41. To Meet without Trousers

I was feeling great. I had won! Against Mr Arrogant Stone Face Ambrose! I was feeling malignant – until I got home that evening and saw the familiar coach sit Sir Philip Wilkins standing in front of our house, with several servants in attendance.

Blast!

Immediately knew what he was there for. On his previous visits, when Wilkins had come alone to see Ella, he had arrived in a small carriage with open roof. The arrival of his largest coach could mean only one thing: a ball. And moreover a ball to which not only Ella would be attending with him. No. We all would go.

Including me.

Me! Sweet little me, exposed to the horrors and dangers of a ball!

Blast, blast, blast! Why hadn't I heard of this? Yes, last time he had given us a last-minute invitation, but something like that was he from usual. Normally invitations to balls were normally issued weeks in advance.

Why didn't I hear about this? I could have started my protest in time, or hidden in the London sewers, or burned the house down!

I saw my aunt step out of the door. Thank God! I had already changed out of uniform for one's trousers, because a moment later she spotted me and gave me a self-satisfied smile. A very bad word escaped me that I was sure a lady shouldn't use, especially to describe her own aunt. But I couldn't help it. I realized what had happened. Of course! That witch had deliberately not told me about the ball so I wouldn't find a way to get out of it!

For a moment, I considered running. I could escape into the dark streets of London and spent the night under a bridge, where surely it would be more comfortable than in a brightly lit balroom with people everywhere wanting to dance. Nobody would try to step on my feet under a bridge, for a start. But then I remembered Ella, and felt ashamed of myself. Hadn't I promised myself that I would find a way to help my little sister get rid of Wilkins? And I was, thinking to go to a ball along with her and her unwanted admirer.

I had to go! I had to protect her from Wilkins' attentions as best I could.

So, feeling as though I were walking towards my doom, I began to set one foot in front of the other. Really reaching the doorway.

"Ah, there you are, Lilly!" My aunt smiled a smile so devious it belonged exclusively to aunts and serial killers. "Do you know what? I absolutely forgot to tell you that we received an invitation to Lady Metcalf's ball."

I closed my eyes. My fate was worse than I had imagined.

"Lady Metcalf?" I whispered, my voice resembling the last desperate vocal attempts of a victim of pertussis[1] before the grave claimed them.

"Indeed. And Sir Philip is so nice as to take us all there in his coach. Isn't that just wonderful, Lillian?"

"I can hardly find words to express my feelings on the subject."

"Probably." She eyed me sharply. Suddenly, her voice became a lot less sweet, and a lot more like that of a general. "Go upstairs dress! I've had your ball gown out for you, and will expect you down here in five minutes."

"We'll be leaving that quickly?"

"No. But I'd like to keep an eye on you. And I have a few words to say to you before we leave."

Oh-oh... This can't be good.

I hurried upstairs to change, determined to do it in under five minutes. Unfortunately, Ella wasn't there to help me, so it took me over a quarter of an hour to squeeze into my ball gown. When I came down again, my aunt didn't look all too pleased. I could hear Maria's high laugh from the drawing room, and a door opening.

"They are coming! Quickly!" Ella ran by the arm, my aunt dragged me outside and shoved the servants away. She pulled me behind the coach and drew herself up to her full height.

"Listen girl! I don't know how you managed to scare v. Lieutenant Ellingham..."

I started to protest, to tell her that I had nothing to do with his disappearance, but she silenced me with one of those scary aunt looks that made you want to put your head under a blanket.

"I don't know you scared him, v." she continued in a low tone, "but I'll wager it was by exhibiting the same appalling behaviour as the other night at Sir Philip's Ball. Refusing to dance, indeed! There will be none of that tonight, little lady, none of your incivilities, none of your bookishness, nothing! You will behave yourself like a true gentleman's daughter or you will have to answer to me."

"But I don't misbehave on purpose," I said, with rising desperation. "It just... happens. I'm not very good at judging what is ladylike behaviour and what isn't. What should I do?"

