



A Lord's Chance (Scandalous Daughters of Duke Street)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Watch out! Here comes trouble.

Lord Lawndry is obsessed with time-pieces and when he spots a rare one in a ball-room, he cannot resist discovering more. One thing leads to another and soon he's on his knees outside a ballroom examining a rare watch.

Mr Gilbert had worked hard to get away from his origins and now he was a key financial advisor to the ton. The last thing he needed was a keen-eyed man to notice ... his watch.

The mystery of the watch and it's maker threatens to push them together and to tear Mr Gilbert's careful life apart. But does Lawndry care only about the watch, or does he care for Gilbert himself?

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Lloyd spent an abundant amount of time staring at men's groins. No one had yet accused him of being a molly—although there was some truth in that claim—because everyone knew he was staring at their watches. It was just his good fortune that the current fashion meant fob chains were attached to one's breaches and were situated neatly beside one's groin, almost as if to draw attention to one's family jewels. Tonight, he was searching for Lord Hedwick who had a Vulliamy or so he assumed given that people continued to introduce him to them. None of that mattered. Legend said there were only 126 Hobart watches in existence, and he'd never seen one, only illustrations of them with the very distinct Guillochage engraving pattern that told him exactly what the watch was. His fingers tingled and his breath quickened. He had to know who the owner of the watch was. "And may I ask who your companion is?"

"Mr Gilbert, at your service." The man's tenor tones sent a shiver of delight down Lloyd's spine. A different sort of shiver to being excited about the Hobart; goodness. A voice like that and a stunning rare watch.

"I am interested in your watch." Possibly more than that, but the watch mattered most.

"You and your watches," Lady Sarah tittered, and he bit back an impatient sigh as her comment jerked him back into society. Yes, he was a little obsessive about his hobby, but he didn't think it deserved to be joked about. His expertise would soon be of use to Lady Sarah's father, after all.

"It is not for sale." Mr Gilbert had an economy with his words that Lloyd admired.

“Nonsense,” Lord Hedwick made a cruel sounding laugh. “Everything about you is for sale.”

Even Lloyd knew that was a rude comment and he glanced at Mr Gilbert who shrugged lightly as the insult couldn’t touch him. At times like this, he wished he had more understanding of social graces, and could say the right thing to ease the tension.

“It is a distinctive example.” He couldn’t tear his gaze away from the watch, certain that it was a Hobart, dating back at least thirty years. He needed to hold it and examine it. “May I?”

“No.” Mr Gilbert turned away. “Lady Sarah, would you like to dance?”

Before Lloyd had a chance to say anything, Lady Sarah had taken Mr Gilbert’s arm and the group dispersed, leaving him standing rather awkwardly beside Lord Hedwick.

“Mr Gilbert may have won this battle, but he won’t win the war.” Lord Hedwick spoke nonsense, so Lloyd ignored it. He’d learned it was easier to ignore illogical comments, rather than ask for clarification because people’s explanations usually only increased his lack of understanding.

“The Vulliamy or... was Mr Gilbert rude because Lord Hedwick was rude first? If it wasn’t for the Hobart, he wouldn’t care for the puzzle of why people interacted the way they did.

“Lady Sarah’s hand. She is a prize, my Lord, if I do say so myself, and while some competition will keep you honest, Mr Gilbert's flashy new wealth is not enough to overcome his lack of breeding.”

Lloyd wasn’t sure what the etiquette was in this situation. “I have no opinion on Mr

Gilbert—” It wasn’t true; the man was handsome in a reserved way that appealed to his own reticent nature, and he owned a Hobart. The man intrigued him. “—And I’ve yet to spend enough time with Lady Sarah to determine if she will suit.” He finally remembered the right phrasing.

“She will suit. She has been raised to be a peer’s wife.”

Her and many others. Lloyd wasn’t opposed to marrying a woman, he had no particular preference either way, and it would certainly be an easier path than falling in love with a man. But he wanted what his parents had; a proper love story. He wanted to fall like his father had, to find someone he could share a life with, who he would love and adore and know everything about. Someone to laugh with and travel with and die with. Damn it. Tears prickled the back of his eyes, as they always did when he thought about his parents.

“I would never allow her to stoop as low as someone like Mr Gilbert.”

Lloyd cleared his throat. “Love doesn’t ask for permission, my lord.”

“Love. What has love to do with the correct union?”

“Excuse me, Hedwick.” Lloyd needed to leave before he said the wrong thing. Love had everything to do with it. He could feel the tightness welling up in his chest and throat, a familiar sign that he’d learned to pay attention to. The room was too hot, claustrophobic, as he walked away, to nowhere in particular, simply to get away from feeling overwhelmed. The problem with these social events was the vast number of people. He kept his gaze low; a Barrow, a Pinchbeck, a Graham, three LeNoir’s, the Leichti owned by Lord Harrington purchased from Lloyd’s mother’s family three seasons ago, and the Hobart. The Hobart. He gasped as he glanced up.

“Mr Gilbert.”

“Yes?”

“I thought you were dancing with Lady Sarah.”

“I was.”

Lloyd made himself take a breath and look at his surroundings. They were in a narrow hallway beside the ballroom, and he wasn't quite sure how he'd ended up here. “And now you are not. I see.”

“Yes.”

“May I please take a look at your pocket watch?” He needed to hold the rare item with a craving that made his limbs twitch, and his eyes feel too big for his face.

“Why?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Nobbie wasn't about to let someone touch his watch, especially not this man who couldn't stop staring at it. The intensity of the man's undisguised lust for Nobbie's old watch confused and interested him. On his sixteenth birthday—or an approximation of it—Nobbie was told to leave the orphanage and find employment. They'd given him a box containing the items he'd been left with as a baby on the doorstep of the Duke Street Orphanage. A very dusty small blanket with a J embroidered in the corner and a scratched-up old pocket watch. He'd turned the key and the mechanism had, surprisingly, worked. It kept time very well, provided he wound it each day.

“Why?” He would need a bloody good reason to let anyone look at his watch. His first possession, and the only connection to his parents, for what that was worth. They'd dumped him at an orphanage when he was only a baby. Sometimes he wasn't even sure why he kept the blasted thing.

“Because it is a rare example of a fine maker and I wish to examine it.” The man's sincerity shouldn't make Nobbie so curious. He needed a bit of distance. Nobbie was usually great at figuring out people; it had been necessary for his survival in this world, but he couldn't quite figure out this man's end game. Why would he say such a thing when it was obviously untrue?

“And who might you be?”

The man lifted his head, brown eyes wide. He had light brown skin and dark brown, almost black, hair, as if he was a blend of several nations in one person, perhaps with a touch of the British East India Company in his background. “Lord Lawndry. Horologist.”

“Horo-what?”

“Horologist. I am an expert in clocks and watches. My mother is a Leichti.”

Nobbie had never met someone so earnest and wide-eyed. If he needed a new target, this man would be perfect. Na?ve, obsessed, and probably, easily parted from his money. The only thing stopping Nobbie from pulling him in was that he couldn’t help but wonder if he was being played too. The innocence would be the perfect cover for a con.

“And what, Lord Lawndry, is a Leichti?”

“The Leichti family have been superior watchmakers in Switzerland for the past three centuries. Lord Harrington is wearing a particularly fine example; I negotiated the purchase for him three seasons ago. It has a clever lever...”

“Please stop.” Nobbie didn’t care for the details of Harrington’s watch. The man was an imbecile, the walking embodiment of why the peerage and inherited money was a terrible idea. The perfect target; more so than this intense man who would’ve happily bored Nobbie to tears talking about watches. Perhaps there was nothing sinister in Lawndry’s lust over the damned watch.

“Can I please observe your watch?” The man didn’t give up. Nobbie clenched his jaw.

“No one touches my watch.” He was annoyed that he had to admit that much, but Lawndry’s eyes bugged wide open and he gasped.

“Oh, that makes complete sense. If I owned a Hobart, I wouldn’t let anyone touch it either.”

“Excuse me?” Nobbie knew, in a back of his head somewhere far away, that he should be pleased to have an excuse to keep Lawndry from touching the only piece of property that mattered to Nobbie. But surely no one would have this much awe over a beaten-up old watch? Unless... That sly part of his brain that was always looking for a new game pricked up its metaphorical ears and he suddenly needed to know why this apparent watch expert, horo-whatever, thought his watch was worth more than emotional and sentimental value. Could there be an advantage here somewhere?

And then Lord Lawndry did the most surprising thing of all. He sank to his knees. Heat rushed up Nobbie’s spine and through his veins as though he’d been suddenly dipped in a boiling vat of oil. Did this man know how he must appear to anyone watching? Instinctively Nobbie glanced over his shoulders, one then the other, and rapidly assessed the hallway, but they were alone. That should’ve helped. It didn’t. Fucking hell. The only men that had sunk to their knees for Nobbie had been paid well for it. To have someone do it voluntarily made him want—he gasped, choking as he tried to hide it—want more than he ought.

“I was correct. It’s not just a Hobart, but a very fine example of one. It needs a thorough clean, of course, and the ...” Lawndry twisted his head and put his ear very close—but not touching—to Nobbie’s watch. Nobbie gulped. His cock was rock hard at the sight of this man sinking down before him. It would be the easiest thing in the world to thread his hands through Lawndry’s hair. The unexpected rush of desire meant it took Nobbie a minute or so to realise that Lawndry was very carefully assessing his watch without touching it. The obedience. Fuck. Nobbie needed this man. Now and forever. If only it wasn’t impossible.

“... yes, the mechanism is running slightly off-time. Less than half a second per minute, and nothing that a good clean couldn’t fix.” Lawndry rose to his feet with his face slightly flushed. “Please allow me to do some maintenance on your—” Lawndry glanced down again. “—watch.”

Nobbie opened his mouth but nothing came out. Did Lawndry just hint that he had noticed Nobbie's response to him?

"Please." Lawndry's pleading would be better placed in his bedroom, not here in a hallway where anyone might see. And the absurdity of him pleading over a damned watch, and not begging for Nobbie's touch... well. "The engravings date the piece to 1780 onwards, perhaps 1785, there will be a mark on the silver inside the mechanism to confirm. Hobart produced only three or four watches each year and they all had the Guillochage pattern on the Hunter casing and up the pendant and bow."

"Not here." Nobbie's stomach swooped, speeding wildly from desire to uncertainty. The watch that had been left with him mattered. Maybe he mattered. No. If that was true, everything about his life would be a lie. He already mattered. He knew this because he'd made something of himself despite being left at an orphanage. He managed to pull his card from his jacket pocket and flicked it towards Lawndry. The card floated in the air, much more casually than Nobbie's own heartbeat.

"Come to my rooms tomorrow at noon."

Lawndry's brilliant smile pierced Nobbie's frigid heart. Nobbie bolted down the hallway, brushing past Lawndry's shoulders in his haste to get far, far away. What was he supposed to do now?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Lloyd had barely slept. Hobart's watches were legendary. The maker had been meticulous, creating only a few every year, and the rarity made Lloyd's blood sing. He'd packed his tools and repacked them several times, finding comfort in the process, and then he'd been early for his meeting with Mr Gilbert, so he'd paced around the block a few times. And now—finally—he followed a butler into Mr Gilbert's townhouse. He hadn't been this excited about a discovery in years. He wished he could tell his mother about it. The discovery had a bittersweet taint to it; she would've loved being part of this.

"Good morning, Lord Lawndry." Mr Gilbert strode towards him, wearing a striped banyan with his nightshirt open at the top. Was he wearing no trousers under the banyan? The banyan hung all the way to his ankles, only showing his slippered feet. The man exuded a peaceful confidence and Lloyd wanted to bottle it up, so he could use it for himself whenever he had to go out in society.

"Morning. I appear to have interrupted your morning ablutions."

"My lord." Mr Gilbert raised his eyebrows and Lloyd realised he'd said the wrong thing, used the wrong word. Well, the man shouldn't lounge about in his night clothes with so much skin showing. Skin that beckoned Lloyd and made him want to watch Mr Gilbert washing himself. He shook his head quickly to try and clear away the image that made his heart race, and his cheeks feel hot.

