

“What daffodils?” Constance asked.

Just then, the prince dinged his glass and the ceremony to honor the Duke of

Barstow's regatta win commenced.

Whatever more Lord Bramley wished to say would not be said this day.

Though she very much wished to know about the daffodils. Or maybe she did not wish to know.

No, the truth was she did wish to know, but should not wish to know.

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Matthew paced his bedchamber. Something had happened, but he was in the dark as to what it was. The prince's fête for the regatta had not gone at all as he'd envisioned it. He'd wished to shake off his day at sea with Lady Juniper and Miss Semper and have a lively conversation with Lady Constance.

Instead, he'd found Lady Constance by the side of Lady Juniper, they were to have tea together to "compare notes," and Lady Constance had not known what he was talking about when he mentioned the daffodils.

Finally, his valet knocked and entered.

"Masterson, you did remember to send daffodils to Lady Constance?"

"Ah, the daffodils. Mr. Wilburn insisted he do it himself. Sometimes that fellow doesn't think anybody else can do anything right."

"It seems then that it is Wilburn who has not done something right," Matthew said.

"That's surprising," Masterson said. "He's rather a stickler for doing things that ought to be done."

"Yes, he is," Matthew said thoughtfully. "So perhaps the truth is he did not think it should be done."

Masterson rubbed his chin. "You think he didn't send them on purpose? That he's in league with the earl? About the dowry?"

“He might be.”

“Now that I think of it, I’ll wager he is,” Masterson said. “Considering some things that have been said below stairs.”

“What things?”

“Well, he might’a said something about how if the money runs low, the servants are the first to go.”

“Did he now...”

“Aye, the kitchen maid has been sniffing round the place for days as she’s convinced she’ll be the very first out the door.”

Matthew was not quite certain what to do about it. If Mr. Wilburn were acting on the earl’s directions, there was not much he could do about it.

“Maybe Mr. Wilburn is taking advice from those other gentlemen he walks the park with,” Masterson said.

“What other gentlemen?”

“The other butlers of the square. They’re thick as thieves, those fellas. One day last year, I saw them all leave their houses in carriages, at the same time. Was that a coincidence? Where were they all going? And then, being a person who likes to have their ear to the ground, I’ve heard that at least four of them take Thursday afternoons off, including our Mr. Wilburn. Why all the same day?”

Matthew had no answers for those questions, though he did not think having the same afternoon off signified anything. After all, there were only seven days in the week,

not a hundred.

“I just wonder if they’re conspiring together,” Masterson said.

Matthew always marveled at his valet’s vivid imagination. The idea that a group of butlers who all lived on the same square during the season were conspiring to some nefarious purpose was ludicrous.

“I think a bunch of butlers conspiring is less of a possibility than Mr. Wilburn conspiring with my father. The earl is determined to push me on Lady Juniper or Miss Semper, though the effort is futile.”

“Lady Constance is not futile, but she doesn’t have the money,” Masterson said, pointing out the difficulty that Matthew kept purposefully ignoring.

“No, she does not. But certainly there must be a way round that. Perhaps I ought to take up gambling after all.”

Masterson shook his head. Very vigorously, Matthew noted. “I don’t advise it, my lord. You’ve never taken to it and it’s no game for a novice. You’d just end worse off in the end.”

Matthew knew that assessment was probably right. He’d never gambled for large amounts and it would probably not be prudent to start at this juncture. It would not be very clever to find himself putting a bullet in his head because he couldn’t settle his debts.

“Well, there’s got to be something to do,” he said. “I just have not thought of it yet. I cannot be pushed into tying myself to a lady I do not even like. In the meantime, send daffodils to Lady Constance and make sure Wilburn does not get in your way about it.”

Masterson nodded gravely. "Fool me once, as they say."

"Just be certain you are not fooled twice. Wilburn can be cagey, in my estimation."

"I'll be keeping a close eye on that butler," Masterson said. "Now, what's this about the earl telling me that you're to attend some sort of poetry night? I hardly believed it when he told me."

Matthew sighed. "Lady Thurston's poetical tableau, which has very little to do with poetry and very much to do with Lady Thurston's pique of the moment. I understand last year's offering was a scold to her husband over her pin money. Every year she transforms her ballroom into a theater, boxes included. She'd probably have more pin money if she did not spend so much on her tableau."

"Why should you wish to go to such a palaver?"

"Because unbeknownst to my father, I have spoken to Lady Thurston and she has confirmed that Lady Constance and her parents have accepted the invitation. My father wishes to go because he knows Lady Juniper and Miss Semper will be there too. I have exacted further insurance of not being harassed by those two ladies by swearing that if they are found in our box, I will turn on my heel and leave."

"I suppose the old soldier took that as well as could be expected."

"If you expected not very well, then he did," Matthew said. "I left him in the breakfast room, my mother soothing him with the idea that it was the way of the world."

Masterson snorted, as everybody in the house knew it was the countess' habit to blame the world for any and all difficulties.

“There is one other problem looming on the horizon,” Matthew said, “but I am not certain I have even grasped what the problem is. It just feels like a problem. Lady Constance and Miss Semper are to have tea with Lady Juniper at her house. To compare notes, Lady Juniper said. She said ladies liked to compare notes.”

Masterson dropped the coat he’d been brushing and stared at him.

“All right,” Matthew said, “obviously you have some idea of the problem.”

“Some idea? Some? Three ladies trading confidential opinions? It’s a disaster.”

“Come now, it cannot be as bad as that,” Matthew said, a bit uncomfortable that maybe it could be as bad as that.

“Mark me, it is as bad as that. It is worse than that. I have three sisters—their notes-comparing would put a curl in your hair, if your head didn’t burst into flames first.”

“As bad as that? Well, if my name comes up at all there cannot be so much against me. It is true I was not, perhaps, as gallant as I could have been on the barge. But I have committed no actual crime.”

Masterson sniffed. “When ladies are comparing opinions, it is a small leap from not very gallant to rogue of monstrous proportions. One time, my sisters were complaining of the butcher shorting them on meat. The fat hadn’t been properly trimmed. Less than an hour later, they were speculating that he needed extra money because he kept a mistress.”

Matthew shuddered. My God. What would be said at that tea?

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Constance was rather impressed as the carriage slowed to a stop on Bedford Square. Lady Juniper's father, the Earl of Wellerston, had a marvelous house of fine white stone and restrained and elegant architecture.

A footman who'd been on the lookout hurried to the carriage door and helped her down.

Her mother had been pleased to understand that Lady Juniper had invited her for tea in her garden. Constance was rather pleased herself.

Lady Juniper was an interesting sort of person. She was exceedingly direct, surprisingly so, but she also seemed very kind. Apparently, Miss Semper had failed to find her sea legs when she'd been on Lord Bramley's barge and Lady Juniper felt the lady would need some propping up to recover from the experience.

The butler, a rather dignified old fellow, led her to the back of the house and out into the garden.

Constance did not know what she had expected from an earl's garden in Town, but it had not been what was before her.

There were flowers, there were bushes, there was a footman standing by in case something was needed—all very usual. But the rest of it...

Lady Juniper noted her arrival and hurried forward. "Lady Constance, you are most welcome." Seeing her guest gaze round the garden, she said, "I do hope you like dogs, I probably should have asked."

"Goodness, I am very fond of dogs," Constance said. It was well that was the truth, as there seemed to be a dog everywhere she looked. They lay under tables and on top of benches and along the hedgerow and on the paved paths.

The dogs did not seem to take much notice of her as Lady Juniper led Constance over to a charming arbor. Cushioned chairs were set round an inlaid marble table, atop which was laid a tea service and a tiered tray of cakes and biscuits.

The footman stood by, occasionally glancing at the dogs to ensure they were still in order. Constance had never seen so many dogs together outside of a foxhunt. These dogs were a deal quieter and far more calm than her father's pack.

Lady Juniper looked somehow softened from what she'd been at Carlton House. Her demeanor was more relaxed and it made her rather pretty. She had angular sort of features that could easily seem pinched with annoyance. They had definitely been pinched at the prince's party, but they were not so now.

"Miss Semper has not yet arrived, but I am certain she will be here shortly."

"I very much look forward to being acquainted with that lady," Constance said. "May I ask, how you come to have so many dogs?"

Lady Juniper nodded and smiled, and Constance was grateful she did not seem offended by the question. She could not help asking it—how on earth did one acquire so many dogs?

"I never started out with so many dogs, nor was it ever my plan to get so many dogs. However, it came to my attention one day, some years ago, that my father was attempting to pawn off one of our hunting dogs. That poor little mite was not at all suited for the work—undersized and rather fearful. Well, I stepped into it and demanded Roscoe as my pet. My father relented, of course. Since then, every sad case somehow lands at our doors—deafness, blindness, lameness, crippling shyness, I've seen it all. It seems people have little patience for anything out of the ordinary."

"And the earl does not mind it?" Constance asked, imagining her own father would

mind it very much.

“There was some rough going in the beginning. The fortunate thing about having so many now though, is when a new one arrives, my father does not even notice it.”

Constance gazed round the garden at the dogs in every location. She would have imagined it would be chaos, but it decidedly was not.

“They are all very well behaved,” she said.

“Indeed,” Lady Juniper said. “I theorize that they all somehow know that they have escaped an unlucky fate of some sort. They are satisfied to enjoy the sunshine and have a good dinner. And then, at home they all run where they like.”

“It must have been quite the job getting them all here,” Constance said, having not the first idea of how it would have been managed. Or even why it had been managed.

“Four farmer’s carts,” Lady Juniper said. “Fortunately, it was not a long journey and they were all very courteous. One of the drivers said he’d never seen the like. Interestingly, that one over there hopped aboard at some point—I haven’t the first idea where he came from.”

Constance watched an old hound roll on his back to catch the sunshine on his stomach. Lady Juniper was a regular Saint Francis.

The butler led a lady into the garden.

“Miss Semper, my lady,” he said.

“Dear Miss Semper,” Lady Juniper said, rising. Constance rose too.

After everyone had duly curtsied and got that out of the way, Lady Juniper said, “Miss Bessy Semper, may I introduce you to Lady Constance Condower.”

“I am very charmed, Lady Constance,” Miss Semper said.

Just as Constance had noted when she’d viewed the lady on Lord Bramley’s barge, Miss Semper was a rather short individual. Possibly made shorter by the enormous amount of frills and ruffles that seemed to pop out in every direction. She was drowning in material.

“Gracious, dogs!” Miss Semper said, just now noticing how many of them were about.

“You are not afraid of dogs, Miss Semper?” Lady Juniper asked.

“Only the ones that bite,” Miss Semper said, looking around as if to identify any that might be thinking of it.

“Fear nothing, then,” Lady Juniper said. “I would never allow such rudeness.”

They seated themselves and Lady Juniper poured the tea. After they were comfortably settled, she said, “Would I be stepping too far if I presumed the season’s early days have so far felt rather fraught?”

Miss Semper nodded vigorously. Constance found herself nodding too. It had seemed rather fraught.

“I do not see any virtue in tiptoeing round a subject, though every governess I ever had vehemently counseled against it. So, I will be plain. I come with a lot of money, Miss Semper comes with a lot of money, and I speculate that there are some in society who at least believe Lady Constance comes with a lot of money.”

“It’s like a noose round one’s neck,” Miss Semper said sadly.

Constance did not disagree. It was one of the reasons she did not wish anyone to know what she came with. One of the reasons she hoped that information had not somehow got out.

“I have always viewed it as being for sale in some manner,” Lady Juniper said. “My father says my choice is up to me, as long as I do not bring him someone who is not a gentleman.”

“That is very liberal,” Constance said. In truth, she thought it was exceedingly liberal. Some fathers, had they funded their daughter in such a generous manner, would expect what society would deem a ‘brilliant match.’

“So it is left up to me to discern if a gentleman is interested in me or my money,” Lady Juniper said.

“Have you any ideas?” Constance asked, hoping Lady Juniper might speak of Lord Bramley in some manner. She was not in the least concerned that Lady Juniper liked the lord, as anybody could see that she did not. But perhaps she knew some bit of information that would somehow redeem him from having two well-funded ladies on his barge for the regatta.

“Oh yes,” Lady Juniper said. “In fact, I have put those ideas into action already. It is in my manner, you see. I do everything I can to drive them all away.”

“I see!” Miss Semper said.

Constance did not see at all. “But, if you drive them all away, how will you ever marry?”

Miss Semper's forehead wrinkled, as apparently she'd not thought that far ahead.

"It is my intention that I will eventually wed the very gentleman my father will not like to hear of. His name is Mr. Witherington, son of a viscount in my neighborhood."

Miss Semper leaned forward. "Is it a secret engagement? Is Mr. Witherington to sweep you off to Gretna Green?"

"There is no engagement. Yet," Lady Juniper said. "He would have asked, I know he would have, but my father has told him in no uncertain terms that it shall not be sanctioned. All because he's got a long-running argument with the viscount over a fence line."

"It's like Romeo and Juliet," Miss Semper said with a satisfied sigh.

"Perhaps," Lady Juniper said. "Though I will not be so stupid as that couple and neither will Roddy. We intend to live. So, I will muddle through this season, driving off the money-hungry, and then go home and propose to my gentleman. My father will have a screaming fit over it but I will remain unmoved by his histrionics. If Gretna Green becomes necessary, then Scotland should prepare for my arrival."

Constance was flabbergasted by Lady Juniper. She had known the lady was direct, but this was something altogether different. She was very bold. It was as if nothing in the world could frighten the lady.

"I wish there were a Mr. Witherington waiting for me at home," Miss Semper said. "My father sent me here to live with my aunt, Lady Florence, and I'm to wed a titled gentleman with good prospects."

"Have any caught your eye, Miss Semper?" Constance asked.

“No, I cannot say so. I feel...well I do not know if I should actually say how I feel.”

“Out with it, Miss Semper. You are perfectly safe in our company.”

Constance nodded to confirm the idea.

“I feel,” Miss Semper said slowly, “as if people, gentlemen, find me silly. I do not understand it, as I do not feel silly at home.”

“It’s the clothes,” Lady Juniper said matter-of-factly. “I cannot imagine what your modiste was thinking of.”

Constance set her teacup down with a clatter.

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Constance hardly knew where to look. Lady Juniper had just very casually told Miss Semper that her clothes were terrible.

Miss Semper glanced down at all her ruffles. “Goodness, I did not have a modiste, only a seamstress. I gave her some ideas, and here we are.”

“You are lost at sea in that dress,” Lady Juniper said, “but do not despair. I will call in my own modiste, Madame Lissette, and we will examine your wardrobe and turn it into something elegant. After all, you certainly have enough material to work with.”

Constance thought Lady Juniper entirely unique in her brand of kindness. Constance, herself, would have expressed kindness by not saying anything about Miss Semper’s dresses. But in fact, Lady Juniper was prepared to do something about it, which was far kinder.

“I would be much gratified, Lady Juniper,” Miss Semper said. “I feel I do not have a particular eye for such things.”

Lady Juniper nodded graciously. “It is no trouble at all. Though, do not be too shocked if Madame Lissette burns that hat you wore on the barge.”

Constance almost snorted with laughter. Once one got used to Lady Juniper’s distinct brand of communication, it was rather delightful.

“Ah yes,” Miss Semper said, “I knew of the regatta before coming to Town and so I’d asked the seamstress to make something with a maritime feel to it.”

“She did not let you down,” Lady Juniper said, “you could have set sail with Nelson.”

With that, they all fairly collapsed in laughter.

After they had recovered themselves, Miss Semper said, “Lady Constance, may I ask about your own circumstances?”

Constance had not had any intention of revealing her true circumstances to anybody. However, these two ladies had begun to feel as real friends who could be trusted.

“Well, I will not put a particular number on it, but perhaps I come with a bit more than most people would think I do.”

“Except Lord Bramley, apparently,” Lady Juniper said. She turned to Miss Semper. “Lady Constance was also invited onto Lord Bramley’s barge.”

“Oh I see, so he somehow knows of your circumstances. More than other people do,” Miss Semper said.

“That is just what I do not know,” Constance said. “I do not see how he could, and yet, I cannot be certain he does not. I rather like him, but I am not certain I should like him. He’s sent me daffodils, which I thought was charming.”

“Ah, he says that he regards you,” Miss Semper said. “I have never received flowers; I suppose I would be all aflutter if I did.”

“Do not get too aflutter, Miss Semper,” Lady Juniper counseled. “There are gentlemen in this town who send flowers flying in every direction. Lord Gerard sent me red roses. The man is eighty if he is a day; I expect passionate love would be the death of him. In any case, if there were a flower that said “I adore your dowry,” I am certain he would have sent that.”

“Do you suppose that is what Lord Bramley is doing? Pretending at regard?” Miss Semper asked.

“That is what I do not know,” Constance admitted. “Is his regard true, or is it something else?”

“We’ve got to smoke him out, then,” Lady Juniper said. “We’ve got to get to the bottom of it.”

Constance very much agreed, though she had not the first idea of how to get to the bottom of it.

“Shall we ask him?” Miss Semper said. “Just march up to him and take him unawares?”

“While I admire your audacity in thinking of it,” Lady Juniper said, “I believe we will need to be more crafty to get at the truth.”

“Crafty? Oh dear, I do not imagine I am very good at crafty,” Miss Semper said.

Constance did not imagine she was very crafty herself, but she was beginning to have a lot of faith in Lady Juniper’s abilities.

The lady tapped her chin. “I do not suppose that whatever your number is, Lady Constance, that you come with more than I do. No, I bring fifteen thousand. That amount, or more than that, would be impossible to hide.”

Constance did not confirm or deny that theory. She did come with more, but it was not necessary to say so.

“If Lord Bramley is the fortune hunter we fear he is, he will go for the highest amount

he can get, which is me.”

Constance was entirely confused. Did Lady Juniper imply she would wed Lord Bramley? It was a sickening thought. And then, how would it even be accomplished? The lady had made her disdain well understood.

Of course, that could not be the case. She’d just explained she planned to wed Mr. Witherington. What was the case, though?

“I see you wonder about it, Lady Constance. I can make myself pleasant when I have a mind to. All I need do is invent some excuse for my prior demeanor, pretend I am bowled over by the man, and then, if he proposes, I denounce him. If he does not take the bait, then you have your answer.”

It was a mad plan. But then, at least it was a plan.

“Would you go to so much trouble on my behalf?” Constance asked.

“Of course I would. We ladies must stick together. After all, what else do we have? We have no real power but for the steadfastness we show each other.”

Constance had not ever thought of things in that way, but Lady Juniper was right. Ladies must support one another. And these ladies were true friends, she was sure of it.

“Gracious, it will be like a game of cat and mouse,” Miss Semper said. “Oh I do hope Lord Bramley comes through it and is not a fortune hunter.”

Constance could not agree more. Let him come through it.

“Bramley is an interesting case,” Lady Juniper said. “On the one hand, he did set out

to have us all three on that barge and it is too coincidental that we all come with significant amounts. On the other hand, if he's planning to overcome our sensibilities with charm, he's not very good at it."

Constance did not fully understand that point. One of the things that frightened her was that he was very good at it. But then, to each his own, she supposed.

They discussed their plan further, Lady Juniper claiming she could arrange for them all to sit together at Lady Thurston's poetical tableau. Lady Thurston was long known to her from her own neighborhood and would happily oblige. If Lord Bramley was out hunting fortunes, he would attend to find the three richest ladies in London all conveniently together in one spot.

After those arrangements were finalized, Lady Juniper determined she would send a note to her modiste this very day and would bring the lady to Miss Semper's house on the morrow. Madame Lissette, Lady Juniper said, would drop what she was doing to attend her.

Constance imagined everybody who knew Lady Juniper would drop what they were doing when summoned. She was such a determined lady.

After they'd had their fill of biscuits and cakes, an odd scene unfolded. Lady Juniper nodded to the footman. He, in turn, motioned with his hand at the dogs. At this signal, the dogs formed a very polite line to receive a bit of biscuit from their mistress.

Heavens, even Lady Juniper's dogs did not dare to step out of line.

The last thing that was accomplished was the naming of their friendship, which Lady Juniper explained was a necessity for any serious endeavor. After Miss Semper suggested Three Peas in a Pod and Lady Juniper hinted that the name might not describe their seriousness of purpose, they settled on The Stalwarts. Constance had

the idea that Lady Juniper had kept that name in her pocket, at the ready for just such an opportunity.

Constance was very glad to have met two such ladies. It felt as if she'd been bobbing round the ocean alone and had just been swept into the safety of a sturdy rescue boat.

Whatever was the truth about Lord Bramley, The Stalwarts would find it out.

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Mr. Wilburn had got the message he'd dreaded ever receiving during his own matchmaking season—an emergency meeting had been called by The League.

Why? Why had Mr. Penny called it?

He felt red creep up his cheeks like a rising tide as he recalled how delighted he'd been to receive the call to an emergency meeting last season. What sort of scrape had Mr. Harkinson fallen into? He'd been delighted to go and find out, though careful to look suitably grave when he got there.

Were they all delighted now? Over what? What had he fallen into unawares?

He hurried up the stairs to their club headquarters. He was late, as Lord Wisterley had held him up with the planning of a dinner. The earl was determined to have Lady Juniper, Miss Semper, and their respective relations to dine.

He'd finally got out of the house by pretending that the note that had been sent by Mr. Penny was from his old aunt—that decrepit lady who did not exist, but who was his perennial excuse for requiring Thursday afternoons off. According to Mr. Wilburn, the lady had written that she'd fallen down a flight of stairs and did very poorly.

If he was not mistaken, Lord Wisterley harbored secret hopes that this latest tumble would finish the lady off.

He found the other members of the league already seated and with teacups in hand.

They looked worryingly somber.

“Do sit down, Mr. Wilburn,” Mr. Penny said kindly, “you appear out of your breath.”

Mr. Wilburn sat down gratefully and poured himself a cup of tea. “I apologize for my tardiness. I think we all know, gentlemen, how a lord might waylay one at an inopportune time.”

Naturally, they all nodded. It happened all too often, as lords and ladies seemed unaware that there were any schedules in the world but their own.

“We ought to get started,” Mr. Browning said. “These unexpected outings always do prompt curiosity in our households.”

Mr. Rennington nodded vigorously. “That housekeeper stared at me something terrible as I put on my coat. It was like she knows something!”

They all ignored that statement. Mr. Rennington lived in terror of his housekeeper. Though, if someone must live in terror, he should have made certain that she lived in terror of him. It was a very unfortunate situation.

“Now,” Mr. Penny said, “I never did think it would be me calling one of these unexpected meetings, as I so little like to discompose anybody, but the information that came to me this morning left me with no other recourse.”

What had Lord Bramley done? There had been no news of anything untoward going

on this morning. If there had been, surely he would have heard it—Lord Wisterley leaned toward the loud side of things. Very little happened that he did not hear by standing outside the drawing room doors or at the sideboard in the breakfast room.

The only thing he'd heard of this morning was the countess had bought a slew of things from a haberdasher, the bill had come in, it was shockingly high, and the countess was forced to explain that it was the way of the world.

"It seems," Mr. Penny said, "that there was an alarming meeting yesterday between Lady Juniper, Miss Semper, and Lady Constance."

"Alarming, Mr. Penny?" Mr. Harkinson said, glancing at Mr. Wilburn with a look of quiet satisfaction.

It seemed that now Mr. Harkinson had got through his own more than alarming run at matchmaking, the fellow was delighted to hear "alarming" associated with somebody else's efforts.

Mr. Penny nodded. "Alarming, Mr. Harkinson. One of Lady Juniper's footmen is brother to one of my own and communicated what transpired at this gathering. It seems they've formed a cabal of sorts."

"A cabal!" Mr. Feldstaffer cried. "That is the very worst sort of gathering."

Mr. Wilburn was often dismissive of Mr. Feldstaffer's grim opinions and dire predictions, but in this case he was right. A cabal was the worst sort of gathering.

Why? What could three young ladies require a cabal for?

"Indeed," Mr. Penny said. "It seems they are suspicious of Lord Bramley."

“Suspicious?” Mr. Wilburn said. “What do they have to be suspicious about? Lord Bramley is not suspicious!”

“The suspicion is about the regatta,” Mr. Penny said. “It seems they found it suspicious that both Lady Juniper and Miss Semper were on the barge, they both coming with hefty dowries.”

Mr. Wilburn blanched. That had been his idea. He dearly hoped Lord Wisterley would never find out that it had made those two ladies suspicious!

“And then,” Mr. Penny continued, “they somehow understood that Lady Constance had been invited too and it seemed even more suspicious.”

“That makes no sense,” Mr. Browning said. “Everybody knows that Lady Constance only comes with three thousand. Her having been invited should have thrown their suspicions to the wind.”

“But apparently,” Mr. Penny said, “Lady Juniper and Miss Semper think otherwise regarding the lady’s dowry. Lady Constance herself hinted that she might come with more, though she would not say a number.”

Mr. Wilburn put his teacup down with a clatter. “She pretends to be a great heiress, then?”

“She has at least hinted at it,” Mr. Penny said.

“Pretending is always a very bad business,” Mr. Feldstaffer pointed out.

“I cannot think why Lady Constance would pretend at having more than she does,” Mr. Rennington said.

Of course Mr. Rennington could not think why. He was so taken up with worrying over his housekeeper that he could not think of much!

“I am afraid she means to trap Lord Bramley in some manner,” Mr. Wilburn said. “If she believes that Lady Juniper and Miss Semper were invited onto the barge for their fortunes, and now she claims she has one...what else could it be?”

“Very bad business, that,” Mr. Feldstaffer muttered.

Mr. Wilburn sighed. He hardly needed to be told it was a bad business!

“There is more, I’m afraid,” Mr. Penny said.

Mr. Wilburn resisted the urge to put his head in his hands.

“It seems they’ve named this cabal they’ve formed,” Mr. Penny said. “They call themselves The Stalwarts, and they intend on doing something.”

“Doing something!” Mr. Feldstaffer said, mopping his brow.

“Doing what?” Mr. Harkinson said.

Mr. Penny shifted on his chair. “I do not know. Apparently, the footman listening to all this was distracted by an old hound who was making himself amusing in the garden.”

“An amusing hound?” Mr. Wilburn said. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Mr. Penny nodded sadly. “Nor I, Mr. Wilburn. Apparently, Lady Juniper has above ten dogs wandering her garden and some of them are thought to be amusing.”

The gentlemen fell to silence, each considering the idea of more than ten dogs in one's garden and anybody thinking that was amusing.

“Let us forget the aberration of an overabundance of canines,” Mr. Browning advised. “How shall we proceed now that we have this information?”

“I believe,” Mr. Penny said, “that we can have no firm direction until we have more information. That is perhaps the direction—getting more information. We should understand what it is they propose to do before knowing what we ought to do.”

Mr. Wilburn sighed. It was so like Mr. Penny to avoid rash action, even when rash action was required.

“I am afraid, Mr. Penny,” he said, “that I must disagree on that point. What we must do is prevent Lady Constance from tricking Lord Bramley. He likes the lady, if he were to believe that she comes with a fortune, well...”

“I see...” Mr. Browning said thoughtfully. “And Lord Wisterley is determined that his son should bring an infusion to the estate. If they were to be somehow deluded into thinking...”

“Is Lord Wisterley only wishing for a sizable dowry,” Mr. Harkinson said, “or is it necessary to keep them afloat? I do not believe you said.”

Mr. Wilburn would like to kick Mr. Harkinson's leg. So far, he had managed to delicately work round the idea that a large fortune was not just wished for, but must be had.

Now, everyone was staring at him, waiting for him to answer.

“It is necessary, I believe,” he mumbled.

“Oh dear,” Mr. Penny said.

“Well!” Mr. Browning said. “These things happen to the best families. There is no point in wondering how or why. If Lady Constance is claiming a fortune she does not possess, then we must stop it in its tracks before the lady brings everybody to the brink of disaster, herself included.”

“Oh yes,” Mr. Feldstaffer said. “Can you just imagine when the contracts are drawn up—that’s when the hammer would fall. The mysterious fortune would go up in a puff of smoke and so would Lady Constance.”

“How, though?” Mr. Wilburn asked. “How do we stop it in its tracks?”

“To my mind, we simply need an idea,” Mr. Penny said.

Mr. Wilburn stared at him. Of course they needed an idea. What else would they need? A cigar?

They fell to silence, each concentrating on thinking up an idea.

Though the meeting went on for a further half hour, it was a half hour mostly filled with silence and sighs. None of them had the first idea how to stop whatever was in the works with Lady Constance.

Mr. Penny concluded by saying that surely they would think of something soon.

Mr. Feldstaffer had replied that he thought that highly unlikely.

Mr. Wilburn, himself, did not know if it were likely or not. All he did know was that it was necessary.

They had to think of something. The Stalwarts, and whatever harebrained plot they'd devised, must be stopped!

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Mr. Frederick Ludwig had informed his father, Baron Finster, of the large and apparently secret inheritance received by the Countess of DeWitton from Mr. Harold Canbury of New York. It was lucky he had that bait to offer, as the old man had been irate by the lack of success of his business dealings in that town.

They'd done some digging and came upon the delightful fact that the countess had a daughter of age, and that daughter was out in society for her first season. Supposedly, she only came with three thousand, so the countess and her family were intending on keeping the secret of their windfall.

They had high hopes Lady Constance was the worst looking lady alive and there would be nobody interested in her and her supposedly middling dowry. Mr. Ludwig would employ his considerable charm and they'd all be right as rain again.

There had never been any other year that the baron had accepted an invitation to Lady Thurston's poetical tableau. What the lady named poetry was really just a cataloguing of her grievances. The baron claimed if he wished to hear a wife complaining about a husband he could very well just stay home. He accepted this year, though.

Through their various connections, they understood Lady DeWitton was long known to Lady Thurston and was sure to be there, daughter in tow.

As well, they were all uncomfortably aware that they could not be everywhere that Lady Constance might appear. They did not have the pull to receive an Almack's voucher, or an invitation from the prince, or other such elevated invitations. They both hated and revered society on account of it, despising and longing for the club

that only allowed them to stand on the peripheries. With enough money, though, they could work their way up and into the most exclusive places. Then they would peer down their noses at those less elevated and slam doors in faces.

As their carriage rumbled to Lady Thurston's house, the baron said, "Let all the other unmarried gentlemen circle round Lady Juniper Croydon and that Semper girl as the biggest prizes going. We will swim straight toward the biggest fish, with none the wiser."

Mr. Ludwig nodded. He must just land that biggest fish on the banks of his father's estate. Then, when the time came to negotiate a marriage settlement, he would press for more, far more, than the measly three thousand DeWitton advertised.

They'd hand it over too, because if they didn't their daughter would be shamed at an engagement called off. If he had to, he'd resort to threats. Perhaps he'd threaten to put it about that the engagement was called off because the lady was found compromised?

