



Ashe (Out on a Limb #1)

Author: Sahara Kelly

Category: Historical

Description: How does an intelligent Regency gentleman end up in a bit of a scandalous mess with a Society-savvy lady?

One might say that the more important question would be how do they get themselves out of it?

Ashe Trease, (yes, that is his family name) is a charming gentleman but a little out of place amongst the Ton. He's only there to escort his Mama and sister, and doesn't really give a fig for Society. He has no idea that he's about to meet a young woman with the same views

Miss Florinda Boothe is every inch a lady, accustomed to the world she inhabits, but irritated by it, nonetheless. To her surprise, she's intrigued to meet a handsome gentleman with not only an intelligent mind, but also a similar opinion, and when they cross paths more than once? Well, you know what's going to happen, don't you?

There are rides, frisky horses, a screeching soprano, a disastrous trip in a punt on the Thames, and—of course—a shocking scandal, thanks to a modiste's mistake!!!

Can these two Society 'rebels' outwit the gossips? Can Florinda see past the forest to the Trease? (Sorry, it had to be said.)

Total Pages (Source): 10

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Many generations ago, when royal favours and titles were being dispensed like seeds from a maple tree in spring, a young fellow by the name of Hopper Trease found himself in the unusual position of assisting a member of the then-Royal family out of a bit of a sticky mess.

The gentleman in question (who shall remain nameless) was caught without some fundamental garments—you can imagine which ones—and in the company of no less than three buxom milkmaids.

Hopper, who'd had an eye for one of those milkmaids himself, would have been within his rights to protest, since he was the manager of this particular farm, and at no time had he been given to understand that the milkmaids' duties included larking about in the hayloft with a well-known Royal missing his breeches.

He managed to contain his temper, however, upon seeing several members of the Royal cavalry approaching the stable and calling for their titled companion.

Aware that disaster might occur should the August Personage be discovered with his royal weapon on full display and in the hands of common milkmaids (all of whom actually had very smooth hands, it must be noted), Hopper lived up to his name, and hopped up into the hayloft in a trice.

He hurried to the tumbled group, shushed them all immediately, handed the gentleman his breeches, and silently pointed down to where the afternoon sunlight was sparkling off the helmets of the officers below.

Horror-struck, the Royal dressed in a hurry, blew kisses to the sighing milkmaids,

quickly asked Hopper his name, then thanked him profusely.

Showing him the ladder that led to the door at the rear of the barn, Hopper bowed respectfully, then held his breath as the man descended, only to appear a few moments later on the ground, straightening his clothing and addressing his men, giving them to understand he'd taken some moments to relieve himself behind the building.

The men saluted, brought the royal horse forward, and the gentleman mounted, leaving with reputation intact.

Hopper, heaving a sigh of relief, turned to the milkmaids with the intention of upbraiding them for their lack of decorum. However, he was but a man, and the sight of three lovely, almost-naked women lounging on the hay was too much to turn down. So, several hours later, the milkmaids staggered down the ladder to the barn, and Hopper, pleased with himself as only a man who has thoroughly satisfied three women could be (and one of them twice), lay at ease, enjoying the late afternoon sunshine and relaxing in the knowledge of a job well done.

Thus he was very surprised to learn, a few months later, that a message had arrived at the farm, directed to him, from that lusty Royal.

Hopper blinked upon learning that he had, in fact, been awarded the title of Hopper Trease, Marquess of Lesser Barnhope. His astonishment grew apace as he discovered he was now the owner of several hundred acres in the next county.

This changed his life considerably, of course. He married a milkmaid (the one he'd satisfied twice), set up house in Barnhope Hall, and raised a large, mostly happy, family. In fact, the Trease of Barnhope Hall were all considered to be prime examples of exactly what Trease should be...sturdy, dependable, and rather nice to look at most of the time.

All of which doesn't have much to do with the following story, but it does, at least, explain the origins of the Trease family, humble though they might be.

So, moving swiftly through time a couple of hundred years, it's time to introduce the hero of our story, the current eldest son—the Right Honourable Ashe Trease.

Yes, the family tradition of embarrassing its offspring by naming them after a species of tree continues, to the snickers and giggles of those to whom they are introduced.

It's a burden, but it hasn't stopped a Trease from getting his way yet...and Ashe will be no different.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Almack's Hallowed Halls, where unexpected encounters are most richly desired...

Almack's was full to the brim on this fateful Wednesday, the skirts of the ladies barely having chance to swish against the evening breeches of the gentlemen. Tomorrow's papers would probably describe it as being a "sad crush", since HRH himself was rumoured to be attending.

Just a whiff of the Royal presence was enough to send every woman possessing that valuable voucher into a frenzy, and modistes everywhere were currently sprawled in their salons with bottles of brandy, exhausted from the panicked rush that had had them running around in circles with pins in their mouths for the preceding week.

While they put their feet up and polished off their brandies, the recipients of all those delightful gowns were passing through the nondescript doors of the assembly rooms, and craning their necks to see who was here, who was where, and whether he had shown up yet. It was also necessary to ascertain if any other attendee was wearing anything similar in style and colour, and if so, how to avoid her for the entire evening.

Gowns were supposed to be unique to the wearer, of course, but since there were only so many yards of each fabric in London, some duplications were inevitable. Thus far, ribbons, trims, flounces, and lace had helped avert disasters.

HRH had not appeared yet, but just about everyone else had, and moving from one place to another was quite a chore. Especially for a tall, well-proportioned gentleman who was accompanying his sister and mother on this exciting evening.

He didn't find it in the least bit exciting, however, more a nuisance, since there was nowhere to sit, stand, or do much of anything. Forget finding food or beverages, the only thing for him to do, really, was lean against the wall and try not to tread on anyone's gown, or train, or in one case a small dog.

The Right Honourable Ashe Trease shared a moment of silent communication with the pup. He was just about as irritated as the little chap glaring at everyone. The dog had the advantage, though, since he could nip an ankle if he wanted to.

Ashe was reduced to the occasional heavy sigh.

"Excuse me."

The carefully modulated tones of a lady percolated Ashe's misery.

"I am trying to get past. Please move..."

He looked around—and down, to where a woman was staring at him. She had the loveliest brown eyes and elegant features, but her expression was less than friendly.

"I beg your pardon." Ashe would have bowed, but there just wasn't room. "As you can see, this crush has me pretty much locked in, but if you give me your direction, perhaps I might forge a path that will allow you to follow in reasonable comfort?"

She thought for a moment, one eyebrow lifting slightly. "I suppose that would suffice." Then she nodded. "Very well. I am going to the refreshment room."

Ash frowned. "You are? Why?" There were many things that Almack's was, quite correctly, known for. The splendour of their served refreshments wasn't one of them.

"That, sir, is none of your business."

Irritated, Ashe raised his own eyebrow. Higher than hers. “Since I’m about to trample several of my fellow human beings on your behalf,” he said calmly. “I think it only fair to be absolutely sure you know what you’re walking toward.”

“Oh, just do it, will you? Or I’ll attempt it on my own.”

He huffed out a breath. “Short tempered too. I pity your husband.”

“You need not waste your pity, sir. I neither have nor want one, not that it’s any of your business.”

“You’re not here alone,” he frowned.

“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous.” She snorted and raised her chin. “This must be your first time at Almack’s, or you’d know not to ask such a silly question.”

“Actually...”

“Once you’ve been accepted by the Patronesses, then permission is granted to access whatever room one desires.” The look of disdain was clear. “The refreshment room is mostly likely occupied by gentlemen, most of whom are trying to avoid dancing, but very shortly will also be welcoming many ladies. I plan on meeting a friend there. However, I suppose it could take you some time to become accustomed to the ways of acceptable behaviour at Almack’s.” She looked down her nose at him, which was, he thought, quite an accomplishment, since she was a lot shorter.

“Indeed, Ma’am...”

Ashe didn’t get chance to finish what he was saying, as the crowd moved around him, allowing a woman to bear down on him with an enormous smile.

“Ashe, darling,” said Lady Jersey. “I heard you were going to be here, and I’m utterly thrilled.”

The most notorious Patroness of Almack’s hugged him and, as he bent down, planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Now, my dear. I must make you known to people.” She noticed the woman standing next to him. The one with the shocked look on her face and her eyes wide.

“Of course. Let’s begin here.” Sally Jersey turned to Ashe again. “Let me introduce you to Miss Florinda Boothe, daughter of Sir Malcolm and Lady Boothe.”

“Miss Boothe.” Ashe looked at her and bowed.

“Er, hullo.” Miss Boothe looked back at him, her expression of confusion mixed with a degree of embarrassment a delight to behold. She barely remembered to curtsy.

He managed not to laugh, though, because Sally then turned the tables. “Miss Boothe, this is the Right Honourable Ashe Trease, very eligible bachelor, and exactly the sort of lovely man who is always a credit to our humble evenings, wouldn’t you say?”

Ashe managed not to blush, merely raising Sally’s hand to his lips and dropping a warm kiss on it.

“Er, of course, my Lady. Quite right, quite right indeed.” Miss Boothe’s eyebrow had resumed its normal position, Ashe noted.

But that chin remained high, and her eyes were saying many things that probably never passed her lips in public.

Ashe was intrigued.

She obviously wasn't.

"Miss Boothe has been granted permission to waltz, Ashe, should you be looking for a partner in this sad crush," said Sally archly. "In the meantime, I must leave you two to get better acquainted." She turned away, only to glance over her shoulder. "Oh, by the way, he's not coming tonight, so as soon as the word gets out, we'll all have a great deal more room to move."

"Thank God," muttered Ashe to her retreating back.

He glanced at Miss Boothe. "So, Ma'am, would you still like an escort? We might be able to push through a little easier in a moment or two, once Sally has whispered the news around."

Those brown eyes narrowed. "I have changed my mind," she said. "There will be no need for you to discompose yourself, sir. But I must offer my thanks for your promised assistance."

And with a haughty sniff and the briefest of curtsies, she spun around on her heel and retreated along the wall.

"What a b—"

"Ashe, here you are, dammit. I've been looking for you everywhere." The voice of his best friend, Northwick Barlow, cut off the word trembling on Ashe's lips.

"I've been stuck here for a while, North," replied Ashe protestingly. "Just couldn't move an inch. Which is why, if you'll recall..." he poked his friend's shoulder, "I said we shouldn't think of coming to these dratted rooms. Nothing but fuss and bother."

“But the ladies, old lad. We’d miss out on all the eligible ladies. Some of ‘em even have more than tuppence, you know.”

Ashe sighed. “I’m not looking for a rich bride, North, you know that.”

“Yes but, dear fellow, I bloody well am, so as my best friend in the entire world, which you declared yourself to be last night, quite loudly, I might add...”

“In my own defence, it was the brandy,” muttered Ashe.

“As my best friend,” repeated North, ignoring the comment, “you should be overjoyed to stand at my side as I pick the finest filly with the best purse, and bestow upon her the honour of marrying me and making me a rich man.”

Ashe shook his head and chuckled. “I can assure you my cup of happiness will be quite full should that occur. As hers will be, as well, without a doubt.” He glanced at the clock and smiled. “However, I’m off to find m’mother and sister. Time for us to depart.” The ‘thank God’ was very clearly implied.

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“Well, who was he?” Susan Finchley stared at her friend.

“Who was who?” answered Florinda, casually lifting one of her mobile eyebrows in question, as if she didn’t know who they were talking about.

“The tall gentleman by the wall. I saw you two exchanging words. You know the one I mean, the really attractive one.”

“He wasn’t that handsome,” returned Florinda, irritated. “And I’ve never heard of him before. Silly name. Ashe, I think. Ashe Trease.”

Susan giggled. “Really? Ashe Trease?” The giggle became a laugh. “I wonder if he has a brother called Fir?”

“Really, Susan. That’s quite immature.”

“Florinda.” Susan stared at her. “Do not tell me you hadn’t already thought of that?”

“Well...”

The two girls stared at each other, and then laughed, trying hard to hide their amusement behind their fans.

After a few minutes of shared hilarity, they forced their countenances back into the acceptable mode of “I’m charmed to be here and everyone should be delighted to meet me”, which every debutante attempted to assume at Almack’s.

“So, is there anyone here of interest?” Florinda looked around. “I never got chance to visit the refreshment room.”

“I’m glad. Going in there on your own without a friend with you? Silly idea, if you ask me.”

“Nonsense. I’m sure there were plenty of ladies there. I might even have taken a chance on a stale biscuit or two.”

“Not worth it.” Susan shook her head. “Eat fresh biscuits at home, Florinda. If some gentlemen had approached you, you might have risked your reputation being in there unescorted. Such a thing could scare away potential husbands.”

“Oh.” She considered the notion. “What a wonderful idea.”

