

32. More Misery Behind the Bush

And his name? Tell me, who is he? 285

For just a moment, Ella's question hung in the air between us like a big, wet elephant on a washing line. 286

"Please, don't ask," I blurted out. "I, um... promised him to tell nobody. Yes, I promised!" 287

This was such a lousy excuse that no little sister in England would have accepted it. Other little sisters would have dug, and bored, and drilled until they had uncovered every last bit of the truth. But all those little sisters probably didn't have a secret lover. 288

Moisture sparkled in Ella's eyes, and the words "just like me and Edmund" practically blinked on her forehead, for all the world to see. 289

"Of course." Nodding eagerly, she enfolding me in her arms. "I understand. Of course you have to keep your love's secret. I understand more than you can ever know." 290

Somehow, I doubted that. I knew perfectly well why she was feeling so deeply for my supposed plight, and it didn't have anything to do with her general compassionate nature, but rather, I suspected, with a certain young man who would soon be waiting for her at the garden fence. 291

"I really hope you two will find a way to be together," she breathed into my ear, her voice sounding tearful. 292

Well, I sure as hell didn't. I had to work hard to keep myself from laughing at the idea of my marrying Mr Rikkard Ambrose. It would perhaps make an interesting tragedy for the theatre, with all the participants ending up strangled within the first five minutes, but in reality? No, thank you! 293

However, I didn't think that was what Ella wanted to hear. 294

"I'm sure we will. I think he's getting really attached to me, and it's quite likely that we will spend more time together in the future." That last part at least was true. "But enough of my problems," I continued, holding Ella away from me with both hands. "Let us talk about you, and the man prowling around you. What about Sir Phillip?" 295

Ella's face paled. "He was here earlier today," she muttered. 296

"To visit you?" 297

"Yes." 298

"Did he bring flowers?" 299

"Quite a lot of them, yes." 300

"And what do you think of him?" 301

"He... is a very pleasant gentleman," Ella replied, doing her best to sound enthusiastic and failing miserably. 302

"That is wonderful! Simply wonderful!" 303

I was testing my newfound acting skills. Of course I knew Ella's interests lay in another direction, but I couldn't tell her that I had overheard her and Edmund pledging their eternal, epic and everlasting love. She would vaporize from embarrassment. And I wouldn't get another chance to eavesdrop on her and her lover, which was essential, both for my plans of furthering the happiness of my little sister, and as my favourite evening entertainment. 304

"So you want to marry him, do you?" I asked with a fake, bright smile. 305

What little colour had remained in Ella's cheeks vanished. "Um... maybe not as such." 306

"Why not?" I pressed. "If he likes you and you like him, why wait?" 307

"Well, we're both so young. Too young, I think, to really think of marriage." 308

"There are girls who get married at fifteen. That is two years younger than you." 309

"True, but still... there's no need to rush things and... and I..." 310

She was desperately groping around for another explanations. I had to say I was impressed with her. Of course her flimsy little lies wouldn't even fool a cocker spaniel with severe concussion, but I was amazed that she even made the attempt. For Ella to lie to anybody, let alone me, was an impressive achievement. She really had to like this fellow Edmund. 311

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The confirmation of this very theory I received not three hours later. A er my nap and an oh-so-delicious meal of porridge and cold potatoes, which I consumed with more relish than usual, I took up my usual post behind the bushes in the garden and waited for the two lovebirds to arrive. I didn't have long to wait. One fluttered in from the direction of the neighbours' house, and it was not long a er that Ella flew out of the back door and towards the fence. 312

"Oh Edmund!" 313

"Oh Ella!" 314

They both clutched the fence in their hands. Their eyes were drawn to the other's as if by some magnetic force. 315

"My love," Ella breathed, moisture in her eyes – and shed didn't need any onions for it. "How I have longed to see you again." 316

"And I you, my love. I have longed to see you again even more than you have longed to see me! Your sweet voice is to my ears as honey to my tongue." 317

"Impossible!" 318

"I assure you, it is. The cadence of your speech..." 319

"No, no, I don't mean the bit about the honey! I mean the bit about you longing for me more than I longed for you! I have definitely longed more for you than you for me. How could I not? You are my pillar of strength in the midst of my woe, Edmund. My sole reason to continue living." 320

That was laying it on a bit thick, wasn't it? Nice walks in the park, reading, fighting for women's rights... I could come up with half a dozen good reasons to continue living o the top of my head. And they most certainly were better reasons than some stupid man! 321

"I assure you, my dearest Ella, that I have longed for you more than you for me. That is the only way it could be. For who am I? Nobody but a simple merchant's son. You are the light of my life, queen of my heart, infinitely more important than me." 322

You got that right misteSatisfied, I nodded to myself. At least the fellow knew his place. 323

Apparently, though, Ella didn't. "You are not a nobody!" she protested. "And I'm not more important than you!" 324

What the... of course you areThrough a gap in the foliage, I shot a glare at my little sister. She should squash this fellow until he was her willing slave, not trying to build his self-esteem! Men's heads were big enough already. 325

Ella seemed to think otherwise. "You are everything to me, Edmund," she declared. "Everything!" 326

"As are you to me." 327

"Oh, Edmund." 328

"Oh, Ella, my love." 329

For a few more minutes, they continued their protestations of love and debate about who had missed whom more in the unimaginably long twenty-two hours or so that they had been separated. Finally, though, they seemed to run out of sweet compliments flowery similes for the passionate strength of their love. 330

The first pause ensued, and then, in a voice as tense as could be, Edmund asked: 331

"How do things stand, my love? What of Sir Phillip?" 332

Ella took a moment to answer. Peeking through the bushes, I saw that she was clutching the fence for support. 333

