

**TUMBLING DOWN AFTER**  
**By Susan Gee Heino**

*Jack and Jill went up the hill,  
 To fetch a pail of water;  
 Jack fell down and broke his crown,  
 And Jill came tumbling after.*

*Up Jack got and home did trot,  
 As fast as he could caper;  
 To old Dame Dob, who patched his nob  
 With vinegar and brown paper.*

*Essex, England May 1814*

Old Dame Dob used the tip of her walking cane to poke at the broken stem of what, just yesterday, had been a very promising cucumber vine. Today it was nothing more than a denuded stub. She shook her gray head sadly.

“We have rabbits, Sam.”

“Indeed, ma’am,” her grizzled gardener agreed. “I’ve filled in the hole under the wall, but I worry they’ll simply dig another and come back for your cauliflower or salad greens tomorrow.”

The lady signed heavily. “They’re so impossibly cute with those long ears, woolly little tails, and such dear wiggling noses! Hard to believe they cause so much trouble.”

“Indeed, but they do. I’ll lay down another load of rock along the edge there once I find out where I’ve misplaced my wheelbarrow...”

“I should have told you, but I sent it off with young Jack. I asked him to bring water from the Maybury Spring.”

“You sent him all the way up there to fetch a pail of water?”

“It’s the best water around. Doesn’t my garden deserve the best?”

“But... it’s the Maybury Spring!”

“Don’t look so surprised. I’ve been getting water from there for some time now and—as you can see—even our rabbits find it quite healthful.”

“Oh, Old Mr. Dob would never approve...”

“Pish. Just because my late husband had some sort of long-standing feud with the Maybury family does not mean that I cannot benefit from their water. My dear Dobs is gone now and I am hoping to make an agreement with Miss Maybury.”

Sam gaped, clearly astounded. “Agreement with Miss Maybury? But surely the lady’s father would oppose it.”

“What that creaky old bore doesn’t know certainly won’t hurt him. Besides,

Sam, those young ladies up there need the few pennies I can pay them for something as simple as water. Heaven knows Jack doesn't complain about fetching it."

Sam grumbled. "I hope water is the only thing the lad fetches for himself up there."

"Are you saying Jack has interests other than water?"

"I know it's not my place, ma'am, but... well, Jack's not a wee lad anymore. I've seen how he eyes the young Maybury lass when we pass her in town..."

The old dame cackled with laughter. "Ah, so my grandson might be interested in a Maybury girl. Now wouldn't that set some tongues to wagging!"

"I doubt your son would find it quite so amusing, ma'am."

"Yes, I suppose you're correct. Robert is very much like his father—clinging to that bad blood between our family and what's left of the Maybury's. Such a shame, though. Wilfred Maybury will likely go to his grave a pauper, leaving his poor girls nothing but a derelict cottage on a scrap of land with that silly spring. He should have made his peace with the rest of the world and set his girls up with decent husbands, at least."

"He's a stubborn old mule," Sam said, clucking his tongue. "He could marry that younger girl off in a trice, as pretty as a rose. I suppose it's too late for the older girl, though. She's a spinster, for sure."

The coy dame just shrugged her shoulders and cocked an eyebrow as her bachelor son Robert strolled into view. "Perhaps, Sam. Or perhaps not."

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"Where the devil is Jill?" the old man in his sickbed grumbled loudly. "It's past time for my tea."

"It's not at all close to tea time, Papa," Miss Georgiana Maybury replied. "Here, I've brought you something to brighten your room; a few blooms from the tree Mamma planted. Aren't they lovely?"

She placed the large vase of brilliant apple blossoms on the table beside her father's bed. He pretended to ignore them, but she noticed the few extra deep breaths that he took to take in the heavenly scent.

"Blooms will just need to be tossed out in a few days," he muttered when he noticed her noticing.

"Yes, but until then we will enjoy them. Did the daily post arrive yet?"

"How should I know if the post has arrived? Your sister was supposed to check on that for me, but as usual, she's disappeared."

"Jill went to help someone draw water from the spring, Papa. You'll be happy to know we've had a few visitors lately and they have been most generous. I've

taken in several shillings this week just for sharing our water.”