Susan rolled her eyes as she tucked her hand into her friend's arm and steered her back toward the music. "Are you still determined not to wed?"

"I'm determined to find you a husband, my dear, since you seem to be set on the notion. For myself? No thank you."

"Miss Boothe, Miss Fincham."

Accosted in their progress by two gentlemen they'd been attempting to avoid all evening, both girls managed quite pleasant and correct curtsies.

"Mr Franklin. Sir Walter." Polite smiles were exchanged.

"There will be a waltz coming up," said Sir Walter, his eye on Florinda. "Perhaps you might do me the honour..."

"My apologies." Florinda raised her arm and waved the card hanging from her wrist vaguely in his direction. "My dances are all taken for this evening."

He turned to Susan. "Would you have room?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I just filled my card, too." She did, noted Florinda, offer the sad news with an encouraging smile, leaving both gentlemen looking disappointed.

"Our hopes are quite dashed," bowed Mr Franklin. "We must make sure to be beforehand with you both next Wednesday."

"How delightful," said Susan.

"Indeed," echoed Florinda.

Moving on, both girls heaved a sigh of relief, and found a now-available niche in which to catch their breaths. From their vantage point, they could see all the way through the rooms to the front.

“At least the crowd is thinning a bit,” said Florinda, slightly distracted by the sight of the back of the Right Honourable Ashe Trease’s head as he escorted two ladies out the door. He was, she realised, quite distinctive.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of this crush. There’s nobody interesting here, except for your Mr Trease, and you won’t tell me about him, anyway.” Susan’s shoulders slumped. “He looked very nice from a distance.”

“I’m sure he is everything that is utterly charming, however, he just left,” said Florinda absently. “And at this moment, I don’t particularly care about anyone or anything other than finding Mama and getting out of here.”

Susan sighed. “She’s with my Aunt. Probably near the musicians, if they’ve put some chairs there this time.”

“Ah.” Florinda took Susan’s arm again and steered her that way. “Come along, then. Between the two of us, I’m fairly sure we can persuade them it’s time to go home.”

Thus intentioned, the pair of pretty young ladies directed their steps toward their chaperones, and less than a quarter of an hour later, they too were taking their leave through the very doors that Ashe and his party had used not ten minutes earlier.

Of course, many others had used the same doors in that time, but it is useful to note at this point that the paths of Florinda Boothe and Ashe Trease have now crossed twice in one evening.

Could this be a portent of things to come?

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Lady Adeline Frothingham's Musicale (featuring world-famous Soprano La Contessa Adorabella DiRossi, in her First London Performance)

“Welcome, Lady Boothe, Miss Boothe, Miss Finchley.”

The butler accepted their invitations and gestured toward the large foyer of Frothingham House, where maids and footmen were busy relieving guests of their outerwear. Since it had rained steadily all day, the entire space, massive though it was, reeked slightly of wet dog.

Florinda shook out her skirts, hoping her brief trip from carriage to doorway hadn't splashed the robin's egg blue silk too badly.

Beside her, Susan was doing much the same thing. “My feet got wet,” she frowned.

“They'll dry off. And we'll be sitting most of the evening, so you don't have to worry about squishing while dancing.”

“Very true.” Susan nodded her agreement. “I've heard that La Contessa is quite a fine singer,” she observed, tucking an errant flower back into the ornate trim around her neckline.

“Yes,” answered Florinda, her voice dry. “With an equally fine figure, I understand.”

“Well, that would go without saying, wouldn't it?” Susan shot her a quick glance. “I mean, she has to have excellent lung capacity...”

Florinda rolled her eyes.

“Come along, girls. We must take our seats.”

Lady Boothe shepherded her little flock of two through the hubbub that filled foyers on such occasions, and into the enormous ballroom that always struck Florinda as being quite out of place in a London house. It would have been more at home in a magnificent palace, somewhere out in the wilds of Somerset, where there was room to spare.

On this night, there were many chairs lined up neatly before a dais, upon which rested the obligatory musical instruments. One lonely fellow had already taken his place and was quietly tuning his violin, providing an excellent background accompaniment to the murmur and rumble of voices, increasing a little as the guests found seats, settled themselves, turned and waved to others and carried on conversations in politely dulcet tones.

The squeal of a chair on the polished floor distracted Florinda, and she shot a look in that direction, only to find herself staring right into the face of a certain gentleman she'd worked quite hard to forget. Obviously, her nights of contemplation had failed, since her heart thudded rather suddenly at his appearance.

He paused, his lips twitched into a slight smile, and he nodded, a very small movement, but clearly intended for her. Then he turned aside and resumed his job of seating the lady he was with.

Probably his mama, she thought, since the white hair, feathers, and overly large jewellery gave it away. Why older women found themselves in dire need of the most enormous gems that could be worn without tipping the wearer over, Florinda had no idea.

Looking down at her hands, she closed her eyes for a brief moment, and attempted to retrieve her countenance, which had been threatened, for some unknown reason, at the sight of Mr Trease.

Thank goodness it was a concert, with limited mingling. There would be a performance, then a break for some refreshments, at which point guests could stretch their legs and fill their stomachs at the same time. After that, though, it would be back to their seats and the rest of the performance.

“Florinda,” said Susan quietly, nudging her friend.

“What?”

“Do you see him?”

About to say yes, how did you know, Florinda realised that Susan was talking about someone quite different. Her friend’s gaze was fixed upon the dais, and the man with the violin.

He continued to fiddle with strings and pegs, plucking, then lifting the instrument to his shoulder, running his bow over the strings, and repeating the process, ignoring his fellows who had joined him on the dais.

“Of course I see him,” she replied. “Looks like he isn’t happy with his violin this evening.” She watched him. “By the time he’s ready, he’ll have played the first aria in bits and pieces, all by himself.”

“But don’t you think he is...” Susan gulped audibly, “delicious?”

Florinda looked more closely. “Well, I suppose you might say so if you find long, fair, silky hair, and long fingers to match, appealing.”

At that moment, the musician stood, adjusted his music stand, then sat down again.

Florinda cleared her throat. “He’s quite acceptably built, too.”

Since the only response from Susan was a gusty sigh, she took that as a sign of agreement with her assessment.

The room was nearly full, and a rustle that began at the door heralded the arrival of the evening’s celebrity. Florinda waited with interest to see the much-lauded soprano in the flesh.

And there was a lot of it.

La Contessa personified that delightful Italian word “abbondanza”, in a variety of different ways.

Her ensemble was magnificent, brilliant peacock blue silk swathed her very generous curves, and feathers from the bird itself adorned the many black shining curls cascading from a knot on the top of her head.

Moving down in one’s assessment, the next notable feature was the prominently displayed cleavage, a valley of unknown proportions which descended between pale mountains, tucked—mostly—within a covering of gold lace and silk.

“Good lord,” muttered Florinda, suddenly and uncomfortably aware of her modest breasts.

“Heavens above,” breathed Susan. “That is a lot of woman.”

“With a very talented modiste,” added Florinda, observing the more than ample rear view of the Contessa as she swayed her way toward the dais.

“She can’t possibly sit down. That gown will split like a roast potato.”

Susan’s comment made Florinda snort a laugh, which in turn earned her a frown from her mother.

“I’m sorry, Mama, but you must admit...”

Lady Boothe frowned at her daughter. “Polite gels do not make personal remarks, Florinda. Must I remind you of that?”

“No Mama,” she replied respectfully.

“I will confess to some curiosity, however, as to the name of her modiste.”

Florinda grinned. “I’ll wager the poor woman is lying on her bed, being fanned by her seamstresses and drinking brandy.”

Lady Boothe politely hid her snicker with her fan. “Hush now. I think the performance is about to start.”

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She was here.

Ashe had tried very hard indeed to put her out of his mind over the intervening days, refusing to dwell on her spirited manner, her glowing brown eyes, shapely assets, her well—other things that it wouldn’t be polite to name.

But by God she had skin he would very much like to touch, just to verify that it was as silken as it looked just above her bodice...or beneath, come to think of it...those soft curves... Damn.

Now here he was, several rows away from her, and already his evening breeches were uncomfortable. He slipped the programme over his lap.

“Everything all right, dear?” His mother leaned toward him. “After Frothingham says a few words, I’m sure the concert will begin.”

“Frothingham has never said a few words in his life, Mama. We’ll be here ’til Christmas if he gets going.”

“Shhh.” She patted his hand comfortably. “If he takes too long, I wouldn’t be surprised if Contessa DiRossi got hungry and took a bite out of his backside.”

Caught off-guard, Ashe managed to turn his bark of laughter into a cough without attracting attention.

He leaned to her side. “I love you very much, Mama,” he whispered.

“Good boy,” she grinned. “Now hush.”

Lady Hazel Trease was one of a kind, mused her son, and when he had told her that, she’d laughed. She had raised her children, her forest of Trease as Ashe’s father called them, with a firm hand and a loving heart.

Lord Hawthorn Trease was an excellent match for her, sparring verbally, laughing prodigiously, and unafraid to show affection to his brood. In fact, he was often heard to declare that he was “damn proud of all of ‘em.”

Which sentiment was, of course, returned fully by his five offspring, who had all come to terms with the naming tradition within the Trease family. It went back, so t’was said, to the time when a certain member of the then-royal family was rescued from an embarrassing predicament and bestowed the title and lands on his saviour.

Ashe had his own ideas about what had occurred in that barn, but that was several centuries ago, and since then the Trease family had prospered through common sense, friendship, and the ability to wield a sword when necessary.

Land was everything, Ashe knew, and the marquessate would continue through him when the unimaginable happened and he lost his Papa.

Which doubtless explained his Mama's desire for him to accompany them to London this season, and do things like sit in uncomfortable chairs, waiting for their host to finish his fulsome and meandering introduction, which was now happening right in front of him.

However, a short burst of music from the lead violinist made Lord Frothingham jump, recall himself, and introduce the evening's star guest.

Finally, the concert began, and Ashe sighed with relief.

Until La Contessa hit the first high note, and there was an odd tinkling sound that had him sitting straighter in his chair.

He glanced at his mother, who had not apparently noticed it. He shrugged to himself. Perhaps he was coming down with something.

But no, that same note, and more, even higher, were starting to vibrate around him.

This time it was no mistake. Ashe had no idea what note it was, since his musical training was next to none. His piano teacher had resigned after three lessons, declaring he was tone deaf and the only instrument he should be allowed near was a drum, and that only if it were buried deep in the woods behind Forest Hall.

Frowning, he looked at the other guests, and a few of them seemed to be shifting in

their seats, also glancing around.

Miss Florinda Boothe was one of them, and by chance their gazes met, both puzzled by the odd occurrence.

She lifted an eyebrow. What's going on?

Instinctively, he raised his shoulders in answer. I don't know.

His concern grew apace as the musical notes seem to vary between the melodious, the high, and the guaranteed-to-make-a-dog-howl levels.

Where the aria was going, he had no idea, but he was now extremely uncomfortable, and he finally looked up to see—to his horror—all the chandeliers in the Frothingham ballroom shimmering, trembling under the musical assault.

Having seen what a high-pitched sound could do to crystal (although he'd never revealed to anyone where he had been at the time, and how it happened, nor would he), Ashe feared the worst.

"Mama," he said, clutching her arm. "Your train."

"Shhh," she whispered, unaware of what was happening.

"Put it over your head. Now."

"What?"

He reached behind her, grabbed the flowing fabric and tossed it over her, crushing feathers, and making her sputter. Then he leaned close and got beneath it himself.

Only just in time.

Contessa DiRossi hit the final note of the aria and, with what sounded like an agonised scream, the glass candleholders in every chandelier surrendered to the audible torture and gave up their lives, shattering into droplets of diamond bright rain.

All over the guests sitting beneath them in the Frothingham ballroom.

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Hatchard's Library and Reading Rooms, the week following the 'Incident' at Frothingham House

Florinda settled her Mama in a comfortable chair near a table set up for the convenience of the patrons. Hatchard's was nothing if not customer-friendly and, as it happened, Mrs Harriet Blackstone, a bosom-bow of Lady Boothe's, had also chosen that morning to visit the bookstore.

Thus, the two ladies were quite content next to each other, presumably discussing fine literature. Florinda knew better, of course. Her mother was doubtless indulging in the favoured pastime of all London mamas during the Season...evaluating every single eligible bachelor, and even a few she hadn't met yet.

The excuse of picking up the latest novel from any of their favourite authors gave the mothers of the Metropolis plenty of opportunities to chat with their peers, share experiences, both positive and negative, and thus continue to create the overwhelmingly complicated "dictionary" of who should be marrying—or at least pursuing with interest—whom.

Hatchard's Reading Rooms provided the perfect setting for these matrimonial machinations.

