



Grace (The Shackleford Sisters #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: In this Regency romantic comedy series, the Shackleford sisters descend on a Regency society that doesn't know what's hit it

Reverend Augustus Shackleford's mission in life (aside from ensuring the collection box was suitably full every Sunday) was to secure advantageous marriages for each of his eight daughters. A tall order, given the fact that in the Reverend's opinion they didn't possess a single ladylike bone in the eight bodies they had between them. Quite where he would find a wealthy titled gentleman bottle-headed enough to take any of them on remained a mystery and indeed was likely to test even his legendary resourcefulness.

Grievously wounded at the Battle of Trafalgar, Nicholas Sinclair was only recently returned to Blackmore after receiving news of his estranged father's unexpected death. After an absence of twenty years, the new Duke was well aware it was his duty to marry and produce an heir as quickly as possible. However, tormented by recurring nightmares after his horrific experiences during the battle, Nicholas had no taste to brave the ton's marriage mart in search of a docile obedient wife.

Never in his wildest dreams did Reverend Shackleford envisage receiving an offer for his eldest daughter from the new Duke of Blackmore. Of course, the Reverend was well aware he was fudging it a bit in describing Grace as respectful, meek or dutiful, nevertheless, he could never have imagined that his eldest daughter's unruliness might end up ruining them all.

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The Reverend Augustus Shackleford rested his hands contentedly on his ample stomach and belched loudly, the stew he'd just consumed resting a trifle heavily on his stomach. It was noon at the Red Lion Pub in the village of Blackmore in Devonshire, England, and while he could quite easily have had his luncheon back at the vicarage, the Reverend much preferred the ale and conversation the pub provided as opposed to the never-ending arguing and bickering that came with the unfortunate position of having nine females residing in his house. Though he'd never asked him, the Reverend was content that his dog Freddy was also of the same opinion. The foxhound was currently curled up under the table, happily chasing rabbits in his dreams.

Reverend Shackleford was not a man of immense wealth and fortune, and under normal circumstances would be quite content with the fact that the coin in his pocket would more than suffice the cost of the meal he had just consumed.

These were not normal circumstances, however, and the coin in his pocket – or anywhere else for that matter, would certainly not be sufficient to provide the money to set up his only son in the manner befitting a gentleman.

His only son after eight daughters. The Reverend sighed. It had taken three wives to finally produce an heir, but the cost of paying for the eight females he'd been blessed with in the first instance was sorely testing even his creativity – something upon which he'd prided himself up until now.

He sat morosely staring into his pint of ale next to his long-suffering curate and only friend, Percy Noon.

“You know me Percy, I’ve got a mind as sharp as a well-creased cravat, but I’ve got to admit I’m completely nonplussed as to what to do to raise the coin.”

“Perhaps you can find some kind of work for your daughters, something suitable in polite society for ladies of a gentle disposition,” Percy suggested as he pushed his tin plate aside.

The Reverend snorted. “Have you seen any of my daughters lately?” he scoffed, shaking his head glumly. “Ladies of a gentle disposition? They don’t possess a single ladylike bone in the eight bodies they have between ‘em. They have no clue how to follow orders or how to comport themselves in any society, let alone a polite one.

“If I wish to secure even a modest fortune for Anthony, then I have no recourse but to marry ‘em off. Though I can’t imagine a man who’d be foolish enough to encumber himself with any of ‘em. Unless he was in his cups, of course.” The Reverend was silent for a while, clearly imagining a scenario where he could take advantage of a well-heeled male whilst the unfortunate victim was suitably foxed. In the end, he sighed.

“Percy, the situation is dire indeed. If I don’t come up with a plan soon, there’s going to be no coin left for Anthony at all. And not only that, we could well find ourselves in the workhouse.” He glared at Percy as if it was somehow all his curate’s fault. “If that happens, Percy my man, there’ll be no more bread-and-butter pudding for you of an evening.” Percy repressed a shudder. He wasn’t sure if it was at the prospect of ending up in the workhouse or the thought of Mrs. Tomlinson’s bread and butter pudding – the last of which could probably have been used to shut out the drafts. The curate suspected the vicarage cook was a little too fond of Blue Ruin to give much attention to her culinary skills.

“Then your only recourse, Sir, is to marry them off and marry them well,” he stated decisively, settling deeper into his chair. “Somehow.”

The Reverend stroked his chin, thinking about his wayward daughters. Each daughter was entirely different than the last. The only similarity they all shared was unruliness. Four of them were already at a marriageable age, with the eldest, at twenty-five, a confirmed bluestocking. What chance did he have of marrying any of them off to a wealthy gentleman bacon-brained enough to secure a fortune for his only son?

He was sure that given time, he could do it. But it would test even his legendary resourcefulness. Especially if he was going to do it without spending any coin.

“Right, we’ll need a list of suitable wealthy titled gentlemen bottle-headed enough to take ‘em on Percy,” he decided, motioning for another mug of ale. “Then we’ll let ‘em know that I have, err ... good, dutiful daughters who are in need of husbands.”

“As you wish, Sir,” Percy said doubtfully as the serving wench brought another ale for them both. The Reverend picked up his tankard and took a large gulp.

“But before we do that, we’ll start by writing down all the positive attributes of the chits so that we can emphasize their good points to any prospective husbands. I mean we both know that none of them are exactly bachelor fare, but we can fudge it a bit without anyone being the wiser. At least until they have a ring on their finger.

“We’ll start with Grace since she’s the one most likely to end up an old maid if we don’t come up with the goods pretty sharpish. Right then, Percy, you start.”

Silence.

The Reverend frowned. “Come on man, surely you can find something good to say about her.”

‘She has nicely turned ankles,’ responded Percy a bit desperately.

“Steady on Percy. I certainly hope you’ve never had an extended opportunity to observe my eldest daughter’s ankles. Otherwise, I might have to call you out.”

Percy reddened, flustered. “Oh no, Sir, not at all, I just happened to notice when she was climbing into the carria...”

“Humph, well I’m not sure we can put that at the top of the list, but in Grace’s case, we might have to resort to it. I mean why her mother chose to call her Grace is beyond me, considering she’s distinctly lacking in any attributes remotely divine-like. And she’s the least graceful person I’ve ever come across. If there’s something to trip over, Grace will find it. Clumsy doesn’t even begin to cut it,” he added gloomily.

“Well, she has very nice eyes,” Percy stated, thinking it best to keep any further observations about the Reverend’s daughter above the neck. “And her teeth are sound.”

The Reverend nodded, scribbling furiously.

“Can she cook, Sir?” The Reverend stopped writing and frowned. “I don’t know that she can, Percy. At least not in the same capacity as Mrs. Tomlinson.”

“Probably best not to mention it then,” Percy interrupted hastily, unwillingly conjuring up the vision of Mrs. Tomlinson’s bread and butter pudding again. “And anyway, marriage to a gentleman is not likely to necessitate her venturing into the kitchen.” The Reverend nodded thoughtfully.

“How about her voice? Can she sing?”

“Like a strangled cat.”

“Dance?”

“I don’t think she’s ever danced with anyone. I deuced hope not anyway. If she has, I’ll have his guts for garters. ”

“Conversation?” Percy was getting desperate.

“Nonexistent. I don’t think she’s spoken more than half a dozen words to me since she was in the crib.” The Reverend was becoming increasingly despondent.

“Does she cut a good mother figure to her sisters?”

The Reverend snorted. “I don’t think any of ‘em are without some kind of scar where she’s dropped ‘em at some time or another.”

“How about her brain?” Percy now resorted to clutching at straws.

“Now that’s something the chit has got. Every time I see her, she’s got her nose in a book. Problem is, that’s the one attribute any well-heeled gentleman will most definitely not be looking for...”

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Nicholas Sinclair, the new Duke of Blackmore looked up at the imposing house in front of him and sighed, knowing he couldn't remain in the carriage for much longer. After a month of travelling, he longed for nothing more than a warm bed and a glass of brandy. Regrettably, it was only late afternoon, so the bed would have to wait, but certainly not the brandy.

The door was opened by the footman, and Nicholas forced himself to move, taking his time on the step so he could climb down without falling on his face.

It had taken nearly six months for him to be well enough to attempt the journey home. His father had been dead for three of them.

“Your grace, welcome home.”

Nicholas straightened his coat before moving up the steps toward the imposing front door where the aging butler stood waiting patiently. “Huntley? By God man, I didn't think you were still alive.”

The butler's expression did not change as he bowed before Nicholas. “I still have some years in me, your grace.”

Nicholas allowed a small smile to cross his face before it disappeared just as quickly. He'd never thought to be back in front of this house and certainly not as the Duke of Blackmore .

Moving from the steps, he allowed Huntley to open the door before stepping inside the house. The few staff were lining the long hall, waiting for him to address them as

their new master.

His collar suddenly tight around his throat, Nicholas cleared it. "Carry on with your duties." He did not need to know their names nor their positions, only that they stayed out of his way.

"Your grace, this is Mrs. Tenner," Huntley stated, motioning to a plump woman wearing a tentative smile as she curtsied before him. "She is your housekeeper."

Nicholas acknowledged her with a nod. "Mrs. Tenner. I will not require anything but my meals in my study."

"Of course, your grace," she stated. Nicholas moved past her and continued down the hall slowly, feeling the stares of his staff burning in his wake. The home was as he remembered, with dark wood and portraits of the previous Blackmores bearing down on anyone that walked through the hallowed halls.

There was a faint hint of disuse, likely because the house had been in mourning since his father's death. And since there remained only a handful of servants, it was clear that most of the house had simply been closed off.

Nicholas waited for the pain of his father's demise to strike some sort of chord within him, but it never came. There had been no love between the father and son for years, ever since Nicholas had stormed from this house at the tender age of fifteen and joined the Royal Navy. There had been no letters, no calls for him to come home, no words of praise for everything that Nicholas had accomplished during his time in uniform. Even when he was appointed Captain – one of the youngest in the fleet - and called upon to join Admiral Lord Nelson to fight at Trafalgar, there had been no word from his father.

In the old Duke of Blackmore's eyes, Nicholas had not existed.

The feeling was mutual.

Finding the door to the study, Nicholas pushed it open, the faint smell of his father's favourite cigar lingering in the air. He didn't enter nor did he glance at the portrait that still hung over the massive fireplace. The study still felt like his father's.

Sickened, Nicholas turned away from the room, unable to take the step forward. The walls seemed to be closing in suddenly, and he couldn't get out of the house fast enough. His father was at every turn, the row between them heavy in the air still, even after twenty years.

He needed to get out.

His pace frustratingly slow, Nicholas stumbled back to the front door. Luckily, the servants had already dispersed so weren't privy to his sudden desperate need for some air. As he emerged onto the terrace fronting the house, he heaved in a lungful of air like a dying man. Which was how he felt much of the time. His chest felt as though it was encased in iron. Slowly, the feeling of panic began to fade, and he was able to breathe a little easier. The air was redolent with spring flowers, nothing like the salty air he'd been used to.

He would get no more of that here in Blackmore.

But then neither would he smell the smoke of battle or hear the screams of his men dying after losing limbs to a cannonball or split in two on the end of a cutlass. And one man, merely a boy, who'd died in his arms...

Trembling, he shut his eyes on the scene that haunted his dreams every night, taking another deep breath. Blackmore was a world away from his old life, and it was high time he put the past to bed.

The problem was, as Nicholas had come to realize, that was easier said than done.

Wiping his suddenly damp forehead with a kerchief from his pocket, Nicholas went back down the steps and followed the stone crushed path through the formal gardens and out between the hedges, finding himself eventually in the orchard behind the house. The trees were in full blossom, and Nicholas wandered slowly through them, remembering times from his childhood when he'd done just this, whether it was to escape his studies or to escape his father.

And Peter.

The thought of his brother caused another wrench in his chest. Forever frozen at fifteen, Peter would never know or face the kind of life Nicholas had experienced. His twin brother lay in a grave instead, and Nicholas had been the one to put him there.

Nicholas pushed away the hurt, setting his jaw.

Peter was dead.

His father was dead.

John was dead.

He was no longer a Captain in the Royal Navy. He was now, God help him, the Duke of Blackmore with all the duties and responsibilities that came with the title. He could almost hear his father's cold voice lecturing him on loyalty to the family name and the need to produce an heir as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, that would involve procuring a wife. Something he neither needed nor wanted.

Nicholas stared out over the orchard, leaning against an apple tree as he waited to get his breath back after the unfamiliar exercise. He smiled grimly. At this point in time, he wasn't even sure he was up to performing the duty necessary to beget an heir. Nevertheless, he would have to find a wife soon and begin the unpleasant task of taking over his father's estate.

The ship he'd commanded was nothing but a nightmarish memory. One that would, God willing, fade over time. The dukedom was the only thing of importance now.

As he turned to retrace his steps, a motionless shape under a tree in the distance caught his eye, and Nicholas frowned. Was it an animal or a person?

There was only one way to find out.

Picking his way carefully, Nicholas eventually found himself at the tree in question, completely nonplussed at what he found. A woman was asleep at its base, her skirts spread out over the grass. There was a book resting on her chest, and a stray, russet curl brushed her cheek, the breeze blowing it lightly across her skin.

Whoever the woman was, she clearly had no regard as to who might find her under the tree. Nicholas crouched down, the splinter wounds in his chest protesting as he did so, and gently shook the woman's shoulder. "Madam."

She made a sound but did not wake, and he gripped her shoulder harder, shaking it more forcefully. "Madam."

She jolted awake, and shot up, the top of her head colliding with his chin. Nicholas felt an explosion of pain in his jaw as he reared back, falling flat on his backside on the ground next to her in a most ungentlemanly manner.

"What?" he heard her ask imperiously. "Who the devil are you?"

Rubbing his now injured jaw, Nicholas narrowed his gaze. “More importantly, Madam, who the devil are you, and why are you trespassing on my land?”

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Grace Shackleford stared at the man on the ground beside her, her head still fuzzy from her impromptu nap in the shade of the tree. The orchard was her favourite place to visit in all of Blackmore, and since the old Duke never stepped foot outside of his large house, she'd never felt as if anyone cared that she borrowed one of his trees every now and again.

But this man clearly had an issue with her being here.

Gathering her book, she glared at him. "This is not your land, but the Duke of Blackmore's."

He was still rubbing his jaw with his large hand, and a smattering of small scars on the back of his knuckles drew her unwilling attention.

"It is my land. I am the Duke of Blackmore."

The words sank into Grace's thoughts. The old Duke had died in his sleep over three months before, and rumours abounded as to when his heir would finally come back and take up his title. "You?"

He didn't smile. "And you are...?"

Grace found it difficult to form the words. This was Nicholas Sinclair. The last time she'd seen him, he was but a lad of fifteen, right before his brother had perished and he'd run off to join the Navy. All the girls in the village had swooned over the two brothers and their good looks, including Grace. Of course, she'd been only five years of age at the time, but she would never forget his arrogant smile.

The years had not been kind to him, the promise of youth had given way to a harsh-featured man with angular cheekbones and a strong jawline. Oh, he was still as handsome as sin with his hair as black as midnight, and his eyes a deep-set blue, but there was now a smattering of grey at the temples, and his eyes were those of someone who had seen too much. There was no kindness in them, and Grace wondered with a small shiver if there was any kindness in him at all.

“Do you not speak now?”

Swallowing, Grace gathered her skirts and stood, peering down at him still seated on the ground. “Of course, I speak. I was just shocked to discover you had finally arrived, tis all. Everyone had given you up for dead.”

He didn’t rise. “As you can see Madam, I am very much alive, and you haven’t answered my question.”

“And as we are not acquainted Sir, you have no right to know who I am,” she replied haughtily, lifting her chin. If her voice wavered a little, she hoped it didn’t show.

He rose then, his imposing stature putting him nearly a head taller than she was. “Madam, I emphatically disagree. I can assure you I have every right to know who you are. You are from this village, I assume?”

Grace clenched her jaw tightly, heart pounding. “I am.”

His eyes hardened further. “Then clearly you belong to me.”

His words had a bite of steel to them that sent another shiver down her spine, and Grace found herself wondering what would happen if she struck him for his insolent words.

She belonged to no one, least of all him. “I will never be owned by anyone,” she responded tightly .

“What about your husband madam – whoever the unfortunate individual may be?” Part of him knew he was foolish to trade insults with this strange woman.

“I have no husband, Sir, and have no intention of taking one.”

“A happy coincidence. I doubt any man would want a sharp-tongued harridan like you in his bed,” the Duke replied cuttingly, his eyes raking down her homespun dress.

Grace drew in an outraged breath. “And you, Sir, have appalling manners for a duke,” she stated frostily, gratified to see his eyes narrow slightly. “Good day, your grace.”

She didn’t wait for him to respond, brushing past him and heading with hurried steps out of the orchard toward the village. Her heart was hammering against her chest, her fingers white from clutching her book tightly against her. The Duke of Blackmore was home.

He would soon find out who she was, as her father was retained at his grace’s pleasure. As the vicar of the village and of the estate, he answered directly to Nicholas Sinclair himself.

Her heart lurched at the possibility of the Duke making a complaint about her. If he did so, she would probably not see the outside of her room for the rest of the year, and even worse, with no books to read.

Grace finally reached the vicarage and pushed open the door, her mind consumed with the need to extract herself from the possible repercussions of her foolish words to the new Duke. Why couldn’t she ever keep her mouth shut?

Paying no heed to the never-ending background chatter from her sisters that echoed throughout the house, she made her way as swiftly and discreetly as possible to the bedchamber she shared with her sister Temperance. As the eldest of eight girls in the household, Grace had become an expert at blending in with the furniture. The alternative was to attract the attention of any or all of her sisters or having to deal with the current Mrs. Shackleford's latest attack of the vapours. She scarcely remembered her own mother who died of consumption when she was eight years of age.

Even though the Reverend had wed twice more after her mother had died, Grace had always been the one her sisters turned to whenever they got into scrapes. In her younger days, it had to be said that most of the time, the predicaments the sisters found themselves in were generally instigated by Grace herself. While she was under no illusions regarding her own lack of ladylike virtues, Grace had slowly become increasingly concerned that she had unwittingly passed her unruly behaviour on to her younger siblings.

At twenty-five, she had no intentions of ever looking for a husband and was content to remain a spinster. However, that did not mean the same fate had to await her sisters. After several futile attempts to instil some kind of discipline, Grace gradually realized the only way she could discourage her siblings' wild ways was to avoid her sisters whenever possible. However, she had to admit, this strategy wasn't terribly successful. Ranging in ages from eighteen down to ten, the youngest three siblings had spent most of their lives running wild following the older four, who had in turn taken their lead from Grace. They simply did not know how to behave any differently. And then, of course, there was the added complication of their five-year-old half brother who had enthusiastically joined in the mayhem since the day he could walk - whenever he was out of sight of his mother. Which was often, given the fact that the current Mrs. Shackleford spent most of the day recumbent on the parlour's chaise longue.

And now with the Duke not returned for five minutes and he and Grace already at cross-purposes, she was very worried indeed about the possible effect their estrangement may have on her sisters' admittedly already meagre chances at matrimonial happiness .

Grace rested her head wearily against her bedchamber door. She felt truly sick. What in God's name was she going to do?

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"Augustus, please can you put a stop to that infernal shrieking and barking? I think my head is in grave danger of splitting in two... Oh, and please ask Grace to fetch my salts."

"Yes, dear." The Reverend's response to his wife's plaintive was vague at best. Indeed, it was probable he didn't hear any of it. He was currently busy drafting a letter to a few prospective candidates for his eldest daughter's hand in marriage. Unfortunately, it wasn't going well. Percy's list was best described as meagre. In fact, there were only three bachelors living within the county who could be considered a catch of any description, and none of them was likely to provide enough of a dowry to make a meaningful contribution to his son's future.

Eventually, the noise reached even his unsensitive ears, and that, accompanied by his wife's wailing, caused him to finally frown and put down his pen.

"What the deuce is going on? DOWN FREDDY," he roared, as the dog began capering around him in excitement.

"Faith, Augustus, your voice is going to put me in an early grave, I swear." The Reverend refrained from adding an "Amen" to his wife's sentiment and strode over to the door.

“GRACE.” His voice triggered a sudden silence, and four heads peered down at him from the top of the bannister.

“She stole my ribbon, Father.”

“It was my ribbon first.”

“You have too many ribbons anyway.”

“And you don’t have any hair to put them in.”

“You take that back, or I’ll...”

The Reverend sighed and prepared to wade in. It wasn’t uncommon for such a fracas to end up with bloodshed. “Fripperies,” he yelled, “have no place in a house belonging to God.”

“’Tis a blessing this one belongs to you then, Father.” He couldn’t pinpoint which of the culprits had uttered the blasphemous remark, but enough was enough. He drew himself up ready to deliver a blistering set down, but before he had the chance to open his mouth, there was a loud knock on the door to which Freddy reacted as if they were under a particularly nasty attack by barking loud enough to wake the dead.

The four girls wasted no time in grasping the opportunity to disappear, and after hurriedly depositing Freddy in the study, the Reverend was forced to take more than one deep breath in order to ensure he was comporting himself in the appropriate pious manner required of a vicar. The loud knocking continued until he finally composed himself enough to throw open the door.

Surprisingly, it did not appear to be one of his parishioners standing on his step, but a lad of around twelve. His attire was worn but clean, as was the boy’s face. The

Reverend saw none of this, however, and thinking himself at the wrong end of some havey-cavey business, frowned and stepped back, preparing to slam the door in the miscreant's face.

Before he could do so, however, the boy spoke. "Are you the Reverend Shackleford?" The varmint's tone was verging on insolence, and the Reverend began to shut the door in distaste. "I've a missive from the Duke for 'im."

Reverend Shackleford paused. What was the likelihood of the Duke of Blackmore entrusting such a lad with any kind of message? It was indeed very likely to be a sham. But what if it wasn't. He'd not heard from the Duke since his grace's arrival, and such a summons was certainly to be expected .

Huffing, the Reverend took a wary step forward. "Give it here then," he muttered holding out his hand, careful to remain alert for any possible shenanigans. The boy simply stared at him and held the missive behind his back, clearly waiting for some kind of reward. Taking a deep, outraged breath, the Reverend very nearly resorted to swearing. Eventually, however, he calmed down enough to rummage inside his pockets, finally discovering a farthing which he dropped into a suddenly eager outstretched hand in exchange for the now badly creased communication. Which sure enough bore the Duke's seal.

Praising the Lord that he hadn't shut the door in the lad's face, the Reverend tore open the missive and read its contents.

It was as he'd surmised. He had been summoned to attend the Duke in his study at ten a.m. on the morrow. He wasn't unduly worried but simply assumed that the new incumbent wished to re-establish their acquaintance and verify that the vicar was up to the business of ensuring the new Duke's soul departed this mortal coil in the right direction when the time came.

Curtly ordering the boy to wait, the Reverend quickly penned a brief response detailing his happy acquiescence, then thrust the note into the boy's hand and bid him be off lest he find himself in receipt of more than a piece of paper.

After finally slamming the door, he heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Looking up, he was surprised to see Grace coming down towards him. This was a turn of events indeed. Usually, his eldest daughter had to be pried out of her room like a cockle from its shell, certainly when her father was at home. The Reverend stood and waited; his mind already turned to the possibility of using this rare opportunity to remind Grace of her duty in the matrimonial stakes. However, as she slowly got to the bottom couple of steps, he couldn't help but take note of her pallor and frowned, hoping she wasn't about to come down with some kind of ague.

He was just about to speak, but as his daughter reached the second-to-bottom step, she predictably tripped, falling forward, her hands flailing like a startled starfish before managing to correct herself in time to arrive mercifully upright at the bottom of the stairs.

They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds. "Has the note come from the Duke of Blackmore?" she finally asked in a small voice so unlike Grace, the Reverend had to look hard to check he'd got the right daughter.

He was tempted to tell the chit to mind her own business, but in light of the conversation he knew he wasn't going to be able to put off for much longer, he held his tongue, saying instead, "Indeed. 'Tis but a summons to wait on him tomorrow, which is nothing more than I expected."

To his vast surprise, his daughter's eyes widened as though she'd seen a ghost before falling in a dead faint at his feet.

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“The Reverend Augustus Shackelford.”

Nicholas laid down his pen as he watched the stout man walk into the study, his waistcoat straining to cover his stomach. The last time he’d seen Augustus Shackelford, the Reverend had definitely been a lot trimmer. In all other ways, time, or possibly God, appeared to have treated him very well.

“Your grace,” the Reverend said, cordially, bowing as much as he was able.

“Reverend,” Nicholas acknowledged, gesturing to the chair before the desk. It had taken him every bit of courage he possessed to step into this study, though he doubted he would ever feel comfortable in the leather chair he currently sat in.

The ghost of his father still seemed to linger, and Nicholas knew he would likely never rid himself of the bastard’s presence for the rest of his days.

“May I offer you a drink?”

“Perhaps some cordial? A cold drink would be very welcome on such a warm day,” the vicar responded, pulling out his kerchief and dotting his forehead with it. Nicholas nodded to the butler and invited the Reverend to take a seat.

Reverend Shackelford seated himself with a grateful sigh. He’d forgone the curricule this morning in favour of a sedate walk, thinking the time it took him to reach the Duke’s residence would provide a much-needed quiet interlude to mull over the recent turn of events. Things were clearly much worse than he’d thought. There was plainly something wrong with his eldest daughter.

Grace, who'd never to his knowledge ever ailed in her life, had continued to float around the vicarage, seemingly unable to settle, ever since her episode the day before. Normally preferring the sanctuary of her room, the Reverend had seen more of her in one day than he had in the last ten years, and for the whole time, she appeared to be watching him fearfully.

While Reverend Shackelford was not lauded for his patience, neither was he unkind or particularly bad-tempered. Indeed, his most important consideration was to ensure his life continued as peacefully and uneventfully as possible. To his knowledge, none of his daughters held any great fear of him, and Grace's constant staring was seriously beginning to unnerve him, especially as she continuously appeared on the verge of speaking.

