



*Such Young
Creatures*

A MIDDLEBURY ROMANCE
1840-1841

A. E. WALNOFER



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A ROGUE RETURNS

~ Nell Caspar
Whitehall, near Plimbridge in Bevelshire
September

OH, NO! Not him! Nell sighed with frustration, looking out of the window at three young men who had just ridden up the drive to Whitehall. One was her elder brother, Thaddeus, but the fellow upon whom her ire was fixed was called Mr. Richard Borley. She remembered him well because of how rude he had been to her at their one previous meeting.

He dismounted his bay horse by the stables, handed the reins over to the groom, and was striding towards the front of the house even before the others stood on solid ground.

Oh Thad, why would you bring that varlet to my coming out ball? She determined to scold her brother thoroughly once she had him alone.

Tall and fair-haired, Borley walked with an unmistakable swagger. When he stopped just before ascending the steps to look up at the impressive stone edifice, Nell ducked away from the window.

It won't do at all if he thinks I'm ogling him.

“Who has Thad brought home with him?” Belinda asked, staring out of the other window in Nell’s bedroom at the scene below.

Nell shrugged cavalierly. “He said he’d make certain there were enough dance partners tonight. We’ll meet them by dinnertime, I’m sure.”

She didn’t bother advising Belinda to avoid Borley as she supposed the proud fellow would be as standoffish now as he had been when he visited Whitehall five years earlier.

Then, thirteen-year-old Nell had shyly ventured to engage him in conversation on his first night there. Knowing that he lived near the Dorset Coast, she was curious about one of its shoreline’s famed features.

“Master Borley,” she had begun bravely, feeling her voice quaver. “Have you often seen the Durdle Door?”

His eyes pinned her in place as if he was surprised she had dared to address him. With a humourless smirk, he replied, “It’s a hole in a rock.”

Then he had angled his chair away from her as if to shirk any other overtures she might attempt to make. Throughout the rest of his stay, he had seemed appallingly bored, hardly looking at anyone who addressed him, and murmuring the barest of civilities when they were required of him – *‘I suppose, ma’am’* – *‘It could be, sir.’*

For years after, Nell had felt shy in the presence of the other boys Thad brought home from school. She generally kept her mouth shut if she had to sit with them, though many would have gladly spoken at length to the pretty brunette with the large brown eyes.

Belinda was still craning her neck to see the young men below. “Well, if they will dance with me even one time each, I shall be extremely happy.”

Then I will console you in your disappointment when that does not occur, Nell thought before turning her mind back to the pleasant matter that had been preoccupying her prior to Borley’s arrival.

Tonight I shall dance with Mr. Elliott Clyde!

She tried not to speak of this particular fellow to anyone too often for fear that the warmth in her voice would reveal her fondness for him. His face flashed into her mind – his wry grin, the intent look in his hazel eyes when he spoke to her. Fortunately, Belinda missed the flicker of a smile this recollection produced as she was eyeing Nell’s gown which was laid out on the bed.

“Oh Nelly, it’s so beautiful,” Belinda said, letting the pink satin of the skirt slip between her fingers. “You’ll take everyone’s breath away.”

This warmed and shamed Nell’s heart simultaneously. Belinda’s own ballgown was a pretty but practical garment –

one that could be easily altered so as to be worn for multiple occasions in the future – yet she showed no signs of jealousy.

However, it is my ball and therefore I am intended to be the celebrated one, Nell told herself. This self-assuaging did not last long as another thought was on its heels. But Lindy will never have a ball of her own – in fact, tonight’s may be the only one she ever attends! Yet here she is, staring at my dress as adoringly as if it were her own.

“Thank you,” Nell said. “I fear my feet may get caught up in it, though. The skirt is so long!”

“Haha! Was all the practice Mr. Farley put us through not enough to give you confidence?”

Weeks earlier, Nell’s mamma had employed a dancing master she knew from her years in London. Tracking him down had not been easy, but Mrs. Caspar had made the effort, knowing how important it was to Nell that she know how to dance properly.

So Mr. Farley had come to stay at Whitehall for a fortnight, spending the mornings propelling Nell about the music room with his sinewy left arm wrapped around her waist while his accompanist played the same twenty songs over and over on the piano forte. After her initial diffidence, Nell had learned to give herself over to the master’s delicate compulsions, delighting in floating across the floor as her mamma looked on from the edge of the room. Belinda, who was visiting the Caspars for an extended time, also benefited from his tutelage.

He taught the girls countless dances, including the lively gallopade, many reels, and – their favorite – the waltz.

One week into their lessons, he had announced, “Miss Caspar, Miss Everson, you both possess a natural grace that many of your partners will not. Therefore, to complete your education, I shall pretend to be a great lummoX who needs *you* to lead *him*. But you must learn to do so discreetly in order to protect the often fragile egos of your suitors.”

What followed was a series of dances which were not as enjoyable, but Nell saw the sense in learning how to take control when necessary. By the end, Mr. Farley had declared the girls two of his finest pupils ever and expressed regret that he would not be able to see them put their skills to use in the public realm.

Nell had thanked him prettily, her heart rejoicing at the thought of Elliott Clyde’s arms around her, twirling her about, unless of course he proved a poor dancer, in which case she would twirl herself about and do her best to make it look as if he was doing so.

“I suppose I feel reasonably confident,” Nell told Belinda. “Though Mr. Farley seemed to think that *you* are the better dancer between us.”