Florinda, although aware of what was going on as bonnet feathers bobbed and fluttered over maternal heads, really was there to find herself some books.

She enjoyed reading and had done even as a little girl. Stealing into her father's library and just inhaling the scent of the volumes was a delight; being able to read

more and more of them as she grew up? A joy indeed.

And with the recent publication of a delightfully witty and engaging novel titled “Sense and Sensibility”, Florinda was now in eager pursuit of another book by the same author.

Focussing on the shelves and titles, she was completely shocked to find herself almost bumping into a gentleman doing the same thing.

“Miss Boothe. What a delightfully unexpected pleasure.”

She swallowed. “Mr Trease. I’m surprised to find you here.”

“Really? At Hatchard’s? I do read, you know.”

“Of course. I never assumed otherwise. But this section contains...well, novels. Surely, you’re more of a racing-form man, or something...”

“Then you are under a misapprehension, which I must take it upon myself to correct.” He touched a book. “I have found a great deal of pleasure in this book by an anonymous writer. Sense and Sensibility. Have you read it?”

Slightly stunned, Florinda nodded. “Of course. I enjoyed it very much, and in fact, my mission today is to find her latest work.”

“I see our minds are running along the same paths, Miss Boothe,” he said in amusement. “Let me also add I’m pleased to see no visible signs of injury after last week’s—er—events?”

She smiled. “Thankfully, we were far enough away to avoid being hurt,” she explained. “It could have been a lot worse if all the crystals had shattered, not just the

glass candle holders, would you agree?”

“Most definitely. Although I’ll confess that at first, I could have sworn that every chandelier in the place had exploded.”

Chuckling, Florinda agreed. “It did seem that way.”

At that moment, another patron started down the bookshelf aisle toward them.

“Would you do me the honour of sharing a table? There are several that are empty in the other reading room, and I would enjoy a conversation with you, Miss Boothe.”

She looked at him, wondering at the gentle look in his blue eyes. And goodness, they were truly blue. Like a spring sky, or a robin’s egg or...

“Miss Boothe?”

“I’m sorry. My wits were wandering. Yes, sir, I believe a few moments of conversation would be most pleasant.”

“Excellent.”

With a smile, he held out his arm, and she placed her hand on it, trying very hard not to squeeze it and measure the strength of the muscle beneath. He might have been an unknown in London, but she was ready to wager her best bonnet that wherever he lived, the ladies were well aware of his appeal.

Once settled in a chair next to a small table, Florinda glanced around, happy to see that in such a genteel and innocuous atmosphere, her sitting with a gentleman had occasioned no screams of shocked outrage, or violent assertions of impropriety.

“Worried?”

Damn him, could he read her thoughts?

“Of course not.” She straightened her spine in the chair. “This is one of the few places where a gentleman and a lady may share discourse without having to wed the next day.” She couldn’t stop the bitter sigh that followed her statement.

“Do I sense a slight touch of melancholy? Possibly from being ‘cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d’?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Goodness. You are well read, Mr Trease.”

“As are you for recognising the words, Miss Boothe.”

She shrugged. “I am of the somewhat unpopular opinion that everyone should read Shakespeare, sir.”

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Don’t tell anyone, but I agree.”

“Oh dear.” She pretended shock, amused at the way his eyes lit up with humour.

“Well then.” Straightening, he looked around the room. “Now that we’ve shared our darkest secrets, what shall we discuss next?”

Florinda pursed her lips. “Might I inquire what brings you to London? I sense that you are not a permanent resident of the Metropolis.”

“Yes, you rather made that point at our first meeting.” His mouth curved into a charming grin.

She bit her lip. "I believe I owe you an apology, Mr Trease. I can only offer the excuse that I was quite tired, my feet were hurting, and I was more than ready to go home, but had to wait upon others."

"And so you took it out on me."

"Um, yes. I suppose you could say that."

"I just did."

Florinda frowned. "I apologised."

"No, you said you owe me an apology. I haven't actually received it yet," he answered punctiliously.

Irritated, she straightened. "Very well then...Mr Trease..."

"No, wait." He stopped her with a brief touch on her hand.

"For what?"

"I have a better idea. Instead of a verbal apology, which will of course be over in four or five seconds, maybe even ten if you decide to utilise the extensive vocabulary which, as a reader, I'm sure you possess..."

"Mr Trease. Do you have a point? Because if so, please get to it shortly before I wither and die of old age right here in Hatchard's reading room..."

He held back a laugh. "Very well. Ride with me."

"What?" She blinked at him.

“Do you ride?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Horses?”

“Er...what else would I ride?”

“Well, there are lots of things, you know. Camels, elephants, donkeys, even cows, apparently, can be ridden if one knows the right place to sit.”

“Really?” Caught up in his silliness, she slipped and betrayed her fascinated interest.

This time he laughed, a rich genuine chuckle of delight. And something, some sparkle, some sound, some vibration...whatever it was, it shook Florinda to her core. She gulped down a gasp of surprise.

Fortunately, he hadn't noticed, since he was now shaking his head. “It's my turn to apologise. I'm frequently told I'm much too literal. I would simply like to invite you to accompany me on horseback one morning soon. I enjoy a ride in Hyde Park and would take pleasure in sharing it with you. And you cannot but agree that it would be the perfect way for you to settle your debt.”

Florinda wondered why her brain should suddenly have turned into something that couldn't produce useful words, so she closed her eyes briefly and took a breath, praying that might return her to the normally calm and controlled woman she knew herself to be.

“Yes.”

Well, it wasn't quite the flowing and loquacious phrase she was hoping for, but it got

her point across.

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She'd accepted his offer.

Ashe stared at the shelves in front of him, seeing nothing at all, his mind filled with the delighted astonishment that had clobbered him upside the head with one simple word. Yes.

He got the feeling that she was as much surprised as he at her response, but damned if he was going to ask her. She'd agreed, and that's all there was to it.

Now, he could spend the next hours kicking himself for not asking if she had her own mount, wondering if she knew where the entrance was so that they could meet there as he'd suggested, and a dozen other stupid things that were merrily dancing through his apparently damaged brain.

Should he bring a posy of flowers?

A small token of his appreciation? A fan? A pair of gloves?

Should he bring his mother as chaperone?

What if it rained?

"Excuse me."

A firm tap on the shoulder brought his attention back to his present surroundings, and he turned to find himself the target of a severely frowning gaze. "You are in my way, young man."

“Lady Sandford,” he bowed deeply. “I do apologise. I must have been wool-gathering.”

“You were standing there long enough to breed a herd of sheep, let alone shear and gather the wool. There are others who might like to read a book, you know.” Her eyebrows were grey, bushy, and fiercely drawn together.

“Of course, Ma’am. Again, my apologies.” He paused. “If you have need of a book from one of the higher shelves, please allow me to assist you?”

It was a vain effort to atone for his behaviour, he knew, and her Ladyship proved it.

“If it’s that high up, I’ll not be able to read the title, will I? And if I can’t read the title, how will I know if I want it or not?”

Ashe sighed. “Of course. How foolish of me.”

She snorted. “You are a young man. Foolishness is inevitable.”

He bowed again, and—chastened—took himself off as quietly as he could, feeling uncomfortably as if he had suddenly returned to the age of eight and had just been reprimanded by his tutor. And his grandmother. At the same time.

A small part of him hoped that the book she wanted was on the other side of the building. On a very high shelf indeed.

But the diversion had distracted him from his confused thoughts about the morrow and his ride with Miss Florinda Boothe.

Since any chance he had of finding a book he might have enjoyed had now vanished into the disapproving fog surrounding Lady Sandford, he quit Hatchard’s empty-

handed, but with a full mind.

Of course Miss Boothe had a horse. She would have mentioned the lack of a mount otherwise.

It wouldn't dare rain, and there was no need for posies or other gifts. Not for a simple ride in the Park. And he'd be damned if he brought his Mama, who would require a carriage and spend most of the time on an inquisition into Miss Boothe's standing, family, history, and most likely her parents' financial situation.

All of which information she would extract under the guise of charm, smiles, and a genuine interest. He'd seen her do it so often, a sweet look, a bent head, and whoever she was talking to would unburden their souls before they realised what was happening.

But perhaps his Miss Boothe was different. Well, she wasn't exactly his Miss Boothe yet, although now he thought about it, he actually rather hoped she might be at some point in the not-too-distant future.

There was something very appealing about her.

Certainly she was pretty. Attractive in a way that owed nothing to powder and silks, and everything to eyes and lips and a mind that one could nearly hear turning over intelligent thoughts. It was a delight for Ashe to find a woman who wasn't afraid to think. To scold, yes, to read Shakespeare too, and to have a quick wit about her that he liked very much indeed.

He did not have to moderate his conversation—he was damned sure she would not only follow, but take over the lead if the occasion arose.

She challenged him in some ways, charmed him in others.

Was it any wonder she'd snagged his interest?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Hyde Park, a morning not long after the encounter at Hatchard's, with the previous night's fog still lingering in a few places...

"Good morning, Miss Boothe."

Ashe's voice was steady, refusing to let a note of relief creep in, or reveal how delighted he was that she'd kept their appointment.

"It is indeed, Mr Trease," she smiled. "Just right for a ride, wouldn't you say?"

He glanced at her groom. "Should we be escorted?"

She thought for a moment. "Probably, but if we keep in sight, perhaps James may wait here..."

Her gaze travelled to the quiet young man atop another mount. "I am quite safe with Mr Trease, James. We will be riding straight this way," she pointed with her whip, "so you will be able to see us at all times."

The lad grinned and touched his cap. "Very well, Ma'am. If you need anything, just wave, or call."

"Of course." She turned her horse and moved to Ashe's side. "Shall we?"

Aware of a little mental cheer, Ashe nodded. "We shall."

A sedate walk led to a comfortable trot, and then into a canter, the horses' hooves

pacing beside each other with every evidence of pleasure, matched by the riders.

He was pleased to see how well Florinda rode her mare, a smile curving her lips as they made their way down the long swath of green toward a line of trees at the far end.

The air was fresh, the sun started to break through the remnants of last night's fog, and there was a beautiful woman at his side. For this moment at least, Ashe was supremely content.

As they finally slowed to a walk, she turned to him, her eyes alight with what he hoped was joy.

"Oh, that was lovely. I wish...well, I know a good gallop is completely out of the question, but it would have been magnificent, wouldn't it?"

"I couldn't agree more," he grinned. "But since we're riding unescorted, let's not risk adding to our shocking behaviour by giving the horses their heads."

She nodded. "I cannot say I dislike London during the Season, but my goodness, the constraints placed on us females...well it seems a bit ridiculous sometimes." She turned her horse and moved up beside him in preparation for their return.

Ashe couldn't help but agree. "I confess that there are times I'm very happy to be a man." He paused. "And that also seems to sound quite ridiculous, doesn't it?"

She chuckled. "Yes, and no. In the context of our conversation, it makes perfect sense. However, if anyone overheard those words without that context? Yes, I think you'd be on the receiving end of some very odd looks."

That made him laugh aloud. "You have a delightful turn of phrase, Miss Boothe."

“’Tis pleasant to have it appreciated, Mr Trease.”

He glanced at her, appreciating the colour in her cheeks, the sparkling eyes, and the curve of her lips as she smiled at him, the distance between them narrowing as their mounts moved a little.

“Call me Ashe?”

She blinked. “All right, Ashe. If you would return the favour and call me Florinda? Not in public, because...well, we’ve discussed that, haven’t we?”

“We have indeed...Florinda.”

She smiled and nodded appreciatively, her gaze lingering on his face.

And it was, of course, at that very moment of tempting and delicious awareness, a wandering bee landed on Florinda’s horse’s nose, scaring the poor thing, and making her buck in terror, unseating her rider and throwing Florinda out of her stirrups, and off her saddle into the air.

Without a second thought, Ashe reached out and caught her, grabbing her hard and pulling her against his chest. He could feel her heart thundering, see the shock in her gaze, and for a moment wondered if she was about to scream.

Fingers clinging fiercely to his shoulders, her breath seemed to catch in her throat as her eyes lowered to his mouth.

With a groan of need, Ashe answered the call of her ripe lips, and pulled her even closer into his arms so he could lean forward and touch them with his own.

Before either of them really understood what was happening, they were locked in a

fierce and thrilling kiss. No mere gentle or polite caress, this was more of a feeding frenzy, a need to devour the other.

Florinda's lips parted, and she welcomed him as he delved deep, eager to taste her, learn her, feed on her breaths as they came quickly, moaning as the pleasure of his tongue teased hers.

A shout broke them quickly apart.

"Miss Boothe, are you all right?" Her groom galloped up.

