

14. The Sins of Mr Rikkard Ambrose

"You haven't heard"

The voice was full of glee and juicy gossip. I was so quickly at the potted plant behind which the group of gossiping ladies were hiding that I saw who had spoken. It was the Duchess of Brandon. I should have been able to guess from the tone.

Lady Allen, obviously the one who had asked the question, flushed a little.

"From what I've heard since I've arrived in town, he's rumoured to be one of the richest men in London," She said defensively.

"One of the richest?" The duchess laughed. The sound almost make me want to go away again, or at least stay my ears while it lasted. "My dear, from what my sources tell me, he is herichest. His wealth is unparalleled. There is only one other man who can hold a candle to him."

Lady Allen's mouth formed a little 'O', and her eyes went wide.

And I had to admit to my shame: for once in my life I felt the same as Lady Allen and the Duchess of Brandon. I was awed, and a cold shiver ran down my back. The more I heard about Mr Ambrose, the more rich and powerful he seemed to become. Where the hell did all this wealth come from? I couldn't believe he was simply the heir of some large estate. Why would he have that monumental building in the city, if his wealth came from his inheritance? And what had all those people been doing there, hurrying about, carrying papers?

The third member of the little discussion group behind the potted plant seemed to harbour similar questions.

"Yes, yes." I knew that voice. Peeking through the foliage, I saw Lady Metcalf wave her fan. "But does anybody know where his wealth comes from? I must say, I have my suspicions that it's not honest money, and that he is no gentleman. I have repeatedly invited him to balls and the theatre, and never once has he accepted my invitation. He hasn't even replied! The nerve of him! I say there must be something fishy about him, there is no other way to explain such dastardly behaviour."

For some reasons those words made a grin appear on my face. Suddenly, I liked my employer a little bit better. Just a little bit.

"Well..." the Duchess said in that drawn-out tone that said "I have a shocking piece of information and I am willing to share, but you must badger me first since I cannot very well appear like a gossip."

"Yes?" Lady Metcalf leaned closer, eagerly. "You know something, Duchess?"

Carefully, I stepped even closer to the potted plant, praying they would not notice me. The Duchess was a treasure-trove of gossip, and for once I was actually interested in what she had to say. Very much so.

"I really can't," she protested. "It is only a rumour, and I would never want to slander anybody."

Amazing how people could lie without their face twitching.

"We won't tell," Lady Metcalf assured her.

"Yes," Lady Allen concurred. "You know us. We don't gossip."

Really, really amazing.

"Well... all right, if you promise not to repeat anything I say."

"We promise," Lady Metcalf nodded eagerly.

"It is only a rumour, mind you, and I do not have any proof." The duchess gloried in the eager anticipation of her friends.

"Does he have anything to do with the Ambroses in the North?" Lady Metcalf tried to guess. "A very good family, I think."

"Dear Lord no, my dear. The Northern Ambroses? The Earl's family? They may have recovered from their financial difficulties, but I assure you, they do not have the kind of money this Mr Ambrose has."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"But if he has not inherited his wealth from them, where did it come from?"

The Duchess smiled. Lowering her voice, she said:

"That is the shocking part. I have heard," she continued lowering her voice even more until it was only a whisper, "that he is involved in commerce"

The two ladies gasped in shock.

"Surely not!"

"Unbelievable!"

"And trade? And he invests in manufacturing and industry? Can you imagine?"

Lady Metcalf began to fan herself. "Stop, please, my friend. Or I am going to faint. That anybody should degrade himself so..."

"You have not heard the worse of it," the Duchess said, ominously.

"My dear, what could be worse than that?"

"I have heard, from a very reliable source, that during his youth he actually worked for money, that he did manual labor"

"Dear me!"

"Heavens!"

"Yes," the duchess repeated with glee. "He worked for a living! Among common working-class folk! It is hardly creditable, is it not?"

"Please, have mercy on us, stop!"

"And not even here in the United Kingdom – but in some wild place in the former colonies!"

"You don't mean – oh Goodness, you don't mean that awful place... what do the people call it again?"

"The 'United States of America'."

"God, yes. Please, Duchess, no more. Even the mere thought of that place makes me shudder!"

"They do not even have a king over there, do they?"

"Worse, my dear! They do not even take tea in the afternoon."

