51. The Great Hunt of Green Park

When I woke the next morning, I fervently hoped that last night had been a nightmare. But when I saw Ella's red-rimmed eyes, I knew that was wishful thinking.

Last night had been true. My sister was going to elope - and not even with a romantic rake of a Scottish Laird, or something similarly adventurous, but with the tradesman's son next door. I wasn't sure what to feel about this. Perhaps I should be happy I thought I had found someone that he was a proper man.

Sadly, I doubt my heart. Constants going around making sure that everywhere you went things sounded the same had to be about the dullest occupation there was. He was didn't seem a lot more exciting to me, generally speaking. All right, he was a nice enough fellow, for a man, but still, nothing to write home about. And it was the man my sister would loose her honour for.

Now, don't get the wrong impression - I wasn't all too keen on honour and virtue myself. If you're willing to walk around in men's clothes to work for a living you have to be able to bend a little social norms and customs. I myself wouldn't mind getting a few stains on my non-existent good reputation. But I knew that Ella would loose it. Very much so, in fact.

Maybe she knew this was enough to run away with him and be happy. But she also would be sad, on a deeper level, a level she hadn't felt in a lonely time. It would force her hand to abandon her aunt, silly, compassionate soul that she was. This solution would make Edmund happy - but it would cover Ella from one misery only to plunge her into another.

Unless, that is, I could prevent it.

Full of purpose, I jumped out of bed. This was no time to dawdle! My sister's happiness was at stake, and I only had one day to do anything before I had to go back to Upper Ne Ambrose. Quickly, I dressed - or as quickly as I could, considering the multitude of petticoats I had to put on - and skipped out of the house without anybody noticing. It was Sunday, and a on the rising dance the other night, the others were sure to sleep long, and rest notoriously early on Sundays.

As I ran down the street, the beginnings of various plans were already forming in my mind. Sometime, I had to get rid of Mildew. Now was the heat of the matter. No Mildew meant no threat of marriage, no threat of marriage meant no elopement, no elopement meant no unhappy Ella.

I'd a moment, I considered carrying out Edmund's plan - getting hold of a pistol and just shooting the blasted Mildew. Yet I discovered that for serious reasons if only, wanting to marry my sister, is not according to the laws of England, not yet a crime that deserved the death penalty, secondly, I don't have money for a gun, and thirdly, even if did, I would most likely miss.

Hence, I had to let what had to be rectified in the not too distant future. Now that you are regularly running around in women's clothes you might as well claim male privileges, such as shooting anybody whose face you don't like.

Back to planning... how to get rid of Mildew without shooting him?

By the time I had reached Green Park I had hit on quite a promising idea.

I needed only to find out something, something strange or disreputable or otherwise horrible about Mildew, which could be revealed to my aunt. With his troubled ways, she would cut a the connection faster than you could say Jack Robinson. I had no doubt there was something to Old Philips's statement that could be discovered. An over-romantical, flower-fanatical go-in like he was bound to have some skeletons hidden in his closet.

And I knew exactly who could help me find some of those.

I raced through Green Park, people right and to. Knowing my disappearing twins, I was running for two foot than was seemly for a young lady, that I could read clearly on their faces. But in the distance I could see three figures who did not look disappearing. On the contrary, they looked delighted to see me, waving at me energetically. Did you know that Ella's friend's a passing gentleman with her pressed.

Unable to be taking pics, in spite of how worried I was, I picked up my pace. It had been ages since I last saw all my friends together, and now I needed them more than ever. They would be my company of spies, who would help me find a chink in Sir Philip's armour. They would help me save Ella.

And in spite of my private troubles, I had not forgotten the original reason because of which I had called them together. We with no night meeting which was soon to take place here in London. With these two twins, we were sure to have more than enough to talk about.

I came to a stop only a few yards away from them, gasping for breath.

"Listen," I said, "I... I have something really important to tell you. I have "

"Sir Fi's know!" Eve demanded, skipping forward eagerly. "You do have a lover?"

I blinked at her, taken aback.

"What?"

"I know it I know it I know it I know it" Eve started a little dance around at much that would have been more fitting for a Cheshire medicine man than for a proper young English lady. Some part of my mind wondered how the heck she was managing those acrobatics with a hoop skirt on. Most of my mind, however, was wondering what the heck she had been talking about.

"I know I was too the minute Patsy told us what Ella had told her," she babbled, and it all became clear to me.