That idea would put some starch into Lord DeWitton's cravat.

"Here we are," the baron said, "turn on the charm."

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am

Matthew approached Lady Thurston's house with some trepidation. Masterson had explained what could be expected when three ladies gathered to compare notes and it had sent a chill down his spine. He did not have sisters himself so could not be sure of the veracity of the tale his valet had told, but it was enough for him to feel on edge.

All he wished to do was have a moment with Lady Constance, without the company of Lady Juniper or Miss Semper. Unfortunately, all his father wished to do was maneuver Lady Juniper and Miss Semper in his direction.

At some point, he was going to have to have a direct conversation with his father regarding his plans. He would not, upon pain of death, pursue either of those two heiresses. One was pinched and unpleasant and the other was a frothy fairy cake staggering round on two short legs.

What he was going to do about the estate's financial shortfalls he did not yet know, but a dowry was not the solution.

He worked to shut off unpleasant thoughts of financial shortfalls. Lady Constance would be in the ballroom somewhere and that would be very pleasant indeed. He was determined to somehow find himself sitting next to the lady at supper, after everyone had suffered through whatever Lady Thurston had prepared for them.

He found Lady Thurston at the door in a high state of nerves and agitation. Her cheeks were downright scarlet, her eyes glittered, and she seemed almost out of breath. She wore a voluminous black cape that covered whatever she wore underneath. He understood from last year she'd been in a nightdress, so who knew.

She greeted him kindly enough, but she ended the greeting by saying, “Prepare to experience some exhilarating highs and excruciating lows this evening, Lord Bramley. The temperature of my tableau is decidedly up this year.”

Matthew suspected that whatever they were to witness this night, it would not be particularly dignified. Of course, if reports were accurate, it never was.

The ballroom had been transformed into something resembling a theater, with a stage at the top end and boxes set up round the perimeter. Each box had the name of the party to occupy it on the front.

“Ah, I have spied Lady Juniper and Miss Semper already,” the earl said. “They sit together.”

Matthew followed his father’s gaze. Then he took in a breath. Lady Constance was in the box too, and looking so lovely.

But what was she doing there? Why must she be with Lady Juniper? Had they not had enough company at the blasted comparing notes tea? What had they talked about that they felt the need to keep talking?

Lady Juniper met his gaze and she very strangely smiled at him. It was not an expression he was accustomed to seeing from that lady. And then, Miss Semper was changed too. She’d garnered the reputation of drowning in bits and bobs and ruffles and had been ludicrously dressed for the regatta, but now that seemed to have changed. She wore an elegant dark velvet dress that did something well for her.

Though Miss Semper looked well, she did not look as well as Lady Constance, of course. Nobody did. That lady’s deep brown hair shined in the candlelight and she wore dark green silk. She was the picture of elegance.

“I do not see why Lady Constance must be with them,” the earl said, a petulant tone creeping into his voice.

Matthew’s mother patted the earl’s arm and said, “It is the way of the world, dear.”

“I don’t see why,” the earl said. “Anyway, why must everything be the way of the world? Is the world writing you letters to tell you about its ways?”

Every so often, the earl got fed up with things being the way of the world. Fortunately, this never seemed to discompose Matthew’s mother.

She laughed and said, “I hardly need the world to write me letters. I am a woman, and women understand these things instinctively.”

Not surprisingly, his father had no answer to that. Neither he nor Matthew had the first idea of what women instinctively understood.

Though Matthew and the earl had different reasons for wondering why Lady Constance should sit with those two ladies, they did both wonder about it.

Still, there she was and he would go over. Really, it would not matter if she sat with Napoleon, he would go over.

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“Here he comes,” Lady Juniper whispered.

Constance could see that for herself, of course. She’d seen Lord Bramley as soon as he’d entered the ballroom. He was a glorious specimen of a man and he nearly took her breath away.

Oh how she wished to run her hands through his dusky hair and trace his strong jaw.

She'd done her very best over the past days to not think of him, with little success. She knew she should not think of him until she understood his real purpose. Did he somehow know of her money? Was that why he seemed to pay her special attention?

Was she being logical in attempting to slow her developing feelings or was she being insecure in imagining that a man like that could not have any real interest in her?

She'd been so at sixes and sevens over it that she'd written a long letter to Lady Jane and expected a scolding reply from that lady any day. Still, she'd had to pour her feelings onto paper. One of the points she had written about was could she ever wed a man who would wed her for her fortune.

Naturally, the answer was no. She had the example of Lady Jane's own mother to guide her. However, were she to face the circumstance, it would be very tempting to say yes and very hard to say no. Constance did not believe that she would ever be as struck by any other gentleman as she had been with Lord Bramley. It was as if he were a lodestone and she were smith's filings—she was inexorably drawn to him.

Now that the plan to get to the bottom of Lord Bramley's intentions was moments from commencing, it all seemed rather mad. If Lady Jane was to be told of the scheme, she would tell Constance that her mind had gone off to summer in Brighton without her. But what else was she to do? She had to know Lord Bramley's motivations. She had to know for certain.

Lord Bramley bowed. "Lady Constance, Lady Juniper, Miss Semper."

"Lord Bramley," Lady Juniper said, "I was hoping to encounter you."

"Were you?" Lord Bramley said.

Constance could see well enough that the idea of Lady Juniper being eager to see him came as a surprise. While Lady Juniper said she could get round having clearly disdained him from the start, it seemed a very big leap.

“I must explain something to you, Lord Bramley,” Lady Juniper said, “as I am afraid I have been forced to explain to some others. You see, over the past weeks I have been distraught over my great aunt’s health. Fortunately, she has managed to pull through. Unfortunately, I fear some I have encountered during this trying time, yourself included, bore the brunt of my rudeness. I was quite overcome with terror and sadness over the idea of losing her, you see.”

“I am sorry, I hadn’t known,” Lord Bramley said.

Constance pressed her lips together. Of course he had not known. What a story.

“So now I am determined to make amends, if you would be so kind.”

“Naturally, of course, think nothing of it,” Lord Bramley said.

“I am afraid that will not suffice,” Lady Juniper said.

“No?”

“If you will be so good as to escort me into supper, I would continue to make amends,” Lady Juniper said.

“Supper?” Lord Bramley said.

Constance thought he rather resembled a trapped animal looking for a weakness on the cage door.

“I knew you would not mind,” Lady Juniper said. “Very considerate of you.”

Lady Juniper was extraordinary. Lord Bramley had not in fact agreed to it. She’d just pretended that he had and now he had no chance of escaping the cage she had craftily lured him into.

Constance was at once thrilled that the gambit was successful, and despairing over the idea that she was not the lady being escorted into supper by Lord Bramley. But, perhaps she could sit nearby and listen to what was said. If he were to remain as standoffish with Lady Juniper as he was this moment, that would be a very good sign.

“Everyone, do find your boxes,” Lady Burberry called. “We are ready to begin.”

Lord Bramley, though he looked as if he wished to say something, bowed and hurried away.

“That went very well indeed,” Lady Juniper said.

“I do not know how you kept your head,” Miss Semper said. “I nearly lost mine and I was only watching.”

Constance felt much the same. Somehow, Lady Juniper had become the general and she and Miss Semper were her willing troops.

“I realized long ago,” Lady Juniper said, “that nearly anything can be accomplished if one approaches the thing with confidence.”

Perhaps Lady Juniper was right. An abundance of confidence was the one thing Constance had always lacked and it did not seem to have done her any favors. Though, she was not certain she aspired to Lady Juniper’s level of confidence—she did not think anybody but Lady Juniper could carry it off.

“Dear ladies, esteemed gentlemen,” Lady Burberry said. “Every year we gather here to witness our dear Lady Thurston’s poetical tableau. I know I speak for everyone when I say I am always deeply moved by the performance.”

Somebody, and it may have been Lord Thurston, snorted.

Lady Burberry determinedly ignored the interruption. “With no further ado, I give you Lady Thurston and her supporting actors.”

There was polite applause, and under the butler’s stern eye, two footmen wrestled with the curtains that had been pulled across the stage. Getting them open after some struggle, the two young men looked grateful to be done with it and hurried away.

The scene that was before them was mysterious. Lady Thurston stood in the center of four other women. All of them wore voluminous black capes, as if they came to tell a tale of gothic horror. They were all very grim-faced and Constance could not imagine what would come next.

In a surprisingly booming voice, Lady Thurston said, “In a usual year, I would use my poetical tableau to give words to my deepest and most personal feelings. Sadly, that is not to be the case this year. A certain person who identifies himself as my husband has forbidden me to express my own feelings.”

All eyes turned toward Lord Thurston. He sat smiling and nodding and appearing very satisfied.

“Therefore,” Lady Thurston continued, “I will use my considerable talents to tell you of another lady, who is like me but not me, and another husband, who is like him but not him. I give you, Lady Thursby’s complaint—one woman’s brave fight to announce the truth to the world.”

Eyes drifted back to Lord Thurston. Or Lord Thursby as he was to be known this evening. That gentleman sat fists balled, looking some combination of incensed and frightened.

“Lady Thursby has eyes,” Lady Thurston said, “and she will speak what she sees. All around her, she sees silks and satins in the latest fashions.”

At this cue, the four ladies on the stage surrounding Lady Thurston, or Thursby, threw off their robes to in fact reveal lovely silk and satin dresses.

“What else does Lady Thursby see?” Lady Thurston asked, looking round the room as if she were searching for something.

She paused, dramatically looked down, and then threw off her cape.

“Lady Thursby sees she is dressed in poverty! In last year’s cuts and fabrics!”

Lady Thurston’s friends who had taken the stage with her took that moment to recoil in horror away from the lady.

Constance put her hand to her mouth to stop the gasp that had already escaped some others.

Lady Thurston stood in a costume made of dirty rags sewn haphazardly together and of such dilapidation that a chimney sweep would have thrown it all in a bin as being well past its time. Constance thought the rags were unlikely to have anything to do with last year’s fashion, but she supposed Lady Thurston meant to say they might as well have.

“Will Lady Thursby hide the truth?” Lady Thurston shouted in her rags.

Her friends peeked back at her and shook their heads, as if to acknowledge that it would be absurd for any lady to hide such a truth.

“Will Lady Thursby be silenced? No, if she has a feeling, she will express it. If she is forced to wear rags, she will show it. Is it unreasonable that Lady Thursby should wish for a live-in modiste? Is it outrageous that she should wish to keep up with the fashion of the day? Is it untenable that this lady should wish for new jewels to go with the fashion of the day? No! What is unreasonable is a shouting across a dining table by a certain Lord Thursby, demanding Lady Thursby speak no more of these modest wants! Lady Thursby may live the life of a pauper, dressed in rags, but she will not be silenced. Lady Thursby cannot be contained.”

“Obviously not,” Lord Thurston said, storming out of the ballroom.

Lady Thurston watched him go and looked not at all perturbed over it. Constance could hardly imagine what their private conversations were like.

“Lady Thursby,” Lady Thurston fairly shouted, “shows the world the truth and remains victorious!”

There was a moment’s silence, as it did take the audience some time to realize that this, whatever it was, had come to an end. Someone somewhere became cognizant of it and started the applause.

“Gracious,” Constance whispered.

Lady Juniper snorted. “Lord Thurston was outfoxed. I admire Lady Thurston for keeping her nerve—she will not be silenced, after all.”

Miss Semper sat motionless, blinking as if to assure herself that she was awake.

“Well,” Lady Juniper said, “now that’s done, I’d better go throw myself at Lord Bramley. If I am not mistaken, he’ll pretend at forgetting he was to take me into supper and will need reminding.”

Lady Juniper leapt up and let herself out of their theater box, leaving Constance with Miss Semper.

“I wonder what we should do now,” Miss Semper said. “It’s not like a ball, where your last partner takes you into supper.”

Constance had wondered the same thing, but she’d speedily come to a conclusion. “We ought to go in with my parents,” she said. “You’ve come with Lady Juniper and now that she’s gone off with Lord Bramley, it might be awkward for you to go with her father.”

“Rather,” Miss Semper said. “He seemed as if he hardly knew why I was in his carriage to begin.”

“Come, we will find my mother and we will see if we can sit somewhere nearby Lady Juniper and Lord Bramley. Perhaps we can overhear.”

“You are very clever, Lady Constance,” Miss Semper said.

“Not as clever as Lady Juniper,” Constance said, laughing.

Before they could set off to execute this plan, a gentleman approached. “Lady Constance, Miss Semper,” the gentleman said, bowing. “Mr. Frederick Ludwig, eldest son of Baron Finster.”

The gentleman was long and lean, with a Roman nose and hooded eyes. Constance supposed he would be considered to have average looks—they certainly did not

compare to Lord Bramley, but then no gentleman did compare to him.

As for his sudden arrival, Constance did not quite know what to make of Mr. Ludwig. Was it usual that a gentleman who was unknown to a lady just walked up and introduced himself?

“I am sure you are aware of the arrangements for supper at this particular entertainment?” Mr. Ludwig asked.

Constance and Miss Semper looked at each other. Constance said, “The arrangements?”

“Ah, perhaps not,” Mr. Ludwig said smoothly. “You see, even though this is not a ball, we are in a private ballroom so may consider ourselves introduced. As there has been no last set of dancing, single gentlemen are expected to approach ladies to escort them into supper. When I saw two such visions of loveliness in one box, naturally I hurried over before I was crowded out by competitors.”

“That is very kindly expressed,” Constance said, though really she said it just to say something. While she did not consider herself ugly, a vision of loveliness was going a bit far.

“Yes, very kind, I’m sure,” Miss Semper said.

“May I?” Mr. Ludwig asked, holding out two arms.

Constance glanced at Miss Semper. That lady shrugged. She supposed they ought to go with the gentleman, as she did not see a way to refuse.

She would not have picked out Mr. Ludwig as someone she particularly wished to know, but he seemed harmless enough.

In any case, perhaps he knew Lord Bramley and would be interested in singing his praises.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am

Matthew was beginning to believe in the fates, and he was beginning to think they did not like him.

This evening was to be so straightforward! He would sit through Lady Thurston's latest complaint and then hurry to Lady Constance to escort her into dinner.

But no, that was not to be. First, the lady had been in a box with Lady Juniper and Miss Semper. Precisely where he did not wish her to be.

He'd gone over anyway. But then, Lady Juniper's temperament seemed to have done some kind of about face. He'd been certain she could not stand the sight of him, but she'd claimed her earlier disdain had been caused by her distress over a sick relative.

That would have been perfectly fine, he really did not care one way or the other. But no! She'd had to insist on him taking her into supper.

Why? She'd said she wanted to make further amends. He did not need any further amends.

While Lady Thurston, or Lady Thursby as she claimed to represent herself, blathered on from the stage about new dresses and jewels, Matthew's mind raced furiously on how to get out of taking Lady Juniper into the dining room.

He'd finally concluded he could not weasel out of it, but had the idea that he could offer to take all three ladies in. He could maneuver Lady Constance to one side and Lady Juniper on the other. He did not know what he would do with Miss Semper.

Once more, the fates stuck their foot out to trip him up. Rather than waiting to be collected, Lady Juniper had come to him. Then, as he was suggesting collecting the other two ladies, he'd watched them stroll off with Ludwig.

What was Lady Constance doing with that fellow?

Matthew did not know the man very well; Ludwig was often in New York on some business or other. He was not a member of any clubs and seemed not to have any interests that distinguished him.

As far as Matthew knew, Ludwig did not shoot or fence or gamble. He'd never even seen Ludwig atop a horse. He was not an intellectual, nor did he have a scientific bent. There was not much to say about the gentleman at all, but for what he wasn't. The only thing that could be said of him was that he was one of those people who could garner an instant dislike for no particular reason.

Matthew's friend Donovan said Ludwig's manner was "as greasy as a pig at a village wake" because one could not quite get their hands round it.

Whatever Mr. Ludwig was, the fates seemed to like him better than Matthew at this moment.

As Matthew led Lady Juniper into the dining room, she said, "Who is that gentleman who escorts Lady Constance and Miss Semper?"

"Mr. Ludwig, eldest son of a baron."

"What do you think of him?" Lady Juniper asked.

"Think of him? I do not ever think of him."

“I see,” Lady Juniper said. “I only thought, he might be suitable for Lady Constance? After all, with her small dowry, she cannot afford to reach too high.”

“What?”

Matthew asked what, but he was not sure he wished to hear what. Did she imply that Lady Constance should shoot low because of her dowry? That lovely lady would not have a need to shoot low if she came with nothing at all!

“I only say,” Lady Juniper said softly, “practicalities. It is the way of the world, Lord Bramley.”

The way of the world? Had she been talking to his mother?

The dining room was crowding up and Matthew made a determined effort to lead Lady Juniper in the direction of Lady Constance.

However, it seemed the fates were determined to knock him flat this evening.

“This will do, Lord Bramley,” Lady Juniper said, indicating two chairs.

It would not do at all, but he did not have much choice. He did find that gentlemanly manners could be enraging sometimes. It would be pleasant if one could just say what one thought, rather than always deferring to the lady in the pursuit of being a gentleman.

If he could say what he thought just now, he’d say, “Lady Juniper, I need no further amends from you. Ever. What I would like to do now is saunter over to Mr. Ludwig, knock him out of his chair, take his place, and have a conversation with Lady Constance.”

Of course, he could not say any of that. Rather, he found himself forcing a smile under the gaze of his father, who was directly across the table.

Lady Thurston sat at the head of the table, having somehow got rid of the rags she'd been dressed in and wearing a perfectly respectable dress. Matthew would not have pegged it as outdated, but considering Lady Thurston's performance, he supposed she did. Lady Thurston stared diabolically at Lord Thurston, who sat at the bottom of the table and glared back at his lady.

Lady Constance was further up the table, and Ludwig sat between the lady and Miss Semper. Though, if Matthew was not mistaken, Ludwig paid all of his attention to Lady Constance while Miss Semper was left to fend for herself.

A footman arrived and filled their glasses. Matthew drank gratefully from his and then signaled the footman to refill it.

"Do you have a drinking problem, Lord Bramley?" Lady Juniper asked.

"Drinking? No," he said. What was she on about? It was only wine, not brandy.

"It is not insurmountable, I suppose," Lady Juniper said thoughtfully. "After all, if one were to rule out every gentleman who drank too much of the spirits, one might be left with a predictably small selection."

What on earth was she talking about? Was this somehow part of the amends she'd been so determined to make? It seemed to him that if one wished to make amends, one did not start by inquiring if that person had a drinking problem.

"And then, it would be my preference to stay in the country most seasons, so I suppose with that much time apart, the gentleman's habits do not much signify."

Matthew was confounded by Lady Juniper's conversation. Who was spending time apart? What gentleman's habits? Certainly, she did not suggest that he was anywhere in the picture.

He glanced at Lady Constance. Mr. Ludwig had leaned over and was speaking to her intently. What was he saying?

"Now, what I said about the raising of children when we danced at Almack's," Lady Juniper said. "I was in the throes of nervous exhaustion on account of my great aunt. In truth, I am far more liberal than I had described."

"I am sorry, what?" Matthew asked.

"My attitudes on children," Lady Juniper said. "Have no fears on that front."

"Why would I have fears on that front?" Matthew asked, beginning to get alarmed at the direction the conversation was taking.

Lady Juniper waved her hands and laughed. "Quite right. It is too soon to be discussing children."

Too soon? The end of time would be too soon. What on earth did this lady imagine? What could he say to it without being ungentlemanly?

Just then, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

He turned to find his father. The earl had just been across the table, how did he get over here? The old man was like a cat, forever turning up places he was not expected.

"There you are, son," the earl said. "And here is the charming Lady Juniper."

“Earl,” Lady Juniper said.

“Bramley was just saying yesterday, I do hope Lady Juniper will attend the poetical tableau.”

Matthew stared at his father. He’d said no such thing, nor would he ever.

“I see,” Lady Juniper said. “We were thinking along the same lines then.”

“Were you, indeed?” the earl said, delighted.

Matthew felt as if he were trapped. He had to get out of this. But how?

“I hope I am not too bold, Lady Juniper,” the earl said, “but I was hoping to issue you and your parents an invitation to dine.”

To dine? In his house? With her parents?

“I am sure they would be pleased, Lord Wisterley,” Lady Juniper said.

Pleased? Matthew felt a growing sickness in his stomach. It was as if these two people had made decisions about his inclinations without consulting him. He had to get out of this conversation. Immediately.

“Oh no,” he said. “I feel the fever coming on, Father. The one I picked up on the continent.”

“Is it a Roman Fever?” Lady Juniper asked, seeming not overly concerned that he might be coming down with a life-threatening illness.

“I’m afraid so,” he said.

“Fever?” the earl said. “But you have not had a recurrence since—”

“My luck has run out, apparently,” Matthew said, attempting to look feverish. “However, if I go home and treat it with tincture of fever tree bark it should not lay me low for long.”

The earl’s eyes narrowed and Matthew could see he did not believe a word of it.

“You had best go, then,” Lady Juniper advised. “Fevers are nothing to toy with, in my view.”

It was the first welcome thing the lady had said all night.

“I can call my carriage and escort you there,” Lady Juniper said.

Blast it.

Matthew leapt to his feet, which might have been a tad energetic for a sick person. “Thank you, no, I can ride my horse. As long as I leave now. Before the fever overtakes me.”

He bowed and strode from the room, leaving his father behind with the mercurial and exceedingly odd Lady Juniper.

What a ridiculous night.

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Constance had been trying to attend to Mr. Ludwig, as he did have an awful lot to say for himself. Though, her eyes kept drifting toward Lord Bramley and Lady Juniper.

What were they talking about?

The plan was that Lady Juniper would drop some heavy hints that she would be amenable to a match. If Lord Bramley were a fortune hunter, he would show his hand.

She did not know if he were showing his hand or not. Mostly, he looked very scowly and Constance found herself hopeful about it.

But then he'd got up abruptly and left. His father and Lady Juniper had been left watching his seemingly rushed departure.

Constance did not know why he left, but she did think that a fortune hunter would not abandon his quarry. It must be a good sign.

"If there is one thing I prefer about New York," Mr. Ludwig said, "it is there is not as much money-grubbing."

At the mention of money, Constance put her attention back on Mr. Ludwig. What did he mean by it?

"Money grubbing, Mr. Ludwig?" she said.

"Yes, you see, over there men are self-made. If a man is in society, he's got funds. Here, gentlemen inherit what they've got and don't do a lick of work to get it. They just expect they'll wed and a dowry will haul them out of any difficulties they've got themselves into."

Constance worked to keep her expression neutral. "Do you speak of any gentleman in particular?"

Mr. Ludwig glanced round the table. “They all do it, of course. Look, there is Lord Leland moving his chair over to Lady Juniper. Everybody knows she comes with a heavy purse. She clearly looks at him as if he is a toad, but that will not put him off.”

Constance followed his gaze. Indeed, Lady Juniper had reacquired her pinched look, a sure sign she was attempting to drive off Lord Leland.

What poor Lady Juniper put up with was the very thing she feared. Word would get out that Lady Constance Condower had inherited a pile of money from a distant cousin and then she would be followed round by those gentlemen trying to get their hands on it.

What she really wished to know, though, was had Lord Bramley somehow discovered it? Was he trying to get his hands on it?

All she hoped for was that he knew nothing about it and would just like to get his hands on her person.

“Self-serving, is what it is,” Mr. Ludwig said.

“So you do not include yourself among the self-serving, I presume,” Constance said.

“I do not. Though I will, in the fullness of time, inherit the barony,” Mr. Ludwig said, “in all other respects my family is self-made. We do not put the burden of financial security on the backs of our wives. We find the notion distasteful.”

Constance supposed she found the notion distasteful too. It was how things were, how they had always been, but it would be nice if it were not so.

She’d not given it a thought when she’d only had three thousand to offer. It was not enough to tempt a gentleman to override his own inclinations. But what she had now

was more than enough.

“Do give up your chair, Mr. Ludwig.”

Constance turned to see a well-dressed lady of middle age staring down at them.

Mr. Ludwig fairly leapt from his seat. “Your Grace,” he said, bowing. He pulled the chair further out for the lady to seat herself.

Constance had no idea who this lady was nor why she’d just ejected Mr. Ludwig from his seat, though there were other open seats available.

The lady settled herself, then glanced up at Mr. Ludwig. “Well? I’m much obliged. There is nothing further I require.”

Mr. Ludwig bowed and took himself off. If Constance had not already met Lady Juniper’s mother, she would have guessed this lady to be her.

“I suppose that was startling,” the lady said. “I am the Duchess of Ralston. I believe you are DeWitton’s girl.” Turning to Miss Semper, she said, “And of course I know who you are—Miss Semper of the large dowry.”

Miss Semper nodded sadly.

The duchess looked Miss Semper up and down and said, “You’ve done something to improve your mode of dress, if I am not mistaken. I applaud the effort.”

“It was all to Lady Juniper, Your Grace,” Miss Semper said. “She took me in hand.”

The duchess laughed. “Ah, Lady Juniper, I understand she does like to take things in hand. Now, I have thrown Mr. Ludwig from his place for a reason, and that reason is

Mr. Ludwig. I do not like him.”

Constance was rather startled. She did not particularly like Mr. Ludwig either, but then she did not downright dislike him. Aside from his alarming comments about money, she’d found him neither here nor there.

“I suppose you’ll like to know why I do not like him,” the duchess continued. “I’d like to know it myself.”

“If I understand you, Your Grace,” Constance said, “you do not like him but do not know why?”

“Precisely.”

“We had a housemaid like that once,” Miss Semper said. “Then we caught her greasing the top stair. It turned out, she hoped my mother would fall down the stairs. She wished my father a widower so she could trap him into marriage. We think she imagined herself a witch, but my mother says she was just a housemaid with some idiotic ideas.”

“Gracious, Miss Semper,” the duchess said. “In what county does such skullduggery go on?”

“Norfolk, Your Grace.”

“That explains it,” the duchess said. “I have a cousin in Norfolk, he’s as eccentric as the day is long. He once told me the wind whispers to him about what he ought to have for dinner. I told him my own wind in Devon would not be so presumptuous.”

Constance was silent during this exchange. There was nothing at all to say regarding a murderous housemaid or a cousin talking to the wind.

“Now,” the duchess said, “I cannot say what I have against Mr. Ludwig, but I can say I have very good instincts. I also take an interest in the doings of young people. I would advise you both to be cautious of him. Especially you, Miss Semper, in case he is after your dowry.”

“But Your Grace,” Miss Semper said, “Mr. Ludwig all but ignored me. He was far more interested in speaking with Lady Constance.”

“Really? Odd, I would not have guessed it,” the duchess said. “Nevertheless, my instincts usually run true so have a care.”

Constance attempted not to gulp or otherwise display her thoughts just now. If Mr. Ludwig could not be trusted and he might be after a dowry...did he somehow know of her money too? Miss Semper was right—Mr. Ludwig had been verging on rude to her.

“Well, you two seem like charming girls and I did see you seated in a box with Lady Juniper so I presume you are all friends?”

Constance and Miss Semper nodded.

“We are, Your Grace,” Constance said.

“Look out for one another, then,” the duchess said. She motioned for a footman. When the young man hurried over, she said, “Do be so kind as to rescue Lady Juniper from Lord Leland. Bring her over here and she may take my seat.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the footman said.

“There now, the three friends will be back together and Mr. Ludwig will have no opportunity to reinsert himself, for this evening at least.”

The duchess took her leave. Constance stared at Miss Semper. What had happened this evening? All she'd wished to know was if Lord Bramley knew about her money. Was he interested in her for her money? Instead, she'd discovered that Mr. Ludwig might be interested in it, and that the Duchess of Ralston was intent on driving him off.

Did anybody know about the money? Or was it that somehow, everybody knew of it...

She'd never in her life worried so much about what other people did or did not know!

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Matthew was not exactly sure how to press forward with his pursuit of Lady Constance. For one, Lady Juniper and Miss Semper seemed always in the way. For another, he had made a firm resolution to avoid Lady Juniper at every turn.

What had got into that lady? First, she had despised him. He'd been entirely satisfied with that state of affairs. Then, she decided she did not despise him and made hints about his drinking and her attitudes on children.

Of course, there was the further problem of his father doing every possible thing to throw Lady Juniper in front of him. That mention of hosting a dinner had sent a chill down his back. He hoped it was only talk and not something actually in the works.

And then, the old soldier had been positively put out with his exit away from Lady Juniper at Lady Thurston's tableau due to a supposed Roman fever. The earl had been muttering complaints about it ever since, despite Matthew's mother explaining it was the way of the world.

To top off Matthew's concerns, there was the estate's finances to consider. As much as he kept trying to forget about that, it would insist on tiptoeing back into his mind.

When it did tiptoe back, it brought some uncomfortable ideas. What if he were to wed with no care for the health of the estate? Did he have the right to bring a lady into such a circumstance?

An odd thing he'd never noticed before was that while all and sundry in society understood what a lady brought to a union, it was less clear what the gentleman brought. There were vague ideas based on acreage and the evidence of spending, but

no firm accounting for a lady to consider. All along, he'd been weighing his own ideas, but what about the lady's ideas? Might she not be opposed to going into something that might be less than stable?

And what about children? Would a son find himself in severe straits and wonder what his father was thinking of? Would a daughter find herself with no dowry and unable to have a London season? What would become of her? If there was nobody suitable in the neighborhood, she might end by marrying a local squire. Or worse, nobody at all.

He'd saddled his horse and gone to the park to clear his head. He had mentioned to Lady Constance that a certain bend in the Serpentine would be a pleasant view to sketch, as it was on his usual route. He'd even named the time. He'd hoped she'd make her way there one day, and he had checked every day, though so far he had not encountered her.

But then, there she was. Finally. Her carriage was nearby and she sat on a three-legged stool, as did the countess, both with sketchbooks in hand. A groom stood nearby, and the coachman was up on his perch seeming to enjoy the fine day.

Hurrying his horse forward lest they suddenly pack up and leave, he dismounted and handed the reins to the groom standing there. He did not know if he had the right to commandeer the countess' groom, but he did not much care.

"Countess, Lady Constance," Matthew said.

"Lord Bramley," Lady Constance said.

If he were not mistaken, she flushed upon seeing him. Hopefully, that was a good sign.

“Bramley,” the countess said, with a decided smile. Matthew got the idea that the lady approved of him. Of course, how much would she approve of him if she knew of his family’s rather straightened circumstances? Or rather, the circumstances that would become straightened if he did not pull in some significant funds.

He brushed that notion aside. “I advised Lady Constance that this was a particularly inspiring view in the late afternoon.”

The countess laughed and said, “I see, so that’s how we come to be at this spot in the late afternoon.”

“Yes, Mama,” Lady Constance said. “We do not know all the good views and Lord Bramley has spent far more time in Town.”