It was a fib, as Nell did not recall the man implying such a thing, but the guilt she felt at having been born to a wealthy father often prompted her to say such niceties to her less fortunate, yet beloved cousin.

“Oh, I don’t recall that at all,” Belinda said, though she looked shyly pleased at the notion.

The ball was still several hours off and the girls were keeping themselves occupied by playing Piquet in the green parlour, a small, peripheral room that was rarely used or even thought of. Nell had settled there in hopes of avoiding Thad’s friends for as long as possible.

Though generally mild in her manners, card games awoke a surprisingly vying nature within Belinda, as she was intent on winning every trick. Her eyes sharply scanned the table and her hand, and she rarely spoke, which allowed Nell’s mind to drift back to thoughts of Elliott Clyde.

Ten years earlier, Nell’s papa, George Caspar, had purchased Whitehall from Elliott’s elder brother, Sir Jonathan Clyde. However, it was not until Nell was fourteen that the Clyde Family returned unexpectedly one day, and she herself had met them for the first time. Since then, the Clydes had made a habit of visiting Whitehall whenever they were on their way to or from Elliott’s school. After their awkward first meeting, Elliott and Nell had learned to chat amiably with one another in the parlour while their relatives and Nell’s governess sat nearby.

During one such visit, Nell looked straight into his winsome eyes and wondered what he would say to her if no one was hovering within feet of them. So she had boldly invited him to walk with her out in the garden – “to that bench we can see

from this window” she added for the benefit of all listening. After looking to her father to gauge any disapproval, the young man happily agreed. Since then, each time the Clydes came to call, Nell and Elliott had managed to have at least a few moments of semi-private conversation. Though this maneuvering never resulted in ardent declarations of any sort, Nell suspected the young man had a tendresse for her, due to his attentiveness and the warmth of his gaze.

And tonight, I will not only see him, but dance with him! Nell was taut with anticipation at this thought, even as she sat staring at the twelve cards in her hand.

She started slightly when the parlour door opened, and the three men she was trying to avoid spilled in.

Oh, pooh! she thought, standing.

“Come, Borley, Bilgemoore,” Thad said, waving his friends forward. “Meet my cousin, Belinda Everson. And here is my sister, Nell.”

As they gave their requisite curtses, Nell noted Lindy’s was a bit wobbly.

The poor dear is nervous! It isn’t often she encounters gentlemen, even those as young and unimpressive as these.

Looking up from the floor, Nell saw that Mr. Borley was studying her. His bow was shallow, as he reached for her hand where it hung at her side.

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Caspar,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze rather than a shake.

“Don’t act as if you’ve never met her before, Borley,” Thad said, moving purposefully towards the mahogany cabinet by the window. “She’s still the same old Nell.”

The fellow’s mouth quirked as if he was sharing a little joke with her at her brother’s expense.

After giving Lindy a cursory acknowledgement, he once again affixed his gaze on Nell. Unlike years earlier when he had called the Durdle Door *a hole in a rock*, there was no disdain in his eyes. Something else danced there – something Nell could not quite define to herself.

Disconcerted, she announced that she and Belinda were expected in the library. As they hurriedly took their leave, Nell wondered at the change in the man – for he was definitely a man now – taller, broader, and more attentive to his surroundings.

Another thought bothered her as well. *Why was Thad fiddling about in the cabinet? Was he looking for Papa’s decanters?*

When they were far down the hall, Lindy whispered, “Mr. Borley is rather handsome, isn’t he?”

“Oh, was that his name?” Nell prevaricated, feeling somehow that she was taking the man down a notch, though he wasn’t there to feel it. “And who was the other fellow?”

“Mr. Bilgemore, I believe.”

“Such a shame they appeared and interrupted our game – it isn’t often I best you!”

“What?” Lindy gasped with mock disdain. “Certainly, you recall that *I* was winning!”

“As you always do,” Nell conceded with an exaggerated sigh, but she wondered if Thad was presently pouring tumblers of brandy for his friends, and felt even more uneasy than before.

Don’t do anything too foolish, brother, she chided him silently.

A NEWLY ACQUIRED SKILL

~ Elliott Clyde

On the road, somewhere in Bevelshire

NOT SO VERY far away from Whitehall, a carriage containing the aforementioned and much-thought-of Mr. Elliott Clyde, was rolling down a long stretch of country road. His brother, Sir Jonathan Clyde, and sister-in-law, Lydia, had retrieved him just that morning from Heath School for Boys for the last time as Elliott's schooling there had finally come to an end. Now they were nearly to Plimbridge where they would secure a room at an inn and prepare themselves for the ball that was to be held in Miss Nell Caspar's honour later that evening.

"You are very quiet, dear brother," Lydia said.

"I supposed you would get enough wittering from all of the mammas seated around you in a few hours' time."

"Oh, that is a certainty." She chuckled. "But we have not seen you for many weeks, and so far today, you have shared very little."

“The only news that might interest you is that I have learned to dance, though I had hoped to surprise you with that later this evening.”

“Ah! Is the fierce Frau Pfeiffer still whirling Heath Boys about the dining hall until they either lose their breakfast or twist their ankles?” Jonathan asked with a laugh.

“Indeed, she is. And you’ll be proud to know that the tiny harridan said I was her *only* student to master the waltz this year.”

“Very good, brother! I concede that *I* heard nothing so lauding from her lips. Truly, she said only one civil thing to me in the entirety of our acquaintance.” Here, Jonathan employed a staccatoed German accent. “I ashume zet you haff uzzet shkills, Herr Clyte.’