I didn't catch much of the conversation at that. I had to admit, I was too blown away. Well, well, well... a gentleman who once did work for wages and earned his way to the top. What a novel idea. I couldn't suppress a grin. How very naughty of you, Mr Ambrose, to so flout the traditions of the English upper class.

But then my good mood vanished and I was overtaken by sudden anger. How dare he? How dare he judge me and my attempt to earn a living, when he himself had done the same? Yes, I was a girl and he was man, but apparently a gentleman. For a gentleman to work for a living was almost more outlandish than for a female to do it. And how, by the way, had he gotten so stinking rich at it? He couldn't have worked as a secretary, that much was for sure.

"I will find out the truth about you, Mr Ambrose," I vowed to myself. "And I will make you accept me. You are my ticket to freedom, whether you like it or not."

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The ball ended about three months later. Well, it felt like that to me, anyway, although it probably only was a few weeks. We were over twenty not only by servants number one, two, three, four, seven, eleven and twelve-five, but also by an enthusiastic Sir Philip Wilkins who kept flashing meaningful smiles at Ella, and wagging his over-large ears. Though I rather think he didn't do the latter intentionally. Outside, he personally called one of his carriages to convey us home – and not the same carriage either, but an even larger and more luxurious version.

Our sitting arrangement on the way home was rather different from before. Now, a glowering Anne and Maria had taken their seats on one side, keeping everyone at bay with the bad mood radiating off them, while the rest of us were comfortably placed opposite them. Other than on the way over, our aunt didn't give the twins a second glance. She was too busy contemplating Ella's matrimonial prospects.

"...three times he danced with you, Ella, just think! Three times. Not to speak of the compliments he made you," she purred. I could almost see the twinkle of gold in her eyes, as she contemplated the wealth of her future nephew-in-law.

Ella nodded, slightly puzzled. "He was indeed most attentive. It is no wonder that so many fine ladies were at his ball, considering how well he behaves to all his guests."

My aunt laughed. It sounded a little like a choking vulture.

"Oh, my dear. I doubt he would have paid so much attention to any of the other ladies."

"But, Madam... what special interest could he have in me?"

This made my aunt laugh again, then wink at her niece. She was about as talented at winking as she was at laughing.

"Of course, of course, my dear. You are very wise to be discrete."

By this, Ella seemed only more puzzled. Anne and Maria were staring daggers at her, choosing rather to believe her insincere than to believe anyone could actually be so innocent. I could hardly believe it myself – but unfortunately, I knew it to be true. This was Ella we were talking about. I resolved to give my little sister a lecture about men once we were safely upstairs in our room.

When we got home though, it looked like it would take some time before we could get to bed. First my aunt had to rush up to my uncle and tell him everything that had happened at the ball. Then she had to rush down and tell us how delighted he had been about everything that had happened at the ball, most of which she had to make up because my uncle probably didn't utter more than two words in response to her jubilation.

And then...

Well, then the flowers arrived. We had just managed to calm my aunt down to a certain extent, when the doorbell rang. We were all so curious who could be calling at this late hour that we gathered at all entrances to the hallway to catch a peek of the front door as Leadfield shuffled down the hall.

It took him a while to manoeuvre himself into a position in which he could open the door without losing his balance and falling over, but finally, he managed. The door opened, and outside young man in livery stood, carrying something colorful and enormous.

"For Miss Ella Linton," he said, thrusting the big thing at Leadfield, who swayed under the weight.

"Thank you," he said, managing a half-bow. "I shall deliver it directly."

Leadfield had hardly closed the door when we all rushed out into the hallway. My aunt was leading the charge.

"Well, Ella?" she demanded of my little sister, who was holding herself in the background. "See if there is a card! See who it is from. Hurry, hurry!"

Cautiously, Ella stepped forward and took the enormous bouquet – for that's what it was – from the swaying Leadfield. I supposed if one liked flowers and things, it was quite impressive. Some yellow flowers, dozens of white ones, and at the very top one of those red thorny things which were supposed to be so romantic. What were they called again? Ah yes, roses! Right beside the rose, a card peeked out of the bouquet.

While just managing to hold the massive flower-arrangement with one hand, Ella took the card with the other, opened it, and read:

"For the most wonderful dance ever. Sir Philip."

"Aww!" My aunt clapped her hands, her eyes glowing with triumph, and the promise of untold riches. "I knew it! I knew they had to be from him. Such beautiful flowers! And on the same evening, Ella, only imagine! I rather expected him to send a little something tomorrow, but on the same evening... That is promising, promising indeed."