There was a scolding undertone to her words, as if she meant to warn her mother off saying anything more about it. Clearly, Lady Constance was embarrassed. He was too. The meeting could have remained just a happenstance, but he’d had to point out he’d suggested the spot. What a stupid thing to say.

Matthew had always noticed that when one did not have a particular thing to say, but felt forced to say something, the result was often stupid.

“Indeed, Lord Bramley will be far more familiar with the views,” the countess said, clearly amused. “Well, I shall rise and stretch my legs for a few minutes, I think. That is, if Lord Bramley cares to take my stool?”

Matthew nodded. Probably too vigorously.

The countess rose, taking her drawing pad with her. She glanced behind her, seeming further amused to find her groom holding his horse. He paid little mind to any of it and sat himself down.

Lady Constance said, “You were right about the view and the time of day, the light here is very good. I am trying to commit to memory the shades of it and the shadows so that I might reproduce it later in watercolor.”

Matthew stole a peek at her sketch pad. He was not sure why she’d claimed she was not very good at sketching—it was skillfully done. The Serpentine, its path, and trees took the forefront. Price’s Lodge, nestled amongst its own grouping of trees was in the distance. Even the charming wood bridge leading to the front door of the lodge was penciled in and the perspective was well done.

“I feel as if you did not have the right to claim you were not very good,” Matthew said. “That is a very skilled sketch.”

Lady Constance was silent for a moment. “I suppose I do not like to presume too much about myself.”

Matthew was mystified. What did she mean? A woman like Lady Constance had every right to presume the moon and stars.

He stared at a soft brown curl that had escaped her pins, just now resting on her cheek. He would not at all mind wrapping it round his finger or brushing it away.

“I do not think I am unrealistic about myself, such as I am,” Lady Constance said. “And perhaps an unclouded view protects me from unwarranted flattery.”

“Do you feel as if you have been the target of unwarranted flattery?” Matthew asked, finding the notion very strange.

“Perhaps,” Lady Constance said. She said it rather pensively, as if it were an opinion she teetered back and forth on.

Matthew could not imagine what she meant by it. What sort of flattery could she have received that she would deem unwarranted?

Then, his own confusion unclouded and he understood what had happened. Ludwig had done it.

Matthew was certain he was right. Ludwig had escorted Lady Constance into supper after Lady Thurston's poetical tableau. As far as Matthew could tell, Ludwig had done all he could to keep the lady's attention.

He supposed Ludwig had turned on the charm. Why wouldn't he? Lady Constance was sure to grab any gentleman's attention. Though, what sort of charm Ludwig was able to turn on was a bit of a mystery.

"I see," Matthew said.

"Do you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Afraid!"

"Well no, not afraid in that sense," Matthew said. "Forgive me if I step too far, but I imagine Mr. Ludwig must be the author of any flattery that did not seem genuine."

"Mr. Ludwig?"

Matthew nodded, though he was not certain why she did not seem certain. "Of course, I had noticed that he escorted you and Miss Semper into supper. I cannot think who introduced the fellow to you."

“Nobody did. He introduced himself. He said that was how it was done at Lady Thurston’s entertainment.”

“Did he now?” Matthew said. That was rather scheming of Ludwig—what was he up to? Matthew wished he knew more about the fellow, but nobody knew too much about him. There was something odd about a man who skulked around Town without anybody knowing too much about him. Who were his friends? Why did he not belong to any clubs?

“Yes, he did say it was the proper procedure for the evening,” Lady Constance said. “Though, in the end, the Duchess of Ralston drove him off from his place at the table. She does not like him, though she does not know why.”

“Yes! That is exactly it with him,” Matthew said. “People do not like him but cannot explain why.” He paused, then said, “You say the duchess drove him off?”

Lady Constance nodded. “After you had gone. Lady Juniper said you were taken with a Roman fever and had to leave precipitously.”

Matthew could feel his face tinge red. “Ah yes, the Roman fever. Well, it was not so much a fever as—”

“As?”

The countess had returned from her stroll. “I believe we have stayed long enough for one day, Constance.”

Matthew swallowed a long sigh. There was so much to say. He’d not even had the chance to firmly warn her off anything to do with Ludwig.

And why was Lady Juniper going round advertising his Roman fever? It was meant

as a private excuse! One did not go round saying why somebody else had left a party. He did not think.

He rose and said, “Countess, Lady Constance, do allow me to carry your sketch pads to the carriage.”

Matthew could see very well that the countess was on the verge of laughter. He supposed she had every right to be—the day a sketch pad became too heavy for a lady to carry was the day all was lost.

Even the coachman seemed perplexed. He sighed and got down from his perch to retrieve the stools the ladies had been sitting on.

Nevertheless, both ladies duly handed over their drawing pads and he escorted them back to the carriage.

As he helped them into the carriage, he said, “Do you attend any entertainments in particular over the next week?” It was a bold question, especially in front of a lady’s mother.

The countess laughed and said, “We attend Lord Nankin’s card party on the morrow, if that at all helps.”

Matthew nodded. He’d not been invited, but he was acquainted with Lord Nankin. Perhaps he could wrangle an invitation. And perhaps for once Lady Juniper and Miss Semper would be elsewhere.

“I suppose you’d best release our groom from your service, Lord Bramley?” the countess said with a twinkle in her eye.

Matthew bowed and supposed so too. He’d entirely forgotten their groom was

holding his horse. He was too taken up with inventing a reason why Nankin ought to invite him to his card party, despite the old gentleman knowing very well that he did not care for whist and was the worst partner the Duchess of Ralston had ever had.

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The members of the league had settled into their respective places for their usual weekly meeting. Mrs. Belkey had come with the tea service and they'd all helped themselves to a cup after she'd quietly closed the door behind her.

Their last meeting had been an emergency called by Mr. Penny to alert them to several alarming ideas. Lady Juniper, Miss Semper, and Lady Constance had formed a cabal called The Stalwarts, on account of finding Lord Bramley suspicious, and they were intent on doing something. Lady Constance had hinted that she came with more of a dowry than anybody realized and so the conclusion was she was posing as an heiress. As to what those three ladies were planning to do, they had no idea.

At that meeting, they'd all thought long and hard about how to quash what seemed a blooming attachment between Lord Bramley and Lady Constance, as it could only end in disaster. Unfortunately, nobody had come up with an idea about that either.

"Does anybody know where we are with this thing?" Mr. Browning asked.

Mr. Wilburn shifted uncomfortably in his chair. By "this thing" he assumed Mr. Browning alluded to their efforts to get Lord Bramley suitably settled. They were nowhere with "this thing."

"Now I did hear, Mr. Wilburn," Mr. Penny said, "that Lord Bramley was struck down with a Roman fever at Lady Thurston's poetical tableau. It sounded very concerning. I hope it will not cut his season short?"

“A fever!” Mr. Rennington cried, pushing his chair away from Mr. Wilburn. “Is it contagious?”

“There was no fever,” Mr. Wilburn said. “He pretended at it to get away from Lady Juniper. His valet told the staff all about it and the earl has steam coming from his ears over it.”

“Ah, but you did say that it was Miss Semper who must be the logical choice,” Mr. Harkinson said. “As Lady Juniper cannot stand the sight of Lord Bramley.”

Mr. Wilburn stared at Mr. Harkinson. He’d hardly said “cannot stand the sight of.” He’d said nothing stronger than she did not prefer the lord.

“We knew that would go wrong from the start,” Mr. Feldstaffer muttered. He then chewed on a biscuit, contemplating all the things that might go wrong in the world.

“As it happens,” Mr. Wilburn said, “it seems that Lady Juniper has had a change of heart. Or rather, her heart was misunderstood in the first place. According to Lord Bramley’s valet, Lady Juniper was in an altered and rather negative frame of mind in the beginning of the season because she feared an old aunt was dying.”

“Hah! Like that old aunt of yours, eh Mr. Wilburn,” Mr. Browning said jocularly. “How many times has that invented lady fallen down the stairs?”

“Enough times that the earl has asked why she doesn’t move to a place with less stairs,” Mr. Wilburn said.

“So you say, Mr. Wilburn,” Mr. Penny said, “that a match between Lord Bramley and Lady Juniper may be possible after all?”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Wilburn said, “though Lord Bramley remains against it and he still

seems to chase after the practically penniless Lady Constance.”

“I would hardly say penniless,” Mr. Harkinson said. “She does come with three thousand, though I suppose for the situation of your lord’s estate it will not do...”

Mr. Harkinson trailed off and as was becoming a habit, Mr. Wilburn had the great urge to kick him.

“But how does this Mr. Ludwig play into it?” Mr. Feldstaffer asked.

“Who?” Mr. Wilburn asked.

“Mr. Ludwig, the son of some baron or other,” Mr. Feldstaffer said. “I did hear that he took Lady Constance into supper at the poetical tableau. And Miss Semper too. I heard he was wholly engaged with Lady Constance and quite ignored Miss Semper.”

Mr. Ludwig. He did not know of this gentleman, but he began to like him already. He would like anybody who took Lady Constance into supper and who was not Lord Bramley.

Mr. Wilburn had felt for some days as if he were in swift water, being swept downstream with no control over his direction. Now, suddenly, Mr. Ludwig had come along like a low hanging branch he could grab onto to pull himself up on a bank. This Mr. Ludwig, whoever he was, had taken Lady Constance into supper and monopolized her time.

Perhaps they’d had a riveting conversation between them. Perhaps Mr. Ludwig had swept the lady off her feet. Perhaps even now they were secretly engaged.

“What do we know of this Mr. Ludwig?” Mr. Wilburn asked hopefully. If this gentleman might remove Lady Constance from Lord Bramley’s notice, that would be

very convenient.

“I believe they are one of those families,” Mr. Browning said, “who keep a very low profile. Baron Finster is the father and I understand they have profitable dealings in America. Something about the exchange and selling shares for something or other.”

Every man in the room sniffed. While their lords and ladies might hold sway above them, tradesmen were below them. It was rather uncomfortable to hear of a lord who was a tradesman.

While it was not as if Baron Finster were selling apples from a cart, he was working for money. There was something unpleasant in the idea, as if it shook the tree of English stability. What was to happen next? Was a duke to become a solicitor? Or perhaps a marquess might like to take up as a country doctor?

“We must prepare to think in modern terms,” Mr. Wilburn said, unwilling to give up on Mr. Ludwig because his father did some sort of work. Really, that would be Lady Constance’s problem.

“Modern,” Mr. Browning said, as if he’d just smelled something vastly unpleasant.

Mr. Wilburn knew very well that Mr. Browning would take any talk of modernity the hardest. He was forever pointing out how old his duke’s family line was. If one listened to Mr. Browning long enough, one might erroneously conclude that the duke’s ancestors were all standing round the manger at the birth of Jesus.

“Though Mr. Ludwig’s family is not as elevated as my lord’s,” Mr. Wilburn said, “we must still consider him a gentleman. If we can push Lady Constance in that gentleman’s direction, then perhaps there will be a way to push Lord Bramley in Lady Juniper’s direction.”

“How though?” Mr. Rennington asked. “It feels rather fraught, this pushing people in directions.”

Mr. Wilburn pursed his lips. Mr. Rennington found nearly everything in the world fraught.

“How can we discover if Lady Constance has an interest in this Mr. Ludwig?” Mr. Harkinson asked.

As they sat in silence for some minutes, contemplating how it might be discovered, Mr. Wilburn began to have an idea. Perhaps it was not necessary for Lady Constance to like Mr. Ludwig. Perhaps it was only necessary that Lord Bramley think she did.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “it seems to me that we must be willing to go to great lengths to prevent Lord Bramley and Lady Constance from certain disaster.”

“Cum Virtute!” Mr. Browning said.

Mr. Wilburn nodded. Mr. Browning was very fond of their motto—with valor. He’d often said his duke would approve of it, if his duke knew of it.

Mr. Wilburn did not know how valorous it would be to trick Lord Bramley into thinking Lady Constance was interested in another gentleman, but that was neither here nor there. It must be done.

“What do you propose, Mr. Wilburn?” Mr. Penny asked.

“I propose that we bring it to Lord Bramley’s attention that Lady Constance has an interest in Mr. Ludwig, and Mr. Ludwig is very rich. He can give her everything that money can buy. You see? This will hit on a sore spot for Lord Bramley, as he...well he...”

“He will not be able to give her everything money can buy,” Mr. Harkinson said, “because he does not have the money to buy it and her dowry won’t help matters.”

“Thank you, Mr. Harkinson,” Mr. Wilburn said tightly. His leg gave a little jerk in Mr. Harkinson’s direction. He pressed his hand on his thigh to stop it from acting on its own and kicking that gentleman off his chair.

“I would not condone such goings on,” Mr. Browning said, “if we were not all fully cognizant of the necessity of Lord Bramley making a practical choice.”

Mr. Penny nodded. “I agree. It is the sort of thing one would not thank you for today, but be grateful to you for tomorrow.”

“It’s the sort of thing that makes one nervous today,” Mr. Rennington fretted. “What if Lord Bramley were to discover it? After all, we do not know if Mr. Ludwig is rich or not.”

Mr. Feldstaffer nodded in agreement. “Just one of the dozens of ways it could go wrong, Mr. Rennington.”

“Do you have another idea, gentlemen?” Mr. Wilburn asked, looking back and forth between Mr. Feldstaffer and Mr. Rennington. He knew very well they would not.

Mr. Feldstaffer had no time for ideas, what with putting all his thoughts on how somebody else’s ideas could go wrong. Mr. Rennington could barely think at all, as he lived in terror of his housekeeper, even when she was not nearby!

After a suitable silence and no other ideas whatsoever, Mr. Wilburn said, “Are we agreed on going forward?”

There were various nods round the room, though Mr. Feldstaffer’s and Mr.

Rennington's were decidedly lackluster.

"It is settled. I will recount the idea of the rich Mr. Ludwig and the blossoming attachment to Lady Constance at the servants' table. Lord Bramley's valet will inform his lord as soon as he can run up the stairs with the news. Hopefully, that will be the end of any ideas regarding Lady Constance. Then, Lord Bramley can very sensibly turn his attention to Lady Juniper and Miss Semper."

"By the by," Mr. Browning said, "I have heard that Miss Semper has taken steps to correct her wardrobe. The Stalwarts brought somebody in to fix up the whole thing. It's said that more ruffles and outlandish headgear went into the bin than stayed in the lady's closet."

"The cabal," Mr. Rennington said, shuddering.

Mr. Wilburn ignored Mr. Rennington's shuddering. If all this cabal the ladies had cooked up between them had going was occupying themselves with Miss Semper's wardrobe, so much the better.

He must assume that the monstrosity of a hat she'd worn to the regatta had made its final and blessed adieu. To the bottom of the Thames, preferably.

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If Mr. Ludwig had ample funds, he would hire a legion of spies to gather information on Lady Constance Condower.

He did not, though.

What he did have was a working and rather clever mind. When he was in Town, he'd long made it a habit to frequent The Brazil, the best coffee house in London.

It had several things to recommend it. It was nearby White's and that club's coffee was considered middling with too much water. The result was that many of White's members stopped at The Brazil for a cup, either coming or going to the club.

The Brazil's booths were conveniently back-to-back, so it was near impossible to not overhear what was said in the next booth. He had, over the years, gathered much valuable information. The owner of the place did not mind him taking up a booth for as long as he liked—the fellow was paid monthly to not mind it. Ludwig would settle in with a newspaper obscuring his face and pretend to read. But all the while, he was listening.

Was there some new business venture being discussed? Was there a new way to bring in money? Was a particular gentleman new to the town an atrociously bad gambler that might be had for everything he'd brought?

Along with those conversations, there was always talk of the ladies. Especially the ladies who had just turned up for their first season. And most especially the ladies who turned up with their pockets full of coin.

The ton might congratulate itself on its delicacy of feeling, but that delicacy was just the froth on a syllabub of cold hard calculations of pounds and pence.

Over the seasons, he had kept a keen ear out for ladies turning up with heavily laden dowries. He'd even made a run at Lady Margaret Mulroy two years prior. That lady had come with eight thousand, which would have been very respectable. Unfortunately, Viscount Kiltonery had swept the lady from his grasp.

Mr. Ludwig had stewed on that for a while. However, he'd since shaken it off. He was after a far bigger fish at the moment.

He had settled himself into an empty booth and had his ears wide open. He was certain he would hear of Lady Juniper and Miss Semper at some point this day. Those two ladies' dowries were the talk of the town. But would he hear of Lady Constance Condower? Did anyone else know of the inheritance from Mr. Harold Canbury of New York?

It was the first time he was not seeking out information, but rather seeking out the lack of it. He hoped he heard nothing at all about Lady Constance. The secret of her inheritance must stay a secret.

For the past hour, he'd been forced to overhear the juvenile ramblings of two young comrades who communicated by attempting to top one another. If one said he'd ridden to Brighton in record time, then the other would claim to have flown there with wings. They no doubt considered themselves dashing young bucks, but as far as Mr. Ludwig was concerned, they were awkward fawns stumbling round on unsteady feet and making too much noise in the process.

Finally, the two imbeciles left, loudly proclaiming they were off to fence at Angelos. Very predictably, they assured one another of the idea that the institution in question had never encountered two such talented young gentlemen. Mr. Ludwig sent up a

prayer that they would both mortally stab each other, thereby ridding the world of two pointless individuals.

Another group took the booth, and this group was far more interesting.

He recognized one of the voices and quickly identified the other two by how they were addressed.

The lords Bramley and Janney, and Sir Jonathan.

“I suppose the old soldier is still pushing for Lady Juniper or Miss Semper,” Lord Janney said. “I know mine is.”

“Mine would be too,” Sir Jonathan said, “if he were still alive.”

“My earl has still not given up hope,” Lord Bramley said. “I’m going to have to sit him down and lay down the law about it.”

“Lay down the law?” Lord Janney said with a guffaw. “Why? Why not just do as I do—pretend I am chasing those two ladies but they do not regard me with favor. My mother keeps saying she does not know why, I seem handsome enough, but perhaps she is just blinded by maternal affection.”

“You can pull that over on your parents,” Lord Bramley said, “but mine are following me all over Town, maneuvering those two ladies in my direction. Worse, Lady Juniper does not seem to despise me as much as she had done and my father has threatened to have both her and Miss Semper to dine.”

“Gad,” Lord Janney said. “Well, if you have to choose between the two, who will it be?”

“It will be neither of them.”

“I say,” Sir Jonathan said, “Miss Semper seems a pleasant and lively creature, once one can see past the enormous bows and ruffles.”

“She’s changed all that, somehow,” Lord Bramley said. “She’s dressed very usually these days.”

“Is she?” Sir Jonathan said, sounding intrigued. “I will admit I found her charming, despite the abundance of bows.”

“I am going to have to be straight with my father,” Lord Bramley said. “It is Lady Constance, or it is nobody.”

Mr. Ludwig dropped his newspaper and coffee overspread its pages. He hurriedly dried it off with a napkin and hid his face again.

Bramley knew of the money. How did he find it out?

“I saw her in the park yesterday,” Lord Bramley said. “She was sketching at a location I told her about. I’ve arranged to have a mahogany paint box and some quality watercolors delivered from Ackerman’s this afternoon. Anonymously, of course. She’s to be at Lord Nankin’s card party this evening and after this I’m off to White’s to track down Nankin and wrangle an invitation.”

“You? At a card party?” Sir Jonathan said. “Everybody knows you are the worst whist partner in the world. Even the queen knows it.”

“Never mind the card party,” Lord Janney said. “Where is all this going? Your earl has spelled out the estate’s difficulties and Lady Constance does not come with enough.”

Yes, Mr. Ludwig thought. That was the question of the hour.

There was a silence and Mr. Ludwig wondered if Bramley would tell his friends of Lady Constance's true worth.

"Yes, I know," Lord Bramley said. "That is, I don't know, but I'll think of something."

"What something?" Lord Janney asked, his tone full of skepticism.

"I don't know yet."

"Bramley," Sir Jonathan said, "there are only two somethings to consider. If an estate is not pulling its weight, then either it must be made to or it must be propped up with a dowry. There is no other something."

"I've asked my father about getting the estate to make more than it does," Lord Bramley said. "He says he and Crickenly, that's the steward, have looked at it backwards and forwards."

"Have you looked at it backwards and forwards?" Sir Jonathan asked.

"Have I? Well, no. The earl likes to keep all that rather close. He keeps saying he'll walk me through all the books at some time or other, but he never has. In any case, I would hardly know what I was looking at."

"I would," Sir Jonathan said. "My father passed on when I was seventeen—I've learned quite a bit since then."

"I see," Lord Bramley said. "Would you be willing to explain to me what I'm looking at? I know where everything is—it's in a large armoire in the estate's library. We

could set off day after tomorrow. Who knows? Maybe the estate can be made to pay more than it has. Then, Lady Constance's dowry amount won't matter."

"It's worth a try, I suppose," Sir Jonathan said. "Sometimes the old guard gets too comfortable and things get overlooked."

"That's right," Bramley said, "we'll just discover what's been overlooked."

The three friends went on to work out the details of the trip. Mr. Ludwig did not care what they were. There was too much else to consider.

Did Bramley know or not know about Lady Constance's dowry? Mr. Ludwig thought he very well might, and all the rest of it was a show of disinterest in money for his friends. After all, it seemed absurd that he and Sir Jonathan would pour over Bramley's father's books. It was not Bramley's estate yet, he had no right to be sniffing through the books. Ludwig's own father would go mad if he tried it.

It would be very convenient for Bramley to supposedly marry for love, and then be supposedly surprised that there was money in it. It would maintain the veneer of delicate feelings the ton was always so interested in. If Bramley would not let on that he knew of the money, then he must come up with some sort of cover for how it was reasonable that he engage himself to Lady Constance.

Whatever the truth of it, Bramley certainly had the intention of proposing, which must be stopped.

The fellow would conveniently take himself out of Town for some days, which might give him some time to stop it. And Bramley had kindly presented an idea on how to begin stopping it.

Bramley would send a mahogany box and watercolors to Lady Constance

anonymously. There was no reason another gentleman, such as himself, might not take credit for it.

In fact, there was no reason a note signed anonymously might not be switched to one that included his name. The delivery from Ackerman's was to be this afternoon. Certainly, he could waylay the delivery boy and make the switch.

Of course he could. He would just claim that he'd wished to send it anonymously but had since found his courage and would have the lady know from whence it came.

A place like Ackerman's would be well-used to idiotic gentlemen making cakes of themselves over women. The delivery boy would find it amusing, and he would have no reason to find it suspicious.

That was quite a bit of information to pick up in one sitting. Now, he must just do something about it and he had a direction.

All hail The Brazil coffee shop.

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Constance hurried into Lady Juniper's back garden for a meeting of The Stalwarts. She was very glad they'd had a meeting arranged for this day, as she might well see Lord Bramley this evening and there were matters to discuss.

Miss Semper and Lady Juniper were already seated at the charming marble table. Lady Juniper's endless amount of dogs were all ranged round the garden, seeming as pleased with their circumstances as they had been the last time she'd come.

"Dear Lady Constance," Lady Juniper said by way of greeting.

“Lady Constance,” Miss Semper said, “you are looking very well.”

“As are you, Miss Semper,” Constance said, admiring the dress she wore.

Lady Juniper had been as good as her word and Madame Lisette had been downright ruthless in stripping down the fripperies of Miss Semper’s wardrobe. She was just now dressed in a lovely muslin that did not scream for attention.

“You note the improvement in Miss Semper’s attire, Lady Constance,” Lady Juniper said matter-of-factly.”

“I must admit,” Miss Semper said, “I feel more myself in clothes such as these. I am afraid my father told the seamstress I was to become a very great lady and she became frightened of it and thought everything must be complicated.”

“The good news, according to Madame Lisette,” Lady Juniper said as she poured out the tea, “is that Miss Semper’s seamstress was rather good with a stitch. The poor girl just did not know when to stop.”

“Lord Bramley came to find me in the park,” Constance blurted out. “And Mr. Ludwig has sent me a mahogany art box with watercolor paints inside, which I find very disconcerting. And I may see Lord Bramley tonight, at a card party.”

“Gracious,” Lady Juniper said. “I had not been certain what we were to discuss at this meeting of The Stalwarts. Now I am rather more clear. Perhaps we go one thing at a time.”

Constance nodded. And really, she was very relieved to have these two ladies to pour out all her chaotic thoughts to.

“How did Lord Bramley find you in the park, Lady Constance?” Miss Semper asked.

“I never see anybody I am hoping to see.”

“Oh, well, he did recommend to me a place near the Serpentine that would be pleasant to sketch. And then a time the light would be favorable.”

“I see,” Lady Juniper said. “So it was nearly like an invitation, rather than a happenstance meeting.”

“Yes, I suppose it was,” Constance admitted.

“Was that wise, though?” Lady Juniper asked. “As we do not yet know his real intentions.”

“Probably not wise,” Constance said.

“But thrilling all the same?” Miss Semper said.

Constance nodded, as it had indeed been thrilling.

“Did he give anything away about his intentions?” Lady Juniper asked.

“Not about having any mercenary ideas,” Constance said. “Though he did inquire about my calendar and my mother told him we would be at Lord Nankin’s card party this evening.”

“Poor you, Lady Constance!” Miss Semper said. “You do not even like cards.”

“No, and neither does Lord Bramley.”

“So if he does turn up it will be further evidence of interest,” Lady Juniper said.

“Yes, I suppose it will be. I just wish I knew for certain what is really in his mind and heart.” She paused, then said, “When I first opened the mahogany art box, I did assume it was him that sent it.”

“It would make perfect sense,” Miss Semper said. “He found you drawing in the park, and then sent you watercolors.”

“Very odd that it is from Mr. Ludwig,” Lady Juniper said.

“As I thought too! I have hardly spoken to that gentleman, as the Duchess of Ralston threw him out of his seat at the poetical tableau.”

“When you did speak to him,” Lady Juniper asked, “did you happen to mention you were partial to watercolors?”

“I hardly know,” Constance said. “I do not recall it, in any event.”

“I often do not recall the full details of a conversation myself,” Miss Semper said. “It is nervousness, you see. Gracious, I dined next to Sir Jonathan at Lady Meredith’s house last evening and it is a blank void in my mind. All I recall is him saying something about his horse.”

“What was Mr. Ludwig’s manner when he spoke to you, Lady Constance?” Lady Juniper asked, presumably leaving Sir Jonathan and his horse behind.

“His manner...” Constance trailed off. She did not know how to describe his manner. He’d said some things that had discomposed her about gentlemen out hunting for large dowries.

“Well, I suppose it is neither here nor there, as you do not like Mr. Ludwig.”

“My mother threw the note into the grate, but I retrieved it as there was no fire.” She handed the note to Lady Juniper.

“Well, it does not say anything shocking, in any case. He just sends his compliments.”

Constance took back the note and tucked it into her reticule. “My mother is sending the box and paints back to Ackerman’s,” Constance said, “and I am glad of it. She says it was far too forward and she cannot like it.”

“Oh I see,” Miss Semper said. “Sending a gift is too forward a thing. I hadn’t thought of it.”

“My mother says that it would only have been acceptable if there had been a growing attachment or if it had been sent anonymously. If the note had not been signed, there would be no problem in keeping it because the keeping would not indicate partiality to any particular person.”

“Perhaps it is fortunate that it was signed, though,” Lady Juniper said thoughtfully. “Had it arrived unsigned, you would have assumed it came from Lord Bramley.”

That idea hit Constance rather hard. “I would have done. And then I would have thanked him when I saw him. I would have been humiliated.”

“Happily, you have avoided that misstep,” Lady Juniper said.

“If I ever did such a thing,” Miss Semper said, “I would fall off my chair and die of embarrassment.”

“You certainly would not, Miss Semper. You are made of sterner stuff than that,” Lady Juniper said.

“Am I?” Miss Semper said, as if this was the first she’d heard of being made of stern stuff.

Constance thought that, of the three of them, it was Lady Juniper who was made of stern stuff. She had taken to examining how Lady Juniper approached a situation as she thought she might learn something from it.

“Let us think about this card party you will attend tonight,” Lady Juniper said.

“Oh yes, let us think about it,” Miss Semper said, examining an almond biscuit as if answers might be found there.

Constance had of course already spent vast amounts of time thinking about it. “I was wondering, is there any way to try to get Lord Bramley to reveal himself? If there is anything to reveal. Is there a way to prompt him to reveal his thoughts about...money?”

Miss Semper chewed on her biscuit; Lady Juniper tapped her chin.

Miss Semper put down her biscuit. “I suppose you might say something like, money is very pleasant, do not you think, and then see what he says to it.”

Constance was not sure of the efficacy of a question like that. After all, nobody was likely to claim that they found money unpleasant.

“As always, Miss Semper,” Lady Juniper said, “you are charmingly direct. I am afraid, though, that what we need to do is to trip up Lord Bramley, assuming he is hiding his motives.”

“Which I, for one,” Miss Semper said, “really hope he is not.”

“I, too,” Constance said. “But I must know the truth.” Constance paused, then she said, “How, precisely, does one trip up a gentleman?”

“You might inquire into his estate,” Lady Juniper said. “Attempt to get some details on future plans. After all, if Lord Bramley is hunting for a large dowry, then certainly there will be plans. There are always plans for an incoming lump sum.”

“I see,” Miss Semper said, “it will trip him up because Lady Constance will not have even mentioned money. He will not be guarded in his answer.”

“That is the hope,” Lady Juniper said. “And then you might mention that I have spoken very glowingly of him. If he is after the largest pile of money going, his ears will perk up at that. Maybe Lord Bramley will send me flowers, then we will have an answer. Heaven knows, the fellow can barely stand the sight of me, so if he will initiate any sort of contact, that will say volumes regarding his motivations.”

Miss Semper fanned herself. “It feels as if we are engaged in such a fraught plot!”

Constance felt compelled to challenge the idea that anybody, not Lord Bramley nor any other gentleman, could barely stand the sight of Lady Juniper. Though, for her own selfish reasons she did hope that was the case. As for Miss Semper’s idea that it was a fraught plot...well it was, rather.

The footman who had led Constance into the garden had been called away ages ago. Now he returned with a platter of cake slices.

“Ah, our butler would have arranged for Cook to send up his famous lemon pound cake,” Lady Juniper said.

The footman nodded that was indeed the case.

“Mr. Michaelson is very good about those sorts of gestures. Well! I believe we have settled on a direction for Lady Constance’s evening encounter with Lord Bramley. Let Operation Trip-up commence.”

Constance did not know how skilled she would be at attempting to trip up a gentleman, but she had to try. She also did not know what Lord Bramley would say about his plans for his estate, but she would listen carefully. She hoped and prayed with everything she had that Lord Bramley had no plans whatsoever.