Lydia laughed, as Jonathan continued, “I could never comprehend how such a wizened little fairy could float across the floor like a petal on a breeze, whilst propelling a recalcitrant, spotty fellow twice her size.”

“She *is* remarkable – the only one to teach me anything at school these last two years.” This was a subtle barb as all who were present knew that Elliott had hoped to quit Heath long ago, but had remained there at Jonathan’s insistence. Though the comment brought silence for a moment, it wasn’t entirely true, as a few discussions Elliott had had with his fellow pupil, Francis Watkins, had given him a war chest of knowledge.

However, he would reveal all of that to his brother at a time when he perceived Jonathan was ready to hear it.

Ever the diplomat, Lydia smoothly said, “Well Elliott, this evening, when you drift past and all of the enraptured ladies ask me, ‘Is that dashing creature your husband’s brother?’ I shall proudly nod my head. Though I must warn you, you will be forced to stand up with every female present. Perhaps we should fashion a dance card for you to maintain order amongst your throng of admirers.”

This drew a rare belly laugh from nineteen-year-old Elliott.

If such a card were to dangle from my wrist, I would write Miss Nell Caspar’s name upon every line, he thought, wistfully. His more rational mind though, told him he would have to be content with just a few dances with her. He hoped keenly that at least one of them would be a waltz.

Why else would I attend so intently to every word of Frau Pfeiffer’s sauerkraut laden breath?

“Well, it is a shame that you are so handsome, as that will only compound your problems with all the females prowling about.” Lydia turned her attention to her husband. “Darling, which room do you suppose they’re using as a ballroom?”

Having both lived at Whitehall years earlier – Jonathan as the estate’s heir and Lydia as his family’s parlour maid ¹– they were very familiar with its interior. As they began to chatter

¹ Jonathan and Lydia’s tale, *A Girl Called Foote*, is the first of *the Whitehall Romances*.

about which room would be most suitable, Elliott was pleased to be left alone with his contemplations.

With a touch of chagrin, he recalled his first encounter with Miss Caspar when he was sixteen years old. While he was following her elder brother, Thaddeus, through the cherry orchard on Whitehall's grounds, she and her governess, Mrs. Blythe, had suddenly emerged from a row of trees. Struck immediately by the girl's natural beauty, Elliott's tongue had tangled like a fishing line. But over the years, when his family would visit hers, he and Miss Caspar had learned to use their wit and eloquence to impress and amuse one another, sally by sally. Elliott would often practice before a mirror in his room what he might say to her at their next meeting – quietly so, lest he be overheard by anyone passing by his door.

As time passed, he sensed that she felt drawn to him as he was to her. Her eyes lit up at his approach and lingered on his face whenever they talked together. He could not fathom what he had done to earn such deference, nor why her exceptional loveliness and intellect had not made her haughty.

She ought to be the proudest girl on Earth! he thought. *How can she not know her worth?*

In the week leading up to Miss Caspar's coming out ball, Elliott had lain awake many nights, wondering if she would soon afterwards make her way to London where innumerable men, young and old, would undoubtedly fall in love with her.

But she is no fool, and would not be charmed by one, he reminded himself. And Sophia has said I can stay with her for a few weeks if I am able to get to town, so I will see Miss Caspar there. Perhaps I will be prepared to make my intentions known to her in a few months' time.

He had nearly broached this topic the last time they had sat together in one of Whitehall's gardens, but the uncertainty of his own future had kept him mum.

No intelligent young woman would attach herself, secretly or otherwise, to a man who has little more than good intentions to offer her. But given just a little more time, I can act on what Francis Watkins shared with me and prove myself a worthy suitor.

As the carriage made its way through Plimbridge to stop in the yard of the Rowan Tree Inn, Elliott felt cautiously optimistic, having no idea how dashed his hopes would be in just a few short hours.

TO SEE A BIT OF THE WORLD

IT WAS ALMOST time for the girls to don their ballgowns, but Nell was weary of cloistering herself in her room to evade Mr. Borley's strange new attentiveness. So, when she saw from her window that Thad and his friends were carrying a bat and wickets towards the northern lawn, she decided to venture out and oversee the arrangement of the drawing room, which would serve as the ballroom.

As she watched her maid, Minnie, set a large bouquet of late roses and scabiosa upon the punch table, she was reminded of the last time she had talked with Mr. Clyde. They had been sitting together in the flower garden whilst Lady Clyde and Mrs. Caspar discussed an unusual rosebush a stone's throw away.

"I overheard your mother speaking earlier," he had said. "Mrs. Blythe is no longer at Whitehall?"

"No. It seems her brother-in-law had been mismanaging the family's horse breeding business for years, so Mr. Blythe returned home to set things to right." Nell sighed exaggeratedly. "Unfortunately, he did not agree with me that his wife and children ought to remain here. He even took the dog, greedy fellow."

Mr. Clyde had chuckled. “You miss her?”

“Certainly.” In truth, it had been extremely difficult for Nell to let her mentor and confidante go, yet she did not want her selfishness to be so apparent. “But she was bound to leave at some point. After all, I am eighteen now, and no longer need a governess.”

At this, Mr. Clyde had suddenly appeared serious, his eyes delving into hers. Then he looked away, resting his elbows on his knees. Such solemnity made him look very much like a pensive elderly gentleman.

“Why so contemplative, Grandfather Clyde?” she had teased.