She held on to Ashe, sitting almost sidesaddle, fidgeting now as her position became uncomfortable. "I am well, thanks to Mr Trease's quick actions, James. But can you catch Buttercup? I think she may have been stung by a bee."

"Of course, Miss." The lad glanced uncertainly at Ashe. "You're sure you're all right?"

"Indeed yes. Mr Trease has me in hand. Just find my horse and we'll see if she's injured, or well enough for me to ride home."

"I could wish for more time," murmured Ashe as they watched James head for the trees. "Should I apologise for kissing you?"

Florinda's head turned swiftly toward him. "No. Of course not. Besides, I rather think it was I who kissed you." She raised her chin unapologetically.

"Maybe," he bit back a grin. "But I had the idea first, I'm sure."

"Hmph." She turned away again. "I will say, however, that I found it most pleasant."

“Did you?” He kept his voice steady, amused at her calm revelations, and aware she had no idea there was a little place on her neck where her pulse thundered visibly. “I did too.”

He shifted her slightly, knowing that she was probably feeling the pommel of his saddle in uncomfortable places. “I will also add I’d very much like to do it again.”

She was silent for a moment, her eyes on her groom as he headed toward her, towing her recalcitrant mount and grinning. “She’s fine, Miss, no harm done.”

“I must get down,” she said to Ashe.

He dismounted, sliding to the ground and holding up his arms, waiting for her to lean forward so that he could lift her down.

She did exactly as he’d expected, but paused as she landed, keeping her hands on his. “I’d like to do it again too,” she murmured.

Then turned away, clearing her throat and speaking in a normal tone. “Thank you, Mr Ashe. If not for your prompt actions, I might well have been injured.” She allowed James to give her a boost into the saddle with his cupped hands. “I trust we shall ride again soon?”

“I would enjoy that very much, Miss Boothe, and I can only repeat how glad I am that I was able to prevent any injury to your person.”

“Of course.” She nodded regally. “I must leave you now, however. I’m sure we shall be seeing each other before long.”

“Ma’am.” He bowed as she smiled and trotted off with her faithful James behind her.

As he watched, her horse tossed its head and glanced back at him, as if to say, “well, I did my best.”

Ashe sent a tiny nod of thanks to the creature who had thrown something of inestimable value right into his arms.

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Although appearing to be coolly collected, despite her equine adventure, on the inside, Florinda’s thoughts were in turmoil.

Her first real kiss.

She devoutly hoped he’d not realised that, nor had he had any notion that her entire world had changed when his lips touched hers.

Shocked, she’d learned in that instant that there was so much more to a kiss than she had expected, assuming it would be a quick and simple touch. Suddenly she’d been encompassed by him, his fragrance, his warmth, his solid strength, and the urge to part her lips had been surprising, natural, and inevitable.

She wanted to taste him again, to experience what playwrights had waxed poetic over for centuries, to feel that unique and wonderful joining between a man and a woman, that had provided fodder for songs and poems as well as jests and teasing flirtations.

In the past, Florinda had listened to friends as they giggled and blushed over stolen kisses. It had seemed silly to her, but she’d smiled and nodded where appropriate, vowing that she would never succumb to such absurdities.

And yet here she was, cheeks quite unusually warm, her heart thudding beneath her riding jacket, and her mind whirling. All because a man had kissed her, and done so

with passion that had caught her unawares.

The fact that she'd returned that passion? Well, that was a shock from which she wondered if she'd ever recover.

And then, as she turned in to the stables behind the house, she found herself eager to repeat the experience and see if it was as lovely the next time around. Perhaps it would be even better. Perhaps there was more to learn...

Trying to sort it all out, she gave James a passing smile as she dismounted. "I am very grateful for your prompt attention," she said. "I wasn't in any real danger, of course, but one cannot control bees or horses." She patted her mount's head with affection. "I would appreciate it, James, if you didn't mention this little incident to anyone? Lady Boothe does worry, and this was one of those silly things that is completely unavoidable. I'd prefer she remain unaware of it, lest she forbid me to ride again."

"Understood, Miss Boothe." He dipped his head. "I have a mother too."

"In that case, enough said." Florinda turned to the head groom who had arrived to make sure her horse was well cared-for. "Mr Jasper, I commend James to you today. He was an exemplary groom, and I'm delighted to say my ride was enhanced by his presence."

James blushed, and Jasper shot him a look. "Well then, lad. Glad you upheld the honour of our stables."

"He did indeed." Florinda finished peeling off her riding gloves. "Now I must away and change in case there are visitors. Thank you again, James." She smiled at him.

Since he was on the far side of her horse, and looking away from Jasper, he shot her a

cheeky wink. “Miss Boothe.” He bowed correctly.

She managed not to laugh and whisked herself from the barn, entering the house through the back door and inhaling the lovely scent of pies that emanated from the kitchen.

Her maid awaited her in her room. “Here you are then, Miss Florinda. A nice ride, I hope?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued. “I’ve your bath ready and your morning dress laid out here, and Lady Boothe wants you to make sure every hair is in place, because there will be visitors coming by today, she said.”

Florinda’s spirits fell. “Oh.” She blinked and sighed as she unfastened her jacket. “Let me guess. Mama has found some poor man and persuaded him to visit and take a look at me as a potential wife.”

“I dunno as that’s the case, Miss, but...” the girl tilted her head to one side. “Don’t you want to marry? Find a nice husband to take care of you?”

Shedding the rest of her clothes, Florinda stepped into the bath and sat in the warm water, resting her head on her knees. “I don’t know, Nancy. I suppose there might be some advantages...” Like warm lips, strong shoulders, and kisses that sent one’s mind spinning... “But there’s also the chance that a husband would be very...stifling. Someone who would insist on having his way in everything.” She shuddered. “I couldn’t stand that.”

“Well, now, Miss, I’m sure Lady Boothe wouldn’t present someone unsuitable, or a gentleman you might take into dislike?”

Thinking about her mother, she idly soaped her legs. “I’m not sure Mama worries about the things that are important to me, you see. She is more concerned with matters of financial security and status. Whether the man reads Shakespeare or not is

irrelevant to her.”

Nancy thought about that. “I suppose a gentleman who reads a lot wouldn’t be a bad match,” she mused. “At least that would keep him quiet.”

Florinda chuckled. “You have a good point there, and he wouldn’t be bothered to worry about my gowns or what styles were fashionable...”

“Oh, which reminds me. Your new walking dress has arrived. It’s ever so pretty.”

Florinda glanced around. “It is?”

“I hung it there...” The maid moved to a cupboard and opened the door, revealing an attractively styled gown. “Isn’t that nice?”

Frowning, Florinda stared at it. “It looks familiar,” she said, more to herself than her maid.

“Well, this is the most popular style this season, they say,” Nancy shrugged. “So you’re bound to have seen something like it on someone, I suppose.”

“Hmm.”

Lost for an answer to that, Nancy simply held out the towel for Florinda. “I’m sure it’ll come to you if it’s important. And it’ll be nice for you to wear tomorrow morning? Your Mama mentioned that you’re going to be spending some time with Sir Reginald Barking. I’ll wager he’s going to be the nicest, handsomest, and most pleasant gentleman in London.” Her optimism almost glowed around her as she helped Florinda dry off and dress.

The young lady herself, however, was far from excited, and barely managed to hold

back a groan.

“Nancy, I hate to disillusion you, but if it’s the man I’m thinking of, then he is one of the biggest asses in town this Season.”

Shocked, the maid stared open-mouthed at Florinda. “Good heavens, Miss. He can’t be that bad, can he?”

Her spirits down around the slippers she was putting on, Florinda sighed gustily. “Oh yes, Nancy. He is that bad. And more.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Boating on the River Thames, including instructions on how to dispose of an unwanted suitor without actually getting oneself wet.

“Har har har.”

The obnoxious nasal laugh made Florinda wince as she stood on the banks of the Thames and watched as Sir Reginald Barking attempted to put a few items into the large punt moored in the water.

“Got to have cushions, of course, har har,” he brayed.

“Of course.” Florinda’s voice was markedly devoid of expression.

One of the cushions apparently disagreed, since it slid from the pile he’d dropped into the punt and plopped overboard, where the current gently cradled it off on a voyage downstream.

“Bother.” Sir Reginald shrugged. “Never mind. There will be enough to ensure your comfort, Miss Boothe.”

“I’m sure.”

Barely aware that she was speaking in two-word sentences, Florinda’s mind was busily creating pithy and pointed comments which she would be directing at her Mama when she returned home from this less than auspicious outing.

Why the devil Lady Boothe had imagined this...this...clod might be a suitable

candidate for her daughter's hand in marriage, she had no idea at all.

It pained her to accept that the enormous fortune he possessed could have been the overriding incentive, since she herself cared little for such things. Sir Reginald's financial situation, which was indeed impressive, came from his ownership of almost half of an entire southern county.

He did nothing himself, of course, but reaped the benefits of everyone who lived and worked on his lands. She wondered, as he continued to load the punt—adding several baskets of provisions—whether he actually knew what any of his tenants did.

She doubted he knew their names, since he hadn't been able to recall his London manservant's name this morning, passing it off as a mere moment of forgetfulness brought on by the sight of Florinda's beauty, which—he avowed—had driven all other thoughts from his head.

To which she had responded, "Ah."

Given that beginning, her two-word comments might actually be described as quite chatty.

"Right then, Miss Boothe. Your magnificent conveyance awaits only one thing before setting off on its journey to paradise." Sir Reginald grinned toothily. "And that, dear lady, is of course, your presence." He held out his arm. "May I assist you as you embark?"

Florinda looked at the loaded punt, then at the bank, then at the punt, and then at Sir Reginald.

"I believe I would be best served by your presence in the punt, Sir Reginald. You will be able to hold it steady whilst I step in from the bank."

“Oh, yes, har har har. Should’ve thought of that meself.”

Suiting words to action, he stepped into the shallow vessel, making it rock quite violently.

“The pole, Sir Reginald. Pick up the pole and put it down in the water.” The phrase “you idiot” was strongly implied.

Florinda sighed as he struggled to follow her directions. Vainly she sought a reason to walk away from this entire business, since it was shaping up to become a rather watery disaster. But that would have been the height of rudeness; after all, he’d gone to the trouble of ordering his servants to provide cushions and a picnic basket.

There was a young lad waiting on the bank as well, and she shot him a glance, only to see him trying his best to smother a laugh.

“You’re going to be doing the poling, yes?”

He choked down his amusement. “If we ever gets that far, Ma’am, yes. But at the rate he’s goin’...”

Florinda sighed in agreement. “Well, you never know...”

“All right, Miss Boothe. Har har har. Your turn.” Sir Reginald extended his arm, his feet now balanced on the floor of the punt. “Quite safe, dear lady. Don’t be nervous at all.”

Since she had enjoyed punting for more than a few years, she could easily have reassured him in that regard. But having watched his inept performance, Florinda was no longer so certain that this was the safest thing she would do this month. She could swim, thank heavens, but would prefer not to. Especially not in the Thames after

being dunked from a punt inexpertly handled by a ranting nodcock foisted on her by a mother desperate to see her daughter wed.

She sighed and stepped carefully into the vessel, ignoring Sir Reginald's arm, and trying not to be too uncomfortable with the fact that the only other person on the punt looked to be someone about twelve years old. Within moments she sat comfortably on the cushions and unfurled her parasol.

"Oh. Har har har. How gracefully you did that, Miss Boothe. And to see you so comfortable? I would say a swan sailing out into the river cannot be more graceful than you embarking on our journey." His eyes narrowed. "'Tis hard to believe you are unwed; such a beautiful prize unclaimed." Then he smiled. "Yet..."

Florinda discovered that she could actually manage a smile of sorts, even though her thoughts were not in the least bit amused, and her skin displayed a tendency to crawl at the look in his eyes. "How kind." She reverted to her preferred two-word sentence.

Sir Reginald, of course, had to ascertain that everything he'd required was, in fact, aboard. During his stock-taking, he had offered Florinda a glass of wine (she'd declined), a shrimp patty (also declined), and had made sure to taste the pies, in order (he said) to verify that they were up to the Barking standards.

Finally, they pushed away from the bank and out into the Thames.

The pole was being skillfully handled by the lad, whose name turned out to be Dickon, and who was clearly more comfortable with the punt than the man who had hired him. He had patiently listened to all the directions showered upon him by his temporary employer, and Florinda's respect for him grew, since she was quite ready to grab the pole and beat Sir Reginald over the head with it.

"If you would, sir," said Dickon respectfully, "try to keep yourself balanced?"

Reaching over the side to dabble your hands in the water is making for a bit of a rough go for the lady.” He paused. “Sir.”

Florinda could almost hear the implied “you idiot”, and managed not to chuckle, since this was one of those rare times when she and a young lad from the other side of London were obviously thinking the identical thing.