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Matthew had gone through a time of it convincing Lord Nankin to fit him into his card party. He'd tracked him down at White's and proposed the idea.

"It is a card party, though, Bramley," Lord Nankin had said.

This was of course an allusion to how little he liked cards. how ghastly he was as a whist partner, and how everybody in the town knew it.

"I know it's a card party," Matthew had said. "I just have reason for wishing to come. In any case, I am not too terrible at piquet."

Lord Nankin had actually snorted. "Not too terrible if you are playing a foreigner who speaks no English and has never heard of the game. I suppose you could muddle through then!"

Matthew had been forced to explain the real case of things—he wished to encounter Lady Constance Condower.

He ought to have started with that explanation. Once Nankin was apprised that his interest in coming had nothing to do with cards and everything to do with a lady, he speedily acquiesced. He even proposed steering Lady Constance toward Matthew for a game of the piquet he claimed he was not too terrible at. He only hoped Lady Constance was not herself an avid card player, else it would not stack up in his favor.

Fortunately, Matthew already knew she was not an avid player of whist. He hoped the same could be said for piquet.

Matthew's father had been another matter to arrange. The earl had assumed that his son would accompany his mother and father to a rout somewhere or other. The earl was certain the party would find them encountering either Lady Juniper or Miss Semper, or both.

Matthew had claimed he'd already promised Nankin he would attend his card party. He then studiously ignored his father's question as to why anybody would want him at a card party when everybody knows he is terrible. The countess mentioned it being the way of the world and while the earl was testily inquiring how it could be, Matthew had slipped out.

Though he was determined to sit his father down and explain the real case of things regarding Lady Juniper and Miss Semper, he'd decided it was pointless to do it until he'd been to the estate and had a firmer grasp of its finances. He hoped to be able to point out that the estate had not generated all it was capable of and outline a plan to have it do so.

Really, it was something he ought to have done long ago. The earl was very protective over his rights as the head of the family and Matthew had let it go at that. The truth was, though, someday he would be the head of the family and he'd really need to know what went on. There were modernizations coming nearly every day, at least so said Sir Jonathan—had they taken advantage of any of them?

He imagined not, as he'd never heard the earl mention anything about it.

As for the visit to the estate itself, he did not think his father would look kindly upon it, so he had not mentioned the plan. He would depart early the next morning and leave a note for the old soldier to read at his leisure.

Lord Nankin's house was not too very far from his own, being on Bedford Square. He was well aware that Lady Juniper's house was somewhere on the square too so he

kept his horse as far into the shadows as he could. He could not say why that seemed a necessity—the lady was hardly likely to run out of her house and collar him. It was just so disturbing that she'd decided she did not despise him and then dropped hints about children.

He arrived on the early side of things so he could examine the layout of Nankin's card room and claim a table that was set up for two. Piquet, bless its irritating and confounding heart, was a game for only two people.

Really, as far as Matthew was concerned, it was a game for no people—the rules were convoluted, he did not remember half of them, and he did not understand why anybody would wish to. Nevertheless, it being suited for two people suited him very well this night.

As it happened, he was so beforehand on the time that he'd had to walk down the mews to track down a groom to take his horse. Then he'd caused some confusion to the servants who were still setting up the sideboards in the card room. Nankin had not even descended yet and the butler had a disapproving air about this far too early guest.

No matter. He had found his table. It was set a little bit apart from the others in a bow window and had only two chairs. He unwrapped the packs of cards, set up what looked like two hands, and fanned out a line of stock cards between them. Then he left his card case. He went to the sideboard and under the disapproving gaze of the butler, filled a wine glass and set that on the table too. To anybody looking, it would seem as if a game had already commenced between two people. Which it would, between himself and a lovely brown-haired lady.

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Constance had gone back and forth over which dress to wear to Lord Nankin's card

party. The aubergine silk was by far her favorite, but she did not wish to waste wearing it to a card party that Lord Bramley did not attend.

On the other hand, if he did attend, she would wish to be wearing the aubergine silk. The color was divine and its neckline particularly flattering.

Finally, Letty seemed thoroughly fed up with her mistress' pacing and examining of this or that dress and Constance settled on the aubergine silk. As she did so, she realized that nobody in the world could sigh like an exasperated lady's maid—it was long and wistful, like a specter's sad lamentations.

As the carriage trotted to Bedford Square, her mother said, "I wonder if Lord Bramley will have somehow walked himself onto the guest list."

Of course, Constance wondered the very same.

"Bramley?" the earl said. "At a card party? I never see him at cards at White's."

"He does not care for cards, Papa."

"He does not care for cards?" the earl asked, seemingly mystified by this idea.

"Perhaps coming to a card party though he has a disinterest in cards will indicate interest in something else entirely," the countess said.

"Really?" the earl said. "Nankin's sideboards are very usual, to my mind. Nothing particularly of note there."

Constance could see her mother press her lips together so she would not laugh. The earl was not very astute at picking up on vague hints. If one wished him to know something, one had better say it clearly and directly.

“Not interest in the sideboards, darling,” the countess said. “Constance. He seems interested in Constance.”

“Does he now? Well that’s all right then. Bramley is a fine young gentleman. Yes, why not? He’ll be an earl someday and I suppose his estate must be up to snuff.”

“Do you know anything of his estate, Papa?” Constance asked.

“In particular? No, not really. I believe it is in Surrey. Well, his earl is not one of those fellows who’s always talking of estate matters. No, he’s not a Bertridge or a Van Doren, who will talk your ear off about crop rotation and planting potatoes if you give them half a chance.”

“I am just hoping,” Constance said, “that he does not look for money. I am hoping he’s not somehow heard of...you know.”

“I cannot imagine how Bramley would have heard of it,” the earl said, a look of concern crossing his features. “Why should you think it so?”

Constance shrugged. “Have you looked at him? He’s glorious.”

“He’s glorious, is he?” the earl said, now looking amused. “I cannot say I’ve noticed. But why should not a glorious young buck pursue my glorious young daughter?”

“Oh, Papa,” Constance said.

The carriage rolled to a stop and all conversation about the gloriousness of Lord Bramley was at an end.

Would he be inside? She did not know but she’d worn her aubergine silk just in case.

Footmen had opened the carriage doors and helped them down and they made their way in. They found Lord Nankin in the great hall, greeting his guests.

“Nankin, how do?” the earl said.

“DeWitton, Countess, you are very welcome. And gracious me, this must be Lady Constance. My dear, I have not laid eyes on you since you were a bit of thing. Long ago, I was at one of your father’s house parties, seeking out some quiet in the library, when you came upon me.”

“I hope I did not disturb your quiet, my lord.”

“You did rather, but it was all very entertaining. You laid out your arguments as to why your pony Daffodil was superior to Miss Somebody’s pony.”

“Oh dear, I’m afraid that was Miss Lading’s pony, Crumpet. Though I would still argue Daffodil’s superiority if pressed.”

Lord Nankin laughed heartily at the idea. “That’s right—loyalty to one’s pony is everything. Now, I wonder, Lady Constance, if I might ask a favor. A friend of mine has come this evening and I tell no tales when I say he is dreadful at whist. Lord Bramley, in fact, I think you know him. In any case, might you be willing to partner him at piquet? I really must keep him away from a whist table by any means.”

Absolutely nobody in the conversation, except perhaps the earl, was fooled into imagining this situation came about by happenstance. Constance was certain her face currently matched the aubergine of her dress, but she did not give a toss about it.

“Papa?” she asked.

“He’s that bad at whist, is he?” the earl asked.

“Dreadful,” Lord Nankin said. “It’s a sad situation, but there you have it.”

“If you like it, my dear,” the earl said, “I suppose it would be a kindness to the other players. Nobody likes to be paired with a bad card player. Very aggravating. I wonder why he does not try to get better?”

Before her father could go too much further with wondering why Lord Bramley was a bad whist player and did not do something about it, Constance said, “That will do very well, Lord Nankin.”

“You are just as charming as when you defended poor Daffodil, Lady Constance,” Lord Nankin said jovially.

As they moved on, Constance had one idea foremost in her mind—Lord Bramley had got himself invited to a card party though he was a terrible card player and he’d made arrangements with Lord Nankin for them to be paired up. It was lovely.

Of course, there was that other niggling idea fighting for attention. Was Lord Bramley’s interest in her person or in her money? She must not forget she had a job to do in discovering it. She would inquire into his estate and any plans that might be brewing and she would convey that Lady Juniper liked him very much.

Please God he would have no plans and would mention that he could not stand the sight of Lady Juniper.

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There she was. Matthew felt as if his breath had suddenly gone too shallow. She really was marvelous in a plum-colored silk. She had the sort of coloring that could elegantly carry such a color. Her pretty brown hair and pretty brown eyes and complexion not too pale were just right for such a color. A paler sort of lady would

provide too much contrast and, well it would just look wrong.

There was not a thing wrong with Lady Constance this minute—she was splendid.

He hurried toward her and hoped Nankin had arranged things satisfactorily.

“Earl, Countess, Lady Constance,” he said.

She very prettily bobbed. Everything she did was pretty, really.

“Bramley,” the earl said jovially, “I understand you’re to be kept away from the whist tables.”

“I suppose I am,” Matthew said, working to avoid the embarrassment that his wretched card playing was so well known.

“My daughter has agreed to partner you at piquet, Lord Bramley,” the countess said.

“Excellent,” Matthew said.

“She’s a rather good sport, I thought,” the earl said.

The countess nodded and then took her husband’s arm. “We should not tarry, my dear. There will be those here you wish to play against and those you’d rather not.”

“Quite right,” the earl said. “I don’t want to hear about crop rotations all night.”

The countess led her earl away to search for two other players who would not speak of crop rotations all night. Matthew assumed he meant Bertridge, who’d just come in with his wife and liked nothing more than talking of estate management.

Of course, crop rotations were a thing he was likely to hear of on the morrow at the estate with Sir Jonathan. Did Crickenly direct that they rotate their own crops? He had no idea.

Matthew led Lady Constance to the table by the bow window. He noted her brows raised to see the cards already splayed across the table.

“I did that,” he said. “I thought it was the most favorable table so did not wish to lose it.”

“I see,” Lady Constance said, a small smile playing round her lips.

Matthew barreled on, finding out what she wished for from the sideboard. Though she’d only said a light German wine, he’d brought a plate of savories and another of sweets back just in case.

“I have a confession,” he said, after serving her the glass of wine and sitting down.

“A confession?” she asked. She looked positively alarmed, as if he were on the verge of confessing to a murder.

“I do not remember half the rules of piquet,” he said.

Her expression relaxed. What on earth had she thought he might confess?

“I expect I do not either,” Lady Constance said. “My governess was at her wit’s end explaining it over and over again. Well, I believe we draw cards to see who will deal.”

Matthew shrugged. “I do not care who deals.”

“Nor I.”

“I’ll do it then. How many cards do I deal?”

“Twelve? And then eight in the stock?”

“That sounds right.” Matthew dealt out the cards and fanned out the stock.

“Now I may have come to the end of my memory regarding piquet,” Lady Constance said, laughing.

Matthew thought it was really hopeless. Neither of them could remember how to proceed.

He said, “This will go nowhere. I know we have to occasionally discard and pick up. Why do not we just pretend at it?”

“Agreed,” Lady Constance said. A shadow seemed to cross her expression. “I would have supposed you would be forced to play cards often at home. I think my father mentioned the estate was in Surrey?”

He could not fathom why she seemed sad about how often he’d been forced to play cards at home, which was not very often.

“Nobody bothers me to play when I am at home. It is one of the convenient things about one’s neighborhood—people’s eccentricities and peculiarities are so familiar that they do not seem strange. I do not like cards, Lady Maidstone cannot bear the sound of a harp, Viscount Welton accuses everyone of eyeing his coveys and we all get on splendidly.”

“I suppose the estate is very comfortable,” Lady Constance said.

Now he thought he understood where she was going with the conversation. He very much liked the direction of it—she was attempting to get a sense for what it might be like to live there.

“The house is a Tudor and very commodious. Much has been done over the years to make the rooms comfortable. I would challenge anyone to claim it was not as comfortable as a modern-built house.”

“Oh I see, there have been renovations done?”

Of course there had been. One could not carry on in a Tudor house without fixing the roof or reinforcing timber or patching up the stucco.

“My grandfather carried out some extensive repairs,” Matthew said. “It really is very comfortable—each bedchamber has its own sitting room and dressing room. We did that by taking down walls where we could. And then, there is also a large dower house that sits empty at the moment. It is on the far side of the park and has a view of a lake.”

“I suppose there are always things to be done on an estate,” Lady Constance said. “There must always be plans in the works.”

Matthew nodded. “I really should know more about it than I do. However, I am going there on the morrow to really have a look at the estate and put a plan together about what ought to be done.”

This seemed to strike Lady Constance very hard. Could it be that she was sorry he was going away?

“Only for a few days, of course,” he said, pretending to pick up and discard. “I must return in time for the Duchess of Ralston’s Secrets Dévoilés. The duchess has already

hinted to me that I will be on her list this year.”

“Secrets exposed?” Lady Constance asked. “I do not believe I know of it.”

“You may be fortunate, then. The dowager selects a group of gentlemen and gives them seven sealed envelopes and a list of twenty ladies. Each gentleman then carries the envelopes to whichever ladies he will. A lady receiving an envelope opens it, reads it, responds to whatever is in it, and reseals it, handing it back to the gentleman.”

“For what reason is all this done?” Lady Constance asked, herself pretending at picking up a card and discarding another.

“So that the duchess can go through all the envelopes that have been brought back to her and select the most amusing. She then reads them out at her party and everybody has to guess who they are about. Last year, the task given to the lady was to write a four-line poem about the temperament of the gentleman bringing the envelope.”

“Gracious, I do not think I would like to be involved in that.”

“Unfortunately, if the duchess decides you are to be involved, you are involved. She is highly and vocally disapproving of anybody attempting to wiggle out of it.”

They were silent for some moments, each moving cards around as if they were playing piquet. Though, had anybody looked closely they would have wondered about what sort of piquet was being played.

“I have only met the duchess once,” Lady Constance said, “when she introduced herself to me and Miss Semper at Lady Thurston’s poetical tableau. I do not suppose I will come to her notice.”

“Do not be so certain of that,” Matthew said. “If she bothered to introduce herself, she has an interest.”

“I suppose Lady Juniper is bound to be included.”

Matthew had not the first idea of why it would be so, nor why Lady Constance speculated on it. All he did know was that the last thing he wished to discuss was Lady Juniper.

He shuffled some cards by way of answer.

“I was at Lady Juniper’s house this afternoon,” Lady Constance said, “it is just across the square here, in fact. She speaks very highly of you. In the highest terms, really.”

Matthew dropped the cards and then hurried to pick up the few that had landed on the floor. What was Lady Juniper about, speaking highly of him to anybody at all, much less Lady Constance?

He did not know into what territory this conversation might travel, but he had no interest in traveling that road. He was determined to get off the subject.

“Did I say what the subject of last year’s secrets exposed was? It was a four-line poem on a gentleman’s temperament,” he said, hoping to veer away from any talk of Lady Juniper and her opinions.

“You did mention it,” Lady Constance said.

So he did.

“Ah, yes, but did I mention that Lady Jemima, she is now the Duchess of Barstow, wrote a rather scathing poem about Barstow?”

“No, you did not mention that,” Lady Constance said. There was something new in her manner. Some new sort of reserve. Had he said something wrong? If he did, he had no idea what it was.

All he could think to do was barrel on.

“Indeed. It was repeated everywhere for a time and so I do remember it. It was: This lord looks down his disapproving nose, dealing out insults wherever he goes. One might think he’d look within on occasion, but that would be a lord of a different persuasion.”

He had thought Lady Constance might be amused by it, but she did not seem amused at all.

“That seems...unnecessarily harsh,” Lady Constance said.

“I suppose so,” Matthew admitted. “I understand Lady Jemima was furious over something he’d said or done when she wrote it. Apparently, all was forgiven as they wedded some weeks later.”

“I see.”

“Well!” a jolly voice said suddenly. “How goes it?”

Lady Constance’s father had suddenly appeared at their table.

The earl then looked at the absolute mess of cards spread over the table and said, “It does not go very well, by the looks of it.”

“We have been muddling along, Papa,” Lady Constance said.

Lord DeWitton glanced at the paper and graphite that lay on the table untouched. “I would ask for the score, but there is no score.”

“Lady Constance was trouncing me so thoroughly that it seemed a kindness to avoid writing it down,” Matthew said.

He did not know what else he could say. He certainly would not say the truth—that neither of them remembered the rules and had just been moving cards around and talking. It was the sort of thing a father might not like and he very much wished to keep in Lord DeWitton’s good books.

“Does your whist game end so soon,” Lady Constance asked.

“Not a minute too soon, in my view,” the earl said. “Somehow we were paired with Bertridge and wouldn’t you know it, I am urged to plant potatoes. I bowed out of a second game because I do not wish to plant potatoes. Now, it seems that Lord Nankin has arranged a violinist in the music room—I will take my daughter there, Bramley, as it does not seem as if anything productive has happened here.”

Lord DeWitton looked down at the piles of cards as he said it and Matthew could not claim it was otherwise.

He rose and said, “I would be delighted to accompany you.”

“I think that’s been enough for one evening,” the earl said. “I would not wish to cause talk unless and until there is something to talk about, if you get my meaning.”

Of course, Matthew understood his meaning perfectly, and the earl was probably right. Sitting alone with Lady Constance at a card table for a half hour was one thing, but to follow her into the music room really might light up speculations. He could not blame a father for being careful of his daughter.

He could not provide anything a father might be satisfied with until he'd been to the estate and was assured that he could somehow make it produce more than it had. Then he would be conscience clear to ask for the lady's hand.

"Lady Constance," he said, bowing.

"Lord Bramley," she said.

Why did she look so serious? He really could not imagine what he'd done wrong.

Whatever it was, he would not find it out tonight.

On top of that mystery, he just realized she'd not even mentioned receiving the mahogany box and watercolors. Perhaps she thought it would seem bold to conclude that he'd sent it anonymously. But certainly, she must know he sent it.

Matthew sat for another half hour, drinking his wine and pretending at playing at concentration. His concentration was not very good though. He felt impatient, he wished to get on with it. The morrow could not come soon enough.

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As a highly placed butler, Mr. Wilburn had always been comfortable in the idea that he was in the know. If there was talk about this or that—if that family had an errant son or that other family just made a brilliant match or anything of note at all happened in Town, Mr. Harold P. Wilburn would know it.

Now, when he urgently required being in the know, he felt very much in the dark. Mysteries were swirling around him and he could not unravel them.

Over breakfast at the servants' table, he'd taken care of the business of the house first, though there was not much out of the ordinary on their shoulders this particular day. Masterson had been informed late the night before that the earl's valet was ill and he would need to step in for a day or two. Other than that, things would proceed quite usually.

Once that was accomplished, Mr. Wilburn launched his plan to have it get back to Lord Bramley that Lady Constance had an interest in the very rich Mr. Ludwig. He even went so far as to claim that Mr. Ludwig had called upon Lady Constance and was received favorably.

Masterson had paid close attention and taken in every word. Mr. Wilburn had every confidence that the news would be relayed that very morning. Masterson would dress the earl, then he would proceed to Lord Bramley, and the information would be communicated.

It was all to go so smoothly! Lord Bramley would see that Lady Constance looked for a gentleman far more prosperous than he was, as she, herself, did not come with a significant fortune. The lord would likely be disappointed, but he would be sensible

and he would turn his attentions elsewhere. That elsewhere would hopefully be in the direction of Lady Juniper or Miss Semper.

Sadly, it had not gone as smoothly as he'd anticipated.

As he'd looked over the sideboard in the breakfast room to assure himself that everything was in order for the lord's breakfast, he heard a terrific shout from the great hall. A shout emanating from the earl.

He'd hurried out to see what caused such a commotion and found the earl with a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Did you know of this, Wilburn?"

Know of it? Know of what?

He had a sinking feeling it might be some sort of letter about racing off to Gretna Green with Lady Constance. It would be a disaster!

"My lord?" he asked.

"My son writes that he is off to Surrey," the earl said.

"Surrey?" Mr. Wilburn repeated, silently thanking the heavens it was not Scotland.

"Oh yes," the earl said, "he writes that he is convinced that the estate is not producing what it should and he has gone to sort it out. Sort it out, he says. Does he accuse me of mismanagement?"

"I am sure not, my lord," Mr. Wilburn said. Though, that was probably exactly what Lord Bramley accused his father of.

He had a very sinking feeling that it might not be as easy as he'd imagined to get Lord Bramley off the subject of Lady Constance. Certainly, that was what had prompted him to take this harebrained trip. The earl had explained backwards and forwards that Lord Bramley must bring in a hefty dowry for the sake of the estate. Instead of complying with that very logical request, he'd run off to attempt to prove it was not so.

"Did Masterson know of this?" the earl asked. "Get me Masterson. If he did know, I will sack him on the spot."

Mr. Wilburn nodded and hurried up the stairs to locate the valet. He must assume Masterson had not known, else he'd have mentioned it over the breakfast table. As for sacking Lord Bramley's valet, that would cause a real uproar and he certainly hoped it would not come to that. It could very well cause a wide rift between father and son.

He found Masterson in the lord's room and sent him below, while he followed fast on his heels. Before he left the room, he did notice, suspiciously, a luggage case in the corner of the bedchamber.

God help Masterson if he knew about this trip.

The earl was pacing the hall. The countess had drifted in and the earl said, "Did you know your son has gone to Surrey to straighten out the estate?"

"Goodness no, does it need straightening out?" the countess asked.

"It certainly does not," the earl shouted.

The countess walked away into the breakfast room murmuring, "Way of the world, darling."

Mr. Wilburn once more wished that the countess would take her breakfast in her bedchamber like every other married lady. She refused to do it, though. She claimed being served a meal alone in her room made her feel like a prisoner.

He thought her reasons somewhat different. Mr. Wilburn was convinced that it amused her to aggravate the earl first thing in the morning about the ways of the world.

Predictably, the earl was enraged. He did not care for the countess' ideas about the world and its ways, especially in the morning.

"Masterson," the earl said, "did you know of my son's proposed trip this morning?"

The valet shook his head. "No, my lord," he said, "he told me yesterday that he would dress himself and be out very early this morning to see a horse he's interested in run a gallop down the Rotten Row. He said I should have a bath ready at ten o'clock."

Mr. Wilburn stared at the valet. It was a rather specific story. He was also convinced it was in fact an invented story. If it had been the truth, it would have been mentioned at the servants' table, as the kitchen maids would have had to get the large pots of water simmering on the stove for a bath.

"I see, so he's fooled you too," the earl said, mollified that the valet had not been in league with his master.

"I feel very fooled, my lord. Did he say where he was going?"

Mr. Wilburn pressed his lips together; he was certain Masterson knew very well where Lord Bramley had gone. He'd likely have gone too had the earl's own valet not been taken ill.

“He’s gone to Surrey, to review the doings of the estate!”

“He never has, my lord.”

“It is highhanded, is what it is,” the earl said.

“It don’t seem right, my lord,” the valet said.

“That is just it, you understand me, Masterson. It is not right. I am the earl, not him. He’s got too big for his breeches. I’ll not stand for it!”

“I suppose you’ll want me to take a letter to him, outlining your displeasure and calling him back to Town,” Masterson said sadly.

Mr. Wilburn tried very hard to stop his eyes rolling round in his head over that proposal.

The earl obviously had not considered such a thing, but he would be reluctant to admit that he had not.

“Of course that is what I want. What else would I want? Set off first thing tomorrow morning. You will hire a carriage and carry a scathing letter from me. I will write that scathing letter this very minute!”

“But my lord,” Mr. Wilburn said, “to send Masterson away...your own valet has been taken ill.”

“Jackson has got a head cold,” the earl said. “Tell him to drink some soup and rest today and then get on with it.”

With that, Lord Wisterley stormed toward the library shouting, “Bring me coffee,

Wilburn! I'll need it for the letter I am about to write to my son."

So that was the morning and one would very naturally assume that had been enough problems for one day.

At the servants' break before the earl's usual afternoon repast, he'd heard of yet another oncoming disaster. It seemed there had been a meeting of The Stalwarts, the cabal of Lady Juniper, Lady Constance, and Miss Semper that nobody really understood.

According to one of his staff, the ladies were launching something called Operation Trip-Up. What was it? Nobody knew, as the servant who'd overheard it had been away arranging lemon pound cake while it had been discussed.

He was to be kept in the dark over lemon pound cake now!

The final event to shake Mr. Wilburn was the return of a mahogany box and watercolors from Ackerman's. It was to be returned to Lord Bramley with no explanation, nor any explanation as to where it had been sent in the first place or who returned it. Mr. Wilburn thought he could guess well enough though.

Mr. Wilburn had marched it into Lord Bramley's dressing room and found Masterson packing a bag to bring on the morrow. A bag he'd planned to pack all along, no doubt.

"This has just been returned by Ackerman's, Mr. Masterson," he said, setting it down on a dresser.

He'd watched Masterson's expressions closely. First had come a shocked and worried look. That had been swiftly covered up with what he presumed was meant to be an air of nonchalance and indifference.

“I see,” Masterson said.

“I do not see, though,” Mr. Wilburn said. “Who is returning it? The boy who brought it back claimed he did not know.”

“How should I know?” the valet said.

“The same way you would know that Lord Bramley went to Surrey before the earl informed you of it.”

Masterson shrugged, but he did not bother to deny it.

Mr. Wilburn turned on his heel and stalked out, leaving the box behind. He would get no answers from Masterson. There were times when a servant’s loyalty could prove very inconvenient.

As he closed the day with a brandy, his natural inclination toward hoping things would just work themselves out without too much effort on his part prompted him to wonder more about that mahogany box.

Everything else that had happened that day had been dreadful. Lord Bramley had enraged his father by going to Surrey to look over the estate’s doings. The Stalwarts had launched the mysterious Operation Trip-Up, the details of which remained unknown on account of a lemon pound cake.

But the mahogany box—might that not end as good news? He was all but certain Lord Bramley had sent it to Lady Constance. If that were so, and she had returned it...

Of course, it might not have been her own inclination. Her father might have insisted.

Nevertheless, it might provide some sort of wedge between Lord Bramley and Lady Constance. That, along with the idea that Lady Constance had gladly received Mr. Ludwig, might be enough.

He must pin all his hopes on it. After all, there was no hope in Lord Bramley banging around the estate in Surrey and it was unlikely there was any hope in Operation Trip-Up, whatever it was.

Mr. Wilburn would not see the other butlers of the league for some days yet. He must just pray he had something better to report than the ridiculous happenings of the past twelve hours that had assaulted him one after the other.

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Constance's thoughts regarding Lord Bramley had felt rather grim since Lord Nankin's card party. She had not the least interest in being out in society for any reason at this moment, but for one—both Lady Juniper and Miss Semper would be at Lord Kelgoody's rout this evening. She needed to speak to them as soon as possible to inform them of what she had discovered via Operation Trip-Up. She wished to hear their opinions. And truthfully, she wished their opinions would differ from her own.

Her father had not the least interest in attending the rout, but Constance had convinced her mother under the guise of wishing to see her friends Lady Juniper and Miss Semper.

It was not exactly a guise, as that was indeed why she wished to go. It was only that she had not revealed why she felt she must see them so urgently. Her mother was left to believe that it was just a young lady's longing to see new-made friends.

In any case, the countess had agreed and they had gone. Now, she searched the crowd

for those two ladies.

Finally, she spotted Lady Juniper and hurried in her direction, leaving the countess to speak with Lady Kelgoody.

Lady Juniper was just that moment looking down her nose at some hopeful young gentleman who would not know he had no chance with her, as she had a viscount at home she was determined on.

“Ah, Lady Constance,” Lady Juniper said at her approach, “I was just informing Lord Welty that I plan on ruling my household with an iron fist, children are not to be indulged, I expect a Godly house, I will not tolerate an excess of spirits, will only permit one half glass of wine at dinner, and I do not care for sauces, as they are far too French. Further, I am of the opinion that a married man has no further need for his clubs. I will never be left behind in the countryside, but I will be at my lord’s side at all times. I am firm in the idea that a gentleman should know what he can expect.”

Constance pressed her lips together tightly lest she laugh. Lady Juniper had trotted out what she called her “drive them off” speech meant to turn round any lothario who had an eye toward her dowry.

“Indeed,” Lord Welty said shakily. “Lady Juniper.”

The lord bowed and moved off as quickly as one can do through a crowd of people.

Lady Juniper smiled and her features softened. “That ought to pour some cold water on that gentleman’s mercenary ideas.”

“Rather,” Constance said. “He seemed as if he’d looked into the eyes of the devil himself.”

“These men really are so gullible—who on earth doesn’t like a sauce? My viscount would never fall for such a ridiculous ruse. Now, I can see you have hurried to my side for more than the amusement of watching me frighten Lord Welty.”

Constance nodded. “Have you seen Miss Semper? I really would like to have a conference with The Stalwarts to discuss what I discovered at Lord Nankin’s card party.”

“Say no more, Lady Constance,” Lady Juniper said. “Miss Semper is in the refreshments room just now and I happen to know there is a cozy little snug at the back of it where we can have a quiet and confidential discussion. The Kelgoodys are long known to my family and I have hidden in that snug in my youth when I and his two daughters played at hide and seek. My father was so admiring of it that he built one very like at my own house, tucked behind a bookcase.”

They set off to find Miss Semper, weaving round people as they went. Constance searched the rooms for Lord Bramley as they went. It was a silly thing to do, as he had said he would be off to Surrey.

But what if his ideas had changed? What if he’d thought better of going to his estate to make plans?

As she searched, her eyes met Mr. Ludwig’s. She hurriedly looked away. There was something uncomfortable in the idea that he’d sent the mahogany box and watercolors and her mother had sent them back. He must have been embarrassed to receive them returned from Ackerman’s. But really, he’d brought it on himself, as he should never have sent them. Or, as her mother said, he should have sent them anonymously.

It was a shame he had not, as it really had been a lovely box and the best quality paints. Of course, if there had been no note, she would have erroneously assumed

they'd been sent by Lord Bramley.

Constance hurried to keep pace with Lady Juniper, who plowed through the crowd in pursuit of Miss Semper like a ship through a channel.

They did find that lady, and each helping themselves to a glass of Canary, they slipped into the snug.

To have such a little hideaway was a lovely idea. Constance thought every house should have one, though she did not have one at home. One would hardly know it was there, as the entrance was down a short hallway that would look as if would lead to a maid's closet. The snug's open doorway was on the right side and entirely hidden from view.

There were two very comfortable sofas, covered in well-worn gray velvet, facing each other and close together. The walls were painted in cream, and low light drifted in from the chandeliers of the refreshments room.