He was quiet for a long moment as if wrestling with something, then finally said, “The other day, I stumbled upon a great bit of wisdom and have been pondering it ever since.”

“Oh? What was it?”

“My young niece, Charlotte, informed me that – due to their temperaments – all cats are girls, and all dogs are boys.”

Recalling how his eyes had twinkled as she erupted into laughter, Nell thought now, *Clearly, he thought to divert me from whatever sobered him at first. Perhaps he was considering baring his heart to me, but then thought better of it, knowing I could not agree to a secret engagement.*

However, perhaps he will want to speak with Papa privately this evening, as I will be out before the night is over.

She snickered at her audacious turn of thought, then heard someone knock upon the front door. Curious, she went to look down into the entryway, but as she passed the library, her mother peered out of its doorway and beckoned her over.

“Oh, I am pleased to catch you alone.”

“What is it that makes you whisper so, Mamma?” Nell asked, amused as she drew near.

“I did not want to ask in front of Lindy, as she might feel left out, but have you thought any further about going to London?”

“Oh...”

Nell’s parents had offered her a season in town shortly after Mrs. Blythe left Whitehall, and she had made a vague answer, supposing that they were only trying to lift her spirits, but here the topic was being raised again.

“I ask because your papa received word this morning that a townhouse on Hertford Street in Mayfair will be available to us by mid-February. His answer, dependent on your desires, will be needed soon.”

“Mamma, I almost think you *want* me in town,” Nell said rather boldly, “even though you have warned me for years of the vanity that flourishes there.”

“I will not deny that conceit can be weighed by the pound in London. However, you would undoubtedly meet some people who are worthy of your consideration.”

“My *consideration?*” Nell queried.

But her mother did not pause. “Besides, think of all the wonderful sights you would see! And the experiences! If you enjoy yourself tonight, just remember that in town you would attend many balls, routs, assemblies –“

“I shouldn’t think *any* of those would interest you, Mamma!”

“It wouldn’t be for *my* benefit, darling, but *yours*. I want you to see a bit of the world – to know it, and yourself, better.”

The hairdresser from Wexhall who had just arrived was coming up the stairs. Supposing the woman would want to get started soon, Nell kissed her mother’s forehead, saying, “I shall consider it.”

Shortly thereafter, Minnie brought a simple meal of cold meats and bread upstairs to the girls. The fluttering in their stomachs only allowed them to pick at the platter half-heartedly, so the servant soon took it away, and returned with an ewer of fresh water. Nell and Belinda washed their hands, faces and underarms thoroughly, then helped each other into their gowns. The hairdresser lent a hand, settling yards of satin and lace, and tying perfect gauzy bows at their waists and bosoms. She had already arranged Nell’s plenteous hair, pinning locks of it into place, and curling a few loose tendrils to bob about her shoulders. Pleased at how the style suited her heart-shaped face, Nell saw it drew attention to her dark, fringed eyes and curvaceous lips.

While the stylist started on Lindy's hair, Nell posted herself next to the window and watched as a few carriages arrived on the grounds, waiting eagerly for one in particular. Her heart caught in her throat when she finally saw it, but it went around the stables, to where she could not see its occupants disembark.

Once Belinda's toilette was complete, Mrs. Caspar wandered in, catching her daughter pinching at her cheeks to draw out their natural colour.

"You are so very beautiful, Nelly," she sighed.

"I look exactly like you," Nell replied, pertly.

"I flatter myself, then!" Her mother laughed, then turned to her niece who was fussing with the pleats in her skirt. "And you, Lindy, look positively exquisite."

Blushing, Belinda began to murmur, "Thank you, Aunt Rose, for my gown...for the dancing lessons, for allowing me to visit here, for..."

"Shh." Mrs. Caspar pulled the girl into an embrace, but carefully so as to not crush her skirts. "With your clever head and kind heart, every shilling has been very well spent. Now, both of you, go downstairs and enjoy your evening."

With nervous smiles at each other, the girls joined hands and exited the room, intent on doing just that.

HEATH AND FAIRMOORE

“CLYDE, is it?”

Elliott turned to see Thaddeus Caspar squinting at him across Whitehall’s drawing room. Many other people were already there for the evening’s festivities, some sitting, others milling about as the musicians tuned their instruments in the corner.

Lifting his eyebrows, Elliott gave a single nod of his head to Thad who stood beside two unfamiliar young men.

“Ah, yes – you lived here before we Caspars took over the place, didn’t you?”

Egads! What would you do if I denied your question, obvious as it is? It was clear to Elliott at once that Thaddeus was playing some sort of rôle before his friends. During his previous visits to Whitehall, Elliott had learned to stomach the falsities of this fellow just to be near Miss Caspar for an hour or so.

“That is correct,” Elliott replied languorously, barely loud enough to be heard, then straightened his cuffs as he felt the assessing gaze of Thad’s companions upon his person.

Get your disdainful glances in now, lads, as soon I will be waltzing with Miss Nell and will have forgotten all about the three of you.

He glanced at the doorway with anticipation as the young woman had not yet made her appearance.

“Remind me, Clyde,” Thad moved closer, his friends following along. “Which school did you attend?”

There was a faint smell of alcohol drifting about them, and Elliott wondered if they had smuggled something in or ducked into Mr. Caspar’s study for a pilfered tippie before the ball began.

“Heath.”

This elicited a smirk from the tallest of the three. “Ah, you’re a Heath Boy, are you?”

The shortest fellow sniffed. “Never heard of it. *We* were all at Fairmoore.”