Sir Reginald was indeed rocking the punt. He seemed unable to sit still for more than a moment or two; if not reaching behind him into the basket, he was turning from one side to the other and gesturing at things he thought might interest her.

Like a tree. Or a squirrel. Or a flower or two blooming amongst the weeds along the bank.

It soon became clear that the word silence meant nothing to Sir Reginald.

And right after that, it became even clearer that Florinda couldn’t possibly survive an hour on the Thames with this ceaseless and meaningless prattle ruining what could have been quite a nice trip.

A few people were now appearing along the bank, since it was a popular path. Some rode, some drove carriages, and even more were walking; the walk here was broad and offered a lovely view of the river as it meandered on its way to the ocean beyond.

And Sir Reginald kept talking. And braying that laugh of his, which sent birds fluttering from trees and made her teeth clench.

Half an hour later, Florinda was approaching desperation, ready to push the man into the Thames, grab the pole from Dickon, and hold him underwater until he shut up.

Since that was not the sort of thing a lady did (although she might think about it a

lot), she decided the simplest way to end the journey was to use Sir Reginald's faults against him.

"Oh, Sir Reginald," she said, interrupting his soliloquy on a dragonfly which had stupidly settled on his knee. "Wouldn't this be a delightful location to pause our voyage? I declare I am quite thirsty."

"Of course, of course, my dear." Sir Reginald turned to Dickon. "Stop the boat, boy."

Dickon, who looked as if he was about to roll his eyes or point out that boats don't stop on a sixpence, caught Florinda's meaningful glance, blinked, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

They slowed, and Florinda pointed to a spot just before the river turned again.

Dickon narrowed his eyes at her, then grinned. "I'll tie up then, sir, just for a bit, so's you and the lady can stretch your legs if you want."

"Yes, yes, go on then." Sir Reginald dismissed him with barely a shrug. "Miss Boothe, my dear, some wine? I'll wager the lad will give us some privacy, and I believe you'll enjoy this vintage." He puffed out his chest. "I had it delivered this morning, just in from France."

"Oh my." Florinda did her best to radiate interest.

Sir Reginald rocked the punt as he stood and reached for the basket, nearly tipping the dratted thing over as he tried to balance sufficiently to reach the wine.

"One moment," Florinda reached out and caught his arm, pulling him back to centre the punt. "I would love to stretch my legs, so why don't I walk on the bank for a minute or two, while you open the wine?" She managed a smile so patently false she

was surprised he responded to it with one of his own.

“An excellent idea,” he beamed. “You, lad, take yourself off until I call.”

Dickon shot a quick look at Florinda, who gave him a tiny nod. “Very good, sir.” He pulled the pole from the water as he looped the rope around a convenient root, securing the punt to the bank.

“Here you go, then Miss.”

Florinda accepted his hand, stood, and stepped out onto dry land with a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Dickon.” She moved a little closer, facing away from Sir Reginald, currently fussing with wine glasses in the basket.

“You know, it would be quite a shame were the rope to come loose just here, wouldn’t it?” Looking around the river bend, she noticed with delight a swifter current.

“Indeed, Miss. Would be awful, I should think. Especially for someone not used to punting.”

“They wouldn’t drown, though, would they?”

“I doubt it,” said Dickon quietly. “Not much more than five feet or so, and even shallower at the bend.”

“Excellent.”

They shared a mutual grin as Florinda began a slow stroll along the bank, allowing herself to actually enjoy the sunshine and the river, without the distraction of a prattling idiot. It was the kind of day that England could produce unexpectedly and

reminded one of the beauties it offered at this time of year.

“I say...” Sir Reginald’s voice intruded into her moment of pleasure, and she sighed, turning back.

“I do beg your pardon,” she began. “Such a lovely day for a stroll. And a ride in a punt, of course...”

“Yes, but...” his voice was quite uncertain.

Florinda could see why. The vessel had, unfortunately, become disengaged from the root, and was now floating away from the bank into midstream, with only Sir Reginald aboard.

He stood with a wine bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, frowning and looking around him, as if unable to accept what was happening.

“You lad,” he called. “Get back here with that pole.”

Dickon moved to the edge of the bank. “Oh dear, sir. I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t get to you now. You’re too far out and I can’t swim...I dunno how this could have happened. Did you touch the rope at all?”

“No, of course not, you stupid...” He paused. “Well, it was caught in the side of the basket. I suppose I might have just...”

The punt rocked and Sir Reginald sat down in a hurry, tipping it to one side and almost taking on water. “Oh. God, what...help...someone...”

“Never you fear, sir, we’ll get someone to rescue you,” called Dickon.

“Don’t worry, Sir Reginald, we’ll alert somebody further downstream.” Florinda calmly watched as the punt pitched slightly, hitting the current as it swept around the bend. “I’m sure you’ll be perfectly safe. And what a fine adventure you’re having.”

She really tried not to sound too amused, but knew on some level she’d failed.

“But what about you?” called Sir Reginald, to his credit. “How will you get home?”

Another voice answered that frantic question.

“Have no fear, sir. I will charge myself with the lady’s safe return to wherever she needs to go.”

“No wait...oh nooo...” the call sounded fainter as Sir Reginald’s nautical adventure continued apace.

Florinda turned toward land, scarcely believing her ears, let alone her eyes. But sure enough, there he was, sitting on a horse, quietly watching her, an amused grin curving his lips.

“Good day, Miss Boothe.”

“Mr Trease,” she answered, pleased that her voice did not reflect the inner turmoil she was currently experiencing. “What a surprise.”

“Sheer coincidence, Ma’am,” he bowed slightly. “But I see we both found it a beautiful day, although our choices of enjoying it differ somewhat.” He shot a quick glance down the river. “Should I rescue him?”

“God no.” She couldn’t help the words pop from her mouth, inappropriate though they were.

His choked laugh was quickly stifled. "In that case, would you allow me to escort you home?"

Florinda glanced at Dickon. "Will you be all right?"

"Of course, Ma'am. Thank you." He bowed. "I know everyone along the river, so don't you worry none." He leaned toward her, a wicked light in his eyes. "An' I'll see that Sir Puff a Lot doesn't come to any harm."

Florinda turned to Ashe. "Would you have a coin or two on you, Mr Trease?"

He narrowed his eyes, but nodded, fishing a crown from beneath his riding jacket. "Will this suffice?"

"Excellent. Thank you." She took it as he held it out, then turned to Dickon. "You've earned this, along with my profound thanks. And I hope Sir Reginald paid you?"

"He did, Miss. I knows better than to go out without my money first." He accepted the coin. "But this is most welcome. My Ma will be very happy."

Dickon touched his cap and grabbed the pole, heading off along the riverbank as Florinda turned to Ashe.

"Well now. I suppose I must once again find myself sitting on your horse," she began. "It's going to become a habit if we're not careful."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Ashe jumped down, and before she knew it, she was in the saddle. This time, he sat behind her, lessening her discomfort.

And then they were on their way, a leisurely walk in the sunshine, his arms comfortable around her as he held the reins.

“So,” he began, humour in his voice. “Having a nice morning, are we?”

Florinda sighed. “It wasn’t...but it is now.” She smiled, the truth of her idle words sinking in as she inhaled his fragrance and allowed herself the luxury of leaning against him.

Yes. This was indeed a very nice way to spend a morning.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Wherein Occurs a Social Disaster of Shattering Proportions on the Banks of the River Thames, Beneath the Branches of a Convenient Weeping Willow...

Ashe was oddly content just to walk the horse quietly along the river with the intriguing armful of delightful woman that was Florinda Boothe. It felt...right.

And his feelings might perhaps be reciprocated, since she was settled against his chest with every appearance of comfort and enjoyment, her back relaxed, her breathing steady.

“Are you in any hurry?” He murmured the words close to her ear, inhaling her scent. Lily of the valley?

“Not at all.” She shook her head a little. “I was expecting to be on the river for several hours at least.” She chuckled. “Sir Reginald had brought a lunch that would easily have fed a dozen hungry boaters. What that man was thinking, I have no idea at all.”

He let that comment settle for a moment or two.

“So it would be a fair assumption, then, to say you were not exactly enjoying the outing?”

Her shoulders moved in a little shrug, but she kept her gaze turned toward their path. “Ashe, you can’t possibly know what it’s like to be a young woman from a wealthy background residing in London.”

Biting back a laugh, he shook his head. "That is correct. But I do have sisters..."

"Well, please don't force them into situations that will require them to be rescued, the way you have rescued me." The sigh that followed was heartfelt, and Ashe could almost feel her turmoil.

"Your parents, I would assume? I am aware that it is all about making the best match, the most suitable alliance..."

"The most financially advantageous marriages," she finished for him, a slight note of bitterness detectable beneath her words.

"Ah yes." He nodded, sobering. "There is always the spectre of money looming large over the Ton."

"Yes."

"And thus I would hazard a guess that this morning was an arrangement made by others, not yourself."

"You would be correct. Not only was it made by my Mama, but I was also not informed of it until the last moment. And I certainly did not realise that my only chaperone was the boy poling the punt."

"And denying you time to come up with a suitable alternative?"

"Exactly." She sighed. "I have caring parents, Ashe, don't misunderstand my displeasure with them. I'm aware that they're looking out for my own interests." She paused. "In their way, not mine. And therein lies the problem."

He thought for a moment or two as they progressed further upstream toward the

outskirts of town. “Sir Reginald is quite wealthy?”

“Disgustingly so.”

“Hmm.”

“And the title goes back for many generations,” she added. “Which makes it even worse.”

“Oh dear,” he chuckled. “I hate to mention it, but mine does too. Does that make me awful as well?”

She laughed, a pleasant sound that was music to his ears. “No, not at all.” Then she turned her head, glancing at him. “Forgive me, but I’ve not heard of the Trease family. Sally Jersey called you the Right Honourable, but there are so many Right Honourables in town...”

“Nothing to forgive, Florinda. I am but one of many sons who will, someday, take over my father’s title and lands.”

She was silent, and Ashe wondered if she’d nibble on the bait he’d just dangled in front of her.

A minute later, she bit. “All right, go ahead. Tell me what you’ll be in the future?”

“What I’ll be? Well, I hope I’ll still be me. But my title will be Marquess of Lesser Barnhope.”

She straightened. “A Marquess? Really?”

“Really. With luck, that day is many years in the future, since my father is of

excellent health and my mother intends to keep him that way.”

“Siblings?”

“Yes. Several.”

“How lucky you are,” she sighed. “Being the only daughter puts one directly on the marital firing line, so to speak.”

“That I can well believe.”

“So, future Marquess, tell me of your estate. Is it near London?”

“A few hours,” he replied casually. “There’s the village of Lesser Barnhope, of course, and a nice acreage. We’re lucky enough to possess a lovely country manor. Well, I should amend that by saying I think it’s a lovely country manor. It’s no Chatsworth, or Blenheim, but it’s home.”

Their horse seemed content to carry its burden steadily along the path, and Ashe noted that some distance ahead was a group of weeping willows leaning over both path and riverbank. Perhaps that might be a good place to stop and stretch their legs for a few moments before resuming their journey.

“Well, I must confess you are somewhat of a puzzle, Ashe,” she said, after some silent contemplation.

“How so?”

“You are...” she held up her hand, “a future Marquess.” She ticked one finger, “with expectations, as they say, of an estate,” a second finger was ticked off, “and you aren’t appalling to look at.” The third finger crooked. “So why aren’t you surrounded

by a bevy of eligible brides?”

He wanted to laugh, but managed to restrain himself. “A good question, but before I answer, I must offer my thanks for your kind assessment of my situation and my person.” He slowed the horse. “And I believe there is a little bench beneath those willows ahead. Would you care to rest there for a few moments? I’m sure our mount would appreciate a respite.”

She nodded. “A delightful idea.”

Ashe brought them to a standstill and then dismounted, easily sliding off the rump of the horse and coming to the side, holding up his arms to Florinda. “Down you come.”

Grinning, she readily dropped into his grasp, and obeying a natural instinct, he held her close for a moment or two before setting her on her feet.

“You’re a tempting armful, Miss Boothe.”

“You’re an appealingly eligible parti, Mr Trease.”

Amused at the absurdity of it all, they both laughed and, after Ashe had secured their mount to the bench, seated themselves, content to listen to the rustle of the willow fronds, the soft babble of the Thames waters, and the munching as the horse grazed on the smooth grass.

“Life is somewhat odd, isn’t it?” Ashe stared out over the waters at the quiet countryside.

“Overall, or at this moment?”

“Overall.” He leaned back. “Here we are, defying all the conventions that surround

our lives here in London by being alone with each other, and yet the world has continued to turn. Nothing calamitous has occurred, no shrieks of horror at my sitting next to you on a bench by the river, nor fainting mamas at the thought of your ruination by our actions.”