After they had settled themselves, Constance said, "Lord Bramley has gone to his estate in Surrey for a few days. To make plans about the estate."

"As we feared," Lady Juniper said, shaking her head. "Where there is a large dowry coming in, there are always plans."

"Yes," Miss Semper said. "You did say that was so."

"There is more, I'm afraid," Constance said. "I did as you suggested, Lady Juniper. I claimed you had sung his praises."

"Indeed," Lady Juniper said. "If he is after the largest amount he can find and then hears I am admiring, he will do an about face and reveal himself by attempting to

woo me.”

“Gracious,” Miss Semper said, “what did he say to that idea?”

Both ladies leaned forward. Constance sighed. “He did not say anything at all. However, he was so taken aback that he dropped playing cards all over the floor and then changed the subject as fast as he possibly could.”

“He dropped the playing cards,” Miss Semper said, “what can it mean?”

“I’m afraid we cannot know what it means,” Lady Juniper said.

“We cannot?” Constance asked. She had been really hoping that Lady Juniper would know, and that she would say it did not mean a thing. Perhaps it did not mean a thing, though not in a way she hoped. If he somehow knew the amount of her dowry there would be no need for an about face—he would know she was the most well-funded lady in Town.

If he knew.

“I fear we will need more information,” Lady Juniper said. “He may just have been startled. We will discover more at his dinner, I suppose.”

“Dinner?” Constance said. “Lord Bramley did not mention any sort of dinner.”

“The invitation from his countess arrived today,” Lady Juniper said.

“Oh yes, my aunt is very keen on going,” Miss Semper said.

“I received no such invitation,” Constance said.

“Perhaps it is just delayed, or went to the wrong address,” Miss Semper said.

“Perhaps,” Constance said. Though, it seemed the sort of thing Lord Bramley would have mentioned. He was to have the two richest ladies to dine. At least, the two richest everybody knew about. There was something obvious in it, just as having them on the barge was obvious. But then, if he knew of her own money, why was she excluded?

If he were after a large dowry and did not know of her money, why was he paying his attentions to her?

Could it be that he’d arranged for the dinner because Constance had informed him that Lady Juniper thought highly of him?

Reaching for any sort of reason why she was excluded that would be palatable, she said, “It could be that the earl was intent on hosting two ladies with significant dowries. And perhaps he does not know that I come with...a bit more than is advertised.”

“So Lord Bramley may know, but might have kept it from his father?” Miss Semper asked. “Why?”

That was indeed the question. Why?

“This is very much a muddle at this point in our investigation. I think we must keep in mind,” Lady Juniper said, “that there is the possibility that Lord Bramley is genuine.”

“I pray it is so,” Constance said. “Though, I must be certain of it and I understand little of what has gone on so far. Or what I think I do understand is not very promising.”

“Perhaps the thing to do,” Lady Juniper said, tapping her chin, “is to discover precisely what plans were made from his visit to his estate. If he speaks of something costly, like replacing the roof or adding to the structure, then we must presume he expects money to be coming his way. If a few rooms are being re-papered, then that would not cause alarm—such things are often done while the family is away.”

“Or even if they are there,” Miss Semper said. “Anybody might wish to re-paper at any time. My bedchamber at home was just re-papered before I came to Town. I had chosen what I thought to be a charming design. But it was peacocks, you see. I could hardly sleep, what with dozens of them staring at me all the time.”

Both Constance and Lady Juniper laughed at the picture of peacocks staring from all four walls.

“Ladies!”

The suddenness of the interruption startled them all. Constance turned.

It was Mr. Ludwig filling up the doorframe.

“I have finally found you out,” he said. “I’ve looked high and low and now here you are.”

Mr. Ludwig moved further into the snug and Constance had the distinct idea that he might try to sit himself down. She, for one, would not stay if he did.

“Mr. Ludwig,” Lady Juniper said, her face once more going pinched, “we are having a confidential ladies’ conversation. As you are not a lady...”

“Ah, I see,” Mr. Ludwig said, backing up. “I did not realize. Well! I just wished to discover if Lady Constance enjoyed the paints and mahogany box.”

“The box?” Constance asked.

“Yes, the box,” Mr. Ludwig said.

“My mother returned the box, Mr. Ludwig,” Constance said.

“She did?” Mr. Ludwig asked.

Constance did not understand him. He must know the box was returned.

“Oh yes, of course,” Mr. Ludwig said hurriedly. “I had forgotten.”

All three ladies stared at him, waiting for the gentleman to explain how on earth he’d forgotten such a thing.

He bowed and said, “Ladies. I wish you good night.”

Mr. Ludwig turned on his heel and disappeared out of the doorway.

Lady Juniper laid her forefinger over her lips. She quietly rose and peered round the doorframe.

“He is gone,” she said, returning to her seat.

“Now I wonder,” Miss Semper said, “if Mr. Ludwig is in the habit of sending out so many boxes and watercolors that he’d lost track—could that be why he did not realize Lady Constance’s box was returned?”

“I shouldn’t wonder at it,” Lady Juniper said, “though I personally have not received one.”

“Nor I,” Miss Semper said.

“The Duchess of Ralston does not care for him,” Constance said, “though she cannot say why. I think I am beginning to feel the same.”

“Gracious,” Miss Semper said, “I have just recently been told of the duchess’ annual party—the secrets exposed evening.”

They spent the next half hour discussing the secrets exposed party, all of them having the hope that they would escape the duchess’ notice and not be included on her list of twenty ladies.

Of course, Constance found her mind often drifting to Lord Bramley. What was he doing on the estate? What did he know?

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Matthew and Sir Jonathan had spent the past two days reviewing the estate's books and taking a tour on horseback with a rather cranky steward. Though Matthew could not claim to be an expert on estate matters, at least not yet, even he could see that Mr. Crickenly was stuck in his ways and had attempted to avoid work at every turn.

The steward did not even direct that crops be rotated year by year, though according to Sir Jonathan everybody in the wide world rotated their crops. Crickenly was of the opinion that the idea was an old wives' tale.

As for tenants, the steward claimed they had no cottages to put them in and no cleared fields for them to farm. In any case, Crickenly said, tenants were always more trouble than they were worth.

Making use of the extensive wood? Cutting down trees for sale was a complicated business.

From what Matthew could gather, the earl and Crickenly had gone comfortably along, both satisfied to run the place by not particularly running the place.

He'd proceeded to have a strong talk with Crickenly, in which the steward at first claimed the earl must direct him to try out these new ideas and the earl never would. That changed when Matthew explained that if he had to go to his father about it, he'd also have to outline how much had been lost through inattention and failing to move with the times.

That had seemed to strike the right chord. To further cement the idea that things would change, Sir Jonathan would send his own steward to the estate to oversee the

progress. Or drive the progress forward, as the case was likely to be.

Now the sun was setting and Matthew and Sir Jonathan sat in the drawing room with their port.

“So you think, based on what you’ve seen,” Matthew said, “that this estate can produce enough to comfortably live on without having to bring in a large dowry?”

Sir Jonathan set his coffee down. “More than enough,” he said. “My God, man, you have nearly eight-hundred acres of trees, a good percentage of them oak. Bring in an auctioneer to clear some acres, collect the money from that, rent out what was cleared to some local farmers and you’re sitting pretty. You’ll then be at your leisure to build a steady income from there. I would advise building cottages at the north end of the estate—the village is not a half mile off and you’ll have plenty of takers.”

“Cottages. I hadn’t thought,” Matthew said, seeing in his mind how it could be.

“You ought to have thought, though,” Sir Jonathan said. “It really is the duty of a landowner to provide tenant farming and places for people to live. God knows what people say about the earl for having failed to do so. They must think him uninterested in his neighborhood’s welfare.”

Matthew gulped over that idea. He did not know if his earl was well-loved or not, though looking at it, he suspected not. It was true that they’d not done anything to give anybody else a leg up.

“Rents and careful harvesting in the forest that’s left uncleared is the way forward. Build the cottages well, mind you,” Sir Jonathan said. “Nobody will respect you if you throw up some shabby structure and it won’t last anyway. Make the rooms commodious and include ample fireplaces. Each should have its own plot for a kitchen garden and build a good road out to the village. Maintenance should be done

timely. Do not get greedy with increases in the rents. These things matter.”

Matthew nodded. Of course those things would matter. If people were uncomfortable, they would look around for who to blame. They would grow resentful, as they very well should.

“Try to get a variety of farmers in,” Sir Jonathan continued. “If things get tight from a drought or some other thing, you might get paid in goods. Best to have one handing over wheat, another pork, and yet another chickens.”

“I feel incredibly stupid that I did not take all this in hand years ago,” Matthew said.

“I’m rather surprised you’re taking it in hand now, actually,” Sir Jonathan said. “I do not know of any other son who has the nerve to skirt round their lord in such a manner.”

“It had to be done,” Matthew said. “My future happiness depends upon it.”

“So you are set on Lady Constance, then?”

“Entirely set. I will return to London and inform the old soldier of my plans.”

“The house on the other side of the park sits empty—with a bit of fixing up it could be very comfortable.”

That, at least, had been an idea Matthew had already thought through. It was the dower house, though it had been unoccupied for several years. It was large as far as dower houses went, with five roomy bedchambers and enough space for a full staff in the servants’ quarters. The views were perhaps even better than from the main house and it was far enough away to afford privacy.

Just then, Masterson hurried into the room, having just arrived to Surrey.

“Ah finally,” Matthew said. “My clothes are rather a disaster above stairs.”

Masterson held out a letter and said, “I bring more disaster with me. The earl was irate when he discovered where you went off to. He’s written out all his feelings.”

Matthew took the letter, opened it, and read it. He laid it down. “I am an ungrateful wretch, apparently. He wrote that particular phrase in four places.”

“There is more,” Masterson said.

“Gad,” Sir Jonathan said, “has the earl written two letters?”

Masterson shook his head. “The mahogany box and paints were returned. Ackerman’s dropped them off at the house.”

“Returned?” Matthew asked. “Was there any reason given?”

“None that I know of,” Masterson said.

“Her father may have balked over it, not knowing who it was from,” Sir Jonathan said.

“Perhaps,” Matthew said. “I thought it strange, actually, that at Lord Nankin’s card party, she did not even allude to it. She must have known that it was me that sent it.”

“I’ll lay bets she never saw it at all,” Masterson said.

“Whatever the case,” Matthew said, “we’ve done everything we can do here to set things in motion. I’d best get myself back to Town.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Masterson said. “The earl gave me strict orders to bring you back, including dragging you back if that became necessary. He expects you tomorrow. Also, I think you better hop to it if you want to beat Mr. Ludwig to the punch.”

“Ludwig?” Matthew asked. “What’s Ludwig got to do with it?”

“There was some talk at the servants’ table about how the fellow had called on Lady Constance and she looked favorably upon it. He’s supposed to be swimming in pounds and pence. It came straight from Mr. Wilburn so I reckon it’s a fact.”

“Ludwig,” Matthew said. “I cannot understand that fellow.”

“Nobody can,” Sir Jonathan said. “I cannot like a gentleman who does not reveal anything about himself. Enigmas are not to my taste.”

“There is more, I’m afraid,” Masterson said.

“How can there possibly be more?” Matthew asked, a snake of irritation itching its way up his spine.

“There’s a bit of gossip going round that Lady Constance, Lady Juniper, and Miss Semper have formed some sort of club. The club meets at Lady Juniper’s house and they planned something called Operation Trip-Up for Lord Nankin’s card party.”

Masterson stepped back a foot after relaying that news, as if it would be well to provide distance between himself and the information.

“Trip up? Trip up who? Trip up me?”

“Apparently so.”

“Trip me up how?” Matthew asked.

“Nobody knows,” Masterson said ruefully. “The fellow who was listening in got called away to fetch a pound cake.”

What on earth was going on?

“Well old chap, I don’t know what you’ve got yourself into,” Sir Jonathan said.

“Nor do I, but I won’t find it out by lollygagging round here. I have no intention of being tripped up, whatever that plan was. I am determined to get to the bottom of it and I am certain I will find Lady Juniper at the bottom of it. The lady has suddenly decided to pretend at liking me—why? I know well enough that she does not, so what is she playing at? Does she dislike me so thoroughly that she attempts to steer Lady Constance away from me?

“And this Ludwig creature, he must be driven off. He has no business calling on Lady Constance. He is...he is...well I do not know what he is! Except to know he must be got rid of at the earliest possible moment. We’ll depart at sunrise.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Mr. Ludwig was so rarely caught out on a thing, but he had been taken unawares at the Kelgoody’s rout.

Lady Constance’s mother had ordered the mahogany box and paints returned. The box and paints she believed had been sent by him had gone straight back to Ackerman’s, and then they would have been returned to Lord Bramley. The countess did not look with favor upon the sending of it, which was concerning. One never knew how much influence a mother had over a daughter. It had been his observation that some were as thick as thieves and some were as oil and water.

He'd somehow not anticipated that the box would be returned. He did not recall precisely what he'd said upon being informed of it by Lady Constance—he may have even stammered. He did know he'd made a quick exit, as he needed time to think.

Aside from the countess' disapproval of the thing, the bigger danger was that when the box and paints made its way back to Bramley, his note had been included.

Bramley might be very put out to discover that his anonymous gift had been commandeered in such a manner. He might be so put out that he might issue a summons to a meeting on an early morning green.

That would prove an insurmountable problem. Mr. Ludwig's swordplay was middling at best and he could not remember when last he'd shot a gun. He would not go to stand there and be murdered. But then, if he would not go, he must take himself far away. He would be on his way back to New York with not enough funds to live a proper gentleman's lifestyle there. What was he meant to do then? Wed an American?

Mr. Ludwig took in a long and slow breath to calm himself. He was allowing his thoughts to run wild. With any luck, the note had not been returned and Bramley would never be any the wiser.

Yes, he must bring his commonsense to the fore and stop imagining meetings on greens where he was blown to bits or run through.

Bramley must simply be moved out of the way with nobody the wiser on how it had been accomplished.

There was a reason Lady Constance and her family were keeping her fortune a very great secret. Other ladies did not do so and marched into London with head held high, delighted that all and sundry understood they were the owner of a significant dowry.

Lady Constance did not.

He must guess that the reason she did not was because she wished to marry for love. She wished to assure herself that the gentleman proposing was after wedded bliss, not financial bliss.

And he, Mr. Frederick Ludwig, was the only person to know her secret.

How stupid that he had not taken advantage of the knowledge more than he had.

What if Lady Constance was to receive an anonymous letter informing her that her secret fortune was known by Lord Bramley and he was actively trying to secure it as his own?

Might that not put off a lady who was determined to wed for love?

He thought it very well would.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Matthew had returned to Town in good time and sought out his father in the library.

The earl's head snapped up as Matthew said, "The ungrateful wretch has returned."

"I meant every word I put in that letter," the earl said. "Where did you find the nerve to go behind me and question how I run my estate?"

"It may seem as if that was what I was doing—"

"That is what you were doing!"

“Well, true, but allow me to explain.”

“I cannot fathom what explanation you could have to excuse such a thing.”

Matthew sat down in front of the desk. “Nevertheless, I do hope you will allow me to explain, as I do not wish for a rift between us.”

“Oh why not? I’m sure your mother would write it off as the way of the world.”

“Father. Please.”

“Very well, what is this magnificent explanation to be then?”

Matthew thought he’d better start at the beginning, rather than launch the old soldier directly into the oncoming future.

“I have always wondered how other families were managing to put aside dowries or purchase neighboring estates. What would we have done if I’d had a sister? Where would the money for her have come from?”

The earl did not look as if he had an answer to that. “There is no use speculating on things that did not happen,” he said gruffly.

“But I have speculated on it, as it affects me. It affects my future. So that’s why I went to Surrey—to get a real picture of our circumstances.”

“And now you know what they are. I’m sure Crickenly told you all about it, though I expect the fellow was mightily affronted to be questioned by the young viscount who is not yet the earl.”

“Affronted, irritated, and resistant,” Matthew said. “All of those things.”

“This better not cause him to up sticks,” the earl said. “Good stewards are not exactly falling out of trees.”

“They are certainly not falling out of any of our trees. Crickenly is lazy as the day is long. He’s done nothing that could easily have been done, all to save himself the trouble.”

“Now that is going far—”

“It is the truth,” Matthew said doggedly. “I brought Sir Jonathan with me, who knows what he’s about. You could have knocked him over with a feather when he saw all the opportunities missed.”

“What opportunities?” the earl said. “We already sell off our extra produce and the dairy does very well too.”

“True. But there is far more that we can do. That we should have been doing all along. We have no need to depend upon dowries to prop the whole thing up.”

Matthew went on to outline his plans for the estate. Upon hearing the long list of steps that must be taken, the earl looked just as tired as Crickenly had done.

“Now Father, here is my idea—you have the right to take a rest. Allow me to take this thing in hand and get it all going.” Matthew did not mention that Sir Jonathan’s steward would shortly be on his way to Surrey to get it all going. He did not point out that it was all going to go forward regardless of what the earl said about it. It had to.

The earl shrugged, which was as close to an approval as Matthew imagined he would get.

“The young are always so determined to do it all differently, as if they know best,”

the earl said. “I suppose you’re determined to make your own mistakes and just as well I am still around to pick up the pieces. If you want to muck around selling lumber, go right ahead—but do not come to me for any investment in it! Furthermore, these harebrained ideas of yours do not solve our very current problem nor does it excuse you from your duty. You may look down your nose at a large dowry, but it is ready and reliable funds.”

Matthew sighed. His father would never believe in the plans until he’d seen the result of them. He believed in the plans, though.

“We are to have a dinner tonight, and I expect you to make yourself pleasant.”

“What dinner?”

“Well, Nankin and some others will come to dine,” the earl mumbled.

“What others?” Matthew asked suspiciously.

“Lady Florence, and her charge—”

“Miss Semper?”

“Yes, and Lady Juniper too, with her parents,” the earl said.

Matthew folded his arms, entirely irritated with the old schemer. “No, it is the barge all over again. It is too ridiculous. You must make my excuses.”

The earl got very red in the face and said, “I will not make your excuses! You will attend and you will make yourself exceedingly pleasant.”

“You cannot force me to come,” Matthew said. It was said perhaps a little

halfheartedly, because of course he could be forced.

“If you do not do as I ask in this matter,” the earl said, “there will be no cutting down trees or building cottages or whatever other cockamamie ideas you’ve thought up for an estate that is not yet yours and will not be for years to come!”

“Very well,” Matthew said. Whatever was to happen, he could not put aside the plans for the estate. It was the only thing that would allow him to ask for Lady Constance’s hand with a clear conscience that he was not bringing her into very pinched circumstances.

In any case, it was only a dinner. A vicar would not be there to drag anybody to an altar. He would just steer as far away as he could from Lady Juniper. He did not like the idea that she was going round speaking highly of him. He especially did not like the idea that he was all but certain the mysterious Operation Trip-Up had been her idea.

If there were one terrible outcome that might occur from this farce of a dinner, it was that Lady Constance would hear all about it. She would know that his household had sought out the two richest ladies in London in the most obvious way imaginable. She would be cognizant of the idea that his household had not done her the courtesy of an invitation and would guess it was because her dowry was so much less. He must hope she knew him well enough by now to know he’d not had a hand in these absurd arrangements.

Whatever else he was, he was not a dowry hunter.

His father had spent the better part of the afternoon trailing after his mother and complaining about all of his son’s impractical ideas. Matthew heard some of it, one of the favorites being, “We’re to be sellers of oak now? Did you know that?”

By the end of it, the countess did not even bother to trot out her ideas about the ways of the world—she just closeted herself in her dressing room.

As if all of that was not uncomfortable enough, the invitation from the Duchess of Ralston had arrived. As she had hinted to him, he was to be one of the gentlemen given seven cards to take all over Town, only to be somehow embarrassed at the end of it.

Matthew might have wished the day to end, except the end of day would bring the dinner he was forced to attend.

Now, the dreaded time had arrived, and so had the dreaded guests.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am

Matthew found himself trapped at his own table. Miss Semper was to his right and Lady Juniper was just across. The table itself was cozily set up for a small party with most of the leaves taken out.

The last thing he wished for at this moment was a cozy party.

“It is really very good to see you, Lady Juniper and Miss Semper,” the earl said. “I have not had the pleasure of extended conversation with either of you since our excursion on the barge for the regatta.”

At the mention of the barge, Matthew could see well enough that Miss Semper took a trip down memory lane regarding her dalliance with too much champagne, her seasickness, and her ruined naval hat.

Lady Juniper said, “It certainly was an unusual morning.”

“I say, Wisterley,” Lady Juniper’s father said, “what are you doing about rents this year? It’s not been the best of harvests and I’m thinking of foregoing an increase altogether. Maintain good will and all that.”

The earl seemed startled by the question, as well he would—they did not have tenants to raise rents on.

“We are examining the matter,” Matthew said hurriedly.

Fortunately, the Earl of Wellerston seemed satisfied with that answer. “What about you, Nankin?” he asked.

Lord Nankin said, “We will do a modest increase. Very modest, though, and there are some tenants particularly hit hard that we will excuse from it. We like to go case by case, as it were.”

None of this talk would have been of the least interest to Matthew three days ago, but it was of vital interest now. What stance would he take when the estate had tenants? Across the board or case by case? It was interesting to think of and he found himself leaning toward case by case.

“Our daughter, our dear Juniper,” the Countess of Wellerston said, “has been named one of the twenty ladies on the Duchess of Ralston’s list for her secrets exposed party.”

It was said with some amount of pride, though Matthew was not certain how much honor was in it.

“As has my Bessy,” Lady Florence said of Miss Semper.

Clearly Lady Florence did not care to be outdone on any matter.

“Lord Bramley?” the countess said, “the duchess did hint you would be one of the gentlemen?”

Matthew had not planned on advertising that fact, but now he was forced to own it.

“Indeed, she has sent the invitation to me,” he said.

“I am sure Miss Semper and I,” Lady Juniper said, “can expect Lord Bramley at our doorstep on the day.”

Matthew stared at her. About the last two ladies he would have chosen from the

twenty that would be on the list were Lady Juniper and Miss Semper.

“Of course Bramley will be there,” his father said jocularly. “With bells on if I know anything about it.”

Matthew ignored that prediction. He said, “I have not seen the list of ladies yet, the duchess does not send it or the envelopes to the gentlemen until the day of the party. Is Lady Constance on the list?”

He watched Lady Juniper and Miss Semper exchange meaningful glances.

“Lady Constance?” Lady Florence asked. “Is that your other friend, Bessy? The one you and Lady Juniper have the little club with?”

“Indeed, Aunt,” Miss Semper said.

“Little club?” Matthew’s father said.

“We are The Stalwarts,” Lady Juniper said. “We have vowed to look out for one another, as any three friends should.”

Matthew noticed she was staring him dead in the eye while she said it. The Stalwarts?

He supposed the club was for coming up with things like Operation Trip-Up. It really was so confounding. What were they trying to accomplish?

“Ladies coming together in a trio and naming themselves The Stalwarts?” his father said jovially. “It sounds very like the three graces of the ancient Greeks.”

Was it very like, though? Matthew did not see the resemblance other than they were both comprised of three women.

“In any case,” Matthew said, steering the conversation back to the original question, “is Lady Constance on the list?”

“She is, Lord Bramley,” Miss Semper said, once more exchanging looks with Lady Juniper.

“I imagine Lady Constance hopes she does not discover Mr. Ludwig on the list of gentlemen,” Lady Juniper said. “He’s a very forward sort of gentleman, daring to send her a mahogany box and paints. Naturally, her mother returned them forthwith.”

“Mr. Ludwig sent Lady Constance a mahogany box and paints?” Matthew said, thoroughly confused. “From Ackerman’s?”

“Where else does one purchase such things?” Lady Juniper said.

What was Ludwig about? Had he somehow discovered that Matthew had sent the same and thought to hop on his idea? How?

“Ludwig,” the Earl of Wellerston said, “I never know what to think of that fellow. And then nobody ever sees hide nor hair of his father, the baron. I do not believe either of them belong to any clubs at all. It’s very uncomfortable, somehow.”

“Indeed,” Lady Florence said, “why come to Town at all if one is determined not to engage with society?”

The Earl of Wellerston was right. Ludwig was very uncomfortable somehow. The box and paints were a specific sort of gift. If it had been flowers, that would be understandable. But paints? Had Lady Constance somehow mentioned to Ludwig that she’d been drawing in the park and then he’d had the same idea Matthew had?

He supposed he should be grateful that Lady Constance’s mother had not looked any

more kindly on Ludwig's attempt than she had on his own.

"I do not think we will see Mr. Ludwig at the secrets exposed party," Lady Juniper's mother said. "The duchess does not care for him, though she cannot think why."

There was a protracted silence as everyone mulled over the idea that nobody knew precisely why they did not care for Mr. Ludwig.

Fortunately, Lord Nankin took advantage of the pause and broached a new topic. Apparently, he had relations in New Orleans who had written him a long letter about a new card game called poque. As he outlined the rules, Matthew thought it sounded even more convoluted than whist and assured himself he would be equally bad at it.

He would be found to be right. After dinner, the gentlemen's port did not go on long and they repaired to the drawing room to try out poque. Matthew could not get the hang of it. There were too many rules and if this happens then that happens, but if that other thing happened then something else happened. On top of trying to remember it all, both Lady Juniper and Miss Semper were relentless in questioning him about his father's estate.

What was the condition of the house? What repairs were needed? What were the future plans for the estate?

It was all very unnerving. Why did they wish to know?

If one or both of them was enquiring because they had some interest in living there, they would have another thing coming! His father had been too encouraging and may have planted ideas, but those seeds would never bloom.

He dodged every question with the idea that he was intent on adding two stalls to the stables to account for his trip there. For one, he did not wish to acquaint them with his

plans as it presumed an intimacy that was not there. For another, his father had heard quite enough about his plans for one day.

Finally, everyone was got out of the house and Masterson brought a double brandy to his rooms. Really, it might have been a triple brandy. His valet had seen that he looked a bit worn out from the whole evening and had taken steps accordingly.

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Constance was eager to set off for Lady Juniper's house for a meeting with The Stalwarts. She must hear what was said and done at Lord Bramley's dinner the evening before.

She was stung that she had not been invited, but she'd spent a deal of time attempting to soothe the sting by imagining that Lord Bramley had not had a say in the invitations.

Only hearing of the actual facts of the dinner would settle her thoughts in one direction or another. Letty adjusted her bonnet and they went down the stairs to await the carriage.

As Letty had done on other days, her maid would accompany her and would be entertained by Lady Juniper's maid. Apparently, the two maids got on very well. Or, as Letty told her, "We are like a house on fire with our talking—once we get going you can't douse us."

In the front hall, one of the footmen approached with a letter on a salver. "This has just been delivered, Lady Constance."

She took up the letter from the tray. It was from a certain Lady Margaret Howsun. Constance did not know the lady, nor had she ever heard of her. She assumed it

would be an invitation to participate in some charity or other—correspondence from a stranger usually was.

The carriage had pulled up and she said, “Come Letty, let us not delay our departure. I can read this in the carriage.”

They hurried out to the carriage and Constance absentmindedly unfolded the letter. She perused it, and then she perused it again. It did not seem as if she could be reading what she was reading. It did not seem rational, or even possible, that a single sheet of paper could set fire to all her hopes and in one instant turn them to ash.

She read it a third time.

Lady Constance—

Please excuse the ruse of having this letter appear to be sent by Lady Margaret Howsun, who in fact does not exist. It was necessary, as I write to you anonymously. I debated long over whether to inform you of a certain piece of information, but in the end I could not allow a lady of breeding to be tricked in such a manner that would affect her entire life going forward.

Lord Bramley is aware of your secret. I know that as I write the word ‘secret,’ you will know of what I speak. He is acquainted with a particular sea captain who returned a particular deceased gentleman to the environs of your estate and he has discovered that deceased gentleman has left an enormous inheritance to your family. He imagines this windfall will greatly increase your dowry.

I know this will come as a great shock to you, as it has come to me. I have always considered Lord Bramley a gentleman and would never have suspected he would get up to such schemes. What a mask of disinterest he wears!

He has kept his earl in the dark about it, as he feels that gentleman would be too obvious in his pursuit of your dowry. Rather, he has allowed his father to chase after the two ladies who are known to have fortunes, taking all eyes off you.

You, though, are Lord Bramley's target. I hope this does not cause too much distress. Please do know that there are gentlemen among us who would not be swayed one way or the other by the amount of a lady's dowry. It is shameful that a man would rely on a wife to prop himself up.

Regards,

A Concerned Bystander

Constance felt numb in body and mind. She dropped the letter. Letty caught it as it fluttered to the seat. As her maid read through it, Constance wondered how it was that she could not feel her hands and feet. It was as if they had disappeared though she could see them.

Her breathing was shallow and rapid, it felt like there was not enough air in the carriage. Everything began to look blurry though nothing was in her eyes.

She was so dizzy. She wondered if she would faint, though she had never done such a thing in her life.

"Gracious," Letty said, throwing the letter aside. Her maid took her hands and chafed them.

"I feel..." Constance said breathlessly, "I feel..."

"You feel in shock, is what you feel, and I am not surprised. I will tell Paxton to turn the carriage round. We must get you home and into your bed."

“No, no,” Constance said, forcing air to go deeper into her lungs. “Juniper.”

Letty sighed. “Proceed on to Lady Juniper’s house? Very well, though I don’t know what she’ll make of you when she sees you.”

Her maid rummaged through her reticule and brought out a vinaigrette. She waved it under Constance’s nose and she got a jolt of vinegar and camphor.

The vague idea that she could not convince Letty that her vinaigrette was not the answer to any and all problems drifted through her mind.

As Letty chafed her hands and Constance worked to slow her breathing, she could feel her hands again and her feet began to tingle, those coming back to life too.

“Aye, this is a rum sort of day,” Letty said. “Sometimes, in wanting to find something out, its found out and a person wished they never looked in the first place.”

“I should have...left it alone?”

“I don’t know what I say,” Letty admitted. “I’m just trying to get your mind working again, as you did look close to a faint. But then, my trusty vinaigrette never does let me down—it’s the camphor, you see.”

The carriage slowed as they approached Lady Juniper’s house on Bedford Square.

“Are your legs going to hold you up?” Letty asked.

Constance was not entirely sure. “I believe so, if you will lend me your arm.”

Letty carefully helped Constance down to the pavement, practically knocking the groom out of the way.

They were let in the house by a footman, who seemed alarmed at her weakened appearance. Another footmen coming up behind him seemed just as concerned.

Constance wished to say something, but her mind was as blank as a sheet of paper that waited for somebody to write on it.

Letty said, "Run off and tell Lady Juniper that there is to be no going out of doors today. Lady Constance needs to be indoors."