"Promising for what, Aunt?" Ella asked.

But my aunt only winked again and hurried off, muttering to herself: "Saint Paul's Cathedral! Yes, nothing less will do. I must and will happen at Saint Paul's Cathedral. And all my old friends will be there. Oh, I can see Mrs Gullifer's face now, green with envy she'll be..."

Anne approached her little sister with a smile that could have scared a tiger. "Congratulations, my sister. They are truly beautiful flowers."

"Thank you," said Ella earnestly, blushing.

"I truly believe," said Anne, "that the bouquet might be even larger than the one I have got."

"What?"

"Didn't you know?" If possible, Anne's smile got even nastier. "Sir Philip sent me a bouquet very much like that three days ago, and one to Maria the day before that. He seems to be fond of giving away flowers."

"Oh," said Ella. "I'm sorry yours wasn't as large. Do you want mine? I wouldn't mind."

I had to steady myself against the wall, otherwise I would have collapsed from fits of silent laughter. Anne's acid-sour face was a picture!

"Don't be too confident, little sister," she hissed, gathered up her skirts and rushed away, Maria right behind her. Ella looked after them, a puzzled expression on her face, then turned to me.

"What was that about?" she asked.

I just waved the question away, while trying to conceal my smile with the other hand. "I'll explain it to you someday, when you're ready."

"Um... thank you very much."

We might have said more to each other, but at that moment my aunt rushed into the room again.

"Oh Ella, Ella my dearest! Isn't it wonderful? Such beautiful flowers! Show me again, will you? We have to find a vase for them, so when he comes to visit he will see..."

She was still rotating like an overexcited top, and her voice too loud to even think of going to bed in peace. So I took a book out of my uncle's library and strolled into the garden. I hadn't indulged in my favourite hobby as much as I would have liked, lately. Too much had been going on. But at least now I had a few hours before I had to go to bed.

What do you think I picked? Some wonderfully romantic novel that dealt with falling in love with tall, dark and handsome strangers? No, thank you! One tall and dark stranger in my life was quite enough. If those books gave help on how to organize a file system, that would have been one thing. But one glance years ago had been enough to tell me that all they were concerned with, was strolling around gardens and mooning a mer men.

I preferred another kind of bedtime story: an atlas of the world from my father's old book collection. Just my kind of book: no chauvinist heroes, no soppy heroines, and plenty of strange, foreign lands promising adventure. If only I could really go there. I could hardly imagine how exciting a trip to inner Africa or the unexplored, icy regions of Canada might be. Much more exciting than dreary old London, I was sure.

Slowly, I wandered through the garden and settled in the grass behind a clump of bushes, where I often sat when I wanted to avoid my aunt. The light of the moon was just enough to see by, so I opened the Atlas and started leafing through it.

I had just managed to lose myself in China, somewhere between Peking and Quingdao, when my thoughts were pulled from their Asian idyll, back to Ella. I tried concentrating on my book, but just couldn't. Poor, innocent Ella. A mer what I had seen at the ball, it was clear as the day that Sir Philip had his eyes on her. She was just hopelessly clueless. I sighed, and turned the page. Well, I would just have to talk to her and explain a few things about what went on between men and women. Was my aunt in bed and out of the way yet?

I was just about to move on from Quingdao to Hong Kong, when a voice from the garden disturbed me.

"Psht!"

Or rather, not the voice disturbed me – but the fact that it was a man's voice. Definitely not Leadfield the butler! And my uncle? He wouldn't be seen dead in the garden. Who in God's name...

"Psht! I'm here, my love."

My Love! Now things were getting a bit thick! I sat up straight and peered through the foliage, but couldn't see anybody. And in the next moment, I stopped looking, because what I heard made me forget all about the man.

"I'm here! I'm here, my love," came the answer to the lover's call in the sweet, innocent tones of my little sister Ella.

I dropped the atlas on my foot.

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Greetings, My Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen!

Huzzah! 3 loud cheers for Lilly, Mr Ambrose & Co! This humble little story of mine has just shot past the two hundred thousand reads mark! And that's all thanks to you and your spiiing support, my fabulous fans! I bow before you! :-)

Some of you had already rightly guessed that Ella has a few secrets to hide. So, who do you think she is secretly meeting?

I am very much looking forward to hearing what you think! :-)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

Continue reading next part