“It’s all very stupid, really, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And the worst of it is that you would bear the brunt of that displeasure. Which I’ve always felt is utterly and completely unfair.”

“Thank you for that,” she leaned over and nudged him casually. “Not many gentlemen would acknowledge that fact.”

“I have a hard time thinking of myself as a gentleman in that way,” Ashe replied, turning to look at her. “I’m just a simple country man with ordinary tastes, and what might well be a growing dislike for London attitudes. At least some of them.” His eyes drifted to her mouth. “I do, however, find myself in the position of thinking about you a lot. Is that dangerous?”

She looked at him, her eyes roaming over his face. “No more dangerous than if I were to confess that I too find myself thinking about you more than I probably should.”

“I am very fond of honesty,” he murmured.

“Are you?” She closed the distance between them. “Me too.”

And there, in the dappled sunlight, beneath the gently swaying branches of a massive willow tree, Florinda Boothe allowed herself to be tugged gently onto the lap of Ashe Trease and eagerly welcomed some very satisfying kisses.

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Ashe fell into the moment, but not without a shiver of apprehension. Every time he saw this woman, touched her, kissed her, he tumbled more deeply under her spell.

The feel of her in his arms heated his blood, the taste of her on his lips fired his brain, and the scent of her skin drifted into his nostrils and aroused his body within seconds.

He was rapidly losing control when it came to Florinda. She had entranced him thoroughly, and every time they met, every time they touched, he tumbled even further into a maelstrom of need.

“Florinda,” he whispered, running his tongue along her ear and loving how it made her shiver and murmur with pleasure.

“Ashe,” she breathed back into his mouth, before returning his kisses with abandon.

He found her neck, nibbling at the place where her pulse thundered, turning her head away so that he could pay thorough attention to the smooth skin leading down to the curve of her shoulder.

She moaned a little, settling even closer to his body, the two of them fitting as if made for each other.

Daringly, he slipped his hand beneath the shoulder of her dress and pushed at it slightly, nipping at the skin his movement had revealed.

She sucked in a breath. “Ashe, I like this so much.” She moved even closer. “Too much, perhaps.”

He stilled. “Should I stop?”

“No.” The word came firmly from her lips as she raised her hand to his face. “I’m

just warning you that I think my feelings are more deeply touched by you than is wise.”

That made him smile. “’Tis good to hear that, Florinda. Now I know that I am not alone in my desire for your...your lips...” he kissed her. “And your caresses,” he lifted her hand to his cheek.

She closed her eyes and let her touch wander to the back of his neck, where her fingers played in his hair. “No, you are not alone.”

He couldn’t resist. Pulling her even closer, he swung her legs up onto his knees and bent over her.

“Good,” he whispered. “Then let go for me...”

The kiss was hard, passionate, demanding. His lips parted hers, his tongue dove within, and his hands stroked, caressed, discovered...

Her body was heating, his was already on fire, and they both moaned as they lost themselves in each other.

Ashe’s breeches were now too snug, and the sight of two hard buds poking through the soft fabric of Florinda’s dress almost did him in.

Reverently, he touched her, hearing her indrawn breath as he caressed those nubs, and watching her mouth fall open as the sensations rippled through her.

“Oh God,” she whispered. “More.”

He cupped a breast, letting his thumb stroke her nipple, loving the way she stared at him in astonishment and then lowered her eyelids as she lost herself to his touches.

“Florinda,” he whispered, unaware of anything but the woman lying across his lap.

“Ashe,” she breathed back, her eyes now fixed on his. “Oh Ashe...”

He bent to her once more, kissing her with every ounce of his ability, trying to let his body and his lips show her how much he delighted in her, how much he desired her.

Unable to restrain the need to touch her, one hand slid down to her leg and gathered her dress out of the way, finding smooth warm skin that begged to be stroked.

She moaned into his mouth, lifting her thigh a little in a silent invitation for him to continue.

He was lost, completely absorbed in this amazing woman, and the unexpected effects she was having on him. He was no virgin; he’d had women before and enjoyed the experiences. But this? With Florinda?

There was no comparison.

So involved was he, the rest of the world faded away as he continued this passionate embrace.

Of course, this was not the best moment for him to ignore his surroundings, since his horse began to fidget and toss his head as a couple of daring squirrels dropped down to the grass around his feet.

This particular beast had a marked dislike of small furry creatures, especially when they came too close.

The result? The horse lifted his head sharply, the reins tied to the bench jerked, and the bench itself tipped over, dumping both Miss Boothe and Mr Trease onto the

grassy bank.

Right on top of each other.

Florinda cried out in surprise, and Ashe grunted as he managed to evade a knee in a certain area of particular concern to gentlemen.

They rolled a little, then stopped, both facing the river, Florinda catching her breath beneath Ashe.

Her skirts were up to her thighs, her bonnet sliding to one side of her head, and Ashe's hand was quite clearly on her naked skin.

As they moved to untangle themselves, a sound drew both their gazes.

There was a boat on the water, and in that boat, her eyes wide in shocked fascination, was a woman staring at them.

It sailed slowly past; Florinda and Ashe returning that stare as it drifted finally out of sight.

For a moment, both were silent. Then Florinda shifted.

"That's torn it," she muttered, struggling as Ashe moved off her and held out his hand to help her stand.

"Are you all right? Who was that?" he asked.

"That, Ashe, was Lady Cornelia Filwarde. And no, I'm not all right, and neither are you."

“What? Why? Who is she?”

Florinda swallowed roughly. “The worst gossip in London.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

In which Our Heroine finds herself at a Loss for Words, and learns that She can Skate Quite Well Around the Truth, even without Ice beneath one's Boots.

Florinda remounted the horse with assistance from Ashe, her thoughts whirling, her body still dealing with the aftershocks incurred by the feel of his hands on her flesh.

She should, of course, be enjoying a bout of hysterics at having been caught in the most compromising of positions by a woman who was undoubtedly capable of ruining not just her reputation, but her entire life.

But for some reason, the expected panic had not set in. At least not yet. And for that, Ashe was partly responsible.

His calm demeanour and refusal to allow the situation to fluster him or throw him into hysterics, had been of assistance in managing her emotions. Mostly.

He'd made sure she was not physically hurt, helped her rise, and brushed her skirts free of most of the debris they'd gathered while rolling on the bank. He'd not even mentioned being on top of her during said activity, although he had sort of wriggled a little when walking to his horse. Unfamiliar with how gentlemen settled themselves after such events, she shrugged and straightened her bonnet, allowing him to cup her foot and toss her into the saddle.

Resuming their previous positions, Ashe clicked up their mount and set them back on the path to town.

"Are you sure you're uninjured?" he asked a few minutes later.

She nodded, her face turned toward the horse's head. "I'm fine, thank you."

Silence fell, during which Florinda considered what topic of conversation might be appropriate to hold with a gentleman who had just been discovered on top of her with his hands up her skirt.

"How much trouble are we in?" Ashe spoke quietly, but firmly. "You'd best tell me now, Florinda."

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "A lot depends on Lady Filwarde. If she decides to bruit it about that we were...well, caught in a compromising position, you might say, then yes, we're in quite a bit of trouble."

"Ahh."

"However," she turned then to look at him, meeting that clear blue gaze and trying to ignore the little shiver it always sent darting over her skin, "if we are incredibly lucky, she may not have recognised us. It wasn't as if we were lying there for hours waiting for boats to pass us and wave." She sighed.

"How's her vision?" he asked hopefully.

"I don't know," she replied, "and that's another thing. Standing in a moving boat, might not have given her the chance to fully identify us." Her shoulders drooped. "I'm wishing for miracles, Ashe."

"You don't need to, you know."

She glanced back at him again, frowning. "I don't?"

"No." He smiled gently. "I'd marry you tomorrow, Florinda. Without hesitation."

“Uhh...”

She was aware that she was gaping at him, but seemed unable to close her mouth. Ripples of some kind of emotion were making her tremble, and she could barely swallow.

“I’m quite serious. I find you enormously attractive, in so many ways. Your company is always a delight, your humour, and intelligence have captivated me, and I don’t know about you, but I find the few kisses we’ve shared to be extremely pleasant.”

“Ahh...”

“I could go on about how my life changed the moment I met you, which it did. And I could also mention how aware I’ve been of you, no matter where we might meet.”

“Umm...”

“And if I were less of a gentleman, I would certainly mention other things...” he leaned closer to her ear, caressing it with his breath. “Such as my desire to explore the more physical aspect of our acquaintance. To get my hands on more of your skin and find out if it’s as soft everywhere as it is on the bits I was privileged to touch this morning.”

Speechless at this point, Florinda just stared at him and blinked.

“But I see my words have robbed you of the power of speech,” Ashe grinned. “So I’ll be quite happy to wait until it returns, and you can give me your response.”

She blinked again, swallowed, and tried to think of something to say, but her brain at this point was completely and utterly unable to come up with anything more useful than a sound.

“Oohhh.”

It seemed to suffice, as Ashe smiled warmly and nodded. “Just in time,” he said, raising his gaze from her face to the path ahead. “I believe we are almost within the limits of the Metropolis.”

Jerked back into the real world (although she confessed to herself that she would’ve liked to have stayed in the other one for a bit longer), Florinda sighed and turned to see they were about to leave the bank and move onto a paved street that led away from the river.

“Where should I take you?” Ashe asked casually.

“Anywhere,” murmured Florinda without thinking. Then she pulled herself together. “I apologise. I believe if you take the second street on the right, you will find the location of several carriages, one of which should be mine.” She shrugged. “Sir Reginald was to return me there at the end of our trip.”

“I see.” Ashe followed her directions, remaining silent as they clattered over the cobblestones and discovered the Boothe carriage exactly where it was supposed to be.

The maid inside looked shocked to see Miss Florinda not with Sir Reginald, but on a horse with the Right Honourable Mr Ashe Trease.

“Is everything all right, Miss Florinda?” She hurried from the carriage.

“Yes indeed, Nancy. There was an unfortunate incident with Sir Reginald’s punt, but luckily Mr Trease was on hand to rescue me and convey me here in one piece.”

She slid gracefully down into his waiting arms, trying hard not to moan with pleasure as they caught her and steadied her. “It was my honour to be of service, Miss Boothe.

And now I shall continue my ride, secure in the knowledge that you have been returned safely to the bosom of your family.”

Florinda raised an eyebrow. “Nancy is a wonderful maid, but more the right hand than the bosom.”

He bowed, grinning. “I stand corrected.”

Recollecting herself, she curtsied. “I am in your debt, sir. Your kindness this morning is very much appreciated.”

“Not at all, Miss Boothe. The pleasure was entirely mine.”

Florinda narrowed her eyes and leaned toward him a little. “Not entirely,” she breathed, then moved quickly to the carriage. “Perhaps we shall meet at the Beswick affair this evening. But now I must hurry home. My dress bears the marks of some muddy adventures, and I’d prefer not to parade around in it.”

Her maid nodded. “You come right along, Miss, and we’ll get you home in no time.”

“Thank you again, Mr Trease. I trust we shall meet again soon.” Florinda’s words were spoken politely across the distance separating them as she clambered into the carriage and gave him a tiny wave.

He gave her a matching polite little salute, knowing she couldn’t hear his mumbled response... “You can wager your entire dress allowance on that, Miss Boothe.”

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“Oh Florinda, thank goodness you’re home.”

“Mama? What’s wrong?”

The older woman blinked for a moment as she ran a worried gaze over her daughter.

“What on earth happened to you?”

“I...well, nothing, really, I just took a bit of a tumble...”

“Oh my dear girl. Was Sir Reginald able to help?”

“Er...” Florinda thought frantically. “Sir Reginald wasn’t there at the time.”

“Where was he?” Her mama’s face creased into a puzzled frown.

“Hopefully at the bottom of the Thames,” snapped back Florinda, finally at her wits’ end. “Mama, I’m sorry, but that man is a miserable excuse for a human being. I don’t care how much money he has, I not only will not consider marrying him, I will actively seek to be elsewhere if there are even the slightest rumours he might be within five miles of me in the future.”

Lady Boothe blinked. “Oh dear. That bad?”

“Worse.” She sighed. “It’s over, thank heavens. I was rescued by Mr Ashe Trease.”

“Who?”

“A gentleman, Mama. Which, come to think of it, is a bit of a rarity in town this Season.”

“Never heard of him.”

Florinda managed not to roll her eyes at the dismissive tone in her mother’s voice.

“He is the son of Lord Hawthorn Trease, and you probably haven’t heard of him either. He’s a Viscount, but rarely visits London.” She paused and put her hands on her hips. “Which, from where I’m standing at this moment, seems to be a very wise decision.”