The first footman ran off. The second said, "May I lead you to the drawing room, my lady?"

"The snug," Constance said, remembering what she wished to say. Lady Juniper had said her house had such a room. Just now, she felt she would be more comfortable being enclosed by four small walls. It was as if the world had got too big and she might fall out of it.

"The what?" Letty asked.

"I know where it is," the footman said. "Right this way, my lady."

They were led through a small library and found the snug cleverly concealed behind freestanding bookcases. It was slightly different from Lord Kelgoody's snug, as it had four well-padded chairs gathered round a low inlaid wood table.

Letty sat with her and chafed her hands until Lady Juniper arrived with Miss Semper on her heels.

Lady Juniper took one look at Constance and said, "Right. James, bring the sherry decanter and three glasses. You may move our tea things in here as well."

Letty had risen and curtsied.

“Thank you, Letty,” Lady Juniper said. “You may go downstairs, my maid eagerly awaits your company.”

Letty hurried off, no doubt glad to give over responsibility for Constance’s current circumstances to someone else.

The sherry and the tea things were brought in quickly and Constance got the idea that the footmen must have set out at a run for them. She must look dreadful, indeed.

“Gracious,” Miss Semper said, “what has happened, Lady Constance?”

“Not yet,” Lady Juniper said. “Lady Constance, say nothing at all until you have drunk down your sherry. If I am not mistaken, you are on the verge of an attack of the nerves. I have seen such things before.”

Constance nodded and did as she was directed. The sherry was soothing and sent warmth through her cold limbs.

She took in a deep breath and said, “I believe I had such an attack of nerves in my carriage. I have never experienced anything like it—I could not feel my hands and feet.”

“But they were still there?” Miss Semper asked, peering at Constance’s shoes.

Constance nodded and almost laughed. “Yes,” she said.

“It was indeed an attack of the nerves then,” Lady Juniper said. “My aunt is prone to them and never does get hold of them in time—she ends fearing she is dying and then is very surprised when she doesn’t.”

“Goodness,” Miss Semper said, “what a horror. I should die if it happened to me.”

“But that is the point, my dear Miss Semper—one does not die.”

“Oh yes, that is true.”

Constance felt herself calm as the sherry did its work and she was surrounded by her two dear friends, both so original in their own ways.

“The question is, if you feel up to it, Lady Constance,” Lady Juniper said, “what brought on such violent feelings?”

Constance reached into her reticule and handed over the letter. Lady Juniper unfolded it and Miss Semper read it over the lady’s shoulder.

Lady Juniper laid the letter down. “Bramley is a scoundrel, just as we feared.”

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Lady Juniper and Miss Semper had read the awful letter and Lady Juniper had pronounced judgment on Lord Bramley. He was a scoundrel.

“Oh I did hope it wasn’t so,” Miss Semper said.

Constance did not suppose Miss Semper could have hoped any harder than she herself had. But all the hoping in the world had not been enough.

Lady Juniper murmured, “Wait a moment,” and picked up the letter again. “Lady Constance, you never did say what your actual dowry was, just that it was a bit more than people might think. This says it is an enormous inheritance.”

Constance nodded, no longer wishing to keep the secret from Lady Juniper and Miss Semper. “It is twenty-thousand. Twenty-three thousand if you count what I initially brought.”

Miss Semper’s teacup clattered on its saucer.

“Well that is quite a bit more than I imagined,” Lady Juniper said.

“I know, and I did wish to say,” Constance said, “but my mother and father and I and Letty made a pact that we would never reveal it to anybody until the signing of a marriage contract.”

“That was clever,” Miss Semper said. “I might have thought to do the same, but I feel my large dowry is one of my primary attractions. My father says it is like wearing the finest clothes—gentlemen cannot look away.”

“And the rest of the letter?” Lady Juniper said, seeming to not wish to delve into the idea that Miss Semper’s dowry was worn as fine clothes. “Does it make sense that Lord Bramley could have discovered your secret from a sea captain?”

Constance nodded. “The relative who left me the inheritance lived in America and we brought him over to bury him in our churchyard. He was well-known in New York and my mother made the arrangements, so the captain could easily have guessed at the circumstances. It just never occurred to us that he’d do anything with the information or know anybody who might be interested in it.”

“This is not the conclusion of our investigation that we were hoping for,” Lady Juniper said. “Miss Semper and I were both encouraged at the dinner last evening. Lord Bramley very specifically wished to know if you were on the duchesses’ list of ladies for her secrets exposed party.”

The turmoil of her mind had pushed any thought of that particular party right out of her thoughts. How on earth could she smile and get through it? Lord Bramley was one of the gentlemen chosen to carry the envelopes to his selected ladies—it had seemed such good fun that he would come to her house with it. Now, she just dreaded it.

“At the dinner, I proposed that I would expect him to come to my house with one of his seven envelopes,” Lady Juniper said, “and he was none too enthusiastic about the prospect. It was his father who seemed eager about it. I really was convinced that he was disinterested in dowries.”

“And then we did press him very hard about what his plans were for the estate, but he would only admit to expanding the stables by a few stalls,” Miss Semper said. “He revealed nothing about any grand plans that might be made with a large dowry.”

“Indeed, we were very encouraged, but that was before we discovered that you are

the richest heiress amongst us and he knows it. Dastardly, is what this is.”

“Well,” Constance said with a deep sigh, “I wished to know, and now I do know. Really, something inside of me has known all along. I am well aware that I am no diamond of the first water. All along, I was trying to convince myself that he somehow preferred a lady of my not very prepossessing looks.”

Both Lady Juniper and Miss Semper stared at her, seeming very surprised. She supposed they would be—Lady Jane had told her enough times to stop commenting on her looks, as it just made people uncomfortable.

“But I think you’re lovely,” Miss Semper said.

“That is very kind,” Constance said.

“Lady Constance,” Lady Juniper said sternly, “I do not know where you’ve got such ideas but you must put them aside this instant. We are all very comely women, if I do include myself in that. Lady Theodora is said to be this season’s diamond and what do I see? A woman so pale and insipid that she would disappear were she standing in front of white curtains.”

Constance laughed despite herself. She really did admire Lady Juniper’s confidence in all things.

“Gracious,” Miss Semper said, “I do not like to speak ill of anybody, but I was rather startled by the veins in her neck—they are very blue.”

“There we are then,” Lady Juniper said, seeming satisfied with Miss Semper’s assessment. “Whether Lord Bramley prefers a frightenedly blue-veined lady or your more attractive coloring is neither here nor there. He knows about your fortune and he has kept that a secret from you.”

The upset and nerves that had overtaken Constance when she'd read the letter began to harden into something else. There was a sort of fury in it. How dare he play with her feelings in such a manner? He really had worked hard to convince her to like him.

As the letter said, what a mask of disinterest he wore.

"He's bound to come to your house with an envelope from the secrets exposed party," Miss Semper said. "What shall you do about it? Bar the door?"

Constance did not see how she could bar the door. Though, she did not wish to open the door either.

"Lady Constance will face it head on," Lady Juniper said, "and we, as The Stalwarts, will face it with her. I am certain he will come to visit you and I too, Miss Semper. He will not want to, but he was cornered into it at the dinner."

"Oh yes, he rather was," Miss Semper said.

"If the duchess' directions in the envelopes we receive are at all similar to past years, we will be asked to describe the gentleman bringing it," Lady Juniper said. "Last season, it was a four-line poem. We do not know what we will be faced with this year, but we now know what Lord Bramley is and we will proceed accordingly."

"How, though?" Miss Semper asked.

"We will simply follow our instincts, Miss Semper. We are all very like and bound to come up with similar responses."

Constance was not certain that was true. She actually thought they were all very different. Nevertheless, she was comforted by their solidarity of purpose. She did not know what she would have done if she had been left to face this situation alone.

“I have sometimes wondered,” she said, “if I did discover that Lord Bramley was fortune hunting, might I not overlook it? Might not something grow between us over time? Despite his initial motives?”

“Gracious,” Miss Semper said, “that seems rather a big gamble. What if it did not? You would be left heartbroken and wishing you had not made the mistake.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Constance said reluctantly. Of course, she knew it was true all along, she only wished it were not.

“Miss Semper is very wise in this matter,” Lady Juniper said. “You do not know the real Lord Bramley and would have no idea who you would be faced with when it was safe for him to drop his mask. We all know examples of it from our own neighborhoods—unhappy ladies who were charmed and deceived.”

“Oh yes,” Miss Semper said. “In my neighborhood, there is a viscount who gambled away his wife’s money. It seems he absolutely cannot stop himself from wagering whatever he can get his hands on. I believe their estate is mortgaged now; I cannot think what they will do about it. Every time I see the viscountess she seems as if she might burst into flames at the slightest provocation. My father says she’ll murder him in his bed one of these days and nobody will blame her for it.”

“A pair of our neighbors,” Lady Juniper said, “who I will refrain from naming, cannot bear the sight of one another. Everybody dreads their annual dinner invitation as they stare daggers at one another over the dining table. My father tells me that one year they absolutely argued across it about who ordered the fricasseed chicken to be on the menu. Apparently, she did, as she knew he particularly despised it. The whole situation was ghastly.”

Constance nodded. She had her own example too—Lady Jane’s mother had been duped in some manner and now was forever left behind in the country while her lord

caroused across England. That lady was deeply unhappy.

No, she would not give herself to such a fate. Lord Bramley was charming and so very handsome and everything wonderful, but that was only what he seemed. She had no idea what was underneath his charming facade. Other ladies had been tricked and lived to regret it. She would not be.

She must harden herself now to save herself from an awful fate later. And she would do it.

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Mr. Wilburn waited for Mrs. Belkey to finish setting down the tea things. She bobbed to the six gentlemen seated in their usual circle and departed the apartment.

“We formally commence our weekly meeting of The League,” Mr. Harkinson said.

Mr. Wilburn did not know why Mr. Harkinson was always so eager to be the first to start the meeting. It was as if that fellow somehow thought he was the leader of them all. Which was ridiculous. If there were a leader, if there were a gentleman each of them would naturally name as being a head above the rest, then of course it was himself.

“Cum Virtute!” Mr. Browning said, staring reverentially at the plaque above the mantel that said precisely the same.

“Cum Virtute,” the others murmured dutifully.

“Mr. Wilburn,” Mr. Penny said, helping himself to an almond biscuit, “how do you get on?”

Mr. Wilburn had given a deal of thought to how he might pretty up the facts he knew of at the moment. However, he had sadly come to the conclusion that it was no more practical than putting a bonnet and shawl on a cow and naming it a lady of fine background. Some situations could not be molded and kneaded into something pleasant. Furthermore, he could really use somebody telling him a good idea to go forward with.

“I am afraid, gentlemen, that things are going in the wrong direction. So wrong, in fact, that I feel as if we are careening downhill in an out-of-control carriage and will only come to a stop via horrendous crash at the bottom.”

“A crash!” Mr. Rennington cried.

Mr. Wilburn stared at him. Mr. Rennington seemed not to understand that it was a proverbial crash, not an actual crash. The man clutched the sides of his chair as if he were on the verge of broken bones.

“I cannot say I am surprised,” Mr. Feldstaffer said grimly.

Mr. Wilburn pressed his lips together, lest he shout: “I am not surprised you are not surprised since you would only be surprised if things were going well!”

Mr. Harkinson, doing his best to act the older statesman though he was no such thing, said, “Perhaps, Mr. Wilburn, you might acquaint us with the facts, as it were.”

As it were, indeed.

“Yes, do tell us,” Mr. Penny said. “I am certain if we all put our minds to it, we can decide what ought to be done next. We only need to know where we are so we may begin thinking about it.”

“That must be true, Mr. Penny,” Mr. Browning said. “Can there be another room in London that just now houses six such astute minds ready to be put to the case?”

Mr. Wilburn could not guess if there were, though he did sometimes wonder if Mr. Rennington could be accused of having an astute mind. An astute mind would not very likely be frightened of his own housekeeper.

“Very well, gentlemen,” he said, “There are myriad circumstances that have come to my attention, but I am not able to make any sort of sense of them.”

“Myriad,” Mr. Feldstaffer said, shaking his head as if anything would have been better than myriad.

“Myriad, Mr. Feldstaffer,” Mr. Wilburn said. “One, I did plant the idea that Lady Constance may prefer the rich Mr. Ludwig, though I cannot see what effect it’s had. Two, a mahogany box and paints was returned to Lord Bramley and I firmly believe the lord had sent it to Lady Constance.”

“But perhaps that is good news?” Mr. Penny asked. “Perhaps Lady Constance is a sensible sort of lady and realizes the finances between them make a match impossible?”

“I’d like to think so, but there is more,” Mr. Wilburn said. “This cabal of Lady Constance, Lady Juniper, and Miss Semper has got some plan in the works—its name is Operation Trip-Up.”

“Trip up?” Mr. Rennington murmured. “Do they know my housekeeper?”

“Why would they ever know your housekeeper, Mr. Rennington?” Mr. Harkinson asked.

“Because how does a mop handle end up being propped across a narrow and dim corridor, I would like to know!” Mr. Rennington said.

The fellow rubbed his knee while he said it, so Mr. Wilburn presumed a tumble had been involved in the discovery of the mop handle.

“Oh I see,” Mr. Penny said, “the lady tripped you up.”

“The harridan tripped me up,” Mr. Harkinson said. “I will not name her a lady under pain of death!”

Mr. Wilburn said, “In any case, we do not know what this plan is that the three ladies have concocted—does it work for us or against us? Is it to trip up Lord Bramley? Is it to trip up the earl, and then Lord Bramley and Lady Constance somehow make off for Gretna Green?”

“Oh dear,” Mr. Browning said. “That is quite a lot to consider.”

“And there is more,” Mr. Wilburn went on doggedly. “Lord Bramley, having been told a large dowry is necessary to the estate, has seen fit to travel to Surrey and make wild plans that would make it not so. He wants to cut down wood and build cottages and no end of other things.”

“Gracious,” Mr. Penny said. “Was the earl approving of it?”

“The earl was irate about it. They had quite the argument over it when Lord Bramley returned.”

“So Lord Bramley believes he can get the estate to do better financially, making a large dowry unnecessary,” Mr. Browning said.

“That is indeed much to consider,” Mr. Penny said.

“And there is more,” Mr. Wilburn said. He ignored Mr. Rennington fanning himself with a napkin and Mr. Feldstaffer looking both saddened and vindicated.

“Unknown to Lord Bramley until the day of his awful return, the earl invited Lady Juniper and her people and Miss Semper and her aunt to dine. Those two young ladies roasted Lord Bramley over the fire with their questions regarding his estate—particularly, what plans he had for it.”

“I see,” Mr. Penny said. “So you think that perhaps there is some secret understanding between Lady Constance and Lord Bramley. You think perhaps the lady was informed that he went to Surrey to see what could be done on the estate to make a wedding between them practicable.”

“Just as I deduced,” Mr. Harkinson said, rubbing his chin in some apparent attempt to appear sage.

“Let us put our heads together on these matters,” Mr. Browning said. He paused, then said, “Wait. There is not more, is there?”

“Of course there is more,” Mr. Feldstaffer said glumly.

“No, there is not more, Mr. Feldstaffer,” Mr. Wilburn said. He refrained from shouting: “Sorry you are disappointed to hear it, sir!”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Penny said, “this situation is not a matter of Lord Bramley and Lady Constance never marrying, but a case of they should not marry this minute. If it can be delayed until it is seen whether or not Lord Bramley’s plans for the estate come to pass...”

“Now that is such a sensible idea that I am surprised they have not thought of it themselves,” Mr. Browning said.

“You know how young people are, Mr. Browning,” Mr. Harkinson said. “As headstrong as badgers.”

“The earl will never agree to the match if he’s got his heart set on Lady Juniper or Miss Semper,” Mr. Feldstaffer said.

“And that is why I fear a run to Gretna Green,” Mr. Wilburn said.

“Might you tell the earl of your fears?” Mr. Rennington asked.

“I certainly might not,” Mr. Wilburn said. “Lord Bramley would deny it and I would end sacked for accusing him of it.”

“They must have a carriage to take them to Scotland, if they will try it,” Mr. Harkinson said. “I imagine it would be the gentleman’s responsibility to make those arrangements. What if you had a word with the earl’s coachman?”

“Ah yes,” Mr. Harkinson said. “Lord Bramley only has his phaeton, and one cannot make such a trip in that vehicle. Not with a lady aboard, not to mention her maid and her cases.”

“A quiet word with the coachman,” Mr. Penny said. “Yes, and then if Lord Bramley orders the carriage for some early morning, he will have to tell the coachman ahead of time that it is to be a lengthy trip. Else, how could the fellow plan properly?”

“I’d take an ax to one of the wheels and let that be discovered on the day,” Mr. Feldstaffer said.

Mr. Wilburn thought that idea rather dramatic. He was also not so certain about speaking to the coachman, who he did not believe liked him very much. Though he did not see what else was to be done.

“And then when you have been alerted by the coachman that a flight is in the works, you could send an anonymous letter to the earl, as if from a stranger,” Mr. Browning said. “It could outline what Lord Bramley proposed to do. The earl will put a stop to it.”

“We will save Lord Bramley from himself,” Mr. Rennington said. “Then, if his plans for the estate do go as well as he hopes, he may be able to convince the earl to sanction the marriage properly by next year.”

Mr. Browning nodded gravely. “Running off to Gretna Green is always a bad business,” he said. “The Scots should not be allowed to carry on with such shenanigans.”

Mr. Wilburn nodded. Really, it was not just the Scots that should not be allowed to carry on with shenanigans. It was a certain young English gentleman too!

He really did not know where these lords and ladies would be without the cool heads of their butlers.

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Constance was able to convince her mother that she should place herself well away from the drawing room for the day of the secrets exposed event. The countess would receive any gentleman who cared to call, take his envelope from him, and bring it to Constance in the library.

Now, she stared glumly at the accoutrements of the day—pen and ink, a lit candle, her father's stamp, and sealing wax.

It was both a relief and a disappointment to be closeted away. She had at one time looked upon the event with a certain amount of giddiness—she would be pressed to say something about the gentleman bringing an envelope. She would be pressed to say something about Lord Bramley.

Surely he would come, and she would still be pressed to say something. However, the something that would be said would not be as flattering as it might have been. Or flattering at all.

Lord Bramley had, all along, known of her secret. He'd known of her money. If only he'd said he knew! If he'd said, then she could have weighed the possibility that he was not only interested in the money, but her too. Perhaps he'd begun the acquaintance interested in the money but then had become interested in her. Or perhaps he'd been interested in her and then found out about the money. She might have come down on his side.

But to keep it secret said volumes.

He had not told her the truth. That had been left to some anonymous person who was

so disturbed by what they saw happening that they had been prompted to inform her of it.

There was a soft knock on the door and Frederick entered with a letter on a salver. “The countess bids me to inform you, my lady, that Lord Bramley delivers this communication for your perusal and awaits its return.”

Constance smiled, though she did not feel like smiling. Frederick was the first footman and took things very seriously. He would be cast down if he imagined his delivery of the letter had been anything less than elegant.

Communication duly delivered, Frederick bowed and exited the room with his usual effort at some sort of aplomb.

The door closed and Constance opened it and read the Duchess of Ralston’s instructions.

My dear girl—

If you are reading this note, then some keen gentleman has seen fit to choose you as one of the seven visits he will make today. Here is your task:

Upon considering the totality of the gentleman in question—his looks, his temperament, his manners, and dare I say it, his effect upon you—name what creature this gentleman would be if he were other than a man. As well, please include some explanation for your choice.

Do amuse me if you can. I adore being amused.

If I choose to read aloud your answer, the authoress will not be revealed.

Margaret Ralston

Constance sat back. She was to name Lord Bramley as some sort of animal.

Was he a fox, clever and secretive? Or perhaps a falcon, circling his prey?

No, those two descriptions were too kind to describe what Lord Bramley had been up to. They were too mild to describe what he'd so casually done to her heart.

Her heart had been pierced and poisoned and though Lady Juniper assured her that she would recover, she was not entirely sure she believed it.

Poisoned. Yes. He'd delivered a veritable snake bite.

Constance dipped her pen in ink.

Viper, he knows why.

She waved the paper to dry it out. It was a daring thing to write, but it was a rather small retribution in answer to the damage he'd done. It was time he understood that she was no longer fooled.

Constance melted wax and applied her father's seal to close the letter. She rang the bell and Frederick came in, swept it up with a flourish, and bowed himself out of the room.

It was done. She did not know what Lady Juniper and Miss Semper would write, but she felt she could count on Lady Juniper to be equally scathing.

Constance wished she felt more vindicated than she did.

She felt rather empty.

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Matthew found it hard to believe he was late for the Duchess of Ralston's party when he'd fully meant to be early. It was not that he was looking forward to the event, but rather he wished to clear up a few things with Lady Constance.

That was, if he could figure out how to broach the subjects. Both things had come to him through servants' gossip—that Mr. Ludwig had been well received at her house, and that there was some operation called trip-up that was mysterious. How was one to mention gossip gained through one's valet? He did not know, but was hopeful that an opportunity would present itself.

That was the sum total of what he was hopeful about. He had dutifully visited seven ladies with the Duchess of Ralston's letters. Lady Constance, the one lady he'd wished to see, had been hidden away somewhere.

Lady Juniper, who he definitely could have done without seeing, had glared at him. He supposed her pretending to like him had run its course. He also supposed she would write something ghastly about him.

Miss Semper had seemed pained to see him, and she'd taken a deal of time filling in her envelope.

After he'd arrived home, he'd found one of the Duchess of Ralston's footmen waiting for him. The young man collected his seven letters and left with them.

The only letter he had much hope for was the one delivered to Lady Constance. Though, what had been asked and what she had written he did not know.

He'd set off on his horse in good time, but not half the way there, Mercury had thrown a shoe. Matthew had been forced to dismount and walk the horse back to the stables. By the time another was saddled, he was decidedly late.

Finally, he'd arrived. The ballroom was packed with people. He scanned it but could not locate Lady Constance. Not yet, anyway. He would find her, though.

The duchess was helped onto her makeshift stage and the crowd quieted.

"My dear guests," she said, "how wonderful that you are all so loyal in coming to me every year for my little bit of amusement. And, what a bit of amusement we have tonight. One wonders what a certain gentleman has been up to this season."

The duchess' butler handed the lady a stack of papers. Matthew could see Sir Jonathan halfway across the room. He looked rather stricken at the duchess' comment.

Matthew supposed he did too. They all would. What certain gentleman?

He knew all of the men who'd been given envelopes; he could not imagine any of them getting up to any serious mischief with the ladies of the ton.

"First, I will acquaint my dear guests with the task the ladies were given. They were asked to name what sort of animal the gentleman would be if he were other than a man, and to provide some comment on their choice."

Matthew attempted to keep his expression neutral, despite the ghastliness of the idea. He was certain Lady Juniper had named him some unbecoming creature.

"Now, we will start with some of the more flattering answers," the duchess said. She held a paper in front of her. "A certain lady has named Sir Jonathan a lion because he

is superior to all men.”

There was gentle applause at the idea and Matthew could see Sir Jonathan looking very pleased with himself. As well he might. Lion, indeed.

The duchess went on to read various other sheets of paper—this gentleman was a stag for his quiet strength, that one was an otter, full of jokes, that other one was a stallion for his good looks. So far, the duchess had not named Matthew in any of it, which was beginning to be worrying. She’d started off the evening wondering what a certain gentleman was up to.

Certainly, she could not have meant him. He was not up to anything.

“Alas,” the duchess said, “we come to less flattering depictions. I thought I would read them one by one, but as they are all directed at the same gentleman I might as well read them all together. Goodness, Lord Bramley, I shudder to think what you’ve got up to.”

All eyes followed the duchess’ gaze to the back of the room.

What had been said about him? He might expect one unflattering submission and he could expect to lay it at Lady Juniper’s door. But how many were there?

“We find the following characterizations for our friend just now in the back of the room,” the duchess said. “Viper, he knows why. A crocodile—danger beneath friendly looking waters. A magpie, attempting to steal what is not his own. Gracious, Bramley, whatever it is you have done, do take steps to fix it. It is not well to have three ladies ranged against you.”

What had he done? He’d done nothing at all.

Three ladies. Of course one was Lady Juniper. Had it included Lady Constance and Miss Semper too? Could this be Operation Trip-Up?

Of course, everyone was staring at him now, wondering what he'd done. They could not wonder as much as he wondered it.

Loudly, he said, "Your Grace, I would happily fix it, if I knew what it was."

As he said it, he began to think that it could only be Lady Juniper's machinations. It had always been unfortunate that Lady Constance chose to be such good friends with the lady. He had not thought, though, that Lady Juniper would go so far as to actively work against him in an underhanded manner.

Had she poisoned Lady Constance's mind? That would account for him being condemned by three ladies—not one, not two, not four, but three. He was certain Miss Semper would go in any direction she was told to. They were a trio. Lady Juniper had informed him at dinner that they were even named—The Stalwarts.

What had Lady Juniper done?

Right from the start, it had been a mistake for his father to scheme to throw Lady Juniper and Miss Semper in front of him. It had been painfully obvious and he supposed both ladies deplored it. But it was not his doing!

"Let us hope then, Lord Bramley," the duchess said from the stage, "that you will shortly be informed of it and can take steps. Everyone, refreshments are in the other room—enjoy."

He would very much like to be informed of it. He would demand to be informed of it.

Footmen opened the doors at both ends of the room and the duchess' guests streamed

through them. Matthew stood on his toes to scan the departing crowd.

Then he saw them—the trio. He hurried after them, weaving round people.

The crush in the corridor made it impossible to move any faster than the crowd moved. By the time he made it into the vast room used for refreshments, Lady Constance and her two alleged friends were standing by the duchess' framed pawprint of Intrepid, the cat who sailed on the HMS Endeavor on Cook's first voyage.

The room was nearly as large as the ballroom, and then some of the crowd had gone off to the drawing room. It was easier to make his way there.

"Lady Constance, Lady Juniper, Miss Semper," he said. He bowed reflexively.

Rather than respond to his greeting, they all three just stared back at him. Miss Semper seemed embarrassed, Lady Juniper looked in a fury, and Lady Constance...he was not certain what her state of mind was. She looked shaken.

"Might I inquire if it was the three of you who painted me a viper, crocodile, and magpie?"

He supposed they had not expected he would get right to the point, but he did not know how else to approach it.

"It must be assumed so," Lady Juniper said, "unless there are other ladies in Town that you have wronged."

"Wronged?" Matthew said. "If this is about my father inviting you and Miss Semper on the barge and to dinner, you should be aware that I had nothing to do with it."

“No, you did not,” Lady Constance said, “you were busy attempting to reel in a bigger fish.”

“A bigger fish? What are you talking about?”

“I am afraid, Lord Bramley,” Miss Semper said, “the whole thing has come out.”

“What whole thing?” What were they talking about?

“Lord Bramley,” Lady Constance said in a cold tone, “the matter has been settled. It would be ungentlemanly to continue to harass us.”

“Harass you? I see,” Matthew said. “I had no idea my attentions were viewed as harassment.”

“Do leave us, Bramley,” Lady Juniper said.

“I would hear that from Lady Constance,” Matthew said.

“Please do go, there is nothing further to say,” Lady Constance said. “Our acquaintance is at an end.”

Matthew stood staring at her for a moment. Then he turned on his heel and strode out. He left, rather than do what he really wanted to do—which was dunk Lady Juniper’s head in a punch bowl.

He did not know what he was condemned for. He did not even care what Lady Juniper and Miss Semper condemned him for—those two ladies could jump off the Dover cliffs for all he cared about it.

But Lady Constance had firmly condemned him. If he was not mistaken, there had

been a real anger in her eyes.

He might never know what had transpired, but he did know one thing—he'd been an utter fool to have raced to Surrey to force the estate into profitability, all to win a lady that despised him.

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Constance had been shaken to her core at the secrets exposed party. It had been one thing to name Lord Bramley a viper when she'd been alone in her library, simmering in anger and outrage. It was quite another to hear it read publicly and then have to face him.

She had faced him, though. With the help of her friends on either side of her, she had stayed firm.

After he'd marched off, Lady Juniper had patted her arm and said, "Well done."

Miss Semper had taken a rather large sip of wine and said, "Gracious, that was rather shattering to the nerves."

"That was very hard," Constance said. "When I look at him, I see who I thought he was. As much as I look, I cannot see what that letter revealed about him. Why cannot I see it?"

"I suspect it may take time," Lady Juniper counseled. "One's mind is not very adept at doing a sudden about face. Wait until next season and watch who he chases, I'll wager it will be a lady new to the scene who comes with a large purse. Then, your lucky escape will finally sink in."

Constance nodded. "I suppose so," she said.

“It must be very hard,” Miss Semper said. “If I were to discover that the gentleman I prefer was not as he seemed, well, I do not know how I should stand up against it.”

As this was the first mention of Miss Semper preferring anybody in particular, both Constance and Lady Juniper said, “Who is it?”

Miss Semper blushed and said in a low voice, “Perhaps he was described as a lion not an hour ago?”

“Sir Jonathan,” Lady Juniper said. “I suppose that will be investigation number two for The Stalwarts. We must assure ourselves that his attentions are motivated by his affection and not your money.”

Constance said to Miss Semper, “Has he said anything directly to you?”

“Oh, declaring himself, you mean?” Miss Semper said. “I am afraid not. I am hopeful though.”

“Then we must discover if he is worthy of your affections, Miss Semper. Lady Constance was nearly deceived and you are perhaps...even easier to deceive.”

“Do you think so?” Miss Semper asked.

“I am afraid so, my dear,” Lady Juniper said. “But have no fear of it—Lady Constance and I are by your side.”

“Indeed, we are,” Constance said. “I would not like you to go through what I have been through. I feel like weeping most of the time, and I do weep when I am alone.”

Her two friends were very struck by it. Lady Juniper and Miss Semper spent the rest of the evening attempting to cheer her up.

Though their words were comforting, the only moments that made her smile at all were the occasions when a gentleman attempted a run at Lady Juniper or Miss Semper, ever vying for their dowries. Lady Juniper's responses to these hopeful lotharios were always entertaining, while Miss Semper simply stood back and watched.

One was told that any husband of Lady Juniper Croydon's must spend each and every evening reading alongside of her—The Iliad could not be read too many times! There would, of course, be the exception of holy days, in which case they'd spend all waking hours reading the bible.

Another was informed that she had a collection of parrots, one for each room, and had trained them to report on where everybody was—there would be no hiding from a wife!

A third was told that she planned to pay her future husband's valet, coachman, and groom their wages so that she might be kept always informed of her lord's whereabouts.

Lady Juniper was loyal to her viscount at home and Constance did not believe the lady's father had the remotest chance of prevailing against the match. That father would eventually discover that every eligible gentleman in London had been frightened off with terrible stories of their future lives together. A large dowry could not overcome the picture Lady Juniper painted of marital infelicity.

