

## Chapter Six

Haughton had not yet left Stantreath. The roads, he'd been informed, were too wet to facilitate an immediate departure following his interview with that confounded Brixton woman. The streams and local canals were too high. Several of the bridges he would need to cross were rendered impassable by a rainstorm that had occurred several days ago some miles inland, the effects of which were only now visiting their destruction on the village and its outlying areas.

This, of course, was the explanation for why he had, in contrast, experienced little difficulty upon his journey to Stantreath. There had been some mud, and one of the horses had thrown a shoe, but apart from that, nothing more than minor inconvenience had marred his forward progress.

But now, the owner of the inn—a Mr. Treacher, who had become the most irritating of bootlickers the moment the crest on Haughton's coach, along with the contents of his wallet, had become known to the odious man—did nothing but protest against Haughton's plans for departure. Surely, he should stay for at least another night, possibly two, until it was certain that all roads toward London were passable again!

And every person in the inn seemed to be in collusion with one another, the stable boys reporting that his coach needed repair, that one of the horses was displaying signs of lameness; while the maids insisted that he needed to change rooms, that the mice had gotten in and wouldn't be more comfortable on another floor? And all while Mr. Treacher added more items to the bill: Another meal, a fresh set of linens for the new bed, two more scoops of coal for the fire.

Haughton sat in a private sitting room at the back of the inn, a space that bore more resemblance to a spacious cupboard than an area intended for the comfort of a fully-grown person, and sipped at a tepid cup of tea. He could ring for someone to bring him a fresh cup, but no doubt the avaricious Mr. Treacher would add three more items to his bill (quality tea being such an expense, the landlord had informed him) and he would be expected to place a gratuity into the palm of whichever overly-obsequious maid took it upon herself to deliver the tray.

And so he took another swallow of cold tea, and he made a third attempt at reading the same newspaper he had been nursing for as long as his dismal beverage had rested near the arm of his chair.

The knock at the door that interrupted this rare moment of leisure was faint, but considering the scant size of the room, there was little chance of him pretending not to have heard it.

"Enter," he said, and didn't deign to look away from his newspaper as the red-faced Mr. Treacher puffed into the room.

"Beg pardon, your lordship." Mr. Treacher attempted a bow, but managed to upset a small table decorated with cheap, vulgar knick-knacks. The landlord apologized profusely, while attempting to set everything to rights, and Haughton shook out his paper and rolled his eyes heavenward. Four ghastly figurines shattered to pieces. He'd be shocked if they didn't show up on his bill as the most precious examples of Ming China in all of Northumberland.

"Yes?" Haughton prompted while Mr. Treacher continued to fuss over the now wobbling table.

One table, broken was how he imagined it would be transcribed. Along with: Chippendale, irreplaceable.

"You've a visitor, your lordship," the landlord said, before he wedged a book beneath one of the crooked table legs and stepped back to survey his handiwork.

"Oh?" Haughton straightened in his chair. There was only one person he'd called on since his arrival in Stantreath, and he wondered if a night spent thinking over his order had finally brought Mrs. Brixton around to his view of things.

"The Reverend Fenton, my lord. Sir. Your lordship." Mr. Treacher took up the corner of his soiled apron and used it to wipe the sweat from his upper lip. "Come to pay his respects, I'm sure. He asks for only a brief moment of your time."

"Of course." Haughton folded the newspaper and folded it again, needing some activity with which to engage his hands. He should have known that his presence in this godforsaken little town would not pass unnoticed. His carriage bore his crest, and in a village of this size, he might as well have simply ridden through the main street with a town caller announcing his arrival. "Send him in."

"And..." Mr. Treacher glanced at Haughton's cup. "Some more tea perhaps? Or some cold meats and a bit of cheese—"

"No trays, no food," Haughton interrupted. "I'm afraid your Reverend Fenton will not be staying long enough to enjoy whatever parade of victuals you may have for our perusal."

Mr. Treacher bowed. "Right you are, your lordship. Sir. I'll just..." Another bow, and the landlord backed out of the room, his hand searching blindly for the doorknob before he slipped out into the hall.

But Haughton's respite was a short-lived one. Less than a minute later, a tall figure, clad from head to toe in varying shades of black and more black, ducked into the room.

Haughton took him into immediate dislike. It was something about the man's eyes, he decided. The gleam in them failed to match the expression on his long, angular face.

"Good morning, my lord." The Reverend Fenton dipped his head and shoulders in a slow bow, while his voice—deliberately stentorian, Haughton suspected—reverberated to every corner of the tiny room. "How condescending of you to allow such a humble personage as myself to intrude upon your time of leisure. You know, it is quite often that I tell my parishioners to find a quiet moment during their busy days, merely a minute or two in which to sit and reflect upon the glories of this life, which is our Lord's gift to us. But often..."