"Mr Gilbert, I meant that I can return later when you are dressed? I didn't intend to interrupt your ..." What word did he need? "Morning routine."

"Are you bothered by my choice of attire?"

Lloyd shouldn't be. He was here to examine, and hopefully maintain, a Hobart.
"Bothered, no. Surprised. Perhaps a smidgeon. Where is the Hobart?"

"Why do you call it that?"

"Hobart?"

"Yes. The inscription says Nobert. N O B E R T."

Lloyd closed his eyes. He'd never heard of such a thing, not even among the cheaper copies by the apprentices of good makers. Copies tended to have the name of the real maker; they were worth more with a maker's mark from a skilled craftsman. "Show me."

"You are very direct."

"I ... Thank you." His mother had always said that it was better to accept something as a compliment than to waste time on a discussion about whether something was correct or not. He tore his gaze away from Mr Gilbert and his lack of adequate clothing. In the middle of the room was a table that would be perfect for working on thanks to the strong natural light coming through a window. He placed his toolbox on the table, and opened it up, spreading out a linen cloth to create a good work surface.

"What do you intend to do with my watch?"

He spun around to discover that Mr Gilbert had snuck up behind him and was now standing very close, and he was surprised to notice that Mr Gilbert was slightly shorter than him. Only an inch or two, yet he remembered him as much taller. The man had a presence about him which made a lie of his actual size.

"If you allow, I'd like to examine it and then possibly clean it and adjust the

mechanism to fix the timing.”

“And you know that it needs this from kneeling on the floor listening to it while a ball was being loudly conducted in the room next door.”

Yes. He’d trained himself to be able to do that. It came from years of practice; one could hardly have a natural talent for the time. “I was careful not to touch the watch.” He needed to remind Mr Gilbert that he’d followed his instructions.

“And now you wish to pull it apart and I’m supposed to trust that you know what you are doing?”

“A fair question. I am a member of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers and am quite well sought after as a valuer of clocks and watches. I was at Lord Hedwick’s gathering to help him with a Vulliamy & Sons clock that he wished to take to auction.”

“I thought you were there to woo his daughter.”

“Hedwick wished for that to happen, yes.”

Mr Gilbert barked out a laugh. “I take it you’d rather see the damned clock than dance prettily with Hedwick’s daughter.”

Lloyd was out of his depth. He knew from past experience that anything he said about someone in society was likely to find its way back to them and he’d be liable for the apparent insult. “She seemed pleasant.”

“Don’t be all flustered now. I’m teasing.”

“You are?” Lloyd didn’t know what to make of Mr Gilbert. This was why he

preferred the mechanical parts of a watch. They were consistent and he always knew what to do with them.

“Are you not interested in Lady Sarah Hedwick? She’s rather pretty.”

“Yes. I mean, no. I am only interested in your watch, Mr Gilbert. Stop trying to distract and confuse me with your teasing.” He didn’t like the way his heart galloped when Mr Gilbert gave him that sly little smile. Was this because he’d been teasing him? People were so confusing.

“Your determination makes me wonder two things.” Mr Gilbert didn’t elaborate.

“Two things?” Lloyd couldn’t stand the prolonged silence with the air crackling between them. He felt like he stood on the edge of the turret at the top of his family castle.

“Am I supposed to be flattered by your attempt to ingratiate yourself with hints that my old watch is worth something?” Was Mr Gilbert angry at him? There was an edge to his voice that Lloyd couldn’t make sense of.

“And the other thing?”

“I’d like to see you on your knees for me again.”

Lloyd stared at Mr Gilbert, whose cheeks had gone pink. “You want me to examine your watch while you are wearing it?”

Mr Gilbert rolled his eyes, which made no sense. “Are you really this obsessed with my watch?”

“Yes. I would have served an apprenticeship with Hobart if circumstances allowed.”

“Lords don’t do apprenticeships.”

Lloyd had heard that too many times, and by the time he’d reached his majority and could do whatever he pleased, Hobart was no longer producing, presumed dead, and he’d missed the chance to work with one of the finest silver workers and precision watchmakers in England, assuming he’d have been able to find him and convince him to let him work with him.

“I think you’ll find that a Lord can do whatever he wants.” His toes started to tap in his shoes, impatient to end this frustrating discussion and get on with his examination of the Hobart. Why was Mr Gilbert so reticent? Why bother inviting him here if he didn’t want him to investigate the watch? Was he wrong about it being a Hobart? Maybe Mr Gilbert knew that and didn’t want to be embarrassed?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Nobbie shouldn't find that assertion so incredibly hot. A Lord doing whatever he wanted was a simple fact of life, but for Lawndry to apply it to an apprenticeship in watchmaking should have been absurd. If Lawndry was acting, he was utterly brilliant, and Nobbie needed to understand his game.

"And what you want is to look at my watch?" He knew better than to ask why Lawndry had targeted him for this scam. His ability to turn a small fortune into a big one was well-known through the peerage. He'd advised many of them in various investments, although that was mostly a front for his real business with Adam. But he knew all their clients and all the people they'd spurned too, and Lawndry wasn't among them. This wasn't revenge either, unless he'd missed something. Unlikely. Nobbie couldn't work out Lawndry's motivations. It may just be the most basic of them all. Desire flickered in his veins, like flames licking at a log of wood. Not the best analogy if he wanted to keep control over his desire. Tempting him, almost grabbing hold of him, threatening to overwhelm him.

"Yes please."

It was the please that did him in. He wanted to see Lawndry kneeling before him, saying please before Lawndry sucked his cock. He wanted to shock Lawndry and see those brown eyes open wide, and maybe even sink his fingers through his silky hair.

"On one condition." It was a risk, yet Nobbie was good at reading people, and he didn't think Lawndry would be horrified by his condition. He might even enjoy it.

"A condition?"

“Yes. I’d like you on your knees again, and I want you to remove the watch with your teeth.” If Lawndry had the same inclinations as Nobbie, he’d understand what Nobbie was asking.

“Your request is not very practical.”

“It is not intended to be.” He wanted to test how keen Lawndry was and he wanted to know if he was correct about Lawndry’s understanding of what else had occurred yesterday.

“You have asked me to do this twice now.”

He had? Damnation. He was usually more careful. “I enjoyed it the first time.”

“But that was so innocent?” Lawndry’s cheeks bloomed into a lovely shade, a warm rich brown.

“Was it? You moved with the grace of someone who has knelt before.”

Lawndry’s blush darkened. “You are very bold. It would be safer to go to one of the many clubs that cater for such things, rather than make such suggestions to a stranger.”

Confirmation that Lawndry understood the potential between them made Nobbie’s head spin, light and a little bit giddy. Lawndry was completely correct in saying that a club would be safer, but only someone who’d been to such clubs would know what Nobbie meant.

“Audentes fortuna luvat.” Orphans weren’t taught Latin, but Nobbie had picked up a few useful phrases in his time, although most were cruder than this one about being bold.

“Yes. I accept, but I must have as much time with the watch as I need.”

“The watch? You are obsessed.” Nobbie stopped wondering what this man’s game was and became intrigued by his obsessiveness. No one could pretend such a thing without it coming across as desperate. It would give away the final goal of the game, but Lawndry didn’t show any of those markers that Nobbie usually picked up on.

“Yes.” Lawndry made it sound so simple. “I have been obsessed with watches since I was a boy, and yours represents a puzzle in the world of horology.”

Suddenly Nobbie understood. A puzzle made sense to him; just like when he was putting together a financial scheme to help a woman escape a bad situation. Finding the perfect solution to a problem was incredibly fulfilling.

“Then you may touch the watch.”

“With my mouth, or...”

Nobbie held up one finger, and when Lawndry stopped talking, he marched into his bedroom and grabbed the watch out of the little lockbox he kept it in when he wasn’t dressed, safely hidden in a false drawer in his bedside table. It was the one possession that he wasn’t going to lose or have stolen. He arrived back in the room to see that Lawndry had spread a cloth over his table and had some tools neatly arranged to the side.

“Here it is.” He held it out, reluctantly.

“Please place it on the cloth. You may sit opposite me and observe.” How did Lawndry know that he couldn’t let the watch out of his sight? The only time he did was when he locked it up as he slept.

“Thank you.”

Lawndry didn't speak again. He simply picked up a cloth and began to clean the outer surface of the watch. There was something erotic about his dedication to his task, and the way he occasionally smiled to himself, as though he'd discovered something satisfying. Nobbie couldn't look away. His friend Sebastian was like this about horses; as children, he'd always been distracted as soon as he saw a horse and then Sebastian would tell Nobbie all about the horse with more detail than Nobbie cared to know. Nobbie had spent his childhood years wondering if Sebastian was just lucky to know what he wanted to do, but then he'd discovered money when he was about ten. An orphanage had been the perfect training ground for him and Adam to perfect their little financial schemes, and now he was able to afford this London townhouse and his own servants. He could even attend social gatherings with high society, although with grudging acceptance.

“It's definitely a Hobart.” Lawndry rubbed his thumb over part of the watch and damn it, Nobbie wanted Lawndry to touch him with such reverence. “You see the maker's mark here.”

Nobbie leaned in closer and looked at a little dent in the silver.

“Hobart was a famous recluse. No one knows where he learned his craft, and then one day in 1759, he brought three watches to Sotheby's and offered them for auction. Every year, he sold between three and five watches of absolutely exquisite quality with stunning workmanship. Each one numbered.”

“How strange.”

Lawndry glanced up. “My mother is a Leichti. Sometimes watchmakers can be a little peculiar.”

“Are you telling me that a random guy turned up at auction every year with three watches and no one asked any questions?”

"People asked many questions." Lawndry returned to his task dismantling the watch, as if that was all there was to it. But Nobbie owned one of these rare watches.

“Did they sell for much money?”

“At first, not really, perhaps 10 guineas but by the end, upwards of 60 guineas. Some were resold at auction for even bigger sums, but most disappeared into collections.” Lawndry shrugged as if he didn’t care for the money, but Nobbie was blinking hard. Sixty guineas, or more, for the watch that he had assumed was sentimental junk. He paid his butler less than that for an entire year’s work.

“If he only sold three watches a year, then there can’t be too many of them?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

“There are believed to be 126 Hobart watches in existence. Each one is numbered.” Lloyd would soon know which one Mr Gilbert owned. The numbers were always etched on the balance wheel. He carefully removed the balance wheel, turning it over to read the number.

“Seventy-nine.” He did a quick calculation. “Which means it was sold at auction around 1785. How old are you?”

“Why is that relevant?”

“The watch is twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old. You appear to be of a similar vintage. Perhaps it was a birthright?”

Mr Gilbert tilted his head. “Do you mean to tell me that I’ve been carrying around 60 guineas worth of watch for years?”

“Yes.” Lloyd began to clean the mechanism. It was slow fiddly work but would be worthwhile to have the Hobart running in perfect condition. As he worked, he realised that Mr Gilbert hadn’t disclosed how he acquired the watch or why he didn’t know how rare it was.

“When did you get this watch?”

“The first time or the second?”

Lloyd nearly dropped his tools, carefully placing them and the pieces of the watch on the cloth with a slight tremor in his fingers. Had he stolen it? “What do you mean?”

“It is no secret in society that I am a graduate of the Duke Street Orphanage. My surname was given to me by a Mr Gilbert who donated funds to the orphanage.”

Lloyd frowned. “I don’t follow how that answers my question.” Sometimes people were so illogical.

“I was left on the doorstep of the orphanage wrapped in a blanket with this watch. That was the first time I acquired the watch. The second was on my sixteenth birthday when I was told to leave the orphanage and get a job. I was given a box containing the things that had been with me when I arrived.”

“The watch. Had the orphanage simply kept it in a box for sixteen years? Did you know about it?”