Constance had been exhausted by the time she finally arrived home. It seemed an exhaustion of the mind had caused her body to tire too.

She'd woke up still tired and spent the day tired. She had not the least interest in going anywhere. She would have to, though. This evening was the Join Forces Rout.

According to her mother, those ladies of the ton who were involved in various charities came together once a year to put it on. Unlike a usual rout, there would be bowls set up throughout the rooms, with a description of a charity propped up by them. Guests were meant to bring bags of coins, and then deposit those funds in the charity bowls they favored. A purse full of money had already been sent to her room.

Letty said, "I think you'll want the blue silk with the scalloped sleeves for tonight."

"Does it matter?" Constance said. Really, she did not think it did. Nothing seemed to matter at the moment.

"You're feeling that poorly over Lord Bramley?"

"I suppose so," Constance said. After she'd received the anonymous letter, she'd shown it to her mother and father. They had been alarmed by it, and had agreed with her that she ought to protect herself from him. So had Lady Juniper and Miss Semper. So had her own judgment.

And yet...

"You've saved yourself and the feelings you have now will pass," her maid said.

"So everybody says," Constance said. She thought the sharp feelings that stabbed at her now would soften to a dull ache. She was certain, however, that she would never feel as strongly about a gentleman as she had for Lord Bramley.

In the eventuality of time, she would marry. Of course she would, what else would she do? But that gentleman would never quite measure up. She knew it. She would have to find contentment in other things.

Perhaps she would involve herself in charities as a way to find fulfillment. She would

examine what was on offer tonight, as she might as well get started with it.

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As Mr. Wilburn sat at the head of the servants' table, he could hardly believe his ears.

"I am sorry, Masterson, would you repeat that," he said.

Lord Bramley's valet nodded. "The three ladies, The Stalwarts they call themselves, named our Lord Bramley a viper, a crocodile, and a magpie."

Though he had now heard it twice, he did not understand it any better than the first time.

"Why on earth should three ladies of society use such pejoratives against the lord? As well, what sort of insults are these, I hardly understand them."

Masterson said, "I see where you're confused. You see, it was at the Duchess of Ralston's secrets exposed party. The ladies were asked to name what animal a gentleman would be. If he were an animal and not a gentleman, mind you."

Mr. Wilburn had never heard anything more absurd in his life. "What are these animals supposed to mean though? A viper and a magpie do not have much in common."

"Ah, well you see the ladies had to make some comment as to why they chose their animal. Let's see, the viper was he already knew why, though he says he don't, the crocodile was something about danger beneath the surface, and the magpie was stealing things."

Masterson sat back as if everything had been satisfactorily explained. Mr. Wilburn

could not make heads or tails of it.

Until an idea began to form. Perhaps the magpie gave it away. This was all due to the earl inviting Miss Semper and Lady Juniper onto the barge, and then to a dinner.

They fancied Lord Bramley was a fortune hunter and condemned him for it.

It was very unfair. Of course gentlemen must find fortunes. Mr. Wilburn was aware that the whole business was buried under the illusion of courtly love, but everybody understood the realities of the thing.

Masterson sighed. "He won't say, but I reckon he's that cut up about it. Lady Constance has gone cold on him."

Now that was a bright spot in this ludicrous situation. It seemed Lady Constance had solved the problem of Lady Constance by herself.

The less than bright spots were Lady Juniper and Miss Semper. All hope was lost there. The earl would likely need to wait until next season to locate a suitable lady for Lord Bramley.

Of course, there was the slight chance that Lord Bramley might make more of the estate, thereby dispensing with the need to bring in a dowry. But that chance seemed remote and exceedingly slim.

No, he was all but certain a dowry would need to be had. Perhaps Mr. Wilburn might gently hint to the earl to not be so obvious about things next season. Though, he would need to tread carefully, as it had been he himself who had posited the barge scheme.

It had seemed such a good idea at the time!

He supposed ladies were more astute than he had imagined—the earl’s efforts had been about as opaque to them as thin chiffon curtains.

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Mr. Ludwig attended the Join Forces Rout every year. It was a large and crowded event that held several distinct advantages. One, the invitations went out from a dozen charitable ladies and so none of them would realize that he’d not got an invitation at all. Two, there were bowls of money scattered throughout the house.

The year before, he’d pocketed ten guineas and only left when he became concerned that he was pressing his luck when Lord Jonas had come into a room near-silently. To be caught at such a thing would bar every door in London against him.

The final advantage was that no lady worth her salt would skip it, as to do so was to look uncharitable. He was certain the countess would bring Lady Constance.

That lady would be primed to speak to him, he was certain. All anybody could talk about everywhere he went today was the scene at the Duchess of Ralston’s secrets exposed party. He’d not been able to attend, as he was not invited and the duchess did not like him. But that had not stopped him from hearing about it.

Lord Bramley had been denounced as a viper, a crocodile, and some bird or other. He did not understand the bird, but he did the other monikers.

His anonymous letter had worked better than he’d even imagined it would.

Bramley was out of the running for Lady Constance. A fellow named a viper would never be able to get back into the running.

Mr. Ludwig suppressed a snort of laughter as he slipped a handful of half-crowns and

shillings into his pocket from the bowl for the Home for Abandoned Children. Bramley would not have known what hit him. He would wonder, just as the rest of the ton was currently wondering, what on earth he'd done.

"Mr. Ludwig," a voice said behind him.

He momentarily froze. It was Lady Constance. When had she come into the room? Had she seen him pocket the money?

He turned and said, "Lady Constance."

"Mr. Ludwig, did you take coins from that bowl?"

"Ah yes, I put in a guinea and took back some change for it. One does like to spread the wealth around, you see."

"Oh."

She did not look entirely convinced. To stop her from wondering further, he said, "I understand the Duchess of Ralston's secrets exposed party was rather rousing last evening."

Lady Constance appeared rather pained to hear it spoken of, so perhaps he should not have mentioned it. He had hoped she would be feeling victorious over having unmasked a scoundrel, but she did not seem so.

"Well," he said, attempting to sound jocular, "they are saying that Bramley's been caught out fortune hunting. I never do understand a man, a real man in any case, looking to a wife to solve his financial problems."

"Who are they?"

“They?”

“You said, they are saying. Who are they?”

“Oh, you know, people here and there. Gossip travels and all that.”

“Constance, there you are,” the Countess of DeWitton said. Lady Constance’s mother hurried in carrying her velvet purse of coins.

“Yes, Mama,” Lady Constance said. “Lady Melvern told me the bowl for the abandoned children’s home was in here and I thought I might read about it.”

“Mr. Ludwig,” the countess said.

He bowed. “Countess.”

They stood there awkwardly for a moment. Mr. Ludwig began to fear his anonymous letter had not been as successful as he’d thought. Bramley had been driven off, but Lady Constance seemed miles from being won over.

What else could he do? He’d put his own note on the mahogany box but it had been returned, he’d tried to call at the house but had been told the ladies were not at home, he’d utterly destroyed Bramley. What next?

He could send flowers, but then if he could not sign them without them being returned what was their purpose?

“Shall we visit the other rooms?” the countess asked her daughter.

“Yes, of course we should, but...Mr. Ludwig, might you give my mother and I a moment alone? I wish to speak to her on a ladies’ matter.”

There was absolutely nothing he could say to that. He felt as if his chance was slipping away. He could not allow it to slip away. He must act quickly. He must speak to the earl and convince him that he was the best choice, then her father could convince her it was so.

“Ladies,” he said, bowing. “Countess, I will call on the earl on the morrow to discuss an important matter.”

He turned on his heel and hurried out before he could be told no. He would speak to the earl man to man. These women had no sense about them and were too ruled by their rather fraught emotions.

Mr. Frederick Ludwig would convince the Earl of DeWitton that he should wed his daughter if it were the last thing he ever did.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Matthew had not slept much the night before. He’d finally given up and taken his horse out early to clear his head.

It did not work one iota. On top of failing to understand what had happened to cause Lady Constance to despise him, it seemed he had become notorious.

Everywhere he went, people stared. He’d even seen Lady Markwell drop the curtain on her carriage window. He was a pariah and did not know why, except to guess that Lady Juniper had turned Lady Constance against him because of his father’s ham-handedness at trying to secure a large dowry.

He decided he must get out of Town—there was nothing for him here. He’d thought of going to the estate, but it was all too likely that the earl would follow him home at some point. His father had really done enough for one season.

He'd finally written a note to Sir Jonathan to ask to borrow his fishing lodge in Scotland. Matthew had been there before—the fishing was excellent and, most importantly, it was very remote. Nobody would stare at him there. The local people who lived nearby would not give a toss for the Duchess of Ralston and her ridiculous parties.

He'd received an answer, and it was a better answer than he'd been expecting. Sir Jonathan would happily lend the lodge, and he was determined to go with him.

Sir Jonathan was a true friend. Which, Matthew supposed, one discovered when one landed oneself in trouble.

The only caveat had been that they must have a carriage for the journey. Sir Jonathan had taken a fall from his horse and while the horse had not gone lame, Sir Jonathan had. He would stay off horseback for the next few weeks.

It was not insurmountable. Both he and Sir Jonathan only drove phaetons, which would not do for such a trip. He decided he would borrow his father's large carriage. They would set off at dawn and he would leave the earl a note about it.

His father was bound to be annoyed, but Matthew was annoyed too. This situation he found himself in would never have happened if his father had stayed out of it. It would serve the old soldier right to have to rent a carriage until his return.

Masterson came into his bedchamber with a fresh neckcloth. Matthew looked at it and said, "I don't know what that is for, I have no intention of going out this evening."

"I see," his valet said. "So it is a sure thing, we leave at first light for Scotland?"

"It is. Tell the coachman, but ask him to keep it under his hat. Tell nobody else—I'll

leave a note for the earl.”

Masterson nodded. “I’ll arrange to hire a sturdy vehicle for myself, Sir Jonathan’s valet, and the luggage.”

“Excellent,” Matthew said.

“But you’re sure there ain’t a way to repair whatever’s been done. Some way to get to the bottom of it and make it up to Lady Constance?”

“I’m afraid her mind has been entirely taken over by the spitefulness of Lady Juniper.”

“She’s a rum sort,” Masterson said.

Yes. Lady Juniper was indeed a rum sort. Lady Constance might despise him, but nobody on earth could despise anybody more than he despised Lady Juniper Croydon at this moment.

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Constance watched Mr. Ludwig leave the room with some incredulity. What did he mean, he was coming to their house to speak to her father on an important matter?

“Constance,” the countess said, “I can only think of two reasons a gentleman such as Mr. Ludwig would wish to have an appointment with your father. One, he has some sort of business proposition, or two he wishes to ask for your hand.”

“Then he’d better have a business proposition, Mama.”

“As I think too, but if it is not so, would there be any reason why he would feel

encouraged?”

“No, none at all,” Constance said. “I like him less every time I encounter him.”

“Well, I suppose we shall discover his purpose on the morrow. I will warn your father so he is not taken unawares and he will be fully informed of your feelings. Now let us go. I did see Lady Juniper in the room set aside for The Young Ladies Training Institute and I know you will wish to see your friend.

Constance did indeed wish to see Lady Juniper. However, she said, “One moment, Mama.”

She took some coins from her purse to put into the bowl for the abandoned children. As she did so, she examined the other coins already there. There was no guinea.

Mr. Ludwig had stolen from parentless children. Now she liked him even less. In fact, she could not think of who in the world she liked less than that gentleman.

“Goodness,” the countess said, “what was the ladies’ matter you wished to discuss?”

“Oh that was nothing,” Constance said. “I just did not wish for Mr. Ludwig to follow us from room to room.”

“Clever girl.”

The countess led her out of the room just as others were coming in. At least those people would be putting money into the bowls rather than taking it out.

They found Lady Juniper and Miss Semper in the room set aside for the young ladies’ training institute.

The countess said, “I will leave you with your friends. I must find Lady Melton and her blankets for infants knitting club or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Her mother made her way out of the room. Lady Juniper said, “I was just explaining to Miss Semper that charities like this one are the type I prefer. Training these girls to be seamstresses or lady’s maids and such is at least arming them with some independence. As much independence as one can have as a woman of little means, in any case.”

“It makes sense, I thought,” Miss Semper said.

Constance leaned forward a bit so she could keep her voice low. “I have just seen Mr. Ludwig take money out of a bowl,” she said quietly. “He claimed he was taking change back from a guinea, but there was no guinea there.”

“That is dastardly!” Lady Juniper said. “We ought to inform the charitable ladies of it.”

“Perhaps not yet,” Constance said. “He also told my mother that he requires an interview with my father on the morrow.”

“You do not think...” Miss Semper trailed off.

“I do not know what to think, really. I am a bit frightened to think...why would he imagine...”

“Ladies.”

They were interrupted by Sir Jonathan. Constance could not help but notice the rather instant flutter from Miss Semper. She giggled, she turned shades, she murmured, “Goodness, Sir Jonathan.”

“Miss Semper, I am glad to have encountered you.” Sir Jonathan appeared very serious, though Constance could not imagine why.

“Are you?” Miss Semper said, seeming hardly able to mask how enthusiastic she was over the idea that he was glad to see her.

“I wished to take my leave. I quit Town on the morrow and likely will not return for some time.”

The effect of that particular statement seemed a heavy blow upon Miss Semper. She was positively speechless.

Lest they all stand there like idiots, Constance said, “If it is not too personal, can you tell us where you travel to, Sir Jonathan?”

She asked it because she was certain it was what Miss Semper would ask if she could get the words out. She dearly hoped that Sir Jonathan was being called away by a sick relation, else he would not have chosen to leave Miss Semper’s side.

“I am traveling to my fishing lodge in Scotland,” Sir Jonathan said. “My friend, Lord Bramley, finds he has been much maligned and wishes to depart London.”

Sir Jonathan bowed, turned on his heel, and walked out.

Constance was speechless. It seemed Miss Semper was too.

“I see what’s happened,” Lady Juniper said.

“You do?” Miss Semper said, her voice full of hope.

“Poor Sir Jonathan does not know what we know. For him, the monikers we applied

to Lord Bramley last evening must seem out of the blue and unfair.”

“Oh dear, he does not like me now,” Miss Semper said fretfully.

“Nonsense, he will come to see the truth, Miss Semper. They will be holed up in a remote fishing lodge with nothing to do but talk and fish. Bramley will talk, the truth will come out, and then Sir Jonathan will understand your very sensible position.”

“I’m sure he will not stay away too long,” Constance said. She meant to reassure Miss Semper, though her thoughts were elsewhere. Lord Bramley was leaving Town.

“I think so too,” Lady Juniper said. “When Sir Jonathan returns, we will launch an investigation into his motives regarding you, Miss Semper. I must say, I have a good feeling that we will discover his motives are pure.”

“That is very comforting, Lady Juniper!” Miss Semper said.

“You are not to fret over it,” Lady Juniper said.

As Lady Juniper reassured Miss Semper, Constance’s thoughts spun ahead of their own accord. Lord Bramley was leaving Town in disgrace. Perhaps she ought not to have done things so publicly. Perhaps she should have told him privately that he must look elsewhere.

Or perhaps it was fair and just that everyone knew what he really was? Might it not save another lady coming along the sort of heartache she was feeling?

She really did not know anymore. As much as she understood that Lord Bramley was a scoundrel, she was saddened that he must be driven out of Town. It was all very stupid. She was very stupid.

She began to wish she'd never inherited that money. If she had not, Lord Bramley would not have looked twice at the unremarkable brown-haired lady. She would not have thought anything of it. After all, why would such a glorious man pay his attentions to ordinary Lady Constance? Her heart would have remained whole, rather than bruised and broken.

The rest of the evening was spent going room to room to read about, and donate to, the various charities. It had become too crowded to talk confidentially and Constance was left to brood in her own thoughts.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am

Matthew and Sir Jonathan had set off at dawn and had already gone two hours out of London. Matthew had left a rather curt note for his father explaining that he'd taken the carriage, and that all thought of Lady Juniper or Miss Semper must come to an end.

“You really have no idea how relations with Lady Constance took such a sharp turn?” Sir Jonathan asked.

“Only speculation,” Matthew said. “I will hazard a guess that Lady Juniper is at the bottom of it.”

“She is a very strange lady,” Sir Jonathan said. “One evening at a dinner I was making conversation, as one must, and she proceeded to tell me that her husband could expect a very austere household and that loud laughing would be frowned upon. Why am I to care what her household will be like?”

“She probably assumed you were after her dowry,” Matthew said.

“Not enough money in the world for that,” Sir Jonathan said. “In any case, I much prefer Miss Semper—now there is a genial lady. Though, I find I am at cross-loyalties now. How can I continue to prefer the lady when she has conspired against you?”

As always, Matthew appreciated Sir Jonathan's steadfastness. He would not, however, wish to interfere with the gentleman's happiness.

“There is no conflict of loyalty,” he said. “If Miss Semper has been led into this,

whatever this is, then she has been led by Lady Juniper. As has Lady Constance. I do not blame Miss Semper for it.”

“Why should Lady Juniper cause such mischief?” Sir Jonathan asked. “Does she have an interest in you? Is it jealousy, do you think?”

“No and no,” Matthew said, laughing at the very idea. “My father has been all too obvious at trying to secure either Lady Juniper or Miss Semper for me, to bail out the estate he has not put much work into. I believe she is deeply offended by it.”

“Well, you’ve got your estate sorted out, at least,” Sir Jonathan said.

Matthew nodded. “Thanks to your expertise, I have.”

Getting the estate in hand had ended being a hopeless operation in regard to Lady Constance, but it was well that he’d done it. It needed to be done.

As he stewed over what lengths he’d gone to, the countryside passed by his window. If all had gone as it should have, he’d still be in Town and would be calling on Lady Constance. He had planned to acquaint her with everything that had been done to the estate, all the plans. He would lay out the practicalities—he had no need for a whopping dowry, despite his father’s views. He would give her a clear view of things, so she might consider them.

If she was agreeable, and he had thought she would be, he would make an appointment with her father. Then, he’d deal with his own father, who would likely have a nervous collapse.

Instead, he was on his way to a remote fishing lodge. It was ridiculous.

Matthew sat up. It was ridiculous. What was he doing? Was he to allow the pinch-

faced Lady Juniper to affect his future so materially?

It had seemed as if he could do nothing. He had been trained since he was a boy to acquiesce to a lady's every wish—it had been drummed into him. To do anything less was to be ungentlemanly, the bane of a gentleman's existence. Whatever else a man was, he must not be found ungentlemanly. Lady Constance had told him that their acquaintance was at an end. If she did not care to elaborate as to why, that was her prerogative.

As a gentleman, he had been told in no uncertain terms to stand aside and so he must stand aside. It would have been bullying and ungentlemanly to refuse to stand aside.

His mother did just what she liked and if the earl did not like it, she blamed it on the way of the world. There was not a thing the earl could ever do about it.

Rules around a lady's rights were all well and good when it came to a reasonable person. Or perhaps not reasonable entirely but mostly, as his mother seemed to be.

He perfectly understood the point behind it all. Women did not have many rights beyond what were afforded them through gentlemanly courtesy.

But Lady Juniper did not exactly fit the mold of the usual lady deserving courtesy. For one, she was not a reasonable person. She was forever going round threatening gentlemen with the uncomfortable life they would live if they pursued her. For another, she did not actually need to wed if she did not prefer it. And for another, she was a pinched and unpleasant person seemingly determined to ruin all the happiness in her sphere.

He'd wished to dunk that lady's head in a punch bowl. That he would not do, though he still had pleasant imaginings about it. However, if he could not fight that lady with swords or pistols or fists, he could fight her with words. He would beat her over the

head with words, if that became necessary.

There was no reason in the wide world why he needed to afford Lady Juniper Croydon any courtesy whatsoever.

“I need to go back,” Matthew said.

“Did you forget something?”

“I did rather forget something,” Matthew said. “I’ll not have the course of my life dictated by that harridan and I’ll not politely stand aside.”

Sir Jonathan rapped on the roof and the carriage slowed to a stop. He stuck his head out the window and said, “Turn round, we’re going back.”

Matthew could hear the coachman’s sigh over this waste of a morning, but it did not particularly affect him.

“So? What is your plan?” Sir Jonathan asked.

“We go directly to Lady Constance’s house and I will demand an explanation from her and I will defeat whatever arguments Lady Juniper has put forth. With any luck, Lady Juniper will be there, they seem always to be together. If that is the case, I will challenge that lady to explain herself and I will do it in no uncertain terms.”

“It’s about time somebody asked Lady Juniper to explain herself,” Sir Jonathan said. “Well, this is a pleasant turn of events. I look forward to seeing Miss Semper again.”

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Constance kept thinking through the odd events of the past days. There was

something itching at the corners of her mind that she could not quite pin down.

She had, at various moments, attributed this feeling of discomfort to several different things. Her disappointment over Lord Bramley or even her ill ease at the idea that Mr. Ludwig would present himself to her father this morning.

Of course, she had nothing at all to fear from Mr. Ludwig. Her father had been apprised of her feelings or rather lack thereof and, as it turned out, the earl did not care for Mr. Ludwig either. If Constance had wished to wed the fellow, her father would have done everything in his power to turn her from the idea. If the gentleman's visit had nothing to do with her, if Mr. Ludwig came with some sort of business proposition, he would be shown the door. The earl had no wish to be in any sort of partnership with that gentleman.

It had been so awkward last evening! She'd seen Mr. Ludwig steal money from the abandoned children. He'd lied about it. He'd said he was taking change from the guinea he'd put in, but there was no guinea in the bowl. Was he really so poor that he needed to steal from children who had nothing?

Constance paused. That was an odd thought. After all, had he not twice said that he had no respect for a gentleman who would use a wife's dowry to prop up his finances? If he were so strapped that he was stealing coins from bowls at a charity party, how else could he solve that problem? Any gentleman in such a situation would be looking toward a dowry, large or otherwise, to assist in remedying the difficulty.

If that were the case, if Mr. Ludwig did need a dowry, why had he made such a point to say that was not the case?

Perhaps that was what gentlemen said, as a matter of course. After all, the anonymous letter revealing that Lord Bramley knew her secret had said something very like.

At that thought, Constance felt as if she'd been hit in the head with a bat. It shook her thoughts around and when they settled, they settled in a very different order than they had been.

She leapt from bed and raced to her writing desk, rummaging through the drawers as Letty came into the room.

Constance pulled out the note that had been sent with the mahogany box and then the anonymous letter.

“Letty, do you suppose these two handwritings are alike?”

Letty hurried over and peered down at the two sheets of paper. “I’m not sure. I suppose they could be. They both look very usual.”

Yes, they did look very usual. Constance reread the end of the anonymous letter.

It is shameful that a man would rely on a wife to prop himself up.

If she could not be certain the handwriting was identical, she could be certain that the sentiment was one she'd heard before.

It was a particular sentiment of Mr. Ludwig's.

Mr. Ludwig was poor enough to steal from abandoned children.

Mr. Ludwig had been persistent in his attentions, despite receiving no encouragement whatsoever.

Mr. Ludwig had mentioned his business dealings in New York, which meant there was the possibility that he, unlike other people, might know of Mr. Canbury. He

might know that Mr. Canbury had been very rich. He might have heard that the old gentleman had died.

And then, as he did travel to New York more than once, he would know more than one sea captain. He might know the sea captain who had brought back Mr. Canbury's remains.

Of anyone, Mr. Ludwig had the means to know of Mr. Canbury and the subsequent inheritance.

Mr. Ludwig was to arrive this morning to meet with her father. If he came to ask for her hand, it was preposterous. It was desperate.

That's what it was—desperate. People did desperate things because they had a lot to lose...

And then, had not Sir Jonathan said that his friend, Lord Bramley, had been much maligned?

What if it were not Lord Bramley who knew her secret? What if it were Mr. Ludwig?

It made more sense that it was Mr. Ludwig. After all, how had she imagined that Lord Bramley was acquainted with a sea captain when he'd not even traveled overseas? Had she imagined he spent his time haunting taverns down by the docks? How else would he know a sea captain?

"Letty, I may have made a very grave mistake."

"Nonsense, whatever mistake you've made, it cannot be grave."

"I may have accused and condemned Lord Bramley over an anonymous letter that

was likely written by Mr. Ludwig to drive him off.”

Letty looked stricken. “That would be grave. Grave indeed.”

“Why else does Mr. Ludwig push himself forward so forcefully? I saw him steal money last evening. From poor children! And now he comes to see my father after Lord Bramley has set off to Scotland. Mr. Ludwig has been to New York. What if it was Mr. Ludwig who spoke to that sea captain and discovered the money? What if I have been fooled all along?”

“Gracious,” Letty breathed. “What will you do? Will you saddle a horse and set off after Lord Bramley?”

Constance stared at her maid. “I certainly will not, what are you thinking?”

Letty shrugged. “It would be romantic, is all.”

“It would be a scandal, is all. I would never disrespect my parents in such a manner. No, if it can be fixed, it must be fixed in a more rational manner than that! Goodness, could it be fixed somehow?”

Letty shrugged, which Constance did not find encouraging.

“If I have accused Lord Bramley...oh, would he ever forgive what I said? I was so cold and told him our acquaintance was at an end. What was I thinking?”

There was the sudden sound of hoofbeats out of doors. Constance threw her shoulders back. Mr. Ludwig had no doubt arrived.

Mr. Ludwig was about to be given what Letty would call the what-for. He was about to experience it by Constance’s own hands. She may have been buffeted by winds not

of her own making, but it was time to trim the sails and steer her own ship.

As for Mr. Ludwig's ship—that was about to sail into a violent storm and sink.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Mr. Wilburn paced the front hall, rubbing his hands together. The world was collapsing around his ears.

When he'd come up to supervise the preparations for breakfast, he'd seen the folded note left on the table in the great hall. It was in Lord Bramley's handwriting and addressed to the earl.

He'd felt in an instant that some disaster was in the process of unfolding. He'd hurried to the stables, praying he was wrong.

He was not wrong. The coachman was gone, as was the family carriage. None of the grooms knew anything about it.

At least, those scoundrels claimed to know nothing about it until he threatened to dismiss them all on the spot. Then he was told the truth. Lord Bramley had set off for Scotland. They said it was all on the up and up, as Lord Bramley was to leave a note about taking the carriage.

Scotland! That one word encompassed all that could possibly go wrong.

His worst fears were coming true. Lord Bramley and Lady Constance were eloping to Gretna Green. He could not know what was in that note Lord Bramley had left, but he doubted any mention of an elopement would be in it. Such things were never advertised until they were fait accompli.

He had, for a moment, slumped on a hay bale.

Then he'd got hold of himself. The couple had set off just hours ago. Lord Bramley traveled with a lady. Those creatures were notorious for wishing to stop here and then stop there, zig-zagging their way across the countryside. They wanted tea, they wanted a retiring room, they wanted to stretch their legs, they wanted to stop and discover if that really was Lady So-and-So's carriage. A trip with the countess was like a sojourn to China and back for how long it took.

With any luck, Lady Constance was just the same. The couple might yet be caught and turned round.

Mr. Wilburn had hurried to his room and wrote out the following, careful to disguise his handwriting:

Earl—

As a concerned person, I write anonymously to alert you that Lord Bramley and Lady Constance Croydon plan to elope to Gretna Green.

He'd waved the paper to dry the ink, folded it, and sealed it with wax. He was careful to use his letter opener to press the wax rather than the house seal. Mr. Wilburn raced back up the stairs. Somehow, he got the note laid with Lord Bramley's note before the earl descended for breakfast.

By the time the earl showed himself on the stairs, Mr. Wilburn's heart pounded in his chest and he was convinced he would drop dead from the exertion.

"Wilburn," the earl said in his usual manner.

"My lord," Mr. Wilburn said. "There are two letters here for you. One appears to be

from Lord Bramley.”

The butler brought the tray with the two aforementioned letters to the Earl.

“Bramley. If he’s gone off to meddle with the estate again, I will, well I will!”

The earl did not say what he would do, precisely.

The gentleman opened up the first letter and perused it. “He’s gone to Scotland with Sir Jonathan and he’s had the nerve to take my carriage! Oh and he says all thought of Lady Juniper and Miss Semper is off. Why?”

Mr. Wilburn did not mention that the why was for several reasons. One, Lord Bramley had eloped with Lady Constance. And two, it was sure to be Lady Juniper and Miss Semper who had named the gentleman a viper and a crocodile. He presumed Sir Jonathan went to witness the nuptials. Mr. Wilburn watched with trepidation as the earl read the second letter.

The lord’s hands shook as he read the short missive, then rapidly reread the first.

“That scoundrel!” he shouted.

Just then, Lady Wisterley came down the stairs.

“Your son!” the earl cried accusingly.

Lady Wisterley, as was ever her habit, did not seem particularly alarmed. “What of him? Is he cutting down more trees? Way of the world, Darling.”

“He’s run off to Scotland with Lady Constance!” the earl shouted.

The countess steadied herself on the balustrade. “That...that is not the way of the world.”

“Well finally—we land on something that is not the way of the world,” the earl said. “What are we going to do about it?”

The countess appeared mystified over that question. Mr. Wilburn cleared his throat and said, “My lord, they have not been on the road long. Perhaps they might yet be stopped and the whole thing hushed up?”

The earl paced the front hall. “Yes, they can be caught...hush the whole thing up! Get me the carriage. I will see Lady Constance’s father at once. I must assume he will be willing to set off on the chase with me.”

“Lord Bramley took the carriage, my lord.”

“Get me a hackney then!”

“A hackney?”

“There is no time to lose, Wilburn. If I must travel by hackney like a grocer to see the Earl of DeWitton then I will do so—I presume you know how the operation works. Do I need money?”

“Yes, my lord,” Mr. Wilburn said. “I will retrieve a sufficient amount from the cash box.”

“The cash box, yes, that’s what we need! How much cash do these hackney people demand? Whatever it is, I’ll give it to them!”

“Perhaps I ought to accompany you, my lord. These drivers can be rough sorts and

may attempt to take advantage of...a gentleman who does not generally employ them.”

The earl turned to a footman and said, “Well? Go find us one of these hackney fellows! Bring me the best you can find!”

Mr. Wilburn walked the footman to the door. “Never mind bringing the best you can find, hail the first you can find.”

“I wish to leave this instant!” the earl shouted as his countess drifted toward the breakfast room.

“The world has gone mad,” the countess said before disappearing round the doorframe.

“Oh really? Now the world has gone mad?” the earl shouted after her. “I’ve only been saying so for years, but no, I was always to understand it was only the world’s ways. Now you see I’m right!”