Georgiana adjusted the drapes to allow adequate sunlight in to cheer her father’s spirits, but not enough that he might complain. The alder trees around their cottage filtered some of the brightest rays, but Papa’s eyes had gone weak and would pain him in bright light. He was unable to read his books in the dim, though, so regulating the windows was a perpetual balancing act. As always, Georgiana did her best.

Papa hardly noticed. “Bah, you’ll give our water away then what will we have left?”

Georgiana gritted her teeth and kept her voice calm as she fluffed the man’s cushions. “The spring flows as well as it ever did, Papa. I doubt we could drain it if we tried. Everyone in all of Essex knows Maybury Spring is the best water to be had.”

“It’s healing water,” Papa said, then coughed. “It always has been. Mustn’t let it fall into the wrong hands—ever.”

“I know, Papa, I know. Your great-grandmother saw fairies blessing the water under the full moon in the dews of May, Eve... and so forth. It is indeed a very special spring, which is exactly why we should be happy to share it.”

“No! I’ll not have you wasting it on strangers.”

“But, Papa, our friends...”

At least that seemed to slow down his ire. Papa frowned, but his words became softer. “Our friends... yes, I suppose it is good to share with our friends.”

“Of course it is, Papa.”

“So you are careful who is allowed?”

“I am, Papa, just as you would be.”

He sighed and settled back into his bed. Exhaustion filled his voice. “Good. That’s a good girl, Georgie.”

“Now you rest, Papa. I’ll go see why Jill is taking so long and then we shall put the kettle on for tea.”

“Thank you. I’d like that,” he said as his eyelids drooped.

Indeed, he would sleep now, and Georgiana would have a bit of a break until tea time. She tucked him in and made her own exhausted sigh as she left the room. Papa’s illness had gone on too long. It was taking a toll on all of them, yet the doctor could give no reason for the man’s condition. Georgiana couldn’t help but wonder if it was sheer sorrow that left him this way. He’d seen the dwindling of the Maybury fortune, the sale of family lands, the loss of his wife and an infant son, and now he lived knowing that once he passed on, the Maybury name would pass with him.

Poor man, that famous spring was all he had left of the Maybury legacy. As his health faded, it was clear that even the legendary waters had disappointed him.

Georgiana pulled her tattered shawl over her shoulders and let herself out the kitchen door. The well-worn footpath would lead her up the hill to the rock-hewn pool cut into the side.

For Papa's sake, she hoped Jill was doing nothing more than dipping water.

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Robert Robertson tried to hide his frustration, but he was not getting a straight answer from his mother. He'd come to the garden—where she could always be found this time of day—to ask if she knew the whereabouts of his young nephew, Jack. She did, of course. She simply wasn't sharing the information with Robert.

"But where did he go?" he repeated.

His mother didn't even bother to look up from the asparagus she was inspecting. "On an errand for me, I told you."

Robert glanced at Sam, his mother's faithful gardener, but the older man simply shrugged and turned away. Clearly, he was not getting involved. Very well, Robert would simply persist.

"I'm very glad the boy is useful to you. Now where did he go?"

His mother sighed and at last straightened herself to meet Robert's gaze. "Oh, very well. But promise you will not be too angry with the boy."

"Angry? Why should I be angry with him for doing an errand for you?"

"Because he's been gone overly long and... well, I know you would not approve of where I sent him."

"Where did he go, Mother?" Even as he asked, Robert knew the answer.

"I sent him to fetch me a pail of water."

"We have a perfectly good well in the corner of this very garden."

"I do not want water from our well."

"From the lake then? I can see the edge of it from here."

"Not from the lake."

Robert scowled at her. "You sent him up the hill, didn't you? Up to that ruddy Maybury Spring!"

"Hush your language, Robert. I did indeed send him there and you are not going to scold him for it."

"I'll scold the both of you! What can you be thinking, Mother? We've nothing to do with the Maybury's—not any of them."

"Your father had a disagreement with the Maybury's; I do not. At least... not with either of the young Maybury ladies."

"And I daresay Jack has no disagreement with them, either."

"He is very happy to bring me my water. It is the very best water around, you know."

“What rot! Water is water. How long has the boy been fetching this water today?”

His mother glanced up at the sky to consider the time, then screwed up her face. “An hour or more. Perhaps that is a bit excessive...”

“Do you think so?” Robert grumbled.