He did not know how, but it was becoming clear that Grace somehow knew of his plans. His first thought was that perhaps Percy had been loose tongued, but when he'd casually thrown the curate's name into the conversation, there had been no reaction. And she certainly hadn't shown any interest in Percy during dinner. He fervently hoped that was the issue. There were, of course, other causes which would be far worse. He shuddered, wondering how much it would likely cost him should he be forced to persuade some gentleman to make an honest woman of her.

"A wife!" The reverend heard the words through a fog and looked up at the Duke in horror, wondering if he'd somehow spoken his concerns aloud.

"I beg your pardon, your grace," he stammered hurriedly. "I must beg your indulgence, but I didn't quite catch what you were saying."

Nicholas frowned. Clearly, the cleric hadn't heard a word. Was the man addled? The Duke opened his mouth to deliver a blistering set down, but at that moment, Huntley appeared with a tray of refreshments. After carefully setting the tray down on the desk, he handed a crystal goblet to the Reverend who took it gratefully. Nicholas

shook his head when offered a glass, enduring the interruption with ill-concealed impatience.

Reverend Shackelford used the opportunity to gather his wits. Perhaps the Duke would be an ally in finding a suitable match for Grace. A quiet word from someone so influential would go a long way to silence the gossipmongers. By the time the door closed on the elderly butler, he was able to direct his attention to the Duke in the pious and restrained manner expected of a man of the cloth.

“You were saying, your grace?” he offered, sipping at his drink.

The Duke of Blackmore set his jaw, causing the Reverend to shift in his seat a trifle nervously.

“I am in need of a wife,” Nicholas grated out finally, the words clearly struggling to make it past his tongue.

Reverend Shackelford blinked. He wasn’t sure how the Duke expected him to help in his grace’s matrimonial ambitions. As a vicar, he certainly didn’t mix in the kind of circles favoured by the higher echelons of the aristocracy. And he had enough matrimonial problems of his own to deal with. “Err, I’m not sure how I can help you, your grace. Is it spiritual guidance for a young lady perhaps? Or is it more of a chaperone you’re in need of? I’m happy to be of service if I can.”

The Duke ground his teeth in frustration. Infernal man. “I need one of your daughters.”

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After some discreet correspondence, Nicholas had learned that Reverend Shackelford had eight daughters in his household, a few of them of marriageable age. He had no

intention of going through the business of wooing a wife or taking off to London in search of a titled one.

He needed a respectful, meek and dutiful woman who would quietly provide him with an heir without any fuss and bother. Surely, as a man of God, the Reverend could be relied upon to have raised his daughters to be such?

Nicholas became aware that the older man was staring at him open-mouthed.

“Is something amiss?” he asked as the silence lengthened.

The Reverend coughed finally. “Let me get this straight your grace. You wish to wed one of my daughters and make her a duchess?”

Nicholas sighed inwardly. “Yes, that’s precisely my wish. I will leave the choosing to you.”

“Choosing?” Was the bloody man being deliberately obtuse, or was he usually this dull-witted? It certainly didn’t bode well for the intelligence of any offspring that might issue from his stock. But then, intelligence had never been considered a prize in the ton .

“As to which one it is to be.” Nicholas flipped over the paper he had been working on and pushed it across the desk. “I’m willing to pay handsomely for a pious, biddable wife.” One that was likely to do her duty and not ask for anything more from him.

Reverend Shackleford let out a strangled sound as he eyed the contract the Duke had prepared, and all of a sudden Nicholas was more concerned the man might be having an apoplexy. Just as he was about to rise and ring for help, the Reverend finally coughed and spoke.

“Certainly, your grace. I would be happy, and of course honoured, to give one of my daughters into your keeping for this happy union.”

“Good,” Nicholas stated, pressing his pen against the contract. “Sign and we will then discuss the particulars.”

The Reverend wrote his signature on the contract with a trembling hand before pushing it back to Nicholas. “When would you like to post the banns?”

“No banns,” Nicholas said as he scrawled his name under the Reverend’s. “No wedding day. I wish to be wed by the end of the week.”

“The week?”

Nicholas arched a brow. “Is that a problem?”

The man was wiping his forehead again. “No, of course not, your grace. It will be as you wish. I will preside over the ceremony myself.”

Reverend Shackelford paused to savour this prodigious moment. “My eldest. You will have my eldest.”

It mattered not to Nicholas. “Bring her at the end of the week, and she will become my duchess. I trust she is of childbearing age?”

“She’s twenty-five,” the reverend replied hesitantly, belatedly wondering if Grace’s age might bring this miraculous turn of events to ruin at the last moment. Wincing slightly, he hurried on “I know she’s a bit long in the tooth, your grace, but most assuredly right at the peak of her childbearing years. And to top it all, she’s a good, dutiful girl and will make you an admirable wife. Of that I am sure.”

“Fine,” Nicholas sighed. He did not want a simpering miss straight out of the school room. “Huntley will see you out. I will procure the special licence and send you word of the day and hour I wish you to conduct the ceremony.”

“I will await your instructions eagerly, your grace. And may I say how truly honoured I am that we are about to become family.”

The Duke eyed him coldly, and Reverend Shackelford hurriedly took his leave, only just resisting the urge to skip out of the room.

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After the Reverend left the study, Nicholas’s valet ambled in, his thumbs hooked in his waistcoat. “So, this is where yer spending yer days now.”

Nicholas leaned against the chair, feeling weary. “A valet does not come seeking his master.”

The Scot quirked a grin as he settled into the chair the vicar had just vacated. “Good thing I’m not a normal valet then, laddie.”

Despite his need to make his unorthodox valet understand the correct airs and graces of English society, Nicholas returned Malcolm’s grin with one of his own. The Scot had been his steward for a good number of years. As Nicholas had risen in the ranks and been appointed from ship to ship, Malcolm had accompanied him and probably knew more about him than any other living person.

During their last campaign, which culminated at the victorious Battle of Trafalgar, Malcolm had saved Nicholas’ life, but in doing so had taken a vicious bayonet wound to the leg. It was while they were both convalescing in Gibraltar that word finally reached them of the Duke of Blackmore’s death, catapulting Nicholas into a role he

was neither prepared for, nor had ever really wanted.

In some ways, the news had been fortuitous, although Nicholas would have died rather than admit it. Having been so grievously wounded in the battle, he'd been forced to give up his commission and simply had nowhere else to go.

Malcolm, ever his loyal steward, elected to return to England with his erstwhile captain, earning him Nicholas's undying gratitude. The Scot might not know the difference between a barrel knot and a waterfall cravat tie, but he understood what his captain had gone through since reaching manhood, and because of that, Nicholas would never see him homeless.

"That's yer brother?"

Nicholas followed Malcolm's gaze to the large portrait above the fireplace. Two solemn boys stared down at them, their father's hunting hounds flanking them. "That's him."

"Ye really did look alike."

Nicholas's lips rose in a small smile as he thought about the times he and Peter had tricked others regarding their identities. It had proven very resourceful with their tutors, and though they often saw the end of their father's belt for it, they continued to do so, even throughout their youth.

There were times, after he'd left England, especially when he was at sea, that Nicholas could have sworn he saw his brother or felt his presence on a stormy night.

After all, it had been on a stormy night he'd lost Peter, and for the life of him, he still could not understand why they'd thought it would be a good idea to race their horses in the rain. Nicholas would never forget his brother's cry as the horse had slipped on

the wet road, how he'd snapped his neck on impact, forever silenced.

The Duke had blamed Nicholas for pulling his brother into the foolhardy escapade that had ended his life. Peter had always been the Duke's favourite and the true heir of Blackmore. As the second son, albeit by minutes, he was merely an interloper.

"Leave me be," Nicholas growled, turning back to his papers, determinedly pushing the hurt back down into the locked box he kept it in. "I have work to do."

"Looks like it," Malcolm remarked, unruffled by his master's bad mood.

Nicholas waited until his old friend had left the room before wiping a hand over his face. The past had no place here. He had no choice but to press forward, to look toward a future which no longer included the rolling of a deck beneath his feet.

Starting with the wife he would have by the end of the week.

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By the time Reverend Shackleford reached the vicarage, some of his early euphoria had evaporated, replaced by apprehension at the thought of the conversation he would have to conduct with Grace. Especially the question of whether or not his eldest daughter's virtue remained intact.

The more he thought about it, the more Augustus Shackleford was afraid that what ailed Grace was simply a fall from that state.

If some rake had thought to ruin his daughter, the Reverend feared he would not be accountable for his actions. No matter how fortuitous the Duke of Blackmore's offer had been, he nevertheless dared not risk trying to pass used goods onto him.

Should Grace prove to have been less than virtuous, he would be forced to choose another of his daughters to take her place in the Duke's bed. And if Grace had a reputation for unruliness, it was nothing compared to her younger siblings.

The Reverend sighed, hovering at the foot of the stairs, unsure whether to simply question Grace himself or to involve Mrs. Shackleford whose diplomacy skills were actually worse than his own. Not to mention her complete lack of discretion.

Nevertheless, this kind of delicate questioning required a woman's touch, the Reverend decided. Beggars could not be choosers, and as a man of the cloth, his wife was the only female he was on any kind of intimate terms with. Therefore, she would have to suffice.

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“Fustian nonsense.” Agnes Shackleford’s response to her husband’s concerns was unusually loud, given the fact that most of the time she affected an air of fragility, speaking in breathless whispers. “Grace is no more a fallen woman than I am.” The Reverend truly had no ready response to either statement, so for once, he elected to remain silent.

“If you were to accuse her of spending too much time with her nose in a book, or climbing a deuced tree, then that would be more to the point, Augustus. No, our biggest problem should the Duke of Blackmore go through with his hare-brained plan to make her a duchess will be how much she is likely to embarrass us in polite society. And I am not concerned it might be due to any premarital indulgence in sins of the flesh.” The Reverend winced as his wife’s voice rose an octave, showing a side to her he’d hitherto not suspected. The effort was clearly too much, and she collapsed dramatically back against her cushions before continuing.

“Should she drag our name through the mud, then surely dear Anthony will not ever be able to mix with the fashionable elite again.” She finished the end of the sentence on a tremulous whisper, dabbing her eyes with a lace handkerchief as she did so.

“To be fair Agnes, the boy is only five.”

“The ton have long memories,” his wife responded with a sniff.

The Reverend sighed irritably. The whole thing was becoming devilishly complicated, and his head was beginning to ache. “So what are you suggesting?” he asked with a frown. “After all, Agnes, this is a golden opportunity we cannot expect to see the like of again. “Do you propose I choose Temperance in Grace’s stead, or perhaps Hope?”

“Definitely not.” Agnes Shackleford shuddered.

“Then, that’s settled. Grace it will have to be. As long as you are of the mind that she’s not surrendered her maidenhead to some devious scoundrel, I’m content she will understand her duty and make his grace a pious and biddable wife.” The Reverend felt as if a lead weight had been removed from his shoulders. “I’ll call for her to attend us right this minute to deliver the happy news.”

Agnes Shackleford’s only response was a long-suffering sigh. Plumping her cushions, she lay back and closed her eyes. “Could you ask her to bring my salts while she’s about it?”

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“He’s what?” Grace jumped to her feet, her expression a mixture of horror and disbelief.

“I said his grace has done you the very great honour of asking for your hand in marriage.” The Reverend stifled his irritation and repeated his statement slowly in the mistaken belief that his eldest daughter had misunderstood the first time.

“Why on earth has he done that? He doesn’t even like me.”

“What has liking got to do with it?” the Reverend asked, genuinely nonplussed. “As long as you do your duty and provide the Duke with an heir, I’ll wager you’ll not have to see the man from one month to the next.”

Grace stared at her father’s baffled face and suddenly felt the need to laugh bubbling up inside her. It was all so ridiculous. The Duke of Blackmore could have any highborn lady he wanted, but for some reason had set his sights on a woman of low birth - one he clearly disliked, after only five minutes of conversation. Why on earth would he do such a thing?

She became aware that her father was speaking again, this time in the earnest voice he usually reserved for parishioners who remained unconvinced that a lifetime in poverty on earth would secure them a better hereafter and were subsequently refusing to contribute to the collection box.

“You have no cause to worry Grace. It’s my belief that when he gets to see you, he’ll be more than content.”

Grace opened her mouth to ask what in the world he was talking about when it suddenly struck her. The Duke of Blackmore had no idea who she was.

Oh God, that was even worse. How the devil was he going to react when he saw her face for the first time as they said their vows? He may not even complete the ceremony. Grace couldn’t decide which would be worse – if he cried off, or if he actually went through with it.

“You know quite well Father that we don’t mix in the same social circles,” she countered desperately. “I’ll be a laughingstock.”

The Reverend couldn’t help observing that his daughter was now wringing her hands, and alarmed, he looked over at his wife who actually appeared to be asleep. Grace’s response had been the last thing he’d expected.

“Agnes?”

His wife’s only answer was a gentle snore. Hastily, the Reverend pulled out his pocket watch, checking the time before tucking it back into his waistcoat. “Now there will be none of that,” he finally said gruffly. “You are my eldest and far past marrying age. The Duke has agreed to a more than generous offer, and you will wed him.” He finished on a suitably decisive note which he hoped would put any ideas of rebellion out of her head once and for all.

Grace's thoughts conjured up the man who'd haunted her every waking moment since their meeting, his cold, piercing eyes and deep frown sending shivers down her spine. What would it be like to be married to such a man? He would most likely lock her in her room and throw away the key.

"I cannot," Grace said once more, her voice this time trembling in a fashion most unlike her. "I cannot Father. Do not make me."

The Reverend was at a loss. Not for one second had he imagined Grace would be against the match. Faith, it was far, far better than the chit could have hoped for. And to top it all, the Duke was hardly in his dotage, but a man in his prime and handsome to boot. A war hero no less.

"Grace," he said finally in exasperation. "What exactly is it you wish me to do? Do you wish me to refuse the man who has our livelihoods in his hands? We would likely end up in the workhouse. Is that what you want for your sisters?"

Grace stared wordlessly at him, stricken. The Reverend knew he'd struck a chord and shamelessly pressed his advantage. "Should you refuse to wed him, I will be forced to choose another of your sisters to take your place," he stated matter-of-factly. "The decision is yours." With that, he climbed laboriously out of his chair and pompously exited the parlour in the manner of a man accustomed to having his commands obeyed by his offspring. At the door, he paused and turned back. Grace hadn't moved. "I will expect your decision before dinner," he said, ensuring his tone was firm, and brooking no argument. "The wedding will take place the day after tomorrow." Grace frowned and opened her mouth to speak, at which point the Reverend decided that stateliness be damned and beat a hasty retreat.

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"The day after tomorrow! Oh Grace, how can Father expect you to get married so

quickly?”

“I thought the Duke was dead.”

“He’s so old!”

“Is this the new Duke?”

“I didn’t know there was a new one.”

Temperance and the eldest twins, Faith and Hope, were the three sisters closest to Grace in age. They had been hurriedly dispatched to attend their sister by their father in another obvious attempt to force his eldest daughter’s hand. So far, it seemed to be working. There was no way Grace could, in good conscience, allow any of her sisters to be sacrificed in her place. Nevertheless, their horrified faces weren’t exactly helping matters.

Grace fell back on the narrow bed, her body still numb with shock. She was going to be a wife in two days.

To the Duke of Blackmore. The man she’d told not two days ago that she had no intention of ever taking a husband and would never belong to anybody.

Looking about the room, Grace briefly contemplated gathering a few things and climbing out of the window to escape the fate that her father had bestowed upon her. She could smuggle a few notes from the drawer in his study and beg a ride out of the village.

But where would she go? She had no extended family to reach out to, and everyone she knew lived in this village. And she simply couldn’t leave any of her sisters to endure the same fate.

Her shoulders slumped in defeat. She had no recourse but to marry the Duke.

Temperance reached out and patted her sister's knee. "I know how you must be feeling dearest, but surely it could be worse. He could have promised you to Percy!" She frowned at a sudden horrified thought. "Surely father wouldn't consider any of us for Percy..."

"Faith," Grace muttered, "it's certain poor old Percy would have an apoplexy at the thought of being saddled with any of us." She refrained from commenting that their father was going to find it difficult to provide all eight of them with suitable matches – or any one of them for that matter, so it wasn't entirely a bag of moonshine to imagine their father might be desperate enough to consider his curate.

The only reason the Duke of Blackmore considered her suitable was because he'd only recently returned home and didn't know of her. Or her sisters...

"And you will move into that grand house," Temperance continued, determinedly avoiding the thought of Percy as a possible husband, "with your own servants and beautiful gowns. Oh, and the parties. You can throw wonderful parties."

Grace looked at her sisters. "I don't think the Duke will be holding any parties. He doesn't appear to be in the least frivolous or prone to enjoying himself. I will be wed to a man who has spent all his adult years up to now away at sea. I know very little about him, but if he's willing to take a local vicar's daughter, it's clear he has no truck with high society."

"Well, if he's not in his dotage, I'm sure you will get to know a lot more about him," Faith replied, her eyes now sparkling with mischief. "Quite quickly, in fact."

Grace's cheeks burned as she thought about actually sharing a bed with a man. With eight females residing in the same household, there had obviously been no lack of

discussion about the opposite sex, but she would be facing her new husband without her sisters around.

She'd have to face the cold, intimidating man entirely alone.

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There were no last-minute reprieves, and two days hence, the morning of Grace's wedding day dawned. Resigned now to her fate, Grace rose in the predawn light and pulled out her best day dress. It was clearly not fitting for a soon-to-be duchess, but it was the best she owned.

She carefully bathed and washed her hair before donning the gown and allowing Temperance to arrange her hair into a simple chignon. The twins tucked flowers into her curls and helped Grace gather her things before she said farewell to each of her sisters, the tears flowing freely down her cheeks as she did so. "Be strong Gracie," Temperance whispered against her cheek as she embraced her sister. "Mother would be so proud of you."

"Their care falls to you now," Grace whispered back as she released her. "Do your best to curb their greater excesses, Tempy. If any of you are to make suitable matches, you will all need to start behaving like young ladies." This was the first time Grace had spoken thus to her younger sister, and Temperance widened her eyes in bewilderment. "They are your responsibility now," Grace insisted, turning away before she disgraced herself completely.

Her father and Agnes were waiting at the door, the Reverend dressed in his finest cassock with a wide smile on his face. To Grace's surprise, Agnes grasped her hands, tears in her eyes. "Look at you, about to become the Duchess of Blackmore."

"Come," her father stated, motioning to the carriage the Duke had sent for them.

“Blackmore awaits.”

Grace looked back, seeing her sisters crowding the doorway to wave goodbye, and blinked back the tears that continually threatened. They would do her no good now.

The drive to her future residence was short, and with every passing minute, Grace felt her anxiety rise until it threatened to swamp her. By the time the carriage halted in front of her magnificent new home, Grace felt the first onset of queasiness. She had eaten nothing since rising, and now her body was reminding her of her folly in no uncertain terms. Swallowing nervously, she accepted the hand of the footman as he reached for her, carefully stepping down out of the carriage .

There in the imposing doorway, stood the Duke, silently watching. Grace felt her queasiness increase as she met his eyes and chanced to observe the shock on his face when he finally realised who he'd signed the marriage contract for.

Taking her father's arm, she ascended the stairs slowly, taking in shallow panting breaths in an attempt to quell the rising nausea and feeling as though she were going to the gallows rather than her marriage bed.

As they reached the top, the Duke finally stepped forward, his face now blank of any emotion. He held out his hand towards her, and Grace swallowed convulsively as she offered one last pleading glance up at her father. The Reverend simply nodded his approval and gently pushed her towards her husband-to-be with an encouraging smile.

Everything seemed to slow down as Grace reached for the Duke's hand, stumbled forward and finally felt the threatened bile surge up unbidden as she emptied the meagre contents of her stomach right at his feet.

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It was the chit from the orchard.

Nicholas nearly laughed aloud at this twist of fate as he watched the Reverend and his daughter move up the stairs, wondering what she was thinking about this nuptial. He imagined she'd known of her fate before he had, but the woman before him bore no resemblance to the harridan who'd taken him to task the last time they met. This version looked as though she was about to faint. Her colour was that of someone at death's door. The Duke frowned, wondering if Reverend Shackelford was trying to pull the wool over his eyes by wedding him to someone who was gravely ill. Although it had to be said, she was a little on the buxom side to be suffering from any serious malady. Despite her obvious discomfort however, her eyes did not leave his as she slowly climbed the steps, and Nicholas felt the first stirrings of an unwilling admiration.

She seemed taller than he remembered. Her dark hair was artfully curled with fresh spring flowers threaded through it. Her green dress clung to a voluptuous form he'd certainly not taken note of during their last meeting. Indeed, she was quite lovely. As she got closer, her eyes flared with barely concealed panic, and she appeared to be panting slightly, leaning heavily on her father who was smiling broadly, seemingly oblivious to his daughter's discomfort

She was certainly pretty enough to turn a few heads, and providing her manners proved to be acceptable, she would do well enough.

And then she threw up all over his immaculately polished hessians.

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“I cannot apologise enough Your Grace. I have no idea what came over her. Grace is usually so ... so, well, composed. I’m sure it’s simply a trifling attack of the vapours. Any young woman would indeed swoon at the prospect of being wed to such a fine specimen of a man.”

Nicholas raised his eyebrows but forbore to mention that swooning wasn’t usually accompanied by vomit.

“No matter,” he finally answered coolly, just as the Reverend looked as though he was going to throw himself on the nearest sword. "As soon as my wife-to-be makes an appearance, we will begin the ceremony.”

The Reverend breathed an audible sigh of relief.

Grace had been sent off with the housekeeper to freshen up while the Duke and her father waited in the drawing room. Both men kept glancing at the clock, and as the minutes ticked by, the Reverend began nervously blotting his forehead with a kerchief. After half an hour had passed, Nicholas decided she was either dead or possibly halfway to London by now.

He was about to call for Huntley when the door finally opened, and the butler announced his wife-to-be.

Reverend Shackleford hurried over to his daughter, and Nicholas was mildly gratified to observe that he did seem genuinely concerned about her. After a few seconds of whispered conversation, the Reverend mopped his shiny forehead one last time, and turned back towards the Duke who remained motionless.

“Your grace,” the Reverend said, relief colouring his voice. “This is my eldest, Grace.”

She dutifully executed a curtsy. "Your grace."

Nicholas was glad to note her colour was much improved. However, her eyes were downcast, and her manner remained meek and submissive - nothing at all like the sharp-tongued woman he'd experienced in the orchard. He told himself this was entirely the right and proper conduct for a woman soon to be wed, and if a small part of him felt the slightest disappointment, he determinedly ignored it. He stared down at her, vaguely nonplussed. Women had not hitherto played a large part in his life, and he was sorely lacking in the art of polite conversation. He wondered what she thought about their arrangement. Not a lot, if her earlier faux pas gave any indication. Had her shock been the same when she'd learned the name of the man she was to marry?

"I must beg your forgiveness for my rudeness earlier," she was saying in a low voice, her eyes firmly directed towards the floor.

Nicholas took a deep breath. "I trust the state of the flooring meets with your approval, Miss Shackleford. Welcome to Blackmore, your new home."

She straightened, finally meeting his eye. "Is it?"

"Grace," her father admonished nervously. "Apologise."

Perhaps the chit in the orchard hadn't entirely disappeared. He raised his eyebrows at her slip, and she quickly lowered her eyes back to the floor. However, he made sure to keep his voice polite but distant. "No apology is necessary. Come, Miss Shackleford. Let us retire to the chapel and get the ceremony underway. It is clear the flooring is not to your satisfaction, and the sooner we can make you the lady of this house, the sooner the polishing will no doubt be up to the required standard." He wasn't sure if he imagined the slight twitch at one corner of her mouth as she placed her hand on his arm.

The chapel was located off the family dining room. Huntley and Mrs. Tenner were brought in as the required witnesses, and in a span of half an hour, Nicholas found himself stating his vows to a woman he didn't even know before pressing a chaste kiss on her cheek as her father announced them man and wife. Stepping back, he looked at the unsmiling face of his new Duchess, words refusing to form on his lips. A woman should hear some sentiment on her wedding day, some measure of affection, yet there was none between them.

Only a measure of regret.

And then it was over. Reverend Shackleford closed his book of common prayer and glanced at each of them uncertainly.

“Well,” he stated with forced joviality, depositing the book back into the cavernous folds of his cassock. “Perhaps I should take my leave now. Let err, you err, give you some time to err, get to know each other?” He ended the sentence with a question mark which was directed to the Duke. Nicholas nodded curtly and bade Huntley lead the way back to the entrance hall.

Once there, he stood back to allow father and daughter to bid each other farewell. The Reverend took Grace in an awkward hug, then hurried out of the front door, leaving his daughter staring after him, her eyes glistening with tears.

To his relief however, she didn't succumb to a flood as the door closed with frightening finality, leaving the two of them standing in the entrance hall, the silence deafening.

Nicholas couldn't get past the events that had just happened. He was married.

There was a discreet cough behind him. “Shall I show her grace to her room?”

Nicholas turned to find Huntley still hovering nearby, the footman next to him. “Yes,” he stated, his voice rough in his own ears. “My wife will require a morning meal as well.”

Grace’s eyes flew to his. “Will we not breakfast together?”

“I have work to do,” he grated out. His wedding day was no different to countless others, just another task that he’d been forced to undertake for the Estate.

His words caught her completely off guard. “But I ... I thought it might give us an opportunity to ... well, perhaps ... become acquainted, mayhap get to know a little about each other?” Her hesitant voice was again completely different to the sharp-tongued woman he’d first met, and his heart contracted almost guiltily at the change.

“Then you thought wrong madam,” he replied sharply. “Huntley will see to your needs as will Mrs. Tenner. Good day.”

He turned and strode to his study before she could respond, feeling the tightness of his collar once more. He didn’t want this. He didn’t want to be forced into marriage or to be working on the endless bloody correspondence.

All he’d known for so long was the feel of the salt air on his face, the sound of his orders being carried out by his sailors or the nervous tension in his body right before a battle.

He didn’t want this life, yet here he would stay until they carried him out in a box...

The morning stretched to afternoon, the lunch tray that Mrs. Tenner delivered still left untouched as the shadows grew in the room. Nicholas buried himself in the work, carefully poring over the ledgers left behind by his father’s steward and answering correspondence from London.