Elliott doubted his former statement, and was not surprised by the latter.

Heath School for Boys and Fairmoore-Drysdale School were located a mere twenty miles from one another, and were thought by many to be well-matched rivals. When urging his students to exert themselves, whether in the classroom or on the sporting pitch, Heath’s headmaster was known to call out, “Come now, boys, you mustn’t let that Fairmoore lot outdo you!”

Thaddeus turned to the window which afforded a view of the front drive. "Tell me, Clyde. Was there truly a lake on the far side of the cherry orchard at one time? I heard two people drowned there."

Elliott's jaw tightened. *He can't possibly know how reprehensible a question that is, particularly directed at me. Very well, I shall educate him.*

"Yes, there was, and those who died were my father and eldest brother." He stared steadily at Thad whose eyes clouded over with chagrin.

The two Fairmoore friends – neither one had been introduced to Elliott – exchanged a humoured glance, but the attention of all was suddenly arrested by movement in the doorway.

Elliott's breath caught, his eyes transfixed.

Miss Nell Caspar.

Her dark hair was piled on top of her head in a voluptuous mound, but several locks hung down in loose ringlets, which danced around her throat as she surveyed the room. Her rose-coloured dress nipped in at the waist, accentuating her figure. The fine cloth of her skirt flowed to the floor, frothing there. The crests of her shoulders were bare, the sleeves snug at the tops of her arms.

Elliott was captivated, holding his breath.

Her eyes flitted about, then came to rest on him. Just as her lips began to curl into a smile, both of Thad's friends blocked Elliott's view as they headed straight towards her.

ONE NONSENSICAL MOMENT

WITH HER HEART in her throat, Nell stepped inside the doorway.

So many people are here!

Some of Bevelshire's notable families – as well as less prominent ones, as the Caspars were fond of their neighbours regardless of their status – were squeezed into the drawing room. Smiling and nodding at them as they regarded her with admiration in their eyes, she searched for one person and found him – standing by a window – looking perhaps a bit taller than the last time she had seen him. His thick dark hair had been combed back, but was falling onto his forehead already. Their eyes met, but just as his head dipped in attentive recognition, her view of him was cut off as Borley approached her.

“Ah, here you are at last! I've been waiting to ask you for the waltz before anyone else dares to steal you away. Where is your card?” He grabbed her hands and held them up to eye-level, examining her wrists.

“My card?” Nell tittered nervously, disengaging herself from his grasp. “Surely those are not necessary at an assembly

as small as this.” She restrained herself from peering around him to see if Mr. Clyde was now engaged in conversation with anyone.

In the far corner, the musicians, who had traveled there from beyond Wexhall, played the first few notes of a song, calling the dancers to the floor.

Borley pulled her toward the open space. “Alright then, but even though there is no card for me to write my name upon, take note that I *must* stand up with you for the waltz.”

“Oh...oh, very well,” Nell replied, disappointed as the air around them filled with a lively tune.

The first reel of the night began, and Nell could not look about for Mr. Clyde as she was engrossed in getting her steps correct. This was not the sort of dancing she had spent all of her life enjoying in the music room with her family and a few dear friends. There, they had always flung themselves about, only minding not to tread on one another’s toes as they recklessly pursued the singular fun that moving one’s body could afford. This evening, her movements must be precise and correct, just as Mr. Farley had taught her, so that the entire party would not be thrown into a jumble.

Surprisingly, Borley proved to be a capable dance partner. When the song ended, he did not release her hand but steered her over to the refreshment table and pushed a glass filled with punch towards her. Nervously, she drained the little cup far

more quickly than was considered elegant. He watched her in this small hedonism, and laughed.

“I say, you’ll be deep in your cups in no time if that’s the way you tip it back!” He stepped closer to her.

Keeping her hands wrapped around the empty glass, she moved backward, putting a bit of space between him and herself, promptly stepping on the foot of someone behind her.

“Oh, I beg your pardon!” she gasped, swinging around to see her victim, faltering in the turn. The hand grasping at her elbow to steady her belonged to Elliott Clyde.

“Good evening, Miss Caspar,” he said, his fingers slowly unwrapping themselves from her arm.

Her breaths came shallow and quick.

“It is so good to see you, Mr. Clyde,” she managed to say, putting down her cup on the table. To her curtsy, he responded with a bow.

“Might I have the next dance?” he asked, his mouth curling slightly up on one side.

“Oh, yes,” she breathed, seeing from the corner of her eye that the fiddler was raising his bow to his strings. Then the first sweet strain of music reverberated through the air.

Mr. Clyde extended his hand to her and she placed her own in it.

“And might I dance the waltz with you, as well, should they play one?”

Bumping into her elbow, Borley intruded on the best conversation Nell had had for months.

“I’ve already claimed the waltz with her, and mind you don’t grow greedy,” he said with a joyless chuckle. “You can’t monopolize her all evening.”

Unruffled, Mr. Clyde made no response.

“Shall we?” he asked, and she let him lead her back to the dancefloor as the few notes swelled into song.

As they danced a few measures, Nell’s fingertips were delicately curled over the top of his right hand. His left hand hovered near her low back, occasionally resting there to steer her this way and that. Nell felt every touch throughout her body and tried to keep her smile small and genteel.

Breaking through her quiet elation, Mr. Clyde said, “My sister, Sophia, has invited me to come and stay with her in London. Will you have a season there?”