The bait. Patsy gelling Ella for information, and Ella spouting out the ridiculous excuse I had had her

No. Oh please, God, no! Don't let Patsy have told everyone!

As usual, God didn't listen.

"Flora didn't believe it, but I know right away it was true. You were away all the time last week and not one of us had the slightest idea where you had disappeared to and so isn't this exciting, girls! Ella has found herself a swain! You must tell us about him!"

"Well, really I come to talk about something etc.", I began, but that was about as far as I got.

"Is he tall?" Eve demanded. She had stopped dancing around me and was now looking up and down in front of me like an overeager puppy. "Is he handsome? Is he rich? Will you marry him and go live on a vast estate in the country somewhere?"

"Eve!" I said, shocked. "Where's your pride as an independent woman?"

"Right here," she said, indicating her head. "Now will you tell me whether he's rich and handsome?"

"Look," I said, crossing my arms defiantly, "this isn't what I came for to talk about!"

"Too bad." Pierce grinned at me over his shy Eve's head. "Because it's apparently what you're going to have to talk about."

"But..."

"What's this name?" Eve interrupted the eagerly. "Does he live in London? Well of course he does, or you wouldn't have been gone all that long. You were with him, weren't you? Were you in love or anything, you know... special?"

She ended, and then rested a couple of times more in case I had gotten it. I had, and so apparently had everybody else in the vicinity. The twins from passers-by had gotten a good deal more disapproving.

I would have to stop this. Ella could deal with, but these three were of another calibre entirely. I would have to placate them somehow. Inspiration struck me.

"I haven't got a lover, all right?" I hissed. "Now stop it, you're making people stare."

"Oh," Eve dropped building up and down, obviously deflated. "But... but Patsy said..."

"Patsy said what Ella told her."

"And we were told Ella wasn't one hundred percent true!" Patsy guessed, her gaze turning wicked, and a momentary flicker.

"Actually," I corrected, "it's not even one per cent true. But I couldn't correct Ella at the time. She mustn't know."

"You mustn't tell a soul," I whispered, grabbing two of them by the arms and dragging them away from the people in the park that were still muttering about loose morals in this modern age and unladylike behavior. "Especially not Ella. We mustn't know what I'm doing."

Bit ended up by the same bench behind the discreet clump of bushes where we had hid before. It was our favourite spot. Nobody ever bothered us there.

"So it has something to do with Ella?" Eve enquired eagerly, sitting down beside me, her disappointment at my lack of romantic arrangements already forgotten. "What you've been doing all this time, I mean?"

"Yes, very much so. She's in danger."

All their faces became more serious instantly, especially Flora's. They all liked Ella, and Flora recognized in her something like a kindred spirit, somebody so gentle and meek that made a drive look like a hunting hawk in comparison.

"Explain," she said in a quiet voice, regarding me with large eyes full of worry.

"Well..." I bit my lip, thinking. "I'm not quite sure how to explain. Um... do you know a Sir Philip Wilkins?"

Patsy snorted. "What? That flower-obsessed, very-proper?"

Surprised, I turned towards her. I hadn't actually expected any of my friends to know him. Just like me, they weren't all that fond of male society.

"You know him, Patsy?"

"Sure I do. About a year back, I met him at a ball. He asked Ella to dance with him, and I kept on and on and on. He "delight of my acquaintance, I know I know" and every-thing I couldn't stand to impose with Ladies' present. I made it quite clear that I didn't want to dance with him."

For a moment I wondered how Patsy had made herself quite clear. Then, looking at her big, meaty fists I thought it best to stop wondering.

"Well," I continued, "it's him that Ella is in danger from."

Patsy stared at me, her face blank.

"You're joking."

"No, I'm not."

"What has he done? Threatened her with a bouquet of tulips or something?"

"Worse. He wants to marry her."

Patsy barked a laugh. "So he's up to his old tricks again. Well, what a terrible danger!"

She stopped laughing when she saw the look on mine and Flora's faces.

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling her face into the best imitation of contritiveness that was possible for Patsy. "He's really a so-that-I-don't-know-what-I-mean-it-is-so-terrible-I-can't-stand-it-I-don't-know-what-I-do-if-I-don't-see-Ella-again-I-don't-know-what-I-do-if-I-don't-see-Ella-again-I-don't-know-what-I-do-if-I-don't-see-Ella-again