When the room finally darkened, he stood and stoked the fire, watching as the flames consumed the wood. Nicholas knew that any other man in his position would be eagerly making his way to his chamber and preparing himself to consummate his marriage, but his feet would not move from the spot. He was rooted before the flames, protected by the four walls of the study and the closed door to his right .

Stalking over to the crystal decanters, Nicholas selected a fine brandy and poured a glass, savouring the sweetness on his lips. Tonight was his wedding night, but he would be spending it in this study and not in the arms of his lovely bride. He couldn't imagine subjecting anyone to the pain and horrors that lived on inside his mind, the images that took over as soon as he closed his eyes.

He was a broken man, one not fit to have any happiness in his life. Nicholas was to forever suffer for his failures, for Peter's death, for the deaths of his men, for the death of his ... of John.

He might have been given the medals and accolades of a man with a worthy career, but he felt even less like the celebrated hero than he did the Duke of Blackmore.

Sighing, Nicholas carried his drink over to the leather chair before the fire and settled in for the night. Tonight, was like every other. The ghosts of his past would infiltrate his mind and have him paralyzed with fear and anguish, just when he was most vulnerable.

That was not something for any young bride to see. Eventually, he would have to pay a visit to her bed if he wished to produce an heir, but right now, Nicholas couldn't be soused enough to do so.

Besides, she'd just found herself sold and married to a man who had done nothing but sneer at her. Nicholas imagined the last thing she wished to see was him grunting above her, taking his liberties because he'd put a ring on her finger.

He downed his brandy, relishing the burning deep down inside his chest, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

If he was lucky, the nightmares wouldn't wake the whole household.

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The sunlight blinded Grace as she opened her eyes, taking a few moments to look at the unfamiliar room. It was lovely, with the soft colours of blue and green in the wallpaper matching the sumptuous blue carpet covering the floors. When Mrs. Tenner had shown her the room, Grace had nearly laughed aloud at the absurd thought that it was larger than all her sisters' rooms put together.

The bed was large enough for all seven of her sisters as well, and it had taken Grace some time to get used to the softness under her body as she'd lain there, waiting on her husband.

Her cotton gown had suddenly seemed silly as she'd donned it for his arrival, wishing she'd had something a bit more, well, fitting for a duke, something that made her feel truly beautiful.

Not that it mattered. Her door had remained closed all night, and in the bright morning light, Grace felt like a fool to even think that he would come to her room. Their marriage had been nothing more than a business arrangement, and while she had not been privy to the real reason the Duke had married her, it certainly wasn't because he wished to be in her company.

A frustrated breath left her lungs, and Grace threw aside the heavy coverlet, sitting on the side of the bed. While she didn't want to be married any more than her husband did, they were tied together for the rest of their lives. The heavy ring on her finger told her so. She had to assume that the Duke wished for an heir. Why else would he bother taking a wife? And for her, the only thing that could possibly make the arrangement even remotely tolerable was for her to have a child.

While she might not be an expert in matters of the flesh, she knew there was no chance of that if her husband did not actually come to her bed. Somehow, she had to change that.

Which meant she needed to learn about her husband, about his likes and dislikes as well as the real reason he hadn't sought out her bed on their wedding night.

Quickly dressing, Grace tied her hair back with a simple ribbon before hurrying out of her room and down the hallway, trying not to gawk at the finery surrounding her. It was hard for Grace to believe that this was her home now, that these were her possessions.

That she was the Duchess of Blackmore.

As she descended the stairs, she heard voices coming from an open door, one of which sounded suspiciously like her new husband.

What should she say to him?

Would he even talk to her this morning? Grace wondered if he'd ever be able to give her a look that did not equate to a frown. Mayhap now was the time to find out.

She gently pushed the door wider, the faint smell of tobacco wafting out of the room as she did so. Her husband was seated behind a large desk, with a small man in one of the chairs in front, both men discussing the ledger that was open before them. "This cannot be accurate," the Duke was stating, his long finger stabbing at the page before him. "I've done my own calculations. It is off by one hundred pounds."

"I assure you, your grace," the other man stammered. "I've transposed the numbers correctly."

“Then I will take it out of your funds, Mr. Thomas.”

“Y-your Grace,” Mr. Thomas pleaded as Grace slipped in the room without a sound.

“You cannot.”

Grace watched as her husband’s expression became carefully blank. “I assure you I can. If I were you, Mr. Thomas, I would be going back and refiguring your numbers before I make my final decision.”

“Yes, your grace,” the small man said quickly, grabbing the ledger and standing. “I will have an answer by the end of the day.”

“See that you do,” the Duke muttered as the man moved past Grace to the door, his eyes respectfully downcast. Grace swallowed as she turned back to her husband, finding him staring at her. “What are you doing here?”

She cleared her throat, clenching her hands tightly together. “I’ve come to see if you wish to join me for breakfast.”

His jaw worked. “I’ve already eaten.”

Of course, he had. “Then perhaps I can join you in here?”

He stood, coming around the desk with a slight limp. Grace wondered what had happened to him. She’d heard he had been injured at Trafalgar, the papers that came from London had waxed lyrical about his bravery, his leadership and what a fine man he was fighting alongside Admiral Nelson, leading the British Fleet to a resounding victory against the French.

Was that why he’d returned? Not because of his father’s death but because his injuries had finished his naval career?

Grace started forward but felt the tip of her boot catch the edge of the rug, and with a small cry, she pitched forward, unable to catch herself.

Suddenly, she was hauled up against a warm surface, strong arms wrapped around her waist to steady her. The smell of sandalwood surrounded her as she lay her hands on his chest, feeling the strong, steady heartbeat under the palm of her hand. “ You do not mimic your namesake wife,” he murmured dryly.

“I’m afraid I never have,” she said breathlessly, trying to process his closeness. He hadn’t touched her yesterday save to place the ring on her finger and the chaste kiss on her cheek, but now he was, she felt the blood start to warm in her body, her heart racing wildly in her chest. “I fear it was a jest to name me as such.”

Grace looked up at his face, hoping to see evidence of a smile.

Instead, his stony gaze met hers, and she felt her heart sink as he set her back, his jaw tightly clenched. “I have work to do, wife.”

“Grace,” she stated, feeling the warmth starting to dissipate now she was no longer encircled in his arms. “My name is Grace. Shall I call you Nicholas or Blackmore?”

He moved toward the desk, his limp more pronounced than it had been before, and Grace was worried that her sudden movements had hurt him somehow. “Nicholas is fine,” he grated out, settling in the chair with a wince.

Grace opened her mouth to ask after his health, but something in his expression halted her. Her husband was very obviously a proud man and would likely not entertain her questions. “I see. Well, I shall leave you to your work then, Nicholas.”

He didn’t respond, and she carefully made her way out of the study, pressing herself against the wall to slow her heartbeat.

She had her answer.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Nicholas etched a number in the column before placing the pen down with a muttered oath. His eyes glanced towards the small clock on the desk, noting it was nearing luncheon. The morning had been a waste of his time as he'd been unable to prevent his mind from continuously returning to his wife's unexpected visit to his study.

That and the way she'd felt in his arms.

What was she doing on her first official day as a married woman? Nicholas knew he was being an arse for not spending time with her. As a lowly clergyman's daughter, she would have very little knowledge of the duties required of a duchess and would need some direction at the very least. But then, what the hell did it matter? Nicholas had no intention of entertaining. He had very few friends within the ton, and those he did have, he'd long since lost touch with. There would be no social visits to Blackmore. His Duchess could sleep her days away underneath a hundred different trees. Nobody would be any the wiser.

Yet she was his wife and would be the mother of his heirs one day. She would need to comport herself in polite company at some point in the future. Perhaps he should consider employing a companion for her? Someone who could show her how to behave in polite society. And a lady's maid. She would need someone to help her dress. And what about her clothes... ?

Bloody hell.

Frustrated, Nicholas threw down his pen and eased himself from behind the desk, hissing as his shrapnel wounds pulled tight against his breeches . He walked slowly out of the study, grunting with the effort of getting his traitorous body to loosen up

and nearly bowling over Mrs. Tenner in the process. “Oh!” she squeaked, her hands tightening the tray in her hands. “Your grace! I was just delivering your noon meal.”

“Where is my wife?” Nicholas asked in a near growl, his thoughts still consumed with the practical problems of having taken a spouse.

“Why, she’s taking her meal in the breakfast room,” Mrs. Tenner said slowly. “She felt the dining room was far too big to sit in alone.”

Nicholas grimaced slightly at the censure in her tone when she said alone . And he couldn’t blame Grace for wanting more intimate surroundings. The small family dining room was built to seat twenty, and the formal dining room could hold nearly fifty. Nodding towards the tray, Nicholas’s voice remained clipped. “I will take my lunch together with my wife.”

His housekeeper’s eyes widened. “Of course, your grace. I’ll take this for you.”

Nicholas reached out and plucked the tray from her hands. “I can take it myself, Mrs. Tenner.”

He knew he’d surprised her but didn’t wait for her response as he walked to the breakfast room, a cheery room his mother had spent a great deal of her time in when she was alive. Grace was seated at the small round table set in the recess of the huge picture window. She started as he walked in and promptly dropped her spoon into her soup as their eyes met. “Nicholas, I ... err...” Her voice petered out as she tried in vain to fish her spoon out of the hot liquid without getting any on her fingers.

“Would you like some help?” he enquired politely placing his tray onto the table.

Grace glanced down at the mess she’d made of her napkin, and her face flamed. Swiftly, Nicholas used his own spoon to lift out the offending cutlery. Once clear, he

deftly wiped it on his own napkin and presented it back to her with a flourish. Hesitantly, she took the spoon and looked back down at her bowl in mortification. “Thank you,” she whispered, wishing a hole would appear to swallow her up. Or failing that, he would simply leave quickly.

“May I join you for luncheon?”

Surprise made her lift her head quickly as he gestured toward the seat across from her.

Making an effort to gather herself together, Grace nodded her acquiescence. “Of course, though I wasn’t aware it was customary for a duke to bring his own lunch with him.”

His lips lifted in an unwilling smile as he took his place. “I’m afraid I intercepted my own meal.”

Finally, a smile, albeit a small one. Nevertheless, she felt her spirits lift at the sight and matched his smile with a tremulous one of her own.

Nicholas felt the blood in his veins heat at the sight. His wife was truly lovely when she smiled. “Well then, I’m glad you did,” she offered shyly.

Determinedly pushing aside thoughts of his wife’s allure, Nicholas uncovered the plate and picked up the fork. “How are your rooms?”

“Lovely. They are much larger than I’m used to. As you know, I have seven sisters and a brother, so I’m used to small spaces.”

Although he was accustomed to being in close proximity with lots of bodies, he couldn’t imagine being crammed into the Reverend’s home with all those family

members. "This house is now your home," Nicholas said instead. "Feel free to make any changes as you see fit. Perhaps you'd like to start with the floor..."

Her eyes flew to his. Was he actually teasing her? She endeavoured to look serious. "As you're no doubt aware, Nicholas, I gave the floor a thorough inspection on the day of our marriage, and I'm happy to report that I found it more than adequate."

He quirked a grin, and Grace felt her heart lurch. Dear God, he was handsome when he wasn't looking so stern.

They sat in silence for a few moments, returning their attention to their luncheon.

"What about you, Nicholas?" Grace asked reaching for her water glass as she finished eating. "Returning home must have been difficult."

"It was my duty," he replied, spearing the food before him. His clipped tone warned her against pursuing the subject. He had no wish to discuss with her or anyone the emotions that had assaulted him on his return.

Grace mentally kicked herself. Clearly, the subject of his change in circumstance was a sore one.

"Do you ride?"

Nicholas nearly dropped his fork but recovered so quickly that she didn't notice the sudden shake of his hand. He hadn't ridden since the night they'd lost Peter. "No."

"Me neither," Grace sighed, pushing away her bowl. "I've never really had the opportunity or the inclination."

Some of the tension eased from his shoulders. "Then what do you do?"

A dreamy smile crossed her lips. "I enjoy reading. I abhor embroidery. I much prefer to be outdoors."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. In his experience, genteel young ladies did not usually spend a vast amount of time looking at books, unless it was to indulge in the latest gossip at the circulating library.

"Novels?" he asked, genuinely interested.

Grace nodded, her eyes sparkling. "I am currently reading Robinson Crusoe."

Nicholas was surprised. "I would have thought such a title is not commonly favoured by ladies of a gentle disposition?"

Grace studied his face, wondering if he was reprimanding her. There seemed to be no censure in his expression however, merely a polite interest. She took a deep breath and spoke the truth.

"I'm not really a gentle woman at all though, as you must be aware."

Nicholas frowned, wondering if this would be a good time to bring up the possibility of tutoring her in the responsibilities expected of a duchess. Instead, he found himself saying, "We have a library here in Blackmore." While it was unlikely the books in its shelves would provide her with any insight into her new role, they would certainly distract her and keep her from getting under his feet.

Keeping her happy had nothing to do with it...

Her eyes flew to his. "Truly?"

He nodded. "Would you like to see it?"

She looked down at his still full plate. “As soon as you finish your meal, your grace. I can wait.”

No longer hungry, and curious to know what her thoughts of Blackmore’s extensive library would be once she saw it, he pushed the plate away and stood. “Come.”

Grace scrambled to his side, and together, they walked out of the room, the tantalizing smell of jasmine tickling his nose. Surreptitiously, he breathed the scent in, glancing down at Grace as she walked carefully by his side. Her eyes were firmly on the floor, no doubt in case she missed her footing.

Finally reaching the library, Nicholas pushed open the door and stood back, allowing Grace to step in first before following in close behind her. She turned in a slow circle, her expression awed. “What a beautiful room,” she whispered reverently. “I’ve never seen so many books.”

Nicholas cleared his throat, watching silently as she lovingly touched the leather spines of the books before her. What would it feel like to have her touch him like that?

When Grace finally turned back toward him, he was struck by the sheer delight in her expression, the softness of her eyes. There was no denying her pleasure made him feel as if he were human once more. “Thank you, Nicholas. This is a lovely present.”

“Consider it your wedding gift,” he said gruffly, suddenly needing to escape her fulsome praise. He didn’t deserve it. “I must return to my work.”

The light in her eyes dimmed, but she nodded. “Of course. I shall see you later.”

It wasn’t a question, but he didn’t answer her, inclining his head before swiftly vacating the room.

Perhaps the library would keep her entertained for a while until he could figure out exactly what he needed to do with her.

Because right now, he wasn't so certain he felt quite as detached as he had when she first arrived, and he couldn't afford to have his heart involved. Their marriage was a business arrangement only.

And Nicholas was determined it would remain so. He didn't dare do otherwise.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Grace stared at the ornate ceiling above her head, her heart heavy. Nicholas had not come yet again to her bed, and she was starting to wonder if he ever would. After today's events, she'd hoped he was warming to the fact they were married. That she was now his wife.

Yet as the shadows lengthened from day to night, she'd eaten a solitary dinner for the second time and made her way to bed.

Alone.

It seemed her new husband was still avoiding her.

As yet she had no lady's maid, and in truth had no wish for one, but it would have been comforting to have someone to speak with as she readied herself for bed. She thought about her sisters and the noisy mayhem that usually accompanied them all as they retired. Her room was undeniably beautiful, but she was surrounded by oppressive silence.

Grace climbed into bed and lay back, staring at the shadows on the ceiling. Was this how it was going to be for the rest of her life? She felt a clutch of fear, then took herself to task. Throwing back the covers, she sat up. She wasn't simply going to lie here and look at the ceiling. There was an entire library for her to explore downstairs.

After locating her wrap, Grace stole down the stairs as quietly as possible. Halfway down, she abruptly froze as muffled sounds of screaming came from her husband's study.

Another cry rent the air, and Grace stumbled down the rest of the stairs, her heart in her throat. Had someone broken in? It sounded as though they were being attacked. She felt suddenly sick at the thought that Nicholas may still have been in the study. Was he even now being murdered?

Without thinking, she grabbed a candlestick from a small occasional table at the foot of the stairs and hurried down the dim hallway to the study.

Throwing open the door, Grace found the room empty save a thrashing man in the chair before the fire.

“No! Don’t you dare die on me, John. Keep your eyes open. Look at me, damn you, look at me.”

The anguish in his words tore through Grace as she made her way to his side, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Nicholas was having a nightmare, and by the torment on his face, she realised whatever it was he was dreaming had actually happened.

Was this why he hadn’t come to her bed?

“Lass, be careful.”

Grace turned to find Nicholas’s valet at the doorway, his red hair sticking out all over his head. She had met the Scot the day before and found him very congenial. “Do you know what’s happening?”

The sombre look on his face tugged at her heart. “Aye. He’s having a nightmare. They continue to plague him, even after all this time.”

“What can I do to help him?” she whispered, kneeling beside the chair. It must be

torturous to know he would endure such pain each night when he closed his eyes.

“There’s nae helping him,” the Scot replied, moving closer to the chair. “And he will not thank ye to see him so.”

“I can’t leave him like this,” Grace stated. Carefully, she lay her hand on her husband’s cheek, feeling the tightness under her palm. Nicholas flinched against her touch, but his eyes did not open, his fists clenched tightly against the chair. “There must be something I can do,” she continued almost on the verge of tears.

“Go on lass,” the Scot replied, his expression troubled. “I’ll get the lad tae his bed. ‘Tis the blasted memories that will not leave him be. And the sights and sounds he’s endured are not for a gentle woman’s ears.”

Gently, he pushed her towards the door. “He’s lucky to have a friend such as you,” she whispered.

The other man grinned. “Aye, and he’s lucky tae have a woman like ye by his side. God willing, he’ll realise it before we’re all old and grey.”

Grace touched the man’s shoulder in thanks before she exited the room, the tears now flowing freely as she climbed the stairs. Perhaps her husband was not the cold man she’d believed him to be. The agonies he’d clearly experienced had wrought such terrible suffering inside him. Mayhap Nicholas had cultivated the remoteness in his demeanour as protection.

To keep people away. To keep her away.

Shivering, Grace climbed back into her bed, pulling the covers to her neck. She had no knowledge of the horrors of battle and felt completely out of her depth. But she was determined to do something. One thing had become abundantly clear. Nicholas

had shut himself away from the world, and it was up to her to bring him back.

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The next morning, Grace opened her eyes to find her husband seated on the side of her bed, dressed for the day. Gasping in shock, she sat up quickly, hugging the bedclothes to her.

“Nicholas?” she asked hesitantly when he didn’t speak. She could see the dark circles under his eyes and lines of exhaustion on his face. He looked like she felt, worn out and weary from the previous night’s events.

“I understand I woke you last night.”

His voice was expressionless, giving nothing away. Grace sat up, pushing the hair out of her face. Had he sought her out to apologize? Surely he understood there was no need. “I was not asleep Nicholas.”

“Still you should have remained in your bed. It is not appropriate for you to see me so.” His voice was curt, and Grace fought against her instinctive need to flinch.

Taking a deep breath, she touched his shoulder, careful to keep the touch light. Plucking up the courage she whispered, “Is that why you have yet to come to my bed?”

He didn’t meet her eyes, though she could see the tightening in his jaw. “I will not subject you to my nightmares.”

Grace climbed out of the bed then and came to stand before her damaged husband, heedless of the fact that she was wearing only her nightclothes. Boldly, she touched his cheek and forced him to meet her gaze.

His eyes darkened, but he didn't respond, simply stared down at her, his face expressionless. Grace summoned the courage she'd just found to do what she must. "If you wish to allow me to help you, I will, but I will not push you to do so Nicholas. These nightmares do not make you weak, but they will destroy you if you allow them to do so."

"You know nothing of the world," he responded cuttingly. "You can't help me. I don't need a nursemaid. I need a wife. One who knows her place."

The iciness in his tone caused Grace's heart to thud sickeningly, and she stepped back slightly, wanting nothing more than to crawl back into her bed and bury herself under the covers. Instead, she stood tall, and clenching her fists together, leaned forward to press her lips against his cheek. "Yes, I am your wife," she started, surprised her voice remained steady. "And you are my husband. Your pain is my pain. I will be here, whenever you need me."

Nicholas's sharp intake of breath told Grace she'd caught him off guard, and she straightened, wanting nothing more than to wrap her arms around him. "Will you have breakfast with me?" she asked carefully, moving to the wardrobe that held her dresses.

The door closing behind her was her only response, and Grace pressed her forehead to the cool wood, her shoulders slumping. He had sought her out, but only to tell her to mind her own business and stay out of his way.

Well if her husband thought she was that much of a damn ninnyhammer, he was in for a grave shock.

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The discovery that her husband had left with nary a word spoken to her had her

spitting feathers. For the first time since she'd become mistress of this mausoleum, Grace felt her anger begin to stir. She had done nothing for him to treat her so. His troubled mind did not give him an excuse for boorish behaviour.

He had intimated he wished her to stay out of his way. Well, disappearing to Scotland without telling her was certainly an excellent way to belabour his point. Well, two could play at that game.

Resolutely she put her ill-mannered husband out of her mind and determined she would learn everything she could about the house she was now mistress of, and mayhap learn a little about what was expected of her. For the next two weeks, she explored the house from top to bottom, seeking out all its hidden nooks and crannies. When she wasn't exploring, she spent most of her time in the library reading about Blackmore's history. Sections of the house were clearly very old, and it had more than its fair share of gruesome legends.

She also wrote to her husband, enquiring after his health and intimating she was missing his company.

After discovering everything she could about her new home, Grace decided to move on to exploring the grounds which were much more extensive than she'd imagined. Luckily, the weather remained warm and sunny, and she enjoyed many an hour wandering the formal gardens and learning about the herbs in the kitchen garden. When she wasn't exploring, she spent her time reading under her favourite tree in the orchard.

She also wrote again to her husband, enquiring after his health and this time intimating her distress that he would stay away from Blackmore and his wife for such an extended period.

To both letters, she received neither reply nor acknowledgement, and by the time a

full month had passed with no word, Grace had finally had enough. It had become abundantly clear that her husband held her in scant regard and was unwilling to show her even the slightest consideration or courtesy that was fitting as his wife and Duchess.

If Nicholas didn't think she was good enough to be his wife, then what was the use in trying to be anything other than she was. She might now be the Duchess of Blackmore, but her husband clearly did not regard her as such. Well, she was still Grace Shackleford, and she'd be damned if she would continue to try and change herself to accommodate a man who plainly had no interest in her.

If and when he wanted her help, she would willingly give it, but until then, she was done trying to make herself into something she was not.

Instead of looking to dress in something that would please her husband on the off chance he returned, Grace put on her most comfortable gown and went downstairs to pen a letter to her sisters.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Reverend Shackelford was a troubled man. He was very much afeared his eldest daughter had become completely addled. She appeared to have lost whatever small sense of decorum she'd possessed and was now running wild around the countryside as though she had nary a care in the world with her siblings in willing tow.

The Reverend was sure the absence of her husband was very much at the forefront of her riotous behaviour, and should the Duke ever decide to return, this wildness would cease immediately. The problem was, it might also result in his daughter being sent away in disgrace. Sighing, Reverend Shackelford saw all his aspirations about to be trampled in the dust. He couldn't even reprimand Grace, since she now far outstripped him in rank.

This called for some kind of action. The problem was, he had no idea what action to take. Should he write a letter to his son-in-law urging his immediate return to Blackmore? Could a mere clergyman urge a duke to do anything at all?

Tare an' hounds, he was in the suds and no mistake. So far, he'd managed to keep the sorry state of affairs from Agnes, which hadn't been too difficult since she generally only moved from the sofa to her bed, and up to now she'd not questioned the reason why silence suddenly reigned in the house for most of the day. The problem was, in two days hence, little Anthony was due his monthly 'afternoon' with his mama, and it was certain the catastrophe would then be out in the open. It was no good him trying to come up with some kind of cock and bull story – she could spot a Canterbury tale a mile away.

If Agnes found out, his life would truly not be worth living. Clambering to his feet, he resolved to seek out Percy. Two heads were always better than one, and he always

seemed to come up with his best plans when prompted by his curate. The Red Lion would ensure complete privacy while they came up with a strategy. Calling Freddy to him, he hurried out of the house before Agnes could ask for her salts.

Two hours and three tankards of ale later, neither man had come up with anything remotely useful. The Reverend was beginning to think his only option was to lock all eight daughters up until Grace's husband decided to come home. However, that wouldn't stop the gossipmongers from having a field day the minute his grace stepped foot back in Blackmore. That was providing the sordid details hadn't already reached him in Scotland. The Reverend felt his collar tighten uncomfortably at the notion of what the Duke would do once he found out.

What they needed was something to replace the gossip. Something that would overtake the current preoccupation with the Duchess of Blackmore's scandalous behaviour.

"We could pay someone to kidnap her?" Percy offered desperately when the silence became too oppressive.

The Reverend paused with his ale halfway to his mouth. Staring into its amber depths, his eyes narrowed in a way that curdled the recently consumed steak pie ominously in the pit of Percy's stomach.

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Grace retied her long hair in its ribbon as she hurried round the side of the house towards the kitchen. She was hot and tired and was hoping the cook, Mrs. Higgins, had made some of her delicious lemonade. She was looking forward to spending a peaceful half hour in the sanctuary of the kitchen before dressing for dinner – a custom she still found tiresome in the extreme. Especially when she spent every evening meal alone in the silence with only a book for company.

While the housekeeper had initially voiced her disapproval at the idea of a duchess spending time in the kitchen, Grace knew both Mrs Tenner and Mrs Higgins secretly enjoyed her company, and over the last two months, she'd spent many an hour learning how to both cook and look after a house. While the latter was certainly a desired skill of a chatelaine of such a large mansion, as a duchess, she didn't need any of the former skills. That said, at least if she managed to persuade her husband to banish her, she would be able to look after herself and her sisters. The thought of having a small house somewhere with her siblings was becoming more and more appealing. Much more so than living a lonely life in solitary grandeur.

As the weeks went by with no word from Nicholas, she had finally accepted that her husband had no intention of making her his wife in the fullest sense of the word, or indeed allowing any closeness between them. If she was to be denied the solace of children, she had decided she would do her utmost to ensure a future for herself elsewhere. She knew the Duke of Blackmore would be very unlikely to divorce her given the scandal it would cause to his family name, but if she continued with her current course of action, he would be certain to wish her out of his sight.