"Oh, that's easy." My aunt let her lan snap open and waved it experimentally. "Just do the exact opposite of what you'd like to do, and you'll be fine."

Can I just say that that remark nd me more than a little bit? I wasn't Muffed behavior, was I?

Was I?

Well, maybe sometimes. When I felt like it. Which was, admittedly, most of the time. Oh, blast it! Very well. I would do as my aunt wished. Fixing a fake smile on my face, I curtised as deep as I could without feeling sick.

"Certainly, Madam. May I be permitted to withdraw from your presence? I wish to seek out my sister."

My aunt blinked, as if she were seeing and hearing a mirage, and not her own niece.

"Um... very well. Go ahead. That wasn't not bad, just now. Not bad at all."

I curtsied again. "Thank you very much, Madam. You are too kind, Madam. Your obedient servant, Madam." Curtsying twice more, just to make the point, I withdrew.

On the other side of the coach, I met my sister. Unfortunately, it was the wrong one. I smiled at Maria as brightly as the sunshine, and did another curtsy.

"Dear Sister! How glad I am to see you. Night I enquire where I can find my dear, dear sister Ella? I wish to speak to her, my dear."

Maria stared at my bright smile with open eyes, her mouth forming a little 'o'.

"Have you been drinking from uncle's port wine?" she demanded.

I wish I had. I had never tried alcohol myself, but I'd heard it was pretty good for numbing the brain and lessen the pain of torturous experiences – like the one I was going through right now.

"Good heavens, no, dearest sister. Whatever can have given you that impression? I would never be so presumptuous! Moreover, why would a lady even think of drinking spirits? What an outlandish idea, my dearest sister."

I smiled again, and curtsied again. And again. Maria was dumbstruck. Blimey, my acting skills were fantastic. I should really consider going on the stage.

"I shall depart now and go looking for dear Ella, my dear Maria."

I was hardly around the corner when my smile flickered and went out. Blast! This would be difficult. Scott to keep up.

I met Ella as she was leaving our house so Wilkins' arm. Immediately, I switched my smile back on and positioned myself on her other side. From the still-open door of our house, I caught the whiz of exotic flowers.

"New bouquets?" I asked her in an undertone.

Ella turned her wide, pleading eyes on me.

"Half a dozen of them! He has sent me that my lips look like rose petals, and my hair like sunflowers, and my skin like lilies, and he apparently thinks it necessary to bring me copious quantities of all those growths every time he makes a company call. Please don't leave me, Lill!"

I patted her arm. "Don't you worry. I'm right here."

For a moment, she closed her eyes in silent gratitude. She looked about ready to faint. And this time, I was ready to bet, her anxiety had nothing to do with the fact that the man next to her wished to marry her against her will. A knight of the British Empire was leading her by the arm! That was enough to make Ella faint and die.

I, personally, didn't have such a high opinion of Britain's aristocracy. They didn't seem to have anything better to do than to roam their lands shooting pheasants and foxes. Not that I mislaid those – I had met a pheasant in green park once, and it had squawked at me in a most unpleasant manner, enough for anybody to want to shoot it – but still, they didn't seem to be a very productive sort of bird[2]. The aristocracy, I mean, not the pheasants.

We all walked to the coach, Wilkins taking the place on one side of her, while I squeezed myself in on the other side, in easy skipping distance of his face. With his long nose and over-large ears, he didn't seem like the sort of chap who would suddenly start ravishing a young lady, but then, you could never be sure. I wanted to be close in he wouldn't get any quick ravishing done while I wasn't looking.

"Well," Sir Philip said, beaming widely. "Isn't this cozy?"

Not for the first time I wondered whether there was something wrong with his brain.

The others climbed in a an us, the driver jumped onto the box and in we went. The coach wheels settled on the cobblestones as we moved towards Lady Metcalf's residence at a brisk pace. Needless to say I didn't know how long the drive was going to be. I was not a regular visitor there.

Just before we turned around the first corner, I looked back and saw a figure standing in front of our neighbour's house. Even at this distance I could see the anguished look on Edmund's face. My, my. The chap had really got it bad. I was so glad I didn't have anything to do with this sis called love, and never would be stupid enough to. It never seemed to work out right.