Mr Gilbert shook his head slowly, his dark brown hair sliding over his pale skin. He had a freckle just below his hairline that peeked out from between locks of hair occasionally. “The orphanage has many such boxes, one for every child who is left there. I didn’t know the contents of my box, didn’t know the watch existed until the day of my ‘graduation’.” Mr Gilbert said that last part with a snide tone, as if he didn’t approve of the way the orphanage had treated his watch. It was a fair thing to be upset about given the condition of it.

“I assumed it belonged to the person who abandoned me and I couldn’t decide if I wanted to keep it or throw it away, but it worked, so I figured I may as well keep it.”

Lloyd got the distinct impression that Mr Gilbert was trying to be more casual about this than he really felt, but he couldn’t be sure. He’d never been great at reading people’s feelings.

“You must be glad you kept it, now that you know what it is?”

Mr Gilbert scrunched up his nose. “Am I? Doesn’t it create more questions? If I was important enough to be given an expensive watch, then why abandon me? Why not sell the watch and keep me?”

Lloyd grimaced. Those were logical questions and difficult ones too. Was he a bad person for assuming that everyone had loving parents like he had? It had never occurred to him to ask such questions. “I do not know.”

“I’m not sure I want to know the answers.” Mr Gilbert’s face was twisted, as if he were in pain. Perhaps he was, although not the type of pain that could be fixed with a drop of laudanum or willow bark powder.

“If you don’t want to know, I can simply clean and maintain the watch, so it will work.” Lloyd bent his head and returned to his task. Neither of them spoke for a long time, and Lloyd was glad that he had something to do. The work was satisfying; he’d always enjoyed the precision of a well-made watch mechanism.

“And if I do want to know? What next?”

Lloyd finished putting the case back together, tightening the final screw before he glanced up. “Sotheby’s will have the auction records. We can find out who purchased the watch in 1785.”

“And you think whoever owned the watch for three years before they left it with me will be someone connected to me?”

It seemed logical to Lloyd, but of course, it may have been bought by an agent. Either way, there’d be a clue in the provenance of the watch. “Hopefully.” He finished by polishing the outer case and then wound the mechanism, listening carefully with a pleasing satisfaction as it kept perfect time.

“Here is your watch, Mr Gilbert.”

Mr Gilbert held out his hand and Lloyd placed the watch into his palm. Their fingers touched, only for an instant, but it was enough to send a shiver up his arm, leaving gooseflesh trailing.

“I can barely recognise it.”

“All I did was clean it.” He was rather pleased with the outcome. It truly looked like a Hobart now. The quality of the make was obvious, and the unique engraving technique picked up the light in a very clever way. “Shall we head to Sotheby’s?”

“Not yet.”

He’d forgotten that Mr Gilbert was not dressed for the day. How could he possibly have forgotten such a thing when he sat opposite with his nightshirt open at the neck? His chest hair was dark like the hair on his head, peeking out from his nightshirt. With a little sigh, Lloyd knew exactly how he’d forgotten. As soon as he’d been allowed to maintain the Hobart, all his attention had been focused there. He’d always been like that with a good mechanism.

“Lawndry.”

“Yes?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“No. Sorry.” Should he admit he was thinking about the Hobart again?

“I said that you owe me.” Mr Gilbert’s cheeks were flushed again.

“I do?” He held his breath, uncertain about what Mr Gilbert meant.

Mr Gilbert leaned over the table, his face close enough to kiss. Did Lloyd want to kiss him? Yes. He gulped.

“You said you’d get on your knees for me, for the chance to touch the watch. Now you’ve touched the watch, it’s time for you to pay up.” Mr Gilbert’s nostrils flared and then his gaze dropped to Lloyd’s mouth. Lloyd was about to protest that Mr Gilbert had said that he should touch the watch while on his knees, before his brain caught up to what Mr Gilbert wasn’t saying. Life would be a lot easier if people just said what they meant. He breathed out slowly.

“Are you saying that you want me to suck your cockstand?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Heat surrounded Nobbie and he wanted to dab at his neck with his handkerchief. He'd never met someone so direct and somehow innocent sounding while not being innocent at all. Lawndry was temptation personified staring at him with those big brown eyes, and Nobbie was going to lose control soon if he wasn't careful. He swallowed.

"Yes. That is what I want."

"Why didn't you just say so? All this fussing about with talk of using my teeth to get the watch, when really all you wanted was ..."

"You. On your knees." Nobbie stood up, pleased his knees held firm. "You've done this before?"

Lawndry narrowed his eyes. "There are clubs that cater to men who prefer men, as well as clubs to cater to people like me."

"Oh, are you like my friend Earnest? He has no preference for gender, although he's fallen in love properly so maybe he only has preference for person now."

Lloyd blinked rapidly. "I don't have no preference. I don't like people who are confusing or intimidating or unkind. I don't like people who say one thing and mean another, or act differently to their words."

"But you?" Nobbie realised he didn't need to know everything about Lawndry's desires. "Never mind. On your knees. We had a deal. You got to touch the watch, now pay up." Nobbie forced himself to sound harsh. He shouldn't care enough about

Lawndry to get the answer to his own foolish question.

Lawndry sat up straight, looking around the room. “Perhaps you want to stand over there, against the wall?”

“Here is good.”

Lawndry licked his bottom lip. God. Did this odd man really think that his mouth was so good that Nobbie would need a wall to lean on? Air burned in his lungs. Lawndry stood up, close, so close. Their lips were almost touching, then Lawndry winked. He placed his hands on Nobbie’s shoulders and pushed his banyan back. The fabric slid to the floor, a silky trail over Nobbie’s skin. Why did that increase the anticipation? He had barely a moment to breathe, when Lawndry spread his hands over Nobbie’s chest, smiled a little to himself, then sank to his knees. It took Nobbie’s breath with him, descending down, emptying him out, and he nearly dropped too. Nobbie grabbed the table—damn Lawndry being correct about the wall—and holy balls... The way Lawndry knelt, eyes wide open, staring up at him with his mouth slightly parted and his cheeks a rosy brown, as if Nobbie were someone who mattered. No longer an orphan, or a convenient financier, but someone who deserved this attention. Lawndry’s attention. He panted and then swallowed to try and regain some semblance of control.

And then Lawndry slid his hands up Nobbie’s bare thighs, and he was glad he hadn’t bothered to dress yet.

“Your nightshirt is very long.” Was Lawndry annoyed that Nobbie’s nightshirt hung to his mid thighs, covering his stiff prick?

“Shall I take it off?”

Lawndry’s mouth did that little thing again. It would’ve been a smirk on anyone else.

On Lawndry, Nobbie got the distinct impression that Lawndry was pleased with himself.

“Yes.”

He pulled his nightshirt up, over his head, and tossed it away.

Lawndry made a noise of pure sin. “Goodness. You are quite beautiful.”

Bless this man and his bluntness. Nobbie closed his eyes. Then immediately opened them again when Lawndry licked all the way up his prick. Pleasure focused in his cock making his balls heavy, and he had to grab the table again. No one he’d paid had ever treated him with such care. He had no time to think about what that might mean, because Lawndry—bless him—was attacking his prick with a wet mouth. The skill of him, how he tenderly licked at his slit, then pressed deeper with his tongue before sliding his whole mouth over Nobbie’s prick. He swayed on his feet, heat gathering tight in his balls. And fuck, the noises Lawndry made, as if he was loving this. The man’s fingers dug into Nobbie’s thighs, anchoring them both here together. Nobbie was so close to losing control. He threaded his fingers through Lawndry’s hair, gently, so that Lawndry had control over his pace but he’d know that Nobbie was here too. Lawndry moved his mouth and tongue torturously slowly, teasing him, and every time Nobbie might get close to the edge, Lawndry seemed to know and changed what he was doing. Nobbie clung tighter; to the table and to Lawndry’s hair, fingers digging into Lawndry’s scalp as Lawndry cupped Nobbie’s balls in one hand. Desire rushed up and down his spine, faster than a spindle on one of those new-fangled loom machines, until his breath matched the pace. Unsteady and frantic.

“Lawndry. Fuck me.”

Lawndry’s mouth sucked off the end of his prick with a sloppy sound. “I am.”

Could anyone sound more satisfied than that? It was too much and exactly perfect at the same time. Nobbie came in great spurts, painting Lawndry's face, as if he owned him for a delicious moment. Lawndry squeezed Nobbie's balls gently with one hand, then lifted the other to wipe Nobbie's seed from his face. With a sly smile, Lawndry licked his hand clean and ... holy fuck, Nobbie would've come again if he wasn't already spent.

"I think the debt is paid." Lawndry's voice was wrecked, hoarse and rough, and Nobbie liked it far too much.

"Let me clean you."

Lawndry nodded. "Thank you." He stayed on his knees, waiting, as Nobbie managed to stagger to his small washroom to grab a soft cloth. As he wet the cloth and squeezed it out, he realised that Lawndry hadn't asked to come. Was he purely a giver? Even the men Nobbie had paid liked to have Nobbie tug them off afterwards for a quick release. He strode back into the drawing room and Lawndry was still there. Waiting on his knees.

"You may stand."

"I think I might need some assistance." Lawndry held out his hands and Nobbie grabbed them, feeling like the worst type of man. He'd been so focused on getting a cloth for Lawndry's face—and all his own responses—that he didn't think that Lawndry might need more than being left there.

"Come here." Nobbie pulled him up and wrapped his arm around Lawndry's waist, guiding him to the chaise lounge. He wasn't quite sure of the etiquette now; having never done this with someone who came willingly without payment. Although—he frowned—perhaps this was no different since they'd negotiated a payment through Lawndry wanting to touch his watch. He sat beside him.

“I have one question.” He had to talk about something, to fix the growing unease at his own ignorance. There was one thing that Lawndry loved to talk about...

“Yes?”

“Are you sure the watch is called a Hobart? I always thought it said Nobert.” He’d been named after the engraving on the back of the watch.

“Yes. Whoever told you it was Nobert definitely read the maker’s signature incorrectly.”

Damn. Even his name was wrong. When he’d been given the watch at age sixteen, his weird name finally made sense, assuming the orphanage had named him after the watch. They were dreadfully lazy with their naming. Everyone got the surname of one of the sponsors, and a first name picked from a list. He’d been unlucky enough to get a nurse that day who’d been romantic enough to name him after his watch, but ...

“What is the matter?” Lawndry asked.

“The orphanage named me Nobert. My friends call me Nobbie.”

Lawndry grinned, leaning his head back against the wall. “Both of us have unfortunate monikers.”

“Oh?”

“Lord Lloyd Laurentius Lawndry.” Lawndry twisted in the chair and kissed Nobbie before he had time to react to the mouthful of Lawndry’s full name. The contact of his warm mouth on Nobbie’s lips was a shock. He’d never been kissed; it’d never occurred to him to do that. And then Lawndry sank his hands through Nobbie’s hair, pulling him closer, and they were kissing. Lawndry kissed like he had knew what he

was doing, like he'd spent hours practicing. A rope twisted around Nobbie's chest, pulling tight with jealousy—thinking of all the other people Lawndry must have kissed like this—and it almost ruined the kiss. Except it didn't. Because someone was willingly kissing him, and it was fucking glorious. Now he simply needed to work out how to do this every day. Nobbie closed his eyes, his brain never quiet, even while all his senses were engaged in his first kiss. Lawndry tasted like salt and sex and whiskey—a sinful combination—and was that a hint of metal? No, he didn't taste like Nobbie's watch. That would be ridiculous.

Nobbie was almost completely certain that he could convince Lawndry to help him figure out why his watch had been left with him. He still wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer, but he definitely wanted to have an excuse to spend more time with Lawndry. Anything for more kisses...

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Logically, Lloyd assumed Mr Gilbert—Nobbie—had kissed someone before. He was an adult with his own rooms; except Nobbie was hesitant, copying Lloyd rather than leading like he had when he'd asked Lloyd to kneel. It was lucky that Lloyd enjoyed both; leading and being led. He couldn't quite make sense of it though. How did Nobbie know to ask Lloyd to kneel like that? But not know how to kiss? Lloyd pulled back from the kiss to think. Did he want to know the answer—he liked answers—or would it confuse him even more? He almost shrugged—people were often illogical—he could just ignore it and so he went to kiss Nobbie again, because kissing was marvellous.