So, she'd enlisted the willing help of her siblings, and together, they had occupied themselves in all manner of dubious activities as publicly as possible in the hope that word of their conduct would reach her husband's ears. Today had seen all nine of them hiding in a hay cart, jumping out and nearly giving the unsuspecting farmer an apoplexy as he began to unload.

So far unfortunately, while they were clearly the talk of the village, the gossip didn't appear to have travelled any further, and Grace had no idea what else to do to get her absent husband's attention.

She entered the welcoming dimness of the kitchen, enjoying the respite from the heat. The July weather remained oppressively hot, and Grace fanned herself vigorously with her handkerchief as she seated herself at the kitchen table. Mrs Higgins clucked

disapprovingly at her mistress's dishevelled state as she first wiped her hands on her apron then poured the young woman some cooling lemonade. Mrs Tenner was nowhere to be seen, and looking down at herself, Grace was grateful the housekeeper was not on hand to see the unkempt state of Blackmore's Duchess. Brushing off the stray bits of hay clinging stubbornly to her skirts, she couldn't help wondering if she'd finally gone too far in her efforts. Luckily there were no other servants present, and suddenly unaccountably ashamed, she quickly finished her drink and tried to make herself a little more presentable before Huntley caught sight of her. She knew the butler would waste no time in reporting her scandalous behaviour to his master – if Nicholas ever deigned to come home. However, she genuinely liked the elderly butler and didn't want him to think too badly of her. Although as she tiptoed past the butler's pantry, she feared she may have already gone too far.

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“Sir, I'm not entirely sure this is a good idea.” Percy was struggling to cover his face with his necktie. “I mean, I think it very questionable that the Almighty would wholly approve of our plan.”

“The Lord helps those who help themselves,” panted the Reverend as he squeezed himself into an ominously itchy woollen jacket he'd ‘borrowed’ from their only stable hand .

“But Sir, what if she has an apoplexy? I'm certain the Almighty wouldn't approve of that.”

“My daughter's made of sterner stuff, Percy, and mayhap a small fright will convince her to behave in the dignified manner befitting her station.”

“I hardly consider putting a sack over her head and dragging her from her bedroom to be a small fright,” protested Percy, much to the Reverend's irritation.

While he had to admit they were indeed clutching at straws, word had today reached him of his daughters' latest exploit, and Reverend Shackleford knew it was time to take matters into his own hands.

They were currently closeted in the Reverend's study, waiting for the sun to set. They would then endeavour to sneak out of the vicarage without anyone being the wiser, although judging by the noise upstairs, sneaking out unobserved was going to be a feat in itself. They were each partaking of a fortifying tot of brandy which the Reverend insisted was purely medicinal and not likely to see them both headed below stairs alongside Old Nick once they'd been put to bed with a shovel. "At least no more than abducting one's own daughter," Percy could be heard muttering to himself darkly. Reverend Shackleford chose to ignore his curate's sudden attack of the vapours, deciding to focus instead on the finer points of their plan. Or, as he thought privately, the bits that were most likely to put them in a hobble.

"Now don't forget, Percy, we are to take her by surprise when she retires to her bedchamber."

"But how the devil are we going to get into her bedchamber?" Percy's expletive showed the extent of his agitation, and the Reverend was beginning to fear his curate was simply not up to the job.

"Leave that to me, lad," he replied soothingly, before knocking back the rest of his brandy. "You just follow my lead."

"Freddy, stay." The Reverend took out a large ham bone he'd pilfered from the kitchen earlier, confident it would provide the necessary distraction to dissuade the hound from thinking to follow them.

Ten minutes later, they were taking a shortcut across the fields towards Blackmore. While nobody had actually spied their leaving, the apprehension of it had led the

Reverend to tread in a large cow pat and a strong smell of manure accompanied them as they approached the shadowed mansion.

“We’ll go around the side,” the Reverend advised his curate in a loud stage whisper. “Grace informed me that the scullery maid usually leaves the basement door open in case of a rendezvous with her sweetheart.” Percy looked over at the Reverend with a scandalous expression. “Does the young woman have no morals?” he asked faintly. “And how is it that the Duchess allows such behaviour underneath her roof?”

The Reverend snorted. “Are we talking about the same Duchess who was last seen bursting out of a hay cart?” He shook his head and sighed. “I think my daughter was hoping I’d see fit to speak with the cur in question and persuade him to make an honest woman of her maid. Grace’s heart is entirely too soft I fear.”

He pointed to a shadowed alcove, and without any further words, the two men tiptoed towards a set of dark steps.

Luck was with them as they found their way above stairs. The hall was dim, with the only strategically placed candlelight casting fantastical shadows over the walls. Everywhere was silent, and Percy began to feel himself sweating at the thought of them being caught in such a compromising position. Worse, there was a strong smell of the manure from the Reverend’s boots, and looking back, Percy could see a trail of dark brown patches. “Sir,” he whispered urgently, intending to beg his superior to abandon their mad scheme forthwith. The Reverend held up his hand for silence however, and habit caused Percy’s words to die in his throat .

“I think Grace is likely to be in the family dining room,” the Reverend whispered excitedly.

“We don’t know where that is,” hissed Percy, the very opposite of excited. “And we don’t know where her deuced bedchamber is either.”

The Reverend glanced over at his curate with a frown. This was the second time in as many hours that his curate had uttered an expletive. A previously unheard-of occurrence.

“Confound it, Percy,” he whispered, “this is no time to be chuckleheaded. We’ll wait in the shadows under the stairs until she makes her way to her chamber, then we’ll follow her. Simple.”

Percy’s wild eyes inferred it was anything but simple, and the Reverend knew if his curate decided to make a run for it, they’d both be in the suds. “Get a bit of pluck to your backbone,” he hissed, taking Percy’s arm and guiding him into an area of blackness. “No one will spy us here.”

Before Percy could repeat his concerns about the trail of manure they’d left behind them, a door opened at the end of the corridor, and light footsteps came towards them. It was Grace. She passed by them without detecting their presence but stopped as she reached the bottom of the stairs, lifting her head and sniffing with a frown.

“She can smell the cow shit you trod in ... Sir,” Percy whispered hysterically. The Reverend felt himself begin to perspire. His curate was about to make a run for it. He could feel it in his bones. Deciding it was now or never, he hurriedly pulled his necktie over his face and burst out of their hiding place brandishing his sack. Grace just had time to turn towards them before he dropped the sack over her head shouting, “Help me, you dolt.”

Percy paused, then suddenly rushed out yelling, “Your money or your life!” causing the Reverend to stare at him open-mouthed, completely flummoxed for once.

“What on earth are you doing, Father?” Grace’s indignant words caused them both to turn confounded toward their captive whose head was still covered by the sack.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Nicholas opened the coach door and climbed out, wincing as he felt the pull of muscles on his injuries. After two months of being gone from Blackmore, he found himself looking treacherously forward to seeing his wife again.

His absence had been explained away as a necessity to see his estate in Scotland. Nicholas knew he wasn't fooling anybody, but he'd needed to put some distance between himself and his all too intuitive wife.

Unfortunately, neither the distance, nor his determination to throw himself into his work had prevented his daytime thoughts roaming again and again to the sight of his wife in her undergarments. He told himself such carnal thoughts were perfectly understandable given that it had been years since he'd seen a woman in such disarray, but while that was true, he'd never in the past given any thought to a woman past the initial slaking of a need.

Malcolm had admonished him on several occasions for his hasty escape, in particular his failure to leave any kind of a note for his wife. The Scot had just had the time to write a brief note to Mrs Tenner on his way out but was not able to shed any light on how long the Duke intended to stay away.

Nicholas felt guilty about leaving without speaking to Grace, but the Scot had no idea how embarrassing it had been to know that Grace had witnessed him at his lowest point. For once, he was grateful his valet was following behind on the morrow.

He would have to face Grace about it, and Nicholas had no idea what to say. To make matters worse, he had not responded to either of her letters and had sent no word concerning his impending return, so his sudden arrival would take his wife

completely unawares.

Still the hour was late, so with luck, that conversation at least would wait until morning. Not wanting to rouse his elderly butler, Nicholas dismissed the coachman and made his way round to a side door he'd used often as a boy – usually when he and Peter wanted to come and go undetected. As he picked his way slowly past the greenhouse, his thoughts returned again to his wife as they so often did. Too often he knew. He pictured her in her bedchamber and unwillingly felt a tightening in his breeches that had nothing to do with his injuries. What the bloody hell was he going to do? So far, he'd made a complete mull of it. Perhaps he should have simply remained at his estates in Scotland, but the thought of never seeing Grace again caused a feeling of nausea deep in the pit of his stomach.

Abruptly, the silence was broken by distant shouting. Frowning, he pulled out his pistol which he carried as a necessary precaution for long journeys and picked up his pace. Entering the main house through the boot room, he crept silently through the kitchen and on into the formal dining room. He could hear voices coming from the main hall, but the shouting had ceased.

Pushing open the dining room door with his foot, he cautiously peered round the corner to the foot of the stairs where stood his wife, still dressed for dinner, her father, dressed in a ridiculous woollen jacket that was clearly three sizes too small and looked as though it had been last used in a stable, and a slim, weasel-faced man Nicholas had not come across before. All three were arguing .

“What the devil is going on here?” His icy voice cut across the trio's quarrelling, and the silence was sudden and absolute as he stepped out into the hall. He heard his wife's brief indrawn breath at his sudden appearance, before she quickly masked her surprise. Calmly, she stepped forward, her head held high. “Husband,” she greeted him coolly, “you did not send word of your arrival. I will wake Mrs Higgins and request some refreshment for you.”

He had a moment to observe how beautiful his wife looked and how unpretentiously she was dressed. She was certainly not wearing clothes befitting her station. Her hair was tied back in a simple ribbon, and her dress had clearly seen better days. He frowned, caught completely off guard.

“I apologise madam.” He gave a short formal bow to accompany his frosty words. “I was not aware you had company.”

“They were just leaving,” Grace offered, giving her father a short sideways glare. “Your grace, I don’t think you have yet met the curate for the Blackmore Estate. This is Mr Percy Noon.”

“At your service, your grace.” The small man’s voice was barely audible as he offered a deep clumsy bow. He looked as though he was ready to bolt.

Nicholas bent his head slightly in response before turning back to his wife.

“Please don’t trouble yourself, madam. My journey has been long and arduous, and I’m extremely tired. ‘Twas my intention to partake of a brandy in my study before heading straight to bed. Once again, I apologise for interrupting your evening. We will speak on the morrow.

“Reverend, Mr Noon.” He gave both men a polite nod and began walking towards his study. Just as he was about to open the door, he turned with another frown. “What the deuce is that awful smell?”

“I err, I mean Percy had the misfortune to fall foul of a particularly large cow pat on the way here, your grace,” the Reverend offered apologetically, ignoring the horrified look his curate gave him. “We will, of course, ensure the affected area is purged of such an odorous malaise before we leave.”

The Duke raised his eyebrows, his glance raking from Grace, to her father and on to the curate who now looked as though he was about to give birth to kittens. There was clearly much more to this than met the eye, but he was too damnably tired to make any sense of it. He shook his head and turned back to open his study door.

“Well that’s put the cat amongst the pigeons and no mistake,” muttered the Reverend wincing as the study door slammed behind him.

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Grace waited for the summons she knew would be coming from her husband once he’d been apprised of her actions in his absence. Her determination to force him to put her aside, which had seemed so practical while he was away, now looked to be childish and ridiculous.

She had yet to get to the bottom of her father’s sudden appearance last night wielding a large sack. He had remained determinedly tight lipped as he set about clearing up the disgusting mess on the floor, and Percy looked completely incapable of speech.

Anxiously, she paced back and forth across her bedchamber, unwilling to venture out until called for. By now, her sisters would know the Duke had returned and would no doubt be waiting with bated breath for word from her as to what her husband intended to do.

Finally, there was a ponderous knock on her bedchamber door. Feeling sick to her stomach, she called “Enter,” and watched fearfully in case Nicholas was on the other side. Instead, to her relief, it was Huntley.

“Your grace,” he offered with a small bow, “the Duke has asked if you will kindly attend him in the drawing room.” Swallowing nervously, Grace managed to nod graciously as befitted her station. Bit devilishly late now she couldn’t help thinking to

herself as she followed the butler towards the stairs.

Her husband was standing in front of the window as she entered the drawing room, the sunlight casting an almost blue tinge to his hair. He waved her to a seat in front of the fireplace in which a roaring fire blazed despite the heat. Obviously, the master's home, Grace thought a trifle hysterically, feeling beads of perspiration dot her brow as she sat as far away from the heat as she could.

Nicholas glanced with a sigh towards the blazing hearth as he took his seat opposite her. "Clearly, the household servants think me made of porcelain," he said wryly. Grace endeavoured to smile politely, only half wondering if her face was about to crack. Her heart thudded so loudly she feared it was about to burst from her chest. She wracked her brains to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind. Her calmness completely deserted her as she stared wordlessly at her husband's stern handsome face. A brief reprieve came as the door opened to admit Huntley with a tray of tea and biscuits which he placed in front of her.

Grace remained rooted to the spot even as the butler withdrew, shutting the door softly behind him.

"Would you be good enough to pour?" Nicholas asked after a few moments, raising his eyebrows slightly at her continued silence.

"Of course," Grace acquiesced faintly, coming out of her trance. Her hand trembled as she sloshed the milk into the cups. All she wanted to do was throw herself at his feet and beg him not to send her away. All her grand plans were reduced to nothing once she'd had a chance to look into his beautiful haunted eyes again.

Her behaviour during his absence had been unforgivable. But it was far, far too late to turn back the clock.

She became aware that he was speaking, his voice stilted and husky. “Before we speak of anything else, Grace, I would like to apologise for leaving so abruptly.” She stared at him disorientated, her cup halfway to her mouth.

“It was unforgivable of me to leave you so soon after our wedding. Especially in light of the fact that you have little knowledge concerning the running of an establishment as large as this one, and with so few servants to help you.” He cleared his throat, mistaking her continued silence for censure.

“Both Mrs Tenner and Mrs Higgins have informed me of your efforts in that regard, and Huntley has also been extremely eager to sing your praises.” He paused again, only the tightening of his jaw giving any indication of how difficult he was finding his confession.

Grace simply stared at him open-mouthed.

“It’s my intention to employ more staff in the running of the house,” he went on, “including the hiring of a lady’s maid for you once we return from London.”

“London?” was all Grace could say weakly.

“It’s past time I purchased you a new wardrobe,” he answered softly. “One befitting your rank as a Duchess of the Realm. Although my manners have been singularly lacking in the time since we married, I am nevertheless fully aware of the necessity for you to present the correct image to the world, and the fact that you are failing to do so is entirely my fault.” He shook his head ruefully before continuing, “Please forgive me, wife, for casting aspersions on your current attire, but anyone of any breeding could be forgiven for thinking you a country maid who had just fallen off a hay bale.”

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Grace saw little of her husband prior to their journey to his townhouse in London. Indeed, she'd seen little of anyone. It had been easy to plead a desire for time to prepare herself for the delights the capital had to offer, and Nicholas was happy to indulge her, clearly thinking her simply a little nervous. However, with so much to do to prepare the estate for his second absence in as many months, he was content to let her be. There would be more than enough opportunity for them to spend time together once they arrived in London.

In truth. Grace was not nervous. She was terrified. While she was beyond grateful to the servants for not tittle-tattling on her, she lived in abject fear that someone else might enlighten her husband. The fact that her predicament was entirely her own fault did not help matters at all. Why oh why did she have to be so impulsive? Nicholas did not come to her bedchamber, and she didn't know whether to be relieved or sorry. If his nightmares were troubling him, he gave no indication, and for the moment, she was content to allow Malcolm to take care of him.

The only time she ventured from the house was for lunch with her family at the vicarage. It was the only opportunity she had to speak with her siblings. Before luncheon, she managed to take her older sisters aside and explain what had happened, but only Tempy seemed fully cognizant of the tightrope her sister was balancing on. The others seemed to regard the last month as simply a lark and were more interested in the possibility of Grace attending balls and soirées and the number of new dresses her husband would buy her. Their bird-witted attitude simply emphasised how foolish she'd been. During luncheon, her siblings argued over whether they would be permitted to visit their sister in London, and Agnes twittered on about Almack's until Grace thought she would scream.

Eventually, in desperation, she turned to her unusually silent father and expressed a wish to speak with him privately. After a few seconds plainly trying to come up with an excuse, the Reverend sighed and agreed to a private audience in his study. At the table, Agnes tittered knowingly behind her hand, clearly thinking there was some

happy news on the way...

One look at his daughter's face as they entered the study had the Reverend hurriedly reaching for the brandy decanter.

"What am I going to do father?" she wailed. "I thought if he banished me, I could have my own establishment."

The Reverend spat out the mouthful of brandy and stared at her in horrified realisation. "You made a deuced cake of yourself deliberately? Of all the damned hare-brained ideas. And to think, I actually planned to kidnap you to save you from yourself."

It was Grace's turn to stare at her father. This time in horrified disbelief.

"Still," the Reverend continued, regaining his cheerful optimism, "no harm done. You've clearly regained your wits, and we all do foolish things when we're young." He completely ignored the fact that his last foolish endeavour had been merely a few days before.

Her father's confession actually did Grace a service. It made her realise that her only recourse was to rely on herself. Her main concern as she took her leave from her family was whether she had inherited her father's tendency to be too ripe and ready by half. She feared her concern was well grounded given her tendency to launch herself without thinking into bacon-brained schemes with little or no forethought.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Grace was still mulling over whether she had indeed inherited her father's penchant for becoming embroiled in bird-witted capers as their carriage passed from Devonshire and on up into Wiltshire. Ordinarily, she would have been consumed with excitement, especially as she'd never been farther than the Port of Dartmouth up to now, but as seemed so often of late, she seemed to spend her mental consideration in trying to work out how to extract herself from hobbles of her own making.

She became aware that Nicholas was speaking to her.

"Are you feeling well?"

She blinked. "Of course. I'm fine."

He narrowed his gaze. "I don't believe you."

Her mouth pulled into a frown. "Why not?"

Nicholas nodded to the book in her lap. "You've yet to open your book."

Grace looked down, her fingers tracing the leather cover, and Nicholas suddenly felt the urge to take the place of the book in her lap. "I've been distracted by the countryside. I've never been farther than Dartmouth before."

While he believed her words, he still had this nagging feeling that something was bothering her. She was extremely pale. In fact, if he hadn't known better, he would question whether she was with child. But as they'd yet to consummate their marriage, it stood to reason her anxiety must pertain to something else.

He sighed and continued, “As you’re aware, Grace, I have been out of the country for a good few years, and consequently, my knowledge of English Society and its foibles is not perhaps what it might be.” His words were terse and clipped, and Grace could feel his distaste. “Ordinarily, I would not trouble myself. I have no interest in learning the latest on dits and have found most members of the ton to be vain and self-centred.” Grace watched silently as Nicholas dragged his hand over his face. “That said, whatever my private sentiments, you have married into one of England’s highest-ranking families, and it is therefore necessary for you to be presented as my Duchess and take your place in society.

“We have been invited to a charity ball being thrown on behalf of naval heroes.” His face twisted in a mirthless smile, and Grace felt her heart contract. “Apparently, it is to be the culmination of the London Season. I have received a particular entreaty that we attend from a good friend of mine, and my reluctant acquiescence is a favour to him and him only.”

He paused, clearly waiting to see if his wife wished to make any comments. Unfortunately, Grace was so swamped with fear at the thought of being the focus of attention on such an illustrious occasion, she couldn’t have spoken if her life depended on it. Frowning, Nicholas continued, “Despite my reluctance to attend, the ball will be a perfect setting for your first public appearance.”

Silence ensued, and Grace realized her husband had finished and was now regarding her quizzically. It was obvious he expected her to show at least a small amount of excitement at the thought of attending her first ball. Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. All she could think about was the possibility she might trip, even fall down the stairs, of being a laughingstock. And dear God, what would happen if her wild exploits in Devonshire became common knowledge?

Nicholas was still waiting for her response, and finally, she cleared her throat and

managed to speak, although she feared her voice was unsettlingly wooden. “I am indebted to you, your grace. As a clergyman’s daughter, I could not have hoped to attend such an exalted occasion. I shall look forward to it immensely, and of course to regaling my sisters with as many details as possible. They will surely be waiting with eager expectation.” She lapsed back into silence, feeling as though her heart was about to erupt violently from her chest.

Nicholas watched as his wife continued to stare determinedly out of the coach window at the scenery as it passed. Her face continued white and tense, and it was clear, despite the words that had come out of her mouth, she had no desire to attend the ball. Was it his presence alongside her she objected to? Or was she simply afraid of being out of her depth? He drummed his fingers on his knee tensely. He detested London. When his mother was alive, they would travel to London every season with her, his father opting to ride horseback, and she would tell them stories of her childhood in the capital. Though the Duke had not wanted his wife to coddle his sons, the Duchess would sneak them out at least once during their trips to enjoy the sights of the city.

But after their mother died, his father still required them to go to London. Gone were the good times the Duchess had engineered, and both Nicholas and Peter had spent long hours in their father’s study instead, watching as their father interacted with his steward and solicitor on behalf of their estate.

And now that estate was his.

Nicholas sighed inwardly. He hadn’t wanted to come to London, but he’d had no choice truly. He’d been sadly remiss with regards to his wife. As much as he abhorred the custom, he needed to introduce Grace to the ton . And he needed to school and clothe her as befitted her station. Her wardrobe would be provided during their brief sojourn in London, and he would endeavour to find a companion who would be suitable as a confidante and also provide the necessary instruction for his

wife's new rank. Once they returned to Blackmore, he would look to employ a full complement of staff to ensure the smooth running of the estate.

Whatever his private feelings, he knew it was his duty to ensure Grace was both content and able to hold her own in society without embarrassing the Sinclair family name.

In attending the charity ball, he was also returning a favour to the man who had taken him under his wing at the beginning of his naval career, and for that, he would suffer through the stares and whispers almost certain to come their way.

Watching his wife's hands repeatedly clench and unclench, he suddenly realized she wasn't afraid. She was terrified. Frowning, he leaned forward and was pleased to note that she didn't shrink back. So, it wasn't his presence she was afraid of.

"I know that mayhap our marriage has been less than ideal up until now, but I can assure you, it is my sincere wish that we do well together." His voice was rough as he forced himself to continue, "As you are aware, I am a private man, but perhaps we might find some common ground to ensure our union is tolerable to both of us."

Grace cleared her throat and looked for a second as if she would burst into tears. Nicholas cursed himself. His declaration hadn't been romantic. But then he had no intention of love coming into the equation at all.

When Grace finally spoke, her voice was low, almost a whisper. "You are too generous, Nicholas."

Nicholas didn't feel generous, in fact, he felt like a complete cad, but he didn't pursue the conversation any further, deciding instead that silence was preferable to making matters worse with his clumsy attempts at idle chatter. A mere two hours later, just as twilight descended, they pulled up in front of a coaching inn in which Nicholas had

already secured them two rooms for the night.

By the time it was fully dark, they were cosily ensconced in a private dining room, Grace gratefully sipping a warming glass of mulled wine, while the Duke opted for his usual large brandy. A few minutes later, their meal was brought in. A hearty mutton stew followed by a freshly baked apple pie. Simple but wholesome fare.

Despite her earlier feelings of despair, Grace found herself ravenous. Mayhap it was the third glass of mulled wine, but she began to feel a little more like herself. She had never before been this timid creature, afraid of her own shadow.

Her husband might yet cast her aside, but there was no reason to suppose her activities down in the wilds of Devonshire would become cruel gossip for the ton . She sipped at her wine, mulling over her problem. Should she manage to emerge from this situation unscathed, it was imperative she curb her impulsive nature and somehow make the Duke proud of her. Grace glanced up at her husband. His face was harshly beautiful in the torchlight, the habitual frown for once absent. She knew he would most certainly catch the eye of the female members of the ton , perhaps even take a mistress. Grace felt an unfamiliar pang at the thought of another woman in his bed. She supposed he would not be obliged to spend the whole night with any lightskirt, a term she'd heard her father use more than once, so his nightmares would not be an issue.

Although Grace was not completely bird-witted when it came to matters of the flesh, neither was she entirely sure of the fundamental actions resulting in the production of a baby. Did a man conduct himself differently when he was not looking to produce a child? Did a woman? She frowned, reaching for her wine glass, only to find it disappointingly empty.

“I think perhaps it is time you retired Grace. Should you drink another glass of wine, I may have to put you to bed myself.” Nicholas’s voice was unaccustomedly soft, a

lazy smile taking the sting out of his words.

Grace coloured up, wondering if her husband could read her thoughts. Dear God, he was handsome when he smiled. Her pulse quickened as she stared at him helplessly, no quick retort springing to her lips. She wondered what it would be like to be kissed by those lips. Was that a necessary part of creating a child? She recalled hearing Blackmore's scullery maid talk about kissing her stable boy. The chamber maid with whom she was confiding, was shocked to the core and had threatened to tell Mrs. Higgins. Grace hadn't remained to eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation but had sent a missive to her father asking for his assistance in facilitating the course of true love by ensuring the stable boy did the proper thing!

She became aware that Nicholas had risen from the table and was now standing at her elbow. Frowning, she looked up at him. Did he think her unable to make her own way to her chamber? Nevertheless, she took his proffered hand and made to rise. The room began to tilt alarmingly, and panicking slightly, she clutched her husband's arm. Without further ado, he lifted her as though she was a mere child, seemingly with no effort at all. "Nicholas, your injuries," Grace protested while trying to make sense of the room spinning.