Suddenly, Ella turned her head to look back, and I quickly turned forward again, fixing my new s tcal ball grin on my face. It was hard to keep up. The expression on Ella's face as she gazed at her lover disappearing in the distance was like a poisoned dagger to the heart of a loving sister.

"What are you looking at, Miss Ella?" inquired the blasted Wilkins, turning to follow her gaze.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," she said, hurriedly, and thank the Lord, it was at that exact moment that we turned the corner, and Edmund vanished from sight.

"Well," Wilkins chuckled nervously, turning around again. "I guarantee you that anything we might be leaving behind is not half as interesting as what we are driving towards."

"Indeed!" Ella's voice was polite, but indignant, disbelieving love-light shone in her eyes.

Anne leaned forward, her curiosity peeked. "Is Lady Metcalf's ball going to be that spectacular, then? Do you know something we don't?"

"Yes, I fancy the ball will be pretty much like any other ball in London. Though I do by no means intend to demean Lady Metcalf's hospitality."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"Forgive me." He smiled at us in a manner he obviously intended to be mysterious. For most of the inmates of the coach, it actually worked. "I should have expressed myself more clearly. It is not what we are driving towards that is extraordinary, but whose are driving towards."

Now he definitely had Anne's and Maria's attention.

"Are we to understand that there will be a personage of special importance present at the ball tonight?" Leaning forward even further, Maria lost no time in asking the central question: "Is it a man?"

"Yes, Miss Maria."

The twins' eyes gleamed, and even Lizbeth's sort of flickered. Mine slid shut in despiration. I knew what the next word out of their mouths would be. It started with an 'w'. And the one a yr that with an 'c'. And the one a er that... hmm... let me think... with an 'r'.

"Married or single?" Anne demanded.

I'm good at guessing, aren't I?

"Single, I believe."

Opening my eyes again, I took a peek. If the twins' eyes had been shining before, they were ablaze now. They had on ed prey and were preparing for the hunt.

"You're being very coy, Sir Philip," Maria accused him, giggling. "You're giving us answers of one or two syllables."

Four or five syllables, actually, Maria, but who's counting.

"What is so special about this man?"

"Yes, tell us! What's so special about him?"

Sir Philip raised an eyebrow. "Apart from the fact that he's just about the richest man in the city of London?"

My eyes, which had just been about to close again, flew wide open. My heartbeat picked up, and so did my breathing. Good God in heaven! The last person of whom I had heard that said...no, that couldn't be! He couldn't be at a ball, could he? What would he be doing at a ball? He'd told me himself he hated any and every kind of social event!

Anne's and Maria's eyes were blazing like bonfires now. "And his name? His manner? His looks?"

Sir Philip shook his head with a smile.

"No, Ladies. You will not be getting any more information out of me. It wouldn't do any good. He has to be seen to be believed."

Oh my God, it's how I know it's him!

Dear Lord, no! I was going to meet lord in a dress! With my family there, and people laughing and dancing everywhere! What the bloody hell was I going to say? What was I going to do? And most important of all, where would I hide

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My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

SURPRISE, SURPRISE! I hope you liked the above extra Christmas chapter, made just for you! – Was it fun to read?

The next chapter will come within a week, according to my usual schedule - just in time to be wrapped up in Christmas paper & placed beneath a Christmas tree!

Your Christmas-preparing Victorian Author

Sir Rob

GLOSSARY:

Pertussis: a rather serious coughing sickness. It can cause quite severe damage to the body over today, in spite of the advances of modern medicine, and can even end in death. As for how exactly one's voice would sound while you're so ering from this disease, let's just say that one wouldn't want to try and sing an opera while one is so ering from it. Probably one would end up sounding like an asthmatic crow with a pebble stuck in its throat.

Bird: For some unknown reason, in British English, one can use the word "bird" to refer to a man, regardless of the fact that they generally don't have wings ;-)

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