“Where did you learn to kiss like that?” Nobbie's voice was taut. Why? Lloyd must've missed something. Like usual. He answered the question, rather than ponder the oddities of tone.

“Eton. Like all good lordlings, I was sent to boarding school, and some of the boys...”

Nobbie frowned, shaking his head as he interrupted. “I have friends who are also only interested in men, but I would never kiss them.”

“Why not? If you like the same thing?”

“They are friends, not lovers.”

Lloyd knew his brain sometimes worked differently to other people, but he wasn't sure of the difference. “Isn't a lover simply a friend that you also kiss?”

“Not in my experience.” Nobbie's face was all screwed up with fierce wrinkles

everywhere.

“Are you mad at me?” Lloyd couldn’t figure out what Nobbie wasn’t saying or what his expression meant. He’d missed something.

“No. Why the fuck would I be mad at you?”

Lloyd tried not to flinch but likely failed. “You are scowling and shouting. It adds up to mad.” He hated it when people were mad at him. Uncle Baldric was always angry at him.

Nobbie growled under his breath. Lloyd couldn’t help it. He tensed waiting for the spray of mean words.

“Who hurt you?” Nobbie’s whisper was fierce.

“What?”

“Someone hurt you. I’ve seen this before.” Nobbie, Mr Gilbert, kept his voice quiet and calm and Lloyd was grateful for that. He tried to breathe slower.

“I’m a Lord. No one has ever hit me.”

“I said hurt, not hit. Not all hurts are physical, my Lord.” When Nobbie used his title like that, he emphasised the ‘my’ and Lloyd wished he could belong to him. He shook his head. Just because he was in possession of a magnificent cock and he was kind to him... it didn’t mean anything.

“No, I suppose not.” Lloyd needed to spend some time thinking about that idea, to let it percolate for a while.

“And no, I’m not mad at you. I was jealous.”

“Jealous? Of me? Why?”

Nobbie sighed and Lloyd supposed he had asked a lot of questions. He shouldn’t be such a nuisance. Just another of life’s confusions; his parents hadn’t minded his questions but Uncle Baldrick had hated them and Lloyd had slowly learned that his parents were the anomaly. Generally people didn’t like the way he talked.

“It never occurred to me to kiss you. I should’ve kissed you.” Nobbie looked like someone had thrown rotten fish at him which didn’t line up with his words.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve only ever done this in brothels.”

His mouth was dry. “That doesn’t make it any clearer. I still don’t understand what you are trying to say.”

“Which part?”

“Why does this make you frown at me?”

Nobbie closed his eyes and Lloyd instinctively stroked his face, brushing his finger under the delicate skin below his eyes, then over the rougher skin on his jawline. Nobbie opened his eyes with a long sigh that sent warm air over Lloyd’s fingers.

“Because you’ve done this before and you know to do that.”

Lloyd wasn’t quite sure. “Do you mean to say that you are jealous of my experience and that’s why you were mad at me?”

“My lord. I wasn’t mad at you. I was mad at me. I was angry that I felt jealousy when I should be relaxing and enjoying being with you.”

Lloyd nodded. “Hmm. That does seem like a waste of time. We could have been kissing this whole time.”

“We could.” Nobbie leaned in closer and pressed his lips against Lloyd’s. It was nice, and Lloyd used his hands on Nobbie’s waist to pull himself closer, and Nobbie took the hint, straddling him so he sat across Lloyd’s lap. Lloyd’s cock strained against his trousers; having Nobbie naked in his lap while he was dressed was a revelation for his desires. There weren’t many things he didn’t like, while there were also not many things that really ignited him. He never expected this to be one of them. A naked Nobbie leaning over him set his blood on fire.

“Undress me.” Lloyd pulled Nobbie’s head closer, kissing him and holding his naked body tight against his own.

“Give me some space.”

Lloyd smiled. “Rather the point. I thought you might like the challenge.”

From the flash in Nobbie’s brown eyes, Lloyd had picked it correctly. All thoughts of mean old Uncle Baldrick vanished, and Lloyd let himself get lost in the kiss. He’d always loved sex, not the initial part where he had to talk to someone—awkward and annoying—but this part when it was two bodies enjoying each other. This part, he loved. It made the first part worthwhile. And more than sex, Lloyd loved kissing. It was a much better use of someone’s mouth than talking. Kisses were never confusing. They were sometimes soft and sweet, sometimes fast and needy. Always brilliantly enjoyable.

This one, with Nobbie, managed to be both. Lying underneath Nobbie meant that

Lloyd had to let Nobbie learn how to control the pace. The man was a quick learner. He remembered how Lloyd had nibbled at his lip, and now he did it in return, toying with Lloyd's mouth until he lifted his hips in frustration and begged for more. Not in words; his words were done. Lloyd begged with needy moans and breathless sighs. He clung to Nobbie's waist, then blinked as he realised he could use his hands to explore Nobbie's naked body. The man was beautiful. Not just his cock which was strong and thick; but all of him. From his broad shoulders to the way his muscles rippled when he moved, and his forearms dusted with hair. Lloyd had always had a thing for forearms, the way the muscle definition moved with long lines, hinting at a physical strength. He lifted his chin, hoping that Nobbie would kiss down his throat but Nobbie chased his lips instead.

"You can kiss me everywhere." He tipped his head further back, and yes... Nobbie kissed down his throat and he let out a good moan when Nobbie licked at the hollow at the base of his throat and a mighty shiver rushed through his chest. He slid his hands up Nobbie's spine, then reached between them to rip off his own cravat. He needed more.

"Let me." Nobbie sat up straighter and undid all the buttons on Lloyd's shirt. He wriggled his arms, tugging his own shirt off, and then Nobbie unbuttoned the fall of his trousers and dragged his thumb along Lloyd's aching hard cock.

"Yes." He loved that, arching his spine to chase Nobbie's hand. Finally.

"Shall I stroke you?"

Lloyd swallowed. "Yes ... but kiss me while you do it." He knew he wouldn't last long; had almost been there when he'd sucked Nobbie's spectacular cock. Nobbie shifted slightly, then kissed him. Tongues tangled and Lloyd covered Nobbie's hand with his own, moving with a frantic rhythm as he chased that glorious end. He groaned into Nobbie's mouth as Nobbie ran his thumb over the end of Lloyd's cock,

and then it happened. The moment he adored as all the heat and pressure in his balls and hard cock released with a rush of blood to his head and he saw stars behind his eyes as he came into Nobbie's fist. Thrusting harder and harder until he was done. He groaned, then lay back on the chaise lounge. Spent and happy. This had been the most unexpected outcome and he had a rare Hobart watch to thank for it. The watch. Goodness, gracious! How could he forget?

“Shall we get dressed and go to Sothebys?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Nobbie wasn't sure if he wanted to snort with laughter or annoyance. He'd just discovered how lovely it was to rest with another man and kiss him, and now that very same man wanted to march across London to talk about a fucking ancient watch. Nobbie still didn't know if he wanted to know why he'd been abandoned with the bloody thing. Or why he was about to get abandoned for it again...

“Do you ever stop thinking about that damned watch?”

Lawndry smirked. “Sometimes I think about other watches.”

“Let's do it then.” Nobbie discovered he wasn't inclined to say no to Lawndry. He wanted him stay with him and kiss him more, and perhaps if they did this, then they could return here for more of time together. Oh fuck, was this why Earnest chased after love so hard? It made some sense because the way his body was relaxed was better than any of the times he'd ever paid for this. Lying on top of Lawndry with their sated bodies warmly wrapped together gave Nobbie something he'd never had and didn't know he'd needed. He kissed Lawndry again, unable to help himself. Lawndry kissed him back. Time disappeared as Nobbie learned more about kissing; the give and take of it, the way he could almost communicate with the different strokes of his tongue against Lawndry's tongue, the feeling of belonging. Damn it. He pushed against Lawndry's shoulders and jumped to his feet with a gasp. How many times had he listened to Earnest wailing because his latest lover hadn't wanted more than sex? How many times had he consoled his friend over misbegotten feelings? And now he was falling into the same trap. He barely knew Lawndry, and if he was completely honest, he knew—deep down—that he still wondered if Lawndry was trying to con him somehow.

“Mr Gilbert?” Lawndry’s use of his formal name confirmed it.

“We have a task to do.” He tried to sound harsh, but of course Lawndry’s eyes lit up at the prospect of hunting down information about his fucking watch.

“We’d better get dressed.” Lawndry stood, tugging his trousers with him—Nobbie had forgotten that Lawndry hadn’t been completely undressed, not like himself—and then Lawndry wriggled. Nobbie got up, grabbed the cloth, and cleaned up Lawndry, who then fixed himself up and pulled a watch out of his fob pocket.

“It is only two in the afternoon. Sotheby’s closes at six during the season, unless there is an auction on when, obviously, they are open much later.”

“Great.” He hadn’t really needed all that information, and it added to his worry that this was all a big scam. He often used that technique; giving someone a lot of sensible sounding but bland information to prove that he knew what he was talking about. It gave the other person confidence in him which was infinitely useful. Having the same idea deployed against him tied his stomach in knots. Lord Lawndry was either the most unusual man in London, or he was playing a long game that Nobbie might just fall for if he wasn’t careful. For some reason—kisses—Nobbie couldn’t resist Lawndry.

It was almost an hour later when they walked into Sotheby’s. Traffic in London during the season was abysmal with every bloody aristocrat in town for parliament and requiring their own carriage, and it’d taken ages for their hackney cab to navigate through all the chaos. Lawndry was nearly vibrating as they walked inside the esteemed auction house, and Nobbie wished he could do something to help ease his nerves. What a slippery slope he was on, sliding into becoming as sappy as Earnest. So no, he wasn’t going to place his hand on the small of Lawndry’s back. He would simply hang back and see if he could work out how this scam was supposed to function. What was Lawndry’s end game? He made a mental note to write to Adam

and ask him to investigate Lawndry.

“My lord, are you here to inspect items for tomorrow’s auction?” The butler asked.

“No thanks. Is Mr Milton in? I have some questions for him.”

The butler nodded. “I will enquire.” He rang a bell and a servant appeared from somewhere. Nobbie was impressed by the level of service. When he’d left the orphanage, he’d worked for an institute like this, but they’d skimmed on clerks, and he’d often ended up doing a lot of his own errands. They all stood around until the servant arrived back with an affirmative answer.

“Perhaps your guest would like to wait in our drawing room while you meet Mr Milton?”

“No. He’s with me.” Lawndry managed to make that sound salacious. He didn’t wait for anyone but marched up the impressive staircase leaving Nobbie to almost jog to catch up. Fuck. He tried not to look out of place; damn it, he’d spent years perfecting his society manners, even changing his accent, so he’d fit in well enough to charm money out of the toffs. One handsome, keen horologist had him reverting to his orphanage ways. It wasn’t good.

“Mr Milson’s office is on the second floor. Sotheby’s employs a variety of experts to assess the different items that they auction, and he is their horologist.”

“There are more people like you?” Nobbie regretted it as soon as he saw the way Lawndry glanced over his shoulder at Nobbie with a scowl. He swallowed.

“There are three competing societies of horologists in England. I am a member at all three, although mostly I’m involved with the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, and often represent my mother’s family’s interests in London via them.”

He cringed, knowing he was out of line and out of his depth. It wasn't a great combination as he'd gained all his advantages through ensuring he knew as much information as possible.

"And this Mr Milson?"

"I trust his opinion." As if that were enough for Lawndry. Well, call Nobbie cynical, but he hadn't survived an orphanage, being a bank clerk, and now becoming a financial advisor to the ton without a good dose of caution. Lawndry pushed open a door and walked inside with a quick greeting. Nobbie wasn't sure what he'd expected, but it wasn't a young dark-skinned man who looked like he'd walked right out of Gentleman Jack's boxing ring. The man was almost as broad as he was tall, and he took up plenty of space in his office as he walked towards Lawndry.