"He came to visit me today," she whispered. 334

Edmund's eyes slid shut and let himself fall against the fence. "Oh fearful harbinger of doom!" he groaned. 335

"He brought me flowers." 336

"What agony!" 337

"They were pink roses." 338

"This is unbearable! Please, God, strike me down with a bolt of lightning!" 339

I glanced up towards the night sky. It didn't look like God was in the mood to oblige Edmund. I wished he would. Then at least the moaning and groaning would stop. 340

"And he said I was more beautiful than any flower he had ever brought me." 341

"Enough! Enough!" With another groan, Edmund slid down the fence, until he was on his knees in the grass. "Have mercy on me!" 342

"He also said I was the most beautiful girl he had ever laid eyes upon," Ella continued, blushing. "I asked him how it was he had met that few girls, and he laughed." 343

"Please! I beg of you, stop! You are killing me! Stop!" 344

"Dearest Edmund!" For the first time, Ella seemed to realize that he was on the ground, unable to stand. Her face filled with horror, and she raised a hand to her mouth. "What are you saying? I would never dream of hurting you!" 345

Personally, I thought she had done a splendid job of ripping his heart into tiny little pieces, but if I cheered her on, that would probably alert them to my presence. So I kept quiet, and just pulled a branch aside to see better. 346

"And yet you are," Edmund moaned. "You are hurting me more than anyone has ever hurt me in my life! The way you speak of Sir Phillip showering you with gifts and compliments... I cannot bear it!" 347

"But my love, you wished me to tell you everything! You expressly demanded it." 348

"I know, I know. And yet it tortures me to hear it. Especially to hear the tone in which you speak. You sound as if his attentions are very welcome to you. Oh, I see how it is. Your new suitor brings with him a great name and honourable rank, and I shall soon be forgotten. Winning your love has only been a dream. Oh Eros, why do you torture me so?" 349

"A dream?" Not caring if her dress got dirty or not, Ella dropped to her knees, into the muddy grass, to be on an eye-level with Edmund. My, my, she really had to love him. I remembered very well the talking-to I had received from my aunt the last time I had gotten my dress dirty. 350

"Edmund, if my love for you is a dream, then the sun is a phantom and the moon an illusion. My love for you is just as indestructible and everlasting as those two giants of the sky. Yet it is by no means as distant. It is right here." 351

With a tender gesture she touched herself right above her heart. 352

"It is?" Edmund whispered. "It truly is?" 353

Oh, come on already! She's already told you it is, hasn't she? 354

Honestly, I was a bit frustrated with the fellow. She had told him she loved him about three dozen times now, and he still didn't seem to have gotten the message. You would have thought once would be enough. How dense could he be? 355

"I swear on everything that is holy," Ella responded with fervour. "I love you." 356

"But the way you spoke of Sir Phillip..." 357

"I may have been flattered, Edmund, I do not deny it." Shamefully, she let her eyes sink to the ground. "It is the first time in my life that I have been noticed by such a great and powerful man, and the strange feeling might for a moment have gone to my head. But that is all it is, Edmund. I swear. I love you, now and forever." 358

Edmund wet his lips. He opened his mouth, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse: 359

"But what then will you say when this great and powerful man asks you to become his wife?" 360

Ella rocked back on her heels. The question had hit her like a kick in the stomach. 361

I, for my part was feeling an urge to kick Edmund in the stomach. 362

"Edmund, I..." Her words trailed o into nothingness. She seemed not capable of forming a response. 363

"This is what it all comes down to," Edmund persisted, his eyes brimming with passion – or maybe hay fever. I wasn't exactly an expert in the different nuances of burning eyes. "Last time we could wait and hope. Last time we could imagine that it was only a passing fancy on his part, hope that Wilkins would be gone soon and we would be safe. But now? I tell you, my love, my darling, he intends to marry you. Sooner or later, he will ask you. The question that remains now is: what will be your answer?" 364

"Please, Edmund, don't!" 365

"Will you answer yes?" 366

"I... I..." 367

"I see reluctance in your eyes. I see tears streaming down your face. It is enough. I see, you do not wish to have him. Will you do the only other thing possible, then? Will you save our love? Will you love him?" 368

Burying her face in her hands, Ella gave an anguished wail. Tears spilling right and le, and she still wasn't using any onions. Really impressive. This "love"-thingy really had to be something, if it could make people act this crazy. 369

"My Aunt spoke of the wedding as a certain great," Ella whispered through her fingers. "She told me how great a match it would be for me, and how happy she was for me, knowing that I would be provided for, and happy, and safe for the rest of my life." 370

Slowly, her hands fell from her face, which was stained with salty moisture. 371

"Tell me, Edmund, how could I disappoint her hopes? How could I be that ungrateful a child?" 372

Hm... maybe by taking a leave out of the book of your favourite sister? 373

But I knew that this solution wouldn't appeal to Ella. She and I lived in different worlds and by different rules, with her rules being pretty ridiculous and problematic. Edmund seemed to realize the same thing at this very moment. 374

"Ella... you don't mean... you don't mean you're going to say yes?" 375

Ella didn't reply anything, just sprang to her feet. 376

"Goodbye, my love," she whispered, and with another sob, she ran o, back towards the house. 377

Bugger!

My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

I'd ask, in my usual way of asking for your feedback, how many of you would consent to marry a flower-fanatic with an oversized nose to please your relatives, but I think that particular feedback question is rather redundant :-)

The far more interesting question is: does Lilly already have a plan?

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

Eros: Greek god of Love (the little winged fellow with the bow and arrows with harts attached at the tips). Known also by his Roman name of Cupid, his name is often used as synonymous for "love".