“You should go and see to him, Robert,” she suggested. “Yes, in case he has encountered any difficulty.”

“I’ll go see to him, indeed, but I’m sure that what he’s encountered he would never call difficulty!”

“You’ll go up there? Oh, I’m so grateful. Thank you, my dear. You are such a good uncle to the poor boy... no mother, no father. He’s very lucky to have you.”

“He’s lucky if I don’t box his ears and lock him in the cellar.”

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A gentle wind brushed through fresh green boughs overhead. The scent of musky earth and blooming hawthorns filled the air, while birds darted about, singing and chattering merrily. Georgiana had to remind herself not to dawdle and take it all in. She was not strolling for her own pleasure, but to find her younger sister.

The Maybury cottage sat at the base of a wooded hill. The trickling waters of the Little Pimley rolled along beside it, and the cottage was set just off the road that ran from their little village down to the main road that ran all the way to Chelmsford. It was a quiet location, but easy to access. There was no wonder that Papa loved the place so much, and that generations of Mayburys had proudly made their homes here. Georgiana could think of no place better.

How much longer they could remain here, she had no idea. With Papa’s health failing and no prospects for the future, she tried not to worry what would become of them. Especially considering Jill’s growing interest in a certain young man and her even more rapidly growing disinterest in propriety.

As feared, Georgiana followed the pathway around a final bend to come to the stone pool that had been built into the side of the hill to catch water from their renown spring. It was clear and fresh and made a delightful gurgling sound as it bubbled from the hill and spilled into the pool. It was also conspicuously devoid human attention at the moment. One lone bucket sat on the pool wall and an old wheelbarrow sat just off of the path.

Clearly someone had come here to fetch water, but where were they now? Georgiana tried to ignore the sick feeling of worry. She should never have let Jill come alone; she suspected the girl was meeting someone. Why did she not pay closer attention?

“Jill, where are you?” she called out.

A nearby rustling sounded and Georgiana sighed with relief when her younger sister appeared from behind nearby brush.

“It’s only you, Georgie,” the girl said. “We were afraid it was Papa!”

“We?”

Another face appeared, also from behind the brush. “Is it really just you, Miss Maybury?”

“Jack Robertson. What are you doing hiding there?”

Jack was a gangly youth, just into his teens, the same as Jill. Georgiana really couldn’t guess how these two young people had first encountered each other, but for some time now there was an obvious affinity. For Papa’s sake, Georgiana had refused to acknowledge it, but she’d seen the glances when they passed in the village, and she was aware how often the boy had been coming to fetch water. To be honest, Georgiana appreciated the money his grandmother always sent along with him, but clearly she should have kept a closer eye on Jill.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Jill said quickly, covering for Jack’s terrified silence. “He came to fetch water and we had polite conversation.”

“Over there in the bush?” Georgiana asked.

“We hid there when we heard you coming! I thought it was... Papa.”

“You thought our father would hobble all the way up here? With his failing health?”

“It is his health we were thinking of!” Jill protested. “Oh, but what it would do to him if he found a Robertson at our well.”

“Better a Robertson at our well than in a bush with his daughter,” Georgiana said, hands on her hips. “Respectable people—of any sort—do not go around hiding in bushes!”

Now both young people had the good sense to appear shamed. To his credit, Jack stepped forward and tried to take responsibility.

“I’m sorry, Miss Maybury. I should have taken greater care of Miss Jill. I swear, she would never let me... that is, we’ve been perfectly proper. She’s a lady and I know it.”

“The *lady* has yew twigs in her hair.”

Jill started to deny this obvious fact, but an approaching sound caught their attention. Someone was crunching up the pathway, approaching them. The loud, determined footsteps were most certainly not those of an aged invalid. The voice that boomed out, hushing even the birds and the breeze, was definitely not Papa’s.

“Jack Robertson! What the devil are you up to?”

Jack went ashen. “It’s my uncle! Oh no... he can’t find me here!”

In desperation, Jack took three frantic steps backward. That was one step too many. The hill had been cut away to allow for a flat tableau where the pool was

constructed with enough area for tending to the spring and gathering water. However, the edge of the tableau dropped off sharply and the rugged slope of the hill was quite steep. Jack's hasty retreat sent him topping over the edge.