"Lord Lawndry. What a pleasure." Mr Milson had a hint of a foreign accent, perhaps from the Africas, mixed with a very posh local accent, as if he'd been educated with the ton. Nothing like Nobbie's accent; he'd worked hard to soften out his orphanage lower-class London origins with reasonable success.

"Milson." Lawndry smiled. "I have a rather interesting puzzle for you."

Mr Milson smiled as if this were exceedingly pleasing to him. "Do tell, but first, please have a seat and I will ring for some tea." The huge man was light on his feet as he walked over to pull the bell. Nobbie would definitely punt on him in the ring. Lawndry sat and waved at Nobbie, so he sat too.

"This is Mr Gilbert. He is in possession of a rather fine Hobart watch."

Mr Milson returned to his office chair and leaned forward, elbows on his desk. "May I see it?"

Nobbie wanted to say, ‘oh that old thing’ or something dismissive. It was very disconcerting to have two apparent experts so keen to see his watch. “Yes.” He half-stood to unbuckle the fob chain, and then placed the watch and chain on Mr Milson’s desk.

A servant knocked on the door and tea was ordered, then Mr Milson very carefully examined Nobbie’s watch. Mr Milson’s wide thick fingers held the watch delicately and Nobbie tried to relax. He kept discovering that this watch meant something to him, and he had to remind himself that no one in this room was going to steal the damned thing.

“Have you checked it for a maker’s mark?”

“Yes. And it is numbered.”

Mr Milson’s eyes widened. “Please tell me it is number 79.”

“How did you know?” Lawndry leaned forward in his seat, perched on the edge.

“This is Hobart number 79?”

“Yes. It is.”

Mr Milson put the watch down carefully on his desk and leaned back in his chair. “I have always wondered about this watch.”

“What do you mean?” Nobbie needed to know what these two supposed experts weren’t saying. His breath burned in the back of his throat with an acidic aftertaste. He’d always known that the only risk in life was ignorance, and this entire meeting had reminded him of his lack of knowledge in this arena. No wonder his hackles were up.

“Every year for thirty-six years, Hobart offered between three and five watches for auction. Each was numbered. Sotheby’s have sold every single watch Hobart ever made, except number 79.”

The world become cold, ice surrounding him. Fuck, fuck. If this was true, then his watch mattered. He had been abandoned, left as a baby, by someone who mattered.

“Are you sure?” Lawndry asked.

“Yes.” Mr Milson leaned forward again. “I am absolutely sure.”

“Please explain.” Lawndry, bless him, said what Nobbie should have been thinking. His mind couldn’t quite catch up to what was happening because the idea that he might matter clanged like a church bell in his skull.

“Six years ago, the Duke of Winchester died.”

What the fuck had this story got to do with some random Duke? Nobbie realised he was shaking his head and he forced himself to be still. Every muscle in his body strained with the effort of not moving. He must not react until he had more information.

“And?”

“At the time, his heir, the seventh Duke, asked Sotheby’s to value his watch collection. I had just joined Sotheby’s as my first clerking job after a scholarship at Harrow, and my boss decided that this would be a good job for a young clerk, because these collections tend to be less exciting than they sound. I travelled to Winchester to create a catalogue without much of an expectation that I’d find anything of interest.” Mr Milson swallowed. “I did not expect to find almost every Hobart watch ever made.”

Lawndry made an odd noise, a splutter that choked on a gasp. “What?”

“The sixth Duke of Winchester had every Hobart numbered one to sixty-five, then approximately one-third of the remaining watches. I catalogued them all, then came back here and went through the archives of our sale results to double check.”

“And?”

“It wasn’t so simple. Several of them had been purchased through agents, and I spent a lot of time tracking down the provenance. Eventually I had a list of all 126 Hobart’s barring number 79. Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t find any evidence that it had ever existed. Until now.” Mr Milson gently touched the edge of Nobbie’s watch with his blunt finger and Nobbie wanted to slap his finger away. He tried to slow his breathing, in and out through his nose.

“Why was the Duke of Winchester so obsessed with Hobart watches?” Nobbie’s voice broke. He really hoped there was a good answer that wasn’t ... that he was the son of a fucking Duke. No. No. No. It couldn’t be. He didn’t want to be related to an asshole Duke who’d forced his poor mother to abandon him at an orphanage. This was why he hadn’t wanted to know why he’d been left with this cursed watch. He’d made a life for himself. He didn’t need this type of nonsense messing everything up ... although ... common sense snuck in as he breathed, and he realised that being a Duke’s by-blow might just be useful. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing. He needed to talk to Adam about it. Thinking about the potential advantages settled his stomach a fraction.

“Perhaps the Duke simply liked them. Hobart’s watches are truly exquisite workmanship. If I had the funds to collect every Hobart in existence, I would.” Lawndry made it sound so simple. “Some people collect art, others jewellery by their favourite creators, how is this any different?”

When he put it like that... Nobbie cursed his over-active imagination. He blamed Earnest who had always played these silly games when they were children; imagine if you were the son of man who left you here while he went to seek his fortune, and then he'll come back for you one day and feed you proper food and dress you in the newest styles. Earnest, whose father had dropped him off at age ten when he'd been a hopeless blacksmith, had a fertile imagination. At least Nobbie had been abandoned as a baby with no knowledge of his family. Earnest had been old enough to understand that his father definitely didn't want him. It was horrific behaviour if one thought about it too hard, which was why Earnest spent his time inventing other fun stories instead.

"For a long time, I had a theory, but I think this watch disproves it." Mr Milson broke the silence, or perhaps him and Lawndry had been talking while Nobbie had been lost in thought and he'd missed something important.

"Tell me your theory." Nobbie hoped it would distract him from weird combination of calculation and panic swirling in his chest, as if he'd been asked to face someone as big as Mr Milson in the boxing ring, and not in a very boring clerk's office at an auction house.

"My theory is that the Duke of Winchester commissioned Hobart specifically to create watch number 79. Did you know that the Winchester Cathedral was built in 1079? It's one of the oldest in the country and the numbers can't be a coincidence."

Nobbie shook his head at the fanciful notion. "If that was true, then he'd have the watch in his collection. How do you explain that he didn't have it?"

"Perhaps he didn't like it, and had it destroyed. I've seen people do worse."

It was true. The toffs had too much money and they were often foolish with it—to Nobbie's advantage.

“Now that we have seen that watch 79 exists, I wonder if the cathedral date is pure coincidence and that Mr Gilbert’s possession of the watch has more to do with Hobart than the Duke of Winchester, who may simply be an enthusiastic collector.”

“What do you know about Hobart?” Lawndry asked. Finally, some common sense prevailed. Naturally, Nobbie would have nothing to do with a Dukedom. The very idea was absurd. Dukes didn’t leave their babies, especially boys, at orphanages. They had local villagers raise their by-blows, then offered them jobs around the estate.

“It is more likely that someone stole the watch from whomever, then left it with their baby so the baby would have something to sell when they were grown.” Nobbie was the king of the financial scam. It’s what he would’ve done if he’d ... needed to abandon a baby? He growled. He would never do such a thing; couldn’t understand why someone would. He should’ve sold the damned watch a decade ago when he’d first been given it because thinking too hard about his origins hurt. It hurt his heart and it hurt his stomach and it gave him a pain behind his temples.

“You are correct. We have no evidence that the Duke of Winchester owned watch 79 as it is not in our auction records, nor was it in his collection. Until today, I had no evidence that it existed at all.” Mr Milson shared a glance with Lawndry like they were plotting something together.

“I suppose that makes it much more plausible that someone stole it from Hobart.” Lawndry’s logic made sense and Nobbie’s limbs finally started to warm up again. The only thing that mattered in his life was his own sense of drive and success. He’d come from nowhere and built himself up alone. Was he destined to always be alone?

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Lloyd had one question about Winchester's collection. If he was a true collector, why would he have all the early ones, but hardly any of the later ones? A Duke was unlikely to be lacking in funds to purchase the newer Hobarts, even though they'd gone up significantly in price, was he? Or maybe Winchester was one of those estates run on bare bones with expenses far outstripping the income from the lands.

"Perhaps we need to find Hobart and check his records against Sotheby's?" Mr Milson asked.

"Are you implying that you don't know who Hobart was?" Lloyd knew the world of horology was small; everyone knew everyone, and yet he didn't know who Hobart was. Odd. He should've had realised before today that it was unusual for a prominent watchmaker to be unknown as an individual in the horology community.

"No. It adds to the mystique around the watches, don't you think?" Milson's comment was illogical and surprising, since he'd always been quite sensible to deal with until now.

"Have you ever tried to find out?"

Milson nodded. "Of course. But they were delivered to Sotheby's every year through a different agent, usually jewellers."

"How about the two of you figure this out?" Nobbie stood up and grabbed his watch off Milson's desk. "I need to get ready for the Harrington's soiree tonight." He left before Lloyd had a chance to react to the sudden change.

“Your friend is interesting.” Milson said.

Lloyd’s face heated. “He’s not a friend. He’s—” He wasn’t sure actually. They hadn’t discussed it and it wasn’t something to be discussed in polite company. He certainly didn’t want his ... inconclusive attraction to men and women to become common knowledge. It would risk his standing and his ability to negotiate on behalf of the Lechti family. His uncle, his mother’s brother, ran the business in Switzerland now, although Napoleon’s rampage through Europe made travel difficult and messages were often disrupted. The Lechti family had declined to send any watches to England for several years now as it was impossible to guarantee their security during transportation.

“He’s what exactly?” Milson asked.

Lloyd blinked. He remembered that he didn’t need to answer the question directly; it was one of the things about society that irritated him but was occasionally useful. “I met him a few nights ago at the Hedwick soiree, and noticed his watch.”

“Let me guess. You harassed him until he let you examine it properly.”

If by harassed, Milson meant that Lloyd had knelt for Mr Gilbert—twice—then yes. His blush must be glowing as his face overheated. The benefit of having an Indian grandmother meant that his tanned skin didn’t blush as readily as a pale English rose, but it was still obvious to anyone who knew him.

“I take it your flushed complexion means yes?”

“Yes. Hedwick invited me to the soiree on the premise that he had a Vulliamy & Sons grandfather clock that he wanted valued, but of course, he introduced me to his daughter, and we never did examine the clock.”

“My lord. Were you distracted by the daughter or the Hobart?”

Lloyd let out a shaky breath. “The watch, naturally. I fear I was a little rude to Lord Hedwick and his daughter in my desire to discover more about the watch. I’d never seen a Hobart in real life.”

“A worthy chase, my lord.”

He glanced up to discover Mr Milson grinning and he smiled back. “Yes. I hate to think what Mr Gilbert's first impression of me was. He wasn’t very receptive to my persistence.”

“I fear that our enthusiasm also scared him off today.”

Lloyd sighed. He had taken Nobbie at his word that he needed to dress for a social event tonight, but the chances were that Lloyd had not noticed some subtle hint and Mr Milson was likely correct.

“Do you think so?”

Milson drummed his fingers on the desk. “Yes.”

“How do you know?” Lloyd really ought to give up on attempting to unravel the mystery of how other people managed to convey information without blunt speaking.

“As soon as we started to discuss finding out who Hobart might be, he made a flimsy excuse and left. I wonder if we got a little close to the truth?”

Lloyd gasped. “Do you think he knows who Hobart is?”

“It’s not unlikely if he has the only Hobart that has no provenance and then he left as

soon as we began to discuss the possibility.” Milson leaned forward on his elbows. “I have always wanted to solve this mystery. My bosses think it is a waste of time. We were paid for the cataloguing and the current Duke of Winchester decided against selling the collection, so it was a dead end according to Sotheby’s.”

“I suppose I could attend this soiree tonight and ask him.” Lloyd didn’t want to go out in society again so soon. Twice a week would likely get his name implied in the newssheets as wanting a wife or some such nonsense. He told himself it was purely about the watch, and nothing to do with needing to see Nobbie again.

“And I shall ask permission to visit the Duke of Winchester to see if I can discover more. It has been several years, and maybe some new information has come to light since then.”