“Oh now, Florinda, don’t get all haughty with me.” Her mother sighed. “I only want what’s best for you, you know. And you will admit I’ve not forced you into anything, which—given the fact that you are closing in on the age where marriage might become impossible—I think is rather restrained of me.”

“You are correct, Mama, and I apologise if I was a bit snippy. But the trip on the river with Sir Reginald was an unmitigated disaster. Thankfully I managed to extricate myself and at a time when Mr Trease happened to be riding in the same area. He...”

She swallowed, considering how to describe the incident with the bench, the horse, and the man who had kissed her silly. “He was all that was kind, and took me up in front of him to ride back to town. He even allowed me to rest a little on a lovely bench by the water, and we engaged in a very pleasant conversation.” Her conscience kicked her soundly. She ignored it as best she could.

“Well, then, I suppose that’s a good thing.” Her mother looked at her with narrowed eyes. “I shall, of course, expect to be introduced to this Mr Trease when next you see him?”

“I would be happy to present him to you, Mama.” She took a breath and fixed a calm smile on her face. “I find him a most pleasant conversationalist.” Her conscience stood up, put its hands on its hips and glared at her, then administered another sound kick.

“But what has made you so glad I’m home? I recall your first comment...”

“Oh, yes. Your dress.”

“A bit muddy, yes, I’m sorry about that, but—”

“The mud doesn’t matter,” sighed her mother. “It’s the fabric, my dear. I learned this morning from my modiste that yours and another gown were made from the very same bolt.”

Florinda frowned. “It happens, I’m sure. But not something that need become a Cheltenham tragedy, Mama?”

The older woman bit her lip. “In most cases, no. But in this case, possibly. You see, the gown was made for...” she took a deep breath, “Lady Delphine Haverling.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Now you understand.”

“Goodness, Mama.” Florinda glanced down at herself. “I’ll change. And probably burn it.”

“Good idea,” endorsed Lady Boothe. “You and Lady Haverling are not dissimilar in stature and colouring, and the merest hint that the two of you might be confused? Terrible. Just terrible.”

Florinda nodded. The notorious Lady Delphine had a reputation that would not hold up to much examination. Given to parading through the Ton with an escort of barely acceptable men, she continually provided fodder for gossip and was tolerated only because she was as rich as Croesus, thanks to her aged husband, who had the sense to remain in the country and let his wife do as she willed with whomever she pleased.

The arrangement worked for them both, but there were restrictions on the woman's activities. Only recently she'd been turned away from Almack's because her escort had failed to dress appropriately. The hostesses didn't like her and jumped on any reason they could find to bar her from their rooms.

There were also whispers that her current retinue of three gentlemen shared her bed. At the same time.

Florinda had spent more than a few moments with Susan discussing that rumour; well out of the range of her parents, of course.

"I'm sure there's no need for concern, Mama. I've worn this for less than six hours, and most of that time have been well out of London. And it will immediately be disposed of. I'll see to it myself."

"Thank God for that," replied Lady Boothe. "Do it now, so my mind can calm down." She held her hand to her bosom as she turned away from her daughter. "I declare I'm going to have a spasm if anything else like this happens to us."

Florinda didn't reply. What could she say? Don't worry, Mama. The grime on my gown is from where I rolled around on the bank kissing Ashe Trease. I'm probably no better than Lady Haverling, come to think of it.

Shaking her head, she walked up the stairs and turned to her room. This dress was finished, but might there be repercussions for the morning's activities?

She had no idea, and that worried her more than a little.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

Demonstrating both the Delights of an Evening Garden Soirée, and how Gossip—no matter whether Right or Completely Wrong—can turn Pleasure into Confusion, and Enlightenment into Action ...

Ashe set out alone for his evening's obligations in a state of mind that was less than tranquil. Thankful his mama and sister were engaged elsewhere, he had chance to think.

And, given that he was a young gentleman with all the attributes that go along with that description, much of his focus was on a certain young lady and how it had felt to have her beneath him, all heat, and silk, and soft skin...

He cursed once again and shifted on the seat of the carriage, convinced his footman had shrunk his breeches and not mentioned it.

Wondering if Florinda would be there, he also wondered how she would greet him, and if she would dance with him. Or perhaps she was regretting their interlude. And of course the horrid interruption that had ended what was heading toward a most improper but thrilling entanglement.

Damn his damned breeches.

He squirmed himself into a degree of comfort and turned his thoughts to another pressing matter—the appearance of Lady Filwarde.

Florinda had said she was the biggest gossip in London, but that title had some pretty serious competition, up to and including the Patronesses of Almack's.

However, any sort of gossip tended to take on a life of its own, so he had no idea if he would be tarred and feathered as a despoiler of young women, or if Florinda would now be shunned as a fallen woman. Either alternative would be unpleasant at least and disastrous at worst.

Sighing, Ashe was quite ready to curse the whole notion of coming to London, but then realised that had his mother not dragged him here, albeit unwillingly, he'd never have met Florinda.

She had changed his life, without question. Up to this time, he'd vaguely accepted that someday he would wed and continue the Trease line by fathering sons. And perhaps a daughter or two.

But that had been in the far distant future. Until now. Until Florinda had turned his world (and his breeches) upside down and inside out.

There was an obvious answer to this particular train of thought, but it was one he couldn't quite say he was ready to sit down with and examine in detail.

Which was probably a good thing, since the carriage was drawing up at the heavily over-flowered entrance to Beswick House, and the carriages and servants told the story of a very busy evening greeting attendees at the garden soirée.

Gambling that the weather wouldn't dare dampen their bold plans, Lord and Lady Beswick had decided to hold their party in their magnificent gardens. In the daylight they were indeed beyond compare, and now, with the clear skies revealing the rising moon, the entire scene could have been lifted from the pages of a children's fairy tale.

Thousands of candles fluttered in the gentle breeze, illuminating walks lined with blooms that appeared magical in the soft light.

Ashe found no butler solemnly intoning his name, just a smiling couple welcoming him with delight.

“Mr Trease. We’re so glad you could join us,” Lord Beswick introduced his wife. “This is the young man I mentioned, Anne. He has ideas. Always good to have members of the younger generation with ideas.” He beamed at Ashe.

Since his ‘ideas’ had consisted of a brief discussion with his Lordship about crop rotation over a tray of biscuits at a recent ball, Ashe was unsure whether to be sceptical or flattered. “I’m honoured you recall our conversation, my Lord. I know I will benefit from the wisdom you so kindly shared.”

“Good lad. Go on then, enjoy yourself.” His genial host grinned and motioned with his hands. “Oh, and pay no attention to the mutters. One gets used to ‘em in town.”

“Er, yes. Of course. Thank you.” He bowed and tried to ignore the creeping sensation of what could only be called the icy fingers of doom that tickled the back of his neck.

His arrival had coincided with that of several renowned beauties, so he was able to escape mostly unnoticed and dart quickly down a path lined with something that smelled nice. Had there been gossip? What else could the murmurs be that Lord Beswick had warned him about?

He passed an assortment of guests, most of whom just gave him a polite nod or ignored him. But one or two (the mutterers, he supposed), stared at him as they walked by, then turned to each other and engaged in a whispered conversation.

An oath trembled on his lips. Something was up, and he was indeed going to be caught in the center of it, dammit. And if he was, then so was Florinda.

“Ashe. Thank God. I didn’t know if you would be here or not.”

“Hullo North.” Ashe blinked, his mind somewhat distracted as a familiar face appeared in front of him.

“Come with me.” Northwick Barlow grabbed his friend’s arm, and all but dragged him through a fuchsia bush, onto a less-travelled path.

“What the...” Ashe brushed off bits of pollen and petals from his coat.

“I need to talk to you.” North punched him in the shoulder. “I need to know what the bloody hell you were doing getting caught with Delphine Haverling down by the Thames? In flagrante delicto, I’ve heard.”

Ashe nearly choked. “What ? You heard wrong,” he shot back. “And keep your voice down, for God’s sake.” He frowned. “Wait. Who the hell is Delphine Haverling?”

“Only one of the most lascivious women in London this season. She’s announced she’s sleeping her way through all the eligible men and will be reporting on them in a book she’s writing.”

“Dear God.” Ashe stared at North. “I don’t even know her. And after what you just said, I don’t think I want to.”

North shook his head. “Look, it’s whispered that you and she were doing...well, something you shouldn’t on the banks of the Thames earlier today.”

Ashe bit his lip. “Let me guess. That comes from Lady Filwarde’s circle?”

“Most of the best gossip does, at the moment. The woman has eyes everywhere.”

The urge to curse, fluidly, at length, trembled on Ashe’s lips, but he bit down on it.

“She’s wrong,” he began, only to find himself pushed down next to a trellis of honeysuckle as a party walked past in the other aisle.

“Doesn’t matter,” whispered North, “although I’m glad to hear it. Knew you had better taste than that.”

“Yes, well...”

“What?”

“Never mind. We can’t talk here.” He swatted at an errant moth.

“All right, let’s stroll a little.”

“Away from the crowd?”

“Of course.” North peered through the shrubbery and nodded, heading along a narrow patch of turf to a spot that had fewer candles and a nicely pruned tree beneath which they could lurk in the shadows.

“Now.” North put his hands on his hips. “What the hell’s going on?”

Rolling his eyes, Ashe looked at his friend. “You won’t believe this...”

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The Boothe carriage joined the line outside the Beswick’s, its occupants waiting patiently as it inched forward to the entrance.

Lady Boothe sneezed.

“Damn flowers,” she muttered, searching for a handkerchief.

“Bless you,” her daughter responded without thinking. “We didn’t have to come, Mama,” said Florinda, sighing. “I wouldn’t have minded staying home for an evening.”

Her mother shook her head. “We had to come, and you know it. If there’s one hint, one eyebrow raised, one tiny whisper about Lady Haverling’s dress and yours, we have to squash it immediately.” She tucked her handkerchief back into her reticule. “I’ve already passed the word to our friends, so all we need to do tonight is hold our heads high, smile, be polite and make sure we’re seen to be quite unconcerned about the modiste’s errors.”

Florinda managed not to roll her eyes. “The world won’t end, Mama,” she began.

“Yours might, Florinda. A hint of scandal, your name linked in any way at all with people such as that Haverling woman, and your chances for a good match this season have gone down the drain.”

About to respond, Florinda felt the carriage come to a halt. She sighed and helped her mother gather her things.

They made their way amongst a crowd of guests, many of whom they knew, and fortunately, there were no comments at all about dresses and Florinda.

She did catch, however, a whisper or two about Lady Delphine, and her skin chilled as she heard the name Trease in the same conversation. It didn’t take a genius to make the connection.

God. The gossips thought it had been Lady Delphine with Ashe on that bank.

They paused on the steps for a moment, as any queue does, and it gave Florinda the chance to lean close to her mother. “Do you know whether Lady Filwarde wears spectacles, Mama?”

Her mother’s eyebrows shot skyward. “What the...that is the oddest question, Florinda...”

“I have my reasons for asking,” she answered, her voice a low murmur. “Do you know?”

Lady Boothe thought for a few moments. “I...you know, I believe she might. Not in public, mind you, but I attended a small tea a while ago where she was present. Spewing gossip, of course. Never liked the woman very much for that reason, and I certainly didn’t go back to that house for tea. Mrs Arthingham’s, I think...”

“Spectacles? Lady Filwarde?” Florinda urged her mother to stay on track.

“Oh, yes. Well, as I recall, she was looking at something out of the window, and she had to delve into her monstrous reticule for them. I remember thinking how ugly the bag was, but she was convinced she’d set a new fashion style with it.” Lady Boothe snorted. “She didn’t.”

Florinda barely heard the tail end of her Mama’s recollections, only the vital piece of information.

Lady Filwarde needed spectacles . Which meant she could easily have mistaken who she saw on the riverbank. Given the dress fabric business? And Lady Delphine’s brunette hair, not dissimilar to her own?

That simple fact might have—in the words of her maid—saved her bacon.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Florinda raised her chin and mounted the rest of the steps into Beswick House beside her Mama, alert for any sounds or murmurs. She was no stranger to the world of the Ton and knew what to look for.

Lady Delphine had been the source of many whispers before, of course, and Florinda was of the opinion that the only reason she was still accepted at events in town was because of exactly that. She gave everyone something to talk about.

It was quite sad, in a way, that so many people with so many advantages in their lives could find no other entertainment so engrossing as gossiping about things they perceived scandalous in others.

Their curtsies made to their hosts, the Boothe ladies crossed the hall and entered the gardens.

As soon as their feet touched grass, what seemed like a swarm of women descended on Lady Boothe. One smaller young lady detached Florinda from her Mama's side.