Jill shrieked when he suddenly staggered and disappeared. She dove for him, flailing to catch one of his thrashing arms. She missed him, of course, and the action sent her off balance, too. With her skirts billowed around her, Jill went tumbling after.

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Robert rounded a bend to see the well just ahead of him. He swore under his breath as he caught sight of his nephew's body vanishing over the edge of a cliff! A girl appeared to go with him. Robert dashed toward the scene.

He heard thuds and crashes and human exclamations of pain. Fortunately, the exclamations meant the young people were likely not killed from the fall, but they'd no doubt be a bit worse for the wear. Apparently, the drop was not sheer, but enough that both parties took quite a tumble. Robert muttered under his breath. A few bumps and bruises would serve his foolhardy nephew right for dallying with one of these Maybury females. It was just one more proof of his father's claims; *nothing good came of a Maybury.*

Right now, in fact, Robert was having his own trouble with one of them. The fretting young woman hovering at the ledge was completely blocking Robert's view. He was not trying to stare at her shapely form, the graceful curve of her neck, or the silken auburn wisps that escaped from her bonnet and tossed coquettishly in the breeze. Somehow, though, he simply couldn't look past her. As with everything Maybury, this woman was trouble.

Robert had seen her in the village, of course. Even before he went off to school and then took up residence in London he was familiar with her by sight. Georgiana Maybury had always been more than passably attractive, although over the years Robert refused to appreciate that fact. He could hardly miss it now, however, as she stood right in front of him and nearly toppled over the edge for concern over her sister.

He would be no gentleman if he did not stop her from falling, so he made the ultimate sacrifice. He stepped forward and reached for her, pulling her back from the precipice and into his arms. She was soft and warm and smelled of apple blossoms. My, but how fond he was of apple blossoms! Odd that he never realized it before now.

"Let me go!" she cried. "My sister... the boy..."

"We'll get them," he assured her, maintaining his hold on her very pleasant person. "It won't do them any good if you fall down after them."

Perhaps his words caught her attention, or perhaps she merely grasped the reality of their situation. Her face turned toward him and he found himself gazing into wide, nut-brown eyes. They were filled with urgency and concern.

“Robert Robertson?” she asked after a moment.

“Yes. You are Miss Maybury?”

“I am. But my sister and your nephew have fallen down the hill!”

She was pushing herself from him. As he believed her to be in control of her faculties now and not likely to leap over the edge, he let her go. He would have liked to keep one arm around her—for her own safety, of course—but she stepped away.

“I’ll get them,” he said quickly and moved to the spot at the edge of the drop where she so recently stood.

“Are they alive?” she questioned when he peered over.

“Yes, yes, I see them moving several yards down, tangled in brush.”

“Oh, thank heavens. Shall I run to fetch a rope?”

“Not yet. I believe I can get to them and help them back up.”

Eying the surroundings for footholds, he began removing his coat. Given the circumstance, he would need all his mobility and, to be honest, he would rather not ruin the fine fabric of a coat from his favorite London tailor. Since he had come back after his father’s death to help Mother care for Jack, it might be a good while before he saw Bond Street again.

Rather than being shocked that he was removing clothing, Miss Maybury came back to his side and began helping him. She tugged at his sleeve as he slid his arm through. Her occasional touch surprised him. Or rather, he surprised himself with his own reaction to it.

“Are you sure you’ll be safe?” she asked.

“I think so. Would you mind holding this?”

He handed her his coat and she took it willingly, folding it absently while her focus was still clearly on the ledge. He gathered his wits and hoped he didn’t make a complete cake of himself in front of her. Hill climbing had not been one of his more recent endeavors.

Taking hold of a nearby sapling, he crouched down and took his first step off the ledge. The slope below was indeed steep, but the underbrush was enough that he could find roots and rocks enough to keep him from slipping. Leaves crunched under his boots as he made his decent, keeping an eye on the young people below but fully aware of Miss Maybury’s eyes on him from above.

“Jill!” she called down. “Are you injured?”

“Ouch. No, I don’t think so,” the girl called up.

“I’ve got her, Miss Maybury,” Jack replied. “She appears to be fine, with a few little scrapes.”



“How about you, Jack?” the lady inquired.

Robert was still concentrating on each careful movement. He was scrambling downhill, half crawling, but he couldn't help feeling touched by the lady's concern. Once they had the young people up by the well, perhaps she would rant about Jack's presence and endangering her sister, but for now she displayed only kindness and consideration.