Lloyd breathed in rapidly. “Oh, it’s the season. His Grace will be in town, so you will not have to travel far.”

“I will pay him a visit in the morning, or...” Milson paused and Lloyd stared at him wondering what he was implying.

“Or?”

“Do you think he’ll be at tonight’s soiree? If I came as your guest, then you’d be free to talk to Mr Gilbert about Hobart, and you could introduce me to His Grace?”

Lloyd nodded as it would be good to have a friend help him navigate society, especially all the things people said when they were saying something else. “Yes, that is a sensible plan. But haven’t you met Winchester previously?”

“As a young clerk employed by Sotheby’s. I will likely achieve more if I was introduced in society as a colleague of yours, my lord.”

Lloyd hated that he needed this pointed out to him. He always missed these social cues, and even though he'd spent years memorising all the rules of society—rules he was grateful existed—he still needed the reminders. “Yes. Yes, of course. You should come as my guest.”

“Excellent. Should I come to your rooms when I have finished work and we can travel together?”

“Yes.” Lloyd ignored the ache in his chest telling him he'd missed something important. He often felt like that, but at least it wasn't going to be a lack of invitation. He had a stack of invitations to every event held among the ton, and his Secretary, Mr Jadeja, was always inquiring if he would be attending any of them. Lloyd gave Mr Milson his direction, then said his farewells before heading home. Apparently he was going to socialise tonight, and he needed to take a nap and a bath to prepare himself for the effort. If he wanted to figure out who Hobart was, he'd need to get through a lot of boring pointless social chit chat first. Why couldn't people just get to the point of things?

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Nobbie stood beside Adam at the corner of the Duke of Harrington's ballroom after telling his friend the whole sorry saga. "Enough about me and this damned watch. What's happening in your world?"

"Hedwick is trying to marry his daughter off to anyone who'll take her, poor girl. She'll end up with someone unsuitable. Hedwick lost money on a Caribbean plantation and needs to get his daughter married before anyone knows."

"How? Plantations are built on enslaved labour, the costs are minimal, it's basically impossible to lose money."

Adam sighed. "The rumour is that his agent cooked the books and stole everything."

Nobbie coughed, rather than laugh. "Serves him right for owning a plantation."

"Yes. I have no sympathy for him. I am concerned about his daughter who is young, pretty, and naïve."

"Like all the ton's daughters."

"Most, yeah. But most of them have decent fathers who care about their safety after they are married. Hedwick is increasingly desperate."

Nobbie turned to his friend. "It's not your job to save every woman in the world. And if Hedwick has no money, there's no money in it for us to save her."

"I couldn't save Rose, Nobbie. I have to try and stop that happening to everyone

else.”

“None of us saved Rose.” Nobbie hated that their childhood friend had married the Earl of Miles-Wilkes, who had pushed her down the staircase, killing her.

“Maybe your friend Lord Lawndry will marry her. I hear you stole a dance with her from under his nose, and he was annoyed at you for it.”

Nobbie swallowed. “My friend Lord Lawndry?” He was surprised at the phrasing, especially after telling Adam the whole reason they’d been spending time together was because of the watch. He didn’t think he’d given away too much.

“Friend, or? Was that a wistful tone I heard when you spoke about?” Adam paused, and Nobbie wished his friend didn’t know him quite so well.

“Adam.” He tried to convey that Adam should mind his bloody business.

“I’ve seen him at the King’s Book Club.”

“Have you? I would’ve thought the Soho Club was more his style.” Nobbie didn’t need the hint from Adam he’d guessed that Nobbie already knew that Lawndry was interested in men, just like Nobbie and his friends. The Soho Club had a broader audience than the King’s Book Club, and mentioning it might help muddy the waters, but no, Adam’s eyes twinkled as he grinned. Nobbie knew that look.

“You should come out with me more often, then you’d know who everyone is.”

“I have you and Earnest for all that gossip. If I’m to be the financial brains, I need to have a clean reputation. Charmers like you and Earnest can be more ... careless.”

“Careless, or fun?”

“Oh come on, Adam. You know what I mean.”

“It wouldn’t hurt you to be less serious sometimes.”

Nobbie elbowed his friend. “Says the guy who wants to save every woman in London from terrible husbands.”

“Oh, look there is your Lord Lawndry.” Adam’s teasing tone shouldn’t have sent a spike of heat through Nobbie’s chest. He knew he should say that Lloyd wasn’t his, but he was too busy searching the room for him.

“Nobbie.” Adam’s whisper softened. “I think I need to meet him.”

Nobbie didn’t like that his feelings were so transparent to his best friend, especially when Lawndry hadn’t even given him permission to use his first name; he knew it—Lloyd—but they hadn’t discussed that type of intimacy yet. He couldn’t speak, just nodded at his friend, and they walked together towards Lawndry who stood with Mr Milson from Sotheby’s and a tall, thin white man.

“Mr Gilbert. I’m so pleased you are here.” Lawndry’s warm smile didn’t help the situation or settle the riot in his abdomen.

“Lawndry.”

“This is His Grace, the Duke of Winchester.” Lawndry introduced him to the man who was perhaps fifteen years older than Nobbie, with blue eyes and the same brown hair that most of the ton shared. Nobbie bowed low, as did Adam, who straightened up and gasped. Nobbie glanced sideways at his friend’s unbelievable rudeness towards an actual Duke. The two of them knew how important it was to behave precisely around people who could easily crush them, and Adam was usually the best of their four friends at wooing the toffs and their offspring.

“I take it you are the owner of 79?” Winchester didn’t mention the watch’s brand, and Nobbie assumed that Lawndry had already talked Winchester’s ears off about the bloody watch. His obsession would be the undoing of everyone but at least there was no way it was a scam, unless the scam was to get access to the Duke, but as a Lord, Lawndry already had that. Maybe it was time to relax and trust that Lawndry’s interest truly was just about the watch.

“Yes, your grace.” He began to pull the watch from his fob pocket to show the Duke.

“You have her eyes.” Winchester sighed. “And the Winchester nose and chin, you poor thing.”

Nobbie dropped the watch and it dangled on its chain, hitting him in the thigh, as he touched his chin automatically. “Excuse me?”

“I think we should retire to the library. Lawndry, Milson, you should come too.” Winchester bowed his head slightly, then walked off. It was typical of a Duke to expect everyone to follow, but they all did. Lawndry was practically vibrating as he walked beside him.

“What is happening, Lawndry?”

“He knows who Hobart is, but he said it’s not a story for me. I’m so curious to know who he is. We had only just met when you walked towards us, and I haven’t told him much of the story yet. I only mentioned that I had found watch 79 and knew the owner. You.”

Adam choked. “Something tells me that you are going to discover the truth very soon.”

Nobbie would’ve tackled Adam for a comment like that when they’d been younger,

and his hands clenched into fists as he tried to stop himself. They were in society. He had to hold his nerve.

“What do you mean?” He hissed.

“Looking at the Duke of Winchester is like looking at you. He’s right about the chin and nose.”

“No.” Nobbie had only been making up silly stories at Sotheby’s when the possibility raised its ugly head. “No.”

“Perhaps he’ll marry Hedwick’s daughter,” Adam laughed. “I could make Hedwick grateful. Imagine, a Duke for his daughter! And a Duke is likely to have some funds to fill our pockets with for the privilege.”

“Perhaps.” Nobbie was grateful for his friend changing the subject. “You’ll have to vet him first to make sure he’s not...”

“Yes.” Adam cut him off because they walked into the library. The sumptuous room was typical of a library in a toff’s house, filled with pretty objects and many books, but none of them likely to have been read. Harrington—whose house it was—was hardly a scholar. His grace waved at some chairs, and they all sat obediently. Who would dare disagree with a Duke?

“Lawndry, please introduce your friends.”

“This is Mr Gilbert, the owner of the Hobart number 79. I’ve inspected it myself and can confirm it is genuine, and you’ve met Mr Milson, the horologist at Sotheby’s.” Lawndry sat on the edge of his chair, leaning forward as if he anticipated needing to leap up and flee the room, or maybe that was just a reflection of the swirling panic inside him. He needed to leave, to throw the fucking watch in the Thames, and go to

the antipodes where no one would know anything about him, where no one would say, ‘gosh darn it, you look remarkably like the Duke of Winchester. You have his chin.’ Nobbie wanted to vomit. And all around him, people were behaving politely as if nothing had changed, even Milson bowed his head low for the Duke on his introduction.

“And this other person?”

“I am Mr Adam Milnes, your grace. Mr Gibson and I have some business interests together.” Adam stepped in to save Lawndry who was staring slightly wide-eyed at Adam, who he’d never met, and saving Nobbie from having to explain why he’d brought a friend with him.

“Everything I say in this room must be kept in strict confidence.” His grace then let out a long sigh and everyone waited. Nobbie held his breath.

“Fuck it,” the Duke swore. He actually swore. “Mr Gilbert, even without the watch as evidence, from the look of you, it’s obvious that you are my half-brother. I always wondered if you’d survived.”

Nobbie froze. Ice formed in his veins and his entire body went cold. No. Loud voices surrounded him, and it felt like everyone was yelling at once, and he couldn’t figure any of this out.

“Why did you abandon me?”

The room fell silent and eventually Winchester coughed.

“I did not abandon you, and neither did my father. It’s complicated.”

“Seems simple to me.” He was the one who’d been left on the doorstep of the Duke

Street Orphanage as a baby.

“It was anything but simple. For what it’s worth, the story begins in 1763, when my father fell in love with a sixteen-year-old village girl. He was twenty and unmarried.” That Winchester clarified his father’s age was good because Nobbie glanced at Adam who looked like he was going to hurt the Duke’s dead father for preying on a sixteen-year-old girl.

“Jane worked for our estate’s jeweller, Mr Hobart—” His Grace’s pronouncement made Lawndry gasp and Nobbie’s mouth filled with a bitter taste, like vinegar.

“Hobart?” Lawndry whispered but Nobbie waved his hand in the air.

“Carry on, your grace. I find myself fascinated by this tale of young love.” Sarcasm dripped off his tongue because he’d heard this story before. The young Duke had knocked up a village girl and they’d dumped the baby so that no one would know.

“Mr Gilbert. It is not a typical tale. Please indulge me.” Winchester waited until Nobbie nodded before continuing. “My grandmother decided that this potential love affair was completely unsuitable for a Duke’s son. She arranged for Jane to marry Mr Hobart and my father found himself engaged to an Earl’s daughter. Without Jane’s marriage, he might have ignored my grandmother, but she was too quick and clever for him. She paid for Mr and Mrs Hobart to move away, ostensibly to remove my father from temptation and make him focus on creating an heir for the Dukedom. Two years later, the first Hobart watches were taken to auction, and my father purchased them, knowing that his Jane had probably helped create them.” Winchester paused, and Nobbie tried to just breathe. Why was breathing so difficult? Every scrap of air burned. Jane. The small blanket he’d been left with had a J embroidered in the corner.

“My father’s first wife died of consumption without having children, and my father

had finally come to terms with Jane being married, so he married again, and I was born in 1778 and then a sibling every two years after that. My mother, bless her soul, died in childbed eight years later. My father grieved for my mother, who he'd loved, and it was my grandmother who finally relented. He'd done his duty and she let him know that Jane's husband had been lost at sea. My father visited her, and they conceived a baby. The boy was born in—" Winchester looked up at Nobbie. "—as you are aware, the boy was born in 1788. My father proposed to Jane, but just as they were making arrangements for the wedding, Mr Hobart returned to England. He hadn't been lost at sea. He had delayed his visit to India to purchase jewels for their jewellery business, and he'd sent a letter on the ship he had planned to travel on. When the ship was lost at sea, Jane assumed he had been lost too, but it was only his letter."

"I'm guessing he wasn't pleased about arriving home to find his wife with a baby." Adam summed it up succinctly.