Elliott Clyde will be in town? Nell had supposed he was too solitary by nature to enjoy being in such a crowded place. *If we were both there, we might dance together at various balls – should we be invited to the same ones. And even if not, there could be rides in the park, visits to museums, and of course any townhouse would have a sitting room where he might call on me each morning!*

Going to town suddenly seemed imperative, and she decided in that moment that she would accept her parents' offer.

“Papa has planned to take a house in Mayfair on Hertford Street.”

“Ah, Sophia lives just north of Mayfair on Mary-le-bone Lane².”

The way his eyes were caressing her face left her in no doubt that he would visit as often as he could, but something occurred to her.

“Won't you be up at university then?”

“How could I stay away altogether, knowing your season has begun?”

It was the most flirtatious thing he had ever said to her and all of her insides fluttered as he continued, “When do you expect to arrive there?”

“Mid-February.”

“Very good. I shall set my watch by it.”

With great regret, Nell heard the song end. Mr. Clyde bowed to her formally as if politely waking her from a dream, then they walked back to the refreshment table where he refilled the glass she had left there.

² B.R. Davies's 1843 map of London labels the lane in this manner, rather than the modern day 'Marylebone Lane'.

“To your debut in London,” he said, lifting his own punch in a toast. She smiled, gratified, before taking a delicate sip.

It was then that her father lumbered over and asked to stand up with her, just in time as a lively country dance was starting.

“Please excuse me,” she said to Mr. Clyde who nodded courteously.

For the next several minutes, she and her papa laughed together as he huffed and puffed along, and Nell sent up a prayer of gratitude that she had learned how to dance with stumbling fellows. When they had finished, he told her how proud he was of her with such warmth in his voice that Nell hugged him there before everyone.

Immediately after, Thad’s shorter schoolfriend, Mr. Bilgemoore, appeared before her, bowing dramatically low.

Embarrassed by the exaggerated spectacle, Nell nearly reached to help him straighten up.

“Miss Caspar,” he said when his face was level with hers again. “I will not sleep a wink tonight if I do not give you a proper whirl about the place.”

She consented, hoping fervently that his dancing would be less caricatural than his invitation had been. When all of that predictably awkward maneuvering was done, the musicians began to play the first few measures of a recognizable waltz – its distinctive 1-2-3, 1-2-3 tempo setting Nell on edge – and

Borley, who had been leaning against the wall, was beside her, grasping at her elbow to propel her toward the dancefloor.

As the song blossomed into being, his arm cinched her waist, and she found herself dipping and turning, delighted at how she was drifting across the floor. A few couples away, she saw Mr. Clyde gliding along skillfully with Belinda, and though she was certainly envious, Nell was pleased for her cousin's good fortune. Closing her eyes, she imagined herself clasped in *Elliott's* arms, sailing along and a little laugh escaped her lips. Her eyes flew open to see Borley looking down at her, a smug smile on his face. He pulled her closer and whispered in her ear, "You're beautiful, Nell."

She arched her back to escape the intimate posture, but the crux of his words did please her.

Thankfully, it was not a long dance and soon Nell felt him pulling her off to the side again. She wiggled her hand out of his, making a great show of needing it to adjust her hair as she stood, catching her breath.

"Here," Borley said, handing her a full glass.

As she lifted it to her lips, she noted it smelled differently from what she had drunk earlier. There was an open bottle on the table that had not been there before. Taking a careful sip, she knew at once that this was Madeira. Having sampled it once before, she did not care for it, but the taste reminded her that she was a grown woman now, that this ball's very purpose was to declare that fact to the world, and that she would be

offered more and more Madeira in the near future because that was what adult women drank. She took a substantial swallow and fought a grimace that threatened to twist her features in disdain. The warmth of the wine burned her throat and she allowed herself a happy laugh, pleased that she was no longer a child. Flashing her eyes about the room, she felt gratified that everyone was there to celebrate her coming out, Borley's testimony of her loveliness still whispering to her heart.

I am beautiful, she thought. It wasn't a novel consideration, but here, with appreciative glances being cast her way from every corner, and the surge of the strong drink flowing through her limbs, she was sure of it. She brushed a stray curl over her shoulder and sipped the wine again. Borley was leaning against the table beside her, his legs jauntily crossed at the ankles.

"That's more to your liking, is it?" he asked, indicating the glass in her hand.

Nell did not respond as she noticed that Mr. Clyde was approaching her again.

Of course, he is, she thought, and turned to receive him with a bold smile, and a tilt of her head.

"Are you enjoying your evening, Miss Caspar?" he asked.

"Indeed, I am," she replied, a little too loudly. "And I'm so very glad to see *you* here."

He smiled, looking pleased but a little taken aback. Realizing how brazen she sounded, she forced her eyes away

from his to observe the other people present as if they interested her, but she felt his gaze remain steady on her face and her heart swelled because of it.

“Well, I would be remiss if I did not request the honour of being your partner for the next waltz.”

Her head felt both heavy and light, confusing her, though it was all so lovely. She opened her mouth, thinking to answer, ‘Yes, of course you may!’ but only a little laugh came out as Borley leaned in, his own mouth working in blustery haste.

“She’s said I’m to have all the waltzes, Heath Boy. You’ll have to content yourself with a reel or two.”

Are they fighting over me? Nell wondered, delighted, thinking of the bucks she’d seen in the wood one day while out riding. Locking their antlers, they had shoved fiercely at each other. When she’d told her father of it, he’d said, “Rutting season. Must have been a coy doe nearby. Mind you keep your distance should you see that again as bucks are unpredictable, especially amorous ones.”