“I... I will be fine,” the boy answered.

“No!” the girl's voice called up from very near Jack's. “He's hurt! Oh, Georgie, do send for help quickly!”

Robert's heart beat faster. Any anger he felt drained away as he pictured his nephew broken, injured on this hillside. All manner of possibilities flashed through his mind. If anything were to happen to the boy... it would kill Mother. She'd lost her son and daughter-in-law in that terrible accident that left Jack orphaned, and now Mother was widowed. What if Jack were seriously hurt... or worse? No, Robert couldn't let it be so.

“I'm coming down to get you,” he called. “Stay still where you are.”

He quickened his pace, sliding a few feet here and there between footholds. At one point he passed what appeared to be scraps of linen torn from Miss Jill's garments, perhaps. From his position pressed close to the earth he could no longer see the young people, but their nervous voices as they comforted and reassured each other made it easy to maintain his course toward them.

At last he had reached them. They were huddled together, perched on an outcrop of rock against a small stand of young holly. A bright trail of blood ran from Jack's temple and over his cheek. Robert took a deep breath and tried not to let his worry show.

“Well, lad, it seems you've broken your crown.”

Jack smiled weakly. “I'm sorry, Uncle Robert. I've always been a clumsy lout.”

“It's not his fault!” the girl said quickly, shifting position and then clutching a branch when she started to slip. “He merely came for water! I... I kept him longer than I should have. Please don't be too harsh with him. He needs a doctor!”

“He'll get one, Miss. Don't worry. Here, let me help you up—”

“No! Take him up first so he can be tended!” she protested.

But Jack wanted to argue. “I'm fine, Uncle. Take Jill up and see that she isn't harmed. And tell her sister it's all my fault and she shouldn't scold her.”

Robert just looked from one frightened young person to the other and shook his head. “Since the blame in this seems evenly placed, I'll simply ignore that topic for now. Come, Miss Jill, I will guide you up then come back for my nephew.”

The youths were too frightened to argue further so Robert set to helping Jill. She obeyed his direction and was a good climber. They reached the top and her sister eagerly helped her to safety. She clasped the girl to her and gave Robert a

worried smile.

“Thank you, sir. Shall we call someone to help with your nephew?”

The blood covering Jack’s face had been shocking, but Robert was encouraged by the boy’s clear-headed behavior. He smiled in return to Miss Maybury and tried to set both ladies at ease.

“He’s knocked his head on something, but from what I could tell he’s still able to climb. Once I bring him up I can assess him better.”

Heading back down, Robert found his way easier than the first time. He would likely find himself aching from the exertion once things were all settled, but for now he was able to navigate the slope with relative ease. After a few yards climb, he discovered Jack was already on his way up, apparently quite capable of rescuing himself. Robert couldn’t at all be comforted by the amount of blood loss that was evident, though.

“Is she safe up there now?” Jack asked quickly. “Did she suffer any injury?”

“She appears fine,” Robert assured. “Now what about you. Can you make the rest of the way?”

“I’m a bit dizzy, but no bones are broken. Er, you won’t have to tell Grandmother about this, will you?”

“How do you propose we keep it from her? You’re quite a mess.”

“I suppose I am. Jill was surely worried for me. If we tell Grandmother, though, she’ll never send me to fetch water again!”

Robert paused a moment, stopping himself from declaring that no one would ever be fetching water again. He could gain nothing by issuing orders like that; Jack would only rebel. The boy’s deep feeling for Jill was obvious. For now, Robert would focus on the matter at hand. Whatever existed between the two young people could be dealt with later.

“We’ll simply tell my mother you took a spill,” Robert said. “She’ll patch you up and that will be that. For now.”

Jack was indeed young and impulsive, but he was wise enough to recognize mercy. “Thank you, Uncle Robert. I’m very grateful.”

“So you should be. Now come along, take that branch there and pull yourself up. We’ll be on our way home as fast as you can caper.”

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The sun was lower in the sky and Georgiana had adjusted Papa’s curtains accordingly. Mr. Robertson had taken his nephew home, Jill had been cleaned up and scolded, and tea had finally been served. Papa knew nothing of the excitement that had transpired, and Georgiana was thankful for that.