Mr. Wilburn did not know if this was the final argument his lord and lady were to have regarding the ways of the world, but he certainly hoped so.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am

Matthew was satisfied that they'd made good time back into Town. As they had departed so early, it was still morning when they approached Lady Constance's Mayfair address.

"Is that Ludwig?" Sir Jonathan asked, peering out the carriage window.

"Ludwig?" Matthew said, throwing Sir Jonathan out of the way to get to the window. "What does he do here?"

"I've no idea, but likely he does nothing good."

"He's got a nerve, calling on a lady so early in the day."

Sir Jonathan tapped Matthew on the shoulder. "It is not too early in the day to call on a father, though."

"A father..." The very idea that Ludwig would have the audacity to speak to Lady Constance's father.

Matthew leapt out of his carriage, just as Ludwig descended his own. The fellow heard the commotion behind him and turned. He looked very surprised to see Matthew standing there.

"Lord Bramley," he said, clearly flustered. "I had thought I heard you'd gone to Scotland."

"I changed my mind," Matthew said curtly. "What do you do here at this time of the

morning.”

Mr. Ludwig puffed out his chest. “As it happens, I have an appointment with the earl.”

“Over my lifeless body you do. Do not set one foot toward that door.”

The man looked a combination of terrified and defiant. Matthew did not know what Ludwig would choose to do, but Matthew meant his threat—he would tackle the rogue to the pavement before he would allow an appointment with the earl to go forward.

He would say his piece to Lady Constance before any man appealed to the earl. Particularly Ludwig.

“Lord Bramley,” Ludwig said, “I do not understand your threats. If Lady Constance has turned away from you, that is nothing to do with me.”

“I warn you, Ludwig,” Matthew said in a low and dark tone, “do not approach that door.”

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Constance had been bracing herself to go down and face Mr. Ludwig. She would tell him everything she suspected and then send him packing.

Before she could absolutely set off for the stairs, she heard a second set of carriage wheels roll to a stop in front of the house.

She hurried to the window to discover who else was arriving at such an hour.

Constance clutched the windowsill. “Letty,” she said in a whisper. “It is Lord Bramley. Lord Bramley is here. He’s not gone to Scotland—he is here.”

Her maid hurried over to the window. Both Lord Bramley and Mr. Ludwig were staring threateningly at each other.

“Hadn’t you best go down then?” Letty asked.

“Gracious yes,” Constance said. She picked up her skirts and ran out of the room. She flew down the stairs and past a footman in the hall and threw open the front doors.

Her arrival seemed to take both gentlemen by surprise.

“Lady Constance,” Lord Bramley said, with a bow.

“Ah, Lady Constance,” Mr. Ludwig said with some sort of false bravado in his voice, “as we spoke of last evening, I have come to see your father.”

“Spoke of?” Lord Bramley said. He looked at her and said, “You did not agree to this?”

“Of course the lady did,” Mr. Ludwig said before she could answer. “Else why would I be here?”

“Of course I did not agree to anything of the sort, Mr. Ludwig,” Constance said, feeling a fury inside her.

“Come now—”

Constance cut Mr. Ludwig off before he could go further. “Not only did I not agree to anything at all, Mr. Ludwig, but I caught you stealing from the charity event last

evening. There was no guinea in the bowl, as you claimed. That caused me to think of a few other things that struck me as odd. I finally put it together—I know it all.”

“I would put nothing past that scoundrel,” Lord Bramley said. “But what is all?”

“There is no all,” Mr. Ludwig said. He attempted to sound confident, but his voice wavered. He knew he was caught out.

“Ludwig,” Lord Bramley said, “whatever it is that you’ve done, you are not welcome here. Be gone.”

“I am not certain the earl would agree with you,” Mr. Ludwig said, getting very red in the face.

“I can assure you that he does,” Constance said. “I informed him of my utter distaste regarding you and as it happens, he very much agrees with me.”

"Distaste is a strong..." Mr. Ludwig trailed off. Constance guessed he was thinking hard on how to salvage the situation he found himself in.

Lord Bramley said, "Ludwig, this is your last warning. Get in your hackney carriage and begone or expect to meet me on a green on the morrow. I would be fascinated to discover what gentleman would agree to act as your second.”

Constance fairly burst with pride for Lord Bramley. How could she have ever condemned him when her eyes and ears had told her different? He was everything a gentleman should be—courteous and kind, but then daring and firm when it was required.

Though, she did not wish for him to risk his life in a duel! What if Mr. Ludwig was a good shot or skilled with a sword?

As it happened, Mr. Ludwig seemed to have no wish to try it out. He turned, and as he got into his carriage, he pointed at Lord Bramley. “He is poor, you know, Lady Constance.”

“You are poor, Mr. Ludwig. I do not suppose Lord Bramley would steal a guinea from abandoned children.”

Mr. Ludwig’s cheeks reddened even more than they had been. Constance was certain it was just now dawning on the man that if he had not stolen that guinea, she might never have figured out what he’d done.

He would not know that getting away with it would not have done him any good. There was no inducement in the world that would have prompted her to accept him.

His carriage pulled away and it was not lost on Constance how amused the hackney driver who had driven him had been over witnessing the whole thing.

Just as that carriage set off down the street, another came down it at breakneck speed and clattered to a stop.

Much to Constance’s amazement, Lord Bramley’s father staggered out of it before it had even come to a full stop.

“Aha! I catch you at it before you have even set off!”

The earl’s butler scrambled out of the coach too. What on earth was happening?

“Bramley,” the earl went on, “I do not know who taught you to have such a nerve as to attempt an elopement!”

“An elopement?” Lord Bramley asked.

Constance might have asked the very same.

The earl paced back and forth on the pavement. “Do you think I am such a rube? You’re off to Scotland and I am not to put the whole thing together? Nobody pulls the wool over my eyes! Also, I received an anonymous note telling me!”

Another anonymous note? Why were people forever sending these anonymous notes?

As that thought drifted by, another arrived to take its place. An elopement. To Scotland. She would go in a heartbeat.

“An elopement?” she said, looking toward Lord Bramley.

“I hadn’t thought,” Lord Bramley said, “I had rather hoped for St. George’s...”

“I would meet you at St. George’s,” Constance said.

“No you would not!” the earl shouted. “It is impossible!”

Just then, the front doors opened. Constance’s father and the countess appeared. “What on earth?” he said.

Constance ignored her father and walked toward Lord Bramley. Lord Bramley walked toward her.

“I came to dispute whatever it was that Lady Juniper planted in your mind. Whatever it was, it is not true.”

“I know it, and it was never Lady Juniper,” Constance said.

They stood very close now, their noses nearly touching. “Might you consider my suit

then?" Lord Bramley whispered.

"Consider it considered and accepted," Constance said softly.

"But I must be absolutely transparent. My estate, rather my father's estate, needs much management to get it in order. I can only assure you that I have taken the required steps. If you will trust me."

"We can live in a tent, if that becomes necessary."

Lord Bramley used his forefinger to tip her chin and his lips gently kissed her own.

Somewhere in the distance, and it did seem very far away, Constance heard Lord Bramley's father shouting.

"Never mind him," Lord Bramley said. "Shall we get into my carriage? We can ride round the town and talk in private."

Constance nodded. There was not anywhere she would not go with him.

They climbed into the carriage as Lord Bramley directed the coachman they were to take a ride round the park. Sir Jonathan exited out the other door while he said, "I'll manage these two fathers."

The coachman set off. Lord Bramley's father shouted, "There they go! Are we to do nothing? They are eloping!"

The coachman called down, "We're just driving round the park, my lord."

Constance peered out the carriage window to see her own father appearing rather slack jawed, her mother amused, and Sir Jonathan speaking into Lord Bramley's

father's ear. Well, they could all react as they might. There was no turning back now and Constance was glad of it.

Lord Bramley took her round the waist and slid her toward him to kiss her once more. For quite a while, actually. His lips were rather wondrous—she could not have known such wondrous things could be done with them.

She ran her fingers through his lovely dusky hair—it would be hers to watch lighten in the summer and darken in the winter. His lips were her lips now.

Constance could not be certain precisely how much time passed, but for the fact that they had suddenly got on the carriage road in the park.

Lord Bramley seemed to get hold of himself, though Constance rather wished he would not. He pulled back and took her hand.

“I have much to explain,” he said.

“As do I,” Constance said, “but you explain first.”

“My father has worked very hard to attempt a match between myself and either Lady Juniper or Miss Semper, on account of their large dowries. It seems it has ever been the habit of my family that a new wife coming in is to temporarily solve all money problems. I was not having it for a moment and knowing that you do not come with...well three thousand is a respectable dowry but not one that could rescue an estate that was teetering toward failure, I was determined to remedy that.”

“How did you do it, though?” Constance asked.

“You remember when I traveled home, looking to make some improvements?”

Constance nodded, because of course she did remember. It had been one of those facts that had seemed to condemn him. It had seemed as if he were making plans for her money.

“I took Sir Jonathan with me, as he is an experienced landowner. I discovered the management of the estate was entirely lax and vast resources ignored. I’ve set everything to rights and informed my father of how we are to go forward—I have no need of a dowry, large or small or somewhere in the middle. I am free to marry for love.”

“Are you?” Constance asked. What a man he was. He’d gone to the estate to make it produce so he might afford to choose her.

“I think you know my feelings,” Lord Bramley said.

“I think you’d better say them.”

Lord Bramley leaned his head back. “I am not one of those gentlemen who easily spouts poetry. All I can say is how it seemed to me when we met. It seemed as if I saw her. The her I had begun to wonder if I would ever see. There you were and it was as natural as the sun rising in the sky. Your looks, well, does anybody have such a lovely hair or expressive brown eyes? Not that I’ve seen.”

Constance was rather taken aback. Of all the things that Lord Bramley might mention as attractive about her, her drab brown coloring had not been one of them.

“I don’t know if you realize that, in the candlelight, there are glints of gold and red in your hair.”

She had not known that. Or if she ever had noticed it, she’d not marked it as anything special.

“And then,” the lord went on, “when we spoke, well of course it was settled in my mind at least.”

“Was it?”

“Very settled. Though, I still do not know what it was that suddenly turned you against me. You said it was not Lady Juniper? I was certain that it was.”

“Not at all,” Constance said. “Lady Juniper and Miss Semper have been stalwart friends.”

“The Stalwarts,” Lord Bramley said. “I did hear about that.”

“Yes, well perhaps you did not hear all of it,” Constance said. “All of it is quite the story, actually.”

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Matthew had achieved his aim. He’d gone to Lady Constance’s house to demand an opportunity to press his suit.

Of course, the last person he’d expected to encounter was Ludwig, though that gentleman had been sent packing soon enough.

Then Matthew’s father arrived with some cockamamie story of an elopement to Scotland. Really, the old soldier had quite the imagination. Matthew had never had the intention of sullyng Lady Constance with the gossip around an elopement. He intended to wed her in a church, with all they were close to invited to witness it.

None of it much mattered, though. He’d known the moment he’d looked at her when she’d run out of the house that something had changed. She did not despise him any

longer.

He'd got her into his carriage as fast as possible so she would not change her mind again.

Based on the past hour, there was no possibility that she would change her mind. They fit together like hand and glove and there was nothing more natural than kissing her—a thing he'd thought of a thousand times.

He'd since told her of the improvements to the estate. Now, she was to tell him what had caused her to turn away from him, and then back to him again.

"You see," Lady Constance said, "Lady Juniper had the idea of forming The Stalwarts to protect us from fortune hunters."

"Oh I see," Matthew said, "and I was suspect number one, I suppose."

"Well yes," Lady Constance said. "It all began when I spotted Lady Juniper and Miss Semper on your barge for the regatta."

"That was my father's doing," Matthew said.

"I thought it might be, but I could not be certain. And then you went to your estate, to make plans you said, and Lady Juniper pointed out that a gentleman coming into a large settlement will always wish to make plans to his estate."

"Now I am lost. Did Lady Juniper live under the illusion that I would pursue her? Or Miss Semper for that matter?"

"Not exactly. Do you remember when I said that Lady Juniper admired you?"

“Rather. It was a ghastly idea.”

“Hmm. The real idea was to see if you would turn your attentions, because of how much she brought. Then you did not and I thought, well I thought...”

“You thought I preferred you and had no interest in Lady Juniper’s money, and you were quite right to think it.”

“Yes, I did begin to hope for it...until I received the letter.”

“What letter?”

“It was sent anonymously, and it said that you were leaving it to your father to chase round Lady Juniper and Miss Semper but that I was the real target because you knew my secret. You’d found it out from a sea captain.”

Whatever Matthew had thought Lady Constance might say, talking of a sea captain and a secret had not been on the horizon.

“You are not secretly married?” he asked, the idea snaking through his insides like poison. “You did not run off with a sea captain? Or you did not have a sea captain perform a wedding?”

Lady Constance looked at him as if he had two heads. “Goodness no. The sea captain knew I was an heiress.”

Matthew breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, I suppose three thousand would seem a fortune to a sea captain. But what was the secret?”

“That my dowry is more than three thousand,” Lady Constance said. “It is twenty-three thousand.”

Matthew laughed. "I see you jest, though I do not quite understand it."

"I do not jest, though."

"Surely..."

"I do not jest," she said.

From the look on her face, it did not seem as if she was jesting. Nevertheless, the whole notion was absurd. If Lady Constance Condower was an heiress coming with twenty-three thousand pounds, certainly every person in London would know it, and talk about it.

Over the next half hour, Lady Constance explained how it had all come about—she'd had a very rich relative in New York that nobody had been aware of. Lady Constance and her mother had kept up a correspondence with the gentleman, though even they themselves had not had the first idea of his fortune.

Then she'd told him of the anonymous letter arriving that accused him of chasing after the money and how she was now all but certain that the author had been Ludwig.

"I know I threatened to challenge him not an hour ago," Matthew said. "Now I really will have to—he cannot be allowed to avoid all consequences for such dastardly behavior."

As Matthew was thinking he'd ask Sir Jonathan to act as his second, Lady Constance snuggled under his arm. "I beg you do not," she said. "We cannot prove it was him and I would be very put out if my gentleman was to end up dead on a green."

"It would not be me ending dead, though," Matthew said.

“Very well, then I would be put out to discover my gentleman on trial or fled to the continent.”

“Hm, well I cannot very well go forward if Lady Constance considers me her gentleman.”

“I do, entirely.”

It occurred to Matthew that he’d got Lady Constance into a carriage and ravaged her as much as he could before a vicar had put his name to it but had somehow failed to confirm that there would be a wedding.

“I will always be your gentleman, will I not? What I mean to say is, you do intend on marrying me? Because I would not consider anybody else. If you were to say no, well, I would become an old bachelor, bitter and alone.”

“Gracious, we cannot have that,” she said, upturning her face and kissing him on the lips.

They were satisfied to occupy themselves thus, until another idea began to form in Matthew’s mind. He cupped her face and said, “I have made a decision. Well, an idea really, I would like to know what you think of it. I will not have your dowry propping up an estate that needs no propping up. Aside from your pin money, which should be whatever you wish it to be, what if we used the rest to purchase another estate? We could afford one not overlarge and then we would be on firm footing for the sons and daughters that may come.”

“Do what you like, Bramley,” she whispered. “I trust you.”

“No, I wish to do what we like. What you like. After all, it’s your money.”

“It will soon be your money.”

“It will be our money, but decisions around it must be yours.”

Lady Constance seemed surprised by the idea, and thoughtful. “If that is your true wish, then I approve of buying an estate—it is an eminently sensible idea. Though, I would like to set aside a thousand pounds for the Home for Abandoned Children. It would be fitting, I think. Mr. Ludwig stole from them and I will replace it with a thousand pounds. It is worth every pound, as had he not stolen those coins, I might never have realized the truth.”

“Consider it done. Now, we’d best return to the house so that I can approach your father for his permission and calm my hysterical father.”

“Your poor earl,” Constance said, laughing.

“He’s deserved all the upset that has come to him,” Matthew said. “He has acted injudiciously, if I am to be kind about it.”

“And your mother? What will she think about our engagement?”

Matthew smiled. “She will claim it is the way of the world and be quite satisfied with the idea.”

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:38 am

When Mr. Wilburn had suggested accompanying the earl to Lady Constance's house, he'd imagined an entirely different scene. The earl was to inform the house why they were missing a daughter, and then there was to be a mad dash toward Gretna Green to attempt to stop the couple.

He'd thought the earl would lay out the impossibility of a marriage between Lord Bramley and Lady Constance and he'd had every confidence that the lady's father would not wish his daughter to land in a less than ideal financial situation.

So much for his assumptions.

They'd thought they'd have to chase after Lord Bramley, but there he'd been, standing on the pavement. Then, he'd stolen Lady Constance away right in front of them and nobody had set off after them. The coachman said they were just going to the park, but why was that believed? Did they not see the lord practically mauling the lady as the carriage went by?

After the carriage disappeared round the corner, Lady Constance's mother had taken them all in hand. Mr. Wilburn would have thought he'd be left to wait outside or in the kitchens, but Lady DeWitton deemed the earl unsteady and requiring him nearby.

That was how he ended up in the drawing room with two earls and a countess under the glare of the resident butler. As that fellow narrowed his eyes, Mr. Wilburn had a great wish to inform him that he was just now in the presence of a member of The League, the most elevated society of butlers in England.

Of course, he could not. It was, after all, a secret society.

“Earl, do sit down and gather your breath,” the countess said. “Frederick, fetch the earl a glass of port. I am sure that is what is needed.”

“It’s all gone wrong,” the earl said, mopping his brow.

Lord DeWitton nodded at his wife’s suggestion. “I will have one myself. I am not certain what it is we witnessed just now. Where has Constance gone?”

“To the park, darling,” the countess said cheerfully. “Now gentlemen, I am certain there is nothing to be alarmed about. Lord Bramley and Constance will return and tell us they are engaged and all will be well. I know Constance was hoping for it and it seems Lord Bramley hoped the same.”

“It cannot be!” the earl cried. “You do not understand. My estate, it is a fine estate, but it does not do as well as some others.”

The earl waved his hands as if to stop anybody interrupting him, though nobody looked on the verge of interrupting him. “Oh I know he’s gone there and done some things to make it produce more, a worthy effort I suppose—but it is not a sure thing!”

“So you are afraid, then,” the countess said, “that you will not have the sort of infusion from a dowry that you thought necessary.”

“Finally!” the earl cried, snatching the glass of port from the footman’s hand. “Finally, somebody understands the problem.”

Lord and Lady DeWitton stared at one another. Mr. Wilburn braced himself for what would come next. This would be the moment that they realized the impossibility of it. And then remembered that a carriage had just left with their daughter being mauled by the unsuitable suitor.

The lord and lady began to laugh. Rather hysterically. Was it a nervous condition of

some sort?

“Why do you laugh?” the earl cried. “This is no laughing matter.”

The countess heaved in a breath. “We will allow the happy couple to enlighten you, Earl.”

“Though,” Lord DeWitton said, “we are rather delighted at your assessment of the situation. It answers an important question for us.”

The earl looked toward his butler. Mr. Wilburn had been standing by the earl’s chair. “Do you understand any of this?” he asked.

Mr. Wilburn shook his head sadly. As far as he could tell, Lord and Lady DeWitton were as mad as spring hares. There was not a lick of sense between them.

The next three quarters of an hour were spent in relative silence. Lord and Lady DeWitton beamed at each other, as only the insane can do when faced with dreadful news.

The earl had two more glasses of port and Mr. Wilburn was growing afraid that he’d have to help his lord out of the house when the time came. He also dearly wished the time to depart had come an hour ago.

Finally, the sound of carriage wheels slowing to a stop drifted into the drawing room. The earl made a heroic effort to get to the window, but upon standing he fell back into his chair.

The countess was more successful. She pulled the curtains back. “It is them; they are back.”

Mr. Wilburn gripped the back of the earl’s chair, steadying himself for what would

come next.

What came next was not anything he had imagined. For some time he was not even certain it could be true. Lady Constance was a secret heiress? Who had ever heard of such a thing?

Then, when he had heard all the details and became convinced, it seemed the earl became convinced too. His lord began to say things like, “We are saved.”

It was at that moment that Lord Bramley put his foot down. Hard.

His father was to know that Lady Constance’s funds would not be propping up the estate. The estate must see success on its own and Lord Bramley would see that it did.

He and Lady Constance intended on purchasing another estate to increase even more what could be made to come in and they expected they would do very well. Their eldest son, were they blessed to have one, would not have the heavy weight of hunting a dowry hanging round his neck. Also, and most incredibly, a thousand pounds was going to a charity for abandoned children.

Mr. Wilburn was all for helping abandoned children, but a thousand pounds of help? How many of them were there?

The earl had argued that it was not necessary to upend all their traditions in such a manner. With a fortune such as that, they might all live comfortably with few worries.

Lord Bramley had simply stared at his father and said, “No.”

After the lord had made his views clear to his father, he requested to closet himself away with Lord DeWitton to arrange the details of the marriage contract.

It would of course have been proper for the earl to join in on these discussions but Lord Bramley chose not to include him. The old gentleman was on the worse for wear side of things from three glasses of port anyway.

The earl had finally left to return home sobered in his ideas but less than sober in his person.

As for Mr. Wilburn, he only fretted over how he would explain this palaver to The League.

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In all the excitement of the events that had transpired, it was not until the sun had set that day that Matthew realized he was missing a valet. As it happened, Sir Jonathan was missing one too.

Masterson and Sir Jonathan's valet, Jesper, had plodded along all the way to Scotland and then been surprised to find Sir Jonathan's fishing lodge empty. Masterson guessed quick enough what had happened—Lord Bramley had changed his mind and returned to London. In truth, he had thought it likely all along, as why should a lord be driven off in such a manner?

One might have thought those two valets would have turned round and set off for Town the next day. They did not.

Rather, they both enjoyed a well-earned rest and spent a week fishing and drinking brandy by a fire of an evening. They lived like lords and told the staff of the house that it had been sanctioned by Sir Jonathan. After all, they reasoned, there was no point in sleeping in the servants' quarters with all those empty bedchambers going to waste.

They finally packed up and returned to Town, both of them sticking to the story that

they were idiots who could not possibly have guessed that their respective employers had turned round.

Constance and Lord Bramley spent the fortnight before the wedding together at all hours, but for when one of them must manage something alone. Lord Bramley saw the bishop for a special license. Constance saw a modiste for a rather elaborate trousseau, most of which would not even be ready in time but sent on later. Lord Bramley made a trip to Rundle and Bridge for the wedding band and, while he was there, a lovely sapphire ring to go with it.

Aside from that welcome present, Bramley also redelivered the mahogany box and paints from Ackerman's. Of course, he thought of challenging Mr. Ludwig again when he was apprised that the scoundrel had somehow put his name to it. He was swiftly talked out of it by means of kisses.

When the couple were not off on necessary errands, they spent an inordinate amount of time in Lord Bramley's family carriage. His father and mother nearly gave up attempting to go anywhere, as the carriage was always gone. The earl was not altogether confident in his skill at managing a hackney driver or Lord Bramley's phaeton.

Matthew stole away the carriage every day though, because it was the most private place the young couple could find.

What when on in that carriage need not be elaborated on, except to say that there was not too terribly much to be discovered on the wedding night that had not already been tried out in the carriage. They were the sort of pair for whom such things came very naturally and it had taken self-discipline on both their parts to be able to enter the church with nothing to apologize for.

Or at least, not everything to apologize for.

The wedding breakfast was a small affair. After all, it was not the event of the season. Lord Bramley was one viscount out of many and his bride was not the catch of the year.

At least, Constance was not the catch of the year until word of her real dowry went round. There were more than a few fathers who berated their sons for allowing the lady to slip through their hands, though nobody but Mr. Ludwig had ever been apprised of the facts of her situation.

Lady Juniper and Miss Semper very naturally attended the church and Sir Jonathan might have spent most of the following breakfast making moon eyes at one of those two ladies. Lady Juniper once more considered launching an investigation into Sir Jonathan's motives, but then on reflection thought better of it. Their investigation into Lord Bramley had nearly ended in disaster.

The couple's wedding trip was of a most unusual kind and lasted nearly five months. They purchased their own carriage and team of horses and set off across the length and breadth of England, looking for that second estate they intended to purchase.

It was by no means an organized or efficient sort of trip, as they did find so many charming inns to stop at and they were so wretched at rising early in the morning to set off. There were days when they finally set off after midday, only to happen upon another charming inn two hours later.

There were several estates they considered. But finally, a letter caught up to them in Yorkshire from Sir Jonathan. There was a property available to purchase in Matthew's own neighborhood and they would be fools not to take it as there was a boundary two acres in length that adjoined the earl's estate.

They returned in all haste and made the purchase. While they had planned to settle in the dower house on his father's estate, they now found themselves the owners of a rather fine house in the Palladian style. They decided between them that if they were

to be blessed with two sons, the land would go to the eldest, but the second son would have exclusive rights to the house and an income to allow him to live as a gentleman. They assumed they would come up with another idea if there were a third or fourth son.

Matthew and Constance settled into the house, finding themselves close enough to Matthew's parents that they might ride over for a dinner, but not so close that they saw them more often than might be wished for.

Constance found herself bemused by the earl and his countess. The earl was forever complaining about what he called: "All these new schemes." The new schemes were, of course, simply the plans Matthew had put in place to increase the productivity of the estate. It was supposed that the steward complained equally loudly, though he did not dare complain to Matthew directly.

The countess simply amused herself by countering all of the earl's complaints with pointing out the ways of the world. That lady would turn out to be a cracking grandmama, as she so very rarely was perturbed by anything. Spilled tea on the carpet? Way of the world. Stole the fairy cakes out from under Cook's nose? Way of the world. Had a mud fight at the edge of the pond? Way of the world.

Her grandchildren always felt very approved of, no matter what sort of shenanigans they got up to. Therefore, they adored her.

Over time, Matthew began to think differently of Lady Juniper. He would always find her vaguely alarming, but he recognized what a good friend she'd been to Constance, and Miss Semper too, for that matter. He also became apprised of how loyal she'd been to her viscount at home, and how that fellow was the cause of all the dreadful stories she'd told, describing how she would manage her household.

Lady Juniper was in fact successful in overcoming her father and marrying her viscount—after all, who in England could hold up against that lady when she was

determined on something?

Matthew and Constance found they liked that viscount very much, as he was a good-humored sort of gentleman and went a long way toward softening Lady Juniper's sometimes pinched features. He also had a fondness for dogs, which was fortunate, as his lady never stopped taking them in one after another.

As for Lady Juniper herself, she would go on to become one of the leading matrons of the ton and regularly pulled aside a young lady and sorted her out to everyone's satisfaction in her original and candid style.

Miss Semper had caught Sir Jonathan's eye right from the start, even when he'd been forced to peer at her through her piles of ruffles and ribbons. From afar, it might seem as if they were very different sorts of people. He was tall, she was short. He was angular, she was rounded. His voice was deep and hers a little fluttery. At their core though, they were very alike. Both were loyal and cheerful and gave everybody the benefit of the doubt. They found themselves well-liked wherever they went.

Sir Jonathan and Matthew had been friends since childhood, they both coming from the same neighborhood. Constance found it very convenient that Miss Semper, now known as Lady Michaels, was to live in such close proximity. And then, Lady Juniper and her viscount were often invited to stay at one or the other's houses.

The Stalwarts were never long parted and the children that eventually arrived heard the story of how their club came to be and promptly named themselves The Loyalists. They wrote to one another when they were parted and ended every letter with their motto—In Aeternum. They all stuck with the idea too and were forever loyal to one another.

Considering what sort of mischief The Loyalists were in the habit of getting up to, Matthew thought they'd be better named The Terrors and their motto should be "Spotting every opportunity for trouble." But as his mother would say, it was only the

way of the world.

Mr. Ludwig came to the destiny that men like Mr. Ludwig often do. Though the full story of what the gentleman had been up to was never revealed, it was put into the ear of certain talkers of the ton that he had somehow caused harm to an innocent Lord Bramley. Somehow, and nobody was clear how, he'd been responsible for Lord Bramley being named a viper, a crocodile, and a magpie.

As everybody liked Lord Bramley and rather disliked Mr. Ludwig, though they could not pinpoint why, that gentleman found his invitations dwindling significantly.

To further his societal demise, Mr. Ludwig amused himself one summer with the daughter of his father's physician. Predictably, the lady became with child. Predictably, her doctor papa noticed rather early on. Predictably, that papa demanded a wedding.

Rather unpredictably, that papa was known to be an excellent swordsman and had offered the further inducement of running Mr. Ludwig through if he did not do the honorable thing.

As Mr. Ludwig had a great care for his own person and a realistic assessment of his mediocre sword skills, he wed the lady and they went forward telling a fib as old as time—the baby had come early.

As there was no money coming in, Mr. Ludwig's estate was eventually mortgaged, and then eventually sold. Mr. Ludwig would become a landless baron and, as nobody had liked him to begin, was invited nowhere.

Mr. Wilburn had once despaired of putting a bonnet and shawl on a cow and calling it a lady of fine background, so dire had the situation with Lord Bramley once seemed.

As it turned out, he was able to slap a very fine bonnet and shawl on the events that

eventually transpired.

The initial difficulty was having to explain why he'd spent all his time trying to get Lord Bramley away from Lady Constance. Had he been successful at it, he would have deprived Lord Bramley of a twenty-three-thousand-pound dowry.

This left him in the uncomfortable position of being wrong if he succeeded and right if he failed. Failed being the particular sticking point, as Mr. Wilburn did not fail at things.

Happily, he was able to concoct a story so improbable that the league's members could only suppose it to be true. At least, most of them—Mr. Browning kept his suspicions to himself.

According to Mr. Wilburn, he had known of Lady Constance's dowry all along. It had been essential to seem as if he were attempting to pry that couple apart and seem as if he attempted to direct Lord Bramley toward Lady Juniper or Miss Semper so that nobody might guess at this secret enormous dowry.

Mr. Harkinson, as was becoming his habit, had asked no end of uncomfortable questions about it. Fortunately, Mr. Penny had pointed out that in the words of the great bard—All's well that ends well.

In any case, Mr. Wilburn was grateful that his adventure in matchmaking had come to a close without disaster. Over the following months, he would convince himself that he had known about the dowry all along. He would assure himself that he'd been rather a genius at concealing that knowledge. It really seemed as if he had been the puppet master and all in his sphere had been his marionettes. After all, a person cannot be blamed for rewriting their own story in a way that's comfortable.

By the time the next season rolled round, Mr. Wilburn was very satisfied with himself. He presumed Mr. Penny's attempt at matchmaking would proceed calmly

and rationally, and probably cheerfully. Mr. Penny was to set out to find the perfect husband for Lady Madeline Cole, daughter of the Earl and Countess of Winthrop.

Whether Lady Madeline would be cooperative with this plan remains to be seen.

The End For Now!