Nell looked from one fellow to the other, before her eyes came back to rest on Elliott’s face. He was waiting for her answer, staring into her eyes as if she was the only person in the room – the only person in the world, perhaps. She lifted her chin and brashly asked, “Would you be satisfied with just another reel?”

She expected him to protest jocularly, joining in the fun, and then she would acquiesce to his request. Instead, his eyes

dimmed, and his mouth grew lax. There was a scoffing chuckle to her left, Borley feeling victorious, she was mortified to realize. She opened her mouth to assure Elliott that she would be very happy to waltz with him, but his answer came quicker.

“I shall be pleased to dance with you whenever you grant me the honour,” he said, bowing his head. “Just say the word.”

With that, he lifted a glass of punch from the table and took it across the room to where his sister-in-law, Lady Clyde, was seated.

“Oh!” Nell said, reaching toward his retreating figure, but the music started again and Borley grabbed her extended hand, claiming her for the dancefloor once more.

Too discombobulated to protest, Nell allowed it, her face burning as her fuzzy thoughts swirled, configuring themselves into some order.

The only man I truly wanted to dance with this evening thinks I've rejected him! And how likely is he to ask again since I humiliated him in front of Boorish Borley?

'Just say the word', he said. She tried to picture herself traipsing up to him later in the evening to announce, 'I would like to dance the next dance with you.'

No, that would never do!

Or 'You may dance with me now.'

Nothing could sound sillier!

She hoped he would be compelled somehow to return to her and renew the request. Certainly, their years'-long amiability would warrant that. But for the rest of the evening, she did not see Elliott Clyde glance her way.

There was a second waltz, and when Borley tried to claim it, she waved him away irritably, staring boldly now at Mr. Clyde across the room. Borley did drift off elsewhere, but Elliott – his shoulders back and head held high – made no move towards her. Instead, he briskly walked toward Belinda who had been situated by a window for the two previous dances. Nell's envy burned hot as she watched her cousin's eyes grow wide with surprised delight as Mr. Clyde extended his hand to her. The only uncharitable thought she had had all month toward Lindy – *Is he truly going to dance another waltz with her?* – resounded so loudly in her head that she worried she may have said it out loud.

Indeed, she saw he was leading the blushing girl out onto the dance floor.

Perhaps emboldened by Nell's rebuffing of Borley, Mr. Bilgemoore sidled up to her and asked if she would dance with him.

“Oh, I thank you, but my shoes are beginning to pinch.” She leaned over to rub her heel. “I fear I may have danced for the last time this evening.”

He bowed in his overblown manner, and vanished from her sight.

Pasting as pleasant of an expression as she could upon her face, she watched as the dancers began to spin and whorl before her, trying not to gawk at the only couple amongst them that held any interest for her.

Goodness, Mr. Clyde just drifts about – and to think, that could have been me in his arms if I hadn't been so ridiculously full of myself for that one nonsensical moment! Her eyes stung with the threat of tears.

This second waltz signaled the end of the ball, and shortly after its final notes were played, various parties milled about to find their fans and reticules wherever they had stashed them. Then they filed towards the hosts to present their compliments and take their leave. Nell shook many hands, her face fixed with a forced smile as she heard profuse congratulations regarding her successful debut. Belinda was at her side, bobbing her head and smiling sweetly at the departing guests.

Suddenly, Sir Jonathan and Lady Clyde were standing before her, their hands held out to wish her goodbye. She bid them adieu warmly, acutely aware that Elliott was standing directly behind them. She caught his eye, pouring as much communication and feeling into the look as she could.

“Miss Caspar, Miss Everson,” he said without pause, nodding solemnly to them both, then headed toward the door with his family.

“What a dancer is that Mr. Elliott Clyde!” Belinda whispered. “And he bears no title, correct?”

“Hmm?” Nell was flustered at her cousin’s effusion. “I believe that is correct,” she said, knowing that it was.

“So he is not so high above me as others here are,” Belinda said with a knowing smile, her left eyebrow twitching, but then the simper vanished. “What is it, Nelly? Do you dislike him?”

Nell realized her face had revealed her unhappiness.

“Oh, oh no. I believe him to be a perfectly respectable fellow. Forgive me, Lindy – I am so very tired,” she said, wondering how many more falsities she would have to utter before laying her head down on her pillow.

“Yes, I suppose you would be, dancing as much as you did!” Belinda hooked her arm around Nell’s as the final guests filtered out the front door. “Well, I am thankful to have danced, even if it was only five times altogether. Come, let’s help each other out of these gowns and go to bed. We can wait until tomorrow to talk about every moment of this enchanted evening.”

As Belinda pulled her out of the ballroom and toward the staircase, Nell despaired that the ball she had been dreaming of for over a year’s time had been a dismal failure.

WITH HOPES TROUNCED

SHIFTING THE reins from one hand to the other, Jonathan yawned largely and loudly, as the carriage jounced them all along through the dark night.

“Careful,” Elliott muttered. “You might startle the horses with that cavernous maw of yours.”

It was the dry sort of comment he was known to say, so he made it now, hoping forced normalcy would throw his brother and sister-in-law off the scent of his current mortification.

Lydia chuckled, then she herself yawned. Elliott expected at any moment that she would say how glad she was that Jonathan was familiar with the way back to the inn as the lamps threw limited light on the road before them.

And I will encourage such conversation – anything to keep them from asking how I enjoyed my evening.