"Hush, wife, you are as light as a feather. I'll not worsen my wounds." For some reason his voice was gruff, and she peered curiously into his eyes which oddly appeared to be glittering. Sighing, she surrendered to the wondrous feeling of security his embrace provoked and rested her head upon his chest as he carried her up the private staircase to their rooms. Once outside her door, he gently set her back onto her feet, keeping hold of her hands to steady her. "Do you still feel out of sorts?" he asked evenly. She wondered if he was angry with her and looked up in trepidation, only to be surprised by his laughing blue eyes. What would he say if she asked him to help her get into her night attire? Would he kiss her? Grace stared into his eyes as the laughter slowly leached from them, leaving the same disconcerting glitter. Mesmerised, she lifted her hand and lightly brushed her fingers over his full lips,

feeling his sudden indrawn breath in response. Slowly, she rose onto her tiptoes and lifted her face to his, leaving no doubt as to her wish. With a low groan, Nicholas obliged, wrapping her in a crushing embrace, his mouth opening over hers in a fierce, wildly arousing kiss. Distantly, Grace recognised that this was nothing like the scullery maid's description, and as an unaccustomed heat began racing through her, she pressed herself against the intimate hardness of her husband's body, wanting, she knew not what. He responded by cupping her bottom, pressing her against his rigid arousal until she moaned in pure instinctive primitive desire.

After what seemed like an age, Nicholas lifted his head and stared down at her eyes, deep pools of languorous wonder. For him. Groaning, he set her from him. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. But he couldn't take advantage of her intoxication, even if he was her husband.

"Grace," he breathed raggedly, "if we continue, I fear I will be unable to stop, and this is not the introduction you deserve to the pleasures of the marriage bed."

Grace looked up at him confused. She wanted to take his hand, pull him with her into her bedchamber, but the seductive invitation that blazed from his eyes earlier was gone. Her heart sank, and she looked back to the floor, humiliated she'd appeared so wanton in his arms. Nicholas pushed her gently towards her room. She didn't look back as she meekly entered the chamber and shut the door.

“No!”

Grace bolted upright as she heard the cry in her dreams, her attention immediately going to the connecting door between their two rooms. Nicholas was having another nightmare.

Her heart in her throat, Grace pushed the hair out of her face as she waited to see if the cry came again.

She had no idea what to do. Malcolm was not with them, having journeyed to the Sinclair London townhouse a day earlier to prepare for their arrival.

“Don’t ... please don’t ... look at me John, concentrate on me...”

This time his words were shouted, the anguish palpable, and Grace feared they would be heard by other residents of the inn. She couldn’t leave Nicholas to deal with this alone.

Silently, she climbed out of bed and pulled on her robe. Taking a candle, she opened the door between their two bedchambers and spied the thrashing man asleep on the bed. Placing the candle on a small table to the side of the bed, she leaned forward and touched her husband’s damp forehead. He moaned low in his throat, and she wished she could take the pain away. Instead, she helped him disentangle his legs from the sheets that trapped him.

She’d never before seen his naked form, but now was not the time to study it as she stroked his brow, ever mindful of his fists as they clenched in the bed.

“Dear God, don’t let him die. Please don’t let him die.”

His heartrending cries broke her heart. “Nicholas,” she said softly, her fingers running down the length of his face. “Nicholas, wake up. It’s just a dream.”

When his eyes did flutter open, they were unfocused and glazed over. Grace kept her touch light as she watched him come out of his nightmare. “Grace?” he whispered raggedly, his eyes focusing finally on her face.

“I’m here,” she whispered, resting her hand against his chest. His heart was beating rapidly under his skin.

She expected him to immediately dismiss her, but instead he lifted his hand and touched her cheek almost wonderingly. “Perhaps you are my grace,” he murmured softly before suddenly pulling her down to lie almost on top of him. She squeaked in surprise but had no time to pull away as his mouth claimed hers in a soul-searching kiss. With a small moan, she surrendered, wrapping her arms around his neck as his hands stroked her back and sides with an urgent hunger. Desire was roaring through him like wildfire as he flipped her over onto her back, their mouths still locked in a scorching kiss.

His mouth seemed to devour hers, and Grace returned his kisses with the same fervour, her hands roaming almost impatiently over the strong planes of his chest. His body was still hot, the muscles of his chest hard and ridged, with a small sprinkling of hairs that led down to the mysterious shadowy area between his legs. His lips slid along her jaw line and down her neck as his fingers worked at the laces holding her shift together, finally parting the thin material and exposing her breasts to his questing hand.

Returning his mouth to hers with a small groan, he rubbed her nipple between his fingers, feeling it peak against his palm. Tearing his mouth away he bent his head to

the hardened bud and carefully took it between his lips. Gasping at the flood of sensations that slammed between her legs, Grace arched her back and ran her fingers through his black hair, holding his head to her in helpless desire. He lavished the same attention on her other breast until Grace was mewling and panting restlessly, her body instinctively thrusting up to meet his.

Slowly, without taking his attention from her breasts, Nicholas slid his hand down her inner thigh. Grace was so lost in sensation, she had no thought until his fingers found her centre. Gasping, her eyes flew open just before he covered her mouth with his, kissing her with raw dizzying hunger until she surrendered, her legs opening as his fingers worked over the aching core of her, a pressure building unlike any other she'd ever felt.

“Yes,” he breathed against her cheek. “That’s it, Grace.”

She cried out as her body jerked, an explosion of warmth spreading out over her limbs. Whatever Nicholas had just done, it felt wonderful.

Grace pressed her forehead against Nicholas’s shoulder, her body quaking. “Is that it?”

His body shook with laughter. “No, my Duchess, that’s not it.”

Oh my.

“Do you wish me to continue?” Grace stared in languid wonder up at her husband. Although his voice was rough with passion, there seemed a calmness about him that had not been there before.

“Yes,” she whispered breathlessly. “Please continue.”

Grace grasped at his strong shoulders as he rose above her. She felt him nudge her legs apart feeling a sudden hardness press against her entrance. Her eyes fluttered open as she felt that same hardness begin to push into her carefully. Staring fearfully up into his face, she hardly recognized his features harsh with passion. "Don't be afraid, Grace," he whispered huskily. "The discomfort will last but a moment." Quickly he plunged deep inside her, breaching her maidenhead. Grace cried out in shock, attempting to pull away.

Holding her tightly to him, Nicholas trembled with the effort of remaining still. Stroking her hair, he soothed his wife as he would an unbroken colt, then began placing soft quick kisses over her face as he felt her start to relax. Slowly, he began to move, sliding partially in and out of her incredible warmth, his face tense with the strain of holding himself back. Gradually, she began to meet him, thrust for thrust until she was arching her hips towards him, her cries encouraging him to finally plunge his full length deep inside her.

Grace felt the throbbing pleasure build and build until it erupted in an explosion that tore a loud cry from her throat. Nicholas took her mouth with his, kissing her almost desperately as he gave one last thrust and joined her in sweet oblivion.

There was no more guessing. She was his wife in every sense of the word.

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Fearing he might crush her, Nicholas rolled onto his side, taking Grace with him. When he finally managed to get his breath back, he glanced down at his wife, marvelling at the feel of her in his arms. His injuries were throbbing from exertion, but for the first time, the realisation actually made him smile. It was a good pain.

They lay in silence for a while, Grace revelling in the feeling of being in her husband's arms. For the first time, she felt like a proper wife. Idly, she traced the

scars on his chest, then cursed herself as he stiffened and drew in his breath.

“Forgive me,” she said softly. “I have no wish to cause you more pain. I simply wish to understand.” She did not remove her hand but held her breath, waiting to see what her husband would do.

Nicholas shuddered again under her touch but didn’t move away, and Grace gradually loosened her breath, snuggling up closer as the cold began to seep in after their exertions.

Glancing down at her, Nicholas reached to pull the covers over them both. “Do you require a bed warmer?” Grace smiled against his shoulder. “My thanks for your concern husband, but I already have one.” She felt rather than heard him chuckle, and the knowledge that her stubborn, handsome husband had a lighter side to him filled her with joy and bode well for their future together. Perhaps even now she was with child.

If only he would let her into his torment and tell her about his nightmares. However, she didn’t want to spoil the moment with her questions, so she contented herself by simply stroking her hand lightly over the healed wounds on his chest.

To her surprise, after a few minutes, he spoke, though his words were barely above a whisper. “I wasn’t always like this.” Grace glanced up, but he was staring off into the dark.

“I left Blackmore when I was fifteen years old.” His voice was impassive as though he was telling the story about someone else. “As you are no doubt aware, my brother died in a riding accident just before I left. What you may not be aware of, is that my father blamed me for his death.” Grace drew in her breath but did not speak. “It was my idea to ride our horses along the road in the pouring rain. My brother may have been the elder by minutes, but he always followed my lead. What my father didn’t

realise was that I blamed myself for his death.” She felt him shake his head. “Or perhaps he didn’t care. He couldn’t bear the sight of me, so I left. I was still a green boy.

“The fact that I didn’t end up dead in a ditch was entirely due to one man. He was already a captain in the Royal Navy on his way to Plymouth to join his ship. He took me with him, and I joined up as a midshipman. Almost immediately, we set sail for the Mediterranean.” He paused, and she felt him look down at her. “Do you have any knowledge of the war against the French and Spanish? It’s not something I believe most ladies of a sensitive disposition would find particularly interesting.”

“You should at least know by now that my disposition is not particularly sensitive, and I very much enjoy reading,” Grace responded tartly. “My knowledge is no doubt lacking, but I believe I know enough.” She softened her voice. “Please continue, Nicholas.”

“The war against Napoleon is still very much in progress, but we had a crucial victory last October.”

“Trafalgar,” Grace whispered. She felt him nod.

“Aye, Trafalgar. You don’t need to know what went before, Grace, but I rose through the ranks very quickly, showing an aptitude for leadership my mentor had somehow observed in me when I was still a lad.” His voice now held a trace of bitterness, and Grace felt her heart contract but didn’t know how to comfort him – or indeed whether he would accept her comfort.

“I spent the whole of my naval career blockading first the French, then the Spanish, and by the time the British fleet sailed for Cadiz, I had command of my own ship.” She felt him swallow and hardly dared to breathe lest he choose not to continue.

“We were greatly outnumbered by the French and Spanish fleets, but not for nothing was Admiral Nelson revered by all. He was a master tactician and gave the order to sail the fleet in two columns directly at the enemy, taking them completely unawares. Only the ships at the front of the line were directly in the line of fire.” His mouth twisted as Grace waited breathlessly to hear what happened.

“I was given the honour of accompanying HMS Victory near the front of the line. My ship took heavy fire as we approached, and I lost nearly half of my crew ... including a ten-year-old boy.” Then he did stop. Grace could feel his chest shaking slightly, and realized suddenly, aching, that her strong, harsh husband was crying. She felt answering tears fill her own eyes. She couldn’t even imagine what horrors he’d gone through. “Please, Nicholas,” she whispered brokenly, “you don’t have to continue if you don’t wish to.”

“The screams,” Nicholas continued as though she hadn’t spoken, “were the worst. That, and the smoke. There were severed limbs lying all about the deck, and the blood made keeping your footing almost impossible.

“John had just celebrated his tenth birthday. He’d been promoted to a cabin boy, helping in the ship’s galley. If he’d stayed there, he’d have been safe.” Grace felt her husband’s hands clench, and in wordless sympathy, covered his closed fist with her own hand. “A cannon ball from a French ship struck very close to where I was standing, and I fell to the deck, my body pierced with splinters of wood in a hundred places, but John, damn his disobedient hide, was closer, and it took both his legs. I managed to get to my feet in time to have him die in my arms.”

He took a deep breath. “Malcolm was my steward. He saved my life. Though sometimes I wish he hadn’t.” His voice became matter of fact. “Nelson’s ploy ensured the French and Spanish line was broken into three parts, and those ships of the British fleet left afloat were able to pick them off one by one. As you are no doubt aware, the battle was a glorious victory, though it cost Nelson his life.

“At the end, I was fortunate my ship was still afloat, and we managed to limp to Gibraltar where my wounds and those of my men left alive were tended. My injuries were such that it became clear very quickly that my career in the Royal Navy was over. I had no idea what I was going to do.”

He looked down at her, and she met his eyes. “That’s when I received news of my father’s death. The old bastard had finally done me a favour because I had nowhere else to go.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

On the same day in London, the Morning Post reported that the Duke of Blackmore, only recently returned from Trafalgar due to severe injuries sustained during the battle, would, for the first time, be resident at his London town house until the end of the Season. Also in attendance would be his wife, her grace the Duchess of Blackmore who would be making her formal bow to society at a ball to be given by the Marquis of Blanchford in honour of recently returned naval heroes. The paper finished by noting that the Duchess of Blackmore's official introduction to society at such an event was fitting indeed.

London's ton digested the news with varying degrees of excitement. Nicholas Sinclair had not, to anyone's knowledge, been present in society since he was a boy. The rumours were rife concerning everything from the injuries he'd sustained, to why he had married so hastily on returning to England. The most popular theory was that the Duke had sustained horrific injuries to his face and figure which had left him completely hideous and therefore unsuitable as marriage material for any highborn lady. This of course was the reason he had chosen to marry a local clergyman's daughter.

Drawing rooms across London were filled with matchmaking mammas and their daughters speculating with shuddering delight as to just how repugnant the Duke would turn out to be. And whether his new Duchess was merely plain or similarly afflicted by some kind of disfigurement.

Predictably, there were no polite regrets for the upcoming Marquis of Blanchford's ball for naval heroes.

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Of course, Grace had no idea of the gossip travelling like wildfire throughout London's Beau Monde . Had she known, she wouldn't have been so certain that her recent misdemeanours would not eventually reach the ears of the fashionable elite.

Instead, she had awakened in the arms of her husband who had made love to her for the second time in a most satisfying manner. To Grace, Nicholas's confession in the early hours had been akin to declaring his love for her. In her naivete, she believed that nothing could come between them; that no gossip could touch them.

Nicholas on the other hand had only informed his wife of the facts. He had yet to communicate the root cause of his nightmares. The true reason he woke up sweating and sobbing night after night and was so terrified of opening his heart or of allowing anyone to get too close.

The actual cause was his complete and utter anguish that he'd failed to save his only son.

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The Duke and Duchess of Blackmore's coach arrived at their townhouse in Grosvenor Square late in the evening. Thus, they were only observed by a few of the square's servants running late-night errands. Nicholas stepped down first, taking care to find his footing before reaching for Grace's hand .

He remained silent as they moved up the stairs together, the door opening at precisely the moment they reached the top step.

Stepping inside the home he had not seen since his youth, Nicholas immediately experienced the cold distant feeling that had accompanied his previous visits after his mother had died.

He became aware that Grace was clutching his arm as she looked around. “Tis lovely Nicholas,” she offered in a small voice. “A bit dark but no less charming.”

“Welcome home, your grace. My name is Bailey.” If anything, the butler was older than Huntley, and smiling at him, Grace was actually worried he would keel over at any second. She glanced over at Nicholas and released his arm. She couldn’t help but notice her husband’s earlier relaxed manner had taken flight. Instead, she was standing next to a cold stranger. She frowned, feeling her heart sink. The Duke stripped off his coat and handed it to the elderly butler before turning to look down at her.

“It is yours to do with as you like,” he said carelessly.

For whatever reason, Grace realized her husband had no love for this house. Before she could make another comment, they were joined by a tall, thin woman who offered a quick curtsy along with a wide smile, immediately setting Grace at ease.

“Welcome, your grace. I’m Mrs Jenks, your housekeeper.”

Nicholas nodded. “Could you prepare a cold repast in the small drawing room. We have not eaten since lunch.” Mrs Jenks nodded and made to show her mistress the way.

“Has my valet arrived?”

“He is attending to your rooms, your grace,” Mrs Jenks informed him. Then she paused before continuing hesitantly. “You are probably aware, your grace, that we are particularly underserved. The old Duke ... your father ... did not wish to keep on more than a token number as he only very rarely ventured up to London in his latter years.”

Nicholas nodded again. "It's my intention to rectify the deficiency as soon as possible. I will require a full complement of servants to be retained at all times. The first of which will be a lady's maid to attend my wife. We will discuss requirements tomorrow in my study."

Mrs Jenks smiled again, clearly relieved. "If you would be good enough to follow me, your grace."

Grace smiled gratefully at the housekeeper and followed her up the stairs. The only light came from the candles flickering in the sconces on the walls, emphasising the gloomy atmosphere. The small drawing room however was much more welcoming. It was decorated in varying shades of pale green which had clearly seen a feminine touch.

"This was my mother's favourite room." She turned as Nicholas walked through the door behind her. Grace nodded and looked around her in delight. "Your mother plainly had beautiful taste. Please don't think me rude Nicholas, but if the rest of the house were decorated as this, it would be extremely pleasing."

"My mother never got the chance to redecorate the rest of the house before she died, and my father had no time for fripperies. To him, this was simply somewhere to stay when he had business in London."

Grace frowned, seating herself on the sofa nearest to the fire and removing her cloak. "Your father must have been a very unhappy man," she murmured.

"I hope so." Grace recoiled at the bitterness in her husband's voice and berated herself for bringing the matter up. There did not seem to be anything else to say, and they lapsed into a slightly uneasy silence as they waited for the cold repast to be brought up. Grace made herself comfortable against the velvet cushions, contenting herself with furtive glances at her husband's saturnine features. Eventually, she could

stand the tense silence no longer and was on the verge of requesting Nicholas show her to her bedchamber. Fortunately, just as she was clearing her throat to voice her request, the door opened to admit Mrs Jenks and a young girl who was carrying a tray almost as big as she was. Fighting the urge to jump up and help, Grace forced herself to remain seated, knowing her assistance would not be welcome. She remained unmoving until the door closed behind the servants and Nicholas invited her to pour the tea.

In truth, Nicholas was consumed with trepidation. He had not expected to confide in his wife, but the desire to unburden himself had been simply too overwhelming. While perhaps not a conventional beauty, Grace had a sweetness of spirit that was hard to ignore. What would she say if she knew the full truth?

That her husband had fathered an illegitimate child with a basketmaker who'd died giving birth to him?

For ten long years, Nicholas had paid for his son's upkeep, seeing John whenever he was in port, until the lad had been old enough to accompany his father to sea.

To his death.

Nicholas squeezed his eyes shut, pushing the memories away with agonising practice. No one knew the cabin boy had been his son. Not even John himself.

But for the first time, he was tempted to confess the story in its entirety. Desperate for another living soul to fully understand the depth of his grief.

Would Grace turn away from him, or would she provide the comfort and absolution he ached for?

And that was the main reason for his fear. For good or ill, he finally recognised that

his wife was becoming far more than simply a means to an end.

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Grace winced for the umpteenth time as the dressmaker missed the fabric with the sharp pin and got the skin at her side instead, forcing herself not to move lest the woman fuss at her again. She'd been standing on the block for most of the day, draped with more fabric than she'd ever seen in her life. Walking dresses - in a wide variety of colours of course; riding habits - despite the fact that she couldn't ride; ball gowns - at least half a dozen - despite the fact that to Grace's knowledge she would only be attending one ball; bonnets; shawls; gloves; slippers. The list went on and on. To Grace's mind, it was all a colossal waste of money.

Automatically following the dressmaker's instructions, Grace's thoughts drifted back to Nicholas. While he'd come to her room to make love to her each night, he had yet to remain until the morning. Her husband continued to enflame in her a passion she'd previously thought impossible, taking her again and again to giddy heights with his wild kisses and intimate caresses, before bringing her and himself to shuddering fulfilment. But once their desire was slaked, he always bade her goodnight, and returned to his own chamber.

While she had woken more than once to distant shouts and cries, she had nevertheless remained in her own bed, understanding that Nicholas preferred to distance her from his torment. She was finding it more and more difficult to suppress the hurt that he favoured Malcolm over his wife to ease his suffering. After their discussion at the coaching inn, she'd been so hopeful he would turn to her. But the gap seemed wider than ever. She longed for their closeness to extend beyond the bedroom but had no idea how to bridge the gulf that persisted between them.

She sighed. Perhaps in due time.

They'd been in London for five days, and although they now had a full complement of household servants, including a pleasant but talkative lady's maid who delighted in regaling her mistress with all the latest on-dits, they had yet to leave the gloomy townhouse. Grace knew Nicholas had been too busy to show her the sights of London, but they had not received any callers either, and while she was filled with trepidation at the idea of entertaining, she couldn't help but wonder, given their social standing, why no one had even left their card.

"Très magnifique." The satisfied words brought her back to the present, and glancing in the full-length mirror, Grace couldn't stifle the pure feminine thrill she felt when she saw that the fashionably French modiste had wrapped her in the most beautiful shimmering gold fabric, announcing in her broken English that "Thees vill be the one for madam's debut. You vill be ravishment."

Of course, providing she didn't turn into a human pincushion by then.

"Voila, you may step down, your grace." Finally.

Grace inwardly breathed a sigh of relief as she waited for the dressmaker to remove the fabric from her shift and reached for her dress, feeling moderately better once she was fully clothed again. She supposed she should be grateful she hadn't actually fallen off the block while the woman poked and prodded her. "You will have this ready in time for the ball?"

The woman nodded, handing off the fabric to her assistant. "Bien sur. Of course, madam."

Grace glanced at the clock. In another hour, she would be partaking of a light repast together with a well-bred though apparently penniless lady whom Nicholas was considering employing as her companion. Initially, Grace had looked at her husband in horror when he'd broached the subject. She realised he was simply seeking to

expand her education concerning the habits of London's High Society lest she make a complete cake of herself – certainly a very strong possibility, Grace had to admit. However, it felt very much as though he was employing someone to spy on her.

Guilty conscience Grace supposed ruefully thinking of her earlier excesses as she made her way to the five o'clock appointment. Mrs Jenks had informed her that her guest – one Lady Felicity Beaumont – had arrived and had been placed in the small drawing room.

In truth, Grace realised that her husband was being extremely lenient in allowing her to interview Miss Beaumont alone, so it was imperative she didn't let him down. Squaring her shoulders, Grace plastered on a determined smile and waved at Bailey to open the door.

“Her grace, the Duchess of Bla...”

His words stuttered to a halt as Grace stepped forward, caught her heel in the fringe of a rug and pitched forward her full length on the floor.

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Grace didn't move for a few appalled seconds. Her embarrassment was such that she wondered if she should simply lie there until someone came to take her to her bed where she would remain until she was at least ninety.

"The first rule of the ton my dear, if you're going to cause a scene, make sure you do it with style." Grace looked up at the owner of the authoritative, if slightly dry, voice to her side.

"I should think you have sustained a fractured ankle at the very least," the diminutive lady continued, her voice now firm and confident. "The rug in question is very clearly a hazard and should be removed forthwith."

Grace managed to get to her knees, giving a small apologetic smile up at Bailey who was hovering anxiously at her other side, before turning back to the lady still regarding her quizzically.

"I fear it wasn't this particular rug at fault madam, but rather my penchant for tripping up on any and all possible obstacles, however large or small they may be."

"I think perhaps my version of events is much better, my dear," the lady, who could only be Miss Beaumont, argued.

Climbing to her feet, Grace smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at telling untruths."

"Then the members of the ton will surely eat you alive, your grace."

Blinking at her guest's cutting assessment of her peers, Grace finally endeavoured to gather her wits and remember her manners. "Please be seated, Miss Beaumont. It was not my intention to prove just how much I need taking in hand, at least not on our first acquaintance. Mrs Jenks will bring us some tea shortly."

Miss Beaumont gave a snort of laughter. "Well you certainly have wit girl, but that may not be enough to carry you through the snide comments and the malicious gossip that is most likely even now circulating the drawing rooms of London."

Grace's response was delayed as Mrs Jenks brought in a tray of tea and tiny cucumber sandwiches. Grace smiled up at the housekeeper in thanks, before eying the sandwiches, thinking they would be very unlikely to keep her stomach from complaining until supper. However, she gave no indication of her concern and managed to perform her duties as a hostess with the necessary aplomb, resulting in Miss Beaumont nodding her head approvingly.

Feeling a little more comfortable with the small though clearly formidable lady sitting opposite, Grace took a deep breath, deciding to voice her concerns.

"May I ask you a question, Miss Beaumont?"

"Felicity, please, your grace, and most certainly."

"The gossip you speak of. Is that why we have received no callers?"

Her companion shook her head, taking a sip of her tea. "Very unlikely my dear. If anything, the juicier the on-dit, the more likely your front door will need replacing by the end of the season. No, your grace, the most likely reason you have yet to receive any callers is simply because there are hardly any ladies of your equal rank. They will no doubt be waiting breathlessly for you to call on them first. Of course, that will not happen until after you have made your formal bow." Miss Beaumont paused and

frowned slightly, placing her teacup down and partaking of a cucumber triangle.

“Under normal circumstances, I pay no heed to gossip -malicious or otherwise, but in this instance, I believe it may be of use to know what is being said, and I will therefore endeavour to find out what I can – discreetly of course.”

“I am very much obliged,” Grace responded with relief. “I think we shall deal very well together, Felicity.”

“That is certainly my hope, your grace...”

“Just Grace, please.”

Miss Beaumont nodded in acknowledgement, giving a slight smile.

Grace smiled back, clapping her hands in delight.

“Well then, my dear, if we are to whip you into shape, there is certainly no time like the present. Pray remember that showing any overt enthusiasm, no matter how fortuitous the information you are receiving, is considered very bad form within the ton . That, more than anything else will focus attention on both your background and lack of breeding.

“And Grace, it will make not one jot of difference that your husband is a Duke if the ton collectively decides to hold you in contempt.”

Grace stared at her new mentor in trepidation. “But surely not everyone would give us the cut direct. Why you yourself Felicity stated not a few moments ago that you personally pay no heed to gossip.”

Miss Beaumont shook her head sadly. “People like me do not count my dear. We are

simply invisible to those who set the rules. My advice would be to listen and pay heed to my advice without intimating whence it came.”

Grace frowned. “You are painting a very bleak picture of the members of London’s Fashionable Society. I cannot help but wonder whether it might behove me to simply return to Devonshire and therefore avoid any prospect of irreparably ruining the Sinclair name.”

“Unfortunately, that in itself would be enough to feed the gossipmongers, my dear,” Felicity responded with a rueful smile. “For good or ill, you married into one of England’s highest-ranking families, and the ton will have their pound of flesh. No Grace, our best course of action is to ensure that you are a success when making your formal bow. Then, and only then should you still wish it, you may return to the wilds of Devonshire with both the Sinclair name and your own reputation intact.”