"I don't know. My father was heartbroken that Jane's husband had reappeared, but he hoped that Mr Hobart would do the right thing and raise you as his own. He sent money for the boy every year and it wasn't until Jane was on her death bed that she wrote a letter to him saying that she'd been forced to send the baby away, but she had left watch 79 with you, so that you'd know how to find out who your mother was, and that my father could find you."

Nobbie wanted to thump Mr Hobart and he wanted to hug Jane and he wasn't even sure what he felt about the previous Duke of Winchester. "We are half-brothers?"

"Yes. I didn't know you existed until last year when my steward found the letter while looking for some other papers, and I am ashamed to admit that I didn't know what to do about it." His grace sat stiffly in his chair. "My father loved my mother, but he loved Jane more. She'd been his first love and his last love and it destroyed him when her husband reappeared. He locked his collection away, but every year, he

would go to Sotheby's for the auction. Most years, he bought something and then he'd come home and drink heavily before locking it up in the rest of the collection."

"That must have been tough, growing up with a father like that?" Adam asked.

Winchester shrugged. "I was at school most of the time, so I was unaware of most of it. When he died six years ago, and I inherited, I had the collection valued thanks to the stellar efforts of Mr Milson here."

"You've never married?" Adam asked and Nobbie almost grinned as Adam tried to figure out a business option for them. He needed the distraction.

"No. I saw what my father's obsession with Jane did for my mother, and for my father's first wife, who suffered through being married to a man who loved someone else. My mother at least enjoyed a few good years with my father when he knew Jane was married and he tried to get on with his own life as best he could. I probably need to marry for the sake of the estate, but I'm not sure I could do that to a woman."

"What about a woman who needs marriage before the ton discovers her father is broke?"

Nobbie should stop Adam but he had far too much to think about and he needed time to contemplate it all.

"It would be a noble reason to marry." Adam laid it on thickly and Nobbie would normally say something to counter that, to make the charm offensive from Adam appear less obvious.

"Lawndry, you have your answer now. Your grace, it was nice to meet you." Nobbie needed fresh air. The last thing he heard as he bolted from the room was his name being called out in a questioning fashion.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Lloyd chased Nobbie through the house, out into the garden, and eventually caught up to him in the mews. Nobbie was leaning back against the brick wall, eyes closed.

“Nobbie. I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“I started this whole mess by insisting that I wanted to know about your watch.”

Nobbie pushed himself away from the wall. “No one could have guessed this.”

“Truer words were never spoken. I would never have guessed Hobart was a woman, and yet it was foolish of me not to consider it given my own mother’s skill as a watchmaker.” Lloyd suddenly found himself pressed against the opposing wall of the mews with hard cold bricks at his back and Nobbie’s warm body pushing him into the wall.

“I meant about being a Duke’s son.”

“Oh, yes, I imagine that is something of an adjustment too.”

Nobbie laughed, a hysterical bitter sounding laugh. “Something of an adjustment. What use is it to me to know this?”

He had no idea. “I don’t know.” He found people complicated at the best of times. A situation like this was far beyond his ability to understand. “I remember feeling a similar unease when my parents died and Uncle Baldrick sold my entire collection and

all my mother's collections."

"Is this your attempt at empathy?" Nobbie growled.

"Yes." He had been devastated by the loss; not just of his parents but to realise that his uncle was nothing like his kind father or caring mother. "To have your whole world view changed is disconcerting. I understand that as it happened to me then. Not in the same way as your news, but perhaps the feeling is the same?"

Nobbie didn't answer, not in words. Nobbie kissed him. It was a fierce unforgiving kiss and Lloyd squirmed between Nobbie and the hard unforgiving brick wall as desire replaced confusion. This was something he understood. He wanted Nobbie and Nobbie wanted him. The simplicity of it made his fingers twitch and he threaded them into Nobbie's hair. Nobbie groaned into his mouth, pressing his hard cock against Lloyd.

"We can't do this here." Not where anyone might walk past. Harrington's ball could still be heard, voices mixed with music into a low buzz floating on the night air.

"No." Nobbie stepped backwards and glanced around the dim mews. "This way." He grabbed Lloyd's hand and pulled him further down the mews and into an empty horse box. The scent of fresh straw kicked up around him as Nobbie pushed him up against the wall again. His spine hit the wall with a thud that shoved all the air out of his lungs. It was almost completely dark in here, heightening all of Lloyd's other senses. Nobbie gave him no time to adjust, kissing him with the same ferocity. Their kiss tied them together, becoming a wrestle as their hands grabbed at each other. The kiss tasted a little metallic where Lloyd's teeth had scrubbed against Nobbie's lip too hard, and when Nobbie reached down between them to squeeze Lloyd's cock, Lloyd wanted to throw his head backwards and gasp, except the wall was in the way. The whole world could be watching and he wouldn't know, as everything was focused on the way Nobbie's fingers plucked at the fall of his trousers trying to gain access.

Lloyd added his hands to help, working to undo Nobbie's trousers and soon—gloriously soon—their cocks were together. Skin on skin. Heat on heat. Breathless together as they wrapped their hands around each other's cocks and stroked frantically, never once breaking the kiss. Lloyd threw one leg around Nobbie's thigh, pulling them closer together as his lungs burned and he squirmed and groaned and thrust against Nobbie's hand. It was desperate and frantic and gloriously fast. Nobbie pulled away from the kiss, sucking in a loud breath in the still air of the stable.

“Nobbie.”

“Lawndry.”

“Call me Lloyd. Please.” He begged to come, to hear Nobbie say his name because this was more than a frantic fucking in a stable block. This was his way of showing he cared for Nobbie and the shock of his news. He wanted to reassure him that everything was going to be fine, that he knew how the whole world could change and there was still hope among the darkness. He was here now, a survivor of his parent's death, and of Uncle Baldric's attempts to intimidate him, and still he thrived. Look at him thriving as he thrust into Nobbie's hand.

Nobbie leaned closer, his lips softly brushing over his ear as he whispered. “Lloyd.”

The intimacy of it sent Lloyd all the way over that glorious edge and he cried out as he came, with Nobbie swallowing the sound with another kiss. Lloyd stroked Nobbie with the same ferocity of his own orgasm and Nobbie came too. The two of them rested against each other, held up by the wall, foreheads together, breathing in sync.

“What now?” Nobbie's question was too loud in the dark.

“We go home and do this again where I can see you?” Lloyd had his answer about

the Hobart, and he wanted to focus on Nobbie now.

“Yes. Take me home. Make me stop thinking.”

He gulped. He would try his best and he could start by cleaning up Nobbie and himself where they’d spilled all over each other’s stomachs. “We are a little messy to go out into the world but we are in a mews. There’s bound to be a rag somewhere.”

Nobbie laughed. “For a lord, you are sometimes very surprising. I’m not going to clean you up with a horse’s rag. Let me use my cravat.”

“I’m not precious. A rag is fine.”

“And my cravat is here, and I don’t need to go hunting for this mysterious rag of yours.”

“Fine.”

“My lord. Let me care for you.”

Lloyd pushed away the urge to whine and say that was his job, but that wasn’t true. Why would it be? They were both grown men. They could share in the care of each other. What was it his mother always said? Don’t apologise for being who he was, just say thank you.

“Thank you.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Nobbie hadn't left Lloyd's townhouse for over a week. At some point, he'd need to check his investments and talk to Adam about their next scheme, but none of that mattered yet. He'd spent most of the time in bed with Lloyd, or pottering about the house, talking about life and everything. Nobbie lay on a rug in front of a fiercely stoked fireplace, and glanced over at Lloyd who was sitting beside him on the rug, leaning back against the chaise lounge, reading an auction catalogue and sighing occasionally at the contents. Those little sighs were so lovely.

Oh goodness. He was rather fond of Lloyd. Fondness wasn't something he'd experienced before, and his heart skipped a beat at the sudden realisation. Did he mind? No, actually, he quite liked this warmth that surrounded him when he was with Lloyd. He liked the way Lloyd was focused and strangely blunt and didn't seem fussed about the usual things in life. Yes, Lloyd was able to be like that because he was a Lord who didn't have to worry about money or his future; things that used to fill Nobbie's cold heart with jealousy. He'd fought hard to have the same things as the toffs in the ton and it was hard to reconcile the way he felt about Lloyd who should've been everything Nobbie wanted to compete against and win for himself. Maybe it was the kissing that really made the difference to Nobbie's heart. Before he'd met Lloyd, sex had been a transaction, and now it was better. Now he cared about Lloyd and wanted to spend more time with him. Especially like this.

"It's odd to think that we are both orphans." Lloyd had avoided the topic of Nobbie's parents for the whole week. Instead, they'd talked about politics—agreeing on most things—and sport and horse racing and investments. They discussed the Peninsula War and the impacts of it and what Lloyd could do in parliament to help injured soldiers and their families.

And of course, they'd spent plenty of time talking about timepieces. Lloyd was obsessed, happily showing Nobbie his collections and projects, and how to pull a watch apart and put it back together. It had been nice relaxing by his side as Lloyd had worked on different clocks and other mechanisms.

"Are we?" Nobbie knew nothing much about Lloyd's family which suddenly struck him as unfair since Lloyd knew Nobbie's whole story of being left at the Duke Street Orphanage by a heart-broken mother, forced to give him up by her husband who'd newly returned from the dead.

"My parents died when I was fifteen."

"Both of them?"

"Yes. Their ship was lost at sea."

"Do you miss them?"

Lloyd's brown eyes shimmered. "Yes. Very much, my mother especially."

"Tell me about them."

"There's not much to tell about my father. He was a diplomat, so I didn't see him much. It was normal for him to be away travelling for months at a time, leaving me with my mother, and when he returned, he spent all his time with her. A son was important for the future, but his true love was her."

"A diplomat. Aren't you lords?" Nobbie asked the easiest question, because it vaguely sounded like Lloyd's father was a bit of fool for ignoring his son. Did Lloyd know that his father treated him like property? An heir, not a person? He'd seen it too many times in his dealings with the ton. He unclenched his fists; he couldn't fight a

dead man on Lloyd's behalf, and he didn't want to ruin Lloyd's memories when nothing good could come of him pointing this out.

"Yes. My great-grandfather was a banker who negotiated some of the British East India Company contracts with the Crown and was made the 1st Baron of Lawndry for his efforts. My grandfather grew up in India and worked there too. He married my grandmother, Harleen Vastrakar, and he became the first Earl of Lawndry. My father followed the same path into diplomacy, and he probably expected to go to India since his mother taught him Hindi, but he was sent to Switzerland where he fell in love with my mother."

"What number Earl does that make you?"

Lloyd grinned. "I thought you were good at numbers?"

"I am. But have you considered that I want to hear it from you?" Nobbie liked teasing Lloyd, especially when he had the baffled expression which made his nose wrinkle.

"Are you teasing me?"

"Yes." Nobbie kissed him on the mouth, then lay back on the sheepskin rug.

"Obviously I am the third Earl of Lawndry, and maybe the final one too."

His chest tightened. "Why?" He could guess—Lloyd might feel the same way he did—but he was a coward and he wanted to hear it from Lloyd.

"I suppose I could marry a woman and carry on the line, but it wouldn't be fair to her." It wasn't like Lloyd to be so evasive, and it made Nobbie's shoulders hitch closer to his neck.

“Why not?” Did he want to know? Yes. No. God. Fuck. He needed to know why.

“Because I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“Are you certain?” Nobbie couldn’t breathe.

Lloyd shook his head. “I am not certain. It remains a distinct possibility, however, and that would mean ... if you were receptive to the idea, that is ... well, it might mean that there will never be a fourth Earl of Lawndry.” Lloyd gave the most ‘Lloyd’ answer that was possible to say. It made complete sense that Lloyd would want to be as certain about love as he was about his watches.

“What happens to the title then?” As if that was the most important question. Fuck, he didn’t care about some pompous aristocratic thing, but it was easier to ask that than deal with the concept of love. Fondness and kisses weren’t love, were they? Earnest’s poems about love were always about great passions, not this gentle sense of belonging and homeliness. Nobbie had never had a home, not really, and now he’d had a week at Lloyd’s home, he was beginning to crave it. With Lloyd? Yes.