To be certain Jill did not run off, Georgiana had sent her up to Papa’s room to

read to him while Georgiana prepared their tea. The girl had been on her best behavior and when Georgiana brought up the tray Jill was primly reading from one of Papa's favorite lectures. Papa seemed in good spirits, so tea was an enjoyable respite from Georgiana's recent harried experience.

After an acceptable time, Jill finished her tea and asked to be excused. She did, after all, appear tired so Georgiana sent her off to her room for a rest. Papa would likely be needed one of his own soon, too.

"Excellent tea," he said as drained his cup. "There's truly nothing like Maybury Spring water."

Georgiana placed the dishes onto the tray for removal. "The best there is, Papa."

"People from the area speak of our waters?"

"Everyone knows it is the best, Papa."

"And you say people have paid you for it?"

She wasn't sure where this line of discourse was going, so she was careful with her answer. "Occasionally people ask about the spring, Papa, and I am happy to share with them. Some of them have paid me, yes, but you mustn't be upset! It isn't as if we have strangers going up and down our hill at all hours, paying a fee as if we were common shopkeepers."

"And why should they not pay for the privilege of our water? Maybury water is the best! It's curative, you know."

"Yes, Papa. I know."

"And it does not bother you to have so many people coming to get it?"

"No, of course not. I know you are proud of our name, and you are proud of our spring. Why should I not show it off when I can? There is no other spring like it anywhere nearby!"

Papa sniffed gruffly. "You are quite right about that! Those dashed Robertsons might own half the old Maybury lands, but they never got their hands on our well."

Drat, she should have known that this line of conversation would turn to the Robertsons. Discussing the old feud only upset Papa and that was the last thing she wanted. How would he react if he ever found out Jill fancied herself in love with Jack Robertson?

"Er, Papa... would it be so very awful if we gave some of our water to Old Mrs. Robertson?"

"Dame Dob? Has she been coming to get water?"

"She is known for her gardens, Papa, and goes to great lengths for them. If you would let me make an arrangement, she would pay handsomely for our water."

She waited, worried that he would erupt with anger at such a suggestion. For a moment his face was unreadable, then he broke into a smile.

"You would make her pay for our water?"

“If you think that is appropriate.”

“And she will tell everyone that her gardens are good only because of our water?”

“I suppose she will mention that.”

Papa laughed. “So! The tables have turned. No longer can the Robertsons lord over us, profiting from our misfortune. As long as we have what they want, they must come begging!”

“I don’t know that I’d be comfortable making her beg.”

“I didn’t mean that, my dear. I meant that for once I am in a position to bargain.”

“So you support making an agreement with her?”

“Make any agreement you like! I should have trusted you with this a long time ago. Yes, Georgie, tell the Robertson household the feud is over.”

“Really, Papa? Are you sure this is what you want?”

“My quarrel was never with Dame Dob, so now that her husband is gone, why should we not become neighbors? After all, it appears we are equal now. I no longer own lands that are mortgaged to them, and they must come to me if they want water from my spring. Why should we not conduct friendly business? Perhaps her elder son—what’s his name, Robert?—is a reasonable man.”

The heat rushed to her cheeks and she tried not to stammer. “Oh, I wouldn’t know about that...”

“You should find out, Georgie. Sell him as much water as he wants. You might be a wealthy woman yet!”

“It’s merely water, Papa. It isn’t a gold mine.”

“Maybe it is, my dear. Maybe it is. Now if you don’t mind, I think I will rest for a bit. My eyes have grown heavy.”

“Of course, Papa. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, you’ve taken care of everything, pet.”

She gathered the tray of tea things, too astonished by his sudden change of heart to say anything more. What on earth could have brought on this strange attitude of his? His color looked good and he seemed well enough. Perhaps she ought to call for the doctor, just in case.

Worrying as she left him, she carried the dishes to the kitchen. Cook was busy with supper and one of the maids left her work to help Georgiana tidy her tray. She only half paid attention to what she was doing, though. Her confusion at Papa’s sudden amity toward the Robertsons gnawed at her. What could cause such a dramatic change?

“Mrs. Miller, have you noticed Papa eating well lately?” Georgiana asked their loyal cook.