"I'm so glad you're here. I've been waiting for you." Susan Finchley almost danced with impatience.

"Oh dear." Florinda sighed. "You've something juicy, haven't you? I know the signs."

Susan nodded and tugged on Florinda's arm. "This way. Let's walk a little."

"I was just thinking about how silly gossip can be, Susan. So if you've a juicy on dit, you might wish to save it for someone else."

"I can't," she replied. "Because it's about your Mr Trease."

“He’s not my Mr Trease,” lied Florinda, cautious now.

Susan waved that aside. “Still, it’s quite shocking.” She leaned closer and glanced around before whispering in Florinda’s ear.

“He was caught dallying with Lady Haverling on the riverbank this morning.” She widened her eyes. “He was touching her leg. Her bare leg.”

Florinda’s skin shivered at the still-vivid memory of that moment, but she dragged herself away from it, seeking an adequate response to Susan’s declaration.

Before she could, though, Susan continued. “So what is he going to do, d’you think? Will he declare his intentions?”

Blinking, Florinda stared at her friend. “What? You think Ashe would offer for her?”

“He’s a gentleman, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but...” Caught on the horns of a terrible dilemma, Florinda seized Susan’s arm. “Do you know where he is? Ashe?”

“Um...” Susan shook her head. “Last I saw, he was speaking to Mr Barlow, I believe. Somewhere over near the honeysuckle. Why?”

“Confound it all,” Florinda swore softly. “We have to rescue him. Come on.”

And with no further ado, the two young ladies rushed off in a swirl of lace, ribbons, and fine muslin, on the hunt for one unprepared gentleman who, at this point in time, was confused, irritated, and really hadn’t a clue what to do about anything. He certainly hadn’t yet realised that he needed rescuing, or that very stylishly dressed help was on the way for that very reason.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:23 pm

In Which Ashe runs Afoul of Scandalous Gossip, but Redeems himself in a Not Entirely Unexpected Way, and Florinda takes up the Cudgel on his Behalf, only to Find she didn't really Need it, since an Annoyed Moth proves the Perfect Substitute.

Ashe was finding the evening to be quite confusing, and not the least a tad annoying.

The glances he found himself receiving were a combination of interest, shock, a sort of odd curiosity, and some flat-out rudeness. And that had been from just a few of the attendees.

North stuck bravely by his side as they moved slowly down one grassy path after another, doing their best to avoid too many nosy guests.

"I should leave," muttered Ashe, growing more and more irritated.

"No, you absolutely should not," stated North firmly. "You know they're wrong in what they're thinking, Ashe. Do not give in to their lurid fantasies. You've done nothing to deserve these whispers."

Ashe stopped by a tall cement urn overflowing with ferns. "Well, actually..."

North nearly bumped into him. And blinked. "What? What ? If you're going to tell me that it's true..."

"Of course it's not. Not exactly, that is. It's just that..." He took a breath. He had to reveal the truth to his friend, and perhaps between the two of them, they could work their way out of this mess.

“I was on the riverbank,” he confessed.

“Oh God, Ashe...”

“Wait. I was on the bank, but not with Lady Delphine.”

“What?”

North slumped against the urn, ignoring the ferns that were crushed against his elegant superfine jacket. “I cannot believe what I’m hearing.”

“It was a series of coincidences,” muttered Ashe. “I was in the right place at the right time to help out—”

“Miss Boothe,” finished North. “Don’t tell me. I saw stars in your eyes the first time you met.”

Ashe frowned. “You did?”

“Of course I did. We’ve known each other too long to be able to hide something like that, my friend.”

He straightened and paced for a minute while Ashe struggled to deal with the shock of realising this man was not just a jolly good chap, but someone with surprising intelligence and insight.

“So how did this...incident lead to all the gossip about Lady Haverling?”

“Not a clue,” replied Ashe. “The only thing I know is that I was not anywhere near Delphine Haverling, nor have I ever been.” He paused. “And wouldn’t be, either. She is not my type at all.”

“Hmm.” North paced again.

“What do I do, North? How do I resolve this situation?” Troubled even more now, Ashe struggled to think of a solution. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to be forced into requesting the hand of a woman I don’t know just because a crowd of gossiping women thinks I should.”

“Some might expect it, Ashe,” cautioned North. “And don’t think that Lady Delphine won’t have anything to say about it. She will, without a doubt, turn the situation to her own advantage if she possibly can.”

“And what the devil is Florinda going to think when she arrives? Is it possible she won’t hear any of this?”

The look he received from his friend was answer enough.

“All right, that was a stupid thing to say.”

“Ashe, answer me this.” North put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “What do you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. You’re in a situation here which involves two women, both indirectly caught in a sort of scandal.” North frowned. “And since I’m having difficulty finding the right words to describe it, it is really rather unusual as well.”

“I can’t argue that.”

“So, my friend, what do you want? Do you want to become entangled with Delphine Haverling, because I’ll wager my new boots she’ll see if she can twist this to her advantage, or do you want Miss Boothe? Because if you do, we’re talking marriage

here.”

Ashe was surprised to find himself opening his mouth with his answer immediately. He didn’t even need to think about it.

“Oh, here you are, you naughty boy. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

And before he could say the words he so desperately wanted to say, he was confronted by an elegantly clad Lady Delphine Haverling, and two of her friends, all smiling and chuckling as the lady herself daringly raised her hand and stroked his cheek.

“We’ve been discovered, dear Mr Trease. What shall we do about it, eh?”

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While Ashe stared aghast at Lady Haverling, Florinda and Susan were hurrying through the assembled guests to where murmurs and exclamations were clearly audible.

“We’re too late,” panted Susan, desperately trying not to snag the lace on the hem of her gown on any rose bushes.

“I don’t care if that dratted woman has found him or not. She’s not having him.”

Florinda’s firm declaration brought a gasp and then a brief laugh from Susan. “I knew it. You are absolutely over the moon for Mr Trease, aren’t you?”

“Nonsense,” Florinda threw the word over her shoulder. “I am...well, I don’t know what I am, actually.”

“Except determined to keep him away from Lady Delphine?”

“Of course. Who wouldn’t be? That woman is an indecorous leech where men are concerned.” Florinda paused to catch her breath. “Where the devil is he?”

“Wait,” Susan grabbed her arm. “There. Look. By that big urn with the ferns...” She pointed through a gap to a spot where several people had gathered.

“All right then.” Florinda took off, heedless of the grass staining her slippers. No delicate mincing steps for her, but as close to a gallop as she could manage in an evening gown.

Arriving at the back of the gathering crowd, she was just in time to hear Lady Delphine’s satisfied voice, obviously pitched so that everyone around her could hear.

“So, Mr Trease. I ask you again, is there something you’d like to say to me? I am just a woman and would most dislike to be the subject of such gossip. Only you can rescue me...”

Florinda barrelled her way through the onlookers. “Excuse me, sorry, oh dear, please let me through...” She pushed and shoved, earning some cross frowns and a muttered expletive or two.

Ready to shriek a couple of expletives of her own, she finally burst through into the space in front of Ashe and Lady Delphine. Susan had followed and barely managed to avoid mowing them all down as she erupted in a whoosh right behind Florinda.

A woman grunted as a flying elbow caught her in the ribs.

“Oh goodness. So sorry. I tripped.” Susan waved vaguely at her feet.

The distraction had given Florinda time to catch her breath and she closed the distance between herself and Ashe without coming into contact with Lady Delphine, who was now regarding her with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

Florinda took Ashe's free hand. "Ashe, darling. I am sorry I'm a bit late. There was a frightful crush outside and our carriage was delayed."

"Um, oh..." He blinked.

"Lovely to see you, Miss Boothe." Mr Barlow, standing on the other side of his friend, smiled broadly. "And Miss Finchley. How charming you look this evening."

Susan, to Florinda's surprise, blushed and dropped a small curtsy. "You are very kind, Mr Barlow."

"Not at all," he replied. "Just being truthful."

Lady Delphine, not at all pleased with these developments, stared at Florinda. "Excuse me, whoever you are, but dear Mr Ashe and I have an important matter to settle between us." She moved to his other side, inserted herself between him and North, and twined her arm through his. "Don't we, darling?"

Before Ashe could answer, Florinda leaned forward and spoke across him.

"Oh you're Lady Delphine Haverling aren't you? I'm Florinda Boothe, and I'm sure you're as upset as I am about that terrible mistake our modiste made on those gowns."

The woman blinked. "Gowns? What gowns?"

"You didn't hear?" Florinda's gaze was all wide-eyed innocence. "Two gowns were made..." she took a dramatic breath, "of the very same fabric."

There was a muted gasp from the women onlookers, of whom there were many—with more coming every minute. The gentlemen merely looked puzzled.

“Wait a minute,” Lady Delphine frowned. “Two gowns the same?”

Florinda nodded. “Yes, isn’t that terrible ? One is yours, and I’m sure it looks magnificent on you, and the other...” She hung her head and stared at her toes, “the other is mine.”

“But...”

Florinda raised her head. “I know. Unpardonable. It was the pink muslin with the blue and green embroidered flowers and green lace trim?”

Lady Delphine’s eyes widened. “I just got that dress last week.”

“As did I.”

“I wore it this week, at the Exhibition.”

“I wore mine on Monday,” replied Florinda. Then she turned and smiled at Ashe. “It was the perfect gown for a day alongside the Thames. Mr Trease might recognise it, since that was the day he and I met under the willows.”

Ashe disengaged his arm from Lady Delphine and turned away from her, keeping Florinda’s hand in his as he smiled at her. “I do indeed, Miss Boothe.”

A murmur rippled through the assembled guests, and a few whispers toward the rear of “what did she say? I can’t hear...”

“Oh, Florinda.” Susan rose to the occasion. “What a good thing you were both in different places. It would have been quite easy for anyone to confuse the two of you, don’t you think?”

North, never one to miss an opportunity, walked to Susan’s side and gave her a slight

bow. “A very acute observation, Miss Finchley.” He smiled at her and Florinda, briefly distracted at their byplay, couldn’t miss the tiny wink he gave her, or the blush that coloured her cheeks as she smiled back.

“Now wait a minute,” Lady Delphine struggled.

“For what, my Lady?” Ashe glanced at her. “Clearly you have made a mistake. We were not in each other’s company at all on the occasion you have mentioned. As you now know, I was with Miss Boothe here.”

“But I heard...”

“And people said,” added the woman standing next to her. “Why I heard it from Lady Filwarde’s own lips.” She nodded firmly.

“Oh dear,” said Florinda, shaking her head. “Lady Filwarde is certainly someone who is au courant with everything that is acceptable.” A lie, but necessary to avoid any further issues. “However, perhaps she was not wearing her spectacles? I understand she uses them when necessary. Now, given the circumstances,” she glanced at Lady Delphine, “which I recall quite clearly, Mr Trease and I were—um—engaged in conversation on the bank of the Thames, beneath some willows. It was a lovely morning, lots of sunshine too.”

“I—”

“Let me finish, if you please, Lady Delphine.” Florinda’s voice hardened as she cut the other woman off at the knees. “Wearing the same gown does not mean we are similar women. I would never assume that I could prey on unsuspecting friends...” her gaze roamed the assembled crowd, “and ask them to believe a ridiculous story, simply for my own amusement.”

“I didn’t—”

“You just did,” retorted Florinda, who was getting angrier every minute at what Lady Delphine had tried to do. “I distinctly heard you asking Mr Trease what he was going to do about the situation you created in your own mind. That, my Lady, was a completely horrible thing to do, and were I in your shoes I would be utterly ashamed of myself.”

“Now listen here...”

“ Enough .” Ashe finally spoke. “This is an absurd situation which should never have occurred.” He froze Lady Delphine with a look that shocked even Florinda. “Your assumptions, my Lady, were so far from the truth as to be both absurd and, as Miss Boothe has stated, ridiculous . And you know it.” He glanced down at Florinda, her hand still tucked in his. “Miss Boothe has been forced to step forward and discuss a moment in our lives that should have been both private and precious.”

He smiled at her, a look of warmth and affection that made her blush and gulp back her emotions.

“It was a moment,” he continued, “that some of you probably recall with pleasure from your own lives. It was the very moment I asked Miss Florinda to marry me.”

The gasp of surprise was so loud and massive, it caused many of the flowers to lean toward it, disturbing a large moth which, cross at having its evening repose interrupted, took flight and landed on the nearest smooth surface, which happened to be Lady Delphine’s expansive and revealingly displayed bosom.

She looked down, let out a horrified squawk, and promptly fainted into the fuchsias.

North shot an amused look at Susan. “Would you care to stroll, Miss Finchley?”

Susan stared at him for a moment, then smiled. “I think I would like that very much, Mr Barlow.”