Lloyd growled under his breath. “Why did you ask that question? Now I have to think about how my mean Uncle Baldrick will become the Earl if I die.”

“Then you’d best outlive him.” He joked, rather liking the idea of Lloyd living a long life. Together with him.

“I don’t have any other relatives. The Lawndry’s weren’t great breeders. Baldrick has no children either, just a misery wife.”

Nobbie tilted his head curiously. He’d done enough work with Adam to know that it was rarely the woman’s fault, and bitterness often came after a woman understood how powerless she was in a marriage. Being someone’s property would do that to

anyone.

“No children?”

“No. It doesn’t matter. The title can go into abeyance and the crown will gift it to some other worthy recipient one day. I’ll be dead, so it won’t matter to me.”

“I suppose that is technically true.” Nobbie sat up, pleased for the distraction from his own thoughts. A silence surrounded them both and it wasn’t entirely unpleasant. Nobbie was happy to wait while Lloyd figured out his thoughts. This week he’d noticed that it sometimes took Lloyd a while to think through what someone had said, and that he didn’t cope very well with sudden tangents or changes.

“I don’t want to think about being dead because it means thinking about how upset other people—” Lloyd stared at Nobbie, “—might be. It was the hardest thing about my mother dying.”

“What?”

“She wasn’t there anymore to talk to about anything. We shared a passion for horology, and I often find things, like your watch, that she would’ve loved to have heard all about. It’s been almost the same amount of time without her as I had with her, and I still turn around and want to say, Hey Mother, you’d love this.”

Nobbie’s chest ached. “The good thing about growing up in an orphanage since I was a baby is that I don’t have parents to miss.”

“You have them now.”

“But they are both dead, and I never knew them, so it’s basically impossible to be sad about that. Confused, maybe. Angry that they abandoned me, but that’s been with me

my whole life.”

Lloyd nodded. “I think I understand why you’d be mad about that.”

Nobbie tried to think of something that might help Lloyd understand. “Imagine if I’d said No to you investigating my watch, and then I sent the watch on a ship to the antipodes, so you’d never be able to find it.”

Lloyd gasped. “You would never.”

“I might have. You were so insistent to me about it that I assumed you were trying to scam me.”

Lloyd dropped his book. “You ... what?”

Nobbie sighed. “Lloyd, why do you relax me so much that I say things like this?”

“This is my fault?”

He shook his head. “No. Of course not. I only meant that I’m better at controlling my tongue around other people.”

Lloyd’s eyes sparkled. “I like your tongue control.”

“Not like that.” Nobbie’s face bloomed with heat. “Growing up in an orphanage meant I learned my place in the world and I’ve had to work hard to find my own place that wasn’t what everyone else deemed appropriate for me.” He wasn’t sure why he was being so open about this.

“Wait a moment. I’m lost. How did we get here?”

Nobbie laughed. “You were the one who made a joke about tongues and took the discussion on a completely different tack. How illogical of you.”

Lloyd placed his hand over his chest. “Me? You were the one who leaped from being angry at your parents to accusing me of scamming you.”

“Thus proving that you weren’t really lost in the conversation at all.”

“No. I’m learning to follow your leaps in logic.”

Nobbie kissed Lloyd on the forehead. “As if you are the most logical person in the world. You have whole conversations in your head, then announce the conclusion and everyone else is supposed to follow along.”

“I do?”

“Yes.”

“I still don’t understand why you thought I was scamming you.”

“Lloyd, my darling.” He’d paused, surprised at his own fondness. “Ahh, you threw yourself at me over a watch, for God’s sake. Who does that? What was I supposed to think, but that it was an elaborate scam?”

“Are you always this cynical?”

“Yes. I hate to break this news to you, but yes. Life works out better when I assume that everyone is trying to get something from me. And you gave me such confusing glances.”

“This is my fault?” But this time, Lloyd was smiling. “It’s your fault.”

“How?” Nobbie leaned closer.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:59 am

Lloyd adored the way Nobbie glared at him. “For being so distractingly handsome, of course.”

“I was right.” Nobbie’s face lit up with a broad smile and he relaxed, shifting to a less intense pose, which helped Lloyd relax too. Maybe whatever Nobbie was going to be correct about wouldn’t be so bad.

“About?”

“You were trying to scam me.” Nobbie winked and Lloyd was completely confused, caught between the seriousness of the accusation and Nobbie’s playful expression. People were so goddamned confusing.

“No. Never.”

“Yes. Not for money. I think you used the damned watch to get into my pants.”

It wasn’t untrue, although Lloyd had acted on instinct when they’d met, not with the deliberateness of a scammer. He had wanted the watch and a little portion of his brain had hoped that if he flirted—or at least attempted to flirt in his own obtuse way—he might have more of a chance of viewing the Hobart.

“God, the way you knelt before me, in the corridor of Hedwick’s ballroom too, was irresistible. I didn’t care about the nonsense you were saying about the watch. I just wanted you to kneel for me again.”

“Happily.” Lloyd placed the auction catalogue on the chaise lounge behind him, and

rolled from where he was sitting on the floor beside Nobbie until he was lying between Nobbie's thighs. "Like this?"

"It's not technically kneeling."

"You'd better stand then."

Nobbie shook his head, his eyes sparkling. "I think I prefer this for now." He stroked his hands through Lloyd's hair, exactly the way he'd done many times this week, and just like Lloyd enjoyed it. He could spend the rest of his days kneeling for Nobbie and having Nobbie's hands in his hair. Nobbie applied the perfect amount of pressure to his scalp that took it from a soothing, fall-asleep-in-his-lap vibe, to a slowly building tension sending flickers of heat down his spine. He nuzzled against Nobbie's thighs, then used his hands to undo the lacing on his trousers, pulling down his fall, as Nobbie's fingers dug into his temples. He sighed as Nobbie pressed his face closer to Nobbie's rigid cockstand.

"I don't need the encouragement." He blew a light breath onto the head of Nobbie's cock, loving the way Nobbie shuddered in response. And then he slowly licked the end, playing until Nobbie cried out in frustration.

"More please."

Warmth combined with heat inside him, and he swallowed Nobbie's thick cock all the way into his mouth until it hit the back of his throat. He had to shift his body slightly, hooking his arms over Nobbie's thighs to get more of the right angle. As he slid up and down, loving the taste of Nobbie and the way he filled his whole mouth, Nobbie's fingers gripped harder and he began to moan. Yes, more like that. He wanted Nobbie to lose control; of his voice, of his breath, and of himself. He wanted the rush of Nobbie coming into his throat.

"Stop." Nobbie's desperate cry made him stop immediately, unmoving. "Not like

that. Off.”

He let out an embarrassing protest as he did as Nobbie asked and found himself being hauled up Nobbie’s torso until they were kissing, then Nobbie rolled them both and the perfect weight of his lover had Lloyd bucking his hips and groaning into Nobbie’s mouth.

“Let me fuck you like this.”

Heat blazed through him and he needed to tear off his clothes. “There is oil on the mantelpiece.”

“Really?”

“I was hopeful.” He tried not to be embarrassed by wanting Nobbie so much, but the way Nobbie’s eyes lit up was worth it. Nobbie kissed him hard.

“Good.” And then Nobbie bounced to his feet, stripping off his clothes before leaning over to grab the small bottle of oil from the mantelpiece. Lloyd couldn’t move, staring at the display of Nobbie’s pale skin and rippling muscles and decisiveness.

“You are still dressed?”

He was. “Do you want me like this?”

“No. The fire is warm. I want to see you.”

He leaped up and stripped off. “Like this?”

“No, as you were.” Nobbie licked his bottom lip, his gaze tracking over Lloyd’s skin, leaving trails of gooseflesh. He tried to sink to the rug slowly, and it must’ve been more elegant than it felt because Nobbie’s cheeks turned pink and his nostrils flared.

“Knees up. Get yourself ready.” Nobbie stood over him, and drizzled oil onto his belly. It splashed on the rug and dripped across his torso, so he dragged his fingers through it, and spread it over his hard cock.

“No. Leave that. Get yourself ready.” Nobbie nudged his knees wider, and he groaned as he obeyed. He swiped his hand through the rest of the oil on his stomach and slipped his fingers behind his balls, opening himself up. Nobbie sank to his knees with a loud moan.

“Lloyd. By God. You are marvellous.”

“Fill me.” He reached up for Nobbie with one hand, needing his touch.

“Yes.” Nobbie pushed Lloyd’s hand away, holding it above Lloyd’s head on the rug, and then lined himself up. The fierce concentration on Nobbie’s face was too intense and Lloyd closed his eyes, breathing out slowly as the steady pressure around his rim built and built, until Nobbie slid inside and Lloyd relaxed around his hard length.

“Yes.”

“Please.”

They both begged for each other, and Nobbie grunted as he balanced on his elbows, sweat slick on his chest and temples.

“Lloyd. Fuck.”

“Yes. I need you.” He reached for Nobbie, his slippery oiled hands sliding over Nobbie’s skin, unable to grip him, but it didn’t matter as Nobbie clung to him, thrusting inside with the perfect rhythm. He cried out for more, unable to make words, just begging with every thrust that slid past that point inside him that sent him closer and closer to the edge.

“Nobbie. Time changes when you do this.” His internal clock changed from being regular and predictable to being in sync with Nobbie and he was unable to tell if they’d been doing this for mere minutes or an hour or more. He never lost track of time, except with Nobbie, and surprisingly, it was wonderful (and only a little bit scary).

“Fuck I love you.” Nobbie’s desperate cry as he came made Lloyd’s heart swell to uncomfortable proportions. This was what he wanted. A love that consumed him.

“Good.”

“Good? You’re a funny man, Lloyd.”

Lloyd gulped. “How can you say that while you are...”

“Fucking you into the rug?”

“Yes.”

“Because it’s true. You are perfect for me. Your obsession with time is funny and surprising and you are so welcoming and I love you. I realise that we’ve only known each for a short time and maybe it’s too soon, but...”

Lloyd might’ve agreed, but his father had said he’d known in an instant that his mother was the one for him, so maybe this idea of time and love was a construct.

“It’s not too soon. Time is literally something humans invented.”

Nobbie kissed him, hard with his hands wrapped around Lloyd’s scalp. “My perfect horologist.”

Lloyd’s chest was going to burst, it had expanded so much. “Yours.”

“Let’s be inseparable best friends who live together.” Nobbie rested his forehead against Lloyd’s, just breathing in the same air as each other. He didn’t elaborate on his comment. Was it a joke? Or was he serious?

“You are thinking a lot.” Lloyd was thinking too much, and he hoped, rather than knew, that Nobbie was thinking about the logistics of this too. He wanted it to work, without society noticing, which was almost impossible when he was a young unmarried Earl.

“I have friends who are in similar situations, and it works. People see what they want to see, and it’s not two men in love, usually.”

It made some sense. There were plenty of unmarried men and women among his social set, and some committed bachelors. He could dream, couldn’t he?

“If you think about your story, Nobbie, it shows that love transcends marriage. Of course I will live with you as if we were married.”

“My story?”

“The Duke was in love with Hobart, but he was never able to marry her because of other constraints.”

“Like her being married.”

“Or him. And when they were together, she was technically a widow, which meant their love at least got some time together. I’m sorry that it didn’t work out like in the books.”

Nobbie kissed the tip of his nose. “What books do you read if that’s the story you want?”

“Wait. Please stop teasing me. I’m still trying to reconcile love and marriage and all the things I’ve been taught and what that means for me now.”

“It’s simple. Marriage is a business transaction. Love is love. We can make it into whatever we want.”

In that case—if it really was that simple—there was only one question that mattered. “My house or yours?”

“Both. It’ll confuse everyone.”

“Except the servants. They always know everything.”

Nobbie kissed him again. “Then we’ll employ servants who also want to live with their best friends.”

“Perfect.” And it promised to be. Nobbie belonged in his life, just like the way the gears in a timepiece slotted together with precise engineering pieces, moving together in unison to create a greater piece of beautiful artistic operation.