“Oh, he’s been eating fine, Miss,” Mrs. Miller replied. “As good as ever. I was

pleased he liked my poppy cakes today. Miss Jill just came down and said he asked for another one.”

Now Georgiana was even more confused. “Another one? When was this?”

“Ten minutes ago. It surprised me that he’d eaten the first one so quickly.”

“But he didn’t! I just now brought down the tray with half of a cake still on it. Polly wrapped it up for me.”

Cook didn’t seem overly concerned. She merely shrugged and continued working a lump of dough. “I don’t know about that, but I gave Miss Jill another cake and she seemed happy with it. Put it in a little basket and headed up.”

So Jill took a cake in a basket, did she? Odd, considering that Georgiana had just sent her off for a nap. Now her concern turned to suspicion.

She left the kitchens and rushed back up to the bedrooms. Sure enough, Jill’s bedroom was empty. No sign of the girl or of the cake.

It was obvious where they both must have gone.

Georgiana grabbed her shawl and raced back down the stairs. It would seem that she and Dame Dob were going to have to come to some sort of arrangement much earlier than expected. She only dreaded having to tell Papa.

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Robert left his study after wasting much of the afternoon there. He wasn’t sure what he would do, but he couldn’t sit in a chair one moment longer. He needed to leave the house, go outdoors for a walk. Anything to distract himself from fretting over the day’s earlier events.

Once he’d gotten Jack home, his mother patched the boy’s nod with vinegar and brown paper. It seemed Jack would not suffer any dire effect from his wound, but Robert banished him to bedrest for the remainder of the day. It was best to be cautious with a head injury and besides, Robert did not quite know what else to do with the boy.

What rot, the lad professing an undying love for Jill Maybury! He raved about her all the way home, swearing he would marry the girl and there was nothing Robert nor anyone could do about it. It was at once rather sweet while at the same time most maddening. Both youths were quite under-age. How could they possibly think either family would approve their ill-fated match?

Jack still had two years of school to complete, after all. If the situation were different, Robert could assure the boy that he and his Jill could wed just as soon as they were older. Jack could have happiness to look forward to. But this was not a different situation; this was a situation where the girl’s family hated them! Mr. Maybury would never agree to a match.

The last thing Robert wanted was to encourage Jack in his suit. The boy seemed

obsessed, as if he could think of nothing but the girl, worrying over her and begging Robert to let him at least send her a note assuring her of his health. Robert declined, not certain how that letter would be received by the girl's household.

It wasn't as if Robert were completely unfeeling for him, however. How miserable he must be, wallowing in puppy-love with little hope for a future. Robert had little experience with such things himself, but he did have to admit that a certain pair of nut-brown eyes had been plaguing him all afternoon. Why the devil could he not stop thinking about the elder Miss Maybury?

"Sir, there's a young lady at the door!"

Robert froze in his tracks at the top of the staircase. He had been just about to go down, but the bottom was blocked by their formidable housekeeper.

"A young lady?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here to see me?" He didn't mean to sound quite so hopeful.

"No, sir. She says she is here to see her sister."

"Sister? No, her sister isn't here," he said confidently.

But then the young lady stepped into view beside the bold housekeeper. "I believe she is, sir," she announced.

"Miss Maybury," he said, as moon-faced as Jack would have been.

Even at this distance, those nut-brown eyes blinked up at him and he could read the worry behind them.

"Jill has run off," she said with raw concern. "She must have come here. Your nephew's well-being is all she can think of."

How could Miss Maybury have such perfect white teeth? And was her skin as soft as it appeared? He would have wagered anything that it was. The rose blush in her cheeks seemed as soft as a petal, and—

But she was speaking! He shook himself back into his senses and tried to focus on her words.

"So have you seen her?" she was asking.

He would have forfeited his father's estate to have been able to give her the answer she so clearly desired, but he couldn't. Instead, he cleared his throat and dashed her hopes.

"No, I'm sorry. Your sister is not here."

"Of course she is here!"

This time the interrupting voice was his mother's. She had somehow appeared nearby, outside the door to Jack's bedroom.

Miss Maybury, one floor below, stood on tiptoes to see who had spoken. Robert stepped aside so his mother could peer down the stairs and greet the newcomer.

"Hello, dear," Mother called. "You must be Miss Maybury."