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Nicholas wondered whether he had been completely beef witted in leaving Grace to form her own opinion of Miss Beaumont. It clearly flew in the face of everything he’d been taught. But therein lay the rub. Nicholas was determined he would not be as his father. Truth be told, his thoughts were turning more and more to his wife. In day to day matters, he found himself wondering what Grace would think in each situation, what she would do. He’d sworn he would never allow himself to get close to another human being after losing both his brother and his son, but despite his efforts to keep his distance, Nicholas feared he was becoming entirely too comfortable with her presence. And even more disconcerting, he found himself wanting to make her happy - and not just in the bedroom.

Frowning, he looked down at the accounts he was working on. His father had left the Sinclair finances in a very healthy position, but the current state of the townhouse indicated just how miserly he had become in his latter years .

The Sinclair London abode had urgent need of improvement. Nicholas had ensured its smooth running by substantially increasing the number of servants under its roof, but the furnishings remained dark and dreary no matter how much they were cleaned and polished. Nicholas had no interest in choosing their replacement apart from removing the overpowering imprint of his father which seemed to permeate everything.

Of a sudden, he wondered whether Grace would consider staying in London beyond the end of the Season to oversee any renovations while he returned to Blackmore. Surely she would enjoy shopping for the latest fripperies. If he could persuade her to do so, he would be killing two birds with one stone in eradicating the uncomfortable presence of the old Duke and distancing himself from his wife's allure.

Putting his seal on the last document with a flourish, the current Duke of Blackmore did not stop to wonder why his perfect solution didn't make him feel happier.

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The Reverend Shackleford couldn't help wondering whether his current troubles had been sent by the Almighty to test him. Frowning into his ale tankard, he shook his head sadly. He had always been on such good terms with God. He worked tirelessly for the good of his congregation and his family. Why the church coffers were healthier than they'd been in a decade, and he had not only secured his eldest daughter an incomparable match but done his utmost to ensure she didn't make a complete cake of herself and ruin them all in the process.

Sighing, he took a sip of his ale before finally admitting to himself that his plan to kidnap Grace had not been one of his better ideas. Percy, usually his loyal companion, had spent most of the last two weeks on his knees. The Reverend had finally only put his foot down when his curate requested a hair shirt. He would never have believed that Percy would turn out to be such a chucklehead.

The problem was Percy Noon was the Reverend's sole confidant - apart from his Creator, and there were some things it did not behove a vicar to chat with the Almighty about. Kidnapping and the resulting Devil's own scrape being one of them. It was clear that his curate was wallowing in the very depths of remorse over their escapade, which was all very well, but Percy's regret didn't solve the problem of potential repercussions.

In particular, the fact that they had been spied upon by the little varmint who'd brought the Duke's original letter to the door. Now the rascal was demanding a whole shilling to keep his mouth shut.

If the Good Lord did not frown on murder, the Reverend would be sorely tempted.

As it was, for possibly the first time ever, he was at a loss as to what to do. And without Percy, he had no one with whom to formulate a plan. Gloomily, he stared down into the depths of his ale. There was no getting away from it, he'd made a mull of the whole thing, and now the Almighty was punishing him.

"Now then sir, it's not often I get to see a man of the cloth in such a fit of the blue-devils. Allow me to procure you another ale, and if you have a mind, partake of some lively conversation to lift your spirits."

Startled, the Reverend looked up at the large jovial-sounding individual standing in front of him. The candlelight in the Red Lion was only sufficient for him to receive a vague impression, and under more usual circumstances, he would have sent the presumptuous fellow on his way.

However, on this occasion, three things conspired to ensure Augustus Shackelford's ruin. The first being the fact that he was sorely in need of a sympathetic ear; the second that Freddy, who could spot an ivory tuner from twenty yards away, had unusually remained at home; and thirdly, the Reverend didn't have enough coin in his

pocket for another pint.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Grace spent the days prior to the Marquis of Blanchford's ball almost entirely with her new companion. Felicity Beaumont proved to be excellent company, possessing a dry wit that served as a perfect foil for Grace's more impetuous personality.

They remained for the most part within the townhouse, but on occasion indulged in an early morning stroll in the gardens in the centre of the square opposite. When Grace chafed at their confinement, her companion sternly informed her that a duchess of the realm should under no circumstances be seen out and about dressed as a milkmaid lest she be the object of not only censure but also ridicule. "And," she informed Grace severely, "the ton are veritable experts at ridicule."

Since this observation touched on Grace's very fears, she forbore to mention it again, and swallowing her anxiety, applied herself diligently to absorbing the rules of comportment and propriety drilled into her on a daily basis by Miss Beaumont.

She met with Nicholas every evening for dinner which by the same necessity consisted of only the two of them. For Grace, the time they spent together was bittersweet. While she craved her husband's company, it was difficult to hold any kind of conversation when they were seated at opposite ends of the dining table. She found herself longing for the sunny breakfast room back at Blackmore .

She was unsure of the Duke's plans once her official come-out was over. Would he wish to stay longer in London? While it would be nice to finally have the opportunity to give and receive calls, to sample the delights of Vauxhall Gardens, or simply promenade in Hyde Park, Grace couldn't help but feel an imposter. She would never be all the crack. Apart from anything else, she was far too clumsy. The most she could hope for was that she didn't embarrass her husband, and the longer she stayed

in London, the more likely that event would be. In truth, she hankered after the rolling hills of Devonshire with the distant smell of the sea and the almost constant cawing of seagulls. At her very heart, she was a country girl, and she knew deep down inside that was all she would ever be, no matter what title she wore.

Lost in her thoughts, it was a while before Grace became aware that Nicholas was speaking to her, and she hurriedly put down her spoon, misjudging the angle of her bowl in her haste and watching with dismay as it tumbled to the floor. Colour flooded her face as Bailey laboriously bent down to retrieve the silverware, dabbing carefully at the resulting stain on the floor.

Looking down the table at her husband, she anxiously clenched and unclenched her hands in her lap, waiting for his censure. Instead, he lay down his napkin, rose from his place and walked down the table towards her. Perhaps he intends to beat me she thought a trifle hysterically as she watched his tall form move gracefully towards her. He reminded her of a panther, and despite her apprehension, she couldn't help but admire his physique. To her surprise, instead of chiding her when he finally stood next to her chair, Nicholas held out his hand. Grace eyed it as she would a snake, and after a couple of seconds, her husband questioned dryly as to whether he had something unsavoury on his fingers.

Shaking her head in embarrassment, Grace hastily took his proffered hand and allowed him to lead her to a door, previously unnoticed in the corner of the room.

“Where are we going?” she asked as he stopped in front of the closed door.

“It came to me that you may not know how to dance,” he answered, pushing open the door.

Grace froze as they walked into the room, seeing a long forgotten small ballroom before her. “We do not have to,” she said softly, turning to face him. “Miss Beaumont

has informed me she has been able to secure a teacher who has a reputation for discretion.”

Nicholas placed his hand on her waist, the other pulling her hand up with his. “It is of no consequence. However, if you prefer, think of this as a favour to me. I have a need to practice this new-fangled waltz I’m told is all the rage in the ballrooms of London.” He gave a wry smile. “And considering the last person I practiced with was Malcolm, you are truly doing me a great service.” His lighthearted words drew an incredulous giggle which had clearly been his intention. Smiling warmly down at his wife, Nicholas adopted an air of mock seriousness.

“One dance, Grace. Now pay attention to my steps.”

Grace bit her lower lip, stifling her laughter, and did as he asked, doing her best to make allowances for his injuries as they moved about the wooden floor. After a few moments, she gradually learned the simple steps and began to move in tune with her husband until he was whirling her about the floor, their steps kicking up the dust around them.

“You are a natural,” he murmured as he eventually slowed their steps, pulling her against his strong form.

Grace smiled tremulously up at him. The feel of him holding her close was beyond delicious, and as she looked into his warm but troubled eyes, she realized she was developing feelings for her inscrutable husband...

Oblivious to his wife’s thoughts, Nicholas looked down at her and quirked another smile. “You will do very well, Grace, of that I am sure, and I promise I will do my best not to tread on your beautifully slippered toes.” He set her away from him, and Grace expected this to be the moment he excused himself. However, her husband clearly had not finished surprising her for the day as he proposed accompanying her

for coffee in the small drawing room.

For that one moment, Grace acknowledged she had never felt such happiness.

She was to remember that precise moment many times in the weeks and months to come.

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Giles Northrop could not believe his luck. As the penniless son of a distant relative of Viscount Northrop, he had spent his whole life on the fringes of the ton . Generally considered beneath the touch, he had been ridiculed and despised in equal measure for as long as he could remember. It was his sole ambition to be finally accepted in the higher echelons of English society.

His visit to Devonshire had been more of an impulse. For three reasons. The first being a rumour that a prime bit of blood was purportedly to be put through her paces at Exeter racecourse, and secondly it provided a much-needed escape from an almost certain ignominious end at the hands of his dubious companions who accused him of trying to cut a wheedle.

However, his principal motivation was the knowledge that the elusive Duchess of Blackmore's father resided in the area, and if there was one thing Giles Northrop was good at, it was sniffing out gossip. Indeed, he could not have hoped for a more favoured outcome - and one that would undoubtedly provide his long-coveted acceptance by the ton - in the chance meeting with Reverend Shackleford in the Red Lion.

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“Oh, your grace, have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” her maid Dorcas

breathed reverently as she unpacked a silver-grey satin cloak that seemed to shimmer in the light.

Grace shook her head mutely. She was surrounded by boxes. She had never in her life seen so many clothes. She had previously considered it all a scandalous waste of money since she was of the opinion that the majority of the beautiful gowns would be unlikely to see the light of day once she returned to Blackmore after the ball.

She sighed, picking up a pair of exquisite lace gloves. Unfortunately, her return to Blackmore appeared to have been postponed. It was now all too likely she would find use for most of her new wardrobe given the fact that her husband had intimated his desire that she remain in London to oversee the refurbishment of the Sinclair townhouse.

Grace frowned. In fact, Nicholas had all but ordered her to remain here while he returned to the Estate in Devonshire.

It seemed to her that every time she felt they were making progress, Nicholas pushed her away. After her impromptu dancing lesson, her husband had elected to keep her company for the remainder of the evening, but she very quickly realised he had done so to discuss their temporary separation. He had only stayed until she had reluctantly agreed to his demands. He had not even come to her bed once he'd excused himself. Restlessly, she threw the gloves onto the dozens already lying on her coverlet. She had been so very optimistic after their dance, and now she was plunged into the depths of despair.

She thought back to her reckless wish that Nicholas cast her aside, allowing her to live her life on her own. Now she couldn't bear the thought of not seeing his enigmatic, beautiful face, of not tasting his lips on hers. She had never before experienced the feeling of safety she felt in her husband's arms and she truly couldn't imagine living without it.

The very worst thing had happened. She had fallen in love with Nicholas Sinclair.

How could she have been so foolish? She'd known from the beginning that her husband had no desire to elevate their relationship beyond that of uneasy companionship, but she had hoped, oh how she had hoped for more - especially after, well ... after he had introduced her to the delights of the marriage bed.

How could she have been so naïve? In truth, she was well aware that to most men, coupling was no more important than winning in a game of cards, but if there was one thing she'd learned - her husband was not most men.

Sighing again, she rose to her feet and instructed Dorcas to continue. The maid curtsied, clearly thinking her mistress slightly addled in her lack of interest in the beautiful garments littering the bedchamber.

Making her way downstairs, she wondered what would happen if she revealed her true feelings to the Duke and begged him to take her home with him. When had Blackmore become home . She pictured her husband's response to such a declaration and shuddered, shaking her head at her idiocy. Perchance the best way to his heart would be to prove to him once and for all that she was no simpering ninnyhammer, and she could very well demonstrate that by transforming the Sinclair Townhouse into a warm and welcoming home. His mother had clearly had beautiful taste, and Grace completely concurred with the old Duchess's choice in soft furnishings. All she had to do was imitate what had already been done.

Feeling more lighthearted than she had in days, Grace decided that first things first, she would ensure she paid the strictest attention to Miss Beaumont's instructions on comportment and etiquette between now and the Marquis of Blanchford's ball.

She would show Nicholas Sinclair that she was worthy of the title he'd bestowed upon her.

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It was a long time since Augustus Shackleford had gone to bed quite so foxed, and as he awoke the next morning with the inside of his mouth feeling as though some unknown creature had crawled inside and promptly cocked up its toes, he wondered for a few seconds where he was before recognising the furnishings in his bedchamber. Looking down at himself, he was horrified to note he was still wearing all his clothes. He racked his brain to remember exactly what had happened. He recalled a rather large fellow offering to keep him company, but after that things became hazy. The Reverend took comfort from the fact that he was definitely in his own bed. The problem was, he had no recollection of how he'd got there. This did not look good at all. He wondered whether any of his congregation had observed him in his cups. If that were the case, he was well and truly in the basket. Even worse, if the little rascal had chanced to witness his conduct, the varmint could well increase his demands to a guinea. Groaning, the Reverend struggled to sit up, trying his damndest to resist the overwhelming urge to cast up his account.

This was most unlike him. Augustus Shackleford enjoyed a drink as much as the next man, but he was not prone to indulging to excess. After all, he was a man of the cloth, and while it had to be said that he was tempted on the odd occasion to bend the rules - Percy's request for a hair shirt being the result of one such indiscretion, he had to admit - the Reverend firmly believed himself a good man at heart who did his best for both his family and his parishioners. Of course, they might not always see it that way, but Reverend Shackleford's main concern was the hereafter, and on occasion, that called for sacrifices in the here and now that were not always entirely appreciated.

Well, it did for anyone other than himself.

Resting his head in his hands, he strived to recall the events of the last evening. The house was suspiciously quiet, and looking at his pocket watch he was aghast to discover it was nearly eleven o'clock. Why had no one woken him? And where the

devil was Percy? Frowning, he realised it was Thursday and Percy would be working on the sermon for the upcoming Sunday. The Reverend sighed. He could expect the piece to largely comprise dire warnings of the fire and brimstone awaiting those who strayed from the path of righteousness. Unfortunately, it had to be said that most of the sermons his curate drafted tended to be directed towards the person giving the address.

Climbing to his feet he paused for a moment as the room began to spin slightly. God's teeth he could be dead in his bed with no one the wiser. Groaning, he made his way out of his bedchamber and down the stairs. A situation such as this called for a stiff brandy if he was to feel anything like himself before the day was over. Mayhap Mrs Tomlinson would put him together a small repast of bread and butter to accompany it. He felt positively bilious at the thought of eating any of the cook's porridge which had likely been standing since seven and could now doubtless be sliced and placed in the middle of a sandwich.

The Reverend was on his second brandy and just congratulating himself on his swift action in putting an end to what could have been a very sticky situation, when he heard a loud wailing coming from the hall. Frowning, he determined to remain closeted in the study in the hope that whatever disaster was underway would simply take itself elsewhere. Unfortunately, the next word shrieked ensured that was unlikely. "AUGUSTUS."

His study door was promptly thrown open to reveal Agnes Shackleford, hair wild, bonnet askew and a kerchief clutched in both hands which she was in the middle of shredding. His wife was clearly up in the boughs about something, and the Reverend felt himself go cold all over.

Clearing his throat, he rose hurriedly to his feet and crossed the room to Agnes who now looked to be on the verge of swooning. "Dearest," he muttered, reluctantly patting her on the shoulder before glancing wildly at four of his daughters who were

gathered white faced at the door.

“What on earth has you so agitated, my dove?” he continued in his most placatory tone, trying to ignore the sick sense of foreboding causing the second glass of brandy to curdle ominously in his stomach.

“Don’t you ‘my dove’ me you ... you ... you bounder,” Agnes sobbed. She turned to her husband, drew back her hand and gave him a resounding slap. “Anthony will never grace the drawing rooms of London. Thanks to you, he will be lucky to have a roof over his head. We are all surely destined for the poor house.”

Blinking, the Reverend held his hand to his face, completely nonplussed. In all their years together, he had never glimpsed her so animated. If the situation weren’t so dire, he would be tempted to call her magnificent with her heaving bosom and her hair appealingly dishevelled. Unfortunately, her next words were akin to a bucket of water being tossed directly at his face.

“What on earth were you thinking, Augustus?” she wailed. “Abducting your own daughter...”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Felicity Beaumont was looking forward immensely to the Marquis of Blanchford's Ball. She had managed to ascertain with a few discreet enquiries that the general consensus within the ton was that both Nicholas Sinclair and his wife were both at best plain as pikestaffs and at worst, entirely hideous. This was clearly the reason they had been eschewed by society up until this evening.

If any of the female gossipmongers had thought to share their opinions with their spouses, the on dits circulating may not have become so lurid. The Duke of Blackmore had attended White's on two occasions and had been observed by several high-ranking members of the ton . However, given the fact that the majority of aristocratic marriages included very little contact between husband and wife, it had to be said that nearly every female under the age of ninety was anticipating the forthcoming evening with a delicious shiver of expectation.

Felicity was very much looking forward to their collective open-mouthed astonishment when they finally got their first glimpse of the Duke and Duchess of Blackmore. In fact, she couldn't recall the last time she had awaited an event with quite so much enthusiasm...

Grace hardly recognised the woman in the mirror - it couldn't possibly be her. The gown had a low décolletage and clung to her curves almost indecently. Wonderingly she twirled around, delighting as the gold fabric shimmered in the candlelight. Dorcas had worked wonders with her hair, piling it high upon her head and securing it with what must have been at least a hundred glittering pins which shone and sparkled in turn.

With a grateful smile, she turned towards her maid who was looking on in satisfaction. "Thank you, Dorcas," she offered sincerely. "You've worked wonders, truly you have." Her maid reddened in embarrassed delight. "In truth my lady, it is you I should thank. Seldom have I had the pleasure in dressing someone as lovely as your grace." It was Grace's turn to colour, and impulsively she leaned forward to give Dorcas a quick hug before stepping back and taking a deep breath. Time to join her husband. She picked up her matching gloves and shawl and headed for the stairs.

At long last, she was to brave the lion's den.

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Nicholas tapped his fingers on his leg, looking at the staircase with some irritation. Another ten minutes and they would be more than fashionably late for the ball, which would likely ensure they were gawped at by everyone attending.

In all honesty, he wanted tonight to be over and done with. He wanted to quit London, go back to Blackmore and try to process the feelings he finally realised he had for his wife.

Since his decision to leave Grace in London, the nightmares had been worse than ever. The thought of returning to Devonshire without her filled him with a sense of anxiety out of all proportion. How the devil had she managed to wheedle her way past his defences? Since partially revealing the cause of his nightmares, he'd found himself on more than one occasion on the verge of confessing the whole story. For the first time in his life, he wanted - no craved - the closeness of another human being.

Only fear kept him silent. Fear she would walk away. Fear she would abandon him like his father had.

Fear he would lose her like he'd lost John...

"Nicholas."

Nicholas glanced up, and his heart faltered in his chest as he caught sight of his wife, looking every inch the Duchess she was. Her shimmering gown accentuated her small waist, the skirts billowing out before her. The neckline was bare, with small sleeves at her shoulders and an impressive amount of cleavage on display for his perusal. "Christ you're lovely," he murmured as she made her way down the stairs.

She blushed, her gloved hand sliding down the railing as she descended. Nicholas watched with a mixture of pride that she was his and irritation that others would have a claim on her after tonight. Both feelings completely hitherto unknown. Suddenly, as she neared the bottom, her mouth rounded, and she pitched forward, allowing him barely enough time to catch her before she tumbled down the remainder of the stairs.

Nicholas held her close against him, his body reacting to her closeness as it always did, but the feeling was short lived as he heard her snuffle. Setting her on her feet, he spied the sheen of tears in her eyes. "Are you injured?" he asked sharply.

She shook her head, staring down at the floor. "I-I am going to embarrass you tonight!"

Nicholas shook his head, putting his finger under her chin and gently lifting her head until their eyes met.

"You will not embarrass me, Grace." He hated the thought that he may have put her under so much pressure, thinking she had to be perfect to keep him happy.

She was perfect to him.

Frowning, he thrust the thought away. Now was not the time.

“But what if I stumble on the staircase at the ball? We will be laughingstocks.”

Nicholas produced a clean handkerchief and dabbed lightly at the tears on her face. This was the first time he'd seen Grace cry, and he hated the feeling of helplessness it provoked. “I will be there to catch you,” he murmured softly.

She gave him a watery smile, but he could see the doubt in her eyes. “Come,” he said taking her arm. “It's time to see if you can steal their breaths as you did mine.”

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Felicity waited for the arrival of the Duke and Duchess of Blackmore with barely restrained glee. Indeed, she was finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the admittedly less than scintillating conversation being offered to her by her companion, one Colonel Daniels who was presently regaling her with the origin and symptoms of dengue fever. She had deliberately positioned herself near to the foot of the stairs in the event her charge should require her services. Under normal circumstances, as the poorest of relations and a spinster to boot, Felicity Beaumont would not have been invited to such an elegant occasion. However, in this instance, Nicholas Sinclair had secured an invitation for her. So far, she had been assiduously ignored by the higher members of the ton, a circumstance that bothered her not at all. It simply gave her the opportunity to observe the myriad of mouths that would most certainly fall open at their graces' appearance.

Suddenly, the conversation and laughter around her died, replaced with an anticipation that was almost tangible. Nearly everyone present turned towards the stairs as the Duke and Duchess of Blackmore were announced. Even from here, Felicity could see the tightness of Grace's grip on her husband's arm as they slowly descended the stairs.

Felicity drew in her breath as she realised that Grace's inherent loveliness had surpassed everything she could have hoped for. She was draped in a shimmering gown of golden silk that clung to every curve of her slender, voluptuous body. Nicholas Sinclair was almost impossibly handsome in superbly tailored black evening clothes. Glancing round, Felicity nearly laughed out loud at the expressions on the faces around her. She could only imagine the lively conversation inside every London drawing room on the morrow. Truly, Grace Sinclair had outdone herself.

Especially in reaching the bottom of the stairs without mishap...

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

An hour later, Nicholas had already had more than enough. He hated events like these.

He hated the people around him, the fawning, the pretence. But more than anything, he hated the fact that his wife was the toast of the ball, her laughter floating through the air.

He hated that no matter how hard he tried; he couldn't crush the jealousy that reared its ugly head every time she laughed.

Or smiled.

Or fluttered her eyes in a direction that was not his.

Swearing under his breath, Nicholas grabbed a glass of warm Champagne and forced it down his throat, grimacing as he did so.

"I never thought I would see the day."

Nicholas turned to find James at his side, his eyes dancing with mirth. James Gilmore was the reason Nicholas had joined the Royal Navy. Older by a dozen years, James became the father figure Nicholas so desperately needed. He too had been invalided out after Trafalgar with the loss of his arm.

"What?" Nicholas turned to his mentor with no small amount of irritation.

"The day you cared about a woman," James replied, shaking his head. "You've yet to

take your eyes off her. ”

“Along with the rest of the ballroom,” Nicholas grumbled as Grace laughed yet again.

James clapped him on the shoulder. “She’s popular because she’s newly married. All the young bucks are hoping she’ll be looking for another bed after being saddled with the likes of you.”

Nicholas felt his jaw tighten as he continued to watch the men flirting with his wife. Dear God, just two months ago, he was wondering what the hell to do with her, and now look at him, casting calf eyes like a damned greenhorn. “They don’t stand a chance,” was his flat response.

“No, they don’t,” James stated shaking his head in mock amazement. “She only has eyes for your ugly face.”

Nicholas barked out a laugh, finally feeling some of the tension ease from his shoulders.

Some, not all. “Tis a sight better than yours.”

“I will give you that, my friend,” James laughed. “Next time you come to London, I’d love to learn more about the woman who has wrangled you into wedded bliss.”

Nicholas thought back to the unlikely beginnings of his marriage and grimaced slightly. He’d only seen James a couple of times since Gibraltar, and as both occasions were in White’s, there hadn’t been the opportunity to regale his old mentor of the circumstances surrounding his nuptials. Indeed, Nicholas was not entirely sure he wished to entertain James with the circumstances surrounding his marriage to Grace. He could visualise only too well the older man’s interpretation of his cavalier attitude.

“’Tis a boring tale, almost identical to the beginnings of most unions, I think.”

James raised his eyebrows, clearly hearing something amiss in the Duke’s tone. “Mayhap I’ll save that particular conversation for your wife then,” he grinned as he secured a glass of Champagne from a passing servant.

Nicholas shook his head, a dark chuckle escaping. “If you think I’d allow my wife to spend any time alone with a debauched scoundrel such as yourself, you must be completely addled.”

James’s response was a shout of laughter which Nicholas did not hear as he was too busy observing another young buck writing his name on Grace’s dance card while wistfully looking at her décolletage as he did so. Nicholas had had enough. There was only going to be one name on his wife’s dance card. The rest could go to the devil.

And once he claimed his dance, he intended to take Grace home and make love to her until she forgot about every man but him.

If he didn’t, he would be sorely tempted to murder every man in this room who’d offered his wife more than a passing glance...

He abruptly made his excuses to his old friend who remained where he was to watch the drama unfold. This was the most entertainment he’d had since leaving the Royal Navy.

Grace was enjoying her debut.

Despite her concerns over embarrassing Nicholas, her introduction had gone without worry, and she now had a full dance card with many dashing, young bucks crowded around her. Never in her life had so many taken a liking to her, but there was only one that she cared about.

And he had yet to come and claim his dance.

“Your punch, your grace.”

Grace turned and accepted the small glass from an eager young man, bestowing him a smile in return. “Why thank you. I am parched.”

He grinned, bowing in her direction. “Then may I ask for the next dance set? I believe it’s the waltz.”

“She’s already taken.”

Grace’s eyes met Nicholas’s stormy ones as the young buck in question stammered and stuttered before taking back the glass and hurrying away. Nicholas extended his hand. Grace took it, and followed him to the dance floor, where they set up for the first strains of the waltz. “Where have you been?”

His hand gripped hers. “I’ve been watching you, my dear. You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“There is so much to take in,” she admitted as Nicholas moved them through the first steps. “But I’ve yet to trip over myself at least.”