Haughton reached into the pocket of his waistcoat while the speech continued. He retrieved his pocket watch, flicked it open with his thumb, and glanced at the time. Good morning the Reverend Fenton had said on his arrival, but no doubt it would be well past midday by the time the man was finished reveling in the sound of his own voice.

"Ah, yes. Of course," Haughton said, as soon as he detected a lull in the Reverend Fenton's soliloquy. "And I assume you're here on some errand of divine beneficence? Prayer books for the poor, no doubt. Or an extra piece of coal for the widows?"

The Reverend bowed again, this time going so far as to set one foot in front of the other before his upper body creaked forward. "You pay me too great a compliment, my lord, to assume that all of my earthly endeavors are for the welfare of those less fortunate than you and I. Indeed, their plight weighs heavily in my thoughts, even now as I stand here before you. But I must confess that my appearance here pertains to more social matters, if you will."

"I see," Haughton said carefully. Now there would be an invitation, he realized. For tea, or perhaps even for a full dinner, complete with five courses and accompanied by the unctuous sermonizing of the Reverend Fenton and guests. "It's unfortunate then, that I'm to depart for London this very afternoon. But if you will give me your direction, I'm sure that my secretary can arrange for a donation to be made to..." Haughton shrugged. "Whichever charity you would deem fit."

"Oh, that is most kind of you, my lord. Most kind!" This was followed by another bow, during which Haughton rose from his chair.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, and nodded towards the door.

The Reverend Fenton's brow furrowed in confusion, before he realized that he was being dismissed. "Of course, my lord. Don't let me keep you. But... I did wish to ask you—it is, I'm sure, no concern of mine—however... What was it that brought you all the way to Stantreath in the first place, my lord?"

Haughton stopped near the door. His shoulders stiffened while his fingers tightened around the rough metal of the latch. "You're correct, Reverend. It is no concern of yours."

"My apologies!" the Reverend cried, and continued to hover in the background as Haughton stalked into the dimly lit corridor. "My sincerest apologies, my lord. It is just... Well, when word reached me that your most elegant equipage had been sighted at the home of the Brixton widow, I thought it my duty to come here and deliver a warning."

Haughton turned around so quickly that the Reverend almost stumbled into him. "A warning? Against what?"

"Well." The reverend stepped back and began to rub his hands together. It was a gesture that Haughton associated with a feeling of glee, and he wondered how much this Man of God was delighting in the opportunity to tell tales about the various inhabitants of his parish. "It is a pair of sisters, my lord. Their parents died a few years ago, succumbed to a fever, I believe. I suspect that it may have been due to some profligate way of living, considering the characters of their daughters."

"Indeed." Haughton eyed the man with renewed distaste, but he fought to keep his features as bland as possible. "And it is their characters, I suppose, that you felt compelled to warn me about?"

"The older sister," the Reverend said, leaning forward, his voice lowered to an exaggerated whisper. "She purports herself as a widow," but there is no mention of her deceased husband's family, or where he was supposed to have come from." He raised his eyebrows. "And the younger sister," he added, the dark lines of his brows rising higher still. "Has since run off!"

"Run off?" Haughton echoed. "And... what leads you to believe the elder of the sisters is putting forward a false impression of widowhood?" He thought of auburn hair and a pair of fiery eyes that flashed at him in shades of gold and green.

The Reverend released a heavy sigh. "There is no mention of her deceased husband's family, and she is always quite vague when it comes to revealing where she and sister resided before coming here. It leads one to think, my lord, that the child did not find its way into this world under a banner of legitimacy. And to see her flaunt the creature, to fly in the face of propriety..." He shook his head. "I must confess that the Lord, in his wisdom, did not see fit to bless me with a daughter. But when I bear witness to this supposed Mrs. Brixton, parading through the town, for all the world as if the child in her arms were not—" He sneezed, his eyes closing as if the mere image he'd conjured when I am thankful I have no female issue to be spoiled or influenced by such a deleterious example of womanhood."

"Quite," Haughton said, and looked away from the man, as if suddenly bored by the entire conversation. His irritation, however, was being kept barely in check. The Reverend had referred to the infant as a creature relegating the child to a status measuring less than human. And all because... Why? Some foolish girl had fallen for his brother's charms? "Good day to you." Haughton said, and shouldered past the man without another glance.

And what had he said about Sophia Brixton? That she was flaunting the child? How? By not taking up residence in an uninhabited cave in order to spare the townspeople from creating more gossip about her and the infant's deleterious behavior?

Haughton returned to his bedroom on the third floor, his arm aching to slam the door behind him. But he remained calm as he reached for his coat, as he adjusted the folds in his neckcloth, as he changed for his hat and his gloves. And he continued to remain calm as he walked downstairs, ignored the inquiries of Mr. Treacher as to his intentions, and set a course for the home of Mrs. Sophia Brixton.

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Still editing and tweaking and working towards the best version of this I can produce! Thank you, readers, for your reads and likes and comments so far. They are more valuable than you could ever know!  
- Quenby Olson