"Yes, ma'am," Miss Maybury replied with an involuntary curtsy. "It's very nice

to meet you. Jack has told me so many nice things about you. I hope he's doing quite well now!"

"Heaven's yes, he'll be just fine, especially now that your sister has come to see him. And she brought a cake, too! What a dear girl."

"The girl is here?" Robert asked, and glared down at the housekeeper. "Mrs. Halsey, did you let her into this house?"

"No, sir, I did not!" the woman said flatly.

His mother solved the mystery for them. "I did, of course. I was out in the garden and saw her come up, so I brought her in. Poor little thing, she had half convinced herself dear Jack was gone to his final reward. It would have been cruel *not* to let her up to visit the boy."

"So she is here? In his room?" Robert questioned.

"With a cake," his mother added. "Yes, yes. Now be a gentleman and invite Miss Maybury up here to see her sister."

There was nothing for Robert to do but obey. He gazed down at Miss Maybury's hopeful expression and invited her up. The housekeeper shrugged and turned to go back to whatever she had been doing. Mother made some sort of chuckling sound under her breath.

Robert frowned at her, but she didn't seem to notice. Or care.

"I'll go let her sister know that she's here. Robert, you be nice to our guest."

"Of course I will, Mother."

She turned but had one last thing to say under her breath. "Awfully pretty for a spinster, isn't she?"

Robert gritted his teeth and hoped Miss Maybury had not heard that. His eyes met hers again and she gave him a nervous smile as she climbed the staircase. Robert could have watched her all day, the pronounced sway of her hips and the occasional glimpse of an ankle. He would surely have to invite her upstairs again in the future.

"Which way is my sister?" she asked when she finally reached the top and Robert did nothing more than continue to stare.

"Oh. Yes. This way."

He showed her toward his brother's room but paused. "Er, your father isn't going to show up with dueling pistols next, is he?"

"What? Oh, certainly not. In fact, he instructed me to bring word that the feud is somehow over."

"Over?"

"It seems so. I can't understand it, but he is eager for our families to be on more friendly terms with each other. Is that... do you think that is possible?"

Despite his overall confusion, Robert had a ready answer for this question. "Indeed, I think it is quite possible, Miss Maybury. I'm beginning to think

anything is quite possible.”

She blinked her sweet eyes and gave him another smile. Perhaps she had been about to speak, or perhaps Robert had been about to find out just how soft those rose-pink cheeks of hers were, but neither of them did anything. They were once more interrupted.

The gushing Miss Jill dashed out into the corridor and practically threw herself into Miss Maybury’s arms.

“Georgie! Please don’t be too angry with me. I just had to see Jack!”

“I understand you were worried, Jill, but you shouldn’t have run off without permission.”

Jill frowned at her sister. “Papa said it would be quite proper to pay a call on a friend.”

Robert was still mostly confused, but Miss Maybury seemed truly confounded. “You told Papa about what happened today?”

“I know you said we shouldn’t trouble him, but it was so dull reading that stodgy old lecture before tea and I couldn’t think of anything other than Jack, so I went on and told him.”

“What on earth did he say?”

“He was surprised, but when I told him how brave Mr. Robertson was when he climbed down to save us, and how you seemed friendly enough with him... well, Papa acted less surprised. He told me I was right to worry about Jack and there would be nothing wrong if I paid a visit.”

“And so here you are. Really, Jill, you ought to have... wait, you told Papa that I was friendly with Mr. Robertson?”

The younger girl looked back and forth between them. “Aren’t you?”

“Well, I...”

Miss Maybury seemed flustered and embarrassed, so Robert took the opportunity to answer for her.

“Anything is possible, they say. Now, did my mother mention something about a cake?”

Jill brightened. “Yes! Come have some with us.”

She spun on her heel and took her sister by the hand, practically dancing away with her. Unfortunately, the girl’s enthusiasm caused her to trip over her skirts and she stumbled a bit. Miss Maybury caught her from falling and cautioned the girl.

“Careful, Jill! We’ve all had enough falling today.”

But Jill simply laughed. “Silly, you and Mr. Robertson haven’t fallen at all.”

Miss Maybury glanced up at Robert and her rosy cheeks grew even rosier. For his part, Robert couldn’t quite hide the schoolboy grin that spread over his face.

“Don’t be too sure of that, Miss Jill. Don’t be too sure.”