Nicholas didn’t respond, but the clench of his jaw told her that something was amiss. “Nicholas?” she asked hesitantly. “Is something wrong? Has something happened?”

He looked down at her anxious face, and his expression softened. “No,” he answered ruefully. “I’m simply not accustomed to watching other men ogle my wife.”

Unsure whether he was teasing, Grace nevertheless gave him a shy smile and gave herself over to the music, determined to enjoy the fact that she was finally in her

husband's arms for all of London to see.

The dance was over too soon, but instead of accompanying her to the fringes of the floor, Nicholas escorted her outside and into a small informal garden. The breeze was refreshing on her slightly damp skin, and Grace sighed, inhaling the scent of roses that perfumed the air. To her delight, Nicholas enfolded her in his arms, nuzzling at her neck. "'Tis a shame we are not able to leave just yet," he murmured in her ear. "But as soon as propriety permits us to do so, I give you fair warning wife, 'tis my intention to take you home to bed. My bed or yours, I have no care which."

Lost in the seductive invitation within her husband's blue eyes, Grace leaned in and hesitantly lifted her arms, slipping them around his neck and pulling slightly. Nicholas groaned, wrapping her in a crushing embrace, his mouth moving hungrily over hers in a deep searing kiss.

"Pon my oath, it's deuced hot in there."

Nicholas stilled as the loud voice sounded at his back.

"'Tis a fine squeeze, it has to be said, but nevertheless it won't do to remain out here for long. I have it on good authority that something's afoot. I overheard Lady Granger talking to that bounder, Giles Northrup, and if that damned ivory tuner's managed to sneak in unannounced, you can be sure there's something nasty smelling at the bottom of it."

The voices faded as the owners returned to the heat of the ballroom, but the mood had been broken, and Nicholas placed a last reluctant kiss on his wife's trembling lips. "It seems some poor unfortunate has fallen foul of the ton ." His wry observation caused a shiver down Grace's back, and she pulled back hurriedly. "Would you like some refreshment?" he asked gently, releasing her with reluctance.

“Yes please,” Grace whispered. “If it pleases you, I’ll remain out here. I ... I ... I’m still a little hot.”

Her voice was slightly breathless, and Nicholas grinned down at her, fully satisfied he’d supplanted any thoughts of the dashing young men vying for her attention earlier.

“I’ll be as quick as I can,” he murmured dropping a chaste kiss on her forehead.

Grace watched her husband go through the open doors, her heart still racing and lips still throbbing from the intensity of his kisses. How could she even have considered a life without him? Grace knew that whatever happened between them, there would never be another man for her. Somewhere, somehow, between throwing up onto his immaculate hessians and dancing her first waltz with him, she’d fallen deeply, irrevocably in love with Nicholas Sinclair. Sitting down on a small bench, she put her head into her hands. She hoped with all her heart she was already with child. She was no simpering miss straight from the school room and consequently under no foolish illusions that a man such as the Duke of Blackmore would ever love someone like her. But if they had a child together, mayhap that would be enough to hold him to her.

She would take whatever she could get.

Suddenly, a figure loomed up to her right, and startled, she reared back, just as an arm gripped hers, pulling her up from the small bench she’d been seated on.

“Nicholas,” she gasped in relief when she recognised her husband’s harsh features. “You had me worried for a second.”

“Come, we have to leave,” he responded curtly.

Frowning, Grace looked up at him, and her stomach roiled as she saw his shuttered

expression and clenched jaw. “Has something happened?” she asked fearfully, allowing him to lead her through a small gate into the formal gardens. Her husband didn’t answer, simply pulled her along at such a pace that she had to pick up her skirts and run to keep up with his long strides. “Nicholas,” she cried breathlessly, fearful she would fall headlong any second.

Abruptly, he stopped and thrust her behind him while he spoke in low tones with a shadowy figure. Panting, Grace peered around her husband’s back but could only tell that the figure was a man. She watched mutely as a carriage pulled up in front of them. The shadowy figure she finally recognised as the man Nicholas was speaking to earlier pulled open the door, then shook Nicholas’s hand before moving swiftly away.

Unceremoniously, Nicholas thrust Grace into the darkened interior, then followed, shutting the door with a thud. Seating himself opposite, he closed his eyes and leaned back, a picture of weariness as the carriage lurched forward.

Grace stared at her husband nervously. “What’s happened Nicholas?” she asked in a whisper, the sick feeling turning the punch she’d consumed earlier to acid in her stomach.

For a few seconds, she feared he would not respond at all. Then she truly wished he hadn’t as the Duke of Blackmore opened his eyes and silently raked his wife with a look of undiluted contempt.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Grace woke to the sound of her maid bustling about her bedchamber. For a few seconds, she wondered why her eyes felt swollen and sore, then it all came crashing back.

The ball, their ignominious departure and worst of all, her husband's glacial expression as he'd tersely informed her they would talk on the morrow, before turning on his heels and disappearing into his study without even bidding her good night.

She'd lain in her bed with tears pouring unchecked down her cheeks for what seemed like hours.

Her deepest fear had come to pass. And now as a result, her husband despised her. In the darkest hours before dawn, she'd heard his desperate cries as the nightmares gripped him, but now more than ever he would not accept her comfort. She didn't think he would accept anything from her ever again.

Wearily, Grace climbed out of bed, finally dismissing Dorcas who, unaware of her mistress's despair, was prattling merrily on about last night's ball. The maid had dropped a puzzled curtsy and exited the room with a murmured, "Yes, your grace."

Donning her clothes with difficulty, Grace couldn't help but wonder when it had become such a struggle to dress herself. After all, it was a task she'd undertaken without thought for over twenty years. She grimaced at her slightly dishevelled image in the mirror. Mayhap she'd have to get used to it all over again. After all, this was how she'd always looked until her husband had elevated her to a Duchess.

How ridiculous that sounded now.

Fighting back yet more tears, Grace opened her bedchamber door and headed downstairs. The thought of breakfast made her feel ill, but she knew she needed to eat something. Out of habit, she glanced at the silver tray in the entrance hall. As always, it was empty. How foolish she'd been to hope it would be full of calling cards.

She had no friends in London. Nor through her own stupidity would she ever. Not now.

Forcing down some toast, Grace wondered where Nicholas was. She did not dare approach him. She would simply have to wait until he called for her. Her stomach was in knots, and the toasted bread tasted like sawdust.

"You have a visitor, your grace." She turned to Bailey in surprise. "I have placed Miss Beaumont in the small drawing room," he continued with a slight bend of his head, "and hope it pleases your grace, but I've taken the liberty of ordering some tea."

Grace jumped hurriedly to her feet. "Yes, yes ... of course, Bailey, thank you."

Felicity was here. Grace hoped it wasn't simply to berate her, or worse, to gloat. But revelling in another's misfortunes was something Felicity Beaumont had never been wont to do. Perhaps she was here to request payment for her services. If that were the case, she would need to speak to the Duke.

Opening the drawing room door, Grace hesitantly walked in, spying her companion standing by the window gazing sombrely out over the square. At her charge's entrance, she turned and composed her face into a welcoming smile.

"They will forget eventually." The words were blunt, but nevertheless edged with a

calm compassion which had Grace swallowing convulsively lest she disgrace herself again.

“I... I... I am not entirely sure what words were spoken last night after our departure, but I am well able to hazard a guess.” Taking a deep breath, Grace shook her head. “I am not concerned with my own disgrace, but that of my husband. He does not deserve the ridicule of his peers.”

Felicity Beaumont seated herself before responding. “I am quite sure he will weather the storm my dear, he is a duke, after all. Unfortunately, you are simply a vicar’s daughter so will not fare so well.”

Grace squeezed her eyes shut in shame. “What exactly were they saying?” she whispered after a few seconds.

“Oh, much about frolicking around in hay bales and embarrassing your father to such an extent, he attempted to abduct you to prevent you bringing further shame to the Blackmore name.” Felicity waved her hand nonchalantly in the air as if the gossip were of no import.

“Dear Lord,” Grace murmured faintly. She subsided onto the sofa, just as Mrs Jenks brought in the tea. Once they were alone again, she poured with a shaking hand and only just managed to avoid spilling the liquid all over her mentor’s morning dress.

“My husband will never forgive me.” Grace stifled a sob as she attempted a sip of the lukewarm tea. “I care not about society, but rather the embarrassment I’ve undoubtedly brought to the Sinclair name. All through my own stubbornness and stupidity.”

“I doubt that very much,” responded Felicity with a snort. “I dare say you had due provocation to act as you did.” She replaced her cup decisively on the occasional

table in front of her. “Before you throw yourself on the altar of martyrdom, my dear, consider this. Sinclair had a reputation for, well, to put it bluntly, being a brooding ill-tempered bore. Now, he has a beautiful wife who is admittedly leading him a merry dance, and he will be all the more popular for it.”

Rising from her chair, she slid on her gloves before continuing briskly. “You looked magnificent last night, my dear. Never forget that. The ton will never forget it either.”

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Standing at the window of his study, Nicholas stared distractedly at the early autumn leaves drifting across the square while he waited for his wife to answer his summons. He’d put off speaking with her until now, not sure he could trust himself to hold a civil conversation. The overwhelming hurt and betrayal he’d felt when he’d walked into the ballroom to discover that the antics of his wife had become the latest juicy on-dit on the vicious tongues of the ton churned a path in his gut that made him want to run somebody through.

Preferably his father-in-law.

But his torment didn’t come from the fact Grace had taken part in activities she knew would embarrass him. It was the reason she had sought to do so.

His wife had hoped he would put her aside.

Nicholas closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, forcing back the anguish he’d felt ever since he discovered the lengths Grace was prepared to go to be free of him. Well now she would have her wish.

He turned away at the sound of the door opening, his heart catching in his throat at the sight of his wife looking so broken and lost. He noted her eyes were red rimmed

and puffy, her hair and dress back to the simple style she'd favoured at the start of their marriage. It seemed she had already put aside the trappings of a duchess. Perhaps she was not as heartbroken as she looked. There was no doubt in Nicholas's mind that this had been her intent all along .

"I understand you wish to speak with me," she murmured, her eyes downcast. Nicholas marvelled at her show of humility, reluctantly recalling the banter they'd shared regarding her persistent observation of the flooring at Blackmore. He waited until she looked up, then nodded curtly towards the chair in the front of his desk, a silent demand for her to sit down.

"I will not waste time discussing possible repercussions of your activities since your exploits have made it abundantly clear that you do not wish for us to reside in the same house as man and wife." His voice was icy, his expression carefully blank.

"I do not wish that," Grace protested softly, her heart sinking at his glacial tone.

Nicholas was silent for a second, then continued as though she hadn't spoken. "We will depart for Devonshire first thing in the morning. There is a cottage on the Blackmore estate which is suitably distant from the main house to ensure we are unlikely to encounter one another. You will remain there until such time as it becomes apparent whether or not you are with child. Should our ... endeavours prove to have been fruitful, you will stay until the child is born." His lips twisted in a mirthless smile. "Beyond that, I do not care what you do. You may remain in the house or leave as you wish."

"You would take my child away from me?" Grace burst out in horror.

"The child will be my heir," he said between his teeth. "The future Duke of Blackmore will not be brought up without his father."

“What if it’s a girl,” Grace countered desperately. “Don’t you want a son?”

Nicholas stared at her, his face twisted with a mixture of grief and loathing. “I had a son,” he bit out finally. “He died.”

Grace’s retort died on her lips as she gazed at her husband’s beautiful haunted face.

“The boy who lost his legs. He was your son?” Her whisper was full of compassion, understanding finally shining in her eyes.

“If he were alive now,” Nicholas ground out, his voice raw with anguish, “you may rest assured madam, we would never have been married.”

Without another word, he turned on his heels and walked out, as if he couldn’t bear to stay in the room with her for another second.

Thankfully, Grace’s intolerable grief gradually turned into tolerable numbness. She insisted on packing her own clothes, much to the dismay of Dorcas who was practically in tears before her mistress finally lost her temper and shooed the young woman out. The last thing Grace needed was a fight with her maid over what was right and proper, especially as she was choosing to leave the majority of her new wardrobe behind. She would have little use for it in Devonshire. She hoped Dorcas would be able to find another position. Unfortunately, a letter of recommendation from the scandalous Duchess of Blackmore would do little to help.

Biting her lip, Grace finally sealed her portmanteau. She had eschewed dinner for a light supper in her bedchamber but had eaten none of it. Her stomach felt as if it contained a large rock, rendering her totally unable to swallow. She glanced around the gloomy room remembering the ideas for its transformation she’d shyly imparted to Nicholas in the warm aftermath of their lovemaking. He’d approved all her plans without any hesitation, holding her close in his arms until he deemed it time for him

to return to his own chamber. More than once she'd had to bite her lip to refrain from begging him to stay.

She realised now how much her husband had indulged her. The cruel man from earlier bore no resemblance to him at all.

Wearily, she climbed into her bed. They were departing London early on the morrow, but she very much doubted she would oversleep. Indeed, she knew she would be lucky if she closed her eyes at all.

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Reverend Shackelford failed to recall a time when his life had been this terrible, and he couldn't help but question the Almighty's treatment of so loyal a servant.

He may well have made a complete cake of everything, but he'd done it with the best possible motives. Wincing, he remembered the old adage Hell is paved with good intentions. He had no doubt that Percy would be including the proverb in his upcoming sermon.

Sighing, the Reverend sipped on his glass of port. His meals had become a solitary affair with only Freddy for company. He'd been taking them in his study since Agnes had refused to speak to him after her fit of the vapours three days ago. She was now in a high dudgeon having taken to her bed with only her salts for company.

The rest of the household were tiptoeing around and speaking in whispers. It was as if someone had turned over the deuced perch, and for the second time in his long, occasionally less than illustrious interval on this mortal coil, Reverend Shackelford was truly flummoxed.

So far, he'd received no word from the Duke of Blackmore and no indication whether

the news of his daughter's indiscretions had found his son-in-law's ears. Quite what the Duke would make of the Reverend's own admittedly ill-advised activities, was something he couldn't as yet bring himself to ponder.

Reverend Shackleford was under no illusions that the damned ivory tuner who'd taken advantage of his being a trifle foxed had refrained from hastening up to London to spread the gossip to all and sundry. It was only a matter of time. Sighing, the Reverend put his head in his hands. He was in the suds and no mistake. Somehow, he had to come up with a plan that would see his son's future honour restored, and more urgently, given the fact that Anthony was only five, to ensure that his eldest daughter was not consigned to living in a barn.

Along with the rest of them.

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Grace had finally fallen into a light doze in the early hours but was woken again at the sound of a cock crowing just before dawn. She lay there until Dorcas appeared with a cup of chocolate approximately half an hour later. Nodding gratefully at the solemn faced maid, she propped up her pillows, determined not to be rushed. Her husband was unlikely to leave without her after all. When Dorcas finally appeared with a basin of hot water, she reluctantly climbed out of bed. She'd intended to don the same gown as yesterday, but with an unexpected hint of mulishness, she changed her mind, choosing instead an emerald green morning gown from her new wardrobe that brought out the colour of her eyes.

Seating herself at the dressing table, she allowed Dorcas to brush and style her hair. If she was to be banished, then her husband's last sight of her would not be the forlorn pitiful woman of yesterday. Her heart might well be breaking, but she still had her pride. Which was what got you into this position in the first place, she couldn't help musing. No matter. She would not have her husband remember her looking as sick as

a cushion. She made a determined effort to smile in the mirror at Dorcas as the maid put the finishing touches to her coiffure which unfortunately resulted in the servant bursting into tears. Hurriedly, Grace rose and handed the distraught maid a handkerchief. Anyone would think I was going to the scaffold, she thought a trifle hysterically. Luckily, a knock at the door brought a swift end to the histrionics, and wiping her eyes, Dorcas went to the door .

Bailey stood on the other side, wheezing slightly from the stairs. “Your grace, his grace is asking whether you have any baggage.”

“Naturally,” Grace responded, slightly irritated that the Duke might expect her to travel without luggage. “I will leave it in my chamber to be collected.”

“If it pleases you, I will take it downstairs for you now, your grace,” Bailey puffed, moving into the room.

“Certainly not.” Grace’s reply was a little sharper than she’d intended, but she had no intention of witnessing the elderly butler suffer an apoplexy as a result of struggling downstairs with her heavy baggage. Softening her next words, she continued. “Please instruct one of the footmen to take care of it. I am sure my husband will be more than happy to wait a few moments more.”

With that, she picked up her reticule and gloves and swept past him to head down the stairs. She stumbled a little as she saw the Duke waiting unsmiling at the bottom, but thankfully managed to descend to the hall without pitching headlong into his arms. Would he even bother to catch me? she couldn’t help questioning ruefully.

Finally, standing in front of her husband, she lifted her head before saying in as firm a voice as she could muster, “I will be ready to depart once I have partaken of some breakfast, your grace.” She thought she saw him flinch slightly at her use of his title, but he merely nodded his head curtly before turning on his heel and heading towards

his study. "Have the coach brought round in fifteen minutes," he bit out to Bailey who had just arrived at the bottom of the stairs.

Fighting back yet more tears, Grace walked into the dining room, seating herself for the last time at the end of the table. She had cried enough to fill an ocean, but no more. She was determined to leave with her head held high. Where this sudden surge of courage had come from, she had no idea, but whatever happened in the future, she would not disgrace herself further in the eyes of the servants, particularly as she was unlikely to see any of them again.

She feared her husband was already a lost cause.

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Nicholas strode over to his desk and poured himself a large brandy. It was early in the day, but he wasn't sure he'd survive the next few hours without being slightly foxed. Swallowing the dark liquid in one go, he quickly poured another. He was unable to get the image of his wife's regal descent of the stairs out of his mind. He couldn't help but admire her pluck. Gone was the snivelling wretch from yesterday. Today she looked like a duchess. His Duchess.

The first woman he'd ever fallen in love with. He could admit it to himself now. When it was far, far too late.

Turning, Nicholas raised his glass to the only remaining portrait of his father hidden away in the corner of the study. "I'm sure you're having a fine time gloating, old man," he murmured bitterly. "Well you've certainly had the last laugh. Trapped in a marriage with a woman who abhors me." He savoured the burning in his throat before pouring a third.

"Still, perhaps you're not finding it quite so humorous," he continued collapsing

bleakly into his chair. “After all, you know exactly what that feels like, don’t you father?”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

This time Malcolm accompanied them on their journey, because Grace realised wretchedly, Nicholas did not wish them to be alone together. Indeed, in his haste to be rid of her, the Duke decided they would return to Blackmore without staying overnight at a hostelry, which demanded a change of horses halfway.

The only time she was allowed to alight the carriage throughout the journey was to see to her ablutions and eat a swift meal. Grace didn't know whether to be relieved or sorry when she was left to dine alone. She suspected she wouldn't have been able to force anything down had she been subject to her husband's scowling face during the meal. She supposed Nicholas preferred to eat with Malcolm.

Her husband hardly spoke two words to her throughout the journey. She only briefly tried to engage him in conversation while Malcolm was supervising the onward journey of their first team of horses once the beasts had had sufficient time to rest. He listened to her in glacial silence before stating flatly that should she utter one more word, she would find herself left behind along with the horses. She suspected he might actually have been a trifle disguised at the start of their journey and was beyond relieved when he finally fell asleep in the early hours.

Despite her weariness, Grace had been unable to stop her mind repeating over and over the events of the last few days. It did absolutely no good at all but nevertheless prevented her from finding any respite in sleep, and by the time the carriage finally entered Devonshire, her whole body was aching to such an extent she couldn't help wondering whether she'd ever be able to walk again. Staring across at her husband's strained face, she felt unwilling sympathy, imagining the pain he was going through from his injuries.

“Try not to bother yerself too much lassie,” Malcolm murmured after glancing over at his master’s sleeping form. Surprised, Grace looked over at the valet. It was the first time the Scot had spoken to her since they’d left London. “I would have spoken to ye earlier, but the Laird forbade it.” Malcolm cocked his head towards Nicholas who continued to sleep fitfully.

“He’s hurting something fierce at the moment, but it’s ma belief he’ll come around eventually. He’s a stubborn one but not entirely cork brained.” Malcolm gave a soft chuckle. “The fact that he had to consume the better part of a bottle of brandy to get into the carriage wi’ ye is evidence of where his heart lies. Bide yer time lassie, bide yer time.”

Grace bit her lip at his kindness and was about to reply when Nicholas opened his eyes. For a second, disorientated, he stared at her sleepily, and she drew in her breath at the slumbering desire in his eyes. She realised the exact moment the events of the last few days came back to him. His beautiful eyes darkened before he turned away and sat up hurriedly.

“We’re about three miles away from the estate yer grace,” Malcolm offered mildly. “Will we be taking her grace to the cottage immediately, or will she abide the night at the house?”

Nicholas frowned and shook his head. “We’ll continue to Pear Tree Cottage. I gave instructions for the house to be aired and a bed made up.” He looked over at Grace, clearly reluctant to communicate directly to her. “I am sure you will be more than comfortable, madam,” he offered curtly. “The cottage is small, but I daresay has more room than you were accustomed to before we wed.”

Grace’s face flamed, and she clenched her hands against the seat to prevent herself from crying out in protest. Outwardly calm, she simply bent her head slightly in acknowledgement and turned to look out of the window.

Dawn was not far away, and the familiar rolling hills of Devonshire were only now beginning to regain their colour after the black and greyness of the night.

For Grace, the journey could not be over quickly enough.

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Reverend Shackleford had finally received a missive from the Duke of Blackmore. It was short, curt and to the point. The Duke had indeed cast Grace aside. She was to live in a cottage on the estate, and his son-in-law made it abundantly clear that he had no wish to see either his wife or any of her family. His grace also directed that while he was in residence, weekly services were to be held within the private chapel at Blackmore as he would no longer be attending the church. They would be delivered by the curate.

Putting the letter down, the Reverend felt a trifle light-headed. The situation was dire indeed. Putting his head in his hands, Augustus Shackleford allowed himself a moment of despondency before taking a deep breath and determinedly rallying. At least his eldest daughter would continue to have an actual roof over her head, and it appeared he was to continue with his incumbency, at least for the moment. Agnes would be happy they were not all about to be unceremoniously banished from Blackmore. The Reverend sighed. Happy was undeniably an overembellishment, but at least there was an outside possibility his wife might actually talk to him again.

Nonetheless, Augustus Shackleford could not escape the knowledge that it was his responsibility to put the whole terrible business to rights, and for the most part he was confident it was not beyond his capabilities. Indeed, it could be said that resourcefulness was his greatest skill; after all, it was his responsibility to ensure the church collection box was acceptably full every Sunday.

And, if he failed to come up with a suitable plan, he could always ask Percy...

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Contrary to Grace's fears, Pear Tree cottage was perfectly lovely. Had she not been in such a hobble, she would have delighted in the charming red brick house. Downstairs consisted of a kitchen, dining room and drawing room while upstairs there were three bedrooms and even a tiny bathroom. The last was completely impractical since the length of time it would take her to heat enough water to fill the bath and carry it up the narrow stairs, would most likely render it cold again by the time she actually got into it. That said, the rooms in the rest of the house were small but nonetheless light and airy and best of all there was an enchanting walled garden with a huge apple tree which she enjoyed sitting under when the weather permitted.

The cottage was cleaned and the bedding changed once a week. The garden was tended to and she was provided with enough victuals to ensure she wouldn't starve, providing she knew how to cook them. For that skill Grace conceded she was truly indebted to Mrs Higgins and the many hours she'd spent in the cook's kitchen at Blackmore. It was Grace's choice to live without any domestic help. Her husband had curtly informed her that he had no care how many servants she chose to employ. Mayhap in the future she would welcome the company, but at the moment, she preferred that of her own .

Autumn came and went with no news from the Duke. She had written to her father and to her sisters but had refrained from entertaining them lest Nicholas find out, thus adding credence to her supposed perfidy. She missed her sisters terribly - in particular Temperance, who was closest to her in age.

Yet, their absence was as nothing compared to her longing for her husband. Her yearning for Nicholas was a persistent ache deep in the pit of her stomach that was with her from the moment she rose in the morning until she finally fell into an exhausted sleep in the early hours. Her mind berated her endlessly for her foolhardiness until she felt as if she might scream. The worst day however came one

blustery October morning when she woke to discover the onset of her menses.

There would be no child from their union.

She remained in her bed for the whole day allowing the tears to fall, grieving for what might have been, and for what she would never now experience. She cried until she felt as though her heart might break, and then, at last, she slept.

To her surprise, the next day she felt slightly better. Rising just after dawn, she stared out at the distant undulating hills wreathed in early morning mist, with the barely visible glimpses of the sea between them and felt the first slight lifting of her heart. She recalled the many wonderful days spent with her sisters on the beaches of South Devonshire.

Their father would order the stable hand to take them in the cart pulled by the only horse they owned. Lucifer had been quite young then. Smiling she remembered the Reverend's explanation for the horse's name. "A more beautiful beast has never likely walked this earth, nor one so deuced evil-tempered. Twas your mother who named him after he bit her for the third time while he was still at his dam's teat."

Grace shook her head. Was it any wonder they'd all grown up so unruly? She couldn't recall a chaperone ever accompanying them on any of their outings. Truly, she'd never really had the makings of a duchess, whatever her father had hoped.

Dressing quickly in the pre-dawn chill, she went downstairs to stoke up the fire. A large stack of dry kindling had been left in the woodshed, enough to last her throughout the winter if she was careful. But then she supposed she could always ask for more if she needed it. Whatever Nicholas thought of her, she did not believe he would see her freeze to death.

Indeed, the only thing she was lacking was reading material. She was still in

possession of the two books she'd borrowed from Blackmore's library before the ill-fated visit to London, which she fully intended to return - once she'd read them, but she hadn't felt like reading up until now. Mayhap today was a good day to go back to her favourite pastime, providing she could concentrate for long enough.

Determinedly, Grace made herself a cup of hot chocolate and snuggled up in the large armchair closest to the now roaring fire. Two hours later, she was still on page six. Sighing, she finally put the book down. Reading matter was clearly not the only thing she was missing. Her mind simply could not focus on the pages in front of her.