True, it had started marvelously – well, it had once Miss Caspar entered the makeshift ballroom – but then, Elliott’s hopes had been so thoroughly trounced that he had barely been able to keep his countenance for the next two hours.

Lydia's warm hand reached over to grab and squeeze his own.

"You danced with such fluid grace, Elliott." She yawned again, taking her hand back to cover her mouth. "Please excuse me. I have grown too old for these events. But truly, brother, I had to ask myself, 'Is this the fellow whose chin I used to wipe with a damp cloth after his forays in the berry patch?'"

"Thank you. Perhaps you can write to Frau Pfeiffer and let her know she succeeded in civilizing me in some measure." He faked a yawn. "By George, you are not the only one who is tired."

But Lydia had not done yet.

"When you danced past, I clasped my hands together to keep them from clapping, and pinched my lips shut so I mightn't cheer aloud. What was the girl's name with whom you waltzed – Miss Everson? She is Miss Caspar's cousin, is she not?"

Elliott shrugged. "I believe so."

"She rather looks like her, though Miss Caspar has the more striking features."

Knowing his sister-in-law, Elliott believed she was fishing for his opinion of the girl but he would not give her such satisfaction.

"There were Fairmoore alumni there," he said.

This evoked a bark of harsh laughter from Jonathan.

Ah, he took the bait. Very good.

“Who are they?” Lydia asked, turning her attention to her husband.

As Jonathan began to explain the history of the two boys’ schools to her, Elliott slipped back into contemplation, recalling the many entertaining and meaningful conversations he had had with Miss Caspar over the years as they roamed Whitehall’s grounds together.

During one such stroll, Elliott had noted that her neck was pinkening.

“The sun seems to have found you,” he said, raising his hand to indicate the area, not daring to touch it. “Perhaps we should move this way in the shade of the tree.”

They had settled themselves on a stone bench under the branches and turned in slightly towards one another, their knees nearly touching.

“Are you eager to return to school?” she had asked, adjusting her shawl.

Elliott had laughed more scoffingly than he intended.

“I believe that means you are not! I would have thought you liked learning – you’re so much more eloquent than any of Thad’s friends.”

Hearing this gladdened Elliott as he had wondered on many occasions what she thought of the boys who might visit Thaddeus at Whitehall. He wanted to answer her honestly, but feared his loathing of school might make him seem immature.

“It’s not the *learning* I misprize, but the other students. Many of them are...” He pressed his lips together, looking up into the tree boughs as he tried to alight on the right word.

“Imbeciles?” she had offered.

“No.” He laughed lightly. “If they were merely *witless*, that would be trying, but tolerable. So many of them are arrogant and duplicitous, two traits I cannot abide – and to be in their company for weeks on end wearies me beyond anything.”

She had looked thoughtful. “I see those same failings amongst my father’s family. They live at Hollyfield Park, Papa’s rightful home. He could push them out at a moment’s notice, but he is uncommonly generous. So they stay there, and we are here.” She was quiet for a moment. “I have wondered, do you miss living here at Whitehall, Mr. Clyde?”

If I still lived here, then I would never have met you, nor would I have the eventual means to court you, Elliott thought.

When Jonathan had sold the Clydes’ ancestral home to Nell’s father, he had divided the profit evenly between Elliott, himself and their sister, Sophia, though he was under no legal obligation to do so. With his third, Jonathan had purchased Ignoble Acres, a large farm, which turned a handsome profit annually. It was taken for granted that when Elliott was of age,

he would find a similarly prosperous investment and be set up for life.

“No, not at all!” Elliott replied. “I have fond memories of living here, but my brother’s farm has long felt like home to me.”

“And will you always live there?” The question did not flow off her tongue as easily as the previous ones had.

She’s wondering what I will make of myself, Elliott had supposed, but was not affronted. He knew any rational woman would want to know how a suitor would support her. It pleased him that she might be thinking along those lines in regards to him, as he readied his answer.

“Certainly not. When I come into my inheritance, I will further myself – set myself up independently. I will have money enough to live comfortably.”

To some, this blunt pronouncement may have seemed uncouth, but he had wanted Miss Caspar to know the truth of his situation.

Although they were both so very young, he longed to tell her of his hopes to court her once he had established himself. But he said none of this in that moment, and had never again revisited the issue so directly.

At least Miss Caspar did not like that stupid Borley fellow – I believe that is what Thaddeus called him – I saw her turn her head from him a number of times.

But what does she think of me? She was polite, yes – friendly, even – but she more than hinted that I oughtn't expect much of her attention. At long last, she knows her worth, as she ought.

And once she is in London, countless gentlemen will scabble for her regard.

He sat taller on the seat.

I must prove that I myself can contend for it.

Jonathan steered the carriage into the yard at the Rowan Tree, where a yardman darted out of the stables to situate the horses. Alighting from the carriage with the others, Elliott made his way into the inn.

Mr. Doyle, the innkeeper was there, sweeping the entryway by candlelight. He stepped aside, cordially asking, “And how was your evening?”

Fortunately, Lydia paused to answer, allowing Elliott to escape up the stairs and into his private quarters. As he shut the door, he caught sight of his face in a small mirror above the ewer table.

“I do have a plan to prove myself,” he spoke aloud to his reflection. “Achieving it is just a matter of time and determination. And when I have done so, I will have much to recommend myself to her and her family.”

Then, he peeled off his clothes and fell into the bed's gentle embrace where he continued to hone his plans, as so very much depended upon them.

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