All of a sudden, she heard barking. It sounded like Freddy. Hurriedly, she went to the window. To her amazement, she spied her father's small curricule pulled by non-other than Lucifer himself. Freddy was dancing around the horse who was doing his best to kick the irritating dog but was hampered by the traces.

Grace never imagined a day would come when she'd feel such overwhelming delight at the sight of her exasperating father. Swiftly throwing open the door, she was immediately bowled over by Freddy who was equally delighted to see her.

"Down boy, down, you infernal beast," the Reverend puffed climbing with difficulty down from the curricule. As usual, Freddy paid absolutely no attention to his master and continued to dance joyfully around Grace .

"What are you doing here, father?" Grace asked when the dog finally ran off to chase an interesting scent.

"I wished to see how you were faring," he responded, leaning forward to receive Grace's dutiful kiss. "And none too soon it seems," he continued, observing her tired pinched face. "You look as though a breath of wind would bowl you over," he muttered moving past her to enter the cottage. "Have you been eating, girl?"

“I am quite well, Father. Thank you,” Grace replied stiffly, following him into the kitchen. “And yes, I am very well provisioned as you can see.”

The Reverend turned back to look at her, and she was astonished to see the depth of concern in his eyes. She had never considered that her father held her in any regard. Indeed, he’d always been merely someone to avoid throughout her childhood.

“May I offer you some tea, father?” she offered hesitantly, not knowing how to deal with this suddenly thoughtful parent. Although she suspected that at least some of his concern was due to the fact that his actions may well have contributed to her disgrace, she nevertheless felt an unaccustomed warmth inside. “Please make yourself comfortable in front of the fire.”

Half an hour later, their stilted conversation finally ran out. The only noise was the crackling of the fire in the hearth and Freddy’s loud snoring as he lay as close as he could in front of it. They had covered every subject possible apart from the hobble they were in, and now, silence reigned.

“Well, there’s no sense in forever avoiding mention of the Devil’s own scrape you’ve found yourself in.” Grace jumped slightly at the Reverend’s sudden loud announcement, but before she had the wit to respond, her father continued in the booming voice he usually reserved for berating his parishioners. “There’s no escaping the fact you’ve been shockingly loose in the haft my girl and unsurprisingly made a complete cake of yourself.”

Grace opened her mouth but had no idea what to say. Her father’s words may have been blunt, but they were nonetheless true. Still, the fact that he’d conveniently omitted to include his part in the whole affair did not surprise her in the least. His next words however, completely dumbfounded her.

“While it has to be said, you’re in the suds, Grace, and no mistake. Nonetheless, it

remains my responsibility as your father to put matters to right.

“You may have tied your garter in public, young lady, but you may rest assured I will do everything I can to ensure you are not left languishing in this shoe box until you draw your last breath.” Grace simply stared nonplussed at her father until he finally sighed irritably and continued in a much milder tone, “Were you truly so cork-brained as to wish to be rid of your husband or were you just kicking up a lark? In other words, do you want to be leg shackled to this Duke of yours or not?”

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Nicholas Sinclair felt as though he hadn't slept in weeks. To be precise, since the day he found out about his wife's duplicity.

He'd never held any real love for Blackmore since he'd left the estate at fifteen, but he'd succeeded in convincing himself that he might transform the mausoleum into a home filled with the chatter and laughter of children. He could actually pinpoint the precise moment this had become his dream. It was the second Grace pitched forward into his arms before the Marquis of Blanchford's ball.

His dream had shrivelled and died that same night, and he'd barely slept since.

The nightmares continued to plague him, and Nicholas feared he'd become addled if they continued for much longer. Either that, or you'll become permanently jug bitten , he thought bleakly as he poured himself another brandy. He was well aware he was dipping too deep, but it was the only thing that provided any relief from the torment he faced each night.

The only thing, that is, apart from the presence of his wife. The Duke tightened his hand around the glass and closed his eyes. His whole being ached for the softness of Grace's touch. He missed everything about her, including her clumsiness. Helplessly,

he recalled her loud laughter, her complete lack of propriety.

And her kisses. Dear God, he couldn't get the feel of her lips against his out of his mind. She had responded so sweetly to his touch, given herself fully to him without any reserve.

Had she truly wished to be rid of him?

Swallowing the brandy, he reflected bitterly that he'd never really know the whole truth. There was no reason for them ever to lay eyes upon one another again, not now he'd received the news that their lovemaking had not born fruit. His wife was not with child.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Reverend Shackelford did not usually have such trouble locating his curate, but it had to be said, Percy had been conspicuous by his absence of late. The Reverend hoped the reason for his old friend's continued nonattendance was not due to his getting ideas above his station, bearing in mind he'd been tasked with delivering the Duke of Blackmore's weekly private service. Indeed, that was what the Reverend wished to discuss with him.

Augustus Shackelford had come up with an incomparable plan to reunite his daughter with her husband and was certain Percy would be every bit as enthusiastic once he'd heard the details.

At length, however, after looking everywhere, he'd resorted to handing Freddy a pair of Percy's unmentionables to sniff, with instructions to fetch. Forty minutes and two pairs of unmentionables later, the hound finally located the errant curate in the Red Lion. This was so unlike Percy who had never to the Reverend's knowledge entered their favourite watering hole without his superior leading the way. Augustus Shackelford was most concerned. First a hair shirt and now the man was turning to drink. What the deuce could be troubling him? Even though they were both faithful servants of the Anglican Church, as a sensitive man of the cloth, the Reverend was not above listening to a confession should it make his oldest friend feel better.

But first things first. Determinedly, Reverend Shackelford hurried into the dim interior of the Red Lion, Freddy in tow, eager to share his exciting news.

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To say the Reverend was surprised at Percy's lack of enthusiasm for his plan would

be akin to saying the weather in hell can be a trifle warm. It took three tankards of ale and some stern words before the curate finally agreed to help, although his aversion to the whole enterprise was clearly evident in his abrupt refusal of a second helping of Mrs Tomlinson's bread and butter pudding. Already on his third plateful, the Reverend couldn't help lamenting the days when Percy would simply follow his lead without question.

Still, the following Sunday afternoon saw them closeted in the vicarage study whilst the rest of the household were recumbent after a particularly large Sunday roast. The Reverend had even written his own sermon for the service earlier that morning and had thus succeeded in escaping the church in record time.

"What the deuce am I supposed to do with these?" the Reverend said, holding up a set of Agnes's stays.

"I think they're supposed to go around your middle and tie at the back Sir," responded Percy. He frowned before continuing, "I'm reliably informed they are supposed to draw in a lady's waist, but only in the event we're able to get you into them beforehand. Which I'm not sure is possible on this occasion." The relief in the curate's voice had the Reverend regarding him with narrowed eyes.

"Fustian nonsense man. Agnes is not exactly a diamond of the first water, and it's a long time since she's been able to spy her drawers while standing up, so let's have no more prevaricating."

Percy winced at the Reverend's description of his wife but refrained from observing that Augustus Shackleford was hardly all the crack himself. Sighing, the curate stepped forward and taking the stays, held them close to the ground for the Reverend to step into. There followed a struggle of gargantuan magnitude as they gasped and wheezed in their efforts to pull the stays up until they sat round the Reverend's middle.

“Zooks, I’ll be lucky if I can take two breaths in this deuced thing. How the devil does Agnes succeed in walking?” The Reverend took two experimental steps forward. “If I have to wear it for long, I’ll end up as queer as Dick’s hatband.”

“We have to tighten them yet, Sir.”

Percy’s observation as he took hold of the laces was surprisingly jovial, but before the Reverend had an opportunity to question his curate’s unexpected good humour, his wind completely left him as Percy yanked hard and, in the Reverend’s opinion, a trifle too eagerly.

“Enough,” he wheezed, “I’m certain I’ll have no difficulty getting the dress on now.”

However, despite their best efforts, it proved impossible to do up the laces at the back of the dress, so the Reverend had to content himself with covering the whole ensemble with a shawl. The bonnet unfortunately resulted in him resembling a drunken doxy, but as the Reverend pointed out, “We only require the disguise to hold until we’re in the chapel, then I’ll have the Duke’s ear.”

Opening the door slightly, the Reverend peered into the hall. Luckily, the coast was clear. Turning back into the room, he ordered Freddy to ‘stay’ in a firm whisper. The hound’s wagging tail drooped slightly, but he obediently lay back down by the fire.

Ten minutes later, the Reverend arrived without incident at their arranged meeting place where he waited impatiently behind a hedge for Percy to bring the cart round. He would have preferred to take the curricule but was mindful that any alteration to the curate’s customary routine may well prove to be their downfall.

The next half hour would be of crucial importance to his daughter’s future happiness.

It would also decide whether or not he would have another opportunity to consume an

excellent Sunday roast the likes of which he'd partaken in not two hours before...

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Nicholas Sinclair waited impatiently in the Blackmore family chapel with only Malcolm for company. As soon as the service was over, he would be leaving for his estate in Scotland. He told himself it was time to set his most northerly estate in order. His Scottish seat bordered the banks of Loch Long, and the house was sorely in need of repairs. It was Nicholas's intention to do much of the work himself wherever possible, mainly because he feared it was the only way he'd ever get some sleep. Fortunately, the land was far too wild for anyone of breeding to chance spying him dressed as a common labourer.

Looking down at his fob watch, Nicholas frowned. The curate was late. At this rate, his coach wouldn't leave Blackmore before dark. He was just about to call the whole service off when there was a slight commotion at the entrance to the chapel. Percy Noon, looking more flustered than the Duke had ever seen him, hurried towards the small pulpit while behind him shuffled a truly revolting looking individual. The only indication that the creature was female, was the fact she was wearing a skirt and bonnet. Indeed, she resembled a trollop the like of which commonly frequented the London docks.

Recoiling, the Duke stepped forward, halting the woman before she reached the front of the chapel which appeared to be her destination. Behind him, the curate was launching into the service with the general confession of sins which for some obscure reason he was shouting at the top of his voice.

Doing his best to shut out the bellowing behind, the Duke attempted to address the woman. At the same moment the curate reached a crescendo with an ear-splitting, "AMEN."

“QUIET,” Nicholas yelled, completely losing his temper. Sudden silence descended. “What the deuce is going on?” the Duke snapped, glancing between the curate and the strange creature standing before him. The doxy lifted her hand, and Nicholas instinctively stepped back, mistrustful of her intentions, just as a whirlwind of fur came charging into the chapel, crashing into the woman and knocking her straight into his arms. With a grunted humph, Nicholas fell backwards, ending up on the floor with the peculiar female lying on top of him. Stunned for a second, they remained motionless staring wordlessly at one another.

“DOWN FREDDY,” the doxy yelled abruptly.

“What the devil...?” Nicholas bit out, watching incredulously as the woman removed her bonnet, leaving him staring into the uneasy eyes of Blackmore’s vicar. Without moving the Duke simply raised his eyebrows in question.

“Your grace, I’ve come to beg your indulgence of my daughter.”

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After finally managing to disentangle themselves, the Reverend and Percy were unceremoniously instructed to wait in the drawing room until the Duke saw fit to attend them. Grace’s father was quite cheered by the fact that his son-in-law had not simply thrown them out on their ears. Percy on the other hand looked as if he was about to have an apoplexy. Reverend Shackleford glanced irritably at his curate. It was clear he was going to have to give Percy a few pointers on how to conduct himself when rubbing shoulders with England’s finest .

Naturally, the Reverend was completely unmindful of his own impropriety in sitting in the Duke of Blackmore’s drawing room dressed as Haymarket Ware.

Freddy of course, was completely unconcerned about the mayhem he’d contributed to

and was now warming his bones happily by the fire.

Half an hour later, the Duke strode in, his face like thunder. Any confidence the Reverend might have possessed flew south in response to the murderous look in his grace's eyes. Without speaking, Nicholas Sinclair strode over to pour himself a large brandy before finally turning towards them.

"You have exactly two minutes to explain yourselves." The Duke's voice was icy, prompting Percy to let slip a small involuntary moan. Ignoring his scatter-witted curate, the Reverend coughed. "Your grace," he began warily.

"One minute thirty seconds," interrupted the Duke.

Hastily the Reverend abandoned all caution. "Your grace, I have no doubt that my daughter is mindful of the disgrace she has brought to your name, but it was all a complete misunderstanding..."

"So, you are telling me that my wife did not do the things she was accused of?"

"Err, well no, not exactly..."

"Then pray enlighten me as to exactly why she elected to jump out of a hay barrel, despite being a duchess of the realm?"

"Well the thing is..."

"And exactly why, if it was all, as you insist, a misunderstanding," the Duke interrupted coldly, "you thought to abduct your own daughter to prevent any further misunderstandings being deposited at my door."

The Reverend opened his mouth, but nothing came out. For the first time he could

remember, he was at a loss for words. All his carefully crafted arguments simply vanished into the ether.

“She assumed you didn’t love her,” Percy suddenly blurted out, adding, “your grace,” when both men turned to look at him. The Duke refrained from speaking, merely raising his eyebrows ominously, but somehow Percy found the courage to continue.

“Your wife lo-loves you, your grace,” he stammered, glancing frantically towards the Reverend who was silently regarding his curate open-mouthed. Swallowing, the small man continued, warming a little to his theme. “Sh-she could not bear to live in a loveless marriage, your grace. She feared you would turn to a mistress to ... to slake your needs...”

The Reverend blinked, before interrupting vehemently, “Steady on Percy, my daughter would never say such a th...”

“She could not endure being near you without your grace’s heart being involved.” Percy’s impassioned speech got louder, and the Reverend subsided, regarding the stranger next to him in astonishment.

“Your grace ... sir ... please, I beg you ... give Grace another chance,” the curate begged fervently. “She is truly miserable without you ... as I am assured you are without her.”

Augustus Shackleford closed his eyes in horror at Percy’s final words. This was it; they were done for. Keeping his eyes determinedly shut, the Reverend waited with bated breath for the axe to fall, until at length the ongoing silence became too much.

Opening his eyes, the first thing he saw was Percy’s white face, rigid with shocked disbelief at his own presumption. Heart thudding, he reluctantly turned his attention towards the Duke, still ominously silent, dreading his grace’s wrath at the curate’s

impertinence.

To his bewilderment, the look on Nicholas Sinclair's face was far from furious. Instead, the Duke looked pensive as if he'd actually listened to Percy's impassioned plea, and his posture almost appeared to have relaxed slightly.

All things considered, the Reverend thought he might possibly be hallucinating.

The fact of the matter was that Augustus Shackleford was entirely done to a cow's thumb and now wanted nothing more than to take to his bed, but he feared to move lest he inadvertently rekindle the Duke of Blackmore's ire.

All three men remained motionless. Only Freddy's soft snoring permeated the silence. After what seemed like forever, the Duke tossed back the rest of his brandy and rang for the butler. While they were waiting, his grace eyed them both with weary exasperation, but his earlier anger seemed to have dissipated. When Huntley finally opened the door, Nicholas gave the elderly butler orders to escort their two visitors out and to have his horse brought round to the front.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

After her father's fervent vow to put things right, Grace found herself repeatedly waking up in a cold sweat over what he would do. After several sleepless nights, she decided her only course of action was to take matters into her own hands before the Reverend took the opportunity to make matters considerably worse. She had no clue of his intentions, but given that his last solution encompassed kidnapping, she was firmly of the opinion that she needed to put a halt to any action he and Percy were currently plotting between them.

Anger was finally replacing heartache, and she resolutely ignored the small voice warning her of the dire consequences the last time this happened. Whatever mistakes she'd made, Nicholas had contributed his fair share. And what's more, she was his wife dammit. Whether he wished it or no, she was the Duchess of Blackmore, and while the ton may forever consider her a provincial upstart with no breeding or manners, she was nonetheless owed more consideration than her husband was currently giving her.

She'd remained banished in her cottage for nigh on three months, waiting, hoping, praying Nicholas would finally condescend to speak with her. Well, enough was enough. She was done playing the martyr.

If her husband refused to come to her, she would go to her husband .

And she would remain by his side whatever his personal thoughts on the matter.

Determinedly, she packed her belongings and after dragging them down the stairs, left them in the kitchen to be collected. Then wrapping herself in her thickest cloak, she donned her boots and started walking. If she succeeded in keeping a brisk pace,

she would arrive at Blackmore before dusk.

Nicholas hadn't been astride a horse since his brother's death. However, after he'd finally succeeded in dispatching what he had no doubt were the worst two incumbents currently in the employ of the Anglican Church, he'd found himself suddenly frantic to see his wife. Against all odds, the curate's impassioned pleas earlier had finally succeeded in cracking open his defences.

Abruptly, all he could think about was his own foolish pig-headedness. He no longer cared what Grace had or hadn't intended. All that mattered was having her in his arms.

Nicholas realised he was not his father to never forgive or forget a mistake. After the overwhelming hurt of Peter's death and his father's betrayal, he'd thought to live his life without the closeness of another human being. Firstly, his son and then his wife had shown him the absurdity of that path. For good or ill, he loved. He had no wish to spend the rest of his life bitter and lonely.

God's teeth, he only now realised just how close he'd come to turning into his father.

Somehow, he would persuade Grace to return to Blackmore with him and give him the opportunity to spend the rest of his life showing her just how much he loved her. With Grace by his side, he believed he would succeed in finally freeing himself from the night terrors that plagued him.

Which was why he found himself galloping over the uneven countryside on his old horse Delilah. Incredibly, it felt as though he'd last ridden the mare only days ago, and he couldn't deny it was unexpectedly glorious. In the space of twenty minutes, he arrived at Grace's house. The small cottage was in complete darkness despite the

dwindling light of early evening. Frowning, he dismounted quickly and tethered the horse to the gate. With mounting dread, Nicholas strode up the path to the front door which opened immediately, adding to his growing concern. After only a slight hesitation, he walked in, calling Grace's name. It took only seconds to determine the cottage was empty. And within the next two minutes he discovered his wife had taken all her belongings.

He was too late. Grace had gone.

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Grace was certain it had not been so far the last time she'd thought to walk to Blackmore in the hopes of catching sight of her husband. This time she felt as if she'd been walking for hours, made worse after discovering very early on that fashionable boots were not made to withstand the rigours of the countryside in winter. Grimacing, she recalled the last time she'd taken this path had been on a dry bright sunny day. Now dusk was falling much faster than she'd anticipated and everything suddenly looked the same in the muted light. Swallowing, she looked around, forcing back the first stirrings of panic. This was Devonshire for goodness sake. She knew this land like the back of her hand and had been lost in it more times than she could count, always being chanced upon eventually by her father or Percy.

A sudden sick feeling of dread paralyzed her as she abruptly realised that in this instance, no one knew she was missing. It might well be days before anyone discovered she'd left the cottage. Feeling suddenly faint, Grace sat down on a large boulder. She was no stranger to this landscape and consequently to its hazards. While generally fairly clement, the weather had been known to cause havoc to the unwary. If she was unable to find her way, and the temperature chanced to fall more than a few degrees, there was a possibility she would freeze to death.

Her mind began to visualise the various ways she might succumb to an early demise,

each imagining more gruesome than the last. She was just recollecting the local legend of Old Nick himself galloping through the darkness, intent on crushing careless travellers with his coal black steed, when, all of a sudden, she heard the sound of hooves. Jumping to her feet, she had no time to run but simply stared transfixed at the oncoming beast, huge in the gloom. “GRACE,” a hoarse voice shouted which sounded to her now rampant imaginings like the howling of demonic forces. Motionless, Grace watched helplessly as the steed bore down on her, only narrowly avoiding trampling her to the ground by rearing up and moving aside at the last second.

The horse stood still, blowing and tossing its head as the rider quickly dismounted and strode towards her.

Unhappily, before Nicholas had the opportunity to ascertain if she’d been hurt, Grace muttered something about infernal justice and promptly fainted at his feet.

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Grace woke in an unfamiliar bed. Blinking, she raised herself onto her elbows and glanced round. The furnishings were masculine as was the recumbent figure snoring softly in the chair next to the bed. With her heart in her mouth, Grace recognised the tall form of her husband. Collapsing back into the pillows, she tried to remember what had happened for her to end up in what she had no doubt was the Duke of Blackmore’s bed.

Glancing back towards Nicholas, her heart missed a beat as she saw he was awake and staring back at her. Swallowing nervously, she made an effort to sit up, belatedly realising that she was dressed in only a chemise. Rising quickly, her husband moved to her side but for some reason paused without touching her. Glancing up at him enquiringly, Grace realised he was waiting for her permission before laying his hands on her. Shyly she took his proffered arm and allowed him to help. When he’d finally

plumped the pillows behind her to his satisfaction, he sat down on the side of the bed and stared at her sombrely. Grace felt her heart leap at the expression she saw there. He was finally looking at her with all the love and longing she'd dreamed of. Fighting back tears, she raised her hand and touched his face gently, marvelling at his sheer masculine beauty.

"Forgive me," he murmured hoarsely.

"There is nothing to forgive," she whispered, fighting back the tears. "I love you, Nicholas."

In answer, he groaned and pulled her unresisting body into his arms, his mouth swooping hungrily down on hers. With a smothered sob of joy, Grace returned his kiss, revelling in the feel of his lips locked fiercely to hers. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pressed herself against him, feeling him shudder in return as he pulled her closer to him, gathering her willing body into his.

"God I've missed you," he whispered huskily against her lips before deepening the kiss.

The exquisite sensation of her in his arms, the feel of her lips clinging to his was almost unbearable joy to Nicholas. Finally, he opened his heart and allowed the last of his resistance to melt away in the arms of the woman who meant everything to him.

"Heal me, Grace," he whispered brokenly when he finally tore his mouth from hers. "I can't do this without you."

"We'll do it together, my love," she murmured resting her head against his chest, tears of joy and relief quickly soaking into the fine linen .

Closing his eyes, Nicholas gently rested his head on his wife's, finally allowing himself to admit what he'd known, almost from the moment his wife had thrown up on their wedding day. Leaning back, he tilted her face up to his and stared down at her with aching tenderness.

"I love you, Grace," he breathed softly. "God how I love you. Can we start all over again? Will you be my wife, my partner, my Duchess?"

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"Well, Percy, I think we have time for a small celebratory drink before we attend the reception at Blackmore. We may have been well and truly in the basket my friend, but I think we can safely say all's well that ends well. It was without question an ingeniously devised plan of action executed with meticulous timing. Not to mention daring."

Reverend Shackelford was too busy congratulating himself to observe the doubtful look on his curate's face. They were in the vicarage study waiting for the rest of the Shackelford household to ready themselves for the first reception to be held at Blackmore since Nicholas Sinclair had inherited the estate.

Pouring them both a generous measure of brandy, the Reverend went on, "Indeed, I'm of the opinion that the whole undertaking would actually be described as heroic should it become common knowledge." Handing Percy a glass, the Reverend frowned slightly and adopted a thoughtful tone. "Perhaps I should try my hand at a novel."

The curate spat out his brandy, staring at his superior in horror. "Of course, your contribution would not be forgotten in the narrative, Percy," the Reverend continued obliviously before pausing slightly. "Or mayhap it would be better turned into a play such as William Shakespeare was wont to do. What do you think?"

Percy opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out aside from a small “err...” In the end, he simply helped himself to another brandy.

“Steady on Percy,” the Reverend admonished. “It won’t do for you to be foxed before attending your first reception, and we’ve both experienced first-hand the consequences of an uncontrolled manner.

“Indeed, it has to be said you’ve revealed a disturbing proclivity for unrestrained behaviour in recent weeks, Percy, which should have a man in your position mindful of the slippery slope downstairs.” He nodded his head sagely after imparting this piece of advice, pointing downwards to emphasise his point. Percy, who had absolutely no clue as to the meaning of ‘a disturbing proclivity’, simply adopted an air of thoughtful piety and took another sip of his brandy.

The silence lengthened as it became evident the Reverend was still awaiting the curate’s opinion of his literary aspirations.

“But what about the rest of ‘em?” Percy eventually questioned, clearly grasping at straws.

Reverend Shackleford frowned, pondering for a second. Percy had unquestionably raised a valid concern. There was indeed a long way to go before he could be certain his son would be accepted in the finest drawing rooms in England.

“Tare an’ hounds, Percy,” he finally stated decisively. “You’re absolutely right. No good will come of resting on our laurels and being deuced frivolous. I still have another seven daughters to marry off.

“Mayhap I’ll save such an inspiring exposition for my memoirs...”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:05 am

Nicholas stood at the window of his study watching his wife frolic in the snow. Frolic – now there was a word he could never have imagined himself using a mere twelve months ago.

Indeed, the very idea of frolicking would have brought out the worst in him. An upright naval captain didn't frolic. And neither did a narrow minded, bad-tempered Duke who might well have been only four and thirty in age but so much older in disposition.

But when one had the remarkable fortune to be saddled with a wife who was particularly partial to frolicking, well, there was only one direction a man could take. Even one who was broken so badly he feared he would never laugh again.

It had taken a singular kind of woman to break through the armour with which he'd surrounded himself. Nay buried himself, and even now his heart thudded at how close he'd been to losing her. The one person who'd truly shown him that life was worth living.

He'd been a bastard. There was no getting around it. But in truth he'd been terrified. How ridiculous that sounded now as he watched his wife stuff snow down her brother's coat. How could he have been terrified of a woman who possessed no guile, no ulterior motive and who'd simply tried to cope as best she could with the hand she'd been dealt ?

He gave a grim chuckle. It had to be said, she'd been dealt a pretty shitty hand.

But she'd loved him anyway. And even more astonishing, she still loved him.

But perhaps not as much as he loved her.

Nicholas Sinclair was done with agonising over things that couldn't be changed. He was done with brooding, done with self-loathing. He'd learned his lesson. The nightmares might never be completely gone, but now they were filled with the fear of losing his Grace.

When happiness came knocking, the only sane thing to do was to throw open the door and grasp it heart and soul. Nicholas had nearly missed his chance. But not again. Never again. He would hang on with everything he had.

And he would relish every bloody wonderful minute of it.

Shrugging on his coat, the Duke of Blackmore pushed open the French doors and went out to throw some snowballs.

THE END